

**Class, Ethnicity, and the State among the Miskitu Amerindians of
Northeastern Nicaragua**



Philippe Bourgois

Latin American Perspectives, Vol. 8, No. 2, Revolutionary Nicaragua (Spring, 1981),
22-39.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0094-582X%28198121%298%3A2%3C22%3ACEATSA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-L>

Latin American Perspectives is currently published by Sage Publications, Inc..

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/sage.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

CLASS, ETHNICITY, AND THE STATE AMONG THE MISKITU AMERINDIANS OF NORTHEASTERN NICARAGUA

by
*Philippe Bourgois**

Solo los obreros y campesinos iran hasta el fin¹ (Augusto César Sandino).

There are marginalized ethnic minorities in almost all countries of the American continent. In many cases, these superexploited autochthonous populations constitute national minorities and require an effective process of decolonization in order to achieve full cultural and economic emancipation. Not all ethnic groups necessarily qualify as distinct nationalities, of course, and not all national minority movements automatically represent the exploited classes. Nationhood is born out of the historical, cultural, and political economic formation of a people; it implies a unified collective consciousness and is usually expressed through struggle. When a population constitutes a distinct nationality, however, and is included in a dominated fashion within the frontiers of a larger state, the feasibility of a socialist liberation strategy based on the creation of autonomous administrative and cultural structures becomes a central issue. In order to determine whether regional autonomy will actually benefit the poor majority, however, the dynamics of the class struggle must be carefully examined. Narrowly nationalist sentiments are too frequently amenable to manipulation. The right to self-determination should not be seen as an abstract truism that legitimizes all secessionist movements. The validity of the demands of an ethnic group ultimately have to be judged by their class content as the struggle for socialism and the interests of the oppressed should always be the primary concern.

In Nicaragua, the first continental state in the western hemisphere in

*The author, a doctoral candidate in social anthropology at Stanford University, collected the material for this article during a nine-month residence in Nicaragua in 1990 during which time he worked for the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios de la Reforma Agraria and the Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización. He would like to thank the compañeros in both these institutions and express his respect and admiration for the Miskitu and Sumu people and for the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional.

A different version of this article will appear in Thomas Walker (ed.), *Nicaragua in Revolution*, forthcoming from Praeger Publishers.

¹"Only the workers and peasants will reach the end."

which a popular, anti-imperialist revolution has triumphed, ethnic minorities constitute at most 8 percent of the total population and most likely no more than 5 percent. Their significance, however, is much greater. The precedent the Nicaraguan government sets in its relations with its non-*Ladino* population has profound ramifications for liberation struggles throughout Latin America. For example, in Guatemala the Maya constitute over half of the population and many are engaged in the armed struggle. Similarly, in countries such as Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador, the indigenous sector is both numerically significant and politically volatile. Finally, the area inhabited by the ethnic populations of Nicaragua — known locally as the Atlantic Coast — has age-old cultural, geographic, and economic ties with the Caribbean, a region budding with progressive social movements.

The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) is conscious of the historical importance of the example it is setting and has assigned priority to the integration of the Miskitu,² Sumu, and Rama Amerindians and the Creole and Carib Afroamericans into the revolutionary process.³ The full participation of Nicaragua's ethnic minorities in the construction of a larger socialist state, however, will be a long-term project, as they have been the victims of a particularly noxious complex of economic exploitation and cultural domination, whose tentacles, albeit decaying, persist today as the major obstacles to their complete cultural and economic enfranchisement. In all cases the decolonization of a significant segment of a nation's population is necessarily arduous. With the leadership of the Sandinistas, however, Nicaragua has become one of the few countries in the world capable of accomplishing such a task.

Within this political context, I will present in the following pages the political economic history of the Miskitu people and analyze their participation during the first year of national reconstruction. The articulation of the Amerindian people with the local and national class struggle is considered to be the crucial facet of the analysis. By suggesting that Nicaragua's indigenous minorities constitute a "nation" of semiproletarianized peasants (i.e., agriculturalists who earn a significant proportion of their income through wage labor)⁴ whose class consciousness is expressed through their cultural identity,

²The most common spelling of Miskitu is Miskito. The Indians themselves, however, prefer Miskitu since the letter "o" does not exist in their language. Mosquito, a form frequently found in older European publications is considered racially derogatory.

³The Miskitu in Nicaragua are estimated to number between 90,000 and 150,000; the Sumu are said to be 15,000 but probably do not exceed 4,000; the Rama are 1,000; and the Creole and Carib between 25,000 and 30,000. The population of Zelaya is thought to be 220,000 and the total population of Nicaragua is 2.4 million.

This paper will not discuss the Afroamerican population with whom the revolution has had certain difficulties during the first year. This is unfortunate as little has been written on the Creoles and there is a pressing need for more information on the subject. In fact, the Creoles represent a potentially reactionary sector. The ethnic Chinese will not be analyzed either, despite the fact that they dominate local commerce in the Atlantic Coast.

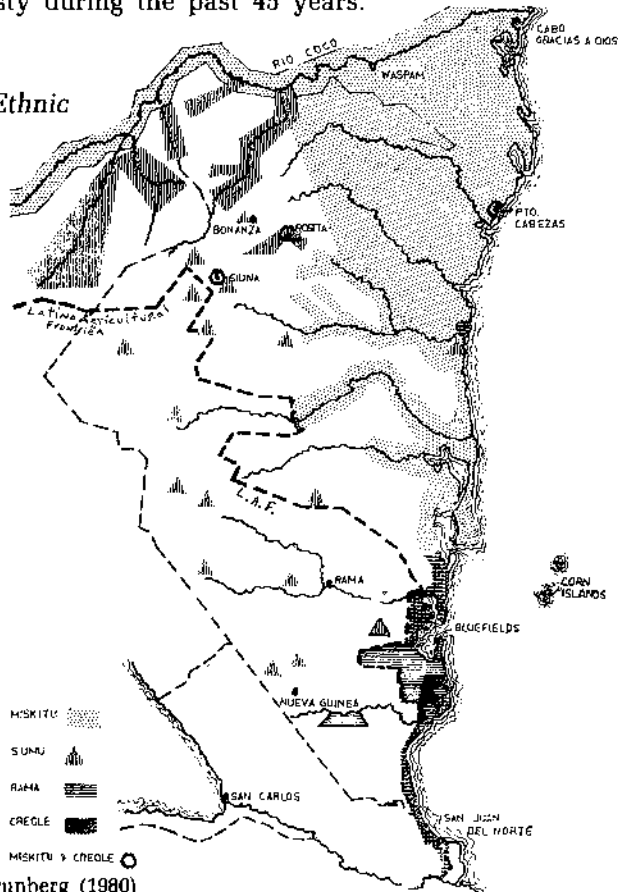
⁴During the last 35 years due to a severe economic depression in the region, opportunities for salaried employment in Mosquitia have actually diminished and there has been an increased reliance on the sale of rice and beans for cash income. The general pattern, however, is still for young men to leave their community temporarily for several years in search of work. Their cash remittances are important in the local economy. In General, Miskitu society is characterized by high mobility as men and women migrate locally to take advantage of seasonal cash income opportunities in the lumber and fishing industries.

I hope to contribute in some way to the struggle for the consolidation of a Sandinista Nicaragua and a liberated Central America.

THE REVOLUTIONARY PROBLEMATIC

The necessity for a dynamic national minorities program in Nicaragua must be understood in the context of the historical, economic, and political development of the Atlantic province of Zelaya, where the ethnic populations reside (see map). The province of Zelaya, whose boundaries coincide with the Nicaraguan half of the Mosquitia, spans over half of the nation's territory but contains only 9 percent of its population. It is by far the most economically underdeveloped zone. This is the direct legacy of the region's past, which conforms almost caricaturally to the classic Third World scenario of the pilferage and rape of the natural resources of a virgin territory by nonnationals. The sacking of the Mosquitia was begun by British settlers⁵ in the seventeenth century, was continued by North American companies under the direct supervision of "Yankee" marines at the turn of the twentieth century and ultimately was systematized by international capital under the auspices of the Somoza dynasty during the past 45 years.

Distribution of Ethnic Groups



Source: Bourgeois and Grunberg (1980)

⁵An eighteenth century colonial report sent to the King of England boasts that in 1769 alone, 800,000 feet of mahogany, 200,000 pounds of sassailla and 10,000 pounds of tortoise shell were extracted from the "Mosquito Shore" and sent to England (White, 1789: 45).

The primary culprits, to cite but a select few, were the Standard Fruit Company, the Nicaragua Long Leaf Pine Lumber Company, Wrigleys Company (all three United States firms); the Rosario and Light Mines Company (Canadian); The Atlantic Chemical Company (a pine resin processing plant dominated by Japanese capital); Industria Forestal del Caribe S.A. (a Spanish lumber company) and, of course, the Somoza family via its fishing and transport firms and its graft-ridden government agencies.

The victims are the local inhabitants — the Costeños — who have been left with a ravaged environment devoid of the most basic physical and economic infrastructure, i.e., there is no access by road to Zelaya; there are few schools; medical facilities are virtually nonexistent; what limited industry remaining continues to be dedicated to the extraction of natural resources entailing minimal secondary processing: mining, fishing, and lumber.

Within one year of the triumph of the Sandinista revolution, the structural prerequisites for the decolonization of the Atlantic Coast have been fulfilled: (1) the gold and copper mines have been expropriated and placed under the administration of the Corporación Nicaragüense de Minas y Hidrocarbones (CONDEMINAH); (2) most of the lumber companies have come under the aegis of either the Corporación Forestal del Pueblo (COFP) or the Corporación Industrial del Pueblo (COIP); (3) Somoza's fisheries have been passed over to the Instituto Nicaragüense de Pesca (INPESCA); (4) the cattle ranches formerly owned by the dictatorship's most prominent local representatives have come under the jurisdiction of the Instituto Nicaragüense de Reforma Agraria (INRA), (5) the Instituto Nicaragüense de Recursos Naturales y del Ambiente (IRENA) has been created as maximum authority for the supervision of the rational exploitation of the country's natural resources by both the private and public sectors; and (6) the Instituto Nicaragüense de la Costa Atlántica (INICA) has been founded to coordinate and planify regional economic development projects. Strides toward the economic transformation of the Atlantic Coast have been taken, but the most arduous task lies ahead: the total eradication of the racist structures that have suffocated the region for so many years — what can be called the cultural decolonization of the Atlantic Coast. In this domain also there has been significant progress. Within four months of the Sandinista victory, MISURASATA, the indigenous mass organization, was founded with the support of the FSLN to lobby for the interests of the Miskitu, Sumu, and Rama peoples. Furthermore, MISURASATA occupies a seat on the Council of State, which is the maximum legislative body of Nicaragua, conjoining the most important sectors of the nation such as the Church, the army, political parties, mass organizations, and business associations. On August 1, 1980, the Council of State passed a law establishing bilingual education — Miskitu-Spanish and English-Spanish — in Miskitu and Creole communities. The national literacy campaign, Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización, launched a second literacy project in Miskitu, Sumu, and English on August 31.

The political importance of a bilingual language policy should not be underestimated. Language, more than anything else, symbolizes ethnic identity. This is by no means limited to the Nicaraguan case. Such diverse socialist countries as the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China and Yugoslavia

uphold the right of national minorities to education in their natal languages. The Charter of the United Nations also affirms this basic human right. Leading Marxist theoreticians and revolutionaries such as Lenin are adamant on the issue:

. . . Russian Marxists say that there must be no compulsory official language, that the population must be provided with schools where teaching will be carried on in all the local languages . . . (Lenin and Stalin, 1970: 4; emphasis in the original.)

To attempt to suppress language diversity can lead to widespread dissatisfaction if not rebellion.

The fact, therefore, that the one year old Sandinista government, despite its devastated economy and crippling foreign debt, has allocated the resources necessary for the alphabetization of approximately 60,000 illiterate Miskitu, Sumu, Rama, Creole, and Carib in their native tongues shows that ethnic minorities will no longer be second class citizens in Nicaragua. Furthermore, the manner in which the campaign is being organized will promote the development of a grass-roots leadership among the indigenous peoples. Due to the shortage of educated Amerindians, seminars were set up in the communities to train people with minimal education in literacy techniques. The bulk of the education campaign, therefore, will be carried out by the village dwellers themselves.

Despite these notable initial achievements, the full incorporation of the Atlantic Coast into the revolution remains an unresolved challenge. It is impossible to eradicate the vestiges of colonialism overnight. Serious cultural animosities persist and continue to evolve in the revolutionary context. A general mistrust or, at best, apathy vis-à-vis the revolution prevails. The situation is exacerbated by the region's geographical isolation — the only access is by air or boat — and more importantly by the linguistic barriers. Only one-third of the Costeños speak Spanish as their maternal tongue and over 50 percent in northeastern Zelaya speak virtually no Spanish at all. The result is a communication gap between the populations of the Atlantic and the Pacific, culminating in a mutual misunderstanding rife with racist stereotypes.

This alienated relationship, however, is not solely the consequence of logistical difficulties; nor is it merely the product of 45 years of Somocista dictatorship. Rather it is the legacy of over 300 years of internal colonialism and international neocolonialism combined with a sharpening of local class tensions following the Sandinista triumph. The Costeños have lived too long under a demeaning yoke of ethnic discrimination and economic marginalization at the hands of their fellow Ladino Nicaraguans to be persuaded in a short period of time that the new central government means to aid them. Similarly, the Ladino national majority has been convinced for too many centuries of their cultural superiority to be able to sensitize themselves overnight to the reality of their ethnic minorities. Furthermore, elements of the formerly pro-Somoza local Costeño Ladino elite have been determinedly attempting to reestablish their faltering hegemony by skillfully shifting to Sandinista stances. Conversely, the indigenous movement itself has not been

exempt from infiltration and manipulation by individuals in leadership positions tainted by former association with the Somocista regime.

Origin Of The Conflict: The Struggle Between Spanish and British Colonialism

The profound cultural antagonisms between the Pacific and Atlantic provinces of Nicaragua arises out of their distinct historical experiences and social formations. It has its roots in the diametrically opposed trajectories of Spanish and British colonialism in the region.

On the Pacific Coast during the sixteenth century, the Spanish alternated between policies of systematic extermination and of enslavement of the aboriginal population. Indeed the decimation of the Amerindians in western Nicaragua was particularly brutal. Large numbers were shipped off as slaves to the plantations of the West Indies and the mines of Peru (Wheelock, 1974: 30, 25 and 26). During the seventeenth century, immense cattle farms were established under the *encomienda* system with the native population working essentially as slaves on the Spanish-owned *haciendas* (Wheelock, 1974: 57).

The Spaniards, however, were unable to penetrate into the eastern half of Nicaragua where the Sumu and Miskitu waged ferocious battles in defense of the sovereignty of their territory. An eighteenth century British document comments:

Their love of liberty added to their natural bravery impelled them to maintain, in sovereign independency the possession of their mountains, valleys, woods, lakes, and rivers, against the superior art, arms and even the cruelties of Spain. This chain of living testimony, unbroken by the remembrance of any event which either reduced them as a people under the power of Spain, or constrained them to receive in the remotest degree Spanish laws or Spanish magistrates amongst them remains as full and fair a proof of their real and perfect independency as any which the laborious written records of any nation more enlightened could produce (White, 1789: 45).

The English, vying with Spain for hegemony in the New World, took advantage of the valiant combativeness of the Amerindians of Nicaragua's Caribbean coast to forge an alliance with strategically located groups of them against the Spanish Crown. This relationship began as early as 1589, when French, Dutch, and English buccaneers established refuges on Pearl Lagoon and the Rio Coco, whence they preyed on Spanish ships (Jenkins, 1975: 62). The Miskitu inhabitants of the Caribbean shore were excellent sailors and fishermen; the pirates, therefore, depended on them as guides, food collectors, and boat hands. An eyewitness reported: "The buccaneers . . . associated the Mosquito Indians as Fellow adventurers in their Spanish expeditions into the South Seas . . . (receiving) . . . the warmest protection of the Mosquito Indians as being Spain's most implacable enemies" (White, 1789: 78). The pragmatic basis of this partnership was recognized with no illusions in a 1789 report by a British colonial envoy: "One common interest united them [the Miskitu] with their new friends, the English, having one and the same common enemy [the Spanish] . . ." (White, 1789: 78).

Through the trade relations established with buccaneers and later with merchants, the Miskitu people obtained muskets and machetes thereby

becoming during the late seventeenth century the major military force of the Central American Caribbean coast. The colonial penetration that took place in the region, therefore, did not result in brute domination and slavery. On the contrary, the successful growth and spread of the Miskitu culture was the result of early contact and trade relations with Europeans.

It was in the interest of British colonialism to invent a concept of Miskitu governmental sovereignty on the Central American Caribbean coast. Originally Miskitu "government" was decentralized and flexible. The Mosquitia was divided into a series of autonomous subtribal and regional units dominated by local groups of elders. The English systematically pursued a policy of reinforcing Miskitu nationalism, and in 1687 in a maneuver to legitimize their annexation of the region, the English crowned one of the many Miskitu tribal leaders "King of the Mosquitia" at a ceremony presided over by the Governor of Jamaica. The Miskitu King's domain formally extended along 410 miles of the coastline, from Cape Honduras — what is today the Honduran town of Trujillo — to the San Juan River — currently the Nicaraguan border with Costa Rica (*Further Papers* . . . 1887: 61). The Miskitu, however, are said to have collected tribute from subjugated populations as far south as Chiriqui lagoon in Panama. In all their dealings with the Miskitu, the English were careful to employ a rhetoric emphasizing their respect for the "inviolable autonomy" of the "Amerindian Nation." A description of the founding of the first British fort in the Mosquitia is indicative of the ironic contradiction characterizing the "independent" status of the Miskitu kingdom: "[We] . . . mounted it [the fort] with cannon, hoisted the Royal flag and kept garrison to show that this independent country of the Mosquito Shore was under the direct sovereignty and protection of Great Britain" (White, 1759: 47).

Regardless of motive, the British presence in Nicaragua presented a sharp contrast to the ravages of the Spanish invasion on the Pacific Coast. Perhaps most importantly, permanent settlers never arrived in the Mosquitia in great numbers. The few that came, rather than attempting to subjugate the local population,⁶ imported slaves of African descent. A report to the Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica states: "We find the number of inhabitants in 1770 to have been between two and three hundred whites, about two hundred persons of mixed blood, and about nine hundred slaves." The Amerindian population at the time was estimated to be between 7,000 and 10,000 (White, 1759: 47).

Unlike the western half of the country, primitive accumulation did not take place on a large scale on the east coast. Large plantations never took root because of the insecurity caused by Spanish raids. In fact, in the spring of 1780 all the British-owned sugar plantations of the "Mosquito Shore" were burned by Spanish soldiers, and in 1787 the English government signed a treaty promising to evacuate its subjects from the territory (White, 1759: 59).

Britain Exits . . . North America Enters . . .

The expansion of North American capitalism brought about significant

⁶In fact, however, there were certain conflicts. For example in January 1775 a delegation of Miskitu leaders held an audience with the King of Britain in which they asked for protection against merchants who were kidnapping Miskitu men and selling them as slaves in the North American colonies (White, 1759: 57).

changes in the structure of the imperialist domination of the Mosquitia. The abolition of slavery in British territories in 1833, the independence of Central America from the Spanish Crown, the wane of British colonial interest in the Americas, and the increasingly aggressive penetration of North American capital in the region all contributed to the precipitation of a crisis for the fragile Miskitu "government." The Nicaraguan declaration of independence and statehood in 1838 implied imminent doom for the relative administrative autonomy that the Mosquitia had enjoyed as a British pawn in the struggle between the colonial superpowers. In the wake of independence from the Spanish Empire, a tide of nationalist sentiment surged throughout the new nations of Central America. The British presence on the Latin American continent was perceived as an unacceptable infringement of Central America's sovereignty. Tensions rose and open fighting erupted. As late as 1848 British troops disembarked in San Juan del Norte to burn the Nicaraguan flag (Jenkins, 1975: 161). Finally, in 1860, under pressure from the United States, the British signed a treaty in which they renounced all claims to the Nicaraguan Caribbean coast. A "Mosquitia Reserve" was established which formally brought the Miskitu kingdom under Nicaraguan jurisdiction, granting, however, a certain degree of autonomous self-government to the Miskitu people. The semi-independent status of the Reserve was repeatedly defended by the Miskitu. In 1877 the Amerindian King rejected a proposal for the integration of the Mosquitia as a province of Nicaragua. One of his most resounding arguments was "the religion, customs, manners, and laws of Nicaragua are in no way compatible" (*Further Papers . . .*, 1881: 57).

Miskitu self-rule became a dead letter in 1894, however, when General R. Cabezas militarily occupied the Atlantic zone, deposed the King, and forced the Amerindian leaders to sign a declaration of allegiance to Nicaragua. The Mosquitia was officially renamed the province of Zelaya. These events, however, had a powerful effect on popular consciousness, arousing a heightened feeling of unity and national distinctiveness among the Miskitu people.

More important than the semantical finagling of international treaties or troop mobilizations was the escalation of penetration by North American capital in Central America during the late nineteenth century. Nicaragua assumed particular economic and geopolitical importance because of the prospects for an inter-oceanic canal through Lake Nicaragua. The Caribbean coast with its easily accessible⁷ reserves of gold and lumber and its soil suitable for banana production became a center for North American investments. Moreover, the indigenous population, because of its history of conflicts with the Nicaraguan Ladinos, welcomed the presence of the North Americans in much the same way that they had attached themselves to the buccaneers and the British. Indeed, even though Panama was finally chosen as the site of the inter-oceanic canal, United States economic interests became so important in the region that in 1912 "Yankee" marines disembarked on the Atlantic Coast to protect North American profits.

A mere half century after the signing of the 1860 British-Nicaraguan

⁷At that time it was easier to get to the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua from New Orleans than from Managua.

treaty, therefore, Nicaragua had graduated from being a victim of Spanish colonialism to being a neocolonial ward of the United States. The Mosquitia, meanwhile, passed from being a subordinate British "ally" to a North American capitalist enclave, losing in the process its right to self-government.

Ideological Ramifications of the Miskitu Colonial Experience

From the point of view of the Costeños, the immediate enemy and the culprits responsible for all their tribulations were the Nicaraguan Ladinos. The independence of Central America and the consolidation of the Nicaraguan nation-state had resulted in the abolition of Miskitu self-rule. The Costeños, therefore, never differentiated between their fathers' enemies — the Spanish-born conquistadors — and their new legal rulers — the Nicaraguan-born bourgeoisie that seized power in 1838.

This equation is refracted to this very day in the local term for non-Amerindian and non-Afroamerican Nicaraguans: "the Spanish." The continued use of the term "Spaniard" symbolically expresses the hatred that has persisted from so many centuries of bitter warfare and colonial outrage. Echoes of the observations of an eighteenth century British colonist are still evident:

The Mosquito Indians, so justly remarkable for their fixed hatred of the Spaniards, and attachments to us . . . have invariably transmitted from father to son the strongest and clearest ideas of their independency on Spain and its subjects, accompanied with sentiments and conduct of the most implacable hatred and revenge towards the whole Spanish race, in retaliation of the enormous cruelties universally attending their first conquest and domination in America (White, 1789: 45).

There is no reason to suppose that these sentiments will be eradicated overnight. As Lenin noted:

National antipathies will not disappear so quickly: the hatred — and perfectly legitimate hatred — of an oppressed nation for its oppressor *will last* for awhile; it will evaporate only *after* the victory of socialism and *after* the final establishment of completely democratic relations between nations (Lenin, 1971: 143-144; emphasis in the original).

Equally important in the collective consciousness of the Miskitu people has been their mystification of the former existence of an Amerindian King. In popular discourse the existence of a King and an autonomous Reserve served to focus discontent with Ladino domination. There persisted a feeling of having been wronged when the King was "dethroned" and his territory annexed to the Nicaraguan state in 1894 by General Cabezas' troops.

Another popular expression of disenchantment has been the widespread rumor of a secret clause in the 1860 treaty that gave the Miskitu people the right to opt for independence from Nicaragua after a lapse of 80 years. Those who still favor the secession of the province of Zelaya from Nicaragua have built a veritable mystique around this "secret clause." It has become a rallying symbol for legitimizing independence currents and for focusing discontent with the Nicaraguan government. Regularly, during holiday celebrations the British flag has been hoisted as a symbolic, albeit ironically^a confused, protest against inclusion in the Nicaraguan state.

^aIronic because in the name of independence, they are adulating the symbol of their grandfathers' colonial manipulators and, worse yet in the case of the Creoles, their former slave masters.

The implacable opposition of the Amerindian population to Spanish colonial penetration manifested itself as well in their resistance to conversion to the Catholic religion. To the Miskitu, the Catholic religion symbolized Spanish imposition and was met with unequivocal rejection. It was not until the arrival in 1849 of the Moravian church, a protestant faith from Germany, that Christian proselytizing in the Mosquitia took root. By 1900, scarcely half a century later, the majority of the Miskitu and Sumu communities had abandoned their traditional religion in favor of the Moravians. Adherence to the protestant faith was an expression of opposition to "Spanish" domination. Significantly, today, in blatant contrast to the deeply rooted Catholicism of the Ladino population of Nicaragua, the majority of the Costeños have maintained a firm adherence to the Moravian church. Even though perhaps 25 percent of the Miskitu have since entered the Catholic church — significantly through contact with North American and not Ladino missionaries — there is a profound equivalence between "being Miskitu" and the Moravian brotherhood. The Moravian faith, therefore, has developed into what could be called a national religion. Unfortunately the Moravian church is by no means unequivocally progressive. Certain of the less principled Moravian leaders severely compromised themselves by cooperating with the Somoza regime. The sermons broadcast by the Moravian church from Honduras have been almost openly counterrevolutionary.

The Period of Neocolonial Domination

During the early twentieth century, unlike the rest of Nicaragua, the Mosquitia enjoyed a frenzied boom of relatively highly paid job opportunities. Of course, no permanent capital investments were made by the companies and the wages disappeared overnight as a function of the depletion of natural resources and busts in the international market. For example, in 1926 the Bragman's Bluff Lumber Company located in Puerto Cabezas was the biggest employer in all of Nicaragua with 3,000 wage earners in the saw mill alone (Karnes, 1978: 115). Today there are probably fewer than 3,000 people earning steady wages in all of Puerto Cabezas. These are long term dynamics, however, analyzable by a local population only in retrospect. The immediately visible effect of the North American presence was easy cash.

Furthermore, the war against U.S. troops in defense of national sovereignty, led by the hero of the Nicaraguan revolution Augusto César Sandino, coincided with the Great Depression. The Costeños did not have the benefit of a sophisticated analysis of the world economy, therefore, the drastic reduction in operations of the foreign export firms due to the collapse of the international market was locally interpreted as the result of the raids of Sandino's army against the North American companies. These factors have rendered it difficult for the Costeños to perceive Sandino as a national hero or to understand the anti-imperialist foundation of the Nicaraguan revolution.

During the dark years of the Somoza dynasty (1936-1979), the region was more or less abandoned by the Nicaraguan government. The mahogany and pine forests had long since been stripped; the banana plantations had been decimated by plagues and hurricanes. Possibilities for easy profits were limited; consequently, Somoza did not interfere in the region. The govern-

ment's presence took the form of a handful of abusive and corrupt bureaucrats and minor military officers and was more notable for its absence, a situation which suited the local population. What few job opportunities that remained were provided by the international companies. The notable exception was the Instituto de Fomento Nacional (INFONAC), which expelled entire Miskitu communities from their ancestral lands under the guise of a rational exploitation of national forestry resources.

There were relatively few of the infamous Nicaraguan National Guardsmen stationed in the area, consequently, repression was slight and, in the Miskitu-dominated half of northern Zelaya, there was no fighting whatsoever. The Costeños, therefore, did not experience the nightmare of the genocidal Somocista dictatorship, nor did they participate in the rigors of the Sandinista combat. They heard about the brutal fighting and repression on the radio but never saw or felt it.

THE SANDINISTA TRIUMPH

The Sandinista revolution reached the Mosquitia almost immediately. On July 19, 1979, handfuls of raggedly dressed "bearded men" began entering the Miskitu communities, declaring them — in a language most could not understand — to be free from the Somocista tyranny and North American imperialism. The initial reaction of the Costeños was to treat the revolution as just another incomprehensible power struggle between two equally dangerous armed factions of "Spaniards."

The Sandinista fighters, for their part, were also profoundly baffled by what they found: an apathetic, if not openly hostile, population who "refused" to understand that they were the victims of imperialism or that General Sandino was a heroic figure. There were no FSLN members of Sumu or Rama descent and but a mere handful of Miskitu ancestry. The FSLN, therefore, lacked cadres who could speak the same language as the indigenous population and who could understand their modes of expression and thinking.

From the outset, the revolution faced the problem of establishing direct contact with the Costeños. Unfortunately the only group that was immediately receptive was the opportunistic "Spanish" residents of the region who formerly had wielded power in the bureaucratic structures of the Somocista government. They took advantage of the initial cultural disorientation of the Sandinistas to befriend them and to defame the Amerindian majority, who had always been their implacable enemies. A series of local crises erupted, exacerbating the mutual misperception the ethnic minorities and the Sandinistas had of each other.

The Founding of MISURASATA

A crisis immediately arose over the right of the existing indigenous mass organization, the Alianza Para el Progreso de los Miskitus y Sumus (ALPROMISU), to continue to exist. This Alliance for Progress of the Miskitu and Sumu people had been founded with the support of the Moravian church in 1973. Most of its leaders, however, had been bought off by the Somocista machine, and as late as July 17, 1979, two days before the Sandinista triumph,

several of them had attempted to pass a resolution declaring allegiance in the name of the Amerindian people to the repressive regime.

There existed, on the other hand, a small nucleus of Miskitu students educated at the National University in Managua, who had opposed the dictatorship. Some of them had even contacted the Sandinistas in Costa Rica. None, however, participated in the armed struggle or were actual members of the FSLN. In fact, their political orientation was not well defined; it was not clear to what extent they supported the revolution.

These young, educated Miskitu commanded a notable degree of support among the poor majority of their people, and they assumed leadership of ALPROMISU on July 19 as the former corrupt directors fled to Honduras and Miami.

In the heat of the personal politicking and mutual mistrust that characterized the first days after the triumph, several of the new Miskitu leaders were arrested for fomenting a separatist movement. It took several weeks to disentangle the situation, and it was not until November 11 that Commandante Daniel Ortega, a member of the Junta of National Reconstruction and the National Directorate of the FSLN, arrived in Puerto Cabezas to supervise the dissolution of ALPROMISU and the founding of the new indigenous mass organization, MISURASATA (the Unity of the Miskitu, Sumu, Rama and Sandinistas). By this act, the formerly excluded Rama were incorporated formally⁹ into the organization and, most importantly, the Amerindian peoples officially joined the Sandinista revolution.

The arrested leaders were reinstated and within the next six months, MISURASATA grew into the single most powerful force in Northern Zelaya. An indigenous revitalization movement stressing the dignity of the Amerindian identity has built momentum. The policy of MISURASATA has been to lobby energetically for basic economic and cultural demands. For example, in the economic domain a fisherman's union was organized, and the prices paid by INPESCA for shrimp, lobster, and turtles were renegotiated to a higher level. Similarly, an agreement was made with IRENA that 100 percent of the revenue of the lumber logged on communal lands would be returned to the communities.¹⁰ In the cultural domain, MISURASATA presented the previously mentioned bilingual education law to the Council of State and provided the cadres who prepared the materials for the indigenous language literacy campaign.

The Class Struggle and the Indigenous Identity

The whirlpool of confusion that plagued Northern Zelaya during the first few weeks after the Sandinista triumph scarred not only the Miskitu people's perception of the new government but also the local FSLN cadres' interpretation of the intentions of the Amerindians. The objective class interest of the Amerindian population coincides with the goals of the Sandinista revolution.

⁹Not a single Rama was present at the founding of MISURASTA, and they continue to remain extremely marginal to the organization.

¹⁰Currently MISURASTA is pressuring for the legal recognition of communal lands. Land titles would, of course, be the most basic guarantee of the permanent well-being and stability of the indigenous population.

Ethnic divisions in the Mosquitia coincide with the class structure.¹¹ The Miskitu, Rama, and Sumu peoples have been without doubt one of the most economically marginalized sectors of the Nicaraguan population. Over 90 percent are impoverished, semiproletarianized farmers and/or artisanal fisherman, i.e., fisherman who use traditional techniques and equipment. As peasant rice and bean producers, although they generally had access to the essential means of production — land, machetes, and axes — they were heavily exploited by the commercial middlemen who, as a result of their control over the means of transportation, purchased the local produce at artificially low prices. As periodic wage workers in the mining, fishing, and forestry industry, they were invariably relegated to the poorest paid, most demeaning jobs. In fact, in the gold and copper mines, they were subject to a quasi-apartheid domination. The safe, well-paid supervisory positions were held by Ladinos and in some instances by Creoles. All the highly dangerous, poorly remunerated jobs underground in the mine shafts, on the other hand, were staffed by Miskitu and Sumu. As ultimate insult, they were forbidden to enter the housing complex and mess hall of the European managers and engineers. In short, the Amerindians constitute a super-exploited class and, therefore, should benefit from the economic programs of the Sandinista revolution.

The bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, of northern Zelaya, on the other hand, composed primarily of merchants, cattle owners and local government employees, have ethnically defined themselves as Ladino. In fact, the class struggle has manifested itself through an ethnic confrontation. When Amerindians rose in the class echelon — that is to say, when they acquired a herd of cattle or managed to obtain a higher education and become teachers or government agronomists — there was a tendency for them to deny the values of their cultural heritage. They “lost” the ability to speak their maternal tongue and associated exclusively with the “Spanish.” At the same time, they were rejected by the Miskitu population because the Amerindian culture with its communal form of land tenure, its institutions of reciprocal labor exchange, and its ideology of mutual aid, has not accepted the existence of economic inequality. In fact, Miskitu culture is, to a certain extent, incompatible with capitalism. As a privileged class, therefore, the Ladino and Ladinoized population has been fervently opposed to MISURASATA and the indigenous movement.

¹¹The class composition of the Afroamericans concentrated in southern Zelaya is different. Within the black population, in addition to a poor lumpenproletariat, there exists a local bourgeoisie with a relatively high representation of North American educated intellectuals and professionals. There is a marked tendency, however, for the better educated individuals to emigrate to the United States. As members of an English-speaking, urban culture, the Creoles benefited most from the capitalist enclave structures. Consequently they are severely and immediately affected by the temporary disruptions in the economy caused by the withdrawal and/or expropriation of the foreign firms. The Creole/Carib mass organization, the Southern Indigenous Creole Community (SICC), unlike MISURASATA, has chosen not to adhere to the FSLN. In general, there is a stronger strain of anticommunism and a greater attachment to North America among the Creoles than among other Costeños.

In late September and early October 1980 economic activity in Bluefields, where the Afroamerican population is concentrated, was halted for three days by a series of local demonstrations protesting the presence of “communist” Cuban primary-school teachers and doctors in the town.



Miskitu woman hand mills rice to separate the chaff (photo courtesy of Philippe Bourgois).

Toward a Greater Participation of the Amerindians in the Consolidation of the New Nicaragua

Given this ethnic/class dynamic, it might appear that there should be no objective contradiction between the welfare of the Miskitu, Sumu, and Rama peoples and the construction of socialism in Nicaragua. The FSLN and the Nicaraguan people overthrew the Somoza dynasty and ousted North American imperialism in order to create a new and nobler life for the exploited peasants and workers. As has been shown, the indigenous peoples figure foremost in the ranks of Nicaragua's exploited. They stand to benefit greatly from the economic programs being implemented locally: (1) subsidies on farm implements and inputs; (2) free agronomic technical aid; (3) guaranteed crop purchases (in some cases at prices 500 percent higher than the prerevolutionary ones); (4) easily accessible cheap credit, and (5) help with the organization of production and commercialization cooperatives.

The continued existence and further development of subjective and objective antagonisms between the Amerindians and the Sandinistas is

perhaps best understood as a consequence of the sharpening of the regional class struggle. The implementation of the revolutionary policies and programs resulted in the proliferation of new government agencies in Mosquitia. This has increased the power of a significant sector of the former regional elite — the government employees — whose status is determined by their strategic positions in the local government agencies. The Ladinos, because of their superior education and their cultural savvy, have privileged access to employment in the new and expanded government institutions. There were even cases of former Somocista bureaucrats adroitly insinuating themselves into local positions of power. These unsavory elements tended to reproduce the racist, colonial relations of dominance of the former regime.

Significantly, the sector of the Miskitu population most directly threatened by, and in competition with, this newly reemerging local Ladino elite is the better educated leadership of MISURASATA. MISURASATA, of course, is setting the tone for the Amerindian nationalist movement. They are the first to point out that while the Somoza regime had abandoned their people to a marginalized peace, the favorable Sandinista social reforms are being administered either by unfamiliar young "Spanish" cadres from the Pacific region, or by the local Ladino elite who had always been their implacable enemies.

This situation is compounded by the fact that the concrete efforts of the new state to raise the standard of living of the workers and peasants, have largely been offset by the disruption of the local economy. Despite the fact that northern Zelaya suffered no physical destruction during the war, the region's economic dislocation has been particularly severe. This is because the largest local merchants — mostly of Chinese decent — fled the country on July 19. The state has not yet been able to establish an efficient distribution network, and shortages of basic items are still chronic. The visibility of these shortages is accentuated by the disappearance of the plentiful, inexpensive, tax-free, U.S. consumption goods — beer, cigarettes, T-shirts — that represented the primary enclave privileges enjoyed by the local population. Furthermore, due to a shortage of human resources and a paucity of information on the Atlantic Coast, some of the government personnel assigned to the region are young and inexperienced.

At the national level the Sandinista leadership has revealed a genuine capacity for self criticism and reevaluation in public declarations on the challenges faced by the revolution in the Atlantic Coast. The right of the Amerindian minorities to maintain their cultural identity and to have a mass organization to articulate their needs has been repeatedly reiterated.

Most of the local FSLN representatives stationed in the Mosquitia, however, are newcomers from the Pacific provinces, consequently, the most difficult and perhaps the most important dynamic for them to understand is that the revolution need not feel threatened by an Amerindian cultural revalorization campaign.

A fear prevails, nevertheless, that a return to indigenous roots will result in the promotion of a separatist movement. This mistrust exacerbates ethnic tensions. For example, the lack of a firm orientation by the local government delegates permitted the intra-village conflicts over participation in the

Spanish language alphabetization campaign versus the one in Miskitu to degenerate into a destructive polemic between the leaders of MISURASATA and the local Ladino representatives of the Ministry of Education.

To understand the potential consequences of the indigenous rights movement, the dialectical relationship between the reaffirmation of the dignity of the Amerindian identity and the consolidation of the unity of Nicaragua as a nation must be fathomed. By showing the autonomous peoples of Nicaragua that their heritage will not only be respected but also promoted, the primary reason for their wanting to succeed from the Ladino-dominated state is removed. By emphasizing, therefore, what appears superficially to contradict national unity — the distinctive identities of the ethnic minorities — a greater trust and sympathy for the central government is actually promoted.¹² Furthermore, in the specific case of the Miskitu, ethnic revitalization unleashes an inherently anticapitalist consciousness and, most importantly, sharpens the class struggle by strengthening the dignity of the oppressed sector. On the other hand, of course, the danger exists that opportunistic Amerindian leaders could manipulate this ethnic consciousness in a destructive manner for personal ends.¹³

Under the Somoza state structure, the Atlantic Coast was an enclave of international capital — primarily North American — and an internal colony of Nicaragua. With the expropriation of the foreign firms and the determined commitment of the Sandinistas to implement economic programs for the benefit of the exploited classes, the material prerequisites for the construction of socialism on the North Atlantic Coast have been guaranteed. For historical reasons, and as a result of the form the class struggle has taken, the Amerindians have defined themselves antagonistically to the Ladino population that has dominated Nicaragua. They constitute a dominated national minority.¹⁴ In the particular case of the Mosquitia, however, secession is not the solution. In fact independence from Nicaragua would harm them. North

¹²Significantly this is the same train of logic that led Marx to conclude that the only way of uniting the British and the Irish working classes was for the British proletariat to support the independence struggle of the Irish (Marx and Engels, 1942: 229). Similarly Lenin in 1914 wrote:

It remains unexplained why Russia cannot try to "strengthen" her ties with the Ukrainians . . . by granting the Ukrainians freedom to use their own language, self-government and an autonomous diet. Is it not clear that the more liberty the Ukrainian nationality enjoys in any particular country, the stronger its ties with that country will be?" (Lenin, 1951: 65).

In fact, Lenin went so far as to make a general theoretical principle over this issue: "The more closely the democratic system of state approximates complete freedom of secession, the rarer and weaker will the striving for secession be in practice; . . ." (Lenin 1975: 5).

¹³It appears that this is probably what precipitated the arrest in February 1981 of several of the leaders of MISURASATA who apparently were planning to establish a separate government in the Mosquitia. According to newspaper accounts they intended to demand representation on the Junta of National Reconstruction, four additional seats on the Council of State and the right to 80 percent of the revenues generated in the Mosquitia (*Barricada 1981*, *Nuevo Diario 1981*). A crisis erupted in the community of Prinzapolka resulting in the deaths of eight people: four soldiers — who had come to detain and question a local MISURASATA leader — and four members of the local community.

¹⁴Given their similar class compositions, their geographic contiguity and the small size of their population, the Sumu, together with the Miskitu might be said to compose a single nationality. A more systemic analysis of this issue, however, is necessary. The status of the Rama and the Afroamericans can only be determined through further study.

American capital would immediately overwhelm them. As one of the young leaders of MISURASATA explained: "Independence for us today would throw us right back into the arms of the American companies." Furthermore, Nicaragua, the state which is "colonizing" the Amerindians, is itself in a stage of transition to socialism and is determined to eradicate all vestiges of internal oppression.

Small, fragmented Third World states are in the interest of international capital.¹⁵ The Amerindians, therefore, must consolidate their participation in the Sandinista revolution. This can only happen, however, when they cease to feel threatened culturally and economically by the Ladinos. A potential solution would be to establish locally autonomous governmental structures fully administered by the Costeños themselves. By the same dialectic whereby ethnic reaffirmation results in a more integrated Nicaraguan socialist identity, regional autonomy for northern Zelaya could cement a firmer national unity in Nicaragua and hopefully some day in a union of socialist states of Central America.

REFERENCES

- Barricada (Managua)
1981 "Vuelve la calma a Prinzapolka," March 1
- Bourgeois, Philippe and Georg Grünberg
1980 *La Mosquitia y la revolución: informa de una investigación rural en la Costa Atlántica Norte*, Managua: Centro de Investigaciones e Estudios de la Reforma Agraria, Instituto Nicaragüense de Reforma Agraria
- Further Papers Relating to the Arbitration of His Majesty the Emperor of Austria in the Differences Between the Government of Her Britannic Majesty and the Government of the Republic of Nicaragua Respecting the Interpretations of Certain Articles of the Treaty of Managua Signed on the 18th of January 1860*
1881 London: Harrison & Sons
- Jenkins, Jorge
1975 "Antecedentes históricos de la explotación de recursos naturales en la costa atlántica de Nicaragua," pp. 11-69 and 153-171 in *Programa Forestal Reporte y Analisis de Resultados* (preliminary version), Managua: Banco Central de Nicaragua
- Karnes, Thomas
1978 *Tropical Enterprise the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company in Latin America*, Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press
- Lenin, V.I.
1971 *Critical Remarks on the National Question and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, Moscow: Progress Publishers
1975 *On the National and Colonial Questions*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press
- Lenin, V.I. and J.V. Stalin
1970 *On National Colonial Question*, Calcutta: Calcutta Book House

¹⁵At this point any conjectures concerning the potential manipulation of the ethnic problematic on the part of international forces intent upon destabilizing Nicaragua remain at the level of unsubstantiated conjecture. If the tragedy of the Popular Unity government of Chile is any example, it may not be until U.S. Senate hearings are held and government documents are declassified that the facts are uncovered.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels

1942 *The Selected Correspondence of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 1846-1867*,
New York: International Publishers

Nuevo Diario (Managua)

1981 "Arreglo con MISURASTA," February 25

Wheelock, Jaime R.

1974 *Raíces indígenas de la lucha anticolonialista en Nicaragua*, Mexico City: Siglo XXI

White, Roberts

1789 *The Case of the Agent to the Settlers on the Coast of Yucatan; and the Late Settlers on the Mosquito Shore. Stating the Whole of his Conduct, in Soliciting Compensation for the Losses, Sustained by each of His Majesty's Injured and Distressed Subjects*, London: T. Cadwell

LA BARRICADA

The Nicaraguan daily newspaper of the revolutionary Sandinista government is now available from its first issue in mid-1979.

1979, one reel

1980, three reels

1981, to be four reels

The cost is \$30 per reel; standing orders are welcomed.

Order from: Custom Microfilm Systems
P.O. Box 792
Riverside, CA 92502

(continued from page 3)

revolutionary societies, the aspiration of the Nicaraguans is to provide not only better health care to more people but to change the relationship between the health profession and the masses of people in the process. A North American health worker residing in Nicaragua reflects on the concrete realities of trying to achieve that goal. And, in his uniquely moving way, poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal sets down in poetic form the feelings of one Nicaraguan on returning to a country that only now has begun to write its own history.