CHAPTER 7

MAKING THE NATION

Nation building has often been depicted as a historical process in which the state is able to transform a set of cultural claims that initially seemed strange into something natural. But the southern Dominican border residents’ pre-1937 ideas about Dominicans and Haitians, the island’s two peoples, were not in conflict with the nation-building project as it unfolded in this part of the country under Trujillo and Balaguer. On the contrary, they helped strengthen it.

In the late twentieth century, La Descubierta’s people remembered Trujillo as the Dominican ruler who had contributed most decisively to the development of the region. The local discourse understood the transformations headed by Trujillo, not in terms of unwanted imposition, not in polluting terms, but rather in terms of positively assessed nationalization and modernization. The purpose of this chapter and the next is to support these assertions. This chapter attempts to document that key elements of the national identity that the Trujillo and Balaguer state sought to build and consolidate did not represent something foreign in La Descubierta. The next chapter seeks to show how the local population in the early 1990s described the massacre of Haitians and Trujillo’s use of terror.

A Divided Island

In and around La Descubierta in the early 1990s, many maintained that it was possible to obtain money by making a pact with the devil. The pact meant that a man or a woman accumulated wealth in return for handing over the lives of others. However, if one lived as a devotee of the devil, sooner or later one had to suffer, because, as one man said, “This pact is totally evil since for some time they are well, but when they [the demon’s representatives] come, look, they’re in a hole.”
This section examines La Descubierta’s devil-pact stories. The point is not to dwell on a set of ideas about magic per se. Instead the aim is to try to substantiate two sets of claims. First, I wish to show that local concepts of magic contained a moral thinking about the island’s division—about Hispaniola’s two peoples. Villagers and peasants in the southern borderlands maintained that those on the other side of the border controlled uniquely powerful magic and sorcery. La Descubierta’s devil-pact stories identified Arcahaie, a place in Haiti, as a center of demonic power, and locals claimed that “the Haitian” had an exceptional ability to produce destructive transformations—evil ones. The Trujillo and Balaguer states’ dominant discourse on the nation was anti-Haitian; it narrated the history of the nation as a fight against savagery (Sagás 2000). The state’s discourses and local magic contained overlapping assumptions; they shared moral premises. Both those who shaped the state’s nationalism and those who shaped magic constructed their arguments about the island’s two peoples, “the Dominicans” and “the Haitians,” by producing a moral landscape, what could be called a geography of good and evil. Together they made, remade, and modified Dominican stories of fear—fear of the Haitian “other.”

Second, an overlap existed between the ideas produced by the state and local discourses before the inception of a systematic nation-building project in the region, that is before the state’s large-scale efforts to Dominicanize the borderlands. La Descubierta’s devil-pact stories go back at least to the 1920s, and so do Dominican border residents’ ideas about the Haitians’ powerful magic, their dangerous sorcery.

The devil-pact stories in the borderlands constituted and shaped views on particular locals’ access to wealth. The stories therefore articulated ideas about money. I shall not discuss these aspects of Dominican devil-pact stories but rather attempt to show that the same stories of an evil contract articulated ideas about Hispaniola’s division, in addition to—and more sharply than—visions of economic power (Derby 1994). In order to demonstrate how southern border residents shaped differences between themselves and their western neighbors through the symbolic construction of the devil’s money, I shall (1) contextually situate the devil-pact stories by briefly relating them to widespread Dominican notions of sorcery; (2) discuss aspects of the devil-pact narratives which explicitly identify a place in Haiti as a demonic center; and (3) attempt to show how a couple of the best-known local stories about devil pacts interacted with, and were rooted in, La Descubierta people’s making of their local history, the community’s past.

Now, La Descubierta people said, there were a number of magicians who knew how to produce destruction on both sides of the political