

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

AISHA KHAN, *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity among South Asians in Trinidad*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2004, 231 p.

Indian academic, Amitava Kumar, from a province in India that once sent legions of indentured laborers to Trinidad, records his visit to the Indo-Trinidadian community in his film, *Pure Chutney*. In Trinidad he is elated to find Hindus and Muslims living together, even intermarrying, in a mixed up “chutney” of tolerance unimaginable in contemporary India, where religious symbols all too frequently trigger violence. Aisha Khan’s lucid account of race and religion in Trinidad traverses this same territory with a thoroughness a short film cannot capture, making a fascinating and complex series of arguments.

Khan’s book is ambitious, spanning a history of indenture from the early nineteenth century to its aftermath in contemporary Trinidad. Her field research with Indo-Trinidadians in Trinidad’s south was conducted over the course of the last decade. Her debt to her mentor, Eric Wolf, is evident not only in her nuanced historical perspective, but also in her attention to shifts in meanings of race and religion, as Trinidad’s politics (from colony to nation) and economy (from plantation to oil) have changed radically. Khan focuses on Hindu and Muslim Indo-Trinidadians as they both accommodate and differentiate themselves from each other, and from other non-Indo-Trinidadians. We read some wonderfully complex family histories (pp. 78-83) showing that neighborhoods, families, and even households, are often comprised of Hindus, Muslims, and even various sorts of Christians, all “living good together.”

Khan handles the slippery concepts of “race” and “religion” in this Caribbean nation, whose diverse population is a legacy of colonialism, slavery and indentured labor, without relying on the dated anthropological concept of “syncretism,” which presupposes existing, essentialized races and religions that may then be “mixed.” Khan, in contrast, drawing on Asad’s notion that the domain of “religion” is itself created by authorizing powers which themselves should be the subject of anthropological inquiry, treats both religion and race as emergent categories, not prior to but arising within everyday interaction in uneven and often contradictory ways.

The “callaloo” of the book’s title refers on one level to Trinidad’s national dish, callaloo, a stew which takes its name and flavor from callaloo leaves.

The flexibility of callaloo – myriad ingredients can be added to it – endow it with symbolic potential to capture the political realities of postcolonial Trinidad. “Callaloo” is now used as a metaphor for modern political life in Trinidad, with the stew’s many ingredients standing for the (at least ideologically) distinct race and religious groups in Trinidad, blending together to form a palatable whole, or by extension, a cosmopolitan polity. What Khan refers to as “callaloo modernity” is represented linguistically in the common phrases in the Trinidadian English vernacular “all ah we is one” and when referring to religion, as “is all one God, anyhow.”

Khan analyzes creolization or callaloo, as “mixing” metaphors, as ideologies that are “causal forces in social processes” (p. 4), at times working in tandem with ideologies of purity, at times at cross purposes with them. For the paradox in Trinidadian political life is that callaloo modernity in some senses requires sharpening the boundaries of the different “ingredients.” Khan notes the increasing tendency in the latter half of the 20th century for both Hindus and Muslims to establish domains of orthodoxy, inevitably stressing boundaries in its fixation with “pure” unadulterated practices. As she notes, “Indo-Trinidadians live callaloo and idealize purity” (p. 222). Here we find Khan encapsulating a distinctive Trinidadian “structure of feeling”: a laudable peaceful co-existence with different racial or religious others combined with blunt and sometimes unflattering commentary about these same others. It is to Khan’s credit as an ethnographer that both of these tendencies, and the tensions between them, are meticulously recorded.

This is hardy ethnography: finely grained descriptions of the quotidian analyzed with sophisticated theory. It will be a key text not only for scholars of the Caribbean, but also for scholars of religion, particularly those interested in how domains of orthodoxy are established or undermined. For those grappling with subject matter currently glossed under the terms “multiculturalism” or “diversity,” Khan’s discussion of “mixing metaphors” is an insightful and welcome point of departure from now hackneyed debates.

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