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ABSTRACT

This paper examines racial composition in the Dominican Republic from the pre-Columbian period, conquest, and colonization to the formation of the Dominican nation. Even in the prehistoric era, the culture of the area that was to become the Dominican Republic was diverse, with a variety of dialects among the native peoples. With the arrival of the Spanish to the New World, a link was added. African slaves added further to the diversity of the population of Santo Domingo, bringing a new cultural heritage and new farming techniques. Immigrants from the Canary Islands and Sephardic Jews arrived to contribute to the island culture, as did Puerto Ricans and Cubans who came in colonial times. English speaking Caribbean immigrants came at the end of the 19th century, and Chinese migration completed the cultural and racial picture of the Dominican Republic in the 20th century. With this diversity of racial groups, it is possible to speak of a hybrid national culture. By understanding this racial complexity, it becomes possible to understand the turbulent social history of this small nation. This background also permits the understanding of the Dominican educational system in terms of its historical framework without making a mistake in comparing it to the analogous educational system of the Americas. (SLD)

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The Dominican Racial Setting: Frame of Reference for the Understanding of Cultural Diversity in the Dominican Republic

by
Francisco Chapman

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The Dominican Racial Setting: Frame of Reference for the Understanding of Cultural Diversity in the Dominican Republic

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1997

This paper examines racial composition in the Dominican Republic from the pre-Colombian period, conquest and colonization to the formation of the Dominican nation. Several ideas dealing with race and cultural diversity in the Dominican Republic are discussed. The use of historical facts helps to clarify the Dominican idiosyncrasy and racial edifice. Francisco Chapman is Assistant Professor of Education in the Educational Foundations and Interdisciplinary Studies at Western Illinois University.

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Foreword

This Occasional Paper puts into perspective the reality of the racial and cultural diversity that exists in the Dominican Republic. The dearth of cultural knowledge and historical facts has often led to a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Dominicans both in their native land and abroad. It is hoped that this paper will help readers to better understand the historical context of Dominicans currently residing in the United States. It is through the understanding of the mechanisms that have produced cultural isolation and identity crisis among this ethnic group that the harmony of multiculturalism will be achieved.

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Introduction

Cultural diversity in the Dominican Republic is framed by a pattern of integration between the different cultures which coincide in this sociohistorical panorama. The development of present-day Dominican society is no different than that which evolved during its prehistory when various native groups migrated to the island of Santo Domingo and began a process of cultural integration that coincided with their "modus vivendi." One fundamental element documenting this process of diversity and unity is concentrated in the motor element of culture and, in particular, language. Marcio Veloz Maggiolo states,

> because the Arawak tongue consisted of a group of dialects without true unity, although derived from a common mother trunk, it is neither true that the continental dialect was spoken in the Antilles, nor that it was common to all islands. The aboriginal groups must have understood each other, on first contact, because of the original etymologies of the mother tongue, or of similar derivations and words in the dialects.[1]

This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the so-called "Ciguayos" spoke, along with the "Macoriges," dialects different from the island dialect.[2]

The purpose of this paper is neither to go into details about the development of the native culture nor to engage in a linguistic study of that period. Rather, it is to make some observations on Dominican cultural diversity and how race hybridism has shaped modern-day Dominican society. To understand the historical and cultural development of the people from the Dominican Republic and to appreciate the processes of their cultural diversity and integration, it is important to begin with an analysis of their origin and development. To advance erroneous and outmoded conceptions about the native culture can easily lead to faulty assumptions about the extent of native contributions in the Dominican Republic. On this particular point, Bernardo Vega cautions us: "One should not exaggerate the Indian element in our culture. Genetic factors, in and of themselves, explain the

weightier influence of the European and African cultures in our formation of ours. Nevertheless, if justice is to be done, what is most amazing is the endurance of some cultural forms inherited from the Indians, even though the period of contact was so short."[3]

The Dominican Racial Setting: A Historical Overview

The Arawak and African ethnics converge on the island of Santo Domingo and, paradoxically, underwent the same linguistic process in relatively analogous circumstances. The natives as well as the Africans spoke different dialects among themselves which made communication difficult at times but at the same time enriched the linguistic development of the island. Vega notes, "The African and the Indian elements fused, without a doubt, producing from the very beginning hybrid situations which the Blacks continued to pass on in the island of Santo Domingo and in the other Antilles."[4]

To clearly understand this embryonic cultural diversity in the island of Santo Domingo, it is necessary to delve deeper into the native system of everyday interaction and their conceptions of family and clan. It is important to add that this original hybrid quality of the inhabitants of Santo Domingo is not an isolated case. Marvin Harris, in his book *Patterns of Race in the Americas*, points out that, "The people and cultures of all the American nations are to some extent hybrid products of centuries of racial and cultural mixture."[5]

With the arrival of the Spaniards to the New World, a new link was added to the history of the development of the race. The Spaniards not only became a new element in these lands, but they also introduced the African and Spanish races to create a fusion of racial diversity. This mixture constitutes, without a doubt, the foundation of the present-day Dominican racial edifice. This racial order consolidates, through immersion, the social entity known as the Dominican Republic. This very

pattern is also reproduced elsewhere in the Americas, with the difference being that in some of those other countries the natives survived while in others the introduction of Black African slaves impeded the full development of the mulatto as an important element of their racial constitution. Marvin Harris asserts,

> In order to understand the present-day distribution of racial and cultural types in the New World, the variable which initially deserves emphasis is the nature of the aboriginal societies with which the Europeans came into contact. One of the most important features of the American environment from the point of view of the European colonist, whether Conquistadors or pilgrims, was not the climate or the topography. It was instead the level of sociocultural integration characteristic of the Amerindian societies with which the European were obliged to interact.[6]

The natives of the island of Santo Domingo organized their society in "cacicazgos" with a communal economy based on the distribution of production according to need. The "Naborias," or workers, performed tasks related to the society production. Farming, for instance, was designated as a female occupation. The "Nitainos" took charge of the chase, fishing and defense of the village; the "cacique" planned agricultural production and distribution of goods among tribes; and the "behique" healed and provided spiritual guidance to the tribe. The form and types of agricultural work implemented by the natives are still visible in the present cultural setting: "In an eminently agricultural country like the Dominican Republic is still today, and given that most methods are traditional, the importance of the slash-and-burn clearing techniques and of the 'conuco' cannot be underestimated; both were inherited from the Indians."[7] This demonstrates that even in the twentieth century the Dominicans continue to practice modalities of aboriginal farming techniques.

The African slaves played a preponderant role in preserving the native farming techniques and way of life: "By the time the Antillean Indians became extinguished, the Africans had managed to learn the techniques to cultivate the yucca and to prepare the cassava bread. Thus, the slash-and-burn

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clearing techniques common among the Taino Indians were passed on to posterity in the island of Santo Domingo. This farming method was indiscriminately practiced by sugar mill owners in order to sustain the labor force which produced gold and sugar in the seventeen century."[8] Tobacco, along with corn and peanuts, is also an important Taino agricultural contribution. According to Veloz Maggiolo,

> All indigenous products of Santo Domingo survived: yams, the "funde" and other African agricultural products came only to complements, item which still today figure prominently in the Dominican daily diet: the sweet potato, the "yautia" (dhautia), the "guayiga," the "Jagua," the "jobo," corn, the "liren," peanuts, even yucca itself, and a variety of hot and sweet peppers. Later on, plantains and rice would be added to these products.[9]

Both the Africans and the Tainos were utilized as fundamental elements of the colonial labor force. Thus, Africans were able to use native implements, utensils and even techniques when they assimilated social experiences linked to the surrounding medium:

> the canoe, a most important element of transportation; the hammock, a handguns amazon bed; fishing systems which used "barbasco" (great mullein) poison; smoking as a way to preserve meat; the "maraca" rattle for their festivities; palm fiber basketry which includes the "macuto" knapsack, an important item in the transportation of goods, and the sleeping mat; [and] the conch used as warning trumpet.[10]

The Africans absorbed these experiences and managed to preserve the important elements of their native heritage.

The natives with their agricultural system and language left indelible footprints on the Dominican cultural panorama. The Africans, either pure or half-bred, reformulated (to the extent possible) part of their cultural heritage on Dominican soil. Even within surrounding limitations, they projected, as time went on, their cultural strength and their place in the history of the land. The Spaniards unknowingly transformed the original culture and, more importantly, produced a new racial element adapted to living in the tropical latitudes. This in no way underestimates the cultural

contributions of other groups of immigrants whose presence in the Dominican cultural panorama is beyond question.

During the sixteen century, the merciless treatment of the Spanish colonists contributed to the extermination of the Tainos. History points out the forced labor in gold mines, the indiscriminate abuses from the Spanish colonists and the disintegration of the kinship structure as the main causes for the Taino annihilation. Hugo Tolentino, in his book *Raza e Historia en Santo Domingo* (Race and History in Santo Domingo), pointed out that, "In Santo Domingo, the Indians disappeared, for practical purposes, halfway through the sixteen century. Of the 200,000 or more original inhabitants, in 1548 . . . only about 500 remained between children and adults who were naturals and of the same stock or descent as those first ones."[11] This massacre limited the possible cultural impact of the native culture on the development of the colony and in the subsequent formation of the nation.

Forced sexual relations between the natives and the Spaniards resulted in the proliferation of the mestizo—the persecuted and discriminated against half-bred victims of the "blood purity" prejudice later wielded by the colonizers. Most frequently, the development of sexual relations was framed within patterns of domination and oppression. Research conducted on the racial colonialization process indicates that sexual contacts between the Spaniards and female Indians were inscribed within a context of brutality which allowed the lewdness of single men in need of women to be expressed in rapes and violations. Part of the extermination of the natives were also due to the contraction of European diseases and concrete situations of oppression which pushed them to collective suicide, or to rebellion. The exploitation and violent nature of contact with the Spaniards led to the death of many Arawaks and constituted an important element in their disappearance.

Ignorance about the sickness and low metabolic defenses of Indians created the conditions which allowed the diseases to make a considerable dent in the native population.

As slaves replaced the natives in the gold mines, they found a similar fate. Victims of humiliation and discrimination they proliferated on the island. Yet the result of the exploitation of this group were different from those of the native inhabitants. Slavery triggered a process of "de-culturation," forcing the Africans, away from their native land, to adapt to the existing conditions and develop new value systems. The Spaniards' feelings of racial superiority led to a construction of the native and Black races as inferior. It is no coincidence that in the historical development of America, the racial differences between natives, mestizos and Blacks are elaborated into a host of racist theses. Both the natives and the Africans were immersed in a process of cultural assimilation imposed and sustained by the military superiority of the colonizers—the controllers of power on the island. The result of this process is evident in the study of the cultural history of the colonized islands.

As early as the sixteenth century, colonists from the Canary Islands, "canaries" or "islenos," roamed the island of Santo Domingo as settlers having arrived initially as workers performing different tasks in the sugar manufacturing industry. By the end of the seventeenth century the Crown itself had planned several immigration waves. They founded cities and ghettoes. Such is the history of the rise of the San Carlos Quarter on the eastern part of the capital city. According to H. Hoetink, in his book *El Pueblo Dominicano* (The Dominican People), "Halfway through the seventeen century new blood was infused into San Carlos again by honest and laborious immigrants from the Canary Islands. By the end of the nineteen century, San Carlos had become part of the urban complex of Santo Domingo although it had preserved its own identity."[12]

The Canerian groups populated other parts of the island of Santo Domingo among them the city of Samana, abandoned and repopulated by the Canarians in 1756 and Sabana de la Mar in that same year. The colonial authorities gave settlers plantations and cattle. Later, in 1764, the Canerians, together with the Spanish and Dominican landowners, founded the city of Bani. According to Hoetink, this city can be called "the Dominican Canary" because it has managed to maintain a cleaner Spanish lineage, to the point that until a few years back there were no people of color living there.[13] Montecristi and Puerto Plata were other Canarian settlements on the island.

After the signing of the Treatise of Basilea, Santo Domingo became attractive to groups of Sephardic Jews from Curacao who settled in various parts of the island. By the nineteenth century, Jewish immigrants had settled in the oriental part of the island. Reliable data attest to this fact: "The tombstone considered to be the oldest in what was the Jewish section of the cemetery on Independence Avenue in the capital says: Jacob Pardo, Natif de Amsterdam, age 46 et decede 6 Dec. 1826. Avec regret de sa famille et amis."[14]

The formation of the Dominican state in 1844 marked the beginning of the prominent participation of the Jews in the Dominican Republic through their houses of commerce:

> Around 1830, during the period of Haitian domination, the Rotschild House of Commerce from Saint Thomas established an affiliate in Santo Domingo under the name of Rotschild and Cohen. But it is primarily during the 1840's, and especially after independence in 1844, that the presence of Sephardic Jews (almost without exception from Curacao) becomes most noticeable."[15]

These individuals contributed most notably to the financing of the independence of the Dominican Republic. Afterwards, they controlled the financial policies of the young republic. The decadence of their economic impact was linked to their assimilation to everyday Dominican life. As the Jews were absorbed into the top social stratum of the epoch, they began to lose their economic ethos,

adopting the economical mentality of those who would much rather invest their riches in houses and real estate, and who chose for their male offspring the traditional academic preparation of doctor or lawyer over the preparation for a business career. As soon as more important government positions were occupied by them, their interest in commerce was relegated as a second option. The economic and political contributions of Sephardic Jews were of great importance to the island from their first incursions in it to their direct participation in the formation and development of the nation.

Cubans and Puerto Ricans also participated in the development of the Dominican culture within the framework of the political life of the "sister colonies." The colonial situation under which Cuba and Puerto Rico lived compelled their best and most notable sons to fight for their liberty. It is for this reason we find tireless fighters like Betances and Hostos working together in the formation of one nation. Numerous Puerto Ricans lived in the city (Santo Domingo). The two immigrant groups, it is said, worked resolutely to bring about the independence of Cuba—already up in arms—and the projected insurrection of Puerto Rico. For instance, Ramon Emeterio Betances, Puerto Rican patriot and medical doctor, conducted important affairs for the Dominican government from his Paris residence. Eugenio Maria de Hostos established several journals, among them *Las Dos Antillas*, *Las Tres Antillas* and *Los Antillanos*. De Hostos also participated in the development of the Dominican national education. Cubans and Puerto Ricans received free properties from the Dominican government as well as other incentives for investment. Eugenio Maria de Hostos, the pedagogue, speaks of an immigration of the capitals which, fleeing the imminent ruin which had threatened them in Cuba and Puerto Rico, came to take advantage of the free concessions of excellent land offered them.[16] The Puerto Ricans and Cubans, of whom 107 were heads of family, arrived in Santo Domingo. These groups of Puerto Ricans and Cubans became integrated into the lifestyle and

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behavior of the Dominicans, thereby assimilating themselves in a very short period of time into the fabric of the budding nation.

During their domination of the island, between 1822 and 1844, the Haitians initiated the importation of immigrants with the purpose of populating areas of the island which had either been abandoned or never populated. When President Boyer decided to bring freed Blacks from North America, he sent Jonathan Granville to New York to be the agent who would secure the human resources necessary to develop settlements in Santo Domingo. Granville was authorized to offer to whomever wanted to emigrate to the island of Haiti a free trip, free lodging and board for four months and 36 acres of farmland for every twelve workers.[17] Between 6,000 and 13,000 accepted the offer in Philadelphia. Those individuals came primarily from urban areas. Some of them returned to the United States after a short stay in Santo Domingo. Hoetink explains, "On account of the difficulties of adaptation brought about by the climate and culture of the new country, [many of the settlers] returned very shortly; about another third of the original contingent perished in a short time."[18]

The Afro-American immigrants who remained on the island (between 500-600) settled in Santo Domingo City, Santiago, Puerto Plata and Samana. Their presence in Samana had a strong impact on the population, creating a situation where patterns of behavior had to be revised. Between Most of them lived as farmers in the beautiful bay of Samana. These groups of Afro-American immigrants had their religious affiliations and received aid from the Wesleyan Methodist Church of England. They organized their own English-speaking school system, which compared favorably with the Dominican national system. In short, these immigrants formed a cohesive core bound by their religion and their language which gave them grounds to feel superior to the Dominicans. These Afro-

Americans also tried very hard to prevent themselves from assimilating into the mainstream culture. Nevertheless, by 1870 the Afro-American immigrants had become assimilated in regions such as Puerto Plata and the capital city. This came about as a result of their having learned the native language and having established marital ties with the Dominicans. This process of assimilation was not completed in Samana until the latter part of the 19th century. No public recognition was given this group of immigrants, however, until Ulises Heureaux, President of the Dominican Republic, appointed General Anderson as Governor of Samana. This group's most important contributions were in the fields of education and health.

English-speaking Caribbean immigrants arrived at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century lured by the incipient sugar industry. At present the cultural influence of this group, as well as that of other English-speaking immigrants from the Virgin Islands, is prominent throughout the Dominican Republic. Arabs (Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians) also joined the Dominican nation around the same time as the "Cocolos" from the Virgin islands and other English-speaking Caribbean islands. They developed an itinerant commerce in agricultural and other rural zones. During the middle of the twentieth century, Chinese migration completed the cultural and racial picture of the Dominican Republic. Undoubtedly, Dominicans are a rare mix of people centered in the Caribbean with a hybrid composition from the most diverse cultures in the world.

With this diversity of racial groups interacting within the Dominican Republic one can not only speak of a hybrid national culture which provides the patterns within which these cultures are framed, but also (in as much as there are places in this Caribbean island where these same cultural influences project themselves distinctively) an element of diversity which marks distinctions and strengthens the national culture. By understanding this racial complexity one can be sensitized to

understand the turbulent social history in this small nation. This background also permits us to understand the Dominican educational system, in terms of its historical framework without making a common mistake of comparing it with the analogous educational system of the Americas.

Endnotes

1. Marcio Veloz Maggiolo, *Sobre Cultura Dominicana y Otras Culturas (Ensayos)* (Santo Domingo: Editora Alfa y Omega, 1977).

2. Ibid.

3. Bernardo Vega, et al., *Ensayos Sobre Cultura Dominicana* (Santo Domingo: Ediciones Museo del Hombre Dominicano, 1977), p. 12.

4. Ibid., p. 20.

5. Marvin Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (New York: Walker, 1964), p. 1.

6. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

7. Vega, op. cit., p. 12.

8. Ibid.

9. Veloz Maggiolo, op. cit.

10. Ibid.

11. Hugo Tolentino, *Raza e Historia en Santo Domingo* (Santo Domingo: Ediciones UASD, 1974), p. 54.

12. H. Hoetink, *El Pueblo Dominicano: 1850-1900, Apuntes Para Su Sociologia Historica* (Santiago, Republica Dominicana: Coleccion Estudios, Ediciones UCAMAIMA, 1972), p. 55.

13. Ibid.

14. Translation: Jacob Pardo, Native of Amsterdam, 46 years old, died on Dec 6, 1826. With the regrets of his family and friends; ibid., pp. 47-48.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p. 54.

17. Ibid., p. 60.

18. Ibid., p. 61.

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