

**ETHNIC DIVERSITY ON A
CORPORATE PLANTATION:
THE UNITED FRUIT COMPANY IN
BOCAS DEL TORO, PANAMA
AND TALA MANCA, COSTA RICA**

By Philippe I. Bourgois

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic Diversity on a Corporate Plantation: The United Fruit Company in Bocas del Toro, Panama and Talamanca, Costa Rica

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This dissertation examines the history of the ethnic composition of the labor force on a United Fruit Company banana plantation on the Atlantic Coast of Panama and Costa Rica. Ten different ethnic groups are discussed, including Blacks of West Indian descent, Guaymi, Kuna and Bribri Amerindians, and six Latin groups (Nicaraguans, Hondurans, Costa Ricans, Panamanians, Chiricanos and Guanacastecans). The history of the integration of each of these groups into the labor force and its location in the local class/ethnic hierarchy is analyzed.

There is a special focus on the ethnic discrimination and the class exploitation faced by each ethnic group. The concept of conjugated oppression is introduced in order to convey the dialectical relationship between economic exploitation and ideological domination (ethnic discrimination). Particular attention is paid to the phenomenon of internalized racism. In this context, the implications of ethnicity and class on historical patterns of political mobilization are analyzed. Each ethnic group tolerates different levels of exploitation and has different capacities for resistance. These change historically, depending upon patterns of integration into the cash economy.

During specific historical periods, management has strategically promoted the ethnic diversity of its labor force in order to augment labor control and to increase levels of exploitation. Some of this

ethnic recruitment is a purposeful "divide and conquer" policy, but much of it is merely a logical response to changing local production requirements and to international economic exigencies.

The material is presented from a historical perspective emphasizing the process of struggle and confrontation. Sources used include archival materials from the United Fruit Company's confidential files (dating from the turn of the century to 1983). In addition data were collected during one year of fieldwork that included residence in a worker's barracks on the plantation.

The central theoretical concern of this study is the articulation between class and ethnicity through an analysis of ethnicity's role in the organization of production and in resistance to exploitation. This discussion is set in the broader context of the relationship between ideology and material reality.

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1: ETHNICITY AND CLASS STRUGGLE

CHAPTER 2: THE SETTING

CHAPTER 1: ETHNICITY AND CLASS STRUGGLE

In recent years, the subject of ethnicity has generated considerable attention and controversy in both scholarship and politics. Despite a plethora of books, articles and journals dedicated exclusively to the topic (cf. Ethnicity, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Research in Race and Ethnic Relations), no general consensus on ethnicity yet exists among anthropologists, or social scientists. By tracing the history of the ethnic composition of the labor force on a banana plantation in Central America I hope to contribute to the discussion on the relationship between ethnicity and class. Specifically, I will examine the role and "meaning" of ethnicity within the productive process. My essential argument is that ethnicity is best understood in the context of unequal power relations i.e., in its articulation with class struggle both within and across classes.

The subject of ethnicity in the context of the plantation imposed itself as the central theme for this dissertation almost against my will. When I began my fieldwork, I had planned to collect data on the details of the productive process and the intricacies of the non-economic forms of coercion practiced by the United Fruit Company on its labor force. Immediately upon my arrival, however, I was forced to recognize--at least on the phenomenological level--the formidable salience of ethnicity in plantation life. In fact, as I exited the bus which brought me to the plantation for the first time, I was greeted by a Kuna Amerindian woman in full traditional dress selling lottery tickets. I found myself surrounded by an array of distinct ethnic groups all constantly referring in a deprecating manner to one another's

phenotypical and cultural characteristics. What follows is an attempt to explicate that initial confrontation.

1.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1.1 Ethnicity Without Class

From a descriptive perspective, the straightforward, subjective definition of ethnicity (most generally accepted by anthropologists cf. Barth ed. 1969) as a socially defined characteristic all peoples possess based on self-ascription and ascription by others, is adequate. Members of the same ethnic group generally share certain identifiable traits such as language, ritual, history, religion, and sometimes phenotype; nevertheless, ethnicity, in its daily manifestation, is a flexible, socially produced phenomenon.

This "common sense" anthropological definition of ethnicity, is the product of a series of debates set in the wrong arena and it is not particularly useful in helping one understand how ethnicity structures social relations. Mainstream anthropological literature has failed to address the origin, and persistence of ethnicity. Instead, ethnicity is treated as a reified trait whose structural significance need not be fathomed. In this dissertation, I analyze ethnicity as an ideological phenomenon: a set of symbolic markers which have been created--or escalated--into a means of structuring power relations.

I will not attempt a systematic review and criticism of the traditional approaches to ethnicity in this introduction as that has been performed adequately elsewhere (eg. Barrera 1979, Berlowitz and Edari eds. 1984). Suffice it to say, that the early literature was

descriptive rather than analytical. Culture was usually treated as a static phenomenon, and historical, political, and economic realities were ignored. Ethnicity was discussed in an idealist vacuum, as the repository of primordial bundles of traits. In the context of Latin America this ahistorical conception presented Amerindian ethnicity as the residue of prehispanic civilizations (Caso 1948). A linear path towards homogenization was predicted (Adams 1967). Social scientists went so far as to present ethnicity as a challenge that had to be overcome by systematic strategies for national integration (Deutsch 1953). The prediction of ethnic homogenization made by the "integrationists," or "developmentalists" as some have called them (Ragin 1979) was not fulfilled. In fact, in many instances, rather than diminishing, ethnicity has re-emerged among minority populations in even more militant forms, spawning a fresh body of mainstream anthropological analysis known as "the new ethnicity" (eg. Bennett ed. 1975, Keyes ed. 1981).

One of the first anthropologists to transcend this static framework, was Eric Wolf (1966a) who introduced to anthropological discourse a more structural appreciation of the larger regional, national (and later international cf. Wolf 1982, Nash 1981) context within which "traditional" peoples operate. He focused on the quality of social relationships within local communities enmeshed in their national, international, and regional networks. Similarly, the early analyses of internal colonialism (Stavenhagen 1970, Gonzalez 1965) and the more ecologically oriented refuge-region hypothesis (Aguirre 1967, Collier 1975) also stressed the broader economic system enveloping local communities. These approaches, nevertheless, still do not place class

and history squarely within the realm of ethnicity; hence the criticisms of the ecological approach (Cole and Wolf 1974), which define more clearly the historical process by which ethnicity emerges through conflict and struggle in a national/regional context (See also Melville 1983, Brickner 1981, Wasserstrom 1983).

The limitations of the anthropological approach to ethnicity in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, to a large extent were due to a fundamental methodological shortcoming plaguing the entire discipline: excessively narrow focuses on local community studies which are set within microcosms. The standard anthropological research technique of participant/observation often prevents fieldworkers from appreciating the larger, structural perspective. Anthropologists have a tendency to embroil themselves in "the great phenomenological swamp" confronting them. Nevertheless, a minimal consensus has emerged within the social science literature that recognizes ethnicity to be a dynamic, constantly changing phenomenon with a historical trajectory set within the context of a larger social formation with which it articulates dialectically. The role of class, within this broadened conception of ethnicity is still a subject of debate, however. In fact, scholars often minimize class--or even omitt it entirely--in their literature reviews (cf. Cohen 1978).

One of the dominant anthropological approaches which continues to marginalize the role of class--and the economy in general--is pluralism (Furnival 1939, Smith 1965). Despite the many penetrating critiques of pluralism (cf. Bartels 1977:396-398, Austin 1983), it continues to be especially influential in the literature on ethnicity in plantation

societies and the Caribbean (cf. Braithwaite 1960). Pluralism is perhaps best understood as the logical product of structural-functionalism, the theoretical approach which has dominated the discipline of anthropology nearly since its inception. Although some pluralists discuss power inequalities (Kuper 1971, Van den Berghe 1975), most limit themselves to tautological, descriptive accounts of the heterogeneous cultural composition of ethnically diverse societies. By confusing the description of phenomena with the analysis of structure, pluralists mute the coercive aspects of economic and power relations. They make no attempt to explain the emergence of differentiated ethnic groups; instead, ethnic diversity per se is converted into the single most important force in society.

1.1.2 The Crucial Nexus: Class and Ethnicity

Perhaps the most important development within theories of ethnicity since the introduction of process and history is the increasing emphasis on conflict, power, and ultimately, class inequality (Vincent 1974). The Black sociologist Oliver Cox (1949) was one of the first scholars to place ethnicity systematically within the context of a discussion of power, political ideology, and class. It was not until recently, however, with the increased legitimacy of marxist analysis in the social sciences, that class, and power relations have been increasingly accepted as important--if not central--to ethnicity. Indeed, even non-marxists have recognized the importance of "...anchor[ing] the study of ethnicity squarely in the matrix of relations of power and relations of production, outside of which ethnic relations can scarcely be understood (Van den Berghe 1975:74)." Some have even called for the

linking of ethnicity to "...objective relations of power and production, conflict and class;" and have stated categorically that "...the relationship between ethnicity and class constitutes the key to an understanding of ethnic conflicts (Ibid. 1975:71,75)." Within mainstream anthropology, a series of volumes on ethnicity (Despres ed. 1975, Keyes ed. 1981, Bennett ed. 1975), as well as theoretical reviews (Banton 1983), have been published which focus on the structure of ethnic group relations and which emphasize political relationships and unequal access to resources. Nevertheless, in the actual practice of testing theory with empirical reality most anthropologists and sociologists (including those published in the edited volumes cited above) fail to place class in the center of their discussion and neglect the complicated historical dynamics of class struggle.

1.1.3 Multi-Disciplinary Political Economy Approaches to Ethnicity

The series of approaches which have been most helpful to me in the analysis of my fieldwork data are those set squarely within a multi-disciplinary political economy framework. The anthropological literature emphasizing class dynamics encompasses a wide spectrum--itself often embroiled in vicious polemics (eg. Leacock 1978, 1982; Bloch 1983). Specifically within the field of ethnicity, these diversely formulated analyses range from the internal colonialism school (Blauner 1972, Hechter 1975) which de-emphasizes the process of class conflict and differentiation within colonized ethnic groups, to more formal class reductionist approaches, which subordinate--although often with reservations--class to ethnicity (Robbins 1973, Forsythe 1979, Pozas 1971, Guzman and Herbert 1974).

More recent, class-based approaches to ethnicity transcend the traditional boundaries of anthropology, drawing on the insights and perspectives of diverse disciplines. For example, theories developed in economics concerning the segmentation of labor (cf. Edwards, Reich, Gordon 1975; Braverman 1974) are useful for understanding ethnicity, as are discussions of imperialism (Sloan 1979). In this vein, one must consider the dynamics of migration and the world system (Burawoy 1976; Folker, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1978; Rhodes 1978; Sassen-Koob 1983); the nature of union struggles (Hill 1974, Nyden 1974, Gutman 1973); the politicization of ideology and nationalist/separatist sentiments (Burawoy 1976; Hechter 1976, 1979; Fox, Aull, and Cimin 1981; Troster 1981); and the details of the labor process and technology itself (Barrera 1979:220-233; Lamphere 1979; Shapiro-Perl 1979; Wells 1984, 1985; Zimbalist ed. 1979).

Increasingly anthropology is moving toward a recognition of the centrality of the political economy of the world system in the analysis of even the most "isolated" local communities. (cf. Wolf 1982, Nash 1981). This world systems, political economy approach links ethnicity to the "rhythms" in the historical development of capitalism. Most importantly ethnicity is rooted not just in the context of unequal power relations, but in the organization of the labor process under the capitalist mode of production (Wolf 1982:379-383). This opens up a vast literature on the work process (eg. review by Burawoy 1979, see also the State University of New York Press' series on labor processes).

The literature on ethnicity within the work process is extensive but of extremely varied quality. In fact, most of it is descriptive and

does not pretend to develop a theory of ethnicity per se (cf. Lieberson 1980, Jain 1970, Lovell-Troy 1981, Loewen 1971, Aho 1967, Wilensky and Ladinsky 1967, Gray 1972). This atheoretical literature is worth consulting, however, if only for the comparative raw material that it offers. In fact, perhaps the best sources for comparative background material are the many technical, statistical reports published by the various federal government agencies of the United States (Census Bureau, Department of Labor, Manpower Advisory Commissions etc.; see Perlo 1984 for a listing of some these studies). These "neutral" statistical accounts present a consistent portrait of a labor force segregated according to ethnicity. Merely through description, they confirm the necessity for ethnicity to be understood in the context of productive relations in general, and the work process in particular.

Similarly, there is a large body of marxist literature which provides descriptive--rather than self-consciously theoretical--analyses of ethnicity within the labor process (eg. Murphy 1984, History Task Force Centro de Estudios Puertorriquenos 1979, and Mullings 1984, see also Joel's 1984 review of the literature). Most of this wide-ranging literature which provides details on the interaction of ethnicity and the organization of production does not pretend to offer a conclusive theory on the significance of culture or ideology. Nevertheless, they were useful to me, even if only to reassure me that the patterns I encountered on the plantation were not an aberration. In short, a review of the empirical studies available confirms the centrality of ethnicity to productive relations in extremely diverse contexts and historical periods.

On a more explicitly theoretical level, Michael Hechter's (1976, 1975, 1979) concept of a cultural division of labor is relevant to the analysis of my fieldwork data; especially his assertion that ethnic cleavages are promoted by the development of capitalism as it scours the world in search of cheap labor. As capitalism spreads it incorporates marginalized populations into the cash economy subordinating them as ethnic groups under the worst possible conditions (see also Petras 1981). The complexity of the ethnic composition of the labor force on the banana plantation where I performed my fieldwork, therefore, is merely one more example of a phenomenon which has occurred repeatedly in other parts of the world. The diversity of the population groups found on the Atlantic Coast of Central America, is related to profits and labor control in the same way as was the immigration-based ethnic diversity of North America in the late 1800s:

Without the Italian, Slav, Greek, Portuguese, French-Canadian, and Russian Jewish workers who furnished the bulk of the labor for the leading American industries by 1900, the industrial expansion that took place between 1880 and 1900 would not have been possible (Wolf 1982:366).

1.1.4 Class Struggle Analysis

Perhaps the most creative recent theoretical development in the literature on ethnicity, is (what I have called for lack of a better term) the "class struggle approach" as presented by Edna Bonacich (1972, 1976, 1979).⁴ A wide variety of authors (probably unaware of one another) have set their analysis of ethnicity directly in the arena of class struggle (Castello 1975, Davis 1980, Smith 1984, Thompson 1979, Wasserstrom 1975).⁵ An emphasis on the historical unfolding of class conflict avoids a mechanical or functional subordination of ethnicity to

economics, and re-focuses the discussion into the arena of process and contradiction. The dynamic itself--rather than class or material reality per se--becomes both what "determines" ethnicity and also what makes it important. The "secret" to ethnicity, consequently lies in the correlation of forces of the various classes and fractions of classes confronting one another within any given social formation. In this manner ethnicity is not reduced to being the product of any single class interest; instead, it emerges from the conflicts of the various class interests constantly confronting one another. This, more dynamic definition of ethnicity, allows for greater flexibility in interpretation:

Far more useful is an approach which emphasizes the class struggle, rather than the predominance of one class over another. Class struggle stresses historical process rather than end-states. Besides, a class struggle approach can help to explain many paradoxical results (Bonacich 1979:39).

Class struggle, of course, is the ongoing, everyday unfolding of divergent interests that sets one class against another (managers versus laborers in the case of my field research) and which, in the process of conflict and accomodation, shapes social organization and identity. Class itself is generally defined as a category of people who share a common relation in the social division of labor. One's class position is determined by one's location within the social relations of production of society and by one's relationship to the means of production. As Eric Wright (1976) and Nicos Poulantzas (1974) have argued, political and ideological relations are part and parcel of the determinants of class position since what is important is not legal status or ownership, but rather "real" economic control of the means of production (Poulantzas 1974:18-19 cited in Wells 1985:4).

In the context of the banana plantation in Bocas del Toro the notion of a confrontation between a working class and a management class is not sufficient. An internal hierarchy exists within the complex categories of managers and laborers. The concept of class fractions, therefore is of paramount importance (eg. Flamarion and Perez 1982:79-86). The complicated hierarchy of differentiated tasks involved in export banana production has created a ranking within the workforce which I will be referring to as the "local occupational hierarchy." This task-based occupational hierarchy conflates with ethnicity to create what I will call the "local class/ethnic hierarchy." Structures of privilege and prestige differentiate the day laborers amongst themselves. Similarly, the different types of skilled workers as well as the several levels of managers are ordered hierarchically. The various categories of workers on the plantation, consequently have distinct perceptions of their class interests and they espouse ideologies (of which racism is one of the most salient) to defend their positions of relative privilege. A useful comparative example is Bonacich's (1979:43) argument that racism in South Africa is the product of class struggle between privileged White workers and cheaper Black laborers, rather than between capital and labor per se as others have claimed (eg. Wolpe 1972, Burawoy 1976).

This raises the question of the role of ideology (class consciousness) in defining class (see Rude 1980, Smith 1984 for summaries of the debates on this subject). E.P. Thompson's (1963) contribution was seminal on this issue. By granting the political sphere a relative autonomy from class he avoids economic determinism in the definition of both class and ideology. Indeed, a consensus on how

to define class (parallel to the class struggle approach to ethnicity) is emerging: "...one must begin with class struggle in any treatment of class (Smith 1984:19, see also Poulantzas 1976, Wells 1985:3)."

1.2 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

1.2.1 Organizational Summary

In the second half of this introduction, instead of extending my review of the literature on ethnicity and political economy, I will preview the content of my thesis and highlight only those theoretical approaches which are directly relevant to the analysis of my fieldwork data. Although the subject matter of this dissertation spans a 100 year period, I have chosen to divide up the chapters by ethnicity rather than presenting them as a chronological account. This introduces a logistical tension to the narrative, and has augmented the risk of my analysis appearing ahistorical. It has the advantage, however, of delimiting more clearly my central theoretical concern. The dissertation, therefore, is divided into seven parts each devoted--with the exception of the one on Latins--to a distinct ethnic group in the plantation social formation. In each case, I begin with a discussion of the group's initial incorporation into the plantation labor force, examining its location in the local occupational hierarchy. I analyze each ethnic group's resistance to exploitation, as well as management's strategy for augmenting labor control. The second half of each section focuses on ideology: ethnic discrimination, and patterns of political and organizational mobilization.

Because of the possible confusion caused by not having proceeded with

a chronological account, I will provide here a thumbnail sketch of the many populations which have passed through the ranks of the Transnational's labor force during its century of operation in Bocas del Toro province (see Figure 1). The very first banana workers were Black West Indians beginning in the 1880s. They founded the banana industry, clearing the jungles, draining the swamps, building the railroads, and planting the bananas. Through the 1920s Black immigrants constituted the bulk of the labor power available to all the industries which were established along the Atlantic litoral of Central America and Panama prior to the turn of the century.

Latins (especially Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans from the northwestern border province of Guanacaste) began to enter the labor force in Bocas in large numbers during the years prior to the Great Depression. During this same period, Blacks increasingly abandoned plantation wage work and established themselves as independent cacao and banana farmers. Many thousands also emigrated to other countries and/or returned to their native Caribbean homelands. ⁶ The demand for labor increased dramatically during and following World War II, obliging the Company to import thousands of Latins from Nicaragua, Honduras, Guanacaste, and Panama's northwestern Pacific Coast province of Chiriqui.

It was not until the post-World War II period that the Company began to employ Amerindians in large numbers. Originally the local indigenous peoples (Bribri, Guaymi, and Teribe) refused to work for the Transnational. During my fieldwork period (1982-1983) both the Teribe and the Bribri, who occupy lands on the immediate periphery of the Plantation rejected wage labor employment on the plantation. The

Guaymi, on the other hand entered the labor force in large numbers beginning in the late 1940s, and since the early 1970s they have constituted a plurality of the Company's day laborers (see Figure 3). In 1952 another Amerindian people, the Kuna, were contracted directly from their native territory (the San Blas archipelago in the Darien jungle of southeastern Panama) to work for the Company for six month stints. During my fieldwork the Kuna constituted approximately six percent of the day labor force (see Figure 3).

1.2.2 "Exploitability" and Labor Control

The fundamental reason for the ethnic diversity of the population in Bocas del Toro is the differential "exploitability" of each ethnic group. At the turn of the century, Black West Indians were the most exploitable population available to capital in the circum-Caribbean region (Petras 1981). By the 1930s they were replaced by Latins (especially Nicaraguans and Guanacastecans) who were the workers most willing to perform the least desirable tasks for the lowest pay. Finally in the early 1950s, the Guaymis replaced the Nicaraguans and Guanacastecans as the "work horses" of the plantation.

Poverty is the most obvious determinant of exploitability. To oversimplify: the poorer the region of origin of a given people, the lower the wages and the worse the living conditions they will accept. This has been aptly described by Michael Burawoy (1976:1082) in reference to South African and Mexican immigrant laborers:

...luxuries superfluous to the basic process of renewal [survival] in the Bantustan or the Mexican village, become necessities in Johannesburg or California. ...the requirements for a minimum standard of living vary from place to place, according to the level of industrial

development.

The determination of wage scales, in the capitalist plantation context, therefore involves a plethora of "cultural factors":

...economists have paid little attention to the cultural aspects involved in the imposition of restrictions on consumption in... new labour force[s]. The consumption requirements of a given society tend to be standardized in terms of the value system of the culture carried by the society. Workers being drawn into a hacienda or plantation type of organization will, in the first instance, tend to judge their reward... on the basis of these antecedent cultural norms rather than in terms of cultural alternatives not yet known to them. [They can be accorded]... a standard of reward consonant with antecedent consumption standards, though by no means necessarily consonant with newly developing cultural evaluations (Wolf and Mintz 1957:384).

Of course poverty alone--no matter whether absolute or culturally defined--is not sufficient to transform a given population group into an exploitable labor force. The correlation of forces in the local class struggle in an ethnic group's home region is of crucial importance. Regions (such as the post-emancipation West Indies, or Nicaragua in the 1930s) where labor control and repression are historically entrenched, produce workers tolerant of considerably higher levels of exploitation. Previous experience with wage labor also affects exploitability (usually negatively from management's perspective) since workers with a framework for comparison are aware that conditions and wages can be altered. Even more importantly, former laborers may have had experience with union organizing.

Also crucial in determining exploitability, is the form of integration into the cash economy of a given population group. The fewer the alternative sources of cash remuneration available to a people, the more likely they will be to sell their labor power at a low

rate. Based on fieldwork on the same plantation in Bocas del Toro, anthropologist Carlos Cabarrus (1982:7) has posited the existence of what might be called a "proletarianization equation": the further away a people are from the plantation vicinity, and the less able they are to commercialize their produce, the more likely they will be to sell their labor power to the Transnational. This is a complicated way of saying what is a matter of common sense to most peasants: it is better to be a small farmer than an agricultural wage laborer. In other words, so long as a rural household has access to both land and accessible markets, no one in that household will perform wage labor. The trend, consequently, has been for each immigrant group to leave plantation wage work as soon as they are able to acquire land and establish themselves as small farmers.
7

Just as there is a differential exploitability between ethnic groups, so too is there a differential ability to resist and to organize. Certain population groups are structurally more vulnerable to exploitation and repression than others. For example, foreign workers on the plantation (i.e., West Indians, Nicaraguans, Hondurans) have historically been deported (or threatened with deportation) whenever they have attempted to organize in defense of their interests. More subtly, vulnerability to repression assumes an ideological and political dimension. Certain population groups are more difficult to mobilize around their economic interests, especially (as in the case of the West Indians) when their historical experience and structural vulnerability has been compounded by racial discrimination.

Resistance--like exploitability--is also a function of the structural

nature of a group's integration into the larger economy. For example because of their lack of integration into the world economy at the turn of the century, the Bribri (unlike the West Indian settlers) were unable to resist the Transnational's appropriation of their land. During my fieldwork period, the Guaymi were the easiest workers to control and dominate because of their lack of experience in the market economy, their monolingualism, illiteracy, abject poverty, and subjection to ethnic discrimination. Indeed, the extreme economic/class exploitation of the Guaymi lends credence to Meillassoux's (1981:97,105, see Rapp 1977) redefinition of "primitive accumulation" as the transfer of values from pre-capitalist societies to monopoly capital. In this respect--the otherwise often reified--paradigm of articulating modes of production of the French economic anthropologists (Rey 1973, Terray 1972) is helpful for explaining how the United Fruit Company (the most advanced representative of monopoly capital in Latin America) has repeatedly searched out pre-capitalist (or marginally capitalist) peoples and incorporated them profitably into its productive structure. The Guaymi social formation is in traumatic, accelerated transition to capitalism. Its incomplete, uneven transition to wage labor and the cash economy converts it into a cheap labor pool for the Transnational. Guaymi territory is a golden pocket of poverty and isolation which has been successfully harnessed into wage labor relations.

1.2.3 Racism and Conjugated Oppression

Another crucial factor in augmenting exploitability is racism (a term which I will be using interchangeably with ethnic discrimination). I will be arguing (as others have noted elsewhere, eg. Gordon 1984) that

oppression is multi-faceted; it is not limited to class or economic exploitation. For analytical purposes, it is useful to distinguish⁹ between ideological domination (of which racism is but one example) and economic or class exploitation. When these two dimensions of oppression (ideological domination and class exploitation) are combined they result in what I call "conjugated oppression." I purposefully use the term conjugated in order to convey the fact that the combination of racism and class exploitation produces a dynamic of oppression which is greater than merely the sum of the two parts.

Conjugated oppression is reproduced in daily interaction by the correlation between the local ethnic hierarchy and the local occupational hierarchy described just above. Its most obvious expression in the plantation context is what I call de facto apartheid relations of production. Workers are assigned to ranked tasks in the plantation structure according to their ethnicity. For example, the Guaymis are relegated to the "dirty" jobs (Oppenheimer 1974) on the plantation and North American Whites hold the highest management positions (see Bourgois 1985, Crespi 1975 for descriptions of de facto apartheid in different multi-ethnic Amerindian settings).

One of the most common manifestations of conjugated oppression is its internalization by the dominated ethnic group--a dynamic with profound¹⁰ ideological implications. During my fieldwork, of all the ethnic groups in the plantation social formation, the Guaymi suffered from the greatest level of internalized racism. This is logical since they were the ethnic group subjected to the most intense dynamic of conjugated oppression. Consequently, they were also the most politically

volatile. Peoples suffering from conjugated oppression (like the Guaymi today or the West Indians at the turn of the century) are susceptible to millenarian redemption movements (see Worsley's 1968 discussion of "cargo cults" in the Melanesian Islands). In the same vein, patron/client relations and charismatic political leaders (Vincent 1978, Wolf 1966b) assume special importance among peoples who are unable to operate effectively in the capitalist economy. This is especially true during the early phases of incorporation into wage labor as the contrasting cases of the Kuna and the Guaymi will illustrate.

This complex issue of the politicization of ethnicity is a frequent subject of analysis (Hechter 1975, 1979; Ragin 1977; Fox, Aull and Cimin 1981; Trosper 1981). Most relevant to my fieldwork, is the extensive literature on the role of ethnic tension in "de-politicizing" the working class. Racism is both a product of and also a legitimation for labor hierarchies. It converts them into class/ethnic hierarchies which then produce conjugated oppression. The arena for working class struggles in segregated work forces is thereby distorted:

...working class political orientations and union consciousness... [are] undermined, as it were, by the development of an almost caste-like stratum of workers at the bottom whose work and life-styles are allegedly different in virtually every important way (Oppenheimer 1974:7).

Both the popular and scholarly literature abound with examples from widely divergent historical and regional contexts of how racism inhibits the emergence of class-based solidarity in heterogeneous labor forces (eg. Szymanski 1976, Gray 1972, Willis 1963, Oppenheimer 1974, Reich 1981):

...racism helps to delay class consciousness by opposing

immigrants against the indigenous workers or against other immigrants on the basis of their ethnic differences or national identity to which they are referred for self-recognition, identity, and organization (Meillassoux 1981:121-122).

The classic discussion of ethnic chauvinism's role in demobilizing the working class is Marx's (1972b:293-294) treatment of the hostility between the Irish and the British:

Every industrial and commercial center in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his own country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude towards him is much the same as that of the 'poor whites' to the 'niggers' of the former slave states of the USA. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and the stupid tool of the English domination in Ireland.... This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite their organization.

This kind of historical example, underscores the usefulness of an approach to ethnic discrimination--and ideology in general--which argues for "...racism [to] be interpreted as a particular mode of reproduction of labor power... [which] intensifies exploitation (Burawoy 1976:1083)." Indeed, to understand racism, one must examine the "...economic expediency of political power... [rather than] skin color (Davis 1980:205)."

To what extent does management consciously pursue a "divide and conquer" strategy with respect to ethnicity? The literature abounds with references to the deliberate fomentation of racist tensions during strike movements (Flynn 1977, Foner 1981, Reich 1981, Spero and Harris

1966). Even outside of the immediate context of the productive process, there are numerous historical references which document how dominant classes strategically manipulate the various ethnic groups within their society to consolidate their power. For example, a South Carolina minister wrote in 1725:

We make use of a wile for our present security to make Indians and Negroes cheque upon each other least by their Vastly superior numbers we should be crushed... [sic] (cited in Willis 1963:162).

Nevertheless, it is not useful to conceive of ethnic antagonisms solely as the products of capitalism and manipulative managers. In fact, capital is not concerned with ethnicity; it is merely seeking the best possible workers at the lowest possible cost. Ironically, however, capitalism's "color blind" drive to scour the world in search of exploitable laborers, creates ethnically charged hierarchies (Hechter 1975, Petras 1981, Burawoy 1976):

The subsequent growth and expansion of capitalism evoked massive relocations of human populations as people carried their labor and resources from areas where they were redundant or obsolete to new key areas of accumulation (Wolf 1982:361).

This is certainly the case, for the plantation in Bocas del Toro. At the same time that one must beware of subordinating ethnic processes in a functionalist manner to the divide and conquer strategies of the dominant classes, one must also be explicit in recognizing that ethnicity cannot be understood outside of the context of its reproduction under capitalism:

Capitalism did not create all the distinctions of ethnicity and race that function to set off categories of workers from one another. It is, nevertheless, the process of labor mobilization under capitalism that imparts to these distinctions their effective values (Wolf 1982:380).

1.2.4 Underlying Theoretical and Methodological Tensions

I will conclude this theoretical introduction with some qualifications on the limitations and biases of my approach. The most obvious problem I face is the extreme subjectivity of ethnicity as an object of study. As there are no defined indices for measuring or even for describing this phenomenon, one is forced to rely heavily on impressionistic observations. In certain instances, I was able to systematize my data collection through access to the Transnational's computerized labor rosters. For example, I have "quantified" the "class/ethnic hierarchy" and the pervasiveness of the de facto apartheid relations of production by comparing region of origin (a good indicator of ethnicity) to job category (see figures 2-11).

Other aspects of ethnicity, however, are not "quantifiable" or even "proveable." The most important is racism, which is one of the most poorly understood and neglected topics in the social sciences. Most analyses of the labor process and class struggle avoid serious discussions of it. I have chosen to focus on an even more problematic aspect of ethnic discrimination--its internalization. Internalized racism is a particularly thorny subject because of its extreme subjectivity and sensitivity. This is especially true for a fieldworker who is a member of the dominant ethnic group in the local class/ethnic hierarchy (a White North American). Indeed, as has been noted by Chicano anthropologists, there is a tendency for Anglo anthropologists to overlook the fact that informants react to them "within a field of interethnic conflict (Rosaldo 1983:64)." What appears to be internalized racism, therefore, may be a "cultural performance" in the context of

unequal power relations (Ibid, Paredes 1978:20-21). Similarly, my data collection on the relationship between ethnicity and patterns of political mobilization and organization is plagued distortions due to the intensity of political repression on the plantation (see 14.1.2). Nevertheless, I chose to address this issue in detail as it is central to my concern with ideology and political mobilization.

Methodological debilities aside, the real tension in this dissertation lies at a higher level of theoretical abstraction. At the risk of excessive honesty, I must confess that despite the fact that I have rooted my discussion of the relationship between ethnicity and class in the process of class struggle, I have occasionally lapsed into the temptation of viewing the class/ethnicity matrix as a special case of the base/superstructure debate. In crude terms, the importance one accords to ethnicity is often related to the unresolved tension within marxist analysis of the relative importance of ideas in determining historical processes. Despite my insistence on history and struggle, I have frequently found myself torn between "vulgar materialism," on the one hand (i.e., explaining away ethnicity as a reflection of economic dictates) and "mystified idealism," on the other hand (i.e., converting ethnicity into a motor force in the historical development of the plantation social formation). At times I have felt that the ideology/material reality dialectic is a function of the theoretical distance of the social scientist. The closer one is to the empirical, day to day reality, the more important ethnicity (and ideology in general) appear to be. When one thinks back on long term historical processes, however, one tends to assign less of an "autonomous role" to ideas than one does when engaged in the nitty gritty of determining how

a given ethnic group participated in a specific union organizing drive or a political election. Most analysts "resolve" the tension between class and ethnicity through the "dialectical formula." I hope to transcend this somewhat evasive compromise by suggesting a new arena for discussion. No satisfactory paradigm yet exists, but there are promising paths for exploration.

NOTES

1

The plantation where I performed my fieldwork is owned by the Chiriqui Land Company, a subsidiary of the United Brands Company headquartered in New York city. Formerly United Brands was called the United Fruit Company and was based in Boston. It will be referred to in the text as the United Fruit Company, the Company, or the Transnational.

2

One of the signs of the infusion of a more structural, dynamic approach to anthropology is the increasing number of studies which adopt larger--if not global--units of analysis (eg. Edelman 1985, Nash 1981, Nash and Kelly eds. 1983, Wolf 1982).

3

See Miles 1980 for a critique of Cox.

4

Bonacich (1979) refers to her approach to ethnicity as the split-labor market theory; this label, however, is too easily confused (strictly due to semantics) with the segmented labor market school in economics (cf. Edwards, Reich and Gordon 1975). I prefer to distinguish Bonacich's more dynamic analysis, from the more descriptive literature on segmented labor markets by calling her theory by the crux of its contribution--class struggle analysis.

5

The most well-known example of class struggle analysis--but without reference to ethnicity--is historian Robert Brenner's (1975) comparison of the development of capitalism in eastern and western Europe.

6

Blacks from Costa Rica emigrated to Cuba for the sugar harvests in the early 1920s. During World War II the migratory flow was oriented towards Panama City, and since that date, most Blacks who emigrate, have gone to the United States (New York, Miami, and Los Angeles).

7

The relationship between the peasant economy and the plantation is not solely antagonistic. On the contrary, there is a distinct advantage to management in maintaining a subsistence sector parallel to plantation wage work (eg. Duncan and Rutledge eds. 1977). As Lenin (1956:40)

argues in his classic book on Russian peasant economics, the capitalist sector continually recreates the subsistence sector in order to externalize the costs of the reproduction of the labor force in agriculture. This was true for the plantation where I did my fieldwork during certain historical periods. Through World War II, for example, the Company was able to pay below subsistence wages during crisis periods without losing its labor force to starvation or emigration because most workers had access to private plots of land with which they supplemented their wages.

8

See Chinchilla 1983 for an application of the articulating modes of production paradigm to the dynamic of ethnicity in Guatemala.

9

Sexism is another example of ideological domination. Like racism, sexism interacts with (and to a large extent assumes its importance and meaning in the context of) class exploitation. Due to time and space constraints I will not examine the role of gender in the plantation productive structure. This is unfortunate since on the level of both theory and practice, the phenomenon of sexism and the nature of its articulation with class shares important characteristics with racism (eg. Fernandez-Kelly 1983, Nash and Fernandez-Kelly eds. 1983, Nash and Safa eds. 1979).

10

see Lowenthal (1968) for a discussion of internalized racism in the West Indian context; see also Fanon (1967), and Malcolm X (1964) for discussions of the internalization of white supremacy by Blacks in different settings; for a traditional sociological description of internalized racism see Bagley (1979). In popular literature, one of the most creative presentations of internalized racism is provided by the North American Black author, Alice Walker (1982). The protagonist in her novel arrives at the revolutionary realization that God is neither white nor male. Internalized racism as a form of ideological oppression can also be placed in the context of the "culture of poverty" debate critiqued by Leacock ed. (1971).

11

The first number on the identity cards all Panamanian and Costa Rican citizens are obliged to carry indicates province of birth. In fact the Panamanian identity cards specify whether or not an individual was born on an Indian reservation. The Transnational's labor roster lists every worker's job title and identity card number.

CHAPTER 2: THE SETTING

Before beginning an analysis of the history of the ethnic composition of the labor force on the plantation in Bocas del Toro, I will provide an outline of the broader context (both logistical and political economic) of banana export production. This chapter begins with a description of the physical setting of my fieldwork site and an outline of the mechanics of banana production. It then places banana production in the larger context of international political and economic relations. The transnational nature of the United Fruit Company sets the backdrop for social relations among banana workers. It is imperative to appreciate the extent to which class and ethnicity in Bocas del Toro are part of the broader international political economy within which bananas are produced, marketed, and consumed. The historical transformations in the technology of banana production are also important.

2.1 THE LOGISTICS OF PRODUCTION

2.1.1 Physical Layout

United Fruit Company plantations are referred to as "divisions." The¹ plantation where I did my fieldwork (hereafter the "Bocas Division") spans both sides of the Panamanian and Costa Rican borders in the Atlantic Coast provinces of Bocas del Toro and Limon (see Map 3). Although approximately 15 percent of the bananas are grown on the Costa Rican side of the border (see Map 5), the entire operation is directed² out of Panama by the Chiriqui Land Company. All the production is exported out of the Panamanian port of Almirante (see Map 4). During the

period of my fieldwork (1982-1984) the Company directly cultivated 6,632 hectares and purchased additional bananas from independent growers whose combined holdings totalled 1,851 hectares. The ownership of these non-Company farms included two state-run enterprises (PAIS S.A. on the Costa Rican side of the border, and COBANA in Panama), and five privately run operationse.

The Company's Bocas del Toro Division is administered through "districts" with a "superintendent" in charge of each district. Districts are further sub-divided into "farms" (between four and ten per district) of approximately 150 hectares all connected by a railroad network. Packing plants are located on each farm where stems of bananas are cut into clusters. The clusters are then washed, selected for quality, sprayed with pesticides and packed into 45 pound boxes. At the end of the day the boxes are loaded onto a railroad car for transport to the port of Almirante from where they are ultimately shipped to wholesale markets in North America and Western Europe.

The daily supervision of the packing operations is performed by an "overseer [mandador]," assisted by a "timekeeper," and two foremen. Between 30 and 60 individuals work in an average sized packing plant. The crucial tasks requiring most skill and training are those of quality selection and packing. Most of the "selectors" are women, who divide the large clusters of bananas into smaller bunches, discarding in the process all bananas which do not meet export quality standards. "Packers" are usually men who place the washed and selected bunches into cardboard boxes.

An additional 40 to 80 workers (always men) are employed in the

fields. These field workers are subdivided into "harvesters" and "cultivators;" most are employed in cultivation. There are dozens of distinct specialized tasks within cultivation, such as pesticide dispensing, pruning, securing guy lines and wrapping plastic bags around immature banana stems.⁷ Harvesting is by far the most strenuous of all the tasks in banana production. Harvesters must carry 80 to 100 pound stems of bananas on their shoulders up to 50 yards and hang them from an overhead wire upon which they are then slid to the packing plant (sometimes over a mile away). Heavily laden harvesters must jump across drainage ditches, duck guy lines and maintain their balance in ankle deep mud for up to 10 hours a day. A foreman and/or an assistant foreman supervises each of these tasks in the fields.

Physically, the plantation is a large, swampy, flat plain of fertile, loam soil, crisscrossed by rivers which periodically flood due to the frequent heavy rainfall. The housing provided by the Transnational reflects a rigid hierarchy conforming to an employee's job category (cf. Camacho 1982). Every few miles, interspersed between the banana farms, are a series of identical wood and cement barracks for the day labor force. Set apart from these housing compounds are slightly larger houses reserved for the overseers, timekeepers, and foremen. Finally in the very center of the plantation, surrounded by tall hedges and fences, is the luxurious housing complex reserved for the top echelons of management called the "White Zone." It is located on the edge of "the Club," a sporting complex restricted to management. The Club has a nine hole golf course, swimming pool, bowling alley, tennis court and airconditioned bar.

The well kept grounds of the White Zone and the Club dramatically contrast with the squalor of the workers' barracks where the roads and walkways are not paved. The heavy tropical showers which fall virtually every day (usually several times a day) convert the housing compounds of the day laborers into fields of mud. In fact, over two meters of rain are accumulated yearly in Bocas del Toro. Temperatures fluctuate only minimally (23 to 34 degrees centigrade), remaining high all year round with almost 100 percent humidity. Geographically the region is extremely isolated. There is no road connecting it to the interior of Panama and the one road which reaches from Limon on the Costa Rican side of the Division (known as the Sixaola District), was only recently completed (1978) and was not paved at the time of my fieldwork. In fact, it was intransitable on several occasions when heavy rains washed away the bridges. In short, the Bocas Division "...is a poor place to live unless you're a banana (Laidlaw & Co. 1964:1)."

2.1.2 Labor Relations

The logistics of banana production have defied mechanization and require constant supervision because of the susceptibility to bruising of the new varieties used in export production. If the bananas are not delicately handled during harvesting, packing, and transport they will arrive in European and North American ports with blemishes. Market values for bananas in export markets are largely determined by physical appearance. A bruise or scar shows up only several hours after a banana has been mistreated, consequently, foremen and overseers scrutinize the actions of the workers under their supervision in order to prevent them from damaging the bananas.

Banana production is seasonless, requiring constant maintenance and harvesting. The result is a rigid schedule of daily employment. Laborers must be willing to work eight to 12 hours a day, six days a week. In fact, during my fieldwork workers regularly went to the fields for a couple of hours on Sundays in order to catch up on overdue harvesting, pruning, fertilizing, or fungus control cycles. Given this gruelling schedule of daily employment, access to a stable, fully proletarianized, and well-disciplined labor force is indispensable to the Company.

Needless to say, management/labor relations are explosive in this kind of a setting. On a daily level a constant tension is maintained between laborers and their supervisors since most of the tasks are paid on a piecework basis, (i.e., by how much is produced). Laborers, consequently, strive to work fast in order to earn more, while their foremen attempt to slow them down in order to ensure that the fruit is not handled roughly. The plantation is literally a "factory in the field." Disproportionally large numbers of laborers are concentrated into a relatively small working space. Consequently, the combativity of banana workers in Latin America is legion. Historically they have been at the forefront of the labor union movement in Central America.

Because the "human factor" is so crucial in banana production the Transnational has developed extremely elaborate techniques for labor supervision and control. Millions of dollars each year are spent on labor relations. In fact, according to economist Frank Ellis (1983:363) it was organizational, rather than technological innovations which spurred the dramatic increases in yields during the 1970s:

...The sustained increase in physical production of the workers can be attributed, above all, to the intensification of their time spent in the productive process. This has been due to the systematic application of the advances made in the administrative sciences to the work process. This explains how it has been possible for the productivity of the labor force to increase at the same time that the proportion between capital investment and labor has declined during the second half of the period studied [1970s] (Ellis 1983:363).

The establishment of packing plants directly on the farms, and the intensification of cultivation techniques has facilitated the growth of a labor movement as workers have become increasingly stable during the post World War II period (see 2.2.2). Despite initial opposition to any form of labor union penetration in the early years, the Company changed tactics in the 1950s, concentrating on co-opting labor unions and their leadership rather than preventing their existence. The Company has deliberately promoted parallel, pro-management unions which are affiliated internationally with the ORIT (Inter-American Regional Labor Organization) and the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions). This "free and democratic" labor movement receives funding, technical advice and training from AIFLD (the American Institute for Free Labor Development). During my fieldwork it was public knowledge that the ICFTU-affiliated union leaders (known as the "whites") were supported by management. In fact the president of the United Fruit Company in New York told me that the Bocas union was "very, very cooperative." Similarly, the Division manager in Bocas told me that the local ORIT leadership was "very responsible."

Since the 1960s, the ORIT/ICFTU affiliated leaders have competed for hegemony of the labor movement on the plantation with a more militant, independent tendency (known locally as the "reds") which is affiliated

internationally with the WCTU (World Federation of Trade Unions). On the Panamanian side of the border bi-annual elections are held in which entirely new slates affiliated with each tendency are elected as units. The winning slate can then change the international affiliation of the union during its period of incumbency. ¹⁵ On the Costa Rican side of the border there exists the same dichotomy between a management sponsored tendency (ORIT-affiliated) and a militant tendency (WCTU-affiliated). The only difference is that individuals rather than slates of leaders are selected at the bi-annual union elections; consequently, the international affiliation and political tendency of the union is not continually changing after each election as it often does in Panama. For the duration of my fieldwork, ORIT-affiliated leaders were in control of the union in Costa Rica and most of the workers dismissed them as corrupt tools of management. In fact, the apathy of the Costa Rican workers towards their union was so pronounced that management became concerned lest "communists" take advantage of the disenchantment to create an alternative movement. For example, the Labor Relations Department for the Sixaola District reported to the Division manager:

...it is dangerous not to promote the Union... because we run the risk of having another union being formed of a different tendency which would oblige us to negotiate under less favorable conditions than the ones we have arranged now (SDF: Weekly labor Relations Report, June 16, 1981).

Company officials regularly stage events in order to make the ORIT union appear combative to the rest of the labor force:

[We] met with the union and announced to the leaders our intention of raising wages. They agreed with our plan and were very satisfied with the proposition that was made to them. They are scheduled to communicate to the workers that the union has requested a meeting with the Company to demand a wage hike. In this manner they will give the impression that the wage increase was a conquest of the union (SDF:

Finally mention should be made of a more recent corporate strategy to defuse the banana workers' union movement in Costa Rica through the promotion of what are called "solidarity associations." These associations are organized logistically as savings and loans credit unions but their self-avowed purpose is to "promote harmony between labor and management." They are specifically pro-capital and anti-union, and they insist that even the ORIT-affiliated unions are communist fronts. They claim that management/labor relations must be based on mutual help and ethics rather than class struggle. Sociologists have compared these associations (which are unique to Costa Rica) to the labor movement promoted by Mussolini in the 1930s and 1940s (see Blanco and Navarro 1982). A solidarity association existed on the farms owned by the government Company, PAIS in the Sixaola District. Although membership was supposed to be voluntary, workers were obliged to affiliate when they signed their employment contracts.

2.2 GEOGRAPHIC INSTABILITY

2.2.1 The Ecological Roots of Instability

Banana production has not always been the physically stable and intensive production process described above. In fact, prior to the introduction of disease resistant varieties in the 1960s, bananas were cultivated for export in an almost semi-migratory fashion. This was due to the rapidity with which bananas deplete prime quality soils and to their susceptibility to disease. From the turn of the century through the late 1960s, the banana companies, were forced repeatedly to abandon infected, exhausted lands and to clear new plantations out of fertile,

disease-free, virgin jungle. The following description by a retired United Fruit Company engineer who was in charge of opening new districts to banana production from the 1940s through the 1970s, provides a succinct summary of these semi-migratory cultivation techniques:

The Panama Disease used to kill everything. The only solution was to get ahold of new lands. It was not possible to maintain bananas once the disease struck. So when one farm died off another was planted, one would die another was planted, one would die another was planted and once the Division was played out you had to leave the country and find another. That's how we ended up in Ecuador, and in Columbia in all those places, Guatemala, Dominican Republic. So From Limon we went to a Division in Honduras that also got killed off then in '28 we came to Armuelles and in '38 the Division in Honduras, which had died off, served as a basis for Golfito and they brought over the buildings the hospital etc., all that from Honduras. Even the personnel was imported from Honduras to develop Golfito.

As will be shown, these shifting cultivation practices strained labor relations (see 9.1.7), since the clearing of virgin territory invariably involves poor working and living conditions for the pioneer laborers.

The Bocas Division was developed according to this pattern of shifting cultivation. Large extensions of jungle were cleared, cultivated, abandoned, and then subsequently reopened to production. In fact, during the 90 years that the United Fruit Company has operated in the region, at one time or another, bananas have been grown for export over a 200 square mile region, ranging from the Cricamola river delta at the southernmost extreme of the Division in Panama to the upper Talamanca valley at the plantation's northernmost boundary in Costa Rica (see Map 5). For example, in the 1890s the bulk of production came from the Cricamola delta, Bastimentos island, Chiriqui Grande and the lands around Almirante (see Map 5). In fact, the remnants of bridges and railroads can still be seen decaying in the jungle in such remote

regions as the mouth of the Cricamola river. With the spread of Panama disease, in the early 1900s and 1910s, banana production extended steadily northward along the Changuinola and Sixaola rivers, crossing into Costa Rican territory in 1908 and reaching the Talamanca valley in the 1920s. Already by 1910, 15,000 acres of bananas had been abandoned in Bocas (LaBarge 1959:39). By the late 1920s, production had already been drastically curtailed in Talamanca and along the Sixaola river on the Costa Rican side of the border (see Map 4). For example, cultivations were reduced from 29,600 acres in 1912 to 4,200 in 1928 (BDA: Calder to Taylor, May 15, 1929). By 1926, the Company had ceased banana production on 49,500 acres (LaBarge 1959:39). In fact, from 1941 through 1949, no bananas were exported out of Bocas. The more fertile portions of the infected banana lands (for example, the entire Sixaola District on the Costa Rican side of the border), were planted in cacao and by 1929, the Bocas Division was exporting over 6.3 million pounds of dry cacao per year (LaBarge 1959:39). From 1932 through 1941 an average of just over 9 million pounds of dry cacao were produced on some 24,000 acres (BDA: Hamer to Pollan, Feb. 1, 1943). According to press reports in the mid-1930s the Bocas Division was the largest cacao plantation in the world (Voz del Atlantico, Nov. 10, 1934:4). The Company began abandoning cacao as well by the 1950s, and by 1967 it no longer maintained operations (neither bananas nor cacao) in the Sixaola District on the Costa Rican side of the border. In fact, it was not until 1977 that the Sixaola District (which in the interim had reverted to "virgin" jungle) was once again opened to banana production--but this time with disease resistant varieties (see 9.1.7).

Each time the Company ceased production on infected or exhausted

soils, it systematically destroyed the infrastructure it had constructed (railroads, bridges, telephone lines etc.) in order to prevent competitors from being able to recuperate production on a smaller scale. A North American historian from the 1930s reported this destruction in the Talamanca District:

Talamanca, Costa Rica, near the Panamanian border, has so fallen from its former economic position that its residents have complained of the the removal by the fruit Company of the latter's telephones, rails and bridges, so that not even a roadbed remained by which they could occasionally hike out of the 'highland of weeds' into the neighbouring municipality (Kepner 1936:62, 90).

Today all that remains in Talamanca of the United Fruit Company's operations are a few decaying wooden buildings and a 50 yard long tunnel through a cliff side.

2.2.2 International Market and War

Another source of instability for the United Fruit Company's operations in the Bocas Division is the industry's dependence on foreign markets. Fluctuations in international market prices for bananas and cacao have repeatedly forced the Transnational to shift drastically production patterns on its Latin American subsidiaries. Most notably during the Great Depression in the 1930s, the Company halved its level of production, almost overnight, in response to a slump in banana prices. Similarly, when West African countries began flooding the world market with cheaper cacao in the 1930s, the Company responded by lowering its expenditures for the upkeep of its Sixaola District cacao farms, allowing living conditions and real wages to deteriorate markedly during the 1940s.

Local operations have also been highly vulnerable to non-economic international crises such as, for example, the virtual embargo on the transport of non-military products on the high seas during World War II. The War, however, enabled the Company to diversify into a new, even more profitable crop known as abaca, from 1942 through 1955. Abaca is the raw material for rope and was purchased from the Transnational on contract by the U.S. Army when traditional supplies in the Philippines were embargoed by the Japanese.

These major production shifts--whether dictated by ecological disaster, international crisis, or political economic calculation--have repeatedly altered local employment opportunities, resulting in disruptive cycles of boom and bust throughout the Transnational's subsidiaries (see Figure 1). In Bocas during World War I and later during the Great Depression, wages were lowered and the work force was considerably reduced. During World War II, on the other hand, thousands of workers were imported and wages were augmented when abaca was introduced. Again in the 1950s, opportunities for employment were increased when the Company initiated an extensive program of banana rehabilitation through a labor intensive system of flood following. The biggest transformation occurred in the 1960s, however, with the introduction of disease resistant varieties (Gran Nain and Valery). This required the construction of packing plants directly on the plantation because the skin of the bananas produced by these new varieties is highly susceptible to bruising. Today, therefore, bananas are immediately packed into cardboard boxes to protect them during transport. The new varieties also require greater cultivation maintenance (fertilizer, pesticides, pruning etc.). This has increased

the skill requirements of the work process and has rendered it important to the Transnational to maintain a stable labor force, altering qualitatively the nature of management/labor relations.

There have been large fluctuations in the acreage under cultivation and in the size of the workforce. For example, while there were only 96 acres of bananas in the Bocas Division in 1948, there were 17,386 by 1956 (LaBarge 1959:195,197). Similarly, In the early 1970s when several thousand acres of the new varieties of bananas were planted, the Transnational's demand for heavy laborers considerably augmented. Between 1964 and 1976 there was an average of 4,552 workers in Bocas (Ellis 1983:215). In 1983 during my fieldwork, there were 5,706 day laborers and 887 monthly employees on the Company's labor roster.

2.2.3 Transnational Juggling

Much of this productive instability was, in fact, willfully promoted by the Transnational in order to increase its leverage with host country governments. The Company's international diversity provides it with a unique bargaining leverage. During my fieldwork, the United Fruit Company had subsidiaries producing and/or purchasing bananas in Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Honduras, Belize, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, and the Philippines. Formerly the Company also had operations in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Mexico. Historically, this diversity has enabled the Transnational to select carefully the governments willing to provide it with the best incentives (i.e., lower taxes, greater repression of the labor movement, subsidized access to infrastructure etc.). Local production decisions, therefore, are often the product of multinational bargaining. For example, in 1915 the Bocas

Division manager was advised by headquarters to suspend new plantings in Costa Rica and Panama because the Company was rechanneling its resources into Honduras where a more lenient concession for land and taxes had been obtained (BDA: Cutter to Kyes, Sept 15, 1915).

The Bocas Division provides an almost caricatural case study of the Transnational's ability to juggle host countries by pitting one nation against the other. ²⁰ Because the plantation spans two countries (Costa Rica and Panama), the Division manager is able to threaten each host government with curtailing production and shifting operations to the other side of the border. For example as early as 1919 when the Panamanian congress was voting on a bill to raise the banana export tax from one cent to two cents per stem, the Bocas Division manager advised the Company's representative in Panama City:

It might be mentioned to him [the president] that at least two-thirds of our bananas come from [the] Costa Rica side of the river... and that if Panama raises the duty we will be compelled to ship these bananas out by Limon, or construct a wharf at Gandoca (BDA: Kyes to McFarland, January 7, 1919).

The Company representative responded:

The President is peculiar in many ways.... I would not care to tell him of the Gandoca wharf [see Map 4] possibilities --although I have always kept them in mind and have mentioned to many people in ...[congress] what we would have to do in their neighbourhood as a matter of self-defense were the duties increased (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, January 13, 1919).

The Company agent also advised the Panamanian congress "...that Panama had no particular advantage over Costa Rica and other neighbouring countries (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Feb. 23, 1919)."

The Company strategy has been to lobby for lower taxes and more

generous land concessions in any given division by exaggerating the advantages that it has been offered in a neighbouring nation. For example, the Company agent in Panama City in 1918 complained to the president that the banana tax in Colombia was one-fourth that of Panama (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Oct. 26, 1918), and stressed the "...absence of profits, high labor [costs] in comparison with other countries and bad quality [of bananas] raised in Bocas (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Dec. 18 1918)." The figures Company's representatives cited in these bargaining sessions with host country government have little to do with reality as the following confidential report to headquarters in Boston illustrates:

...the arguments I used to the Commission... were the same ones--agricultural development, stability, encouragement of foreign capital, same duty as other countries, etc... as formerly used. I laid particular stress on the advantages under which we were cultivating bananas in Guatemala and Honduras, long term contracts, land grants, etc... without being absolutely certain of my ground, but knowing they knew less than I did (BDA McFarland to Cutter, Oct. 29, 1920).

On another occasion the Company agent reported:

The President [of Panama] this afternoon called my attention to the \$/40 per share dividend on United Fruit Company stock... I assured him that this was all sugar and freight profits and explained in a lot of details mostly made up at the moment, how much sugar lands we had planted and the profit thereon, that we had paid no extra dividends for several years... but we had made little of the \$40 on bananas. He seemed rather relieved (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Dec. 8, 1920).

...Don Ricardo [the President of Costa Rica] asks for values. In order to avoid any conflict with Costa Rica tax returns and show what we have spent in Talamanca, use our investment figures... the Costa Ricans lack of knowledge of conditions and affairs in their own country is proverbial, and I have no intention of giving out data on our affairs until it is absolutely necessary to do so and then only generalities (BDA: Chittenden to Blair, July 1, 1921).

These tactics continue today (cf. CEPAL 1982). For example, during my

fieldwork on the Costa Rican side of the border I was repeatedly told by managers, foremen, and even workers themselves, that Costa Rica had the highest costs of production of any country in the world. Likewise, on the Panamanian side of the border I was told the exact same thing i.e., that Panama had the highest cost of production in the world. This practice has been documented in the publications of the UPEB (Union of Banana Exporting Nations):

The transnationals, according to the Costa Rican press, argue that the fruit of that country is the most expensive in the world while at the same time they have said the exact same thing about the fruit in Panama, Honduras and other UPEB member countries.

Despite the transnationals' argument that Costa Rican fruit 'is not competitive' that country will become the largest banana exporter in the world this year (UPEB 1983:34).

The strategic importance of the Company's diversified geographic base of operations was highlighted in 1974 when the banana producing countries attempted to form a cartel and establish a uniform tax of one dollar on each box of bananas exported. The three principal banana transnationals (Castle and Cooke, Del Monte, and United Fruit) who control 80 percent of the export banana market, broke the cartel by threatening to withdraw from each country individually, claiming that their neighbour was offering a lower tax rate. Under the threat of losing the income and employment derived from the banana industry each government, one by one, rescinded on their commitment to the one dollar tax.

2.2.4 Juggling the Labor Movement

Geographic diversity is also useful to the Transnational in its

confrontations with labor. During strikes, the Company can compensate for shortfalls in one division by increasing production in another. In fact the superintendent of the Sixaola District explained to me that the Company purposefully maintains a world overproduction of at least one division's worth of bananas in order to guard against strikes and ecological disasters. When production is paralysed by a strike in one division, quality controls in neighboring divisions are temporarily relaxed and the number of bananas reaching the world market remains constant.²²

Once again, because the Bocas Division spans two nations, it lends itself particularly well to international juggling. In fact, the manager of the Bocas Division explained to me that he was able to break a two month long strike on the Costa Rican side of the plantation, which completely paralysed the Sixaola District in January of 1983, by compensating for the lost production on the Panamanian side of the plantation where there was no work stoppage (13.2.1). Similarly during the summer of 1984, the Company's Golfito Division on the Atlantic Coast of Costa Rica, waited out a three month strike without significant economic losses merely by increasing production in the Armuelles Division which lies just across the border in Panama and supplies the same international markets as Golfito (see Map 3). Any additional shortfall was easily compensated for by increasing purchases in the Company's Ecuadoran Division and by passing boatloads of bananas from the Limon and Bocas divisions through the Panama Canal to the North American Pacific Coast markets serviced by Golfito.

The labor movement is also vulnerable to the regional geographic

diversity that the Company maintains within the same country. In fact, in confrontations with union leaders in Panama, the Company frequently threatens to withdraw to the "other side of the mountains" where the workers are more obedient. In Costa Rica, the Company has three different subsidiaries (Compania Bananera de Costa Rica, Compania Bananera del Atlantico, and the Chiriqui Land Company)²³ which operate five banana and/or african palm plantations (Golfito and Quepos on the Pacific Coast, Guapiles, Siquires and the Sixaola District on the Atlantic Coast (see Map 3). Similarly, in Panama one subsidiary, the Chiriqui Land Company, administers two divisions: Bocas on the Atlantic Coast and Armuelles on the Pacific.

2.3 MONOPOLY POWER

2.3.1 The Founding of the United Fruit Company

The final aspect of the United Fruit Company which needs to be explained as part of the context within which ethnicity and management/labor relations operate is its power as a major monopoly in the world economy. Although several smaller companies have competed with the United Fruit Company over the past 85 years, it was not until the 1960s that the United Fruit Company (renamed United Brands) was forced to share the world market with two others transnational banana producers and commercializers: Castle and Cooke (formerly Standard Fruit) and Del Monte.²⁴

The United Fruit Company was incorporated in New Jersey on March 30, 1899, the fusion of the three largest banana importers of the period: The Boston Fruit Company headed by Andrew Preston, the Jamaica-based

holdings of Laurence Baker, and three plantations (in Costa Rica, Panama and Colombia) owned by Minor C. Keith a railroad financier active in Central and South America (LaBarge 1959:16, Kepner 1936:41-43). It had a capitalization of \$11,230,000, with 112 miles of railroad, and some 236,200 acres of land (of which 61,363 were cultivated) in Santo Domingo, Cuba, Jamaica, Honduras, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Panama (CSUCA 1980:28, Kepner 1936:45). A few years later, Nicaragua, Mexico and Guatemala were added to the list of countries hosting United Fruit Company subsidiaries.

The Transnational has been known for its monopolistic practices since its inception, hence its Latin American nickname "the octopus [el pulpo]." Charles Kepner, a historian and protestant minister who did fieldwork on plantations in Central America together with Jay Soothill a former Company employee have amply documented (Kepner 1936, Kepner and Soothill 1935) the monopolistic practices of the newly formed banana conglomerate through the 1930s:

...this powerful company has throttled competitors, dominated governments, manacled railroads, ruined planters, choked cooperatives, domineered over workers, fought organized labor, and exploited consumers (Kepner and Soothill 1935:336).

Historical corroborations of Kepner and Soothill's harsh criticisms abound. For example a judge who chaired a case against the United Fruit Company in the 1920s stated,

The averments of the answer show that the United Fruit Company has combined and dominates substantially all of the other persons, individuals, firms, or corporations engaged in the trade of importing tropical fruits from Central and South America and the Antilles; that there are twenty-five or more constituent agencies in this combine to monopolize the procuring by production and purchase, and the carriage and distribution to consumers, of these articles... (cited

in Kepner 1936:44).

In fact the Company lost an anti-trust suit in the U.S. Supreme Court in the late 1950s. The most revealing criticism of the Company's monopolist practices, however is provided by its former employees. For example, the former head of the Public Relations Department wrote in his memoirs: "United Fruit bought protection, pushed governments around, kicked out competition, and suppressed union organization (McCann 1976:160)."

The founding of the Bocas del Toro Division at the turn of the century provides a good example of how swiftly the United Fruit Company was able to exert monopoly control over a given region once it had targeted it for expansion. Prior to the turn of the century there were dozens of competing banana companies (both foreign and national) in Bocas del Toro province. In fact, in the 1880s Bocas del Toro was known as one of the banana producing regions with the largest number of small independent growers and commercializers. The producers delivered their bananas by canoes to purchasers anchored in the middle of Almirante Bay. In 1904 the Company bought out the largest producer, the Snyder Banana Company and began offering purchasing prices far above the market rate to local producers so as to drive the other commercializers in the region out of business. Once the rival purchasing companies had been bankrupted, the Company promptly lowered the purchasing prices for bananas to below production costs, thereby driving out the competitive growers. In this manner, within a few years the Company had driven out or bankrupted its local competition and was able to exert exclusive control over the Bocas del Toro banana industry, as the following complaint to the president of Panama from a delegation of private producers illustrates:

The City of Bocas del Toro, once so prosperous, owing to the banana industry commenced some twenty years ago by native sons, aided by industrious foreigners such as Messrs. [list of seven names] is today found in a state of decadence for the reason that the industry has been monopolized, as well in its production as in its exportation, by the powerful company called the United Fruit Company, which some ten years or more since came and established itself in this place, resulting with its intelligence and with its money and the assistance received from the government in driving from the market the other companies which previously sent their vessels here for cargoes of fruit which they purchased at living prices, so these companies were obliged to completely abandon this port because the previously mentioned company reduced the price to a minimum and limited purchases, so that the greater part of the fruit was lost for lack of buyers (BDA: "Petition to the President of Panama," 1907).

2.3.2 Land Monopoly

The United Fruit Company usually purchased exclusive rights to all the locally available prime banana lands in the regions where it operated. In Bocas, the Transnational purchased immense estates of virgin jungle for token sums through local intermediaries who obtained the land from the government free of charge under the guise of land colonization and development schemes. The governments of Panama and Costa Rica allowed these wholesale transfers of land to the United Fruit Company to occur even though the original "colonizers" made no pretense to develop their newly acquired lands before selling them to the Company (Quesada 1977).²⁷ In fact both the staking of the original land claim as well as its transfer to the United Fruit Company, were often performed in the very same session before the same judge. This was the case, for example, with the 11,000 hectares comprising the Sixaola valley which were purchased on March 1 1900:

Attorney Jose Astua Aguilar for himself and in the name of his children [list of five names], his wife... and Rodolfo Rojas Montero, for himself and in the name of his

daughters [list of names] presented themselves... before the judge... claiming for each one of the twelve persons indicated 500 hectares of government land situated in the district of Limon and bounded as follows: ...

Mr. Anderson continues stating that all of the rights which the parties mentioned herein have in the two denouncements specified have been deeded to him... as cessionaire he cedes in turn all of his rights, actions and privileges which he has or may have in the before mentioned denouncements... to the United Fruit Company of Jersey City in the sum of five thousand colones which in this act and in my presence he receives in current money (Protocol # 7, cited in Palmer 1907:185-186).

By the mid 1930s the Company had obtained over 3.6 million acres throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, most of which was never planted. For example, as late as 1934, 88 percent of the land owned by the Company was not cultivated (Kepner 1936:86). Company officials claimed that they needed these vast expanses because of the mobile nature of the banana industry due to disease and soil exhaustion. In fact, control of such immense expanses was a means of preventing rival firms from being able to enter the industry: "...the United Fruit expands its territorial domain not because it needs more land but in order to cripple its competitors (Kepner 1936:87)."

Through its ownership of most of Central America's reserves of prime banana land, the Company benefited from the previously discussed ecological susceptibility of bananas to disease and soil exhaustion. This was explained to me by elderly Company officials, who stated that the devastation of most plantations within ten or fifteen years of their initiation due to Panama disease raised the barriers to entry to the industry. Few other companies wielded sufficient capital to build the initial infrastructure (railroads, ports, housing) necessary for opening new divisions. Furthermore, most of the reserves of top quality virgin

lands were already owned. In fact, an epidemiologist in charge of disease control for the Company told me that "the Company dragged its feet" in the 1950s in the search for a variety of bananas resistant to Panama disease. Once the the banana industry was stabilized physically with the introduction of fertilizer and disease resistant varieties in the 1960s, the United Fruit Company lost much of its monopoly power. Today, vast expanses of virgin land are no longer necessary for the long term success of a banana company. The same soil can be cultivated year after year with no appreciable decline in productivity. The Company's ownership of millions of acres of jungle, therefore, has become
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redundant.

2.3.3 Influence Over Host Country Governments

Although the United Fruit Company may have lost some of its monopoly control within the banana industry, it continues to wield disproportional power over the economic and political affairs of the nations within which it operates. Historically, the Company has repeatedly bolstered or destabilized host country governments depending upon their willingness to provide tax breaks, land concessions and labor repression. It has shown a distinct preference for military
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dictatorships. Indeed, in several instances the United Fruit Company actively maintained or restored the power of dictatorial military regimes in Central America, hence the derogatory nickname of "banana republic" for the Central American nations.
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For example, in 1954 the Company contributed to the overthrow of President Arbenz of Guatemala (cf. Schlesinger and Kinzer 1983, McCann 1976:44-62). Significantly, at the same time that the Company was pressuring the State Department to

overthrow the Arbenz government, it had already begun expanding operations in Panama and Costa Rica in anticipation of a possible withdrawal from Guatemala should their efforts backfire (LaBarge 1959:268).

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The Company also regularly engaged in the emolument of public officials. Samuel Zemurray, a United Fruit Company president in the 1930s was famous for his remark, "In Honduras, a mule costs more than a deputy (Volk 1981:5)." In fact, more recently, in 1974 Ely Black, the Company's president (who subsequently committed suicide) paid the president of Honduras (General Oswaldo Lopez Arellano) 1.25 million dollars to lower the banana export tax (McCann 1976:217,233, Tracy 1976:146, Volk 1981:21). These tactics persist today. An official stationed on the Company's Honduran subsidiary told me:

Of course we pay bribes here. It's no secret. Everything works with bribes and deals in this country. We can buy--and sell--anyone we want here. We can even buy the communists. Everything is corrupt here.... You have to work that way.

Most of the time, the Transnational does not have to pay for the favors provided by host country governments. Because the banana companies are usually the biggest employers as well as the largest, most consistent sources of export revenue in the countries within which they operate, they interact at the highest levels of government, as the following note from a Company lobbyist in Panama City indicates,

I have never liked to bother Dr. Porras [president of Panama] outside of office hours but my wife has no such scruples, so she went to the Presidencia that evening and had a heart-to-heart talk, reminding him of his promises not to increase the banana duty (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Feb. 23, 1919).

In fact, the letters in the Company's historical archives reveal that by the late 1910s its Panama City representative was consistently successful in introducing and repealing legislation in the Panamanian congress:

After conferring with several deputy friends I arranged for the Immigration law to be recalled to second debate and my amendment inserted... and the amendment [was] approved. The export Duty law, however, came up the same afternoon, for third debate but by getting some of my friends to employ obstructionist methods, the third debate was not completed although they did approve several articles including the 2 cents tax on bananas (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Feb. 23, 1919).

...the law was passed exactly as we wanted it... (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Feb. 26, 1919).

We talked over the matter frankly at some length and he [the president of Panama] finally told me 'Don't worry; you have always gotten what you want my friend' to which I agreed (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Oct. 26, 1919).

Dear Friend,

I [the president of Panama] received the copy of the project for increasing taxes. It will remain definitively the way we decided upon it the day before yesterday. I have already made several copies to give to a few friendly senators for them to introduce it when the second debate is taking place in order for the modifications suggested by you and accepted by me be established. I am your close friend and faithful servant... (BDA: Porras to McFarland, Dec. 17, 1918).

When diplomacy failed, the Company always had a last resort:

...if it becomes necessary I think we could probably take this matter up with the State Department at Washington and they would compel some settlement of the question (BDA: Kyes to McFarland, April 6, 1919).

...in view of the role the United States has played in mediating... [I] believe [the] Department [of State] should know of present attitude which may culminate in our interests being seriously prejudiced (BDA: Kyes to

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Chittenden, Feb 16, 1918).

The Transnational is not usually forced to resort to extra-economic pressure to guarantee the protection of its interests. Its sheer size renders it such an intimidating foe to most Central American governments that they generally acquiesce to its demands. The statistics are self-evident: in fiscal year 1981 net sales for United Brands were \$4,058,387,000; total assets were \$1,309,428,000; the Company owned 91,000 acres and leased an additional 42,000 acres of improved land; the total number of Company employees was approximately 46,000 (United Brands 1983a:1-13, United Brands 1983b:11). In that same year, the entire gross domestic product of Costa Rica and Panama respectively represented only 34 and 95 percent of the United Fruit Company's net sales respectively (IMF 1984). Host countries cannot expect to negotiate as equals when faced with such a transnational juggernaut, especially when--as in the case of Costa Rica in 1983--bananas represent their largest single source of foreign exchange revenue. Furthermore, the banana transnationals have bolstered their position vis-a-vis the banana producing nations, by diversifying into unrelated industries, making them less dependent on fruit production for their profits. In 1983, for example, banana sales accounted for only 24 percent of United Brands' consolidated net sales (United Brands 1983b:2).

2.3.4 Enclave Economy

At the local level the Company's international projection, political influence, and product diversity translates into an almost omnipotent control over social, economic and political life in the immediate territory surrounding the plantation. Even the most superficial amenities in the daily life of the local population, are provided by the

Transnational--from ice for drinking water to electricity after hours in the dance hall. In the words of the former head of public relations for the Company,

The Company owns it all, lock stock and barrel. It owns the clubs and offices, the sheds, the land, the banana plants, every piece of equipment, the golf course and tennis courts, the sewer lines and streetlights and fire hydrants, the railroad lines, the motorcars, the trains the docks, the boats, the airplanes, the radio stations, every house from the division manager's right down to the lowest worker's, along with every stick of furniture and even the plates they eat from and the knives and forks on the tables. Even the water in the faucets and the electricity in the walls are supplied by the Company (McCann 1976:140-141).

Economists refer to these plantation social formations as transnational enclaves since there is no linkage to the host country economy and society. All relationships (whether economic or social) revolve around the Company and its international markets. For example, the Bocas del Toro plantation has been so marginally integrated into its host countries, that physical access from the interior of Costa Rica and Panama is difficult. Until the introduction of an airline service in the 1940s, it was easier to get to Bocas del Toro from Boston than from Panama City or San Jose.

The very nationality of the Bocas Division has been historically ambiguous. At the turn of the century the Company altered the national status of the Sixaola District in order to oust a rival firm, the American Banana Company which had obtained a concession to the territory from the Panamanian government in 1903. The United Fruit Company had acquired title to the exact same expanse of land three years earlier, but from the Costa Rican government. When the American Banana Company began building a railroad on its newly acquired Panamanian concession,

Minor Keith of the United Fruit Company created a nationalist outcry in Costa Rica and arranged for Costa Rican soldiers to "occupy" the region and confiscate the "contraband" railroad equipment (see Palmer 1907, Kepner and Soothill 1935:53-63, for detailed accounts with copies of primary documentation of this land/nationality struggle). In 1921 when Panama and Costa Rica attempted to fight a war to determine the nationality of the territory occupied by the plantation, the Company stopped the hostilities and evacuated the warring parties on its ships (Pinzon 1921; Boston Globe, March 22, 1921).

The ability of the Transnational to shape most aspects of the historical development of the Bocas del Toro region, as well as to control the minute details of the daily life of the local population has had serious ideological ramifications. Residents of the region tend to view the Company with a fatalist respect. A common phrase is: "If the Company is big today, I hope it grows bigger tomorrow so that I can rest assured that my grandchildren will have enough to eat." It is in this context of historical domination (both ideological and economic) that the forthcoming discussion of the relationship between ethnicity and class in the plantation production process must be understood.

NOTES

1

The Bocas Division is also sometimes referred to by Company officials as the "Changuinola Division." In the historical archives it is alternately called the "Panama Division" and the "Almirante Division." For clarity's sake, I will use exclusively the name Bocas Division to refer to my fieldwork site.

2

The Chiriqui Land Company, was registered in the state of Delaware

in 1927.

3

PAIS stands for Agroindustrial Producers of Sixaola (Costa Rica). COBANA is the acronym for the National Banana Corporation (Panama). PAIS deserves special mention as an example of the United Fruit Company's ability to channel nationalist sentiment into a profitable enterprise. United Fruit Company officials founded this "national corporation" as a "joint venture" with the Costa Rican government when president Daniel Oduber threatened to expropriate over 8,000 hectares of uncultivated territory in the Sixaola District. In return for "donating" the land to the government, the Company received 40 percent of the shares of PAIS. As a national agricultural corporation, the new corporation qualifies for subsidized capital from international financial institutions which promote agricultural development projects. According to a long term contract, all the bananas (and african palm) produced by PAIS must be sold to the United Fruit Company for subsequent commercialization. In this manner, the Transnational is guaranteed a steady supply of palm oil and bananas without having had to provide the initial capital investment. Furthermore, since PAIS is a national company, it can use more repressive tactics in evicting the hundreds of small farmers who have invaded the uncultivated portions of its territory.

The Company has showed considerable sophistication in recent years in its ability to accomodate the nationalist sentiments of its host countries. For example the president of United Brands testified in the U.S. Congress in favor of President Carter's Panama Canal Treaty in 1978. The Transnational's Public Affairs Department distributes a pamphlet version of this testimony (Milstein 1978) as evidence of the Company's "new attitude" towards Third World governments. See Nunez (1976) for a critique of this "new attitude."

4

I resided in workers' barracks on the Costa Rican side of the border, called the Sixaola District (see Map 4).

5

On an average day, a typical packing plant can produce between 2,500 and 4,000 boxes of bananas each weighing 45 pounds.

6

In Nicaragua since the Sandinista revolution, women have begun working in the fields but everywhere else in Central America field work is reserved for males.

7

The "bagger" covers the immature stems of bananas with a plastic bag impregnated with pesticide to prevent insects from eating the bananas as they grow. The guy line securer holds up the banana plants with rope to prevent the weight of the banana stem from dragging down the entire plant in case of heavy wind or rain.

8

Ironically these superficial skin bruises and scars do not usually affect the fruit inside the peel; nonetheless, shoppers in the industrialized world refuse to purchase blemished bananas and are prepared to pay more for those with a clean exterior.

9

Piecework payment causes workers to raise voluntarily their level of exploitation since their pay is a function of how much they produce. This results in premature aging and rapid health deterioration among

long term banana workers (see Bolanos 1979; Chediak 1980).

10

Indeed, banana production is one of the most labor intensive agricultural export crops in the world. For example, the land to laborer ratio in the Sixaola District was 1.12 hectares for each worker during my fieldwork (SDF: Loose statistical documents). By comparison the land to labor ratio in cattle production oscillates between 40 and 60 hectares for each worker.

11

The following description of a strike in the 1970s on a Colombian banana plantation provided by a retired Company official illustrates well the explosive nature of management/labor relations:

They [the strikers] besieged the houses. They would shout offences and scream at us and cry... terrible things they did. They took over the fancy houses of the Company. The manager was an American. They tied him down and the women urinated on him. They did all kinds of terrible things to him; they did not let him speak in English. At the end the army sent over 500 soldiers.... The superintendent escaped; but he got lost in the jungle for three days and later went crazy .

12

A candid--even if offensive--analogy for the importance of the psychological factor in labor relations was provided to me by a foreman in the Sixaola District,

Dealing with workers is like treating a woman. You stick your finger into her and it's a bad thing to do... but it's also sort of good thing too. You understand what I mean? It's all psychology. You can send any worker happily diving down a dark fox hole or wading through the filthiest drainage ditch if you just treat him right.

13

In the late 1950s, the United States government pressured the Transnational to recognize ORIT unions. In 1958, United Fruit Company headquarters issued a circular to,

ALL TROPICAL DIVISION MANAGERS:

...I had a long conference with... high officials in the State Department. The State Department representatives were obviously disturbed by the bad relations between ORIT and the United Fruit Company and stated that they considered the free labor movement, as well as American business itself, to be essential arms in the fight against communism (BDA: Bump to all managers, December 12, 1958).

A report from the Bocas Division manager to headquarters reveals that management founded a union during this period in order to keep the labor movement under control:

The Workers' Union [was] organized under the auspices of Mr. Myrick [the Division manager].... Vargas was... actually employed to head up the labor union in this division, and at the meeting held a couple of weeks ago, he was elected president of the union. His work has been entirely satisfactory to date (BDA: Munch to Moore, June 24, 1953).

14

For a detailed discussion of CIA involvement in AIFLD and ORIT, see Agee (1975).

15

The white union slate has a history of favoring compromise with management, and avoiding strikes. White union leaders are staunchly anti-communist. The red slate, on the other hand, pursues a militant, confrontational approach to management/labor relations, along both economic and political lines. In contrast to the "whites," the "reds" adopt resolutions in solidarity with national liberation movements and in favor of human rights in Central America. They tend to make anti-capitalist--rather than anti-communist--declarations. Some of the red slate's leadership are also members of the Panamanian Communist Party [Partido del Pueblo]; consequently both management and the pro-management union leadership refer to the red slate as "communist." The red union members themselves differentiate their movement from the pro-management one by calling themselves "class conscious [classista]." Because the terminology "class conscious" is ambiguous and politically charged, for the sake of neutrality and simplicity I will refer to the WCTU-affiliated tendency (the reds) as the "militant" or the "independent" union movement.

16

The first devastating disease to hit the export banana industry was a root and stalk fungus which originated in Bocas in 1903; hence its name the "Panama disease" [fusarium cubense]. Today the most problematic disease faced by the industry is black sigatoka [cercospora musae], a leaf fungus which can only be controlled by expensive aerial spraying.

17

The most spectacular case of infrastructure destruction by the United Fruit Company was its abandonment of the Tela Division in Honduras (see Map 3). In 1930, 125 kilometers of railroad track were ripped up and hundreds of bridges were torn apart (LaBarge 1959:28-29). Much of the railroad track was simply thrown into the ocean and the wooden supports of the bridges were left to rot by the side of the rivers where they had been dismantled.

18

The abaca plant [musa textilis] resembles the banana plant. Although it is sometimes called "Manila hemp," it is not related to true hemp or to hennequen. Its buoyancy makes it especially useful for ships' hawsers and cables.

19

I attempted to collect the statistics on the size of the labor force and the extensions of land planted in bananas, cacao and abaca over time in order to present them as a graph. Unfortunately these statistics are highly inaccurate and contradictory. In its various publications, the Company provides dramatically inconsistent figures for the same year.

20

The following report written in 1912 by the French consul in Costa Rica portrays well the United Fruit Company's transnational strategy for juggling local governments (and labor forces) by promoting the instability of its subsidiaries:

The United Fruit Company has already succeeded on several occasions in ridding itself of competitor companies by

flooding markets with bananas at a loss. Now, however, the Company has adopted a new strategy. It just announced that it was laying off half of its labor force on its Costa Rican plantations and that it was going to reduce daily salaries... from one dollar to 75 cents. This reduction in production will severely affect the economic situation of Costa Rica. In this manner the United Fruit Company provides itself with bargaining power in its dealings with the government.... The plantations in other countries--and in this particular case the Bocas del Toro Division in Panama--will compensate for the production lost in Costa Rica.... Nor will the Company have a labor shortage as the termination of the Panama Canal has left a large number of unemployed workers available... (FAA: Report of the French consul in San Jose, April 28, 1912:161, courtesy of research notes of Dr. Isabel Wing-Ching, University of Costa Rica).

21

According to a former Standard Fruit Company official the transnationals also engaged in extra-economic pressures against the incipient banana cartel. Standard Fruit Company spread the rumor that the United Fruit Company had paid someone to assassinate President Torrijos of Panama, who was the primary impetus behind the movement to raise banana export taxes.

22

Labor unions have been unable to analyze the international constraints debilitating their strikes. A Company official told me:

The unions are childish. It's such a small period out of the year that we make all our money. But the unions haven't figured that out yet. They always go on strike at the wrong time like in December or November when there's an oversupply on the world market. The best time to strike is March, April, or May. If they sat down and analyzed this they could be very dangerous.

For example, during a two month long strike in its Limon Division in 1982, Del Monte merely augmented its exports from its Guatemala Division, thereby compensating for the production lost in Costa Rica.

23

The inscription of the Chiriqui Land Company in Costa Rica is merely a legal formality to account for the portion of the Bocas Division (the Sixaola District) which overlaps into Costa Rica. In fact all administrative decisions in the Bocas Division have always been made by the Chiriqui Land Company's main offices in Panama and New York city.

24

The Standard Fruit Company began operations in the 1920s but was much smaller than the United Fruit Company until the late 1960s. Del Monte entered the banana industry when the United Fruit Company lost a U.S. Supreme Court anti-trust case and was obliged to sell its Guatemala Division to Del Monte.

25

For primarily apologist accounts of the early years of United Fruit Company expansion see Adams 1914, Crowther 1929, Reynolds 1927. For a well documented critique of Company operations see Kepner and Soothill 1935 and Kepner 1936. Although dated, these last two books still provide some of the best insights into how the United Fruit Company operates.

26

In 1899 Panama was still a province of Colombia. It did not obtain independence until 1903.

27

The government of Costa Rica gave the Company vast extensions of land free of charge. For example, through the Soto-Keith contract of 1884, Minor Keith was granted 800,000 acres of land (8 percent of the arable land of the entire country) in return for financing the termination of the Atlantic railroad.

28

The "dilemma" of technological transformations in the ecology of banana production has, once again, become a problem for the Transnational in its search for a variety of bananas resistant to black sigatoka. Apparently a debate is currently taking place within management over the advisability of promoting research for a sigatoka-resistant variety of bananas. The cost of bi-weekly aerial fumigation against sigatoka is one of the greatest barriers to entry to competitors. A United Fruit Company agronomist explained this to me:

United Brands has to calculate: do they make more money by finding a sigatoka resistant banana plant or by not finding one? The way it is now, you have to have the capital for the aerial spraying, or you have to sign a contract with a buyer who will spray for you. When a resistant plant is found, then any old Joe Blo will be able to grow export quality bananas.

29

A Honduras-based Company official told me, "It is much easier to deal with military governments."

30

Honduras is probably the most classic example of a "banana republic." For example, in 1911, the Cuyamel Company, (later to become a subsidiary of the United Fruit Company) successfully sponsored a naval invasion of the country by an exiled local caudillo, Manuel Bonilla. As soon as Bonilla seized the presidency, he granted the Cuyamel Company generous land leases and tax holidays (Volk 1981:4).

31

The United States Secretary of State (John Dulles) and the Director of the CIA (Allen Dulles) at the time of the overthrow of the Arbenz government were former United Fruit Company attorneys. The Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (John Moors Cabot) was the brother of the president of the United Fruit Company (Thomas Cabot) (Schlesinger and Kinzer 1983:82-83,106.)

32

Since the ouster of Arbenz, the Company has continued to be active in covert action politics. For example, it supplied two freighters for the Bay of Pigs invasion against Cuba in 1961 (McCann 1976:212). The destabilization of unsympathetic governments is by no means limited to the United Fruit Company. For example in December 1983, Castle and Cooke (the Standard Fruit Company) pulled out of Nicaragua literally overnight. According to a Standard Fruit Company official, "We wanted to make an example of the Sandinistas. We wanted them to fall flat on their faces."

33

The Transnational has also "done favors" for the U.S. government. For example, in the 1970s when the Company was considering withdrawing

from direct production in Honduras and limiting itself to commercializing bananas, the State Department (according to a Company official based in Honduras) requested that the Transnational not diminish its presence in Honduras "in order to maintain U.S. influence and stability." Similarly, Seymour Milstein, the president and chief executive officer of United Brands, is a member of President Reagan's Economic Commission on the Caribbean Basin. According to a high level Company official, following President Seaga's election in Jamaica, Milstein arranged for the United Fruit Company to provide technical assistance to a banana renovation project in that country despite the fact that it did not appear to be profitable. When I asked him why Milstein was willing to do this he responded:

He's just a dirty jew trying to get in good with the president. He wants to become a member of Wasp [White Anglo Saxon Protestant] clubs.

34

The extent of United Brands' product diversity was brought home to me as I began writing this dissertation in New York city and realized that not only had the Transnational provided me with a thesis topic, but it had also produced my lunch (John Morrell frankfuters) and the printer attached to my word processor (a TRT).

35

Bocas del Toro Province is so dependent on United Fruit Company infrastructure that even the government security forces cannot perform their bodily functions without thanking the Transnational as the following letters from the lieutenant colonel and his subordinate document:

Now we have new toilets thanks to God and the collaboration of the Chiriqui Land Company and its men (BDA: Solis to Lippa, Oct. 24, 1962).

The toilets of this unit were replaced with the grand collaboration of the Chiriqui Land Company of which you are a worthy assistant manager. I beseech you to accept in my name and in that of the government of the republic profound gratitude for this altruistic gesture of yours (BDA: Lippa to assistant manager, Oct. 29, 1962).

PART 11: THE BRIBRI

CHAPTER 3: THE APPROPRIATION OF THE TALAMANCA VALLEY:
1908-1931

CHAPTER 4: INTEGRATION INTO THE CASH ECONOMY: FROM SUBSISTENCE
AGRICULTURALISTS TO SMALL FARMERS

CHAPTER 3: THE APPROPRIATION OF THE TALAMANCA VALLEY: 1908-1931

The Bribri Amerindians were the aboriginal inhabitants of what became the Talamanca and the Sixaola districts of the Bocas del Toro Division. They are the first ethnic group to be discussed in this dissertation. This first chapter describes the Bribri people's initial contact, with the Company at the turn of the century when their prime agricultural lands were appropriated. It also documents their efforts to resist the Transnational. The second chapter analyzes the economic integration of the Bribri into the plantation social formation. Originally, the Bribri did not enter the Company's labor force because they were not integrated into the cash economy. Today they continue to resist proletarianization, but this resistance is now made possible by a greater (rather than a lesser) incorporation into the market economy: they have achieved marginal economic success as small farmers. Although they are exploited by non-Amerindian commercial middlemen and they are the victims of ethnic discrimination, they have managed to remain relatively independent from the Company by retaining access to land and markets.

3.1. INITIAL CONTACT

3.1.1. The Company Expands Into Bribri Territory

The rapid spread of Panama disease on the banana farms planted on the Panamanian side of the Bocas Division obliged the Company by the 1910s to expand northward up the Sixaola river, onto the Costa Rican side of the border. Although small quantities of bananas previously had been shipped out of Costa Rica by boat across the Sixaola river, it was not

until 1908, when the Sixaola bridge (see Map 4) was completed,² that large scale shipments of bananas were transported by rail to the port of Almirante. This enabled the Company to plant the Sixaola District of the Bocas Division, (formed by the eastern half of the lower Sixaola valley) during the 1910s.

Already in 1913, the Company had begun preparations for extending its farms further up the Sixaola river into the Talamanca valley, which was then the heartland of Bribri territory. In 1913, for example, the manager advised the Boston office that there were "...10,000 hectares of good land available in the Talamanca valley (BDA: Kyes to Schermerhorn, Jan. 29, 1913)." By 1915, the manager reported that all of the Company's land titles "...[were] complete, not only in the Talamanca valley, but along the Sixaola (BDA: Kyes to Cutter, Nov. 25, 1919)." In fact, 12,734 hectares of the 13,111 that the Company eventually owned in Talamanca were titled prior to Nov. 26, 1913 (BDA: Bocas manager to Boston³ headquarters, Oct. 31, 1945).

The actual contract to extend the railroad into Talamanca was signed in 1913 with a North American who was to construct it at an estimated cost of 40 cents per yard (BDA: Kyes to Schermerhorn, Oct. 2, 1913). The opening of the tunnel at the entrance to the Talamanca valley in 1914, marked the beginning of the Company's penetration of Bribri territory on a massive scale; by 1916 already 3,000 acres of bananas had been planted in Talamanca (BDA: Kyes to Cutter, July 25, 1916). In 1920 the Company reported an investment of slightly over four million dollars on the Costa Rican side of the Bocas Division, half of which was in railways and \$900,000 in bananas (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, July 12, 1921).

At the height of production in the early 1920s, the Costa Rican side of the Division (the Talamanca and Sixaola Districts) was exporting slightly over 3 million stems of bananas per year (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, 12 July, 1921). During this period the Company controlled all aspects of production and commercialization. Only six percent of the bananas exported were purchased from private farmers. The total length of the railroad on the Costa Rican side of the border (from the Sixaola bridge to the last farm in the Talamanca District) was 45 miles constituting a two and one half hour trip. From the Sixaola bridge to the port of Almirante, there were another 45 miles (see Map 4).

3.1.2. The Company Appropriates the Land

This dramatic expansion by the Company into Costa Rica occurred at the expense of the aboriginal population, especially in the Talamanca valley where most of the Bribri lived. Numerous eyewitness accounts confirm that the Company resorted to violence:

[The United Fruit Company]... ordered its foremen to get rid of the Indians. They'd say, 'chop the trees down on top of them; the Company is taking responsibility.' I lived it! You'd feel terrible seeing the Indians fleeing with their little Indian babies in their arms. And the women would run with their few rags hastily tied up in bundles, dropping them along the way without time to retrieve them. And behind them desolation: Domestic animals, huts, shelters, graveyards. Everything was wiped out by the avalanche of fallen jungle. ...to fell a palerque [traditional Bribri housing compound] 200--sometimes 300--of us would be needed to chop it down. The Indians went hysterical. They wouldn't follow the best paths in their flight. They weren't ready for us; we'd catch them by surprise (Melendez 1983:11-12).

In less literary language, a former West Indian laborer recalled:

...the Indians was living there [Talamanca].... The Company take all the flat lands... rob them... take all the land and turn them into the back. When them see you

coming they gone... keep a moving... keep a moving...
keep a moving.

According to elderly Bribri, they were forced to take refuge in the surrounding mountains:

The Company burned the huts so that the indigenous people would have to leave. They were forced to emigrate and most went... to the headwaters of the rivers. As a matter of fact, that is what happened to my mother. They were all born up there in the headwaters of the Uren cause they could not coexist with the Company (Swaby 1982:14).

Of course from a legal perspective, the Company's acquisition of
6
Bribri territory was legitimate. The Company utilized its standard techniques of land acquisition and purchased the Bribri lands for symbolic sums through intermediaries (see 2.3.2). An elderly Bribri, Don Simon Mayorga who lost his family's holdings in this manner described the process to me:

We did not realize that the landlords from Cartago and San Jose--those people--had gotten ahold of all the lands from the mouth of the Sixaola river till here [Suretka,]. They had taken out papers and we were living here like parasites [derogatory term for illegal land occupant]... and parasites we were when the Company came in and bought our farms from the landlords.

Ironically, in subsequent land disputes the Company recognized that these lands had been previously inhabited, but only in order to be able to claim more of the territory. For example, in a legal proceeding over the exact boundaries of a 5,000 hectare plot which was purchased in 1912, the Company lawyer extended the area of the claim by specifying that the engineer who measured it "...did not exclude any of the portions occupied by huts at that time, such as Amubri and Tunsula [two Bribri communities] (BDA: Gongora to Chittenden, Jan. 7, 1919)." In fact, the Company actually benefited from the infrastructure left behind

by the original inhabitants of Talamanca: "...there are some very good bananas which could be used for seed when our development reaches there... [and there are] the remains of the native ranches... (BDA: Adams to Blair, Sept 9, 1921)."

By law the Company was obliged to compensate any private farmers located within the confines of the land that it purchased from intermediaries or acquired on concession from the government. The Company files contain numerous references to payments to "squatters" (eg. BDA: "List of [135] Squatters, Talamanca Valley Development," Sept. 21, 1921). Most of the surnames on these lists, however, are British, indicating that the bulk of the small farmers who received compensation for their huts and plantings were West Indians, or Bribris whose fathers were West Indian. In fact Company archives reveal that some West Indian speculators made a business out of anticipating where the Company intended to plant. They established farms on those lands in order to qualify for compensation pay when they were evicted (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, June 28, 1919). According to Don Simon Mayorga, however, most Amerindians were not paid for their land:

They didn't pay for our land. The little bit that we owned became the last section of the Company's farm at Sipurio [planted in 1918].... It had been the little farm that my mother had left us and they didn't pay us; the Company never paid us; there was cacao and plantains, but they never paid.

Furthermore, according to a newspaper account from the 1930s cited by Kepner, reported that the payments by the Company to local farm owners were made under false pretenses:

In La Tribuna of November 21, 1930, Rogelio Melendez reported meeting a Talamancan Indian who asked him to explain the meaning of two pieces of paper he held in his

possession. These turned out to be a check for fifteen dollars from the United Fruit Company and a record of the sale of the Indians's two hectare farm, which up to the moment he did not realize he had sold to the United Fruit Company (Kepner 1936:84).

3.2. THE DEBILITY OF BRIBRI RESISTANCE

3.2.1. Historical Background

The debility of Bribri resistance to the Transnational's acquisition of their lands was rooted in the colonial experience of the Amerindian peoples the Central American Atlantic Coast litoral. Prior to the United Fruit Company's establishment in Costa Rica, the Bribri were isolated subsistence agriculturalists with no integral ties to the world economy. Nevertheless, they had already been profoundly affected by the international world system, especially by the disruptions caused by Spanish and British colonial expansion into the New World. The Bribri and their aboriginal neighbors throughout Talamanca and Bocas del Toro had been decimated by the ravages of the Spanish conquest and by the spread of European diseases in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Subsequently, the economies and social structures of the surviving indigenous populations along the coast were disrupted by the repeated raids of the Miskitu Amerindians from Nicaragua. From the late 1600s through the mid 1800s, Miskitu military expeditions regularly descended as far as Chiriqui lagoon, raping, killing, and pillaging (Gordon 1984, Holms 1967, and Helms 1982). The violent raids of the Miskitu obliged all the Amerindian peoples residing along the Atlantic litoral from Honduras down to Bocas del Toro to flee up the rivers into the highlands, abandoning their coastal lands and communities.

Ironically, these Miskitu attacks on the region where the plantation

is now located were the result of an instrumentalization of ethnicity and nationality by the the British Empire which was attempting to expand its sphere of influence onto the Central American mainland. The dramatic military and economic expansion of the Miskitu from the 1600s through the first half of the 1800s, was a product of the protracted Anglo-Spanish struggle for hegemony in the Caribbean (Bourgeois 1982:306-309). This process was initiated unofficially by French, Dutch and British buccaneers in the late 1600s, who provided the Miskitu with firearms and machetes in return for help as guides, fishermen, and foot soldiers against the Spanish. Once Jamaica was established as a colony of Great Britain, the British crown founded an official "alliance" with the Miskitu. In addition to supplying the Miskitu with firearms the British, in 1687 brought one one of the many Miskitu leaders to Jamaica and crowned him "king of the Mosquitia." With British firearms and a new political structure legitimized internationally, the Miskitu became the most powerful military force on the Atlantic litoral. They established an "empire" that extended from Trujillo, Honduras to Bocas del Toro, Panama (see Map 1). The Miskitu king even managed to collect regular tribute from the Costa Rican government in return for assurances of not sacking the cacao plantations in Limon (Fernandez 1969:100).⁸ As late as 1845, the Miskitu king, escorted by a British warship, planted his flag on Bocas del Toro Island, demanding that the population show allegiance to "their natural lord (Ganuza 1979:62)."

Oral history accounts of the Miskitu attacks by local inhabitants in Talamanca and Bocas (eg. Reid 1983, Palmer 1977) document the fact that the aboriginal peoples from southern Costa Rica through Northern Panama⁹ were forced to evacuate the coastal region. In her collection of oral

histories from southern Costa Rica, Paula Palmer records a description of the exact escape route taken by the Bribri when the Miskitu invaded. The description was provided by a Black Costa Rican from the coastal village of Cahuita, himself a descendant of one of the Miskitu raiders:

... the Miskitu Indian came in and run them [the Bribri] and they cut across from Carbon to Talamanca region. They take different creeks from Carbon to the Sixaola river at a place name of Bratsi [entrance of the Talamanca valley] take the river up to Telire, keep travelling and go to Amubri and keep going up different branch of river. They kill a lot of them... [You used to] find skull of Indians that was killed by the Indians them from the Miskito Coast that run these Indians them into the hills and kill some of them... plenty of those skulls and still have the hair (cited in Palmer 1977:26-27).

The most impressive legacy of the trauma caused by the Miskitu is the threat Guaymi parents still use to discipline children: "If you don't behave, the Musiki [Miskitu in Guaymi] will come and take you away."

More concrete documentation of the profound impact of the Miskitu raids on the region is provided by the fact that most of the geographical place names along the Coast are derived from Miskitu words. In fact the very name Talamanca means "place of blood" in Miskitu. All the rivers watering the Bocas Division today have Miskitu names: Sixaola means Banana river (sixa=banana and awala=river; Changuinola means river of the Changuines; Sansan means Vegetable river. Even the Cricamola river in the heartland of Guaymi territory is from the Miskitu word for seagull (Krikam).

From the Company's point of view, the practical effect of these Miskitu raids was to reduce drastically the density of the inhabitants along the fertile valleys closest to the coast. Ironically, therefore, the Company benefitted from the Anglo-Spanish colonial rivalry which had

promoted the Miskitu incursions into the region. For example, the entire Sixaola District had formerly been inhabited by Bribri who fled from the Miskitu attacks of the late seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (personal communication Maria Eugenia de Bozollie).¹² When the Company planted the area in the early 1910s, consequently, there was no local population left to displace.

3.2.2. Unequal Confrontation: Subsistence Agriculture Versus Monopoly Capital

On a more theoretical level, the inability of the Bribri to resist the loss of their lands in Talamanca can be understood as the logical outcome of the contact between a sophisticated representative of monopoly capital and a precapitalist people. The Bribri were illiterate, did not have firearms, had no influence in the central government, and spoke neither Spanish nor English. As Don Simon Mayorga explains:

How were we going to fight back? There was no one to defend us... there was nothing we could do. I was a little boy at the time... We were very very simple, and they did exactly as they pleased with us... We didn't speak Spanish; we went up into the hills.

A non-Amerindian eyewitness expressed this in blunter terms: "Indians can't fight. What they gonna fight you with [laughs] they afraid of you... them a innocent people man."

Significantly, in contrast to the "helpless" Bribri, the non-Amerindians living in Talamanca were able to defend their land claims successfully. As Don Simon Mayorga noted, "The only land the Company didn't touch was that of the priests who were from the U.S. in

Amubri. That was the only place that they respected 'cause it was marked by a wire fence." This last detail of the "wire fence" highlights the difference between alienating land from a precapitalist people versus one fully integrated into the world economy. The Bribri at the turn of the century lacked an understanding of the very concept of private property. None of them had titles to their ancestral lands; they did not even know what a title meant.

13

3.3. RESISTANCE

3.3.1. the Blacks Fight for the Bribri

Although I have emphasized the ease with which the Transnational obtained the land in the Bocas Division, there was in fact, some organized resistance in the Talamanca valley to the Company's expansion. Significantly, however, it was the West Indian settlers (who by the late 1910s, had been establishing themselves in increasing numbers as small farmers among the Bribri) who led the opposition to the United Fruit Company. The Black population had a higher capacity for resistance to exploitation than the Bribri (see 1.2.2). Having formerly worked as day laborers, all of the West Indian settlers in Talamanca had previously had extensive contact with Company officials as well as with foreign authorities in general. In fact, most had probably participated in strikes, or work stoppages against the Transnational (see 5.2.2). Furthermore, they were literate and fully integrated into the cash economy; many were merchant/barterers among the Bribri commercializing bananas, cacao, hides, domesticated animals, and sarsaparilla.

The best known of these "Black Indian" leaders was the father of

Alberto Jimenez who today is a Bribri leader. Jimenez' father was a Jamaican who was brought to Costa Rica by Minor Keith to work on the trans-Atlantic railroad (see 5.1.1). Upon completion of the railroad, he moved to Talamanca where he homesteaded a banana farm on hilly terrain too marginal for Company production. He was--like his son still is today--bi-cultural and tri-lingual (English, Bribri, and Spanish). He was fully integrated into Bribri society, practicing the traditional form of sororal polygamy; at the same time he was a leading member of an all-Black male lodge. His son, Alberto Jimenez explains,

As he was the only person with some understanding and learning, he became the champion of the indigenous people and he went on various delegations to San Jose [the capital] to talk with the government to put a halt to what was happening and to demand that they pay for the houses that the Company was burning. The Company did pay a few people.

In order to participate in these land struggles, Black settlers had
14
to alter their ethnicity. For example, according to Jimenez junior, the manager of the Bocas Division, in a confrontation with his father told him that he had "no business getting involved in the Bribris' business." When Jimenez senior responded that he was a Bribri, the North American manager retorted, "If you are an Indian I'm a Chinaman." Jimenez' decision to fight for the Bribri, eventually cost him his economic livelihood, when the Transnational retaliated by blacklisting him and refusing to purchase his bananas or cacao. The best documentation of the differential ability for resistance according to ethnic group is provided by the Company's extensive internal correspondence on the subject. For example, the Bocas Division manager wrote his supervisor in Limon:

We have not had trouble with a single Indian; the trouble is mostly with negroes and some spaniards but very few or

any of them are costarica.... If these people were Indians or natives [Latin] I am sure we would have no trouble with them and could deal with them, but they are renegade niggers, Panamanians and Colombians, and are naturally bad characters, and would not have the least objections to resisting forcible expulsion by forcible resistance...[sic] (BDA: Kyes to Chittenden, Dec. 9, 1916).

In other words, threats and violent eviction worked effectively in the case of the Bribri but not against Blacks. In fact, the Company lawyer advised the Bocas manager who was having problems with Amerindian squatters in Talamanca, to limit himself to energetic threats against the Bribris still residing on Company land because "...the Indians are timid and I am sure that by insisting strongly they will abandon all pretension of ownership of the land. (BDA: Mullins to Kyes Dec 7 1916)."

3.3.2. The Bribri Monarchy

Although Blacks led the resistance to the Company's appropriation of the Talamanca valley, the Bribri, within the context of their traditional culture, had at least one institutionalized means for protecting themselves against the outside world and for pressuring for their interests: A king. Since the 1870s the Bribri king had been officially recognized by the government of Costa Rica as the leader of the Bribri people, and he received a salary from the state. Occasionally he would go on delegations to the capital to negotiate with the Costa Rican government. Had there been a powerful monarch alive at the time the Company was clearing away the Bribri communities to plant bananas (1913-1914), it would have been considerably more difficult for the Transnational to operate in Talamanca. Under mysterious circumstances, however, the Bribri king was poisoned in 1910, at

approximately the same time that the Company was beginning to plan its future expansion into the Talamanca valley.

Elderly Bribri claim that the Company was responsible for poisoning the Monarch. The king had advocated limiting the access of non-Amerindians to his territory:

...[The king] was one of the people most opposed to the entrance of the White men. He did not want to let them pass beyond Suretka where he lived. And he did not want them to exploit the lands of Talamanca. But the Company managed to enter. The Company paid for the king to be killed in order to be able to enter and do what they pleased in Talamanca (cited in Lynch 1982:35).

According to Jimenez, the Company had originally "...tried to buy ... [the king]; granting him a few privileges so that he would not complain." When that strategy failed, however, "In order to prevent him from causing them problems, they [the Company] eliminated him." Significantly, eight days after the king was poisoned, his successor suffered the same fate, along with two of his closest advisors--also 15 protagonists in the fight for Bribri sovereignty over Talamanca.

Today, popular versions of how the king was killed by the Company have been politicized. Non-Amerindians, and those Bribri who favor the presence of the government and foreign companies in Bribri territory, claim that the king poisoned himself by mistake in a drunken debauch when he confused a vial of iodine for a bottle of liquor. In contrast, those Bribri who are most adamant in the defense of indigenous rights (territorial integrity of the Reservation, bi-lingual education, etc.), insist that the Transnational murdered the king. They have converted him into a symbol of Amerindian resistance to foreign penetration and exploitation. This tradition of indigenous resistance has become

especially important since the late 1970s when the Government, in consortium with a Mexican company (RECOPE) initiated oil exploration operations throughout the territory currently occupied by the Bribri.

Regardless of how the king died, no successor was recognized by the Costa Rican government and the institution of the Bribri monarchy subsequently disappeared. Several "pretenders" emerged, however, and even without official legitimation they managed to mobilize a certain amount of opposition to the Company as the following letter to the Division manager indicates, "...Ramon, the uncrowned king... planted a large patch of corn near the old palace at Tunsula (BDA: Adams to Blair, March 25, 1921)." The text of another Company letter indicates that, at least briefly, the Costa Rican government may have considered recognizing one of the new Bribri king's land claims against the Transnational: "...they say the Indian king came from San Jose with word from the President that they could go ahead with [farm] work regardless of the Company (BDA: superintendent of agriculture to Blair, Nov 6, 1916)." In fact, however, the institution of the Bribri monarchy was ineffective in combating the Company's appropriation of Talamanca as the following protest written by the husband of one of the daughter's of the deceased king illustrates:

At Coroma Talamanca I have two pieces of land which for a long time have been cultivated with cocoa and other products, which I acquired with my wife by will of her father, the king of that region Sr. Francisco Saldana. Now I am prohibited to work those lands by the representatives of the United Fruit Company at that place, alleging that the company owns the land. Apart of the rights which since immemorial times I have acquired, due to the possession of the first cultivators of the lands which I have continued for so many years, I cannot see how the United Fruit Company can have acquired a cultivated land in those conditions and much more that it considers itself with a right to exact from me the ejection from [what] legitimately belongs to

me.... The act they are trying to exercise is out of order... [sic] (BDA: William Smith to Mullins, Jan 17, 1914).

3.3.3. Hexing the Company

Unable to resist the Company's penetration through insitutionalized political and legal channels, the Bribri resorted to witchcraft. Today, the Bribri claim that their ysekra [shamen] were successful in driving out the Transnational by provoking floods and spreading disease. Indeed, in the early 1920s, the maze of crisscrossing rivers conforming the Talamanca valley began changing their course, knocking down bridges, ripping up railroad tracks, and destroying the plantations. It was these floods, combined with the prevalence of Panama disease which forced the Company to reduce operations in Talamanca in 1927 (Diario de Costa Rica, Nov. 25, 1927).

In 1928, following a major flood that drowned several people, Suretka, formerly a railhead junction, was made the final stop on the Talamanca line (see Map 4). With each passing year, more and more track and bridges were disassembled. Most of the infrastructure was merely destroyed to prevent competitors from being able to take advantage of it in the future (see 2.2.1) but some of the track and bridge pylons were shipped out to other divisions for reuse. By 1930, the telephone system had been dismantled, the railroad removed, and 27 bridges physically destroyed (La Tribuna, April 30, 1930).

As with the different versions of the poisoning of the king, the various interpretations of the factors which forced the Company to retreat from Talamanca have been politicized and transformed into a symbol of Amerindian resistance. Non-Amerindians provide a "scientific"

explanation for why dramatic flooding occurred within a few years of the Company's entrance into the Talamanca valley. They explain that the Company cut down all the timber along the watershed of the Sixaola river thereby causing its tributaries to overflow and change course. This "objective" explanation is rejected by Bribri Amerindian leaders. Don Simon Mayorga, for example, asserts that the floods began when the Company seized the burial ground belonging to one of the most powerful usekras who "...with prayer threw the water down on them..." According to his version, the North American foreman who ordered the planting of this sacred burial ground was converted into a stone during the flood. Don Simon Mayorga even claims that the "great usekra" who caused the floods, was also responsible for the spread of Panama disease by the preparation of a magic potion which he spread over the farms.

18

Significantly, elderly West Indians who sympathize with the Bribri attempts to reclaim their lost lands, also ascribe to versions which emphasize the effectiveness of Amerindian resistance:

The Company had a bad foreman there and the Indians were living on a piece of land and the foreman go there and worry the men them and run them out of the land. Well them made a complaint to the head man them of the United Fruit Company but they didn't pay them no mind. And they say all right they will see what gwona happen to Talamanca and they go up in the river away up and they spent three months blocking up the water between two hills, the two sister hills, waiting on the weather waiting on the rain make a flood. About a hundred odd of them work there.... I know the place I go right there and see that.... They take leaves and wood and dammed the place. Go right up, go right up. And when they finish it the rain start to come down good now and full it right up and they let it go. It mash up the whole place. A thousand odd people drown. The water carry away the houses and all them things.

Just as they invoke the memory of their assassinated king, Amerindian leaders today recall the past exploits of their usekras in order to

mobilize the Bribri in support of their land rights, and to create a mystique against foreign penetration into their territory. Several Bribri, for example, told me with evident pride that the current usekra had placed a jinx on RECOPE, the oil company digging in Talamanca. A rumor was circulating that the drill bit kept breaking mysteriously and that the baffled engineers had sought an audience with the usekra to beseech him to release the jinx.

Regardless of the objective causes for its retreat, by 1931 the Company no longer operated in Talamanca. By 1934 all the land on the Costa Rican side of the border was virtually devoid of bananas with only 32,207 stems exported (compared to 2,812,000 stems in 1924) across the Sixaola bridge to Almirante (Memoria de Fomento 1934:229). The Company retained possession of its holdings in the lower Sixaola valley up to a farm known as Volio at the entrance of the Talamanca valley by planting cacao on the exhausted and infected soils (see Map 4).

The indigenous people viewed the Company's retreat from Talamanca as a triumph and almost immediately descended from the headwaters where they had taken refuge to reoccupy the flatlands formerly planted in bananas. In fact, the 1930s represented a period of retrenchment by the Company throughout the Bocas Division (primarily due to the spread of Panama disease). Only 81,600 stems were exported from the entire Division in 1939 and all shipments were suspended in 1941 (BDA: Loose papers). The consequent reduction in labor demand forced many Latin and West Indian day laborers out of permanent wage employment. They immigrated (especially the West Indians) to Talamanca and settled among the Bribri. This period marked the beginning of the transition of the

Bribri people into small farmers. This process of the integration of the Bribri into the cash economy is analyzed in the following chapter.

NOTES

1

The Company's relationship to the Teribe Amerindians is somewhat comparable to the case of the Bribri. The Teribe live close to the plantation, but have historically shunned wage labor employment. During my fieldwork less than a dozen Teribe worked for the Company. The Teribe, however, did not lose their land to the Transnational. They had long since fled upriver prior to the arrival of the Company due to the Miskitu raids of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see 3.2.1). Today some 1000 Teribes live in closed corporate communities on the Panamanian side of the border, a few hours upriver from the plantation above a series of rapids. They have a "king" recognized by the Panamanian government and certain rights to self-government. Essentially they are semi-subsistence peasants who commercialize, cacao, fruits, and meat to intermediaries on the plantation.

Similarly, the Cabecar Amerindians who are neighbours of the Bribri in Talamanca, have never worked for the Transnational. I do not include the Cabecar Amerindians as one of the ethnic groups forming part of the plantation social formation, however, as they reside so far up the rivers and on such isolated, marginal territory that they have never had extensive contact with the United Fruit Company. Most of the Bribri's usekras [shamen] are Cabecars. This is surprising since the Cabecar have been dominated by the Bribri politically and economically for hundreds of years. Long before the arrival of the Company the Bribri had conquered them militarily and pushed them upriver into the more marginal lands.

2

The Sixaola bridge was completed illegally without Costa Rican government permission (BDA: Chittenden to Cutter, July 12, 1921; Fournier 1974:41)

3

In 1920, the United Fruit Company's subsidiary in Bocas del Toro claimed ownership of over 28,200 hectares of land in Costa Rica (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, July 12, 1921).

4

Such a low ratio of purchased bananas compared to Company produced bananas was typical of newly developed regions with fertile, virgin soils.

5

These figures on railroad mileage do not include the myriad switches and feeder lines that crisscrossed the network of farms throughout Talamanca. They added up to another 76 miles and included ten major bridges (BDA: Kyes to Schermerhorn, July 10, 1913). By 1925 the Company

had a total of 282.661 miles of track in the entire Division, with 36 steam engines operating 299 banana cars (BDA: Loose papers). Most of the production of the Bocas Division in the 1920s was located in the Talamanca valley. A significant amount of fruit was also purchased from small producers in the Chiriqui lagoon region (see Map 5).

6

Ironically the most serious legal impediment to the Company's legal title to the lands in Talamanca had nothing to do with the fact that the territory was inhabited by the Bribri. Instead, objections were raised by the Costa Rican government due to an 1885 law which had reserved 1,500 hectares in Talamanca for a colonization scheme known as San Bernardo. In fact part of the justification of the subsequently aborted San Bernardo settlement was to "...attract to [Talamanca] Whites in order to improve the Indians through contact with them (ANCH #9496: June 20, 1888). By law no land within a 20 mile radius of the San Bernardo colony could be privately owned. The Company managed to overcome this legal impediment through its influence in the highest sphere's of the Costa Rican government as the following letter from the fiscal overseer of the Republic of Costa Rica to the secretary of state indicates:

...if we were dealing with any other person we would take them to court... but I consider that this Company because of the respect which is owed to it, should not be subjected to such recourse..." (BDA: fiscal overseer to secretary of state, Aug. 12, 1919).

7

For example a North American geologist who surveyed Talamanca in the 1870s and 1880s wrote:

Less than two centuries ago, the population of Talamanca... numbered in the thousands. Today there are barely 1,200 souls. The Shelaba tribe has disappeared; the Changuines are about to be exterminated; the Tiribies [Teribe] population is composed of 103 souls; and Lyon [a North American residing in the Sixaola valley] tells me that the Cabecar population along the Coen has been reduced by more than half in the last 17 years, while the reduction of the Bribri population is only slightly less dramatic (Gabb 1981:113).

The Changuines in former days lived in the valley of the Changuinola river [heart of the Bocas Division today]... and they are if not completely extinct, only represented by a handful of individuals, absorbed by their neighbours the Tiribies and by the Valientes [Coastal Guaymi] (Ibid.:165).

8

In 1721 the governor of Talamanca requested the governor of Jamaica to return 2,000 Amerindians who had been abducted by Miskitu raiders and sold into slavery to British planters (Chacon de Umana 1967:97).

9

The Guaymi, Bribri, and Teribe Amerindians all have elaborate legends of the wars waged against the Miskitu invaders. The Guaymi, for example, attribute the genesis of the name of "Fever Beach" in the Chiriqui lagoon to the poisoning of a Miskitu raiding party by a Guaymi sukia [shaman]. According to the legend, a host of Guaymi women enticed a group of Miskitu invaders into partaking of a banquet of poisoned fruits. Similarly the Bribri attribute the origin of the Gandoca lagoon

to the damming of the Mata de Limon river by Bribri warriors who were preparing an ambush for a party of Miskitu raiders.

10

Information on the Miskitu origin of the names in Talamanca and Bocas is from Conzemius 1922:300-303.

11

Other significant communities in the vicinity of the Bocas Division which have Miskitu names are Cahuita, Hone Creek, Gandoca (from God dankan or "thank God" because of the easy landing afforded by the Gandoca estuary to the invading Miskitu war parties). The most meridional Miskitu name along the Guaymi coast in Chiriqui lagoon is king Buppan, meaning "where the king anchored."

12

The mound upon which the palm oil processing plant and workers barracks of PAIS are located, are said to be the ruins of a former Bribri settlement.

13

The unequal nature of the Bribri/Transnational relationship was so extreme, that when I would press non-Amerindians for explanations of how the Company managed to oust the Bribri from their lands in Talamanca, they would look at me with surprise as if I were simple minded. It was taken as self-evident "common sense" that "progress" involves the expropriation of indigenous people. In fact, it was considered to be an almost self-defining cultural trait of Amerindians to retreat before the advance of "Whites" (see Whitten 1975 for a similar version of this in the Ecuadoran agricultural frontier).

14

Ethnic ambiguity and fluidity is typical of the Bribri and persists today. Bribri cultural absorption of West Indians was so extensive that it was institutionalized into traditional Amerindian culture with the founding of a new clan for Black Amerindians. Black Bribris today are treated exactly as if they were full blooded Bribris despite the fact that some of them, can shift their ethnic identities at their own convenience. In fact, I was told of cases of brothers who have chosen different ethnic identities--one Black the other Bribri.

15

One of the assassinated Bribri leaders was the king's secretary, who was also the son of the previously cited North American geologist William Gabb (see fn. 7).

16

The Sixaola Banana Company, a Costa Rican company, which had been operating with increasing success in the region in the early 1930s, made publicly complained of the United Fruit Company's unfair competitive tactics. Shortly thereafter, in 1935 this locally based rival went bankrupt and the Company purchased its infrastructure for \$27,000 (La Voz del Atlantico: March 9, 1935:1; Quesada 1977:77).

17

With poetic license, the following literary description of the Company's entrance and exit from Talamanca conveys the magnitude of the disruption:

The locomotive came and took out millions and millions of bananas for the gringos. And while the imbecile creoles [Costa Rican upper class] and lackeys in the capital of the republic applauded the 'civilizing' deed of the United, in Talamanca, rotgut, sweat, and blood was flowing. But not

too much later, the earth tired of giving so many bananas and cacao wasn't all that important to the Yankees. So they ripped up the train tracks, pulled down the bridges and, after spitting with disdain on the exhausted earth, they left triumphantly, bankrupting even the naive creoles who thought they could bask in the shade of the Yankee boot and had set up shop in the region. So silence returned to the Talamanca valley; but it was the silence of death. The gringos and their retinue left but the Indians remained. The humiliated Race, brutalized, and practically exterminated was left crying out its pain in the heart of the mountains. (Fallas 1978: 74-75).

18

Anthropologist Maria Eugenia de Bozollie (personal communication) collected a similar "witchcraft account" of the spread of Panama disease which involved the burying of dead armadillos in the fields.

CHAPTER 4: THE BRIBRI AND THE CASH ECONOMY: FROM SUBSISTENCE AGRICULTURALISTS TO SMALL FARMERS

Although the Company successfully appropriated the most fertile portions of the Bribri's land when it entered Talamanca in the 1910s, this did not entail a classic process of "primitive accumulation" as defined by Marx (1972:713-749) in his discussion of the enclosure movement and the genesis of the industrial revolution in Great Britain. The Bribri were too marginally incorporated into the capitalist economy to be susceptible to wage labor discipline; they were not "...hurled as free and 'unattached' proletarians on the labor market (Marx 1972:716)." Nonetheless, a minority sector of the Amerindians eventually did perform wage work for the Transnational at the height of its operations in Talamanca in the 1920s. Furthermore, an even larger number of Bribri interacted economically with the Company, at least indirectly, through market intermediaries.

4.1. ECONOMIC INTERACTION WITH THE COMPANY

4.1.1. Trade Relations

Most Bribri were gradually integrated into the world market economy through trade relations rather than through wage labor. In fact, since the 1600s, long before the existence of the United Fruit Company, the Bribri had bartered sarsaparilla, rubber, and animal hides to European pirates and traders. These mercantile relations, however, had remained incipient through the 1930s and did not require a serious economic and social adjustment to capitalist relations of production. In fact, the accounts by West Indian traders who operated in Bribri territory at the

height of the Company's operations in the region (1910s-1920s) indicate that the relationship of the indigenous population to the cash economy was marginal:

They don't have no use for money. If you go to the Indian and ask them how much you want for that pig or cow, they don't know. They don't know money. And they won't accept the change from you unless it is in the coffee tree money [a coin from the colonial period with the design of a coffee tree on it] (cited in Palmer 1977:77).

Similarly, an elderly Jamaican who supplemented his income as a day laborer for the Company in Talamanca by trading with the Bribri, reminisced of the large profits he made off of the Bribri's inability to understand cash relations:

You carry gun powder, salt, shirts, pants and you change it with them.... They like anything in red. They give you a 200 pound hog just for a pants. They swap you a cow for a pants and a lady frock; they give you a big cow a six--seven hundred pound cow.

Another elderly West Indian upon overhearing the above description criticized the former trader for his lack of scruples. His comments convey in human terms the unequal nature of the economic relationship when a pre-capitalist people are first enmeshed in the market economy:

Them [the traders] rob the poor Indians. You will carry a dog--that's the chief thing they like, a dog. You carry a dog and get two--three hog; you come down and make plenty money. How they [the Bribri] gonna get vexed if they don't know nothing? Them is an innocent people man.

Indeed, to a certain extent, the Bribri's incipient mercantile relations benefited the Company, at least indirectly. They sold cows, pigs and other subsistence items to traders at exceedingly low prices; these goods then reappeared in the plantation economy, lowering the reproductive costs of the Transnational's labor force and allowing for

the payment of lower wages.

4.1.2. The Bribri as Wage Workers

The same dynamic which made the exploitation of the Bribri so extreme in mercantile interactions, also limited the extent to which they could be exploited directly in the productive sphere as wage laborers. The Bribri had not yet developed sufficient cash needs to be forced to reorient their economy to the external market--much less to engage in permanent wage labor. Perhaps most importantly, as subsistence agriculturalists, even after the expropriation of their prime alluvial flat lands in Talamanca, the Bribri were never fully shorn of their means of production. Given their minimal needs, they were able to survive on the marginal broken lands upon which they had taken refuge in the highlands. As an elderly West Indian explained to me: "They would not do nothing; only plant their rice and dive fish." Such a low level, subsistence survival would not have been acceptable to a people more integrated into the cash economy. In the case of the Bribri, however, although profoundly dislocating, their retreat to the mountains did not imply the total destruction of their subsistence way of life.

Furthermore, had the Bribri even sought wage work in large numbers, they would not have been suitable to the Company: they did not know how to tell time, how to read, write or count, or even how to recognize the occidental calendar. Their traditional relations of production were based on reciprocal labor exchange arrangements; the corporate style of contractual, hierarchical work relations was unfamiliar (and unacceptable) to them. Once again the descriptions provided by former West Indian laborers document well why the Bribri did not enter the

local labor market:

The Indians plentiful there [Talamanca] but they hardly work because they were, what you call, a people scared of the colored people.

The Indians them was wild, they didn't know nothing about work.... They don't wear clothes. There no work at all they could do--nothing.

Nevertheless, by the early 1920s a small minority of Bribri individuals, especially those from mixed unions with West Indians, began to engage in wage labor. In fact, to a large extent, the Black immigrant workers and traders in Talamanca served as intermediaries for the integration of the Bribri--or at least a minority sector of the Bribri--into the cash economy:

Its just down lately, 1922 coming up 1928 they begin to get a little civilized with the colored people. Because the colored people the men them they have to do with the women them ya understand man? Having children with them and such the like.

For example, Don Simon Mayorga, who has been quoted extensively in the previous chapter, was the progeny of a Bribri woman and a Nicaraguan² Black of West Indian descent.

Individuals like Don Simon Mayorga were among those who first engaged in wage work. In 1922 only a half dozen years after the Company had expelled him and his sisters from his mother's farm, Don Simon Mayorga (according to his own description) hesitantly descended from the headwaters and began full-time wage work for the Transnational. Typically, he signed up on the crew of a Bribri contractor felling virgin jungle. In his account he specifies that he chose a contractor who was a fellow Amerindian [paisano].

In this manner, a significant (but minority) sector of Bribri society descended from the mountains in the early 1920s to engage in wage labor. This process was described (with some poetic license) by Carlos Luis Fallas (1978:74) who worked for the Transnational in the region during this period:

The race conquered at last fled upriver to hide its pain in the heart of the mountains. And way out there the greedy searched them out, and succeeded in enticing back many of these unhappy folk back by force or through the craving for fire water. Quite simply, the banana Company needed slaves for its new plantations.

According to Don Simon Mayorga, the Amerindian labor force minimized its social interaction with the Black and Latin workers. This was confirmed to me by the accounts of West Indian laborers from the period who explained that the Bribri maintained themselves in separate living quarters:

The Indians don't live in houses. They build their own ranch. They don't like the house business; they don't like shut up for them must have the air. They only build a ranch. You see the cover of a roof and that's all....

Evidently even those Bribris who were willing to experiment with wage labor, remained on the margin of social life on the plantation, and retained much of their customary practices.

The bulk of the Bribri who performed wage labor in these early years did not fully proletarianize themselves. They were not even semi-proletarians (i.e., peasants who seasonally supplement their income from crop sales with wage labor) as there were no consistent patterns to their bouts of wage labor. According to the West Indian farmers who occasionally employed them on their private farms in the 1930s:

They [the Bribri] work, but they don't work plenty

plenty. Well they don't work like the Black people work straight straight. No, no they want a little money and they work; maybe they work for a two month or a three month and they get what they want and they gone. And don't come back again. Work morest come onto Christmas. Work for themselves more, plant the rice, corn and all those things, raise pigs, raise corn, chickens....

4

The Bribri would not submit to accepted norms of labor discipline:

There only one fault with them. Suppose you get one to work with you, don't stand there with them. They say that you are watching them; they don't like that. If you show them the work and let them know how much you pay them you leave them.... You can't be up and down there while they are working. I don't handle them like servants. I looking for help. A poor man can't pay for servants; he pay for help.

The Indians are a funny people; if you don't understand them they no work for you. If they don't know you they don't work for you. A very curious people; they don't work for anyone.

4.2. TRANSITION INTO A PEASANTRY

4.2.1. The Logic of Being a Small Farmer

5

Although the Bribri have long since developed permanent cash needs, there were none working in the Bocas Division during my fieldwork. They have access to land and markets in the Talamanca valley which was designated as an Indian Reservation by the Costa Rican government in 1976. Consequently they have been able to establish themselves as small farmers, commercializing cacao and plantains. They only occasionally perform wage labor for neighbours and acquaintances when immediate cash needs cannot be satisfied from crop sales. They have been integrated into the cash economy, but as semi-independent peasants rather than as agricultural proletarians. In other words, during my fieldwork, it was precisely the extent of the the Bribri incorporation into the cash economy--rather than their lack of integration--which kept them out of

the plantation labor force.

The refusal of the Bribri to work for the banana companies (or for any other company, such as the oil concern, RECOPE which is located directly on Reservation lands and pays higher wages) is independent of ethnicity; it is simply part of the "common sense" logic shared by all small peasants (regardless of their ethnicity) to reject wage work when cash needs can be satisfied through farming (see 1.2.2). Although most peasants (Bribri, Latin, and Black alike) told me that they could earn more money if they worked for the banana companies, they also note that it is not worth the effort because of the difficulty of saving money in the "degenerate atmosphere" of plantation social life. They complain that Company work is gruelling and demeaning: "You kill yourself... it's for slaves [Uno se mal mata... es esclavizado]." Perhaps most importantly, they object to the poor treatment by the Company foremen. They will not tolerate externally imposed labor discipline; it comes as a shock to them to be criticized and shouted at by generally arrogant (and racist) foremen attentive to their every move. As independent farmers, on the other hand, "There's no one to hassle you... [nadie le regana]; no one's hounding you [nadie le tiene tallado]." They also often point out that on their own farms, when it rains they can stay home in bed "warm and cozy [calientito]." Similarly when they wake up feeling sick, they do not have to drag themselves to the fields with a fever lest they be fired for absenteeism. The fact that no Bribri (and few Blacks) work in the Bocas Division has resulted in a plethora of ethnic stereotypes. Local racist discourse insists that Amerindians refrain from wage labor because they are irrational and primitive (Blacks on the other hand are supposed to be lazy). For example, the

Manager of the Bocas Division explained to me (after he had discovered that I was an anthropologist) that the "Talamanca Indians" were incapable of understanding the concept of saving money and investing it: "They don't try to progress; they don't try to save; no one tries to be richer than anyone else in their society."

Indeed, a superficial tour through the Indian Reservation reveals a panorama of poverty and underdeveloped infrastructure. There is no electricity or running water; clothes are ragged; and household utensils are minimal. Most of the houses are huts with mud floors and thatched roofs. Furthermore, the nutritional indicators for the children of banana workers are considerably superior to those of the peasants on the periphery of the plantation (personal communication, delegate of the Ministry of Health in Talamanca).⁷ Nevertheless, a strictly cost benefit analysis (especially when viewed in the perspective of a long term investment) supports the decision of the small farmers not to convert themselves into permanent banana workers. During my fieldwork, there was a disproportional increase in the value of land after a minimal amount of labor had been invested in it. Ownership of "improved" land (i.e., cleared and/or planted in permanent tree crops) represents one of the most secure ways of saving money. Bribri farmers explained that even though they do not have access to regular sources of money income like the banana workers, they live with greater security. When they fall ill or become debilitated, instead of being laid off by their employer (and finding themselves stranded with their family with no source of income), they can either sell their land or post it as collateral for a loan. Most importantly, land serves as security for old age. Banana workers, on the other hand, are usually fired when they