CHAPTER 3

KIN, FRIENDS, AND LEADERS

As the twentieth-century Dominican state-building project unfolded in the southwest, the region’s well-tried institutions—such as the family, compadrazgo, and patronage—were put to use in new ways and for new purposes. But the basic local institutions were neither threatened nor undermined. In La Descubierta, local social and cultural distinctiveness was not eliminated. On the contrary, the building of the state both depended upon and reinforced particular local forms. In La Descubierta, the state was largely brought into being and constructed by the community’s own inhabitants.

Analysts who stress that central power imposes itself describe the construction of the nation-state as a historical process in which the state mostly forces, disciplines, and homogenizes. They suppose or argue that state-building and nation-making are processes essentially lacking in legitimacy in the eyes of peripheral or outlying communities within the state’s boundaries. The history of La Descubierta in the twentieth century is, however, not in accordance with such a picture.

In what follows, I sketch the political and social history of La Descubierta. I tell this story chronologically. The history of La Descubierta is a history of networks—the networks that produced, reproduced, and transformed the structure of power in this region. This story shows how, to a striking degree, the area’s two dominant leaderships in the early 1990s—those of Miriam and Rafaelito—were products of the past.

Before 1930: Dominicans and Haitians

Although scattered references exist in a number of texts, there is no published history of La Descubierta. The archives of the Dominican Party in La Descubierta were destroyed when a crowd pillaged the village’s headquarters (today’s Community House) sometime after Trujillo’s
death. Information on party candidates and results of elections since 1962 were available at the municipal Electoral Board.\(^2\) However, the most inspiring sources are of two kinds: taped conversations with many of the politicians in the village, and an autobiographical narrative written by La Descubierta’s leader during the Era of Trujillo Jesús María Ramírez. The narrative, which takes us back to before 1920, was written—according to a daughter with whom he spent his last years—in the Dominican capital in the 1980s.

Jesú María wrote some 400 pages of notes about his life in La Descubierta. He was born in Neyba in 1909, moved to La Descubierta in 1921, left the community for Santo Domingo in 1964, and died in 1988. While I was in the field I was given access to parts of the notes by his daughter. She said she was in the process of shortening and revising the notes for family circulation and possible publication. The revision was done to protect her father’s reputation, and involved eliminating repetitions, imposing a stricter chronology on the narrated events and checking information against other sources. In 2000, Jesús María’s story was published in Spanish in Santo Domingo as a book of some 150 pages: Jesús María Ramírez, *Mis 43 años en la Descubierta* (My 43 Years in La Descubierta). In this book, I refer to both the book and the notes. The reference to the book is: Ramírez (2000); the reference to the notes is: Ramírez (n.d.). I have used the notes only where I have been unable to find in the book what I have found in the notes that I was given access to. Like the oral materials, Jesús María’s story raises obvious questions. But both sets of data mean a possibility of hearing voices where there otherwise only may be a silent past.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the intense growth of sugar production based on plantations and slavery in French Saint-Domingue had created a thriving market for ranching products in the Spanish sector of Hispaniola. During this period, frontier cattle activities expanded and central-southern frontier towns, such as Báñica (in the Spanish sector) and Hinche (in the French sector), prospered on account of their strategic location on the route to Port-au-Prince (Derby 1994:497). With the loosely controlled border, a large part of the cattle trade was illegal. The same period also registered another important “illegal” movement, one that went in the opposite direction—from the French to the Spanish colony. The two colonies’ vastly different developments in the eighteenth century made the Spanish side of the border a desirable refuge for the French plantations’ runaway slaves (Moreau de Saint-Méry [1797–1798] 1996; Deive 1980, 1985). According to Mats Lundahl, there were some 3,000 escaped Saint-Domingue slaves on the Spanish side in 1751; twenty-five years later, in 1776, “the towns on the Spanish