9
Geography of Minority Populations in Central America

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The Present Situation

Latin America is commonly visualized today as a homogeneous culture region inhabited by Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Latinos, most often of mixed Amerindian and European ancestry (mestizos). A closer inspection will reveal that such a generalization is valid only at the broadest level of analysis. Of the more than 360 million people living in Latin America at the beginning of the 1980s, Ibero-Americans accounted for just over ninety percent of the total population. The remainders, perhaps thirty-two million, are remnants of minority cultures that still exist as cohesive, recognizable cultural units. Amerindian groups linger in the continental interiors; Afro-Americans populate the Caribbean islands and fringe lands; and numerous colonies of foreign migrants dot the Latin American landscape. Taken together, the non-Latino communities can be considered as an important minority, a population that lives apart from the Latinos who dominate political and economic affairs south of the United States. Although the traditional, folk societies are not prominent participants in the modern world, they are a primary factor in flavoring and differentiating the individual countries of Latin America and are therefore worthy of our attention. This essay presents the case of the minority peoples of the seven countries of the Central American isthmus and discusses features that have traditionally been of interest to geographers.

On the first of January, 1980, the population of Central America was about twenty-two million. Eighty-five percent of this number was sufficiently Hispanicized to be considered a part of the majority population that dominates the economic, political, and social activities of the isthmus. The remaining fifteen percent, or just over three million people, can be grouped together as the minority, a population that, for the most part, does not participate in national affairs (Figure 1 and Table 1). In every one of the seven Central American countries, the minority population is increasing in numbers. However, their proportion of the population is decreasing—decreasing at a rate that will soon, it seems, bring the demise of that population—a population that gives distinctive flavor to the isthmus.

As a first matter, definitions for the majority and minority populations must be established. For absolute simplicity, the population components of Central America have been narrowed to three: 1) Ladinos, 2) American Indians, and 3) Antillean migrants and others. Ladinos comprise the majority population. They are, for the most part, Spanish-speaking mestizos of mixed European and American Indian heritage. As the term applies in this chapter, they also include Spanish-speaking Europeans and other Hispanicized groups such as the "colonial Negroes" of Panama. The term Ladino, frequently heard in Guatemala and Honduras, is used much less in southern Central America. The non-Ladino population, the minority sector, can be traced to one of two origins. They are either (1) the descendants of the indigenous occupants of the isthmus or (2) relatively recent immigrants, most of who have come from the West Indian islands. The former group preceded Ladino prominence; the latter group has immigrated since. The label "Indian" applies only when a population uses and aboriginal language or when it exhibits distinctive Indian traits in such things as diet, clothing, footwear,

health care, agricultural techniques, and so forth. The migrant component is composed mostly of English-speaking blacks and whites of the Caribbean rimland. It also includes such newcomers as the German-speaking Mennonites of Belize, and the Chinese, Middle Easterners, and Hindus who have concentrated in urban areas, particularly in ports.

The attempt to categorize all Central Americans into this framework is made unusually difficult because national censuses are not uniform in their classification of population. Fortunately, foundations for the study of population composition have been prepared by the previous works of Richard Adams (1957) and Helmut Nuhn (1975). All calculations here have been updated, however, and new information has been added with the able support of the most prominent anthropologists and demographers in Central America.

Although the scale of presentation here is at the macro level, whenever possible, data were accumulated from the local level upwards. Undoubtedly errors exist throughout the data-gathering mechanisms -- from village counts to the national census, even among the United Nations demographers who project population trends. Still, something of value emerges from a geographical perspective: the general trends of historical demography for the isthmus, the distribution of population components, the status of minority reserves, and finally, the relentless Ladinoization of Central American minorities into a modern world.

Figure 1.

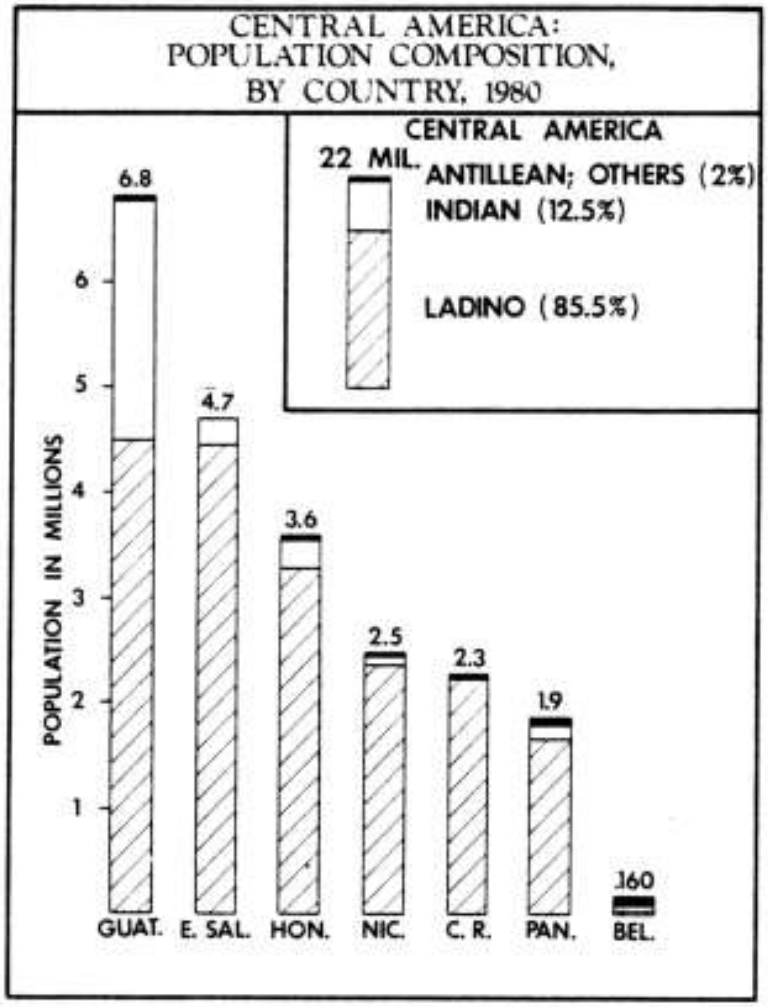


Table 1. Central America: Population Composition by Country, approximate for 1980.

Country (population)	Ladino %	Indian %	Antillean Migrants, Others %
COSTA RICA 2,300,000	97.9	0.4	1.7
NICARAGUA 2,500,000	97.5	1.8	0.7
EL SALVADOR 4,700,000	95.2	4.7	0.1
HONDURAS 3,600,000	92.7	5.5	1.8
PANAMA 1,900,000	91.6	5.0	3.4
GUATEMALA 6,800,000	67.0	32.5	0.5
BELIZE 160,000	20.0	13.0	67.0
CENTRAL AMERICA 22,000,000	85.5	12.5	2.0

Historical Demography of Central American Minorities

At present there are four times as many Central Americans as there were in 1500. That humans have been so successful in populating the isthmus, however is not of much importance to this discussion. Our focus is on the change in composition of population.

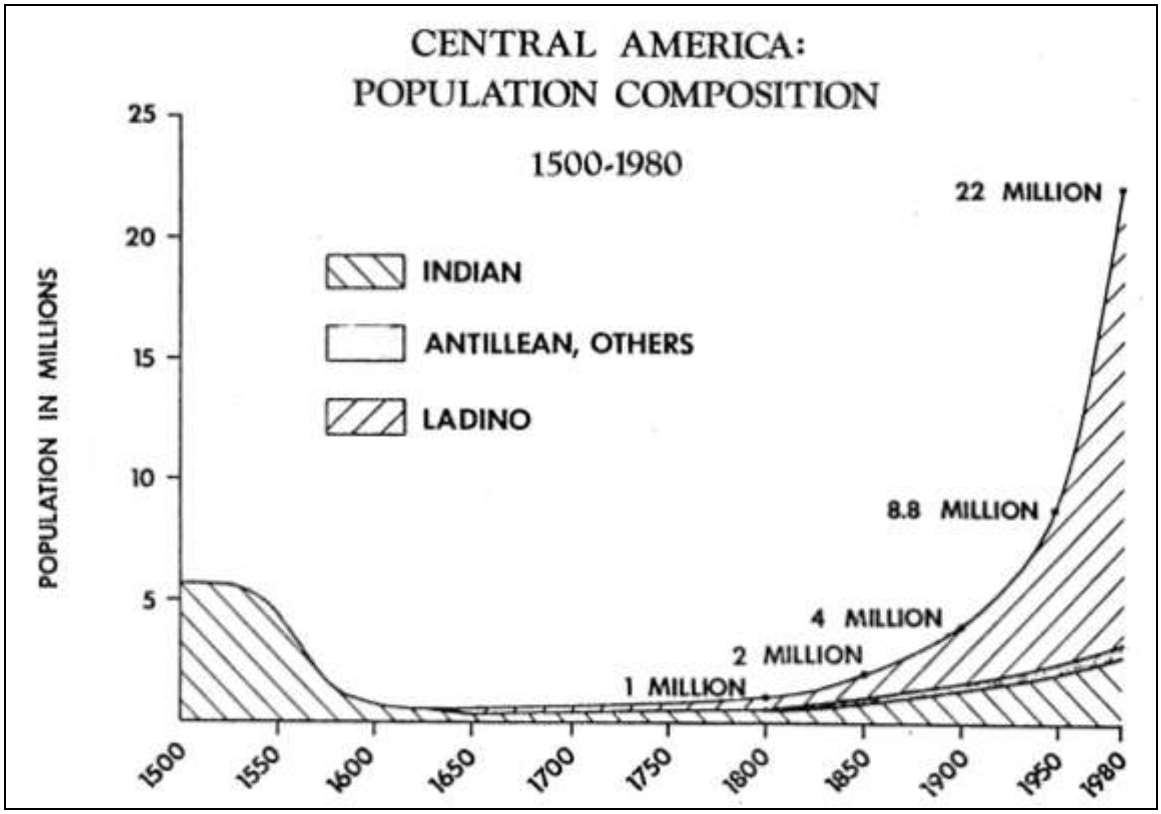
Of course, the aboriginal population was Indian - not one dominant group, but many groups, with innumerable cultural ways. The most easily recognized geographical division was between the advanced civilizations of the Maya and Aztec of the north and west (Mesoamerica), and the less densely settled zones of Lower Central America that were occupied by the more rudimentary Chibchan-related tribes. Relative population densities in 1500 were not much different from those of today. As one proceeds down the isthmus from northwest to the south and east density generally decreased. Areas of highest population in 1500 are generally the areas of highest population today.

The disastrous consequences of European contact with American peoples is shown most clearly in the rapid loss of indigenous population throughout the New World. In Central America alone, by 1650, according to Denevan (1976:291), the population dropped to one-twentieth of its total in 1500; a drop from 5.5 million to about .25 million. The smallpox epidemics of 1522 in Guatemala and the 1531 measles invasion throughout Central America were only the first of

several disease-related reductions in population (Sánchez-Albornoz 1974:6l). Spanish invaders, such as Pedro Alvarado, Pedrarias and Córdoba, were also much to blame for Indian deaths in battle.

The early growth of Ladino population in Central America was unusually slow. Before 1800, population increase in the region was the least for any large area of the Americas. It took until the middle of the nineteenth century, about 1845, for the Ladinos of the isthmus to out-number the Indians (Figure 2). By 1920, when the population of the isthmus had regained its pre-Contact size, the composition of the population had been radically altered. Then, Indians were in a great minority, comprising less than thirty percent of the total.

Figure 2.



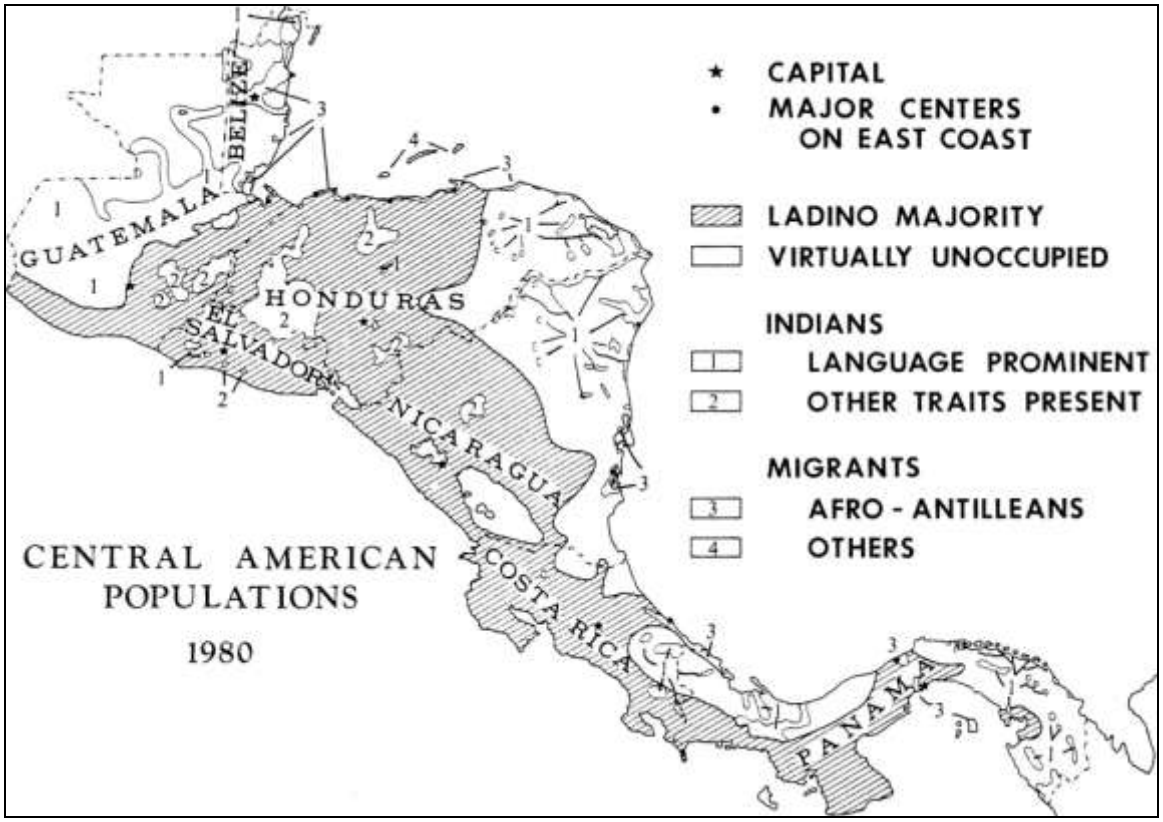
As time has proceeded, the gap between the Ladino and minority populations has enlarged exponentially, primarily from two major causes: 1) the minorities have a lower rate of natural growth, and 2) they are being acculturated into the Ladino realm. Bolstered by better health care, reduced child mortality, better nutrition, and better living conditions, the Ladinos enjoy growth rates well above three percent yearly. Minority rates are less than two percent.

The most frightful corollary to the Ladino-minority differential is the unparalleled and seemingly unbridled growth of the total population. While the population doubled each fifty-year period between 1800 and 1950 [1 million in 1800, 2 million in 1850, 4 million in 1900, 8.8 million in 1950], during the last thirty years, between 1950 and 1980, the increase has been 2.5 times. For the isthmus, that is an average growth rate of 3.1 percent annually. Each year almost 700,000 more people become Central Americans.

Modern Distribution of Population

Isthmian peoples occupy amounts of land in ratios somewhat different from their relative populations. The Ladinos, comprising 85 percent of the population, inhabit only 50 percent of the land (Figure 3). The Indians, with 12.5 percent of the population, live on 15.5 percent of the land. The migrants, 2 percent of the population, have 1.5 percent of the land. These proportions indicate the predominantly rural nature of the minority populations, and the typically urban concentrations of Ladinos. Of course, one-third of Central America remains virtually uninhabited.

Figure 3.



The Ladino realm is most secure and complete toward the western side of the isthmus. Here the national capitals were established; and here native peoples early felt the severe impact of Spanish entry into the isthmus. By the mid-sixteenth century, only twenty-five years after initial contact with Europeans, the aboriginal populations along the Pacific coast had either been destroyed, forced to flee into the interior uplands, or were well on their way toward absorption into the Spanish culture system.

In contrast, the east, or Caribbean, side of the isthmus, as noted previously by Parsons (1954), Augelli (1962), and Jones (1970), is today "fragmented" into several culture areas. Unlike the Pacific coastal people, Caribbean dwellers found their shores to be beyond the effective control of colonial Spain. In fact, until fifty years ago, England and the United States exercised more authority over the east coast than did Spain or her Hispanicized offspring. It is in large part because of the non-Spanish intruders and their allies, the Antillean migrants, that the east coast is yet outside the Ladino sphere.

Minority Zones. Four large zones remain outside the realm dominated by the Spanish-speaking Ladinos: 1) northern Guatemala and Belize; 2) Mosquitia, in eastern Honduras and Nicaragua; 3) northwestern Panamá and adjacent Costa Rica; and 4) the Darien area of Panamá. Within these relatively isolated zones Indian cultures have most successfully retained their pre-Columbian folkways.

Virtually everywhere that Indians live within the Ladino sector, although they may retain some Indian traits, they are well on their way to being incorporated to Ladino ways. Most have lost the use of their language. Only in three very small areas—the Pipil sections of El Salvador, the Jicaque Reserve in central Honduras, and the Talamancan areas of the Pacific hill lands in Costa Rica—are there enclaves of indigenous languages.

The migrant sector has the most consistent locations of all groups. For over 300 years, as we know from the writings of Parsons (1954), English-speaking Protestants have lived along the shores of the western Caribbean. Modern Afro-Antilleans, including West Indian Negroes and the Garífuna (or Black Caribs) range along the entire east coast and number about 200,000. Anglo-Antilleans, mostly of the Bay and Corn Islands, are the largest white component and amount to about 10,000.

Minority Reserves. The most obvious, although somewhat contradictory, attempt by governments to retain minority folkways has been the establishment of formal, bounded lands for the sole use of Indians and Afro-Antilleans. These lands, normally called reserves, are the most formal geographical expression of minority territory in Central America (Figure 4). To be a reserve, the lands must have legal status. Fortunately, the fleeting, fickle world of Central American politics has not often disrupted reserve status as power has passed from one administration to another. Of the twenty-two instances known to this writer, only three reserves have been reclaimed by national governments.

Figure 4.

At the moment, seven culture groups have nineteen areas reserved for their use. Almost one-third of these are the small Mopán and Kekchí Indian areas of southern Belize that date from the 1870s. Other active reserves are occupied by the Jicaque of central Honduras (since 1927), several Talamancan groups in southern Costa Rica (from the 1950s), and the Guaymí, Cuna, and Chocó populations of Panamá (1932). The Garífuna (Black Caribs) retain agricultural lands near Punta Gorda in southern Belize, but similar grants at Stann Creek and Trujillo, Honduras, have been reclaimed by national governments. The reclamation at Stann Creek came because the Garífuna did not use their allotted farm plots. The little-known grant at Trujillo has not been recognized by Honduran administrations of this century.

The largest block of reserve land, once called the Mosquito Reserve, is now only a historic example. Following the transfer of the British Protectorate of Mosquitia to Nicaragua, for the period 1860 to 1894, the reserve was recognized and had a well-organized political structure. Today, the area is a part of the Nicaraguan department of Zelaya.

Ladinoization

Contacts between the geographical realms of the majority and the minority normally bring the Ladinoization of minority populations. Minority groups are being acculturated virtually everywhere throughout minority lands. The agents and degrees of change differ, but normally pressures originate in the national capitals of the interior and are implemented by local Spanish compatriots.

It is obvious that the influence of national cultures is increasing, particularly on the east coast. The Ladino realm reaches the sea only in northwestern Honduras and nearby Guatemala, in Costa Rica near Limón, and in the Canal Zone. The ten Caribbean ports, shown in Figure 3 as "major centers on the east coast," serve as primary sources of incorporation of non-Ladino coastal peoples. Currently, the most overt efforts at Ladinoization seem to be in Belize, the Bay Islands of Honduras, and Panamá.

Belize is still a British colony (1), but Guatemala is pressing more vigorously than ever its two-century-old claim. Although there seem to have been few converts in Belize, some segments of the Belizean community, perhaps twenty percent, traditionally have preferred political union with Guatemala, rather than independence under the control of Belizean Creoles. Whether Guatemala will incorporate Belize or not, there is ample evidence of Ladinoization. During the last fifteen years Spanish has become a prominent street language in Belize City.

On the English-speaking islands off northern Honduras, economic developments, particularly from tourism, are attracting droves of mainland Ladinos who are hastening acculturation there. In Panama, recent governments have successfully gained more control over the minority populations of the Canal Zone and former fruit company lands.

Elsewhere, formal government pressures to Ladinoize are constant, but they take a more leisurely pace and more tolerable form in the presence of a few military outposts manned by Ladinos, mandatory Spanish language schools, and the prohibition of the English language. Much more the conduits of change seem to be the recently improved transportation systems that connect the coast and the interior capitals. Limón and San José, Costa Rica, are connected by an all-weather road. Bluefields and Managua, Nicaragua, are joined by riverboat and bus on a daily basis; and Tegucigalpa and three sites in Honduran Mosquitia have scheduled flights three times each week.

Concluding Remarks

Three major points seem most important to a discussion of minority populations in Central America. All of them concern the ability of such people to continue to exist. First, the trends in size and composition of population indicate that while the number of minority' peoples is currently increasing in every single polity, the proportion of the minority population is everywhere decreasing.

At some yet unknown time, the relatively slow rate of acculturation can be expected to increase dramatically when a position of "Ladino preponderance" is reached. At that time, the minority populations will be reduced rapidly and probably to virtual extinction.

Secondly, the attempts to halt Ladinoization by the use of legally established reserves seem to be ineffective. On occasion, they may even promote acculturation by bringing minorities into more contact with the bureaucrats of national governments.

Thirdly, there is spatial variation in methods of acculturation. Unlike cases in interior Central America, where Indians often choose to enter Ladino realms, the migrant communities of the rimland are being invaded. Differences can be seen in landscape alterations as well. Alterations in rimland landscapes often precede social change or the actual presence of large numbers of Ladinos. In the interior, landscape changes normally lag behind societal change. These changes reflect the role of governments that impose landscape alterations to aid acculturative activities.

Carl Sauer (1941:23) once suggested that the competition between cultures for territory was a worthwhile theme for geographical research, and much study could be done along this line in Central America. However, the outcome of the conflict is without doubt. In the changing face of the rimland of the western Caribbean and in the mountainous interior of the isthmus, can be seen not only the gradual demise of minority enclaves in Central America, but also the eventual assimilation of minorities elsewhere in Latin America, wherever nationalism, economic developments, and better transportation encourage intra-national contacts.

Note

1. Belize, formerly British Honduras, became legally independent in September 1981.