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Author(s): Ronald N. Harpelle

Source: *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Feb., 1993), pp. 103-120

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/157659>

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The Social and Political Integration of West Indians in Costa Rica: 1930–50*

RONALD N. HARPELLE

People of African descent in Costa Rica form a marginalised and geographically concentrated minority group. The limited interest that academics have shown towards people of African descent is a reflection of their position in Costa Rican society. National histories consistently ignore the contributions of West Indian immigrants to the economic and social development of modern Costa Rica.¹ Moreover, the existing literature on people of African descent in Costa Rica fails to document properly West Indians' efforts to integrate into Hispanic society.² As a result, several misconceptions continue to exist about the evolution of the West Indian community in Costa Rica.

One of the most enduring myths is that West Indians only sought integration into Hispanic society after the 1948 civil war.³ The myth portrays José Figueres as the politician who eliminated the legal barriers that prevented West Indians from becoming Costa Ricans. However, a closer examination of the period before the civil war reveals that Figueres merely recognised that the children of West Indian immigrants had become a new electoral base and he took advantage of the situation. The transformation of the West Indian community into an Afro-Costa Rican one preceded 1948, and had its origins in the economic crisis of the 1930s.

The effort that Figueres made to welcome people of African descent was in marked contrast to the treatment the West Indian community received

* I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding research for this article.

¹ See, for example, Carolyn Hall, *Costa Rica: A Geographical Interpretation in Historical Perspective* (Boulder, 1981) or Carlos Monge Alfaro, *Historia de Costa Rica* (San José, 1947).

² See Carlos Meléndez and Quince Duncan, *El Negro en Costa Rica* (San José, 1972); Michael D. Olien, 'The Negro in Costa Rica: The ethnohistory of an ethnic minority in a complex society', unpubl. PhD diss., Univ. of Oregon, 1967; and Paula Palmer, 'What Happen'—a Folk History of Costa Rica's Talamanca Coast (San José, 1977).

³ See Meléndez and Duncan, *El Negro*, pp. 135–7, or Olien, 'The Negro', pp. 123–7.

Ronald N. Harpelle is an Instructor in the Department of History, University of Saskatchewan.

under previous governments. Until the 1948 civil war created a political opening for the descendants of West Indian immigrants, they were considered an unwelcome addition to Costa Rica's 'white settler society'.⁴ People of African descent were described as 'pedantic' and 'stupid' and some influential Costa Ricans advocated sterilising the entire community to prevent its spread.⁵ Many people in the highland region of the country were concerned about the presence of people of African descent in Costa Rica, but the immigration of West Indians had been a necessary part of the development of the Atlantic region.

The first West Indians arrived in Limón in 1872 to work on a railway that was built to provide highland coffee growers with a more direct route to European markets. Initially, workers from Italy and even US prisons were imported but they proved unsatisfactory labourers.⁶ Contractors were forced to look for workers who were considered more suitable. Despite existing laws against the immigration of non-Europeans, the government allowed contractors to bring in labour from restricted groups.⁷ The government justified the hiring of West Indians by arguing that they were more resistant to the hardships of working in the tropics.

Poor management resulted in the failure of several early attempts to build the railway, and mounting financial difficulties meant the government lost control over the enterprise. Foreign loans were contracted several times as the country borrowed extensively to finish the project. In 1890, after twenty-one years, the 110-mile link between San José and the port city of Limón was finally completed. In order to finish the railway, the government granted major concessions to Minor Cooper Keith, the contractor who completed the project. Keith was given possession of the tracks and 800,000 acres of adjacent land for renegotiating Costa Rica's loans with British bankers.⁸

Long before the termination of the project, Keith used his acquisitions to experiment with the cultivation of bananas, a new and increasingly popular export commodity. West Indian opportunities for work in Costa

⁴ Most of the literature on Costa Rica is based on the assumption that the vast majority of the country's inhabitants are racially pure. For a discussion of the development of the 'white settler' myth, see Ronald N. Harpelle, 'West Indians in Costa Rica: Class and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Community', unpubl. PhD diss., Univ. of Toronto, 1992, pp. ix-xxi and pp. 4-9.

⁵ Carlos Monge Alfaro, *Geografía social y humana de Costa Rica* (San José, 1943), and Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica (ANCR), Congreso series, no. 15,400.

⁶ The Italians went on strike, sparking an international incident, and most of the convicts died.

⁷ The basis for the exclusion of most non-European immigrants can be found in the Ley de Bases y Colonización, ANCR, Congreso series, no. 2,692. See also ANCR, Congreso Series, no. 5,772, for a discussion of the Costa Rican concerns about the resettlement of slaves after the Civil War in the United States.

⁸ ANCR, Congreso series, nos. 8,894, 8,895, and 8,996.

Rica were extended as Keith's banana plantations grew into the United Fruit Company and Costa Rica became one of the world's most important banana producers. The Costa Rican government had reservations about the continued presence of West Indians in the country, but allowed immigration to continue because the coffee élite did not want highland labourers to migrate to the lowland banana plantations, where wages were higher.⁹

A sizeable West Indian community developed in the banana zone and the benefits of United Fruit's presence in Costa Rica went almost exclusively to them. In Limón, employment was available all year round on the company-owned plantations, docks and railway. Moreover, peasants could rent or squat on land in peripheral areas and enjoyed some financial independence. For many, life in Limón was at least as good as elsewhere in the region and the isolation of the community meant that a degree of economic and cultural autonomy was possible.

However, the West Indian community's socio-political isolation from the rest of the country was short-lived.¹⁰ The success of the banana industry in Limón and growing shortages of accessible land in the highlands combined to attract Hispanics to the region. By the early 1920s there was a steady migration of unemployed and landless peasants to Limón from the highland region. Upon arriving in Limón, they discovered that the West Indian community was entrenched.

By 1925, the first protests against the West Indians reached the government in San José.¹¹ Tensions increased when the 1927 census revealed that over 21,000 people of African descent lived in the country.¹² According to the census, 55% of the population in Limón was of African ancestry and 431 'Negroes' were found living in San José. The census figures were released at a time when the benefits of United Fruit's operations in Costa Rica were being questioned by the government opposition.

Opponents of the government and United Fruit allied themselves with Hispanics in Limón who competed with West Indians for the best jobs. Criticisms crystallised on the company's monopoly over the banana

⁹ Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *The Political Economy of Central America since 1920* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 12.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the early period of West Indian settlement in Costa Rica, see Elisavinda Echeverri-Gent, 'Forgotten Workers: British West Indians and the Early Days of the Banana Industry in Costa Rica and Honduras', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1992).

¹¹ *The Atlantic Voice*, 18 Sept. 1934.

¹² Government of Costa Rica, *Censo de Población de Costa Rica, 11 de Mayo de 1927* (San José, 1930). Figures are derived from combining the 19,136 'Negroes' and 2,121 'mulattos' that were listed in the census. A total is necessary if comparisons with the 1950 census, which did not distinguish between the two, are to be made. Other studies have ignored this discrepancy between the two censuses and presented distorted views.

industry and the use of foreign labour in its operations. One of the first opportunities to develop a broad-based opposition to the company occurred in 1930, when United Fruit's contrast with the Costa Rican government came up for renewal.

Three issues dominated the debates over the 1930 contract: the extension of United Fruit operations to the West coast; the composition of the labour force; and the level of taxation. The contract's opponents managed to persuade the government to charge twice as much in export taxes and to include a provision stipulating that Costa Ricans be hired whenever they were equal in aptitude. The biggest disappointment for those opposed to the contract was the government's agreement to allow the company to start investing in new operations on the Pacific coast.

Critics feared that West Indian workers would migrate to the other side of the country where they would 'Africanise' yet another part of the national territory.¹³ A statement published in a San José paper by several members of Congress (including a future president) denounced the contract and its implications for the purity of Costa Rican society.¹⁴ Only a few weeks before, the director of the National Census Office had launched a scathing attack on the West Indian community in a newspaper article based on the 1927 census figures.¹⁵ Both instances were attempts to channel popular discontent towards United Fruit by inciting xenophobic reactions among Hispanics.

The battle continued when the government's opponents in congress ordered a commission to look into United Fruit's compliance with the terms of the new contract. The report, presented in 1932, found that United Fruit had violated virtually every aspect of the agreement.¹⁶ Based upon the commission's findings and the worsening economic situation in the country, the government was forced to initiate negotiations on a new contract. United Fruit was willing to consider another agreement because events beyond its control were threatening operations in Limón.

One of the company's problems on the Atlantic coast was the mounting tension between labour and management. The Communist Party had

¹³ A common misconception exists among historians and Costa Ricans that a law prohibited the migration of people of African descent to the highlands. There are scattered references to incidents of people harassed on their way to the highlands by Hispanics who would not let them pass, but, contrary to popular belief, there was never any legislation prohibiting people of African descent from going inland from Limón.

¹⁴ *La Tribuna*, 30 Aug. 1930, signed by Rafael Calderón Muñoz, Otilio Ulate Blanco, Adriano Urbina, Carlos Manuel Echandi, Ramón Bedoya, José Rafael Cascante Vargas, Juan Guido Matamoros, Manuel Antonio Cordero, Francisco Mayorga Rivas, Víctor Manuel Villalobos B., Marcial Rodríguez Conejo and J. Manuel Peralta.

¹⁵ José Guerrero, '¿Cómo se quiere que sea Costa Rica, blanca o negra? El problema racial del negro y las actuales contrataciones bananeras', *La Tribuna*, 13 Aug. 1930.

¹⁶ ANCR, Congreso series, no. 16,358.

made important inroads in Limón and founded a strong labour movement on the plantations. Just as the company and government sat down in August 1934 for the final negotiations on yet another contract, the biggest strike in the history of the country broke out on the Atlantic coast. Significantly, the vast majority of West Indian labourers did not participate actively in the strike; they chose instead to stay home in order to avoid trouble.¹⁷ United Fruit refused to sign an agreement with the strikers even though small producers agreed to the terms. The walkout resumed and the government ordered the police to use force against the strikers. The leaders were arrested and several activists were killed.¹⁸ Despite the repression, the Communist Party and the union retained their influence among Hispanic workers in Limón.

The other factor that pushed United Fruit into a new set of contract negotiations was the presence of the Panama disease on the Atlantic coast. It infected the soil on the plantations and the company was forced to move its operations as the disease advanced. By the early 1930s, United Fruit was running out of disease-free land in Limón and the only solution was to cross the temperate mountain range. In the 1930 contract, the company had established a framework for the development of Pacific coast plantations, but the 1934 agreement became the legal means to begin cultivation.

When the new contract was signed in early December, 1934, the company agreed to invest more and to exchange exhausted plantations in Limón for permission to cultivate 3,000 hectares of land on the Pacific coast.¹⁹ Congressional opponents reacted strongly against what they saw as yet another concession to the multinational. The only provision that was not vehemently attacked in Congress was an article that prohibited United Fruit from employing 'coloured labour' in its Pacific coast operations. Only one politician, Communist deputy Manuel Mora, appealed to the government to drop the prohibition but his protest was ignored. On the final vote, even the two political representatives from Limón voted in favour of the new contract.²⁰ The 1934 contract was the first and only time that the movement of people of African descent in Costa Rica was restricted by legislation.

¹⁷ Despite the contentions of some authors, there is no proof that West Indians were more than passive participants in the strike. Most documents and oral accounts indicate that the majority of West Indian workers did not take part in the strike.

¹⁸ One of the best accounts of the strike can be found in Emel Sibaja Barrantes, 'Ideología y Protesta Popular: La Huelga Bananera de 1934 en Costa Rica', unpubl. Licenciatura thesis, Universidad de Costa Rica, 1983.

¹⁹ ANCR, Congreso series, no. 17,004.

²⁰ The deputies were Juan E. Romagosa and Virgilio Chaverri.

For the West Indian community, the prohibition was matched by provisions in the contract that gave the government a higher profile in Limón. The government gained control over large tracts of land that were used to found agricultural colonies for dispossessed Costa Ricans. As people migrated to the province, the government presence became ubiquitous and West Indian residents were faced with a greater degree of control from San José than ever before. As a community, the West Indians had little to gain and much to lose from the government presence in Limón. The community's informal economic practices and lack of patriotic attachment to Costa Rica brought all West Indians under official scrutiny.

Beginning in the 1930s and especially after 1934, the government instituted a series of political programmes that forced the West Indian community to reassess their association with the country. For example, although West Indian labourers were a prime target in the 1934 contract, the heightened government presence in Limón meant that the livelihoods of small farmers were also threatened. West Indian squatters occupied land along the coast, as well as easements along roads and railway lines which remained within the public domain. In 1932, the government began to demand rent and charged two *colones* per year for every hectare occupied by a farmer.²¹ Most of the land that was affected by the new rents was cultivated by West Indian peasants.²² In addition, while the 1934 contract set a ceiling of one *colon* per year on the rent charged by United Fruit to its tenants, by 1936 the government was charging 24 *colones* per year to people on government land in Limón.²³

West Indian farmers were reluctant to pay exorbitant rents for land they considered their own, and the authorities found it difficult to collect. As a result, many peasants fell into arrears and the government increased its efforts to collect the rent.²⁴ Upon assuming the presidency in 1936, León Cortés immediately called for a census of the public lands.²⁵ New regulations were drawn up stipulating that occupants of government lands were required to sign a fifteen-year lease. At the end of the agreement the land was to be sold to the highest bidder with no compensation to the farmer who had leased it. Peasants were threatened with immediate confiscation of their land. Many were compelled to sign

²¹ *The Atlantic Voice*, 3 May 1936.

²² Unlike Costa Rican peasants, who had the right to claim the land they cleared, West Indians were not citizens and were, therefore, forced to rent from the government.

²³ A review of the company's rental contracts during the 1930s reveals that most of the land was rented in large blocks to people who were not of West Indian origin. See the protocols of company lawyer Profirio Gongora, ANCR, Protocols Section.

²⁴ For a detailed discussion of the rent increases refer to *The Atlantic Voice*, 3 May 1936.

²⁵ See *The Atlantic Voice*, 31 May 1936, 13 June 1936, 31 Oct. 1936 and 24 July 1937.

the contracts even though they could not be certain that they would be able to purchase the land when it was put up for sale.

At the same time, United Fruit was gradually withdrawing from the Atlantic coast. New investments were curtailed and some of the existing installations, like bridges and tracks, were removed for use elsewhere. As early as 1930, small farmers complained that the company was removing the telegraph lines, rails and the bridges on which remote West Indian communities depended.²⁶ The 1934 banana contract opened new plantations on the Pacific coast and United Fruit took away even more of Limón's lifelines. Under the burden of high rents and with the increased difficulty of marketing produce, farmers were forced to reconsider their attachment to land in Costa Rica.

Simultaneously, the government took measures to restrict the immigration of West Indians into Costa Rica. The rules on immigration were tightened in 1930 to require a bond for immigrants wishing to enter the country.²⁷ A few years later the bond was raised to 1,000 *colones* for most immigrants.²⁸ The high price of entry into the county kept West Indian immigrants away and created considerable pressure for out migration. The 'immigrants law' also required all resident foreigners to apply for permission from the Governor if they wished to leave the country temporarily.²⁹ Finally, in 1942, the government passed a law prohibiting all immigration of 'the black race, chinese, arabs, turks, syrians, armenians, gypsies, coolies, etc'.³⁰ The door was shut on West Indian immigration to Costa Rica and remained technically closed until 1960.³¹

Along with tighter immigration rules, parallel efforts were made to register the existing West Indian population. In 1931 the first in a series of registration laws was passed that required every adult male in the country to obtain a *cédula de identidad*. The *cédula* was followed by a *carnet de extranjero* in 1936 and, a few years later, by a *cédula de residencia* which was renewable on an annual basis.³² In each case, people were asked to register with the government. With the identification of individuals, people could be singled out and groups could be targeted for special treatment. For example, people who entered the country illegally had to worry about the effect of revealing themselves and those who were

²⁶ *La Tribuna*, 30 April 1930.

²⁷ ANCR, Gobernación series, no. 7,967, and Congreso series no. 16,018.

²⁸ *The Atlantic Voice*, 29 Aug. 1936. ²⁹ *The Searchlight*, 20 June 1931.

³⁰ Government of Costa Rica, *Colección de Leyes y Decretos*, Ley no. 4, 1942. The *Colección de Leyes y Decretos* is an annual publication of the Government of Costa Rica.

³¹ Government of Costa Rica, *Colección de Leyes y Decretos*, Ley no. 2,694, 1960.

³² Government of Costa Rica, *Colección de Leyes y Decretos*, Ley no. 40, 1931, *The Atlantic Voice*, 12 Sept. 1936 and *Colección de Leyes y Decretos*, Ley no. 37, 1940.

unemployed could be identified by the authorities. The cost of registration also meant that the poorest members of the community could not afford to comply with the law and became potential targets for harassment. Consequently, the government placed a wedge between those who complied with the new regulations and others who were in tenuous legal positions for failing to comply with the new laws.

Registration laws for the West Indians were matched by changes in the rules for naturalisation. In 1931, the government passed a new and more explicit law on the naturalisation of foreigners.³³ It set higher standards and required more documentation than the previous legislation. The new rules for naturalisation were not initiated as a result of increased requests for citizenship. Rather, they were a means of protecting the country from people who might have sought refuge in citizenship to obtain access to employment or other social services.

The legislation that was passed by politicians in San José combined with overt discrimination in Limón to increase pressure on the West Indian community. For example, in 1933 a petition with over five hundred signatures was sent to Congress from residents of Limón who requested the prohibition of 'Negro' immigration.³⁴ At the same time, the police in Limón began to prohibit 'poor or coloured children' from playing in Vargas Park while the children of the local élite were enjoying their recreational hours.³⁵ A short time later the municipality of Limón began building a bathing complex that was for 'whites' only.³⁶ Similarly, in 1935, seating at Limón's three cinemas was segregated for the first time.³⁷ Whereas West Indians were used to being segregated from United Fruit officials, they were not ready to accept discrimination from Hispanics.

West Indians in Costa Rica struggled to preserve their community while the government's objective was to denigrate and preferably eliminate the vestiges of their cultural identity. Legislation combined with overt discrimination to contain the growth and spread of the community. During the 1930s and 1940s, government policies that were aimed at the Atlantic coast were designed to force integration on a group that consciously distanced itself from Hispanic society. West Indian immigrants and their offspring were left with two alternatives: they could turn their backs on the problem and leave the country in search of a better future, or they could stay and make the best of a bad situation. Those who left the country disappeared into various streams of migrant West Indian labour and those who stayed became the electoral base that José Figueres built upon in Limón.

³³ Government of Costa Rica, *Colección de Leyes y Decretos*, Ley no. 1, 1931.

³⁴ ANCR, Congreso series, no. 16,753.

³⁵ *Trabajo*, 16 April 1933.

³⁶ *La Voz del Atlántico*, 31 Aug. 1935.

³⁷ *The Atlantic Voice*, 6 April 1935.

Migration was a means of self-preservation long practised among West Indians in Limón. Most people had family in the West Indies and the extension of United Fruit operations throughout the region provided opportunities for the adventurous. The majority of the West Indians who migrated to Costa Rica came from Jamaica and some passed through other countries on the way. As their employment and living standards in Costa Rica became more tenuous, thousands of people moved again. A United Fruit manager in Limón estimated that between January 1940 and July 1941, 4,400 people left the region for the Canal Zone and that 80% of them were 'male labourers'.³⁸

Panama was attractive to migrants because of its proximity to Limón. Even in periods of economic recession, the Panama Canal continued to function, and United Fruit operations survived the economic crisis of the 1930s. As a result, thousands of men and women were able to find employment outside of Limón. One of the principal destinations in Panama was Colón, where many West Indians from Costa Rica moved during the expansion of the canal.³⁹ Informants reported that, although there were strict prohibitions against foreign labour in Panama, it was common for people to enter the country surreptitiously and join the mass of undocumented West Indians already there.⁴⁰ Moreover, United Fruit documents from the era indicate that when the Panamanian government did enforce hiring restrictions there were ways of manipulating numbers to disguise the high percentage of non-nationals in the workforce.⁴¹

No accurate statistics are available to verify the number of people who left Costa Rica between the censuses of 1927 and 1950 but reasonable estimates can be constructed. According to census data, between 1927 and 1950 the 'negro and mulatto' population in Costa Rica decreased from 21,257 to 15,188 for a net loss of 6,139 or 29%.⁴² However, if the growth of the West Indian population followed the national average, they would have numbered 34,000 by 1950. Consequently, if the actual emigrants and any children they would have produced are included in the calculations,

³⁸ United Fruit Company correspondence, Munch to Chittenden, 16 July 1941. The author would like to thank Philippe Bourgois and Rafael Bolaños for providing copies of United Fruit Company correspondence that they obtained during their research in Bocas del Toro, Panamá.

³⁹ The Third Locks canal expansion took place between 1939 and 1942.

⁴⁰ The author interviewed several people in Limón but wishes particularly to thank Walter Ferguson, Stanford Barton, Sylvester Cunningham and Alfred King for providing the best insights into the community's history. Another rich source of oral history are many hours of interviews collected by the Ministerio de Cultura, Juventud y Deportes in San José.

⁴¹ United Fruit Company correspondence, Wm. Jackson to H. S. Blair, 8 Jan. 1929.

⁴² Government of Costa Rica, *Censo de Población de 1927*, and Government of Costa Rica, *Censo de Población de Costa Rica (22 de Mayo de 1950)* (San José, 1953).

the loss to the community between 1927 and 1950 amounted to 19,000 people or 62% of the potential population. In addition, the drain on the community was aggravated by the fact that the emigrants were people with the best chance to succeed. Women, the elderly and anyone less likely to be able to obtain employment on plantations or construction projects stayed behind in Limón.⁴³

For those who remained in the country, two strategies were available. They could either attempt entry into Costa Rican society by becoming citizens or they could somehow resist government pressures. Statistics show that people who became citizens were still a minority of the total West Indian population in the country in 1948 and that a larger group of foreign and Costa Rican-born individuals continued to maintain a distance from mainstream society.

By 1950, as many as 6,500 people of African descent in Costa Rica were considered citizens. As citizens, West Indians could rely on the constitution and had opportunities that others did not. They had access to public land and government services. Citizens could keep their children in public schools even when there were problems with space and they paid fewer taxes than foreigners. There were two principal ways for members of the community to become citizens. People who were born abroad had to apply to become naturalised citizens while those who were born in Costa Rica had a constitutional right to citizenship.

The naturalisation of citizens from most countries placed an onus on the applicant to prove that he or she was in a position to contribute to Costa Rica. Immigrants who managed to purchase property or otherwise obtain security in Costa Rica were most likely to succeed with their application for citizenship. Another important prerequisite was that the applicant obtain letters of support from influential Costa Ricans. Consequently, social status and ties to the dominant class were important measures of a person's suitability for citizenship.

Significant numbers of foreign-born West Indians became Costa Rican citizens between 1927 and 1950. Prior to 1927, only twenty-five people with West Indian nationality became naturalised Costa Rican citizens.⁴⁴ The mid-century census showed that there were just over one thousand naturalised Costa Rican citizens in Limón. Since the largest group of foreigners in the province were British subjects, almost all of the naturalised Costa Ricans were West Indian.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, only about

⁴³ *The Atlantic Voice*, 22 March 1941, expressed concern about the women and children left behind by the exodus of the men.

⁴⁴ Government of Costa Rica, *Índice completo por orden alfabético de las opciones, inscripciones y naturalizaciones practicadas desde el año de 1829 hasta setiembre de 1927* (San José, 1927).

⁴⁵ Nicaraguans were the second largest group of foreigners but they had to opt for citizenship, not naturalisation.

25 % of all foreign nationals who lived in Costa Rica became naturalised citizens by 1950.⁴⁶

Individuals who were born in the country but whose parents were foreign nationals followed a different process to become citizens. The children of foreign nationals were not automatically accorded recognition from their parents' home government or by the Costa Rican authorities. The vast majority grew up as stateless individuals. However, if a person was born in Costa Rica they had a legal right to opt for Costa Rican citizenship.⁴⁷ By 1950, approximately 45 % of Costa Rican-born West Indians had exercised their right to citizenship through the option process.⁴⁸

A look at the people who opted for citizenship and when they made their decision reveals the effectiveness of government efforts to make West Indians conform. A comprehensive list of individuals who became citizens between 1829 and 1927 reveals that there were no options sought by Costa Rican-born West Indians.⁴⁹ However, between 1935 and 1950, 2,155 children of West Indian parents opted for Costa Rican citizenship.⁵⁰ Moreover, of the 900 women and 1,255 men, 1,567 of them became citizens between 1941 and 1947. An analysis of the applications that were approved reveals that a disproportionate number of applicants lived in San José where the West Indian community was small, but where citizenship was more important. In San José, by 1950, between 70 and 80 % of all the people designated as negroes or mulattos had opted for citizenship. In comparison, only seven per cent of their peers in Limón opted for citizenship during the same period.

The people who exercised their right to citizenship tended to be young and independent of the community. The options for citizenship between 1935 and 1950 reveal that the majority of West Indian applicants were single, between the ages of 21 and 34 and, if they were male, were usually employed in a skilled trade. Almost all of them were born in the province of Limón and, at the time of application, 43 % either lived in San José or

⁴⁶ Government of Costa Rica, *Censo de Población de Costa Rica (22 de Mayo de 1950)*.

⁴⁷ Among the people who were allowed to opt to become Costa Ricans were the children of foreigners who were born in the country, the children of nationals who were born abroad and Central Americans whose country of origin had a reciprocal arrangement with Costa Rica.

⁴⁸ All statistics on options are taken from the *Libro de Acuerdos del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores*, vols. 2 to 8 which were found at the Registro Civil in San José.

⁴⁹ Government of Costa Rica, *Índice completo*.

⁵⁰ Figures drawn from a database of 2,155 individuals of African descent who opted for citizenship between 1935 and 1950. The subjects who were included in the study were selected from the 5,177 individuals who opted for citizenship between June 1935 and December 1949. No data was available for the period between 1927 and 1935. Choices were made on the basis of the applicant's own statement on nationality.

outside of the country. The profile of the applicants from Limón tended to mirror that of people from San José with the exception that proportionately fewer women applied for citizenship if they lived outside of the capital.

The statistics on female applicants support the proposition that citizenship was an important means of survival for community members. Trends in the statistics on female applicants are identical to those of men in cases such as age or birth status which were not influenced by issues of gender. However, female applicants were different from their male counterparts in some respects. As in other societies, women were more vulnerable because of the limitations society imposed on their mobility, opportunities for employment and general independence.

Female applicants were less likely to occupy traditional positions in society. In San José, 50% of the applicants were women who worked at a wider variety of jobs than their counterparts in Limón. Moreover, whereas only 84.2% of male applicants were single, 97.6% of the female applicants were unmarried. A mere 22 of the 900 women were married and half of the women who became citizens lived in San José, Panama or Kingston, away from their community. Citizenship was one way to assure a more secure future for women who were on their own in a patriarchal society.

In the rural areas male dominance played a role in restricting women from making applications but they were not the only people subject to control by others. A certain number of those who did not seek to become citizens may not have been in a position to do so even if they desired. People with disabilities, children and those who did not have proper documents were unable to apply for citizenship without the assistance of friends or family. Judging by the data on options, West Indian parents were reluctant to obtain Costa Rican citizenship for their children. The overwhelming majority of applicants did so shortly after reaching the age of majority.

Everyone else who did not become a naturalised citizen nor opt for citizenship experienced the mounting pressure to conform, and their decision to remain in the country amounted to a type of passive resistance. The 1950 census indicated that 7,060 people in Limón were considered to be foreigners of British origin. If the people born abroad are subtracted from the total then 4,391 of the foreigners in Limón were born in Costa Rica. Many may have been children, but a number were adults who had established themselves as workers or peasants. They faced all of the same restrictions placed on foreigners but did not enjoy the protection accorded to British subjects through international treaties. These people formed the majority of the West Indian population until the late 1940s. Over time,

their numbers decreased due to emigration and the successful efforts by the government to persuade West Indians to become Costa Ricans.

People could avoid becoming citizens because Limón was an isolated area that was only linked to the highlands by a single railway track. High levels of poverty, cultural differences, idiosyncrasies and open hostility helped further separate West Indians from the Hispanic mainstream. In Limón, goods and services could be obtained from within the community itself. Contact with Hispanics was only required when dealing with government authorities, and then the knowledge of Spanish was optional because interpreters could be found. Many West Indians perceived Hispanic culture and lifestyle as inferior to their own with the result that association with Costa Ricans was minimised. As a result, many West Indians refused to become Costa Rican citizens.

Nevertheless, citizenship was seen as a key to acceptance in Costa Rica and many believed that it was a solution to their problem of mobility within the country. West Indians believed that by becoming Costa Rican citizens they could expect to have the same rights as Hispanic nationals.⁵¹ Unfortunately, the decision to become a Costa Rican citizen helped alienate West Indians from their own community and did not necessarily produce the desired results. Younger skilled members of the community heeded the call to become Costa Rican and they soon represented a new force in the community.

One way to gauge the changes in the community is to look at the character of the organisations that its members supported in their struggle for recognition. For example, until the early 1940s the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was the most important secular organisation in Limón. The strength of its support in the province made the local division of the UNIA one of the longest surviving in the world.⁵² Marcus Garvey's visits to Limón generated a mass following and the association remained at the forefront of cultural organisation for two decades.⁵³ The secret of the UNIA's success was that it reduced its membership prerequisite to a common denominator with which the entire West Indian community could identify. Apart from being people of 'good character' and paying nominal dues, members needed only to belong to the 'negro race'.

However, the changes in the relationship between the community and Costa Rica during the 1930s and 1940s marked the decline of the UNIA.

⁵¹ Afro-Costa Ricans argued that the provisions of the 1934 banana contract that excluded them from working on the Pacific coast should not apply to citizens of colour. See ANCR, Fomento series, no. 3,387.

⁵² Limón continues to boast one of only a handful of Universal Negro Improvement Associations still in existence.

⁵³ See Harpelle, 'West Indians in Costa Rica', pp. 122-167.

Other organisations began to attract the younger generation by appealing to their need for a secure future. The concern of the new groups was not, as in the case of the UNIA, to found a homeland elsewhere for people of African descent but rather to make them feel at home in the country of their birth. Support for the UNIA began to wane in the late 1930s and other organisations with a distinctly Costa Rican character emerged to represent community interests.

The shift to an Afro-Costa Rican identity became public in 1940 when the first in a series of organisational meetings was held in San José to fight for the rights of 'coloured' Costa Ricans. At the meeting, Alex Curling told the assembled group that 'several Costarricans in good standing' were in sympathy with the cause.⁵⁴ A few weeks later, ex-President Ricardo Jiménez wrote in the *Diario de Costa Rica* in defence of coloured citizens.⁵⁵ Members of the West Indian community were appreciative of the ex-President's contribution because he represented authority. They expressed their appreciation in a letter to a local newspaper in which they thanked Jiménez for his contribution and humanitarian sentiments.⁵⁶

The letter came from a new group in Limón called the National Progressive Association of the Youths of Colour of the Atlantic Zone. The Association wrote its letter of thanks 'in the name of Costarricans of the Coloured race'. A short time later, after a name change, the National Association for the Advancement of Young Coloured People (NAAYCP) began its membership drive citing a desire to assure the 'welfare of future generations'.⁵⁷ The NAAYCP was followed by a number of similar organisations such as the Afro-Costarrican Youth Uplift Association and the National Association for the Progress of Coloured Costa Ricans (NAPCCR). Each group was established to represent those members of the community who were Costa Rican citizens. As such, they formed a distinct and generally elite group within the West Indian community.

The new organisations urged people to protect their rights by becoming Costa Ricans. For example, in 1944 Feresford Duncan, a founding member of the NAPCCR, warned West Indians that the government was considering the imposition of restrictions against foreign workers in the Atlantic Zone.⁵⁸ Instead of defending the rights of the West Indian community as a whole, Duncan told the children of immigrants to protect themselves by opting for citizenship. He advocated the further co-optation of the West Indian community.

Just weeks after Duncan's warning, the law on options was altered further to restrict West Indians from becoming Costa Ricans. On 18

⁵⁴ *The Atlantic Voice*, 14 Dec. 1940.

⁵⁵ *Diario de Costa Rica*, 4 Dec. 1940.

⁵⁶ *The Atlantic Voice*, 14 Dec. 1940.

⁵⁷ *The Atlantic Voice*, 11 Jan. 1941.

⁵⁸ *The Atlantic Voice*, 22 July 1944.

August 1944, President Teodoro Picado signed a decree that, among other things, required all young people to opt for Costa Rican citizenship before the age of 22 or lose their right to do so.⁵⁹ What it meant to West Indians was that many had only one year before the law came into effect to decide whether to obtain the necessary documentation and apply for an option. All those who did not act forfeited the right to become Costa Rican citizens.

Duncan's appeal was followed by editorials, articles and other pleas urging those in the community who did not have status as British subjects to opt for citizenship. In a strange twist which reflected the greater willingness of some community members to exchange a West Indian identity for a Costa Rican one, Picado was portrayed as a man who was giving people of African descent a chance. Yet Picado's imposition of an age limit on the applications for options was not an opportunity but just another attempt to force the West Indians to conform. Indications are that the threats worked because 1945 became the year in which more community members opted for citizenship than ever before.⁶⁰ Despite the pressure, thousands of people did not heed the call to become Costa Ricans and divisions within the community remained centred on the key issue of affiliation with the Costa Rican state.

Community leaders consistently attacked people from 'the lower order' for not doing something to protect themselves from the government's discriminatory policies. From their pulpits, at their meetings and in the press, the leaders of the West Indian community berated members for living up to the racial stereotypes that were common in Hispanic circles. The community elite were careful to advocate conciliation, not confrontation. They understood the tenuous position that West Indian immigrants and their children were in and they pointed to the most expedient solution to the problem. West Indian salvation in Costa Rica was dependent on citizenship.

The forces dividing the community were never fully understood by those who sought to steer its members toward a Costa Rican identity. For community leaders the divisions were inherent to the 'race' and not an expression of class interests or ethnic identity. In 1938, a local newspaper editor argued that the 'negro race' had yet to learn how to work together and that was why they were in the position they found themselves in. He wrote that the 'Negro... must be separate; must be boisterous; must be

⁵⁹ Government of Costa Rica, *Colección de Leyes y Decretos*, Ley no. 207, 1944. At the Archivo Legislativo see document no. 1,753-A for the formal discussion of the new law.

⁶⁰ In 1945, a total of 335 children of West Indians opted for citizenship. The previous record had been 241 options in 1941 and the average number of options in the previous decade had been 110 per year.

disunited and disintegrated; must be disrespected and scorned by the other Races who realise that unity produces strength, respect and admiration'.⁶¹ The editor's attitude and that of other members of the community elite reflected the Social Darwinism of the Hispanic community which also felt that the 'negro' had not yet obtained the maturity of the 'white' race.

The West Indian community leaders imagined that people of African descent could share in the exclusive 'white settler' heritage of Costa Rican society. They spent their energy trying to convince people to become Costa Rican citizens instead of fighting discriminatory policies and other attacks on their community. Community leaders failed to link the rapid decline of the banana industry with the mounting discrimination against people of colour. They thought that all the West Indian community had to do to overcome the difficulties of the 1930s and 1940s was to adopt an Afro-Costa Rican identity.

While community leaders urged their people to prove their patriotism, Hispanic intellectuals had already made up their minds on the subject of the suitability of people of African descent in a modern society. In 1942, Rodrigo Facio, Costa Rica's patriarch of modern economic history, wrote that the 'black population was not adaptable to patriotic sentiment'.⁶² His views were echoed by Carlos Monge Alfaro, a leading Costa Rican historian, who wrote in a school textbook that in addition to being pedantic and stupid, the 'negroes' were a transient group without a national consciousness and no spiritual nationality.⁶³

Facio and Monge Alfaro were two of the leading intellectual figures of the anti-government movement that emerged in the 1940s and founded the second republic. Their concern about the West Indian's lack of a national consciousness revealed a fundamental problem that confronted José Figueres and his followers after they overthrew Picado's National Republican government. Many West Indians did not share in the Costa Rican identity and had not developed the same political attachments as their highland neighbours.

The solution to the problem posed by West Indian isolation was found in post-1948 efforts to consolidate the civil war victory. José Figueres joined West Indian community leaders in an appeal to the community to become a part of a new era in Costa Rican history. According to one source, he travelled throughout Limón 'speaking English, kissing babies and dancing with black women'.⁶⁴ He did things that no other leader had

⁶¹ *The Atlantic Voice*, 26 Feb. 1938.

⁶² Rodrigo Facio, *Estudio sobre la economía costarricense* (San José, 1972), p. 59.

⁶³ Carlos Monge Alfaro, *Geografía social y humana*, p. 126.

⁶⁴ Meléndez and Duncan, *El Negro* (San José, 1972), p. 135.

ever done and it endeared him to the residents of Limón. Figueres brought a new political style to Limón because he had to generate electoral support in the province.

Figueres knew that Limón was a stronghold of the Communist Party and the vanquished National Republicans. He also knew that in order to win elections he would have to broaden his electoral base. This was partly achieved by the new constitution of 1949 that gave women the right to vote. In Limón, Figueres appealed to West Indians for support because they represented a significant part of Limón's electorate. The 1950 census revealed that people of African descent represented 33.2% of the residents of Limón and 4.6% of the Costa Rican population.

Figueres extended a hand of friendship to the West Indian community by eliminating the clause in the 1934 contract that prohibited 'coloured people' from working for United Fruit on the Pacific coast. Moreover, Figueres' speeches proclaimed a blanket amnesty for all those born in the country who were not yet Costa Rican citizens, although the laws concerning citizenship and how it was obtained were left unchanged in the new constitution. Community members were encouraged to join the political process and their participation was evidenced in 1953 when Alex Curling became the first person of African descent to be elected to congress.

Afro-Costa Ricans had been excluded from national politics until José Figueres and the Partido Liberación Nacional permitted them to participate. According to one source, only thirty people from the community went to the polls in 1948.⁶⁵ Many more went to the polls in 1953 and they voted for the party that had accepted candidates from their community. From a mere handful, the West Indian electorate had grown to several thousand and they made their choice on the basis of community solidarity.

Alex Curling considered himself to be Afro-Costa Rican. He was one of the first Costa Rican-born West Indians to opt for citizenship and was among the most ardent promoters of equal rights for all citizens. He helped to convince the members of his community who were eligible but had not yet become citizens to secure a future for themselves as Costa Ricans. When the government insisted that foreign nationals become naturalised citizens, Alex Curling fought for extensions to the time limits placed on applications.⁶⁶ The number of stateless individuals in the country decreased to a level of insignificance throughout the 1950s.

⁶⁵ Kathleen Sawyers Royal, 'Participación política del negro Limonense', in Meléndez and Duncan, *El Negro*, p. 222.

⁶⁶ Government of Costa Rica, *Colección de Leyes y Decretos*, no. 523, 1949; no. 1,155, 1950; no. 1,916, 1955, and Archivo Legislativo, no. 2,386.

The transformation of identity of West Indians in Costa Rica began in response to attacks on the community. Their survival as a distinct cultural group in Costa Rica depended on their ability to take advantage of their right to citizenship. Thousands of people left the country in search of a more secure economic future but many others compromised their ethnic identity by integrating into Hispanic society. Those who sought shelter in citizenship defined a new generation which demanded a new relationship with Costa Rica. They formed a voting bloc that could be used to counter the influence of the Communist Party in Limón and José Figueres recognised the benefits of their support. Figueres offered Afro-Costa Ricans an opportunity to share in the future of the country and they accepted.

The West Indian community's struggle to retain its position in Costa Rica can be measured in both cultural and economic terms. Culturally, the West Indian community has become an Afro-Costa Rican community. Government institutions and Hispanic society have suppressed the West Indian identity in Costa Rica. Economically, Limón never recovered fully from the decline of the banana industry and the emigration of thousands of people. Limón remains one of the most disadvantaged regions of the country and the socio-economic position of the Afro-Costa Rican community reflects the provincial economy.