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# The status of West Indian immigrants in Panama from 1850-1941.

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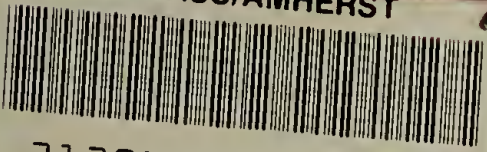
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THE STATUS OF WEST INDIAN IMMIGRANTS  
IN PANAMA FROM 1850-1941

A THESIS PRESENTED  
BY  
SADITH ESTHER PAZ B.

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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## PREFACE

One of the most important decisions taken by the Republic of Panama after becoming an independent country, November 3, 1903, was to adopt its Constitution on February 15, 1904. This important document was the result of a rapid improvisation even though the country as a province of Colombia had enjoyed already partial independence in its administration. This fact emphasizes the attitude towards the immigration described in the Constitution. It is necessary to recall the principal articles related to this matter in order to understand the legal conditions that ruled the immigrants who were already in the country or those who wished to come.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the Constitution was specifically to promote the general welfare and to guarantee the benefits of freedom to Panamanians and to any other individual who inhabited the country. This statement revealed a noble attitude towards the large number of prospective immigrants attracted by the possibility of improving their lot.

Citizenship was at once granted to those immigrants with a residence of more than 10 years who wanted to become Panamanian citizens. New immigrants had to comply with additional conditions such as exercising a profession in science, art, or industry; or by possessing some real estate or active capital.<sup>2</sup>

Article 19 stood as an example of a nation who intended to respect every human right. It said, "There will be no slaves in Panama. Anyone who, as a slave, enters the territory of the Republic will be free."<sup>3</sup>

The second Constitution was published in November 22, 1940. It contained fundamental changes regarding immigrants. No longer did it aspire to protect the welfare of all of Panama's inhabitants nor guarantee their freedom. It declared itself responsible for the well-being of Panamanian citizens exclusively.

One can deduce from its provisions, that the new Constitution was the product of a national disposition which tended to be reactionary against immigration. Panamanians were fearing an attack on their traditions and social structure. The restrictive measures were especially directed towards the English-speaking, West-Indian Blacks who had migrated into Panama mainly on four different occasions since 1850.

The Constitution defined "prohibited immigration" (inmigración prohibida) as: Blacks whose language was not Spanish; 'yellows', and those originating from India, Asia Minor and North Africa. The best these people could hope for was restricted citizenship. Furthermore, the Panamanian-born offspring of at least one parent being of prohibited immigration, whose race was black and non-Spanish speaking, was denied his or her citizenship. Unless there was 'substantial' proof that he had lived under the Republic's jurisdiction



during his childhood and adult years, the Panamanian of non-Spanish speaking black parents could not aspire to consider himself a citizen. Only the President of the Republic, had the power to change his status. The request of these Panamanian-born for prospective citizenship had to be processed within the first three months after the 1940 Constitution became effective.<sup>4</sup>

This contrast of attitudes between both constitutions may seem peculiar. A review of the laws and statutes on immigration passed by the National Assembly, will reveal the underlying reasons for the change. It will show the process as a slow but constant one, which grew as a result of increasing nationalistic tendencies. The immigration legislation also reflected the feelings of helplessness on the part of Panamanian leaders who were unable to instill in the people, the reaffirmation of their culture and traditions, and to assure them of a stable national economy which would be able to absorb the national native labor force.

Taking the 1940 Constitution as a reference point, it is obvious that the group chosen as 'scapegoats' were the Black-English speaking immigrants. The problem is not why but how this group became the victim. It is important, therefore, to analyze the reasons which motivated, on four different occasions, 1850, 1880, 1904, 1938, the mass immigration of West Indian blacks to Panama. It is also important to analyze the socio-political attitudes and economic con-

ditions during their residence in Panama, vis-a-vis Panamanian attitudes and conditions. Both analyses will hopefully disclose the cause and effects of Black West Indian immigrants in Panamanian life.

CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL OF THE WEST INDIANS IN PANAMA

(1850-1914)

The sugar plantations in the British West Indies had a labor force which was composed of men and women brought in from Africa as slaves. Once the slavery system was abolished in 1832, the freed slaves faced a difficult political situation, a chaotic economy and a society which did not allow them any upward social mobility. A look into these factors will provide us with an understanding of the reasons for the migration of West Indian blacks to Panama and the results of their subsequent stay as permanent residents.

The anti-slavery movement succeeded in its persistent efforts but the defeated landowners challenged the outcome with measures which would make slaves' life as difficult as before. Great Britain abolished slavery on April 17, 1832. This decision did not reach the West Indies until 1834, during which the Parliamentary Council approved the measure of Freedom by Order. Thus, on August 1 of that year, the slaves were freed and a system of apprenticeship was introduced by the Emancipation Act.<sup>1</sup>

The British government had to develop a plan which would meet the demands of both groups pressuring it--the anti-slavery movement and the West-Indian planters. These two groups opposed each other in essence. One, required the emancipation of slaves. The other, alleged slavery as essential to the sugar production system. Already with the declaration of the abolition of slavery, the movement which favored the measure was satisfied in principle. The true problem was

to satisfy the planters. Sugar production had to continue to be profitable in spite of abolition. The only way this could be achieved was to establish a work wage system that would employ free labor.<sup>2</sup> Realizing that such a transition would be too drastic, the anti-slavery leaders believed that a system of apprenticeship would smooth the transformation.

The law which freed the slaves compelled them to serve an apprenticeship of up to twelve years. It was later reduced to less time. They would be paid in wages and were responsible for their own upkeep. They were required to pay from their wages twice a year, a portion towards the price of their own freedom. The British government granted the planters approximately from \$15 to \$20 million pounds in loans which were to be redeemed by the slaves, not the planters. These concessions were made so as to maintain the support of the colonists and West-Indian merchants which depended upon immediate compensation in order to carry out the emancipation program.<sup>3</sup>

The administration in Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad had many difficulties in reaching a common agreement to restructure the Colonial government in the aftermath of emancipation. These islands now faced economic disaster. No governor was able to come with a feasible solution. To compound the problem, the planters in their disappointment tried to obstruct in every way possible the rules imposed almost overnight.<sup>4</sup> This lack of unity contributed to the restive-

ness of the former slaves who, unable to earn their living, had to work for a miserable wage. They hoped at first to buy land, but reality changed their dream into a nightmare. Land prices were too high and a heavy investment was necessary in order to make the fields productive.

Another problem for the freed slaves was the overpopulation of all the islands. For example, Barbados, with 166 square miles, had to support a population of 193,000 which gave a density of 1,163 to the square mile.<sup>5</sup> Table I indicates the density for the other islands.

TABLE I

Population Density<sup>1</sup>  
1850

Barbados. . . . .	.1,163	per square mile.		
British Guayana . . . . .	.1,700	"	"	"
Grenada . . . . .	665	"	"	"
Guadeloupe. . . . .	442	"	"	"
Tobago . . . . .	241	"	"	"
Trinidad. . . . .	229	"	"	"

I Eric Williams. The Negro in the Caribbean.  
Washington D.C.: 1942.

A census in 1851 gave the population of Barbados as 135,939 with the following classifications:

Whites. . . . .	.15,824
Colored & half-castes . . . . .	.30,059
Blacks. . . . .	.90,056

The labor market was overstocked, and the land was scarce and high priced. Nevertheless, small proprietors of less than five acres increased, from 1830's to 1851, from

1,100 to 3,537. Overcrowded conditions tended to keep the laboring population in a subservient position. The professions of emancipated blacks created a kind of middle class composed of small landed proprietors, mechanics, merchants, clerks, businessmen and artisans. They were reluctant to become wage earners on the plantations which they considered tyrannical.<sup>6</sup>

Trinidad in 1851, counted 69,000 inhabitants. In 1858, there were 80,000, of which 50,000 were creoles of African descent. After the emancipation, the planter established a system of lower wages and more work for the freed field workers. This did not have favorable results for the freed blacks, as a high percentage of field laborers had become small landowners who worked on the plantations on a part time basis to complement their income. The wage system provoked them to bring up their children as traders or mechanics.

Jamaica's socio-economic conditions were more outstanding than those of the other islands. Three different censuses placed the black population at 380,000 in 1834, at 361,657 in 1844, and at 350,000 in 1860. In 1834, 320,000 slaves were liberated. Only 45,000 of them had any education and formed a group of tradesmen. 50,000 of them were engaged in the tillage of the soil. These figures include the small proprietors. In 1860, 20,000 worked for the sugar estates; 10,000 as domestics and 3,000 in the public works.<sup>7</sup>

As it appears, the desire for social mobility, which was common to these large populations of West-Indian Blacks, proved their ability to survive the slave status and to look for a better opportunity as soon as they were emancipated. It was not an easy goal to achieve. So far, the socio-economic conditions constituted by their environment was an almost insurmountable obstacle. The wages were low, and the work was exhausting, most of all for the children who, instead of receiving good education, had to go to the fields as soon as possible.

The reasons of migration are easily understood after the study of the conditions that preceded and followed emancipation. The emphasis in the three islands of greater population does not exclude the others: Tobago, Grenada and British Guayana. The emigration from these islands was less in number, but showed the same trends as in the others.

It was very difficult for the planters and the white population as a whole, to accept the emancipation of their slaves. It was much more difficult to accept the freed men as part of their society. Race distinctions were perhaps more strictly observed now that the black man was also a British subject.<sup>8</sup> At best, there were some colonists who felt that the blacks owed them everlasting gratitude for having been granted their freedom. Others, the majority, whose ultimate purpose was to maintain the status-quo in spite of emancipation, employed the system of lower wages to obtain



more work from the freed field workers. This strategy contributed to keeping the laboring population in a subservient position.

Once they had achieved emancipation, the freed men had no knowledge of any occupation other than working the soil. One of the objectives of the apprenticeship system was to train the former slaves in different trades so as to prepare them to be more independent. Another reason was to supply a more diversified labor force. Unfortunately, the system of apprenticeship did not meet its expectations, although there was a great increase of persons engaged in trades and mechanical arts. Perhaps it was precisely such increase which discouraged the continuation of innovation as more freed men were reluctant to become wage earners on the plantations, causing a large deficiency of field labor. This was especially true of Barbados and Trinidad.<sup>9</sup> In Jamaica, the last colony to abolish slavery in 1838, the apprenticeship period was drastically reduced to four years by the planters, leaving approximately 320,000 freed men without any preparation or training. Of the British West-Indies, Jamaica had the lowest percentage of freed men in the trades or service occupation; the overwhelming majority engaged in field work.<sup>10</sup>

The system of apprenticeship gave the government an excuse to postpone indefinitely the establishment of the popular education programs. In Jamaica for example, no considerations had been made about popular education. In 1860,

only 20,000 students, less the 6% of the total population, were enrolled in private school. The planters were responsible for the faults of policy and government which, besides keeping the population in ignorance through the flat discouragement of education, hopelessly confronted a bankrupt economy that drove the creoles from the plantations. In Barbados and Trinidad, there was an established system of education although its deficiency helped to "prevent the circulation of general intelligence."<sup>11</sup>

On the whole, under the system of apprenticeship, the blacks did not really learn to develop self-reliance in solving their own problems. Unfortunately, the public instruction system did not help them uphold their interests.<sup>12</sup> The freed man remained in his marginal status although he now was a British citizen.

Another major obstacle to the smooth transition to emancipation was the economic situation with which the colonies were confronted. The colonists held the abolition of the slave system responsible for the bankruptcy of their economy. However, all were faced with a difficult economic situation. Moreover, the sugar production monopoly which the British colonies enjoyed, had been successfully challenged by the growth of beet sugar in the French province of Landes, and cane sugar in other French West Indies colonies and Cuba. Other factors such as the slave system itself, made the colonial economy's recuperation impossible. This was partly due

to the high costs of the slave system. In Jamaica, approximately 200 sugar estates had been abandoned due to debt and lack of capital, as far back as 50 years before emancipation had taken place. Absenteeism was an important deterrent for a profitable business. The exportations of sugar had decreased from 150,000 tons in 1805 to 85,000 tons in 1833. Coffee exports also suffered a loss of 50% from 1814 to 1832. Moreover, from 1815 to 1850, the price of sugar fell approximately 75%.<sup>13</sup> The persistent lack of capital after emancipation contributed to an unceasing depression which made it almost impossible to continue production, much less to pay freed labor. To avoid the latter, an effort was made to encourage the Hindu Coolie immigration to replace the new small landowners in the sugar fields. Such immigration caused an increase in unemployment and a decrease in the part-time employment in which most of the freed laborers engaged to complement their income during the 1840's.

✓ In Barbados and Trinidad, the planters followed a mistaken policy by refusing to give any inducement for the laborer to remain in the fields, such as higher wages or a more liberal land tenure.<sup>14</sup> They preferred to recruit cheap labor from other parts of the British empire. Consequently, there was an influx of East Indian Coolies who came to replace the freed laborers on the field. After their 3 year indenture period, the Coolies successfully competed against the freed field workers as they underbid the

blacks in daily wages. Although only 1/12th of the fertile land was under cultivation, the reticent landed oligarchy refused the concession of land to freed men as had been done in Jamaica.<sup>15</sup>

Overpopulation also affected the island's economy. The freed black had very little chance to attain economic security in the West Indies. Under the circumstances, he could not satisfy even his primary necessities. The black man was forced to emigrate to look for higher salaries. Secondary reasons for emigration were the political situation in the islands and a society which did not allow upward social mobility for the freed men.

On December 12, 1846, the United States signed the Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty with New Granada's Liberal government which guaranteed the latter's sovereignty in the Isthmus in exchange for the unlimited rights to transit across the territory. This agreement was beneficial to a politically weak Colombia, as it would no longer have to contend with the continuous threats of the Panamanian separatist movements. These motions toward autonomy had been taking place in Panama not only as a reaction against the unceasing party conflicts which caused a political crisis in Colombia, but also as a manifestation of patriotic feelings which sought for a corresponding political structure.<sup>16</sup> Panama separated from New Granada on three different occasions: September 26, 1830, July 9, 1831, and November 18, 1840.

Although the Isthmus rejoined a peaceful New Granada December 31, 1841, its leaders did not abandon their goal of an independent Panama.

The 1846 negotiations assured the United States of an advantageous position in Panama over the British for the acquisition of control of the interoceanic waterways. The contract included regulations concerning navigation, commerce, and the "neutrality and maintenance" of the free transit through the Isthmus, which decisively favored the United States. Additionally, the government had the right to devise and establish whichever means of communication it esteemed most convenient. Without doubt, this contract would deeply affect Panama's socio-economic structure in the succeeding years.

After its war with Mexico, from 1846 to 1848, the United States annexed the territory known as California and came into possession of Oregon, thus fulfilling in great part its goal of Manifest Destiny. In 1848, shortly after the settlement of the Northwestern boundary, a Swedish adventurer named John August Sutter, discovered gold in California beginning the Gold Rush. The distance between the settled states, especially those undergoing industrial development, and the new possessions, made the latter inaccessible particularly for administrative purposes.<sup>17</sup> The water route to California via Cape Horn was too long and time-consuming. North Americans again looked upon Panama as the most conve-

nient crossroad by which the United States might achieve rapid communication between its east and west boundaries. As a result, sudden and uncontrolled wave of foreigners invaded Panamanian soil.

The excessive human traffic through the Isthmus demanded the organization of steamship lines. The United States Congress quickly authorized contracts for the establishment of two steamship companies which would connect the east and west coast of North America through Panama. George Law and William H. Aspinwall took charge of the organization of the routes. The steamship Falcon serviced the Atlantic Coast from the ports of New York and New Orleans to the Chagres River. The Pacific route was covered by the steamship California from California and Oregon to Panama City. The Isthmus became again the compulsory stop for the goldiggers. There was a demand for coast to coast land transportation, food and lodging, services which became very well paid.<sup>18</sup>

The California Gold Rush gave new life to the Isthmus which had become poor and obscure due to the unceasing civil wars in their struggle for autonomy from Colombia. In the years preceeding 1840, the Panamanian economy had experienced a grave depression. The presence of the foreign element contributed to the improvement of such situation. The rundown appearance of Panama City changed completely in less than four years. Old houses were restored and new ones were built. Foreigners from all parts of the world disrupted the quiet

atmosphere that had been characteristic of the Panamanian setting. Although the contact with the foreigners was exclusively based on a business level, it brought to the surface racial and cultural differences. Such dissimilarities caused animosity among Panamanians against the newcomers who spoke a different language and who mocked the native costumes, customs, and religious expression.<sup>19</sup> Another reason for the Panamanian attitude towards the foreigners was due to the fact that those who had come in the Falcon's first voyage, introduced the 'cholera morbus' in the seaport of Cruces in 1848. The lack of sanitary conditions due to the uncontrolled massive immigration, caused the disease's rapid propagation throughout the Isthmus, resulting in an epidemic.

On December 28, 1848, New Granada granted a concession to the Pacific Steamship Company for the building of a railroad across the Isthmus of Panama. A contract was drafted in 1849 between John Lloyd Stephens and Henry Chauncey, would-be organizers of the Panama Railroad Company, and the government of Colombia. The builders were hardpressed for time as the Gold Rush endeavours were surpassing any record of past output. The demand for a new and faster means of transportation had made the building of a railroad a necessity. Such construction demanded a large labor force which Panama was unable to supply. Those in charge of recruitment began to promote the immigration of labor to the Isthmus.

In 1850, the Panama Railroad Company hired one thousand

Chinese from Canton to start work on the construction of the line. However, due to illness, chronic melancholy and other factors such as their addiction to opium, the Chinese' stay in Panama was of short duration. This first group of immigrants was prejudicial to the Company as the majority deserted their work on the railroad as often as possible and "had to be rounded up by the police and sent back to work".<sup>20</sup>

Those who were in charge of the construction, Misters Trauwine and Totten, made a contract with the Royal West Indian Mail Steam Packett Company so that it would transport large numbers of laborers from the Caribbean to Panama for a minimal fee.<sup>21</sup>

The demand for paid labor in Panama offered very good opportunities, especially to the West Indians. The unfavorable situation which they confronted in their respective islands induced their immigration to the Isthmus. From being farmers and rural people, they became laborers in construction and industry, a change which they welcomed. The West Indian migrant laborer proved to have better work capacity than the Chinese. Although West Indians found a different political organization in Panama, the socio-economic opportunities which it offered were much better than in their places of origin.

The construction of the railroad began in August of 1850 with a labor force of three hundred workers gathered from Ireland, India, England, France, Germany, Austria, the West



Indies, Colombia, Costa Rica and Panama. Four months later, the number of employees had risen to more than one thousand. The labor force continued to increase during the four years of construction, from 1850 to 1854, as it had during the first four months. The total working force was seven thousand men by the completion of the construction. Although the West Indian group was not numerically important, it proved to be the most adaptable to the climatic and working conditions. As other groups of immigrants decreased due to illness, the West Indians replaced them.<sup>22</sup>

At the beginning of the railroad construction in 1850, the Colombian Conservative President had been replaced by a Liberal whose platform included, specifically, opposition to the continuation of slave traffic that had been favored by the former government in spite of emancipation. This attitude did not mean a radical change towards the incorporation of black people into the social structure of Panama. Although the initiative to open the doors to West Indian immigration in Panama was in the United States' hands. The local attitudes made it clear that these immigrants, like the others, had to restrict their ambitions. The West Indians soon sensed this opposition and isolated themselves in order to protect their traditions and language.<sup>23</sup> Besides, many who thought to establish themselves as tradesmen, joined others who considered Panama as a transitory home where they could earn some money to buy land in their own country.

The principal handicap was not color nor race but language. As they spoke English, it was impossible for them to send their children to the Panamanian public schools which, aside from this inconvenience, were considered inferior to the British system. The community organized private schools. Another handicap was the loyalty of these immigrants to their British costumes. The Panamanians interpreted this attitude as resistance to the national institutions, norms and speech.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, this first generation of West Indian immigrants had left one chaotic political situation for another. The high wages they were enjoying came from North American companies, thus, their interest was to work as much as possible and, for the moment, to put aside any close contact with Panamanians and their society.

In spite of the United States' priority over the Isthmian traffic and its means of transportation, New Granada granted a concession to France for the building of the Panama Canal in 1876. In 1880, the building concession was transferred to Count Ferdinand D'Lesseps, who had also brought the rights to the Panama Railroad Company. He later merged both properties into one Company, the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interoceanique, which declared itself bankrupt in 1889. Five years later in 1894, a private French Company named Compagnie Nouvelle acquired all the rights to the French Canal project until 1904. The latter was organized mainly for the purpose of securing a buyer of the assets.<sup>25</sup>

The first company accepted workers from the West Indies because they had proven to be more adaptable than other migrant laborers during the railroad construction. During its operations (construction) a second massive West Indian immigration took place in Panama, affecting again the numerical as well as the racial composition of the Isthmus. Jamaica was the chief source of labor supply followed by Barbados, St. Lucia and Martinique. The following figures indicate the high proportion of West Indian workers: in 1884, more than half of the 19,000 workers employed by the Panama Canal Company or the Compagnie Universelle were West Indians. In 1885, among 12,875 laborers under contract, 9,000 came from Jamaica. In 1888, out of 22,000 workers, 19,800 originated from the West Indies.<sup>26</sup> Because of the economic disaster due to the Canal Company's bad administration, the cholera and the yellow fever that killed about 16,000 workers, compelled D'Lesseps to abandon his project. When the French Company failed, many immigrants returned to their native countries. Those who chose to remain in Panama tried to adapt their living conditions to the host country's way of life. They found jobs in the railroad company. Others, engaged in subsistent agriculture in the small farms they had acquired along the railroad line. Still others, moved to rural communities for farming and gradually became part of them.

Another Frenchman, Phillippe Bunau-Varilla formed a company, to take charge of the canal enterprise until he

was able to mastermind the treaties by which all the rights to the railroad and canal project passed to the government of the United States. This development was not a surprise. Having gained an unusual strategic position in the Caribbean after the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States needed a canal. In 1902, that nation's Congress passed the Spooner Act, authorizing the purchase of the rights and assets from the new French Company, and the negotiation of a treaty with Colombia. A proposed canal treaty signed by the United States and Colombian foreign ministers, John Hay and Dr. Thomas Herrán in 1903 was rejected by the Colombian congress on the grounds that it was a menace to national sovereignty. Hoping to take advantage of the situation, the Panamanian State Assembly decided to make Colombia's veto the immediate cause for declaring national independence. Correspondingly, the United States offered its support to the Panamanian cause in exchange for the would-be nation's approval of a treaty similar to the Herrán-Hay. Panama claimed its national autonomy from Colombia on November 3, 1903. In the meantime, Phillippe Bunau-Varilla worked out his treaty, independently of the Panamanian delegation already in Washington and succeeded in imposing his views and conditions.<sup>27</sup> As a result, in 1904, the French transferred the rights of the concession to the United States government in exchange for \$40,000.00.

The new administration of the Canal took advantage of the presence of 700 West Indian workers who had been under contract to the French companies for the construction of the canal and the maintenance of the railroad. Immediately, labor recruiting agents started to import other workers from different countries. The following census taken in 1906 gives the origin and numbers of those workers:

Spaniards . . . . .	8,222. <sup>28</sup>
Greeks . . . . .	1,100.
Italians. . . . .	2,000.
Colombians. . . . .	1,500.
West Indian . . . . .	30,000.

In 1910, there were 5,000 Europeans and 28,000 West Indians working on the canal. In 1913, at the peak of employment, there were 44, 711 unskilled workers, about 40,000 of which were West Indians.<sup>29</sup> Unlike the French administration, the North Americans established distinctions related to salaries, lodging, and medical services between white United States citizens and unskilled Europeans and West Indians. The first group was paid in gold, enjoyed comfortable housing and good medical care. The second group was paid in silver and received second class medical attention. In spite of its inferior quality and conditions, the housing facilities available, could not meet the silver employees' demand. Some governors of the Canal Zone like Chester Harding and M.L. Walker petitioned Congress to increase living quarters for the employees of the Canal Zone. However, on the whole, it seemed that the North American Canal administration shunned the res-

possibility of providing decent shelter for the workers, leaving it to the Panamanian government. This attitude indirectly opened the way to the exploitation of the workers by the owners of tenement housing in the country. The rents were sky-rocketing. The poor sanitation facilities created numerous health problems for the West Indians living in Panama which also contributed to the atmosphere of opposition to the country. When Congress was close to granting \$1,300,000 for a project to house 16,000 workers and their dependents in the Canal Zone in 1916, the Panamanian landlords, by lobbying in Washington D.C., were able to bury that bill on the pretext of the loss of prospective income from the immigrants' rents.<sup>30</sup>

As the building of the Canal was coming to an end, some workers had to be laid off. The administration offered to pay all transportation and to guarantee repatriation, if desired, to those who had been working for more than 500 labor days. Once the excavations of Corte Culebra were finished in October 1913, about 10,000 West Indian workers were laid off. About 50% of them found work in the banana plantations of the United Fruit Company in Pocas del Toro; a northwestern province of Panama.<sup>31</sup> The other 5,000 remained in the terminal cities of Panama and Colon, hoping to find jobs in the Canal Zone where they would be preferred because they spoke English. In the next chapter we will learn how being unemployed in Panama affected the process

of West Indians' integration into society.

Thus, the Canal had become a reality in spite of a history of complicated problems. From then on, Panama had to face not only North American interference but also the consequences of a large group of West Indians, who had decided to stay and take advantage of the benefits promised them by the 1904 Constitution. The transformation of the Isthmus into an international crossroad gave it considerable importance and an opportunity to reaffirm its position as an independent nation. The participation of the West Indians in the construction of the Canal was their biggest contribution to Panama. Nevertheless, in the years to come they found little acceptance there.

FOOTNOTES

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CHAPTER II

THE IMPACT OF WEST INDIANS IN PANAMA

(1914-1940)

There are three facets which immigrant groups and their host societies undergo, in the process of integration: acceptance, adaptation and reaction. The first warrants a certain degree of assimilation of the customs of each group involved. The second, implies a combination of the characteristics of each culture in the social attitudes of the groups. The third, may be manifested in the emergence of anti-transcultural movements, due to the social oppression of the immigrant group, or the effects on both from the acceptance of foreign cultural characteristics.<sup>1</sup>

An unusual experience occurred in Panama with its largest group of immigrants, the West Indians. Little progress was made in the process of acceptance. Adaptation proved difficult, as the immigrants tried to preserve intact their original cultural patterns, such as the folkloric traditions, music, religion and to a lesser degree, their language.<sup>2</sup> The social integration of the West Indians became a problem because, not wanting or being unable to 'absorb' the national culture, they chose to live outside of it. On the other hand, a cultural phobia in the part of the Panamanian people, created a permanent opposition to any foreign influence, inciting the defense of their culture rather than race, against the possible effects on the language, customs and ideas of the country. After considering the viewpoints of both groups at the end of the Canal construction, Chapter II will deal with the West Indian's integration within

Panamanian Society in its socio-cultural, economic and political aspects, respectively.

To immigrants the Isthmus offered the vision of a new country, but Panama, although undergoing a stage of transition, had already developed a personality of its own. Its culture was the result of Spanish traditions, French inspirations and some North American imitations. The country's upper class reflected most fully these trends. The lower class was composed of native blacks, Indians, mulattoes and mestizos that found a common link in the Spanish culture. As a result, the latter was enriched with the contributions received from the influx of these different groups.

The language, Spanish, also reflected the strong influence of foreign elements in the difference of pronunciation, word meanings and the anglicisms used among the masses in Panama. Roman Catholicism was the official religion. However, its followers added some of their pagan traditions to the religious rituals giving it a sense of mysticism and superstition. The country's artistic forms of expressions were mostly african-influenced, especially the folk dances such as the tamborito and cumbia.<sup>3</sup>

The geographic location and history of Panama gave its inhabitants contrasting feelings of submission and independence. As a semi-isolated province of Colombia, Panama preserved its social and rural family structure.

Once the first construction period began in 1850 such structure underwent many unforeseen changes. The struggles to separate from Colombia were legendary. Nevertheless entanglements with other nations, especially the United States, fostered a passive acceptance of economic and political dependence, and generated a conflict of national identification.

The Panamanians were able to accept some immigrants such as the French and Spaniards with whom they had much in common. Their Latin culture and language made them welcome. However, their Hispanic social structure was challenged by the West Indians, the most numerous but not necessarily homogeneous groups of immigrants.

West Indians also had a cultural personality of their own. On a racial level, sensitivity to shades of color had great meaning for them. Due to their social differences, the island of origin caused many frictions, most of all between Barbadians, Jamaicans and Trinidadians.<sup>4</sup> These internal conflicts were obstacles towards unity against the injustices they had to face. Although different among themselves, a common name would be legally assigned to them; "Antillanos". The West Indians believed that this designation in the civil registry made them second class citizens in their efforts to become permanent residents of Panama.

As a consequence, West Indians immigrants felt insecure as Panamanians. They drew strength from grouping together and reaffirming their British-based social and cul-

tural heritage. They prided themselves in being British citizens and remained loyal to that government. Unfortunately, the indifferent attitude of the British whites toward their black compatriots placed the West Indian community in Panama at a disadvantage. The white English advocated the custom of racial discrimination, injuring the loyal black citizens who, often times, expressed their willingness to defend the British Empire 'with their lives if necessary'.<sup>5</sup>

In 1904, Panamanians had accepted West Indians and through their constitution, had given them the opportunity to become citizens. Panamanians interpreted the West Indians affinity to England as an indication of their contempt for local norms.<sup>6</sup> They had witnessed through the years, the subordination of West Indians as human beings and as employees of the Panama Canal Company in spite of having a double social standard in the Canal Zone. West Indians preferred the United States rule to the Panamanian because it offered better economic conditions for the time being. For example, in 1938, the Panama Canal West Indian Employees Association (P.C.W.I.E.A.) requested that they be considered "de facto" citizens of the United States though not "de jure", in view of the services rendered to the Panama Canal Zone Government.<sup>7</sup> Now that they were living in Panama, they isolated themselves from the Panamanians. Loyalty to England, preference for the United States and I-

solation from Panamanians affected West Indians in a negative way in different levels such as: Their children's education, their position as workers within the country's labor force and in the Canal Zone, as well as their legal status within the Isthmus. This study will concentrate later on the legal aspects provoked by West Indian attitudes.

Education was a factor contributing to West Indian isolation. In the Canal Zone their children received a second-rate education which prepared them for the local job openings for blacks. The schools did not provide them with a professional training until 1946, when two vocational schools were opened for blacks.

West Indian children did not learn about Panamanian history or geography in any public schools.<sup>8</sup> The families who lived in Panama did not send their children to public schools; instead, they enrolled them in small private ones which were usually sponsored by various churches. They were taught English, history and geography, the pound system and how to count British currency with complete lack of concern that they were residing in Panama.<sup>9</sup> Although their schools were deficient, the educated immigrant played an important role in the field of education in Panama. West Indians established private tutoring as a popular method for learning English. As early as July 12, 1893, Samuel T. Bailey founded the first West Indian private school in Colon. It was named Parochial School in Christ Church. In



In 1904, Dr. J.T. Barton founded the Panama Private Academy at Plaza Herrera, in Panama city, where evening classes for a commercial school were also held. The concept of the private school system was later readily adopted by Panamanian educators.

Language was an important obstacle to rapid integration. Neither the Canal Zone Schools nor the private schools taught Spanish. Inability to speak Spanish prevented West Indian children from attending the country's public schools. The tradition of organization, sociability or social behavior, family life and the practice of Christian principles to which they had been subjected during the British Colonial administration in the West Indies, were very much in contrast with those of Panama. As would be expected, both groups considered themselves far removed from each other's ethnic, religious and linguistic natures.<sup>10</sup>

Traditionally, belonging to a solidly established 'God-fearing' family was very important to the West Indians. As a restricted immigrant group, their family relations were very much affected. An imbalance in sex ratio promoted marriage with Panamanian women. An imbalance in ages caused problem between the immigrant generation and their children because of the lack of a middle age and young adult contingency in an already top heavy age pyramid.<sup>11</sup> Both of these imbalances, couple with the contrasting ways of life and social structure of the Isthmus, overpowered the tra-

ditional West Indian family patterns. Parents born in the islands found it almost impossible to maintain their culture. Their children were socially marginal and lacked identification with either culture. John and Mavis Biesanz have summed up the West Indian youth's identification conflict:

(The young West Indian) scorns his parents' Union Jack and Royal family... admired Bing Crosby, Lena Horne and American material culture...likes the free and easy Panamanian life and its comparative racial mobility. (He) has little sense of patriotism (and) feels he belongs nowhere.<sup>12</sup>

Lack of advanced education led to a negative personal attitude and social behavior of young West Indians. In 1955, the Biesanzs reported that this group was very inclined towards promiscuity, which resulted in an illegitimacy rate of approximately 71%.

There were four commonly practiced family models among West Indians. Less than 25% of the marriages were monogamous, had some degree of economic stability such as a house or plot of land, and rigidly observed Christianity. More than 25% lived in faithful concubinages. There was also the maternal or grandmother family, where the mother's parents assumed the role of the child's father. The last form was called the 'keeper family', a superficial or unstable relationship between the parents, in which the mother worked to help support the children. Although most men shunned the legal and economic responsibility of a family, they were more likely to get married after achiev-

ing some economic security, than their Panamanian counterparts.<sup>13</sup> (See Table II).

The differences in social classes among West Indians derived from occupational and behavioral factors. The upper class consisted of professional people who had a high social status in the islands, the educated blacks, who became professionals and looked for positions in the various government offices, ministers of the established churches, journalists and teachers. Those British West Indians who enjoyed a high social status back home, strove to be equally accepted as members of Panamanian society.<sup>14</sup>

The middle class included church and lodge leaders who were loyal to their cultural and religious traditions in spite of a low earning power. They tried to give their children at least high school education. In many ways, the middle-class blacks collaborated with the government policies, as an obvious proof of achieving success through persistent effort. They believed that men of superior character and ability could arrive at positions of power without limitations as to race. Their example persuaded working class blacks to accept the status quo of the group within Panamanian society.<sup>15</sup> The lower class consisted of menial laborers. Their way of life was undisciplined. Most engaged in promiscuous and irresponsible in education but participated enthusiastically in gambling, horseracing,

or the lottery.<sup>16</sup>

As a whole, due to their small salaries, the West Indians realized that they would not be able to provide for their families in case of illness or death. During the early 1920's, they organized fraternal and benevolent societies, forming a cooperative security against becoming a public burden. These organizations gave such positive results that they served as an incentive for the beginning of the adaptation of a social security program on a national basis. The field of sports and music in Panama also received substantial contributions from the West Indians, whose deep religious convictions turned their churches into social centers for the provision of recreation, educational programs and musical expressions.

During the depression years, West Indians began to identify even more with North American ideals. They tried to be more economically active in order to acquire the commodities North Americans possessed in the Canal Zone, such as clothes, cars, etc. Unfortunately, their 'image' suffered in Panamanian society as they tried to immitate the other intruder.

During the early 1900's, some West Indians discontinued their work, in the Canal Zone and moved into Panama City and Colon on a permanent basis. Many of them had left their work, partly because of the severities of the laws to which they were subjected there. In turn, these workers

TABLE II

MARRIAGE PERCENTAGES FOR WEST INDIANS OVER 15  
YEARS OF AGE IN THE CANAL ZONE AND PANAMA!

	CANAL ZONE	PANAMA
FEMALES:		
SINGLE:	25%	50%
MARRIED:	50%	23%
MALES:	50%	50%
SINGLE:	43%	20%
MARRIED:		

NOTE: 25% of blacks live in consensual union.

SOURCE: John and Mavis Biesanz, The People of Panama. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 316 (Based on 1940 Census figures).

successfully sought employment as plumbers, firemen, carriage and Trolley car conductors and even as policemen in the national territory.<sup>18</sup>

Most West Indians did not take advantage of the opportunity to acquire farm lands which Panamanian law had made available to immigrants. Although the majority had been farmers in the islands, they preferred to live in the urban centers. One explanation was that they had come to avoid farm work for what it reminded them. Another was that land was not accessible to them as it was to other settlers.<sup>19</sup> Still more important, living in the cities allowed them to maintain close contact with other West Indians, giving them a feeling of security and an opportunity to preserve their customs and tradition.

After the completion of the Canal in 1914, the large labor force employed during its construction was no longer needed. The Canal's maintenance work could not absorb the 31,000 West Indian workers. Once more, victims of unemployment, these people faced the necessity of emigrating in search of new jobs elsewhere or competing for them in Panama. A number of them retired from the Canal Company and decided to settle in Panama with their small disability payments. Most had lost family ties and friendships in their islands of origin.<sup>20</sup> This situation caused a noticeable increase of the population in the national territory, particularly in Panama City and Colon.<sup>21</sup> (See Tables No. III

and IV).

The West Indians, now 'new' residents, represented an antagonistic sector in the national process of revindication in the 1920's. Their lack of interest in the nation's problems had adverse consequences. The most significant one would be the development of a persistently progressive racist-oriented policy, most of all nurtured in the economically powerful sectors of Panamanian society but also in the government, manifested especially through its legislative measures.<sup>22</sup>

During the 1920's and early 1930's government officials gave West Indians the opportunity to settle into vacant plots of lands in the outskirts of the capital. In doing so, these officials tried to make the 'Antillanos' presence less obvious in business centers. Additionally, these politicians defended the landlords' implicit agreement restricting available housing for these immigrants to certain areas in Pueblo Nuevo, Rio Abajo, Parque Lefevre and Ciudad Radial. Although the wooden houses had poor sanitary facilities other groups of Canal Zone workers settled there, causing a substantially important wave of migration into the national territory. West Indian migration became more acute when mass unemployment took place in 1929 in the Canal Zone to make way for North American citizens who were left jobless during the depression in the United States.<sup>23</sup> The Canal Company's lack of concern for their workers was classified as dumping,

TABLE III

POPULATION CENSUS OF THE REPUBLIC OF PANAMA\*  
RACIAL DISTRIBUTION

1911

Panamanian territory:	290,503
Canal Zone:	90,434
White: . . . . .	46,323
Black: . . . . .	43,967
Mestizo. . . . .	191,933
Other. . . . .	3,280

Source: Panama: Oficina del Censo. Distribución de la población por raza. 1911



TABLE IV  
POPULATION CENSUS OF THE REPUBLIC OF PANAMA.  
(RATES OF POPULATION INCREASE)

PROVINCES	1911, 1920, 1930, 1940				1911	1920	1930
	1911	1920	1930	1940	1920	1930	1940
Bocas del Toro	22,742	27,239	45,851	25,498	19.8	41.8	60.0
Cocle	35,011	45,151	48,244	55,244	29.0	6.9	15.5
Colon	32,092	58,250	57,161	78,119	81.5	1.3	36.7
Chiriqui	63,364	76,470	76,918	111,206	20.7	0.6	44.6
Darien	3,992	10,728	13,391	14,930	19.3	24.8	11.5
Herrera	23,007	28,984	31,030	33,118	26.0	7.1	22.8
Los Santos	30,075	34,639	41,218	49,621	15.2	19.0	20.4
Panama	61,885	98,035	114,103	173,328	59.5	16.4	51.9
Verguas	59,614	66,603	69,543	84,934	11.7	4.4	22.2
Rep. Panama							
Total :	336,742	446,098	467,459	631,549	32.5	4.3	35.1

	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Republic of Panama:	290,782	275,807	566,589

\*Source: Panama: Oficina del Censo. Censos de Población  
1911, 1920, 1930, 1940

since it forced the local unemployed labor to turn to a weak and already overburdened host.<sup>24</sup>

Panamanian regarded West Indians as a threat to their well-being and also began to hold them responsible for the national social ills.<sup>25</sup> Reacting to the national resentment towards the West Indians, the government, which had proved unable to provide jobs for its unemployed, used them as 'scapegoats' during the mid-1920's, to divert public attention. Notwithstanding the profits made from the West Indians as consumers and accessible cheap labor, the general feeling was that only expulsion from the national territory would solve the socio-economic situation. The news media contributed to reinforce this popular sentiment. Typical was an editorial in the Panama-Weekly in 1924, which queried:

Are we going to stand aside and permit an inferior unassimilable foreign element that is objectionable from a sociological point of view, to take advantage of the few jobs that our native element could fulfill? 26

The West Indian immigrant incorporated himself to the Isthmian economy as a consumer, the same way Panama had incorporated itself to the United States economy. As Panama became a consumer market for the United States, it could not offer sufficient job opportunities for them, as the rate of unemployment in the Canal Zone rose. Although the country had confronted this situation especially from 1889-1903 and from 1913-1915, the government officials still did not

attempt to establish programs of development in which the unemployed immigrants and the national labor force could be integrated into the process of industrial growth. On the contrary, they insisted on maintaining a service economy overwhelmingly beneficial to the economically powerful sectors in the government. Independently, an arbitrary system of government employment, further limited the West Indian 'middle' or educated class as it rarely found occupational stability in the public offices.

Panama developed disproportionately. The construction and operation of the Canal reaffirmed the old national economic structure rather than helped its transformation. Three different factors perpetuated the traditional economy. First, the economic system was designed to exploit the geographic position of the Isthmus since colonial times. Now that the canal was finished, the profits would be unsurpassed. Second, slow agriculture development, combined with high population increase, provided cheap labor for the maintenance of the Canal. Moreover, the exodus of small farmers into the cities precipitated the concentration of fertile lands in the hands of fewer plantation families (latifundistas). Third, Panama became a consumer market for the United States' production surplus and could not compete even in principle.

The period from 1920 to 1930, was one of economic adjustments for Panama. The favorable work opportunities no longer existed, but the search for employment was still high.

There were 467,459 inhabitants according to the 1930 Census, with a population increase rate of 4.7% (See Table V & VI). Panama had 'secured' two new markets for its domestic products after the construction period had ended selling to ships in transit and to the Canal Zone itself. Once the Canal Company established fully stocked post exchanges, these new markets slowly disappeared.

The Isthmus could not supply enough agricultural products for the rapidly growing population. Although the exportation of preserved meats rendered handsome profits, cattle owners did not improve or multiply their breeding stock to meet the steadily increasing demand. Agricultural development almost ceased as the economically progressive chose to concentrate on the service industries, while the fishing industry 'existed' practically for internal consumption purposes.<sup>27</sup>

Changes in the general conditions in Panama, during the 1920's brought the West Indian question to surface. Not being able to find work in the Isthmus, Panamanian laborers turned to the Canal Zone for employment. However, the Panama Canal Company preferred the hiring of West Indians because they were subjected to lower pay rates under the classification of 'silver roll' workers. This policy incited the Panamanians to denounce them as dangerous competitors. Independently, these 'competitors' thought of Panama as a refuge from the discrimination of which they were victims in the

TABLE V  
 DISTRIBUTION OF THE POPULATION  
 BY RACE AND SEX

RACE	TOTAL	F	SEX	M	PERCENTAGES
Mestizo	249,583	125,055		124,528	52.36
White	73,813	38,862		39,951	18.14
Negro	69,583	36,738		32,845	14.67
Indian	42,397	23,730		19,167	9.16
Mulatto	22,445	11,764		10,681	4.80
Oriental	4,138	3,350		788	.87
Total	467,459	239,499		227,960	100.00

Source: Panama: Oficina del Censo. Censo demografico  
 de 1930. Tomo I, p. 18.

TABLE VI

TERRITORIAL DISTRIBUTION OF THE POPULATION  
 ACCORDING TO PROVINCES AND POSITION HELD BY  
 EACH RACIAL GROUP

PROVINCE	MESTIZO	WHITE	NEGRO	INDIAN	MULATTO	ORIENTAL
BCCAS: 15,851 %:	18.95	4.04	39.61	32.19	3.55	1.66
COCLE: 48,244 %:	76.76	5.71	6.68	7.17	3.42	0.26
COLON: 51,161 %:	12.69	10.13	45.98	26.51	2.97	1.72
CHIRIQUI:" 76,918 %:	61.30	20.51	3.37	12.81	1.83	.19
DARIEN: 13,391 %:	31.22	.85	11.59	50.86	5.19	.29
HERRERA: 31,050 %:	72.0	20.42	2.27	.10	4.96	.25
LA SANTOS: 41,213 %:	60.68	35.75	.59	--	2.86	.12
VERAGUAS: 69,543 %:	76.63	15.43	1.52	1.73	4.16	.53
PANAMA: 114,103 %:	44.10	19.23	24.23	1.12	9.52	1.80

Source: Panama: Oficina del Censo, Censo demografico de 1920.

Canal Zone.<sup>28</sup>

While many Est Indians were put out of work in 1929, national labor representatives continued to fight for equal employment opportunity for Panamanians in the Canal Zone. In the midst of economic depression in 1936, an agreement was reached between Panamanian officials and United States Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, in which Panama was offered the advantage of having its citizens enjoy a status of equality with the North Americans, for employment in the Canal Zone, 'when' or 'wherever' feasible. Thus West Indians were further limited in work opportunities.<sup>29</sup>

The restrictive economic measures concerning West Indians diminished their potential strength as the second largest labor force in Panama and curtailed any open competition from them in business or as workers. (See Table No. VII): These measures were largely responsible for the lack of development of a professional class among them. In 1944, there were only two doctors and three dentists of West Indian descents.<sup>30</sup>

Because of class distinctions, West Indians were unable to cooperate as one group for economic purposes. Feelings of distrust, between one social class and the other, dissipated their collective strength. As a whole, middle class West Indians engaged in the service enterprises. They were usually owners of tailorsshops, liquor and novelty stores, beauty parlors, dry cleaners, dress makers and the like.<sup>31</sup>

TABLE VII  
 PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE TOTAL GAINFULLY  
 OCCUPIED POPULATION TEN YEARS OF AGE AND OVER  
 BY POPULATION CLASSES

	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE	PERCENTAGE	
				M.	F.
All Classes:	207,718	171,839	35,879		
Blacks:	39,103	30,527	8,576	84.5	27.0
Mestizos:	135,255	112,315	21,940	80.1	15.8
White:	29,162	23,982	5,180	83.1	20.1
Others:	5,198	5,015	183	90.6	13.8

Source: George Westerman. West Indian Offsprings in Panama: A Study of Relationships between Ethnic and Cultural Groups in a Cosmopolitan Setting. (Panama: 1944), p. 16



The economic situation in Panama began to improve after 1937. The need to defend the Canal in view of growing world-wide belligerency created multiple work opportunities and a period of relative prosperity. The conflict between Panamanians and West Indians did not subside as the Panama Canal Company managed to persuade the National Legislature to allow a fourth wave of these immigrant workers into the country. Aside from intensifying the socio-economic conflict, the unexpected immigration caused an acute shortage of housing in the terminal cities. The bonanza lasted for a few years, until 1945, and its aftermath was very damaging both to the West Indian group and to the socio-economic and political conditions of the Isthmus.

As panamanian increasingly considered them to be a negative factor or influence in the economic life of the Isthmus, the West Indians participation as an interest group within the local social structure decreased. West Indians' integration as a socio-political interest group in Panama did not take place, and their participation in the national politics was minimal. Constant mobility, economic instability, and daily subordination by the Panamanian and North American cultures obstructed their ability to manifest themselves as a political interest group with the government structure.

Since the 1910's and beginning with Belisario Porras' candidacy for President, black leaders collaborated with

conventional politicians. They acted as intermediaries between the politicians they represented and their community in order to obtain its votes during election time. Panamanian politicians were aware that support or lack of it from the West Indians community could be a decisive factor in an electoral turnout.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, as a general rule, the government did not take into consideration the importance of West Indians' participation in its attempt to unify the Panamanian people against United States's presence in the Canal Zone. Additionally, it never considered them in the country's decision making process.<sup>33</sup> However, some interaction with, and integration to the Panamanian mainstream did occur. This was manifested through the increase in enrollment of West Indian offspring into the public schools. In their study, John and Mavis Biesanz assert that third generation West Indian children felt 'thoroughly Panamanian' and 'took their citizenship very seriously'.<sup>34</sup> Integration was also evidenced in the emergence of professional and, to a small degree, in political participation on an individual basis.

From the beginning of its Republican period, in 1903, Panama waged a struggle of revindication against the interventionist role of the United States in the country's internal affairs and its 'occupation' of the Panama Canal Zone. Labor and student organizations, along with other 'politically progressive' groups, became the major spokesmen for the Panamanian cause while denouncing United States'

aggressive intervention in the country's affairs. Being overexposed to the North American way of life, not to mention the subjects of an acute economic domination, the West Indian population as an interest group did not understand or identify itself with Panama's struggle of National liberation.<sup>35</sup> As such, they were obstacles to developing Panamanian nationalism. This situation led to the perpetuation of racist-oriented policies by the Panamanian government.

The West Indians were a potentially important group within the country's political situation, but their foreign status counterbalanced their importance. The Panamanian commercial elite emphasized this last condition directly and openly. The United States foreign policy representatives also made a point of it in a more subtle manner. The presence of the West Indian working force in Panama meant the expansion of an internal market which in turn, increased the commercial activities and the selling of services in the hands of the national commercial elite. On the other hand, the superimposed presence of foreign labor force on its national counter part, guaranteed a division and the weakening of the 'politicized' working masses in urban areas for the United States.<sup>36</sup>

The national commercial elites continuously underlined the fact that West Indians were not only foreigners but were also prohibited immigration (immigración prohibida)

to keep them as consumers, not as competitors. In doing so, they indirectly checked the industrial development of the country. The economic sector principally benefited from the business made in the Canal and Free Trade Zones. Thus, it was necessary to collaborate with the North American government to protect its interests. Article 136 of the 1904 Constitution granted the United States power to intervene in the country's internal affairs. Such 'privilege' was exercised during presidential elections to 'guarantee an orderly process'. Gerardo Maloney and George Priestly in their work on West Indian participation in national politics, V.F. Goytia (Biografia de una Republica), Santiago Montero Z. (Panama: su historia y su presente), have classified such participation as a breach of Panamanian sovereignty, as well as sponsoring the continuation of power of the commercial elites throughout the various so-called 'democratic administrations'. Interventions such as the following demonstrate that the United States contributed in checking Panama's institutional development: On November 14, 1904, General Esteban Huertas attempted to overthrow President Amador Guerrero. The United States, through its Canal Zone government, demanded that the national government abolish its army and establish a police force instead. Exercising its rights granted in the 1904 Constitution, the Canal Zone government intervened in the 1908 electoral process to sponsor Jose D. Obaldía's presidency. In 1914, United States established

the border limits between Panama and Costa Rica in its White Agreement (Fallo-White), nullifying Panama's previous agreement (Fallo-Loubet). As a result, Panama lost the Valle of Talamanca and Coto regions. That same year, United States signed the Thompson-Urrutia treaty with Colombia, which established border limits between Colombia and Panama. The latter, lost the Atrato River region to Colombia. After a series of encounters between Panamanian police and North American soldiers in the terminal cities, the United States government issued a document (No. 245, October 15, 1916), ordering the immediate disarmament of the Panamanian police force. United States' occupation of Panama City and Colon took place in 1918 due to President Ciro Urriola's postponement of elections. Also, from 1918-1920, United States troops invaded and occupied the province of Chiriqui in order to 'protect' William Chase, a North American citizen involved in the assassination of Dr. Saturnino Perigault, governor of that Province.<sup>37</sup>

The United States also intervened when the economic interests of the national elites were at stake. One case was the mobilization of the United States troops to the national territory to 'appease' two tenants' manifestations (Movimientos Inquilinarios), in 1925 and 1932, against high rents. Of all the protesters, the West Indian group was the most affected. Although their opposition to the issue at hand, was expressed in terms of conflicting commercial character-

istics, Maloney & Priestly defined their action with the political term of "class struggle".<sup>38</sup>

West Indians who achieved middle-class status were considered community leaders. They concentrated mainly in improving their followers' buying power while emphasizing their role as consumers. These leaders did not attempt to consolidate minority group consciousness among the West Indian population. George Westerman, Armando Fortune, Javier Jimenez, and Maloney and Priestly, on the subject of West Indian political participation, have accused them of surrendering political loyalty in exchange for economic stability. This group's failure to express itself as a unified political group during thirty years of compulsory interaction with Panamanian society, made it vulnerable to the emergence of a deep rooted reactionary nationalism whose major exponent was Dr. Arnulfo Arias Madrid. From 1936 to 1940, he expressed such nationalism in the drawing of a political platform that was later interpreted as being a doctrine or theory which totally rejected the West Indians as undesirables.

Once the 'Panameñista' program, as it was called, had been legislated through the enactment of the 1941 Constitution, the West Indians were divided about its significance. The majority considered the charter to be the final expression of the unfair treatment they had received, of their economic and social oppression and of political ostracism

due to race. Others wanted to reaffirm their native citizen's status to prove that they were as Panamanians as the rest. On the whole, there was widespread demoralization among West Indians, as was seen through their restlessness, poverty, juvenile delinquency and crime.<sup>39</sup>

The social behavior and traditions of the islands, were not only transferred to Panama but, as we have seen, were inculcated upon the immigrants' Panamanian-born children, in spite of the changes they suffered. Rather than being an incentive for the development of their descendants' favorable attitude toward the traditions of their country of birth, the West Indian parents were largely responsible for their children's total lack of identification to both cultures.<sup>40</sup> Actually, the radical difference between the two cultures, made the process of adjustment difficult and slow as we have tried to show. Whereas, the West Indian did not make good use of the early positive attitude of Panamanians for social interaction. The latter, distrustful of the former's cultural disparity, proceeded to curtail its total assimilation.

The Panamanian government always lacked interest for the establishment of programs such as in education, designed to absorb the various immigrant groups into the national community. Consequently, the first generation of immigrants experienced conflict and disorganization. In general, not only Panamanian society imposed certain social limitations

for West Indians but also the foreign interests that were and are still active in the country. These factors contributed to reduce the development or unification of the nations's interest groups as an anti-imperialist force, including the West Indians, which had been systematically subjected to and affected by the United States economy.<sup>41</sup>

Some writers have been aware of the reaction of West Indians to acculturation. At the same time, they have underlined the attitude of the government towards these immigrants. George Westerman acknowledges the peculiar situation of the group that strengthened by its convictions of being superior, would not accept a complete integration, in spite of the advances offered by Panama. He underlines also, the beginning of a systematic opposition to West Indians. First, as an imitation of the treatment given to them by North Americans and second, as a means to create a homogeneous nation. However, it is important to stress that Westerman looks at the Antillanos too favorably considering them more as victims than as people who contributed to their own persecution. Felipe Escobar defends the right of any nation to dictate its immigration policy. Nevertheless, he criticizes as an anti-democratic procedure, the consideration of West Indians as representatives of a different and inferior race and not as those who had contributed so much to the country's economy. Prospero Melendez explains the position of the government as the right answer to the problem created by the



West Indians. Their dedication for many years to a foreign country, unabled them to be a living force in the country, unabled them to be a living force in the country of their choice. Moreover, he explains how North American's lack of concern for them, once they were no longer useful, created a problem for Panama, as their presence was a great burden for the welfare institutions to which they had not contributed. Maloney and Priestly insist mostly on the laboring influence of West Indians. They argue that in Panama, the trend was to ignore their presence and importance on account of their close relations to North American policy. It would take a long time to arrive at an official recognition of their values as voters but they had to sacrifice their political participation in exchange for economic stability.

This variety of criteria stresses the profile that can be drawn from this chapter. As an uprooted conglomerate, the West Indians had to make a choice. They had changed hands. England had given them, together with their freedom, a distinct cultural background. The economic dependence on the United States obliged them to silence their relation to England and to partake of a new system of values. This created an isolation in front of the country who was the owner of the same zone where they were working. The future appeared very uncertain, as the next chapter will indicate.

FOOTNOTES

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CHAPTER III

THE LEGAL STATUS OF WEST INDIANS

Until 1926 the religious and political tolerance which had characterized Panama served as an incentive for immigration, especially from 1850 to 1904. The excessive flow of people in transit and those who had gone to work on the railroad, gave the appearance that racial, religious, social or political discrimination did not exist. However, as early as 1842 there were regulations imposed which affected black immigration. At that time, its purpose was to check the importation of slaves. As black settlement increased, Panamanian officials strongly believed that the risk was "being run that the ethnic differences would become stronger than national feelings".<sup>1</sup>

Aside from contradicting Panama's official stand, as well as that of other nations, racial discrimination 'backed' by legislative measures, was a serious offense to human dignity. In his socio-juridic study of immigration, Nicolas Delgado states that Panamanian legislation since the beginning of the twentieth century was very specific about immigration in certain aspects, but showed no concern in others. Immigrants had to settle in Panama with their families in order to be considered permanent residents. They would not enjoy full civil or political rights even as citizens. They could not voice their opinions nor participate in national politics. On the other hand, the legislation did not establish a process to find a common basis for a smooth coexistence between ethnic and native groups, in spite of the dif-

ferences in language, customs or set of goals. According to Delgado, this policy contributed to the corruption and demoralization in the Public Administration.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, he did not expound on the important aspect of legal racial discrimination and its implications for Panama's international image.

Felipe Escobar and George Westerman seem to agree on the fact that racial prejudice and discrimination was not a Panamanian characteristic in principle, but was developed after the French and North Americans 'introduced' it during the construction years. Nevertheless, they do agree with Delgado that government officials did great damage to the country by illicitly allowing immigrants. These officials took advantage of the fact that there were no control measures to check the influx of clandestine aliens into the country. The liberal dispositions of the 1904 Constitution were outdated drastically and demanded a substantial reform, especially in its judicial aspects.<sup>3</sup>

A general overview of the 1904 and 1941 Constitutions, and of the laws and statutes<sup>4</sup> reveals three different eras in Panamanian politics regarding immigration. First, the policy was open; later, some restrictions were made evident, and finally, the attitude was to be negative. These changes were evidenced in the handling of various aspects of legal and clandestine immigration.



During the late 1900's, government officials believed that the future of Panama depended on improving the agricultural economy. In order to achieve this goal, they decided to offer ample opportunities to Europeans familiar with rural economic activities. The specifications required for their entrance and the facilities the government offered them give an idea of the legal provisions. On the other hand, the modernization of the country through a railroad and a canal, demanded a large foreign labor force controlled by the authorities responsible for those enterprises. It was an imposed immigration which resulted in many problems. In addition, the country had to face a clandestine immigration which brought a new contingent of people and created different problems.

Panama's increasing strategic and commercial importance was attractive to foreigners. The government took legal provisions to control this influx. Clandestine immigration took place during the railroad and canal construction years from 1850 to 1860, and from 1880 to 1914. These periods coincided with the economic booms. At that time, it was easy to enter Panama without being noticed. These immigrants originated from the Caribbean and Colombia especially and most were black. Many entered from the Pacific, temporarily landing in the coast town of Jaque and from there, going on to Panama City as if they were natives. Others crossed the dangerous selvatic region of the Darien Mountains until

they reached the small Indian hamlets where they could find temporary shelter. A third group came into the country through Panama City and Colon as crew members or as stowaways of the ships that stopped in both harbors. These illegal entries became so common that in the first two areas above mentioned, the ratio of foreigners to native Panamanians was estimated as 2:1.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that there was no body of legislation to deal uniformly with this problem of illegal entry until 1941 had serious implications for the country's economy and society. Panama needed more people in its territory in order to progress, but they had to be of a kind that could contribute to a normal prosperity. Unskilled laborers who entered illegally into the country competed with the natives and succeeded in leaving up to 50,000 without jobs.<sup>6</sup> Officials had no legal instrument to check the influx of foreigners. The forty different documents relating to this problem lacked the reinforcement of a uniform law. Besides, many times the normal process of each case met with the opposition of some officers who found a way to amass a fortune by accepting bribes in exchange of an identity card (cédula) or other document as proof of permanent residence.<sup>7</sup> A general legislative reform was urgently needed. The Constitution of 1904 was thought to be the answer because it included the new resolutions about immigration. However, the problem of clandestine immigration and bribed government employees

continued throughout the 1940's.

Panama had been dealing with the legal standing of immigration since 1842. In that year the Isthmian Assembly imposed regulations having to do with black immigration. The Conservative government of Colombia approved of slave traffic and wanted to take advantage of Panama's geographic position to increase the trade, but the latter's state assembly prohibited the importation and trade of "human merchandise" in an attempt to stop effectively this lugubrious economic activity.<sup>8</sup>

Once independent, Panama organized all of the immigration legislation in its first Constitution of 1904. Before 1941, such legislation was clarified many times.<sup>9</sup> The principal documents relating to immigration are as follows:

1. Constitution of 1904: Articles 6, 8, 9, 10, 16, 19, and 21.
2. Constitution of 1941: Articles 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 31, 41, 106, 152, and 168.
3. Laws: From 1904 to date, there are sixteen laws specifically related to immigrants.
4. Decrees: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs made effective the policy expressed in the 12 decrees approved by the President of the Republic.
5. Statutes:
  - a) Administrative Code (Código Administrativo): dedicated its first two chapters exclusively to immigration.
  - b) Civil: Articles 1, 5a, 6, 39, 40, 74, and 77 deal with the subject.

- c) Commerce: Articles 8,9,10,11, and 60 regulated the commercial activities of foreigners.
- d) Labor: Article 605 established the ratio between Panamanian citizens and foreigners to be employed by a commercial or industrial firm in the country.

The National Constitution of 1904 was an expression of liberal political thinking. From its beginning the document was concerned with the well being of the population as a whole. Additionally, it guaranteed all the benefits of human freedom to the country's inhabitants.<sup>10</sup> On the subject of citizenship, the 1904 Constitution also appeared to be open. Article 6 stated that regardless of their parent's nationality, all those who were born on Panamanian soil native citizens. Naturalization was granted to those who, after residing in the country for more than ten years, wished to become citizens.<sup>11</sup> Although this last provision required that the applicant enjoy a certain degree of economic stability, it was not discriminatory on the basis of race. Usually, if economic requirements were established, it would follow that the disadvantaged group of people would be of the darker race. However, given the nature of their work, the West Indians enjoyed relatively good salaries in the Panama Canal Company, compared to the local wages, so that if so desired, which was rarely the case, the West Indians could become citizens with relative ease.

Unfortunately, the situation changed after the completion of the canal. More than half of the West Indian labor force joined the ranks of the unemployed in Panama. The legislative Act (Acto Legislativo) of October 19, 1928 amended Article 6, stating that those persons who were born in the Isthmus of foreign parents would be considered Panamanian citizens if after their 21st birthday they opted for said nationality.<sup>12</sup> Articles 8 and 9, assured that the foreigners would enjoy the same general rights of Panamanian citizens. Article 16, protected individual rights and equality before the law for Panamanians and foreigners. In Article 19, the Republic promised the emancipation of those slaves who migrated to Panama. Finally, Article 21, granted free and restricted travel within the national territory to all.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike that of 1904, the Constitution of 1941 is a manifestation of the biased political attitude which was then predominant in the Isthmus. For three years, an intransigent nationalism which has been classified as "fascism" by writers on the subject, had dominated Panama. Its most eminent exponent Arnulfo Arias employed racist tactics to convince Panamanians that the West Indians were responsible for all ills of the Republic. Consequently, the Arias government in 1941 proceeded to rid itself constitutionally of responsibility towards the Panamanians of West Indian descent. With the promulgation of the 1941 document, approximately

50,000 were ipso facto, "denationalized" (desnacionalizados) subjected to a long period of persistent racial discrimination the effects of which can still be felt.

The preamble of the national document states that it was the duty of the National Assembly to promote the improvement of the nation. The state guaranteed all the civil and political rights to native Panamanians only.<sup>14</sup> Article 10, declared that Panama's official language was Spanish and held the state responsible for the maintenance of its purity and promulgation throughout the country, an indirect statement that no other language would be tolerated. Coincidentally, the majority of West Indians spoke English and very little Spanish.

Regardless of their parent's nationality, those born in the Republic's jurisdiction would be considered Panamanian citizens. They would not be so considered if one of their parents was of prohibited immigration (immigración prohibida), especially if the parent was a non-Spanish speaking black.<sup>15</sup> Article 13 made a provisional exception to the conditions exposed in the one preceding it. For three months after the Constitution became effective, the President of the Republic could grant Panamanian citizenship by birth to the offspring of parents of prohibited immigration who showed evidence that they lived in, and had been subjected to the country's jurisdiction all their childhood and adult years. They also had to be able to prove

that Spanish was the language spoken at home. Another restriction was the limitation imposed upon traveling within the national territory.<sup>16</sup>

Article 14 allowed immigrants who were not classified as "prohibited immigrants", to become Panamanian citizens. The following article gave power to the President to deny citizenship to those applicants he considered unsuitable.<sup>17</sup> Articles 21 and 22 recognized the civil rights of the foreigners, but established certain limitations. First, they reserved political rights for native Panamanians. Second, they stated that immigrants would be legally treated according to their behavior. This Constitution and other Public Treaties (Tratados Públicos), intended to regulate immigration. The government was to be responsible for the selection of "Healthy elements, hard workers, those who would be able to adopt to national life and who were capable of contributing to the ethnic, economic and demographic improvement of the nation."<sup>18</sup>

Although Article 31 specified that there would be no death penalty and that the penalty to exile would not be imposed upon Panamanians, many West Indian-Panamanians were forced into exile shortly after the Constitution was promulgated. Three months was too short a time for them to show documented proof that they were born, lived and had gone to school in Panama. Moreover, it was very difficult if not impossible, to prove that Spanish was predominantly spoken. Obviously, this measure was not only extremely unfair but

represents a shameful stage in Panamanian legislation, as well as an international disgrace.

Between the enactment of the 1904 Constitution and that of 1941 Panamanian legislation adopted a series of legal dispositions which delineated the governments' policy concerning immigration, especially in its attempt to promote the flow of desired elements into the country. Unfortunately, the socio-economic changes brought upon the Isthmus by the completion of the Canal, were decisive factors in the shift of immigration policy. No longer was the government's purpose to promote desired immigration, but to check the flow of those persons which were considered disadvantageous to the development of the nation.

Decree No. 34 in 1911 encouraged the immigration of farmers, professionals, technicians, and retired people to Panama. In 1913, the Isthmian National Assembly approved Law 20 on January 31, with the purpose of populating vacant pieces of lands for cultivation. Articles 25 and 26 of the first paragraph in Chapter III, offered full ownership of plots of lands measuring ten hectares each (24.71 acres) to those Panamanian families or foreigners with permanent residence in the country who did not already own farming land, but desired to do so. Other legal provisions such as Law 32 of 1919, and Decree 6 of 1921, continued to pursue this objective. The offer was valid either for the plot which they already occupied without legal claim or in any other part of the country



where land was available. The proposal held true for those prospective immigrants, and their families, who entered the country to dedicate themselves to rural economic activity. Government officials, eager to secure laborers, communicated to the Spanish and Italian governments in 1913 and 1914 through a special, semi-official, representative by the name of Antonio Burgos, who had conducted a study on the feasibilities of such project. Immigration via these laws was classified as "civilized."<sup>19</sup>

Promoting the maintenance of white supremacy against the impending menace from the super-imposed immigration of blacks, was perhaps the motive for encouraging such immigration. The Spanish government was enthusiastic in its response to the initiative "so promising" to Panama.<sup>20</sup> The Panamanian government thought that the offer would attract many prospective farmers from those countries which would be more adaptable to Panamanian culture. Nevertheless, few came because the building of the canal still gave more immediate financial compensation.

The construction of the canal was completed in 1914. The large labor force which had been employed for the task was no longer needed. The mass of unemployed made themselves felt in the Panamanian economy, either by their lack of funds, or by challenging the normal labor force of the country. Most European migrants engaged in the trades, established themselves as small merchants, shopkeepers or

restaurant owners. They blended into the national group quickly due to their common Latin heritage. The West Indians on the unemployed. About 17% went to work for the United Fruit Company in the banana plantations throughout Central America. A smaller percentage continued to be employed as the maintenance staff of the Panama Canal Company. The rest remained jobless. Although they considered their stay as transitory, few took advantage of the repatriation which the Canal Company guaranteed. While many still hoped to find jobs in the Canal Zone, they had to turn to Panama in search of employment.

The country did not have sufficient job openings for the natives, much less for the West Indians. As they continued to be out of permanent employment, the living conditions of the West Indians deteriorated. These consumers were no longer as profitable as they had been to the Panamanian landlords and commerce in general. The government started to regard them an unpleasant burden. As a result, the National Assembly added the West Indians to the list of unwanted immigration. Law 13 of November 23, 1926 was passed to implement new government measures on immigration. Article 1 forbade the immigration of Chinese, Japanese, Syrians, Turks, Indo-Asians (Indico-orientales), Indo-Arians (Indo-arios), Dravidians and West Indians as well as Guyanese Blacks, whose original language was not Spanish.<sup>21</sup> Those already established as residents who wished to travel temporarily out of the country were denied re-entry, unless they were married to a Pana-

manian or who had their business recorded in the Civil Registry.

Also in 1926, immigration quotas were instituted. The government justified this measure as an economic necessity and assigned the following numbers:

Group A: Holland, Switzerland Norway and Sweden . . . . .	200 persons/yr.		
Group B: Australia, Denmark, New Zealand, Finland . . . . .	100	"	"
Group C: Germany, Austria and Philippines	50	"	"
Group D: Haiti and other countries not specified in the previous groups, nor those of prohibited immigra- tion . . . . .	10	"	"

The quotas excepted foreign immigrants working in the Panama Canal. They were subjected to the regulations contained in the various Public Treaties (Tratados Publicos). Law 16 of January 31, 1927 ammended Law 13. The racial discrimination in this document is evident when it stated that those belonging to the races referred to in the first article of Law 13 of 1926, would not be admitted as immigrants even if they had been born in, or were citizens of another country. Up to 1928, the annual immigration quotas were set according to the persons' country of origin. From that year on, immigration quotas were based on race.<sup>23</sup> Law 16 also granted the executive power authorization to allow West Indian immigrants into the country provided that the applicant, in this case the United States, could prove that:

- a) There was a shortage of specialized workers in the country that were required for specific projects in the Canal.
- b) The project or work required was for the public benefit or was of an agricultural nature.
- c) The immigrant worker's salaries would not be lower than the national minimum wage.<sup>24</sup>

This change in legal dispositions reflected the influential role played by the United States and the Canal Zone Government in the country's decisions.

In 1938, Law 54 reaffirmed in its fifteenth article the discriminatory policies enacted through twenty-four years of immigration legislation. It stated:

"The immigration of Chinese, gypsies, North Africans, Turks, and non-Spanish speaking blacks, is absolutely prohibited. Those foreigners belonging to any of these races, who come as substitutes of a fellow countryman, will be considered as transients only, and will not be able to reside in the national territory"

In order to guarantee the enforcement of these measures, the National Assembly established the Central immigration Office Through Law 79 on July 25, 1941, Chapter II, Title VII. Classified as a "Preventive Police Service" (Servicio de Policia Preventiva), this office verified the legal entrance, the place of residence, and departure of all immigrants and residents. According to Nicolas Delgado, the immigration officers used these restrictive measures for graft.<sup>25</sup> Other decrees restricted "prohibited" immigrants once they were in the country limiting further their participation in Panamanian life.

Work laws were enacted as early as 1914, to curtail their

their economic activities. For example, Law 6 of October 29, 1914 protected native Panamanian workers against the impending threat of West Indians after the completion of the canal. According to this law, employers were to choose native workers over the foreigners under equal circumstances. The United States would have to hire at least 50% of its permanent labor force from those unemployed native citizens while the project lasted. Another, Law 6, passed on October 13, 1926, required that Panamanian or foreign owners of all business, commercial, agricultural, and industrial establishments functioning within the national territory to have at least 75% of their laborers Panamanian.<sup>26</sup> In 1930, the National Assembly approved Law 17 of December 19, prohibiting immigration of workers engaged in trades that would be competitive to those of Panamanians. Although this particular measure was justified by the onslaught of the great depression, it was obvious that the Panamanian government had failed to create sufficient jobs for its workers. Notwithstanding, the government claimed to protect the national interests. Government officials contended that Panamanian legislation rejected West Indians' immigrants based on economic factors alone. Notwithstanding, social rejection of this group was being nurtured on the side also. The Panamanian government implemented further labor restrictions on immigration in 1931, by prohibiting the entrance of artisans to the country.<sup>28</sup> Law 16 of November 16, 1931 modified Law 71, in order to clarify the restricted group.<sup>29</sup> As they

would no longer be able to come to Panama as manual workers, the West Indians had claimed to be artisans in their applications as an alternative for entry.

Finally in 1941, the Decree-Law 28 of July 28, provided native workers with absolute protection. Those persons of prohibited immigration were banned from all kinds of jobs except those of a menial nature. They might dedicate themselves to agriculture, aviculture, apiculture, hand laundering and domestic occupations or they could be chauffeurs, mechanics, or artisans.<sup>30</sup> Aside from all these belittling practices against West Indians they were forbidden to express their religious, philosophic, political or scientific ideas through public means of communication such as the press. Moreover, they could not openly formulate opinions about the country's national politics.<sup>31</sup>

After the adoption of the 1941 Constitution, the West Indian migrant felt more acutely the steady pressure of nationalism working to restrict and finally to reduce him to a negligible factor in the socio-economic structure of the country.<sup>32</sup> All these measures forced the total separation of this social group from the Panamanian national constituency. Instead of finding ways to plan programs that would promote their integration to the nation's way of life, the persistently discriminatory immigration policies contributed to the West Indian's rejection of their host country's culture.

One of the principal reasons underlining the appeal of Panama as a haven in 1904, was its alleged political freedom characterized by the total absence of discrimination against the foreigners. Differences of race did not matter. What interested the country was the betterment of the ethnic formation of its inhabitants and to look for a greater homogeneity of the society. This idealistic position had received many set backs by 1941, by the creation of standard rules in order to select the immigrants according to race. The adoption of the anti-democratic position of prohibiting immigration, particularly the one composed of black people who did not speak Spanish was one of these policies. The review of the Constitutions of 1904 and 1941 shows that the basic contradictions between both and the use of many other legal tools are proof of patent discrimination against a large group of people who contributed to the welfare of the country.

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10

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CHAPTER IV  
OFFICIAL REJECTION OF WEST INDIANS

A few weeks after proclaiming its independence from Spain on November 28, 1821, Panama's new leaders decided to unite their country's destinies to those of Colombia. A significant number of 'Panamanians' regretted having approved of the annexation. Many felt that as Panama had voluntarily joined the State of Colombia, she should be granted a generous degree of autonomy. In fact, that nation's economic and political evolution was incongruous to the latter's archaic and centralist political structure. Colombia's treatment of the Isthmian province was cause for growing discontent among Panamanians. According to G. A. Mellander, such uneasiness nurtured a "spirit of revolution and separation" which "manifested itself with recurring regularity throughout the years of Colombian hegemony over Panama." This chapter will deal with the rise of Panamanian nationalism under Colombian rule and the socio-economic factors which buttressed it during the first four decades of the present century.

The representatives of the democratic movements in Panama, adopted the liberal doctrines. Simon Bolívar's military victories in South America gave an important thrust to separatist ideals. In November 28, 1821, independence was proclaimed in Villa de los Santos, receiving general acceptance as soon as it was made known. Don José Fábrega was appointed first governor of the new country. However, he had to accept an almost unanimous decision recognizing Panama as part of

Gran Colombia (Estado Republicano de Colombia).<sup>1</sup> Above all, Fabrega tried to avoid violence coming from those who objected to Panama's annexation to Colombia and recognized the economic advantage of the country's location between two continents and oceans. Upon joining Gran Colombia, one of the first demands made in Panama was that popular elections be held for Assembly representatives.

The decision to become part of Colombia resulted from the need for defense against potential reprisals from Spain, but union with Colombia brought few benefits. The language of their former colonizer was almost the only link that united both countries. When Colombia showed through parish divisions, the difficulty it had in keeping the Gran Colombian union, Panama felt confident enough to propose a reunification of Gran Colombia through its administration which had separated on September 26, 1830 from Colombia. The military commander of the Isthmus, General Jose D. Espinar, offered the government of Panama to Bolivar.<sup>2</sup> At Bolivar's request, Panama rejoined Gran Colombia three months later.

General Eligio Alzuru began another separatist movement July 9, 1831, creating a dictatorship that lasted 50 days until it was crushed by General Tomas Herrera's troops. Herrera was appointed General Commander of the Isthmian Department in July of 1831 during Alzuru's assumption of power. After General Alzuru's total deposition, General Herrera became provisional governor of Panama. In 1832, Gran Colombia

became Nueva Granada with the drafting of a new constitution and Juan José Argote was appointed Governor of Panama. Thus, the division of powers, long sought in Panama, was established when Argota was in charge of civil matters and General Ferrer of the military. Their administration was a progressive one which showed the administrative capacity of the local government. A factor which was important in their government program, was the creation of a free port in Portobelo as a means to combat smuggling and create more facilities for commercial activities.<sup>3</sup>

A Panamanian, General Herrera's nomination as military commander of the Isthmus, strengthened the desire for independence through the years. The political instability of the Colombian administration caused an impact in Panamá, and the economic depression reduced the region to real misery. Both factors strongly contributed to the thought that the best solution for Panama could be found in independence. On November 18, 1840, the Isthmian Assembly declared its separation from a central government which the majority of Nueva Granada's provinces opposed. Panama left the door opened to the possibility of becoming a state once more, if a federal government was implanted in Colombia. Nevertheless, Panama began its new independence under the name of Free State of the Isthmus (Estado Libre del Isthmus).<sup>4</sup> The independence experience made evident the Isthmus capacity for maintaining an autonomous government. During this time, an

army and police force were constituted. An economic structure was developed, based on a tributary system allowing investments on education; such as, the creation of a University, as well as the establishment of economic and diplomatic relations with Costa Rica.

Unfortunately, the life of the new country was of short duration, ending on November 28, 1841. Although General Herrera refused to rejoin Nueva Granada, Panama's legislative body was "persuaded" to accept Colombia's proposal. Nevertheless, the experience had clearly revealed the deep nationalistic convictions of the Panamanian people and their persistent efforts to find the recognition of their rights. A vague promise of some autonomy helped Colombia reaffirm its power in the Isthmus.

Due to its implicit weakness, and in order to secure Panama for its own, Colombia supported the Monroe Doctrine to avoid any foreign intervention in the Isthmus. As a result, in 1846 Nueva Granada signed an agreement called the Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty with the United States. In exchange for the right to establish a passageway through Panama convenient to its expansionist projects, the United States government guaranteed Colombian sovereignty in said territory.<sup>5</sup>

In 1849, the Liberal Party succeeded in replacing the Conservatives in the Colombian government. The 1853 constitution was the Liberals' attempt to create a federal state

within a unitary Republic.<sup>6</sup> In February 27, 1855, this new constitution established a specific regulation regarding Panama, through which it was granted local autonomy. The army and navy, foreign affairs, income and credits corresponding to the federal state, remained under the Colombian government which might intervene in the interoceanic communication whose benefits were designed to pay its foreign debt.

From 1851-1855, Panama enjoyed her first period of peace and prosperity under General Herrera's third term as governor. The circumstances created by the construction of the railroad, brought the first stage of modernization to the country. Money was abundant and circulated in gold. The economic activities shifted from rural to merchantile. The bonanza helped to rebuild the main cities, to open schools and hospitals, to update plazas and to open new markets. Utilizing its autonomy, the government proved efficient in its administration of public funds. It was obvious to the numerous foreigners who worked or traded in Panama, that this country had a personality of its own.

The pride of being necessary to the world at large and the assurance of tapping an inexhaustible treasure, were two attitudes that underlined the character of Panamanians. From now on, this popular feeling constantly developed into a strong nationalism in spite of adverse situations. Three basic objectives defined this nationalism: to preserve the cultural heritage through the use of Spanish as the official



language and as a tool for education; to protect the rights of the "Spanish" social class through the imposition of strict regulations for immigrants of different races, and to administer exclusively the country's wealth.

During the 1860's, two major changes occurred in Panama. One was the separation of church and state in 1862. Don Manuel Maria Diaz' provisional government seized church wealth and properties. It banned the various religious communities, such as convents and abbeys and expelled nuns from Panama, September 9, 1862.<sup>7</sup> Another change followed the drafting of a new constitution, May 8, 1863. The United States of Colombia became the name of the new federal government which was composed by Antioquia, Bolivar, Boyaca, Cauca, Cundinamarca, Magdalena, Panama, Santander, and Tolima. Panama was constituted as a sovereign state whose governors would now be presidents. From 1864-1871, there were fratricidal encounters within the military sector about whether the state militia or the National Guard, had more predominance, causing an alarming lack of public security as Panamanian historian Ruben D. Carles has written: "it was a labyrinth of personal preferences and interests."<sup>8</sup>

There was controversy in Panama, as well as in Colombia, concerning the former's real status. Some thought Panama should be considered a sovereign state with complete powers. Others, could only envision the Isthmus as part of Colombia. The situation climaxed in 1898 with the beginning

of the War of a Thousand Days. Although this war was a major conflict within Colombia, some Panamanian leaders made independence their objective during this civil aggression. The international acknowledgement of Panama as a strategic point for the future, was particularly appealing to the United States government. It would try to be first in having the privilege of control over the Isthmus. The government of Panama was aware of every strategy designed to arrive at that goal. Economically, the situation had changed, the bankruptcy provoked by the French enterprise on the canal, had affected everyone. Dissatisfaction toward the Colombian government was the result. On the other hand, since the Colombian senate disapproved the Herrán-Hay Treaty, relations with the United States became highly strained. Lack of unity for a positive independence left the country in the hands of many leaders who preferred the destruction of a civil war that lasted three years to the benefit of a common entente. When independence was reached on November 3, 1903, the new nation was almost taken by surprise. The new treaty for the construction of the canal between independent Panama and the United States, was not known to most Panamanians until much later. It seemed as if everyone was framed in order to recognize the necessity of an independent country, while at the same time, to curtail the development of its nationality. Such disposition forewarned a strange and dangerous alliance between the U.S. and certain Panamanian officials.

Panama, as an independent country, could not assure real stability in its future and act according to the location of its territory and its "immense wealth". The United States' presence would be cause for constant frictions, misunderstandings and finally, of a national movement against its role. The administration privileges of the Canal, and the right to intervention in Panama's political life, as granted in Article VII of the 1903 Treaty, could only end in a national liberation movement.<sup>9</sup> The rights granted in the 1903 treaty were ratified in the 1904 Constitution. Already in the late 1910's, the nation's 'progressive' sectors stated their opposition to the various United States military interventions, as well as to the different administrations which had been collaborating and benefited from such measures. At that time, the use of force, silenced this opposition, but it helped to strengthen the group of professionals and young people who wished to put an end to the 1903 Canal Treaty.

In the late 1930's, would-be president Dr. Arnulfo Arias Madrid, emerged as the spokesman for national feelings. His government represented the national bourgeoisie as well as the popular sectors of the cities and countryside.<sup>10</sup> Arias changed the National emblem from 'Pro mundi beneficio' to "honor, justice and freedom". The reformist program rejected North American influence by including a general revision of the 1904 constitution which was a clear expression of the

will that Panama belonged to Panamanians alone. The theme of "Panama for Panamanians", would lead to the reorganization of the nation as whole, and to the establishment of rigid norms for its socio-political structure. Black immigrants who did not speak Spanish were one of the victims of the revision. The revisionist measures sought to reaffirm a national identity through a restructuring of the socio-economic system, in order to counteract the dependent mentality which had developed, due to the all-encompassing nature of the United States presence in the Isthmus.<sup>11</sup> Panama's economic development was difficult and disproportionate.

Fluctuations of the interoceanic transit, inherently affected the country's production activities. The temporary or transient population at times was superior in number to the permanent one. Because of the country's particular economic activities, the population density differed from one place to another disproportionately. Additionally, the rural migration to the urban sectors maintained the local markets severely limited in scope, making it difficult for the creation of basic industries. These markets were also highly dependent upon outside stimuli.<sup>12</sup> Aside from disadvantageous competition with the United States, the lack of accessibility to business probability estimates for Panamanian industrialists, private enterprises, and commerce in general, deterred long range investments and the exploitation of national resources through industrial development.

Instead, most capital remained static, engaged only in short-range investments and preferably those which would render disproportionately high interests to the amount invested.<sup>13</sup>

The working-class was most affected by these circumstances because permanent employment was not guaranteed. They could find only seasonal jobs which involved, in most cases, humiliating working conditions. As a result, the unemployed sought to work in the two sectors which could guarantee them a permanent and constant livelihood--the Panamanian government and the North American administration of the Panama Canal Zone and Company.<sup>14</sup> Neither proved beneficial nor served as promoters of an adequate and necessary national identity. Government employees received pay for their political loyalty rather than their administrative output--a policy which led to the deterioration of the merit system and the prevalence of influential, but highly incompetent personnel. The bureaucracy underestimated the worker's production and degraded his social function. On the other hand, the Panama Canal Company instilled feelings of apathy, rejection and alienation among Panamanian laborers towards their country.<sup>14a</sup>

During the 1920's, the general attitude of Panamanians was pessimism, distrust, and apprehension for their future. Very few believed that Panama could function as an independent and self reliant political entity. Within this context, one can not only justify Arnulfo Aria's emergence as a reactionary nationalist, but also state that his political presence cor-

responded to the times and to the historical necessity of the country in that 'stage of development'. In order to reaffirm the concept of nationality in Panamanians, it would be necessary to erradicate their anti-national mentality, by emphasizing the possibility of being absorbed by a foreign culture, namely the United States,<sup>15</sup> which could very well have "used" West Indians as instruments for their 'cultural penetration'.

The awakening of Panamanian consciousness was manifested in the various integration efforts during the 1930's, in the hopes of achieving national consolidation. Politically progressive sectors, especially the student movements, began to question the country's conventional axioms. They advocated a process of national 'regeneration', increasingly based on nationalistic principle. In 1935, the National University was founded and new political parties emerged to search for a true definition of the Panamanian 'essence'. Intellectuals wrote on the nature of Panamanian culture, or Panameñidad as it has been called. Octovio Mendez Pereira stated that Panama's 'spiritual life' was intimately related to the country's transitory nature, which curtailed the development of strong traditions and a better understanding of its nationality.<sup>16</sup> Diogenes de la Rosa proposed that the given economic infrastructure of the country coupled with man as a 'social being', determined the character of Panamanians. He went on to say that their carefree attitude, their

preference for improvisation and lack of projection were the results of "acquired wealth without effort", causing a spiritual and cultural superficiality.<sup>17</sup> Diego Dominguez Caballero stressed that the society's lack of homogeneity, the sharp contrast between the desolate introverted rural ambience and the complex, extrovert urban setting, created three different worlds--the campesino, capitalino, and criollo--especially in the cities. He contended that Panamanians were impulsive and emotive, lacking enough consciousness and effort to fight for what they wanted.<sup>18</sup>

The change in political trend, as well as people's attitudes was reflected in 1934 when Panama refused a United States check for \$250,000 as payment for the Canal Zone territory. It demanded that the payment be made in gold, as the paper currency had been devaluated. Another example occurs in 1936 with the signing of the Arias-Roosevelt Treaty, also called the General Treaty of Friendship and Collaboration (Tratado General de Amistad y Cooperacion). This was the first treaty that was partially beneficial to Panama. It "did away with" United States' intervention. The United States would no longer 'defend' Panama's sovereignty or acquire any additional lands for the 'canal's maintenance'.<sup>19</sup> That same year, the rent of the canal was increased from \$250,000 per year, to \$430,000.

Panama's reputation of a melting pot has been referred to more adequately, as a "mosaic milieu."<sup>20</sup> In spite of living in close proximity, racial groups did not intermingle

in significant percentages to affect each other's characteristics deeply. Lacking in orientation, leadership and a strong sense of national unity, Panama's nationalists increasingly began to focus on the West Indian group. They considered this group an obstacle to the reaffirmation of their nationality. "No hard and fast lines, barred one from participation in any field on the basis of race", but it is true that the restrictions were experienced in an economic level.<sup>21</sup> The greatest restrictions against West Indians occurred during periods of depression and acute unemployment. Then national resentment was at its highest, as West Indians were preferred for Canal Zone employment, because they would work for less money and were assigned local rates. Panamanian nationalists also saw their culture endangered as Protestantism, with its unnumerable sects and practices, became more influential.<sup>22</sup>

As nationalism grew, the country's racial composition was described by the government as an overwhelming mixture of Spanish and Indian, placing other racial groups, such as blacks, mestizos and mulattoes as secondary. Table VIII provides the racial distribution of the total population in 1941. It shows mulattoes as the largest group, totaling 354,079. Although Panamanians did not enjoy being considered a black nation, they were proud to tell of the "historically rebellious nature of the native negroes". Compared to them, the West Indians were servile and slavish. Therefore, Panamanians



could not feel any racial solidarity with a group that was as "impotent" as they were. The Biesanzs make an interesting point in saying that:

"Panamanian resentment of the Chombo\* has been tied up with their fear of the yanquis."<sup>23</sup>

Chombo is a local term used to describe the West Indians. During the 1930's-40's, 'Chombo' was derogatory term, but it has lost a lot of its original meaning.

In 1939, when Panamanian nationalism, was very strong and Arnulfo Arias had been insisting for some time that the nation's ethnic composition could not afford to absorb any more blacks, the United States exerted pressure on the national legislature to allow a fourth wave of West Indian immigration for the construction of the third set of locks. So that against its will and contrary to the government measures, Panama was coerced into allowing more West Indians to come. Nevertheless, government officials demanded that a clause in the contract stipulate that they were definitely forbidden to enter the national territory. Although popular opinion was against West Indian presence, there were others who were sympathetic to this group, giving it serious thought to their situation.

An editorial of the Panama Tribune in 1939, dealt with this matter extensively:

We believe it is time that the governments of the various West Indian Islands and the British government, which is responsible for the welfare of those islands, begin to find avenues for the employment of the brawn and sinew and intelligence of the population of the is-

lands, if not in their own island home, certainly within the broad expanse of an empire which has unlimited wealth and untold resources. The West Indian governments cannot, with any regard to dignity, continue to maintain the attitude of being willing and ready to dump their workers, like so much excess human baggage, on the hostile shores of other countries, where they arouse the antagonism of the natives, are despised and abused merely for the sake of being provided with the daily bread of life which they have difficulty in obtaining in their own homes.

If West Indian workers are to be brought again to work on the Panama Canal, it should be on the basis of better wages and better conditions or even the prevailing standard which, God knows is bad enough, although better than formerly. There should be no lowering of the scale, no retrogression to former times. In all the progressive countries of the world, a proper value is being placed upon the labor of man. The West Indian should not continue to be the only exception to this rule. It is on this basis that we rest our entire objection. If it is to be utilized, there must be a New Deal for West Indian labor.<sup>24</sup>

The work lasted five years. West Indians did not get a better deal, approximately 25% of the 25,000 workers brought in from Jamaica, returned home although their contracts clearly forbade them to come into Panama, West Indians were compelled to do so, as unemployed immigrants were not able to remain in the Canal Zone territory. One of the reasons was Canal Zone government's inability and unwillingness to the alien population in the Canal Zone was estimated at 30,043.<sup>25</sup>

The situation in Panama City was worse. The capital was not large enough to offer an ample market for the professionally trained, much less for the unskilled laborers. The population Census for 1921 counted 40,000 inhabitants in Panama City. Nine years later, in 1930, the population had increased

## TABLE VIII

POPULATION CENSUS, RACIAL DISTRIBUTION.  
1940

Indians . . . . .	64,960
Mestizos . . . . .	135,604
Negroes. . . . .	82,871
Mulattoes. . . . .	271,208
Total. . . . .	631,549

Source: Panama. Oficina del Censo. Distribucion  
de la poblacion por raza, 1940.

up to 74,409. Approximately 25% of the city's total population was foreign born and predominantly black.<sup>26</sup> In 1940, Panama City counted with 111,893 inhabitants, approximately 26.3%, or 29,402, were black. (See table No. IX).

As the labor market was very limited, Panamanian dependence on government jobs was high. In addition, there was a shift of control in the fields of activities from one ethnic group to another. The merchant activities, formerly in the hands of the national upper-class fell under the domination of Chinese, Hindus and Europeans. The West Indian labor force constituted a serious threat to the native workers in the menial or unskilled occupations--in the factories, as maids, chauffeurs, masons and in construction work. In order to protect citizens, national legislation stipulated that some professions required that practitioners be Panamanian-born. Real estate and government employment were also fields exclusive for Panamanians.<sup>27</sup>

Once they retired from the Panama Canal Company, West Indians lost the right to live in the Zone's budget housing, to buy in the post exchanges, or to secure Zonian medicines or medical assistance. Since few returned to their islands of origin, they had no choice but to go to Panama's terminal cities where they had friends and family ties. From the 1940's to the 1960's, their retirement pay was \$25.00 per month. The retirees further aggravated Panama's al-

TABLE IX

## PERCENTAGE OF BLACK IN TOTAL POPULATION

	TOTAL POP.	BLACK POP.	PERCENTAGE
Province of Panama	171,999	38,770	22.5
Panama City	111,893	29,402	26.3
Province of Colon	57,297	28,703	50.0
Colon	44,393	23,532	53.0
Province of Bocas	9,949	5,857	59.0

Source: George Westerman, The Problem of West Indian Offspring in Panama: A Study of Race Relationships Between Ethnic and Cultural Groups in a Cosmopolitan Setting. (Panama: 1944) p. 157

ready serious housing, hospital and rest home conditions. After having given their best years, those who had worked anywhere from 25 to 30 years for the Panama Canal Company, flooded Panama City and Colon and could not pay for their bare necessities. Approximately 75% of them were between 60 to 75 years old. Of these, nearly 8% needed to be confined to hospital beds or to public homes for the elderly, a situation which would cost the state almost \$481,800.00 a year. The Canal Zone Government would pay only 25% of the total expense, making Panama responsible for the rest

\$361,350.00<sup>28</sup> It was an unfair demand on Panama, as only an insignificant percentage of those retired from the Zone, had ever paid national taxes.

All of the above-mentioned factors contributed to setting the stage for Arnulfo Arias' interpretation of Panamanian nationalism. He embodied his analysis of the state of national affairs in the pronouncement of the Panameñista program. At best, this 'program' attempted to instill national pride, dignity and self-respect for their culture in Panamanians. At worse Panameñismo was political sensationalism based on racial discrimination.<sup>29</sup>

Arnulfo Arias began to assert himself in national politics during the depression. He rejected any foreign ideologies or influences even though his definition of Panameñismo as an innovation was vague. In fact, Panameñismo was another

way to define nationalism with a pre-eminent regionalistic nature. He thought it was necessary to create more jobs, paying higher salaries so that the working class would benefit. He called for close national unity, discipline and order, as well as for the unification of the national ideologies and hopes to "assure" the country's future. As a nationalist, Arnulfo Arias call for a strong and independent government, which would not be representative of the upper class' economic interests, obstacles so long to the socio-political development of the country. He refused to admit that Panama's geographic position alone would determine its government policies, much less distort its Indian-Spanish (Indo-española), 'personality'.<sup>30</sup>

According to Arias, Panama's racial composition was exclusively the result of an Indian and Spanish mixture. He argued that people of other cultures were unassimilable and should not be part of the national society. He criticized actively the Chinese, Hindus and black West Indians alleging that they were undesirable because they did not speak Spanish. Many natives felt that West Indians brought dislike upon themselves because they lacked 'personal care', were misbehaved socially and were 'ordinarily loud'.<sup>31</sup>

Arias thought, Panama had a promising future if it could overcome the "racial problem". He was convinced that this serious issue had its roots in the Canal construction era, when the North American government introduced large

numbers of people "of strange color into our culture".<sup>32</sup>

Arias did not deny that some West Indians, once assimilated into the national culture, had contributed to it. However, he was extremely critical of those, he considered them the majority, who continued to live as strangers grouped together in Panama City and Colon, protected from expulsion because they were Panamanian-born and safeguarded through their parents' British citizenship.<sup>33</sup> Arias also criticized the United States immigration measures and its insistence in hiring West Indians only to work on the canal, aggravating the social tension in Panama. Economically, neither the Asian or black-West Indian immigrants were helpful for Panama, as there was a preponderance of unskilled labor that could not be absorbed by an underdeveloped country. Once asked about immigration, Arias said:

The kind of immigration we want for our country, must meet certain physical and moral requirements. These immigrants must be willing to work and share with our noble and hospitable native, our nation's wealth. Welcome are all artisans who come to teach their trade in our shops and encourage the creation of industries. Most of all, welcomed are the farmers who will come to make our lands fertile.<sup>34</sup>

The Panameñista program (el credo panameñista) espoused regulated immigration. It stated that the numbers of immigrants should be allowed according to the country's capacity to incorporate them. The immigrant had to obey the laws, respect the country's traditions, and learn "panameñismo", but he could not deliberately compete with Panamanians in the



professions. Immigrants who came with intentions of exploiting natives would be refused and/or repatriated. Also to be refused were those who tried to promote 'anti-democratic' ideas, as well as those who could possibly create a 'minority problem'.<sup>35</sup>

The objective of Arias' policy was to incorporate all sectors of the population within the national economy and to introduce different groups of immigrants into the country gradually, taking into consideration Panama's ability to make room for them in its society. Felipe Escobar justifies Arias' policy on the ground that his racism was no different than that of past administrations and at least he tried to set up a screening process whereby the immigrants entering the country could be prospective Panamanians.<sup>36</sup>

The Panameñista "doctrine" climaxed with the ratification of the 1941 Constitution. It was a manifestation of the Arias Administration's political ideology, as well as a reflection of the popular sentiment at the time. Felipe Escobar describes the Panameñista doctrine as being similar in concept to Mussolini's fascist party in Italy, and Hitler's Nazi party in Germany.<sup>37</sup> Maloney and Priestly designate Arnulfo Arias' political ideology as a manifestation of Panamanian society's total rejection of West Indians. They contend that it was an outgrowth of foreign capital's association with the national oligarchy which imposed a normative cultural pattern beneficial to their interests. Ideologically, the Panameñista doctrine curtailed minority participation in

in the political process. Consequently, total national consciousness could not be achieved if group divisions persisted.<sup>38</sup> V.F. Goytia affirms that the ratification of the 1941 Constitution was the beginning of a degeneration of human and political principles which very well could have led the country into anarchy.<sup>39</sup>

The lack of an effective cultural interaction between Panamanians and West Indians was due to the insufficiency of adequate educational facilities, the absence of industries, a scanty government interest and the affected group's indifferent and unsympathetic attitude toward their 'adopted' country. These factors contributed to the immigrants' refusal to take part in the national struggle of reivindication.

Panama did not establish a minimum or preliminary education program to explain its social norms to the newcomers. Moreover, the restrictive measures for admission to the public school system, kept many West Indian children isolated from the Panamanian youth. The government did not organize any community program to make the process of integration smoother. Neither the media--newspaper and radio--nor the civic or religious groups made arrangements to arouse favorable public opinion about these immigrants.

There was friction between the two groups as they competed for the few jobs available due to an almost non-existent industrialization process. The government did institute

well-defined economic practices which would foment the agricultural and industrial development in rural areas. In the cities, employment went to those who had influence, (padri-nos). In private business, the employee was insufficiently compensated. We see then that there were very few incentives for immigrants..

The problem got worse because none of the governments responsible for the immigrants--Great Britain, United States or Panama--ever considered the West Indian worker's adaptation to a different socio-cultural milieu. Proof of the apparent lack of concern for their 'human merchandize' was that the British and North Americans only considered their work resiliency, not the cultural discrepancy between them and the native group. However, it would be unethical to blame these governments alone. As we have seen in previous chapters, West Indians made things worse because they considered their stay in Panama as transitory, not bothering to interact or learn a little about where they were living. Their main, almost exclusive, interest was to acquire some wealth so they could return to their countries with a better position.

The North Americans did not care whether or not West Indians were adapting to their new environment. Their only concern was that they do the work that was demanded of them. Their bigoted attitude towards the non-white races did not permit them to allow black participation in the Canal Zone's

"socio-economic democracy". On the other hand, Panama attempted to free itself of the responsibility, instituting and forcing the restrictive legal measures which completely disassociated the West Indian group from the natives. Moreover, it established a process of denationalization of West Indian-Panamanians. Once the 1941 Constitution was approved, approximately 50,000 of them had their citizenship revoked. These measures were not the best that either government could have adopted because different ethnic groups which composed the Isthmian community could not be separated from one another without undermining the country's nationality.

Greater work opportunities in the Canal Zone continued to attract West Indians and their offsprings. Due to the international nature of the Canal, it was an advantage for the Panama Canal Company to have a bilingual labor force. Paradoxically, the Canal Zone government ignored or rejected their requests for housing in its territory. In turn, the great majority lived in the Zone's outskirts, which were Panama's slum areas--Calidonia, San Miguel and Chorrillo. Panama only offered them economic conditions similar to those of the islands. Politically, the West Indians could not or as an escape from their living situation, as well as to amass a large quantity of money for their return to the islands. As a result, close ties were established between the Canal Company and them. Both groups, West Indians and

North Americans, shared a common background--their British-based culture, language and similar living styles. This commonality propitiated a gradual but constant process of West Indian assimilation of and adaptation to North American principles, way of life, and their feelings of superiority to Panamanians.

There was superficial West Indian assimilation of the Panamanian cultural patterns. Regardless of their deficiency, North Americans offered them at least a second-rate education, in comparison to Panama banning their children from its public schools. West Indians felt a sense of gratitude towards North Americans, in spite of the racial discrimination they experienced in the Zone. After all, it was not much different from their way of life in the British West Indies. Nevertheless, this ethnic group considered itself the product of a socially hybrid environment.

Although West Indians did not enjoy social, political or economic stability in Panama, their large numbers and the long years of residence there, allowed them to become more absorbed into the local population. Consequently, they considered themselves an integral part of the national culture, as they had contributed to the country's economic transformation. The legal dispositions, especially those stipulated in the 1941 Constitution came as a big blow to them. Having lost all ties with their countries of origin, West Indians did not know any other way of life but the Panamanian.

Like their predecessors in the British Islands, West Indians now faced a similar socio-economic situation, but a worse political circumstance. They had two alternatives-- emigration or endurance of the racial persecution. The older members of the West Indian community were inclined to overlook the problem, its importance and implications. A popular choice was to attempt to secure United States' citizenship. A less attractive prospect was to become British citizens. For those who wished to remain in Panama, the only prerogative for West Indians was to fight to have their inherent citizen rights restored. In 1944, they founded the National Civic League (Liga Civica Nacional) to represent them legally. They demanded that articles concerning immigration and nationality in the 1941 Constitution be abolished. It was the first time they would organize as a political interest group to demand their inherent civil rights.

## CONCLUSION

The economic and socio-political conditions that existed in the West Indies after the abolition of slavery, resulted in mass unemployment for the freed blacks. Independently of this, Panama was striving for its autonomy and the exploitation of its geographic position--her most important resource. As a growing industrial power, those unemployed blacks and Panama's location constituted an important asset for the United States' expansionist goals. Chapter one has shown how all the elements involved--West Indian blacks, Panama and the United States--converged for the construction of the Panama railroad and later the Canal.

Chapter two indicates how the mutual coexistence of these groups proved to be a difficult problem. Inequality of power and the cultural dissimilarities between them, made their acceptance and adaptation to each other almost impossible, especially for Panamanians and West Indians.

As the United States became the strongest economic support for the Isthmus' maintenance of its service economy--a detrimental factor to the development of a sound economic system based on production--Panama was unable to react unfavorably to the North American presence. On the other hand, Panamanians thought that West Indians had nothing else to offer except problems and cause them inconvenience. Chapter three demonstrates that in turn, Panamanians were able to react

against them due to their precarious situation. The legislative measures that were enacted, are proof of the ever-growing and constantly aggressive governmental policy affecting West Indians. These laws, decrees and statutes serve as indicators for the national and official rejection of the West Indian immigrants. We have seen in Chapter four how a nation became an independent republic and the underlying reasons for the nationalistic tendencies which used the West Indians as a stepping-stone towards Panama's socio-cultural unification.

A large labor force was needed to construct the "road" that would reaffirm United States' power in the American continent, as well as the rest of the world. Panama also needed that labor force in account of the thrust given to the facilities that allowed it to profit at its highest level up to then, from its riches in services which had an important international value. The benefit produced by the West Indians was diminished by the inconvenience of their living in Panama. Their numbers indicate the seriousness with which they renounced to their islands in the hope of leading better lives. They hardly considered that one day they would be branded as undesirables in their adopted country. The Panamanian will for full independence unfortunately resulted in the alienation of a group who had shown through its work to have made a sincere contribution to the welfare of the Isthmus, regardless of who benefited. It is understandable that



Panama tried to be the exclusive administrator of its territory, but the adoption of this unfavorable attitude towards West Indians, revealed the acute nature of the conflict of Panamanian identity at the time.

FOOTNOTES

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J. & M. Biesanz, and George Westerman have referred to Panama's racial composition as a mosaic milieu.

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G. Jimenez, Panama in Transition. . ., p. 101

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Ibid., pp. 106-108.

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Melendez, Panama y el canal. . ., pp. 15-16.

30

Felipe Escobar, Arnulfo Arias o el credo panameñista: ensayo psico-patológico de la política panameña (Panama: Editores Ferguson & Ferguson, 1946), p. 23, 24.

31

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Ibid., p. 34.

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Ibid., p. 74.

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Ibid., pp. 76-77.

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As quoted by Escobar, Ibid., p. 32.

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