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# Mutual Integration Versus Forced Assimilation: The Conflict between Sandinistas and Miskitu Indians, 1979-1987

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# **Mutual Integration Versus Forced Assimilation:**

## **The Conflict between Sandinistas and Miskitu Indians, 1979-1987**

by

**Jordan Taylor Towne**

**An honors thesis submitted to the Honors Committee of**

**The University of Colorado at Boulder**

**Spring 2013**

**Abstract:** This study aims to i) disentangle the white man's overt tendency of denigrating indigenous agency to ethnic identity and, through the narrative of the Miskitu people of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, display that this frequent ethnic categorization oversimplifies a complex cultural identity; ii) bring to the fore the heterogeneity inherent to even the most seemingly unanimous ethnic groups; iii) illustrate the influence of contingent events in shaping the course of history; and iv) demonstrate that without individuals, history would be nonexistent—in other words, individuals matter. Through relaying the story of the Miskitu Indians in their violent resistance against the Revolutionary Sandinistas, I respond contrarily to some of the relevant literature's widely held assumptions regarding Miskitu homogeneity, aspirations, and identity. This is achieved through chronicling the period leading to war, the conflict itself, and the long return to peace and respectively analyzing the Miskitu reasons for collective resistance, their motives in supporting either side of the fragmented leadership, and their ultimate decision to lay down arms. It argues that ethnic identity played a minimal role in escalating the Miskitu resistance, that the broader movement did not always align ideologically with its representative bodies throughout, and that the Miskitu proved more heterogeneous as a group than typically accredited. Accordingly, specific, and often contingent events provided all the necessary ideological premises for the Miskitu call to arms by threatening their culture and autonomy—the indispensable facets of their willingness to comply with the central government—thus prompting a non-revolutionary grassroots movement which aimed at assuring the ability to join the revolution on their own terms. Before the law, the Miskitu would no longer wait for their admittance, so fight they did.

## **Dedicatum**

This essay is dedicated to Dr. Francisco Barbosa and Dr. Fred Anderson: the most dynamic, passionate, and inspiring *old heads of the past* under whom I've thus far had the privilege to study.

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## Preface

I originally intended to write on the Cuban Revolution. However, I grew embittered to the revolution because I desired to study one that I perceived to be “just.” After watching *¡No Pasaran!*, a documentary of the Nicaraguan Revolution, in Dr. Barbosa’s class, I discovered my new outlet. Dr. Barbosa convinced me that the just revolution occurred in my Uncle Sam’s backyard. The Nicaraguans resurrected Sandino, and achieved increasingly massive popular support in the two decades of their lengthy war against Somoza, championing the humble desires of the peasants and proletariat to create a nation that served, rather than oppressed, the majority of its inhabitants. They held fair elections to demonstrate legitimacy, and respectfully handed power over to UNO after losing the election of 1990. The \$1.6 billion debt left by Somoza, the impoverished conditions characterized by the lowest literacy rate and the worst quality of life in the hemisphere proved no match to the determination of the masses to simply make things better. In no other social revolution was democracy so fervently adhered to. The new constitution ratified in 1987 stands beside the U.S. and Mexican constitutions as the most celebrated in the world.

I read a particularly wonderful essay by CU alum, Brian DeLay entitled *Independent Indians and the U.S.-Mexican War*, and soon after stumbled upon the story of the Miskitu Indians from a copy of *State, Class, and Ethnicity* by Carlos Vilas, in attempting to find a suitable research topic that specified beyond the Nicaraguan Revolution. Dr. Anderson always advised his aspiring historians to appreciate the agency of Indians in shaping the United States, a consideration becoming increasingly prominent in the field of social history. Dr. Anderson served as an advisor for DeLay, whose resulting essay effectively

portrayed the influential and distinct roles of the Comanches, Kiowas, Navajos, and Apaches during the U.S.-Mexican War, and evinced the existing literature's blunt minimization of the Indians as non-agent proxies of the U.S. government. Rarely, if ever, had Indian agency in the U.S.-Mexican war even been speculated, much less acknowledged.

With DeLay's essay as my analog, I became versed in the Miskitu narrative, and wondered why they would ever choose to take up arms against the admirable Nicaraguan vanguard, especially when the prospect of their unity appeared so profoundly beneficial. I found the Miskitus' resistance to be a refreshing and inspiring success, and an exception to the typical indigenous story that too often ends in extinction or severe marginalization. I struggled to form a tenable argument, and often found myself toiling in agreement with the contradictory views posited by the relevant scholars. Come the end of the semester, as I turned in my prospectus, I overtly sympathized with the Sandinistas, and regarded the premises grounding Miskitu resistance as ignorant, contradictory, and ultimately backwards. I subsumed Miskitu consciousness entirely under the veil of ethnic chauvinism and found the U.S. government at fault.

Then, I revisited Reynaldo Reyes's autobiography, *The Unknown War* by Bernard Nietschmann, and *Resistance and Contradiction* by Charles R. Hale Jr. In my preliminary sketches over the next few months, I became convinced of the legitimacy of the Miskitu cause and sought solace in defending their insightful political ambitions, which I now consider as anything but backwards. But what truly rooted their call to arms? No longer could I reconcile categorizing Miskitu political, national, and cultural identity as ethnically motivated. None of the Miskitu themselves from the primary sources I used

ever contended their resistance to the central government as a defense of their ethnicity. In fact, they scoffed at such a notion. When asked about their national identity, many claimed to be Nicaraguan and rarely ever mentioned “Miskitu” unless the question forced such a response. How could their struggle be based on ethnicity when they lived peacefully amongst other indigenous and non-indigenous groups, including the Sumu, the Rama, the Creoles, and Mestizos? Perhaps more importantly, how could the distinct culture of the melting pot that is the Atlantic Coast be conflated to ethnicity? As Nietschmann points out, nobody considers the Palestinians in Israel an ethnic minority. Furthermore, the mestizos of the west are ethnically just as indigenous as the Miskitu, differing only in their miscegenation with people of lighter skin.

Somehow, *The Trial* by Franz Kafka imbued me with the sense that the Miskitu merely desired their admittance under the law guarded by the FSLN cadres. The Miskitu over and over again considered themselves as Nicaraguan, but felt like outsiders in their own nation as the Sandinista government, whose Marxist framework lent poorly to adequate considerations of ethnicity, imposed an “us and them” dichotomy upon a people who largely embraced the revolutionary programme. As Kafka metaphorically reveals the plight of the German-speaking, Czech Jews of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, able neither to escape nor embrace their “Jewishness” under the law bureaucratically administered from afar, the Miskitu were similarly caught in the labyrinthine struggle of simultaneously defending their distinct culture and integrating into a united Nicaraguan nation. They could not escape being treated as an ethnic group by a government that perceived them as a unanimous entity void of ideological differences, when in fact, the

Miskitu proved every bit as ideologically heterogeneous as the citizens of the United States today.

In reconciling these considerations, I finally came to embrace the opinion that I defend in this paper—that the commentators on the subject inadequately analyze the conflict by adopting the same perspective as the Sandinistas in their initial categorizations of the Miskitu, a viewpoint that failed miserably and compelled the Miskitu to take up arms. The scholars correctly convey the important events in the wax and wane of the conflict but too often contradict themselves in assuming that the Miskitu constituted a homogenous force at the community level whose members aligned ideologically with their fragmented representative bodies. This oversimplification of the Miskitu does not sufficiently address the complexity of the localized agency that proved quite influential in beginning, continuing, and ending the war. I furthermore found it suitable to emphasize the implications of unforeseen consequences in escalating the violent struggle. For example, the first shot fired in the war was accidental, and led to a massive grassroots organization of “betrayed” Miskitu, the size and force of which astonished the Sandinista cadres, who theretofore rejected such mobilization as existing even *in potentia*.

The canon conveys painfully deterministic rhetoric in relaying the narrative by overemphasizing factors several generations removed from the young men who fought and died for rights the Miskitu had only recently articulated. For a year and a half I’ve grappled with these considerations, and somewhat reluctantly fashioned a view that finds itself at odds with the authorities of the subject. How could I feasibly contribute to the literature while never having set foot in Nicaragua, like so many of the scholars did, and how could I be so audacious to challenge the few tenets agreed upon throughout the

contentious literature? Most importantly, how could I, a young and idealistic WASP, construct an argument that convincingly conveys the ideology of an indigenous group more accurately than my predecessors? For answers to such questions, maybe you should ask Ward Churchill, as I can only respond speculatively. But if nothing else, if this essay at least more properly addresses Miskitu agency and evinces that they are every bit as complex and capable—indeed, as human—as any other group of people, including we white researchers choosing to comment from afar, my primary goals will not have gone in vain.

# Map of Nicaragua



## Introduction

Having gone several days without food, Rafaga and his boys marched diligently on towards Francia Sirpe, to prepare for what they collectively perceived as the most critical mission of the war. Suddenly, Rafaga spotted the peak of a mysterious mountain in the distance and suspected it to be the physical manifestation of an ancient Miskitu<sup>1</sup> legend. He instructed his boys to amend course and head towards the mountain, prolonging their journey in order to ascertain the truth of his suspicion. Weary, worn, and hungry the boys reluctantly heeded Rafaga's call. As the soldiers had difficulty imagining what purpose lay behind their leader's seemingly delusional thoughts, they trudged onwards for more than a day, finding nourishment in the fertile hills of the mountain's base, when Rafaga found a cave – "Come boys, I have found it! Come! Let's go see for ourselves this legend."<sup>2</sup> By this point, the boys plainly refused. No reason could motivate Rafaga to act in such a bizarre way, they thought. The boys perched hastily near the foot of the mountain while Rafaga ventured into the small opening before him.

Once in the cave, Rafaga succumbed to strange and unfamiliar sensations, which he later described as a spiritual epiphany.

Up until that time on the road to Francia Sirpe when I first saw Muku from afar, my soul had only been heated by the many battles I had witnessed. I believed God knew what lay ahead in my journey and that He also knew that I, like a brittle

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<sup>1</sup> Miskitu are also referred to as Miskito, Mosquito, etc. Miskitu also encompasses the plural while researchers also commonly use Miskitos.

<sup>2</sup> Reynaldo Reyes and J.K. Wilson, *Rafaga: The Life Story of a Nicaraguan Miskito Comandante* (Norman, OK. and London, England: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 111. From this autobiographical account of the war by Reynaldo Reyes, I am simply retelling some of his most interesting life-stories, which, in a way, symbolizes the greater Miskitu narrative.

piece of iron that had only been hammered and heated, now needed to be tempered by His cooling spirit inside Muku Hill. This would make the leader in me more malleable and the soul inside of me more sensitive to great demands and capable of extension. By that process of annealing, I became the comandante who was equal to the task required by Alpha Uno.<sup>3</sup>

This overwhelming experience profoundly altered his perspective of those he had been fighting against, and even of his superiors. His actions following the visit to the cave in Mount Muku are renowned to the inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast, as he helped organize the first direct peace talks between the Miskitu and the Sandinista government independent of United States influence.

Such is one of the many accounts of Reynaldo Reyes, better known by his war name, Rafaga—an ordinary Miskitu by birth, turned inspiration and unabated war hero to his boys. This tale is aimed to parallel the experience of the Miskitu Indians from 1979 to 1987 as they struggled for autonomy and self-determination in the midst of the Nicaraguan Revolution. Rafaga's story of altering allegiances through the process of fighting for his people's rights is characteristic of many Miskitu and reveals the grassroots nature of their resistance, their shifting collective consciousness, and the existence of inter-ethnic division. But before the remaining details are revealed, it is imperative to provide context.

Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America and shares its borders with Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the south. The Maribios, a steep mountain range, divide the nation into eastern and western halves, distinguishing the respective cultures as

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<sup>3</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 118.

much as the climates. While the predominantly Mestizo (mixed-race) Pacific Coast region is more urban and modernized, comprising about 90 percent of Nicaragua's three-million inhabitants, the tropical Atlantic Coast, particularly abundant in natural resources, is more rural and underdeveloped, largely suffering the brunt of exploitation by foreign companies.<sup>4</sup> This region is home to several ethnic minorities, including the Miskitu, Creole, Sumu, Garifuna, and Rama peoples. The 1894 *Reincorporacion* of Nicaragua subsumed the Atlantic coast region within its boundaries, creating a nation with two distinct histories of colonization<sup>5</sup> that contributed to deep-seeded animosities, as the Spanish conquered the West and the British indirectly colonized the Atlantic Coast.

Since the *Reincorporacion* increasing numbers of Mestizos settled further East, and by 1980, comprised about two-thirds of the region's population of 270,000. The Miskitu are the largest indigenous group of the Atlantic Coast numbering about 70,000, followed by nearly 30,000 Creoles, and around 7,000 Sumu, Rama, and Garifuna peoples. The Atlantic Coast region encompasses about 60 percent of the land area of Nicaragua.<sup>6</sup>

Repressive authoritarian rule dominated the state in its first century as an independent nation. This is closely linked with the influence of economic intervention by foreign superpowers. The U.S. government began engaging in economic relations with Nicaragua around the turn of the twentieth century, while companies came in to extract lumber, gold, rubber, and bananas. This blatant exploitation of Nicaragua's resources and people sparked enmities about neocolonial exploitation, which fomented over time. Following a

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<sup>4</sup> Carlos M. Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua: Capitalist Modernization and Revolutionary Change on the Atlantic Coast*, trans. Susan Norwood (Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1989), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 7.

nearly successful resistance movement led by General Augusto Cesar Sandino in the early 1930s, the U.S. government formed a tight alliance with the Nicaraguan National Guard and placed its head, Anastasio Somoza, in charge of the nation in order to safeguard economic interests. Somoza and his sons, Luis and Augusto, served as despots from 1937 until the Sandinista takeover.

In 1979, after several years of struggle, leftist guerillas known as the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) overthrew the U.S.-backed dictator Anastasio Somoza. Even though the leaders of the FSLN identified as Marxist, they accepted help from anybody who shared a hatred for Somoza. People of all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, men and women, old and young alike, fought against all odds with the aim of creating a just society that served, rather than oppressed, the masses of Nicaragua, and to finally liberate their land of the imperial subjugation by the United States government. The vast majority of Nicaraguans supported the Sandinista takeover, affectionately referring to the ousting of Somoza on July 19 as “the Triumph.”

In general, the indigenous groups of the Atlantic Coast observed Nicaragua’s revolution with indifference. Though certainly repressed and subject to the economic exploitation of the Somoza dynasty, the Miskitu were governed by their own kings and faced little direct interference from the central government, and thus proved able to continue embracing their ancient culture. This lack of interaction with the Pacific Coast led to minimal indigenous support for the Revolution, despite their nearly unanimous resentment for Somoza.<sup>7</sup> Though Sandinista-Miskitu relations initially proved promising, the Miskitu began a powerful resistance movement, forcing the Sandinistas to confront

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<sup>7</sup> Charles R. Hale Jr., *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State* (Stanford, CA., Stanford University Press, 1994), 13.

another formidable opponent aside from the U.S.-backed Contras in their attempt to maintain sovereignty. Heavy conflict ensued until the FSLN cadres reoriented their ideological stance concerning ethnic groups in late 1984, where after the two sides engaged in negotiations until the conflict officially ended in 1987.

Soon after the Triumph, the Sandinista government replaced ALRPOMISU (Alliance for the Progress of the Miskitu and Sumu), the indigenous rights organization of the Atlantic Coast, with MISURASATA (Miskitu, Sumu, Rama, Sandinista All Together). Led by the young and Managua-educated Miskitu, Steadman Fagoth, Brooklyn Rivera, and Hazel Lau, MISURASATA began negotiations with the central government regarding the appropriate *modus operandi* for integrating the impoverished Atlantic Coast into the Revolutionary programme. Among other notable reforms, the Sandinista government, in collaboration with MISURASATA, administered immensely effective and popular health and literacy campaigns throughout the Atlantic Coast. However, disagreement between the Sandinista government and MISURASATA over land rights sullied relations and roused the Sandinistas' suspicions of MISURASATA's ties to the U.S. government.

The thaw of the Cold War did not diminish the U.S. government's anti-Communist sentiments, which proved especially prominent under the Reagan administration. The Cuban Revolution marked a formidable increase in U.S. involvement throughout Latin America. Having long since considered the resources of Nicaragua as a valuable economic interest, it is clear that some members of the U.S. government planned on ousting the Sandinistas from the day they secured authority. Accordingly, the U.S. government sought alliance with MISURASATA, supplied nearly all arms used by the

Miskitu, and poured millions of dollars towards assuring the demise of the Sandinista vanguard. The nature of U.S. government intervention and its overall influence on the Miskitu resistance has been subject to interpretation.

It is perplexing that such a poor and marginalized ethnic group as the Miskitu chose to rise against the Sandinistas, who so resolutely advocated the ascent of the underprivileged. In this paper, I will examine the factors contributing to the wax and wane of the Sandinista-Miskitu conflict, paying particular attention to the evolution of their respective perceived identities, and the extent to which U.S. government intervention exacerbated their ideological differences. Furthermore, I will analyze the roles played by MISURASATA and other indigenous organizations representing the Miskitu in their interactions with the Sandinista and U.S. governments, and the degree to which the ideologies of such organizations' leadership actually embodied the general Miskitu perspective.

Scholars have tended towards inconsistent responses on the subject through advancing emphatically pro-Sandinista, anti-Sandinista, or ethnic-based lenses, largely undermining Miskitu agency by strictly reducing Miskitu collective action to by-products of the motives of intervening governments or to Miskitu perceived ethnic identity. Such responses perhaps reveal that the Cold War fostered an inherent capitalist versus communist dichotomy that has since permeated the literature, and furthermore, that many scholars still mistreat the agency of indigenous groups by stressing indigenous collective ethnic identity as the fundamental basis of their actions. Though political and ethnic motivations certainly played a role in escalating the Sandinista-Miskitu conflict, they do not alone suffice for explanation. Rather, it appears as though the combination of several

factors impelled the advent of a grassroots movement whose members felt obligated to take up arms.

The increasingly radical demands made by MISURASATA in their negotiations with the Sandinista government until 1981 led to the government's disdain for the leadership of MISURASATA.<sup>8</sup> In February 1981, the Sandinista government ordered the arrest and imprisonment of 42 members of MISURASATA, and in the process met confrontation with Miskitu at a Moravian church in Prinzapolka, leaving eight dead. This event sparked general Miskitu distrust for the Sandinista government, which intensified following Fagoth's flight to Honduras with 2,000 Miskitu upon his release from prison. Just north of the border, Fagoth, the CIA, ex-Somocistas, and the Honduran National Guard coordinated a war funded by the U.S. government with the intent of overthrowing the Nicaraguan revolutionary vanguard.

While MISURASATA, and in particular, Steadman Fagoth, provoked the Sandinista government, largely under the auspices of the U.S. government, specific reactions by Sandinistas imbued the Miskitu with the general perception that their autonomy had been threatened and betrayed. Such sentiments resulted in the general Miskitu perception that Sandinista interaction in the Atlantic Coast constituted a project of forced assimilation, distinct from their desire for a process of mutual integration. This desire simply stipulated their entrance into the revolutionary program on their own terms primarily through respecting their land and its resources and cultural preservation. As a result, many Miskitu found it obligatory to fight in order to defend and legitimize their autonomy. Those in support of the resistance did not always agree with the representative indigenous

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<sup>8</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 62.

organizations, some simply desired peace, and others knew relatively little about the reasons for fighting in general.

The dominant interpretations on this subject attribute the source of conflict as a nearly unanimous expression of ethnic militancy, largely fomented by underlying historical sentiments and unanimous contempt for the revolutionary government. This has led to a significant underestimation of the actual events leading to resistance, regarded as trivialities of an imminent conflict. On the contrary, in this paper, I contend that ethnic identity played a minimal role in escalating the Miskitu resistance, that the broader movement did not always align ideologically with its representative bodies throughout, and that the Miskitu proved more heterogeneous as a group than typically accredited. Accordingly, specific events provided all the necessary ideological premises for the Miskitu call to arms by threatening their culture and autonomy—the indispensable facets of their willingness to comply with the central government—thus prompting a non-revolutionary grassroots movement which aimed at assuring the ability to join the revolution on their own terms. I argue that the collective Miskitu conceptions of national, cultural, and political identity were not veiled by ethnocentrism, as the scholarship tends to suggest.

Correspondingly, this interpretation calls into question the relevant literature's general emphases on Miskitu homogeneity, alignment with its representative bodies, and perceived ethnic-identity as prominent features of the conflict, and adds oft overlooked evaluations of the dramatic roles played by individuals and contingent events in shaping the course of the narrative. Perhaps such considerations can contribute to a more adequate understanding of the interrelations of a peoples' class, ethnic identity, and political

consciousness in determining their actions, the extent to which a fighting force may be considered representative of the people in whose name it fights, and the power of the U.S. government in influencing the fate of those with whom it interacts.

Rafaga spent several hours in the cave of Mount Muku contemplating the ancient etchings in the rock and remnants of the people who once occupied the space. “As I stood in the big room where the chairs and altar were, I began to see in my mind’s eye and to feel in my spirit that the ancient Indians had used the place for ritual worship.”<sup>9</sup> His acceptance of the reality of the Miskitu legend, which must have survived countless generations, fostered a more resilient spirituality and increased faith in the old heads of the Atlantic Coast. Though Rafaga believed the Miskitu should continue fighting for their rights, he could no longer reconcile the internal disputes amongst his own people as a justification for violence between Miskitu, making him apprehensive of his commander, Steadman Fagoth. Nevertheless, Rafaga expressed enthusiasm to get to Francia Sirpe and begin Alpha Uno.

Back on the mountainside, Rafaga found his boys impatiently awaiting his return. They had wasted more than two days for their leader’s peculiar interest in what they thought was surely an ordinary mountain. Though certainly frustrated, they showed no antipathy towards their beloved Comandante, only excitement to re-embark to Francia Sirpe and begin their critical mission. Alas, Rafaga soon proved the boys’ relentless trust in him well warranted.

Rafaga and his 160 soldiers set off from Francia Sirpe for Honduras deep in the night of December 18, 1983 with three thousand Indians as company—Finally, Alpha Uno had

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<sup>9</sup> Reyes, *Rafaga*, 111.

begun. The CIA and Steadman Fagoth devised the mission, hoping that its magnitude would stimulate international sympathy for the Miskitu cause and garner additional aid.

It was an incredibly great sight to see those three thousand Indians—men young and old, women and young girls, little children of all sizes, and babies in their mothers' arms—walking together with dignity and honor, proclaiming to all the world that we Miskito Indians did not want any more punishment from the Sandinista government, that we wanted our rights to be given back to us.<sup>10</sup>

His accountability for the direct impact on the lives of thousands of Indians for whom he had been fighting filled Rafaga with tremendous pride. Though the four-day journey proved every bit as perilous as he had anticipated, Rafaga stopped at nothing to assure that all in his charge traversed the border to the land where he was promised they would find prosperity. On December 21, the three thousand former Francia Sirpe inhabitants reached the protective Rio Coco, and upon crossing, became political refugees.

However, dissatisfaction overcame Rafaga upon witnessing the conditions of the refugee camps, which Fagoth had promised would provide a better quality of life. Fagoth expressed the desire for Rafaga to carry out an Alpha Dos, and imprisoned Rafaga after his refusal. Rafaga's realization that life north of the Rio Coco was actually worse than in Nicaragua made him regret undertaking Alpha Uno and making false promises to his Indian brothers. He now knew that Fagoth cared not for the Miskitu, but for power.<sup>11</sup> His disappointment upon arriving in Honduras mirrored the disappointment he and many other Miskitu felt upon their realization about the Sandinista shortcomings. In both instances many Miskitu felt betrayed and never fully forgave the culprit. Alpha Uno

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<sup>10</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 122.

<sup>11</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 128.

imbued Rafaga with great hope that the Sandinistas would begin actualizing Miskitu autonomy, only to discover that MISURASATA was just a proxy of the CIA. He then began working towards achieving peace.

The remainder of this essay is divided into the following sections: *History of the Atlantic Coast*, in which I briefly explain the demography of the Atlantic Coast and its history since the European incursion of the Western Hemisphere, primarily focusing on the Miskitu since the *Reincorporacion* of 1894 until the end of their resistance of the Sandinistas in 1987; *Historiography*, in which I provide analyses of the prominent secondary literature pertaining to the subject, and address the leading points of contention; *Primary Source Evaluation*, wherein I assess the legitimacy of the primary sources used for research and offer a succinct description of how they pertain to my overarching claim.

Next, I present the body of my argument, in which I defend my claim in a three-part chronological narrative. *Part I: Blood in the Church* elucidates Sandinista-Miskitu relations until the incident at Prinzapolka in February 1981, including reasons for their perceptions of betrayal and the contributions of possible underlying historical factors to the haste with which mutual resentment intensified. *Part II: Big Heads and Big Lies* focuses on MISURASATA between the emergence of war and the Sandinista government's ideological reorientation of 1984. I speculate about the levels of Miskitu support for the war and their general perceptions of the Sandinistas while tracing the clandestine operations of the U.S. government and the Miskitu recognizance of its economically based ulterior motives. *Returning Home with Written Rights* chronicles the resumption of dialogue between the Sandinistas and Miskitu in 1984, including analyses

of the various indigenous rights organizations in their attempts to match the influence of the original MISURASATA, until the ratification of the Nicaraguan Constitution in 1987. Correspondingly, I consider the terms under which the Miskitu laid down arms, while indicating their potentially significant relations to the causes for resistance, and whether or not the war ultimately enhanced Miskitu autonomy.

In the *Conclusion*, I link the central tenets of each section of my argument stressing the influence of contingencies and individuals in shaping the Miskitu narrative. I then consider limitations to my argument and the areas in need of further study. Finally, I point to the larger significance of understanding the Sandinista-Miskitu conflict, and make suggestions for further research.

## **History of the Atlantic Coast:**

The Miskitu are the largest of various ethnic minorities sparsely populating the Atlantic Coast of Central America, from Honduras to Costa Rica. The vast majority of the Miskitu reside in Nicaragua along the Rio Coco River, from Cape Gracias a Dios in the North to Pearl Lagoon in the South. Since time immemorial, the Miskitu have successfully resisted hegemonic dominion from Spanish-speaking colonizers, and along the way, formed strategic alliances with English-speaking Imperial forces.

By the seventeenth century, English colonizers settling from Jamaica landed ashore the Atlantic Coast with African slaves. Economic relations ensued, while the Miskitu traded resources such as lumber and pine oil for various commodities of the international market. The introduction of African-descendants led to miscegenation, and the two groups effectively dominated the land at the expense of dwindling populations of Sumu, Rama, and Garifuna peoples. The English used a method of indirect colonization over the coast, and allowed the Miskitu and Creoles to choose their kings and maintain their traditional culture and way of life. “The Miskitos, and later on the Creoles, assumed themselves to be subjects of the British, opposed to any attempt to unite with the Spanish colony in the Pacific and, after independence, with Nicaragua.”<sup>12</sup> The Miskitu willingly allowed British colonization, and contrary to the Spanish method of direct colonization, this alliance with the English enabled the Miskitu to continue embracing their ancient culture.

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<sup>12</sup> Charles R. Hale Jr. and Edmund T. Gordon, “Costeno Demography: Historical and Contemporary Demography of Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast” in *Ethnic Groups and the Nation State: The Case of the Atlantic Coast in Nicaragua*. (Stockholm, Sweden: CIDCA, 1987), 12-32.

In 1848, two Moravian missionaries arrived in Puerto Cabezas after having little success in finding converts in Jamaica. Moravianism proved well accepted by the Miskitu, and the Moravian church soon became the most powerful institution of the region. In the course of less than two generations, the Moravian Church became the main form of expression of the ethnic identity of the Coast's people, both Indians and Creoles."<sup>13</sup> The church prioritized education and increased literacy rates throughout the Coast, teaching in English and the native tongues. Furthermore, the Moravian Church adopted a staunch anti-Nicaraguan stance, more than likely in response to the nation's catholic bent. Thus, the Missionaries supported Miskitu autonomy largely out of fear of interference by the Nicaraguan government. The Miskitu, as a result, developed stronger animosities towards the Pacific Coast and a sense of national identity, which identified as British more than Nicaraguan.<sup>14</sup> This re-emphasized and strengthened the Miskitos' desire to remain separate from the Nicaraguan central government.

By the 1860s, the United State government developed an interest in the Atlantic Coast due to its abundant natural resources, and began attempting to replace British influence over the area. After successfully waning British economic ties with the Miskitu, the British, Spanish, and American governments officially declared the Atlantic Coast the legal entity of the Miskitu in 1862, and named the region the Mosquito Reserve. The British government felt that by granting the Miskitu legal autonomy, the two could continue their economic ties in the face of U.S. Intervention.

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<sup>13</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> All of the relevant sources comment on this, but Hale's opinion most succinctly describes the general contention amongst the literature. For example, he states they displayed a preference for Anglo-hegemony over a Spanish one. Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 56.

The Spanish, British, and U.S. Governments continued jockeying for control over the region until 1894, when Juan Zelaya, the head of the Nicaraguan government, “by means of a small military operation... occupied the city and port of Bluefield, removed the authorities of the Mosquito Reserve, declared the sovereignty of Nicaragua over the region, and raised the Nicaraguan flag.”<sup>15</sup> British involvement with the region abruptly ceased. Without British support, the Miskitu lacked the means to prevent nominal annexation, but they unanimously reprehended it. Less than a month after the *Reincorporacion*, hundreds of Miskitu gathered in Puerto Cabezas and wrote a letter to Queen Elizabeth expressing their disapproval of the “Spaniard's” encroachment, declared their support for the British Crown, and pleaded for assistance in recognizing Miskitu autonomy. No response came and the Mosquitia Reserve remained officially subsumed under the nation of Nicaragua.

The introduction of North American enclave economies drastically shifted the socioeconomic structure of the Atlantic Coast, and over the next half-century, created an ethnic based hierarchy wherein the Miskitu lay subservient to the Creoles and Mestizos. Foreign companies instituted a period of wage-labor, which forced the largely uneducated and unskilled Miskitu into physically demanding occupations, such as work at the mines. Furthermore, the Creoles came to dominate church authority while the increasing numbers of Mestizos took the skilled labor positions. The Miskitu were not alone in suffering the brunt of neocolonialist exploitation, and stood similarly to the vast majority of Nicaraguans to the west, with the addition of ethnic undertones.

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<sup>15</sup> Vilas, *State Class and Ethnicity*, 12.

A popular rebellion led by General Augusto Cesar Sandino and his rag-tag assembly of guerrillas known as the “mean little army,” who sought to put an end to the unjust oppression suffered by the masses for Yankee benefit defined the 1920s and 1930s. Fearing the potential strength of this rebellion, the central government called the United States Marine Force in for help. Sandino's execution in 1934 temporarily marked the end of his movement, but widespread unrest thereafter permeated the social consciousness. After quelling the notable resistance, the Marines crowned the head of the Nicaraguan National Guard, Anastasio Somoza-Debayle sovereign. Miskitu support for Sandino's Rebellion mirrored their ambivalence in the Revolution to come. So long as interactions with the west remained minimal, the Miskitu were content. Furthermore, the Miskitu tended to sympathize with the U.S., and largely supported their motives over those of the central government.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond sharing English as a vernacular, U.S. Economic intervention utilized the same *modus operandi* of indirect rule as the British, and provided much appreciated commodities to the Coast integrating them into the international market. Furthermore, most of the Moravian Missionaries were American and steadfastly evangelized Miskitu autonomy as achievable only through avoiding inclusion with the West. Somoza and the U.S. profited enormously through collaboratively exploiting Mosquitia land and labor. The Miskitu largely met the indirect method implemented by the U.S. And Nicaraguan governments with compliance, and the region soon experienced a powerful period of economic boom.

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<sup>16</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 100.

Overexploitation led to a severe recession on the Coast in the 1960s. The poor economic conditions and advent of international organizations concerned with indigenous rights led to the creation of ALPROMISU as a representative body for indigenous groups of the Atlantic Coast. The leaders of ALPROMISU were primarily Miskitu pastors and aimed to legitimize Costeno determination over their region and curb developmental progress.<sup>17</sup> Somoza permitted ALPROMISU's organization but provided no legal power. However, ALPROMISU and the Moravian Church collaborated to improve Costeno education—a process through which the Miskitu learned of their inalienable rights and long history of “Spanish” resistance. This intensified Miskitu perceptions of ethnic-identity. The Somoza Regime used the Nicaraguan National Guard to keep a close eye on ALPROMISU. Fear of denouncing Somoza fostered ALPROMISU's ambivalent support of him and the FSLN's popularizing revolution.

Though some Miskitu headed west to support the Sandinista cause, the lack of guerrilla forces throughout the Coast distanced the Miskitu from the Revolution. The Triumph of 1979 amounted to minimal Miskitu celebration. They assumed the new government would be no different from its predecessor. However, Somoza's ousting hastily altered daily life in the Mosquitia by causing an immediate exodus of the foreign companies. The FSLN's economic expropriations proved less successful throughout the Coast as a result of its deep and longstanding underdevelopment. This left many on the Coast jobless, without access to the American commodities they depended upon, and

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<sup>17</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 87.

nostalgic for the economic conditions in the presence of foreign capital.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the Sandinista government continued dissolving all the “Somocista” institutions, including ALPROMISU. Upon strong Miskitu insistence for its replacement, the government reluctantly allowed the creation of MISURASATA, so long as its leadership consisted of Managua-educated Miskitu.<sup>19</sup>

Following MISURASATA's inception, it collaborated with the central government and quickly enacted widely popular and effective health and literacy campaigns and reorganized the economy. Crippling economic sanctions administered by the U.S. Government on the socialist state impeded its ability to realize economic progress on the Coast, leaving it largely underdeveloped to this day. The fair negotiations between the FSLN and MISURASATA and variety of improvements of the Coast legitimized Miskitu conceptions of regional autonomy<sup>20</sup>, which intensified over the first two years of their interactions with the central government.

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<sup>18</sup> This is an argument largely embraced by Vilas and Hale, but described succinctly in Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 100-102, wherein he posits definitions for “Anglo-affinities” and “ethnic-militancy.”

<sup>19</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 96.

<sup>20</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 97.

## **Historiography**

In this section, I group the relevant literature into three broad categories based on perceived similarities in the arguments about the reasons for the Sandinista-Miskitu conflict. As I pointed out in the introduction, objective interpretations of the conflict are few and far between, a fact which appears closely linked to the capitalist versus communist dichotomy instilled by the Cold War. The three groups are referred to as pro-Sandinista, anti-Sandinista, and ethnicity-based. While each group has contributed meaningfully to the literature, the interpretations advanced by the pro-Sandinista and ethnicity-based camps tend to garner more acclaim and popularity in the canon than the anti-Sandinista stance. While a tenable anti-Sandinista interpretation seems possible, its advocates to date have articulated positions based far more on personal opinion than the historical events, though such sentiments arguably coalesce more succinctly with Miskitu feelings. These groups are not entirely exclusive and some overlap is apparent between the pro and anti-Sandinista camps with the ethnicity-based interpretations. Some contemporary publications have adopted more objective interpretations, albeit through far more specified scopes.

The pro-Sandinista approach is characterized by stressing MISURASATA ethnic chauvinism and susceptibility to U.S. government manipulation as the primary causes contributing to the outbreak of war. Furthermore, this stance emphasizes U.S., Contra, and MISURASATA human rights abuses against the Miskitu to force them to fight and defends the Sandinista vanguard's responses to the 'Indian Question' as just and remarkably progressive in relation to other nation's attempts at dealing with indigenous

minorities.<sup>21</sup> The pro-Sandinistas tend to regard the Miskitu as a ‘sleeping giant’ yet without the ability to undergo revolutionary transformation due to their backward consciousness and underdeveloped, over-exploited land.<sup>22</sup> The most notable advocates of this position include Carlos Vilas and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz.

Bernard Nietschmann and William Meara represent the anti-Sandinista group. Their interpretations affiliate most notably through holding that the Miskitu constitute their own nation, one separate from and far older than the neo-colonial state to the west. They commonly stress Sandinista interactions with the Coast as an illegal and unanimously resented incursion, aimed at annexing the independent nation for economic interests. This stance is fused with powerful anti-communist rhetoric and treats U.S. intervention as a valiant liberation of the marginalized, while dismissing the Sandinistas as assimilationist, if not genocidal miscreants, inherently evil by nature of their political ideology.<sup>23</sup>

Nietschmann and Meara cite alleged Sandinista human rights abuses, Miskitu political, not ethnic identity, and the economic decline of the Coast after the triumph as evidence.<sup>24</sup>

The marked differences in the overarching claims made by the members of the ethnicity-based interpretation admittedly render its reference as somewhat of a misnomer, but it is designated as such in order to highlight the scholars’ common attempt to adequately explicate Miskitu ideological reasons for bearing arms, aside from their perceptions of Miskitu merit. Perhaps the only theme common to the arguments advanced

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<sup>21</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas: Human Rights and Self-Determination* (New York City, NY.: Praeger Publishers, 1984), 243.

<sup>22</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Nietschmann, *The Unknown War: The Miskito Nation, Nicaragua, and the United States* (Lanham, MD., Freedom House, 1989), 2-4.

<sup>24</sup> For example, see Nietschmann, *The Unknown War*, 34-5, and William R. Meara, *Contra Cross: Insurgency and Tyranny in Central America, 1979-1989* (Annapolis, MD., Naval Institute Press, 2006), 98-9.

by Charles R. Hale Jr., Glenn T. Morris and Ward Churchill, and Eric Meinger is their insistence on Miskitu agency as a powerful entity in shaping the events of the narrative. Each also alludes to Miskitu grassroots organization as influential to the outbreak of their violent resistance, and moreover characteristic to eventual Miskitu distrust of the Sandinistas and U.S. intervention, and the ensuing return to peace.

Charles Hale contributes perhaps the most comprehensive addition to the literature with his *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894-1987*, in which he explicates the evolution of Miskitu collective consciousness since the Reincorporacion, and its influence in sparking violent resistance. Hale, an American anthropologist who did research for CIDCA in the 1980s, while living on the Atlantic Coast for two years, includes compelling Miskitu voices in his narrative, and ultimately displays admirable sympathy for both the Miskitu and Sandinistas in retelling the conflict. Hale ultimately contends that the combination of deeply rooted Miskitu sentiments, which he terms “Anglo-affinities” and “ethnic militancy” constitute the key factors in understanding the emergence and continuation of Miskitu collective action.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, he stipulates that both the Miskitu and Sandinistas expressed a mutually hostile “contradictory consciousness” which furthermore fomented tension and ultimately prolonged the conflict. This contradictory consciousness is characterized by the Sandinistas and Miskitu as both being “cultures of resistance, imbued with premises that limited their liberating potential and brought them squarely into conflict.”<sup>26</sup> He also contends that the Miskitu showed far more excitement for the Triumph than typically held. Government policies and the structural conditions within the Coast economy after

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<sup>25</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 81.

<sup>26</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 161.

1979 heightened intra-ethnic tensions while grassroots organizing certainly encouraged collective action. In Hale's view, they suddenly had an opportunity for "the good fight".

While Hale does an extraordinary job of explaining the important events in great depth, limitations arise from his treatment of them and the conclusions he draws from such detailed analyses appear suspect. For example, rather than pointing to the events, such as the Sandinistas' arrest of the leaders of MISURASATA, as crucial in escalating conflict, he treats them as trivialities in a relationship destined for failure based entirely off of the Miskitu history and their contemporaneous ethnic-identity. This ethno-centric approach implicitly assumes that MISURASATA, even with its own internal divisions, was fully representative of the larger Miskitu populace. In my argument to come, I will expound greatly upon this limitation, with support from my primary sources.

Furthermore, Hale did the vast majority of his work in Sandy Bay Sirpi, and concludes that Miskitu sentiments there hold throughout the entire Coast, a somewhat hasty generalization largely dismissed by my primary sources. For example, Hale acknowledges that the inhabitants of Sandy Bay Sirpi proved especially anti-Sandinista largely due to their proximity to Fagoth's operative in Honduras and firm insistence of the old heads to support the war.

Vilas does an excellent job of explaining the economic conditions of the Coast between the *Reincorporacion* and Sandinista-Miskitu conflict, but his Marxist approach treats Miskitu collective action deterministically, and his argument is overall contradictory by claiming the Miskitu are only a product of their socio-economic standing while simultaneously stipulating their ethno-centrism, which he claims evolved outside of their economic situation, accounts as the primary factor leading to their

resistance.<sup>27</sup> By arguing that the Miskitu were yet unable to account as agents of history, he maintains that they were unable to join the revolutionary program. Accordingly, he contends that the Sandinistas overlooked this fact and proved limited in their ability to adequately address the “Indian Question” through subsuming class, ethnicity, and political ideology under one category, whereas, for the Miskitu, each was distinct and created a contradictory consciousness necessitating armed resistance.<sup>28</sup> This approach is slightly too sympathetic to the Sandinistas, and views the Miskitu in the same way as the Sandinistas viewed them—backwards.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz provides the best analysis of potential heterogeneity amongst the Miskitu by claiming that they tended to be Pro-Sandinista, and that those who fought were coerced by the contras, the U.S.-backed counterrevolutionary forces operating in Honduras. However, this is also the primary setback to her argument. By arguing that the Miskitu were simply a reluctant proxy of the U.S. counterrevolutionary campaign, she actually assumes that they constituted a homogenous, pro-Sandinista body forced to resistance out of fear. This view undermines Miskitu agency through failing to differentiate Miskitu resistance from Contra resistance, and by claiming that the U.S. government and, in particular, the Reagan administration, were solely responsible for the conflict. This view furthermore treats the Sandinista government as entirely guiltless, albeit with some convincing evidence. Nevertheless, her interpretation is weakened by her lack of acknowledgement for legitimate Miskitu animosity for the revolutionary government. Dunbar-Ortiz does not acknowledge the grassroots composition of Miskitu

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<sup>27</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 101.

resistance, instead arguing that the increasingly radical demands made by MISURASATA sullied relations and came as a result of U.S. government intervention.<sup>29</sup>

Morris and Churchill take an interesting stance that perhaps most adequately acknowledges Miskitu agency in the conflict. They achieve this through explicating Sandinista shortcomings in dealing with the Miskitu, particularly emphasizing Sandinista-Miskitu disagreement about land rights. They ultimately argue that the Miskitu fought the Sandinistas out of cultural and political, not ethnic, differences, which they felt necessary to defend, and that this defense was an entirely just struggle against a neocolonial threat. Accordingly, their argument can be simplified in the following terms—just as Nicaragua popularly and justly resisted the imperialist force that is the United States government, the Miskitu, similarly resisted the imperialist force of the Nicaraguan government.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the essay primarily concerns the manipulative role played by the U.S. government, which arguably supported a just cause, but for the wrong reasons.<sup>31</sup> This view points out the Miskitu agency and grassroots composition in the resistance as evinced by their popular refusal to allow further U.S. support, and carry on a war without a legitimate representative body after the dissolution of MISURASATA. This interpretation, however, is weakened by its *prima facie* support for indigenous resistance through contending that any and all Miskitu demands were justified simply because of their indigenous nature.

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<sup>29</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas*, 250.

<sup>30</sup> In an interview I conducted with Ward Churchill over phone in early March, he explained and briefly summarized the argument he and Glenn T. Morris made in the essay they published in 1987.

<sup>31</sup> Ward Churchill and Glenn T. Morris, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* – “Left-Wing Revolution, Right-Wing Reaction and the Destruction of Indigenous People” in *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Issue: 11.3, Fall 1987, “Militarization and Indigenous Peoples: Part 1 The Americas and the Pacific.

Dunbar-Ortiz's analysis of the radical demands made by MISURASATA evinces the problematic nature of Morris and Churchill's argument. For example, the Miskitu demanded full control of over 56% of Nicaraguan territory in *Plan '81*, at the exclusion of the vast majority of its inhabitants, which included Mestizos, Creoles, Sumus, and Ramas. In other words, as Dunbar-Ortiz notes, the Miskitu made demands that had no chance of being approved by the Sandinistas, in order to foment tension, which appears to have been coordinated under the auspices of the U.S. government.<sup>32</sup>

Nietschmann argues that the Miskitu constituted a separate nation, which has been under attack for half a millennium. This nation, he contends, had every right to defend against annexation by Communists, and that they likely would have had no chances of success without help from the U.S. government. This view is quite similar to the one posited by Churchill and Morris, except that it is far more supportive of U.S. intervention, and while admitting to their ulterior motives, argues that they were far less injurious than the motives of Nicaragua's "Stalinist regime".

CIDCA is a Nicaraguan institution that specializes in social science research on the Atlantic Coast, which compiled findings of several of its members in *Ethnic Groups and the Nation State*. This source includes articles by Hale and Vilas, which account as their preliminary endeavors leading to their more comprehensive publications to come. Galio Gurdian, Hans Peter Buvollen, Andrew Gray, and Pierre Fruhling provide analyses of specific topics of concern pertinent to the Coast in the midst of its violent resistance to the Sandinista government, and emphasize the importance of the Miskitu history in determining their course of collective action, and revolutionary states' troubles with

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<sup>32</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas*, 250-2.

properly treating ethnic minorities. Members of CIDCA spent significant time on the Coast, and, without their findings, much of the later contributions to the literature would likely prove far more speculative in nature.

Through studying this, one can learn a lot about the typical progression of social revolutions and the vanguards' repressive reflexes to dissent, in this case plagued by the cadres' incremental oversimplification of its "counterrevolutionary" enemies. Additionally, one may understand to a greater extent the extraordinary difficulty most revolutions have in maintaining the popular support of ethnic minorities, that the combination of Miskitu collective identity and the Sandinistas' mounting anxiety towards resistance showed an oversimplification of the Miskitu people as a unanimously expressive resistance movement. Perhaps the Sandinistas' dealings with the Coast demonstrate an apparent limitation in most Marxist structural approaches in tending to reduce all types of collective identity to socio-economic terms, *prima facie* disregarding ethnicity as an ontological entity. Ultimately, the points of contention amongst the canon elucidate its yet inadequate ethnic-categorization that oversimplifies a complex cultural identity. This underestimation has likely stemmed from the similar mentality adopted by the Cadres and soldiers of the FSLN in their collective predetermination of Costeno identity regarding their roles in the revolution.

## Primary Source Evaluation

The primary sources utilized for research may be grouped into two broad categories: i) Miskitu sources and ii) media sources. Most of the Miskitu primary sources are transcribed interviews published in compilations aside from the guidelines stipulated by indigenous organizations and Reynaldo Reyes's autobiography. I have utilized or read through various media sources pertaining to the subject, such as newspaper articles, the film *¡No Pasaran!*, an autobiographical piece by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and an interview I conducted with Ward Churchill. Though not all such sources were able to contribute to my overarching argument, and are thus not utilized in this essay, *¡No Pasaran!* and Dunbar-Ortiz's memoir facilitated various avenues for study during the beginning of my research and are thus at least worth brief mention.

Alvin Levi carried out several interviews with Miskitu and Creole peoples of the Atlantic Coast and compiled them in *Nicaragua, the People Speak*. This provides direct interviews with fifteen costenos during the summer of 1984, which marks the most intense period of conflict between the Sandinistas and Miskitu. The interviews took place largely in Puerto Cabezas, Bluefields, Corn Island, and Sumobila, which respectively constitute the largest cities in the northern and southern regions, a small town in between, and a resettlement campaign in the region's interior. Miskitu embrace differing views of the central government within each community, ranging from loyal support to bitter resentment. However, nearly every interviewee contends that he or she desires peace, identifies as Nicaraguan, and perceives MISURA, the Contras, and U.S. government

support with disdain.<sup>33</sup> Interviewees varied in gender, ethnicity, and age, ranging from early twenties to seventy. The vast majority of the interviewees claimed to support the central government and feared the Contras more than the Sandinistas. They tend to express the hope for the US government to stop funding the indigenous organizations because then, they contend, a return to peace will ensue and the villages can return to revolutionary redevelopment.

These interviews provide a trustworthy glimpse into the daily lives of several Miskitu, who each offer unique perceptions while largely displaying particular appreciation for the Sandinista health and literacy campaigns and the Moravian Church.<sup>34</sup> In addition, many comment about the improved safety and increased involvement in the communities. Furthermore, those who dissent to the central government do so largely out of economic considerations primarily relating to food or job shortages.<sup>35</sup> From such sources one may glean an appreciation of the range of political perceptions regarding the government and the war, while also evincing some commonalities cherished by all. However, it is possible that Levie tailored the sources he published based on a political motive, perhaps trying to

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<sup>33</sup> Alan Levie, *Nicaragua: The People Speak* (South Hadley, MA., Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1985), 137-77.

<sup>34</sup> For example, from Levie, *The People Speak*, 142-43: in an interview he conducted with a peasant woman of twenty-four from Puerto Cabezas, Nubia speaks fondly of the literacy campaign and pledges support for the Sandinista government, and 149-50: an interview with a middle-aged male shopkeeper who claims that the Contras kidnapped his son and forced him to fight against the Sandinistas.

<sup>35</sup> For example, in Levie, *The People Speak*, 157-9: documents a public procession held at the Court to replace a Sandinista CDS coordinator for the village who left briefly on vacation. Levie attended the meeting and recorded some of the quotes showing the differences in political ideology held by the Miskitu: While a male in his twenties revels in fear of the Sandinistas and claims they took away his job and are trying to exterminate the Miskitu, a younger woman responds that such information is all a big lie constructed by Fagoth and the Contras. Overall, the meeting went fairly well without much dissent though, and soon after a man was designated as the temporary CDS coordinator of the village.

show that support for the central government existed amongst the Miskitu. Charles Hale attests that the Miskitu frequently responded to interviews conducted by perceived foreigners deceitfully, as if to mock the interviewers, or would simply respond with the answer they thought that the interviewer might want. It must also be taken into consideration when evaluating these sources that many Miskitu feared unwarranted imprisonment by the central government, so it may not be too implausible to suspect them displaying different views publicly than they held privately.

I use these sources often and find them to be largely trustworthy. I find this to be the case based on the great fear many of the Miskitu demonstrated for the Contras. Many parents interviewed had sons captured by MISURA and forced into battle. Whether or not their broad support of the Sandinista government might be suspect, Miskitu never once in these interviews acknowledged ethnic distinction from other costenos. Furthermore, I find that the articulations made by the Miskitu to be legitimate because Levy often recounted his public interactions with Miskitu, who did not shy away from arguing about their political perceptions. These sources are all useful in my overarching argument, which contends that ethnic militancy did not exist at the community level, supported by their general desire for the war to end, and that the Miskitu communities proved quite heterogeneous.

In his autobiography, entitled *Rafaga*, Reynaldo Reyes also provides meaningful insights about the fragmentation of the Miskitu leadership, Miskitu reasons for taking up arms against the Sandinista government, the inalienable rights of costenos, and displaying contradictory views with the leadership of MISURA and KISAN. Though Reyes clearly exaggerates many of his stories, his memory of the events align with reality, and

secondary sources often comment on his participation with the central government in negotiations for peace.<sup>36</sup>

Reyes is unique to the Miskitu because he was lucky enough to receive university level education, could have obtained a high position in the church but instead decided to support the revolutionary government and uphold posts designated by them,<sup>37</sup> such as serving as a National Defense Committee (CDN) member. He is one of the few Miskitu who fought as a guerrilla for both the FSLN and MISURA, and then participated in the negotiations for peace. In that sense, he displays the general trend of the Miskitu in originally supporting the government, turned to fear and resentment and culminated in support once again.

In providing by far the most in-depth personal Miskitu narrative and his active involvement with several community leaders, I use several of Reyes's anecdotes as representative in some way to the broader Miskitu populace based on the period. Beyond this, I make use of Rafaga's passionate defenses of the revolutionary ideal, of wanting to see the Atlantic Coast united with the Sandinista government, and his contention that the Miskitu fought to reclaim the rights that the Sandinistas originally granted them.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, his fervent distrust and dislike of Fagoth is analyzed in different contexts, and helps to show that many fought for the Miskitu best interests and resented Fagoth,

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<sup>36</sup> For example, Hale references Reynaldo Reyes in *Resistance and Contradiction*, 173, claiming that he was a field commander who chose to negotiate with the Sandinistas, indicating that the low chances of winning the war contributed to their decisions to engage in dialogue with the central government.

<sup>37</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 10.

<sup>38</sup> For example, in Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 56, Reyes claims "I believe it is my obligation to fight with my brothers for our Indian rights."

but still fought for him because he provided the most viable, if not only outlet for armed resistance.

The *New York Times* and Managua-based *Envio* are two periodicals that provide several different articles about the Atlantic Coast. The *New York Times* articles published frequently include interviews with Brooklyn Rivera, chief of MISURASATA's reincarnate, and chronicling the resumption of dialogue between MISURASATA and the Sandinista government as told either by Rivera or Tomas Borge.<sup>39</sup> Contemporaneous articles published by *Envio* similarly focus on the relations between the Sandinista government and the indigenous organizations, evaluating the merit of allegations against the Sandinistas of human rights abuses, and the conditions of the resettlement camps of Tasba Pri.<sup>40</sup> Both agencies tend to mythicize their increasingly hostile perceptions, mirroring their divergent understandings of domino-theory politics. Ultimately, *Envio* and *New York Times* articles contextualize the prevalent themes inherent to the dichotomous conceptual differences *supra et ultra* the respective leaders of Nicaragua, the Miskitu, and the U.S. Accordingly, the sensitivity of the subject amongst its participants inflated.

*Envio* often provides leftist analyses of the actions of the Sandinista government. Its articles tend to support Sandinista ideological motives.<sup>41</sup> Contrarily, the *New York Times*

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<sup>39</sup> For example, Neil A. Lewis, "Miskito Rebels Say They Want a Truce," *New York Times*, September 25, 1987; Proquest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), with Index (1851-1992), A3.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, a brief description of some of the Miskitus' decision to engage in peace talks is provided in "Who's Political Football are they, Miskitu fighting amongst themselves," *Envio* Vol. 5, No. 59, (May, 1986): 1-27.

<sup>41</sup> See "The Politics of Human Rights Reporting on Nicaragua" in *Envio* vol. 5 no. 60 (June 1986), 14-29 in its evaluation of the detrimental incursion of the U.S. government, while seeking to disprove nearly all foreign allegations with certainty.

articles often embellish Sandinista “abuses,” clearly partial to the Miskitu cause. The differing conceptions of Rivera and his motives from these articles portray a significant disparity between the polarizing interpretations of the revolution, which fomented with U.S. intervention.<sup>42</sup> These sources are both used to bolster the existence of fragmentation amongst the Miskitu leadership and Rivera’s non-revolutionary aspirations. *Envio*’s legitimacy is limited by its inseparable biases from political affiliation while the *New York Times* articles occasionally misinterpret analyses of the Sandinista government’s abuses of human rights largely tendency to view the Sandinista government’s actions from the increasingly suspicious lens of the international community.

Ohland and Schneider provide another meaningful compilation of published documents by the Sandinista and Miskito leadership. This includes the documents presenting the rights of MISURASATA until 1982. I use this compilation of sources to highlight the increasingly radical changes in MISURASATA’s demands to the central government. Furthermore, this source contains a letter written by Fagoth in 1979 to the central government<sup>43</sup> and some writings by Brooklyn Rivera. I utilize these sources to

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<sup>42</sup> Refer to the tonal disparity between an American indigenous advocate Glenn T. Morris in his description of Miskitu collective resistance as “the foremost struggle for indigenous sovereignty in the world” transcribed from: Stephen Kinzer, “U.S. Indians Enlist in the Miskito Cause,” *New York Times*, (November 11, 1985); ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009) with Index (1851-1998): A3., and “Reagan & Co. Mine the Road to Peace,” *Envio* vol. 7 no. 79 (January 1988): 2-16., in asserting that the Sandinista cadres are “trying to make very clear... that no matter how difficult the situation becomes or how much pressure is brought to bear against the country, Nicaragua’s desire for peace will not be manipulated.”

<sup>43</sup> Steadman Fagoth, interview about the interests of indigenous communities, entitled “Unity and Fraternity between MISURASATA and FSLN,” *El Nuevo Diario*, reprinted in Klaudine Ohland and Robin Schneider in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity: The Conflict between Sandinists and Miskito Indians on Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast* (Copenhagen, Denmark: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, November, 1983), 73-9.

evince the fragmentation amongst the Miskitu leadership. These sources are largely only useful in Part I and Part II because Ohland and Schneider published the compiled documents in 1982. A piece by Norman Campbell published under MISURASATA entitled *We are not against the revolution!* and Rivera's response *We are part of this revolution!* are from March and April 1981, soon after the Sandinistas' imprisonment of MISURASATA members and helps evince my claim that Fagoth played a decisive role in escalating conflict.

The Nicaragua Reader provides many meaningful sources, especially pertaining to the Sandinistas' ideological reorientation of 1984 and analyses of the Atlantic Coast during the war and the resettlement camps. For example, *Inside a Miskitu Resettlement Camp* by Katherine Yih evinces the satisfactory conditions of the *asentamientos* through her interviews with Miskitu at Tasba Pri, leading her to contend that life in the camps actually increased Miskitu support for the Sandinistas.<sup>44</sup> This source calls into question Bernard Nietschmann's claim that the *asentamientos* were no different than concentration camps in Nazi Germany. However, many commentators opposed to the Sandinista government assert that they always made sure that the camps appeared suitable before allowing spectators. Nevertheless, the Miskitu interviewees appear honest in their answers. For example, they support the Sandinista decision to move them for their safety, but simply express the tremendous aspiration to return home, while blaming the Contras for the unsettlement. Furthermore, this source invokes the perceptive political awareness demonstrated by the Miskitu during the war, a sentiment used in arguing against Vilas's

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<sup>44</sup> For example, see Katherine Yih, "Inside a Miskitu Resettlement Camp," in *The Nicaragua Reader: Documents of a Revolution under Fire*, by Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer (New York City, NY.: Grove Press, Inc., 1983), 90-4.

claim that the Miskitu only displayed ethnic consciousness while lacking the capacity to develop a political consciousness.

While I use other primary sources, the aforementioned are the most prominent and, together prove representative of the opinions articulated by interviewed Miskitu. Overall, there are not many Miskitu primary sources available because there are no published commentaries of the war written by Miskitu. Even Reyes's autobiography was pieced together through recordings. The reason for the lack of Miskitu primary sources is that they prefer to tell history through oration rather than writing. Nevertheless, the available sources are sufficient in supporting my overarching argument based on the existent commonalities in their perceptions. For example, though they articulate different political ideologies, they never mention ethnicity as a motivating factor in fighting, nor often even the land. Furthermore, the Miskitu interviewees all identified as Nicaraguan and wanted the war to end.

## Part I: Blood in the Church

“Before the Law” is a Kafkaesque parable, and tells of a man seeking entrance to the law through a guarded doorway. He waits the entirety of his life for admittance, which is never granted. Just before dying, the man asks why no one else has attempted access, even though everyone seeks the law. The doorkeeper responds, “no one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it.”<sup>45</sup> Seeking entrance to the law is an endemic theme to the Miskitu consciousness in the years after the Triumph, but instead of merely waiting for admittance, they fought for it.

Reyes’s decision to fight against the Sandinistas came from the confines of a cell, wherein denial of his access to legal rights catalyzed noncompliance. He waited desperately for a heavy night rain, ideal cover from pursuing authorities, should he successfully escape his confines. Rain finally came late on December 19, 1981, exactly one month after his imprisonment. His presumed guilt to the Sandinista authorities—that being Miskitu proved his compliance with Fagoth—led to a defiant resignation of his support for the Sandinistas. Late in the night, when most of the guards were out on the town, Reyes made a desperate plea for water, and feigned deathly ill upon the guard’s response. Reyes asked to be taken to the courtyard so as to douse himself in cold water. The guard permitted, and just after making it outside, Reyes caught the unsuspecting guard with a swift chop to the throat. He grabbed the guard’s gun and beat him with it and then ran unidentified to the nearby pier.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Edwin and Willa Muir (London, England: Vintage Classics, 1999), 201.

<sup>46</sup> Recomposed from Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 67-72.

A swift barrage of bullets compelled him to swim nearly a mile to a more discrete location, where he eventually found solace in the house of a devout Moravian woman, who, with the help of the Miskitu community, concealed his whereabouts from the pursuing Sandinista authorities. He was able to spend a couple of nights with his children and told them that he must fight for his rights against the Sandinistas. Even though he resented Fagoth, Reyes headed to the bush, desiring only his legitimate admittance and protection under the inalienable laws conceived by the Sandinista cadres.<sup>47</sup> The government's nominal enactment of its progressive legal strictures taught Reyes his rights, while in practice, excluded him from them, leaving him with no viable options but to join MISURA's resistance, albeit with opposing, non-revolutionary aims.

Reyes fought for the Sandinistas as a guerrilla on Nicaragua's western front during the revolution, held government designated posts upon returning to the Coast, and demonstrated a firm adherence to the revolutionary ideals even after resorting to the bush. Even so, being Miskitu rendered him as a suspicious outsider to the Mestizo guards, and his attempts at garnering their trust proved futile. Rafaga's unjust treatment echoes that felt by many Miskitos who had interacted with Fagoth or MISURASATA at all in the past, as the Sandinista government ostracized leading Miskitu from the Revolution based on their ethnicity, which catalyzed tragic consequences. The Miskitu were scared of the revolution. They did not want to topple it, but in trying to prove their commitment, many were still imprisoned unjustly.

Accordingly, in this section, I relay the relevant events between the Triumph and the massacre at the Prinzapolka church and contend that the MISURASATA and the

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<sup>47</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 173.

Sandinista government implicitly instilled the Miskitu with an entirely new ethnic identity, enabled through the collaborative creationist history imparted by Coastal reform policies, and in particular, the literacy campaign. The Miskitu could only meaningfully engage with the suspicious Sandinista government by assuming this imposed ethnic identity, which sparked a grassroots defense of Costeno culture in the face of perceived assimilations policies. This defense furthermore proved distinct from MISURASATA's objectives. The thrust of this argument is encapsulated in the existence of Miskitu resentment for Steadman Fagoth, coupled with the Sandinistas' increasingly erratic fear of general Miskitu support for him. Such fears triggered unwarranted over-reactions by the Sandinista authorities, while the Miskitu, who thus far maintained a deep commitment to the revolution, felt unable to escape its marginalizing tendencies. Ultimately, Sandinista perceptions of Miskitu ethnic-identity as necessarily at the core of their increasing distrust of the central government has been traditionally accepted by the literature, when in fact, it appears virtually non-existent to the general Miskitu psyche.

The primary factors influencing this grassroots organization and turn from quiescence to resistance are closely linked with the literacy campaign, the incremental demands made by MISURASATA, and the Sandinista government's responses to their suspicions of the organization and its leadership. Compelling Miskitu descriptions of the decision to bear arms bolsters my claim about the nature of relations between the Sandinista government and MISURASATA.

### **The Birth of MISURASATA**

The government authorized MISURASATA as the new indigenous organization for the Atlantic Coast, albeit with some reluctance, in November 1979, only months after assuming control of the State. While many of ALPROMISU's leadership joined MISURASATA, young and educated Miskitu were placed in charge by the FSLN. These leaders, most notably Steadman Fagoth, Brooklyn Rivera, Hazel Lau, and Armstrong Wiggins assumed far more political responsibility in dealing with the government than their predecessors of ALPROMISU, though it is apparent that the FSLN originally anticipated MISURASATA to be a cultural and social as opposed to political entity.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the FSLN received MISURASATA's first statement of principles and demands with gracious respect. Over time, it became apparent that MISURASATA's leadership used ethnocentric rhetoric to conceal individual political motives.

MISURASATA issued their initial statement in the summer of 1980, and echoed ALPROMISU in asking for educational reform, with particular emphasis in assuring that it be conducted in the native languages of Miskitu and English<sup>49</sup>. Within weeks, the central government initiated its Coastal literacy campaign and furthermore provided MISURASATA a seat in the council of state, the FSLN's legislative national body<sup>50</sup>, thus granting its admittance before the law—under the representation of MISURASATA's president, Steadman Fagoth. The government “accepted in principle indigenous

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<sup>48</sup> Hale, Charles, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 100.

<sup>49</sup> For example, the document *MISURASTA: General Directions* states “The Sandinist State must guarantee our indigenous peoples their right to exist, to live in accordance with our customs and to develop our cultures, since they constitute specific ethnic entities—that is to say, the right to maintain and develop our cultures, languages and traditions. We do not want to imitate foreign forms, but to be as we are. Therefore, we strive that our Sandinist country be a truly multi-ethnic state.” Included in the compilation by Ohland and Schneider, *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 52.

<sup>50</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas*, 239.

ownership of traditional villages and communal lands, and awaited a study and proposal from MISURASATA on which to base the confirmation of this principle.”<sup>51</sup> In addition to educational reform, the government instituted various other programs throughout the coast, providing improved medical care, transportation, and technology.”

MISURASATA’s increasingly radical demands in its ensuing proposals to the central government hastily deteriorated relations, and ultimately imbued Costeno Indians with a distinct conception of “us versus them” with regards to the West and their imposition of authority.

Popular mutual support for the revolutionary government and MISURASATA prevailed throughout the communities of the Coast. Not only did the Miskitu demonstrate a firm commitment to the Revolutionary programme, but also they proved willing to endure the economic hardships brought by the region’s redevelopment due to the improved health-care, education, and communal collaboration.<sup>52</sup> Nubia Mora, a Miskitu woman of twenty-four at the time of the Revolution was a secretary in Puerto Cabezas who spoke fondly of the years after the triumph.

Before, many women became pregnant. Often, the man just walked away. Now the government forces him to pay for the children. Before, for women, there was nothing. Now every girl goes to school. If she shows promise and the desire, she is encouraged to continue her education. There is no limit to what a woman can do now.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas*, 240.

<sup>52</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas*, 240.

<sup>53</sup> Levie, *The People Speak*, 141.

This improvement to communal organizational and functional capacities increased with popular participation in the community and allowed women to fulfill their traditionally designated role of nurturing the community.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the prior existence of prostitution, theft, and racism that plagued many Miskitu communities abruptly ceased following the Triumph, as the Sandinista Defense Committee members (CDNs) improved the sense of justice in the community.<sup>55</sup> The women could effectively care for their children and participate progressively with regards to the community, with sufficient resources to not be compelled to prostitution. Nearly no research has been conducted on the potential differences in opinion between men and women in supporting the struggle.

Furthermore, the Miskitu recognized MISURASATA as the vehicle through which the progressive reforms were enabled. Miskitu mutual support for the Sandinista government and MISURASATA, evinced by grassroots cooperation with the brigadistas<sup>56</sup>, Moravian Church authorities, and community leaders ultimately surfaced a distinct Miskitu cultural and historical identity characterized as Nicaraguan and Moravian before Miskitu. This shift in social consciousness evolved in opposition to the increasingly ethnocentric views advanced by MISURASATA's leadership, and enabled their capacity for mass

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<sup>54</sup> For example, Dunbar-Ortiz makes a similar claim to this by reference to the matriarchal composition of Miskitu society in *Indians of the Americas*, 241 and 256.

<sup>55</sup> For example, in an interview conducted by Alan Levie, Clifford Blanford, a middle-aged Creole man married to a Miskitu woman claims "Lydia, my wife, and me talk about this a lot. We both have the same ideas about things. We both support the government. Take crime. Now there are very few thieves. Before the revolution—oh, boy!" and soon after states "Then there was discrimination here. Since the Triumph we seem to mix better. We have more of a Christian brotherhood now. I like that," Levie, *The People Speak*, 144. This evinces the improved safety of the communities brought with the Revolution and furthermore, shows unification around the Church more than ethnic identity.

<sup>56</sup> Brigadista is the term used by the Sandinistas and Miskitu to refer to the teachers of the Literacy Campaign.

organization in defense of the revolutionary ideals. Though the Miskitu acknowledged MISURASATA as its representative body, it merely functioned in their eyes as the policy designer, their enactment resided locally, within the communities. In most Miskitu villages, community authority resided with the local leaders of the Moravian Church.<sup>57</sup> Thus, communal progress developed Miskitu conceptions of the Revolution locally rather than through MISURASATA, inciting varying conceptions of the revolution.

Generally, the secondary sources stipulate the Miskitu desire for gaining access to the law is characterized by their resistance to allow political and legal marginalization based on ethnicity. As a result, the community leaders coalesced a grassroots mobilization in order to force the central government to rescind its fearful abandonment of progressive legal rights, which guaranteed fair trial. The differing ideologies espoused by community members' pertaining to politics did not deter the nearly unanimous demand for inclusion into the Nicaraguan revolutionary program. Such considerations suggest that the leadership of MISURASATA provided the means for resistance enabling community organization, albeit through contrary motives. If true, Miskitu agency ought to be reinterpreted by inclusion of local composition to the relevant discourse at the expense of viewing the Miskitu communities as similarly counterrevolutionary.

### **The Literacy Campaign**

The government spent liberally in funding the literacy campaign that began in October 1979, which sent teachers, built schools, and taught countless Miskitu to read and write in

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<sup>57</sup> Vilas and Hale comment on this composition most comprehensively. Vilas notes the role of the church as the authority in *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 33, and Hale does, too in *Resistance and Contradiction*, 48-51.

their vernacular. In just over a year, the Coastal Literacy Campaign more than quadrupled the region's literacy rates, which hovered around ten percent before the Triumph<sup>58</sup>, mirroring the success achieved by the FSLN's educational reform out west. In much the same fashion as the Cuban revolutionary vanguard's *alfabetizacion* two decades prior, Nicaraguan literacy campaigns focused on instilling a revolutionary consciousness through cultivating "the New Man," which translated to "the New Indian" on the Atlantic Coast. The brigadistas collaborated with the local authorities in instituting educational reform, teaching the Miskitu of their inalienable rights and their collective history.

In teaching Miskitu history, the brigadistas<sup>59</sup> emphasized the Miskitos' inherent commonalities with General Sandino, the martyr in whose name the masses of the west fought and won their revolution. This imbued the Miskitu with a social consciousness characterized by their everlasting resistance to colonial subjugation, and the rights they've successfully protected since time immemorial. A Miskitu adult from a small village on the coast of the Rio Grande contended:

MISURASATA sent teachers from the Rio Coco; it was really wonderful.

Our brigadista was named Pablo. He taught us about how things were first time; we had no idea before. He taught us that Indians have many rights, our own territory, the right to self-government and to live in harmony with one another. At the same time, they sent people to measure our land.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 8.

<sup>59</sup> Educated Sandinista and Miskitu youth largely served as the brigadistas. Initially, the brigadistas were predominantly Mestizos from the west, but over time increasingly became young Miskitu.

<sup>60</sup> An adult community member who lived in Sandy Bay Sirpi, as quoted by Charles R. Hale Jr., *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 79.

With nostalgia for “the good old days,” the Miskitu determinedly sought to manifest their perceived destiny. Hale concisely describes the broad contention that this glorification of the past linked inextricably with the formation of Miskitu ethnic identity. This appears true, but for peculiar reasons.

The joint enactment of educational reform by MISURASATA and FSLN vanguard colluded in “westernizing<sup>61</sup>” Miskito political consciousness, which necessitated the conceptualization of an ethnic-identity to participate politically with the government and constructed a New Indian fluent in the contemporaneous political discourse of ethnic minorities in revolutionary states. Over time, MISURASATA selected the brigadistas, often Miskitu no older than twenty, and directed them to emphasize ethnocentric rhetoric and a creationist history as a means to enhance its political legitimacy on the Coast over the central government.<sup>62</sup> Historian Eric Meringer asserts that in order to “promote this new ideology and further advance their ethnic agenda, MISURASATA leaders proclaimed themselves stewards of Miskito history announcing ‘coherence and continuity of [the Miskito’s] historic memory’ as an essential element in their mobilization and

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<sup>61</sup> Referring to the Western European political model and ideal. Hale and Vilas both comment on this evolution of Miskitu political consciousness. However, whereas Vilas denies the Miskitu capacity to yet become politically conscious due to their lack of experiencing the exploitation of capitalism long enough, Hale contends that the Miskitu actually demonstrated keen political awareness. Respectively from Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua*, 126, in his description of indigenism as politics, and Hale in *Resistance and Contradiction*, 96, in his description of the effects of the literacy campaign.

<sup>62</sup> Eric Rodrigo Meringer. “The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation: Intraethnic Political Division Among Nicaragua’s Miskito People during the Sandinista Era.” *Oral History Review* 37, no. 1 (2010): 1-17. Furthermore, MISURASATA publicly advocated for its right to teach its own version of history. Vilas also acknowledges the MISURASATA’s desire to “create” their own history in *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 122.

construction of a new society.”<sup>63</sup> Accordingly, the literacy campaign cultivated a Coastal ethnic revival out of a distinctly ethnic-based conception of history, which increased in proportion with MISURASATA’s demands. This incremental process of ethno-genesis is linked closely to the political aims of MISURASATA’s president, who took drastic measures to secure authority in the face of the organization’s longstanding intra-ethnic divisions.<sup>64</sup>

Miskitu community members responded divisively to MISURASATA’s gradual turn to ethnic-chauvinism. Distrust for Fagoth existed within MISURASATA and Miskitu villages and ultimately split the Miskitu in their attempts of reconciling the seemingly contradictory conceptions of Miskitu identity and the revolutionary ideals. The implications of this inter-ethnic division require further explication of MISURASATA’s relations with the central government following the turn of the revolutionary decade. Such explications will help in understanding the relations between the government’s conceptions of the Coastal Indians and the Miskitu collective response.

### **MISURASATA’s Increasing Demands**

Though traces of ethnocentrism appeared in MISURASATA’s *General Lines* of 1980, they did not suggest separatist motives, and the Sandinistas met the strictures with approval. However, MISURASATA’s *Plan for Action* of January 1981 demonstrated a radical departure from its original demands through the inclusion of indigenist rhetoric

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<sup>63</sup> Meringer, *The Local Politics of Indigenous Representation*, 12.

<sup>64</sup> The political aspirations of Brooklyn Rivera and Hazel Lau became increasingly at odds with Fagoth’s radicalizing motives. For example, see Meringer’s transcription of an interview with Hazel Lau in *The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation*.

that stressed inalienable Coastal rights as an aboriginal nation.<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, what began as negotiations towards regional solidarity with the Nicaraguan state turned into MISURASATA's conception of the Atlantic Coast as the "Moskitia," an independent nation, separate from and far older than Nicaragua. This ideological transformation was developed through their creationist history that hyperbolized resistance to the "Spanish." The evolution of MISURASATA's demands resulted in the FSLN's roused suspicions of the Miskitu as a proxy of intensifying U.S. government counterrevolutionary intervention, which culminated in the Sandinista vanguard's costly response in February 1981.

The Sandinistas particularly disputed the land demarcation of *Plan '81*, which demanded MISURASATA's sole control of 30 percent of Nicaragua's territory at the exclusion of any oversight by the larger state.<sup>66</sup> The FSLN cadres pointed to the vast disparity between these demands and the ones originally advanced by MISURASATA and refused to grant the organization control over a territory in which the Miskitu constituted nowhere near half of the population. The government responded by investigating the leadership of MISURASATA only to discover that Fagoth previously stinted as an informant for Somoza's Secret Police (from a letter) and that advisers

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<sup>65</sup> For example, see Ohland and Schneider note in a commentary that the emphasis on cultural defense in the *General Guidelines* switched to announcing "an 'intensive consciousness-raising campaign' and possible 'massive demonstrations' in order to push through the land claims" and demands the creation of several Misurasata, like Juventud MISURASATA and Mujeres de MISURASATA to replace the organizations supplied by the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas perceived these demands as separatist, from *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, 22.

<sup>66</sup> The specifics of these demands are included in Dunbar-Ortiz's *Indians of the Americas*, 238, and Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 139.

connected with the counterrevolutionary opposition prepared and financed the land demarcation to be presented following the consummation of the literacy campaign.

During the conclusion of the Coastal literacy campaign in February 1981, the government arrested 43 MISURASATA members and activists, including Fagoth, alleging their involvement with ex-Somoza and CIA covert operations.<sup>67</sup> In the process, Sandinista officials barged into the Moravian Church of Prinzapolka and interrupted its session to detain Ariel Zuniga, a MISURASATA literacy worker, and Fagoth's brother in law. Eight men died in the ensuing scuffle while news of the event spread rapidly throughout the Coast. The marked uncertainty of exactly what transpired in the Prinzapolka Church on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February resulting in the deaths of four Miskitu and four Sandinistas. The diametrically opposed conjectures adopted by the Sandinista government and the Miskitu about what happened during the religious ceremony rendered imminent the violent clash to come.<sup>68</sup>

The Sandinista soldiers' intrusion of the Moravian Church while the Miskitu celebrated the success of the literacy campaign and disrespecting the church authorities, who agreed to talk with the Sandinistas as soon as they finished the religious ceremony, constituted perhaps the most offensive and assimilationist actions to the Miskitu.

Furthermore, that blood was shed as a result during the most sacred of rituals, no matter

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<sup>67</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas*, 241.

<sup>68</sup> While the Sandinistas claim the Miskitu incited the conflict by stealing a soldiers' gun, the Miskitu tend to argue that the Sandinista officials are to blame. For example, refer to Meringer, *The Local Politics of Indigenous Self Representation*, 10, in an interview conducted by Meringer with an anonymous Miskitu who was in the church and witnessed the scuffle. The interviewee provides an incredibly detailed description of the event and contends the Sandinista soldiers outside of the church began firing after they heard the initial gunshot. He states that three Miskitu in the church had effectively taken the guns from the Sandinista soldiers inside the church and fired back.

who fired the first shot, it imbued many Indians with the perception that the Sandinistas did not value Miskitu culture. Reyes stated,

I believe that it is really very important for all to know exactly how the real... war began that day in Pizapolka... The government was trying to defuse Fagoth's idea of bringing a war against the Sandinistas. By removing our leaders, the government believed that the idea would die. But the government's action had an opposite effect on the Indian people. They had been pushed too far and were ready for war.<sup>69</sup>

No matter how fervently the Miskitu supported the Revolutionary government, it would never be able to supersede their loyalty to their brothers and to the Moravian Church. This is why the Miskitu remained so adamant in protecting their cultural customs.

The government quickly released most imprisoned, and authorized Fagoth's discharge about a month later on the condition that he attend school in Europe. Fagoth promised he would go to Denmark so long as he could visit for one last time his ailing mother.

However, after seeing his family, Fagoth rounded up more than 2,500 Miskitu around the Rio Coco and led them into Honduras, thereafter leading an auxiliary branch of the hardly covert U.S.-backed counterrevolutionary operation, while the young Miskitu men in his company received combatant training.

The Sandinistas conceived of all Miskitu as ideologically united with Fagoth, though most Miskitu had no direct interaction with MISURASATA and knew little of its incremental demands. Reyes claims that soon after the tragedy at Prinzapolka,

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<sup>69</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 42.

While in my quarters at the Sandinista *jefetura* command post, a group of my Sandinista companeros arrested me and took me to the Tronquera jail. The government believed that all Miskito Indians were participating with MISURASATA. Because I was Miskito they had begun to mistrust me, and for that they put me in jail.<sup>70</sup>

In characterizing all Miskitu as counterrevolutionary, even those most loyal to the revolution, who worked for the government, the Sandinistas imposed an ethnic identity upon the Miskitu by abruptly recanting the just protection under the law that originally gained the Sandinistas so much support. Though this treatment varied from mere suspicion to unwarranted arrests and imprisonments, the Miskitu united out of fear and wondered whether the government planned all along to use repressive tactics in order to force the Miskitu in assimilating to Mestizo culture. Ultimately, this shows that the Miskitu came to bear arms for entirely different reasons than the ones stipulated by MISURASATA's leadership, which made no secret about its alliance with the Nicaraguan Democratic Front (FDN)<sup>71</sup>.

Although MISURASATA certainly emphasized a creationist history that focused on ethnocentrism, imbuing the Miskitu with a new collective consciousness, their conceptions of ethnicity appear minimal at most in their decision to take up arms. From the beginning, those who decided to resist the revolutionary vanguard aimed not for its overthrow, but rather to re-secure the rights upon which the Sandinistas infringed. It is clear that not all Miskitu supported counter-revolutionary resistance, or resistance of any

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<sup>70</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 47.

<sup>71</sup> This was the name of the Counterrevolutionary representative organization backed by the United States.

kind for that matter. Many still continued to have faith in the government. For example, a Miskitu man claimed, “I support this government... they’re trying hard. You can’t fault them for that. Of course, they make mistakes, too. If you’re human, you make mistakes. Isn’t that so?”<sup>72</sup> But enough Miskitu had fled to Honduras with Fagoth, and viewed resistance as the only option. Fagoth provided an outlet for action, which they followed. However, even most who supported the war also still identified as Nicaraguan.<sup>73</sup>

The Miskitu identification as Nicaraguan supports the notion that they also fought to defend their culture. While Bernard Nietschmann addresses the sources of conflict as a defense of culture from an assimilationist and totalitarian regime<sup>74</sup>, and protection of an aboriginal nation distinct from Nicaragua, Glenn Morris and Ward Churchill contend similarly albeit through a far weaker claim that the Sandinistas accidentally prodded the Miskitu into justifiably viewing the revolution as assimilationist, and fought not out of ethnocentrism but to protect their distinct culture.<sup>75</sup> Yet, both assume the Miskitu as constituting a unanimous anti-Sandinista group, and neglect to distinguish between the motives for resistance at the community level and within MISURASATA’s leadership. Awareness of the existence of varying levels of support for the Sandinista government

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<sup>72</sup> Alvin Levie, *Nicaragua the People Speak*. 145.

<sup>73</sup> For example, Rivera and Reyes both continued to identify as Nicaraguan. They simply desired their inclusion under the state’s guarantees again.

<sup>74</sup> Nietschmann, *The Unknown War*, 30.

<sup>75</sup> Churchill and Morris, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, this article is presented on the website for Colorado’s American Indian Movement, <http://coloradoaim.org/history/NicaraguaRockandhardplaceanalysis.html>, but first appeared in *Cultural Survival*, vol. II, No. 3 (Fall 1987). Churchill, Morris, and Nietschmann advocate a view known as Fourth World Indigenism, which contends that indigenous groups are entitled to absolute sovereignty over their land, which they may claim under any and all circumstances and in accordance with international law must immediately receive all demands from the national sovereign body. However, this viewpoint is difficult to defend due to the fact that the Miskitu constituted a minority group in the land they wanted full control over, at the exclusion of all other ethnic groups.

and the broad reluctance within the communities to beginning a movement that would inevitably turn bloody is critical in understanding the conditions leading to war.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, many of the imprisoned Miskitu were completely innocent and had no ties, or even awareness, of MISURASATA's covert relations with counter-revolutionary forces, and actually continued to support of the Revolution. Nevertheless, their unjust relegation to an ethnic minority held with increasing suspicion by members of the Sandinista government left a scar that would not soon be forgotten. While several thousand Miskitu received military training under the CIA and remnants of Somoza's national guard north of the Rio Coco, many more fled to Honduras and constituted a powerful contingent willing to respond to the Sandinista betrayal violently.

This calls into question the widely held assumptions in the relevant scholarship that the war began from an intense ethnic-militancy grounded in deeply rooted aspects of Miskitu history and characterized by continual resistance to the "Spanish," and that the vast majority of Miskitu ideologically aligned with Fagoth.<sup>76</sup> Rather, the revolution educated the Miskitu, enabled them politically and communally, and by and large made an agreement with the Miskitu guaranteeing their fair treatment under the law in return for adherence to the revolutionary ideals. However, the Sandinistas alienated its popular contingent of support throughout the Coast by over-reacting, as the government turned from a liberating force to a repressive one. This eventually forced the Miskitu to broadly

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<sup>76</sup> For example, refer to both Hale and Vilas. Hale builds off of Vilas's argument and coins the terms "ethnic militancy" and "Anglo-affinities." Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 105-7, and Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 100.

support MISURASATA, which remained as the single political authority still worth trusting.

Ultimately, the positions adopted by Hale and Vilas assume the same characterization of the Miskitu as adopted by the Sandinista government following their roused suspicions, and treat the Miskitu as an ideologically homogenous ethnic group fully aligned with MISURASATA. However, the available Miskitu voices reveal evidence to the contrary. Whether or not Miskitu individuals continued to support the government, proponents for both sides acknowledge the existence of a brewing war with sufficient numbers and legitimate political premises. Failing to comment on the existence of Miskitu heterogeneity further weakens the claim that ethnic-militancy grounded the resistance by undervaluing localized Miskitu agency and moreover incorrectly supposes the firm grip of a leader who was not even in the same country.

## Part II: Big Heads and Big Lies

Trapped by a troop of Sandinista soldiers in the thick of the jungle, Reyes clutched his 22.-caliber tightly, hoping its 18 bullets would be enough to save his surrounded boys with empty guns. “I began firing that... long hunting rifle like it was a machine gun. I had to do that to save my boys because the Sandinistas were going to kill us. When it was over, there were eleven soldiers dead right in front of us and I had not used the last [bullet].”<sup>77</sup> “Rafaga,” one shouted, “our savior!” This is how, in early 1982, Reyes received his *nombre de guerra*, which means ‘gust of wind’. The boys collectively raised their drained arms to heaven.

Deep in the jungle, right outside of some town in northeastern Nicaragua, is where most of the battles between the Sandinistas and Miskitu took place. The poorly armed Miskitu held God close as they fought for their rights. This, one of Rafaga’s first clashes with the Sandinistas, in early 1982, left him with a heavy heart. He did not think of himself as a killer, but violence offered the only viable hope for re-securing autonomy in the minds of many Miskitu.<sup>78</sup> Starting in December 1981, a few thousand Miskitu men carried out missions, from a CIA operative in southern Honduras, against Sandinista forces occupying various Miskitu villages. Many of these men fled to Honduras at Fagoth’s request, others were forced.

In this section, I show the fragmentation between Miskitu. After mid-1982, most Miskitu in Nicaragua tended to side with the new Costa Rica based MISURASATA, but enough were already fighting for Fagoth’s Honduras based MISURA that the Miskitu were essentially fighting two separate wars. Scholars have only vaguely commented on

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<sup>77</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 61.

<sup>78</sup> Reconstructed from Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 58-64.

the effects of this split at the community level<sup>79</sup>. The MISURA branch served as a leg for the Contras, yet many fighting for MISURA, like Rafaga, fought for very different aims than its leader, Fagoth. It appears as though the Northern towns tended to support MISURA, while the communities farther south sympathized more with the Sandinistas and sided with MISURASATA.

This period is characterized by the beginning of U.S. government public intervention and the central government's attempts to defend the revolution. During this period, the Miskitu recognized Fagoth's betrayal in fighting a war for the U.S. government, which clearly did not have Miskitu best interests in mind, and responded varyingly to the ensuing split of MISURASATA, which resulted in a two-front Miskitu war. Resentment of the government increased following the Sandinistas' resettlement campaign. However, the Miskitu had to choose between supporting two distinct representative organizations to address their differing sentiments. This period marks the height of the conflict, which did not wane until the National Elections of 1984, after which negotiations for peace began. Ultimately, I contend that the split between the Miskitu leadership also existed at the community level, and that Miskitu ethnic-identity played a minimal factor in their decision to support the government, MISURA, or MISURASATA. Instead, many were coerced into battle by the Sandinista government and MISURA, while those remaining in their villages tended to align with MISURASATA based on the mutual desire to return to peace.

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<sup>79</sup> Only Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas*, 245-6 hints at the existence of Sandinista-Miskitus, but makes the controversial and unfounded claim that most Miskitu supported the Sandinistas and most who fought against the central government were coerced into fighting.

## Responses to the Massacre at Prinzapolka

Soon after the incident at Prinzapolka, Miskitu began making bows and arrows, with which to confront Sandinistas in the area. Furthermore, nearly 5,000 had fled to Honduras and received military training from the remnants of Somoza's National Guard. However, violent conflict between the Miskitu and Sandinistas did not appear until the U.S. government began its public intervention in Nicaragua, marking the creation of the Contras and sending aid and arms to the Miskitu.<sup>80</sup> The war began on 21 December 1981 with Operation Red Christmas, during which Miskitu guerrillas from Honduras invaded the Rio Coco and brutally tortured and murdered at least 60 people associated with the Sandinista government<sup>81</sup>. The arrival of U.S. aid undoubtedly enabled the Miskitu to carry this mission out, and the Sandinistas responded in an unpopular manner again. To the Sandinista perspective, this event effectively marked the beginning of the Contra War.

Though the Sandinistas dissolved MISURASATA, Fagoth created a new organization with most of the same members, known as MISURA. He dropped the SATA from the name because it is the part of the acronym that refers to the Sandinistas.<sup>82</sup> Though many Miskitu did not have counterrevolutionary motives, Fagoth certainly aimed to overthrow the central government, and Operation Red Christmas made these powerful separatist motives clear to the Sandinistas, which proved increasingly viable with its newfound U.S. government support. Fagoth's alignment with the U.S. government, CIA, and ex-

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<sup>80</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas*, 250.

<sup>81</sup> Charles R. Hale Jr, "Institutional Struggle, Conflict and Reconciliation: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State (1979-1985)" in *Ethnic Groups and the Nation State: The Case of the Atlantic Coast in Nicaragua* (Stockholm, Sweden: by CIDCA, 1987), 101-128.

<sup>82</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 153.

Somocistas did not bode well with the majority of MISURA's leadership, and led to irreconcilable fragmentation within the organization.

### **Resettlement Campaign**

The Sandinista government responded to Operation Red Christmas by militarily evacuating the Rio Coco area in January 1982, whose inhabitants could either cross the border into Honduras or move inland to *asentamientos*, or resettlement communities. The government viewed the action as necessary to protect the inhabitants of the new war zone, due to Fagoth's obvious ties with the U.S.-backed counterrevolution and its potentially strong base among the Miskitu<sup>83</sup>. Most of all, the Sandinistas feared that the Coast would become the center of counterrevolutionary operations, wherein the U.S. government could form operative bases. The Sandinistas destroyed many of the villages in order to prevent this from happening.<sup>84</sup> Half of the 20,000 Miskitu inhabitants of the Rio Coco region, mostly the young men, left for Honduras, while the other 10,000 were relocated to the camps of Tasba Pri<sup>85</sup>. This move temporarily eliminated the remaining Miskitu who sympathized with the Sandinista government in northeastern Nicaragua, while Reagan and Fagoth used this "forcible relocation" to garner international sympathy for the counterrevolutionary cause by charging the move as an example of human rights

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<sup>83</sup> Hale, "Institutional Struggle, Conflict, and Reconciliation," 122. Also noted in an article by Gabriel Bell, et al., "There was not too much resistance during the relocation" printed in Klaudine Ohland and Robin Schneider, *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity: The Conflict between Sandinists and Miskito Indians on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast* (Copenhagen, Denmark: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 1983), 269-84. In this interview, FSLN members talked about the relocation and contend that the Miskitu primarily showed gratefulness in their ensuing improved safety.

<sup>84</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua*, 154.

<sup>85</sup> Tasba Pri was the largest of the resettlement camps. In the Miskitu language, Tasba Pri means "Free Land."

violations by the Sandinista government, and likening Tasba Pri to the Nazi's genocidal concentration camps.<sup>86</sup>

The quality of life in the camps has been widely acknowledged by human rights observers as adequate if not better than the standard in the traditional villages. Katherine Yih claims, "improvement in the quality of life in Tasba Pri has not only been economic; popular participation in the administration of the communities has increased as well," and furthermore notes that over time "the Miskitu people's attitude has shifted palpably from resentment to satisfaction with improving conditions, and a growing trust of the Sandinistas."<sup>87</sup> However, many Miskitu grew embittered to the Sandinistas for taking them from their homes, which they loved. One woman in Sumobila, a resettlement village, claimed "I don't want to die in the mountains. I want to die on the Rio Coco. We don't have the right food here. It's bad. In my village we have fish, rice. We had pineapple and coconut. We had everything on the Rio Coco."<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, another woman who simultaneously participated in Levie's interview stated that she still supports the Sandinista government, and claims that the contras constitute the real problem.<sup>89</sup> This

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<sup>86</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz comments extensively on the allegations of human rights abuses committed by the Sandinistas and proves that the vast majority of allegations did not occur. Furthermore, in a speech by U.S. President Ronald Reagan, he refers to the Miskitu as "Freedom Fighters" and claims that they in serious danger of extermination at the hands of the communist Sandinistas: Reagan, Ronald, "Let me Set the Record Straight on Nicaragua," from *The Nicaragua Reader: Documents of a Revolution Under Fire*, edited by Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer (New York City, NY.:, Grove Press, Inc., 1983), 14-17.

<sup>87</sup> Katherine Yih, "Documents of a Revolution Under Fire" from *The Nicaragua Reader: Documents of a Revolution Under Fire*, edited by Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer (New York City, NY.: 1983), 90-94.

<sup>88</sup> Levie, *The People Speak*, 165.

<sup>89</sup> Levie, *The People Speak*, 165.

evinces the heterogeneity that characterized the Miskitu during this period at the community level.

From all of the Miskitu interviews about living in the camps of Tasba Pri, they never once mention their ethnic-identity as a reason for resenting the government, and tend to sympathize with the Sandinistas. Furthermore, they blame the resettlement on the Contras and MISURA. Their main problems with resettlement are linked to their desire to return to living as they did before, in their own hometowns where they were born and had lived their entire lives. Some express the fear of having to remain in the camps forever, but claim that as soon as their brethren drop their arms, they will be able to return home. The following quote by a Miskitu man living in Sumobila is perhaps most representative of the Miskitu opinion: “There are some here who are afraid to speak out because you’ll think that they’re against everything—against the government. We are not against. We only want to live as we did before.”<sup>90</sup> This overwhelming desire for peace is especially prominent amongst the inhabitants of the Tasba Pri settlements, and seriously calls into question the widely accepted notion of the relevant literature that the Miskitu responded to the resettlement campaign with massive resentment of the Revolutionary government. In fact, the resettlement appears to have merely fomented distrust from the onlookers, and became their main avenue of attack in garnering international support to discredit the Sandinista regime.

### **MISURA and MISURASATA**

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<sup>90</sup> Levie, *The People Speak*, 166.

Of the Miskitu who remained in Nicaragua, many originally supported MISURA. However, serious fragmentation arose within MISURA's leadership, concerning its operation as an auxiliary of the contras, who only desired to overthrow the Nicaraguan government and demonstrated no concern for Miskitu interests. This decisive split proved most prominent between Fagoth and Rivera, and led to Rivera's imprisonment. Upon release from prison, Rivera fled to Costa Rica and reorganized MISURASATA. Luciano Baracco claims that "Rivera's split from Fagoth appears to have been informed by a desire to distance Miskitu demands from the CIA anti-communist agenda that informed the FDN and to remain focused on MISURASATA's original programme for autonomy."<sup>91</sup> Rather than using a new name for the organization, he wanted to demonstrate his willingness to again unite with the Sandinistas. Fagoth planned on assassinating him and the others who dissented him, including Ariel Zuniga, Fagoth's brother in law, after the Honduran guard released them, and they fled to Costa Rica.

From the outset of MISURASATA's reincarnation, Rivera did not use the ethnocentric, anti-communist, and separate-nation rhetoric of Fagoth. However, he had neither the political experience nor hold on the church like Fagoth.<sup>92</sup> He also operated in Costa Rica, further away from the large Miskitu populations in northeast Nicaragua than MISURA close by in Honduras. As a result, MISURASATA proved unable to garner

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<sup>91</sup> Luciano Baracco "We Fought for our Land: Miskitu insurgency and the struggle for autonomy on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast (1981-1987)" in *AlterNative*, Vol. 7 no. 3 (2011), 233-245.

<sup>92</sup> Rivera was not revered as a charismatic and politically persuasive person, as was Fagoth. Reyes discusses that this made it hard for Rivera to gain a lot of support at first in Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 39-40. Furthermore, similar sentiments are noted in Meringer, *The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation*, 8-9.

broad support until Fagoth's traitorous behavior was realized beyond the leadership of the organizations, at the community level.

Rivera's dismissal from MISURA, creation of his own indigenous organization, and subsequent attempts to gain legitimization made it apparent to the Miskitu that Fagoth and the U.S. had betrayed them. One Miskitu combatant, in an interview with Luciano Baracco, said "we thought we were fighting to defend our territory, but we were being used by other interests."<sup>93</sup> While it appears as though most in Nicaragua sided with Rivera, Fagoth already had several thousand Miskitu men fighting for him, and aid and arms from the U.S. to enable violent resistance. Though most of them continued fighting for Fagoth, because dissent would likely result in execution, it is clear that they maintained their stance of fighting to re-attain the rights granted by the Sandinista government, not overthrow or separate from it. They also largely came to regard Fagoth as a traitor. Miskitu support for MISURA or MISURASATA changed back and forth depending on their perception of the state of the war.<sup>94</sup>

In an interview with a writer for the *New York Times*, Rivera comments on his decision to sever ties with Fagoth and MISURA. "The F.D.N. has been very hostile and aggressive toward us," he said. "They consider us an enemy because we maintain our

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<sup>93</sup> Anonymous A, in an interview with Luciano Baracco about the corruption of Fagoth, from Luciano Baracco, "We Fought for our Land: Miskitu insurgency and the struggle for autonomy on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast (1981-1987)" in *AlterNative*, Vol. 7 no. 3, 2011, (233-245).

<sup>94</sup> For example, Hale makes the following claim: "Although Rivera had greater legitimacy in the international political arena, and a more coherent programme, his position cost him political support at the base. Once having chosen the armed alternative, Miskitu combatants could only survive with a constant flow of material and supplies. As Rivera cut himself off from the CIA and agreed to negotiate with the Nicaraguan government (1984), many former MISURASATA units shifted loyalties to MISURA or the FDN to ensure their military sustenance." Hale, "Institutional Struggle, Conflict and Reconciliation," 122.

independent positions and will not become soldiers in someone else's army... I am not a contra,' he said. 'We are fighting for our rights, not to overthrow the Sandinistas.'<sup>95</sup> This claim displays the increasingly popular sentiment amongst the Miskitu that Fagoth had betrayed them by selling Miskitu aims to the U.S. government, and evinces their perceptive understanding of the political conditions leading to their resistance, which all along tended to portray the desire to reclaim the rights granted them by the Sandinistas and to be able to integrate into the Revolutionary programme on their own terms. A necessary prerequisite for uniting again with the central government was to be represented by the organization that shaped its aims around Miskitu best interests. This is why Rivera ended up accumulating increasing support amongst the general Miskitu populace.

Rivera lacked the resources to continue fighting through refusing FDN or U.S. government aid and arms, so he joined forces with ARDE (Democratic Revolutionary Alliance), a counterrevolutionary group fronted by an ex-Sandinista guerrilla commander, Eden Pastora. Pastora similarly refused to fight for the contras due to their ties with ex-Somocistas and the U.S. government.<sup>96</sup> However, he also desired to overthrow the Sandinista government. The irony of Rivera beginning a non-revolutionary struggle against the Sandinistas from Costa Rica that necessitated support from a separate counterrevolutionary struggle shows just how much Miskitu resistance depended upon outside forces for its enablement. The Miskitu simply lacked the necessary means to head

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<sup>95</sup> Brooklyn Rivera, as quoted by Stephen Kinzer. *Miskito Leader Reports Help From Europe*, in *New York Times* September 17, 1985; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009) with Index (1851-1993), A10.

<sup>96</sup> Vilas, Carlos. *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 118.

their struggle alone, and it is understandable that historians have often subsumed general Miskitu aims under the motives articulated by the organizations with which they tied.

### **1984 National Elections and Sandinista Ideological Reorientation**

In preparation for the November elections, the Sandinista government underwent a radical ideological shift in their response to the “Indian problem,” which became known instead as an “ethnic question.” Hale estimates that the desire to accumulate more popular support throughout the Coast prompted the change in policy and practice, as the Sandinistas viewed every vote critical in the election of a war-torn state that might be too close for comfort.<sup>97</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, on the other hand, emphasizes the government’s genuine commitment to fulfilling Miskitu desires as motivating the adjustment.<sup>98</sup> Ultimately, both assessments appear correct. Three years of war with the Miskitu taught the Sandinistas a lot about their shortcomings in treating the Miskitu and escalating conflict. Furthermore, Rivera’s split with Fagoth and reincarnation of MISURASATA provided a viable avenue through which negotiations for peace might ensue. Instead of treating the Miskitu as a problematic ethnic-minority through repression, the Sandinistas altogether dropped the term “ethnicity” from their rhetoric, removed most of the troops occupying various villages, and significantly decreased the number of Miskitu arrests. The intensity of conflict thus lowered temporarily and the Sandinistas could now legitimately evince its fair treatment of the Miskitu to the international community. The specifics of this ideological re-orientation are further explicated in part III.

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<sup>97</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 148.

<sup>98</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas*, 247.

In June 1984, the Sandinista government sponsored the creation of MISATAN (Miskitu Asia Takanka Nicaragua)<sup>99</sup> from a group of pro-Sandinista Miskitu in the *asentamientos* and hoped that it could emerge as the main interlocutor with the government, but it failed to ever garner broad Miskitu support outside of Tasba Pri,<sup>100</sup> which still predominantly sympathized with MISURA or MISURASATA. MISATAN dissolved within two years of its inception, as its representative body became embittered to the Sandinista government's negotiations with MISURA, while maintaining that it could never garner broad support if other indigenous rights organizations simultaneously negotiated with the central government for a return to peace.

The Sandinistas emerged from the elections victorious by a significant margin, and in a study included in *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua* Vilas tentatively claims that 48% of the Miskitu populace that cast votes supported the Sandinistas.<sup>101</sup> It is quite surprising that no other source makes reference to this study. Perhaps other commentators on the subject omitted such studies from their research because the results seriously call into question the typical assessment that the Miskitu unanimously resented the Sandinista government. The Sandinistas responded to their democratically legitimized sovereignty over the state with much enthusiasm, and officially resumed dialogue with MISURASATA in December 1984. Rivera made public to the international community

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<sup>99</sup> In English, roughly Miskitu of the Atlantic Coast United with Nicaragua.

<sup>100</sup> Vilas, *State, Ethnicity, and Revolution*, 155.

<sup>101</sup> This study was conducted by Judy Butler in *La Costa voto. Los Costenos y las elecciones*, included in Carlos M. Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua: Capitalist Modernization and Revolutionary Change on the Atlantic Coast*, trans. Susan Norwood (Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989), 177. This appears to be the only study of its kind to date. The results perplexed Vilas, who envisioned far lower Miskitu support for the FSLN. However, it must be understood that nearly a third of the 80,000 Miskitu who lived in Nicaragua at the time of the Triumph remained in Honduras, while many of those remaining in Nicaragua likely did not participate in the elections.

that he desired working for peace in collaboration with the central government. Overall, the higher than expected Miskitu support for the government evinced in the national elections provided proof that not all Miskitu shared the counterrevolutionary motives of Fagoth, and imbued the government with the perception that a return to peace proved more than viable.

The views espoused by Miskitu concerning their opinions of the revolutionary government evince an insightful understanding of the political conditions at play, whether or not they supported the Sandinistas. For example, one Miskitu man expressed optimism that the villages of the Coast would resume the progress that characterized the first year and a half following the triumph, and blamed Fagoth and the Contras for impeding such progress. “According to the government plans, things are going to get much better. I believe so, especially when this war is over. Myself, I’m not in the militia. I can’t have anything to do with the military.”<sup>102</sup> Not only do these sentiments display more trust in the government than most sources acknowledge, they additionally evince the broad Miskitu desire for a return to peace, which will be further explained in Part III.

Many left for Honduras due to economic conditions and fear imbued from counterrevolutionary propaganda. The Coast had only one radio station, *Septiembre de 15*, which was orchestrated by Fagoth and served as a vehement anti-communist propaganda machine. One man stated “In 1980, 1981, people came across to us from Honduras. They told us that the Sandinistas were going to kill us. They said that the Sandinistas were going to destroy all of the Miskitu people. They said that the Sandinistas hated us and that they wanted our land, so they were going to wipe us out.

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<sup>102</sup> Levie, *The People Speak*, 161.

They told us... in Honduras... we would be safe.”<sup>103</sup> Others grew embittered with the Sandinistas due to the poor job market and never enough meat or milk at the markets.<sup>104</sup> Fagoth’s propaganda campaign furthermore fomented disdain for the “red-faced totalitarian regime.”<sup>105</sup> Until 1985, this propaganda proved largely successful in engraining Miskitu with fear of the Sandinistas, yet as dialogue with the Sandinistas resumed and the Miskitu became aware of Fagoth’s alignment with the U.S. government for personal benefit, increasing numbers of Miskitu disregarded the anti-Sandinista propaganda as “big lies from big heads.”<sup>106</sup>

## Conclusion

Thus, it appears as though the first years of conflict were characterized by serious Miskitu fragmentation from above and below, that even the vehement anti-Sandinistas feared the contras and Fagoth’s MISURA more. The broad dissatisfaction with U.S. government support of the Miskitu for ulterior motives reveal, by this point, a blunt rejection of Anglo-affinities and desire to continue resistance on their own terms, for their own interests. On the surface, these notions understandably appear to be ethnically charged, yet upon further inspection, the Sandinista ideological reorientation stopped

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<sup>103</sup> Levie, *The People Speak*, 146.

<sup>104</sup> For example, an old woman interviewed by Levie passionately insisted that the Sandinistas broke her hip: “I went to the store to buy some meat. And, as usual there was nothing there... I was so angry with *them*—so disgusted—that I fell into a hole in the road... So you see, *they* did this to me. *They* broke my hip” from Levie, *The People Speak*, 148.

<sup>105</sup> Fagoth often commented that the government was showing the red face of totalitarianism. One example of this is a Miskito-language radio broadcast by Steadman Fagoth from Honduras, shown in Levie, *The People Speak*, 139.

<sup>106</sup> Rafaga and others commonly refer to Fagoth as a traitor and claim that he and the U.S. only told “big lies.” For example, Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 98-9.

treating the Miskitu as an ethnic problem, and the Miskitu responded varyingly, but increasing support for the Sandinista government is apparent. Moreover, the fact that the Creoles displayed similar sentiments as the Miskitu, and also fought against the Sandinistas, evinces the conception that costeno resistance fought solely for their fair inclusion into the Revolutionary programme and to defend their distinctive cultural customs, as a multi-ethnic contingent.

The scholarship to date largely ignores these notions. While Dunbar-Ortiz holds that the only Miskitu who fought were forced to fight and that most were Pro-Sandinista, Nietschmann argues that every Miskitu considered the Sandinistas as “rabid dogs,” and the vast majority dissented to inclusion in the state.<sup>107</sup> Vilas maintains that the Miskitu unanimously hated the Sandinistas because they still lacked a political consciousness, which they masked with an ethnic consciousness, while openly referring to the Indians as backwards.<sup>108</sup> Hale, on the other hand, asserts that the Miskitu displayed perceptive political views, though they yet remained contradictory.

In sum, the various scholars continued fervidly defending their preconceived notions of the factors leading to conflict, even though this period is actually marked by an increasing desire for a return to peace and a favorable response to their re-election. However, this is not to say that all Miskitu supported the Sandinistas, if even a majority, but by the time broad awareness of Fagoth’s ulterior motives ensued, marked particularly by increasing support for Rivera and MISURASATA, the general perceptions embodied by the Miskitu remained largely at odds with MISURA. It is surprising that the relevant

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<sup>107</sup> Nietschmann, *The Unknown War*, 30.

<sup>108</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 135-138.

literature neglects to consider the possibility of fragmentation beyond the leadership of the Indigenous organizations, at the community level.

### **Part III: Returning Home with Written Rights**

In 1985 Rafaga replaced his gun with a pen, leaving the bush for the negotiating table. He decided to fight for peace after visiting with the “old heads” and people of thirty Miskitu villages, who unanimously expressed the desire for the bloodshed to end so that people could return home—from the bush, from Honduras, and from the *asentamientos*. Fagoth and Rivera continued to wage war from Honduras and Costa Rica, and what they lacked in popular support they made up for in power. Rafaga began a tedious process of dialogue with the Sandinista cadres, the leadership of the various indigenous rights organizations, and community members.

I explained to them my reasons for quitting the fight and my resentments toward the MISURA and KISAN leadership for its mistreatment of the Indian refugees in Honduras. I was trying to bring them over to our way of working for victory without more shedding of Indian blood. I told them about the old heads’ hopes for peace and reminded them that this was our traditional way of living—the way of taking advice from our old chiefs, not from leaders in Honduras who were being advised by CIA or from leaders in Costa Rica who were being advised by North American anthropologists and lawyers.<sup>109</sup>

Even though most Miskitu by this point resented Fagoth as a self-serving traitor and believed that he did not represent the interests of the Miskitu, they had yet to receive the rights for which they felt obligated to fight. Through his ties with the U.S. government, Fagoth had the means to continue making war.

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<sup>109</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 163.

Rafaga often spoke on behalf of the Miskitu with members of the Sandinista government to bring an end to the civil war. This process proved difficult to achieve as the countless meetings often ended in stalemate and confusion, but Rafaga remained optimistic. The opposing sides met to assure that however bitter their differences remained, by no means were they irreconcilable. However, many of the boys with whom he struggled to survive—sharing everything from the last piece of bread to the final cigarette—remained in the bush. How could they assure that the documents guaranteeing their rights could be trusted, that the government which betrayed them would abide by the laws it enacted?

Rafaga met most often with FSLN Minister of the Interior, Tomas Borge, for whom he developed sincere respect. “In all of my dealings with him in behalf of my people and on a personal level, he has every time kept his word and demonstrated a genuine desire to understand our problems completely.”<sup>110</sup> Borge expressed a deep commitment to restoring the war-torn communities and granting the Miskitu the rights they demanded. But peace could only come with trust in the governmental provisions. Rafaga claimed that “autonomy should not be just a piece of paper with ink on it that is thrown into the wastebasket when the war is over,”<sup>111</sup> as he and many others felt had been done after the triumph. Thus, the means for bringing about peace had to start at the community level.

Regardless of those continuing to fight, the negotiations mutually treated the protection and repair of the communities as the top priority. If the Miskitu’s daily life could return to functioning as it did in the initial days of promise after the Triumph, then perhaps the militancy would wane. Cease-fires in the war-torn villages were enacted. By

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<sup>110</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 161.

<sup>111</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 172.

1986, the Contras no longer constituted a severe threat to the vanguard regime, which allowed the central government to re-allocate essential resources to the Coast.

Gradually, increasing numbers of Miskitu laid down their arms. This resulted from four equally influential factors: i) Miskitu awareness of the corruption of their leaders, and ii) that they had no realistic chances of ever winning the war, iii) the firm insistence of the “old heads” and other community members that the bloodshed must end, and iv) the Sandinistas’ improved image amongst the Indians. By the end of 1987, the two sides achieved tentative peace with a new Nicaraguan Constitution that included the Autonomy Law. The process towards peace is marked by the resumption of dialogue between the Sandinista government and the indigenous rights organizations representing the Miskitu in December 1984, various cease-fire agreements with Miskitu villages, providing resources to the Coast for its redevelopment, allowing the Miskitu from the asentamientos to return home, and a string of bilateral agreements eventually written into law.

In this section I examine the conditions under which the Miskitu laid down arms and returned home from the bush. From the beginning of negotiations in December 1984 to the hesitant peace achieved nearly three years later in October 1987. Indeed, the peace accords doubled the length of the war. No matter how much the Miskitu desired peace they would only stop fighting with firmly secured rights. I contend that peace prevailed in much the same way it originally deteriorated—at the grassroots level, through the advice of the old heads. Furthermore, this period perhaps best evinces Miskitu heterogeneity through the intense fragmentation amongst the leadership of the various indigenous rights factions and Miskitus’ varying responses. Ultimately, the Miskitu remained rather

skeptical of the rights they received, but the government responded adequately enough to the Miskitu demands for them to justify ending the war.

### **Resumption of Dialogue**

The resumption of dialogue occurred through discussions with all of the indigenous organizations and community leaders. Miskitu agreed to discuss a return to peace with the central government due to their broad acknowledgement of their corrupt leadership, the improvements made by the central government since their ideological re-orientation, and the low odds of winning the war. These perceptions shall reveal that Miskitu ethnic identity played a minimal role and remained ideologically divided beyond their general agreement about these perceptions.

Overall, Vilas, Nietschmann, and Hale posit decidedly different views about the nature of dialogue in returning to peace. Whereas Vilas argues that the Sandinistas legitimately met Miskitu demands<sup>112</sup>, Nietschmann claims that the Sandinistas unjustly coerced them into compliance<sup>113</sup>, and Hale contends somewhere in between, explaining that the Sandinistas demarcated the political space within which negotiations could resume, and that the Sandinistas ultimately granted the Miskitu many of their desired concessions, but also tricked them into agreement.<sup>114</sup> I tend to agree more along the lines with Vilas but also believe that the Miskitu and their leadership demonstrated a keen

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<sup>112</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 142. For example, Vilas claims “the reformulation of the policies and programs for the Coast and the gradual abandonment of revolutionary ethnocentrism and indigenist chauvinism set the stage for a more open relationship between the FSLN and the revolutionary government, on the one hand, and Costeno leaders, on the other.”

<sup>113</sup> Nietschmann, *The Unknown War*, 65-66.

<sup>114</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 174.

understanding of the laws they ended up agreeing to. This notion is supported by Rafaga's consistent references to the "bilateral" agreements and his satisfaction in them.<sup>115</sup>

As described in Section II, the elections held by the FSLN in 1984 and their overwhelming victory, for whatever reason, elicited a radical ideological shift in their treatment of the Miskitu. Tomas Borge, Minister of the Interior for the FSLN assumed the chief role in negotiating with the Miskitu. The Sandinistas' new platform for the Coast ultimately determined the political space<sup>116</sup> within which negotiations ensued and aimed to further legitimize FSLN sovereignty over the Coast through broadening Miskitu support. The Sandinistas intended on achieving peace through "the achievement of 'hegemony' through 'political-ideological struggle.'"<sup>117</sup> The government enacted this through offering substantial aid to recuperate the Miskitu villages and providing the essential resources to the Coast: the rations, medical care, and infrastructural improvement that originally brought the people to adopt the revolutionary ideology. The resumption of these provisions and the community members' overwhelming desire to return to peace enabled the process of negotiations and eventually allowed the bullets to rest.

In order to improve support at the local level, Borge entirely replaced the tropa (government officials assigned to the Coast), with older and more educated members who integrated more thoroughly into the community.<sup>118</sup> The new tropa members went to church and participated in the Miskitu festivities while also respecting dissent for the

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<sup>115</sup> For example, see Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 155.

<sup>116</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 174.

<sup>117</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 171.

<sup>118</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 170.

Sandinistas to a much higher degree. The number of Miskitu arrests decreased significantly, and punishments proved more lenient.<sup>119</sup> Thus, through becoming more involved in the Miskitu community, the Sandinista government came off far less “assimilationist” to the Miskitu than they had in the escalation to conflict. In fact, it appears as though the tropa attempted to assimilate to Miskitu culture, and did so rather successfully. This significantly improved the perception amongst Miskitu about the central government, but still came far short of eliciting their full trust.

The emergence of Miskito awareness about the corruption of their leadership largely enabled the Sandinistas to improve their image to the Indians. Though I mentioned this in Section II, the full depth of this corruption proved evident in 1985. Rafaga contended that “all these realizations about the corruption of our leaders moved us toward dialogue with the Sandinistas.”<sup>120</sup> General Miskitu resentment of the conditions of life in Honduras, of Fagoth’s personal use of funds allocated to him for the resistance, and Miskitu discovery of *Libro Unico*, Fagoth’s secret journal from the CIA dictating his every move.<sup>121</sup> However, the extent to which the Miskitu resistance depended upon U.S. support necessitated their alignment with Fagoth in order to fulfill their harrowed battle for Indian rights, no matter how much they resented him<sup>122</sup>. Reconciling this contradiction proved tricky in the years to come.

This ultimately led to Fagoth’s forced resignation from MISURA, from which the Miskitu formed KISAN. The Miskitu in Honduras at the time, explained Rafaga, tried to

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<sup>119</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 171.

<sup>120</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 142.

<sup>121</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 145.

<sup>122</sup> For example, Vilas and Hale both comment on the necessity of U.S. government aid in enabling the Miskitu to continue the war.

get Rivera to lead KISAN, which would effectively cut all Miskitu ties with the U.S. and unite the existing indigenous organizations. But he refused to show up to the meeting. As a result, those present at the assembly elected Fagoth's mentee, Wycliffe Diego, as the organization's president.<sup>123</sup> A group of KISAN members in favor of peace referred to their sector as KISAN por la Paz, with Rafaga as a chief leader, and created the first cease-fire for the war in the Miskitu village of Yulo in 1985.

Another important factor enabling dialogue between the Sandinistas and Miskitu to resume stemmed from the waning threat posed by the contras to overthrowing the Sandinista government. October 1985 marked the "Strategic Defeat" of the FDN. The Sandinista's legitimate landslide victory in the election of 1984 and their increasing support amongst Nicaraguans seriously damaged U.S. government propaganda campaigns to decrease support for the government. "From that point on, despite massive, continuous infusions of U.S. aid (both covert and congressionally approved) and repeated efforts at reorganization and revitalization, the contras never recovered the initiative as an offensive military force." Though the FDN could forever remain a thorn in the side of the Sandinista government, they no longer constituted a legitimate threat to its overthrow.

Rafaga perceptively verifies the futility of their fight. "I believed that if all of the communities of the Atlantic Coast were begging for peace and we guerrilla boys kept fighting, we could have no victory. I felt it was better to obey the old heads, abide with them, and cooperate with their ideas."<sup>124</sup> Most Miskitu echo this realization, and no longer felt justified in waging a war that could only result in more casualties. In this context, then, the process of dialogue can be understood.

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<sup>123</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 143-4.

<sup>124</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 164.

Section II illustrates the conditions under which the central government desired to begin negotiations with the Costa Rica based MISURASATA. The two sides met in December 1984, the first of four meetings, which began with promise and ended in MISURASATA's re-escalation of conflict. Talks would not occur again until 1988. The failure of negotiations with MISURASATA and MISURA's vehement denial to engage with the Sandinistas in any way but through war sparked the central government's attempt to create a new indigenous rights organization. In June 1984, they organized MISATAN from a group of pro-Sandinista Miskitu in the asentamientos and hoped that it could step up as the main interlocutor with the government, but it failed to ever garner broad Miskitu support<sup>125</sup>, which still predominantly sympathized with MISURA or MISURASATA.

By July 1985 the FSLN conceived a tentative autonomy document that they presented to the Miskitu at village meetings.<sup>126</sup> From this came the cease-fire of Yulo. This cease fire marked the first notable agreement between the two sides. Rafaga attended the meeting with twenty-nine old heads and was proud of the progress. "We made a bilateral agreement with Borge that we Indian fighters would not be taking any more guns or bullets from Costa Rica and Honduras. The government, in turn, promised to give us every kind of military materiel we should need to defend Yulo."<sup>127</sup> This re-allocation of the necessary provisions to the Coast furthermore increased government support. As a result, cease-fires like the one achieved in Yulo were enacted gradually throughout several other villages in the ensuing months. These agreements took the war out of the

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<sup>125</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 155.

<sup>126</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity*, 155.

<sup>127</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 156.

communities and appear to have significantly improved Miskitu trust in the Sandinista government.

Various newspapers in the U.S. frequently published articles about the negotiations with interviews from Rivera during which he always claimed to be Nicaraguan and to want to participate in dialogue towards peace.<sup>128</sup> But the two had reversed conditions for dialogue to resume: The Sandinistas required the Miskitu to lay down arms before resuming talks, while the Miskitu leadership first wanted their rights.<sup>129</sup> This helps further evince Hale's contention that the Sandinistas created the political space within which negotiations could resume.

However, Hale furthermore contends that the Miskitu were more or less confused by the documents they signed into agreement, and that peace ensued in a rather uncertain manner. This view fails to adequately take into account the differences between the leadership and the people. Though Hale states that it started at the community level and eventually convinced the leadership to start moving towards peace, he also holds that Sandy Bay's deeply entrenched alignment with MISURA was representative of all Miskitu communities. This does not appear to be the case, as Rafaga contended nearly all of the Miskitu perceived the representational organizations as corrupt. They wanted peace but would come to it in no uncertain terms. Once their rights had been acknowledged,

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<sup>128</sup> For example, refer to the *New York Times* articles, published, in particular, by Stephen Kinzer, Phillip Russell, James LeMoyne, Shirley Christian, and Penny Lernoux between 1985 and 1987. Though they all cover the same subject, see the most comprehensive explanation of the negotiation process in Stephen Kinzer, "Miskito Chief Due in Managua for Peace Talks" *New York Times*, October 21, 1987; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), with Index (1851-1922), A5.

<sup>129</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 170-1.

they dropped their arms. The Miskitu demonstrated a keen understanding of the political framework during this process.

### **Miskitu against Miskitu**

Perhaps the most critical factor leading to the overwhelming Miskitu desire to end the war was Miskitu fighting Miskitu. In fact all of the Conterrevolutionary allegations against the Miskitu, as Nietschmann argues occurred for reasons of the Sandinistas unjust policies of incursion and annexation – were actually committed by the Contras. This pitted the Miskitu in an uncomfortable place of having to trust one or the other institutions that both betrayed them. This led to the Miskitu playing the Sandinista government, KISAN, and MISURASATA. One of Baracco’s interviewees made the following insightful claim

So after 6 years of heavy fighting, and Miskitu being killed on each side, there was a point when the leadership, the elders, intervened to say we can’t just kill each other... we saw we were fighting against brothers coming from Honduras and the elders intervened and they said ‘no’.<sup>130</sup>

The old heads largely ordained the return to peace, who served as the only remaining leadership for the Miskitu that had yet to betray them. Rafaga echoes similar sentiments in coming to characterize Miskitu versus Miskitu conflict as unacceptable, likening it to behavior like animals.

Miskitu agency at the local level is evinced by a sizeable portion of the Miskitu who were satisfied with neither the central government nor the indigenous organizations

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<sup>130</sup> From an interview with “Anonymous A” conducted by Luciano Baracco in Puerto Cabezas, 2009, as transcribed in Baracco, “We Fought for Our Land” 242.

negotiating with them. As a result, the dialogue aimed at achieving peace also imbued a sense of dissatisfaction that did not stop “with passive dissent but motivated constant semiclandestine political action as well, such as sending food to the bush people and secretly housing field commanders who visited the community. The same people who engaged in this ‘resistance’ often participated fully in *autonomia* and thereby contributed directly to its success.”<sup>131</sup> The organizations did not stop with their allegations of Sandinista human rights abuses either, even though the leadership of the indigenous organizations committed all of the allegations they made against the Sandinista government, in order to gain enough political legitimacy to continue the war. This fragmentation fostered varying displays of Miskitu agency.

Furthermore, the mutually hostile outlets for resistance trapped the Miskitu with the frightening and difficult decision to either remain in Honduras or return to Nicaragua. In an article for the *New York Times* published in August 1986, author James LeMoyné states:

The Miskitos are torn by internal disputes and seem increasingly uncertain of their future. Several told a recent visitor that they were worried that they might never be able to return to Nicaragua. Some Indian leaders said they fear that their people could become like the Hmong and Meo tribesmen in Asia - indigenous people drafted into a war by the C.I.A. and later abandoned.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 191.

<sup>132</sup> James LeMoyné, “Miskitos are Arguing with Themselves” *New York Times*, August 3, 1986, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), with Index (1851-1922), A4.

Morris and Churchill's contribution to the literature makes the same comparison except replaces LeMoyne's "could" with "already did."<sup>133</sup> Until the ratification of the Autonomy Law postdating the aforementioned article by half a year, a large contingent of refugees remained in Honduras.

### **The Autonomy Law**

The ratification of the Autonomy Law in May of 1987 allowed the vast majority of the Miskitu remaining abroad to come home, and at least nominally put an end to the war. The return began in late 1985. 12,000 returned home until 8,000 left for Honduras again from a KISAN terrorist campaign which was blamed on the Sandinistas. The Peace and Autonomy commissions between 1985 and 1987 attempted to come to a bilateral agreement, which progressed slowly. In these commissions, each village elected its own leader to be sent to negotiate with the FSLN, and eventually achieve a local cease-fire agreement. In 1987 more than 120 villages signed and 19,000 Miskitu had been repatriated.

Hale includes an interpretation of the specific legislature of the Autonomy Law as it compared to the rhetorical demands made by the Miskitu, through categorizing four specific types of Miskitu demands: territory, economic control, political exclusivity, and cultural exclusivity. He then explains each demand and the resulting rights granted by the Autonomy Law going to show that the demands and laws are both ambivalent in a few cases. For example, the bilateral law guarantees the rights to the communal lands that have traditionally belonged to Costeno ethnic groups, stipulating that those villages may

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<sup>133</sup> Morris and Churchill, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*.

retain all profit from the exploitation of resources, while the government retains joint custody with the Costenos over villages further inland which are not considered to be traditionally inhabited by indigenous peoples. Accordingly, it grants the right to a regionally autonomous council comprised of members from each ethnic group as elected by Costenos. The council members are promised the right to preserve their culture without interference from the central government, while also sharing power with the State in upholding regional autonomy in both regions' ultimate subservience to the federal enactments of the State constitution.<sup>134</sup> Thus, the Autonomy Law met Costeno demands for political representation and cultural preservation in a manner similar to the U.S. government's political distinctions between local and federal sovereignty, and appears to have achieved broad Miskitu support.

The fact that the government waited to ratify its proposed constitution and the revisions made along the way until it had the support of the Miskitu people illustrates the commitment of the central government to acknowledging and respecting Miskitu demands. Vilas claims that the Miskitu had no clear concept of autonomy at first, and that it developed slowly focusing on land, resources, language, self-government, preservation of their cultures, religion, relations with the central government, the powers of the regional governments, and modes of participation.<sup>135</sup> However, the Miskitu appeared to display clearly defined goals for autonomy to begin with, as will be shown in the description of the Autonomy Law.

Various newspapers agencies in the U.S. and Nicaragua including the *New York Times* and *Envio* frequently published articles in 1986 and 1987 about the proposed autonomy

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<sup>134</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 197.

<sup>135</sup> Vilas, *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua*, 171.

law and include interviews from Rivera in which he always claimed to be Nicaraguan and to want to participate in dialogue towards peace, but more importantly, that he would not order his men to lay down their arms until the Sandinistas granted them their inalienable rights.<sup>136</sup> But the two had reversed conditions for dialogue to resume: The Sandinistas required the Miskitu to lay down arms before resuming talks, while the Miskitu leadership first wanted their rights. This helps further evince Hale's contention that the Sandinistas created the political space within which negotiations could resume.

However, Hale additionally contends that the Miskitu were more or less confused by the documents they signed into agreement, and that peace ensued in a rather uncertain manner. This view fails to adequately take into account the differences between the leadership and the people. Though Hale states that it started at the community level and eventually convinced the leadership to start moving towards peace, he also holds that Sandy Bay's deeply entrenched alignment with MISURA was representative of all Miskitu communities. This does not appear to be the case, as Rafaga contended nearly all of the Miskitu perceived the representational organizations as corrupt. They wanted peace but would come to it in no uncertain terms. Once their rights had been acknowledged, they dropped their arms. The Miskitu demonstrated a keen understanding of the political framework during this process. In this sense, I tend to agree more with the interpretation that Hale argues against: The Sandinistas improved their image enough to the Miskitu and adequately enough granted their demands to end the war.

In examining the law proposed in May, 1987 and ratified with the Nicaraguan constitution months later in November, Hale perceptively notes that the *Principles and*

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<sup>136</sup> "Miskitos on the Rio Coco: Who's Political Football Are They: Miskitu Fighting Amongst Themselves," in *Envio*, Vol. 5, No. 59, (May, 1986): 14-27.

*Policies for the Exercise of the Autonomy Rights of the Indian Peoples and Communities of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua* “shows just how far the revolution and costeno leaders had come in understanding one another” in reaffirming the unity and indivisibility of the Nicaraguan state, and ratifying the struggle against all forms of racism, ethnocentrism, separatism, and hegemony, and “affirms the right to collective and individual property on the lands Costenos have traditionally occupied” while demonstrating respect for the procedures “for transmission of property and land use.”<sup>137</sup> Though Hale goes on to claim that this bilateral agreement was more or less forced upon the Miskitu by the Sandinistas in the political space they demarcated, the Miskitu perhaps achieved their highest level of unanimity since the Triumph. Rafaga contends that “for me, autonomy is not a gift from the Sandinistas. The autonomy of Tawaswalpa<sup>138</sup> is a historical right that the Sandinista government has recognized... This was a great step for us.”<sup>139</sup> Accordingly, whether or not the Miskitu were prodded into accepting the laws proposed by the Sandinista government, they struggled for nearly three years to make sure it aligned with their desires. Once the Miskitu community leaders finally achieved satisfaction with the legislation, the Miskitu began returning home *en masse*.

Southbound Miskitu flocked by the thousands across the Rio Coco officially changing their status as refugees to repatriates. By the end of 1987 around 20,000 Miskitu had returned home, while another 10,000 made the cross in the ensuing months. Fagoth temporarily moved to Miami, and the US government ceased its counterrevolutionary operations, though they continued imposing crippling economic sanctions on Nicaragua.

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<sup>137</sup> Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, 171.

<sup>138</sup> Traditional name of the Atlantic Coast in the Miskitu language.

<sup>139</sup> Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, 172.

Nevertheless, the process of revitalizing their communities recommenced with the same gusto in the year following the triumph. They secured their admittance to the law, and they demonstrated pride in their Nicaraguan identity.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, this period has been far less discussed by the literature, as Vilas, Nietschmann, and Hale respectively are the only sources covering the entire war. Furthermore, very few primary sources have appeared after 1985, so Rafaga is one of the few from which I could develop my argument. Nevertheless, Hale and Vilas both contend that ethnic militancy and Anglo-affinities abruptly departed from the Miskitu psyche. They do a good job of noting the desire of the community members to return to peace and the fragmentation of the leadership, but for some reason again neglect to mention the divisions of the community level. It appears as though the Miskitu were trapped between their support for the structure of the Revolutionary government and their loved ones who died to secure their rights. While many like Rafaga eventually convinced the vast majority of refugees to return home and soldiers to drop their arms, not even the ratification of the Autonomy Law and nominal return to peace could fully erase disdain for the government. Nevertheless, the government did an adequate enough job of getting enough support and developing legal provisions for the seven-year war to finally end.

In fact, it appears as though the Miskitu adopted the same anti-imperialist perception of the U.S. government. Hale acknowledges that the influence of Anglo-affinities largely receded during the peace accords. I contend that this decrease happened long before though. Nevertheless, the Miskitu were caught in the contradictory notion of

necessitating U.S. support to have the means for warfare and wanting to continue the fight on their own terms. They apparently demonstrated more of a willingness to obtain peace with the Sandinistas than accept further aligning with the ulterior motives of the U.S. government.

The Autonomy Law sufficiently addressed the Miskitu desire for regional autonomy and also allowed for more political representation at the local level throughout the Coast. Such considerations, when combined with the continuance of Sandinista aid to the region effectively enabled the Miskitu to return to peace while also considering the war a moral victory. Their fight indeed increased Coastal autonomy, gave them final say over their own land, and allowed for their mutual integration into a unified nation officially led under the legitimate and popularly elected central government, and protected by the laws of the new Constitution.

## **Conclusion**

This study suggests that the Miskitu proved far more politically heterogeneous as a group and that the Sandinista government and later commentators on the subject have imposed an over-emphasized ethnic identity upon the Miskitu. Furthermore, it implies that the Miskitu held far different ideological reasons for fighting than the leadership of MISURA, and fought against the Sandinsitas to reclaim rights previously granted by the central government after the triumph, rather than attempting to create a separate nation on the Atlantic Coast. The implications of such claims are wide ranging, especially when considering their distance from the broad contentions articulated by the relevant literature. First, it places Miskitu agency on a higher plane by emphasizing the grassroots nature of their resistance. Second, it renders the Miskitu as more politically aware than most researchers contend by removing the conception that they were imbued by a contradictory and backwards consciousness. Finally, it solidifies their collective consciousness as more concerned with national identity than ethnic identity.

Indirectly, these conclusions furthermore suggest the influential roles played by unforeseen events and individuals in shaping the course of the narrative. These considerations are aimed to place more weight on near rather than distant events in retelling the Miskitu tale during their conflict with the Sandinistas and ultimately render the deterministic interpretations inadequate. Had Steadman Fagoth not assumed the lead role of MISURASATA and KISAN or without an accidental gunshot in the sacred Moravian church of Prinzapolka, it is quite plausible to assume that bloodshed would not have ensued.

Broadly, the story of the Miskitu during the 1980s is unique in comparison to other indigenous groups in Central and Latin America, because of its retrospective success. They actually achieved their mutual integration into the nation of Nicaragua on their own terms, and the central government displayed far more commitment to fulfilling indigenous demands than any of its neighbors. In fact, during the negotiations towards peace, the Sandinistas and Miskitu desired to create the standard for other nations to follow in their treatment of indigenous citizens. The model the two groups mutually constructed undeniably deserves respect. The Autonomy Law and Nicaraguan Constitution of 1987 legislatively crafted a united nation with regional autonomy based on two distinct cultures, granting impressive political authority to both regions under a broad and inclusive sovereign body.

Moreover, the FSLN of Nicaragua also counts as an exceptional case in relation to all the revolutions of history. No other revolutionary vanguard so quickly held fair elections to prove its legitimacy, publicly acknowledged its own shortcomings, or altered its ideology along the way to progress its inclusivity for all demographic groups. Similarly, no other vanguard so respectfully handed over power after losing an election. The Sandinista insurrection serves as the quintessential social revolution, especially for Latin America. Likewise, the Miskitu resistance that necessitated their just inclusion into the revolutionary program was not in vain. Without taking up arms, it is likely they would not have achieved such a degree of autonomy, nor would the Sandinistas have been able to adequately include ethnic minorities into their ideological ontology.

Today, the Atlantic Coast is still economically destitute, while Nicaragua is the second poorest nation in the western Hemisphere. The FSLN lost the election of 1990 while

nearly half of the Miskitu populace who participated voted for the Sandinistas. The election of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) reverted the progress made on the Coast and made it susceptible to unjust economic exploitation again. However, the Sandinistas reclaimed power in 1994 and have held onto it since, though most claim the FSLN has lost its sense of revolutionary justice under the increasing corruption of President Daniel Ortega. Ironically, Steadman Fagoth now occupies a minimal position within the FSLN. The Atlantic Coast still has the regional autonomy ratified in 1987, and the Miskitu have far better relations with the government than they did during the 1980s, but the process of redevelopment will likely take decades to achieve.

### **Research Limitations**

This study proves limited in a few significant ways. First of all, and most importantly, I constructed my argument without ever setting foot in Nicaragua or any direct interaction with Miskitu. As a result, my conclusions are limited to the selections included in other researcher's compilations of Miskitu sources. Though I believe the study adequately interprets the available sources, the legitimacy of such interpretations is inferior to direct interaction in the area. However, it is possible that commenting from afar allowed a more objective analysis due to the sensitivity of the subject that has thus far not lent much to impartiality. Nevertheless, sometimes even superior objectivity cannot adequately replace direct experience. Valuable historical interpretations often earn their respect from means other than objectivity.

Secondly, the significant departure from the conclusions of the authoritative figures of the subject serves as another limitation to the applied method of research. The

commentators have nearly unanimously found common ground in their estimations regarding Miskitu animosity for the Sandinista government and the momentous influence of Anglo-affinities and ethnic identity in determining the Miskitu reactions to the revolutionary government. Nevertheless, my departure from such interpretations is not without warrant. The Miskitu testaments steered me away from being able to agree with the interpretations offered by the non-Miskitu who either strongly supported the Sandinistas or the U.S. government. Sometimes it appears as though historical interpretations can only sufficiently address the events as they become further distanced by time.

Finally, the force with which I suggest the ways in which the Miskitu thought of themselves and attempt to address the composition of their distinct identity and collective consciousness is limited by its analysis through adherence to the western European ideal. The Miskitu culture, and most indigenous cultures for that matter, think in different terms and display a different, though equally complex, consciousness. As a result, it is difficult to accurately represent the ideologies of indigenous groups, but perhaps my research can contribute meaningfully to the relevant audience similarly attached to the western European model.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Future research ought to focus on the narratives of other ethnic groups of the Atlantic Coast, which have been scarcely considered. The findings of such research would undoubtedly improve analyses of Miskitu ethnic identity based on the degree to which the other groups, like the Creoles, aligned with Miskitu ideology. Furthermore, research

about the political ideological differences based on Miskitu age and gender would significantly advance the conceptions of Miskitu fragmentation. I have speculated that the women may have tended to support the Sandinistas more than Miskitu men based on the increased female agency and community involvement fostered by the revolutionary redevelopment of the Coast. Furthermore, those who went to Nicaragua were predominantly young men. The studies conducted on Miskitu gender thus far have addressed the rampancy of machismo throughout the Atlantic Coast, which is perhaps suggestive of why young men proved so willing to take up arms when the opportunity presented itself. In addition, research aiming to further understand Miskitu ethnic identity during the war would be quite beneficial to the relevant subject in order to replace the reduction of other types of indigenous identity to ethnicity, which dominates approaches thus far maintained.

In sum, the Miskitu call to arms against the Sandinista government and the long war that ensued resulted from complexities not yet adequately considered. Further research should undeniably contribute to the articulations thus far advanced and enhance our conceptions of such complexities that are inherent to every group of people and, similarly, every war. Successful social revolutions are few and far between in history, but resistance to them seemingly always occurs. Hopefully this study improves the considerations pertaining to such intricacies between ethnicity and revolution and allows future investigations of the subject to more satisfactorily acknowledge their full breadth in the Nicaraguan Revolution.

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