



## PANAMANIAN ANTILLEANS: AN ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

By

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The contribution of Antillean Blacks to the development of the Republic of Panama has been successfully captured on film and in writing. However, a major yet untold legacy of their contribution can be found in the transition and adjustment experiences, both positive and negative, of the process of assimilation of Antillean immigrants into Panamanian society. The Antillean immigration into Panama provides a uniquely instructive case for understanding critical elements of the African Diaspora which include the historical context of the movement of Blacks within the Western Hemisphere as well as the all important issues pertaining to race/ethnicity and culture.

**Historical Context** - Vasco Nunez de Balboa, a Spanish Explorer, arrived in Panama in 1510, from Santo Domingo on the run from his creditors. He quickly ousted the Spanish Crown's emissary and established himself as co-mayor along with Martin Zamudio, of Panama. Hearing much about a huge ocean nearby, he set out in September of 1513 with 150 Spaniards and 1,000 Indian slaves and after 25 days of hacking through the jungle, he reached Pacific Ocean and altered history. Panama became the most strategic place in the Western Hemisphere, and the future site of the Panama Railroad and Canal.

Throughout the colonial period, Panama remained a major point of crossing between the two oceans but by 1821, declared its independence from Spain and became part of Gran Colombia. Aware of Panama's strategic position, the U.S., built the railroads by the 1950s. Later when Panama declared independence from Colombia on November 3, 1903 it was with the help of the U.S. whose warships prevented the Colombian government from suppressing the Panamanian secession. The U.S. immediately recognized the new republic by Nov. 6, 1903, and by November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1903, the two countries signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla treaty in which Panama granted the U.S. "the use, occupation and control of a ten mile wide zone of land for the construction, maintenance, operation and protection of said Canal, in perpetuity."

**Black Presence in Panama** - Prior to the arrival of Antilleans in Panama, other Blacks had been there for centuries. There is some evidence that early on in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Africans first came to Panama as free men and/or indentured servants as part of the Spanish and Portuguese expeditions. That changed by the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Africans arriving in Panama came primarily as a result of the slave trade that continued for more than two-hundred years through the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Africans brought to Panama as slaves, often referred to as Colonial Blacks, adapted to their new situations by speaking the language and assuming the Spanish surnames of their colonizers. However, in Panama and throughout Latin America other aspects of the relationship between slaves and colonizers also affected assimilation. The Spanish Catholic Explorer in Latin America was much

more likely than his English Puritan counterpart in the Caribbean and North American to engage in not only intermingling but also intermarriage with the African slaves, native Indians and other groups in Panama resulting in a population consisting largely of mixed groups of Mulattos, Mestizos and other variations. The result of centuries of intermingling and intermarriage, coupled with other socio-economic and political trends and events, is that descendants of Colonial Blacks in Panama today are almost all monolingual Spanish speakers, with Spanish surnames and with few exceptions, they have also shed most of their resemblance or desire to lay claim, to their African ancestry.

**Race/ethnicity/culture** - Unlike Colonial Blacks, the Antillean Blacks in Panama have been mostly Anglophones who came in largest numbers from the islands of Jamaica and Barbados, and in lesser numbers from Antigua, Grenada and other islands. However, Antillean Blacks also came from slave experiences and made similar adaptations. On arrival in Panama, they came with the language and surnames of their English colonizers.

Beyond language and names, a major distinction between Colonial and Antillean Blacks is that Antilleans arrived after they had been emancipated as slaves and after their island nations had begun to agitate for independence. This meant that by the time they arrived in Panama, many Antillean Blacks were already involved, for several generations in some instances, in the development of Black leadership and the capacity, and preparation to govern and self rule on their respective islands.

The arrival of large numbers of Antillean Blacks into Panama was not accidental. It coincided in the first instance with the building of the railroads and many of them returned home after completion of that project. The second and larger wave came to work on Panama Canal construction project and this time majority decided to stay and became part of Panamanian society. That decision had enormous consequences

Antillean Panamanians endured decades of social and political discrimination from mainstream Panamanian society. Panama created immigration policies designed to deport large numbers of Antilleans and to deny citizenship to others. These racist policies were not aimed at all people of African Ancestry. Under President Arnulfo Arias, exclusionary immigration policies were enacted that deliberately targeted Antillean immigrants. These political policy decisions were accompanied by punitive social behavior as well. Most Antilleans were monolingual English speakers, and they and their offspring were derided for their inability to speak Spanish. Antillean school children were also taunted by classmates and called derogatory names because of their race, ethnicity and culture. It would take decades before cultural exchanges between Antillean culture and Panamanian culture would begin to occur. It started with a slow acceptance by Panamanians of Antillean culture in such areas as West-Indian food and cooking methods and Antillean acceptance of Panamanian traditional dances, folklore, music, etc.

Today, Antilleans in Panama have made great strides in terms of assimilation. For example, in the past 30 years there has been increased social mixing and intermarriage, with Antillean blacks becoming more Hispanicized. For some this has a downside. One reason for this sentiment is that large numbers of Antillean descendants have become monolingual Spanish speakers which they were

compelled to do as a condition of acceptance and assimilation. In the process they lost their hold on the English language which initially gave their parents and grandparents an economic edge in the workplace.