Who Are We Really? Linguistic and Cultural Expressions of Trinidadian Douglas

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Abstract

The peculiar histories of the colonies in the Caribbean brought together people from Europe, Africa and Asia in a common place where they frequently contested political, social and economic space. The mutual hostilities that developed out of these contests for prominence of one kind or another presented identity and loyalty issues for many persons of mixed heritage who were a natural development in the contexts of such a social structure. In Trinidad, for example, Douglas- the offspring of (East) Indian and African unions- find themselves in situations where the imperatives of social interaction require them to constantly negotiate between their parent communities. This is evidenced by their display of linguistic and cultural practices that either connect them to one or other of their ancestral groups or alienate them from either one or both groups.

This paper describes and examines some of the linguistic and cultural practices which Trinidadian Douglas use as markers of alienation or connectedness within the public domain as well as their private spaces.

Background

Trinidad is the larger island in the twin island republic of Trinidad and Tobago. The most southeasterly island in the Caribbean, it is situated between 10° 2' and 11° 12' N latitude and 60° 30' and 61° 56' W longitude. Trinidad is 4,768 km^2 (1,841 sq mi) in area with an average length of 80 km (50 mi) and an average width of 59 kilometres (37 mi).

The development of modern Trinidad dates to the late 18th century when the then Spanish administration invited French Antillean planters to settle in the island. Since then, development has been accompanied by continual contestation for power and access to resources among Spaniards, French, the British who captured the island in 1797, groups of West Africans who came as slaves and as free men, Indians who came as indentured labourers between 1845 and 1917, and members of other smaller racial/ethnic groups. Indians and Africans, the two largest groups, have been involved in direct contestation for several decades and this has marginalized the *Douglas*, the offspring of (East) Indian and African unions for many years.

Etymologically the word *Dougla* is linked to *dogla* which is of Indic origin and is defined by Platts (1884, p.534) as a person of impure breed, a hybrid, a mongrel; a two-faced or deceitful person and a hypocrite. In Bihar, Northern India, from where many Indian indentured labourers migrated to Trinidad, *dogla* still carries the meaning of a person of impure breed related specifically to the "progeny of inter-varna[1] marriage, acquiring the connotation of 'bastard', meaning illegitimate son of a prostitute, only in a secondary sense" (Reddock 1994, p.321). The term, however, in its transplanted usage by Indians in Trinidad and Guyana, is employed to designate the offspring of an Indian and an African (Creole). The term *Dougla*, has undergone processes of semantic expansion and amelioration to denote "all persons of mixed African and Indian descent" (Alleyne 2002, p. 230).

Introduction

In Trinidad the comparatively recent academic preoccupation with race and ethnicity and the corollary preoccupation with establishing right to presence and even to ascriptive privileged position have generated a considerable corpus of texts. In the press of race/ethnic concerns, however, *Douglas* have been almost completely overlooked by scholars as a bi racial community and there has been no self identifying spokesperson to voice a position (individual or collective) about the group. This may be due in part to the ways in which Douglas perceive themselves in relation to either of the ethnic groups to which they are linked and how they in turn are perceived by those around them, particularly African–and Indian–Trinidadians.

If we accept the eye-witness testimony of John Morton, the Presbyterian missionary who proselytised the Indians in central and south Trinidad. Douglas have been present in Trinidad since 1876, yet to date, even though the most recent (2011) census has recognised this particular mixture, Douglas are not seen as a people with a collective

[1] Varna is the Sanskrit word for colour, which was translated by the Portuguese, who were the first Europeans to observe it, by the word casta, or 'pure'. The Aryans, light-skinned people with sharp features, created this distinction because they did not want to mix with the darker flat-featured people whom they conquered. As such an elaborate caste system was built. See Daly1974, p. 3.

identity. Further to that, the constant and persistent contestation for power both economic and social between their two ancestral groups have left many Douglas uncertain about their own personal identity such that at any point in time *Douglas* may align or connect themselves to one ancestor group or the other without claiming a separate identity. Or, because of personal circumstances and experiences, *Douglas* may disavow or alienate themselves from either community and declare themselves Trinidadian, thus claiming a national identity as an ethnic identity, as happens in Belize for reasons of affirming allegiance to national sovereignty (Le Page and Tabouret-keller 1995).

In the context of identifying markers of connectedness and alienation through language choices it is commonly accepted that ethnic and minority groups employ separate or private languages linked to their heritage but this is not the case in present day Trinidad, where minority and heritage languages have long lost their status as first languages. There is instead, an indigenous Creole language, Trinidadian English Creole (TrinEC), which is employed by most citizens. This language exhibits a lexical amalgam of donor varieties brought to the island during the period of its colonization. The extent to which Trinidadians employ these lexical items is linked to their affinity to the particular donor group. Such that, after more than a century, some lexical items linked to a particular racial/ethnic group have attained general currency while others have maintained a symbolic load of signaling connectedness to a particular group.

One Dougla response to this is the convenient appropriation of the varieties of languages exposed to and in use by them while growing up, but this itself presents the problem that Douglas do not have a uniform upbringing. Some have been nurtured in households where TrinEC was the mother tongue, while others may have been exposed to Hindi/Hindustani/Bhojpuri (all used interchangeably among the lay population) and or Arabic/Urdu. Whatever the exposure, though, TrinEC still seems to be their native language, but the fact that this holds true for the entire society poses a challenge for an unambiguous affirmation of Dougla identity through the use of a particular linguistic variety.

As a consequence of this, the markers of connectedness and alienation employed by Douglas are hypothesized as being expressed chiefly through the use of lexical items available to them via their socialization practices. This hypothesis is supported by the research posited independently by Bucholtz (1999) and Alleyne (2001). They affirm ethnicity can be expressed within a common language by the use of varying phonological features, morphosyntactic and/or phrasal categories, by lexical choices and by different frequencies of use of the same feature. This penultimate observation is more relevant to the linguistic situation in Trinidad, where there is no ethnically favoured language in the sense understood by Joshua Fishman (1997, p.332).

Who or What determines Dougla?

A major problem in the business of establishing a Dougla identity lies in the difficulty of determining who is a Dougla. Perception and self-perception play critical roles in assessing the Dougla identity. This is so because, in spite of the fact that the phenotype dictates that a Dougla is the offspring of African and Indian lineage, the degree of this mixture is always a cause for contention. The degree of Indianness, as Rahim (2007) asserts, is the major element in the ascription of Dougla identity. This assertion is corroborated by fieldwork undertaken for this study. Results of preliminary interviews among the sample population suggest that individuals are

styled Douglas based on the observable degree of Indianness in their phenotype "if they do(h)[n't] have soft, wavy hair, you might think they still mix[ed] bu'[t] not wit[h] Indian". There are Douglas who bear to a greater extent the distinguishing marks of their Indian heritage, but there are others who carry the physical characteristics associated with the African.

Age, class, education, gender, and regional location also figure prominently in perception and self-perception, and it is not certain how many of those categorising themselves in the official censuses as 'Mixed', 'Other' or 'Not stated' may be counted as Douglas by others, including Douglas. Trinidad's hypersensitivity to colour is another determinant. Light-skinned Douglas may well escape the designation but their darker skinned counterparts - who in some cases may be their relatives - may be unable to do so.

What Others Say

Reddock (1994) confirms that for most of their existence, Douglas did not make their voice heard as Douglas about the issues in the country that were affecting them and fieldwork conducted during 2001-2010 also supports this. This noticeable silence is a phenomenon contrary to standard practice in Trinidad, where self-declared spokespersons aggressively claim to represent sections of the masses on all issues and especially the pervasive ethnicisation of said issues. But in spite of this, even when Douglas were the subjects of discussion, as happened in the national debate on Douglarisation in the late 1980s when African-Indian conflicts dominated social and even cultural life no collective Dougla voice emerged to participate in the prolonged national debate; also, Douglas were not invited qua Douglas to publicly pronounce on the issue. The heated debate arose when the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR), the government of the day, proposed a plan for compulsory national service. This proposal foundered because purists, actuated by their own fears, anxieties and insecurities, represented it as a reprehensible scheme for enforced miscegenation. The term douglarisation, the process by which Douglas are birthed, was bandied about as potentially the most unwelcome outcome of the plan as spokespersons claiming to represent silent masses of Indians and Africans engaged in a protracted debate (Regis 2002). This debate ignored the sensitivities of Dougla individuals and they in turn allowed themselves to be generally objectified and treated dismissively and negatively.

This inability to find voice within the public arena, may be linked to their general feeling of alienation and marginalisation started by the circumstances of birth and the unrelenting latent hostilities between their parent groups brought sharply into focus during the periods of contestation for political power. This feeling of alienation and marginalisation is adequately captured in 1961 by calypsonian The Mighty Dougla's "Split Me in Two" (see appendix), which highlights the predicament of the Dougla in a situation in which race/ethnicity was becoming more assertive and aggressive especially among the Indian and African Trinidadians. In "Split Me in Two" the narrator represents the situation of the Dougla as one of isolation from or of dangerous neutrality between the warring Africans and Indians intent upon positioning their group strategically in the soon-to-become independent state. Dougla's protagonist recounts situations which may be characteristic calypso fictions or exaggerations and may not have been the life experiences of Dougla himself, who

was a native of Belmont, a tolerant district of Port of Spain. The narrator/protagonist of "Split Me in Two" describes his childhood as one of loneliness: "always by mehself like a lil monkey/ Not one single child wouldn't play with me". He narrates a traumatic and perhaps fictional incident in adulthood when warring Africans and Indians equally but separately beat him as a member of the rival group. In the final stanza, however, he redeems Dougla identity in terms of its ability to boast not one heritage but two. This well-composed calypso elevated him to national Calypso King, the most prestigious award in calypsodom. This public recognition and acclaim, however, did not promote any sustained national interest in the predicament of the Douglas; neither did they promote the emergence of a collective Dougla voice.

Interestingly, Douglas' feelings of alienation and marginalisation also appear to be perpetuated by the absence of an ancestral, or better, of one ancestral homeland which functions as a symbolic homeland and source of inspiration and consolation for the formation of a separate Dougla identity. Unlike other recognised racial/ethnic groups, Douglas lack an organization and a headquarters. In fact, they are denied that corporate identity because of what Schilling-Estes describes as the dominant culture's belief that "'authentic' tribal groups must be of homogenous rather than multi-tribal origin" (167). It is quite possible that the failure on the part of officialdom to register the *Douglas* as a group may have resulted in the failure of the Douglas to recognize themselves as such. Lacking official recognition and sharing the categories 'Mixed' and 'Other' with individuals of any of the numerous permutations possible for so many years may have been a factor in their failure to declare themselves an ethnic group or a biracial minority.

Many purists refuse to accept that Douglas are a legitimate biracial group, rather they opt for labelling them as simply an unwanted consequence of inevitable mixing; a set of individuals existing in the margins without voice; tolerated, accommodated but not truly valid. In 2005, while delivering the feature address at the official launch of the Indian Arrival Day Heritage Village set up by the El Dorado Shiv Mandir, Elizabeth Rosabelle Sieusarran, a lecturer at what was then the School of Continuing Studies of The University of the West Indies, said

> In our quest for establishing unity among our people it is imperative for us to note a rapidly increasing phenomenon from the rise of a western system of education and the consequential westernisation of the Indian community. This has resulted in the prevalence of inter-caste, inter-religious and inter-racial marriages. The Indian community has to decide how to handle the offspring of this significant group locally referred to as douglas. Do we accept them or ostracise them? Whatever course is adopted, the fragmentation of the Indian community must be avoided. Above all, we must always remember that Trinidad and Tobago is our patrimony. Our ancestors gave their blood and we have laboured to enrich our country. We live in a multi-cultural society and co-existence is a necessary ingredient for our success in the future (Bowman 2005, p.5).

Although Sieusarran invited her audience to reflect upon the problems caused by westernization, she reduced all of these to the fragmentation caused by "the prevalence of inter-caste, inter-religious and inter-racial marriages". She then ignored the progeny of the many Indian–non-Indian relationships who are visible in the social

landscape and targets the Douglas as the source of the problem of fragmentation within the Indian community. While this acknowledgement of the existence of the Douglas and of their organic connection to the Indian communities goes beyond the traditional Indian perception of their community, Sieusarran's statement is rooted in 19th century prejudice against Indian cohabitation with Africans. According to the report, at one point during her address she stopped and looked around the mandir, allegedly to see if there were any Douglas present.

The alienation experienced within the public sphere during the years following independence, transfers into the private space. Mixed individuals, and Douglas in particular, have always been free to choose the group to which they feel akin or the group to which accommodates them. On the one hand, some Douglas negotiate both ancestral communities with ease, while others feel uncomfortable in both camps. This choice of alignment, neutrality or separation appears to be indexed to issues of upbringing, other personal circumstances and experiences. Some circumstances are so traumatic, however, that Douglas opt to alienate themselves from either ancestral groups. Rahim (2007, p.17) explains her Dougla father's predicament: "Trinidadian was the only identity to which he would subscribe- not Indian or African or *Dougla*" She adds that he claimed this nationality "with a kind of fervour that suggested a desperate compensation for some deep, unspoken suffering."

Generally, during this period (1960s – early 1990s) Douglas renounced their dual heritage and chose to subsume their identity into the ancestral group to which their phenotype subscribed. There were no attempts on the part of Douglas to employ any lexical items which signalled ethnic affiliation, that is to employ words used by any ethnic group to project an identity or to assert themselves as separate but equal members in the society.

What Douglas Say and Do

A general shift in the linguistic and cultural behaviour of Douglas occurred after 1995. This year is particularly important because it records the ascension of the first *perceived* Indian political party and Indian prime minister. With this shift in the balance of power, Indic terms once relegated to specific domains and in the company of like interests came to the forefront and began to appear in print and electronic media. Some Douglas, who would have naturally subsumed their identity within their Indian ancestry and others who felt that the political climate demanded it, aligned their speech to incorporate the 'new' terms that their Indian relatives were employing to signal their identity. In particular, words within the semantic domains of religion, kinship, kitchen, insult and taboo replaced commonly used TrinEC equivalent terms in some contexts. The word *happy* for example was replaced by the word *Shubh* in the Divali greeting and *Mubarak* in the Eid greeting on television and all daily newspapers. The Indic word *mandir* and the perceived Indic *masjid* replaced the more perceived English forms temple and mosque, respectively as attempts were made to project a distinct Indian identity. For the layman, terms such as *jhanjhat* and *koochoor*, the Indic terms used to express the act of causing mischief (locally termed 'making confusion'), replaced the TrinEC equivalent commess (itself a retention from French Creole) and baccahnal in the speech of some Indians and Douglas alike. The fact that these terms are consciously used to replace the alternative forms is an indication that a conscious attempt is being made to connect with an Indian identity.

Curiously, the same atmosphere that 'licensed' Indians and by extension Douglas, who subsumed their identity within this side of their ancestry, also 'licensed' other Douglas who sought to assert their ethnic title. The term Dougla and the person it stood to represent were now presented as a new way of interpreting and representing self. Douglas now employed the term to affirm their identity as well as raise the level of consciousness about the presence of *Douglas* within the society. In 2004 a private entrepreneur launched a campaign that proposed that *Douglas* were the only individuals capable of bridging the gap between the two major races and as such the only solution to quell the ethnic tensions that were resurfacing as a direct result of the shifts in the balance of political power in 1995 and then again in 2000, 2001 and 2002. It was felt that if Douglarisation were encouraged then citizens would be unable to deploy the race card in their contestations for access to resources and patronage. Thousands of jerseys were printed with the logo "race-busters" on the front and either DITA (an acronym for "Dougla is the Answer") or "Be Wise: Douglarise" on the back. These jerseys were distributed throughout Trinidad and Guyana where there is also a large number of Douglas. The *Dougla* executive director, as well as some staff members at the community television station Gayelle the Channel joined the bandwagon in February of 2004 by wearing these jerseys at the launch of the station. In the following months the entrepreneur appeared on radio talk shows and television promoting Douglarisation through talk, poetry and song. His initiative, however, was better received in the neighbouring Guyana whose racial/ethnic plurality mirrors that of Trinidad.

Other Douglas and persons of mixed heritage also embraced the opportunity brought about by the new political atmosphere. For some of them, they sought to conveniently appropriate the term *Dougla* as a metaphor. In September 2008 at the launch of a bi-monthly magazine *Dougla* a group of young persons of varying racial/ethnic backgrounds led by a Dougla executive producer stated that the aim of their magazine is to celebrate Trinidad and Tobago's perfect mix which, to them, is captured in the term Dougla. '*Dougla*', as re-defined by them, is a mentality and not an ethnicity; the etymology of the word has no bearing on the term and does not inhibit the possibility for expression and celebration. Some Douglas argue that this is now the very essence of their existence a complete balance with themselves and the society. In Trinidad, they believe being of mixed ancestry is the essential characteristic of the true indigene.

So…Who Are We Really?

Genotypically, a Dougla is the offspring of any of the following combinations:

African mother/ Indian father;
African father/ Indian mother;
African mother/*Dougla* father;
African father/ *Dougla* mother;
Indian mother/ *Dougla* father;
Indian father/ *Dougla* mother;
Dougla mother/ *Dougla* father.

This set allows for all possible permutations of Dougla including second and third generation Douglas in spite of the belief by some scholars (Hernandez-Ramdwar (1997); Reddock (1994)) that the term is only used to describe first generation offspring. Douglas are, as Narroll (1964) states in his definition of ethnic groups, a biologically self-perpetuating ethnic group whose membership identifies itself and is

identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.

Douglas are individuals who select from among one of three or a mixture of three options in the formation of an identity. They opt to:

1. Form an allegiance to and alliance with one ethnic group to the exclusion of the other;
2. Form strategic alliances with both ancestral groups; and
3. Maintain a neutral position avoiding ethnic issues linked to either ancestral group.

Douglas manifest a polymorphous identity adding another layer to a society classified by some as stratified and by others as plural. The advocates of plural society theory claim that the several ethnic groups retain their separate spaces, mixing when necessary but not merging, while the proponents of stratification theory hold that the society is divided along lines of socio-economic class. Douglas display a series of identities existing along what can be called a continuum, the extreme points of which mark the sublimation of Douglas into their Indian or African race/ethnicity while the midway point marks a position of neutrality. Interestingly, when Douglas manifest an identity linked to their Indian ancestry they do so by employing Indic lexical items while their affinity to their African forebears is marked by an avoidance of said items. When Douglas appear to be neutral they exercise accommodative behaviour to either side by employing or avoiding Indic lexical items as is necessary or convenient. This necessary or convenient appropriation might itself be a distinctive feature of Dougla identity.

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Appendix

Split Me in Two (1961) **(The Mighty Dougla-Cletus Ali)**

Let us suppose they pass a law
They doh[don't] want people living here anymore
Jus suppose they pass a law
They doh[don't] want people living here anymore
Everybody got to find their country
According to your race originally
What a confusion I would cause in the place
They might have to shoot me in space

Chorus
Because they sending Indians to India
And the Negroes back to Africa
Can somebody please just tell me?
Where they sending poor me, poor Dougie
Am I neither one nor the other
Six ah one half ah dozen of the other
If they serious bout sending back people for true
They got to split me in two

From the time a small I in confusion
I couldn't play with no other lil[little] children
If I go by the Negro children to play
They say you little coolie now run away
Ah go by the Indian children next door
They say "nowherian what you come here for"
Ah always by mehself [myself] like a lil [little] monkey
Not one single child wouldn't play with me

Chorus
So if they sending Indians to India
And the Negroes back to Africa
Can somebody please just tell me?
Where they sending poor me, poor Dougie
Am I neither one nor the other
Six ah one half ah dozen of the other
If they serious bout sending back people for true
They bound to split me in two

Here what happen to me recently
I going down Jogie Road walking peacefully
Some Indians and Negroes rioting
Poor me didn't know not a single thing
But as I enter in Oden Trace
An Indian man cuff meh straight in meh face
I ran by the Negroes to get rescue
"Look a Coolie"

And them start beating me too

Chorus
So if they sending Indians to India
And the Negroes back to Africa
Can somebody please just tell me?
Where they sending poor me, poor Dougie
Am I neither one nor the other
Six ah one half ah dozen of the other
If they serious bout sending back people for true
They bound to split me in two

Some fellas having a race discussion
I jump in to give my opinion
A young fella watch meh in meh face
He say "You shut yuh[your] mouth
You eh got no race"
What he said to me was a real insult
But is not I to blame is meh father fault
When he say[said] I have no race
He did talking true
Instead ah having one race
Yuh [you] know I got two

Chorus
So if they sending Indians to India
And the Negroes back to Africa
Can somebody please just tell me?
Where they sending poor me, poor Dougie
Am I neither one nor the other
Six ah one half ah dozen of the other
If they serious bout sending back people for true
They bound to split me in two

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