

## Venezuela's melting pot: 1500-1800

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Not much is known about the demography of the native population of Venezuela in Colonial times. Until mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, some factual information may be gained from the narratives of the first conquistadores, missionaries and colonists, as well as of authors writing in later times of the Colony, but with access to original sources. After mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, some quantitative information of demographic relevance was collected by the Jesuit, Capuchin and Franciscan missionaries and, in the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, by the colonial administration and the religious authorities. The native population declined, from between 200,000 and 500,000 inhabitants at contact (guesstimates of modern authors) to perhaps 120,000 in 1800, according to Humboldt's estimate. It is possible that the initial decline became steeper after the first smallpox pandemic of the 1580s and continued, at a slower pace, until the Independence. As in other regions of South America, marriage was early and almost universal, and the high ratio of births to deaths seems to indicate a high potential for growth, interrupted by frequent mortality crisis. A competing cause of the decline of the natives was the process of *mestizaje* that intensified with the increase of the population of European and African origin.

**Keywords:** Venezuela. Population. Mission. Mestizaje.

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### From Columbus to Humboldt: a concise outlook

When Alexander von Humboldt landed in Cumanà in July 1799, the population of Venezuela, according to his own later estimate, counted some 800,000 inhabitants: 120,000 were native *iiós*; about 200,000 were of Hispanic birth or descent; 60 or 70,000 were slaves of African origin; and another 400,000 or more were mestizos of mixed ethnic background (HUMBOLDT, 1814, p. 558). The size of the population three centuries before, when Columbus navigated the gulf of Paria on his third voyage, remains unknown and still defies the skillful efforts of modern scholars: available estimates range between 200,000 and 500,000 souls (CHEN; PICOUET, 1979, p. 14). Settlement was more numerous in some areas of the cordillera's valleys in the western part of the country, where agriculture was practiced, and between the coast and the mountain ridges bordering the coastline; the vast expanse of the Llanos (Plains), between the eastern Cordillera and the Orinoco river was mostly deserted, except along the main rivers, inhabited by nomadic or seminomadic populations. A few dispersed tribes lived in the forestland south of the Apure-Orinoco line, and in the Guayana area, between the Orinoco, the Atlantic Coast and the Amazon.

Map of Venezuela



Source: Author's sketch on the basis of official maps.

In the words of Humboldt, penetrating the country from the Caribbean coast:

[...] we first encounter cultivated fields along the coast and around the mountain chain along the coast; then the pastures and the savannah; finally, south of the Orinoco there is a third region, that of the forests, that cannot be penetrated except via the rivers that cross the region (HUMBOLDT 1, 1814, 567).

Communication, and therefore mobility, was easy on the east-west axis, along the coast or along the Orinoco and its main tributaries, but was difficult along the South-North axis, because of the need to cross rivers, waterways, and other bodies of water. Spanish settlement was slow: according to cosmographer Lopez de Velasco, in the 1570s there were eight Spanish *pueblos*, and four “ciudades” (incorporated cities) with little more than 200 *vecinos* (households) (VELASCO, 1894). In all, some 400 *vecinos* – maybe 2,000 persons – and about 60,000 *indios* (it is not clear whether the number refers to households or individuals) in the region at that time under Spanish control (a fraction, maybe one fifth, of Venezuela). Spanish settlers introduced husbandry and developed agriculture in some areas, mainly for subsistence. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the indigenous population has been estimated to be between 200,000 and 300,000 (VILA, 1965, p. 327-28) and a similar number (280,000) is given for mid-17<sup>th</sup> century (ROSENBLAT, 1954, p. 59), plus another 100,000 equally divided between whites, blacks and persons of mixed origin. From the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, husbandry extended all over the country, and agriculture was rapidly developing, with the cultivation of sugarcane, tobacco, cotton and later cacao and coffee. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

The blacks with their masters (*criollos* and *mestizos*) were fundamentally employed in agriculture, cultivating coffee, cacao, sugarcane, tobacco, indigo for export, and other products for internal consumption; while the *indios* with their masters (*criollos* and *mestizos*) were employed in husbandry in the vast expanses of the Llanos between the piedmont of the Andes and the delta of the Orinoco, in the Maracaibo basin and in the lowlands of the Macizo Coriano. (CHEN; PICOUET, 1979, p. 18)

A population of between 100,000 and 150,000 at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century probably represents the bottom of the declining trend of the natives since contact, and before the steady recovery in the rest of the century.

As elsewhere in Iberoamerica, the European intrusion brought about a decline of the indigenous population; a population that was sparsely settled, dispersed in small tribes, and more often than not nomadic or seminomadic. There were no structured kingdoms or chiefdoms, as in Mesoamerica or in the Andean region. The European intrusion did not clash against a complex political, religious and cultural social order with a hierarchic organization; nor did it destroy a secular order. But population declined all the same. This was the general opinion expressed in the few surviving *Relaciones Geograficas* written in the late 1570s and in the 1580s at the request of the Spanish authorities (ARELLANO MORENO, 1964, p. 111-205). In the province of Caraballeda and Caracas there were 7-8,000 *indios*, 4,000 of which lived close to the two cities, “but they were many more at the times of Fajardo and

Losada” (in the 1550s), the decline being due to pathologies like smallpox and measles, diarrhea and catarrh, but also to the consequences of “pacification” and excessive work. In the province of El Tocuyo, “at present there are few indios [...] there were many more at the beginning [first contact]”. In Trujillo “there were 13-14,000 indios before, now they are 4 or 5,000”; being rebellious and belligerent, many fled the region. In the district of Barquisimeto, the decline of the indios was brought about by the wars and slaving raids, many being transported to Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo. Many indios were used like beasts of burden and employed in search of gold. In Nueva Zamora, on the Maracaibo lagoon, the indios were once much more numerous, the depopulation being brought about by the slaving raids and destructions made by the Welsers (the first German colonists). In the *Relaciones*, as well as in other documents, the decline was multicausal: pathologies, particularly smallpox, war and violence, excessive work, slavery, flights.

The opinions of contemporary witnesses were not always shared by later, well informed and respected observers of the indigenous population. Father Gumilla, a tireless Jesuit missionary active in the first part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, thought that the causes of the reduced population of many tribes, and of their decline, were mainly due to the continuous interethnic conflicts, to the sterility of women, and to the flights into the “depth of the forest” (GUMILLA, 1741, p. 560-3). A few decades later, another Jesuit missionary, Filippo Gilij, was convinced that the size of the indigenous population was more or less the same as at the time of contact. Bloody interethnic conflicts had always been a constant among the natives; it is true that smallpox was unknown before the arrival of the Spaniards, but evangelization had eradicated abortion and infanticide, and the sick were taken care of and not abandoned by their next of kin as before (GILIJ, 1784, p. 260-1). In Humboldt's view there were no proofs that the contemporary population was smaller than three centuries before. He acknowledged a reduction of the free and independent indigenous population in the north of the country (between the line of the rivers Apure and Orinoco and the sea): this was the consequence of the settlement of the Spaniards and of the compression of the space and of the resources that were vital for nomadic or seminomadic modes of life. However, where agriculture was developed and adopted by the indios, often at the initiative of the Missions, their numbers were on the increase. Humboldt gives the example of the Caribe tribes: those that were still independent were few in number and declining, while those living in the Missions of the Piritu district, where agriculture had been developed, were prosperous and increasing in number. “Population growth is incompatible with the restless modes of life of the independent tribes” (HUMBOLDT, 1814, p. 459). And while the religious orders settled their missions among the independent forest tribes, white colonists followed in their steps:

In this long struggle, the religious secular arm tends to subtract the indios “reduced” [those that live in the Missions] to the hierarchic order established by the Missionaries, and gradually replaces the Missionaries with the secular clergy. White and mestizos, favored by the Corregidores, settle among the indios. The Missions become Spanish

villages, and the indios lose even the memory of their national idiom. This is the march of civilization from the coastline into the inner land, a slow march, contrasted by men's passions, but firm and steady. (HUMBOLDT, 1814, p. 462)

Until the second part of the 18th century, when the Bourbon's colonial administration started collecting data, counting souls, households, villages, industrial establishments, and other statistics useful for the governance of the colony, little is known about Venezuela's population. There are occasional data collected by the clergy or the administrators, but nothing systematic exists. Even less is known about the indigenous population, part of which lived dispersed in the depths of the backcountry. However, the religious orders (Jesuit, Franciscan, Capuchin) that established a network of Missions after mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, collected some information of demographic interest. A systematic recount of the population was conducted by Caracas bishop, Mariano Martí, in the 1770s and 1780s, with many details useful for the analysis of the different ethnic groups (MARTÍ, 1989).

This paper strives in three steps to put some systematic order into this dispersed and not yet properly analyzed material: first, a brief survey of the literature concerning those factors that may have affected the demography of the country, such as epidemics, armed *entradas*, and slaving raids. Second, an analysis of the data of demographic interest collected by the religious orders. Third, a comparative analysis of Mariano Martí's data for whites, blacks, mestizos and indios. If the Conquest brought about a deep demographic, social and cultural crisis in the entire American continent, the ways in which the crisis manifested itself varied according to the modalities of the European intrusion, the characteristics of the indios, the nature of the territory, the historical contingencies. The Venezuelan case adds to the complexity of the American experience.

### **Factors of demographic change: pathologies, violence, slavery**

Pathologies imported from Eurasia, particularly epidemics of smallpox and to a lesser extent measles, are considered by many scholars the main cause – when not the sole one – of the demographic collapse of the American native population. A less extreme view, while admitting the importance of smallpox in determining the collapse, postulates that its destructive power, after the first epidemic, must have been declining, for various reasons. First, those who survive the pathology are immunized against contagion in a subsequent epidemic; second, there is a selection process through which the proportion of the individuals not immunized but who are less susceptible to the contagion, increase in time. Third, there is a social learning process of the population: the sick are nourished and are not abandoned; close contact with the infected is avoided; collective flight from an infected place into more secure areas takes place. Fourth, after an epidemic there is a rebound of unions and births, and a recovery of the population (LIVI-BACCI, 2008, p. 56-61). In short, epidemics must have been one – probably the most important one – of the many factors of population decline.

The existing historical documentation suggests that smallpox hit the country in the late 1570s and the 1580s.<sup>1</sup> There is an earlier testimony by Federmann, whose entrada reached Tocuyo in 1530 and who was told that several years before a new disease had hit the country (GUERRA, 1999, p. 150). Smallpox hit the mining community (Real de Minas) in the province of Los Teques in 1578; the survivors were forced to abandon the site. However the first widespread epidemic of smallpox was in 1580, when a Portuguese ship landed in the port of Caraballeda with infected sailors on board; the contagion spread like wildfire among the indios and “depopulated the province, swept away entire nations in such a way that only their name remained” (OVIEDO Y BAÑOS, 1723, p.175-6). This epidemic was an episode of the continental pandemic that swept South America at the end of the century. Another outbreak occurred in 1588, introduced in the city of Mariquita (Colombia) by an infected black woman from Guinea, spreading eastward to Caracas and southward to Chile (SIMON, 1883, p. 207). Most of the smallpox outbreaks were brought by ships plying the busy Caribbean waters and carrying infected passengers, slaves or crews: in 1611 smallpox ravaged the island of Margarita; in 1612 it hit Maracaibo, brought by a ship arriving from Cartagena. In 1614 the infection was introduced by a ship proceeding from Cartagena and landing in La Guaira: smallpox reached Caracas; an infirmary was organized *extramuros*; and a hospital was set close to the cathedral. In 1626 an infected ship from Angola landed in La Guaira, and quarantine was declared; in 1693 a ship with infected slaves arrived at La Guaira and smallpox spread everywhere; it was one of the most devastating epidemics to ever hit the country. Another severe outbreak occurred in 1766 that, according to Humboldt, caused 6-8,000 deaths (GUERRA, 1999, p. 368). There are plenty of local episodes of epidemic outbreaks in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, but little is known about their diffusion, nor about the number of lives they claimed. The same can be said about the incidence of measles that, however, was much less deadly than smallpox. Another new pathology was yellow fever, a disease of African origin that implanted itself in the Caribbean region in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and visited Caracas in 1694 and again in 1756, and then several times between 1793 and 1802. The disease was carried by ships arriving from the Antilles. Contemporary chroniclers make reference to other diseases – like intermittent fevers, diarrhea, respiratory pathologies, infections – that ravaged the indigenous population, but they were probably the normal burden of disease of the natives.

Few conclusions can be drawn from the existing documentation. There is little evidence concerning the impact of smallpox before the late 1570s. The *Relaciones Geograficas*, as we have seen, make reference to smallpox as a cause of depopulation, but they were written after the first epidemic in 1578. After that date, smallpox was a regular visitor to Venezuela, and was typically reintroduced from abroad by ships landing in Venezuelan ports. The three major outbreaks seem to have been those of 1580, 1693 and 1766. By the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of inoculation became widespread, and Humboldt himself was a witness to inoculations carried out by people without medical training. Assuming

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<sup>1</sup> A rich survey of epidemics during the colonial period can be found in Archila (1961) and in Guerra (1999).

that smallpox arrived in Venezuela in the late 1570s, one could venture the hypothesis that its major impact on the natives might have occurred during the following half century, with a negative but waning effect after the first two or three decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Armed *entradas* (expeditions) into the depths of a newly discovered land were a common trait of the Spanish Conquest in the first decades after contact. The country had to be explored; the indigenous population had to be subdued; new kingdoms had to be discovered; and new riches – precious stones, gold, silver – had to be found and exploited. *Entradas* often ended in bloody conflicts with independent native groups and tribes, with ensuing deaths, flights and enslavement. Diego de Ordaz navigated the gulf of Paria and in 1532 was the first European to explore the Orinoco delta before navigating the river upstream until the Atures cataracts. He punished the lack of cooperation of a native group with the mass killing of over 100 indios and the enslavement of their women and children (OVIEDO, 1992, p. 393-94). In the eastern part of Venezuela, between 1529 and 1550, several expeditions financed by the Welser, a powerful family of German bankers, to whom Charles V, in repayment for his debts, had assigned governance of the country, left Coro for exploration and the search for riches in the interior. Clashes with the natives were frequent: Aguado wrote that given the abuses, killings, and exploitation that the tribes suffered at the passage of those expeditions, it was all too natural that they had been reduced to small numbers or destroyed (AGUADO, 1904, p. 416-17). Before, during the first two decades of the century, pearl fishing operations had destroyed the populations of the islands – Trinidad, Margarita and Cubagua – and of the gulf of Paria, as well as the slaves brought from the coast and from the Bahamas. Contemporary chronicles give a wealth of examples of the ill consequences of the *entradas*. Given the small number of the Spaniards in those expeditions it is unlikely that violence took many lives among the natives; on the other hand, *entradas* did generate flights, displacement, dislocation and a deep distrust among the natives for the newcomers. Conflicts with the natives continued in the second part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and beyond; the number of white settlers was growing slowly, from little more than 2,000 in the 1570s to 5 or 6,000 in the second decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> (VAZQUEZ DE ESPINOSA, 1948, p. 82-92). By the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century armed *entradas* ceased and the Crown, in an effort to ensure control over the colonists, opted for supporting the evangelization of the natives by the missionaries of various religious orders.

Enslavement of the natives was another destructive feature of conquest and colonization. Slaves were employed in the search for pearls at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Father Rivero, a Jesuit, reports the feats of Captain Alonso de Jimenez among the pacific Achaguas, a nation of 4,000 people. In 1606 he captured a great number of them, took them as slaves to the gold mines “where they all perished”. A few years later, an expedition of Antonio de Tapia enslaved 320 Achaguas and Caquetios. And in 1657 Captain Juan Lopez Picón returned from an expedition in the Airico region with 140 prisoners (RIVERO, 1883, p. 22-23, 29). The Jesuits Rivero and Gumilla and the Franciscan Caulin recount the mechanisms of the slave trade as it developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of the trade was in the hands of the Dutch, settled in the region of the river Esequibo. Dutch traders were in close contact

with the aggressive Caribes, who lived in the Orinoco delta and to whom they sold firearms and ammunition, instructing them in their use. The Dutch also provided the Caribes with axes, wedges, hammers, and other metal tools that were very much in demand among the tribes; the Caribes exchanged the tools for slaves captured by the tribes, and took them back to the Dutch, who sold them for personal service, work on the plantations and in the mines, and as oarsmen for water transportation. In many cases, the Caribes assaulted the villages and forcibly enslaved young men and women. This circular trade – Dutch-Caribes – other tribes-Caribes-Dutch-market – was renewed every year and involved the capture of several hundred slaves per year. Rivero speaks of 300 indios abducted every year (RIVERO, 1883, p. 45), Caulin of 200 (and twice that many left dead in the attacks and transfers) (CAULIN, 1779, p. 372-73). Gumilla narrates that in 1737 an expedition of 27 canoes led by the Caribe cacique Taricura raided the Missions of Piritu and took 300 prisoners (GUMILLA, 1741, p. 362-64). The Jesuit Father Román, who was stationed in the Rio Negro in the Pará (Portuguese) jurisdiction, was charged with the control and registration of the slaves entering the Pará (presumably from the Orinoco) and had registered 8.000 cases in 6 years (ASTRAIN, 1925, p. 476). The demographic impact of the abduction of hundreds of young people every year was probably of limited consequence, at the macro level, for a country with a population of 100 or 200,000 individuals. However, at the local level the impact may have been important, producing dislocation and flights of the natives.

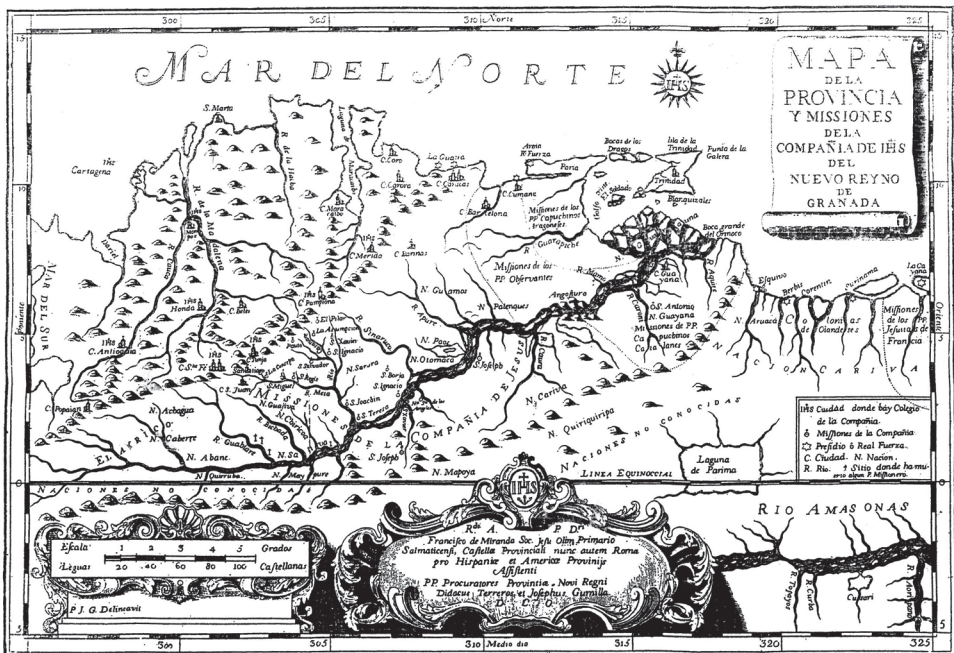
### **The Missions and their demography**

In the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the religious orders increased their efforts to evangelize among the indios, with the foundation of missions in areas of the country where the colonists had not yet ventured and with the support of the colonial administration. Augustinians, Franciscans, Capuchins and Jesuits intensified their contacts with the tribes, inducing Caciques and Shamans to convince their people to settle in a location well suited for the foundation of a village, insuring their protection against hostile tribes and against the colonists eager to exploit their labor, and providing the natives with those metal tools that represented a great leap forward for their subsistence economy. Successes and failures depended on the ability and persistence of the Missionary, on the predisposition of the tribes and their past experiences with the white men, and on the willingness of the tribes to adapt their modes of life to the teachings of the fathers. There are many chronicles left by the missionaries recounting the difficult process of evangelization and the extreme instability of the mission villages: continuously abandoned, often moved to a different location, destroyed in interethnic conflicts, or cancelled by epidemics. Efforts to convert the native tribes into stable and settled communities were often frustrated by the native's traditional mobility, favored by a dense network of waterways. The fathers' attempts at evangelization met many obstacles and dangers in a vast and often unknown country, where many tribes had suffered the violence of the *entradas* of the white men, and



where interethnic conflicts were frequent. The missionaries were normally accompanied by an armed escort, not always friendly with the natives, nor under the full control of the father. In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, at the peak of the religious orders' efforts – the Jesuits were expelled from the Colonies in 1767 – the natives living in the missions numbered about 40,000 (10,000 in the Jesuit missions, 6,000 in those of the Augustinians, 20,000 in the missions governed by the Capuchins, and 16,000 in those under Franciscan rule), perhaps one fourth or one fifth of the presumed total native population of the country. Many indios lived in the *doctrinas*, or villages under the supervision of secular clergy, while others were *independientes*, unconverted indios living mostly in unexplored areas.

The Jesuits' evangelical efforts started in the region of the Casanare in the 1660s (after earlier failed attempts), in the western part of the Llanos, the region extending from the Cordillera to the Orinoco. The Casanare river is a tributary of the Meta, that is the main tributary of the Orinoco on its left bank. After many failed attempts, the Jesuits succeeded in founding a series of missions on the river Meta and later in the lower and upper Orinoco. The Franciscans and the Capuchins, on the other hand, entered through Cumaná or other ports of the Caribbean coast, and directed their action southward, the former on the left bank of the Orinoco, the latter on the right bank. Their drive met the expansion of the Jesuits moving in the opposite direction; in 1734-36, with the intermediation of the Governor General, an agreement was reached concerning the limits of the respective zones of influence (ASTRAIN, 1925, p. 468-69; Map 2).



José Gumilla, S.J.: "Mapa de la Provincia y Misiones de la Compañía de I.H.S. del Nuevo Reino de Granada". Año 1741

Source: Gumilla (1741).

The growth in number and importance of the missions in the 18<sup>th</sup> century has left a few quantitative traces. Missionaries were certainly under the obligation to keep the parish books of baptisms, marriages and burials, but none of those have survived. However, a few summary statistics – often mere global population estimates – were collected and have reached us; if properly analyzed they offer an interesting view of the structure and dynamics of the native populations.

There are several counts of the population of the Jesuit missions before the expulsion of the order in 1767. However, even a basic analysis is problematic, and for several reasons: the number, names, and locations of the missions changed over time; the meaning of the denomination of the various population categories is not clear (how old are the *pueri* or children, and the adolescents? Are the *soluti* widows and widowers, or also unmarried adults?) and they are not consistent over time; the size of village populations was very small (normally a few hundred); and the level of mobility was high (in some cases entire tribes moved in and out of a mission, or merged in a different mission). These distortions affect most of the missions' population data.

Table 1 presents some structural data of 6 missions of Casanare obtained averaging three enumerations (1717, 1729 and 1735) in order to obtain a minimum of stability in the data. About half the population was married (44%) or widowed (5%). This is consistent with the early and universal marriage that was typical of the native populations of the continent, and was strongly endorsed by the missionaries. This means that practically the entire adult population had been married at least once. In general, the fathers encouraged marriage just past the age of puberty, at 14-16 years of age. On the other hand, if the *pueri* (children) and the adolescents represented the population below age 15, they accounted for about half the total population, a proportion consistent with a very high birth rate.<sup>2</sup>

There is no doubt that the natives belonged to the category of “high pressure” populations, with high fertility balancing high mortality.

In 1752, about 9,000 natives were under the control of the Jesuits in the Casanare, Meta and Orinoco regions – a small number, if measured against the unrelenting missionary action (over the course of more than a century long) and the great extension of the region. Small, then, but significant given the low density of the population. In Table 2 the population (1752) of 6 missions of Casanare, 5 of Meta and 7 of Orinoco is given, with a basic structural breakdown.

<sup>2</sup> Were the mission's populations stable, some inference could be made about the birth and death rates on the basis of the age structure combined, for instance, with a given level and model of survivorship. In a stable population with an expectation of life of 20 years, and a rate of growth of 1%, the population below age 15 would be 43%, with a birth rate of 67 per thousand and death rate of 57 per thousand. With an expectation of life of 25 years, the respective values would be 41%, 56 per thousand and 46 per thousand (COALE; DEMENY, 1966).

**TABLE 1**  
**Population of 6 Casanare Missions – 1717-1735**

Mission	Married	Widowed	Adolescents	Children (pueri)	Catecumenos	Total
Pauto	211	30	15	187	0	443
Patute	146	24	8	118	3	299
Betoyes	299	41	19	312	21	693
Tame	523	53	138	617	0	1,331
Macaguane	494	47	65	413	0	1,019
Casanare	191	23	23	216	0	454
<b>Total, 6 Missions</b>	<b>1,864</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>268</b>	<b>1,864</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>4,238</b>
<b>Distribution (%)</b>						
Pauto	47.6	6.8	3.4	42.3	0.0	100.0
Patute	48.8	7.9	2.7	39.5	1.0	100.0
Betoyes	43.1	6.0	2.7	45.1	3.1	100.0
Tame	39.3	4.0	10.4	46.3	0.0	100.0
Macaguane	48.5	4.6	6.3	40.6	0.0	100.0
Casanare	42.1	5.1	5.1	47.6	0.0	100.0
<b>Total, 6 Missions</b>	<b>44.0</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>44.0</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: 1717, ARSI, Novi Regni, 15.1, fg. 120; 1729: ARSI, Novi Regni, 15.1, fg. 249; 1735: ARSI, Novi Regni, 15.1, fg. 270.

Note: Average of population counts of 1717, 1729 and 1735. This latter date is conjectural, on the basis of the dates of the documents bound in the same archival volume before, and after, fg 270. The documents was sent to Rome to Father Retz, General of the Jesuit order between 1730 and 1750.

**TABLE 2**  
**Population and structure of the population of the Missions of Casanare, Meta and Orinoco – 1752**

Region	Married	Widowed	Adolescents M	Adolescents F	Children (pueri)	Children (puellae)	Population (baptized)
<b>Population</b>							
Casanare, 6 Missions	2,356	293	890	691	522	544	5,312
Meta, 5 Missions	926	108	270	217	198	189	1,908
Orinoco, 7 Missions	838	227	342	184	134	96	1,821
<b>Total, 18 Missions</b>	<b>4,120</b>	<b>628</b>	<b>1,502</b>	<b>1,092</b>	<b>854</b>	<b>829</b>	<b>9,041</b>
<b>Distribution (%)</b>							
Casanare, 6 Missions	44.4	5.5	16.8	13.0	9.8	10.2	100.0
Meta, 5 Missions	48.5	5.7	14.2	11.4	10.4	9.9	100.0
Orinoco, 7 Missions	46.0	12.5	18.8	10.1	7.4	5.3	100.0
<b>Total, 18 Missions</b>	<b>45.6</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>16.6</b>	<b>12.1</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>9.2</b>	<b>100.0</b>
	<b>Children per married couple</b>	<b>Gender ratio, children (%)</b>	<b>Gender ratio, adolescents (%)</b>	<b>Children per 100 adolescents (males)</b>	<b>Children per 100 adolescents (females)</b>	<b>Young (children and adolescents) per 100 population</b>	
Casanare, 6 Missions	0.90	96.0	128.8	58.7	78.7	49.8	
Meta, 5 Missions	0.84	104.8	124.4	73.3	87.1	45.8	
Orinoco, 7 Missions	0.55	139.6	185.9	39.2	52.2	41.5	
<b>Total, 18 Missions</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>103.0</b>	<b>137.5</b>	<b>56.9</b>	<b>75.9</b>	<b>47.3</b>	

Source: ARSI, Novi Regni, 15.1, fg 272-273.

Note: Due to some error in transcription, the total population for the 18 Missions should be 9,025 instead of 9,041.

Four considerations must be made. First, there must have been a change of definitions, since the proportion of the pueri is much lower and that of the adolescents much higher than in 1717-35 (Table 1). The age of the pueri is a puzzle: they may have been children below the age of confirmation (normally 10 years old), or below the age at which they started to get some formal education (normally 7 years old).<sup>3</sup> Second, the population structure for the Orinoco's missions diverge from those of Meta and Casanare, maybe because they were of more recent foundation and therefore less stable. Third, the data confirm the universality of marriage. Finally the combined high proportion of children and adolescents (47.3%) is consistent with a high birth rate. The ratios in the bottom part of Table 2 confirm the relative deviance of the more recent Orinoco Missions from the Casanare and Meta ones.

While the Jesuit penetration into Venezuela originated in the Nuevo Reino (Colombia), proceeding eastward through the Casanare, the Llanos and to the Orinoco, the Franciscans came from Spain, entered through the country in the north – Cumanà and other ports – and moved southward to the Orinoco left bank. According to Antonio Caulin, for a period Rector of the Franciscan College of Barcelona, 138 friars arrived from Spain in 13 expeditions, over a hundred year long period, with the assistance of a few dozen lay brothers. In 1755, there were 30 missions and *doctrinas*, founded by the Franciscans; many had disappeared or been abandoned or destroyed by other tribes, by pirates, or by epidemics (CAULIN, 1779, 376). Caulin provides a brief description of each village and, among other information, records the date of the foundation of each mission, and the cumulative number of births and deaths between the foundation of each village and 1755 (or the year of their demise). The textual information for 25 villages has been extracted and recombined: the data are reported in Table 3.

TABLE 3  
Baptisms and Burials in 26 Villages of Piritu, from the foundation to 1755

	Village	Year of the foundation	1755, or date of village dissolution	Years (from foundation to 1755 or diss.)	Baptism	Burials	Final population	Baptisms per 100 burials
1	Concepcion de Piritu	1656	1755	99	6,000	4,600	1,600	130
2	Jesus Maria Joseph de Caygua	1657	1755	98	8,500	5,400	1,500	157
3	Santa Clara de Zapata	1661	1678	17	1,499	856	NA	175
4	San Miguel de Araveynecuar	1661	1755	94	5,000	3,000	950	167
5	San Antonio de Clarines Paricuatar	1674	1755	67	4,294	3,356	1,100	128
6	N S del Pilar del Guaymacuar	1674	<b>1755</b>	81	5,800	4,950	1,400	117
7	San Lorenzo de Aguaricuar	1675	1755	80	4,000	3,430	700	117
8	San Buenventura	1675	1684	9	780	356	400	219

(Continue)

<sup>3</sup> In a stable population as described in note 2, the proportion of children below age 10 would be about seven percentage points above the proportion of children below age 7.

(Continued)

	Village	Year of the foundation	1755, or date of village dissolution	Years (from foundation to 1755 or diss.)	Baptism	Burials	Final population	Baptisms per 100 burials
9	San Diego de Chacopata	1675	1680	5	519	279	240	186
10	San Francisco Guariomocar	1675	1755	80	2,700	2,100	400	129
11	San Bernardino Guartecuar	1675	1755	80	4,900	4,600	1,600	107
12	San Pablo Mataruco	1680	1755	75	3,100	2,350	700	132
13	San Joseph Curataquiche	1679	1755	76	3,900	2,150	580	181
14	San Juan Evangelista (Guarive, Tucuyo)	1681	1755	74	2,150	1,860	350	116
15	San Juan Capistrano del Parney	1689	1755	66	2,200	1,400	500	157
16	Pueblo de los Pozuelos	1692	1755	63	1,400	1,150	300	122
17	San Bonaventura del Roldanillo	1688	1710?	22	NA	250	200	NA
18	San Diego de Chacopata	1689	1755	66	1,170	400	200	293
19	Araguita	1690	1755	65	2,160	1,100	250	196
20	S Pedro Alcantara Chupiquiré	1699	1715	16	300	250	100	120
21	San Matteo	1715	1754	39	3,200	2,000	867	160
22	Panapotar y Margarita (S Ana, S Barbara)	1734?	1755	21	500	NA	NA	NA
23	San Joaquin de Pariri	1724	1753	29	1,200	NA	390	NA
24	Santa Rosa de Ocupi	1732	1755	23	2,000	1,000	605	200
25	N S de Chamarapica	1740	1750?	10	150	NA	200	NA
26	SS Christi de Paraguan	1744	1755	11	200	90	NA	222
	<b>Total</b>			<b>1,366</b>	<b>67,622</b>	<b>46,927</b>	<b>15,132</b>	<b>144</b>

Source: Data extracted from Caulin (1799).

Note: For S. Antonio de Clarines, registration was missing for 14 years.

It is impossible to know the trustworthiness of the data. First, all the numbers are rounded. Second, Caulin apparently asked the fathers to consult the parish books – he had the authority to do so – but it is impossible to know how carefully the books were kept, and how careful were the calculations, or estimates, made by each father. Third, Caulin gives only the rough estimate of each village's population (given in hundreds) at the final date (1755) but no information is given for other dates.<sup>4</sup> The 25 villages had, in 1755, a

<sup>4</sup> A couple of examples of the annotations of Caulin. The Mission of San Miguel de Aravenyacuár was founded in 1661 and "from the registrations in the parish books it results that 5,000 souls have been baptized and in this number are included those who were already Christians in the former site. From the book of burials we desume that 3,000 people had died. There are now 900 inhabitants" (CAULIN, 1779, p. 232). Nuestra Señora de Guaymacuar was founded in 1674 and "from its foundation to the present year of 1755, up to 5,800 souls have been baptized, and in the same period 4,950 people had died; [the Mission] counts today more than 1,400 people of all ages, not to speak of the many that are fugitive in the plains of the province of Caracas, that are more than 200" (CAULIN, 1779, p. 254-55).

population of about 16,000 people; they had been in existence, in total, for 1366 years (or 55 years on average: the oldest village was founded in 1666, the most recent in 1744); their mean population was 640 inhabitants in 1755 (the smallest had 200 inhabitants, the largest 1,600). About 68,000 baptisms and 48,000 burials had been reported, with a conspicuous excess of 42% of the first over the second. This excess, however, does not necessarily imply that the native population had been on the increase during the period considered, because an undetermined if small proportion of the baptisms was not of newborn, but of gentile adults, adolescents and children joining a mission. There is no way to know how many of these were.

The average mission, in the average year of its existence, had about 50 baptisms and 35 burials and, assuming a denominator equal to the average mission population size of 640 in 1755, these figures translate into birth and death rates of 81 and 57 per thousand, respectively. These rates are above the levels found in other missions with trustworthy data (in Paraguay's 30 missions and in the Mojos missions in the 18<sup>th</sup> century birth rates were at least 10 points lower (LIVI-BACCI, 2016, p. 436).

Thanks to Humboldt we have some further data for 38 Piritu missions, presented in Table 4. As in 1755, the average population of the missions was 652 inhabitants, and the birth and death rates 78 and 39 per thousand, suggesting an implausible level of natural increase of nearly 4 per cent. Humboldt (who had the manuscript registers in his possession) was surprised by the "extraordinary rapidity of the population increase in the old missions of Piritu, distant from the Orinoco", and contrasted them with an increase of 1 or 2 % for the populations closer to the Orinoco (HUMBOLDT, 1819, p. 307). As already argued (cfr. note 3), these levels are not credible, and must be the consequence of an undercount of the villages' population and, perhaps, of the burials that, more frequently than the births, went undetected by the fathers, given the high mobility of the population. Differential intense immigration may have been another factor.

The Capuchins' penetration into the country, proceeding from the coast, was similar to that of the Franciscans. The Aragonese Capuchins founded a series of missions in the region of Cumaná, while the Catalan Capuchins operated in the region adjoining the southern right bank of the Orinoco. Table 5 resumes a very detailed series of data (RIONEGRO, 1930, p. 196-202) for 16 *doctrinas* and 16 missions, for which a count of the cumulative baptisms, burials and marriages was collected in 1780. The same data were collected also for 12 missions "destruidas" (destroyed). The *doctrinas* (villages guided by a priest belonging to the secular clergy) were all founded between 1660 and 1728 (with an average duration of 87 years), while the missions that were still active in the conversion of the heathen natives, had been founded between 1728 and 1776 (average duration of 36 years).

TABLE 4  
Demography of 32 villages, Piritu region – 1799

Villages	Married	Unmarried adults	Children	Population	Births	Deaths	Marriages	Birth rate	Death rate	Marriage rate	Mean village population
La Purisima Concepcion de Piritu	366	259	660	1,285	120	64	27	93.4	49.8	21.0	
Nuestra Senora del Pilar	558	542	1,019	2,119	204	108	46	96.3	51.0	21.7	
San Antonio de Clarines	422	776	458	1,656	115	93	25	69.4	56.2	15.1	
San José de Caigua	526	775	547	1,848	118	50	34	63.9	27.1	18.4	
San Pablo Apostol de Huere	204	306	438	948	101	68	22	106.5	71.7	23.2	
Santa Rosa de Ocopi	417	411	261	1,089	104	47	23	95.5	43.2	21.1	
Total, 6 large villages	2,493	3,069	3,383	8,945	762	430	177	85.2	48.1	19.8	1,491
Total, other villages	3,886	5,111	6,636	15,833	1,172	531	291	74.0	33.5	18.4	495
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,379</b>	<b>8,180</b>	<b>10,019</b>	<b>24,778</b>	<b>1,934</b>	<b>961</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>78.1</b>	<b>38.8</b>	<b>18.9</b>	<b>652</b>

Source: Humboldt (1825, p. 169).

Note: 17 mission villages and 21 villages "de doctrina".

TABLE 5  
Missions of the Aragonese Capuchins, Cumaná – 1780

Misiones	Baptisms	Marriages	Burials	Population	Baptisms per marriage	Baptisms per 100 burials	Birth rate	Death rate	Mean village population
Doctrinas, 16 Missions	39,106	10,377	20,480	7,442	3.8	190.9	60.4	31.6	465
Vivas Conversiones, 16 Missions	9,280	2,909	4,329	4,581	3.2	214.4	55.7	26.0	286
<b>Total, 32 Missions</b>	<b>48,386</b>	<b>13,286</b>	<b>24,809</b>	<b>12,023</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>195.0</b>			<b>376</b>
12 Missions destroyed	3,475	965	2,292	1,993	3.6	151.6	167.7	110.6	166

Source: Rionegro (1930, p. 196-202).

Note: Mean duration of the Doctrinas, 87 years; Vivas conversiones, 36.4 years; Destroyed, 10.4 years. Baptisms, burials and marriages are cumulated values between the foundation of the mission and 1780. Rates are calculated as a ratio of cumulated births (deaths, marriages) divided by the duration in years of the mission and the population in 1780.

Again, baptisms are double the number of burials, and the ratio between baptisms and marriages is 3.6. Even considering the high mortality of the population (and therefore the short duration of the average marriage), this is a relatively low level if compared with the levels found among the natives in other regions, generally comprised between 4 and 5. The document (RIONEGRO, 1930, p. 201) reports also the cause of destruction for 12 missions: in four cases the cause was the flight of the indios afraid of retaliation, after the homicide of three fathers and of a lay Spaniard and because of the deaths caused in a fight

due to collective drunkenness; in three cases, the indios were “bad people” willing to return to their heathen state; in two cases the mission had dissolved because of the absence of a father; in two other cases because of the invasion of the French and the aggression of the Caribes; and in one case because of an epidemic of smallpox.

The Catalan Capuchins have left much summary data of demographic interest for their missions on the right bank of the lower Orinoco. We offer a synthesis of the data in Table 6, covering the 1755-1816 period, during which the number of the missions grew from 11 to 29 and their total population from about 3,000 to about 22,000 souls.

TABLE 6  
Demography of the Missions of Guayana – 1755-1816

Years	Number of missions	Total population	Population per mission	Mean duration	Baptisms per 100 burials	Baptisms per marriage	Persons per family	Married per 100 inhabitants	Children per 100 inhabitants
1755	11	2,907	264	14.95	162.2	3.3	–	–	–
1788	30	11,395	380	27	206.5	6.7	–	–	–
1797	30	16,139	538	35.53	188.9	6.1	–	–	–
1799	28	15,886	567	–	–	–	4.2	47.6	29.1
1816	29	22,246	767	55.34	170.4	5.8	–	–	–

Source: Rionegro (1930, p. 100-101, 233-236, 305-306, 259-272, 322-323).

Note: Mean duration = number of years the Mission had been in existence. Children are designed as “parvulos” and “parvulas”: below 7 or below 10 years of age.

Over the period, there is a consolidation of the missions, as their average population trebles to 767 in 1816, and a conspicuous excess of baptisms over burials is confirmed. It is interesting to report the comments attached to the document that reports the data for 11 missions in 1755, three decades after the initial foundation. One of the missions, Suay, was “entirely destroyed by smallpox” in 1729, five years after its foundation; it was reconstituted with 300 indios “drawn from the woods”; in 1741 the village was burned by the English and suffered smallpox and later, in 1749, was hit by an epidemic of measles; in the two epidemics the majority of the indios died. Therefore, the population living in the mission in 1755 had been “drawn from the woods”. A similar story is told of the mission of Caroní where “of the initial population, no indio has been left, consumed by the smallpox, measles and the invasion of the Caribes, so that those counted in 1755 are ‘recruits from the wilderness’”. The mission of Maruca, founded in 1730, “was annihilated in 1741 by smallpox and measles” (RIONEGRO, 1930, p, 101).

## The Roving Bishop

Mariano Martí, Bishop of the Dioceses of Caracas y Venezuela, initiated his pastoral visit to his immense dioceses in December 1771, and concluded it in Guarena more than 12 years later, in March 1784 (MARTÍ, 1989). Every year he undertook a long voyage visiting every village and leaving a written summary of its religious, social and



demographic conditions. In 12 years he visited 9 *Ciudades* (cities), 12 *Villas* (townships), 190 *Pueblos* (villages), 94 *Sitios* (sites); he logged 2,553 leagues (some 14,000 km) and, among other statistics, enumerated 341,138 inhabitants and 55,029 families, about half the total population of the entire country. With reference to the entire *Capitanía*, only the provinces of Cumanà and Guayana were outside the dioceses' territory. It is, of course, the demography that interests us here: up to 1777, the total population was registered, with the distinction between "blancos" and "indios", reporting the number of homes, households, families, children (*parvulos*), persons "de confession" (probably adolescents not yet confirmed), persons "de communion" (possibly all adults and confirmed adolescents); for the indios there is also the distinction between men and women. From 1778 on there are more details: as far as the ethnic groups are concerned, blancos, indios, negros, mulatos and esclavos, with the express indication (repeated for every village visited) that the mestizos were to be counted as blancos.<sup>5</sup> For each ethnic group, there is a breakdown by sex, combined with their status (married, unmarried, *parvulos*). Data for each site visited can be grouped by *vicariato* (20 districts, headed by a Vicar of the Bishop), or in various combinations of the localities visited (cities, townships, villages).<sup>6</sup>

Table 7 offers a synthesis of the post-1777 results of the visit, covering 110 villages, 5 cities and 8 townships, for a total of 179,000 persons (52% of the population of the entire dioceses). The data are presented for each of the 5 ethnic groups, separating the "rural" population (villages) from the "urban population" (cities and townships). About 28% of the population were blancos that, as mentioned above, included the mestizos; the indios were 16%, mostly in the villages; the negros no esclavos 7% and the mulattoes no esclavos 33%, while the esclavos (mainly blacks, but also mulattoes) accounted for 15% of the total. As for the place of residence, about 27% of the enumerated population lived in urban areas (*ciudades* and *villas*) and 73% in the villages; while the urbanites included 38% of mulattos, 29% of blancos, 25% of negros, 20% of the slaves and only 9% of the indios. These latter were practically excluded from the "ciudades de españoles"; the slaves instead were mostly employed in plantations and in cattle raising, while the high proportion of mulattos in the urban areas was probably due to their employment in the households of the blancos or as artisans.

<sup>5</sup> Data were classified according to the instructions dictated by the "new circular order (*circular novissima*) whereas the mestizos are to be included among the "blancos" and the "zambos" among the "negros" (MARTÍ, 1999, p. 325).

<sup>6</sup> For the sake of concision, data of Table 7 groups all Cities and Townships – the "urban population" – and all Villages and Sites [different word?] – the "rural" or non-urban population.

**TABLE 7**  
**Population of the Diocese of Caracas by ethnic group and residence – 1778-84**

Ethnic group	Population			Distribution (%)			Ratios (%)			
	Diocesis	Villas and ciudades	Villages	Diocesis	Villas and ciudades	Villages	Diocesis	Villas and ciudades	Villages	
<b>Blancos – whites</b>							<b>Blancos – whites</b>			
Solteros	11,495	3,200	8,295	22.6	22.0	22.8	Parvulos/Total	26.1	24.1	26.9
Casados	7,514	2,236	5,278	14.8	15.4	14.5	Parvulos/Mujeres	71.3	62.6	75.1
Solteras	11,332	3,410	7,922	22.3	23.5	21.8	Parvulos/Casadas	182.4	160.0	192.0
Casadas	7,280	2,190	5,090	14.3	15.1	14.0	Parvulos/Parvulas	106.2	102.7	107.5
Parvulos	6,838	1,775	5,063	13.4	12.2	13.9	Solteros/Hombres	50.4	48.4	51.2
Parvulas	6,439	1,729	4,710	12.7	11.9	13.0	Solteras/Mujeres	60.9	60.9	60.9
Total	50,898	14,540	36,358	100.0	100.0	100.0	Varones/Mujeres	102.1	97.1	104.3
<b>Indios</b>							<b>Indios</b>			
Solteros	5,233	483	4,750	18.1	17.6	18.1	Parvulos/Total	30.7	34.9	30.3
Casados	4,631	417	4,214	16.0	15.2	16.1	Parvulos/Mujeres	87.0	108.0	85.0
Solteras	5,724	477	5,247	19.7	17.4	20.0	Parvulos/Casadas	197.7	235.0	194.0
Casadas	4,499	406	4,093	15.5	14.8	15.6	Parvulos/Parvulas	99.7	118.3	97.7
Parvulos	4,442	517	3,925	15.3	18.9	15.0	Solteros/Hombres	53.1	53.7	53.0
Parvulas	4,454	437	4,017	15.4	16.0	15.3	Solteras/Mujeres	56.0	54.0	56.2
Total	28,983	2,737	26,246	100.0	100.0	100.0	Varones/Mujeres	96.5	101.9	96.0
<b>Negros – blacks</b>							<b>Negros – blacks</b>			
Solteros	2,518	666	1,852	19.7	21.1	19.2	Parvulos/Total	33.3	39.5	31.3
Casados	1,619	249	1,370	12.7	7.9	14.2	Parvulos/Mujeres	97.0	125.5	88.7
Solteras	2,769	748	2,021	21.7	23.7	21.0	Parvulos/Casadas	262.9	508.6	219.1
Casadas	1,619	245	1,374	12.7	7.8	14.3	Parvulos/Parvulas	103.0	93.8	107.1
Parvulos	2,160	603	1,557	16.9	19.1	16.2	Solteros/Hombres	60.9	72.8	57.5
Parvulas	2,097	643	1,454	16.4	20.4	15.1	Solteras/Mujeres	63.1	75.3	59.5
Total	12,782	3,154	9,628	100.0	100.0	100.0	Varones/Mujeres	94.3	92.1	94.9
<b>Mulatos – mulattoes</b>							<b>Mulatos – mulattoes</b>			
Solteros	12,728	4,978	7,750	21.7	21.8	21.7	Parvulos/Total	26.1	25.2	26.7
Casados	8,303	3,398	4,905	14.2	14.9	13.7	Parvulos/Mujeres	68.8	66.3	70.4
Solteras	13,682	5,212	8,470	23.4	22.9	23.7	Parvulos/Casadas	178.7	166.2	187.1
Casadas	8,565	3,463	5,102	14.6	15.2	14.3	Parvulos/Parvulas	95.2	96.0	94.7
Parvulos	7,840	2,936	4,904	13.4	12.9	13.7	Solteros/Hombres	60.5	59.4	61.2
Parvulas	7,463	2,819	4,644	12.7	12.4	13.0	Solteras/Mujeres	61.5	60.1	62.4
Total	58,581	22,806	35,775	100.0	100.0	100.0	Varones/Mujeres	94.5	96.6	93.2
<b>Esclavos – slaves</b>							<b>Esclavos – slaves</b>			
Solteros	7,071	1,520	5,551	25.9	27.9	25.4	Parvulos/Total	26.0	28.1	25.5
Casados	3,118	382	2,736	11.4	7.0	12.5	Parvulos/Mujeres	71.2	76.1	69.9
Solteras	7,068	1,639	5,429	25.9	30.1	24.9	Parvulos/Casadas	244.1	408.8	219.7
Casadas	2,909	375	2,534	10.7	6.9	11.6	Parvulos/Parvulas	102.6	104.1	102.2
Parvulos	3,596	782	2,814	13.2	14.4	12.9	Solteros/Hombres	69.4	79.9	67.0
Parvulas	3,505	751	2,754	12.9	13.8	12.6	Solteras/Mujeres	44.7	32.4	47.4
Total	27,267	5,449	21,818	100.0	100.0	100.0	Varones/Mujeres	102.1	94.4	104.1

(Continue)

(Continued)

Ethnic group	Population			Distribution (%)			Ratios (%)			
	Diocesis	Villas and ciudades	Villages	Diocesis	Villas and ciudades	Villages	Diocesis	Villas and ciudades	Villages	
<b>All ethnic groups</b>	<b>All ethnic groups</b>									
Solteros	39,045	10,847	28,198	21.9	22.3	21.7	Parvulos/Total	27.4	26.7	27.6
Casados	25,185	6,682	18,503	14.1	13.7	14.3	Parvulos/Mujeres	74.6	71.5	75.8
Solteras	40,575	11,486	29,089	22.7	23.6	22.4	Parvulos/Casadas	196.3	194.5	197.0
Casadas	24,872	6,679	18,193	13.9	13.7	14.0	Parvulos/Parvulas	103.8	103.7	103.9
Parvulos	24,876	6,613	18,263	13.9	13.6	14.1	Solteros/Hombres	60.8	61.9	60.4
Parvulas	23,958	6,379	17,579	13.4	13.1	13.5	Solteras/Mujeres	62.0	63.2	61.5
Total	178,511	48,686	129,825	100.0	100.0	100.0	Varones/Mujeres	98.1	96.5	98.8

Source: Extracted from Mart, (1799, p. 6-9).

Table 7 also presents the distribution of the population according to age/marital status, as well as a series of ratios between the different population groups. The data are of difficult interpretation: who are the “parvulos”, and who are the “solteros” (unmarried)? Given that the parvulos were 27-28% of the total population, their age was presumably below 7 or thereabout, while the unmarried were the adolescents below the customary age at marriage (14 for females and 16 for males) as well as other adults. Even so, their high proportion (44% of the total population) and the low proportion of the married (only 28%, against well over 40% as in Tables 1 and 2) leaves many doubts as to the criteria followed by Bishop Martí in the classification of the population by marital status. A possible explanation could be that while the Mission fathers probably defined as married all stable couples (particularly those with children) of a village, the Bishop adhered to a more stringent and formal definition of marriage, excluding people in de-facto unions. Finally, were the widowed included among the married or among the unmarried? Probably they accrued to this latter category that appears to be overrepresented.

Given the uncertainty concerning the definition of the different categories, and in the absence of other independent parameters (estimates of the rate of growth, fertility or mortality indicators), Bishop Martí's data are of little help for the reconstitution of the demographic system of the Venezuelan population. However, the internal comparisons between the different ethnic groups allows a few interesting considerations. In the first place, the gender ratio (in the total population and among children – varones/mujeres and parvulos/parvulas) is relatively well balanced and close to 100%, and this is a reassuring element as far as the quality of the count is concerned. Second, the proportion of children in the population is higher among the indios and the negros (31-33%) than among the other ethnic groups (about 26%). Whether this is due to higher fertility or to other factors (survival, age and marital status composition), it is impossible to say, but the higher ratio between children and married women (parvulos/casadas) among the indios and the blacks (and also among the slaves) than among the blancos and the

mulattos reinforces the first hypothesis.<sup>7</sup> Third, the proportion of the married population (on average lower than in other counts) is very low among the negros and the slaves, and particularly so among those living in the *ciudades* and *villas*. This fact may be related to their professional composition (servants in the urban Spanish households) and/or to a higher prevalence of de facto unions among the non white population. This hypothesis is sustained by the fact that the proportion of children among the negros was higher than in the rest of the population, in spite of a lower prevalence of the married population: in other words, many children were probably born to de-facto, unmarried couples. Finally, the distribution of the different ethnic groups by age/marital status is practically identical in the cities and townships, with only a few exceptions (marital status as signaled above).

Bishop Martí's census, in addition to its descriptive value and in spite of the many shortfalls typical of the conditions of its time, suggests also the interesting hypothesis that the relative structural homogeneity between the different ethnic groups could have been the result of a relative parallel stability of the social order. Intense differential migration of the ethnic groups, or markedly different fertility and survival systems would have affected their respective age structure.

### Decline or collapse of the natives?

A native population between 200,000 and 500,000 at the times of contact is cited by some scholars for the Venezuelan territory. The negative impact of the Hispanic intrusion, because of the violence of the *entradas* – the exploitation of labor, the dislocation and displacement of the *indios* from the more densely settled areas along the coastline into the backcountry – determined a decline in the first decades following the first contact. It is likely that the fall of the population accelerated with the great smallpox pandemic of the 1580s and the ensuing recurrent outbreaks of the disease.<sup>8</sup> But with the passing of time, the depressing impact of smallpox must have been on the wane, as suggested in the first pages of this essay. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the population continued to decline, if we believe in Humboldt's estimates for 1800 (120,000 natives), perhaps at a slower pace. Notwithstanding the decline, the fragmentary data point to a relatively high potential for growth of the *indios* (the high ratio between births and deaths, and the very young age structure support this hypothesis).

As in other parts of the Americas, the indigenous pool lost population not only because of a negative balance of births and deaths, but also because of the steady passage of its offspring into the mixed, mestizo component of the population that, in 1800, included about half the total population of the country. This process of intense *mestizaje* is likely to have accelerated

<sup>7</sup> This ratio was 182:100 for the Blancos, 179 for the Mulattos, 198 for the Indios, 244 for the Esclavos and 263 for the Negros

<sup>8</sup> By the end of the 16th century the indigenous population has been estimated to have been between 200,000 and 300,000 (VILA, 1965, p. 327-28), and a similar number (280,000, plus another 100,000 equally divided between whites, blacks and persons of mixed origin) is given for mid-17th century (ROSENBLAT, 1954, p. 59).

its course with the parallel growth of the white population. The same instructions given to Bishop Marti for his visit, and concerning the inclusion of the mestizos in the category of the blancos, may be interpreted as an encouragement to the mixing of the population. This process of *mestizaje* may have offset the natural dynamism of the indios during the colonial times. After the independence wars - when the demographic nadir was reached – there was a steady recovery (326,000 in 1889, CHEN and PICOUET, 1999, p. 22). The indigenous population of Venezuela may have developed according to the phases outlined above. These phases are, to be sure, hypothetical, given the paucity of the data and their uncertain quality and coverage. During the three centuries of the colonial period the native population certainly declined in number, but its vitality was not lost and nourished a powerful mixing process.

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## Resumo

*O melting pot venezuelano: 1500-1800*

Pouco se sabe sobre a demografia da população nativa da Venezuela dos tempos coloniais. Até meados do século XVII, algumas informações factuais podem ser obtidas por meio das narrativas dos primeiros conquistadores, missionários e colonizadores, assim como de autores

do final do período colonial com acesso a fontes de documentos originais. Até meados do século XVII, alguma informação quantitativa foi coletada pelos missionários jesuítas, capuchinos e franciscanos e, na última década do século XVII, pela administração colonial e pelas autoridades religiosas. A população nativa, que era de 200.000 a 500.000 habitantes (estimativas de autores modernos), diminuiu para talvez 120.000 em 1800, de acordo com a estimativa de Humboldt. É possível que o declínio inicial tenha se tornado mais acentuado após a primeira pandemia de varíola de 1580 e tenha continuado, em um ritmo mais lento, até a Independência. Como em outras regiões da América Latina, os casamentos eram precoces e quase universais, e a elevada taxa de nascimentos sobre mortes parece indicar um alto potencial de crescimento, interrompido pelas frequentes crises de mortalidade. Uma causa competitiva para o declínio da população nativa foi o processo de mestiçagem intensificado com o aumento da população de origem europeia e africana.

**Palavras-chave:** Venezuela. População. Missões. Mestiçagem.

## Resumen

*El melting pot venezolano 1500-1800*

Nuestro conocimiento sobre la demografía de la población autóctona de Venezuela durante la Colonia es limitado. Hasta la mitad del siglo XVII, las narraciones de los primeros conquistadores, de los misioneros y de los funcionarios ofrecen algunas escasa información y lo mismo puede decirse de algunos autores que escribieron en tiempos posteriores con acceso a fuentes originales. Después de la mitad del siglo XVII, la información de tipo cuantitativo se debe a los misioneros capuchinos, jesuítas y franciscanos, y, en las últimas décadas del siglo XVIII, a la administración de la Colonia y a la Iglesia. Algunos autores contemporáneos estiman la población autóctona al contacto entre 200.000 y 500.000 habitantes, que se redujo a 120.000 en 1800, según las evaluaciones de Humboldt. Es posible que el declive inicial se haya acelerado por causa de la primera pandemia de viruela en la década de 1580, y que haya continuado a un ritmo más lento hasta la independencia. Como en otras poblaciones de América del Sur, los nativos de Venezuela se casaban muy temprano, y muy pocos permanecían solteros, además de que la razón muy alta entre nacimientos y defunciones indica un potencial de crecimiento demográfico muy elevado, interrumpido por frecuentes crisis de mortalidad. Una concausa del declive demográfico de la población autóctona fue seguramente el proceso de mestizaje, muy acelerado como consecuencia del crecimiento de las poblaciones de origen europeo y africano.

**Palabras clave:** Venezuela. Población. Misión. Mestizaje.

Recebido para publicação em 04/07/2017

Aceito para publicação em 07/08/2017

