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Abstract/Résumé analytique

Ethnicity, Religion and Repression: The Denial of African Heritage in Costa Rica

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The experience of West Indians in Costa Rica in the first decades of the twentieth century was marked by instances of racism and intolerance. The West Indian immigrants were English-speaking Protestants of African descent, and they found themselves in a Hispanic country that distinguished itself as a white settler society in Central America. West Indians were discriminated against by their Hispanic neighbours, United Fruit Company officials, and the Costa Rican government. Tension increased as the banana industry faltered and the world economy declined in the 1930s.

This article examines the reaction of West Indian community leaders and the Costa Rican government to the proliferation of African-influenced religious sects in Limón during the 1930s. The sects were a source of division within the community and a target of discrimination by Hispanics. The article looks at the rise in popularity of the sects and studies some of the reactions to the heightened profile of the religious groups. Hysteria is shown to have replaced common sense after the local press alleged that the sects committed all sorts of atrocities. The government's response was to arrest and attempt to deport suspected practitioners. The local West Indian elite, mindful of the tenuous footing the community had in Costa Rica, joined in the condemnation of and attacks against the dissident religious groups. The increased popularity of African-influenced religion was not just a passing episode in the history of the West Indian community in Costa Rica. It was part of a larger social malaise that marked a turning point in the relationship between the West Indian minority and Hispanic majority in Costa Rica.

Les expériences des Antillais de Costa Rica dans les premières décennies du vingtième siècle étaient remplies d' exemples de racisme et d'intolérance. Les immigrants Antillais de descendance africaine, étaient de langue anglaise et de religion protestante. Ils se retrouvèrent dans un pays latino-américain qui avait la réputation d'être une société colonisatrice blanche en Amérique centrale. Les Antillais souffrirent de discrimination aux mains de leurs voisins hispaniques, des employés de la United Fruit Company et du gouvernement de Costa Rica. La tension s'intensifia d'avantage dès que l'industrie de la banane chancela et que périclita l'économie mondiale des années trente.

Cet article examine la réaction des dirigeants de la communauté antillaise et du gouvernement de Costa Rica devant la prolifération des sectes religieuses à Limón durant les années trente. Ces sectes étaient une source de division dans la communauté et une cible de discrimination par les Hispaniques. Cet article s'intéresse aussi à la hausse de popularité de ces sectes et analyse certaines réactions vis-à-vis de ces groupes religieux au profil élevé. Le bon sens fit vite place à l'hystérie dès que la presse locale prétendit que les sectes étaient coupables de toutes sortes d'atrocités. Pour toute réponse, le gouvernement appréhenda les praticiens suspects et tenta de les déporter. De son côté, l'élite Antillaise locale, consciente de la position précaire qu'occupait leur communauté au Costa Rica, se joignit aux attaques et à la condamnation des groupes religieux dissidents. La popularité grandissante des religions de source africaine ne devait pas être seulement une épisode de courte durée dans l'histoire de la communauté Antillaise de Costa Rica. Elle était, au contraire, une des composantes d'un malaise social plus vaste qui marqua un tournant dans les rapports entre la minorité Antillaise et la majorité Hispanique de Costa Rica.

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ETHNICITY, RELIGION AND REPRESSION: THE DENIAL OF AFRICAN HERITAGE IN COSTA RICA

He had a grievance that he nursed
Against the bad white man
He nurtured it until it worsened
And grew clear out of hand

Joe Gordon could not understand
This man's arrogance and pride
It galled, as did his oppressive hand
And would not let him bide

Alderman Johnson Roden
"The Outlaw"

A. J. Roden's poem about brigand Joe Gordon's struggle against the injustices of plantation life underscores recurrent themes in the West Indian experience in Costa Rica.[1] Since the first West Indian immigrants arrived in Costa Rica over a century ago there have been many instances of discrimination. This article examines the reaction of West Indian community leaders and the government to the proliferation of African-influenced religious sects in Limón during the 1930s. The sects were a source of division within the community and a target for discrimination by Hispanics. The article examines the apparent rise in popularity of the sects and examines the response of community leaders and the Costa Rican government to the perceived threat posed by the religious groups.

The first West Indian labourers to arrive in Costa Rica at the end of the nineteenth century worked in the construction of a railroad link between San José and the Atlantic port of Limón. They brought with them a myriad of cultural and religious practices which flourished alongside the new agricultural industry. Between 1910 and 1915, Limón led the world in the production of bananas and West Indians continued to immigrate to Costa Rica in search of employment opportunities. Some obtained skilled positions with the railway or on the banana plantations while others became independent farmers who

[1]The author would like to thank Donald K. Gordon for providing copies of R.J. Roden's poems. See Donald K. Gordon, "Alderman Johnson Roden: The Tailor-Poet," *Afro-Hispanic Review*, Vol. 2 No. 2, (May 1983).

relied on the United Fruit Company for prosperity. In 1925 a study of labour conditions in Limón by the U.S. consul indicated that 75 per cent of the United Fruit Company's farm employees and 60 per cent of the people working for independent banana producers in the province were of West Indian origin.[2] By 1927, people of African descent in Limón made up 58 per cent of the province's population and a significant proportion of them were born in the country.[3]

For many people life in Limón was brutal and the injustices of the plantation system were almost impossible to bear. The United Fruit Company controlled every aspect of life in the province. It employed, housed, clothed and provided transportation, communication, and medical services for almost everyone in Limón. The company even provided a funeral car on the railroad to take people to their final resting places. The relative security provided to West Indians by the fruit company evaporated with the spread of plant disease during the first quarter of the twentieth century and the resultant decline of the banana economy on the Atlantic coast. In the 1930s, as the disease advanced, the fruit company's managers decided to move operations elsewhere. West Indian farmers and workers were left to fend for themselves.[4]

The government's presence in the banana growing region was minimal until the late 1920s, after which Costa Rican authority began to fill the vacuum left by the company. The West Indian community's grievances shifted to the new authorities as the government's profile in Limón increased. Heightened government presence in Limón brought all West Indians under official scrutiny. The community's informal economic practices and their lack of patriotic sentiment toward Costa Rica resulted in the introduction of a series of laws that discriminated against people of African descent.

In 1932, for example, West Indian squatters were forced to begin renting the land they had cleared and brought into production. The government charged the farmers two colones per year for every hectare they occupied. Within a few years the rent was increased to twenty colones per year for West Indian farmers.[5] The price that West Indian farmers paid to rent their land was extremely high. Meanwhile, the United Fruit Company was only allowed to charge one colon per hectare for land it rented to independent producers, and a review of the company's rental contracts during the 1930s reveals that most

[2]United States Department of State, J. J. Meily, American Consul, Limón, Costa Rica, to the Department of State, 22 Mar. 1925, 818.5043.

[3]Government of Costa Rica, *Censo de población de Costa Rica: (11 de mayo de 1927)*, San José: Ministerio de Economia y Hacienda, 1928.

[4]Between 1930 and 1950 banana exports from Limón declined to nineteenth-century levels. See Clarence F. Jones and Paul C. Morrison, "Evolution of the Banana Industry in Costa Rica," *Economic Geography*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 1952.

[5]*The Atlantic Voice*, 3 May 1936.

of the land was rented in large blocks to people who were not of West Indian origin.[6]

During the same period the government also took measures to restrict the immigration of West Indians to Costa Rica. The rules on immigration were tightened in 1930 when a new law was passed that required a bond for immigrants wishing to enter the country.[7] A few years later the bond was raised to 1,000 colones for most immigrants.[8] The high cost kept West Indian immigrants away and encouraged illegal entry into the country. The "immigrants law" also restricted the mobility of people who were already in the country because it required all resident foreigners to apply for permission from the governor if they wished to leave Costa Rica temporarily.[9] In 1942, when banana exports from Limón had almost ceased, the government passed a law prohibiting all immigration of people of African descent.[10]

Along with tighter immigration rules, parallel efforts were made to register the existing West Indian population. In 1931 the first in a series of registration laws was passed that required every adult male in the country to obtain a "cédula de identidad." The cédula was followed by a "carnet de extranjero" in 1936 and, a few years later, by a "cédula de residencia" which was renewable on an annual basis.[11] In each case, people were asked to register with the government. With the identification of individuals, people could be singled out and groups could be targeted for special treatment.

Legislation combined with overt discrimination to contain the growth and spread of the community. In December 1934, G.P. Chittenden, United Fruit's general manager in Costa Rica and León Cortés Castro, the Secretary of State for Development, signed a contract that prohibited "people of colour" from working for the United Fruit Company on its new Pacific coast plantations.[12] The community was, therefore, marooned on the Atlantic coast where they were subject to discriminatory restrictions.

The prohibition of West Indian labourers on the Pacific coast was matched by a series of efforts at racial segregation in Limón. In 1935, shortly after the contract was signed, the municipality of Limón built a bathing complex that was for "whites" only.[13] That same year, seating at Limón's three cinemas was segregated for the first time.[14] Whereas West Indians were accustomed to being kept away from United Fruit Company officials and their families, they were not ready to accept discrimination from Hispanics.

[6]See Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica (hereafter cited as A.N.C.R.), Protocolos, Porfirio Gongora, 1930-40.

[7]A.N.C.R., Gobernación series, No.7967, and Congreso series No.16018.

[8]*The Atlantic Voice*, 29 Aug. 1936.

[9]*The Searchlight*, 20 June 1931.

[10]Government of Costa Rica, *Colección de Leyes y Decretos*, Ley No.4, 1942. (San José, 1943).

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

[12]A.N.C.R., Congreso series, No. 17004.

[13]*La Voz del Atlántico*, 31 Aug. 1935.

[14]*The Atlantic Voice*, 6 Apr. 1935.

The community struggled to preserve its cultural identity while the government's objective was to denigrate and preferably eliminate it. The 1930s and 1940s became a period in which people of African descent were forced to make decisions about their future in Costa Rica. Thousands left the country in search of better opportunities, but others remained to make the best of a bad situation.[15] The drain on the community was aggravated by the fact that the emigrants were primarily younger men. Women, the elderly, and anyone less able to find work elsewhere stayed in Limón.[16] Those who remained in Costa Rica were forced to cope with injustices on a daily basis.

As community members struggled to redefine their relationship with Costa Rica, West Indians were forced to endure systematic attacks from government authorities. While some fled the country or attempted to become citizens, the majority were forced to seek shelter within the community itself. They sought solace in religious movements or in secular organizations like the Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.). The churches in Limón and the organizations associated with them offered the most popular form of respite. However, religious practices in Limón were very different from the homogeneous brand of Roman Catholicism practised elsewhere in the country.

Life in Limón was the natural enemy of mainstream religious formalism. Most people lived in isolation along the coast or along the railway lines and the smaller communities were often beyond the reach of mainstream religions. Moreover, religious devotion in Limón had both ethnic and class connotations. With some exceptions, religious divisions tended to reflect the social structure in Limón. The Catholic Church was primarily for Hispanics while the Anglican Church was the spiritual refuge of United Fruit officials and West Indian community leaders.[17] Nonconformist churches like the Methodist and Baptist churches tended to enjoy popularity among the workers and peasants of the province. Moreover, West Indian labourers were considered to be "joiners" who frequently belonged to "several church organizations, several lodges and improvement associations."[18]

There was, however, no shortage of alternatives to the mainstream religions since the nature of Limón's population — as immigrants from a wide variety of cultures — meant that several spiritual influences evolved in every community. In Limón, as elsewhere in the Caribbean region, African and Christian beliefs were often intertwined. One of the best examples is the case of Joseph Hibbert who lived in Limón between 1911 and 1931. Hibbert's

[15]More than half of all West Indians left Costa Rica between 1927 and 1950. See Ronald N. Harpelle, "West Indians in Costa Rica: Class and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Community," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1992.

[16]*The Atlantic Voice*, 22 Mar. 1941, expressed concern about the women and children left behind by the exodus of the men.

[17] The Anglican Church in Limón was at one time the largest congregation in Central America.

[18]United States Department of State, J. J. Meily, American Consul, Limón, Costa Rica, to the Department of State, 22 Mar. 1925, 818.5043.

experience in Costa Rica formed an integral part of his doctrinal teachings. Over the years he became convinced that there would be a day of reckoning for the white race and a return to Africa for the chosen race.[19] From Limón he moved to Jamaica where he founded the "Ethiopian Coptic Faith" and became one of the originators of the Ras Tafarianism.[20] The struggle for cultural survival in Limón helped produce leaders and provided enthusiastic support for people who advocated black nationalism.

Another example of the role of plantation life in the development of afrocentric ideology is the place of Limón in the history of the U.N.I.A. Marcus Garvey, the organization's founder, lived in Limón during 1910-11 and his experience formed part of the foundation of his African nationalism. A few years after he was chased out of Limón for fomenting division within the local West Indian community, Garvey founded the U.N.I.A. as a movement to radicalize people of African descent around the world. Subsequently, Garvey visited Limón and was met by cheering crowds. Within a few days he "might easily" have collected $50,000 dollars from West Indian banana workers for his U.N.I.A. ventures.[21] Garveyism and its affiliated African Communities League were not religious movements, but they had a lot in common with Afro-Christian religions in the Caribbean region.

Organizations like the U.N.I.A., mutual aid societies, and non-mainstream religious groups reflected the divisions that existed between people living in Limón. According to one report, "division and a continual undercurrent of dissention" was promoted by "numerous religious sects, secret societies and peculiar insular loyalties" within the West Indian community.[22] Moreover, the divisions within the West Indian community were "encouraged by the labor policy of the United Fruit Company in order to render effective organization . . . less likely."[23] During the first decades of the century the internal threats to social stability in Limón were also kept in check by the transient nature of the labour force. However, the economic and social crisis that resulted from the decline of the banana industry served to heighten the profile of the most radical groups. As a consequence, in the mid-1930s the government began to focus its attention on Afro-Christian sects in Limón and the entire West Indian community came under increased scrutiny.

[19]"Ethiopianism" was popular in Limón. The crowning of Ras Tafari as the Emperor Haile Selassie in 1930 was noted in the local press and the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy a few years later was followed closely by people in Limón.

[20]Ken Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings: The Jamaican Labour Rebellion of 1938 and its Aftermath*, (The Hague, 1978) 164.

[21] Robert Hill, editor, *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, (Los Angeles, 1985), III:536.

[22] United States Department of State, J. J. Meily, American Consul, Limón, Costa Rica, to the Department of State, 22 Mar. 1925, 818.5043.

[23] ibid. According to the same report, the United Fruit Company used a "secret service" which "reported on actual happenings" and circulated "distorted reports for the benefit of other groups."

On 20 September 1936 the *Diario de Costa Rica* published an article that discussed a new "form of lunacy" that was "taking a very serious hold of one section of the population."[24] Dementia apparently resulted from participation in the "savage" religious practices of what the newspaper called "Cocomia." The *Diario de Costa Rica* presented "Cocomia" to Costa Ricans as an evil practice with "strange and frightful repercussions."[25] The article noted that practitioners in Limón had been detained on several occasions, but were released because the police were unable to prove that any laws had been broken.[26]

"Cocomia" was actually a religious practice native to Jamaica and popularly known as Pocomia or revivalism.[27] It was also synonymous with a wide variety of Christian and quasi-Christian religious sects that existed in Limón during the period. As a group, the sects included the Pentecostal Baptists who spoke in tongues, and others whose practices reflected strong African influences. In many instances the sects were forums for both religious expression and the defence of the community's African heritage. However, the press distorted more than just the name of the religion because all sorts of "diabolical" rituals were attributed to the sects. Women were said to be naked from the waist up during worship and human sacrifice was often hinted at. Some groups were also accused of smoking marijuana and engaging in scandalous sexual behaviour with minors as part of their ritual. The Hispanic press was joined by West Indian community leaders who considered the sects to be subversive.

In response to the press reports in the *Diario de Costa Rica*, *The Atlantic Voice*, the mouthpiece of the West Indian élite, published a series of letters, articles and editorials against the evils of the religious sects.[28] One letter to the editor from Mr. W. A. Petgrave stated that Pocomia sects were increasing in numbers during 1936 and attracting "the lower order" of the community. The writer urged the government to pass laws against religious sects and to use an "iron hand" in dealing with the leaders. Petgrave, a community leader in Siquirres, went so far as to send a petition to the Secretary of State asking for action in suppressing the sects and demanding the expulsion of adherents of Pocomia from the country. The problem for community leaders in Limón was

[24] *Diario de Costa Rica*, 20 Sept. 1936.

[25] According to the article, "Cocomia" had been prohibited in Cuba because, in the extreme, children were sacrificed.

[26] *Diario de Costa Rica*, 20 Sept. 1936.

[27] Detractors referred to Pocomia as Pocomania in an effort to highlight the irrational nature of the cult and its adherents.

[28] The editor of *The Atlantic Voice*, Samuel Nation, had a history of attacking non-conformist religious practices. In the aftermath of a strike by West Indian workers in 1910, he gave testimony at an inquiry into the activities of strike leaders who were associated with the practice of "obeah." See Aviva Chomsky's discussion in "Plantation society, Land and Labor on Costa Rica's Atlantic Coast, 1870-1940," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1990.)

that a small number of people were drawing attention to the fact that African influences were a part of the West Indian heritage.

In Limón, the most notorious example of Pocomia was a group led by Altiman Krimbell Dabney.[29] Dabney was "Heir of Law, Crownprince First of the First Resurrection Fourpole Demander, E-3 V V F C C S G X G," and claimed to have been sent to Costa Rica by the "God of the black race."[30] Although community leaders portrayed him as a lunatic to be both scorned and pitied, "Shepherd Alti" enjoyed popularity throughout the province. Dabney had a knowledge of traditional medicine and was considered to be a powerful healer. Moreover, he had a sanctuary where he offered salvation from the impending apocalypse that God would use to punish all those who oppressed the "black race."[31]

Dabney's appeal stemmed from the radical difference between his religious teachings and those of the mainstream churches. He was said to practice the "black arts" and was known to be defiant of authority. His temple was located close to the city and was guarded by a small group of his followers. Dabney preached that Limón would be consumed by fire and water but that "the Gods would not allow any harm to befall his sanctum: it could not be approached by anything profane."[32]

Shepherd Alti was the subject of religious persecution by the Costa Rican government and was denied help from the British authorities. For example, one Sunday in 1932 police entered Dabney's tabernacle during a service, destroyed the interior and took the worshippers down to the police station. About a month later, the police went to the homes of church members in the middle of the night and arrested several people who were then jailed without trial. When Dabney asked for an explanation, he did not get one so he attempted to sue the Costa Rican government for 7,000 dollars in damages.[33] Dabney continued to suffer at the hands of police and sought protection from the British authorities. He reported to the British Legation in Panama in 1933 that on several occasions his life had been threatened by the local police and that they had attempted to demolish his temple. Although Dabney and at least some of his followers were British subjects, he was refused assistance.

The most significant accusations made by Dabney were against President León Cortés. Dabney claimed that on 3 May 1936, when Cortés was about to be inaugurated, a policeman informed him that "there were plans being made

[29] The Jamaican press spelled his name as Altamont Dobney.

[30] *La Voz del Atlántico*, 7 Nov. 1936.

[31] Altiman Dabney's cult following has many parallels to that of Brazil's Antonio Conselheiro in the 1890s. For example, they both rejected the authority of governments in distant capitals that did not share their cultural identity. See Euclides da Cunha, *Rebellion in the Backlands*, (Chicago, 1944).

[32] *The Atlantic Voice*, 7 Nov. 1936.

[33] *The Daily Gleaner*, Kingston, Jamaica, 19 Jan. 1937. His followers claimed that he had won his case but never received redress.

to kill him."[34] Dabney claimed that the new president was behind the plot. Although Dabney may have been exaggerating, he was linking his problems to the individual who was behind the most systematic attack ever to be made on the West Indian community. Cortés was the government official who had negotiated the 1934 banana contract with United Fruit that prohibited "people of colour" from working on the Pacific coast. León Cortés was openly hostile toward people of African descent and Altiman Dabney blamed him for the injustices that befell the West Indian community. As soon as Cortés assumed the presidency in 1936, his government began issuing orders that amounted to assaults on the West Indian minority.[35]

Tension between Dabney and the police escalated in late October 1936 when he was accused of kidnapping a fourteen-year-old girl. The child's grandmother brought her to Dabney a year earlier and the girl became a medium for God at religious meetings. The girl's mother was also a one-time member of the "Shepherd's" flock, but by late 1936, after the press began to attack Dabney, the parents contended that their child was being held against her will. However, the grandmother's continued involvement prevented the police from arresting Dabney because she assumed responsibility for the girl.[36] The police eventually raided Dabney's sanctuary, but they needed more than mere accusations to justify arresting him.

The police had a difficult time building a case against Shepherd Alti because he was not doing anything illegal. Dabney was not breaking Costa Rican laws by dispensing his medicinal services or by exercising his religious freedom. Therefore, an effort was made to infiltrate his organization using a "secret service" which reported on his activities. A couple of West Indians were enlisted as spies and, according to them, Dabney voiced "lengthy anathemas" against President León Cortés during his sermons.[37] Government officials took Dabney's denunciations seriously. His denunciation of the president of the republic, a man they believed was beyond reproach, was not only considered to be evidence of Dabney's dementia, but also the kind of proof required by the authorities to label him a pernicious person. As a lunatic and threat to the state, Dabney could then be expelled from the country in summary fashion.

When Dabney's sanctuary was raided in October 1936, a group of his followers defended him with sticks and knives against the police.[38] According to newspaper accounts, the first attempt to subdue Dabney was repelled. A few hours later "more than 28 well-armed police along with a large crowd of private individuals again attacked the Healing Balm Tabernacle."[39] After a protracted battle, the police put down the resistance and several people were

[34] *La Voz del Atlántico*, 7 Nov. 1936.
[35] See Harpelle, "West Indians in Costa Rica," 76-112.
[36] A.N.C.R., Relaciones Exteriores Series, No. 1819 Bis.
[37] ibid.
[38] ibid.
[39] *The Daily Gleaner*, Kingston, Jamaica, 15 Jan. 1937.

taken into custody. Among those who were arrested there were more women than men who came to the defence of the "Shepherd." When the police finally subdued Dabney he refused to put clothes on and voiced his disrespect for Costa Rican authority. Dabney was then wrapped in a sheet and taken to the police station along with his entire "Body Guard who were all dressed in fantastic costumes."[40]

The police assault on Dabney's sanctuary resulted in the confiscation of several items that illustrated the Shepherd's popular appeal. Among the items that were confiscated from Dabney's church, were thousands of letters from people asking for cures and potions.[41] Since the West Indian population in Limón amounted to less than nineteen thousand in the mid-1930s, Dabney's popularity extended far beyond the confines of his sanctuary. The letters were proof of Dabney's appeal to people who believed that he had a special vocation. There were also some people who believed that Dabney's mission on earth went beyond curing the sick. When the police stormed the temple they found stockpiles of clothing and other items that loyal followers had brought for the judgement day. Observers believed that the faithful had sold all their earthly belongings and given the proceeds to their "Shepherd" for safekeeping.[42]

One of the most revealing pieces of information about Dabney surfaced when he was inadvertently allowed to make a final statement in the local press. The police gave *La Voz de Atlántico*, the Spanish half of the local newspaper, a copy of Dabney's statement. The release was intended to serve as proof of Dabney's insanity. Instead, the "Shepard" was given a public platform for his parting message. Dabney cursed Costa Rica for persecuting him and wished that the "brightest day be converted into the darkest night with rain, wind, thunder and lightening, earthquakes and floods."[43] At the conclusion of his final address to Limón's West Indian community Dabney called upon the "God of the black race" to bring disaster upon Costa Rica.

People in Limón were left with a denunciation of Costa Rica that they could not easily forget. Residents were reminded of Dabney's curse a few months later when the brand new segregated bathing complex was completely destroyed by a storm that was described as the most unusual ever to occur in Limón. According to one popular account, the event was "divine intervention" as "the ire of Neptune sent the whole contraption, barricade and dancehall to HADES."[44] Years later, according to an informant, some people thought that Dabney was responsible for the unexpected and sudden death of León Cortés in 1946.

[40] *The Atlantic Voice*, 31 Oct. 1936.
[41] A.N.C.R., Relaciones Exteriores Series, No. 1819 Bis.
[42] ibid.
[43] *La Voz del Atlántico*, 7 Nov. 1936.
[44] Dolores Joseph, *Tres relatos del caribe Costarricense*, (San José, 1984) 37.

Within a matter of days of Dabney's arrest, he, five women, two men, and three children were paraded through the streets of Limón and deported as undesirables. The *Diario de Costa Rica* reported that the government intended to put an end to the practice of Pocomia in Costa Rica and that more expulsions would follow. No further expulsions were reported in the newspapers, but many people were detained as suspected Pocomians. An informant explained that the reason so few people were expelled for practising Pocomia was that most of Dabney's followers were not Jamaicans but Costa-Rican-born West Indians who could not be deported because no other country would accept them.

Therefore, despite the Costa Rican government's success at ridding the country of Altiman Dabney, African-influenced religions continued to exist in Limón. Dabney was only one example of a larger phenomenon in Limón. The popularity of African-influenced religion was linked to the social and economic deterioration of the West Indian community's situation in Limón. People turned to Dabney and other alternative spiritual leaders because they offered hope of a better future to people who were destitute.

The details on revivalism in Limón are consistent with descriptions of religious movements elsewhere.[45] Revivalism in Limón was similar to some religious movements in Jamaica where adherents often converted "shortly after traumatic experiences involving economic disasters."[46] Economic and social disasters are also a primary component in the rise of millenarian movements in other parts of the world.[47] In Limón, the effects of the economic crisis in the 1930s were most felt by the West Indian community because the upheaval that resulted from the decline of the banana industry was compounded by government attempts to impose more control over Limón. West Indians were deprived of their livelihoods as the United Fruit Company began to move its operations to the Pacific coast, yet were required to pay more of their meager incomes to the government as Costa Rican authorities assumed direct control over Limón.

Another aspect of revivalism in Jamaica that appears to have been characteristic of the version in Limón was the predominance of women participants who were motivated "at least in part by the need for economic security."[48] While studying Pocomia in Jamaica, Donald Hogg found that many of the women were single, separated, or widowed and that many left the group after entering relationships with men or achieving economic security.

[45] Literature on many other religious cults reflect the same sorts of social dislocation that were present in Limón. For examples, see Edward Seaga, "Revival Cults in Jamaica," *Jamaica Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (June 1969), or Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, (New York, 1959) or Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order*, (Chapel Hill, 1979).

[46] Hogg, "Jamaican Religions" pp.286-88.

[47] For example, G.W. see Trompf, editor, *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements*, (New York, 1990) and Michael Barkun, *Disaster and the Millennium*, (New Haven, 1974).

[48] See Hogg, "Jamaican Religions," 286-87.

Revivalism, with its emphasis on communal security, no matter how poorly organized, had the potential to attract many women in Limón where plantation agriculture took men to work camps. Moreover, the economic crisis of the 1930s affected women more than men because of the limitations society placed on their ability to secure work outside the home. Men tended to be more mobile and thousands left the country in search of work.

The hysteria created by the increased popularity and notoriety of Pocomia in Limón was fuelled by the threat of the sects. People like Dabney catered to individuals who were not comfortable with the existing choices in religious affiliation. Adherents of the sects infuriated the West Indian leaders because the Hispanic press used hearsay about Pocomia to denigrate the entire community. Dabney's followers were said to be "haunted," or led by "evil spirits."[49] There were rumours that the police had discovered several human skeletons in Dabney's temple and that the practitioners of Pocomia used human blood in their ceremonies. Although the rumours circulated freely, an informant stated that they were "not verified but it was noised around" and that the "noise" became too loud for community leaders to bear.

The Costa Rican government, which was always wary of the potential for racial violence against the Hispanic minority in Limón, relied on public opinion to determine when Pocomia could be suppressed. Limón's local newspaper carried extensive accounts of the sect's vile practices and often mocked those who believed in the preachings of people like Dabney. Samuel Nation's articles against Pocomia and in support of police action were taken as the sanction of the community leadership. In a report written by the local chief of detectives and echoed in a report by the Justice Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Relations, justification for the treatment of the Revivalists was linked to articles in *The Atlantic Voice*.[50] The newspaper's attacks on Dabney served to fuel the discrimination that was already being experienced by the West Indian community.

Samuel Nation was not the only one to take a firm stand against the sects that were endemic to Limón. According to *The Atlantic Voice*, several dozen members of the West Indian community wrote President León Cortés to express their "utter regret and shame" concerning the "heinous mysticism" that characterized Dabney and his followers. They thanked Cortés for his timely intervention in the matter and urged him to continue his efforts to eradicate Pocomia in Costa Rica. The support of community leaders for government repression did not curb the incidence of religious fanaticism, but it did provide a precedent for further action against West Indians.

In the months and years that followed, the Costa Rican government took advantage of élite West Indian support for, and British ambivalence toward, the suppression of the religious sects. On several occasions local police officials harassed and occasionally arrested members of minority religious groups.

[49] *The Searchlight*, 26 Dec. 1931.

[50] A.N.C.R., Relaciones Exteriores Series, No. 1819 Bis.

Repression worked to silence some people, but did not put an end to the existence of what were labelled as religious cults, nor did it lessen the élite's anxiety over the heightened profile of the community's African heritage.

A few months after the first crack-down on African-influenced religions the local élite became concerned that some of Dabney's former disciples had begun to follow a man who became known in the press as the new "Pocomanian" chief. George Davis was the leader of the Pentecostal Union Baptist Church which was affiliated with the Pentecostal Union Society in Oregon. When one of Davis's so called followers murdered his young sister, the priest was arrested for complicity in the act. According to newspaper reports, Ferdinand McIntosh had a fit of insanity and Davis was called to use "spiritual powers" to cure the man. McIntosh had been "apprehended" near the Panamanian border and returned to Limón because he was unable to care for himself.[51] During a fit of anger he was thrown to the ground and bound hand and foot by concerned neighbours. Davis arrived, prayed with the man and after he had calmed down, released him from his bonds.

The next morning, McIntosh apparently awoke in a rage, took off his clothes and chased his family out of the house with a machete. The family hid in a neighbouring house where McIntosh burst in and attacked them. The unfortunate victim of his wrath was his four-year-old sister whom he "made into mince meat."[52] McIntosh was eventually subdued by concerned neighbours, but Davis was also sought by the police as a contributor to the tragedy.

When Davis was finally arrested a few weeks later, he was accused of more than merely contributing to the incident. Hysteria over Pocomia had replaced common sense and *The Atlantic Voice* alleged that McIntosh had been advised by Davis to "get a sacrifice and eat its brain and heart."[53] Davis was released from custody for lack of evidence, but his reputation as a "Pocomaniac" had been established. Undaunted by the negative publicity, he continued to teach his religious beliefs to those who would listen.

Like Dabney, Davis was considered by the local authorities to be a thorn in their side. The week before the tragedy, in a scene reminiscent of Jesus clearing a temple of money changers, Davis had "run amuck" and insulted a United Fruit Company official.[54] The suspected Pocomia priest cleared a meeting of the Jamaican Burial Scheme Association out of a house owned by the company. Use of the house had been given to Davis to hold religious services and he considered it to have been "consecrated to the service of his god." In response to the attack, United Fruit cancelled Davis's complimentary

[51] In the late 1930s the Costa Rican and Panamanian governments were disputing the boundary between the two countries. United Fruit Company officials and Costa Rican authorities occasionally apprehended people who they thought might be attempting to slip into Panama. Unofficial migration of West Indians from Costa Rica was a delicate subject for the Panamanian government. Ferdinand McIntosh may have been caught trying to enter Panama illegally.

[52] *The Atlantic Voice*, 3 Apr. 1937.

[53] *The Atlantic Voice*, 17 Apr. 1937.

[54] *The Atlantic Voice*, 24 Apr. 1937.

travelling pass, which he used to take his message throughout the province and *The Atlantic Voice* began a series of personal attacks on the new Pocomia priest in town.

After the initial hysteria over the young girl's death, Davis was forced to disassociate himself publicly from Pocomia and devote his attention to the faith of the Pentecostal Baptist Society. Nevertheless, his chapel was broken into and searched by police in January 1938 because of rumours that he had once again been practising Pocomia.[55] All the police found and confiscated was a copy of the Bible and some lanterns. A few days after the raid, the *Diario de Costa Rica* published a picture of Dabney and his wife along with an article stating that the government would be deporting anyone else who was considered to be a Pocomian.[56] However, the police were found to have acted illegally by breaking into the chapel, and Davis went on the offensive by threatening legal action against anyone who slandered him by linking his church with Pocomia.[57] The problem for the government was that unlike Altiman Dabney, Davis did not take his wrath out on the president of the country. Consequently, the government was unable to argue that he was a pernicious person. In November 1938, Governor Alvarado's request that Davis be deported was denied by the Secretary of the Interior because the government lacked the evidence needed to pass a deportation decree.[58]

Alvarado's deportation of Dabney and attempted expulsion of Davis were consistent with and linked to an earlier attempt to rid Limón of "undesirable foreigners." In 1936, Alvarado appealed to the new president, León Cortés, for a solution to the problems caused by mentally ill "individuals from a foreign race" who were wandering the streets of Limón.[59] The government responded by stating that Costa Rica was not responsible for foreigners resident in the country and the British consul was asked to help send undesirable West Indians to Jamaica.

A list of over fifty individuals who were considered to be too dangerous to be loose in Costa Rica was produced and the government attempted to deport all of them to Jamaica. Almost half of the dangerous foreigners were women, and while the Costa Rican authorities considered most to be Jamaican, the authorities knowingly included the names of people who had been born in Costa Rica or on other Caribbean islands. With the assistance of the British consul, the Costa Rican government appealed to the Jamaican government to accept responsibility for the entire group. After a series of diplomtic communiqués, the Costa Rican government was unable to convince Jamaican authorities to take responsibility for the people on the list and none of them were deported.[60]

[55] *The Atlantic Voice*, 22 Jan. 1938.
[56] *El Diario de Costa Rica*, 18 Jan. 1938.
[57] *The Atlantic Voice*, 19 Feb. 1938.
[58] A.N.C.R., Gobernación Series, No. 8866-3.
[59] A.N.C.R., Relaciones Exteriores Series, No. 1819 Bis.
[60] ibid.

West Indian community leaders were also concerned about the problem posed by individuals who drew unflattering attention to Limón. People in the province already found themselves in a tenuous economic position after United Fruit began its move to the Pacific coast and by 1936 West Indians in Costa Rica were experiencing heightened levels of discrimination by Hispanics. They understood the threat that growing numbers of apparently sick people posed to the well-being of the entire community. Therefore, West Indian community leaders were quick to join the Costa Rican authorities in their attempt to deal with the supposed spread of mental illness.[61]

The Governor of Limón and leading members of the West Indian community worked together to get to the root of the problem. However, they did not link the apparent rise of mental illness to the marginalization or increased discrimination against the West Indian community in Costa Rica. Instead, the West Indian élite and their Hispanic counterparts assumed that the heightened popularity of African-influenced religious practices was one of the "principal causes of so many insane Negroes" in Limón.[62] Therefore, the threat of Pocomia became the excuse necessary to suppress any form of deviant behaviour in Limón.

Despite police vigilance against the suspected practitioners of Pocomia, the sects continued to be popular in Limón. The government's response was to arrest people of African descent. When no other description of criminal activity suited the circumstances, they were charged with "immorality or having bad social customs." Police records during the period of heightened hysteria over the sects indicate the degree of government action. In the annual reports on crimes committed in the provinces, the police in Limón showed that they had charged a far higher percentage of people with moral infractions than anywhere else in the country. The following table shows that, on a per capita basis, in 1937 as much as thirteen times as many people were charged with morality crimes in Limón than in other provinces.

The arrest and occasional deportation of individuals were the most expedient means of attacking the "maniacs," but other solutions were also considered. Continued agitation by Limón's leading citizens led the government to look into the possibility of sterilizing people who were considered to be incurably insane.[63] *The Atlantic Voice*, the English half of the local newspaper which prided itself as being at the forefront of attempts to "uplift the negro race," considered sterilization to be the only effective method of stemming the evil in society. In a remarkable comment, the English language editor, Samuel Nation, argued in favour of the sterilization of "the offspring of germ infested,

[61] The British authorities in Costa Rica demonstrated their concern by asking the United Fruit Company to "come to the rescue" by granting several "old, sick indigent women" free passage to Jamaica. See *The Atlantic Voice*, 22 May 1937.

[62] *The Atlantic Voice*, 26 Sept. 1936.

[63] *The Atlantic Voice*, 12 Nov. 1938.

diseased parents, who must not only drag out their own weary, wretched existence, but who . . . constitute a dangerous menace" to public health.[64]

Crimes committed against morality and good customs

Province	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	Population*
San José	40	16	86	185	208	153,183
Alajuela	4	5	21	38	67	97,577
Cartago	2	4	19	43	32	70,198
Guanacaste	1	9	23	27	62	51,142
Heredia	4	1	14	54	37	38,407
Limón	**15**	**6**	**113**	**166**	**80**	**32,278****
Puntarenas	9	15	40	42	50	28,739
Total	75	36	316	555	536	471,524

* Population figures are taken from the 1927 census and are meant to serve as an indication of the relative dimensions of the police action.

** According to the 1927 census, 58 percent of the provincial population was either "negro or mulatto."

Source: Gobierno de Costa Rica, *Anuario Estadístico*, (1935-1938) Reproduced by Chadwyck-Healey Ltd., London.

When Nation's attacks against the practitioners of Pocomia diminished, his counterpart with *La Voz de Atlántico* published editorials that went even further in their condemnation.[65] In April 1939, *La Voz del Atlántico* raised fears among its readers by stating that Pocomia had reached new heights in the region.[66] According to an editorial, adherents of Pocomia were involved in desecrating of graves, robbing corpses, dealing in body parts, and kidnapping children.[67] The editorial asked the government to use stronger measures to eliminate the sects from Costa Rica. The paper presented Pocomians as a threat to all the decent people in the province and predicted more tragedies if the "Altimen" were not eliminated.

The editorials against Pocomia reported the most outrageous abuses said to have been committed by the sects. What was lacking and what the police

[64] ibid.

[65] Obeah is a form of traditional medical and spiritual practice that is performed by gifted individuals known as Obeahmen.

[66] *La Voz del Atlántico*, 1 Apr. 1939.

[67] The editorial also added to the lexicon of the Spanish language by referring to the leaders of Pocomia cults as the "Altimen."

authorities seem to have overlooked was that not a single incident of so called "black magic" had been uncovered. Everything was hearsay and based on police reports that speculated on the nature of items found in the possession of practitioners. The information about practices that filtered to the government and newspapers was based on observations of ceremonies. Women were said to wear white turbans and to dress in white gowns. At meetings, adherents were said to jump about, scream and even fall into a comatose state.[68] Nonetheless, there were few consistent patterns of deviant behaviour and the authorities may not have been able to distinguish between Pocomia and other nonconformist religious expressions.

Consequently, the doubts about the practices of Pocomia also carried over to speculation about the exact nature of other, presumably more respectable, groups. Davis was not the only leader of a Protestant sect to be targeted for harassment. While the initial attacks were against people like Dabney, other less threatening groups also became targets. The United Fruit Company joined in the harassment by suspending its sponsorship of annual excursion trains for religious denominations. According to *The Atlantic Voice*, the decision was made because of the "bad behaviour and unwarranted miscarriage of law and order among certain groups who patronized the excursions."[69]

At the height of the hysteria over Pocomia sects, the local newspaper lumped other groups like the "Witnesses of Jehovah, Russelites, Adventists and Bedwardites" in the same category.[70] All were non-conformist and exclusive groups who attracted some members away from the mainstream churches. The Bedwardites and some Adventists also had elements of racial intolerance to them, and, therefore, posed a real threat to the interests of the West Indian élite. In response to the attacks, Frank Fletcher, a Seventh Day Adventist minister, wrote to *The Atlantic Voice* to complain about the ignorance of the writer. He argued that the Seventh Day Adventists were respected throughout the world and that the newspaper should attempt to prove things before printing them.[71] Despite Fletcher's criticism the newspaper did not change its editorial policy and the attacks on divergent religious groups continued into the next year.

In most cases, the people who were least able to defend themselves came under attack and the West Indian élite did little to help. People who drew unflattering attention to the community were scorned by more respectable members. Community leaders chose to join in the condemnation of individuals who were at the fringes of society because they did not want Hispanic society to reject all West Indians. Some community members enjoyed a greater degree of economic security than others and they were protective of it.

[68] For a good description of the rituals see Seaga, "Revival Cults in Jamaica."
[69] *The Atlantic Voice*, 22 June 1940.
[70] *The Atlantic Voice*, 31 July 1937.
[71] *The Atlantic Voice*, 7 Aug. 1937.

West Indian community leaders had developed what Frantz Fanon has called "black skin" and "white masks."[72] Accordingly, the community that they represented was portrayed as one whose members were childlike and in need of direction. Community leaders adopted the same values and stereotypes as the dominant Hispanic society. Where discrimination against West Indians was obvious, community leaders blamed West Indians for not doing their part to demonstrate that they were equal in every way to the Hispanic majority. The attitude of the West Indian leadership reflected attitudes that were prevalent in highland society and helped the government justify its over-reaction to Pocomia in Limón.

The hysteria over Pocomia began to subside in 1939 and disappeared from public records as quickly as it had appeared. The repression worked because it forced people to hide their affiliation with religious practices that were regarded with disdain. Consequently, accounts of Pocomia no longer occupied unwarranted space in newspapers and the number of people arrested for morality crimes decreased to levels that were comparable to those of other provinces. Costa Rican authorities and West Indian community leaders began to focus their attention elsewhere. War had come to the world and people of German descent became the new threat to internal security.

However, Pocomia was not merely a passing episode in the history of the West Indian community in Costa Rica. It was part of a larger social malaise that marked a turning point in the relationship between the West Indian minority and Hispanic majority in Costa Rica. After 1938, more people of African descent than ever before began leaving the country in search of opportunities elsewhere. At the same time, the number of Costa Rican-born West Indians who became citizens began to increase.[73] For a time, Pocomia offered some members of the West Indian community a solution to their problems; they put their faith in the "God of the black race" to protect them from the racism that was endemic in Limón.

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[72] Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, (Paris, 1952).

[73] See Ronald Harpelle, "The Social and Political Integration of West Indians in Costa Rica: 1930-1950," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 25, Part 1, (Feb. 1993).