
Neocolonialism and plantations on the Garifuna Coast of Central America

*"In the constitution of this small, maritime banana republic was a forgotten section."
Cabbages and Kings, O. Henry*

The Garifuna people arrived on the coasts of Central America 218 years ago, after having been expelled by the British Empire from San Vicente island. It was the last bastion of the Caribe people that had not been conquered by European powers, greedy to multiply sugar cane plantations in their overseas colonies. The Garifuna lived in isolation for a century, allowing us to preserve the culture of our indigenous Arawak-Caribe ancestors, until the arrival of the banana companies in Central America in the early twentieth century.

The state of Honduras ceded part of the territory we had occupied since 1797 to the banana companies, in exchange for construction of railways and port infrastructure. This marked the beginning of a process of deterritorialization of the Garifuna people which continues to this day; now enormous tracts of African oil palm have replaced the banana plantations.

From a New Orleans brothel to the Tegucigalpa Presidential Palace

On December 22, 1910, in an apparent night out, four men, being followed by the US Secret Service, entered a brothel in the city of New Orleans. At that time and in that port, it was common knowledge that an uprising was being plotted against Honduran president Miguel Dávila, promoted by General Manuel Bonilla—former president of Honduras—and his adventure partner Samuel Zemurray, recognized banana trader.

Among the group of partygoers in the brothel were: Honduran General Manuel Bonilla, his mentor Zemurray, Lee Christmas, a mercenary who had previously participated in the constant skirmishes happening in Central American republics, and Guy "Machine Gun" Molony, a veteran of the Boer War in South Africa. The agents in charge of monitoring the activities of the alleged conspirators did not realize when the latter snuck out of the brothel to embark on the Hornet; a ship purchased with funds from Zemurray, who also equipped Bonilla with an army of US mercenaries under Lee Christmas's command and abundant ammunition.

A profile published by US newspaper The New York Times on December 24, 1910 notes the departure of the Hornet from the New Orleans port, and its "distinguished" crew, armed to the teeth. The newspaper emphasized that telephone lines between New Orleans and Port Eads—located at the mouth of the Mississippi River in Louisiana—mysteriously stopped working, without chance of stopping the Hornet from moving downriver and taking course toward the Gulf of Honduras.

Of Cabbages and Kings

"In the constitution of this small, maritime banana republic was a forgotten section." That phrase, included in a series of stories published by North American writer O. Henry in 1904, coined the term

"banana republic," which described servile governments predisposed to allow agricultural exploitation through large-scale monoculture plantations.

Seven years after the printing of O. Henry's stories, Honduras was enshrined as the "model" banana republic, with Sam Zemurray as its father at the time. Zemurray was architect not only of the invasion of Honduras but also the bloody 1954 coup in Guatemala against the legitimate government of Jacobo Arbenz. Guatemalan President Arbenz had expropriated a portion of idle lands from the United Fruit Company, which Zemurray had taken over through a kind of coup against its shareholders in 1933—after which he came to head the company's board of directors.

One of the greatest benefits Zemurray achieved was abolition of the tax on bananas, as well as acquiring land concessions that swelled the company's existing holdings on the Cuyamel River basin. Mercenary Lee Christmas became head of General Bonilla's armed forces, becoming the first US citizen to hold that office in Honduras.

African oil palm plantations irrigated with blood

During General Manuel Bonilla's term, a good part of the northern coast of Honduras was handed over to the Cuyamel Fruit Company—a company owned by Sam Zemurray. This company was then bought by US-based United Fruit Company, which in turn merged with the company AMK to form the United Brands Company. By 1929, the United Brands Company had imported different varieties of African oil palm seeds to Honduras, which were planted in the Lancetilla Botanic Garden in the city of Tela. Later in 1938, the first plantation on the Birichicheen ranch in El Progreso was established, and in 1943 the San Alejo plantation was established, and still exists today.

During the military dictatorship of López Arellano in the early 1970s, oil palm plantations were of vital importance in the so-called land reform. Peasant cooperatives were established in the Aguán valley and thrived until, with the counter-reform of the 1990s introduced under Rafael Callejas' administration, many were pressured to sell their plantations at bargain prices. It was at that moment that businessman Miguel Facusse—known as the "palm grower of death"—appropriated a large part of the Aguán Valley.

After the 2009 coup, peasant farmer groups began a process of recovering the plantations that Facusse had encroached, a situation which has led to a low-intensity war, with a count of over a hundred peasants murdered in the last seven years.

"Model Cities" and Neocolonialism in the 21st Century

In 2011, the administration of Porfirio Lobo—resulting from fraudulent elections held months after the 2009 coup—approved constitutional reforms that paved the way for the "model cities."

The so-called "model cities" are attributed to US ideologist and economist Paul Romer, who tried to implement them in Madagascar. However, a coup cut short his plans. This was in response to the attempt to hand over 100 thousand hectares of land on the island to Korean company DAEWOO (subsidiary of the transnational company POSCO) in order to plant African oil palm."

After the Madagascar fiasco, Romer sold his idea of "model cities" to the Lobo administration in Honduras. Unlike the over 3000 "special economic development zones" (SEZ) that exist on the planet, the "model cities" have the incentive of outsourcing the application of justice and security, making possible quasi-independent states that thus go unpunished by national laws.

By October 2012, the Special Development Regions Law, legal framework for the "model cities," was declared unconstitutional, leading to the legislative power's coup of the judiciary, thereby exacerbating the effects of the 2009 coup. The National Congress reintroduced "model cities" months later under the name 'Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEED),' which were again approved instantly.

"Model cities" have been promoted abroad among the circuit of right-wing libertarians. Attracted by the potential outsourcing of justice in order to enjoy a kind of legal tabula rasa, these cities would incentivize the exploration of "plantations of the future," where biotechnological, medical and other production will be implemented, as well as tax havens.

In the midst of all this, Garifuna community lands in Honduras have been included as a possible site on which to build empires of wealth in the sea of poverty in which we survive. Meanwhile, Honduras continues to be the banana republic that O. Henry described at the beginning of the 20th century, and the monoculture plantation model that Zemmurray imposed has come back under Paul Romer's futuristic scheme. Once again, the local population is nothing more than disposable manual labor that benefits transnational corporations and the floating islands (cities created in the oceans free of state governance), promoted by Peter Thiel and his anarcho capitalists.

Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña, OFRANEH
<http://www.ofraneh.org/>