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Banana Workers**



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conjugated oppression: class and ethnicity among Guaymi and Kuna banana workers

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The [Kuna] Indians from San Blas give less trouble due to the fact that they are more civilized and less vice-ridden than the Guaymi.

[Report by a Panamanian Ministry of Labor inspector to his superiors, June 24, 1957]

They're *cholos* but they're not *cholo cholos*.¹

[Hispanic banana worker describing the Kuna, 1984]

Anthropological theories of ethnicity have evolved significantly since the initial steps away from primordialism toward the more process-oriented, socially constructed definition set forth in Barth's (1969) frequently cited collection of essays. Through the 1970s a voluminous literature on ethnicity flowered, much of it—following a modest, but path-breaking article by Joan Vincent (1974)—has focused on power relations within a context of conflict. Although the sociologist Oliver Cox (1949) had already placed ethnicity within the context of power, political ideology, and class, it was not until recently, with the increased legitimacy of marxist analysis in the social sciences, that class and power relations have been accepted as vital to ethnicity. Indeed, nonmarxists have specifically recognized that “the relationship between ethnicity and class constitutes the key to an understanding of ethnic conflicts” (Van den Berghe 1975:75). Others may criticize what they consider to be the reductionism of a class analysis, but nevertheless focus on the issue of competition for “material interests” even if they consider the “political arena” more determinant than the market place, the shop floor, or the farmer's field (Despres 1984:18). Recently a central proponent of cultural pluralism acknowledged the importance of “Marxist class analysis,” calling it “complementary rather than mutually exclusive” to pluralist theory (M. G. Smith 1984:170–171). In short, a diverse range of theorists, from cultural pluralists (for example, Despres 1975; Leons 1977; Maybury-Lewis 1984) to nuanced political economists (Barrera 1979; Bonacich 1979; Burawoy 1976; Fox 1985; O'Brien 1987;

This paper discusses the relationship between class and ethnicity—and more broadly between ideology and material reality—by comparing the integration of the Kuna and Guaymi Amerindians into the labor force of a United Fruit Company banana plantation in Central America. Both the occupational/class hierarchy and the ethnic hierarchy of plantation society are analyzed. The most dramatic difference between the two Amerindian peoples in the plantation context is their location in the ethnic hierarchy. The Kuna have mobilized and adapted their “traditional” ethnic and corporate structures to mediate their economic exploitation on the plantation and to exert leverage for superior ethnic status. In contrast, ethnic discrimination and public humiliation suffered by the Guaymi constitute a form of ideological domination that combines or “conjugates” with their economic marginalization and results in a dynamic of institutionalized oppression. [ethnicity and class, plantation work process, ethnic discrimination, political economy, Kuna and Guaymi Amerindians]

Stoler 1985; Wasserstrom 1983; Wolf 1982:379–383) are now emphasizing class conflict, historical processes of capitalist development, or at least competition for material resources.

Given this newly energized focus on class conflict and power in the analysis of ethnicity, the multidisciplinary political economy approaches are breaking new ground. They place capitalist development in the center of the discussion and deal systematically with the relationship between class and ethnicity:

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].

Tremendous diversity of emphasis and approach exists within the political economy framework. Some theorists emphasize the role of the state in the context of changing class formations under capitalist growth (Greenberg 1980). Others point to the role of legal structures (Dominguez 1986); imperialism (Sloan 1979); colonialism and its impulse on ideologies of political mobilization (Fox 1985); internal colonialism and the cultural division of labor (Hechter 1975); the instrumental mobilization of elites (Friedlander 1975); the international division of labor in the world economy (Enloe 1986); immigration (Burawoy 1976; Grasmuck 1985); “primitive accumulation” through articulating modes of production (Meillassoux 1981; Rapp 1977); or the process of class struggle in a “split labor market” (Bonacich 1979).

Despite this proliferation, no dominant paradigm has emerged even among those who agree to the centrality of class and who reject reified, idealized conceptions of ethnicity. The discussion of the relationship between ethnicity and class is still plagued by a debate over the relative determinancy of ideology and material reality. The Damocles sword of “economistic” reductionism, mechanical correspondence, or teleological functionalism hangs over virtually all class-oriented analyses of ethnicity. Even authors who address the issue of reductionism in a critical manner do not claim to be able to resolve it definitively (see Kahn 1981 for a discussion of the base/superstructure concept). Rejecting a mechanical subordination of ethnicity to economic forces, Fox (1985) offers an emphasis on agency, process, and social practice, while Bonacich (1979) focuses on class struggle.

Certainly a subtler understanding of ethnic processes is being developed through an increased focus on the process of conflict itself. This locates the crucial parameters of ethnicity in confrontation on all levels—ideological or economic—rather than on material reality *per se*. If both ethnicity and class can be understood as part of the same material social process, then the “either/or” template which lurks unrecognized beneath too many political–economy understandings of ideology and economy can disappear.

Conceiving of ethnicity as a material social process does not necessarily deny that there might exist a primordial “Lévi-Straussian” set of traits and relations that some ethnographers might want to call ethnicity. That is a moot point, however, because any reified bundle of traits (whether it be language, custom, or shared values) is meaningless outside its context in the everyday interchanges among the different classes or class fractions of any given society. Ethnicity is significant in a given individual’s life because it bears a relationship to a structure of power relations. It is not merely a fascinating pile of pretty clothes, dance steps, spicy foods, and exotic sounds—phenomena best analyzed by literary critics, musicologists, art historians, and linguists. If we accept a common sense definition of ideology as a charged belief system in a matrix of power relations, then ethnicity is interesting and socially relevant as a form of ideological expression, that is, as part of a social process of confrontation.

Ideology, furthermore, is an organic component of “material reality” because class structure—presumably the cornerstone of what is called material reality—cannot be defined “materially” as a mere relationship to the means of production and the social division of labor. Class acquires its social meaning through ideological and political processes in the form of “class consciousness” and political mobilization (cf. C. Smith 1984). Conversely, ethnicity—or gender or any other human “characteristic” which has the capacity to charge power rela-

tions—is just as much a material social process as is class because it structures political alliances and determines patterns of upward mobility in as real a manner as does “control of the means of production.”

To document these relationships I compare the experience of domination of two different Amerindian peoples—the Kuna and the Guaymi—on a U.S.-based transnational banana plantation based in the province of Bocas del Toro, but which spans the Panama/Costa Rica border. I analyze the details of the productive process because if there is such a thing as “material reality,” the best way of approximating it is to document what people do all day in order to survive. Power relations take on their ultimate relevance in the production process. They determine an individual’s income, work effort, exposure to occupational hazards, access to leisure time, and goods and services. I therefore pay special attention to what I call the plantation’s occupational hierarchy, a ranking structure based on class, or more precisely, class fractions. This occupational hierarchy, however, exists in the context of an ethnic hierarchy which both defines and is defined by it. For analytical purposes, the occupational hierarchy can be said to operate in the economic sphere and the ethnic one in the ideological. In practice, the two are not separate but create one another.

Both the Guaymi and the Kuna entered the labor force of a United Fruit Company banana plantation in Bocas del Toro province, Panama, in the early 1950s. They came from roughly similar economic settings: in their home communities they rely primarily on subsistence agriculture and have limited access to cash income. Their political structures, however, differ both at the community level, and in relationship to the Panamanian state and other outside corporate entities. The divergent experiences of the Kuna and the Guaymi on the plantation over the past 25 years can be explained largely by the different ways they have mobilized their respective ethnicities in mediating politically and ideologically their relationship to the non-Amerindian world. The result, in concrete terms on the Bocas del Toro plantation, is a profoundly different experience of economic exploitation and ideological domination.

The Kuna have achieved a remarkable upward mobility in the ethnic hierarchy by self-consciously organizing around their “Indianness.” They have adapted and created new “traditional” institutions, expressed in a racial idiom, to jockey for power and to bargain for their economic interests in the occupational hierarchy, as well as to defend their dignity in the ethnic hierarchy. In contrast, it is precisely that “Indianness” of the Guaymi that condemns them to the systematically institutionalized ridicule that they suffer in the ethnic hierarchy and which is a key component of what I call their ideological domination. A pervasive structure of ethnic discrimination against the Guaymi not only legitimizes their relegation to the inferior, strenuous tasks on the plantation, but also prevents them from organizing and defending their interests politically.

In order to compare the experience of oppression of Kuna and Guaymi workers, therefore, it is useful for analytical purposes to distinguish between their economic exploitation, which is a function of their location in the occupational hierarchy, and their ideological domination, which is related to their location in the ethnic hierarchy. The two groups initially started in essentially the same marginal location in the occupational hierarchy, but they now occupy very different positions in the ethnic hierarchy. The content of their oppression, therefore, is profoundly different. In contrast to the Kuna, the Guaymi suffer from what I call a “conjugated” oppression. I use the term conjugated to differentiate between the two peoples’ experience of oppression and to illustrate how economic and ideological processes are related in an organic manner. Conjugated oppression occurs when an economic structure—in this case the occupational hierarchy of a transnational corporation’s banana plantation—conflates with ideology—in this case the ethnic hierarchy in Bocas del Toro—to create an experience of oppression that is more than merely the sum of its constituent parts: class and ideology. The “conjugation” of ideology and class expresses itself in distinct patterns of political mobilization and in differ-

ential margins of exploitation and labor control, which will be the focus for the empirical analysis here.

This case study comparison does not pretend to explain the origins of Guaymi or Kuna ethnicity. That would require, among other things, a systematic analysis of the colonial history of the two peoples and their contemporary relationship to the Panamanian state, as well as an understanding of the changing political economy of their subsistence systems and their incipient cash economies in their home territories. Instead this analysis focuses on the particular experience of ideological domination and economic exploitation of two minority segments within Kuna and Guaymi society—males who have migrated to the United Fruit Company plantation in Bocas del Toro. The ethnicities of the migrants have been “charged” by a competitive, hierarchical, capitalist production process with a rigidly institutionalized structure of labor control.

I purposefully focus on the relationship of these two ethnic groups to the production process—the occupational hierarchy—and to the ideological currents of plantation society—the ethnic hierarchy—because I believe these to be central arenas for understanding ethnicity’s meaning and import in any social setting. The goal of this comparative study is to transcend the reductionist stalemate of class analyses of ethnic relations that are unable to resolve the issue of the relative determinacy of ideas or material reality. Taken to its extreme, my argument might be understood as denying any “relationship” between class and ethnicity—or between ideology and material reality—since the two are inseparable. They cannot be conceived as distinct dimensions, however, because class and ethnicity are not characteristics, but social processes that define one another. Both shape the same “material reality,” the same structure of power relations and conflict, which also produces them.

the setting

The United Fruit Company’s Bocas del Toro plantation offers privileged insight into processes of ethnic discrimination and economic exploitation because it is, to a certain extent, a caricature of most ethnically diverse societies. Its intensively capitalized system of export production set in an enclave economy dominated by a single employer headquartered in the United States intensifies the dynamic one finds in more diversified large-scale societies and renders it more visible. Over the past century, the plantation’s complex division of labor has incorporated successive waves of immigrant laborers, creating a hierarchical structure of ethnically defined occupational niches. The ethnic diversity of plantation society (some half-dozen ethnic groups depending on where one draws distinctions) is structured by a complicated and hierarchical productive process, subdivided into dozens of job categories involving different degrees of technological skill, as well as physical and mental stress. Most societies contain versions of such interrelated ethnic and occupational hierarchies, but here the relationships and conflicts are more evident and sharply drawn. The almost 6000 day laborers and 700 management employees on the plantation are segmented into what one could call a de facto apartheid occupational hierarchy. The “objective” characteristics of this hierarchy are recognized by the local population and are most often expressed in ethnic stereotypes. For example, non-Amerindians insist that the Guaymi spread corrosive fertilizers and dangerous pesticides because “their skin is thicker and they don’t get sick.” They are not paid the full wage for strenuous field work because (according to a foreman):

“The Indian has low physiological needs. Because of his physical constitution, he can bear to do tasks that the Hispanic just can’t perform. The Indian only thinks of food; he has no other aspirations. He works to eat.”

Blacks, on the other hand, predominate in the Maintenance Department’s repair shops and electrical division because they are “crafty and don’t like to sweat.” Recently arrived Nicara-

guan Hispanic immigrants are said to work almost as hard as the Guaymi because they “are tough, have leathery skin (*cueron*) and aren’t afraid of sweating under the hot sun.” Finally, white North Americans are the top managers because “they are the smartest race on earth.”

The history of the ethnic composition and the productive structure of the plantation has made the region into a “pressure cooker” which produces charged belief systems (ideologies) around ethnicity. All the necessary structural ingredients and catalysts are present: conflicting management-labor relations, a hierarchized logistics of production, a boom-and-bust economy, waves of immigration, and remarkable ethnic diversity (Bourgeois 1988). The plantation residents “essentialize” in racial idiom the characteristics of the various cohorts of the labor force in order to explain and justify the constellations of power relations which are rooted in the productive process. This provides an ideal opportunity to view ethnicity in its ideological expression as part of a material social process.

The first workers to arrive in Bocas del Toro, and to stay in substantial numbers as full-time laborers, were black West Indians who founded the banana industry in the 1880s. Initially they were model workers; they cleared the jungles, drained the swamps, built the railroads, and planted the bananas for low wages without frequent labor disruptions (Bourgeois 1986). By the 1910s and 1920s, however, when they began organizing unions, engaging in strikes and establishing themselves as independent farmers, the Company imported Hispanics (especially Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans from the northwestern border province of Guanacaste). By the 1930 Depression, Hispanics dominated the labor force. In the 1940s, during a temporary boom provided by an artificial U.S. Army market for abaca (a natural fiber used to make rope, formerly imported from the Philippines), the Company imported thousands more Hispanics (primarily Hondurans and Nicaraguans).

Amerindians were not recruited into the labor pool systematically until the early 1950s when the work force rose from 3383 in 1950 to 5298 in 1953, due to the reintroduction of bananas as the primary export of Bocas del Toro, and—more importantly—to Company efforts to undercut the new labor movements on banana plantations throughout Central America by flooding regional labor markets. In the early 1960s unions finally established themselves in Bocas del Toro and management responded by implementing “divide-and-conquer” tactics to diminish labor’s bargaining power. Amerindians, primarily the Guaymi, emerged as the crucial component in this strategy. During my fieldwork (1982–1984)² they constituted 42 percent of the day labor force.³

In numerical terms, the Kuna are considerably less significant. Between 1982 and 1984 they represented only 6 percent of the labor force, and at their height in the 1970s they never exceeded some 15 percent. Nevertheless, as will be shown, their importance transcends their numbers. The Kuna segregate themselves from other workers and are frequently portrayed by management as an example of self-discipline, obedience, and industriousness.

initial integration of the Guaymi

It was not until the late 1940s and early 1950s that the Company began experimenting with Amerindian labor in a systematic manner. The first Guaymi arrived spontaneously toward the end of World War II, seeking cash employment. Initially plantation managers refused to hire them; the monolingual, illiterate, and inexperienced Indians were considered too inefficient and unpredictable to warrant inclusion in the plantation labor roster. Indeed, during this early period Guaymi migrant workers were only marginally integrated into the cash economy. Ethnographic reports from different regions of Guaymi territory from the 1930s through the mid-1960s note that many of the Guaymi did not fully understand the use of money (Johnson 1948:244; Young 1978:47).⁴

By the early 1950s, however, the Company was formally employing between 1000 and 2900 Guaymi according to eyewitness estimates (Gordon 1957:11; May and Plaza 1958:224; Chi-

riqui Land Company 1951:29). It is not clear what propelled the Guaymi to enter the labor force in such large numbers between the late 1940s and early 1950s. Cabarrus (1982:6), and some of the Guaymi I interviewed, claim that it was because of the contraction of local markets for peasant crops during the 1940s. Others state that it was in response to the Transnational's recruitment drives.

Whatever the underlying economic reason, the integration was problematic from management's perspective. The majority of the new Guaymi immigrants were (and for the most part still are) largely subsistence agriculturalists, coming from isolated, traditional, "closed corporate" communities with minimal—if any—direct contact with non-Amerindian society. The difficulty in making the transition from a subsistence agricultural economy to one based on full-time wage work gave rise to the emergence of patron/client intermediaries (cf. Cabarrus 1979:50–56). The lack of "proletarian" skills of the new Guaymi laborers (their inexperience with cash transactions, routinized work hours, and so on) and their incomplete dependence on the money economy led the Company to establish special broker institutions to supervise, train, and recruit the new Amerindian workers. Company correspondence abounds with references to the maladaptive qualities of the Guaymi who were undergoing this "traumatic transition"—absenteeism, "irresponsibility," and drunken brawling. Managers complained to headquarters that the Guaymi would abandon the plantation in November and December without even picking up their pay checks in order to harvest yams and plant corn and rice in their home communities (Bocas plantation manager to Moore, 25 February 1952). Meanwhile wage work so disrupted the subsistence economy that Reverend Pascal, a Methodist minister active in Guaymi labor recruitment requested on humanitarian grounds that the Company,

specify a shorter period for releasing them [the Guaymi] to go home to attend to their crops since the country becomes impoverished by the diminishing Indian crops . . . Corn, Yams, Rice etc. The cream of labour being harnessed at this end [on the plantation] [Reverend Pascal to "Management of C.L.C.," 26 July 1954].

Significantly, the political structures of Guaymi society, in contrast to those of the Kuna, were incapable of adapting to this conflicting situation. No indigenous institutions emerged to mediate the profoundly dislocating process of labor migration to the plantation. Guaymi society has no clearly defined corporate structures at a regional level to represent them in their dealings with the outside world or to regulate itself internally within its traditionally defined territory. Even at the community level the ethnographic literature notes that the political structures are fluid and ambiguous (see Bort 1983:64).

Helms (1979:28) argues that colonial conquest and marginalization destroyed traditional Guaymi political organization creating a "deculturated, egalitarian society that has lost much of the traditional elite subculture pattern through European contact." As a result, the Guaymi have been unable to present a united front to negotiate with or to combat the outside world. Although there is now a yearly Guaymi Congress with an elected leadership of "caciques" with ambiguous powers, they have been singularly unsuccessful in gaining formal recognition of Guaymi land rights from the Panamanian government. Guaymi territory does not have the self-governing autonomy, known as *comarca*, which the Kuna won for themselves in the 1930s.

In the early 1950s the vacuum in Guaymi institutional structures for mediating contact was filled by community-level, opportunistic strongmen—frequently of mixed Hispanic/Amerindian descent—who were sponsored by the Company itself. These labor recruiters received one dollar "per head" for each young male delivered to the plantation (Cabarrus 1979:50 ff.). They would abandon barefoot, ragged, monolingual Guaymi immigrants on the banana loading docks in the port of Almirante, leaving them without money, food, or a place to sleep. Sometimes no work was immediately available (cf. Petition Presented by 69 Guaymi to the Manager of the Chiriqui Land Company, Bocas del Toro, 27 March 1960). A Honduran abaca worker who witnessed this process described the vulnerability of the first Guaymi immigrants with poetic sorrow:

"The Indians would arrive, like guinea pigs and wild boar [*sahinos y guatusas*] driven out of the mountains: their feet bleeding [*los pies pelados*,] frightened and with no place to sleep. Anyone could just grab them and put them to work for any old miserable pay [*por cualquier cochinateda*]."

initial integration of the Kuna

The arrival of the first Kuna in 1952 could not contrast more sharply with that of the Guaymi. They came in a controlled and limited manner. One of the three head *caciques* of Kuna territory, *Sahila* Olotebilibiquiña,⁵ signed a contract on their behalf with the United Fruit Company after several months of negotiations, aided by the U.S. Consul in Panama, who had had extensive experience since the 1930s with Kuna migrant laborers in the Canal Zone and on U.S. military bases (Whittaker to Munch, 7 June 1953; Holloman 1969:126). During the negotiations, two Kuna representatives of the *Cacique* were even sent to inspect working and living conditions on the plantation. The final contract specified that cohorts limited to 25 men were to travel from the San Blas archipelago in Kuna territory to Bocas del Toro (see Figure 1) to work for 6 months in railroad maintenance (Mais to Munch, 10 November 1952; Richards to Matheis, 29 November 1952). They were to be paid 22 cents⁶ per hour for 9-hour days, and were to receive half of their pay on the plantation, the remainder to be sent to the authorities of San Blas upon completion of the 6-month period (Richards to Matheis, 29 November 1952).

Olotebilibiquiña insisted in the contract on his right to supervise the conditions of the Kuna laborers. Although on several occasions he pressed for better working conditions and higher wages, it appears that he was primarily concerned with protecting Kuna culture and with tempering the dislocation that Kuna workers (and Kuna society in general) suffered as a result of the sudden involvement in wage work. For example, Kuna workers were forbidden to take their wives with them, to prevent them from becoming too comfortable away from home. They were forbidden to drink alcohol or engage in behavior that might "shame" their people. The *Cacique* specified:

I do not wish any of the men that I send with my permission to engage in corrupted behaviour. . . . I have to make myself respected. . . . If any worker drinks liquor, he is to be fired from his work and sent immediately to Colon [Olotebilibiquiña to Munch, 3 May 1954].

At Olotebilibiquiña's insistence, the Kuna were to live together in segregated barracks and were to work in all-Kuna squads under the direction of a bilingual Kuna foreman (Richards to Matheis, 29 November 1952). All Kuna employed by the Transnational during these initial years (1952–1960) had to be explicitly approved by the *Cacique*, and were subject to his rigid social discipline. Company correspondence reveals that the *Cacique's* dictates were enforced (Munch to Linton, 9 June 1954; Smith to Peith, 2 December 1953).

The concerted action by Olotebilibiquiña to control and channel labor out-migration offers a stark contrast to the massive, disorganized flow of "frightened, barefoot" Guaymi who were arriving on the plantation at the same time, enticed by the false promises of opportunistic, Company-sponsored Guaymi "leaders" who were collecting one dollar for every healthy male they delivered. Indeed, without the restrictions and controls imposed by Olotebilibiquiña, large numbers of young Kuna men may very well have descended upon the Bocas del Toro plantation in the same unprepared, defenseless manner. The limited alternative sources of cash income available to the Kuna in 1952 (from sales of coconuts and artisanal *mola* embroideries, and wage labor in the Canal Zone and on U.S. bases) made the 22 cents per hour Company pay highly attractive to Kuna subsistence agriculturalists. However, the *Cacique* placed limits on migration, a fact that was noted by the Company's agent in Panama City:

ever since the first group of San Blas Indians [have] returned . . . all the men in the various Islands want a chance to go to Almirante but . . . cacique Olotebilibiquiña [is] trying to make it hard [Mais to Munch, 15 September 1953].

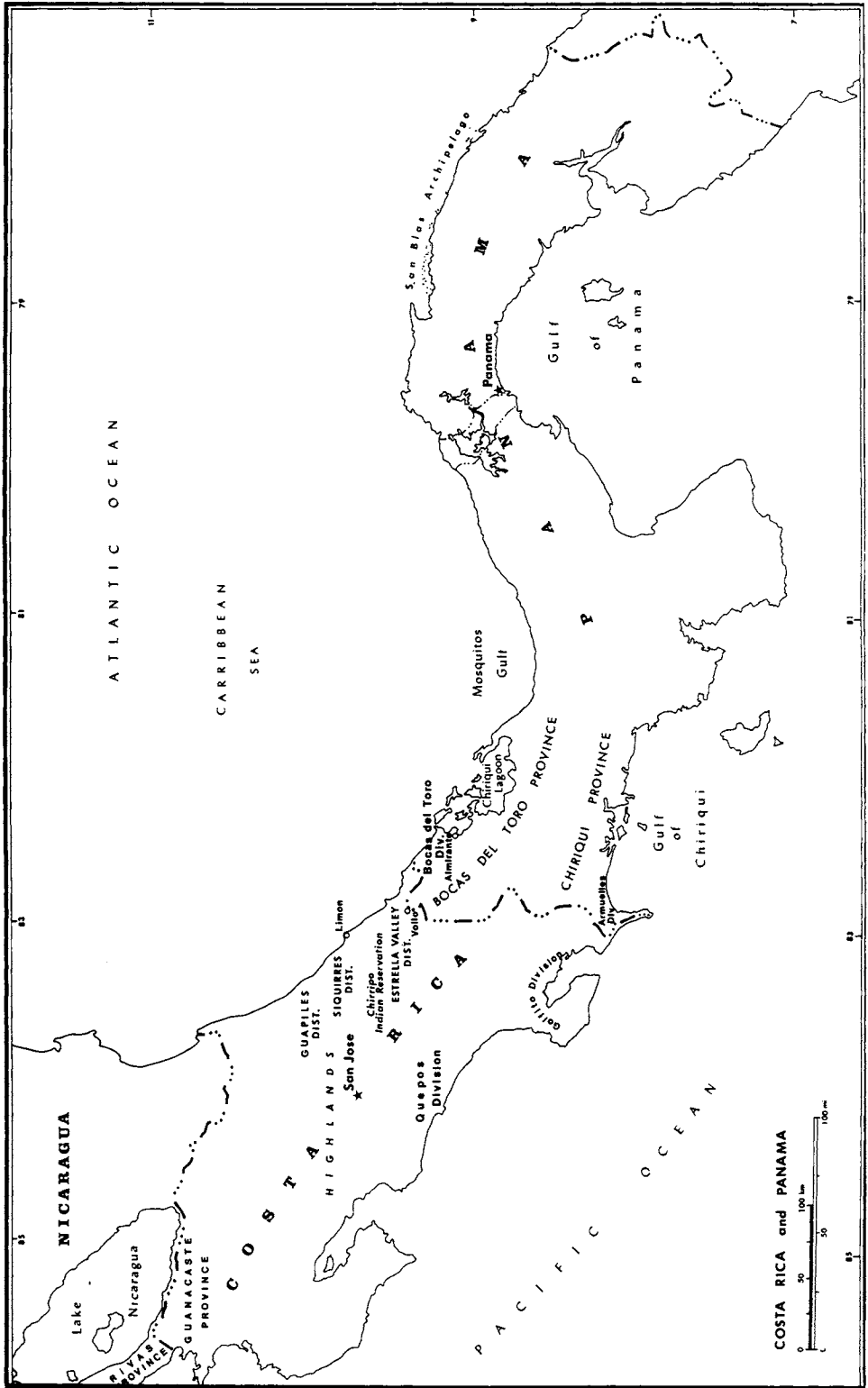


Figure 1. Bocas del Toro Province, Panama.

“traditional” Kuna institutions

The key to the striking difference in Guaymi and Kuna experiences in this early phase of contact lies in the extraordinary capacity of the Kuna to adapt or reinvent their traditional political structures to protect their land base and their political autonomy (Holloman 1975; Howe 1986:9–24). The turning point for Kuna adaptation to the exigencies of the modern world occurred in 1925 during their successful revolt against the Panamanian government, aided by a warship sent by the United States. In the 1930s they negotiated the special status of political-administrative autonomy known as *comarca* for their home territory of San Blas, and over the years have continued to create community and regional structures to maintain control over their resources. They have even incorporated the new hierarchies and power structures of the outside world into their annual “Kuna General Congress.” Representatives from the National Guard and the central government attend the Congress, as do managers of the major corporations employing Kuna workers, including the manager of the United Fruit Company’s Bocas del Toro plantation.

Of equal importance, the Kuna have incorporated migratory wage work into the ritual structures of their corporate communities, thereby offering a sense of purpose and logic to emigrating banana workers set squarely within the “traditional” bounds of Kuna ethnicity. This protects the young men from dislocation and trauma when they go literally overnight from subsistence agriculture in an all-Amerindian community to intensive wage labor in a foreign plantation where they have low prestige as an ethnic minority. The extension and adaptation of Kuna institutions not only provide a framework for psychological, social, and political support, but also a moral incentive and even an economic link mandating subsequent return to the home community. For example, in the early years of plantation work in the 1950s, Kuna men traveled to Bocas del Toro to save money for the puberty ceremonies for their young daughters, one of the most important and expensive rituals in Kuna culture (Sherzer 1983:61, 151–153). The success of a daughter’s initiation ceremony affects a Kuna’s sense of dignity and social prestige in the community. It is also central to the definition and reassertion of the ethnic community, drawing a sharp separation between the Kuna and non-Kuna. The 6-month labor contracts, therefore, were well-suited to the needs of anxious Kuna fathers whose daughters were approaching puberty. In 6 months of plantation labor they could save sufficient cash to sponsor an adequate ceremony. Ironically, then, the demands of traditional Kuna culture propelled a significant sector of Kuna men into the wage-labor market at the same time that it enabled them to participate more successfully in the corporate structures of their traditional community upon their return. Kuna society thereby channeled potentially divisive and disruptive cash income toward activities that reinforced Kuna ethnic identity.

For its part, the United Fruit Company bureaucracy skillfully adjusted to traditional Kuna discourse. The Bocas del Toro plantation manager carefully imitated the traditional Kuna tone and style in his correspondence with Olotebilibiquiña. Using the salutation “My dearest friend,” he carefully wrote out the *Cacique’s* formal title, “2cnd Sahila’ of the Kuna *Comarca*” and referred to the Kuna laborers as “your sons” (Munch to Olotebilibiquiña, 5 March 1959). Most importantly, the Company arranged for the *Cacique’s* visits of inspection to the plantation with great pomp. Boats, trains and spending money were placed at his disposal.

The Company’s relationship with Olotebilibiquiña was formalized when a desk job in the Department of Labor Relations was assigned to a man the *Cacique* designated as “Representative of the Kuna community in Bocas del Toro Province,” a position later made permanent. During my fieldwork, the Company no longer maintained any *caciques* on its payroll, but it still graciously paid the expenses once a year of Kuna leaders who requested permission to inspect working conditions on the plantation.

Perhaps most crucial to the Kuna/Transnational relationship is the new “traditional” institution known as UTRAKUNA (Union of Kuna Workers), founded in the early 1970s. A mutual

aid organization to which all Kuna in Bocas del Toro are obliged to belong, on pain of social ostracism, it was granted legal recognition by the Panamanian government in 1972. Membership dues (two dollars per month) are automatically deducted by the employer from Kuna workers' pay checks and are deposited directly into UTRAKUNA's bank account. A portion of these funds is saved to care for Kuna caught in emergencies in Bocas, and the remainder is invested in economic development projects in Kuna territory. These investments are channeled to the border regions of the *comarca* to prevent the encroachment of non-Amerindians on uncultivated lands.

UTRAKUNA was specifically founded to counter the increasingly disorganized influx of Kuna workers during the 1960s, once Olotebilibiquiña had ceased to control the United Fruit Company's access to Kuna labor. In response to changing production techniques, which involved higher costs of worker training and specialization, the Company was encouraging its laborers to make longer commitments to banana work. Relatively large numbers of Kuna began arriving with their families to remain for indefinite periods. By 1966, approximately 800 Kuna were working on the Bocas del Toro plantation (Holloman 1969:127), and the structures mediating Kuna integration into the plantation economy began breaking down. In the words of an elderly Kuna laborer, "It got so bad that we lived all dispersed one separate from the other . . . Like Hispanics! Just imagine!" Back in San Blas in the 1960s as well, the traditional structures of Kuna society were seriously strained due, in part, to the uncontrolled emigration to Bocas del Toro and the Canal Zone. Finally, in 1970 with Olotebilibiquiña's death, *Cacique* Estanislao Lopez replaced the deceased chief as intermediary for migrant laborers and revitalized the system of controls on labor outmigration. He enforced the rule that Kuna leaving their home communities must present "passports" to local Kuna authorities, and launched a campaign to organize all Kuna laborers outside San Blas into local associations whose leaders were to report annually to the Kuna General Congress in San Blas.

In the daily life of the plantation, the new Kuna corporate institution UTRAKUNA reaffirms the sense of common Amerindian identity and solidarity by regularly assembling Kuna banana workers in periodic meetings roughly comparable to the local-level nightly gatherings (*onmaket*) held in most San Blas communities (Howe 1986). The mechanisms for social control that were whittled away during the 1960s have thus been reasserted. Supervision extends to the details of personal life, especially when issues of ethnic continuity are in question. For example, during my fieldwork a Kuna worker was sent home in disgrace to San Blas for cohabiting with a Guaymi woman. Earlier a Kuna woman had been berated at an UTRAKUNA meeting for dating the son of the North American manager of the plantation. As an index of its social control, UTRAKUNA has persuaded major employers in the region to hire only Kuna bearing letters of introduction from their island leaders or from the president of UTRAKUNA.

The unity that UTRAKUNA imposes on the Kuna labor force provides it with heightened bargaining power vis-à-vis the Transnational and the government authorities of Bocas del Toro province. It is able to demand special favors, ranging from minor fringe benefits to major infrastructural investments. For example between 1982 and 1984, UTRAKUNA arranged 1) for the Kuna club room to receive a free set of dominoes; 2) for new outdoor kitchens to be constructed in selected Kuna dormitories; and 3) for a new dormitory reserved for single Kuna men to be budgeted into next year's construction plans.

advantages to the Transnational

From the Company's perspective the highly formalized relationship that has been cultivated with the Kuna since the 1950s is extremely profitable and beneficial for labor stability. This relationship has been adjusted over the years, as technological innovations and political constraints have altered the Company's qualitative and quantitative labor requirements. The 1950s

were characterized by an acute labor shortage in Bocas del Toro and by large fluctuations in labor demand as the Company attempted to reintroduce bananas, through an experimental labor-intensive system of flood following, to lands abandoned since World War II because of root disease. The initial 6-month contracts negotiated with the *Cacique*, therefore, were ideally suited to the Company's needs, since they allowed it to hire and fire relatively large numbers of workers on short notice without providing severance payments, sickness or accident pay, and without risking labor protests.

The biggest asset of the Kuna, from the Company's perspective both in the 1950s and today, is the high level of labor control that can be imposed on them. Indeed, Company officials have consistently showed a greater appreciation for the Kuna than their numbers warrant. In 1954 the manager reported "The San Blas Indians [sic] are practically saving the situation here for us" (Munch to Mais, 18 June 1954). They were lauded for being "well disciplined. . .exceptionally good in railway section gangs," and "quick to learn" (cf. BDA; Mais to Moore, 23 September 1954). Most importantly, the Kuna were praised for "cause[ing] absolutely no trouble" as the 6-month contracts prevented them from becoming involved in the local labor movement and from developing "union ideas" (Munch to Moore, 11 March 1954).

Perhaps most extraordinary from management's perspective is the fact that the exemplary labor discipline of the Kuna is consistently self-imposed under the supervision of *caciques* and their local representatives. In the 1950s Olotebiliquiña repeatedly requested the manager "to write to me for me to know how my children are behaving in your Company" (Olotebiliquiña to Mais, 2 March 1959). Whenever a Kuna proved to be a bad worker or became involved in the union movement, all management had to do was notify the *Cacique* that this worker had "misbehaved." By carefully respecting traditional Kuna etiquette, the Company is able to fire troublesome Kuna whose job tenure might otherwise have been protected by Panamanian labor laws. Nor does the Company have to provide full severance pay when a visiting *cacique* orders a worker to return to San Blas; the event is registered as a voluntary resignation.

The traditional structures of Kuna society thus deliver a level of labor discipline that the Company would be incapable of enforcing. The head of UTRAKUNA monitors his members in order to make sure that they do not become alcoholics and that they fulfill their obligations to their employer, family, and community. Management is guaranteed punctual, honest, responsible, and motivated workers who shun labor unions and politics. During my fieldwork, UTRAKUNA leaders systematically searched out Kuna with absentee records, or whose work efforts were reported as slacking, or who were seen drinking excessively. These workers are admonished to improve their attitude so as not to disgrace the Kuna people. Indeed, Kuna conceive of being a model worker as part and parcel of their ethnic identity.

The Company has cultivated the loyalty of the president of UTRAKUNA. The original UTRAKUNA president, "Tony Smith," held the position for 13 years. Under the Company's tutelage he had become increasingly pro-management and anti-communist. By his own admission, he considered preventing Kuna "troublemakers" and "communists" from infiltrating the labor force to be one of his primary tasks and maintained a "blacklist" that he consulted regularly in order to ensure that only "very democratic" Kuna entered the labor force, thereby favoring the primacy of ethnic organization at the expense of pluri-ethnic class-based alliances:

"We Kuna come here to work and not to subvert the public order. . .or to get involved in politics like the Hispanics. We can't let those who come to disturb the local peace give us all a bad name."

the Kuna in the occupational hierarchy

The controlled manner in which the Kuna have incorporated themselves into the labor force has altered their status in both the occupational and ethnic hierarchies. Although both the Guaymi and the Kuna began performing the same low-prestige, burdensome tasks in the 1950s

(that is, railroad maintenance and machete work), there are few Kuna today still working in the fields. Most are in the packing plants or in "soft" service jobs (messengers, chauffeurs, night watchmen, club bartenders, and so on). Foremen and supervisors praise the Kuna for being "clean, honest, polite, reliable, and skillful with their hands;" they criticize them, however, for being "useless for heavy work."

The upward mobility of the Kuna is limited to the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy; their jobs are generally considered inferior to those of blacks and Hispanics. Indeed, they are concentrated in a particular niche of low-status "soft" jobs, and are considered especially "suited" for low-prestige tasks that require team work and that are crucial to Company operations. For example, several of the men who signal to the airplanes that spray pesticides (Chlorotalonil and Dithane) in order to prevent the spread of the devastating leaf fungus, black Sigatoka, are Kuna. These "signal men" run between the rows of bananas waving flags to the airplane pilots to show them where to drop the next load of fungicide. During my fieldwork, the Company was negotiating with the local Kuna leader to phase out the Guaymi signal men and replace them with Kuna, on condition that the Kuna commit themselves to remaining on the plantation for several years. The Guaymi were said to be too unreliable for this important task, as "they are always going off on binges and missing work." Hispanics and blacks, of course, resist work as signal men because it involves prolonged heavy exposure to venomous chemicals. As a farm supervisor explained, "Hispanics are no good for this work; they get sick all the time and complain that their eyes sting."

The Kuna are, as one would expect, underrepresented in administrative positions on the plantation. Although they comprised 6 percent of the day laborers in 1983, they constituted only 1.2 percent of the monthly employees and only one Kuna earned over U.S. \$500. Significantly this one employee earning over U.S. \$500 per month was a woman and had been ostracized by the rest of the Kuna community on the plantation. There was only one Kuna foreman and he supervised the pesticide signal men. Typically, however, the manager's "messenger boy" was Kuna. In the limited job market outside the banana industry in Bocas del Toro, the Kuna are employed as cooks and house cleaners, and as orderlies in the state-run hospital, service positions that involve prolonged personal contact with non-Amerindian employers. Many Hispanic and black workers will simply not accept such subordinate service status. The Guaymi, on the other hand, are considered too erratic and awkward with non-Amerindians to be trusted in the home. The Kuna reputation for courtesy and cleanliness has created a mystique favoring the hiring of Kuna cooks, house cleaners and child-care assistants.

the Guaymi in the occupational hierarchy

The Guaymi are disproportionately located in the most burdensome and dangerous field jobs. By carefully examining the location of the Guaymi in the occupational hierarchy we can obtain an objective measure of their low status. An apartheid-like division of labor is immediately visible even to a casual visitor. Jobs involving prolonged exposure to sun and rain, such as chopping overgrown grass with machetes, are performed almost exclusively by Guaymi. Railroad track maintenance crews with no access to shelter (formerly a "Kuna job") are composed of Guaymi. In the everyday life of the plantation workers the obvious subordination of the Guaymi in "dirty" and "hard" work is "essentialized" in racial/ethnic terms, creating the dynamic of conjugated oppression. The details of the occupational hierarchy provide living proof to the other ethnic groups that the Guaymi are inferior human beings.

This segregated division of labor is reflected in the Company's February 1983 labor roster. Although the Guaymi comprised over 42 percent of the day labor force, they constituted only 4 percent of the monthly employees. Moreover, these few Guaymi monthly employees (35 individuals) were concentrated in low-income, low-prestige jobs, such as watchman or railroad

brakeman. None of the 244 management-level employees earning over \$500 per month was Guaymi. In fact, there were no Guaymi in positions higher than that of foreman. Even among the foremen, only 3.8 percent were Guaymi and only 5 percent of the assistant foremen were Guaymi.⁸ As in the case of the monthly employees, they were concentrated in low prestige, less desirable tasks. None of the assistant foremen was in the packing plants; most were supervising either harvesting or pesticide-related tasks. One-third of the foremen were in railroad maintenance. Within the skilled and semi-skilled tasks the Guaymi were just as badly represented: *None* of the 50 operators of heavy- and medium-weight equipment was Guaymi; *only two* of the 75 tractor drivers were Guaymi; *none* of the 80 office-workers; *none* of the 24 secretaries, and so on. (See Bourgois 1988).

packers versus fieldworkers and harvesters

Although well over half of the field laborers were Guaymi, they made up less than one-third of the packing plant workers. Furthermore, those Guaymi working in the packing plants generally held the less desirable positions. For example, in all the plants visited, the person disposing of rejected bananas and severed stems (*pisotero*) was always a Guaymi. This is one of the most undesirable tasks; it is “dirty,” and is one of the few jobs in the packing plant paid by the hour rather than at by-piece rates. Similarly, all the packing plant sweepers and garbage collectors (tasks also remunerated at an hourly wage) were Guaymi. Farm administrators questioned about this apartheid-like structure said: “The *cholo* does not have the mental retention to be able to learn the more skilled tasks [*No tiene retencion mental para capacitarse*].”

The economic implications of the plantation’s labor hierarchy may be seen in the artificially skewed pay scales for harvesting crews.⁹ Harvesting, one of the most strenuous tasks in banana production, is virtually the exclusive domain of the Guaymi. On most plantations in Latin America, harvest crews earn more than packing plant laborers, even though they usually work slightly shorter hours.¹⁰ On the Bocas del Toro plantation, however, the reverse is true: harvesters earn less than packers.¹¹ This unique inverse relationship is due to the preponderance of Guaymi on the harvesting crews. On the Costa Rican side of the plantation, where Costa Rican labor laws prevent Guaymi from working, harvesters earn more than packers. Similarly, on the state-run farms in Bocas del Toro where the Guaymi represent only 23 percent of the day labor force, and where (according to the Panamanian government manager) there is no policy of systematically relegating Guaymi to harvesting crews, the packer/harvester wage ratio favors the harvesters, as it does on most other banana plantations in Latin America. In other words, the conjugated oppression of the Guaymi translates into a dollars and cents saving for the Transnational.

Most analyses of ethnic diversity in labor markets focus on the political dimensions of management’s “divide-and-conquer” strategies for undermining union movements, on the economic labor supply distortions caused by ethnic segmentation, or on the flooding of labor markets with new workers who accept lower wages. I wish to delve deeper and show how ethnic diversity and the emerging ideologies of discrimination and marginalization on the plantation articulate with the minute details of labor control and labor quality. The ideological constructs, which are reaffirmed by the reality of the production process, further bolster the occupational hierarchy. Thus ethnic platitudes and generalizations such as, “The *cholos* are ignorant. . . It makes it easier to manage them. . . They let themselves be exploited. . . With civilized people you can’t just do what you want with them. . .” are perceived by Bocatorans as proven by “material reality.” From the Guaymi’s perspective such platitudes translate into sweat, fatigue, and intensive labor, and for the U.S.-based Transnational, higher profits. As the manager explained:

“If it were not for the Indians we would be forced to pay higher wages here. Even with the 125,000 unemployed we’ve got in Panama City, we couldn’t get them to come up here. . . . Panamanians simply

won't work for the wages the Indians settle for. It's easy to work with Indians. They're not as smart and don't speak good Spanish. They can't argue back at you even when they're right. It's easier to convince them. Hell, you can make them do most anything."

By relegating the Guaymi to harvesting tasks the United Fruit Company can impose higher standards of quality control on the bananas they harvest. Since many Guaymi do not understand fully the logic of piece-rate payment, they can be pressed by their foremen to work slowly and with greater care at the expense of their earnings. This affects the dollar value of the bananas in foreign ports since the fruit bruising caused by workers rushing to take advantage of piece-rate remuneration sharply reduces export values.

The most extreme exploitation is directed against the young, recently arrived Guaymi who are unfamiliar with management's different mechanisms for payment (piecework versus hour wage) and who are not aware of the different strategies banana workers have developed to maximize their earnings while minimizing their effort. Unlike the Kuna, no institutionalized mechanisms of mutual aid and support exist to orient newcomers and protect them from abuse. Consequently, newly arrived Guaymi workers on hourly wages are often placed among laborers who are being paid at a piece-rate. Thinking that they have to keep pace with these workers, they do not realize that when paid by the hour they should try to work as slowly as possible. Foremen who were asked about this practice said, "*Cholos* don't care how much they earn. They're too stupid to understand what they are being paid."

In contrast to the Kuna, who have bargained for preferential access to segregated housing, the Guaymi are placed in inferior quality housing reserved exclusively for them. This is justified by Company officials and other workers as a cultural phenomenon or even in racial-ethnic terms: "By nature they like to live squeezed together [*por su naturaleza les gustan vivir apretados*]. The Indian is accustomed to live in groups; they like to be accommodated all in the same room."

In addition to the harvesting crews, the occupational categories most consistently filled by Guaymi are clearing drainage ditches and dispensing pesticides—especially nematicides, which can cause sterility (Chediak 1980:72–118, Ramirez and Ramirez n.d.). Two workers died from nematicide poisoning during my fieldwork and several others were seriously debilitated. A Hispanic foreman responsible for a squad of Guaymi spreading the herbicide Gramoxone said, "If you get careless and forget to rotate them, the next thing you know the damn *cholo's* bleeding at the nose all the time and you gotta pay for his sick care for the next couple of weeks."

ethnic hierarchy

These extreme forms of economic (class-rooted) exploitation represent only part of the Guaymi banana workers' experience of oppression. The complementary dimension (as in other exploitative situations) is ideological: the racist ridicule to which they are subjected by all the other ethnic groups on the plantation. In the statements cited above by non-Amerindians justifying the economic exploitation of the Guaymi in the production process, we have had a glimpse of the pervasiveness and depth of this ideological domination. It is accepted as a matter of "common sense" that the Guaymi are inferior human beings. Non-Amerindian parents often scold their children with the insult, "stop acting like a *cholito*."

The public humiliation to which the Guaymi are repeatedly subjected is conveyed in a scene I witnessed on my arrival at the bus terminal on the Costa Rican side of the plantation: an ape-like howling filled the air, "who. who. who. who!" The young Hispanic men and women, owners of the shanty shack stores, were jeering at a flatbed transport cart carrying young Guaymi from the Costa Rican farms where they had been spreading an abrasive potassium fertilizer with their bare hands. As the cart stopped, a group of shack owners gathered around the Amerindians, jeering and taunting them. Stony-faced, the Guaymi, hiding all emo-

tion, approached the howling peddlers and bought soft drinks and candy. After they had left, the storekeepers bragged about how much they had short-changed or overcharged the “*cholitos*.” Several other Guaymi browsing in the surrounding shops overheard them.

Because of frequent interactions like this the ideological dimension of domination becomes the most painful element in the day-to-day experience of most Guaymi banana workers. The highly charged atmosphere of ethnic antagonism overshadows and obfuscates exploitation by class or economics. The Guaymi perceive ethnic domination to be their most immediate daily problem, since it is most visible and insulting.

In this polarized and humiliating context, the concept of “conjugated oppression” is especially useful. The interaction of the ideological dimension with the structure of occupational subordination and systematic economic marginalization escalates the Guaymi experience of oppression into something more than the sum of its ideological and economic parts. For example, individual Guaymi begin to internalize the dominant ideology, and engage repeatedly in public displays of humiliating and/or self-destructive behavior: massive alcohol consumption, public brawling and attempted suicide.

On any given payday, one can see young, drunk Guaymi men, barely able to stand on their feet, taking turns punching one another in the face. In traditional Guaymi society ritualized fisticuffs known as *balseria* (*krun*) and *kubruidi* is an important institutionalized means of expressing individual valor and of cementing political patterns of leadership within and across communities. In the context of rotgut liquor and hostile non-Amerindians, however, it becomes a forum for public degradation. Sometimes up to a half-dozen staggering young men alternately pound one another in the face and fall in the mud in drunken slow motion with a crowd of non-Amerindians jeering them on. The fights end when one of the young men, his face a bloody mess, can no longer lift himself out of the mud. By early evening on a typical payday blood-stained, mud-coated Guaymi lie unconscious or groaning in garbage piles and drainage ditches throughout the plantation (cf. LaBarge 1959:226).

Another significant measure of ethnic antagonism is found in the brothels, the only public locale where Hispanics, blacks, and Amerindians regularly interact socially. Discrimination is so entrenched, however, that non-Guaymi men refuse to have sexual relations with women who service Guaymi. Significantly, this is not the case for women who occasionally service Kuna customers. All the women are of the same ethnicity: Hispanics from the impoverished northwestern Costa Rican province of Guanacaste. Nevertheless, a woman who reserves herself for the Guaymi is known as a “*cholera*.”¹² Bare-handed fisticuffs among the Guaymi inside the brothel assume an especially degrading dimension. On busy days the 40 square yards around the toilets are reserved for intoxicated Guaymi to fight and collapse on a floor covered by a film of slime from the overflowing urinals.

“Common sense” notions of Guaymi inferiority have been institutionalized within the local Panamanian legal system. Instead of being fined or locked up overnight when arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct, Guaymi are forced to perform hard labor, cleaning public parks with a machete. This contrasts with the preferential treatment the Kuna receive from the police and Panamanian National Guard in Bocas del Toro. UTRAKUNA has negotiated a special status for the Kuna whereby the authorities immediately surrender all those arrested to the Kuna authorities. For serious violations the guilty individual is sent back to San Blas for punishment.

The most dramatic advantage the Kuna hold over the Guaymi is that they do not suffer from ethnic discrimination as intensively. Although the Kuna are recognized as Amerindians, and hence would normally have low prestige in Panamanian society, by mobilizing their cultural institutions and political structures they have been able to command a margin of inconsistent—if not downright schizophrenic—respect from most other ethnic groups on the plantation. On several occasions I was warned not to confuse the Kuna “who look like *cholos*” with the Guaymi “who are real *cholos*. . . of a lower cultural level.”

It is within the ethnic hierarchy that the Kuna most sharply differentiate themselves from the Guaymi, because in the occupational structure they occupy an only slightly higher position. Although they do not perform strenuous labor in the fields, the Kuna are still concentrated overwhelmingly in low prestige tasks. Furthermore, a disproportional number of Kuna work as signal men for the crop dusting planes and are exposed to high levels of pesticides. Nevertheless, their traditional institutions provide some protection for their economic and political interests. More importantly, UTRAKUNA has created a powerful sense of cultural solidarity and pride. Kuna migrants who speak very limited Spanish are able to maintain their sense of self-respect, despite their lack of skills and preparation as individuals for dealing with non-Amerindian plantation society. While the expressions of traditional Guaymi culture, such as inebriated fist fighting or filed teeth, are ridiculed by the other ethnic groups, this is not the case for the Kuna. Kuna women wear full traditional dress in Bocas del Toro without being subjected to disparaging comments. This dress includes a nose ring, bracelets, anklets, gold necklaces, a headdress and brightly patterned clothing adorned with *molas*, stylized embroidered cloth decorations.

In recreating a microcosm of their tightly knit “closed corporate” society on the plantation, the Kuna observe rigid standards of social control. They do not engage in prolonged drunken binges or fights and are not publicly self-destructive. Such “cultural supervision” provides Kuna migrant workers and their families with a support network—both psychological and economic—which enables them to resist internalizing the racism directed against Amerindians by Panamanian society. Unlike the Guaymi who avoid non-Amerindian stares in public,¹³ the Kuna openly greet non-Kuna and converse with them on their way to and from work. As has been noted, they present themselves as a “model people” to all the other ethnic groups and, under the supervision of their local leaders, keep their segregated dormitories and houses conspicuously clean, neat, and well painted.

political implications

The contrast in the patterns of Kuna and Guaymi political mobilization sheds additional light on the differential role ethnicity plays in integrating these two peoples into the labor force. Once again the concept of a conjugated oppression in the Guaymi experience is useful for explaining the Guaymi propensity to mobilize around millenarian leaders. In 1960, almost overnight, the Guaymi rallied behind a charismatic “white” Hispanic leader Virgilio Schuverer, an upper echelon Company employee (Cabarrus 1979:83–84). Eyewitnesses describe the three-week-long strike that followed as explosive. The formerly timid, complacent Guaymi laborers were metamorphosed overnight into a unified political group demanding justice and redemption. The strike unleashed their repressed, internalized energy, and fused it with the concrete economic demands they shared with the entire labor force.

Previously influential Guaymi leaders representing the status quo were rejected with a violent vengeance. For example, Reverend Pascal, the Methodist minister who in the late 1940s and early 1950s had arranged for the first groups of Guaymi to work for the Company, was forcibly run out of the province by an angry mob of strikers:

I was present at the 1960 strike and the U.F.Co invited me to advise the Indians not to leave the farms. . . . When I was on the *tribuna* [platform] speaking, the leftist leader [Schuverer] came and would have had me lynched by their group but for the immediate intervention of the police who knew me as a man of peace and gave me police protection until I boarded [the] plane back to Panama City. . . . The leftists effectively embittered the mind of the Guaymies. . . embittered by their ideologies of hate [personal letter from Reverend Pascal, 30 Dec. 1983].

Company files similarly contain the outraged denunciations of high-level managers assaulted by their own house servants (Wells to Cantrell, 5 Dec. 1960).

The strike imbued the Guaymi with a sense of exhilaration as they asserted their dignity and power over their former bosses. Indeed, the yearning for a transformation of the status quo

resurfaced more explosively several years later when a millenarian religion, known as the *Mamachi* movement, swept through Guaymi territory promising the beatification and enrichment of all faithful Guaymi within 4 years. The Guaymi yearning for social redress was expressed in distinctly ethnic terms. *Mamachi* leaders advocated total isolation from non-Guaymi culture (see Young 1978:57). The more radical *Mamachi* leaders advocated the destruction of cattle and pigs, which were viewed as "Spanish" introductions that had required fencing and had led to an acceptance of Western definitions of private property. According to the preachers, if all the Guaymi people followed the sacred teachings, great disasters would befall the "White race" and great riches would be showered on the Guaymi, who had suddenly become God's "chosen people." "Banks" were built in isolated villages in 1964 to store the enormous wealth scheduled to arrive the following year.

By contrast Kuna political mobilization around ethnic and Amerindian nationalist tenets has occurred in a deliberately controlled institutionalized setting ever since the success of their U.S.-supported 1925 rebellion. The Kuna have adapted their traditional institutions to external political and economic exigencies, and in the process, they have redefined their ethnicity. This has allowed them to overcome the discrimination directed against Amerindians by accentuating their "Indianness" rather than by minimizing it.

From a practical perspective, the Company's structures of labor control benefit greatly from ethnic polarization within the labor force. As has been shown, political discussion and confrontation among plantation workers revolve around ethnicity rather than class. Ethnic antagonisms within a fractionalized occupational hierarchy maintain the labor force divided, and orient popular discourse away from issues of mutual class interests and economic exploitation.

The institutionalization of Kuna ethnic solidarity has resulted in an effective channel for negotiating Kuna management/labor conflicts. UTRAKUNA and the other traditional institutions of Kuna society are responsive to the short-term economic needs and interests of most Kuna individuals. The Kuna, consequently, take their labor problems to their traditional indigenous institutions and leadership structures rather than to the labor union. This undermines the union's importance and relevance, reducing the possibility of class-based solidarity across ethnic lines (Cabarrus 1979:81). Furthermore, the revitalization of traditional Kuna culture on the plantation in the early 1970s has led the Kuna to minimize their social ties with non-Kuna in a manner reminiscent of their behavior in the 1950s when *Cacique* Olotebilibiquña was their mediator. Given this formalized ethnic differentiation, it is hard for the Kuna to identify with the interests of their non-Kuna co-workers. Active participation in a non-Kuna movement such as a labor union is largely viewed in ethnic terms as a "betrayal of one's race." Should the other plantation workers initiate a militant strike the movement may bypass the Kuna, as they are operating within a completely different set of social relations and obligations.¹⁴

The contrasting cases of the Kuna and the Guaymi in Bocas del Toro provide a magnified vision of how different political and institutional capacities to mobilize ethnicity can become key components in shaping a group's upward mobility. It is not enough to look at so-called "objective" parameters such as a group's relationship to the means of production and its location in the division of labor; just as crucial is the ideological relationship of that group to the wider society. In the case of the Kuna, this "ideological dimension" has been shaped by a historic process of political mobilization and institution building that is expressed in ethnic terms as cultural solidarity and purported superiority, but is experienced in everyday economic relations in the form of more privileged labor conditions, higher wages, and better fringe benefits relative to the Guaymi. The most central aspect of everyday interaction for the Guaymi, on the other hand, is their public humiliation experienced at the work site in the form of higher levels of labor intensity, lower wages, and/or greater exposure to the most venomous pesticides. Ideologies also determine the details of social interaction outside the workplace, ranging from the character of sexual interactions in the brothel to the sanction imposed by a court of law for an arrest on charges of disorderly conduct. Unlike the Kuna, the Guaymi do not have institu-

tional structures or other ideological means to mitigate their systematic vulnerability in the plantation setting.

The ideological constructs of a dominant group significantly intensify the minority group's experience of oppression. This contributes to their self-definition and shapes their ability to mobilize politically. Since class position is the product of a historic construction of power, economics, and ideology, one cannot ask the question whether class or ethnicity is the more important. Both define an individual's experience of and resistance to oppression, and evolve out of the same confrontational process.

notes

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¹In Panamanian and Costa Rican slang "*cholo*" is a racist term for Amerindian.

²I lived in banana-worker barracks on the Costa Rican half of the plantation. I was fortunate to be provided access to historical archives and to current production statistics and documents.

³The statistics on the ethnic composition of day laborers on the Bocas del Toro plantation were calculated from an 11 percent random sample taken from the Company's computerized labor roster for the month of February, 1983. The ethnicity of the laborers was determined by the first number on their identity cards which indicates where they were born. Only those born on the Guaymi Indian Reserve (that is, those whose numbers begin with "1P1") were counted as Guaymi. The actual number of Guaymi on the plantation, consequently, is probably higher, since some Guaymi are born off of the Reservation and others change the initial numbers on their identity cards so as not to appear to be "fresh from the bush."

⁴Guaymi territory spans three Panamanian provinces: Bocas del Toro, Chiriqui, and Veraguas. All my fieldwork observations come from the Bocas del Toro Guaymi in the plantation context. Even within Bocas del Toro province, however, there are significant differences between coastal Guaymi who have had more contact with the outside economy and inland, up-river Guaymi who are more subsistence-oriented. These two groups, consequently, have had distinct responses to plantation wage labor due to the different political and economic realities they face. My observations and generalizations apply specifically to Guaymi immigrants from the inland, up-river sectors of Bocas del Toro, along the Cricamola river basin, as the "Cricamola Guaymi" comprise the bulk of the Guaymi plantation laborers.

⁵Olotebiliquiña's name is today more accurately spelled "Olotepilikinya" but I will retain the old spelling in this text since that is how he signed his letters (personal communication James Howe). Some Kuna documents also spell his name Olotebilikina.

⁶Panama uses U.S. currency.

⁷*Sahila* or *sakla* is a generic term for leader ranging from regional leader to village task leader or teacher of ritual (personal letter from James Howe, 29 December 1986).

⁸The percentages for Guaymi in specified skilled tasks are based on absolute numbers determined by counting all the employees above the category of day laborer. For example, according to the 1983 labor roster there was a total of 158 foremen and 95 assistant foremen on the Bocas del Toro plantation.

⁹A harvesting squad is generally composed of one cutter, who selects and cuts the banana stem, two backers who carry the stems to the overhead cables, one hanger who hangs the stems on the cable, and a hauler who slides the stems along an overhead cable to the packing plant.

¹⁰These observations on the ratio of the salaries of harvesters to packers are based on field visits in the summer of 1983 to United Fruit Company plantations in Honduras and Costa Rica and to a former Standard Fruit Company plantation in Nicaragua.

¹¹For example, on a day that the packers earned \$15 to \$17, the harvesters took home between \$11 and \$12.

¹²The only other ethnic group discriminated against in the brothel are blacks. Women who service black men are known as “*negreras*.”

¹³An anthropologist who undertook fieldwork among the Guaymi in Chiriqui province also noted the difficulty in establishing contact with Guaymi due to a history of discrimination:

the Ngawbe [Guaymi] are extremely reticent in talking to outsiders about themselves except regarding the most banal topics. This attitude may be the result of long and sad experience. The Ngawbe are aware that many Latinos consider them to be dirty, ignorant savages and openly ridicule their customs and beliefs. Thus, my initial attempts to delve into the mysteries of their culture were met with reticence and silence and with requests that I go back where I came from [Young 1971:31].

¹⁴A company official commenting on the behavior of the Kuna in the 1960 strike in which Guaymi workers were protagonists, said: “Oh we didn’t have to worry about them; they were still on six month contracts and we just sent them home.” For the Guaymi, ethnic polarization has also assumed an institutionalized political form. Since the explosive 1960 strike, when for a three-week period the Guaymi made common cause with the rest of the labor force, two separate Amerindian and Hispanic union movements have emerged along ethnic lines, each affiliated with different international union confederations and with distinct political attitudes toward management. The Hispanic union—affiliated with the World Confederation of Trade Unions—is militantly confrontational, while the Guaymi one—affiliated with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions—is conciliatory. Polarization between the two movements has been so extreme that in 1979 a dispute over union election results paralyzed farm work and pitched battles were waged between Hispanics and Guaymi. These confrontations were once again expressed in ethnic terms: “We [the Guaymi] had won the election and they [the Hispanics] were trying to keep us out.”

appendix 1: names cited in archival correspondence

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Linton, D. K.: UFCO employee in charge of cacao, Bocas Division; 1954.
Mais, V. T.: Chiriqui Land Company agent, Panama City; 1950s.
Matheis, L. V.: UFCO employee, Bocas Division; 1950s.
Moore, Franklin: senior assistant vice-president, UFCO, Boston; 1950s.
Munch, G. D.: Manager, Bocas Division; 1950s.
Olotebiliquina: *Cacique* of the Kuna Amerindians, San Blas; 1950s through 1970.
Pascal, Bernard [Reverend]: Methodist reverend of French West Indian descent, evangelized and taught school among the Guaymi; 1917 to 1950s. (Pseudonym).
Peith: employee of Railroad Maintenance Department, Bocas Division; 1953.
Richards, R.: superintendent, Sixaola District; 1954.
Smith, Ike: head of Engineering Department, Bocas Division; 1953.
Wells, R. C.: superintendent of aerial spraying, Bocas Division; 1960.
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