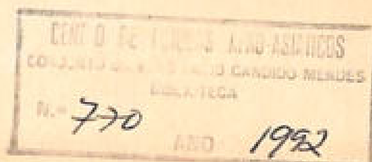
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N.º 770 ANO 1992

CROSSCURRENTS IN THE DIASPORA
COLONIAL BLACKS AND WEST INDIANS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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Paper presented at the CEAA Conference on the African Diaspora and Race Relations in the Americas, Rio de Janeiro, 5-10 April 1992.

Preliminary version

Afro-Central American: the very term sounds odd and unfamiliar. Another way to put it is "Central Americans of African descent." Who are these people and how do they identify themselves? How do they view and interact with one another? How African is their culture and heritage? Those questions will help focus my paper today.

BACKGROUND. First, a little background on African peoples in Central America. Panama is the only part of the isthmus that received and still has large numbers of persons of African descent. Many arrived involuntarily during the era of slavery, but most came voluntarily afterward, as migrant laborers and settlers. Nineteenth century Colombians called Panama their "black province," due to the large proportion of African-Americans there, and one still has the impression that a third to a half of the people who live in the transit corridor are of African descent. In this sense Panama belongs more to Northern South America, with its large black population, than to mestizo Central America.

The rest of Central America has small numbers of people of African descent, mostly along the Caribbean coast and in the

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larger cities. Leslie Rout categorized Honduras and Nicaragua as having significant Negroid influence (6-30% of population); and Costa Rica and El Salvador as having a small minority (2-5%). (Rout 1976: 211)

The earliest blacks to arrive in the region accompanied the conquistadores, as soldiers, sailors, aides, and tradesmen. Sixteenth century towns had significant numbers of blacks, slave as well as free. Soon, however, growing numbers of Africans were taken across the isthmus at Panama for transport to Peru and other Pacific coast settlements. The peak of the slave trade across Panama came in the late 17th century and then abated in the mid-18th. By then, meanwhile, thousands of Africans had escaped and formed maroon camps secure against Spanish attacks. The palenques of Panama were famous in colonial times. (Guzman 1978)

These predecessors of today's Afro-Central Americans became Ladinos, that is, Hispanicized and acculturated. Even before slavery ended they blended in and formed part of the multi-hued spectrum of peoples in Panama.

Toward the end of the colonial era, two new groups of African-descended persons arrived in Central America. British entrepeneurs brought hundreds of slave and free black workers with them to the Mosquito coast, that ran from Belize down to Costa Rica. These and intinerant black traders effectively incorporated the Mosquito shore into the British Caribbean sphere. Many settled, operated farms and trading posts, had

offspring with native wives, and became permanent fixtures in the archipelago of towns along the coast. (Heckadon 1980:7-14)

Then in 1797 perhaps the most extraordinary people of African descent arrived: the ancestors of today's Garífuna, or Black Caribs. Nancie Gonzalez's fine study (1988) traces these people back to the island of St. Vincent. There, 17th and 18th century runaway slaves settled with Carib Indians, and some tribes became so heavily influenced by African phenotype and culture that Europeans called them Black Caribs. These people fought tenaciously for their lands and independence, opposing both British and French attempts to force them into plantation labor. They were virtually impossible to control.

Finally, in the 1790s, fearing the spread of the Haitian rebellion to their slaves, the British decided to deport the Black Caribs. Some 4,000 were taken forcibly to Roatán Island, which they soon abandoned for the Honduran coast. A smallpox epidemic meanwhile reduced their numbers to only 1700. During the 19th century they moved along the north coasts of Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, mixing with native peoples and an occasional European. They became ethnic sponges, absorbing elements from any and all sources they came into contact with, including the Miskitos. Gonzalez portrays them as mostly Amerindian in their material culture and family life, yet more African in religion. Numbering only 20-30 thousand today, the Garífuna nonetheless have been extensively studied by anthropologists.

Finally, huge new waves of African-Americans arrived in Central America beginning in the second half of the 19th century. They migrated because of declining opportunities on their islands and prospects for good jobs and land in Central America. (Conniff 1985) This can be called the phase of West Indian migrations. The sizes of the vectors corresponded roughly to those of the earlier slave trade: most went to Panama, and lesser numbers to Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. The West Indian migrations peaked in the early twentieth century and have diminished since the Depression.

NUMBERS. We can only estimate the numbers of Africans and African-Americans who arrived in Central America over the past several centuries. My guess is that the total lies somewhere around a half million for Central America proper and a million for the entire circum-Caribbean region.

My guestimates run like this:

<u>Africans during the slave trade:</u>

100,000 during the colonial era, concentrated around Panama and along the Caribbean coasts of South and Central America;

<u>West Indians since emancipation:</u>

250,000 to Panama;

150,000 to Mosquitia;

100,000 to Tierra Firme;

100,000 to Belize and Yucatan.

These numbers might seem exaggerated, yet over a long period of time they are plausible. The estimate for Mosquitia, for

example, implies average arrivals of only a thousand persons a year. We know that people have been moving about the Caribbean in fishing boats and canoes for millenia and in coasting traders and steamers for over a century. And the flow has consistently been from the islands to the mainland. Finally, we also know that considerable re-migration to the United States has occurred. (See Roy Bryce Laporte's work)

IDENTITIES. Let me stress the tremendous variety of the arrival experiences of Africans and persons of African descent in Central America. They came at different times, in different statuses, from different places, and with different cultural endowments. This alone suggests care with any generalizations. To illustrate: at one extreme, we have the bozal slave landed at Panama in the 17th century to transport cargo across the isthmus; at the other, we have the Jamaican teenager who disembarks at San Pedro Sula in hope of finding a job in the banana or sugar plantations. Thus, we find many Afro-Central American identities, corresponding to these different arrival experiences and the characteristics the immigrants brought.

THE CASE OF PANAMA. Now I am going to focus mainly on Panama, although much of what I say has relevance to other countries in the region.

We know from Alfredo Castillero Calvo's works that slaves had many opportunities to gain their freedom in colonial Panama. Moreover, the number of free blacks and mulattoes rose steadily over time, while the number of slaves diminshed. (Castillero

Calvo 1969) The way for Africans and especially African-Americans to prosper in Hispanic American society has always been to assimilate, that is, to behave and appear European. Thus free blacks got ahead by speaking Spanish, assuming Hispanic names, learning to read and write, marrying persons lighter than themselves, becoming practicing Catholics, belonging to associations, participating in the European-oriented economy, and exercizing civic responsibilities. We know from travelers' accounts that by the mid-19th century a substantial proportion of Panama's well-to-do population had some African genetic heritage, due to the continuous mixing and social mobility. (Omar Jaen Suarez 1978:450-1)

Today, persons descended from Africans who arrived in Panama before the mid-19th century are called colonial blacks (negros coloniales). They have little conception of their African roots, due to many generations of assimilationist behavior by their predecessors. The higher their status today, the less they identify with African origins, because the inherited success owed precisely to eschewing such heritage. Colonial blacks are scarce in African-American scholarly forums. (For example, of the ten organizers of the Primer Congreso del Negro Panameño, held in 1981, only one had a Spanish name, Eugenio Barrera. Camilo Perez, not African American, attended meeting in San José.)

In general, colonial blacks identify strongly with what Brazilian specialists call the myth of racial democracy. They assert that slavery in their country was less brutal than

elsewhere and that opportunities abounded for freedom and citizenship. They claim descent from free persons, rather than slaves. They deny that discrimination exists, that their life chances are diminished by their color, or that the white elite maintains subtle barriers to their advancement. If black persons experience discrimination, it likely comes from other sources, such as limited Spanish or lack of familiarity with Latin customs. Finally, some claim to be able to see physiological differences between themselves and West Indians. (Conniff 1985:166-7)

Colonial blacks are juxtaposed to those who arrived afterward, made up largely of West Indians and their descendants (antillanos). Most West Indians arrived in Panama (and throughout the isthmus) after the turn of this century, and they joined immigrant communities in the ports and major cities. Today they are 3rd or 4th generation Panamanians, yet they allege many forms of discrimination on the part of the Hispanic population. The cultural separation between them and the colonial blacks could hardly have been greater: most West Indian immigrants were Protestant, English-speaking, British subjects, class conscious, and only two or three generations removed from slavery. Virtually no grounds for ethnic or cultural solidarity existed between colonial blacks and West Indians.

The Panama Canal, and to a lesser degree the United Fruit Company (UFCO), hampered the usual sorts of immigrant accommodation and integration of West Indians in Panama. A large

number lived in Canal Zone housing or adjacent neighborhoods, which became ghettoes. Their immigrant characteristics (e.g. English-speaking, Protestant, British customs) received positive reinforcement from canal employers, who sometimes denigrated Hispanic culture. In effect, the canal operated a Third Country labor system that kept the West Indian population dependent upon it for jobs, services, and cultural reinforcement.

From the early days of this century, Panamanians rejected the permanent settlement of West Indians in the isthmus. The ins and outs of this spurning have been recounted in several places and do not need repeating here. (Conniff 1985; Beisanz & Smith 1951; Westerman 1980) Colonial blacks as well as whites and mestizos refused legitimacy to the West Indians, usually citing as reasons the latter's cultural heritage and ties to the Canal Zone rather than race. Olmedo Alfaro's 1925 booklet, _El peligro antillano en América Central_, vividly illustrated the attitude. It spoke of an "invasion" of people of "antagonistic black race" who were incapable of "absorbing our civilization." He did not assert racial rejection, however, stating that colonial blacks displayed a "nobility of character and ability to assimiliate." Clearly, willingness to become Panamanian lay at the heart of this attitude.

The wave of opposition to the West Indians led them to form defensive institutions. Hundreds of West Indian schools, unions, businesses, churches, burial societies, newspapers, and sports clubs sprang up in Panama City and Colon. This only confirmed

the worst fears of the Hispanic Panamanians that the immigrants would never assimilate. As late as 1970 a leading academic would describe the West Indian communities as "encrusted like alien bodies, gathered in a constellation of urban 'islands' walled off against outside influences." (Castillero Calvo 1970:106) Those who did wish to win acceptance tended to Hispanicize their names, marry Latin spouses, convert to Catholicism, renounce English in their homes, and avoid associating with West Indians descendants. This constituted a form of cultural genocide in the eyes of critics.

Persons speaking on behalf of the West Indian community argued that they should not have to abandon their identities to be accepted as full-fledged citizens of Panama. After all, their forebears had immigrated many decades before, had built and operated the canal and international businesses, and had enriched Panama's culture with their language, music, art, religion, sports, literature, and world view. They proposed a kind of integration that would blend the best features of both Latin and West Indian societies and cultures. Such a hybrid would respect both traditions as legitimate, allowing individuals to choose their lifestyles from a broad range of acceptable behaviors. Each generation had a leading proponent of this strategy: Sydney Young in the 1930s and 1940s; George Westerman in the 1950s and 1960s; and Alberto Smith in the 1970s and 1980s.

Other strategies existed, of course. Many thousands, among them some of the most talented Panamanians of West Indian

descent, simply emigrated to the United States and joined flourishing communities in New York, Brooklyn, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Others turned their backs on Hispanic Panama and remained in their enclaves, in the suburbs of Panama City, Colon, and the former Canal Zone neighborhoods. Many of these latter felt deep anger for abuses committed by Latin and U.S. government officials. Still others opted for an aggressive integration, in which they stressed revolution from above as the best means to achieve their rightful places. This approach flourished during the dictatorship of Omar Torrijos, when many persons of West Indian descent believed that a pluralist nationalism would prevail. (Priestley 1986) Most of these strategies also found expression in a rich West Indian literature that emerged after mid-century.

Unlike colonial blacks in Panama, most in the West Indian community acknowledged their African roots and were much more atuned to African-American intellectual and political currents in the rest of the hemisphere. Young helped sponsor Garveyism in Panama. Westerman maintained friendships with many black politicians in the United States. In recent years, George Priestley, Alfred Rowe, Gerardo Maloney, and Esmeralda Brown have organized or participated in African-American in congresses. Gerardo Maloney served on the editorial board of Afrodiáspora. Roy Bryce-Laporte is in attendance here.

To summarize, major points debated by colonial blacks and West Indians included racial discrimination, national identity,

assimilation vs. integration, tertiary migration, African vs. West Indian origins, and languages.

CENTRAL AMERICAN COMPARISONS. While no other Afro-Central Americans have experienced the troubles nor undertaken as probing an identity debate as Afro-Panamanians, Costa Rica's West Indian community has dealt with severe ostracism during the past 70 years. Ron Harpelle's dissertation spans the period from the 1880s until 1950, revealing how Latin Costa Ricans suddenly awoke to the "Antillian menace" in the late 1920s and attempted to legislate West Indians out of existence. The government created difficulties for naturalizing West Indians and their children, and in 1934 the legislature attempted to bar black laborers from new banana plantations on the Pacific slope. Although a small number settled permanently in San Jose, the large majority remained in Puerto Limón, socially and geographically distant from the capital. Even today Limón is virtually the only region with a large number (though no longer a majority) of people of African descent.

[Para on Avi Chomsky's study]

The remaining countries of Central America have small enclaves of blacks, virtually none of colonial origin. Most are either Garífuna or creoles, i.e. descendants of West Indian immigrants who moved there to work in logging, mining, farming, and construction. They have been subject to so much hostility from the Hispanic people, descended from Europeans and Amerindians, that they tend to remain in coastal enclaves like

Livingston, Puerto Barrios, Puerto Cortez, Trujillo, La Ceiba, Ciudad Camarón, Bluefields, Corn Island, and Puerto Cabezas. After the Sandinista revolution, the creoles and Miskito of Nicaragua found themselves under intense pressure from Managua to accept the policies and tutelage of the government. (Dennis 1981) Even today the north coast of Central America belongs almost wholly to the Amerindians and those of African descent.

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