

*Estratificación socio-racial y económica de Costa Rica, 1700–1850.* By LOWELL GUDMUNDSON KRISTJANSON. San José, Costa Rica, 1978. Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia. Tables. Graphs. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Pp. 178. Paper.

This is a collection of three essays based on direct research in hitherto unreported documents of the National Archives of Costa Rica. The first points out that there was some slavery of persons of African origin in colonial Costa Rica, but that it disappeared because the economic deprivation of slaveowners gave rise to considerable manumission, with accompanying relaxation of class and caste lines, and miscegenation. The second essay, about the social conditions of a Guanacaste hacienda from 1815 to 1835, underlines the extreme simplicity of ranch life where there were very few employees, and the usual sharp lines between Latin American patrón and peón were much obfuscated.

The third essay interprets 1838 census reports from the community of Barva in the *meseta central*. The most relevant conclusions focus on the holdings of wealth by various occupational classes. The author finds that *jornaleros* (wage workers) constituted 31 percent of heads of households but held only 8.8 percent of the wealth, thus constituting a definable depressed class.

Indeed, the most cohesive theme of the essays is that although social stratification was not so rigid in colonial Costa Rica as elsewhere in Latin America, it was not an idyllic utopia of social equality and economic democracy as some writers suppose. Actually, most of the literature on the subject has contended only that a degree of social flexibility and rough egalitarianism arose out of common poverty and administrative neglect, and that on the *meseta central* land was distributed among more people than is common in Latin America.

Despite the author's disclaimers, most of his thrust is very much in the same direction. For example, even in his statistics on distribution of wealth in Barva, the author also reports that *agricultores* and *labradores* (less affluent tillers of the soil) constituted 25 percent of heads of households but held 71.6 percent of the wealth, including land. For Latin America that would be somewhat exceptional and if anything confirms previous contentions.

The book is replete with tables, notes, and bibliographies, not all of them relevant to the theme of social stratification. The author has given us a very realistic appraisal of certain aspects of early Costa Rican life, but has not knocked over any windmills.

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