

Cultural Identity and the Afro-Caribbean Immigrants on Costa Rica's Talamanca Coast

BRENDAN BLOWERS

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Introduction

A great breadfruit tree was felled in Puerto Viejo last year to make way for the new road that will follow the coast to the Panama border. A man the people remember as “Old Dan” planted that tree more than eighty years ago, the people say, and it was the mother tree of all the breadfruit from Puerto Viejo down to Monkey Point. The people want the new road and the progress it will bring them. They also loved that old breadfruit tree. It stood strong for many years and now its hijos thrive and produce though it is gone.

(Palmer 14)

Since the first English-speaking Caribbean islander arrived on the Costa Rican shore to settle down and make a home for himself as a turtle fisherman in 1824, it would be about 170 years before the Anglophones would come into regular contact with the dominant Costa Rican mestizo population that make up most of Costa Rica. During that time the West Indian immigrants would construct their own cultural identity nearly in isolation. Upon the arrival of banana companies, transportation, and increased trade in the early 1900’s, their culture would undergo significant changes due to contact with surrounding groups.

When cultures come in contact after a period of isolation, there is a transfer of cultural elements between the two groups that causes a reformulation of their previous traditions and customs. When this happens frequently over a long period of time, cultural anthropologists refer to the process as “acculturation.” It occurs at varying speeds and to different degrees based on how often groups come into contact, the size of the population, the time period over which they interact, and the specific geography of the place where interaction occurs. Members of the cultural group undergoing change are to some degree able to channel the direction of this process, because it is “a highly selective process in which a group undergoing cultural contact

maintains its social identity and to a degree its cultural distinctiveness and integrity” (Keesing 387), even though it “happens virtually automatically and is usually unintentional” (Gans 153).

Assimilation is more of an unmitigated conversion “where members of one ethnic group are fully integrated culturally and socially into another ethnic group” (Keesing 387).

Assimilation also requires more openness on the part of the non-immigrant group, as it is “often impossible without the immigrants being formally or informally accepted by the non-immigrants whom they seek to join” (Gans 153). On the Costa Rican Talamanca coast, “the period after 1950 saw the gradual assimilation of a once distinctive, Anglophone West Indian culture into the dominant Hispanic mode” (Molina 137). Blacks had largely established a cohesive subculture and cultural identity, complete with a distinct language (English), religion (Protestant), and way of life (turtle fishing and small farming collectives). But their assimilation occurred at the expense of this previously held cultural identity.

Early research on assimilation assumed it to automatically indicate upward mobility in the host society, but this is not always the case. In reality, the assimilation and upward mobility function independently. In the case of the Afro-Caribbean communities of the Costa Rican Talamanca coast, who have historically been discriminated against politically and racially, assimilation is an ostensibly attractive opportunity in contrast to their historical mistreatment. However, based upon research analyzing the role of cultural identity in securing collective rights for minority groups in Latin America, and upon research distinguishing assimilation from upward mobility within a host culture, I argue that Costa Rican Afro-Caribbeans must retain their strong unified cultural identity and be more strategic and reserved about the ways in which they adapt to the Latino Costa Rican majority.

Race

The color question, well, you know it always exist. To be frank, it exists today, same way. Out here on the coast, nobody come to molest us, but nobody was giving us any assistance neither.

Selven Bryant from Puerto Viejo (Palmer 208)

The predominating belief of Costa Ricans that they are “a traditionally egalitarian people of European descent has been seriously challenged in recent decades” (Biesanz 97). When compared with neighboring Latin American countries, this claim has some validity. However, historical discrimination set in motion certain ways of thinking about perceived “others,” the repercussions of which are felt today.

Popular understanding of “race” oversimplifies it by basing it “mainly on a few highly-visibility bodily characteristics” (Keesing 65). Visible variations in biological traits have long been used to create divisions and oppress groups exhibiting certain physical characteristics, and Costa Rica is no different. Although recent clarifications have been made to clarify and even do away with the idea of “race,” a historical analysis must include popular measures that were used to delineate and discriminate between differences of appearance.

Genetically, Costa Ricans have a rich mix of different ancestry. In 1995, geneticists at the University of Costa Rica determined the gene mix of Costa Ricans to be 40-60% white, 15-35% Indian, and 10-20% black. Despite genetic studies such as this and the inherent problems with defining “race” based on skin color, Costa Ricans do not consider themselves mestizos. Instead, continuing a trend championed by the elite, “by 1850 ‘whiteness’ had become part of the national self-image” (Biesanz 109). When President Ricardo Jiménez instated the law that

prohibited the transfer of “colored” employees to work on the Pacific railroad, “his interior minister added that relocation ‘would endanger the racial purity of the Costa Rican’” (Biesanz 114). The constant need to import healthy workers threatened this “racial purity.” Because of a high infant mortality rate and hygiene issues, social policies were implemented “that are among the most progressive in Latin America.” However, these policies “had a eugenic motivation that was closely linked to the insistence of a white racial national identity” (Molina 90).

Even today, remnants of the “white” self-perception persist. Racism against darker-skinned people works its way into taunts at soccer games and advertising, even to the point where other Central Americans accuse the Ticos¹ of “feeling superior, in part because their skin is lighter” (Biesanz 109). The effects of racial discrimination throughout the history of Afro-Caribbeans in Costa Rica would exert considerable pressure on them to assimilate following the 1948 civil war.

Pre-1900’s – Isolation

“My father leave Jamaica just like so many others... In those times you just up and down and nobody ask you many questions”

John Spencer (Molina 80)

The historical events of the Afro-Caribbean coastal communities are crucial in order to understand the power structures that controlled their development as an ethnic group. The first recorded settlers arrived in 1824, fisherman drawn by abundant marine life that populated coastal waters rich with coral. They fished for turtles and other sea life and grew small crops of coconut palms to market the nuts and oil. Over the following decades the original settlers populated the

¹ “Ticos” is a term Costa Ricans use to refer to themselves, but does not become part of the Afro-Caribbean identity until after 1949.

coast in small groups of about thirty families concentrated in eleven villages. These small communities offered such services as “schools, churches, shops, organized sports, and cooperative forms of transportation and trade” (Palmer 39). More Jamaican workers were “imported” between 1870 and 1890, along with Chinese and Italians, in order to help build railroads for the rapidly growing banana industry, dominated by the U.S.-based United Fruit Company. During the peak years of the banana industry from 1890-1914, the region became “the most ethnically complex and politically sensitive region of Costa Rica” (Molina 80). In 1908 the railroads built by the United Fruit Company bridged the river separating Panama from Costa Rica and reached the Afro-Caribbean settlers. The region was still not connected with the central highlands of Costa Rica by land, and the railroad and sea would continue to be the only transportation options for the inhabitants of that area until 1976. During this period in their history, the settlers lived mainly in isolation.

1915-1948 – Initial Contact brought by Foreign-Owned Companies

The presence of the United Fruit Company and the banana trade was “catastrophic for the Bribri natives² of Talamanca and Sixaola” (Molina 80), and wreaked havoc on the area’s land in huge segments. Nevertheless, the period between about 1915 and 1948 was a time when a cohesive cultural identity of the east-coast Afro-Caribbeans was established. They were “loyal to their British heritage in the heyday of the empire” (Biesanz 114) and “sent their children to private schools that used Jamaican texts in English and took them to the Baptist and Anglican churches on Sunday” (Biesanz 115). Due to lack of work in the 1920’s, white Ticos began seeking better working opportunities in the banana plantations, where wages were five to six

² The Bribri are a dwindling indigenous group neighboring the black inhabitants of Costa Rica’s east coast.

times higher. Up until this time, the Spanish-speaking highlanders and English-speaking coastal groups had lived peacefully apart. The Jamaican immigrants, “were content to live apart from the Latinos, whose language, religion, hygiene, and easygoing work habits they despised” (Biesanz 114). Mr. Paul Rodman recalls that the “Jamaicans looked upon the Spaniards³ as inferior” (Farmer 134). According to Mr. Rodman, the Latinos let their kids run around naked and defecate in the open air. He also states that 99% of them could not read or write, while 80% of the Jamaicans could. Fights broke out nearly every payday (Palmer 134).

Racial tension arose around job-related treatment. The Latino Costa Rican’s “budding anti-imperialism” mixed with “racist anxiety about the Anglophone and Protestant blacks” (Molina 80). The white Tico believed that the blacks got higher-paid management jobs simply because they spoke English. According to the United Fruit managers there was a difference in work ethic – the Afro-Caribbeans were trustworthy, hard working, and because some had descended from slaves they were more accustomed to the harsh working conditions of the coast. The United Fruit Company exploited these racial tensions in order to keep business rolling during strikes. If one ethnic group went on strike, they would simply draw from another ethnic group who was willing to work (Biesanz 114). Mr. Rodman believes that “the man that made the most benefit from this was the United Fruit Company. Because if we had stopped bickering among ourselves we could have united against the Company... [and gotten] better conditions” (Palmer 135). In 1934, the United Fruit Company shifted the bulk of its operations to the Pacific Coast. A 1939 decree by President Ricardo Jiménez prohibited the transferring of “colored” employees to the new location, “arguing that relocation would upset the country’s ‘racial

³ “Spaniards” is a derogatory term the Jamaicans used for Spanish-speakers.

balance’ and possibly cause ‘civil commotion’” (Biesanz 114). As a part of several inclusive civil rights reforms in 1949, Pepe Figueres would repeal this racist law.

According to resident Clinton Bennet, up until 1948 the government of Limón⁴ “was actually controlled by the United Fruit Company” (Palmer 237). The United Fruit Company as the main power player would be replaced by the Costa Rican government in the changes that followed 1949, but damage had already been done by ravaging the land, exploiting coastal residents, and catalyzing racial tensions between ethnic groups. In a defensive survival measure against this oppression, however, the black coastal people united around their shared cultural heritage and formed a distinct cultural identity.

1948-Present – Transfer and Reformulation after the 1948 Civil War

Many east-coast blacks fought on Pepe Figueres’ side during the civil war of 1948. Pepe Figueres’ went on to become the new president and immediately began making socially inclusive reforms. On January 15, 1949, the Costa Rican government adopted a new constitution that allowed women and blacks to vote, and later that year anyone born in Costa Rica automatically became a citizen (including the Afro-Caribbeans and indigenous peoples). Following this decree, “blacks began to enter politics, move to San José, attend public schools, and assimilate culturally” (Biesanz 115). The last census to ask about race and ethnic origin was in 1973. Most east-coast youth now learn Spanish, and the trilingual *Limonense*⁵ tradition of Caribbean English, Creole English, and Spanish is gone. The youngest generation consider themselves “Tico” and

⁴ Limón is the main center of commerce on the east coast.

⁵ “Limonense,” from the principal city of Limón on the coast, refers to anything with its roots in the Afro-Caribbean east coast tradition.

exercises all the rights of a Costa Rican citizen. Black pride groups have arisen, and in 1994 the Association for Afro-Costa Rican Development was established.

Many of the older members of the community resisted this assimilation. Ever since 1910, when the government began enforcing a law that all children had to attend public schools or be fined 10 colones a day, English-speaking Jamaican descendants felt the educational system was a threatening influence on their cultural identity. They had been sending their children to private schools where they learned English and British customs for decades. In the 1970's, a critical eye was turned on public education because it was "tearing our black children away from their cultural roots" (Palmer 244), specifically eroding away their English language. Culture, which is normally passed on to the next generation naturally by an enculturation process, was not being transferred successfully to the new generation of *Limonense* children. In 1974, a commission designed the *Plan Educativo de Limón*, with four resolutions intended to reform the education of the east coast in a way that honored the cultural identity and past the Afro-Caribbean children were not learning. As a part of this initiative, Paula Farmer compiled a written record of the people's oral history in her book *What Happen: A Folk-History of Costa Rica's Talamanca Coast*. But "the homogenous culture and community of the Afro-Caribbean villages described in 'What Happen' [was] gone forever" (Palmer 11).

Assimilation and Success in a Society

A general look at the statistics of Latin America indicates that "Indians and blacks ... suffer disproportionately from poverty, lack of access to basic social services (such as education and health), unemployment and labor market discrimination" (Hooker 288). Recent progressive measures throughout Latin America are being implemented to bestow collective rights on minority groups. However, these reforms use as their main criterion "the possession of a distinct

cultural group identity” (Hooker 291), which often leads to the inclusion of indigenous groups but the exclusion of Afro-Latino groups. In other countries, “multicultural citizenship” has been a recent trend in the 1980’s and 1990’s, but in Costa Rica this process had begun in 1949. The strong cultural identity the coastal blacks had at this time included them in the collective rights reforms. Any ongoing progress in addressing the distinct issues that are relevant to the *Limonense* east-coast population, such as agrarian reforms, the history and language taught in their schools, and multi-ethnic inclusion in employment, can only be prolonged as long as Costa Rican blacks retain a unified cultural identity.

On the other hand, over fifty years have passed since the Afro-Caribbeans began to be legally and socially accepted as equals. Perhaps the cultural identity that the older generation is nostalgic about has served its purpose and in its place is a truly multicultural, multiethnic “Costa Rican” national identity. Alphaeus Buchanan predicted that “here in Talamanca there’s not just going to be unity among black people, but among Indians and blacks and white. We are all *Talamanqueños* (Palmer 245). Despite previously mentioned instances of continued racial discrimination against darker-skinned Costa Ricans, black *Limonenses* are becoming an integral part of Costa Rican society, in politics, education, and the economic sector.

Studies have been done on assimilation and upward mobility in the United States to discover more about which immigrants “succeed” and which end up in a downward spiral. These two processes must be studied independently, because although they are often conflated in theory, one can actually occur without the other. In reality, “acculturation and assimilation operate separately from mobility” and “immigrants can move up economically and socially without having to acculturate or assimilate” (Gans 154). The first-generation Afro-Caribbean people of Costa Rica’s east coast were fortunate that economic opportunities were readily

available for them – without these, mobility within the Costa Rican society would have been much more difficult. However, “the immigrant generation’s upward mobility often affects the occupational choices of the next” (Gans 158). In the case of the U.S., “second-generation young people developed non-immigrant occupational aspirations, leading them to reject the cheap-labour jobs meant for immigrants and becoming candidates for unemployment and ‘second-generation decline’” (Gans 157). Fortunately, because the Limón area was geographically isolated from the highlands and because they maintained a distinct cultural identity and work ethic of their own, the second-generation decline did not occur. Now, however, this phenomenon is occurring. In the case of Costa Rican blacks, the recent assimilation of their culture into mainstream Latino culture gave them better opportunities for upward mobility, phasing out racial discrimination and providing more opportunities for their communities. However, this happened largely at the expense of their cultural identity and may affect their ability to secure any future collective rights.

Analysis

The historical sources used refer to the post-1949 changes as “assimilation,” which focuses on the role of the white Costa Rican government extending a more open invitation to *Talamanqueño* involvement in society. It is less often described as “acculturation,” which gives more volition to the Afro-Caribbean people as they choose certain cultural characteristics that will remain a part of their identity, and sacrifice others. The fact of the matter is, the *Talamanqueños* rely more on themselves than on the dominant culture to choose the degree and manner in which they blend with Latino Costa Rica.

Retaining some key areas of their cultural identity and resisting assimilation on those points will continue improving the role of the Costa Rican Afro-Caribbeans. Their English

heritage gives them access to jobs in today's world market, and provides them with an edge in Costa Rica's tourism economy. Their work ethic, praised by the United Fruit Company employers, also makes them an economic contender and a valuable asset to the Costa Rican industry. Thus, black Costa Ricans must resist assimilation in several areas that give them an economic advantage, those being their English language and tourism. Doing so will stop the recent splintering of their already fragile cultural identity, and unify them in a way that allows them to benefit from collective rights reforms.

The 1949 decree that changed the role of the Afro-Caribbean villagers on the east coast, and the subsequent reforms in collective rights, have augmented the multicultural citizenship that Costa Ricans affirm. Because of their unique history and cultural identity, *Talamanqueños* offer an important dimension to that complete whole. Adhering to this cultural heritage while simultaneously making selective steps toward uniting with their Latino compatriots will continue their success as an integral part of Costa Rican culture.

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