

Summary: Economies and Cultures

The Economies

During the colonial period, the economy of the Caribbean Islands was based on growing sugar cane. Sugar was so valuable that most plantation owners did not raise other crops. Instead, they bought food from other countries. This led the Caribbean Islands into a single-product economy. This type of economy can be unstable. If something happens to that single product, a country's economy can be ruined.

The people of the West Indies needed to diversify their economy. They began to raise other crops. They also developed other industries, including tourism.

After becoming independent, Central America depended on growing bananas and coffee. When the prices of these items fell, Central Americans faced economic hardship. Central American countries have worked to become less dependent on agriculture. They have built factories and encouraged tourism.

Caribbean and Central American Cultures

Cultures vary from country to country in the Caribbean. Native American, African, and European traditions blend in different ways. Music often blends African and European styles to create something new, such as salsa music in Cuba and reggae in Jamaica.

The countries of Central America share a common history. Their cultures blend Native American and Spanish influences. The majority of people in Central America speak Spanish. Central Americans also speak about 80 Native American languages. Almost half of these languages are Maya languages. Roman Catholicism, brought by the Spanish, is the most widely practiced religion in the West Indies. However, various African-influenced religions exist. Some Central Americans have become Protestants or Mormons. Even some ancient Maya beliefs, such as the companion spirit, are still popular among some of the people. Traditional crafts are important in Central America. Many of the craft styles and methods originated with ancient Native Americans.



Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

sugar cane *noun*, a plant whose sweet sap is used to make sugar and molasses

single-product economy *noun*, an economic system that depends on one product to supply almost all jobs and income

diversify *verb*, to invest in a variety of industries



After You Read

REVIEW How have the people of the West Indies tried to overcome the problems of a single-product economy? Highlight the ways that people of the West Indies have tried to diversify their economy.

REVIEW What cultures are reflected in the music of the region? Circle the words that name the cultures reflected in the region's music.