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Contemporary Hijra Identity in Guyana: Colonial and Postcolonial Transformations in Hijra Gender Identity

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CONTEMPORARY HIJRA IDENTITY IN GUYANA: COLONIAL AND
POSTCOLONIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN HIJRA GENDER
IDENTITY

by

SHAINNA ALI

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Anthropology
and The Burnett Honors College
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Orlando Florida

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Thesis Chair: Dr. Rosalyn Howard

ABSTRACT

Before European colonialism, inhabitants of Guyana were Amerindians scattered across the “land of many waters” (Glasgow 1970:6; Rabe 2005:5). During the era of imperialism (1499-Guyanese Independence May 1966), the Dutch and British utilized indigenous and African slave labor as well as indentured servants from Asia to harvest cash crops (Glasgow 1970:131; Whitehead 2010:53). The British brought indentured servants across the *kala pani*, or dark water, from India to Guyana under the pretense of a better life. Under the harsh restrictions of colonial life, the Indian indentured laborers, negatively referred to as *coolies*, were culturally suppressed. Virtually all aspects of daily life and institutions were altered, including such apparently natural areas of social life as gender. This thesis examines the possible existence of *hijra* in early 21st century Indo-Guyanese society as a third gender identity from India, that survived the transatlantic separation from India, colonial oppression and postcolonial suppression (Bockrath 2003:83; Nanda 1998; Reddy 2003: 163-189; Reddy 2005a:256-266).

DEDICATIONS

To my parents, Sharla and Sheik, for your warm love, unreserved support and the opportunity of achieving a higher education, a gift I will not take for granted.

To my sister, Neshanna, for providing me with unconditional love and support.

To my family, without whom this thesis would not be possible; thank you for your faith.

And to Michael, for your helping hand and for believing in me more than I do myself.

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LIST OF TERMS

- Badhai** A ritualized performance done by hijra at weddings and ninth-day ceremonies in order to bless fertility. This performance includes singing and dancing. Badhai is also the term used for the compensation received for performing the ceremony. Badhai can include money, food, and or gifts and a main source of income for hijra.
- Berdache** “Two-spirit,” transgender or homosexual identity among American Indians such as the Aztec.
- Bhajan** Hindu hymn or prayer.
- Chela** A young, student-like state of hijra identity.
- Dholak** An Indian drum.
- Emic** An insider approach.
- Fa’afafine** A Samoan gender identity.
- Ferm** Individuals born with ovaries and some aspects of male genitalia.
- Guru** Translates to “teacher” in Hindi. In terms of hijra, gurus are also considered to be hijra elders that guide individuals through the processes of becoming hijra and provide mentorship throughout their lives.
- Harmonium** An accordion.

Hook swinging	Practice in which individuals pierce their skin and suspend themselves with the use of hooks.
Herm	Individuals with one testis and one ovary.
Hijra	Individual(s) of a third gender predominantly Indian identity that have the power to bless others with fertility or curse with infertility. There is a debate regarding whether this status is truly third gender, transsexual, transvestite, transgender, bisexual or homosexual.
Merm	Individuals born with testes and some aspects of female genitalia.
Moksha	The liberation from the cycle of reincarnation in the Hindu faith.
Ninth-day	A ceremony in which an infant is blessed by a pandit and given his or her auspicious name.
Pandit	Scholar, teacher and priest within the Hindu religion.
Phagwah	Commonly known as “Holi,” is a festival of colors that is celebrated among the Indian Diaspora.
Mooran	Also known as “Mundan,” this is a Hindu ceremony performed when a child receives his or her first haircut. The hair is symbolic of undesirable traits from the child’s past life.
Sadhin	Female gender variant who fails to develop secondary sex characteristics and then denounces the female gender. This gender identity is similar to that of hijra. This term can be used for the singular or plural tenses.

Sannyasis	A denomination of religious ascetics in which hijra are known to belong to as noted in the Ramayana.
Sari	Female dress in India usually made from 7-9 yards of cloth and wrapped around the body
Sati	Hindu ritual in which a widow either volunteers to or is forcibly thrown into the funeral pyre of her late husband.
Shiv-shaktis	Individuals, such as hijra, who have the powers of the Hindu deity Shiva.
Svadharm	An individual's duty that is to be completed in their current life span.
Sworn virgin	Alabian third gender status that indirectly allows individuals born as females to inherit land or avoid arranged marriage.
Zenana	Male prostitutes.

INTRODUCTION

Sex and gender: these are two terms that I believed were synonymous for most of my life. In an introductory anthropology course, my eyes were opened to the Western gender normative of “male” and “female” that I, like many others, grew up conforming to. After I finally learned the truth, I was eager to learn about the fluidity of gender. While delving into research related to different gender identities worldwide such as *berdache*, a “two-spirit,” transgender or homosexual identity among American Indians such as the Aztec, and *fa’afafine*, a Samoan gender identity, I was quick to find hijra identity in India (Estrada 2003:12; Herdt 1994; Kulick 2003; Lang 2003; Samoa Faafafine Association Inc. 2009). Since my parents are Indo-Guyanese, I had a particular interest in hijra, considering my Indian ancestry. As a first generation college student, my interest was sparked for the first time in a concept that connected me to my family, to my culture, and to myself. In my excitement, I began to talk to my family members about my newfound research interest and, before long, I realized that hijra identity is also associated with Indo-Guyanese culture and is not strictly a mainland Indian gender identity.

One day, in 2008, my mother and grandmother were having their routine daily call and my grandmother asked about my coursework. My mother promptly replied, informing her of my recent research study of hijra identity, and my upcoming search for the identity’s existence in Guyana. My grandmother instantly reminded my mother of hijra in Guyana, including those who were present at her birth ritual and those of her brothers as well. Growing up with a Hindu mother, I was aware of various Hindu ceremonies that survived the long trip from India to Guyana. This includes the *Ninth-day*

in which a *pandit*, a Hindu priest, would bless a newborn and provide him or her with their astral name, *Mooran*, in which a child receives his or her first haircut, and several engagement, marriage, and funeral rituals (Despres 1967:97). I can even recall attending services in a *mandir*, a Hindu temple, and throwing colored powder in celebration of *Phagwah*, a spring celebration (ibid). Until that phone call however, I was unaware of hijra in Guyana. Furthermore, I was astonished to learn that in the Western world, specifically in Guyana, hijra were practicing their rituals as recently as the 1960s. Since my family told me that the British did not allow indentured laborers to speak their native languages, such as Hindi, I inferred that this practice, combined with hours of plantation labor, caused a decrease and ultimate abandonment of native languages and, furthermore, of native practices including hijra rituals (Mars 2002). The next time I spoke to my grandmother, I asked her about her recollection of hijra rituals; she confirmed similar rituals to those that Serena Nanda documents among Indian hijra, such as dancing at weddings and Ninth-day ceremonies. Additionally, she mentioned that they were not men and they were not women, however, they possessed the gift to bless fertility (Bockrath 2003:85; Nanda 1998:1-4).

Although, my grandmother disclosed similarities to hijra identity that I had previously discovered in my research, there were many key factors she did not mention, such as ritual castration and asexual status. Of course there was the possibility that she forgot to mention these details, never knew about such details herself or felt uncomfortable discussing such topics with her granddaughter. However, I could not help wondering if hijra, an identity birthed in mainland India, had traveled and transformed in Guyana. Quickly after learning about the possibility of hijra identity in Guyana, I started

to consider the definition of hijra in Guyana versus in India and the possible catalysts for identity transformation. I hypothesized that hijra gender identity in Guyana differed from hijra identity in India due to colonial and postcolonial strains on the identity itself and the Indo-Guyanese culture overall.

Unfortunately, there is a substantial lack of data concerning Indo-Guyanese peoples. The literature on Indo-Guyanese focuses on the transfer of labor from India to the Caribbean and briefly on their experiences during British Colonialism. There is a profound lack of attention given to the ethnic diversity that exists and has existed in Guyana since colonialism (Glasgow 1970; Rabe 2005:5; Ridgwell 1972). Even the most recently published work on Guyana focuses on the Amerindians that are a minority in Guyana (Guyana Bureau of Statistics 2002; Whitehead 2010). Furthermore, there is also a significant void in the literature on gender in Guyana, especially within the realm of transgender; gender-related works focus on the placement of men and women in Guyanese society (Trotz 1996). This thesis will aim to shed light on this significant gap in the research about Guyana, specifically concerning ethnic diversity beyond indigenous peoples, and how the processes of colonial transformation impacted Indo-Guyanese peoples and the gender identities and cultural practices they brought to this South American country. This research has the potential to contribute to diverse fields of scholarship, including cultural anthropology, colonial, postcolonial, religious, and gender studies. Furthermore, this thesis is also very important to me personally, as I am ethnically Indo-Guyanese, and this thesis project provides me with the opportunity to experience being an “insider” or “native” anthropologist and to contribute to Indo-Guyanese research.

The first chapter of this thesis examines the core definition of hijra identity based on its status in India, including third sex and third gender characteristics. Chapter 2 documents the existence of hijra in Guyana. Chapter 3 discusses the influence of colonialism on cultural identities. Chapter 4 details the continuing influence of colonialism on cultural identities and the contemporary construction of hijra identity in Guyana.

CHAPTER ONE: HIJRA IDENTITY

Hijra: A Third Sex, Third Gender Identity

Hijra is an identity that developed in India. In terms of sex and gender, hijra do not conform to either male or female identities (Nanda 1998:13-18; Reddy 2003:163-188). In terms of sex, hijra can be born intersex. The sex scale has great distance between what biologically determines a male and a female. According to Anne Fausto-Sterling, there are at least three additional sexes that lie within this realm: *herms*, individuals with one testis and one ovary; *ferms*, who have ovaries and some aspects of male genitalia; and *merms*, who have testes and some aspects of female genitalia (1993:21; 2000)¹. The three aforementioned sexes are all specific denominations of intersex and most individuals that are born this way have ambiguous genitalia, making it hard to classify them under the two-part, male-female Western classification. In the West, the tendency is to have constructive surgery in order for an individual to fit more clearly within the male or female realm (Fausto-Sterling 1993:20-24; 2000). In India, however, there is a role for those with ambiguous genitalia, and that role is as a hijra.

Individuals born as males can become hijra by abandoning their male or female characteristics. The alternate gender-variant, females who renounce their female characteristics or fail to develop secondary sex characteristics, are referred to as *sadhin* rather than hijra (Penrose 2001:4). Impotence is central to defining a male as hijra and not as a "man." Then, hijra undergo an emasculation operation, a form of ritualized surgical

¹ Fausto-Sterling later changed her analysis on sex in her book *Sexing The Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*.

castration, to renounce one's male qualities (Bockrath 2003:83; Nanda 1998:24-38).

Although their absence of male genitalia classify hijra as not male, it does not qualify them as females either and in this sense, they are "neither man nor women" (Nanda 1998).

The Roles of Indian Hijra

The oldest written record of a hijra comes from the Indian Ramayana, an ancient Hindu text compiled between 400 B.C.E and 200 C.E. In this account, Ram, the heroic prince of Ayodhya, was banished into exile in the forest. As all the villagers followed him to the outskirts of the town, he turned to them and assured the worried villagers that he would return and advised the men and women to go back their homes. Upon Ram's return, he was shocked to see a group of hijra awaiting him in the same location where he had told the villagers to return home. Humbly, one of the hijra explained to Ram that he (Ram) had only told the men and women to return home, but they [the hijra] are "neither men nor women" and therefore, Ram never told them to leave. Instead, the hijra stayed in the area as ascetics, praying for Ram's safe return (Bockrath 2003:86; Reddy 2003:189-190; Venkatesananda 1988). This particular account places hijra close to Brahmin, the highest Hindu caste, for the hijra's willingness to escape from daily life and to dedicate their lives to prayer and God (Nanda 1998:13).

Many Hindu hijra who believe that hijra were sanctified by Ram find congruencies between hijra and Lord Shiva, who embodies characteristics of both man and woman, making him whole rather than the half a single male or female would be (Lal 1999:122-125). An account about Shiva tells of an instance in which he was given the responsibility

of creating the world; however Shiva would soon discover that Brahma had already taken on this task. Enraged, Shiva then ripped off his genitals and threw them towards the Earth; this act in turn, blessed the world with fertility. This account is the source for the origins of the hijra castration ceremony, in which males undergo a ritual removal of the penis, following which the individual is symbolically no longer male and yet not quite female. Just like Lord Shiva, hijra, without their male sex organs and the ability to procreate are able to bless individuals with the gift of fertility (Bockrath 2003: 83; Lal 1999: 123-124; Nanda 1998:29-30; Reddy 2003:176). In accordance with the accounts of Ram and Shiva, hijra can be placed in the categories of ascetics or castrated males who are “neither man nor woman” (Nanda 1998:13-19).

Followers of the Hindu faith other than hijra believe in the association between Ram and hijra as well as Shiva and hijra. The hijra tie to Lord Shiva and hence the power to bless individuals with fertility or scorn with sterility has become intertwined with Hindu culture. Also referred to as *Shiv-shaktis*, which translates to the power of Shiva, the masculine principle of the elements in the universe, and the power of Shakti, the dynamic in which the elements come to life. Possessing this power then, hijra perform the ritual of *badhai* in which they bless individuals with the gift of fertility as Lord Shiva did for the Earth. In this ceremony, hijra arrive at the home, regardless of whether they were invited or not, play their *dholaks* (drums) and *harmoniums* (accordions), dance and sing to bless the families and expect to be accommodated for and gifted with money and gifts (Khan et al. 2009:441,445; Nanda 1998:1-6).

According to the Hindu faith, by remaining abstinent and performing *badhai*, hijra are performing their *svadharma*, their spiritual task. (Nanda 1998:15) Carrying out these

religious obligations keep hijra on the path to *moksha* in which they will be “released from the cycles of human existence” (Penrose 2001:7). This belief allows for hijra identity to exist within Indian society (Penrose 2001).

Perspectives of Hijra Identity in India

Hijra According to Hijra Elders

Hijra elders are known as *gurus*. Their senior status usually gives them the responsibility to help, control, and guide their hijra disciples (Khan et al. 2009:443). In India, hijra leaders explain that in order to be revered as *sannyasis* or “ascetics and religious mendicants,” (Bockrath 2003:84) hijra must conform to certain rules such as remaining chaste. Some hijra elders even claim they never experience sexual desire as a true hijra is incapable of sexual desire (ibid). The hijra elders believe, however, that if hijra were to take part in any sexual act, they would deface the hijra community overall. Hijra would no longer be valid as highly regarded religious characters (Nanda 1998:10). For this reason, hijra elders do not consider hijra identity to be congruent with homosexuality or bisexuality. Hijra elders disagree with the belief that hijra is a transgender role. These elders are adamant when claiming they are “neither man nor woman” and use Hindu scriptures to defend their third gender status (Herdt 1994; Nanda 1998; Reddy 2002:163-170).

The hijra elders are quick to make the distinction between “true hijra” and other identities that may seem equivalent to the outsider’s eye. Hijra elders claim that individuals who claim to be hijra and resort to prostitution simply do so as a means of survival. The elders do not refer to these individuals as hijra and sometimes refer to them

as *zenana*, men who submit to sodomy and deprive female prostitutes of their living (Bockrath 2003:83). According to hijra elders, those in the category of *zenana* are unworthy of hijra status due to their inability to remain abstinent. Leaders of the hijra community declare that such individuals actually are homosexual, transgendered or “fake hijras, or men who are only impersonating women” (Nanda 1998:10-11).

Hijra According to Modern Hijra in India

There are modern hijra in India who adhere to the ethical conduct set by hijra elders. These modern followers claim to remain abstinent and uphold their dharma by payments of *badhai* (Bockrath 2003; Penrose 2001:7; Nanda 1998:11, 43; Reddy 2005a:260). As *chelas*, subordinates of their hijra gurus, they respect their elders’ spiritual advice and knowledge of what it means to be hijra (Nanda 1998:43-48).

There are individuals who classify themselves as hijra who admit to homosexual prostitution (Bockrath 2003:84). Some of these individuals choose to keep this as a secret from their hijra elders while others are open about their acts. Some hijra who engage in prostitution like Kamldevi, even venture to say that those, like the gurus, who claim they have “no sexual interest are telling lies” (Nanda, 1998:57). Those that risk telling the truth about their acts to their gurus jeopardize their status as hijra, as strict gurus may renounce their status as hijra and refer to them solely as *zenana*. As *zenana*, they are no longer valid as *Shiv-shaktis* and would not be allowed to perform *badhai*. *Badhai* is the main source of income for hijra and this is a main reason that hijra *chelas* do not tell their gurus about their sexual acts. Furthermore, the fact that *badhai* is their primary source of

income is one of the fundamental reasons hijra turn to homosexual prostitution (Reddy 2005a:260).

Marginalized by society, it is difficult for hijra to find jobs. Sometimes they are able to find housemaid positions, but this is rare. Alms from badhai are usually not enough to survive on. For this reason, many hijra turn to homosexual prostitution in order to survive. These individuals claim that some gurus do condone such acts and turn a blind eye to reality. Homosexual prostitution does not solve the economic crisis of modern hijra. Many seek husbands as a way out of their seemingly never ending poverty. Meera, a hijra guru, even chose a husband of her own although several of her peers did not agree with her actions (Nanda 1998:11, 43, 76-79). In order to make ends meet, some hijra with husbands continue prostitution. Although marriage enhances hijra economic status, the act of sexual intercourse goes against the austere nature of hijra, in which some claim to be asexual and never experience sexual desires (Bockrath 2003:83-87). Furthermore, the modern act of hijra marrying men denies the definition of hijra as third gender (Khan et al. 2009:446).

In addition, there are hijra males who don *saris* and perform hijra blessing rituals at weddings and childbirths who also have wives and children. These individuals then seem to be bisexual or transvestites (Nanda 1998; Reddy 2003). These individuals do not perform the castration ritual required, according to hijra elders, to reject the male gender and to become hijra. Many of these individuals face economic hardship as the hijra do and seek to profit from the ritual of badhai. This is a desperate measure and these individuals are usually not accepted as chelas by hijra gurus (Nanda 1998; Reddy 2002; Reddy 2005a).

An Etic Perspective of Hijra

Followers of the Hindu faith who believe in shakti truly believe that hijra possess the power to bless individuals or curse individuals (Nanda 1998:5-7). These individuals try to accommodate hijra rituals and provide them with their required amounts of wheat flour, sugarcane, sweets, cloth for sari and money in order to receive their blessings (1998:3). Not all Hindus revere hijra as the sannyasis, especially because of contradiction between religious asceticism and sexual interactions. Many hosts of hijra uninvited rituals will refuse to pay. Sometimes they provide them with rude remarks instead and threaten to lift their saris and expose their mutilated or ambiguous genitalia (Khan et al. 2009:445). Although the hijra claim that viewing their exposed genitalia will cause both males and females viewers to become infertile, this declaration has no weight for those who do not have faith in hijra powers (Nanda 1998:6-7; Penrose 2001:11).

Hijra are located within an extreme margin of society. Since they are outside the male-female dichotomy, they are subject to mental and physical abuse. Reliance on badhai is not always enough for survival. Social exclusion causes a diminished sense of social responsibility as well as decreased self-esteem. Hijra then revert to prostitution and find husbands for economic stability; however, this only contradicts the religious nature of hijra and perpetuates the belief that hijra powers are invalid (Bockrath 2003:84; Khan et al. 2009:441; Reddy 2003:164; Reddy 2005a:260).

Diasporic Hijra

Hijra in Southeast Asia

Within the literature, hijra identity seems almost exclusive to India. The identity, however, is not restricted to one country despite the overwhelming association with India. There are few, but important, accounts of hijra in the neighboring Southeast Asian countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh (Drenner 2009; Khan et al 2009; Walsh 2010). Pakistan and Bengal gained recognition as independent nations in the early 20th century; prior to this time, these two nations were the Punjab, Sindh, Balochista, and Bengal provinces in India (US Department of State 2009). It is then possible that hijra identity existed in Pakistan and Bangladesh since this time.

There are an estimated 300,000 Pakistani hijra. Pakistani hijra are generally shunned. Hijra in Pakistan dance at weddings and beg for compensation (BBC News 2009). Some sources claim that hijra in Pakistan revert to prostitution in order to survive (Walsh 2010). The predominant Muslim society of Pakistan provides no acceptance for hijra as Hinduism provided for Indian hijra (BBC News 2009; Bockrath 2003:86; Babda 1998:13; Reddy 2003:189-190; Venkatesananda 1988). Hijra in Bangladesh are also marginalized by society. Khan et al. state that hijra in Bangladesh are “asexual outcasts” (2009:446). This shows that, regardless of the host country, hijra are marginalized because of their nonconforming gender status.

There are no suggestions in the literature that pertain to the existence of hijra identity outside of Southeast Asia. The news media recognizes the existence of hijra in

Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, there is a profound lack of cultural anthropological research on hijra outside of India. To the best of my knowledge, only one article exists that highlights the presence of hijra in Bangladesh and none exist that demonstrate the existence of hijra in Pakistan (Khan et al 2009).

Hijra in the Americas

In an informal conversation in 2009 with an individual who I will refer to as “Sati,” I learned that there is a group of American transgendered individuals interested in Eastern dance styles who associate themselves with hijra. Sati, who was born as a male, is transgender and currently identifies herself as a female. Sati mentioned her fascination with hijra culture. She was interested in the concept of an ancient gender identity receiving social acceptance by its culture. Her fascination caused her to go to India and receive the traditional castration ceremony. Sati does not perform any hijra rituals, yet she associates with hijra identity. According to accounts I have heard from my family members and close friends, hijra identity also exists in Guyana.

Accounts of hijra in Guyana attest to their ritual roles. My grandaunt recalls that hijra would come and dance for newlyweds and newborns. This shows evidence for the carryover of badhai to Guyana. Of the Guyanese individuals that mentioned their knowledge of hijra in Guyana, none mentioned the castration ceremony or intersex status that defines hijra in India (Nanda 1998:3, 5, 14). It is possible that these individuals are not aware of the aforementioned characteristics, and it is also possible that these characteristics are not used to define hijra identity in Guyana.

The accounts mentioned in this thesis are from informal conversations. To the best of my knowledge, there had been no research on hijra identity in Guyana thus far. Cultural anthropology in Guyana places a heavy focus on the Amerindians that existed in Guyana prior to colonialism. The most recent cultural anthropology research continues to focus on the Amerindian population who are a minority in terms of population composition (Guyana Bureau of Statistics 2002; Whitehead 2009). Further research needs to be done in regards to Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Guyana hijra.

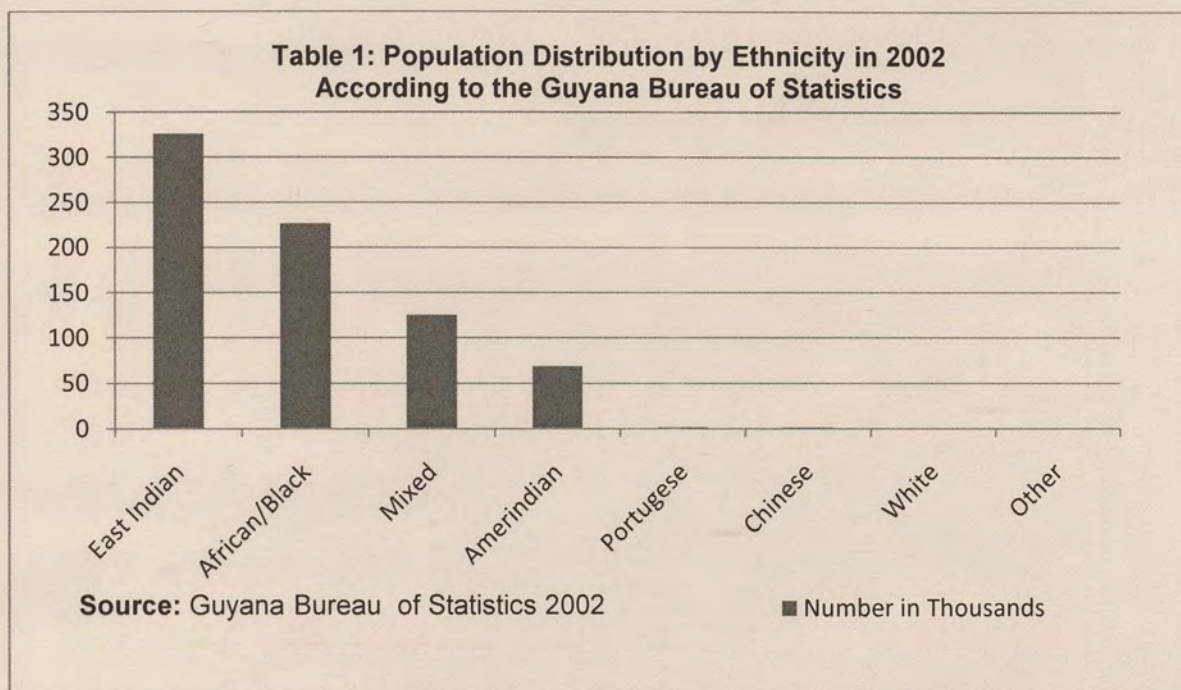
CHAPTER TWO: GUYANA

Where in the World is Guyana?

The Cooperative Republic of Guyana is located in Northern South America although its colonial history has associated the country more with the Caribbean. Guyana is located to the east of Venezuela, to the west of Suriname and to the north of Brazil. The country spans 214,740 square kilometers, making it the third smallest country in the continent of South America and a nation slightly smaller in landmass than Idaho. The terrain is comprised of coastal plains, forest zones, and savannahs. The climate is tropical and hence attracted European settlers from the Netherlands, France and Britain (Jeffrey and Baber 1986:5-6; Universal Periodic Review 2010b; Whitehead 2010:145). The current population consists of 751,223 individuals, most of whom are descendants of slaves and indentured servants brought to the country when it was a colony (Jeffrey and Baber 1986:5-12; Guyana Bureau of Statistics 2002).

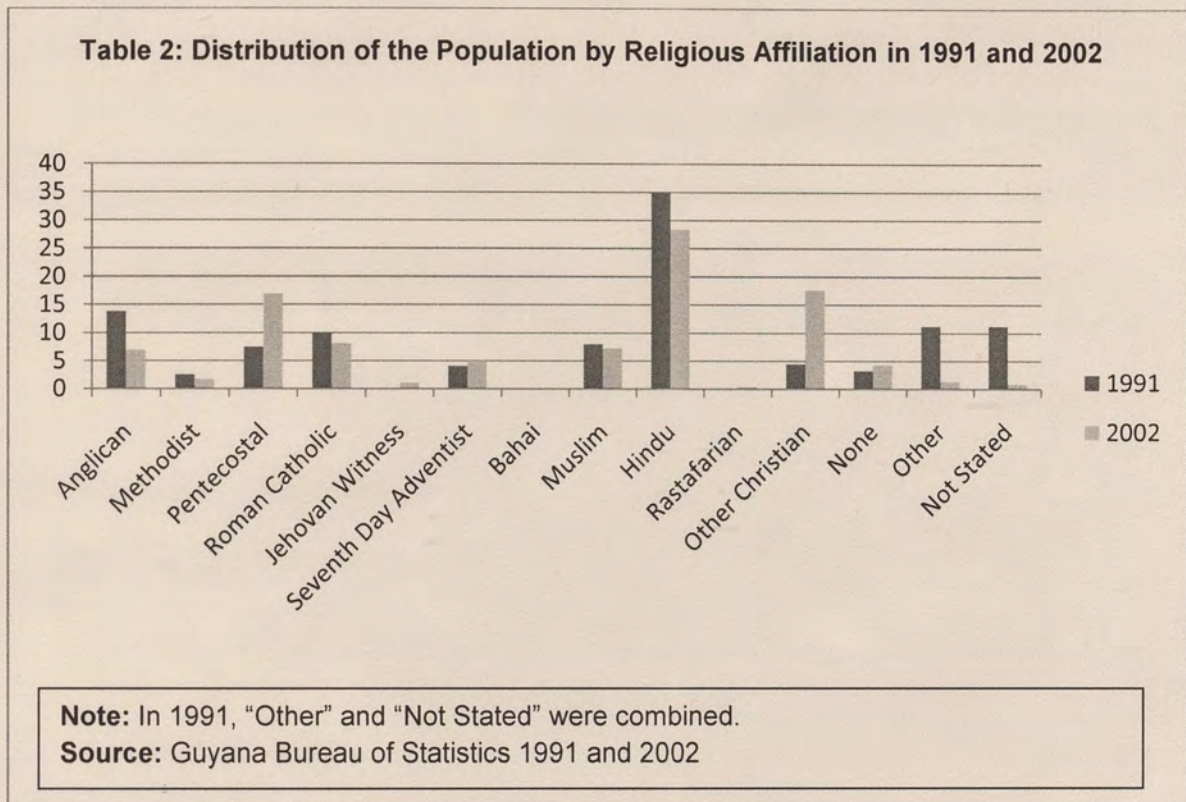
As noted in Table 1, the most recent census notes the existence of East Indians, Africans, Amerindians, Portuguese, Chinese, Caucasians and individuals of mixed descent in Guyana (Guyana Bureau of Statistics 2002:27-28). The East Indian and African populations in Guyana have been known to dominate politics (Whitehead 2010:145). According to Table 1, this occurrence can be attributed to their majority status as the combination of about 227,062 Africans and 326,277 East Indians make up about seventy-four percent of the population whereas the mixed population totals about seventeen percent, the Amerindian population totals about nine percent and the

Caucasians, Portuguese, Chinese and other races total less than one percent of the population (Guyana Bureau of Statistics 2002:27-28).



The largest religious group in Guyana, as shown in Table 2, belongs to followers of Hinduism. This group makes up about 28 percent of the population. The Christian group, including Baptists, Moravians, Brethren, and Methodists, are the second largest religious group and together they make up about 18 percent of the population. This exemplifies the growing influence of Christianity in Guyana, since the 1991 Census showed only about five percent of the population to fall into this category of “other Christians,” whereas the Hindus were 35 percent of the population in 1991 (Guyana Bureau of Statistics 1991). As can be seen in Table 2, the number of Anglicans, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Muslims and Hindus have decreased (1991-2002) while the number of Pentecostals, Jehovah Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Bahai, Rastafarians and Other Christians have increased. The 23 percent decrease in the Hindu

faith is particularly important to contemporary hijra in Guyana, since the concept of hijra is rooted within Hinduism (Guyana Bureau of Statistics 2002:32-34).



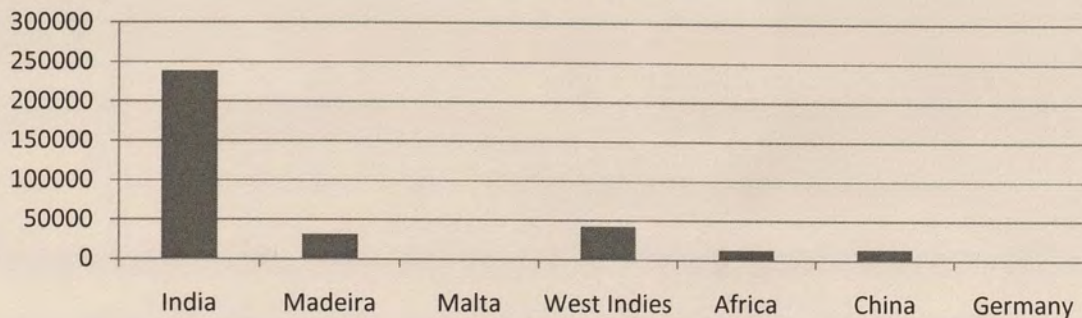
Colonialism in Guyana

European interest in Guyana was sparked with Sir Walter Raleigh's fictitious El Dorado, the city of gold. Subsequently, Holland, France and Britain wanted to plunder the country for its proposed riches and resources (Despres 1967:31; Jeffrey and Baber 1986:4; Mars 2002:53) Although Guyana has been passed between the hands of the Dutch and British several times, and even the French once, Guyana was ultimately ceded to the British (Despres 1967:31). British control of the land was made official at the Treaty of Paris in 1814, and by 1831, the three former Dutch colonies of Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo were combined to form British Guiana, which after independence was renamed Guyana (Jeffrey and Baber 1986:5; Chambers 1989:xxi-xv).

In 1803 a sugar economy dependent on slave labor was already in existence (Despres 1967:33). Even when the separate colonies of Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo were ceded to Britain in 1803 by the Articles of Capitulation, there was no decrease in the demand for slave labor and no distraction to the overall process (Despres 1967:33). During the nineteenth century, sugar production increased enormously, and there was an influx of African slave labor to meet production demands (Mars 2002:47).

The British abolished slavery in 1834, however, many colonies, including British Guiana, had a four year period of “apprenticeship” in which slavery continued until 1838. From 1834 through 1838, the future of British Guiana’s sugar, coffee and cotton industries was uncertain (Jeffrey and Baber 1986:13; Mars 2002:47-48). The British attempted to enslave the present Amerindian population but this was a large failure; the natives would simply return from the bush from where they came, into the interior, their homeland that they knew well (Jeffrey and Baber 1986:10). There was an option of using former slaves in the indenture system; however, like the natives, there was fear that they would retreat to the interior and revert to traditional African culture even though they had been acculturated through slavery (Despres 1967:54). The solution was to import indentured servants to British Guiana.

Table 3: Number of Indentured Servants Arriving in British Guiana 1835-1918



Note:

The total of German immigrants during this time is unknown.

Source:

Cultural Pluralism and Nationalist Politics in British Guiana 1967

As can be seen in Table 3, indentured servants included Portuguese, Chinese, West Indians, Africans and East Indians, and an unsuccessful set of Germans (Basdeo 1986:43; Bastos 2008:39; Despres 1967:46-65; Jeffrey and Baber 1986:12; Mars 2002:48; Rabe 2005:18). The first Germans came in 1834, the Portuguese came from the Madeira Islands in 1835, the Chinese mostly came from Hong Kong in 1853, and the Indians came in 1838 from Northern provinces like Bengal and Bihar while others came from Southern provinces. (Basdeo 1986:43; Bastos 2008:39; Jeffrey and Baber 1986:12; Mars 2002:48; Rabe 2005:18). Most of the Indians who arrived were poor and from lower castes in India. Several had been tricked by recruiters, led by false promises, into indenture (Basdeo 1986:43). Indentured servants would sign contracts assigning them to five years of labor and a meager wage (Despres 1967:54; Mars 2002:48; Rabe 2005:18). Indians were required to adhere to a ten year indenture in order to qualify for a free passage back to India (Basdeo 1986:46; Despres 1967:57). Laborers of Portuguese, Chinese, Indian, and African descent were brought to the Caribbean with the hopes of

escaping poverty and living a better life (Bastos 2008:39; Beezmohun 1996:329; Chambers 1989: xv; Mars 2002:48). The British continued to exploit the indentured laborers for over a hundred years after the abolition of slavery.

The decline in the sugar industry at the beginning of the 20th century caused a need for change in the British imperial system in Guyana. Calls for reform were pronounced and led to the independence movement in the 1950s to 1960s. Guyana finally achieved its independence in May of 1966. In 1970, the country adopted the status of a Co-operative Republic and by 1980 a new constitution was enacted (Chambers 1989:xiii-xv).

CHAPTER THREE: CULTURAL IDENTITIES UNDER COLONIALISM

Afro-Guyanese Slaves in British Guiana

During British colonialism, slaves from Africa were brought across the Atlantic to Caribbean countries for a lifetime of hard labor and virtually nothing else (Jeffrey and Baber 1986:9). Long hours of labor prohibited religious practice. They were prohibited from speaking their native language and needed to learn English instead in order to communicate with their masters (Despres 1967:45). Plantation life was oppressive for Afro-Guyanese slaves and they lacked basic rights (Mars 2002:67). Slaves did not have the right to object to plantation work. Those who did were quickly put into place by the whip. Whippings were frequent; they were the main method of control (ibid). Some slaves who recognized the injustice of their treatment would react in two main ways: suicide or revolt. In the colonial system, it was a slave's word against his or her plantation owner, his or her manager, or any colonial official (Despres 1967:54; Mars 2002:38; Rabe 2005:16). This was the main reason that uprisings were highly unsuccessful in British Guyana; because the current system leaned in favor of the colonial officials, revolts would only result in further punishment. In 1828 alone, colonial officials recorded over 20,000 slave offences, most of which were on the basis of failure to work (Rabe 2005:16).

Slave patrols were developed by plantation owners and managers to control and punish runaway slaves (Whitehead 2010:52). Patrols were encouraged to resort to violence if necessary and, for the price of one hundred guilders or gold coins, they could either bring the runaway slave back, dead or alive, or provide evidence that that the

runaway had been disabled, such as displaying a right hand (Mars 2002:67). Women and children runaways were usually taken prisoner. Men who surrendered were tried and then either hanged, broken on the wheel, or burned at the stake (Mars 2002:68). Slaves were bombarded with repercussions for any action that did not translate to hard labor. Unable to have a normal life, colonialism prohibited slaves from expressing their identity, and their culture. According to anthropologist Leo Despres, slavery destroyed African customs and communal patterns and replaced them with the plantation system (1967:45). However, other scholars believe that cultural elements did persist; slaves retained and transformed aspects of their ancestral identities regardless of the heavy colonial pressures (Bonnett 1990; Manuel et al 2006:10-11; Staff 2002).

Indentured Servants in British Guiana

With the abolition of slavery in 1838, indentured servants were brought to the Caribbean from countries highlighted in Table 3 in an attempt to fill the labor void (Despres 1967; Mangar 2007). As noted in Table 3, East Indians were the majority of this labor force imported into British Guiana. When John Gladstone noticed the decline in slave labor in the 1830s, he, like many others concerned for the British economy, hypothesized solutions for the labor crisis. He inquired about East Indian labor for British Guianese estates. He received permission from the Colonial Office and the Board of Control of the East India Company and the first wave of indentured servants from India arrived in Guyana in 1838 (Basdeo 2007).

Indentured servants were considered to be much better off than the slaves before them. After all, they were given some basic rights. Contract laborers were not considered

to be property, had the right to maintain their culture and practices, and could return to their homeland after their contract expired (Despres 1967:57; Rabe 2005:18). The aforementioned rights seemed to be available just in theory during British Colonialism; in practice, such rights were not always granted (Despres 1967:57). The overall process of indenture under British colonialism was restrictive for the indentured servants (Basdeo 1986:46; Despres 1967:54).

Although, indentured servants were not required to work until death as the slaves who preceded them, the treatment was similar (Mars 2002:51). They lived in the same quarters as had the slaves before them, and most worked just as hard (Rabe 2005:19). They were required to work strenuous, unrelenting shifts an average of six days each week in harsh tropical conditions (Basdeo 1984:43; Beezmohun 1996:329). Indentured servants were required to be present for roll call at six o'clock in the morning. They then worked either seven hours in the field or ten hours in sugar factories and were compensated about a dollar and fifty cents per week, this is equivalent to 38 dollars per week in 2008 (Despres 1967:57; Measuring Worth 2009). Indentured laborers needed a pass in order to leave the plantation (Despres 1967:57; Rabe 2005:19).

Time was an expensive resource in British Guiana. The British made sure that every hour that could be used for plantation and factory labor was utilized. Time as a resource was a severely scarce commodity for the laborers themselves. Their lives during this time solely consisted of hard labor. The lack of time as a resource allowed no time to be allocated for themselves or for their cultural practices.

Rules for indenture were set by the Consolidated Immigration Ordinance in the Law of Summary Convictions. Just as with slaves, the British colonial minority continued to hold the power in British Guiana. The ordinance enforced this power. The labor and vagrancy laws set in place served as a form of social control over the indentured laborers (Mangru 1986:43). Criminal sanctions were imposed on indentured servants for refusing to work, failure to work in a timely manner, leaving unfinished work, disorderly behavior, being absent from work without permission, threatening with words, and threatening with gestures (Basdeo 1986:47; Mars 2002:72). If a laborer was caught without a pass they could be charged under the vagrancy laws in which they were either punished with a fine, hard labor or imprisonment. Indentured servants were frequently persecuted with failure to work (Mars 2002:72). In 1871, 32 of the indentured servants in British Guiana were charged with breaching their contracts by failure to work (Rabe 2005:19). An amendment to the ordinance in 1873 declared that criminal defendants could not testify on their own behalf (Mars 2002:72). Laborers were convicted by the evidence of their employers, an obvious bias of which plantation owners and managers did not hesitate to take advantage. A colonial magistrate in 1869 stated, "The manager can always produce a number of overseers, drivers, and others dependent upon him to make an overwhelming weight of testimony in his favor" (Rabe 2005:19). The servants were seriously restrained in terms of personal liberties (Basdeo 1986:47). As the slaves before them, indentured laborers frequently rioted, however, most focused on their work (Rabe 2005:19). Indentured servants stood no chance in the colonial judicial system of British Guiana. The plantation had complete control over the indentured laborers. No consideration was taken for the laborers' culture and under the colonial system, and in

fact, as part of the “civilizing” discourse of British colonialism, “adoption of British values, education, modes of dress, behavior, and etiquette received the highest priority” (Mars 2002:3; Rabe 2005:18-20).

Hijra under British Colonialism in India

British colonialism was oppressive to the nation of India. By 1858, control of India was virtually in the hands of the British. There was no respect for Indian cultural perspectives and practices. The British were repulsed by indigenous religious practices including *sati*, a death ritual in which a widow throws herself on her husband’s funeral pyre and *hook swinging*, a practice in which individuals would pierce their skin and suspend their bodies (Bockrath 2003:87). The British wished to eradicate the “breach of public decency” in India, as they deemed such actions immoral (Cohn 1996:3; Penrose 2001:4). This included criminal sanctions for the aforementioned practices and hijra-related practices as well.

Hijra were specifically targeted in the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 which enforced registration for any eunuch reasonably suspected of kidnapping or castrating children. According to this Act, such actions were prohibited in Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that did not condone “carnal knowledge against the order of nature” (Bockrath 2003:87). Through this Act, a simple assumption from a colonial official would cause a hijra to be arrested without a warrant and imprisoned for two years, fined, or both.

Criminalization of hijra and other Indian practices oppressed the culture and identity of Indians residing in their homeland of India during British colonialism

(Bockrath 2003:87-88). To the best of my knowledge, there is currently no available data regarding the nature of hijra identity in Guyana during British Colonialism, the evidence of cultural suppression of hijra in India, combined with cultural suppression of laborers in British Guiana, leads us to infer that colonialism negatively influenced the existence of hijra identity before independence.

CHAPTER FOUR: GENDER IDENTITIES IN POSTCOLONIAL GUYANA

After laborers' contract for indenture expired they were freed. Two-thirds of the indentured population in Guyana chose to remain in the colony while the remaining third returned to their eastern homeland of India (Despres 1967:57). Some laborers would continue to work on sugar plantations and others independently sought their own landgrants through the government and decided to become rice farmers (Despres 1967:60; Rabe 2005:19). The Portuguese and Chinese who remained mostly moved to towns and became shopkeepers and merchants (Rabe 2005:18). The Indians attempted to recreate Indian village life in rural areas of Guyana. Free from labor contracts, and with an increase in the amount of time able to be allocated for themselves and a decrease in oppressive colonial employers, the Indo-Guyanese were able to revisit their Indian values; they were able to once again place strong emphases on family and religion (Rabe 2005:19).

The system of indenture was abolished in 1917 (Mangar 2007). The postcolonial climate brought pride to the ex-territories (Beezmohun 1996:331). People who were previously laborers were now able to practice their culture as they did in their homeland. Over one hundred years had lapsed by this time. During this time, these laborers were oppressed by their harsh work schedules and the mandates of the colonial officials above them. This oppression gradually suppressed the indentured servants' ability to practice their cultural traditions. As a child, I was confused as to why my Indo-Guyanese family could not speak Hindi. They were able to sing *bhajans* (Hindu hymns) and recite Hindi

prayers, but unable to fully converse in the language. My family told me that, during colonialism, they were prohibited from speaking their native language. The laborers adopted English in order to communicate in British Guiana and then, with time, decreased the use of their native languages. By the end of colonialism in British Guiana, Hindi was not a widespread language, most likely because it had been previously forbidden. The duration of colonialism had caused a linguistic loss of the Hindi language and the Indo-Guyanese culture. This loss of language is just one of the many aspects of culture that was suppressed among Indian laborers in British Guiana. Generation after generation, the colonial system in British Guiana separated the laborers from their land of ancestry and from their culture as well (Lal 2009). With the abolition of indenture, the laborers were quick to reaffirm their culture, now that they had the time and freedom to do so.

Although the system of indentured labor was banned in 1917, the country was still British Guiana, a British colony (Mangar 2007). The former laborers and their descendants were able to practice their culture, but as the British hovered. When British Guiana became Guyana, an independent country, in 1966, they became free of British oppression. The Indo-Guyanese had been attempting to rejuvenate their culture since the end of indenture; Guyana's independence allowed the Indo-Guyanese to reinvigorate their cultural ideals since they were entirely freed of British oppression (Beezmohun 1996:300). The Indo-Guyanese population tried their best to accommodate. My family is a good example of this. My father's family continues their Muslim religious practices and my mother's family continues their Hindu religious practices; both sets of practices can be traced back to their ancestors who first brought their cultures to Guyana.

The Perseverance of Hijra Identity in Guyana

Hindu rituals reemerged in postcolonial Guyana, but did hijra? To the best of my knowledge there is no existing research regarding Indo-Guyanese hijra in the literature. As mentioned previously, to date there is a significant lack of research for the Indo-Guyanese population, beyond colonialism. The focus of cultural anthropology had been on the Amerindians, although they currently constitute less than ten percent of the population and Indo-Guyanese represent over forty percent of the population (Guyana Bureau of Statistics 2002). As mentioned previously, the most recent publication related to Guyana, published in December 2009, focuses on the Amerindian minority population in Guyana and briefly mentions the Indo-Guyanese majority (Whitehead 2009). The scarce amount of literature that does address the Indo-Guyanese population focuses on family structure, violence, and British Colonialism (Beezmohun 1996; Glasgow 1970; Jeffrey and Baber 1986; Lal 2009; Mangar 2007; Mars 2002; Samuel and Wilson 2009; Trotz 2004).

Since I am Indo-Guyanese, my *emic*, insider, approach allows me to use informal conversations with Guyanese individuals to determine whether hijra identity exists in contemporary Guyana. According to my grandmother, hijra came to my mother's home to bless her at her Ninth-day ceremony, a ritual in which an infant is blessed by a pandit and given his or her auspicious name (Despres 1967:97). Hijra were also present for my mother's brother's Ninth-day ceremonies as well. This account establishes the presence of hijra in Guyana in the 1960s. My grand-aunt also recalls them and their dancing. This particular aunt currently lives in Guyana and attests that she has not seen or heard any evidence for hijra in decades. A Guyanese male, who was born in Guyana in 1949 and

lived in several Guyanese towns throughout his life, cannot recall the existence of hijra in Guyana. His testimony is particularly important because as a Guyanese man, he lived in New Delhi and encountered Indian hijra there. He remembers his grand-aunts and grand-uncles telling him about hijra. He was told that they were men dressed in feminine garb that sang and danced at the home of a newborn and were given gifts in return. This account would then place hijra in Guyana prior to 1949.

The Lingering Laws of British Colonialism

Although there has been progress since the end of colonialism to adapt a constitution and law of its own, some laws remain unchanged from the colonial era in Guyana (Amnesty International 2009; Universal Periodic Review 2010b). In this way, colonialism still influences the citizens of Guyana, as well as other former British colonies. Section 377 of the Indian Constitution, which criminalized homosexuality, was enforced by the British in 1861. Although the law was established by Indian law prior to British rule, it was loosely enforced, if ever. Some claim that this is because of the ties between Hinduism and homosexuality. Anil Bhanot claims that homosexuality is an accepted part of Hinduism, the national religion of India (Craigwell 2009). Several agree with him, especially regarding those who are unable to conform to a male-female gender dichotomy, such as hijra. Bhanot states, "the ancient Hindu scriptures describe the homosexual condition to be a biological one, and although the scripture gives guidance to parents on how to avoid procreating a homosexual child, it does not condemn the child as unnatural" (Craigwell 2009).

In July of 2009, the New Delhi High Court ruled that Section 377 of the Indian Constitution was “discriminatory and therefore a violation of fundamental rights under the constitution” (Roche 2010). Homosexuals in India are no longer subject to the possible fine and imprisonment sanctioned by the oppressive colonial law (Shah 2009). Britain itself has had laws that both recognize and accept homosexuality since 1969. India has finally stepped out of the colonial shadow, but many former British colonies, such as Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago still have their anti-homosexual laws in place (Craigwell 2009). In these countries the criminal punishment for homosexuality varies; homosexuals can be punished with long prison sentences, death and even government sanctioned violence (ibid).

In the Constitution of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, established in 1980, Chapter Three covers the fundamental rights and freedoms available to Guyanese citizens. Section forty of Chapter Three states:

Every person in Guyana is entitled to the basic right to a happy, creative and productive life, free from hunger, disease, ignorance and want. That right includes the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, that is to say, the right, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex, but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest, to each and all of the following, namely

- (a) life, liberty, security of the person and the protection of the law;
- (b) freedom of conscience, of expression and of assembly and association; and
- (c) protection for the privacy of his home and other property and from deprivation of property without compensation (The Constitution of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana 1980).

Although this section states that fundamental rights are awarded to “every person in Guyana,” treatment towards those who transgress gender norms in Guyana demonstrate that they are not inclusive (Starbroek News 2009; Universal Periodic Review 2010b). In

January of 2001, the Parliament of Guyana voted in favor of an amendment for the Constitution of Guyana that would include “sexual orientation” as one of the categories mentioned in Chapter three. Under pressure from Christian and Muslim Religious groups, the President refused to pass this bill (ibid). Another attempt was made in May of 2003; this time, the bill did not even make it through the Parliament. Because of this, the colonial era laws are able to linger in the Constitution of Guyana and continue to discriminate (Universal Periodic Review 2010b).

Sections 351-355 in Chapter Eight of the Constitution are considered to be “Offences against Morality.” Section 352 forbids “committing acts of gross indecency with a male person” and holds this action as punishable by two years of imprisonment (Amnesty International; The Constitution of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana 1980; Universal Periodic Review 2010b). Sections 353-355 prohibit “unnatural offence,” sodomy, and any indecent acts (The Constitution of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana 1980). These actions are punishable by ten years of imprisonment or even death (Amnesty International).

Chapter 8.02 of the Constitution of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana is the “Criminal Offences Act”. This chapter, like 8.01, also antagonizes the liberties mentioned in Chapter Three of the Constitution. Section 153 xlvii bans the “wearing of female attire by a man” and “male attire by a woman” (1980; Universal Periodic Review 2010b). In 2009, eight males were arrested under this Act and each was fined \$7,500. The defendants claim they were improperly treated by the police; they were not permitted to make any phone calls and were not even told why they were being held (Craigwell 2009). This act is particularly important to consider in terms of the possible revival of hijra

identity. A main aspect of hijra is that they wear feminine apparel. This law suppresses the existence of hijra identity in Guyana since it is strictly enforced.

In 1995, twenty-four year old Mark Ramos, a homosexual male, attended a party in a predominantly East Indian village in Guyana. After leaving the party he was approached by a gang of heterosexual men and brutally beaten. He struggled to reach the nearest police station for help. Reports state that he was kept in a holding cell and only mocked and beaten further. He was eventually transferred to a hospital in Georgetown, the capital, where he died, simply for being homosexual in a country that does not tolerate gender identities that do not conform to the norm (Craigwell 2009).

A Movement for Contemporary Laws in Guyana

The injustice towards homosexual and transgendered individuals in Guyana is achieving recognition in contemporary Guyanese society. Furthermore, several blame the colonial era laws. Several organizations including the Caribbean Forum for Liberation and Acceptance of Genders and Sexualities, Global Rights, Guyana Rainbow Foundation, Human Rights Watch, International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and the Society against Sexual Orientation Discrimination have been pushing for civil rights for unrecognized gender identities in Guyana. In March 2009, these groups joined forces to support the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender citizens of Guyana. In a letter to the Bharat Jagdeo, the President of Guyana, the groups complained of the violence and mistreatment towards homosexual and transgendered individuals in Guyana. Scott Long, the director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender rights program at Human Rights Watch notes the “archaic laws” used in Guyana and furthermore, how

such laws “violate basic freedoms” (Stabroek News 2009). The groups seek to repeal colonial era laws in order to keep up with changing times. They also highlight the fact that Guyana is, and has been, a member of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) since 1977. In 2003, the ICCPR added six major international human rights conventions to its Constitution including the United Nations (U.N.) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The lingering colonial era laws would need to be repealed in order for Guyana to uphold its commitment to the ICCPR. Additionally, in the letter the groups underlined the fact that Guyana is also a member of the Organization of the American States (OAS), an organization that adopted the “resolution on human rights, sexual orientation and gender identity” in 2008 (Stabroek News 2009; Universal Periodic Review 2010b). Guyana is therefore responsible to uphold gender rights under the OAS (2010).

In February of 2010, a group of transgendered individuals supported by the Society against Sexual Orientation Discrimination (SASOD) of Guyana filed a motion to have the Supreme Court of Guyana overturn Section 153 xlvii of the Criminal Offences Act and Sections 353-355 of the Offenses against Morality (Advocate 2010; Society against Sexual Orientation Discrimination 2010; Schneyer 2010; The Constitution of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana 1980). The group joined in protest of the treatment of six transgender individuals who were arrested, detained and mistreated in February of 2009 (Craigwell 2009; Schneyer 2010). Seon Clarke, one of the six individuals, confessed that the moment was “one of the most humiliating experiences of [his] life,” and he felt “less than human” (Advocate 2010; Society against Sexual Orientation

Discrimination 2010; Schneyer 2010). The Supreme Court has not yet declared whether it would or would not hear the case. However, the motion has raised the issue of discriminatory, archaic laws to international human rights groups (Reuters 2010).

As one of the 192 members of the United Nations, Guyana is subject to Universal Periodic Review (Universal Periodic Review 2010a). In the Universal Periodic Review, each nation is reviewed every four years by their fellow countries. There are three basic stages: first, the human rights situation in the nation is reviewed; implementations from the last review are considered; and finally, recommendations and pledges are made on the human rights situation in the nation. Guyana will be part of the eighth session of Universal Periodic Review in May of 2010 (Universal Periodic Review 2010a).

According to the review, Sections 352-355 and 153 the Criminal Offences discriminate against homosexual and transgendered persons. Furthermore, the review states that by signing the Organization for the American States' resolutions on Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, Guyana took an important step against discrimination. Moreover, the review recommends that the aforementioned sections that discriminate against homosexual and transgendered individuals be repealed from the Constitution of Guyana in order to recognize that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons deserve the same rights as any other Guyanese citizen (Organization of American States 2010; The Constitution of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana 1980; Universal Periodic Review 2010a).

Gender identities outside of the Westernized norm currently lack rights in Guyana. For hijra identity, this is significant. Although free from British rule, this cultural identity, as known in India, cannot be fostered due to the political and legal

atmosphere. Hijra identity was suppressed during colonialism and still remains suppressed by the contemporary legal system in Guyana. The current movement towards civil rights in Guyana for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals would finally allow the existence of hijra identity in Guyana. Hijra would finally be free to express themselves in public and would be able to perform hijra rituals without being reprimanded by the law. Hijra would be able to be true to their identities without the fear of prosecution under the suppressive laws.

Contemporary Hijra in Guyana

To the best of my knowledge, there is currently no literature, or even any reference to contemporary hijra identity in Guyana. However, I have been told of their existence. My grandmother remembers them attending my mother's Ninth-day ceremony, my grand-aunt recalls them singing and dancing at various Ninth-day ceremonies and weddings, and the grand-aunts and grand-uncles of an anonymous male remembered hijra dancing and singing at Ninth-day ceremonies and births in return for gifts. In all of these accounts, the common thread is that individuals remember males dressed as females singing and dancing at Ninth-day ceremonies and weddings for badhai. Accounts of hijra in India mention the same elements (Lal 1999; Nanda 1998; Reddy 2003; Reddy 2005a). Accounts of hijra in Guyana, however, do not mention the castration ceremony. My grandmother was the only individual who mentioned the third gender status of hijra in Guyana. My grandmother was also the only individual to mention that Guyanese hijra are able to bless individuals with the gift of fertility or curse with sterility.

According to my informal accounts, a variance is present in the elements that characterize hijra gender identity. This variance can be due to memory or lack of knowledge pertaining to hijra. If my informal accounts present an accurate representation of hijra in Guyana, and justify the variance between hijra in Guyana and in India, such variation can be attributed to acculturation. The Indo-Guyanese culture was especially oppressed by the dominant British culture in Guyana (Oregon State University 2008). The Indo-Guyanese were restrained by colonial limitations as indentured laborers. The British presence hovered over the Indo-Guyanese even after the abolition of indenture in 1917 (Mangar 2007). The British's domineering culture lingered in Guyana until the nation gained independence in 1966. With the British removed from Guyana, it would seem that British influences would be removed as well. However, this is not the case. The colonial era laws enforced strictly by the British, such as Chapter 8.01 Section 153 xlvii that bans the "wearing of female attire by a man" and "male attire by a woman," remain in Guyana; these laws keep the influence of British colonialism present in contemporary Guyanese society (1980; Universal Periodic Review 2010b). British colonialism and the British culture overall, affected and affects the culture of Indians in Guyana. The influence of the British on the Indo-Guyanese culture caused a culture change among the Indo-Guyanese (Oregon State University 2008).

According to my research, hijra in Guyana, are third gender individuals who adorn themselves as females, dance at weddings and Ninth-day ceremonies, and have the ability to bless with fertility or curse with infertility. There is no mention of castration as there is in India (Bockrath 2003:83; Nanda 1998:24-38). It is possible that the removal of the ritualized castration ceremony among hijra occurred as a process of acculturation.

Within the indenture system, Indo-Guyanese were virtually unable to practice this culture. This would mean that there were possibly no hijra cultural practices during this time. By the end of indenture in 1917, generations of laborers were removed from India, and from their Indian culture (Mangar 2007). The Indo-Guyanese culture was not assimilated, regardless of the pressures they faced from the presence of the British; after indenture, Indo-Guyanese did regain their cultural practices. Simple evidence for this is the fact that Indo-Guyanese still celebrate holidays related to Indian culture such as Phagwah (Despres 1967:97). At some point in time, hijra identity was revived in Guyana, hence the informal accounts. It is possible that by this time the Indo-Guyanese were unaware of the castration ceremony. It is also possible that the Indo-Guyanese found that the existence of the cultural role of hijra was more important than the specific elements, such as castration. Hijra identity was then accommodated to Indo-Guyanese society in order to keep the cultural role present rather than to have it assimilated into the British, Westernized, gender dichotomy.

Other cultures have had to accommodate when faced with the dilemma of cultural assimilation. During the Holocaust, the Jewish prisoners attempted to accommodate their religious practices under their harsh conditions. Sometimes women made Sabbath candles from old potato peelings and margarine. Individuals in concentration camps would have secret prayer services in the barracks while others would guard them from the Nazis (The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2010:39). Albanian *sworn virgins* are another example of a culture attempting to accommodate in order to avoid assimilation. The peasant society in Albania is highly patrilineal (Littlewood 2002:45). The roles for males and women are separate; male responsibilities include feuding,

ploughing and irrigation, whereas, female responsibilities include fetching water, cooking and childrearing (Littlewood 2002:43). In Albanian peasant society, only males can inherit land. This poses an issue when there is a shortage of males. The Albanian peasants, however, found a way to accommodate the shortage of males within their population. If a father has no male heir to leave his property to, he can declare his daughter is a man (Littlewood 2002:45). These sworn virgins dress as men, have short hair, and take on male labor responsibilities (Littlewood 2002:45). The sworn virgins fill an important cultural role; individuals who become sworn virgins accommodate to help maintain the overall cultural identity. For the sworn virgins of Albania and the hijra of Guyana, keeping specific cultural roles is more important than the overall loss of the identity.

Since I was unable to find any suggestion of hijra identity in contemporary Guyana within the literature, the information that I have relies on informal conversations. It is important to take into consideration that the individuals who provided me with this information may not be familiar enough with hijra identity in Guyana to provide details regarding this gender identity. It is also possible that these individuals are unaware of the existence of the elements that differ between hijra in India and hijra in Guyana.

According to the informal conversations I had with Guyanese individuals regarding hijra gender identity, there are no accounts of hijra in contemporary Guyanese society. It seems as though hijra identity has virtually disappeared in Guyana. It is possible that hijra are now associating with Western gender denominations such as transvestite, transgender or homosexual. At this point in time, I am unable to declare if hijra identity exists in contemporary Guyanese society. Furthermore, if no hijra currently

exist in Guyana today, I do not have enough evidence to determine what caused their disappearance. Further research needs to be done regarding contemporary and historical hijra in Guyana. Further research also needs to be done regarding the Indo-Guyanese population overall.

CONCLUSION

Cultural elements of India were transplanted to the colony of British Guiana with the indentured Indian laborers. Commonly known practices that persisted include wedding practices and birth rituals (Despres 1967:97). The existence of hijra in Guyana, although lesser known, can be noted as another cultural aspect, practice, and identity that survived the voyage across the kala pani. Additionally, hijra identity has been shown to have persevered in spite of colonial oppression and postcolonial suppression as recently as the 1960s. The existence of hijra identity in Guyana exemplifies the Indo-Guyanese connection to their Indian ancestry and culture.

Further research needs to be done in terms of hijra and the overall Indo-Guyanese culture in order to fill the current void in the literature. Research needs to be done to understand the cultural transformation of hijra identity caused by colonialism. There should also be research done to determine whether or not hijra identity exists in contemporary society and, if not, the research should focus on the cause of the identity's extinction after the 1960s. For example, researchers should attempt to shed light on the possible influence of globalization on hijra identity in contemporary Guyana and the possible linguistic and cultural replacement of hijra identity with Western gender terms. Finally, researchers should also study the current push for the appeal of discriminatory laws against gender identities in Guyana and its possible influences on hijra identity. Additional research will contribute to the scholarship of various disciplines relating to gender, colonial, postcolonial, Caribbean, and East Indian studies.

¹ Fausto-Sterling later changed her analysis on sex in her book *Sexing The Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*.

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