

## CHAPTER 4

### POPULATION, ETHNIC GROUPS, LANGUAGES

The population of Costa Rica in mid-1968 was approximately 1,597,000, making it the least populous country in Central America, excluding Panamá. The annual growth rate, however, is high, about 3.6 percent, and the population is growing rapidly. Whites and mestizos (persons of mixed Indian and white ancestry) are the dominant ethnic groups, comprising 97 percent of the population. The largest minority group is composed of about 32,000 Negroes whose forebears immigrated from the West Indies to Limón Province in the late 19th century. Indigenous Indian tribes are gradually being acculturated and numbered only from 5,000 to 8,000 in late 1968. Spanish is the national language and is spoken by the majority of the population. The Negroes speak an English dialect which, in recent years, has increased in importance, especially in the business world.

Costa Rica has experienced one of the highest population growth rates in the hemisphere in the last several decades—the combination of a consistently high birth rate and an ever declining death rate. Although the country is not considered overpopulated, the rapidly expanding population is putting great pressures on government and industry to provide necessary and expanding services. Most of the population, however, are too young to help provide these services, nearly half being under 15 years of age. In response to these conditions government and private agencies have initiated family planning programs, and in recent years the growth rate, although still considered very high, has slackened.

Most of the people live in rural areas, but there has been a moderate migration to the cities, particularly to San José. Women have tended to migrate in greater numbers to the urban areas of the Meseta Central where they find job opportunities, whereas men have found greater demand for their services in the port towns of Golfito, Puntarenas, and Limón.

Net immigration is considered negligible, although there is a foreign-born population that appears to be decreasing as a percentage of total population. More than half of the foreign born are from Nicaragua. Most of them live in the provinces bordering their country, as do the immigrant Panamanians, who constitute the second largest foreign-born group. Jamaicans are found overwhelmingly in

Limón Province. Most other foreigners are concentrated in the capital of San José.

Costa Rica has one of the most homogeneous populations in Latin America, since the majority of its people are descended from the Spanish settlers who colonized the highlands. The small bands of existing Indians were driven into isolated areas in the lowlands, and the number of Negro slaves never exceeded 200. Immigration was minimal even from other Spanish colonies; thus the present highland population is predominantly of unmixed white stock, chiefly Mediterranean, originating from Spain.

In the highlands are a number of mestizos descended from the few Indians assimilated into the colonial settlements, but 400 years of contact and interaction have blurred racial lines and eliminated any social or cultural difference. The largest mestizo concentration can be found in the Province of Guanacaste, which did not become part of Costa Rica until the 19th century. Even here there is no feeling of ethnic unity, although the people do have a strong provincial loyalty. This stems from their unique political history, however, and not from their racial stock. There is no racial prejudice between the two areas, and the Guanacasteans are readily accepted into highland society.

The only minority groups of importance are the West Indian Negroes and the remaining Indians. The former who number approximately 30,000 emigrated from Jamaica in the 19th century to work on the construction of railroads, and, later, on the banana plantations. They are found primarily on the Atlantic coast, although after the failure of the plantations in the 1930's, many began moving to the highlands. As of 1968 the majority were subsistence farmers who grew bananas and cacao for export. The older generations have retained both their English language and their West-Indian culture. Only the younger generation considers itself Costa Rican and is attempting to become part of the dominant highland culture.

There are essentially three major Indian groups in the country who number approximately from 5,000 to 8,000. The Chorotega-Mangues of the Nicoya peninsula have been almost wholly assimilated by the surrounding mestizo population and have lost all of their indigenous past except for a few religious beliefs and their agricultural techniques. The Boruca of the southern Pacific area are being rapidly assimilated, and the process has been accelerated in the last 20 years by the completion of the Inter-American Highway near their villages and the operation of government schools in their territory. Today less than 100 speak their native language. The Talamanca tribes of the isolated jungles on the Caribbean coast have preserved more of their pre-Columbian culture than the other two groups. They have been more isolated and subject to fewer Spanish

influences. These Indians have even resisted the conversion efforts of Catholic priests, who have been the most frequent visitors to their territory. Some Talamanca families have moved to the Pacific coast where they have abandoned many traditional ways, but the groups who remain in the east still follow the customs of their ancestors with only minor inputs from Spanish culture.

Spanish is the dominant language of the country. Because there have been fewer foreign influences, the Costa Rican's vocabulary has remained more like the Iberian Spanish than that of most South American countries, particularly those with large Indian populations. Yet 400 years of separation have produced marked changes in speech patterns, and the Costa Rican's pronunciation most nearly resembles that of the Guatemalan Spanish speakers. English is the second language of the country, although it is spoken primarily by 30,000 West Indian Negroes. In recent years, however, it has become a valuable asset in industry and business where bilingualism is highly desired. The remaining five Indian languages all belong to the Chibcha family but are mutually unintelligible. Except for the Talamanca tribes, who adhere strongly to their own traditions and customs, the Indians are abandoning their native tongues and adopting Spanish as they become assimilated into the dominant Costa Rican society.

## POPULATION

### Composition

According to the 1950 census, over 97 percent of the population was either white or mestizo (the two groups being listed together), nearly 2 percent was Negro, and fewer than 0.5 percent was Indian. The 1963 population census did not enumerate the population according to these groupings, but if the 1950 percentages still held in 1968, and there is indication that they did, there were approximately 1,559,000 whites and mestizos, 32,000 Negroes, and 6,000 Indians.

### Age, Sex, and Urban-Rural Distribution

The population is quite young and predominantly rural (see table 4). In 1963, 57.4 percent of the population was under 20 years of