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*Anthropology Today*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Apr., 1986), 4-9.

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# The Miskitu of Nicaragua

## *Politicized Ethnicity*

PHILIPPE BOURGOIS

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The Miskitu Amerindians residing on the northeastern Atlantic coast of Nicaragua are currently in the centre of an exceedingly bloody war. They represent almost one-fourth of the counter-revolutionary (*contra*) fighters funded and trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua which came to power after ousting the dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979. The relationship of the Miskitu to the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua has become a subject of bitter polemic internationally. Unfortunately, because of a dearth of

hard facts within the public debate, most international observers and social scientists have by necessity tended to rely on preconceived political and theoretical orientations to assess the new Nicaraguan government's treatment of their ethnic minority populations. I shall try to depoliticize this Pandora's box by analysing the historical roots of the current crisis. Although the Nicaraguan government's policies towards its minority populations have been contradictory and ridden with errors, the conflict can best be understood as the outcome of several hundred years of tension between ethnic minorities and the Mestizo national majority.

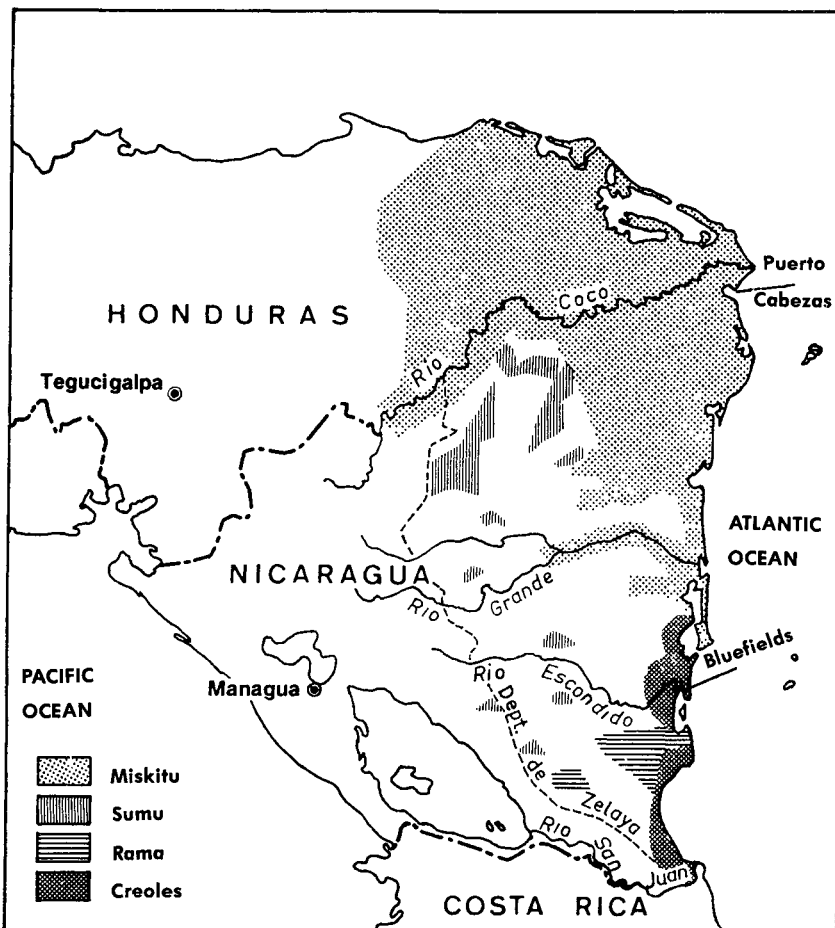
The theoretical and practical implications of the Miskitu experience extend far beyond the Atlantic coast of Central America. The Miskitu conflict with the Nicaraguan state is set squarely in two contradictory world-wide power struggles: 1) the pan-Amerindian movement for indigenous rights; and 2) the United States government's determination to maintain its political and economic control in Latin America. Too often indigenous struggles are understood in strictly Manichean terms - good versus evil. The case of the Miskitu reveals a complicated history of internal contradictions intricately entwined with world power struggles. An analysis of the Miskitu armed opposition renders more evident the need for anthropologists to refine their theories of ethnicity and its complicated relationship to class confrontations. These analytical challenges are all the more important because the tenor of future relationships between class-based revolutionary movements and ethnic-based indigenous ones, throughout Latin America and the rest of the world, hinges on the example set by the Miskitu and the Sandinista revolution.

### The current situation

First a few basic facts concerning the current situation. The Miskitu are only one - albeit the largest - of five ethnic minorities inhabiting Nicaragua's Atlantic province of Zelaya; they are estimated between 70,000 and 130,000, followed by some 26,000 English-speaking Creoles of Afro-Caribbean descent concentrated in the southern coastal port of Bluefields. There are also some 5,000 to 10,000 Sumu Amerindians, approximately 600 Rama Amerindians, and 1,500 Garifuna, a people of Afro-Amerindian descent. Mestizos, the product of European, Amerindian and some African admixture, are the dominant ethnic group, both at the regional and national levels, constituting over 170,000 or 65 per cent of the Atlantic Coast population.

Since 1981 when the CIA began funding armed resistance against the Nicaraguan government, there has been fighting between the sandinistas and various *contra* organizations, the hard core of which are composed of

*Map adapted from Nicaragua Aujourd'hui, no. 13-14, April-May 1985, p.9.*



former members of Somoza's National Guard. From 1982 through 1984, the Mosquitia became a particularly bitterly contested war zone. Two Amerindian organizations (in various permutations of alliances with the other Mestizo and Somocista dominated *contra* organizations) performed the great bulk of the fighting (and dying) in the region. The funding and armament for the Amerindian rebels has remained primarily North American; administered by the CIA. Significantly, however, in contrast to the Mestizo and Somocista dominated *contra* forces, the Amerindian insurgents are supported by an important sector of the *costeno* population. Although some Creoles, Sumus, Mestizos and even Ramas have joined the rebels, it is the Miskitu who are most mobilized in their favour. At the same time, however, there are many young Miskitu fighting in the Sandinista army and some have even become revolutionaries; nevertheless, they represent the exception rather than the rule. In fact, although the Miskitu opposition's political ideology is often expressed in traditional anti-communist or religious terms, their mobilization is most consistently articulated at the local level in manichean ethnic terms: 'We...the Indians...the Good' versus 'Them...the Spaniards...the Evil!'

During the course of the bitter fighting that has ensued - especially from 1982 through early 1984 - many Miskitu leaders were imprisoned, tens of thousands became refugees and/or were evacuated from their home villages. Although nothing resembling the 'genocide' denounced by the Reagan administration ever occurred, there were serious cases of violations of human rights by government troops, including civilian casualties and physical abuse. The Amerindian rebels for their part engaged in particularly brutal assassinations and maimings of non-combatants which, as I intend to illustrate, are indicative of the nature of their mobilization against the central government.

The Nicaraguan government has recognized publicly that human rights have been violated on the Atlantic Coast, and some government soldiers and officers have been prosecuted and jailed. In late 1984, virtually all of the imprisoned Miskitu were released on an amnesty and the government began negotiations with the various factions within the Miskitu armed opposition. A formal dialogue was first initiated in October of 1984 with Brooklyn Rivera, the leader of MISURASATA - the more reformist and less anti-communist of the two Amerindian organizations. Ironically, however, it was with the local leaders of MISURA - purportedly the more extremist and manichean/dogmatic of the two Amerindian armed organizations - that a semi-formal cease fire was signed in May 1985. During the same period, the government published a programme setting the basic guidelines for institutionalizing a form of regional autonomy for the Atlantic Coast. Among other actions intended to regain the lost trust of the Amerindian population, the government allowed all the evacuated populations to return to their original communities.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these positive steps towards reconciliation, as of early 1986, the negotiations between the government and the Amerindian rebels continues to falter tensely and the *de facto* cease fire with both MISURA and MISURASATA appears exceedingly fragile. The chances for more definitive peace negotiations have been seriously hampered by the massive influx of newly approved North American financial aid to the *contra* leadership based in Honduras. At the national level in the rest of the country, the increase in the intensity of

the fighting due to the increase in US aid to the *contra*, combined with the further deterioration in the economy since the US economic embargo, have further reduced the political space for experimentation and flexibility.

Given this tragic situation of warfare and political polarization, it remains to be shown why it has been so easy for the CIA to find thousands of young Miskitu men and women willing to engage in a particularly brutal and violent armed struggle; and why such a significant sector of the civilian population supports a protracted blood bath which has left the local economy and infrastructure in shambles.

### Origins of Miskitu Amerindian nationalism

The militarist Amerindian nationalist ideology of MISURA and MISURASATA has profound roots in the very origin of the Miskitu people as a unified ethnic group.<sup>3</sup> By trading with the European buccaneers preying on Spanish shipping in the Caribbean during the 16th and 17th centuries, the Miskitu became the first Amerindian people on the Central American littoral to obtain firearms. With their superior fire power, they not only resisted Spanish conquest, but also conquered almost 700 miles of the Atlantic seaboard from Trujillo, Honduras through Chiriqui Lagoon in Panama.<sup>4</sup> From the beginning, therefore, the fate of the Miskitu - and indeed their very success and growth as an ethnic group - was inextricably intertwined with the larger political confrontations between the colonial superpowers in the Caribbean and Latin America. The Miskitu military expansion became so crucial to the British strategy for wresting control of the Caribbean mainland from the Spanish that the Governor of Jamaica formalized the British/Miskitu 'alliance' in 1687 by crowning one of the many Miskitu leaders 'King of the Mosquitia'. Indeed the British systematically promoted the concepts of Miskitu militarism and national sovereignty in order to legitimize their own colonial expansion into the region:

[We]...mounted...[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.<sup>5</sup>

Ironically, therefore, the Miskitu have always been at the centre of international power struggles. In the 1700s it was Spain versus Great Britain; in 1984 it is the US versus Nicaragua. The relationship of the Miskitu fighters to the United States government, therefore, is analogous to the Miskitu/British 'alliance' noted by a British historian in 1774:

[The Miskitu]...have always been, and still are, in the place of a standing army; which, without receiving any pay, or being in any shape burthensome to Great Britain, maintains the English in firm and secure possession, protects their trade, and forms an impenetrable barrier against the Spanish, whom they keep in constant awe.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of the real colonial power relations involved, today the former existence of a Miskitu King has become a symbol which mobilizes nationalist aspirations.<sup>7</sup> For example in the 1970s under Somoza there were repeated rumours that the Miskitu King had returned and was circulating throughout the lower Coco River preparing his people for secession. Similarly when MISURASATA was in its early formative stage in 1980, elderly Miskitu sometimes talked of 'working for the return of the King'.<sup>8</sup> On a more neutral level, the Miskitu can still point out descendants of the 'royal family'; there are numerous rumours as to the true location of the cache holding the defunct Monarch's sceptre and crown jewels. In this context, debates over whether or not the Miskitu

are a national minority are academic. Although they do not fulfil the objective requisites necessary to constitute a sovereign nation state, their ethnic identity is deeply imbued with an Amerindian nationalist yearning. The *contra*, especially Steadman Fagoth, the founder of MISURA, have succeeded in mobilizing these nationalist aspirations in order to deepen the confrontation with the Nicaraguan state.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Central American Caribbean social formation: A US enclave**

The tensions between ethnic minorities and the Nicaraguan Revolution are not limited to being merely a 'Miskitu problem' and a 'Black problem', or even strictly an ethnic problem. Even the Mestizos from the Coast are less enthusiastic about the Revolution than those living in the Pacific provinces. Nicaragua, like almost all Central American nations, faces an Atlantic Coast littoral that has been integrated historically into a different social formation from that of the national mainstream. The entire Atlantic seaboard of Central America was penetrated by US multinational corporations beginning in the late 1800s. Because of the physical isolation of these zones, the foreign companies established an unparalleled level of control. The classic example, of course, are the banana companies which established mini-nation states on the Atlantic Coast of every single nation in Central America (except for El Salvador which has only a Pacific Coast). In Nicaragua the most important North American companies extracted minerals, lumber and bananas for US markets. All production was exported; the coastal economy had no linkage with the rest of the nation. There was more regular transport and commerce from Bluefields to the United States than to the interior of the country. Indeed, it was easier to reach the Mosquitia from New Orleans than from Managua.

This economic domination is reflected culturally and politically in the consciousness of the local population. In fact the ethnic composition of the region has been profoundly affected by the labour migrations spurred by the US companies which established themselves locally. For example, most of the Afro-Caribbean people in Central America arrived as migrants at the turn of the century seeking wagework in railroad construction or in the lumber and banana industry. These extensive US investments also repeatedly attracted US Marines to protect them, and from 1912 through 1933 North American troops occupied the country with but a brief respite in 1925-1926. The Marines spent a disproportionate amount of their time on the Atlantic Coast.<sup>10</sup>

Out of this protracted period of economic and military domination by the United States there developed a profoundly anti-communist, pro-North American political ideology among the Creole, Miskitu and, to a slightly lesser extent, the Mestizo *costenos*. This was exacerbated by the conservative and, likewise, fervently anti-communist and pro-North American tenor of the Moravian church, the strongest ideological influence on the Miskitu and Creole peoples. The rigidity of the ideological template of the local population - especially the older generation - resulted, for example, in complaints by elderly folk in Bluefields over the 'spread of communism' when they mistook a group of visiting North American tourists for Soviet military advisers.

The FSLN (Sandinist National Liberation Front) was largely unaware of this stark contrast in political identity between the Pacific and Atlantic populations. In the first years the FSLN, for example, mechanically introduced

to the Coast the same political symbolism (slogans, songs, heroes, chants etc.) which had been effective in the Pacific. In contrast, the Voice of America and the *contra* radio stations were skilfully responsive to local ideological prejudices. This was exacerbated by the war emergency which focused FSLN slogans more on nationalistic, patriotic themes such as the defence of the homeland, rendering them less flexible or adaptable to local ways of thinking.

### **Internal colonialism**

Another legacy of the North American enclave on the Atlantic Coast was a history of internal colonialism. The previous regimes did not bother to administer or to develop the region; it was never an organic part of the nation state. There was only a minimal local presence of petty bureaucrats who contented themselves with minor taxes and kickbacks from the foreign corporations busily extracting the region's natural resources. North American corporations and aid agencies provided the few social services available, further confirming to the local populace the superiority of the US. Many *costenos* are convinced that the Atlantic Coast - even after the destruction caused by open warfare since 1982 - contributes more to the national economy than it receives in government services and investments, although the reverse is obviously the case. In other words, there is a pervasive sentiment among the local populace - irrespective of ethnicity - of being exploited by the rest of the nation. Ironically, this has been exacerbated by the massive expansion in government welfare services since the advent of the Revolution. Local residents resent the overrepresentation of Pacific Coast functionaries in the new government jobs.

The ethnic composition of the FSLN prior to the revolutionary triumph reflected the marginality of the Atlantic Coast in national politics. There were no FSLN members of Sumu, Rama or Garifuna descent, but a handful of Miskitu descent, only a slightly larger number of Creole revolutionaries, and not many Mestizo *Costeno* cadre. The Sandinistas, therefore, lacked representatives who spoke the same language as the ethnic minorities or who were familiar with the problems of the region. Once again South Zelaya has had an advantage over the North since the commander and 'Delegate Minister' - roughly equivalent to governor - of the zone is an English-speaking Creole, and the majority of the few *Costeno* cadre the FSLN had prior to their triumph were from the Bluefields region. Significantly, in June 1984 a Miskitu woman was appointed 'governor' for northern Zelaya; consequently, the two highest political administrative posts in the regions of ethnic minority concentration were held by minorities themselves, by the fifth year of the Revolution. The 4 November 1984 national elections further reinforced this pattern of minority political representation with the election of a Creole and a Miskitu to the National Assembly to represent the Atlantic Coast.

### **Historic patterns of inter-ethnic and class domination**

Another legacy - perhaps the most important - confronting the FSLN is the historically entrenched patterns of ethnic and class domination on the Atlantic Coast. Nicaragua's ethnic minorities, unlike the majority of workers and peasants in the rest of the country, suffered a dual form of domination: class exploitation and ethnic oppression. The Miskitu, Sumu, and Rama are at the bottom of this local class-ethnic hierarchy, performing the least desirable, most poorly paid jobs. In the gold mines in Bonanza, for example, the Miskitu

and Sumu have always been relegated to the most dangerous, strenuous tasks in the pits where they suffer from the highest rates of silicosis, a permanently debilitating lung disease.

Above the Amerindians but below the Creoles comes the Mestizo population, many of whom are landless labourers recently migrated from the Pacific provinces. Like the Miskitu, they engage in poorly remunerated agricultural wage labour and have a high level of illiteracy and alcoholism.

The Creoles dominate the skilled jobs. Because of their better education they tend to obtain white collar employment in disproportionate numbers. Since the decline in activity of the foreign corporations in the region over the last 50 years, many Creoles have withdrawn from the local labour market, relying instead on income earned on foreign vessels or cash remittances from family members in the United States. Above the Creoles is a stratum of upper-class Pacific-born Mestizos, usually of lighter complexion than the poorer Mestizos, who hold most of the administrative and many of the political appointee positions. Finally, until the triumph of the Revolution this ethnic-class hierarchy was capped by a minuscule layer of North American and European whites who owned or ran the few companies still operating on the Coast, such as the gold mines or the lumber export firms.<sup>11</sup>

### Historic patterns of racism

This class hierarchy has been accompanied by acute ethnic polarization and racial prejudices. Mestizos and Creoles present the 'inferiority' of the Miskitu and other Amerindians as a matter of common sense. In turn, the working class and peasant Mestizos look down upon the Creoles for their dark complexion, but the Creoles - whether dark or light skinned - insist upon their superiority over the 'Paniás' (Spaniards).<sup>12</sup>

These patterns of inter-ethnic domination which are solidly rooted in local class inequalities cannot be eliminated by decree. Indeed this ethnic/class hierarchy extends with local variations throughout all the nations of the Central American Atlantic littoral. Racism is an integral part of the social formations spawned by the multinational enclaves.<sup>13</sup>

Although racism *per se* is still not a recognized topic of discussion among most FSLN political cadre (and much less so among apolitical sectors of the *costeno* population), theoreticians within the revolutionary process have begun to publicize this issue. For example a publication by the Center for Investigation and Documentation of the Atlantic Coast (CIDCA) notes that there is an inherent tendency for class-conscious movements composed of the dominant ethnic group of a country to subordinate the struggle against ethnic oppression to that of economic exploitation. The document concludes that in the case of Nicaragua, '...class exploitation and ethnic oppression are inextricably interconnected both in history and in the present. Therefore, one form of domination cannot be successfully eradicated without a conscious, simultaneous struggle to eliminate the other.'<sup>14</sup> Ironically the Mestizo *contra*, for all its indigenous rights rhetoric, has evidently not learned this lesson. In fact in mid-1984, a prominent member of ARDE resigned from the organization, citing racism against the Miskitu as one of his primary motives. Miskitu rebel sympathizers also complained of the treatment their people received from the North American representatives of the CIA stationed in Honduras. Indeed in 1984 and early 1985 when the US congress limited funding to the Nicaraguan *contra*,

the MISURA fighters within the FDN *contra* coalition felt the economic pinch much more severely than the Mestizo fighters.

### Internalized racism

Perhaps the most explosive psychological legacy of this history of dual domination is the neurosis of internalized racism on the part of the Amerindians at the bottom of the class/ethnic hierarchy. This helps to explain why so many Miskitu have been willingly mobilized into a virtually suicidal war, and why cruelty and wanton violence have been so prevalent. The Miskitu armed movement appeals to deeply ingrained sentiments of heartfelt injustice and humiliation rather than to a secular political ideology. Through the structures of MISURASATA/MISURA, the Miskitu rebel leadership offered their people, who had always been ridiculed and exploited by the surrounding non-Amerindian ethnic groups, an illusion of racial superiority. For example, Fagoth advocated the expulsion of the Mestizo population from the Mosquitia and the relegation of the Creoles to second class citizenship status.

Such radical, ethnic-nationalist revival movements, often combined with a messianic and millenarian mystique, are a phenomenon commonly observed among oppressed ethnic minorities throughout the world. Comparable examples of mass mobilization include the Caste Wars of the Maya in Mexico's Yucatan from 1847 through 1900, the Ghost Dance movement among North American Indians in the 1870s and 1890s, the numerous cargo cults of the Melanesian islands, and the Mamachi religion of the Guaymí Amerindians in Panama during the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> These movements unleash energies that have been distorted by decades or even centuries of oppression, injustice, and alienation.

The mobilization of thousands of armed Miskitu has indeed changed the position of Amerindians in the class/ethnic hierarchy of North Zelaya. Since the accentuation of the fighting, local Mestizo and Creole residents no longer dare to make derogatory remarks about the Miskitu as frequently as they used to in public. This is most clearly evidenced in the change in attitude towards the Miskitu language. Formerly it was referred to as a dialect and it was rarely spoken outside the Miskitu communities. Since 1983 the Miskitu language dominates in Puerto Cabezas. Partially this is the fruit of a deliberate Sandinista policy to foment respect for Amerindian culture.<sup>17</sup> Sadly, however, it has taken massive destruction and bloodshed to enforce a grudging, fearful respect for Miskitu culture by non-Amerindians in Zelaya. This dynamic is largely independent of political orientation. For example, the absolute number of Miskitu has increased since the beginning of the fighting since individuals who formerly 'passed' as Creoles or Mestizos no longer hide their Amerindian identity whether they are FSLN cadre or *contra* sympathizers. Even pro-Sandinista Miskitu hostile to the *contra* sometimes reveal a sense of pride at the determination and power of their brethren tragically mobilized into armed struggle against them.

### Revolutionary mobilization and the vicious cycle of war

By detailing the historical and anthropological roots of the dichotomy between the Pacific and Atlantic Coast populations in Nicaragua we have seen that the problems have existed well before the Sandinista Revolution; indeed, to a large extent the conflict transcends politics. Obviously, Mestizo Sandinistas did not invent racism in *Costeno* society. Nevertheless, these explosive tensions inherent in the social fabric were catalysed by the revolutionary process and then exacerbated by the war.

Ironically it was the Revolution itself which initially mobilized the Miskitu. The Sandinistas not only introduced a genuine democratic opening into Nicaraguan political and social life, but also an infectious sense of hope and omnipotence. During the first few months, the radio daily urged everyone, including the Miskitu, to organize, to be proud of being poor, and above all, to demand their just rights. This is articulated by Brooklyn Rivera, the head of MISURASATA, who publicly recognizes his debt to the Sandinistas:

Of course the Revolution made this whole movement possible. The fervour of the revolutionary triumph injected into the soul, heart and atmosphere that everybody could express themselves and participate. Before there was no incentive... we were just asleep.<sup>18</sup>

The factor which most obstructs reconciliation between the Sandinistas and alienated *costenos* is the war itself. The war disrupts more than just the economy; it distorts the political process, reducing the space for politically acceptable dialogue. It forces into the foreground military defence rather than flexibility and self-criticism. Hence, for example, the deterioration in the relations between the state and the Amerindian population due to the relocation of the 20,000 people inhabiting the Coco River. Although the government has allowed all these people to return to their communities, the damage is already done. Obviously, one does not have to be an 'ethnic minority' to resent displacement and the loss of one's house and livestock. Perhaps even more negative to the process of reconciliation are the civilian casualties which have occurred in the heat of the war.<sup>19</sup> Although the Sandinista leadership has for the most part recognized the Revolution's errors and heavy handedness on the Atlantic Coast<sup>20</sup>, a significant sector of the population has been alienated by negative personal experiences and they hesitate before trusting the new initiatives of the Sandinistas such as the regional autonomy programme. A dangerous situation of polarized mutual miscommunication has emerged.

For example, when the Sandinistas unconditionally released 307 Miskitu prisoners, many *costenos* did not consider this amnesty to be a sign of generosity or good faith since they did not think the prisoners should have been arrested in the first place. This gap in the interpretation of events extends to the violence of the *contra* itself. For example, when one of the factions of the Miskitu armed opposition broke the June 1985 ceasefire and burned the motor which provides drinkable water to the population of Puerto Cabezas, many local residents claimed that this unpopular act - the entire community was without water for over a week - had been performed by the Sandinistas in order to blame it on the *contra*. Similarly, the following month, when a Mestizo faction of the *contra* burned the only public transport boat connecting Bluefields with the rest of the nation, rumour had it that the attack had been performed by Sandinistas dressed as *contras*. More impressively, on several occasions, when I questioned Miskitu civilians - ostensibly not members of opposition organizations - about a recently committed rape and killing of a Miskitu nurse by MISURA fighters they responded, '...she was probably an informer for state security!'

Such a deep polarization can emerge only under war conditions. This takes us full circle to the core of the problem: US intervention. If MISURASATA and especially MISURA had not been provided with sophisticated military hardware, intensive military training and millions of dollars of spending money, there would never have been a protracted armed struggle. There

would have been serious conflicts between the ethnic minorities and the Sandinistas, and there may have been some bloodshed, but it would not have degenerated into a prolonged, bloody, fratricidal civil war; it probably could have been resolved through a tensely charged - but largely non-violent - process of dialogue, confrontation and compromise.

Minorities suffering from ethnic oppression feel their injustice deeply and have a tremendous potential for militant mobilization. The FSLN leadership was not aware of the complexity of the situation facing the Revolution on the Atlantic Coast. Few Sandinistas had ever been to the region; no systematic analysis of ethnic discrimination or the indigenous minority question existed. Tragically this was not the case for the United States. Indeed, the mobilization of ethnic minorities with historical grievances behind US government objectives has become a recurrent pattern of North American interventions throughout the Third World.<sup>21</sup>

The most spectacular example, of course, was the military mobilization of the Hmong in Indochina during the Vietnam War in the early 1970s. In the particular case of Nicaragua, the real fear of the CIA and the US State Department, therefore, is not that the Sandinistas might mistreat their ethnic minorities, but rather the opposite. The Sandinista effort, to dismantle the historical patterns of inter-ethnic domination and class exploitation on the Atlantic Coast, threatens to set a 'subversive' precedent for other multi-ethnic nations. By promoting armed struggle and ensuring the prolongation of an agonized blood-bath, therefore, the United States has been able to retard - if not prevent - the emergence of that liberating example.

1. The repeated periods of fieldwork upon which much of the information in this article is based were made possible by Galio Gurdian, the director of the Center for Investigation and Documentation of the Atlantic coast (CIDCA). Most recently he arranged for my visit to the Coco River following the ceasefire in July and August 1985 in order to prepare a diagnostic on the autonomy process and on the return of the Miskitu to their home communities. I would also like to thank all the coastal residents - too numerous to name individually - who helped me during my fieldwork in the Mosquitia. Dr. Edmundo Gordon, the CIDCA director in Bluefields, played a crucial role in the preparation of an outline for a series of articles I wrote several years ago on the same subject, 'Ethnic Minorities', in *Nicaragua, the First Five Years*, edited by Thomas W. Walker (New York: Praeger, 1985, pp.201-216); and 'Nicaragua's Ethnic Minorities in the Revolution' *Monthly Review* 36:8:22-44. Much of his original outline, and portions of his original analysis, are incorporated into this article. Dr. Marc Edelman provided useful comments on earlier drafts, and theoretical discussions on ethnicity with Dr. Eric Wolf were helpful as well.

The propaganda offensive of the Reagan administration alleging Sandinista massacres of the Miskitu began in the winter of 1982 with a series of extreme distortions. The Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, displayed a photograph of what he claimed were Miskitus' cadavers being burned by Sandinista troops. In fact, it was later revealed that the photograph had been taken three years earlier and depicted victims of Somoza's National Guard being incinerated by the Red Cross (*New York Times*, 3 March 1982; see also *Le Figaro Magazine*, February 23, 1982 and *Le Canard Enchaîné*, February 24, 1982). In the same vein, the United States ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, announced on US television (the McNeil Leherer show, February 14, 1982) that the Sandinistas were in the process of 'rounding up' 250,000 Miskitus into 'concentration camps'. That would have been more than double the world's known population of Miskitu. See *Human Rights in Nicaragua; Reagan, Rhetoric and Reality* (New York: Americas Watch 1985).

Despite these fantastic polemics, in the United States 80% of the population - according to a 1984 opinion poll - do not

know which side their government favours in the war in Nicaragua; nor can they distinguish between the political orientations of the guerrillas fighting in El Salvador and in Nicaragua. Most likely, an even smaller percentage would recognize who the Miskitu are.

2. The October 1985 version of *Barricada Internacional* No. 19, the international publication of the FSLN, provides a good example of recent developments in Sandinista policy towards the Atlantic Coast. For example, interviews with MISURA and MISURASATA leaders are published (see pp. 6,8). Nevertheless, the fragility of the ceasefire has been demonstrated by several violent confrontations: see, e.g., *New York Times* 25 Jan., 8 & 11 Feb. 1986

3. For the best historical account of the Miskitu see John Holm, 'The Creole English of Nicaragua's Miskito Coast: Its Socio-Linguistic History and a Comparative Study of its Lexicon and Syntax', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of London (1978).

4. The fierceness of the 17th century Miskitu raiding and slaving expeditions against their neighbours is testified to in the oral histories of the surviving indigenous peoples throughout the area of Miskitu expansion. The Bribri, Cabecar, Teribe and Guaymi peoples in Panama and Costa Rica, for example, have all retained elaborate tales of Miskitu wars. In fact, Guaymi parents scold misbehaving children with: 'the *Musiki* [Guaymi for Miskitu] will come and get you' (Author's fieldwork in Limon, Costa Rica and Bocas del Toro, Panama 1982-3). For an excellent bibliography covering both the historical and the contemporary period see the April-September, 1985 issue of *Encuentro* [Revista de la Universidad Centroamericana en Nicaragua], No 24-25, pp177-203. In that same issue there are worthwhile articles on the history of the Coast as well as on the contemporary period written by the staff (and collaborators) of CIDCA.

5. Robert White, *The Case of the Agent to the Settlers on the Coast of Yucatan; and the Late settlers on the Mosquito Shore...* (London: T.Cadwell, 1789), p45.

6. Troy Floyd *The Anglo-Spanish Struggle for the Mosquitia* (Albuquerque: U. of New Mexico P., 1947) p.67 citing Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, Vol 3 (London: 1774) p320.

In fact the Miskitu became so trusted by the British that on several occasions in the late 1600s and early 1700s they were brought to Jamaica to crush slave revolts (Richard Price, 'Introduccion', in *Sociedades Cimarronas, comunidades Esclavas Rebeldas en las Américas*, p19, edited by Richard Price (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1981. English version published by Johns Hopkins U. P. 1979) citing R.C. Dallas *The History of the Maroons* (London: T.N. Longman and O. Rees, 1803), Vol. 1, p38.

7. For a detailed scholarly analysis of the Miskitu kingship see Philipp Denis and Michael Olien, 'Kingship among the Miskito', *American Ethnologist* (1984), 11:4, pp718-737.

8. Tape recorded interview with Brooklyn Rivera, January 11, 1984, Pavas, Costa Rica.

9. Fagoth, for example, climaxed a speech in early 1981 with visions of a not too distant future when Mestizo Nicaraguans would have to show passports in order to enter Miskitu territory. See CIDCA, *Trabil Nani* (New York: Occ Paper of the Riverside Church Disarmament Program, 1984), p15.

10. The best summary of the dynamic of US economic penetration into the region is offered by the French Consul in Costa Rica in 1898: 'The Yankees...do not content themselves merely with stating or even writing that the interest of their nation is to absorb all the markets of America; they act at the same time as they speak and it is with money, special missions, pioneers and the threat of their cannons which they do not hesitate to use to knock down any closed doors.' Taken from *Ibid*, Nouvelle Série Tome 2, April 24, 1898, p62. (Courtesy of Dr. Wing-Ching).

11. Tani Marilena Adams, 'Life Giving Life Threatening: Gold Mining in Atlantic Nicaragua. Mine Work in Siuna and the Response to Nationalization by the Sandinista Regime', unpublished master's thesis, University of Chicago (1981), pp 69-71.

12. Creoles deprecatingly refer to Mestizos as 'Machete man', on the grounds that Mestizos not only earn their living by swinging a machete, but also swing that machete in drunken

brawls. Mestizos, in turn, claim that Blacks are cowards, afraid of the sight of blood.

13. For an examination of the historic role racism and ethnic group differentiation has played in a US corporate enclave on the Atlantic Coast of Central America see Philippe Bourgois, 'Ethnic Diversity on a Corporate Plantation: The United Fruit Company in Bocas del Toro, Panama and Talamanca, Costa Rica', Unpublished PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Stanford University, (1985). Published summaries in Spanish and English can be found in 'Racismo, Division y Violencia', *Dialogo Social* [Panama], Vol. XVII, No 164 (February, 1984), pp 18-25; and Working Group on Multinational Corporations in Central America, 'Racism and the Multinational Corporation: The Ethnicity of the Labor Force on a Subsidiary of the United Fruit Company in Limon, Costa Rica and Bocas del Toro, Panama', *Indigenous World/Mundo Indígena*, Vol. III, No2 (1984), pp 7-10.

14. Edmundo Gordon Gitt (CIDCA), 'La Labor del CIDCA y Aproximacion Teorica a la Problemática de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua', in *Memoria del Seminario Costa Atlántica de Centroamérica*, ed. Carmen Murrillo and David Smith (San José, Costa Rica: Confederacion Universitaria Centroamericana, 1983), p148 and 151.

15. Hugo Spadafora, 'Errores de Edén Pastora', *La Nacion Internacional*, (June 7-13, 1984): 11.

16. See Bernard Barber, 'Acculturation and Messianic Movements', in *Reader in Comparative Religion*, ed. William A. Lessa and Evan Z. Vogt (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1958), pp512-515; Nelson Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatan* (Stanford: Stanford U. P. 1964); Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968); and Philip Young, *Ngawbe: Tradition and Change Among the Western Guaymi of Panama* (Chicago: U. of Illinois P. 1971); see also Philippe Bourgois 'Guaymi Banana Workers on a United Fruit Company Plantation', Cambridge MA: Occasional Paper No 19 of Cultural Survival.

17. For example, CIDCA published in 1984 the first Spanish language grammar of Miskitu as well as a booklet of traditional Miskito stories. Sumu and Rama grammars are currently also being prepared.

18. Tape recorded interview with Brooklyn Rivera, January 11, 1984, Pavas, Costa Rica.

19. Already in early 1984, US-based independent human rights organizations noted progress in Sandinista/ Miskito relations: 'The most important improvement has taken place in relations with the Miskito Indians. We have previously said that human rights violations in Nicaragua most severely victimized the Miskito population. Accordingly, the Americas Watch is very pleased by the positive developments affecting them (Americas Watch, *Human Rights in Nicaragua*, (New York: Americas Watch, April 1984), p3)'. This was reiterated in subsequent reports: 'The Government's record of relations with the Miskitos has improved dramatically, including an amnesty, efforts at negotiations and the beginnings of repatriation, while the *contras*' treatment of Miskitos and other Indians has become increasingly more violent (Americas Watch, *...Reagan, Rhetoric, and Reality*, pp14-15).

For further documentation on human rights violations see, Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights of a Segment of the Nicaraguan Population of Miskito Origin*, (Washington D.C.: OAS, May 16, 1984); Americas Watch *Violations of the Rules of War by Both Sides in Nicaragua, 1981-1985* (New York: Americas Watch, March 1985). See also press reports on *contra* violations in *New York Times*, March 7, 1985, *Washington Post*, September 30, 1984, and Reed Brody, *Contra Terror in Nicaragua* (Boston: South End Press, 1985).

20. See for example the October 1985 issue of *Barricada Internacional*, vol 12.

21. Eric Wolf and Joseph Jorgensen, 'Anthropology on the Warpath in Thailand', *New York Review of Books*, (Vol XV, No9, December 17, 1970), pp26-35. For a good example of a study '...designed to be useful to military and other personnel...' see, Kensington Office of the American Institutes for Research, *Ethnographic Study Series: Minority Groups in North Vietnam* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, April 1972).