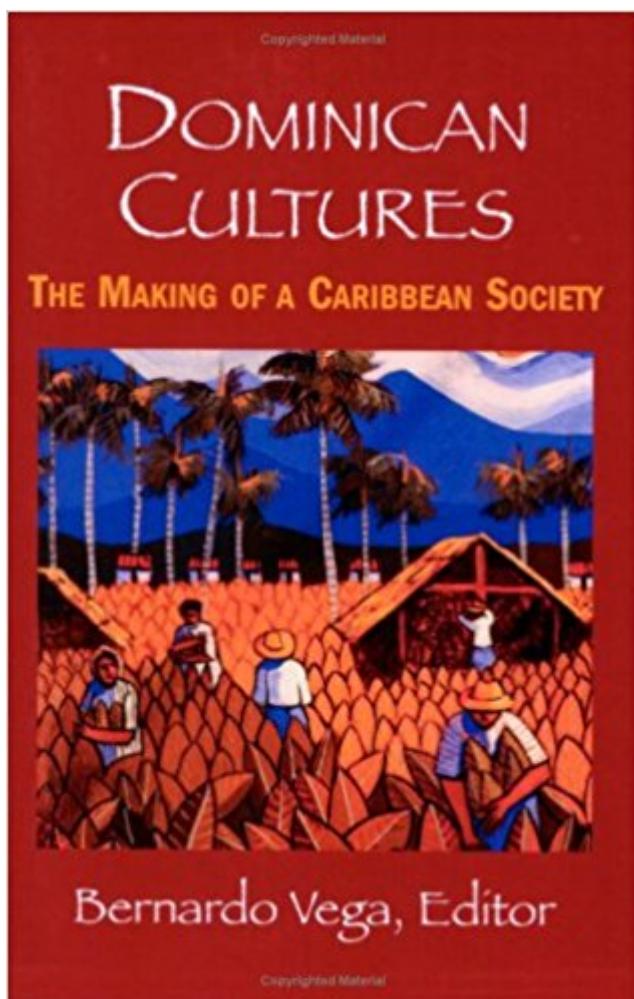


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Dominican Cultures: The Making Of A Caribbean Society



Synopsis

Traditional histories of the Dominican Republic have long overlooked the influence on the national heritage of black Africans. This cultural amalgam provides the backdrop for this book, which acknowledges the multicultural nature of Dominican society.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Hispanic American Historical Review: 2009 "This fine collection of essays offers a much-needed introduction to the historical formation of Dominican society and culture. Penned by several of the most prominent scholars of Dominican history and society, this translation will be very useful for teaching purposes since it offers a sampling of key scholarship that remains unavailable in English. Originally prepared for the national museum, El Museo del Hombre Dominicano, these essays made a splash when first published in 1981, since in highlighting the multicultural formation of Dominican society they challenged the Hispanophilia then dominant in Dominican textbooks. Some of the key features that distinguish the country from its neighbors--the early extinction of the indigenous population, the rise of colonial cattle ranching, and the eighteenth-century development of a freedman majority--resulted in a nation of maximal race mixture, yet one not without diversity, as this elegant volume clearly shows. The first cluster of essays evaluates the relative weight of the indigenous, Spanish, and African populations in shaping this nation of immigrants. The Arawaks contributed slash and burn agriculture as well as the inter cropped conuco or kitchen garden, the preference for tuber crops, and the coa or digging stick still used in the rural interior. Vega's essay

raises some key aspects of early Dominican society that help explain its distinctive homogeneity. Unlike in the rest of the Greater Antilles, most Dominican slaves arrived early on and were not employed in plantation agriculture but rather worked on small farms producing ginger, yucca for cazabe flatbread, and corn. Colonial poverty encouraged a more paternalistic style of slavery than in the more prosperous neighboring plantation economies, where racial boundaries articulated along patterns of labor segmentation. Vega chronicles an impressive number of indigenous cultural retentions, including place names and folklore, while waging a frontal attack at the nationalist mythology promulgated by the Trujillo regime that Dominicans were in any way biologically India or indigenous. A chapter by Carlos Dobal discusses the Spanish cultural inheritance, which has been renewed in successive waves of migrations, most notably from the Canary Islands and Cuba. The dean of Dominican slave studies, Carlos Esteban Deive, offers rich examples of African retentions from his extensive colonial research while carefully critiquing several schools of thought, including those of Frank Tannenbaum and Sidney Mintz, as well as the "cloak and dagger Africologists" (p. 87) who see African retentions everywhere. He stresses that African-derived cultural forms have been diffused throughout Dominican society and adopted by phenotypic whites, which helps account for their apparent misrecognition by Dominicans. The lines of debate between Dobal and Deive could be useful as fodder for class discussion, since Dobal minimizes African features, while Deive highlights them; Dobal claims cofradías or religious brotherhoods as Spanish, while Esteban Deive notes that some colonial cofradías were founded to honor African deities, such as the sacred twins of the Dahomeyan Arara (p. 94). Ruben Silie draws from his important research on the rural hato or extensive cattle ranch, the basis of the eighteenth-century economy. While materially impoverished, these cowboys relied primarily on their own hunting skills, and when they could afford help, they hired free blacks on the ranch and only relied on a slave or two for domestic work. With little capital to afford slave purchase, the Spanish colony provided liberal manumission to runaways from the neighboring French colony of Saint-Domingue (today Haiti), who called themselves indios to distinguish themselves from their former status as slaves (p. 155). The hato and the conuco or provision ground were thus the formative engines of creole society. As Deive and Silie stress, without the plantation complex binding African-derived people and their cultural forms to one social location, their cultural forms spread throughout society. The final two essays treat the late nineteenth-century emergence of market relations, as sugar plantations fueled by U.S. capital transformed the economy and society. Contract labor from the British West Indies and Haiti became a solution to the labor shortage, but Germans, Spanish, Italians, Syrians, and Sephardic Jews also poured in, expanding the emergent commercial sector, and tobacco, coffee, and cocoa exports

increased. FrankMoya Pons covers the U.S. military occupation (1916-24), which also spurred the process of modernization through road building and disarmament. By drastically reducing customs duties, the 1919 U.S. customs tariff flooded the country with imported goods, which curtailed local manufacturing and Americanized local tastes. Local manufactures were later spurred on by World War I, as Dominican industries benefited from the increased U.S. demand for sugar products. Moya Pons notes that after the Trujillo dictatorship (1930-61), increased tourism and travel to the United States fostered the emergence of a new racial consciousness among Dominicans, who came to identify with other Caribbean immigrants and peoples of color in the United States. Courses on the Caribbean often leave out the Dominican Republic because of the way it breaks with the plantation society paradigm. With the recent boom of interest in early slavery from Central Africa, this volume would be a fine complement to Linda Heywood and John Thornton's recent work *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (Cambridge, 2007). It demonstrates very effectively the end results of early slavery and creolization processes, reminding us that the two-tiered racial system of the Anglophone world was not universally the outcome."--HAHR 2009 vol.89,no3 --hispanic american historical review

Frank Moya Pons, Research Director at CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, is the author of twenty books. He has taught at Columbia University. Former Dominican ambassador to the United States, publisher and author of more than twenty books

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