

**Brinsley Samaroo. Review of *The Trinidad Dougla: Identity, Ethnicity and Lexical Choice* by Ferne Louanne Regis. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. ISBN (10): 1-4438-9079-0, (13):978-1-4438-9079-3. (Hardcover) xviii + 222 pp.**

The major tendency for those who study and write about Trinidad and Tobago has been a concentration on the three dominant groups; namely Europeans and their descendants, and the Afric and Indic peoples. Most studies have examined how these two groups have interacted with each other and the consequences of such interaction. From the late twentieth century other shapers of the society have been cautiously added: First Peoples, Chinese, Portuguese and Syrian/Lebanese. Related approaches have, of course, enriched the narrative and have done much to explain the sociology of the society. In all of this, however, there has been only glancing references to the Douglas, offspring of the mixing of Indic and Afric arrivals who today constitute a significant part—some 23%—of the Trinbagonian population. This sector has been quietly but steadily on the increase and can therefore no longer be ignored. The marked emergence of Douglas has serious implications for the nation in all sorts of ways. Does the Dougloid population, increasing as it is, represent what the nation would be in 2050? Or will it continue to exist as a stepchild of the nation? Already, one group, the politicians, is increasingly courting this segment because they realize that, in tightly contested seats, the Dougla vote can well decide the electoral outcome. So our political future will no doubt see an increased effort to court that in-between sector.

It is for considerations such as these that Ferne Louanne Regis' *The Trinidad Dougla* deserves serious contemplation. Most of our analyses of Dougladom have been based on guesswork and speculation. Whereas North American and Indian scholars have taken the time to study the phenomenon of ethnic intermixture, such studies are rare for the Caribbean. When in fact they are undertaken, as in the case of black and white intermixture, they start off on the wrong foot by using the derogatory, European-led term "mulatto", deriving from the barren offspring of a horse and an ass, to describe the result of such a union. More enlightened scholars use the term "coloured" to identify this group. Even so, most people who write about Douglas neglect to capitalize the "D", indicating disrespect for this group of citizens. Ferne Louanne Regis writes with a passion because she herself is of Dougloid ancestry. She is

worried about the “undeclared marginalization of the Douglas and the Dougla’s ambiguous position in the society” (23). The Douglas themselves are a confused lot because of the larger society’s failure to recognize them as a valid unit of the population. In official censuses they are lumped into “Mixed” and “Other” categories which deny them a formal presence in the nation. In some sectors of the population, still carrying the colonial mentality, they are regarded as outcastes as in India where the term originated and where there continues to be a considerable population of Douglas. In Gujarat they are called “Habshis”. In Trinbago the ethnicization of the politics led to further marginalisation which was accurately captured by the calypsonian Dougla in 1961 whose “Split me in two” posed the Dougla dilemma squarely before the populace. Because of that marginalization the Dougla community has failed to proclaim an identity and have equally been reluctant to form any kind of bonding organization in a society where many religious, social and cultural groups tend to bond together. At best the Dougla presence is regarded as an exotic sideshow occasionally raising its head as in Brother Marvin’s 1996 rendition of “Jahaji Bhai” which gained temporary recognition because of its enchanting melody. After that, as before, the Dougla dilemma was not seen as a national issue worthy of serious discussion.

The book *The Trinidad Dougla* is important because it is carefully constructed and its findings represent years of research in places such as Couva, Gasparillo, Point Fortin and Tunapuna. The author also followed Douglas at their Caura River limes where respondents identified closely with the spirits and were therefore given to freer speech; there were also conversations at a mechanic shop where Douglas spoke frankly. The result of these widespread interactions is an authentic record of peoples’ true feelings, often given upon an assurance of anonymity.

Structurally the informants are categorized into three compartments: those who identify with either the Afric or Indic group to the exclusion of the other; those who form strategic alliances with both ancestral groups; and those who take a neutral position, avoiding reference to either of the ancestries. In this way, internecine complications are avoided and the reader is given a clear indication of what to expect in the final analysis. In order to narrow down the examination further, the author chooses a range of topics which constitute the semantic area most frequently inhabited by Douglas; namely, the terms and artefacts associated with cooking,

kinship and familial relations, folk and cultural terms used among the Indic side and finally, insults and taboos among Douglas.

A significant departure from most other studies relating to the Indic side of the story is the author's clear understanding that there is no separation between religion and culture as in Western Christian ontology. In fact, she emphasises that on the Indic side the culture is religious so that many of the words used as identity markers have profound religious connotations and therefore carry high symbolic values. Such an understanding can only be realised by a researcher who understands the society properly. Having decided on the categories to be analysed in this treatise on The Trinidad Douglas the author then indicates that the door to be opened for this interpretation is the use of language in the above-mentioned categories of daily living. The result is a collection of 103 terms in the speech and writing of the Douglas community. Thus we have pages and pages in chapter three which are a linguist's delight. Equally, they reproduce for the historic record terms and descriptions which are being used by an increasingly diminishing minority, most of them in rural areas. The majority of the Indic terms derive from the "cow-belt" of Northern India from whence the majority of the indentureds came. This area is most often described as the Bhojpur region, centring on Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. To this reviewer's knowledge, the last such compilation of Indian-derived everyday terms was published by a senior British administrator in Northern India. Many of these terms are contained in George Grierson's *Bihar Peasant Life* published in Calcutta in 1885. *The Trinidad Douglas* provides a much-needed update on that ancestral lexicon. So, it is with great delight that we are re-familiarized with words like *daru* (rum), *kawr* (a mouthful of food), *saanay* (eating food with hands) and *talkaree* (a vegetable side-dish). The book therefore is a refreshing reminder of a not too distant past. Equally, there are words which derive from the African vocabulary such as *madinga* (an African muslim) and *tabanca* (sadness after infidelity or abandonment).

Like most well-constructed tomes, *The Trinidad Douglas* seeks to contextualise the local Douglas situation within the larger international scenario. How do other mixed minority groups such as Native Americans or mixed Canadians negotiate their spaces in these other New World environments? In this regard, the book looks at two similarly placed communities in North America. The first group highlighted is the mixed community of American Indians in Robeson County, North Carolina, where

these First Peoples live alongside larger groups of European Americans and African Americans. These “Lumbees” are confusing to the federal authorities which call them “mixed”, “free coloured” or “free white”. All of these classifications deny them their First Nation status and, in that process, the entitlements given to accredited First Peoples. One of the ways in which the Lumbees seek survival of their identity is through the creation of their own language which is a mixture of their lexical terms with English in what has been described as Lumbee Vernacular English (LVE). The other mixed group chosen for this study is the Meti population of Western Canada. Metis are descendants of native Canadians and European settlers, mainly French. Although there are about one million Metis in Canada they are as marginalized as the Lumbees of the USA or the Douglas of Trinbago. As with the Dougla population, some cling to their First Nation identity, others to the French heritage and others to a Greater Canada affiliation. There is considerable disunity among these entities, facilitating a larger side-lining by the nation as a whole. Perhaps there is a case for an international unification of people of mixed descent as the various First Nations are currently doing.

The argument of *The Trinidad Dougla* is that the local challenges are not unique nor are they restricted to any one group. There are larger structural problems to be clarified and these are linked to the preservation of language as a unifying factor since language is the repository of a people’s soul. In this way, Ferne Louanne Regis believes that “Douglas, like others, would draw from a pool of resources available to them via their community, the linguistic tools needed for social interaction” (13).

In the final analysis, *The Trinidad Dougla* opens up a whole new area of research on an increasingly important sector of the national community. At the present time, that element seems to be unaware of their increasing importance. Most are not even aware of the dilemma of choosing among the Indic, the Afric or the neutral options. Because of the absence of proper information and analysis, our Douglas live in a confused space not realizing their potential as agents of national unity. Many Canadians regard the Metis as the true Canadians, a genuinely hybrid race. By the same token, our Dougla population may well be regarded as the true Trinbagonians, reflecting a society in which ethnic tensions can be reduced.

In this regard, *The Trinidad Dougla* provides a useful opening to what one hopes will be a wider debate about the national space which is being increasingly occupied by Douglas. This will be good for those who live in the shadow of their joint ancestry as well as for the health of the nation as a whole. Like soca-chutney which combines the lyrics and melodies of the Afric and the Indic in Trinbago, an increased recognition and inclusion of the Dougla population, can lead to greater understanding among our peoples. We should pay heed to this, a major message of *The Trinidad Dougla*.