Minority Rights Group International

R E P O R T

Afro-Central Americans:
Rediscovering the African Heritage

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EDITED BY MINORITY RIGHTS GROUP

AFRO-CENTRAL AMERICANS: REDISCOVERING THE AFRICAN HERITAGE

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MINORITY RIGHTS GROUP

Minority Rights Group works to secure rights and justice for ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities. It is dedicated to the cause of cooperation and understanding between communities.

Founded in the 1960s, MRG is a small international non-governmental organization that informs and warns governments, the international community, non-governmental organizations and the wider public about the situation of minorities around the world. This work is based on the publication of well-researched reports, books and papers; direct advocacy on behalf of minority rights in international fora; the development of a global network of like-minded organizations and minority communities to collaborate on these issues; and **the challenging of prejudice and promotion of public understanding** through information and education projects.

MRG believes that the best hope for a peaceful world lies in **identifying and monitoring conflict** between communities, **advocating preventive measures** to avoid the escalation of conflict and **encouraging positive action** to build trust between majority and minority communities.

MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council and has a worldwide network of partners. Its international headquarters are in London. Legally it is registered both as a charity and as a limited company under the United Kingdom Law with an International Governing Council.

THE PROCESS

As part of its methodology, MRG conducts regional research, identifies issues and commissions reports based on its findings. Each author is carefully chosen and all scripts are read by no less than eight independent experts who are knowledgeable about the subject matter. These experts are drawn from the minorities about whom the reports are written, and from journalists, academics, researchers and other human rights agencies. Authors are asked to incorporate comments made by these parties. In this way, MRG aims to publish accurate, authoritative, well-balanced reports.

Panamanians protesting at the renegotiation of the Panama Canal Treaty with the USA in the 1970s
CARLOS REYES-MANZO/ ANDES PRESS AGENCY

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MRG

Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (UN General Assembly; Resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992).

Article 1

1. States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories, and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.
2. States shall adopt appropriate legislative and other measures to achieve those ends.

Article 2

1. Persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (hereinafter referred to as persons belonging to minorities) have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination.
2. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life.
3. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in decisions on the national and, where appropriate, regional level concerning the minority to which they belong or the regions in which they live, in a manner not incompatible with national legislation.
4. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to establish and maintain their own associations.
5. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to establish and maintain, without any discrimination, free and peaceful contacts with other members of their group, with persons belonging to other minorities, as well as contacts across frontiers with citizens of other States to whom they are related by national or ethnic, religious or linguistic ties.

Article 3

1. Persons belonging to minorities may exercise their rights including those as set forth in this Declaration individually as well as in community with other members of their group, without any discrimination.
2. No disadvantage shall result for any person belonging to a minority as the consequence of the exercise or non-exercise of the rights as set forth in this Declaration.

Article 4

1. States shall take measures where required to ensure that persons belonging to minorities may exercise fully and effectively all their human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination and in full equality before the law.
2. States shall take measures to create favourable conditions to enable persons belonging to minorities to express their characteristics and to develop their culture, language, religion, traditions and customs, except where specific practices are in violation of national law and contrary to international standards.
3. States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.
4. States should, where appropriate, take measures in the field of education, in order to encourage knowledge of the history, traditions, language and culture of the minorities existing within their territory. Persons belonging to minorities should have adequate opportunities to gain knowledge of the society as a whole.
5. States should consider appropriate measures so that persons belonging to minorities may participate fully in the economic progress and development in their country.

Article 5

1. National policies and programmes shall be planned and implemented with due regard for the legitimate interests of persons belonging to minorities.
2. Programmes of cooperation and assistance among States should be planned and implemented with due regard for the legitimate interests of persons belonging to minorities.

Article 6

States should cooperate on questions relating to persons belonging to minorities, inter alia exchanging of information and experiences, in order to promote mutual understanding and confidence.

Article 7

States should cooperate in order to promote respect for the rights as set forth in the present Declaration.

Article 8

1. Nothing in this Declaration shall prevent the fulfilment of international obligations of States in relation to persons belonging to minorities. In particular, States shall fulfil in good faith the obligations and commitments they have assumed under international treaties and agreements to which they are parties.
2. The exercise of the rights as set forth in the present Declaration shall not prejudice the enjoyment by all persons of universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms.
3. Measures taken by States in order to ensure the effective enjoyment of the rights as set forth in the present Declaration shall not prima facie be considered contrary to the principle of equality contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
4. Nothing in the present Declaration may be construed as permitting any activity contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations, including sovereign equality, territorial integrity and political independence of States.

Article 9

The specialized agencies and other organizations of the United Nations system shall contribute to the full realization of the rights and principles as set forth in the present Declaration, within their respective fields of competence.

Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965)

Article 1

4. Special measures taken for the sole purpose of securing adequate advancement of certain racial or ethnic groups or individuals requiring such protection as may be necessary in order to ensure such groups or individuals equal enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms shall not be deemed racial discrimination, provided, however, that such measures do not, as a consequence, lead to the maintenance of separate rights for different racial groups and that they shall not be continued after the objectives for which they were taken have been achieved.

Article 2

1. States Parties condemn racial discrimination and undertake to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms and promoting understanding among all races, and to this end: ...

d) Each States Party shall prohibit and bring to an end, by all appropriate means including legislation as required by circumstances, racial discrimination by any persons, group or organization;

2. States Parties shall, when the circumstances so warrant, take, in the social, economic cultural and other fields, special and concrete measures to ensure the adequate development and protection of certain racial groups or individuals belonging to them, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. These measures shall in no case entail as a consequence the maintenance of unequal or separate rights for different racial groups after the objectives for which they were taken have been achieved.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

Article 30

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

American Convention on Human Rights

Article 23 Right to Participate in Government.

1. Every citizen shall enjoy the following rights and opportunities:

a. to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives;
b. to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections, which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and by secret ballot that guarantees the free expression of the will of the voters; and
c. to have access, under general conditions of equality, to the public service of his country.

2. The law may regulate the exercise of the rights and opportunities referred to in the preceding paragraph, exclusively on the basis of age, nationality, residence, language, education, civil and mental capacity and conviction by a competent judge in criminal proceedings.

Article 24 Right to Equal Protection

All persons are equal before the law. Consequently, they are entitled, without discrimination, to equal protection of the law.

Preface

Africans have been present in Central America since the early sixteenth century. Thousands were shipped to the region as slaves, others participated in the 'discovery' and conquest of countries in the region. Afro-Central Americans would take leading roles in their country's fight for independence. However, the African presence and heritage in Central America has remained largely unnoticed and ignored.

Minority Rights Group (MRG) first raised the issue of the black presence in Latin America as a whole in its book *No Longer Invisible – Afro-Latin Americans Today*, published in 1995. The book sought to highlight one of the most marginalized groups of people within Latin America and to support them in their struggle for greater 'visibility'. Following on from this, MRG is now publishing this new report, *Afro-Central Americans: Rediscovering the African Heritage*, focusing on the black communities within Central America, including Mexico. The report shows how the region's black populations, including Creole and Garífuna (Black Caribs), have been historically discriminated against under a variety of political systems. It demonstrates that, although black people have remained largely invisible to wider Central American society, their contribution to the region's socio-economic and cultural development has been significant.

Such a report is long overdue. Many Afro-Central Americans exist in the most marginal of socio-economic conditions. Unemployment among black people in the region is high, sanitation is far poorer in the areas where they live than in other communities, and childhood malnutrition among Afro-Central Americans is rife in certain countries. Afro-Central Americans remain among the poorest sectors of society, largely excluded from positions of power and influence.

The report contains sections on the main black populations in Central America – in Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica, Belize and Honduras – written by academics and activists from the region, and others who have made the subject an area of special study. Together, the authors attempt to fill a significant gap in the knowledge that exists on the region, supplementing MRG's current reports on the Americas.

Furthermore, this new report shows the importance of the African heritage in Central America. With the millions of Africans of different ethnic groupings shipped as labour on the plantations, railways and mines of the New World, came African religions, languages, dance and music. The various accounts demonstrate how this African culture lives on throughout Central America; in the *punta* music of Honduras, the Creole language of Costa Rica, the oral history traditions of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, women's social activism, and the diet of yam or cassava eaten by many Afro-Central Americans today.

The report questions why the denial of this African heritage is rarely discussed in international gatherings and why discrimination against Afro-Central Americans goes largely unrecognized. Yet, if wider society has ignored Afro-Central Americans, black people themselves are working towards increasing their own sense of vision and self-awareness. Whether dating back to the movement for the eradication of slavery, or the influential teachings of Marcus Garvey, for example, the demand for recognition and a growing call for rights for Afro-Central Americans is increasing across the region.

MRG believes that this increasing sense of self-awareness and calls for rights should be heard and acted upon. MRG supports the need for further work to recognize the African heritage throughout the region. Efforts should be made to research and document the presence, contribution and current situation of Afro-Central Americans, to highlight the full extent of their marginalization and to seek a more realistic assessment of their socio-economic, cultural and political experience.

The recognition of the Afro-Central Americans' situation is essential if the countries of Central America are to fulfil the terms of the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. Furthermore, the region's governments should be encouraged to celebrate racial pluralism rather than fearing, denigrating and manipulating ethnic differences.

It is hoped that *Afro-Central Americans: Rediscovering the African Heritage* can help to shape a better future by making the position of Afro-Central Americans more widely known and understood, encouraging decision-makers to act to meet the claims and to support the aspirations, of Central Americans of African descent.

Alan Phillips
Director
June 1996

Introduction

One of the principal themes of this new report, *Afro-Central Americans: Rediscovering the African Heritage*, is the extent to which the black presence in Central America has been largely ignored to date.

Few Central American states collect ethnic data in censuses or other official polls and of those that do, they only include people considered to have 'African features' as an Afro-Central American. This is one of the reasons why countries in the region are able to claim that their black populations are numerically insignificant, despite other evidence to the contrary. Despite the lack of information available, there is thought to be only very small black minority populations in El Salvador and Guatemala, and for this reason, these countries are not represented here.

However, even for those countries where data is available, identities can be misrepresented and the historical legacy of oppression and discrimination can be denied. Ideologies of *blanqueamiento* (whitening) and *mestizaje* (race mixture) offer some of the clearest explanations for this. Central America, like Latin America in its entirety, has, with few exceptions, tended to deny what is African about the region, and associates the loss or 'dilution' of African physical and cultural characteristics with the idea of 'progress'.

Therefore the number of Afro-Central Americans is contested. However, even for those six countries dealt with in this report, an estimated 1.5 to 11.8 million people are thought to have some degree of African ancestry, and may be considered as Afro-Central American.[1] Afro-Central Americans are therefore a sizeable proportion of the region's population, possibly representing a numerical majority in Belize, a large minority in Panama, sizeable minorities in Mexico and Nicaragua and small minorities in Costa Rica and Honduras.

Aside from the discourse over the size and make-up of the black minorities in the region, the report acknowledges the common and at times, distinct experience of Afro-Central Americans, recognizing the political, economic and social context of the countries of the region.

The report begins with Jameelah Muhammad's account on Afro-Mexicans. Muhammad establishes that some 500,000 Africans were brought to the country during 1519–1810 to work in the silver mines and sugar plantations and argues that Afro-Mexicans today are among the least represented and most oppressed of all of Mexico's ethnic groups. Conversely, however, she points to a strong African presence in Mexico, fortified by black Mexicans' leadership in the wars for independence.

Jane Freeland focuses on the position of the two main Afro-Nicaraguan groups – the Creole and the smaller Garífuna populations. Freeland highlights how the ascendancy of the *mestizo* population (of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry), ousting the Creoles, helped replace English with Spanish as the official language. Furthermore, she discusses the Sandinista government's 'autonomy process' following the 1979 revolution and the results of its attempts to bring minority rights to the fore.

Panamanian and Costa Rican history resonates with Afro-Caribbean migrant labour influxes, as described by Darién J. Davis for Panama, and Kathleen Sawyers Royal and Franklin Perry for Costa Rica. Davis gives a succinct account of the Afro-Panamanian community, mitigated by class, of *nativos* (Afro-Panamanians who predate the Caribbean migration) and *antillanos* (who came from the Caribbean over a long period but in greatest numbers after the 1870s to work on the Panama Canal). Sawyers and Perry consider the legacy of the English-speaking, Protestant, black labourers brought in to work on railway construction and banana plantations, and Costa Rica's Spanish-speaking Catholic majority.

Debbie Ewens argues that Belize is unique in being the only black nation in Central America. She describes how two-thirds of the land was in Creole[2] hands by the mid-nineteenth century. Yet despite this, she explains how lighter-skinned *mestizos* have tended to enjoy more influence, leading her to conclude that 'multiracial tensions' rather than 'multiracial harmony' have underpinned the situation.

Writing on Honduras, Rachel Sieder discusses what it believed to be the largest Garífuna population in Central America, focusing on the degree of syncretism within the Garífuna religion and the factors that have helped the Garífuna to stabilize and retain their ethnic identity. She also considers one of the most hopeful signs of intercommunal cooperation in the region – the way that the Garífuna and indigenous peoples of Honduras have begun to work together over their demands for land and fishing rights.

1 Based on Oviedo R.M., 'Are we or aren't we?', *NACLA Report on the Americas: The Black Americas 1492–1992*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1992, p. 19.
2 People of African descent

Based on Oviedo, R.M., 'Are we or aren't we?', *NACLA Report on the Americas: The Black Americas 1492–1992*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1992, p. 19, copyright 1992 by the North American Congress on Latin America, 475 Riverside Drive, #454, New York, NY 10115; supplemented by individual country sources.

Mexico

The African presence in Mexico is a subject often denied, but people of African descent have influenced every aspect of Mexican life, culture and history.[1] They participated in its 'discovery' and conquest, exploring unknown territories and establishing communication between the indigenous peoples and the Spanish. Black people were also crucial to the early development of Mexico's economy, making it the most successful in colonial Spanish America, and they had a leading role in the War of Independence. Black people maintained a high profile in the ranks of Mexico's revolutionary forces.

Africans made important contributions to Mexican folk tales, religion, medicinal practices, cooking styles and, most notably, music and dance. For example, the hit song 'La Bamba' was sung as early as 1683 by black people from Veracruz. The *bamba* is also a traditional dance. Bamba or Mbamba is the name of an ethnic group in Angola who arrived in Mexico via the slave port of Veracruz in the seventeenth century. According to J.A. Rogers, among the many prominent Mexicans of African ancestry was the muralist and painter Diego Rivera.

In spite of this impressive historical, social and cultural legacy, however, Afro-Mexicans exist today as a marginalized group. They are, arguably, the least represented and most oppressed of all Mexico's ethnic groups, and have yet to enter the mainstream and be recognized as full citizens.

Historical background

Precise figures for the number of Africans brought into Mexico are difficult to come by. Many were brought in illegally, and unknown numbers of people died during the journey or escaped to the mountains upon arrival. It is estimated that between the arrival of Hernán Cortés in 1519 and the start of Mexico's War of Independence in 1810 more than 500,000 Africans were brought to Mexico. Their numbers increased so rapidly during the early years of the colony that the Spanish authorities feared a black uprising. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Mexico employed more enslaved Africans than any other country in the Americas. Most came from West Africa, although people were also brought from Central and East Africa. *Ladinos* – Africans born and hispanicized in the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal[2] – entered the country through the ports of Acapulco, Veracruz, Campeche and Pánuco.

Africans traditionally were skilled labourers in colonial Mexico. Their expertise was needed in the silver mines of Zacatecas, Taxco, Guanajuato, Durango and Pachuca, and on the sugar plantations of the Valle de Orizaba and Morelos. In many colonial cities they built roads and bridges, and it is thought that some of Mexico's cathedrals were built and designed by black people. Their labour was needed in the *obrajes* (textile factories) of Puebla, Michoacán, Mexico City and Oaxaca. They worked on the cattle ranches and dived for pearls in the pearl fisheries – a highly dangerous activity during which many drowned. Many served in domestic capacities, too.

Spaniards such as Bartolomé de las Casas suggested that Africans were needed to replace the *indios* who were being exterminated at the alarming rate of 4 million within the first 12 years of the conquest. As early as 1511 Africans were said to be able to do the work of four indigenous people and were therefore considered four times more profitable. Their presence was indispensable in the mines and the sugar plantations of the colonial period. Mexico City, along with Lima in Peru, became the largest and wealthiest city in colonial Spanish America.

During this period, Mexico's African population always exceeded the European. According to the scholar Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, in the sixteenth century black Mexicans constituted 71 per cent of the non-indigenous population, while the Spanish represented the remainder.[3] By the eighteenth century the number of African and mulatto (mixed race) Mexicans had declined to about 65 per cent of the non-indigenous population. However, while Afro-Mexicans represented only about 2 per cent of the total national population, and white people constituted less than 1 per cent; the native population was a massive 98 per cent.

Despite the fact that a large number of Africans had entered Mexico, as early as the late 1740s their numbers had declined due to several factors. In the sixteenth century the main cause of death for the Afro-Mexican population was European diseases like yellow fever, tuberculosis and syphilis. Death in the sugar-cane fields and in the silver mines was also very common among black workers. Moreover, much of the decrease can be attributed to the Spanish-American concept of *blanqueamiento*. It was legally and socially beneficial for Afro-Mexicans to mix with either indigenous people or the Spanish. Black women who married Hispanic men improved their social status and that of their children. Despite the many efforts by non-black Mexicans to restrict relations between African and indigenous people, black men often had sexual relationships with indigenous women, largely because black women were unavailable to them. During much of the colonial period, black women represented less than 10 per cent of the immigrant population. They served primarily as cooks and maids for the Spanish, and many became their concubines. It was a general rule to admit more men than women to Mexico, resulting in a ratio of black men to black women of about three to one.

Legally, the progeny of a black man and an indigenous woman was a free child; that of two black slaves was always a slave child. As time went on, most of the non-indigenous population of colonial Mexico came to be the offspring of miscegenation between Africans and indigenous people.

They were known as *jarocho* ('wild pig'), *chino* or *lobo* ('wolf'), depending on the dominant features.

When black men were allowed to marry black women, this was almost always carried out against the will of one or both parties. Slave owners married off enslaved black people and mulattos as soon as their age would allow, to procure children. The Catholic Church mandated that such couples see each other only on Saturday nights. Some slave owners forbad them to sleep in the same bed. This and other injustices led Afro-Mexican men to escape to the mountains and later, *palenques* (armed settlements of escaped slaves or maroons). The isolation of these *palenques* offered sanctuary to maroons and also preserved elements of African tradition. Here the uneven sex ratio caused many former slaves to kidnap indigenous women and force them into what were called *casamientos de monte* ('mountain marriages'). In some cases, indigenous women willingly became the sexual partners of black and mulatto men.

Mountain marriage is still an acceptable practice today in the Afro-Mexican community of Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero State. The groom proudly boasting, 'Me la robé' ('I stole her'); while the bride confesses, 'Me jullí' ('I got married').[4] Later, the town gossips about the event, saying, 'Se jullieron al monte' ('They got married in the mountains'). This is not a real kidnapping but a voluntary agreement between the bride and groom.

The introduction of women changed the *palenques* demographically. After the birth of children, the men were less mobile. They became more concerned with family responsibilities such as farming than with fighting and protecting themselves against the Spanish. 'Throughout the colonial period many palenque settlements in Veracruz died evolutionary deaths as restless unattached male runaways became village husbands and fathers.'[5] The former maroon community of Yanga became racially and ethnically indistinguishable from other settlements that dotted the area, after a few generations.[6] The people of Yanga have now lost their identity as a black community. Most of the Afro-Mexican inhabitants of the Yanga *palenque* (the best-known *palenque* in Mexico) have moved to the neighbouring town of Mata Clara.

Oppression, struggle and independence

Africans and mulattos were perceived in a negative way, perhaps in order to justify the brutal oppression to which they were routinely subjected. The Spanish described them as 'vicious people', 'naturally evil', of a 'bad race', 'bellicose' and 'bestial'. In an effort to maintain their own alleged purity of blood, to ensure their superior status and to relegate black people to the lowest rung of the social ladder, in the seventeenth century the Spanish established a social system based on an elaborate colour bar. This caste system, prevalent throughout Latin America, controlled all aspects of life for Afro-Mexicans. Every person of African or indigenous ancestry was denied rights to education, and was not allowed to bear arms, to travel freely at night, to wear jewellery or silk, and in many cases to marry. Black people were not accepted in ecclesiastical orders. For those who violated these oppressive colonial laws, the punishment was as excessive and merciless as castration, maiming and disfigurement. Some black and mulatto slaves were branded with the slave owner's name. One of the cruellest and most widespread forms of physical punishment was a practice known as *pringar*, dropping hot pork fat or pitch melted over a large candle onto the victim's skin.[7] When a group of maroons were caught during the uprising of 1536, they were beheaded; their heads were later exhibited in Mexico City's Plaza Mayor as an example to others.

African resistance to slavery and oppression in Mexico began immediately after the institution was established. Aguirre Beltrán points out that more than 2,000 black people, approximately one-tenth of the black population, had escaped from their Spanish masters.

In Mexico, black revolutionaries first offered emancipation to slaves during the War of Independence. Known as the poor people's champion, Vicente Guerrero, also known as El Negro Guerrero, who would later become Mexico's second President, and General José María Morelos both played a significant part in winning Mexico's independence from Spain. The Mexican states of Guerrero and Morelos were named in honour of these war heroes. Other black people in leadership positions during the War of Independence included Juan del Carmen, Juan Bautista, Francisco Gómez and José María Alegre. Some historians point out that it was the *ejército moreno* (dark army) of Father Hidalgo that launched the independence struggle.

One of the reasons why black people were so involved in the War of Independence was because they were fighting, not only for national liberation, but also to end the institution of slavery and the caste system which supported ethnic segregation and discrimination. It was a duty of every citizen of the colony to serve in the military, a responsibility that many white people evaded. However, those black people who had obtained their freedom joined the cause that promised them full liberty. As early as the eighteenth century troops of free black people were protecting the major cities of colonial Mexico. By 1770 Afro-Mexican militia began to appear. However, even though these people served in the military they did not enjoy full citizenship rights.

It was during Guerrero's presidency in 1829 that slavery was officially abolished. Two years earlier, segregation laws had been abolished and new laws passed that prohibited the Catholic Church from using race designations in church records. Guerrero, Morelos and other revolutionaries had developed nationalist views. They wanted all the people of the nation to think in terms of nationality and not race. Those who had been referred to by the Spanish as *mestizo*, *mulato*, *negro* and *indio* now demanded to be called Mexicans. Children born after independence were recorded simply as Mexicans rather than as *negro*, *indio*, and so on. As a consequence, Afro-Mexicans moved further away from an African identity, and studies of black life in the post-colonial period suffer from the absence of ethnic identifications.

Population, demography and ethnic identity

The Mexican government does not nowadays collect data by ethnic group. The last census to do so was in 1810, when black people represented 10.2 per cent of the Mexican population. A 1950 estimate revealed that the Afro-Mexican population was about 5.1 per cent of the national total, half of what it had been at the time of independence.[8] Because of the high level of miscegenation, mostly between indigenous people and Hispanics, the African genetic pool diminished over time. To a large extent, this was official policy, as it was throughout Latin America, expressed in the now highly suspect phrase *mejorar la raza* (improve the race). This is a process by which African ancestry is 'diluted' by racial mixing. The idea was to mix the races to form a homogeneous group, the mythical 'cosmic race', an ideology perpetuated by many Mexican intellectuals, including the twentieth century philosopher José Vasconcelos.

Historically, Mexicans of African descent were considered the most undesirable group with which to miscegenate; African features were spoken of as 'abominable'. Many Afro-Mexicans tried to 'pass' the colour line into the European group if possible, or into the indigenous group. During the late colonial period, people of indigenous or African descent were allowed to buy the title of *blanco* (white). Such was the case for the famous José María Morelos. He was of African descent, but was described on his birth certificate as a *criollo* (a white person of Spanish origin). However, for *negros atezados* (very dark black people) and *negros retintos* ('double-dyed' black people) this was impossible.

The current number of Afro-Mexicans is not known. However, Miriam Jiménez Román, from New York's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, estimates that '75 per cent of the population of Mexico has some African ancestry due to the pervasiveness and the extension of the African throughout Mexico'. The *1994 Britannica Yearbook* estimates that African descendants constitute 0.5 per cent of Mexicans – that is, 474,000 identifiable Afro-Mexicans among 94 million. This low estimate is partially due to the conflict over how 'black' is defined.

Mexico has tried to 'dilute' its dark population by discouraging – and in the case of the former dictator Porfirio Díaz by banning – immigration of people of African descent and encouraging immigration of European peoples, promising them jobs and economic stability.

Neither a single authority nor consistent data exist on the question of black demographics in Mexico. Historically, the Afro-Mexican population was concentrated on the coasts: on the Costa Chica in the western states of Guerrero and Oaxaca, and in the eastern states of Tabasco and Veracruz, where black people have remained living in and around the former slave ports. People of African descent also inhabit the northern deserts of the states of Coahuila, Zacatecas and Sinaloa; and they reportedly live in the southern states of Yucatán and Quintana Roo, where they represent 10 per cent of the province.[9] A further Afro-Mexican community, settled in the northern state of Coahuila, owes its origins to North American slaves who escaped during the seventeenth century and later cohabitated and intermarried with Seminole Native Americans. Today, their descendants have a society and culture of mixed African and Native American heritage.

Interestingly, many historically black communities along the Atlantic coast of Mexico bear names of African regions or make reference to people of African ancestry. Along the coast are towns called Angola, Guinea, Mozambique and Cerro del Congo or Congo Hill. Other settlements are named in recognition of the various African ethnic groups that came, such as La Mandinga, El Mocambo, La Matamba and El Monzongo; or they bear names such as El Mulato, La Mulata, El Negro and Juan Mulato. Some town names simply indicate maroon territories, such as Cimarrón and Palenque. There are also Afro-Mexican communities named after black liberators who fought against the Spanish. The town of San Lorenzo de los Negros was later named Yanga, after the African-born prince who after 40 years of fighting the Spanish won sovereignty for his people, while Mandinga y Matosa was named after the maroon leader Francisco de la Matosa.

While many Afro-Mexicans lack a clear consciousness of their African heritage, some do not. The term *mestizo* is never used to refer to Afro-Mexicans but is reserved exclusively for indigenous-Hispanic Mexicans. People of visible African ancestry are called *moreno* (brown), a euphemism that evolved after the War of Independence and replaced the malicious term *negro*, which dated from the slave trade.

The term *negro* evokes much discomfort among Afro-Mexicans and is avoided. In response to use of this word, Afro-Mexicans of Costa Chica say: 'Los negros son solo los burros, nosotros somos "prietos"' ('Negroes are donkeys, we are dark'). People in this community refer to their group as the *negrada* or the *negradita*. Members of this community who are of mixed Spanish and African origin, and who in colonial Mexico would have been called *mulatos blancos* and *mulatos lobos*, are known as *blanquitos* (little whites), because of the lightness of their skin and their less obvious African features. *Blanquitos* are the most privileged group in the community, generally occupying middle-stratum positions such as clerks. The *negros puros* – people with strong African features – are called *cuculustes*. According to local people, such individuals are the most discriminated against of this community. While the inhabitants of some Afro-Mexican coastal communities seem to associate negroid physical features with negative personal stereotypes, in other towns of the region such as the community of San Nicolás, residents adopt such African names as Angola, Congo and Nigeria in proud recognition of their African ancestry.

Socio-economic conditions

Only one detailed study is known to have been made of an Afro-Mexican community. In 1946 the Afro-Mexican scholar Aguirre Beltrán investigated the predominantly black town of Cuajinicuilapa in the state of Guerrero. But research on contemporary social conditions in Mexico tends to exclude black communities completely. Within the past decade, however, concerned anthro-

pologists and others have visited Afro-Mexican communities, describing them as impoverished and marginalized. Illiteracy is common, and opportunities for education are scarce; school facilities are inadequate. In these communities residents have received little or no assistance from the government. Many towns lack such basic facilities as sewerage, drainage, potable water and paved streets.

According to data collected by Aguirre Beltrán, the town of Cuajinicuilapa became accessible only in 1965, when a highway was constructed; the first school was established only in 1940; the local businesses are owned entirely by the few upper-class white people. As a result of the agrarian reforms of 1910, black people work primarily on *ejidos* (communally owned estates) cultivating beans, corn, peppers and sesame seeds – their primary cash crop; others make a living by selling bread and other items, especially near tourist resorts like Acapulco. In the 1940s both the infant mortality rate and the number of women who died in childbirth were extremely high in the town due to the lack of doctors and medical facilities. Children under four died at an alarming rate, representing 45 per cent of the total deaths in the municipality. Half of the children born in Cuajinicuilapa did not live to the age of five. Epilepsy, diarrhoea and fever were the major killers.

More recent evidence comes from the neighbouring Afro-Mexican town of San Nicolás. Here the schoolteachers, administrators, doctors and nurses are non-black and come from other parts of the country. Interestingly, however, all political matters are handled exclusively by Afro-Mexicans. The following observations and comments were made by Gwendolyn Twillie, chair of the Theatre Arts/Dance Department at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, USA, during her brief stay in San Nicolás:

> *'The houses along the dusty dirt roads are of three types: mud and sticks with dirt floors and tin roofs; brick; and the less common adobe houses of mud and sticks covered with plastic. The typical kitchen is a lean-to made of sticks with a tin roof. No bathrooms were observed. The houses are sparsely furnished – a hammock, two chairs and rope beds being standard. Those families fortunate enough to have refrigerators use them to store soft drinks for resale. A sign with soft drink logos nailed to the outside of a house is not only an advertisement, it is a status symbol proclaiming that that family owns a refrigerator.*
>
> *The day begins very early for the people of San Nicolás. Women wash, do other household chores, tend to the children, and bake* pan *(a type of sweet bread). Most of the men farm. In addition to corn, sesame seeds, chillies, jamaica beans, rice, watermelon, papaya, lemons, oranges and cacao are also grown. A few men own livestock, and some money is made through the sale of cattle and goats. Some of the men own small* camionetas *(small trucks), and they earn money by picking up passengers. It is commonplace for the women and girls to transport goods by carrying them on their heads. They work very hard and there is little time for leisure.*
>
> *There are not enough teachers. The classrooms are crowded; there are few books and virtually no supplies. Children were observed using rulers made from paper to measure the diagram of a town square in shared textbooks. An interview with the principal of one of the three primary schools and a third-grade teacher revealed that most of the students do not finish secondary school. There is not a great deal of interest in school, except for the units on the conversion of dollars to pesos. Most of the students plan to go to the United States to work. They do not mind entering the country illegally to work in the fields. According to the principal, a recent survey revealed that 13 out of every 100 people from the state of Guerrero go to the United States to work.*
>
> *The average Mexican lives in poverty, but the people of San Nicolás are poorer than average. The stark poverty is humbling. Many of the children appear to be malnourished. Their bloated abdomens and knobby knees are sure signs of malnutrition …*
>
> *Mexicans generally do not have much to say that is complimentary about the people of San Nicolás. Mexicans often declare: "You should not go there, the people are bad. They will rob you. They will kill you. They are on drugs." These statements are typical from Guadalajara to Acapulco and beyond. The people of San Nicolás do not deserve the wholesale derogatory comments that are made about them as a people. They have the same hopes, dreams and desires of other human beings. They want a cleaner town. They want better roads. They want a drainage system. They want a better life and they deserve it. Yet, although the people experience these deplorable circumstances, the author cannot help but sadly conclude that the people of San Nicolás could not sense that they deserve better. All they know or have been taught is destitution, slavery, and that they are a despicable people.'*[10]

Cultural identity

Several factors have contributed to Afro-Mexicans' loss of cultural identity: the achievements of Mexico's African peoples have not been acknowledged; unlike the indigenous population, they lost many of their traditions during the upheavals of their enslavement; and as we have seen, their integration into the dominant society has been relentlessly brutal. Even so, Afro-Mexicans have managed to preserve a degree of African identity. In particular, they have successfully retained their musical styles. The musicologist Rolando Pérez Fernández has observed that traditional Mexican music 'is fundamentally the result of the transculturation between the Spanish and the blacks'. Traditional Mexican music finds its origin in the states that were heavily populated by black people: southern Jalisco, Michoacán, Guerrero, Oaxaca and, along the Pacific coast, Huasteco, Tabasco, Veracruz and northern Puebla. Each state has contributed a *son* (sound) or style of its own, narrating stories of love and conflict. Some popular *sones* are La Morena, La Negra and El Maracumbe. These styles are similar to many Afro-Caribbean and African musical forms. Other musical forms attributed to Afro-Mexicans

are dances like the *jarabe*, the *chilena*, the *gusto* and the *zapateo*. These dances were once prohibited by the colonial administration but today are considered the model of Mexican folklore. Various African-style drums and the marimba (originating in the Congo) are widely used.

Another cultural form common among Mexico's black community is the *corrido*. *Corridos* are narrations in the first or third person by a *corridista* who witnessed a particular event. The themes are historical and revolutionary as well as tragedies of love and death. The *corrido* is usually recited or sung in an Afro-Mexican dialect. Popular along the Costa Chica of Mexico, these poems illustrate occurrences in everyday life. Since 1990 black communities of the Costa Chica have held annual competitions where *corridistas* compete against one another. Also, such narratives as 'The Rabbit and the Coyote' are as popular in the black communities of Mexico as they are among Afro-Americans elsewhere in the region.

Since the colonial era, the Dance of the Devil has been unique among Afro-Mexicans of the Costa Chica community, a tradition that was practised and preserved in the maroon communities. In the ceremony, men dress up in old tattered clothes and wear a horse mask. The Devil is represented by a man dressed in women's clothing. The participants dance traditional African dances throughout the night. Catholic deities, beliefs and rites are mingled with African ones. This dance is performed during Carnival, Kings' Day, Corpus Christi Day and the Day of the Dead. Aguirre Beltrán discovered that many religious beliefs and practices in this community, such as the cohabitation of dead relatives and family, and possession by ancestral gods and spirits, have their origin in the Congo and Guinea.

The language of Afro-Mexicans is sometimes said to be 'unintelligible Spanish'. In his study of the Afro-Mexicans of Cuajinicuilapa, Aguirre Beltrán noted that the Spanish spoken by many black Mexicans is similar to that of other areas in Latin America where people of African descent predominate. This unique Spanish dialect, which is rhythmic and rich in metaphor, developed because maroon communities were isolated from the rest of the country.

Other cultural traditions that speak of African influence include the carrying of babies on the hip and of objects on the head, which are common practices among Afro-Mexicans, and the building of *redondos* – homes made in a circular pattern, with reed walls and conical thatched roofs – throughout the Costa Chica. Both of these African practices have been adopted by the indigenous people who live in the region. Certain culinary techniques and foods have also been popularized by Afro-Mexicans, such as *mondongo* (pig intestines).

Discrimination and gender stereotypes

To date, no major study on Mexican race relations has been done; until recently the subject was kept out of national debate. When racism is talked about in Mexico, it is assumed to be racism against indigenous people, not against people of African ancestry. In Mexico it is argued that there is no discrimination, because there are no black people to discriminate against. Yet contemporary Afro-Mexicans are discriminated against for the same reasons that applied during the colonial period – for their alleged inferiority and skin colour. During the colonial era, they represented the bottom of the social scale, and they have remained there ever since.

Racism against black people in Mexico is subtle. Although legal segregation of blacks from whites no longer exists, there is a clear distinction between the life of an Afro-Mexican and that of a *mestizo* member of the oppressive, dominant group. Ironically, in May 1992 the former President of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and the Mayor of Mexico City invited leaders of several Afro-American studies programmes across the United States to the country, in an effort to bridge a perceived gap between Mexico and the Afro-American community in the USA. No such efforts have been made regarding Mexico's own black population.

Despite Salinas's claim that Mexico has successfully assimilated its black population, the only assimilation that has taken place is linguistic and, to some extent, biological. There is no general acceptance of the African ethnic and cultural element in the national heritage. Mexico, like other countries in the region, identifies itself as a nation of *mestizos* – people of mixed indigenous and Spanish blood. Latin American historians claim that the 'discovery' of their region was an encounter of two worlds, the indigenous and the Spanish, a notion fully endorsed by Mexican academia. While many Mexicans boast about their Spanish relatives, rarely will one admit to having a black grandparent.

Afro-Mexicans have not assimilated, which explains their absence from such institutions as universities, hospitals and the government. While few black people occupy positions of authority, it is relatively common for them to excel in such stereotypical roles as athletes and entertainers. Their primary sources of income, however, are fishing, farming and domestic work. The popular Mexican saying 'Work hard like a nigger to live like a white' aptly illustrates the situation.

Since the beginning of Spanish domination, people of African origin have been portrayed in popular culture in a range of insulting stereotypes. Today they are depicted in the most distorted way on television, and especially in comic books which many Mexicans seem to enjoy. The popular comic book *Memín Pinguín* is one example of how black people are negatively portrayed; it features a carricature of a young Afro-Hispanic boy who is constantly bullied because of his physicial 'ugligness'.[11] Afro-Mexicans appear on national television almost always in such stereotypical roles as maids and entertainers.

Specific information concerning the condition of black women in Mexico is non-existent. However, the manner in which they are portrayed in Mexican popular culture provides an idea of some of the problems they encounter. Afro-Mexican women generally work as cooks, maids and domestics. Like black men, they are viewed as objects of servitude – overweight, uneducated, illiterate and poor, and speakers of unintelligible Spanish. Yet black women in Mexico cannot seem to escape the myth of being oversexed. Many historians write about Spanish men's desire to have African women as their concubines. In this way, the black woman's body has become a commodity. She was known as

a prostitute in major colonial cities like Puebla City and Mexico City. At one point in history the words negra and 'prostitute' were synonymous. This image has persisted, and is routinely depicted in Mexican comic books.

The agenda for change

Afro-Mexicans have begun to mobilize for social change and economic development. Their primary focus is teaching black pride and improving the social and human rights status of all Afro-Mexicans. One of the earliest manifestations of this process of recovery occurred in 1932 in the state of Veracruz, when the descendants of maroons pressured the Mexican government to change the name of the town of San Lorenzo de los Negros to Yanga in honour of the Muslim maroon leader. Yanga's achievements included founding the first free town of maroons in Spanish America – something about which the average Mexican is never taught. Carnival here is now held almost exclusively to pay tribute to Yanga, the Liberator. This annual event acts as a celebration of African identity and culture. In an effort to build links between Africans and Mexicans of African descent, relationships have been established between the Embassy of the Ivory Coast and the municipality of Yanga since 1988.

Despite such initiatives, and regardless of the major role that Afro-Mexicans had in the liberation of Mexico, and their participation in the development of the nation and the countless other contributions they made to Mexican society, the general attitude towards black people in Mexico remains racist. They have yet to achieve political or social equality. Skin colour has remained an indicator of social position. The few black professionals encountered in Mexico tend to be Africans, African-Americans or Haitians, most of whom are employed in their respective embassies.

Afro-Mexicans lack recognition, representation, leadership and participation in the political, economic and educational institutions of their country. While indigenous groups have received national as well as international attention and support, Afro-Mexican voices have largely gone unheard. To live up to its claim of racial democracy, Mexican society must deal with its own racism and begin to accept its black population by viewing and projecting Afro-Mexicans in a positive light, and by illustrating their contribution to society in school textbooks and academic studies and by other means. This can be achieved by promoting Mexico as a tri-ethnic society as opposed to the mythical country of *mestizos* for which so much has been claimed. The production and circulation of negative images of black people in the media and popular culture should be brought to an end. Funds should be made available to improve the impoverished communities where most Afro-Mexicans live. Finally the culture, way of life and socio-economic conditions of the many silent black communities in Mexico should be studied and included in national analyses and reports, to combat the present ignorance and injustice.

Nicaragua

Strictly speaking, Nicaragua has three Afro-Latin American ethnic groups, all concentrated in the Caribbean Coast region.[1] The Creoles descend from African slaves imported from the Caribbean and their white English masters. The Black Caribs or Garífuna[2] descend from escaped slaves and indigenous Caribs and Arawaks of the Antilles, and the Miskitu from escaped slaves and indigenous peoples of the 'Mosquito Coast' of Nicaragua and Honduras. Yet while the Garífuna are proudly Afro-Latin American, the Miskitu identify themselves as indigenous, and will not be dealt with here.[3]

The 36,000 Creoles are the third largest of the six ethnic groups of the Coast, 12.14 per cent of the regional and about 0.9 per cent of the national population. The majority live in the urban settlements of what is now the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS).[4] Smaller groups live in the towns of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN), and there are migrant populations in Managua and in the United States (US). The Garífuna number just 3,068, only 1.02 per cent of the regional and 0.04 per cent of the national population. They chiefly inhabit two small villages, Orinoco and La Fe, on the shores of Pearl Lagoon north of Bluefields, and are scattered in other lagoon-bank villages, and in Bluefields.

Uniquely in Central America, both groups have recently experienced a socialist revolution which made minority rights a central issue. Each made different demands of the revolution, rooted in their historical experience, and gained rights unique to the Americas, which are now in jeopardy.

The Creoles: dual colonization and identity[5]

The Atlantic Coast has always been physically and politically isolated from the rest of Nicaragua. Multiethnic, multilingual and Protestant, with strong Anglo-American affinities since the arrival of English settlers in the seventeenth century, it is incorporated into a typically Central American state, dominated by Spanish-speaking, Roman Catholic *mestizo* descendants of indigenous peoples and the Spanish who colonized Nicaragua's Pacific Coast region in the sixteenth century.[6]

Nicaragua's dual colonization created a tradition of hostile relations between the two resulting societies, which was exploited and exaggerated in the competition between 'Anglo' and 'Hispanic' powers for control of this strategic territory. Ethnic identity was shaped by this competition and the interventions it triggered: from Britain, North America and the Nicaraguan state itself. Each power favoured different ethnic groups, giving them space to develop but altering their relationships with the others, creating the complex inter-ethnic hierarchy observable on the coast today, and the Creoles' place within it.

Britain set the pattern in the seventeenth century by forming a strategic alliance with the indigenous Miskitu of the Coast against their common enemy, the Spanish, and ruling the territory indirectly through a Miskitu chief recognised as 'King' of Mosquitia. British settlers imported African slaves, who occupied the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy created by this alliance. As in other slave societies, masters and slaves interbred, and their offspring formed an élite group within the slave population. When Britain left the Coast in 1787, many of this group inherited economic and political roles previously occupied by the British, and formed independent communities which became the Creole centres of today.

Their advance was checked when Britain returned in 1845 to fill the power vacuum following independence from Spain, declaring Mosquitia a British protectorate. Nevertheless, political, economic and cultural changes in the nineteenth century enabled the Creoles to move up the ethnic hierarchy until they replaced the Miskitu as most favoured group.

From 1849 Moravian missionaries evangelized first Creoles and later Miskitu and other indigenous peoples. Mission schools taught literacy in English, strengthening links with English-based culture. Educated Creoles were trained as 'native helpers' to the white missionaries, and later as ministers, gaining authority over other ethnic groups as the Moravian Church became influential, politically and economically as well as spiritually.

Following independence from Spain (1838), Nicaraguan nationalism, backed by US expansionism, gradually forced Britain out of the Coast, ending the special relationship with the Miskitu. To protect Miskitu rights, a US-style 'Mosquito Reserve' was created (1860), but its constitution limited the Miskitu chief's powers, giving control to an advisory council dominated by Creoles.

Between the 1880s and the 1950s US companies increasingly penetrated the Atlantic Coast economy, exploiting its resources in independent enclaves. Here, the Creoles' English-based education qualified them for clerical and middle management positions, while *mestizo* immigrants, casual indigenous workers and unskilled black workers from the Caribbean did the heavy labour. As Afro-Caribbean immigration increased, a class/colour distinction developed that persisted well into the twentieth century, between 'Negroes' – black, predominantly Anglican and Baptist immigrants – and Creoles – older-established, lighter-skinned, Moravian professionals, independent farmers and fisherfolk. Gradually, 'Negroes' assimilated 'upwards', and all Afro-Caribbean *costeños* (coastal people) called themselves 'Creoles' to mark their associations with the Anglo culture and to distinguish themselves from the indigenous groups. By the 1890s Creoles were firmly in the ascendancy, in the church, the

Mosquito Reserve and the enclave labour hierarchy. However, their authority, which depended on the presence of an external power, was short-lived.

In 1893 Pacific Coast politics brought to power the Liberal President Zelaya, determined to 'reincorporate' the Reserve into the Nicaraguan state. Creoles fought hard to defend their autonomy but were defeated by US-backed government forces and stripped of their leadership roles. *Mestizos* ousted Creoles from government and administration; Spanish replaced English as the region's official language; teaching in other languages was forbidden. Designed to create national unity, these policies fuelled hostility to 'the Spaniards', particularly among Creoles. Frustrated by governments they considered inefficient, corrupt and culturally inferior, Creoles backed repeated coups and uprisings, confirming *mestizo* perceptions of the Coast as a hotbed of secessionism. Yet despite their support, when a 1909 conservative coup deposed Zelaya, neither the region's autonomy nor the Creoles' place in its government were restored. Even their status in the labour hierarchy of the enclaves slowly declined as US companies withdrew.

Modern Creole identity

Creoles perceived themselves first regionally, as *costeños*, then ethnically, as Creoles. Their identity interwove class and ethnic elements and was inseparable from their position in an observable ethnic hierarchy. At the time of the Sandinista victory (1979), Creoles still considered themselves the élite of this hierarchy, blocked only by *mestizo* domination from leading political and administrative positions. They still dominated the Protestant churches, and retained a share of white collar jobs disproportionate to their numbers,[7] accepting only reluctantly the non-skilled or agricultural jobs associated with indigenous groups and *mestizo* peasants. Education was the key to this status.

Other critical markers of identity were contact with English-speaking culture, sometimes through higher education in the US, and a lifestyle based on the imported goods made available through the US enclaves. As enclave work declined, Creoles took to 'shipping out' as crew on US boats, or migrated, first to the towns, then to Managua or the USA. Most Creole families could rely on dollar remittances to supplement their earnings and maintain their status.

To break into *mestizo*-dominated jobs, Creoles must assimilate towards *mestizo* culture, at the cost of ethnic allegiances, the last cultural markers to be shed being Protestant religious affiliations[8] and Creole-English speech. Such sacrifices were less urgent on the Coast, where the lifestyles of Creole and *mestizo* élites borrow elements from each other. But in the Pacific region, Creoles would explain away their English speech by claiming to be Puerto Ricans, rather than be identified as Nicaraguan *negros*.

Creole women occupied a similar middle ground, enjoying more freedom than women of other groups. They retained rights, originating in the African family, to sexual pleasure and the negotiation of important family decisions. Creole history had given greater economic power to men, and Moravianism emphasized women's housewifely role. Nevertheless, Moravian education was open to women, who were encouraged towards careers in nursing or teaching, or to work as secretaries or accountants. Unmarried Creole women contributed to the family income with waged work, while mothers and grandmothers took charge of the household. Male migration left many female-headed Creole families, often with children of various fathers.

Attitudes to language mirrored the Creoles' self-image. Dominance in the ethnic hierarchy had long depended on command of Standard English, yet this became increasingly difficult to acquire and maintain. When Spanish displaced English as the school language, English became just another curriculum subject. As the companies withdrew, there was less call for Standard English and less contact with native-speakers. By the time of the revolution, it was spoken fluently only by an older minority, educated in Protestant Church schools by North Americans, or US-educated Nicaraguans who rejected Creole as 'broken' or 'bad English'. Most Creoles internalized these values: 'It was put into our mind that a person that speaks Standard English is ... well-prepared ... we all time look at that person with certain respect.'[9] Such linguistic and cultural alienation is common throughout the Caribbean. Here, it was complicated by the age-old hostility between Anglo and Hispanic cultures.

Political activity

Most Creoles were apolitical. At school, 'they no tell you nothing about politics'; parents warned: 'politics, watch out, don't get in that thing'.[10] Those who did followed two distinct tendencies, broadly corresponding to the 'Creole' and 'black' identities.

The 'Creoles' acted as *costeños* in the interests of the region, forming pragmatic alliances with *mestizo* national parties to negotiate better conditions for the Coast and leadership positions for themselves. At the time of the revolution this tendency was represented by the Organization for the Progress of the Coast (OPROCO), founded in the 1960s, and including 'most of ... the worthwhile civic and political minded Creoles'. It promoted several ambitious but ultimately abortive projects, aimed at integrating the Coast with the national economy. OPROCO died in 1979 of 'internal strife and ... mistrust of the Sandinista Revolution'.[11] The second tendency took a more ethnic, 'black nationalist' stance. In the 1920s Marcus Garvey's ideas travelled to Nicaragua with 'Negro' immigrants. A Nicaraguan branch of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) attracted Creole and black men and women in large numbers. However, it drew Moravian disapproval as 'anti-white'. When Garvey's direct influence waned, the movement petered out.

Black consciousness resurfaced in the 1970s. The training of black clergy abroad began to emphasize cultural sensitivity and the ideas of Martin Luther King. Sailors brought home Jamaican reggae music which sparked youthful interest in Rastafarianism. These influences coalesced in 1977 in the Southern Indigenous and Caribbean Community (SICC). Mainly a cultural movement, it also linked younger Creoles with community memories of Garveyism and Creole resistance struggles. Some even

advocated affiliation to the Black Power movement, but SICC's activities remained relatively parochial. Few Creoles were willing to call themselves 'black' or, worse, *negro* in Spanish, still a powerful insult that lumped them indiscriminately with other minorities.

Ethnic rights and revolution

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) came to power in 1979 with pledges never before made by a Nicaraguan government, to 'end racial discrimination' and 'encourage the flowering of the local cultural values of the region'.[12] Yet their first encounter with the Coast was an explosive clash of opposing interpretations.

Sandinista class-based ideology had little room for ethnicity. 'Culture' meant only its non-material expressions – language and beliefs – not their material and political foundations.[13] While demands for a literacy crusade in local languages were understandably 'ethnic', claims to economic and political self-determination were not. Racial inequality, the product of capitalist 'divide and rule' practices in the US enclaves and the Somoza state, would be 'eliminated' by 'integrating' the coast into an egalitarian economic system. Ethnic-based political activity would duly 'mature' into class-consciousness.[14]

Costeños saw it differently. The enclave times were 'golden days', with company stores stuffed with products 'from out', and good wages.[15] North Americans were benefactors; US-staffed Protestant churches had provided most of the social services on the Coast and still set the prevailing apolitical, anti-communist ideology. The enclaves had practised racial segregation, but *costeños* associated racism more easily with 'Spaniards' from the Pacific, and 'integration' with annexation.

The USA armed one disaffected group, the Miskitu, to fight against the 'communist' revolution. Between 1981 and 1983, as the Miskitu struggle merged with the counter-revolutionary war, it eclipsed the needs of other groups. Indeed, all Sandinista–ethnic conflict is still viewed in terms of this struggle.

Yet Creoles presented the revolution with a different challenge. The Miskitu made their claims through an apparently popular organization, highlighting international indigenous issues, which the Sandinistas initially found sympathetic. Creoles were barely mobilized and had no comparable associations. Although they claimed rights as an ethnic minority, the Sandinistas' perspective on discrimination picked up only their class implications.

For Creoles, 'the economic crisis was an ethnic crisis too'.[16] Sandinista economic policies, designed to reduce inequality and economic dependency, undermined Creole status in the ethnic hierarchy, and therefore their identity. Exchange and import controls reduced the flow of dollars and culturally significant imported goods; jobs arising from economic development plans were non-traditional. Yet to the Sandinistas, Creole complaints seemed like pleas for 'bourgeois' privilege cloaked in ethnicist language. Creoles expected recognition of their talents, but Sandinista distrust gave key posts to *mestizo* technicians and administrators from the Pacific Coast. SICC was passed over and a Miskitu organization was legitimized as official representative of all the minorities, with a seat in the Council of State held by a Miskitu.

In late 1980 Creole discontent exploded when Cuban 'atheist communist' workers arrived in Bluefields to take 'our kind of jobs'. SICC organized strikes and demonstrations which escalated into the first ethnic violence of the revolution, which was forcibly repressed by the government, amid accusations of racist abuse.

This explosion opened a space for negotiation with more pragmatic Creole leaders. Where there were tangible gains, the FSLN gained support. So the Literacy Crusade (1981), run in Standard English by local educators, mobilized young people and seemed to fulfil Creoles' hopes of reviving English-based education, until the war brought it to an abrupt close. Creole representation in leading posts improved. By 1985 they held 54 per cent of senior economic and administrative posts compared with 26 per cent in 1979, though they remained underrepresented in politically sensitive organizations.

However, a socialist economy strangled by war and US embargo could never meet Creole economic demands. Few took up arms. 'We Creoles ... don't like to fight. We want to live in Christianity.'[17] Passive resistance, adaptation or migration were the Creole style. Even so, in the 1984 elections the FSLN won 56 per cent of the Creole vote, compared with 67 per cent nationally.[18]

The 'autonomy process'

In 1984 the government began to seek a political solution to ethnic conflict, through the 'autonomy process', a three-year 'literacy programme in autonomy' for both government and costeños.[19] Guided by a National Autonomy Commission of elected representatives from each ethnic group, 'popular promoters' led detailed consultations in communities, workplaces and schools. Dialogue between ethnic groups, including *mestizos*, began to develop ethnic pride and break down ethnocentrism. In Tomás Borge's phrase, autonomy was 'proved before it was approved', through peace negotiations, amnesty for *costeño* fighters, locally managed development projects and bilingual-bicultural education programmes in the region's three languages.

Out of this debate the 1987 Atlantic Coast Autonomy Law was forged, and its principles incorporated into the 1987 constitution. Based in a concept of multi-ethnic nationality new to the Americas, it gave people dual rights as Nicaraguans and as self-defined members of ethnic groups. To the cultural rights already recognized by the Sandinistas, it added economic rights – to land, trade, influence and a share in the exploitation of natural resources – and political representation through independently financed Autonomous Regional Councils.

Lacking the input of grass-roots organizations like those which mobilized indigenous Nicaraguans in ethnic conflict and reconciliation, the Creole process was rather top-down and focused on the end product. Creoles in the communities reacted with 'wait and see' scepticism. Consequently, the actual devolution of political control became so important that when Hurricane Joan (October 1988) forced the postponement of regional elections,

there was real danger that 'the disaster of the hurricane could be converted into the disaster of our autonomy'.[20]

Nevertheless, the process stimulated new pride in the Creole identity. Black Nicaraguans became visible beyond the Coast, in diplomatic missions to Africa and the UN, and, for the first time, starred in the national baseball league and the national team.

At the same time, Creoles' relationship with their black African and white Anglo heritages was hotly debated. Argument surfaced first around the bilingual programme, launched in primary schools in 1985. The Moravian-led educational establishment saw it as a pointer towards restoring the tradition of English education; children could speak Creole in class, teaching materials would reflect Creole realities, but ultimately, Standard English would 'overcome' Creole. To younger radicals this was a 'surrender to cultural domination'; Creole should not be a mere stepping stone, but celebrated as black Nicaraguans' authentic language.[21] From the practice of bilingual education, understanding grew about the roles of both languages. Outside of school, poets found their voice in Creole, or the vibrant Creole-Spanish mix typical of Creole talk.[22]

Similar oppositions crystallized around cultural revival, crucial to a group who 'don't know much about ourselves because … nothing has really been left that we can go back to and say … these are some of the artifacts … [or] the writings'.[23] A Centre for Popular Culture revived the traditional Palo de Mayo (Maypole) festival to welcome the rainy season, reclaiming its erotic, African elements from Managua's fashionable nightclubs as the core of 'Mayo Ya' (May Now), a festival of arts linking Creoles with their Caribbean roots. While for some, this revival 'hardly went beyond the folkloric', others resented its celebration of the 'vulgar and obscene'.[24]

As Regional Council elections approached, these currents expressed themselves in new projections of the 'black internationalist' and the 'pragmatic Creole' political traditions. The 'black' tendency, revitalized by the revolution, campaigned on the FSLN ticket, with a vision of autonomy as freedom from internal and external colonization, based in an identity proud of both heritages. The 'pragmatic Creole' tendency, heirs to OPROCO's developmentalist assumptions and class/ethnic ambivalences, campaigned as the regional version of the National Opposition Union coalition (UNO), appealing to disparate, unmobilized anti-Sandinista resentment and nostalgia for the 'golden days' of capitalist prosperity. In the absence of effective Creole grass-roots organizations, no specifically regional party formed to challenge the FSLN view of autonomy.

Creoles in power

Ostensibly, autonomous government gives Creoles the leadership role they craved. They have a strength beyond their numbers in the RAAS Council, taking key posts on its executive board in both the 1990 and 1994 elections. Yet they have been unable to advance either regional or ethnic rights. Responsibility for much of this failure lies with Managua. Regional Council elections were finally held in February 1990, at the same time as the national elections which defeated the Sandinistas. So instead of cutting their political teeth with a government committed to consolidating the autonomy process, councils faced hostility to its very principles.[25] Besides, the FSLN had left key aspects of the Autonomy Law, such as the relative powers of central, regional and local government, and the mechanisms for controlling the Coast's resources, to be discussed and defined with the new Regional Councils: 'It didn't cross our minds that we were going to lose the election … so we were careless.'[26]

The Chamorro government took advantage of these ambiguities, paying lip-service to autonomy while reinterpreting it as an innocuous form of local government. Central control was reasserted through a Managua-based Regional Development Institute (INDERA) that usurped the functions, and the funding, of the Regional Councils. Unilateral concessions gave designated foreign companies free rein over Coast resources, with risible returns of profits to the region. Councils rendered impotent by lack of finance were forced to confront central government on first principles.

Creole capacity to lead effective opposition to these abuses was undermined by their own contradictions. In both Regional Council and National Assembly elections in the RAAS, most Creoles had voted anti-Sandinista, against war, socialist austerity and the *panyas* (Spaniards). Regional results mirrored national ones: UNO, the party of central government, controlled the council and its executive board, while the FSLN fumed in opposition.[27] Paradoxically, this vote handed power to those most ambiguous about autonomy and least willing to confront central government, since they shared its class and sectoral interests. Although there were some early cross-party alliances, class, party and personal enmities, with Creoles in a leading role, paralysed council activity, playing into central government's hands.

Meanwhile, economic conditions deteriorated. By 1994 unemployment had topped 80 per cent; infrastructure destroyed by war and Hurricane Joan was still unrepaired; crime and drug abuse were mounting. Yet, with 'their' government malfunctioning, ordinary Creoles had even less say than before autonomy. Their councillors, especially from the anti-Sandinista benches, were inexpert at representing their constituents. The projects intended to 'prove' autonomy on the ground had withered for lack of financial support. Small wonder, then, that 'where … Indians would stand out and demand their rights … Creoles … just sit around and grumble.'[28]

The Garífuna: resistance and assimilation

The Garífuna entered the Atlantic Coast ethnic hierarchy in the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1830s Honduran Garífuna had fought, and lost, with the royalists against Morazán's liberal land reforms. Fearing reprisals, they fled northwards into Guatemala and Belize and south into Nicaragua. Initially, they worked as seasonal loggers in the US-owned mahogany camps, establishing permanent settlements between 1881 and 1913.

Hard-working and reliable, they earned positions of responsibility in the enclave hierarchy beyond their 'proper station' as black immigrants, provoking jealousy and hostility towards their 'strange' language and customs. Creoles bracketed them with indigenous peoples as 'pagans'; Miskitu rejected them as rivals. Their Catholic allegiances set them further apart, especially when in 1913 the government authorized Capuchin missionary work which rivalled that of the Moravians.

Garífuna resistance to this hostility took strength from their culture. Their cult of the ancestors linked present trials to their long history of persecution, and as they buried their dead in Nicaraguan soil, attached them to their new territory. Traffic and trade up and down the Coast maintained contact with other Central American Garífuna. Their language, in regular use as late as 1953, further cemented their group identity.

This identity came under threat when depression followed the decline of the foreign enclaves. In the open labour market 'the Garífuna people ... was look upon as ... the least people', in Creole parlance, 'the cow's tail',[29] and were forced to depend on subsistence agriculture, traditionally women's contribution to family income. To keep afloat, they assimilated, linguistically and culturally, to the dominant Creole culture, migrated to Bluefields and married outside the community. By 1980 there were even non-Garífuna living in Garífuna villages. 'No one under 34 converses in the language; no one in the previous generation speaks it regularly … the last ancestor ritual [*dugu*, or *walagallo* in Nicaragua] took place seven years ago … and no more Garífuna dances are held.'[30]

The Garífuna and the revolution

Unlike other *costeño* minorities, the Garífuna quickly understood how the revolution could benefit their survival and development. The prospect of legal land titles under the 1981 Agrarian Reform Law promised to resolve long-standing struggles over land rights with neighbouring Creole and Miskitu communities. Under the Autonomy Law, 'so long you could get your education and you could understand … you was equal like everybody … people start studying and … lift our self-esteem'.[31] The Garífuna formed a strategic alliance with the Sandinistas, remained loyal to them throughout, and still vote strongly for the FSLN.[32]

This alliance, like others in their history, proved costly. In 1983–4 Garífuna communities suffered *contra* attacks, forcing La Fe people to flee to Orinoco and Bluefields. In 1985 Orinoco became a Sandinista army base. Young Garífuna did their military service alongside Sandinista soldiers, interpreting it as part of their historic struggle 'to keep our land and to stop the foreigner from coming to take our riches'.[33]

Garífuna loyalty was rewarded under the 'autonomy process'. In 1986 Orinoco became the centre of an autonomy pilot project with foreign NGO assistance. During the 1981 Literacy Crusade a Belizean Garífuna volunteer working in Orinoco had rekindled interest in the culture, teaching the children a few words of Garífuna. (His plan, however, was foiled by the outbreak of counter-revolutionary war.) The autonomy process continued this cultural revival. The *walagallo* ceremony was revitalized, first as folklore, for the Mayo Ya festivals in the 1980s. More authentically, in the 1987 Mayo Ya, it united Honduran and Nicaraguan Garífuna to effect a successful cure, and led to agreements to hold ongoing exchanges.

The Garífuna since 1990

Garífuna are now shunned by other *costeños* because they supported 'Pacific Coast people who had strange ideas and were communists'.[34] Their interests were not well represented by the polarized first Regional Council, especially since their constituency did not return a Garífuna candidate. The election of a trusted FSLN candidate from Orinoco in 1994 has given them a clearer voice.

In today's work-hungry conditions, envy of former Sandinista favour translates into discrimination, forcing Garífuna back to their subsistence economy, to the poorest *barrios* of Bluefields, and the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy. Little remains of the prosperity visible during the autonomy process, nor of the NGO 'community' projects, designed with too little understanding of the family basis of Garífuna economic activity and reciprocity.

The displacement of war, study in Bluefields and abroad, and the drug economy and culture which have swept the coast since 1990 have all disrupted Garífuna life. Young people question the old identity; their parents worry about how to reintegrate them. The revolution left a strong sense of Garífuna pride, but uncertainty as to how it should be expressed.

Land remains their economic and symbolic base, around which the people of Orinoco recently rallied to defeat government attempts to sell their rainforest hinterland. But many feel that they are 'incomplete Garífuna', disconnected from the body of their culture, and even from the ancestors, by their ignorance of the Garífuna language. The *walagallo,* which integrates Belizean and Honduran Garífuna scattered in the USA with their home communities, evokes great ambivalence here. Many doubt its validity. Some young people are interested in reviving it; older ones fear they will debase it 'just for fun'. Others dream of re-establishing links with the mainstream by continuing the language revival begun during the revolution.

Without their central unifying ritual or language, other cultural signs risk becoming matters of individual family custom, disconnected from the system that gives them coherence. Grandmother-headed families, for instance, maintain strong links with their ancestors. Garífuna men evoked both God and family spirits before battles against the *contra*. Women still maintain and pass on traditional Afro-Catholic birth and funeral practices, and women and men are still skilled in traditional medicine, which enjoys NGO support.[35]

Conclusions

Many Creole gains from the autonomy process still hold, although the constant need to defend them hinders further advance. Social mobility is no longer systematically blocked; the pressure to assimilate to *mestizo*

culture has been removed. When they complain of discrimination, it is as *costeños*, concerning Pacific Coast society; they have lost their new-found visibility beyond the coast, in sport and diplomacy. The important revival of cultural identity has lost momentum with the demise of the Popular Cultural Centres; Mayo Ya and oral history research are again dormant, although in 1994 a Culture for Autonomy group has opened a popular arts centre with Swedish NGO backing.

English/Spanish bilingual-intercultural education has been pushed up to sixth grade by determined Creole teams. Nevertheless, every year sees exhausting appeals against centrally imposed cuts. Technical training depends on foreign NGO assistance, although the Ministry of Education is now beginning to take more responsibility. Planning problems should lessen as education and other social services are devolved to the region. The Autonomy Law provides unambiguously for this; its realization is a matter of political will. However, in the current polarized climate, it could become a political football.

The Garífuna have lost most from the change of government. They suffer overt discrimination for their ethnic differences and their Sandinista loyalties. To strengthen their voice, they need support to reactivate the links with their mainstream culture established during the revolution. What form these should take is for the Garífuna to decide, with good support. If language revival is the goal, for example, it might be worth considering family exchanges involving all generations, to ensure learning of authentic community language, since school-based revival from such a low base is rarely successful.

The Autonomy Law, appealed to by both groups as 'a virtual legal Bible',[36] permits too many interpretations to be an effective weapon against abuses. Nor will its symbolic power last long if it fails to produce lasting change in the lives of ordinary *costeños*. Central government must urgently complete its *reglamentación* (detailed elaboration), defining with Regional Councils the limits of their powers. It must also tackle the conflict between its own free market policies and the law's stipulation of state and regional management, by at least regulating firms exploiting Atlantic Coast resources. Otherwise, the region will again be powerless to defend itself against over-exploitation, a particular threat to the Garífuna.

Since such positive government action seems unlikely, *costeños* must take autonomy into their own hands. Creoles, having probably gained most from Nicaragua's revolutionary autonomy process, and have a particular part to play. Yet there is a danger that, as discrimination against them recedes, they will become lost in intra-group factionalism, forgetting their relationship to the whole multi-ethnic complex. 'The black community has to make an intense effort to understand itself. And that can only come after it understands the Miskitu, the Sumu, the Rama and the Spanish-speaking people.'[37] This is particularly relevant to the Garífuna, significantly unrecognized in this list, and overtly discriminated against by Creoles.

The current economic situation also distracts Creoles from this *concientización* (awareness raising). Migration and 'shipping out' on tourist cruisers are still prevalent, and the artificial prosperity of dollar remittances maintains Creole dominance in the socio-economic hierarchy. At the same time, those not so protected sink, with the whole economy, into increasing poverty. Some even abandon traditional prestige jobs to earn more 'selling ice creams and bananas from home', or go into domestic service,[38] coming into new competition with more pushy *mestizos*.

There have been promising efforts, largely by NGOs, to reactivate the autonomy process at grass-roots level. The Creole-led Foundation for Atlantic Coast Development, in collaboration with Nicaraguan and Honduran Human Rights Commissions, has sponsored 'Human, Civic and Autonomous Rights Commissions' which train local autonomous rights activists within a broad human rights framework. In July 1994 a Swedish-financed Atlantic Coast Autonomy Development Office initiated monthly training workshops for councillors. At the party level, a new Creole-led Authentic Autonomy Movement won two seats in the 1994 council elections, on a platform of unity around regional plans based on community development.[39]

In March 1995 the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast began its first foundation year. A long-cherished dream of Creole educators, it aims to create and keep within the region the critical mass of trained people necessary for genuinely autonomous development. It is dependent on foreign aid. Indeed, too many key ingredients of autonomous development are kept afloat on NGO assistance. Although invaluable, it is necessarily short-term, unable to provide the economic base the autonomy process needs. Nevertheless, if it comes in sufficient quantity and is *costeño*-controlled, it could have important advantages by allowing a localized and relatively depoliticized version of the autonomy process to continue.

Women, especially Creoles, seem happier to organize in this less politicized atmosphere. Many still prefer to work through church groupings in practical economic activities that do not openly challenge traditional gender roles. Others are becoming prominent in the Human Rights Commissions. A women's movement launched in 1988 appealed to a common *costeña* identity, creating awareness of shared interests across ethnic divides. Latterly, the interaction of gendered and ethnic discrimination has become an issue, especially in the public sphere, and in 1994 a new Afro-Caribbean women's group formed to focus specifically on Creole women's experience. At a more formal level, nine of the 45 seats in the 1990 RAAN Council went to women, two to Creoles. In the RAAS five out of 45 seats went to women, two to Creoles. These far-from-proportional figures were sustained in 1994. In the RAAN a Creole woman, Alta Hooker, has played a key part in consensus-building, first as second secretary to the council's executive board and, since 1994, as its president.

'If [autonomy] succeeds, it will set indigenous and other ethnic struggles ahead by twenty-five years. If it fails, or is made to fail, it will set those struggles back just as far.'[40] This process must be defended, locally, nationally and internationally, as the best guarantee of Creole and Garífuna minority rights, and as an example to other Central American states.

Panama

Afro-Panamanians – Panamanians of African descent – have played a key role in the development of the Panamanian nation. That contribution, however, is not always acknowledged or recognized. The purpose of this section is to present a coherent picture of the status of Afro-Panamanians in contemporary Panamanian society. Given the scarcity of official documents and empirical data relating to Afro-Panamanians, and the various (skin-colour) classifications used in Panama to categorize people of African descent, this task is a difficult one. Despite these difficulties, however, this section will attempt to answer three basic questions: who are the Afro-Panamanians? What are the problems they face in Panamanian society? And what measures have they taken as a group to combat those problems? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to begin with a brief examination of Panama's historical and geographical importance.

Background

Bordered by both the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans, the Panamanian isthmus, some 75,517 square miles, unites North and South America. Panama's economic, political and social history has been influenced, if not dominated, by its strategic geographical position. Rodrigo de Bastides landed on the isthmus in 1501, accompanied by Vasco Nuñez de Balboa and Juan de Costa. Following their arrival, Panama almost immediately became an intercontinental crossroads and a centre for the launching of expeditions to South America.[1] The Spaniards also considered building a waterway to speed the transport of treasures, personnel and cargo across the isthmus. Not until 15 August 1914 did the USA complete what had been a Spanish dream: the Panama Canal.

The canal fundamentally changed the Panamanian way of life. Before 1903 Panama was a province of the Republic of Colombia. In 1902 the United States Congress authorized President Roosevelt to acquire land from the Colombian government to build an inter-oceanic canal in the rebellious province of Panama. One year later, the Republic of Panama, assisted by the USA (which gained sovereignty over a 10-mile-wide strip along the canal), proclaimed independence from Colombia. Since then the USA has had a significant role in Panamanian politics.

Demographics and race relations

US and other foreign investment in Panama has had a profound effect on the country's demographics. Three main ethnic groups constituted colonial Panamanian society: indigenous peoples,[2] Spaniards, and Africans who accompanied the Spaniards as servants or slaves. While the abolition of the slave trade slowed the flow of people of African descent to many of the Latin American republics, in Panama this was not the case. In the 1820s small groups of workers from the Caribbean islands travelled to work on construction projects in northern Panama.[3] Migrations continued throughout the nineteenth century for the construction of the Panama railroad, and for the cultivation of crops for the expanding commercial agricultural enterprises in the coastal regions.

Virtually all countries in Central America received migrants from the Caribbean islands and in some cases from Asia. This migration changed the demographics in the region, spawning a new and vibrant Afro-Caribbean culture. Today, West Indian Afro-Creoles constitute a large percentage, and in some cases the majority, of the population in the coastal regions of Belize, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Panama.

The construction of the Panama Canal encouraged the second migration of labourers, the majority of whom made Panama their home. The canal builders considered Caribbean workers ideal because they understood the language of the overseers and had no roots on the isthmus to support a campaign for worker's rights.[4] In the 1870s, when France won the contract to build the canal under the direction of Ferdinand de Lesseps, almost 20,000 migrants arrived from the Caribbean, particularly from Jamaica and Barbados. The vast majority were of African descent. When the USA took over from the French, over three-quarters of the workforce came from the British West Indies. The Caribbean population at first settled in the Canal Zone areas such as Colón City, but by the 1930s this migration had significantly changed the demographics of Panama City.

Panamanians have often approached the Caribbean presence with trepidation. On the one hand, Panamanians proudly proclaim themselves a nation in which people of all backgrounds coexist harmoniously. But Panamanians are also anxious to preserve their Hispanic heritage in the face of US domination and they have systematically rejected all foreign influences. Xenophobia prompted President Anulfo Arias Madrid to deny citizenship to children born in Panama of West Indian descent, and to include a provision to this effect in the 1940 constitution. Despite the 1946 constitution which revoked this injustice, West Indian black people continued to face prejudice and discrimination.

According to John and Mavis Biesans: 'the most virulent attacks against the Antillian threat have coincided with periods of economic depression and unemployment'.[5] Discrimination, however, is not based solely on economics, nor is it based entirely on race. After all, not all Afro-Panamanians are of West Indian descent. Part of a wider history of discrimination against people of African descent, the discrimination against Afro-Caribbeans is

exacerbated by nationalism and xenophobia. Nationalism arises, in part, as a defence against the overwhelming US dominance in Panamanian affairs.

Panamanians – who, like most Latin Americans, have inherited European aesthetic values – often denigrate 'blackness' and exalt what is 'white'. In addition, Panamanian nationalism, based on *mestizaje*, or the idea that Panama is a nation of mixed-race people, has denied West Indian contributions to national culture and society and stymied native 'black consciousness'. Furthermore, Panamanian nationalism attempts to co-opt black people born in Panama while encouraging West Indians to identify with Hispanic values. Thus the Panamanians' social hierarchy has racial and cultural underpinnings.

Panamanians often attempt to distinguish West Indian black people (*antillanos* or *chombos*) from Panamanian black people who predate the Caribbean migration, the *negros nativos*. Language often assists in this separation. For Panamanians the *chombos* are *negro* or 'black', while *nativos* are often called *morenos*, a euphemism for 'black'. These distinctions are mitigated by class considerations and personal relationships. The term *moreno* may also be used to describe black people held in high esteem. Thus, while many Afro-Panamanians face prejudice owing to their race or cultural background, black people are not legally prohibited from ascending the Panamanian social hierarchy. Moreover, West Indian black people who speak Spanish and appropriate the symbols of Panamanian nationalism are found at all levels of government and business.

One *antillano* from Colón, the second largest city in Panama, commented on the complexity of Panamanian racism:

> *'There is a prejudice against us because we speak English, but rich Panamanians send their children to American schools to learn English. We are discriminated against, not because they think that we are inferior, but because they resent blacks being here. Panamanians are strange. They speak bad about you, but then they treat you like friends.'*[6]

Another West Indian settler who eventually returned to the islands compared race relations in the US-run Canal Zone with race relations in the Panamanian territory:

> *'In the zone, white North Americans didn't socialize with us. Everything was totally segregated. When we passed into Panamanian territory, you always heard of stories of prejudice, but we never experienced it. Panamanians were horrified at the US system.'*[7]

While Panamanians often distinguished *negros nativos* from *antillanos*, North Americans did not. One *nativo* reported that 'to the Americans, a black was a black, no matter where you came from'.[8] Since many Panamanians are of mixed heritage, US segregation policies instituted in the Canal Zone prior to the 1960s treated Panamanians as black people.

Common discrimination did not motivate *nativos* and *antillanos* to consolidate a consciousness until the 1980s, however. *Antillanos* suffered a series of injustices which the *nativos* escaped. While all Panamanians have constitutionally defined civil rights, the rights of *antillanos* were always questioned, even for second- and third-generation *antillanos* who had no other home but Panama.

The 1970s represented a crucial period in Panamanian nationhood. Panamanian Chief of State Omar Torrijos and US President Jimmy Carter revised the 1903 Hays–Bunau–Varilla Treaty which had given the USA jurisdiction over the Panama Canal and the Canal Zone in perpetuity. A more encompassing nationalism, coupled with a desire for sovereignty, brought Panamanians of all backgrounds together, including Afro-Panamanians and those of West Indian descent. Although 1990 population statistics indicate that, of the 2.5 million Panamanians, about 12 to 14 per cent are of West Indian descent, a vast majority of them have spoken Spanish as a first language since the 1960s and they identify with their new Hispanic heritage. But many of them cherish their Caribbean roots. Third- and fourth-generation Antillians who speak Spanish also speak English. While most Panamanians are Roman Catholic, West Indians are predominantly Protestant (Anglican or Methodist).

Minority rights and the 1989–90 invasion

Many Panamanian scholars and writers believe that, as assimilation increases, tensions between black people and white people will decrease. While this may be partly true, the theory fails to recognize that Panamanian politics and economy are dominated by a small élite who scorn the popular classes which include black, *mestizo* and *mulato* sectors. The Panamanian oligarchy's opposition to General Manuel Noriega, who is of mixed racial heritage, for example, had racial overtones. Unfortunately, the 1989 invasion, which, according to US officials, aimed to remove Noriega, was disastrous for the poor, and black communities.[9]

Shortly after midnight on 20 December 1989, the US military southern command, under Commander General Maxwell Thurman, led the most extensive military exercise ever to take place on Panamanian soil. Codenamed *Operation Just Cause*, the invasion began with a downpour of artillery fire on several targets in densely populated urban areas. It did not come to an end until Noriega's arrest on 3 January 1990. In the interim, many poor Panamanian communities were completely destroyed. Many of the communities hardest hit were in the city of Colón; others were the neighbourhoods of San Miguelito, Panama Viejo and El Chorillo in Panama City. An estimated 20,000 Panamanians lost their homes, more than 2,000 died, and many more 'disappeared'.[10]

While members of particular ethnic groups were not specifically singled out during the invasion, the poor neighbourhoods that suffered were disproportionately inhabited by Panamanians of African descent. US detention of many of the community leaders such as the labour leader Mauro Murillo and Balbina Herrera de Periñón, the Mayor of San Miguelito, infuriated many Afro-Panamanians.[11] In the aftermath, the US military temporarily moved those left homeless into makeshift refugee camps at Albroock Air Station, under the auspices of the

Panamanian Red Cross. Five years later, many were still without homes and jobs. The psychological wounds have been immeasurable.

Despite the travesties of the invasion, many Panamanians emerged later to organize their communities. Several grass-roots movements continue to protest against the invasion and to demand both information and retribution. The president of the Afro-Panamanian Refugee Committee, Ashton Bancroft, for example, vehemently protested against invasion abuses, while attempting to organize the victims. Olga Mejía of the National Human Rights Commission and Isabel Corro of the Association of the Dead continue to search for information on the 'disappeared'. Other human rights and local groups have joined in to help rebuild community morale.[12]

The invasion, which was condemned by the UN and many Latin American countries, instigated an unprecedented level of human rights abuses in Panama. Throughout the 1980s human rights violations by the security forces and other paramilitary groups reached unparalleled heights. As in other Latin American nations, those who have suffered most have been poor black people. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states that no one shall be the object of arbitrary interferences in his/her private life, family or otherwise, yet community, grass-roots and labour leaders were consistently harassed. The documentary film *The Panama Deception* (1992) illustrates the extent to which the black and *mestizo* communities were devastated by the invasion. Panama has yet to recover.[13]

Education

The 1989–90 US invasion only exacerbated Panama's existing problems. Public services such as health and education are in desperate need of restructuring. Although Panamanians are generally more literate and better educated than many of their Latin American neighbours (literacy is approximately 89 per cent),[14] multicultural education has yet to be systematically introduced in a land which prides itself on being *mestizo*. The African presence and its contribution to Panamanian history and culture are largely ignored or overlooked in the standard textbooks used by private and public schools. *Quiero Aprender*, a national publication which is used for teaching Spanish to children, for example, mentions black people only briefly. There is no mention of Afro-Caribbeans, even in reference to the building of the canal.[15]

Labour, social and ethnic movements

Despite their absence from textbooks and official statistics, Afro-Panamanians continue to have significant roles in education at all levels, in grass-roots community efforts and in trade unions. Many Afro-Panamanians have also returned to the Caribbean or have moved to the USA (New York being one of the preferred destinations).

Today, information on Afro-Panamanians is often hard to unearth. This may be due to the fact that Afro-Panamanians often organize around issues which may not seem to be motivated exclusively by race, such as labour issues or community development. Moreover, the Panamanian mainstream media are uncomfortable discussing ethnic issues openly, and so many events often go unnoticed. Furthermore, Afro-Panamanian consciousness continues to be inhibited by three major obstacles: nationalism; the division between *antillanos* and *nativos*; and a social hierarchy based in part on skin colour, which allows a select number of blacks and mulattos to ascend unhindered into the dominant *mestizo* culture.

Since the 1960s, however, Afro-Panamanians have become more and more aware of the advantages of unity. Although *antillanos* continue to lead the movement, Afro-Panamanians figure prominently in many of the trade unions, for example. The National Centre of Panamanian Workers (CNTP), in particular, has supported Afro-Panamanian endeavours. This association stems in part from the CNTP's historical link with the People's Party, which became an important force among the United Fruit farmworkers, many of whom were West Indian.[16]

In the 1980s Afro-Panamanian activists organized a series of national congresses to discuss issues of race and ethnicity. These encounters marked a turning point in the consciousness movement, as *nativos*, *antillanos* and various Panamanian officials, as well as representatives of several indigenous groups, participated. Bringing together popular and neighbourhood organizations, intellectuals, students and government officials, the congresses, which started in 1981, created a dialogue on issues crucial to Panamanian society; these include: Afro-Panamanians' contribution to national culture, workers' rights, inter-ethnic relations, the immigration of Afro-Panamanians to the USA and the international fight against racial discrimination and apartheid.[17]

As a result of these encounters, Afro-Panamanians committed themselves to a series of resolutions, promising to intensify studies on Afro-Panamanian contributions to national culture. Today, most Afro-Panamanians agree on the importance of recognizing the African and Caribbean contribution to the nation, and educating Panamanians in this subject. Panamanians of West Indian descent, in particular, continue to recognize the contribution of pan-African leaders such as Marcus Garvey to the lives of Panamanian workers.[18] Garvey is only one among a pantheon of black leaders who influenced the Panamanian labour and black consciousness movements.[19]

Afro-Panamanians continue to forge a sense of community through education, coupled with direct denunciations of acts of discrimination and prejudice. The first congress highlighted the treatment of black musicians in the National Symphonic Orchestra under Eduardo Charpentier de Castro. According to Afro-Panamanian activists, denouncing specific incidents allowed them to publicize socially unacceptable behaviour and thus raise the consciousness of all Panamanians. It also helped to create a network and forum to which Afro-Panamanians could turn.

Afro-Panamanians joined with other human rights activists and forged solidarity with indigenous groups.

Together with the Kunas, Guaymíes and the Chocoes, for example, they requested that the government return lands and demarcate them carefully to assure indigenous people of a livelihood, limit tourism within those territories and permit indigenous people to take charge of tourism in their areas.[20]

Owing to the large presence of West Indians in the ranks of the Afro-Panamanian movement, its vision remains international, with strong contacts with pan-Africanists throughout the Caribbean and the USA. Afro-Panamanians consistently and publicly condemned apartheid in South Africa before the election of Nelson Mandela as state President in the spring of 1994. They have also publicly endorsed a wide array of international political candidates.[21]

Afro-Panamanian women have had significant roles throughout these struggles. In the early 1900s, when the canal builders brought over approximately 31,000 official workers, the vast majority were men. Unofficially, however, more than 160,000 men and women migrated, and the Panamanian authorities were very 'flexible' in their documentation. The canal authorities initially attempted to solve this imbalance by allowing in a number of single women, especially from the French Caribbean.[22] Eventually, West Indian women entered Panama as family members, since the canal authorities believed that families encouraged stability and worker reliability. By the time the canal had been completed, the ratio between men and women had stabilized. Immigrant women participated in the workforce in a variety of capacities, from washer women and cooks to clerics and secretaries. Today, Afro-Panamanian women remain active in the formal and the informal economies, although unemployment is generally higher among women than men. Women also tend to receive lower salaries than men, but this is not peculiar to Panama.

Afro-Panamanian women such as Graciela Dixon have an active role in the movement. Ironically, mainstream Panamanian mores, characterized by machismo, often minimize Latin women's participation. The West Indian heritage, while not free of machismo, has historically seen a greater participation of women in all aspects of society. Often Panamanians of non-Caribbean background express dismay at the involvement of West Indian women in social movements, misinterpreting their presence as an indication of loose morals. The irony of this is that strong religious values among the West Indian Protestants impose a stricter code of conduct than that of their Catholic counterparts.[23]

Prospects for the future

The 1989–90 invasion stymied popular mobilization on many levels; Afro-Panamanian mobilization was among them. Indeed, the activities of Afro-Panamanian leaders and activists after the invasion illustrate the wider non-racial activities of community-building inherent in their struggle. Activists continue their protest through demonstrations, while collecting and disseminating information on the invasion and its devastation, and helping the refugees and homeless.

Several forums continue to serve the community in all of these endeavours. The Centro de Estudios Afro-Panameños (Center for Afro-Panamanian Studies) serves as an archive for information. Activists and professionals at the University of Panama have also been instrumental in acquiring information on Afro-Panamanians.

Panama is only now beginning to emerge from the severe economic and political problems generated by the invasion. Rates of both unemployment and crime remain high, and the economy is not generating sufficient jobs to absorb those coming on to the labour market. The recent Haitian refugee crisis underscores the relationship between social and ethnic tensions and nationalism. Panamanians protested vehemently against the arrival of Haitian 'boat people' from the US naval base at Guantánamo, arguing that they resented the USA using Panama to solve its problems. Former President Guillermo Endara himself recognized that these protests were ethnically and linguistically influenced (Haitians speak Creole). After all, Cuban immigrants from Guantánamo were not greeted in this manner.[24]

The 1994 election of President Pérez Balladares of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) signals an era of reconciliation. Founded by ex-President Torrijos, and later serving the interest of General Noriega in the 1980s, the PRD is beginning to reshape itself by returning to its populist roots. Within this new political framework civil rights for all will be safeguarded only when Panamanians deepen their understanding of the contribution that all ethnic groups have made to the creation of modern Panama. Afro-Panamanians, in particular, must recognize that opposition to discrimination and racism is a political affirmation independent of their cultural background. As in most Latin American countries, however, issues of race and ethnicity are interrelated with issues of class, and serious economic programmes and changes in education are essential for the future.[25]

Costa Rica

Most Afro-Costa Ricans live on the Atlantic Coast of the country and are ethnically and culturally closer to the English-speaking Caribbean than to Afro-Hispanic communities of much of Latin America. Mainly descended from West Indian migrant workers, they traditionally kept themselves apart from the majority population. In recent decades this separateness has begun to dissolve, along with their strong sense of cultural identity. While there have been some improvements in their socio-economic status, the community still faces significant problems of poverty and disadvantage.

First arrivals

Official accounts of Costa Rican history do not record it, but Africans first entered Costa Rica at the very start of the European conquest in 1502. A few accompanied Columbus when he arrived on the east coast in September of that year.[1] By 1707 the Spaniards had begun to ship Africans into Costa Rica as a substitute for indigenous labour. Many slaves were put to work on the cacao plantations that supported the colony's economy. Costa Rica also supplied slaves to other Spanish American countries.[2]

Over the next 250 years it is thought that sizeable numbers of people of African origin came from the Caribbean islands to settle on the Atlantic Coast. Elsewhere, growing numbers of maroons (escaped slaves) lived in the more isolated areas.

Black workers of Limón

To facilitate the growing trade in coffee with Europe, an eastern seaport and a railway connecting it to the rest of the country were needed in the Atlantic coastal region, soon to be officially designated as Limón Province. In 1870 Tomás Guardia, the country's President, obtained a loan from the British government to build a railway, and the construction of the first warehouse at Port Limón began on 15 November 1871.

Due to the perceived urgency of the construction work, foreign labourers were brought in. A report from 20 December 1872 reads: 'Today, at 2 p.m., the schooner *Lizzie* of 117 tons arrived ... carrying 7 men and 123 workers for the railroad. Included are 3 women.' Most of the new migrant workers were Afro-Caribbeans. While many came directly from the islands, especially Jamaica, others travelled up the coast from what was then part of Colombia and would become Panama, where they had been working for the French canal project. Thus began a pattern of migration between the Caribbean, Panama and Limón that would persist for decades.

Caribbean workers were recruited through a subcontracting system using overseers, which meant that proper employment contracts were not drawn up.[3] Pay was low, and the climate and conditions were harsh, with swamps, mosquitoes and prolonged rains. Many of the early migrant labourers died, despite the widely held belief that they had adjusted to the tropics.

The Keith brothers, who were contracted to build the railway, introduced the commercial cultivation of bananas beside the railway tracks. Jamaicans rather than Hispanic Costa Ricans were preferred for this work, because they had previous experience of banana cultivation and because they spoke English and were therefore considered loyal to the British Crown and the US-run company. When the French canal project collapsed in 1887, more Afro-Caribbeans came to Costa Rica in search of employment.

With the introduction of banana growing, the black workforce once more demonstrated its versatility. Canal builders turned railway builders and operators now also became farmers. The Keiths' company grew not only bananas but also cacao, sugar-cane and, further inland, coffee.

The primary concern of the migrant workers was to make some money and then return to their home islands. But although their labour on the railway and plantations sustained much of the national economy, their wages remained meagre. Few, if any, earned enough to re-establish family ties, and the threat of unemployment and poverty was ever present. Return to the islands was little more than a dream.

In 1899 the Keiths merged their plantation enterprise with the Boston Fruit Company to form the United Fruit Company. Between them, the United Fruit Company and the Keiths' Northern Railway Company ran Limón for their own advantage, controlling the province's railways, docks, steamships and land. United Fruit continued to rent hundreds of acres of national land, tax free. The company built and ran housing, supply stores, medical facilities, churches and schools, determining the distribution of settlements along the railway route.

Ethnic relations and racism

By the early twentieth century Limón Province had a resident Caribbean population of many thousands, most of whom were single men, living as temporary residents. Despite their homesickness, the Afro-Limonenses came to form a permanent colony. They remained closer to the Caribbean, especially Jamaica, than to the host country in their speech, dress, food and way of doing business among themselves.[4]

In any case, Limón and its population remained largely isolated from the rest of the country, despite the railway. Few Afro-Costa Ricans ever travelled to San José, the capital – a distance of 103 miles. It was said that for each of those miles, an immigrant worker had died.

Tension existed between labourers and overseers, between black workers and native Costa Ricans, and even between the older Jamaicans and subsequent arrivals of younger Caribbean men. In general, the native Costa Ricans did not like having the Afro-Caribbeans in their midst; they spoke a different language, were Protestant rather than Catholic and had a different way of life. The immigrants did not trust the host population either. Seeing themselves as temporary inhabitants only, the Afro-Caribbeans kept apart. Most could not speak Spanish and had no wish to learn it, regarding Spanish culture as inferior to that of Britain. Those who had children did not want them educated among the Spanish-speakers, whom they despised, preferring private schools instead.

During the 1920s and 1930s disaster struck Limón; various diseases attacked the banana plants. The United Fruit Company gradually abandoned its operations there, leaving behind its workforce. The company signed new agreements with the Costa Rican authorities and switched to the Pacific Coast instead.

A ban was soon issued by Congress on any person of colour dwelling or seeking a job in the new company enclave to the west – on the grounds that jobs were needed for the Pacific coastal dwellers. (Racist legislation such as this has often been passed in Central America. Until recently, El Salvador did not grant permanent residence to black people. Ironically, the few Afro-Americans in El Salvador are usually US diplomats.)

Many of the formerly subcontracted black labour force set up as small-scale independent growers of bananas, cacao and hemp on land vacated by the company. Others migrated to the larger towns, initiating a gradual process of cultural adaptation.[5]

Yet for many others unemployment, hunger and despair took hold. Significant numbers of the second generation of black Costa Ricans, ironically calling themselves 'Nowhereans', saw themselves as neither British, Jamaican nor Costa Rican. Although born in the country, none were legally its citizens. The United Fruit Company, the railway company, the Costa Rican government, the British consulate in Limón and the Jamaican government appeared to have washed their hands of them.

It was not until 1949, when a new constitution was drawn up after the civil war – in which many Afro-Costa Ricans fought with honour – that the former Caribbean islanders obtained full Costa Rican citizenship. The indigenous peoples of Costa Rica living in the same province would have to wait even longer.

Migration and the Afro-Costa Rican family

After the collapse of the east coast banana economy, and with discrimination still practised, if unofficially, large numbers of the 'Nowherean' generation of Afro-Costa Rican men – and some women – were forced to seek employment elsewhere. Many went to Panama in search of contract work; others went to sea, working for the shipping companies that plied the Caribbean and western Atlantic.

Migration for the Afro-Costa Ricans was thus a strategy for economic survival. But it was also a means of self-improvement, because migrant workers sent money to those who remained behind, helping them to become home-owners rather than tenants. In particular, with the 'ship-outs', as those who went to sea were called, black families achieved some upward economic and social mobility, often with ownership of small parcels of land or by starting a small business. Most of the men who signed up with the shipping companies had no qualifications, but a small percentage were professionals who had not been able to find work in Costa Rica.

The shipping companies obliged the men to serve at sea for eight to 10 consecutive months, so there was relatively little time left to spend with their families. As a result, women came to head many an Afro-Costa Rican household.

In keeping with a good deal of Afro-American culture, Afro-Costa Rican families were, and remain, extended rather than nuclear. This bears out the traditional African saying that it takes a village to educate a child, which, some have argued, owes its origins to pre-colonial African culture. The idea that children belong to the community, regardless of origin, has persisted.

One of the basic distinguishing features of Afro-Costa Rican families today is that they have depended on internal informal support systems to a greater extent than Hispanic Costa Rican families. This applies even to the most progressive and upwardly mobile black families. Flexible household structures have enabled families to maintain stability. A readiness to absorb kin and other individuals in need of food, clothing and shelter has been an important factor in the collective survival of economic hardship.

Nevertheless, among those Afro-Costa Ricans who sought to establish a Western-style nuclear family, the migration process was sometimes immensely damaging. The men often established new families abroad, which undermined their ties with spouses and children left behind.

In addition to the periodic booms and slumps that attracted Afro-Costa Ricans to Panama or to sea, in the 1960s many black Limonese women went to the USA as domestic workers in Brooklyn and the Bronx. Their children, left in the care of grandmothers, aunts, other relatives and friends, could not have survived without the support of extended family.

Multi-ethnicity outside Limón

In Limón the Afro-Costa Ricans have remained a recognizably separate community; but elsewhere in the country considerable ethnic mixing has taken place. There is little government data, and official recording of ethnic identities ceased in the 1950s. However, most Costa Ricans today are thought to be partly African by descent as a result of intermixing with Africans brought over by the Spanish.

In the pre-industrial period there were several *pueblas* (non-white reservations, both urban and rural) in central and north-western Costa Rica where indigenous and

black people lived. It was also a common custom for upper-class Hispanic men, including clergy, to take young slave women as concubines, producing mixed-race 'god-children' who would carry their fathers' surname.

Difficulties with social integration sometimes occurred when former slaves bought their freedom or were granted it by their masters and began to work for themselves, notably in the former capital city of Cartago, inland from Limón. The white community of Cartago, headed by the city governor, would not countenance this social mobility of former slaves and confined black people to a *puebla*. This site is still a landmark in Cartago, a short distance from the Basilica de Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles, the black Virgin patron saint of the country.

Garveyism

In 1909 the Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) made the first of several visits to Limón. Observing the deplorable working conditions on the banana plantations, he determined to dedicate his life to the African-American struggle. His public lectures helped Afro-Costa Ricans become more aware of their social conditions and problems. Increasingly a figure of international standing, he established one of the first branches of his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the country.

Under Garvey's leadership, significant numbers of Afro-Costa Ricans came to feel that they had more in common with the inhabitants of Bluefields in Nicaragua and of the Atlantic Coast of Panama than with those of San José or London. The phrases 'We is we' and 'We is one people' became common parlance.

The influence of Garveyism was in many ways short-lived. Most young black people today see themselves as Costa Ricans first and foremost. And Garvey's legacy is sometimes considered to have been an impediment to black integration into the Hispanic Costa Rican labour movement.[6] Nevertheless, Afro-Costa Rican civic leaders such as Quince Duncan, Eulalia Bernard, Jocelyn and Kathleen Sawyers, Debroy Barton, Headly Hall, and Dr Sherman Thomas running for the presidency in 1996, were inspired by his message. And, over the years, UNIA-inspired lodges, burial schemes, churches, clubs and other community institutions have provided communal defences against poverty and hunger.

During the 1940s and 1950s these institutions were of considerable importance to the Afro-Limonenses, serving as centres of culture, recreation, spiritual guidance, education and self-help. In recent decades their role has declined, because of the growth of state welfare provision.

Today's reality

The Afro-Costa Rican population, perhaps 2 per cent of the national total, is still concentrated in Limón Province. An estimated third of the population of Limón city and the immediate vicinity – about 20,000 people in all – is Afro-American; and the total Afro-Costa Rican population of the province is probably more than three times that figure.[7] The last time that the national census included ethnic origin, in 1950, 91 per cent of Afro-Costa Ricans lived in Limón Province, with most of the remaining 9 per cent in San José Province.

Limón city might seem an anomaly compared with the rest of Costa Rica, because even today its character more closely resembles that of other Central American Caribbean ports. Spain generally neglected the Atlantic Coast, while the influence of the British and their Jamaican subjects was strong. English and its offshoot dialects were, and remain, the *lingua franca* of a western Caribbean coastal belt that is home to some 500,000 people.

Contemporary Afro-Costa Ricans have retained many of the customs of their grandparents, although with some modifications. They are still closer to Afro-Caribbeans in outlook, culture, beliefs and language than to the rest of the country.

Yet there are differences. The older Afro-Costa Ricans had little more than basic education. Most attended parish schools provided by the churches, or the UNIA, or by individual teachers. Most had a 'trade' and learned some music and the history and geography of Jamaica and Britain, but nothing about Costa Rica. This has changed. Younger generations have had better opportunities than their forebears, and they enjoy full citizenship rights. They have full access to education and they can, in theory, work and live wherever they wish in the country.

Third-generation Afro-Costa Ricans are, in effect, bicultural. Their children go mainly to schools where Spanish is the first language, although most still speak and understand an English-based Limón Creole popularly called Mek-a-Tell-Yu.[8]

In fact, Afro-Costa Ricans have a tradition of literacy that belies their difficult circumstances. Most of the earlier migrant workers arrived knowing how to 'read, write and cypher', and they sent their children to school no matter what. An estimated 97 per cent of black Costa Ricans can read and write, and they are generally highly educated.

The rather meagre opportunities available for self-improvement have not been neglected. There is hardly a field that Afro-Costa Ricans have not entered, but nursing, teaching and entertainment represent their traditional occupations, and significant numbers of men still go to sea. Since 1949 Afro-Costa Ricans have taken part in national politics, largely through membership of the Partido Liberación Nacional. There have been perhaps two dozen black MPs and governors, as well as one black cabinet minister.

Economically, however, the position has not changed radically. Afro-Costa Ricans no longer suffer the severe hardships of earlier decades, but many black families still live in poverty, and only a small minority have enjoyed what might be called social or financial success. It remains the case that both Afro-Costa Ricans and the country's indigenous inhabitants have always lived in the poorest, most marginal parts of the country, and they continue to do so. They experience unemployment, poverty and sub-standard housing disproportionately. Despite official denials and excuses, the inequality remains plain to see.

Belize

Belize, formerly British Honduras, is unique among the nations of Central America. It is the isthmus's only black nation; English is its official language; and its political history and development have been closely tied to Britain. This geopolitical peculiarity, and the country's isolation from other former British colonies (Jamaica is 600 miles away), have helped shape the destiny of its people.

Belize's population is composed mainly of Creoles (people of predominantly African descent), Spanish-speaking *mestizos* and a smaller number of Garífuna (Afro-Carib people). Numerically, the Creoles were long in the ascendant, occupying a central position with regard to the identity of their nation, in contrast with the marginalized status of most Afro-Hispanic communities of the region. Recent growth of the Hispanic community, however, has introduced new tensions.

Early history

Belize was first settled by British sailors or loggers in 1638. It developed as an ambiguous bastion of British presence in a Spanish-dominated region supported by slave labour. British colonialism in the Belize settlement was 'created through confrontation and conflict'.[1] Settlement was established for the sole purpose of exploitation of the forests.

Almost from the beginning, Spain and Britain fought for ownership of the territory, and most treaties between the colonial powers included a clause on Belize. However, the country was of little political concern to either power. It was not until 1862, 224 years after the first settlers arrived, that the British Crown found it convenient to declare the territory a British colony, administratively linked to Jamaica. Until that time 'Belize offered an interesting study in primitive and spontaneous government set up without the sanction of the Crown, one that is unique and altogether anomalous in the story of the acquisition and development of Britain's colonial empire.'[2]

If Britain had misgivings as to the political status of the colony, it had no doubts about its economic value. Belize was a major producer of logwood at a time when the dye extracted from this wood was valuable to Europe. The lucrative trade in this species of timber, and later in mahogany, determined the foundation of the settlement and its retention in the late eighteenth century when conquest by Spanish invaders seemed inevitable.

African slaves are thought to have been brought to Belize from diverse origins, and the political climate of hesitation and inaction gave their descendants the opportunity to live in an informal atmosphere. The dispute between the two world powers over ownership disallowed any legal form of government in the settlement, and this limited the legal structures that could be created. Such a situation favoured slavery but permitted a pattern of legal improvisation, unlike in the more formalized Spanish colonies in Central America. Besides this, legal restrictions in Belize prevented the establishment of *haciendas* and impeded the development of agriculture.

While not benevolent, and comprising all the components of slavery elsewhere in the Americas, slavery in Belize had some differences. For example, the slave owners were forced to show a measure of respect towards their charges, due to the intense and arduous nature of the logging work undertaken, the isolation of the camps, the proximity of the Spanish and the slaves' economic value.

Restricted economic and political activity, an improvised social system and an uncertain economic future may appear unenviable. Yet these factors, with the formal ending of slavery in the 1830s, favoured the evolutionary development of Afro-Belizean society. The situation was further aided by the early reduction in numbers of the white population. At the dawn of the nineteenth century people of colour represented 75 per cent of the settlement's inhabitants. The Belize settlers from Britain tended to be men of low status who often could not obtain British brides. This allowed for an open and accepted relationship between white men and women of colour which quickly created an energetic and confident multiracial society.

By the 1820s the Creole population had grown demographically and economically strong, and two-thirds of the land was in its possession by the middle of the century. The wealthiest Creole landowners converted land to cash and educated their children in Britain, allowing them to achieve an élite status that no one had envisaged.

Meanwhile, the way of life of the majority of Afro-Belizeans developed largely out of the forest economy. Men would spend months working at the isolated logging camps, while women remained at home in villages and towns, caring for their children, baking bread or taking in laundry to make up for the lack of income.

African and other cultural influences

Belize had a 'selective' immigration policy that unwittingly kept away influences that had the potential to change the emerging Afro-Belizean society and culture. Black people were brought directly from Africa rather than via Jamaica, which secured the continuity of African culture in the settlement. For example, *obeah*, a form of witchcraft of African origin, was criminalized and made punishable by death in 1791, yet the practice persisted well into the nineteenth century.

Belize Town, the cradle of Creole development, has been called an 'overgrown village' whose unusual pattern of settlement 'seems to have had particular consequences

for the persistence and change of aspects of the African cultural heritage'.[3] Belize Town was home to a growing multi-ethnic population and the seat of central government. The construction of Government House, the court house, the Belize hospital and the Anglican cathedral laid the foundations for a socio-political structure that would accommodate the original Maya, white settlers and the various strata of African and Creole peoples. Along with the development of infrastructure came the gradual implantation of African culture among all sections of the population, including white people. A new and hybrid Belizean culture developed as a result.

A mid-nineteenth-century description of the conduct of wakes before the end of slavery shows how Belizean culture had become a blend of West African, European and Creole elements. It can be assumed that slave owners were of British ethnic origin:

> *'If a slave owner died, all his dependants and friends came together to be feasted; and the wife or mistress and her children prepared the house and provided provisions and plenty of ardent spirits. The corpse, dressed in its best clothes, was laid upon a bed ... Cards, dice, backgammon, with strong drink and spiced wine, helped to beguile its watches ... In the negro yard below, the* sheck'ka *and the drum 'proclaimed the sport, the song, the dance' ... [of] different African nations and creoles ... [T]he corpse was carried in the morning to the churchyard, the coffin being borne by labourers, who ... used to run up and down the streets ... with their burden, knocking at some door or doors ... contending with the spirit who opposed the interment of the body. At length some well-known friend came forward, speaking soothingly to the dead ... They then moved all together towards the grave, and the* sheck'ka's *jingle, the voice of song and latterly the funeral service of the Established Church were mingled together.'*[4]

Vivacity at wakes remains common to all ethnic groups in Belize. There were other influences too. The *Honduras Almanac* of 1830 states:

> *'It is not rare to meet with black persons who possess an utter aversion to spirituous liquors, and can by no means be prevailed upon to taste a beverage in which they know anything of the sort to be a component part.'*[5]

This suggests an Islamic element in the cultural mix. Accounts of Christmas holidays from the nineteenth century give further evidence of the 'creolization' process.[6] Such festivities were marked by the use of drums, costume and dance rivalry and other features common to many Afro-Central American cultures. The Creole dialect and Anancy stories of Belize are also remnants of African culture. Creole became the *lingua franca* of Belize and penetrated every ethnic stratum.

Social and political change

Belize entered the twentieth century with many of the historical factors that had contributed to its anomalous position still in place. The creolization process was an established fact. The presence of British political culture was a crucial component of Belizean social stability and formal Afro-Belizean equality, in a region where violent upheavals were common and black communities were frequently oppressed.

By the 1900s the Creole population had waged a successful struggle for political power, in which labour movements and black organizations had played a part. Theoretically, at least, they have retained since that time access to all social and political institutions in the country, and in this sense Belize has been presented as a prototype for social justice and equality for Central America's communities of colour.

Demographically, the white population had shrunk through net emigration and interbreeding, and the Creoles began agitating for social change. The climate was right for political activism. Afro-Belizeans received a rude awakening in the West Indian Regiment of the British Army, where they discovered a hate-filled racism. Discrimination existed in Belize, but the soldiers experienced a level of bigotry previously unknown to them.

Despite the gradual establishment of social services, poverty continued to dominate the lives of most Belizeans of all ethnic groups. Plantation agriculture had developed, but steady jobs remained beyond the reach of much of the population, with the economy still primarily dependent on the export of timber and other forest products. The rise of the Creole population was, however, assisted by British commissions of inquiry that reported on conditions in the colony; the Moyne Commission into social and economic conditions was of particular importance. Outspoken comments were made concerning the stark poverty of the population, and the deplorable labour conditions. This helped create a liberal atmosphere in which Afro-Belizeans could assert their social and political rights.

Trade unionism, legal reform, democracy and self-government came strongly together in a political agenda that placed power directly in the hands of the Creole majority and cemented the political future of Afro-Belizean involvement in the political arena. Such efforts bore fruit in the post-war Colonial Development and Welfare Act, which facilitated economic and social improvements.

Persisting problems

In recent decades the ethnic composition of Belize has been transformed. After Hurricane Hattie in 1961, large numbers of Belizeans began to migrate to the USA. Whereas the 1980 census found that 40 per cent of the country's inhabitants were Afro-Belizean and 33 per cent *mestizo*, Creole emigration and the immigration of *mestizos* from other parts of Central America, mainly as peasant farmers, had resulted by 1991 in *mestizos* constituting 41 per cent of the population, with the Creole proportion in decline. This shift towards a more Spanish-speaking population has considerable implications for the country's future and is already a source of friction.

Although the Creoles were, until recently, numerically dominant, they were not an absolute majority of the population. Inter-ethnic prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination have continued to exist, if not in any

institutionalized form. Overall, the lasting effects of colonialism have tended to favour people with lighter skins, who are disproportionately represented among the wealthy and powerful. Garífuna, were traditionally discriminated against in Belize and demonized by some as having cannibalistic tendencies. The colonial heritage and a long history of inequalities, which used to define and solidify ethnic boundaries, is now reinforced by the pervasive influence of US economic and cultural domination; this has been referred to as the 'imperial succession'.[7]

Most Belizeans, particularly dark-skinned Creoles, live in poverty. Weekly earnings average between US $25 and $50, while a basic weekly food basket costs about $60. The 1991 census put the rate of unemployment at 20 per cent, and youth unemployment is 43 per cent in Belize City. Only 31 per cent of young Belizeans in the 15–19 age group have paid work, while 70 per cent of the country's adult women have never earned a wage.

Belize City still has areas where makeshift houses of one or two rooms accommodate families of six or more and are reached by 'London Bridges' spanning mosquito-infested swamps. Single motherhood and unemployment prevent the renting of better homes. The 1991 census showed that 38 per cent of households in the capital obtained drinking water from public pipes; and in 1990 it was estimated that only 43 per cent had adequate sanitation.

Malnutrition, parasites and respiratory tract disease continue to be among the chief causes of death among Belizean children. Belize is only now beginning to experiment with fresh milk, having relied for years on the condensed variety. The daily diet remains based on the traditional staples of yam, cassava, rice and corn. Health care for most Belizeans also bears the seal of poverty. A new central public hospital is currently being built for Belize City, but it will reportedly have less bed space than the old facility, which is rumoured to be marked down for conversion into a private hospital. This suggests that, although government policy embraces free medical care, it is likely that the population will be forced to pay for the service.

National literacy is estimated at about 70 per cent, with some 20 per cent of the population classified as semi-literate and 9 per cent as illiterate. An estimated 11 per cent of children never attend primary school, and 46 per cent do not complete their primary education. Belize's education process places strong emphasis on academic achievement, and almost no vocational, technical, creative or artistic studies are available. According to the Ministry of Education, only 47 per cent of the teachers in Belize primary schools in 1991–2 were fully trained.

Many youngsters work in the informal economy instead of going to school. Boy's income-generating activities include selling newspapers, cutting grass, cleaning yards, selling bottles, shoe shining, delivery and, in some cases, begging, stealing and peddling drugs. Girls, as reported by UNICEF, work as 'baby-sitters, domestics, shop assistants and prostitutes'.[8]

In recent times, increasing numbers of women have moved out from the home into paid employment. Yet traditional conceptions of wifely obedience are still potent, and the majority of the female population remains essentially passive. A few semi-official women's organizations operate in such fields as domestic violence and child abuse.

It is estimated that 60,000 Belizeans – one-third of the population – live in the USA. This trend has resulted in considerable damage to family and community life. It also represents a classic case of the 'brain drain' from South to North, because those who leave the country are among the best educated. The 1991 census indicated that as many as 47 per cent of emigrants, but only 20 per cent of immigrants aged 15–34, had reached secondary education or higher.

Single parenthood, teen pregnancy, crime, drugs, HIV/AIDS, gang violence and dysfunctional families disproportionately affect people low on the socio-economic ladder, and hence are a significant reality in the contemporary lives of Creole Belizeans. Political activity among Belizeans tends to be on a non-ethnic basis, although fears have been expressed that a form of politics based more on ethnic groupings might emerge in the future.

Facing the future

Belize is a country with a young and rapidly growing population, half of whom are under 18 years of age. An increasing number of Afro-Belizeans are youths with insecure family backgrounds – children of poverty and often victims of abuse and neglect. UNICEF has stated: 'The healthy family structure in Belize is at risk, as are healthy, egalitarian economic conditions.'[9] Projections indicate that by 2015 the potential labour force will increase significantly in both percentage and absolute terms, creating an even greater demand for employment opportunities. Many Creoles now express anxiety that lighter-skinned *mestizos* are moving ahead of them in socio-economic terms. Thus, physical appearance continues to correlate with socio-economic position, although there is no formal racial discrimination in Belizean life.

Despite issues of ethnicity, however, Belize's major problems, which threaten its stability, are mainly non-racial and non-ethnic. They centre on the country's severe case of economic dependency and indebtedness, which is likely to become worse under the impact of the recently concluded North American Free Trade Agreement. Much of the economy is under foreign, in particular US, control.

So Afro-Belizeans continue to evolve, not in a country of 'multiracial harmony', but in a society of multiracial tensions. For most Belizeans of all ethnic groups, poverty, low educational attainment, few opportunities for economic advancement or social mobility, and political weakness are the dominant experience. 'Without major economic developments, it is unlikely that any significant shifts will take place in the relations of class, race and ethnicity in the social structure.'[10] Future prospects for Creole Belizeans, as for most of their compatriots, seem likely to hinge on whether a greater measure of economic justice is obtainable for majority populations, both generally between South and North, and within the countries of the South.

Honduras

Nearly all black Hondurans belong to the Garífuna Afro-Carib population group, which currently numbers some 98,000 people. In Honduras the experience of the Garífuna has been largely one of marginalization and disadvantage. Issues of communal land rights, and access to and protection of natural resources, have been a particular concern for the Garífuna community. While there are significant Garífuna populations in the country's capital, Tegucigalpa, and in the northern cities of San Pedro Sula, La Ceiba, Puerto Cortés and El Progreso, most Garífuna are located on the Atlantic Coast, in some 43 towns and villages from Masca in the Department of Cortés to Playaplaya in the eastern-most Department of Gracias a Dios.

Origins and history

The origins of the Garífuna remain the subject of considerable controversy, but it is now generally agreed that they are the descendants of African and Carib populations from the Antillean islands of St Vincent and Dominica. Following the shipwreck of two Spanish slave-ships in the mid-seventeenth century, the surviving slaves are said to have taken refuge on St Vincent, where they mixed with the local Carib population, forming maroon (former slave) communities in the north-east. The indigenous origin of much of the Garífunas' economic and cultural universe can be seen in the manner in which Garífuna women cultivate and prepare yucca, used to make *casabe* (cassava), and also in certain linguistic traits.

In 1775 the British conquered St Vincent and evicted the Garífuna in order to take over their fertile lands. War between the colonial forces and the Garífuna ensued, and in 1797 the surviving Garífuna, some 3,000 to 5,000, were expelled and taken to the island of Roatán, off the Caribbean coast of Honduras. With the Garífuna's forced deportation, the English aimed to rid themselves of a rebellious population and cause problems for their imperial rival, Spain, which controlled the territory of Honduras. Many of the Garífuna died *en route* of disease. The survivors subsequently populated the sparsely inhabited coastal region of mainland Honduras.

The Garífuna were often recruited as local militia by the Spanish during English incursions on the coast. However, the friendly relations between the Miskitu (allies of the British) and the Garífuna periodically aroused Spanish suspicions against the latter. It was only the heroic defence of the port of Trujillo by Garífuna soldiers against a British attack in 1820 which secured a series of privileges for the Garífuna, ratified in the first post-independence constitution in 1825.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, in common with many indigenous populations in Central America, the Garífuna allied themselves with conservative forces against the liberal reformers. The eventual defeat of the conservatives in the mid-nineteenth century led to an exodus of Garífuna from Honduras to the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. This pattern of war and expulsion has dominated the historical memory of the Garífuna:

> *'If you look closely you will see that we have always had a history of danger. We were always persecuted, the powerful always wanted to humiliate us, they always wanted to take away the land of our ancestors. Fighting with our weapons, we have always escaped to the mountains and we have always defended ourselves from the bad spirits.'*[1]

Religion as resistance

During the late nineteenth century the evangelizing work of the Catholic Church began to have an impact on the Garífuna. Since the Second World War the influence of evangelical Protestant sects has increased significantly. Most Garífuna would describe themselves as Catholic, yet their religious rituals represent a syncretism between Catholicism and prior belief systems. As one Garífuna elder stated: 'We Garífuna believe in God and in the spirits of our dead, and we will continue to be Catholics. This is our Garífuna tradition.'[2]

Garífuna concepts of the world combine indigenous and African elements and are centred on ancestor cults. The Garífunas' philosophical-religious system is known as *dugu* or *walagallo* and in some respects compares with the voodoo system practised in Haiti. The idea of *gubida*, or ancestral spirit possession, continues to have a central role in Garífuna religious practices; possession of an individual is considered an illness, and *gubida* is used to explain periods of illness or abnormal behaviour. The condition is officially diagnosed by a shaman (male or female) who enters a trance to consult with the spirits of the dead. The dead are believed to be able to communicate their wishes through the dreams of their living family members experiencing *gubida*. Ritual offerings to appease the ancestral spirits include food and drink, together with animal sacrifice, and (in the case of the more elaborate *dugu* ceremony) trances and spirit possession are common. In the case of death, Catholic mass and wake are observed, together with Garífuna rituals which include songs, dance and traditional drum music. Many African influences can be seen in dance styles – including the *punta*, now popular throughout Honduras, oral traditions, forms of drum-playing and animal sacrifice. According to Honduran anthropologist Ramón Rivas, out-migration together with remittances of dollars from family members living in the USA appear to have increased the frequency and elegance of traditional religious ceremonies among the Garífuna.[3]

Garífuna religious practices, conceived of as a collective struggle against death and illness, constitute a focus of resistance against ethnic and class oppression. José Idiáquez notes that the role of ancestors in the collective historical struggles of the Garífuna is of central importance, and it is this, he argues, together with their ability to absorb new cultural aspects into religious practices, which lends particular stability to the Garífunas' ethnic identity.[4]

Language

Most Garífuna speak Spanish and Garífuna. The linguistic origins of Garífuna may remain in dispute – researchers claiming it to be a mixture of other languages, including Arawak, French, Yoruba, Swahili and Bantu – but it is a central part of Garífuna ethnic identity:

> *'For us Garífuna, the defence of our language has always been very important. Many people have made fun of our language and the same thing happened to our ancestors. But they were never shamed by this. We speak our Garífuna language, we pray and sing in Garífuna. This is why it's important that the teachers who educate our children should be Garífuna, so that the children can learn Garífuna and our religious beliefs. Our religious beliefs and language are an important part of our culture and our Garífuna tradition and we have to defend them in the same way that our ancestors did.'*[5]

The recent establishment of a National Council for Bilingual Education, financed by the international community, has considerably strengthened Garífuna demands for use of their language in local schools.[6]

Socio-economic position

The main economic activities among the Garífuna are subsistence agriculture (yucca, plantains, beans, rice and maize) and fishing. However, unemployment and under-employment are high – affecting over 80 per cent of the population – and men tend to emigrate periodically outside their communities in search of work, reinforcing the traditional matriarchal structure of Garífuna families. Skill specialization is uncommon among the Garífuna and they are particularly disadvantaged in the national job market. Some 72 per cent of the Garífuna population is illiterate or semi-literate.[7] Migration to the USA in search of work has increased in recent decades.

In a country where some 70 per cent of the population lives below the official poverty line, the Garífuna are one of the most disadvantaged sectors. Socio-economic indicators show that 62 per cent of Garífuna children up to the age of 12 display signs of malnutrition; and malnutrition affects up to 78 per cent of children below 12 years of age in the most isolated departments of Colón and Gracias a Dios.[8]

In recent years, conflict over land, particularly in the area around Trujillo and Limón, has become acute. Politicians, military officers and large cattle-ranchers have illegally expropriated Garífuna communal lands. For example, in the Sico Valley, Limón, military officers with interests in the agro-export of African palm have come into conflict with Garífuna groups.[9] Additional pressure on scarce land resources comes from increased migration from the interior, and clashes have occurred with landless peasants who have occupied Garífuna plots. There has also been conflict over fishing rights, with Garífuna in the Cayo de Cocinos being denied access to their traditional fishing areas by private capital interests anxious to develop 'ecotourism' projects.[10]

Some Garífuna leaders have traditionally been co-opted into the traditional, clientelist political parties (liberal and nationalist) and have failed adequately to represent the Garífuna as a whole. However, others have been elected as local mayors and have concentrated on addressing the community demands. For example, in Limón, Garífuna Mayor Lombardo Lacayo has commissioned a survey to establish the legal status of lands in the municipality as a first step towards recovering Garífuna communal lands which have been illegally expropriated.[11]

Strategies for recovery

The oldest Garífuna organization, the Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (OFRANEH), works together with the *patronatos* in local communities but enjoys little legitimacy and has been beset by internal organizational problems since it was founded in 1984. OFRANEH has sponsored workshops and local theatre to educate the public about Garífuna origins and culture. Such efforts, together with the international success of the National Garífuna Ballet (which performs a stage version of the *walagallo*) and also of the popular group Banda Blanca – who along with other groups have popularized *punta* music – have helped to 'nationalize' Garífuna culture throughout Honduras. However, they have arguably done little directly to improve the position of the Garífuna.

More radical Garífuna organization in Honduras has grown in recent years. Garífuna are now working together with other indigenous groups in the Consejo Asesor Hondureño para el Desarrollo de las Etnias Autóctonas to highlight the encroachment on indigenous lands. In July 1994 an unprecedented demonstration by Honduran indigenous groups occurred in the form of a protest march (or 'indigenous pilgrimage' as it was called by the organizers) converging on the capital, Tegucigalpa. Some 3,000 indigenous activists, including Garífuna groups, camped outside the Legislative Assembly for five days. Their demands included respect for indigenous rights, environmental protection measures and the release of indigenous leaders jailed in land disputes. The programme also included demands for the return of communal lands to the Garífuna and a 30 year ban on logging throughout the country. The indigenous groups were strongly supported by progressive elements of the Catholic Church throughout the country, and many priests joined the protest.

The protesters' demands were positively met by the newly inaugurated government of Carlos Roberto Reina; on 14 July an emergency commission was set up including the ministers of culture and health, the director of the

agrarian reform institute, the transport minister and a representative of Congress to attend to the indigenous groups' demands. The government has already cancelled some logging concessions in Lempira and Intibucá and seems to be committed to taking positive action on the question of indigenous rights, including the implementation of International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169. Garífuna have joined forces with other ethnic groups, such as the Lenca, and the non-governmental Committee for the Defence of Human Rights to lobby the government for full implementation of the ILO Convention. Subsequent to the march in July 1994, Garífuna groups have met in Iriona, Colón and other areas to discuss the land problems affecting them. However, powerful local interests will continue to intimidate Garífuna activists, and further conflict over land is likely.

Conclusion

Garífuna traditions of struggle and their collective religious beliefs and practices have lent stability to the group's identity. Demands for autonomous political participation have increased in recent years, but advances in this respect have been slow and piecemeal in nature. The centrality of Garífuna demands for respect of patrimonial land rights has strengthened their linkages with other ethnic groups in Honduras and their bargaining position with the government, which, although broadly in favour, in principle, of respect for indigenous rights, has yet to prove its commitment to enforcing those rights in practice.

Conclusion

This collection of writings discusses the presence, heritage and contribution of Afro-Central Americans to the wider societies of the region – an existence that remains largely unacknowledged both in the region and in other parts of the world. The writings also document their continued marginalization. This highlights the need for recognition and understanding of the situations they face and action to assist in the fulfilment of Afro-Central American people's rights as individuals and as members of a distinct minority group.

Afro-Central Americans: Rediscovering the African Heritage also shows how these communities have fought to retain their identities, refusing to be rendered invisible and resisting cultural assimilation. Yet, as the report discusses, Afro-Central Americans remain largely among the poorest sectors of society, with little access to decision-making structures. The question remains therefore, how will governments react to Afro-Central Americans' growing levels of self-awareness and organization, and their increasing demand for rights and recognition?

As Anani Dzidzienyo[1] points out, legislation to 'regulate' the relationship between different ethnic groups 'can only be part of the solution, as blacks have not been excluded by law from full participation in society.' Dzidzienyo continues: 'Given the interplay between (a) laws, customs, etiquette and publicly articulated views about the ideals of inter-racial harmony and (b) the reality of racial segmentation, not much would be gained by this [legislation].' As the authors demonstrate, Afro-Central Americans' marginalization and 'invisibility' has been due to a range of factors, some unique to the countries in question and others that are common to the region.

In general, Dzidzienyo suggests that among the *mestizo* populations, nationality is the dominant identity. It is perceived to bind these multi-racial societies, even though it also serves to marginalize any other identities that might be perceived as challenging national unity. In practice, the prevalent 'national' identities mask the operation of disparities in power between groups and exclusion from many political, economic, and social spheres of activity in the national life of these countries.

Even though the domestic laws of the countries of the region do not exclude or explicitly discriminate against Afro-Central Americans, their access to health, education, employment and political participation remain woefully inadequate. As long as this continues, most members of these communities will remain marginalized. Proactive steps by governments and others are still needed for Afro-Central Americans to achieve their full rights as guaranteed in the 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and in a range of other international and regional legal instruments. There are a number of key areas were action is needed, particularly in relation to protecting and promoting: the linguistic, religious, and general cultural rights of these communities; their land rights and general rights to effective participation in the development and economic life of the country; and, the right to participate effectively in decisions concerning Afro-Central Americans and the regions where they live.

Some Afro-Central American communities have achieved some of these rights at a limited level. For example, revolutionary Nicaragua devised autonomy arrangements designed to promote effective participation in decision-making and development. Although these arrangements appear to have been weakened recently, this is a model that could be appropriate for some other groups in the region. A number of countries have some level of bilingual education, a provision that helps to protect the group's language and culture. What is neglected on a more consistent basis are measures intended to allow minorities to benefit from economic growth, to participate in political decision-making, and to encourage recognition in the wider society about the history, traditions, language, and culture of Afro-Central American communities.

Governments could take an initial but important step by recognizing the contribution Afro-Central Americans have made in the past and continue to make in the present to social, economic and cultural development. The form this recognition takes should arise out of dialogue with representatives of Afro-Central American communities, dialogue that also addresses the demands that have already been articulated by these groups.

It is hoped that this report will have injected an impetus to recognition and action for the improvement of the lives of Afro-Central Americans, and that it will lead to debate and fill some of the gaps in knowledge that have long gone unchallenged. The report's recommendations are offered as an indication of paths to be followed to ensure that societies in the region acknowledge and welcome their African heritage and recognize Afro-Central Americans' rightful place within Central America.

1 Quoted in *No Longer Invisible, London, MRG, 1995*, p. 350.

Recommendations

Protection and promotion of Afro-Central American identities

Countries in the region should take steps to fulfil their commitments under the UN Declaration on Minorities, Article 1, which requires that: 'States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories, and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.' As a minimum, governments should recognize distinct Afro-Central American groups and acknowledge them within national analyses, censuses and reports. The information and methodology should be accepted by all groups in society. Following these analyses, further research should be undertaken with representatives of these groups to identify the socio-economic and cultural needs of these communities.

Promoting non-discrimination

Article 4.1 of the UN Declaration on Minorities requires that states should take measures to ensure that minorities may enjoy all their fundamental and human rights without any discrimination. To this end, governments should take responsibility for initiating public information campaigns against racism and promoting awareness of cultural diversity. Furthermore, ministries for education and information should promote campaigns against racism in schools and colleges, and through the media.

Promoting multicultural education

Measures should be taken within all government schools to encourage knowledge of 'the history, traditions, language and culture of the minorities existing within their territory' (UN Declaration on Minorities, Article 4.4) in order to enhance recognition of Afro-Central American groups by wider society. A number of steps could be taken to realize these rights. Where desired by the Afro-Central American groups concerned, children should have the opportunity to have instruction in their mother tongue, as is provided in the Declaration on Minorities (Article 4.3). Educationalists should develop curriculum materials for use in schools and colleges that present the history and contributions of Afro-Central Americans in the region and portray positive images of their communities today. Centres for African and Afro-Central American Studies should be established in universities.

Economic development and minority rights

Afro-Central Americans share problems related to poverty with other communities in the region. Yet they are routinely among the poorest communities and they have their own specific problems and issues. These include securing their basic rights. It is recommended that poverty alleviation and the promotion of rights must be achieved together. Development schemes to improve the economic and social position of Afro-Central Americans should be designed with Afro-Central Americans' full involvement at every stage of the process and be based on the values of self-reliant and sustainable development. Investment should be made in the infrastructure of regions where Afro-Central Americans are concentrated, and credit and technical assistance should be made available to members of these communities.

Effective participation in decision-making

Afro-Central Americans are often excluded from positions of power. As a result, they are often denied their right, as stated in Article 2.3 of the UN Declaration on Minorities, to participate effectively in decisions that concern them or the regions where they live. Steps should be taken by governments to facilitate participation and representation in governance and policy-making at local, national, regional, and international levels. Mechanisms should allow for diversity of opinion and interests within these communities, and should be designed taking into account research and evaluation of successful models of participatory structures and inter-group cooperation.

Mexico

1 In 1939, in the state of Veracruz, many giant heads displaying negroid features and carved from a single block of basalt, were unearthed. The creators of these sculptures, the Olmecs, were one of the most influential cultures of ancient Mexico. Other terracotta artefacts suggesting a pre-Columbian African connection were also found. See van Sertima, I., *They Came Before Colombus: The African Presence in Ancient America*, New York, Random House, 1976.
2 Many Moors (black Muslims) who were expelled from Spain in 1492 were enslaved and taken to Mexico. Spain as a rule prohibited this introduction of Muslims.
3 Aguirre Beltrán, G., *La Población Negra de Méjico: Estudio Etnohistórico*, Xalapa, Universidad Veracruzana, 1989, p. 180.
4 The verb *juller* seems to be peculiar to this communtity, as it does not exist in Spanish dictionaries. It can mean 'to elope', 'to run off and get married'.
5 Carroll, P.J., *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, Ethnicity and Regional Development*, Austin, TX, University of Texas, 1991, p. 91.
6 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
7 Palmer, C.A., *Slaves of the White God: Blacks in Mexico, 1570–1650,* London, Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 50.
8 No census seeking information on ethnic origin was permitted until 1921. But between 1930 and 1940 matrimonial licence forms stipulated that the applicant must indicate his or her race; see Rout, L.B. Jr, *The African Experience in Spanish America: 1502 to the Present Day*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 280.
9 Black people were taken to the state of Yucatán to construct the railways; see Aguirre Beltrán, G., *Cuijla: Esbozo Etnográfico de un Pueblo Negro*, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985, p. 220.
10 Twillie, G., unpublished description of San Nicolás, 1991, reproduced with the author's permission.
11 The Organization of Africans in the Americas, based in Washington, DC, has recovered many Mexican artefacts, media and advertising images, publications and artworks depicting black people negatively.

Nicaragua

1 The terms 'ethnic group', 'indigenous people', 'people', 'nation' and even 'minority' all became sensitive during the Sandinista revolution. I adopt the usage of 'ethnic group/community' agreed for the Nicaraguan constitution (1987) and the Atlantic Coast Autonomy Law (1987). All these groups use '*costeño*' (Coast people) to refer to their regional identity.
2 Both names derive from the Carib word for the group and its language. 'Carib' is used by English-speaking members, and 'Garífuna' by Spanish-speakers. The Nicaraguan group favours 'Garífuna', even when speaking English, to signal the ethnic pride gained in the revolution.
3 For a comparison of Miskitu and Garífuna histories, see Dunbar Ortiz, R., *The Indians of the Americas: Human Rights and Self-Determination,* London, Zed Books, 1984, p. 261.
4 Population figures from Union of Small Farmers (UNAG), 'Consulta a Mujeres Campesinas, Indígenas y Negras' (mimeo), August 1994. The British called this region the 'Mosquito Coast' or 'Mosquitia'; it became 'Zelaya Province' on annexation into the Nicaraguan state, and 'Special Zones I and II' under the Sandinistas. *Costeños* themselves chose its current names, during the development of the Autonomy Law (1987).
5 See Dunbar Ortiz, *Op. Cit*.; Freeland, J., *A Special Place in History: The Atlantic Coast in the Nicaraguan Revolution*, London, Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign/War on Want, 1988; Gordon, E.T., 'History, identity, consciousness and evolution: Afro-Nicaraguans and the Nicaraguan revolution', in *Ethnic Groups and the Nation State: The Case of the Atlantic Coast in Nicaragua*, Stockholm, University of Stockholm, 1987; Smith, H., 'Redefining national identity', in *Nicaragua: Self-Determination and Survival*, Boulder, CO, Pluto Press, 1993; Vilas, C.M., *State, Class and Ethnicity in Nicaragua: Capitalist Modernization and Revolutionary Change on the Atlantic Coast*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 1989.
6 According to Germán Romero in *Wani: Revista del Caribe Nicaragüense,* no. 13, 1992, '*mestizo* Nicaragua' is a nationalist myth which omits a third ethnic ingredient: mulatto slaves of African origin, who by the eighteenth century constituted a significant proportion of the Nicaraguan population. On emancipation, they had a key role as soldiers and militia in suppressing Pacific Coast indigenous rebellions and fending off attack by Atlantic Coast indigenous peoples. *Mestizo* society tried to hide or disguise their presence, and by the nineteenth century they were fully assimilated.
7 A 1985 survey of ethnicity and social class in the working-age population of Bluefields, cited in Gordon, *Op. Cit*., p. 161, classified 53 per cent of Creoles as 'middle class'; 8 per cent as 'élite' bourgeoisie or top state officials; 32 per cent as 'lower classes'; 7 per cent as unemployed. All further survey data are from this source, unless otherwise stated.
8 In 1985, 11 per cent of Bluefields Creoles were Catholics, 49 per cent Moravians and 34 per cent of other Protestant denominations.
9 Sidney Francis, Creole project worker and poet, interview with author, Bluefields 1989.
10 Johnny Hodgson, Creole Autonomy Commission coordinator, interview with author, Bluefields 1994.
11 Sujo Wilson, H., 'Brief historical notes on the origin and political behaviour of the Afro-Nicaraguans of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua', presented at the Second Seminar of the Association of Black Nicaraguans held at the Moravian College, Bluefields, Nicaragua, September 1989 (mimeo). Sujo was one of the founder members of OPROCO. See also Vernooy, R., *Starting All Over Again: Making and Remaking a Living on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua*, Wageningen, Netherlands, Landbouwuniversiteit te Wageningen, 1992, pp. 257–61.
12 FSLN, *Historic Programme* , quoted in Vilas, C.M., 'Revolutionary change and multi-ethnic regions: the Sandinista revolution and the Atlantic Coast', in CIDCA/University of Stockholm, *Op. Cit*., p. 70.
13 Vilas, *Op. Cit*., *State, Class and Ethnicity*, p. 191.

14 Dunbar Ortiz, *Op. Cit*., pp. 75–109, compares class-based and ethnicist analyses of ethnic rights, pointing out the 'virtual denial of discussion' in the Americas until relatively recently.
15 Sujo Wilson, H., 'Historia oral de Bluefields', *Wani: Revista del Caribe Nicaragüense* , 1991, p. 25.
16 Creole FSLN Commander Lumberto Campbell, quoted in *Pensamiento Propio*, no. 17, 1987.
17 Betty Jordan, Creole trader, interviewed by Vernooy, *Op. Cit*., p. 178.
18 Butler, J., 'La costa votó: los costeños y las elecciones', *Wani: Revista del Caribe Nicaragüense*, no. 2–3, 1985, pp. 27–31.
19 Conversation with Ray Hooker, then National Assembly deputy for the south, and Creole representative in the Autonomy Commission. See English translations of the Autonomy Law and the relevant constitutional clauses, in Freeland, *Op. Cit*., Appendices I and II, and accounts of the consultation process and analyses of the law in Vilas, *Op. Cit*., *State, Class and Ethnicity*, pp. 170–84, and Gurdián, G., 'Autonomy rights, national unity and national liberation: the autonomy project of the Sandinista popular revolution on the Atlantic Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua', in CIDCA/Stockholm, *Op. Cit*., pp. 171–89.
20 Johnny Hodgson, quoted in *Barricada International*, 19 January 1989, p. 13.
21 Yih, K. and Slate, A., 'Bilingualism on the Atlantic Coast: where did it come from and where is it going? (Special Zone II)', *Wani: Revista del Caribe Nicaragüense*, no. 2–3, 1985, p. 26.
22 See e.g. June Beer's poems, quoted in her obituary, *Wani: Revista del Caribe Nicaragüense,* no. 5, 1986, pp. 36–9; 'Tres poemas de Carlos Rigby', *Wani: Revista del Caribe Nicaragüense,* no. 8, 1990, pp 52–9; and Hurtubise, J., 'Poesía en inglés criollo nicaragüense', *Wani: Revista del Caribe Nicaragüense*, no. 16, 1995, pp. 43–56.
23 Faran Dometz, Moravian leader and former head of the Moravian College, interview with author, Bluefields, September 1994.
24 Savery, W.E., 'Una crónica social orquestada', *Wani: Revista del Caribe Nicaragüense*, no. 4, 1986, p. 43; Sujo, H., 'Palo de Mayo, todos los olores del mundo', *Wani: Revista del Caribe Nicaragüense*, no. 11, 1991, p. 106.
25 Most parties in the ruling National Opposition Union (UNO) coalition voted against the Autonomy Law in the National Assembly in 1987.
26 Hugo Sujo, losing FSLN candidate and former member of the Autonomy Commission, interview with author, Bluefields, March 1991.
27 This pattern recurred in the 1994 Regional Council elections; though support passed to a modern version of Somoza's party, the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC), it campaigned on the same 'golden days' nostalgia. See 'Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast: new government, old problems', *Envío,* vol. 13, no. 155, 1994, pp. 33–43
28 Faran Dometz, interview with author, Bluefields 1994.
29 Fermín González, sixth grade teacher, during discussion with parents and teachers, Orinoco primary school, 1994; and José Idiáquez, interview with author, Managua, 1994.
30 Davidson, W.V., 'The Garífuna of Pearl Lagoon: ethnohistory of an Afro-American enclave in Nicaragua', *Ethnohistory*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1980, pp. 41–3.
31 See note 29.
32 In the 1984 presidential elections 65 per cent of the main Garífuna communities voted FSLN (compared with 67 per cent nationally). In 1990, 50 per cent of Garífuna voted FSLN (compared with a regional average of 33 per cent and a national average of 40 per cent). In the 1994 regional elections, 90 per cent of the Orinoco vote went to the FSLN candidate. See notes 18 and 27.
33 Interview with Freddy Guerra, Orinoco, in Idiáquez, *Op. Cit.*, p. 187.
34 See note 33.
35 On birth practices and traditional medicine, see Idiáquez, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 23–69; on funeral customs, *Ibid.*, pp. 127–45.
36 Ray Hooker, opening address to Second Symposium on Autonomy, 4–7 November 1991, quoted in *Envío*, vol. 10, no. 125, 1991, p. 17.
37 Interview with Ray Hooker, Bluefields, 1986, transcript kindly supplied by Duncan Campbell (Latin America Bureau).
38 Miss Patricia, primary school teacher, in a women's workshop organized by the small farmers' union UNAG, Vernooy, *Op. Cit.*, quoted in UNAG, *Op. Cit.*, p. 16.
39 MAAC is a political projection of the Association of Black Caribbeans formed in 1989.
40 Member of the Autonomy Commission, quoted in 'Separatism to autonomy', *Envío*, April 1989, p. 41.

Panama

1 Arauz, Dr C.A., 'La presencia negro en el Panamá colonial', *La Prensa*, 13 February 1991, pp. 2–11.
2 Indigenous peoples account for almost 7 per cent of the Panamanian population and are by no means a monolithic group. Major groups include the Kuna, the Guaymí and the Terraba.
3 Conniff, M., *Black Labor on a White Canal 1904–1981*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981, p. 16.
4 Many migrants from the French-speaking islands also travelled to the isthmus to work on the canal, but their numbers were relatively small.
5 Biesans, J. and Biesans, M., *Panamá y su Pueblo*, Mexico City, Editorial Letras, 1962, p. 176.
6 Interview with the author, Colón, Panama, July 1991.
7 Interview with the author, Nassau, Bahamas, October 1991.
8 Interview with the author, Colón, Panama, July 1991.
9 El Chorillo and San Miguelito, two of the poorest neighbourhoods in Panama and predominantly black, were particularly devastated.
10 Figures of casualties vary from the low US Department of State estimates of 300 to those reported by human rights groups and the Catholic Church, of more than 500. The Panamanian Committee on Human Rights pegs the number at 556; Xavier Gorostiaga, S.J., '¿Después de la invasión a Panamá que sigue?', *Tareas*, no. 74, 1990, p. 89, quotes a figure of 2,500, while other groups report figures of close to 4,000; Beluce,

O., *La Verdad sobre la Invasión*, Panama, Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos, 1991, p. 102; see also 'Economía e invasión: las perspectivas de la economía panameña', *Tareas*, no. 74, 1990, p. 40.
11 During interviews conducted in the summer of 1990, many Afro-Panamanians expressed a sense of tragedy at this treatment. Many Panamanians of all walks of life who criticized the operation's outcome none the less expressed the need for US involvement.
12 Beluce, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 109, 120.
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16 Maloney, G., *El Canal de Panama y los Trabajadores Antillanos*, Panama City, Ediciones Formato, 1989, pp. 16–20.
17 Among the organizers of the congresses were Graciela Dixon, Woodrow Bryan, George Priestly, George Fisher, Luis Anderson (president, First Congress), Joseph Dixon, Harley James Mitchell, Gerado Maloney, Luther Thomas and Eugenio Barrera.
18 *Primer Congreso del Negro Panameño*, Memorias, Panama City, Impresora de la Nación, p. 26.
19 Among the various Afro-Panamanian role models is Dr Diógenes Dedeño Cenci, rector of the first Department of Afro-Panamanian Studies.
20 *Primer Congreso del Negro Panameño*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 44.
21 Afro-Panamanians have publicly supported Salin Salem Salim in Tanzania, for example.
22 Conniff, *Op. Cit.*, p. 29; interview with Gerardo Maloney, July 1991, University of Panama, Panama City. For a good fictional text which examines the role of women from the French Caribbean in Panama, see Condé, M., *Tree of Life*, New York, Ballantine, 1992.
23 *Primer Congreso del Negro Panameño*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 30.
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25 Wilkinson, T., 'The ghosts of Panama's past haunt elections, spooking some observers', *Los Angeles Times*, Home Edition, Part A, 10 May 1994, p. 4.

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We thank Donald Duncan, Fernando Hall, Delia McDonald and Mario Symes, whose interviews have been drawn on in the writing of this section.

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2 Interview with Delia McDonald.
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1 Bolland, O.N., *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize*, Belize City, Cubola, 1988.
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2 Interview with Don Francisco Guiti, Cristales *barrio*, Trujillo, Honduras, cited *Ibid.*, p. 156.
3 Rivas, R., *Pueblas Indígenas y Garífuna de Honduras*, Tegucigalpa, Guaymuras, 1993, p. 286.
4 See Idiáquez, *Op. Cit.* An example of this ability to absorb new cultural elements is given by González, who in 1984 noted that Garífuna in one Honduran village had incorporated jazz-blues musical accompaniment into their funeral rituals. She speculates that this is probably a result of large numbers of Honduran Garífuna having lived in New Orleans over the past generation; González, N.L., *Sojourners of the Caribbean: Ethnogenesis and Ethnohistory of the Garífuna*, Chicago, IL, University of Illinois, 1988, p. 79.
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7 Rivas, *Op. Cit.*, p. 279.
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