CONSTRUCTING A MULTI-ETHNIC STATE: CHALLENGES TO NATIONALISM AND
POLITICAL AUTONOMY IN THE ATLANTIC COAST OF NICARAGUA

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
School of Politics, Philosophy, and Public Affairs

AUGUST 2015

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of
BRUNO MARTIN BALTODANO find it satisfactory and recommend that it be
accepted.

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Martha Cottam Ph.D., Chair

___________________________________
Otwin Marenin, Ph.D.

___________________________________
Thomas Preston, Ph.D.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In putting together this dissertation, I was blessed by good fortune far in excess of what I deserved. There are many who contributed in bringing this work to fruition and my deepest gratitude goes to the members of my graduate committee for their patience, guidance and, most important, the occasional push along the long and winding road.

In my first year as a graduate student, I lost a beloved aunt to cancer; Tom Preston was there to help me put things in their proper perspective at a time when all I wanted to do was to go home. I will never forget that.

If I could bestow the title of Maharishi upon anyone it would be Otto Marenin. Time and again he listened to what I thought were cataclysmic-level problems and, seemingly effortlessly, delivered succinct and keen advice that showed me a clear way forward. Thank you, Otto.

Martha Cottam was not only a teacher, friend and supporter but the best mentor I’ve ever had. Her efforts on my behalf made my experience in graduate school far more enriching than I ever could have imagined. But, most importantly, she was instrumental in helping me to find the long-lost voice of a dead guerrillero…my father. In doing so, she helped me to become not only a better academic but also a better person. Muchísimas gracias por todo Martha.

I am grateful to all my aunts and cousins, who were more like mothers and sisters to me.

Mis viejitas, Mayin, Chilla, Machita, Lionidas, este proyecto no hubiera podido ser llevado a cabo sin su amor, ayuda y confianza en mí. Les agradezco todo los sacrificios que hicieron.

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My mother, María de la Cruz Baltodano, raised me as a single mom in Nicaragua (not an easy thing to do) and sacrificed much so that I could get a good education. She enrolled me in a private school that she could scarcely afford and made sure I got on the bus every day for the hour-long drive to school in Managua. As if that was not enough, one day in late September, 1984, she left her home, friends and family and became a refugee in a foreign land alongside with me. Mama, mil gracias por todos tus sacrificios. Dijo Darío, el gran poeta, que “el amor de una madre es amor no dichoso pero es inmenso, un santo amor.” Te quiero mucho.

Joe Huseby, Martín Meráz García, Nicole Burchett and I went through our graduate school years together. We shared many ups and downs and I benefited largely from the fellowship. Thank you for being my friends and colleagues.

My father, Ricardo Vargas, made the choice to leave his family, home and friends to go up into the mountain, pick up a rifle, and become a revolutionary. He lost his life for a political cause; namely, to leave a better country for his children. I chose to become a political scientist largely because of the sacrifices he made. Gracias mi viejo.

Finally, I could not have finished this project this without the support and encouragement from my wife, Laura, and my children, Brandon, Andrew, Gabriella and Victoria. Laura, I still remember the day when I, indeed, saw our unborn children in your eyes on a bright summer day in Genie Springs, Florida. I love you deeply, you are my rock. Kids, you are the most fascinating people I have ever met. I am blessed to watch and help you grow. My love for you is truly immeasurable, you are my home and I will always be there for you.

This work is dedicated to my mother and my family.

To all of you, thank you. I remain, now and always, in your debt.
CONSTRUCTING A MULTI-ETHNIC STATE: CHALLENGES TO NATIONALISM AND POLITICAL AUTONOMY IN THE ATLANTIC COAST OF NICARAGUA

Abstract

by Bruno Martin Baltodano, Ph.D.
Washington State University
August 2015

Chair: Martha Cottam

On the surface, Nicaragua looks like a nation-state. But, upon closer examination, it behaves like a core-community, non-nation-state struggling to unify two peoples: on one hand the core-community of Mestizos in the Pacific and Central regions, on the other the indigenous and afro-descendant peoples of the Caribbean Coast. Minority groups in the Coast, particularly the Miskitu-nani, resist assimilation into Mestizo culture and preserve primary political loyalty to their ethnic group. Drawing upon political psychology, this work considers the viability of creating a superordinate identity in Nicaraguan. It examines the rise of indigenous identity following the Sandinista Revolution, political alliances during the Contra War and the political autonomy regime. This study focuses on the perception of opportunity for both self-determination (from the perspective of the peoples of the Coast) and for national unity (from the perspective of the Mestizo core-community), opportunities that did not fully exist before the drafting of the Law of Autonomy.

This dissertation contributes to the growing body of knowledge addressing nationalism, indigenous political identity and political autonomy. This has important implications for the
behavior of political actors in Nicaragua, for the preservation of cultural and biological diversity in the region and for the wider international community.

Based on field and archival data, this work posits three conclusions: First, the indigenous peoples of Nicaragua are adept at recognizing risks and opportunities to their group and behave accordingly - thus it’s erroneous to view their actions simply as those of “pawns in a chess board,” controlled by domestic or foreign actors. Secondly, failures of the central government in fully protecting political autonomy in the Coast have had a negative influence in the creation of a superordinate identity in the Coast. Finally, even as the development of political autonomy in Nicaragua is oftentimes portrayed by conservative Mestizo political leaders as an imminent risk of disintegration of the nation-state and as the peoples of the Coast have a long history of distrusting Mestizos, the interactions between the core-community and the indigenous peoples of Nicaragua are not purely antagonistic and, therefore, the development of a nationalism in the Coast is probable.
Appendix A

Political Divisions:

RAAN: (Región Autónoma Atlántica del Norte) North Atlantic Autonomous Region
RAAS: (Región Autónoma Atlántica del Sur) South Atlantic Autonomous Region

Source: Universidad Centro Americana, Managua, Nicaragua, 2008
Appendix B

Land Utilization and Vegetation – Nicaragua

Source: INAFOR, Oficina Nacional de Registro Forestal, Managua, Nicaragua 2003
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Geographic Distribution of Indigenous Populations (RAAN and RAAS)

Source: Dirección de Estadísticas, MINSA, 2003
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Ethnolinguistic Map, Indigenous People, Nicaragua

Source: Ethnologue.com
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Mískitu Ancestral Lands (Prior to 1960)

Source: Universidad Centro Americana, Managua, Nicaragua
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Advancement of Latifundios

Source: Universidad Centro Americana, Managua, Nicaragua (Maldidier)
Appendix G

Map of overlapping indigenous land in the RAAS
TABLE 1

**Combined** Population (RAAN and RAAS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Population</th>
<th>Mestizo</th>
<th>Miskito</th>
<th>Creole</th>
<th>Sumu</th>
<th>Rama</th>
<th>Garifuna</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mestizo</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miskito</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creole</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumu</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rama</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garifuna</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Departamento de Planificación y Desarrollo, INATEC, 2005
TABLE 2 – *Ethnic Representation in Municipal Government (RAAS/RAAN)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group in RAAS</th>
<th>Council Members</th>
<th>1998 (%)</th>
<th>Council Members</th>
<th>2002 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mestizos</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creole</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miskítu-nani</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garífuna</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumu-Mayagna</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rama</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>47</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>47</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group in RAAN</th>
<th>Council Members</th>
<th>1998 (%)</th>
<th>Council Members</th>
<th>2002 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mestizos</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>47.93%</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>56.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miskítu-nani</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>43.75%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creole</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.16%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumu-Mayagna</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.16%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>48</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>48</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Consejo Supremo Electoral (Supreme Electoral Council) 2002
### TABLE 3 – COGNITIVE IMAGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Intentions</th>
<th>Decision makers</th>
<th>Threat or opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enemy</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Small elite</td>
<td>Threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbarian</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Small elite</td>
<td>Threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperialist</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Exploitive</td>
<td>A few groups</td>
<td>Threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Benign</td>
<td>Small elite</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degenerate</td>
<td>Superior or equal</td>
<td>Weak-willed</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Confused, differentiated</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogue</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Small elite</td>
<td>Threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ally</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Many groups</td>
<td>Threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image of Other Political Actor</td>
<td>Threat/Opportunity</td>
<td>Strategic Preference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enemy image</td>
<td>Threat high</td>
<td>Containment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbarian image</td>
<td>Threat high</td>
<td>Search for allies, augment power</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial image</td>
<td>Threat high</td>
<td>Submit/ revolt when possible</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogue image</td>
<td>Threat moderate/low</td>
<td>Crush</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degenerate image</td>
<td>Opportunity high/moderate</td>
<td>Challenge, take risks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial Image</td>
<td>Opportunity high</td>
<td>Control, exploit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ally Image</td>
<td>Threat/Opportunity (Will help in either context)</td>
<td>Negotiate agreements, Common strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 5: INDICATORS FOR THE APPEARANCE OF NATIONALISM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Miskítu</th>
<th>Rama</th>
<th>Sumu</th>
<th>Mestizo</th>
<th>Creole</th>
<th>Garífuna</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change-Oriented Elite</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>MODERATE</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>POOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Participation</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>MODERATE</td>
<td>POOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viability (Defense)</td>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>POOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viability (Economy)</td>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>MODERATE</td>
<td>POOR</td>
<td>POOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness (History)</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>POOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness (Culture)</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness (Language)</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity (Religion)</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity (Race)</td>
<td>MODERATE</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONGES</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Ethnic</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>STRONG</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHART 1 - Miskitu
Survey, “How do you feel in relation to your ethnic or national identity?”
(More Miskitu, More Nicaraguan, Just as Miskitu as Nicaraguan, Don’t Know)

Source: Instituto de Desarrollo Humano, Managua, 2004
CHART 2- **Sumu**
Survey, “How do you feel in relation to your ethnic or national identity?”
(More Sumu, More Nicaraguan, Just as Sumu as Nicaraguan, Don’t Know)

![Pie chart showing ethnic/national identity preferences](chart.png)

- **Sumu**: 60%
- **Nicaraguan**: 30%
- **Neither**: 6%
- **Same**: 4%

Source: Instituto de Desarrollo Humano, Managua, 2004
CHART 3 – *Mestizo*
Survey, “How do you feel in relation to your ethnic or national identity?”
(More Mestizo, More Nicaraguan, Just as Mestizo as Nicaraguan, Don’t Know)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic/National Identity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nicaraguan</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mestizos</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Instituto de Desarrollo Humano, Managua, 2004
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There is a story of long, long ago, my grandmother told it to me.

It was in the time of the ancients and there were little children in a village

One day, they sprouted wings.

“You will surely die one day my mother,” said one child,

And so the children went outside at once, whereupon they changed into birds.

The children survived and thrived in that way, the mothers and fathers of the children died.

Tzotzil origination myth
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On the surface, Nicaragua has all the trappings of a proud nation-state. Her territory is demarcated between two navigable rivers to the north and south and by two oceans to the east and west, the majority of her population is homogenous (almost 75% of its 6 million people are Mestizo)\(^1\), most Nicaraguans profess Christianity as their religion (nearly 99% with Roman Catholics the majority at 63%)\(^2\) and almost everyone speaks Spanish (more than 90%).\(^3\) Moreover, according to Pablo Antonio Cuadra, one of her most revered poets, all Nicaraguans are bound to their motherland by a *tejido antiguísimo de tierra y sangre* (an ancient tapestry of blood and soil).\(^4\) Nonetheless, if we take a closer look at the history and geography of this Central American country the truth is that her story is, indeed, a proverbial tale of two people, of two Nicaraguas. On the one hand we have the Nicaragua of the Mestizo population of the Pacific and Central regions; a nationalist and proud people, most of whom are still prone to refer to Spain as “la tierra madre” or “the motherland.” On the other hand we have the Nicaragua of the *indigenous people and ethnic communities of the Atlantic Coast*\(^5\) who, for far longer than the nation-state has existed, have sought to acquire self-determination and political autonomy. These minority groups have long resisted efforts

\(^1\) 2005 Nicaraguan Census.
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) CIA World Factbook, 2009 edition
\(^4\) Cuadra, (1971).
\(^5\) These terms are the legal definitions used in Nicaragua, since the inception of the 1987 Constitution, to refer to the three indigenous communities (Miskitu-nani, Sumu-Mayangna and Rama) and the three ethnic communities (Garifuna, Creole and Mestizo) that live in the Atlantic Coast. Unlike the rest of the country, by law, minority populations must self-identify as such in the two Autonomous Regions of The Coast. It is important to remark here that the Mestizos, the core-community and ethnic majority of Nicaragua, are recognized as an ethnic minority in the Autonomous Regions. This is of primary importance in regards to the implementation of the Law of Autonomy and any subsequent political efficacy of the other minority groups, vis-à-vis the Mestizos who, according to the 8\(^{th}\) population census of Nicaragua (conducted in 2005), are already the demographic majority in the Atlantic Coast – 182,300 Mestizos with 155,850 Miskitu a close second.
to be forcefully assimilated into Mestizo culture and, to this day, continue to maintain primary political identification to their indigenous groups – as opposed to the common national identity – thus rendering Nicaragua as something other than a typical Westphalian nation-state.6

THE “PROBLEM” OF THE COAST

One of the elements that make the case of political autonomy in Nicaragua an attractive case study is the fact that it is one of the few countries in the continent where territorial political autonomy for indigenous groups has been adopted by the national state and enshrined at the level of constitutional law7. Moreover, one of the most distinctive (and troubling) elements of the model of indigenous autonomy adopted in Nicaragua is its multiethnic character – as dictate by its Constitution. As such, autonomy in Nicaragua, and in Latin America as a whole, represents a paradigmatic moment that stands the chance, if allowed to flourish, to drastically alter it civil society.

In the last decade of the 20th century many Latin American countries underwent attempts at creating systems of indigenous political autonomy and some of them are trying to do this while simultaneously trying to navigate the neo-liberal idea of multiculturalism. Political autonomy, as a political structure, was conceived as a means to provide self-governance to minority groups, (Lapidoth, 1996). In some countries, like Mexico, indigenous people create their own de facto systems of autonomy in order to gain self-determination. Some other countries, like Guatemala, are unique in their

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6 This definition will be further explained later in this paper.
7 It is only in recent years that initiatives were taken to establish regulations to protect regional autonomy for indigenous people, such as the 1993 Languages Law; the 2003 General Health Law, which promotes respect for community health models; Law 445 on the System of Communal Ownership of Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Communities of the Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua and the Bocay, Coco, Indio and Maíz Rivers (which came into force at the start of 2003 and which also clarifies the communities’ and titled territories’ right to self-government) and the General Education Law, which recognized a Regional Autonomous Education System (drafted in 2006).
limitations to implement autonomy, and also how group identity is more socially constructed (since most people are of mixed ethnicity). In fact, Nicaragua is one of the few countries, along with Colombia and Panama, where popular demand for indigenous autonomy was officially enshrined into the national Constitution and is the only one where the model of autonomy exists within a multi-ethnic territory share by multiple indigenous and ethnic communities.

Indigenous autonomy, in order to become a viable tool for self-determination, first demands *de jure* recognition of the status of indigenous communities as *peoples* with natural rights that precede the birth of the state – given that the groups existed *before* there was a nation-state. The challenge for Latin American countries, especially Nicaragua because of its chosen model of autonomy, is how to preserve it within the context of an open-market liberal economic system. Hale argues that the best way to understand indigenous autonomy in Latin America in the 21st century is through the prism of a neo-liberal multi-culturalism that presumes the adoption, by central governments and the civil society, of a welcoming discourse towards cultural diversity, while simultaneously using the institutions of political power to protect the open-market liberal economic system and the political regimes that serve it. Hale argues that, “the recognition of cultural differences gives states and, equally important, civil society and transnational organizations, greater prerogative to shape the terms of political contestation, to distinguish between authentic and ersatz expressions of identity, between acceptable and disruptive cultural demands” (Hale, 2002).

In the Nicaraguan case, indigenous autonomy faces an existential dilemma: it will either serve to establish legitimacy for the central government – if it brings about
self-governance and ends the marginalization of the peoples of the Coast OR, it will erode power from nascent indigenous political institutions – if it fails to integrate the peoples of the Coast into the larger civil society in Nicaragua. Additionally, the Nicaraguan autonomy tango is at a perilous moment given that the political context under which it arose has changed drastically and now represents an impediment to its advance. Increased intrusion from the central government into the affairs or regional councils, encroachment and illegal land grabs by non-indigenous groups, megaprojects like the proposed Grand Canal of Nicaragua and greater demand for the extraction of natural resources from indigenous lands represents a clear threat to autonomy.

Given that the Nicaraguan model calls for autonomy to be given to each of two separate regions, instead of creating separate spaces for each group, none of the indigenous or afro-descent groups actually ended up with any territory of their own, thus, no group has exclusive control on their land. It is my opinion that the autonomy experience stands at a razor’s edge and is likely to be modified significantly because its multi-ethnic context makes cooperation and consensus less likely to occur. Each of the groups looks for solutions that will bring the greatest benefit to their own people and only succeed in weakening the position of the Coast as a whole. Add to that the fact that, as direct result of encroachment and land grabs, Mestizos are now the demographic majority in the Coast, it is clear to see why the current status of indigenous autonomy does not benefit the indigenous peoples or the afro-descendant communities.

The chronic competition between historically antagonist ethnicities in the Coast represents an opportunity for the central government in Managua, to resolve one of the central problems that political autonomy presents to traditional Westphalian nation
states; namely, the dreaded decentralization of political power. Autonomy must be partnered with transference of power from the State to the regional units; this presumes a modicum of self-determination from each of the lower units. The Constitution of Nicaragua deliberately avoided giving this to the peoples of the Coast, who are historically alienated by non-permeable boundaries of ethnicity and culture. Accordingly, this dissertation focuses on one aspect of politics in Nicaragua – the struggle for indigenous autonomy and self-determination in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. Given the political culture of the nation, Nicaraguan domestic politics are often permeated by identity, marginalization of ethnic minorities and the struggle for the protection of national sovereignty.

Nicaragua has long been a land of conflict. The chronic nature of conflict that has cursed the country did not begin with the Spanish invaders and the colonial era. The indigenous inhabitants of the country, from both the Pacific and the Caribbean Coasts, arrived themselves as displaced war refugees from the central valley of Mexico and from the area that is modern-day Colombia, respectively, and both groups experienced chronic patterns of ritualized warfare, slavery and forced servitude. That is not to say that the Spanish conquest did not leave a violent mark on Nicaraguan political culture, in fact it was devastating. The existing indigenous population of the Pacific and Central regions, estimated at 1 million in 1522, was reduced to a few tens of thousands in a matter of 30 years. But the main legacy of the Spaniards into modern Nicaraguan political culture is the predominance of a Mestizo population that, given its strong connection to the Spanish crown, time and time again allowed outside forces to exert control over internal politics. The other legacy of colonization was the rivalry between
social classes. The years of wars between the cities of León, populated by lower class criollos, and the city of Granada, populated by the creole aristocracy, would eventually lead to the creation of the two main political parties in Nicaragua (Liberales from León and Conservadores from Granada) and a shameful predisposition for internecine conflict. The economic interests of Cornelius Vanderbilt and the racist dreams of William Walker established a pattern of armed intervention and disregard for Nicaraguan sovereignty that continues to this day.

As such, this work focuses on the many forms of political participation that arise from within the process of political autonomy. It becomes axiomatic that this work turns on an analysis of ethnic identity and the process of autonomy as the central vehicles for the deliberate transformation of Nicaragua into a *Multiethnic State*. Throughout this dissertation, I trace the politics of race and ethnicity by looking at how they shape what it means to be a Nicaraguan and how they affect the ongoing crisis over the use of indigenous land. I argue that race and ethnicity are not only interrelated but are actively being re-created, themselves re-defining not only the nation but her people as well. While my primary analytical focus is on the process of autonomy as a vehicle for nationalism, indigenous self-determination is also discussed throughout the chapters. For most of their history, the political fortunes and aspirations of the peoples of the Coast have long been entangled to their capacity to determine their own fate. Although the experiences of the indigenous and afro-descendants in the Coast are distinct, they share one thing in common: active resistance to Mestizo nationalism and its homogenizing force in Nicaraguan politics. One of the central questions asked in this work is, “Why do the peoples of the Coast continue to hold such a strong distaste for
Mestizo nationalism?” Additionally, “How can the peoples of the Coast re-shape their primary political loyalty vis-à-vis the nation at large?”

In the post-revolutionary period, land rights on the Coast are characterized by the internecine conflict with a troubling increase in the political capital of Mestizos and the decreasing political capital of indigenous and afro-descendant communities. This was not always the case. As the original population of the region, the peoples of the Coast should have been relatively well positioned to secure their rights and presence in the politics of the region, especially through the administrative councils that are the constitutionally-mandated sovereign power on the Coast. At the end of the Contra War, the central government of Nicaragua codified statutory law that protected indigenous and multicultural citizenship rights. As a consequence, land rights are defined as both communal and indigenous. Therefore, contemporary politics in the Coast should be almost exclusively a regional matter. But, alas, that is not the case. Afro-descendant communities have experienced a loss in power in their negotiations with both the Nicaraguan central government and with their indigenous counterparts. At the same time, indigenous communities have experienced devastating, and increasingly violent confrontations over land titling with Mestizo settlers engaging in illegal land grabs.

This should not be happening, not only because the peoples of the Coast have long-held historical precedence for traditional use of their land and, now, have the statutory means to protect them, but also because the peoples of the Coast have proven, over their long and varied histories, capable of altering their political context. In other words, the peoples of the Coast are not pawns in a game; they have always been involved as decisive political actors.
The struggle for political autonomy represents the frontline of identity politics in Nicaragua. It must be said that the Sandinista Revolution and the Contra War destabilized and reshaped regional hegemony and civil society in the Coast in a most paradoxical of ways. On one hand, they created further marginalization in terms of: ethnicity, gender and the division between remote rural communities and urban communities. On the other hand, they created the space necessary for increased political participation and multiculturalism and emphasized modernity. The fascinating part of it all is that the constitutionally-stated desire for a Multiethnic State seems to become a viable vehicle for indigenous inclusion. I argue that this occurs because politically-active groups with impermeable borders (that is to say, with clear definitions of who is and who is not part of the in-group), like the Miskítu-nani, are predisposed to make better use of legal mechanisms created to protect multi-ethnicity. There is a small, but growing, body of academics (like Juliet Hooker and Charles Hale) that are looking at how the indigenous and afro-descendant peoples of the Coast navigate and use the politics of indigenous autonomy in order to protect the welfare of their group vis-à-vis the hegemonic core-community of Mestizos. Hooker argues that, while Mestizo nationalism recognizes diversity, it does not allow for a reimagining of national identity as anything other than Mestizo. Hale suggests that the emergence of multiculturalism

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8 During a trip to Bilwi, RAAN, in 2010 I was the guest of two extraordinary women, Lottie Cunningham, who works on family law and works closely with Miskítu leaders on issues related to domestic violence, and Melba McLean, a Sumu-Mayangna that worked on the Awas-Tingni v. Nicaragua case and currently runs El Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica (CIDCA). Separately, both highlighted to me how the marked growth in political participation in Costeño civil society created new openings for women, from different backgrounds, to take active leadership roles in the Coast. This is a most welcomed changed.

in Latin America will do little more than protect traditional racial hegemony, as such he expect that it is actually set up to prevent true multicultural citizenship.\textsuperscript{10}

It is the emphasis of this multi-ethnic and multi-cultural\textsuperscript{11} political structure that prompted me to question the effect that the Nicaraguan model of autonomy will have not only on promoting cooperation between historically antagonistic groups in the Atlantic Coast but, most importantly, on enabling the creation of a superordinate identity as “Nicaraguans” in a region where multiple primary political identities are present in a historically disputed territorial space. Given that, the three central questions addressed in this dissertation will be:

First, how does indigenous political autonomy affect the creation of a Multiethnic State in Nicaragua? It is possible that the burgeoning autonomous regions will learn to use their relatively new power of self-determination as a platform from which to push back against the government-led plans for multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity. After all, historically, the people of the Coast have seen any and all attempts at acculturation instead as assimilation.\textsuperscript{12} Given that the Law of Autonomy enshrined their right to preserve their culture and way of life,\textsuperscript{13} the opportunity here is to use political autonomy as a tool to counter perceived attempts at perceived assimilation while increasing their role in the Nicaraguan political arena and civil society.

Second, will autonomy help to establish pluralism in Nicaraguan politics and, in doing so, foster legitimacy for the central government? While there is no one single model of autonomy used throughout Latin America, all of them have experienced one

\textsuperscript{10} For further details see Hale’s “Neoliberal Multiculturalism: The Remaking of Cultural Rights and Racial Domination in Central America,” Political and Legal Anthropology Review, 28, no. 1 (2005): 10-28.
\textsuperscript{11} As defined in the Nicaraguan Constitution.
\textsuperscript{12} In this paper acculturation is defined as: Competence in another culture with acceptance of one’s native culture. Assimilation, on the other hand, is defined as: Absorption into the dominant culture with loss of one’s native culture.
\textsuperscript{13} In fact the Constitution demands that the state do all it can to avoid encroaching into their traditional culture.
common thread; they have all created tension between the indigenous peoples and the State when it comes to decentralization of political power. This happens because, while autonomy is the only viable means towards self-determination, particularly when it comes to “customary law”\(^\text{14}\) and culture, it has consistently been used by national political parties to co-opt regional governments into pushing their own political agenda, thus further marginalizing the voices of political minorities and delegitimizing indigenous governments. In Nicaragua the latter is already taking place. Regional councils have been forced to make the choice between receiving funds from Managua or maintaining the perception of legitimacy from the communities they serve.\(^\text{15}\)

Finally, how will the rise of identity politics affect the implementation of a super-ordinate identity as Nicaraguans in the peoples of the Coast? Regional autonomy has advanced significant legislative changes in terms of public education and land use but it has also brought to light old stereotypes and systems of out-group marginalization and abuse. Already, historically marginalized and oppressed groups in the Coast – women, Sumus and Rama – are underrepresented in regional and municipal councils and are systematically been displaced from the homes not only by Mestizo settlers but, more and more, by Miskítu families.\(^\text{16}\)

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF NICARAGUA, THE CARIBBEAN COAST AND HER PEOPLE

\(^\text{14}\) Like for most other indigenous, aboriginal or native peoples of the world, “customary law” refers to unwritten and traditional law. An example of this is the system of *Talamana* or “repayment” used in Miskítu communities where the victims and perpetrators of crimes (e.g., theft, domestic violence) get together and arrive at some value that the perpetrator must make in order to account for his/her misdeeds.

\(^\text{15}\) Law 445, 2006, created a separate, independent, municipal councils to be made up of members elected from their community with all funds needed for their function (rent, utilities, etc) given by the government in Managua. Beginning in 2011 (El Nuevo Diario, 12/17/2011, *El Gobierno impugna consejal en Tasbapounie*), funds have only been released based on the central government in Managua being allowed to “certify” the election of members of the regional council. In one famous case, the municipal council for the Creole community in Bluefields had to relocate their office and pay for rent and utilities out of their pocket after Managua refuse to certify the results of the municipal elections.

Nicaraguans loosely refer to their Caribbean coastal plains as “La Costa Atlántica” or the Atlantic Coast. This is, of course, a poor misnomer given that the entire coast is bathed by the Caribbean and not the Atlantic Ocean. In terms of geography, the Coast comprises nearly 60% of the national territory while its inhabitants represent only 6% of the total population. The Law of Autonomy of 1987 divided Nicaragua into three political regions: The two “Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast” and the rest of the country. Appropriately, they are called “North Atlantic Autonomous Region” (RAAN by its Spanish nomenclature) and “South Atlantic Autonomous Region” (RAAS). Most of this relatively vast (in Nicaraguan terms) region is covered by tropical rainforest, dense evergreens, mangrove swamp, richly dissected by meandering rivers and uncultivated savannahs. A mountain range separates it from the Pacific Coast, the more populated and affluent part of the country. The indigenous peoples of the Coast are also collectively referred to as “Miskito,” even though the people of this region include two other indigenous nations (the Sumu-Mayangna and the Rama) as well as two Afro-descendent ethnic communities (the Garífuna and the Creole).

In terms of group identity, the people of the Coast have always been culturally diverse and historically have always navigated a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual setting. The three indigenous groups in the Coast speak three different Misumalpan-Chibchan languages; and have more in common with South America indigenous culture (small scale, subsistence economy of fishing and hunting) than with the Mesoamerican empires.

17 Throughout this work, the term “the Coast” will be used to refer to the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua.
18 See Appendix A for details.
19 See Appendix B for details.
20 See Appendix C for details.
21 See Appendix D for details.
of the Aztecs and the Mayas. The two Afro-Caribbean ethnic communities developed a separate culture and identity of being black and creole. They arrived in the Coast through a process of forced migration, slavery, human trafficking and violent struggle in search for self-determination.

The people of the Coast have their own language, historical narrative and collective memories which are central to the construction of not only their worldview and cultural heritage but also to the manner, in which they navigate inter-group relations, dictate their place in the larger society and color their political relations with the Nicaraguan central government. The fluctuating class hierarchy in the Coast has always been accompanied by ethnic polarization and racial prejudice, and it’s common for indigenous people to find themselves victims of blatant racism. Patterns of intergroup conflict are solidly rooted in class structure created during the colonial period.

Geographically one can observe several trends in Nicaragua in terms of social exclusion, namely regional disparities between the peoples of the Atlantic and Pacific and Central regions. Additionally, one of the two Miskitu groups and all of the Afro-American ethnic groups of the Coast, live at a meeting point between Anglophone and Hispanic worlds which means that the Coast, with its indigenous and English-speaking minorities, had a long history at the periphery of the Spanish Empire. This political isolation, combined with the added “remote” nature of the Coast, made the

22 Bierhorst, 1990.
23 Decker and Kreener, 1998
opportunities for cultural inclusion drastically lower than elsewhere. Within this context, it is as if the people of the Coast were destined for exclusion not only on the basis of their racial makeup and ethnicity, but also from their language, culture, and geographic location.

Not surprisingly, this marginalization is also true in the political arena. It manifests itself throughout all levels of government, from local to national. In spite of democratic transitions throughout Central America, there is still a perceived sense of increasing corruption in Nicaragua.\(^{27}\) Many Nicaraguans, and foreigners, are still forced to bribe officials in order to navigate and obtain access to basic services\(^{28}\). This is exacerbated in the Coast where race and ethnicity compounds economic class, especially within higher spheres of inclusion than those available to the Miskitu-nani.\(^{29}\) Given these realities, it is not difficult to imagine the peripheral and fragile nature of the political world inhabited by the indigenous people of the Coast.

Central to this research is the realization that the Law of Autonomy has generated new political spaces and discourses within the people and the civic society of the Coast and, therefore, is directly affecting Nicaraguan political culture and traditional group hierarchy in the Coast.\(^{30}\)

\(^{28}\) I cannot help it but recall an incident that I witnessed in person during a research trip to Nicaragua in 2008 where one of my colleagues, a Mexican-born American citizen, faced following a routine traffic stop in Managua. The options given to my colleague were to either surrender his U.S. driver license and navigate the bureaucratic system himself or, give ten U.S. dollars to the police officer at that moment and make the matter go away altogether.
\(^{30}\) Throughout this work I define political culture as the habits, customs and attitudes of a given nation-state and the people that compose it at a particular time.
More narrowly defined, and from an ethno-linguistic perspective, the Coast is a sparsely-populated area that, for 200 years, remained a British protectorate until it was legally ceded to Nicaragua in 1860.

In terms of a historical timeline, the Coast has experienced four distinct eras that have shaped the political identity of the peoples of the Coast:

1. **Pre-colonial Era**: Beginning approximately 2500 BCE with the arrival of Misumalpan linguistic groups (Miskítu-nani, Sumu-Mayangna and Rama) in a northward migration from the area that currently composes the country of Colombia. This period is marked by relatively peaceful interactions between the three groups, aside from ritualized raids and tribal war.

2. **Colonial Era**: Beginning approximately in 1630 CE with the arrival of British slave traders and buccaneers into the Coast. British colonialism altered inter-group dynamics to the extent of creating a hierarchy with the Miskítu-nani as the top and with their willingness to allow them relative autonomy in their own affairs.

3. **Republican Era**: Beginning in 1860 with the annexation of the Coast into Nicaragua and the subsequent sale in 1960 of approximately 50% of “traditional” Miskítu territory to the country of Honduras under the Luis Somoza administration. This period was marked by increased Mestizo migration into the Coast, a reshuffling of group hierarchy with the Mestizo at the top of the social hierarchy and by the pseudo-legal argument (from the Nicaraguan central government) that the people of the Coast were “tenants” with no civil rights nor protection under the law for use or titling of land.

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31 See Appendix E for details.
32 Rizo, 2004,
4. **Autonomy Era**: Beginning in 1985 with the creation of the Northern Zelaya Autonomy Commission, by the Humberto Ortega administration, as a means to end the Contra War. This led to drafting a new constitution that included a law of autonomy and peace accords between the Miskítu-nani insurgents and the central government of Nicaragua.

In terms of Miskítu ethno-history, most scholars agree that the proto-Miskítu were a group of “two to five-thousand Miskítu-speaking Amerindians that likely lived in small settlements,” in what now constitutes Cape Gracias a Dios in the North-Eastern corner of Nicaragua. The Miskítu-nani, for all intended purposes, are an indigenous people composing two separate ethno-linguistic communities:

1. **The “Tawira” or “Straight-Hair Miskítu”**: Descendants of the proto-Miskítu. Most speak Spanish as well as their native tongue and are the largest indigenous group in Nicaragua.

2. **The “Sambo-Miskítu”**: Descendants of “the First Africans” (as Costeño scholars prefer to label the two early waves of former African slaves that found their way inland from Jamaica and joined with the local tribes) who speak a creolized version of English and/or Spanish. The Sambo-Miskítu is an ethnic group that emerged beginning with the arrival of shipwrecked African slaves to the Coast in 1641. In terms of phenotype, the term can include anyone from a “full Black in Bluefields to an almost White, English-speaking inhabitant of The Corn Islands.”

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33 Offen, 2002.
34 This term will be used in this paper to denote the Caribbean or African-descendent communities of The Coast of Nicaragua in order to draw a tangible cultural distinction between them and the three indigenous nations.
35 Offen, 2002
The proto-Sumu-Mayangna were another Misumalpan linguistic group that settled in the central Caribbean coastal plain as well as the central highlands of Nicaragua, they were hunter-fishers and settled primarily along river banks. \(^{37}\) Currently they reside predominantly in the RAAN and are, by and large, fluent in one of the three dialects of the Sumu-Mayangna family (Ulwa, Panmahka and Tuahka) in addition to Spanish and Miskitu. \(^{38}\) Until recently, their formal education was conducted in Miskitu.

The proto-Rama were the northernmost Chibchan linguistic group and settled along a territory extending from the Rio Escondido north of Bluefields lagoon to the Rio San Juan which forms today the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica in what is now the RAAS. \(^{39}\) They are the smallest demographic population in Nicaragua. \(^{40}\) Their native language is nearly extinct (only 24 fluent speakers remain), a development that was encouraged by the Moravian missionaries whose religious teaching was carried out in English. \(^{41}\) During the colonial era, the Miskitu granted the Ramas a small island in the lagoon of Bluefields (currently Rama Key) in recognition of their allegiance against the Sumu-Mayangna. The majority of them speak a version of creolized English. \(^{42}\)

Some anthropologists claim that relationships between the three indigenous groups in the region were poorly pronounced, \(^{43}\) and evidence supports the notion that modern differences between the Miskitu-nani and Sumu-Mayangna may not have been so differentiated \(^{44}\) but that it began to change drastically in the XVII century. By this

\(^{37}\) Green, 1989

\(^{38}\) It has been argued that fluency in another group’s language is an indicator of weaker political status in the Coast – see Gonzales et al, 2004, Hale 1998.

\(^{39}\) Kaufmann, 1989.

\(^{40}\) 2005 Nicaraguan Census.

\(^{41}\) Rama language project

\(^{42}\) Grinevald, 2003.

\(^{43}\) Dennis, 2004.

\(^{44}\) Nietschmann, 1973.
time British presence stood in defiance of Spanish hegemony in what is now Nicaragua and Honduras and, in 1680, the British crowned a Miskítu leader as “King of the Miskítu Kingdom,” forcibly placing the Miskítu at the top of an artificially created hierarchy that placed the Sumu-Mayangna and Rama as subservient to the Miskítu-nani. This system remained in place until 1894 when the Nicaraguan central government began the institutionalization of a “Hispanization” program for the Coast. In pre-colonial times warfare was ritualized and consisted of low-impact raids (for food, women and children) that followed socially stipulated patterns. It is important to note that the conditions of inter-tribal warfare did not allow any one particular group to become hegemonic over the others. These dynamics were drastically altered by first contact with the British in 1629. The English Crown needed vast supply of lumber, food, animal skins and slaves for its sugar plantations in the Caribbean. In trade they offered the Miskítu firearms (muskets), metal tools and rum.

The tribe quickly realized an opportunity and efficiently adopted a trade economy, changed their traditional raids to capture males (for slaves) and expanded their raiding territory down to modern Panama. This new economy altered the political and military dynamics between the indigenous tribes and created an artificial tribal hierarchy, which the Miskítu quickly learned to exploit. Combined with the preservation of the “Miskítu King” the shift in economy from sustenance to slave supply transformed the balance of power in favor of the Miskítu and highlighted identification with the newly formed dominant group.

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46 Krantz et al, 1987
After the Spaniards eradicated most of the indigenous tribes of the Pacific and Central regions of the isthmus, an alliance with the British proved protective for the Miskítu-nani. In turn, this proved disastrous to their ancestral enemies (the Sumu-Mayangna) who were nearly decimated and effectively relocated from their lands by the Miskítu-nani.

It is important to note at this point is that, the more prestige and power that the Miskítu acquired the more likely they were to behave brutally towards the Sumu-Mayangna and the Rama – further emphasizing their own higher status while stressing the lower status and subjugation of their former enemies. The alliance with the British provided the tribe with a means to deter the advancement of the Spaniards – which sought slaves for its mineral mines in South America.\(^4^8\) The central theme that arises out of the colonial period is the frugal understanding of the Miskítu-nani of the shifting political economy of their region. Once the dynamics of their new status became apparent the Miskítu actively endorsed the British economic model. They supported British military campaigns and even viewed themselves as subjects of the Crown.\(^4^9\) Support from the British led the Miskítu to grow in numbers and become the hegemonic group in the region. As a consequence of the colonial experience of the Miskítu-nani were predisposed to an easy relation with English-speaking North Americans.\(^5^0\) Charles Hale goes as far as to term this positive group identification with English-speakers of the Miskítu an “Anglo affinity.”

**POLITICAL AUTONOMY AND THE MULTIETHNIC STATE IN NICARAGUA**

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\(^4^8\) Ibid  
\(^4^9\) Hale, 1994.  
\(^5^0\) Dennis, 2004.
Following the peace talks that led to the end of the Contra War, the process of indigenous autonomy in Nicaragua received a great deal of international attention. Of particular interest to journalists, political analysts and to academics was the nature of the Law of Autonomy but, following the defeat of the Sandinista Party in the 1990 Nicaraguan presidential election, the process began to fade from the attention of the global community. It seems that the assumption was that the election of Violeta Chamorro would herald an era of increased pluralism in Nicaragua. In fact, the opposite occurred. At the national level, the same lack of interest befell the autonomy efforts by the peoples of the Coast and their affairs, once again, fell on familiar ground; namely, disinterest from the government and the rest of the country and marked political marginalization. One reason why this occurred is that the post-conflict period brought with it significant and urgent problems, like disarming former Contras and providing safe return to Miskitu refugees, but the most troubling pattern that arises from the post-revolution years was the sad reality that, for most Nicaraguans, once the Contra War was over, the Coast once again seemed like a far-off place and of no consequence to the rest of the country. For all intended purposes, this was a return to “business as usual.” Throughout the dissertation, I argue that the process of autonomy and the post-revolutionary emphasis on the multiethnic state has not only increased Mestizo hegemony and nationalism, but in fact limits the room for a wider acceptance of indigenous and afro-descendants into the Nicaraguan civil society.

Within this renewed context of deliberate antipathy towards the Coast, it must be mentioned that the case of the Nicaraguan indigenous autonomy, one based on land sharing and cooperation, is remarkable in Latin America. It is more so given the fact, almost 20 years after, the autonomy process endures and continues to grow, even in the face of significant problems. A central argument posited in this work is that the successes and failures of the Nicaraguan
experiment with political autonomy will have a significant impact in the politics and the struggle to create a new nation: namely one based on political pluralism and on the understanding that its population is not solely represented by its core-community (the Mestizos) but is instead multi-ethnic (as proposed in the constitution) in composition and culture. At the international level, this case also has the potential to set precedents of relevance to other nations – as was the case in the ICJ ruling on the Awas Tingni vs. Nicaragua. Another reason for the genesis and value of this dissertation is that, this many years into the Nicaraguan autonomy “experiment,” there has not been much academic work done on its origin, evolution and future prospects. As such it feels the proverbial lacunae of knowledge as well as helps to better understand the forces, actors and impetus driving (or ameliorating) the process of indigenous autonomy and self-determination.

The autonomous regions in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua were established following the drafting of the new Constitution in 1987. The Law of Autonomy (Law 28) created 2 separate regional councils, one for each autonomous regions (North and South), with the requirement that membership in the council be “multi-ethnic” and in accordance to the demographic distribution of each of the six indigenous peoples and ethnic communities of the Coast. The regional council is composed of 45 elected members, each serving a 4-year term elected in region-wide elections that are open to all political parties, be they national or regional in nature. Law 28 establishes the regional council as the “supreme authority”51 in each of the regions, separate and sovereign from each other and from the Nicaraguan central government in Managua. Additionally, Law 28 created municipal and communal governments. By virtue of this autonomy “experiment” the people of the Coast began to lay claim to the right of self-determination and, with it, the political foundation for cultural and economic development. The challenge to the central government is the fact that self-determination is antithetical to traditional Westphalian nation-states.

51 La autoridad máxima,” as written in Spanish.
The path towards peace and reconciliation in the Coast that was begun in 1987 allowed regional units to decide which type of political organization they will use to implement autonomy and self-determination. It also gave birth to a national dialogue on the relationship between the central government and the regional councils but, the process itself has stalled in providing three basic political requirements:

1. Transference of power and resources from the central government in Managua to the regional councils – as was agreed upon during the peace talks that led to the end of the Contra War.
2. The creation of institutions, and mechanisms, whose duty it will be to foster regional economic development – based on communal land titling as legally established in the Law of Autonomy.
3. Application of the Law of Demarcation of indigenous lands so that each group can, finally, lay claim to their traditional land and have a say on what is done within its territory – this is the most vital part of the process and the one that has experienced the most resistance from the central government.

But, before we continue, let us take a step back to the roots of the armed conflict in the Coast. When the Sandinista arrived in the Coast in 1979, they found a local population that considered them outsiders at best, ignorant interlopers at worst (Molieri, J., in Hale, 1987). The peoples of the Coast were not particularly receptive to the social programs the Sandinistas came to offer, This was due to the fact that the Sandinistas misunderstood group dynamics in the Coast – they saw them in terms of Marxist class struggles while they were, in truth, conflicts based on race and ethnicity (Nietschmann, B., in Hale, 1987). The more orthodox Marxist voices in the Sandinista political elite fostered little sympathy for the indigenous interpretations of their own culture and history (Pastora, E., interview, 2008). Stereotypes of Costeños as backward and
primitive were also common in Mestizo Nicaragua and contributed to ethnocentrism on the part of Sandinista leaders who worked in the Coast. Within two years, relations went from lukewarm to bitter. In late 1981, the Daniel Ortega administration, ordered the Sandinist Police to arrest all the MISURASATA (Miskito, Sumu, Rama, Sandinista Asla Takanka) leaders after they argued that they deserved land rights simply for being indigenous. The definitive break occurred shortly after these demands were presented to the government, open conflict erupted (Hale, 1987).

Miskítu fighters joined the Contra insurgency financed by the United States, the Sandinista government became increasingly suspicious of what they perceived as “separatist” attitudes of the peoples of the Coast, and a series of political confrontations that became debacles followed shortly thereafter. The Ortega administration forcibly relocated forty-two Miskítu-nani villages along the Río Coco to an urban area ironically called Tasba Pri or “Free Land” (Ortega Saavedra, H., 2004). Fighting, punctuated by failed attempts at negotiation, continued throughout most of the 1980s. Sandinista troops were quartered in some communities, where hostile local villagers viewed them as an army of occupation. The armed conflict left the region devastated, local communities on edge and did little to bring an end to the Contra insurgency. U.S. support for the Contras undoubtedly played a major factor in the armed conflicts on the Coast but the Daniel Ortega administration’s response to perceived “separatism” had much to do with the real threat posed by the Contra War. These factors created the larger context in which the conflicts took place. Without the weapons supplied by the United States, Miskítu fighters groups would have been powerless. Without Daniel Ortega’s misguided attempt to dictate cultural and political realities in the Coast and, most importantly, his disastrous decision to relocate Miskítu-nani communities to “safe zones,” the Miskítu would have likely remained outside of the conflict and continued to see it as a war between “Spaniards.” However, for the people of the Coast, the
struggle for self-determination was their own, and it was a natural and shrewd decision to look for allies among their longtime U.S. friends. By the mid-1980s, it had become apparent to the Miskítu-nani that they had been manipulated by the CIA and by the forces of the Frente Democrático Nicaragüense (FDN), who cared nothing about goals like land rights, cultural autonomy, and local control over natural resources (Hale, 1987). It was at this point that the autonomy plan, proposed by a more progressive voices within the Sandinista political elite, became a viable option for peace talks between the Miskítu-nani and the Nicaraguan government, even as trust for the Sandinistas was hard to come by, “We want autonomy, but it is difficult to trust the Spanish,” (Stedman Fagot, in Hale, 1987). The Law of Autonomy was signed into the Constitution in 1987.

Both the Constitution and the Law of Autonomy acknowledge the rights of communal land titling to be vested on the indigenous or ethnic communities that have long-standing and traditional claims to a particular area and, vested upon the regional council, the power to veto any commercial use of all natural resources in the autonomous regions and the recognition that Nicaragua is a multiethnic state. In this context, the autonomy model in Nicaragua legally affords a great amount of self-determination and decision-making power to the two regional councils, vis-à-vis the central government – at least in regards to the commercial use of indigenous land and natural resources. But, the conditions on the ground belie a different reality. Since their inception in 1987, the regional councils have been faced with adverse conditions and increasing encroachment into their political power.

Following the end of the Contra War, the post-conflict years in the Coast and the transition in power from the Daniel Ortega administration to the Violeta Chamorro presidency,

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52 National Assembly, 1987
three successive Neo-Liberal administrations effectively began to erode the power of the regional councils. Amongst the ways in which this occurred were: reduction in the funds used for administrative matters, granting of commercial concessions (or temporary access to land and resources) in the autonomous regions, creation of independent committees created solely with the purpose of acting as intermediaries between the regional councils and the central government in Managua (like the committee for cleansing of indigenous land, in charge of certifying which group holds “traditional” claim to a particular regions). Moreover, indigenous autonomy in Nicaragua is limited by internal factors, particularly long-held distrusts between indigenous and ethnic groups in the Coast. Of particular concern is the long history of the Miskítu hegemony and of the images they hold of the other groups in the region – who are seen largely as child-like, unsophisticated and easily manipulated by the Miskítu-nani.

On top of already volatile group relations, is the growing threat of Mestizo encroachment into the Coast, a group that opposes communal land-titling and, by gaining control of land (legally or otherwise), effectively undermines self-determination. Conflict with indigenous communities over land rights has already occurred and seems likely to increase in the future (Hale, 1987). Finally, a growing threat, to not only autonomy but human security, is seen in drug-trafficking gangs that operate along the Coast, particularly in the North, in the vicinity of Bilwi, the largest city in the RAAN. All of these internal factors not only weaken the viability of indigenous autonomy but also threaten the development of the “revolutionary nationalism” in the Coast. Notwithstanding the national and internal challenges to the solving of the “problem of the Coast,” regional councils have made significant advances in numerous areas, particularly in

54 González, 2008
55 This will be discussed in further details throughout this work.
56 This “legal” ownership of land by Mestizos in the coast will be discussed further in chapter 3 and in the conclusion
matters of education and in the protection of a political space in Nicaraguan politics for the six different groups of the Coast. The progress has indeed been slow but it is significant, compared to what in the past because it has the potential to force the all Nicaraguan people to make sense of how the peoples of the Coast figure in Mestizo nationalism and in a multiethnic state.

CHALLENGES TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF A MULTI-ETHNIC STATE

“Nicaragua es un Estado nacional multiétnico,” so claims the 1987 Constitution.

The deliberate choice of these words seems to me an attempt to create a new identity, a “New Nicaragua,” one that identifies no longer political ideology as a unifying force but rather diversity in identity, history, language, culture and tradition. From that moment forward, the nation, and its political apparatus, promised to move forward as yet another hatchet blow to the stability of the traditional Westphalian nation-state “tree.” In the traditional way, the State is the medium to centralize power, territory and sovereignty, and the best option to protect the future of the nation and its people. Historically, Nicaragua has followed this pattern and its largest demographic group, the Mestizos, have attributed the characters and attributes of their group and region (Nicaragua: La Tierra de Lagos y Volcanes) to impute a common identity and forge the nation. The problem is, now, that the multi-ethnic nature of the “New Nicaragua” creates a logistical nightmare given that the different ethnicities in the Coast are strongly bonded and self-identity with the geographic region they occupy. It is not only that the rest of the country, and its government, considered them as the other but the people of the Coast see themselves as different and isolated.

57 Ironically enough, during the 5 years I lived in Nicaragua following the Sandinista Revolution, one of the goals of the Sandinista government was the creation of “La Nueva Nicaragua,” by which they meant a nation that was finally ruled by the people and for the people (if I may be allowed to borrow the words from the similar spirit of the American Revolution) and one that prized its sovereignty and self-determination above all other political goals.
The Nicaraguan colonial experience, with the Spaniards controlling one half and the British the other half, left her people with two separate regions: each regions is distinct in culture, society, religion and economic modalities. In the Pacific region the legitimacy of a centralized political regime is unquestioned. Mestizos may not like their government very much at any given time, but their predilection for a strong central government, one language (Spanish), one religion (catholic) and one culture (Mestizo) has never been questioned. In the Caribbean Coast, afro-descendants and indigenous groups prefer to speak Creole, English and/or their native languages, are Protestants (mostly Moravian) and have a strong distaste for centralized power (Vilas, 1989). It wasn’t until the resolution of the Contra War, and largely by the hard work and sacrifice of the peoples of the Coast, that the possibility of a way to unify the two Nicaraguas into one common understanding of what it means to be “Nicaraguan” began to coalesce into a viable reality.

A multiethnic nation can exist and not be recognized by its members. That is the situation that, for far too long, plagued the Nicaraguan people given their tendency to devalue other ethnic groups that did not conform to the core-community of Mestizos. This multiethnic character initially became apparent to the extent that it presented a challenge to Mestizo cultural and political hegemony.58 This is the biggest challenge to the creation of the “dream” of a multiethnic state; namely, to the extent that the people of the Coast are seen as the anti-thesis of what it means to be Nicaraguan, the move towards ethnic inclusion at the national level will continue to be seen as a zero-sum game. And, seemingly more troubling, evidence from the 2005 UN Development study seems to point out that the autonomy process has a negative correlation to the perception of being “Nicaraguan” first (before a member of an ethnic group) in the people of

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58 In my own house and family, to this day, the feeling was that “los Miskitos” (a common umbrella term that covers all peoples of the Coast) are backward people that only need to learn Spanish and our “ways” in order to modernize. Racism and ethnocentrism is, indeed, alive and kicking in 21st century Nicaragua.
the Coast (PUND, 2005). This is the biggest challenge because it has the potential to negatively affect the way that Mestizos see the peoples of the Coast as demanding a country of their own instead of inclusion into the national community UNDER indigenous self-determination. This is exactly what transpired in the years between 1990 and 2007 when Nicaragua was ruled by three subsequent neo-liberal administrations.

The presidential elections of 1990 that saw Violeta Chamorro rise to the presidency were not only a defeat to the Sandinista Party and Daniel Ortega but also to the fledgling indigenous autonomy process. The worst parts of the situation facing Nicaragua were not only the devastation of not only the Contra War but also the debilitating costs of the long years of economic embargo placed upon Nicaragua by the Roland Reagan administration (Walker, 1997) and the political polarization created largely as a byproduct of US foreign policy, under the Reagan doctrine implemented as part of the long-term strategy to win the Cold War.

Beginning with the Chamorro administration, there were open and clear resistances from elected officials to the system of regional councils as they were deemed to be “bent on balkanization of the nation,” a view that was further crystalized under the Alemán administration (Hooker, 2005). This meant that the autonomy process was put “on hold” from 1990 until 2001 when the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled on the *Awas Tingni v. Nicaragua* landmark case. The Inter-American Court found that the Alemán administration and the government of Nicaragua was in violation of several articles of the American Convention on Human Rights, and ordered the state to demarcate and grant title to the land as property of the Awas Tingni Community as well as to pay reparations. This decision was an important step in protecting indigenous rights in

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59 By the time I fled Nicaragua in late 1984 the country was already in a military, political and socio-economic chaos. Add to that the 1988 hurricane and the diminishing structural and financial support from Cuba and you have a country in shambles.

60 Archives, U.S. Department of State, accessed 7/12/2014
Nicaragua and their right to the “use and enjoyment of their ancestral land and natural resources as a human right to be honored and protected” (ICHR ruling, 2001).  

Within that context, there are a number of challenges in the attempt to developing a unified identity in the Coast.

1. **The conceptualization of what it means to be “ethnic” is changing in Nicaragua:**

   Before the birth of political autonomy, and the 1987 constitution, ethnic groups in the Caribbean Coast included indigenous peoples and afro-descendants. Now, as per the 2005 census, Mestizos are the demographic majority. This is a direct consequence of illegal settlers, land-grabs by Mestizo families themselves displaced by the boom of latifundios in the 1990s and concessions given to campesinos who were former Mestizo Contra fighters. Given this dynamic, the definition of Costeño is itself in flux and one that stands to, once again, be defined by Mestizo standards set in Managua and not in the Coast.

2. **The model of autonomy granted to the Coast demands cooperation:**

   Since the Law of Autonomy did not grant autonomy to any one group and the government has yet to implement the Law of Demarcation, groups in the Coast must find a way to cooperate amongst each other in order to present a unified front to Managua. But, thus far, there is no evidence that this is a consistent reality (Woods and Morris, 2007). To this day there continues to be marked rivalries and disagreements on long-term goals between both of the regional capitals of the Coast, Bluefields and Bilwi, but even within communities with traditional claims to the same territory (URRACAN, 2005). Cooperation between groups has been further limited by the marked political polarization in the Coast seen over the last 15 years, a polarization along party lines: it’s Sandinistas against anti-Sandinistas (who are now the majority in the Coast). It is only

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61 While this outcome was unquestionably a huge win for the Awas Tingni Community, questions remain about its value and application given the fact that, 14 years after the landmark case, Nicaragua has yet to comply with the Inter-American Court’s orders to demarcate and grant title in the Awas Tingni territory.

62 By law census must be taken every 10 years in Nicaragua, the next one is due to be compiled in 2015.
the Sandinistas who have, consistently, shown some willingness to support the autonomy process.

3. **Failure from the Central Government to Implement the Law of Demarcation:**

   In the absence of institutional control, land disputes are being resolved at the individual level, oftentimes through the use of violence (PNUD, 2005). Intercommunal conflict in the Coast is once again played out on old-standards; domination and violence. Add to this chronic poverty and economic under-development (HDI, 2013) and it the crisis in the Coast becomes clear to the outside observer. At the completion of this dissertation, the peoples of the Coast do not have *legally delineated* (i.e., legally-protected) territory upon which they can exert total control. This situation has the potential to create more conflict over natural resources and, evidently (PUND, 2005) has further served to encouraged encroachment into indigenous land. The question then becomes: Can Nicaragua protect its *alleged* multiethnic nature without the necessary mechanism to peacefully protect indigenous lands, culture and way of life? Given the group dynamics and history of the Coast that is not a likely possibility.

   Indigenous autonomy in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua was, first and foremost, a political victory for the peoples of the Coast. It has become increasingly difficult to manage it and protect the process. Nonetheless, the autonomy experiment continues its march upon a long and winding road. The important message herein is that the future of Nicaraguan pluralism and the definition of “Multiethnic State” are its companions along the way. The questions that this study intends to address, as previously mentioned, center on the relationship between the rise of a unifying identity in the Coast and the construction of a multiethnic state in Nicaragua. My working hypothesis is that they are both mediated by the indigenous autonomy “experiment”; in other words, the more that the central government of Nicaragua protects its own constitutional

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Human Development Indexes place Nicaragua 132 out of 187 nations, in par with Kiribati and Tajikistan.
laws in regards to autonomy, the more legitimacy they will lend to their role in the politics of the Coast and the more likely they will be to create a unifying identity in the peoples of the Coast.

The question, for the government and the people of Nicaragua, then becomes: Do they have the mechanism and institutional tools with which to do so?

Growing up in the Mestizo half of Nicaragua, our stories of peoplehood were all one-sided. Like all school children, I learned about the exploits of, and paid homage to, seminal figures that, allegedly, gave birth to our nation. “Founding fathers” like the Chorotega Chieftain Diriangén and the Nahuas Chieftain Nicarao for their insurgency against the invading Spaniards, Mestizo leaders Andrés Castro (and his valiant fight against the forces of William Walker) and Augusto C. Sandino (and his fight against the occupying forces of the U.S. Marines) all have statues, monuments, professional teams and children named after them. But there is no such homage being paid to the Miskitu Chieftain Whana nor to the Sumus’ Laikatara nor to the ancestors of the Rama, Garifuna or Creole. If Nicaragua is to truly live up to its lofty goals of inclusion of the peoples of the Coast, they must also be included. To this day, Nicaraguans refer to the country as “the land of lakes and volcanoes.” This stands in contradiction to the fact that it is also a land of coastal marshes, savannahs and swamps.

The 1987 constitution heralded a series of new laws created with the specific purpose of inclusion of the peoples of the Coast. These were intended to be the tools and mechanism with which they would alter the national identity into one that was more inclusive of the peoples of the Coast. Additionally, international legislation began to play a significant role in the process of political transformation of Nicaragua. Old and new legal instruments, like the U.N. Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the ICHR ruling on Awas Tingni v. Nicaragua, helped to create the foundation for change. Given all these, this study will also attempt to illustrate policy
options for the central government of Nicaragua and the peoples of the Coast as they try to navigate towards a more unified state. This dissertation is primarily concerned with demonstrating the role that political identity and political autonomy play in the Coast, as well as in the stated (national) goal of developing a sense that ALL Nicaraguans are one people.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This dissertation is organized into Six Chapters. It is my attempt to create a space within my own work for Image Theory. As such, the dissertation is not about political autonomy per se, but about group identity, perception, and how they affect political behavior, specifically political participation, in the Coast. The political arena and civil society, once reserved solely for men and the Mestizo and Miskitu community on the Coast, now welcome a wider range of political actors (Sumus, Ramas, afro-descendant, and mestizo men and women) from both rural and urban communities. The following chapter explores the theoretical issues and provides an overview of the literature associated with the study of political autonomy and its influence on nationalism and group identity and politics in the Coast.

Chapter 1 was the introduction to the dissertation. Chapter 2, discusses the methodology used in the study, analyzes of the data and a brief description of the different pieces that were required to put together this study. Chapter 3 will discuss, in detail, the role that group identity plays in Nicaragua with an emphasis on the Miskitu-nani, Creole and the Mestizo given their long history of predominant involvement in the politics of the Coast. The nature of group hierarchy in the Coast will be closely discussed as well as the link between indigenous and afro-descendant identity and territory. Finally, the perceptions held by the Mestizos and the central government of Nicaragua towards the peoples of the Coast will be discussed. Chapter 4 will discuss the role that Nationalism plays on the “problem of the Coast” and will discuss the role
that “Revolutionary Nationalism” plays in the construction of the multiethnic state in Nicaragua. Chapter Five will discuss in detail the major tenants of Social Identity Theory and Image Theory. This chapter provides a detailed description of the major contributors of these theories, its assumptions and why they are suited to analyze intergroup violence in the Coast. Finally, Chapter Six summarizes the findings of this study and offers policy recommendations for both the central government and the regional councils.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

THE NICARAGUAN CASE STUDY

This work is a case study dealing with the extraordinary case of indigenous polities in Nicaragua. I collected and present detailed information about the development of indigenous autonomy and a concentrated look at the larger national polity. It relies heavily in the accounts of individual subjects. As such, this is a qualitative descriptive research; this case study looks intensely at the political behavior of the peoples of the Coast, drawing conclusions about that group and only within that specific context. The central emphasis of this dissertation is exploration and description and attempts to provide intimate knowledge of the Nicaraguan polity as it relates to indigenous and afro-descendants. The focus is primarily on the development, cognitive behavior and intergroup interactions between political actors in the Coast.

In spite of the stated goal of building a multicultural and multiethnic nation base on inclusion and acceptance of diversity, the Nicaraguan central government continues to systematically erode the rights of the indigenous and ethnic minorities in the Coast. In order to try to grasp a better understanding of this phenomenon, I used a model to develop the operative images of groups in the Coast as well as the indicators for nationalistic tendencies. The key
variables identified and analyzed are: political autonomy, pluralism, group identity and nationalism.

Table 5 displays the checklist of nationalism indicators for each group in the Coast.

Table 4 displays Images and Strategic Part.

Table 3 displayed the Cognitive Images.

This approach also attempts to operationalize the likely options available to oppose a given out-group. In order to assess this, I applied a content analysis approach, which involves coding of public statements of groups or individual decision-makers available via news outlets, interviews, speeches, video and social media. There are two main purposes of this approach: to look for patterns of intergroup behavior in the Coast of Nicaragua and to look for patterns that give meaning to the Nicaraguan case study.

As mentioned above content analysis is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text. The content analysis of documents, including “speeches, interviews, writings, and other verbal or written materials” has been a common practice in political science (Cottam et all, 2010). Although this research technique has been used mainly to analyze the behavior political leaders at a distance it can be used to analyze group behavior (Hermann 1984, 1987, 1989). The principal actors whose data are analyzed here include political leaders, community leaders and private individuals. The main analytic frameworks for the organization and presentation of data in this case study includes:

1. The role of participants.
2. Formal and informal exchanges among groups.
3. Historical analysis and Critical incidents that challenge or reinforce fundamental beliefs, practices, and values.
DEFINITION OF INDICATORS OF NATIONALISM

For the purpose of this study, change-oriented elites are elected individuals who are directly responsible for some form legislature or some policy decision-making. One central aspect of this indicator is that the change-oriented elite must enjoy moderate levels of perceived legitimacy and willingness to abandon the status quo. In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas enjoyed this as well as intellectual elites and academic in the Miskítu and Rama communities. Political participation is defined as either conventional (voting, running for office) or unconventional (insurgency, protests, etc.). It must display willingness to participate actively in the political arena and be also willing to think not only parochially but nationally. Viability (defense and economy) are defined as the capacity of any one group to use soft and hard power in order to protect the future of the group. Additionally, the community must be willing to not only protect the state but also the individual members of the group. Uniqueness accounts for a group’s understanding that they belong together, that the will is present to live together as a people in the future. Finally, a common language relates to uniqueness is the capacity to identity and adore one’s own language. Finally, identity is a three part indicator (religion, race or ethnicity) and they all imply that the person is a member of an in-group.

FINDINGS

Based on an assessment of the relationship between political autonomy and its impact on political identity and political behavior on the Coast three main findings are distilled. First, life under a system of indigenous autonomy has increased social categorization and the relevance that ethnic identity play in political behavior in the Coast. Marked instances of ethnocentrism and negative stereotypes are reported in relationships between groups in the Coast. Secondly, the conflict over land rights in the autonomous regions of Nicaragua is rooted on mutual
misperceptions: The peoples of the Coast perceive the Mestizos, and the central government, as monolithic, their intentions to be hostile, and their behavior to be aggressive and manipulative; the Mestizos, perceive the peoples of the Coast to be self-interested in their intentions, and unpatriotic and separatist in their behavior. The 5 different groups of (original) peoples of the Coast, (Miskitu-nani, Sumu-Mayangna, Rama, Creole and Garifuna) live in remote communities in overlapping geographic zones. But, even as different communities of each ethnic group live away from each other, overwhelming reports from news sources and NGOs show that separate communities perceive threats to the community to be challenges to the group at large. Finally, in terms of the development of a true nation-state in Nicaragua, despite the goals and intentions of the central government, Nicaragua remains a core-community, non-nation state, even as the integrity of the state is not in doubt. Conditions in the country, in 2015, remain as the Cottam's described them in 2001, despite a successful revolution and the end of the Cold War.

An interesting finding, when evaluation the Cottam’s checklist of indicators of the formation of a nation-state in the Nicaraguan case study, is that the change-oriented elite, namely the ruling Sandinistas who were the revolutionaries that advocated a radical form of anti-imperialist nationalism (the so-called “Revolutionary Nationalism”) have themselves proven to be ineffective at to developing a sense of national identity in the peoples of the Coast.

The overwhelming perception by Mestizos in Nicaragua is that the communal claims to land and self-determination in the Coast are illegitimate. Coupled this with the “stubborn” unwillingness from the peoples of the Coast to acculturate into Mestizo nationalism, leads them to view life under the system of political autonomy as an unwitting risk to the full socio-economic development of the nation. Media outlets and political elites often portray both
indigenous and afro-descendants as criminal, opportunistic and unpatriotic.\textsuperscript{64} The fact is that neither Costeño politics, nor the peoples of the Coast, have never fully fit well into the narrow national paradigms of the Mestizos. Not only have the peoples of the Coast long engaged in the development of competing models of nationalism, but identity politics in the Coast have historically unfolded within a far broader context of alter religion, language, culture, colonial experience, \textit{de facto} autonomy. In making this argument, I suggest that the process of political autonomy can take on a transformative nature IF adopted within a true pluralist context – this has yet to be the case in Nicaragua. While not without their contradictions and limitations, identity politics can be a positive force in reshaping Nicaraguan civil society, especially if the political elite were to adhere to the inherent pluralistic nature of Revolutionary Nationalism.

CONCLUSION

By seeking to understand as much as possible about the case the relationship between political autonomy and the creation of a unifying political identity in the Coast this case study specializes in information based on the particular contexts of Nicaragua. The hope is that this emphasis can help bridge the gap between abstract research and concrete practice. The methodology outline above is designed to address the issue of the viability of the Nicaraguan model of indigenous autonomy and provide an overall assessment on its current status. This study will provide insights on its consequence, political relevance and politico-historic background. Additionally, this methodological approach seeks to address the opinions and attitudes of different identity groups in the Coast and the central government.

CHAPTER THREE: GROUP IDENTITY AND POLITICS IN NICARAGUA

MISKITU HEGEMONY IN THE COAST

\textsuperscript{64} See PUND, 2005 for details.
According to the 1987 Constitution, the Nicaraguan people have a multiethnic nature\(^{65}\) and, it goes to add, the communities of the Coast have autonomy over the regions on which they live.\(^{66}\) The case of the Autonomous Regions of Nicaragua presents a unique and fascinating case of interactions between different ethnic groups. In the Coast one encounters discourses of being Indigenous, Afro-Caribbean, Mestizo and “Mixed” within a highly politicized Central American context. Additionally, and in sharp contrast to the common Mestizo misperception that political autonomy is a new concept to the Coast, a close analysis of the unique politico-historical context of the region illustrates that its people (especially the Miskítu-nani) enjoyed de-facto autonomous regional governance since the British made the Coast their protectorate.

When the British Crown left the “Miskítu Kingdom” in 1787 the “Miskítu King” was left with an unprecedented situation: the Spanish Empire was forced to deal with emancipation movements in the continent and was in no position to move into the Coast and subjugate them. Nietschmann (1973) argues that, during this period, the perception of legitimacy of self-determination or autonomy of the Miskítu people was born. Given that, all the tribes in the Coast became subservient to the Miskítu they were forced to pay tribute to the King and punishment was meted out for failure to pay tribute.\(^{67}\) A succession of Kings and Chieftains were left with de facto autonomy and centralized power in their immediate sphere of influence.\(^{68}\) Combined with the fact that, by this time, the new Mestizo aristocracy of the Pacific Coast was in no position to enter the region, the suddenly powerful Miskítu-nani continued to expand their hegemony.

\(^{65}\) Author’s translation.
\(^{66}\) Nicaraguan Constitution, Article 181.
\(^{67}\) Nietschmann, 1973.
\(^{68}\) Hale, 1994
New market opportunities opened up. Given their expanded presence, previously unused resources presented them with market opportunities. Tropical woods (primarily mahogany) and formerly unappealing hunting or ignored animals (like the jaguar, crocodile and the caiman) became valuable commodities (Nietschmann, 1973). This further motivated the Miskítu to expand their territory and enlist groups that were perceived as weaker (Sumu-Mayangna and Rama) into indebted servitude. This ushered the abandonment of subsistence economy for the sake of exploitative models.

The early 1800s found a Miskítu group that was not only acculturated to British culture but whose population thrived and position grew in status – a stark contrast to the experience of the tribes in the rest of the Coast. They gained a superior position over all the other indigenous groups of the region and became hegemonic to the extent that they dominated other groups from Honduras down to Panama. Once again they quickly, and effectively, shifted their subsistence economy from small scale fishing and hunting to an economy of trading for goods. Most importantly, this period left a tangible sense of entitled autonomy and self-determination.

These changes would predispose the Miskítu to become less rigid in their appreciation of opportunities while simultaneously increasing their cohesion and identity to the group. In this setting, their identity as Miskítu provided them not only with a positive comparison to other tribes but group identity emerged as the central political dynamic in the region – particularly during the period of perceived autonomy of the Miskítu kings. This situation helps to explain why they supported the British colonial power, developed strong distrust of Spanish-speakers and came to see all other indigenous groups as inferior in capability and possessing a weaker culture.

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69 One of the goods still on high demand, for the British, was slaves for sugar plantations.
These dynamics would influence not only the interaction of the Miskitu and other groups in the region but would also go on to color their interaction with English-Speaking Creoles and, later, with U.S.-owned companies that were directly shaping the creation of the Nicaraguan nation-state. North American businesses were originally attracted to the region for commercial lumbering (mahogany and other precious woods) but quickly expanded to banana plantations. These companies would hire Miskitu as contract wage laborers and in the process introduce the concept of long-term employment (usually requiring men to take year-long contracts). The banana boom proved economically viable for the group but altered their internal dynamics, instead of working in their immediate communities men would move away from their communities and send money and goods back to their villages.

Given that they were the most populous of the tribes in the region most of the contracts went to the Miskitu and put further strain on the weaker tribes to assimilate Miskitu cultural elements. For the Sumu-Mayangna and Rama this period brought further disintegration of their identity, for all of the indigenous tribes this period introduced a money-based economy, a deterioration of the nuclear family and an affinity for inexpensive foreign goods from the company commissary. Interestingly, this new economy created new interactions between the tribes of the region. Since most of the men took year-long contract Miskitu women took over agricultural work while old men did the hunting. Those that could afford it hired Sumus and Ramas to do the

70 Hale, 1994
71 Most Miskitu ethnographers (see Nietschmann, Hale and Dennis) note that, in this period, Miskitu became the lingua franca of the region.
72 Nietschmann, 1973
harder job of tilling clearing fields.\textsuperscript{73} This only served to further enhance the perception of Sumus and Ramas as inferior, child-like and significantly inferior in power and culture.

Once again Miskítu-nani were quick to adjust to the new economy and to the opportunities provided to them by the foreign companies. All of this was done in relative isolation from intrusion by the central government. Within this moneyed economy Miskítu culture had to alter traditional patterns in order to accommodate new labor arrangements (“hired hands” to till their fields “back home”) and high impact extraction on their environments. By this time the Miskítu were highly acculturated to their new environments: they actively embraced market economy, an increasing number spoke Creolized English and most adopted Moravian theology.\textsuperscript{74} Nietschmann goes as far as to claim that it was this acculturation and the effectiveness of Miskítu in adopting new economic models that prevented the group from experiencing the loss of cultural identity and group cohesion that became the norm for the rest of the tribes of the region – and in the rest of Latin America. Thus acculturation had the unintended effect of preserving group dynamics and the distribution of power in the Coast and left the Miskítu-nani, as separate from the other groups in the Coast, in the position to manipulate and enforce the cultural, linguistic, and political rules in the region. The more power the Miskítu-nani accumulated, the more evidence they saw of the other group’s inferiority.

British presence stood in defiance of Spanish hegemony in the region and, by externally placing the Miskítu-nani at the top of an artificially-created hierarchy it

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Hale, (1994), Nietschmann, (1973) and Dennis, 2004
moved the Sumo-Mayangna and Rama as subservient to the Miskítu. This system remained in place until 1894 when the Nicaraguan central government officially annexed the Coast and Spanish-speaking Mestizos arrived and began the institutionalization of a “Hispanization” program for the Coast. The central theme that arises from the colonial period is how exogenous forces changed traditional tribal dynamics and shaped the evolution of the use of violence in the Coast. Support from the British led one group in the Coast to grow in numbers and become dominant in the region and created artificial stereotypes of inferiority, backwardness and “indian-ness” that remain to this day. It divided people in the Coast by racial categories. Within this system there were four categories: Miskítu-nani, Creoles, Sumo-Mayangna and Rama. Miskítu-nani benefitted the most and, therefore, they had a vested interest in maintaining the system and there is evidence that they continue to do attempt to do so today. Social identity theory argues that a dominant group can react with violence when its status is challenged by a subordinate group. Additionally, the British colonial experience of the Coast predisposed the Miskítu-nani to an easy relation with English-speaking foreigners, to distrust Spanish-speakers, to see themselves as higher status than the other groups, to increase cohesion when threatened and to use violence against groups perceived to be lower.

INDIGENOUS IDENTITY AND THE CONCEPT OF “LAND”

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75 Hale, 1994.
76 Miskítu-nani refer to the Mayangnas and the Ramas as “Indians.”
78 IDH, 2005.
80 Dennis, 2004. Charles Hale (1994) goes as far as to term this positive group identification with English-speakers of the Miskítu an “Anglo affinity.”
Under British rule, the indigenous people of the Coast enjoyed a sense of political and cultural autonomy not experienced by other ethnic groups in the western half of Nicaragua. The Miskítu-nani was left in a dominant position and with relative autonomy in the Coast. Moreover, the fact that the Spaniards never attempted to colonize the Coast and held little interest in its affairs, served to protect de facto political autonomy in the region. As a consequence, the Miskítu-nani became hegemonic and began to maltreat subordinate groups.

The new independence found a Miskítu group that was not only acculturated to British culture but whose population thrived and whose position grew in status – a stark contrast to the experience of the other tribes in the Coast. They gained a hegemonic position over the other indigenous groups in the region; this allowed them to expand their territory from Honduras down to Panama. It is important to note that, in a relatively swift manner, they shifted their political economy from slave raids and hunting to barter and trading for goods to maximize opportunities to their group. Miskítu identity afforded them not only with a positive comparison to other groups but also emerged as a political dynamic – particularly during the period of de facto autonomy of the Miskítu kings. These changes would predispose them to adopt fluidity in their appreciation of opportunities while simultaneously increasing their cohesion and identity to the group. This fluidity proved to be a useful skill in the current crisis given that it allows the group to quickly perceive and respond to threats to their status.

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81 Nietschmann goes as far as to claim that it was the colonial experience in the Coast that prevented the tribe from experiencing the loss of cultural identity and group cohesion that became the norm for the rest of the country – and Latin America.

At the height of British presence in the Caribbean, the Coast received an influx of former slaves from the plantations in the Caribbean. Some of them chose to marry local women and their children then became accepted into Miskítu culture. This migration pattern initially served to strengthen group dynamics in the Coast and was also the birth of a new phenotype and cultural subgroup: The Sambo Miskítu.

While the Coast remained under British influence, the Moravian Church began to send missionaries. Their presence proved to be momentous to the people and the society of the Coast. These English-speaking missionaries institutionalized education and, more importantly, created a super-ordinate identity; namely, Protestantism, for the peoples of the Coast. As the missions became the epicenter of culture and education in the Coast, Protestantism became an identity that further separated the Coast from the Pacific Coast and Central Highlands that were predominantly Catholic. Moreover, and for self-serving reasons, the Moravians encouraged the newly converted to assert their de facto political autonomy precisely at the onset of a period of territorial expansion as the central government of Nicaragua embarked in annexation of the Coast. Initially, this served two purposes: First, it calmed a growing sense of dread over the Nicaraguan state and its assimilation designs for the Coast. Second, as literacy and Protestant theology advanced, it widened the distinction between the people of the Coast and the “Spaniards” from Nicaragua.

83 Hale, 1994
84 Offen, 2002, and Nietschmann, 1973. Currently, the Miskitu-nani is composed of two groups: the Tawira, or “straight-hair” and the Sambo-Miskitu, individuals whom, in other parts of the world would be thought to be Black given their hair and complexion. They speak the same language and share most cultural traditions.
85 A shared identity that helps to override in-group vs. out-group differences. See Myers (1990) for more details.
87 Hale, (1994), Nietschmann, (1973) and Dennis, 2004
88 Even if it may be axiomatic it is important to highlight the fact that, from the beginning, the people of the coast did not consider themselves members of the new nation-state of Nicaragua
Beginning with the period of the Miskitu King, the Miskitu-nani have seen all other indigenous groups in the Coast as less worthy, less educated and commonly refer to other indigenous groups as “uncouth Indians.”\footnote{During a trip to the RAAN in the summer of 2010 I had the opportunity to hear, multiple times and in multiple settings (in the regional airport in Bilwi, taxi cabs, the street market, the port, hotels and restaurants) Miskitu-nani refer to Sumu-Mayangnas as “indians.” The word is typically spoken with a long emphasis on the first syllable and punctuated with a heavy inflection at the end (“iiiiinndio!”). The effect is one of disdain and disgust.} This is currently evidence in their active role in the displacement of Sumu communities in the North Autonomous Region but has always been part of the Miskitu narrative, a narrative that contains the central theme of an “unbroken and autonomous period of self-rule before ‘the Nicaraguans’” (Offen, 2003). But, the most significant evidence of Miskitu “exceptionalism” in the Coast is the Miskitu flag. The flag is first mentioned in the historical record in 1824 as being hoisted by the Miskitu King during a fight against invading forces from Colombia (Offen, 2003). It flew over Bilwi until 1997 when then president Arnoldo Alemán had it replaced with the Nicaraguan flag.\footnote{The flag removal was added to the long list of insults suffered by the Miskitu-nani at the hands of the Nicaraguans} The combination of a traditionally hegemonic group, a strict ethnic hierarchy and strong out-group antagonism rendered relations between the Miskitu-nani and other ethnic groups in Nicaragua as one marked by suspicion and mistrust. This situation was only made worse with annexation and the implementation of a “one-way assimilation” strategy towards the goal of making “Nicaraguans” out of the “Costeños” – the one-group umbrella that the Mestizos use for groups in the Coast.

De facto political autonomy came to an end in 1960 when the Somoza family ceded half of the Miskitu territory to Honduras. Somoza forced the Miskitu-nani south of the Coco River, away from the rivers and forest and into the marshes in order to facilitate large scale clear cutting of precious woods. The Army used barbarous tactics
and, for the first time in their history, the Miskítu-nani were brutally repressed by an outside force. This only served to increase out-group antagonism towards Spanish-speaking Mestizos. Somoza was ruthlessly effective in his control of the Coast and, coupled with the fact that he had no interest in the region besides protecting the interests of the lumber and mining companies, his “predatory quest for power” also carried a pointed spear: “colonization of the Indians” under the assumption that national interest was best served via Hispanization. This was a difficult period for the group.

Spanish became the official language in schools and business and large numbers of Mestizo peasants were encouraged to migrate to the Coast in an attempt to increase population and help the “Indians” to “modernize.” Paradoxically, this one-way assimilation only served to make ethnic identity more salient in the Coast.

The sharpest point of the spear was forced relocation to “Indian colonies” and Somoza’s decision to privilege the growing population of Mestizos in the north of the Coast and ethnic Creoles in the southern areas near Bluefields. This transition from the dominant group to, at best, a midlevel laborer proved extremely difficult for the Miskítu-nani, especially those relocated to colonies. Miskítu-nani were forced to distance themselves from their group and to identify with the Creoles, who had suddenly moved up in the new group hierarchy in the Coast. As more land and property came under the control of the Somoza family, migration of Mestizo peasants accelerated. Even with increased opportunities for wage labor, “indian workers” were often relegated to strenuous, low paying jobs and had no chance of upward mobility while business, education and infrastructures were controlled by Mestizos.
Following the Contra War, group hierarchy was again restructured, this time placing Mestizos at the top but this has coincided with a new phenomenon: Miskítu recognition of “land” as part of their identity (Hooker, 2005). Beginning with the Contra War, the Miskítu-nani couched their political participation (in the form of an armed insurgency) as a struggle for the “defense of our land” (Offen, 2002). It was until the Sandinistas introduced “communidades de base” (grassroots communities) with the explicit purpose of increasing political participation, that the Miskítu began to recognize the value of merging land with their identity. As articulated by Miskítu leaders, the notion of indigenous political autonomy meshed notions of self-determination, group identity and land (Offen, 2002) and no other group in the Coast has been as effective in recognizing the political implications.

During a period when minorities in the Coast can only protect their status, and identity, through the mechanisms of political autonomy and self-determination, the Miskítu-nani have found a way to mesh the politics of identity with those of a territory.

**CREOLE IDENTITY AND THE CONCEPT OF “LAND”**

The Creole elite in the Coast during the Colonial and Republican Eras were generally sea traders that were well integrated as intermediaries in the commerce of the Coast. They procured commercial goods on credit from Anglo traders in exchange for raw materials (turtle shell, mahogany, fruits and vegetables) independently harvested by indigenous populations (Nietschmann, 1973). In doing so they were instrumental in linking the Coast to global trade.

The Colonial Era was formative for the development of Creole communities in the Coast. By this time, growing numbers of Afro-descendants had won entry into
Costeño society through emancipation, marrying with Miskítu and their own labor, but most were still faced with limited options for upward mobility. De facto autonomy in the Coast, from both colonial and national rule, encouraged settlement and allowed the Creole access to agricultural lands and the possibility of becoming farmers (Nietschmann, 1973, Offen, 2002). This diversification of Creole market economies not only stimulated settlement, but would become an important site of political power for Creoles. The displacement of Miskítu from the political hierarchy of the Coast during the Republican Era opened roads for Creole to pursue autonomy and self-determination, which was directly tied to further migration, which in turn influenced how Creoles would come to claim their role within the context of politics of the Coast. That is to say, it afforded Creoles their own expressions of territoriality and identity.

Creoles have long associated access to and control over land and natural resources with economic and political autonomy, which today remain core values in contemporary Creole politics (Hooker, 2005). In this case, Creole group identity is fundamentally linked to the degree to territory and self-determination.

The advancement of Mestizo latifundios that began in earnest towards the end of the Republican Era and continues well into the Autonomy Era proved just as destabilizing to the Creole as it is to the indigenous communities. Like indigenous peoples, afro-descendants are ethnically distinct from Mestizos, with cultural values and practices that are directly linked to land use and tenure (Offen, 2002). In one sense, this also point out historical and cultural differences between indigenous and afro-descendant and their use of land, but it also suggests that afro-descendant patterns of land tenure are widely misunderstood.
Historically, afro-descendant land tenure on the Coast can be described as:

a. Communal and traditional

b. Private and modern.\(^91\)

This dual nature continues to be a heated debate currently in Nicaragua about the relationship between indigenous and afro-descendant tenure (Hooker, 2005). And it also implies ramifications into the legitimacy of communal land titling for ALL communities in the Coast. Historical tensions between indigenous and afro-descendant communities concerning the use of land and natural resource rights can be traced to the Republican Era when the balance of regional power was altered in the Coast to benefit the Creoles over the Miskítu (Woods and Morris, 2007). These events further deepened the chasm between rural and urban communities.

Another complication factor raised by the Creole identity and the concept of land is that territorial claims throughout the Coast are not only contiguous, but frequently overlap with one another.\(^92\) Degrees of overlap vary from region to region and, prior to 2013, some overlapping claims generated conflict between communities in the Coast (Awas-Tingni v. Nicaragua, 2001). Beginning with the Nicaraguan Canal Project, the growing threat of governmental takeover of lands through imminent domain (illegal in the Coast until the passage of Law 840 in 2013) has had the surprising result of ameliorating inter-communal conflict and increasing inter-communal cooperation between indigenous and afro-descendant communities in the Coast (Acosta, 2015 and La Prensa, 12/2014). Over the last two years, indigenous and afro-descendant communities in the RAAS have opted for land sharing and territorial unification as a

\(^91\) Private ownership of land is illegal in the autonomous regions; see the 1987 Constitution and Law 445 (Communal Land Titling) for further details.

\(^92\) See Appendix G for an example of overlapping claims to land in the Coast.
means to counter threatening governmental behavior. The Canal Project is a very threatening situation to communities that stand in the proposed path of the canal. This represents a shift in the perception afro-descendants from competitors for limited resources with threatening intentions to that of allies joined against a more powerful, common enemy. It is logical for the peoples of the Coast to perceive the intentions of the Mestizo central government as threatening and act accordingly.

The relationship to land of indigenous and afro-descendant communities developed along separate lines. On one hand, the relationship between Creole groups and their land is based in shared dependence on land and natural resources for sustenance and economic opportunities. One the other hand, indigenous peoples have invested deep historical, religious, and cultural meaning attached to their territory. But, both share the notion that control of their land is a means to protect the continuity of group identity (Offen, 2003, Acosta, 2015, Alvarado, 2007). This brings us back to one of the central questions that drive this work; namely, how will the amalgam of land and identity in the Coast affect the implementation of a super-ordinate identity in Nicaragua? Relevant to the issue of displacement of peoples of the Coast from their traditional homeland, this raises the following questions:

1. How do state policies affect the rise of Mestizo cultural and political hegemony in the Coast?
2. How do state policies affect the consolidation of state control over land and natural resources in the autonomous regions?

As illustrated in Appendix F, this is not a recent phenomenon. It must be also clarified that it is not simply the result of foreign economic interests. Instead, the displacement of afro-descendants and indigenous communities in the Coast by Mestizo settlers is a direct byproduct of governmental policies and agrarian reform predicated on private ownership of land.
3. How do state policies affect the likelihood that the peoples of the Coast will be able to re-define Mestizo nationalism?

   Thus far, the answer to these questions has been that the Coast has been transformed into a region where Mestizos are the demographic majority and Nicaraguan nationalism is defined under their terms and it’s forcing each ethnic group to reinvigorate their primary political loyalty to their ethnic group. Additionally, this is leading to erosion of indigenous and Afro-descendant access to and control of communal lands, natural resources and political representation in the Regional Council – the main ruling structures in the autonomous regions. Moreover, these same processes have effectively alienated indigenous and Afro-descendant communities from their access to subsistence and commercial activities. Regions around Bluefields, Río Escondido and Kukra Hill were important centers of indigenous and Creole agricultural economies during the Colonial and Republican Eras. Today, these areas are deeply integrated into Mestizo and global economies (Acosta, 2015). But, loss of control over territory does not break the deep bonds held by indigenous and Afro-descendant communities with those lands nor their desires to regain some degree of control over them (Hale, 2005).

   **THE POSITION OF THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT**

   This section analyses the role that images play in in the Coast and during the Contra War. It relates to historical events, long-held patterns of interaction between ethnic groups and the prevailing images of the people of the Coast held by the Nicaraguan government. Finally, the

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94 See table 1 for details.
95 See Charts 1, 2 and 3 for details.
96 See Table 2 for details.
nexus between patterns of interaction and the evolution of cognitive images is used as a foundation for examining the current worldview of the government.

The following synopsis serves the purpose of introducing basic terms and ideas; it is not intended as a comprehensive primer on Image theory (IT). IT posits that cognitive construct or images are a necessary consequence of the need to simplify the world around us (Cottam, 1994). By creating categories, encompassing ideal types, people provide an efficient means of filtering between correct, important and extraneous information. They then use these cognitive archetypes to make inferences about a given group’s or individual’s behavior, forecast possible actions and assess avenues of response (Cottam, 1994). There are three further points to highlight. First, images are not static; people and groups are typically perceived to fall within a spectrum of the prototypical image. Strategy and modality of action is determined by how close a given actor perceives the other’s image, vis-à-vis the archetype. Secondly, images are bound tightly to emotion and perceptions of threats or opportunity (as will be seen in the case of both the peoples of the Coast and the Nicaraguan central government); the nexus between capability, cultural sophistication and perceived intention plays a significant role in the decision-making process. Finally, the image of a group can change according to changes in perceive intention, capability and sphere of influence (Cottam & Cottam, 2001). Out of the crucible of cognition and affect are born choices of action or behavior.

The argument here is twofold. First, particularly relevant to the Miskitu-nani, the decision to join the armed insurgency against the Sandinista Army during the Contra War was positively correlated to the perception of existential threat to their group. Secondly, from the perspective of the Sandinista government, and given historical patterns of interactions between the Mestizo elite and the peoples of the Coast, the decision-making of the Sandinista elite process lead to the
mistaken perception that the Miskítu were not acting on their own volition but rather as pawns of external forces. The nexus between these two positions provides the foundation for the analysis of the long-lived distrust of Mestizos in the Coast from a political psychology perspective and provides a contrasting interpretation to the nature of the insurgency.

Following the arrest of all the leaders of MUSIRASATA and the forced displacement of Miskítu communities along the Río Coco, the Coast experienced a brutal period of armed violence. The Sandinista resolve to incorporate the peoples of the Coast into the revolution created resentment because Costeños felt that the revolution was not their own, but was imposed upon them by revolutionaries who were outsiders. This resentment was further exacerbated by historical tensions between the peoples of the Coast, Protestants who speak English, and the Mestizos who live in the interior, who are Catholic and speak Spanish.

Beginning as early as February 1980, tensions between Miskítu-nani and the Sandinistas escalated into violent confrontations in Prinzapolka when the Sandinista Police arrested the entire leadership of MISURASATA on the belief that they had become a vehicle for separatists movements in the Coast (Baracco, 2011). The Miskítu resisted the soldiers and, in the ensuing scuffle and gunfight, four Miskítu-nani and four Sandinista soldiers were killed. In 1982, the Sandinista army attempted to create a clear-fire zone (in preparation for the war against the US-supported Contra forces) by forcibly relocating some 10,000 Miskítu-nani living in scattered villages along the Río Coco into urban resettlement camps in Matagalpa. These actions were perceived as threatening to the peoples of the Coast and provoked many Miskítu and Sumu villagers to flee as refugees into neighboring Honduras. They soon joined the MISURA contra army (a reorganized version of MISURASATA) who allied themselves with the FDN Contra
armies funded by the US government. The MISURA army operated from bases in the Honduran
from whence they conducted raids into Nicaragua.

The majority of refugees (nearly 38,500 between 1981 and 1986, according to Oxfam
and the UNHCR/World Relief program) who fled to Honduras were Miskitu-nani, although a
sizable number of Sumu-Mayangnas (approximately 3,000) have also registered in the UNHCR
settlement programs. Usually, refugees arrived in groups from a particular village, and settled in
Honduras as a group under the same village name. These refugees left their homes in Nicaragua
because they did not want to be forcibly relocated to planned Sandinista resettlement towns, such
as Tasba Pri. Some refugees claimed to have fled their villages after hearing rumors that
Sandinista soldiers were digging mass graves in the event that villagers resisted relocation. Many
refugees fled in order to follow family members who had already left for Honduras. Young men
left to avoid being conscripted into the Sandinista army. Refugees who did leave their native
villages often described being chased by Sandinista airplanes and shot at by soldiers at the border
(Oxfam and the UNHCR/World Relief program).

Sandinistas viewed the indigenous fighters, composed largely by illiterate villagers but
organized by Mestizo political elites97 as “manipulated Indians” (Hale, 1987), historically a
childlike image of inept, dependent and easily corrupted individuals. The fact that these
insurgents were motivated by the basic necessity of survival and protection (Molieri, 1987) was
irrelevant to the Sandinista. The perception of threat, especially given that these groups of
“inept” people were being influenced by the Americans and former members of the Somoza
National Guard, became an ominous reality. Under this circumstances, one does not negotiate
with these people, one acts quickly and decisively with force or coercion (Cottam, 1994).

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97 Mostly members of the FDN, line Adolfo Calero.
This extraordinary circumstance evolved into a historical pattern in the 1990’s following deliberate delays of the institutionalization of indigenous autonomy (mandated by the 1987 Constitution) under the administration of Violeta Chamorro and Adolfo Alemán (Walker, 1997). With an eye towards attracting foreign investment in Nicaragua (Walker, 1997) Presidents Chamorro and Alemán delayed the autonomy process in order to secure unfettered access to indigenous lands and resources for development. This situation would provide precedence for a new wave of forced displacement of indigenous families and communities by a less-organized but equally nefarious group: illegal Mestizo settlers. Armed groups, closely resembling paramilitaries, are closely integrated into apparatus of government control in the Coast, to the extent that they pay and are given “title” to indigenous land (illegal under the 1987 Constitution) by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (Davis, M in Indigenous Law Bulletin, 2002) and frequently call upon the Nicaraguan Police to enforce their “title” claims. This situation leaves indigenous communities with a sense of “déjà vu” to the period of internal displacement and forced migration of the early 1980s.

In terms of images the government has of the Mestizo settlers, since the “movement” began in earnest in the mid 1900’s, it is varying levels of the Ally image depending on the level of perceived threat to the legitimacy of the central government of Managua. One police official with whom I had a conversation over lunch, during a trip I made to Bilwi in the summer of 2010, referred to the relationship between Mestizo settlers and municipal officials (who tend to also be Mestizos) as, “an extramarital affair.” Given the historical legacy of Mestizos in the Coast, the settlers are imbued with at least a modicum of threat – to the extent that they retain relative

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98 For example, in 1995 the Nicaraguan government granted a 30 year logging concession to a Korean logging company called Sol del Caribe, SA (‘SOLCARSA’) to log on the traditional lands of the Awas Tingni without consulting the community nor seeking their consent.
99 Human Rights Watch, 2001
impunity for acts of brutality and use of violence. Their ability to remain immune from the jurisdiction of the courts is perceived, by the displaced indigenous families, as a “legitimate” form of political violence.

Following the Contra War, the returned refugees refocused their attention to traditional life, rebuilding their communities and, at the regional level, securing political autonomy (Hooker, 2005). Over the next decade, politically active indigenous groups – partly because they did not conform to open-market, liberal economic models (they abhor the idea of private ownership of land and despise the use of natural resources in a mass scale) and began to actively demand self-determination and autonomy – presented a problem to the central government of Nicaragua. The legacy of the Contra War left an indelible mark in the Nicaraguan psyche that these groups where, in truth, seeking to create an alternate form of government and, at worst, sought to secede from the nation. In effect, the fact that they lived in the periphery of the political arena and provided pseudo-gubernatorial functions, (e.g., security, welfare, criminal justice) gave every reason to Managua to view them with apprehension. As previously mentioned this dynamic can enhance the perception of threat and narrow policy options for the government.

The peoples of the Coast have traditionally been seen as childlike in Nicaragua, a social burden in constant need of direction and assistance. As previously detailed, the majority of the peoples of the Coast are made up mostly of poorly educated campesinos, laborers and indigenous people, a group of people that have long-suffered by being categorized into a rigid image of the dependent. Historically, in their drafting of legislature concerning the Coast, the Nicaraguan National Assembly, long composed almost entirely by upper class Mestizos and the moneyed elite (asamblea.gob.ni), saw the indigenous peoples of the Coast as primitive, easily corrupted,

100 Human Rights Watch, 2001
101 Legitimate is understood to be the capacity to act freely and with impunity.
and culturally inferior (Woods, 2007, Hale, 1994 and Hooker, 2005). The inclination was to see them in patronizing terms, evaluate their capabilities as inferior and intentions as benign. Initially these attributes fit well into a textbook case of dependent image (Cottam, 1994). This all changed during the Contra War. As previously mentioned, the majority of Costeño men that joined MISURA as well as the Contras became part of an anti-Sandinista movement that was perceived to be, by Mestizos, as an anti-Nicaraguan movement. In this way, perceptions associated with an indigenous insurgency were transferred to all members of the group, even as the militant indigenous rhetoric of MISURA had a narrow emphasis on autonomy, self-determination, and human security (Baracco, 2011). This “militant” nature of MISURA compounded the image of a dependent and changed it from potentially benign to potentially harmful. No longer were these childlike peoples acting rebelliously during a time of war. Even in the face of relative peace, miscreants (Stedman Fagoth, Brooklyn Rivera and, interestingly enough, their former adversaries, the Sandinistas) were looming in the background, threatening to “dupe” naive “Indians” into challenging the legitimacy of the central government of Nicaragua (Baracco, 2011). At this point the dependent’s lack of sophistication became a liability for the central government as it meant that they would be unable to resist the influence of cunning elite.

**CONCLUSION**

While communal land rights are recognized and codified by domestic and international law, the Nicaraguan central government and the Mestizo majority in the Coast promote and continue to implement private models of ownership of land and utilization of natural resources. This paradox is one of the central challenges to the re-creation of Nicaragua as a *Multiethnic State* and for the proper implementation of political autonomy in the Coast. While the peoples of the Coast continue to expect realities on the ground to be shaped by law, the reality is that the
central government is implementing a different plan. Thus Mestizo-led agrarian reforms and governmental policies continue to frame and re-create life on the Coast to the detriment of the peoples of the Coast. Over the last decade, the central government has demonstrated its unwillingness to change its approach to “the problem of the Coast.” Their lack of political will, from the central government, to implement existing laws that recognize indigenous and Afro-descendant understandings on land rights and what it means to be a “Nicaraguan” is limiting the capacity for political participation and, therefore, eroding pluralism. Historically, the Nicaraguan state has viewed indigenous and Afro-descendant cultural, political, and material demands as a threat to the consolidation of state power and the promotion of a unifying national identity. Costeño identity politics, rooted on their long experience with self-determination, continue to be perceived, by the Mestizo state, as separatist movements and threats to the national unity. At the same time, the peoples of the Coast tend to perceive the behavior of the Mestizos and the central government as a further obstacle to the creation of a unified national identity.

CHAPTER 4: NATIONALISM AND THE “PROBLEM OF THE COAST”

REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM

Nicaragua was one of the first Latin American countries to deliberately adopt multicultural citizenship reforms that assigned special collective rights to indigenous peoples. The problem is that this decision openly contradicted the basic premises of Mestizaje and of Mestizo nationalism (Hooker, 2004). This particular brand of Nicaraguan nationalism argues that the country is a nation-state, one that adopted Catholicism as a religion, one that accepts centralization of power as a system of government and one that nationalized Spanish as the

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102 Mestizaje is the process of interracial and/or intercultural mixing of the Indigenous and the European. As such, Mestizaje is both a discourse and a mechanism with which to construct a national identity that essentially denies the value of indigenous as antithetic to modernity and progress. Mestizaje ask Indigenous Peoples to join the national community and economy, adopt their language, and abandon their traditional ways. All types of countries in Latin America have laid claim to the positive value of being a Mestizo nation. For example, “the spirit of Cuba is Mestizo,” said the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, even in stark contradiction to his own background as an Afro-Cuban.
official language. This is the Nicaragua of lakes and volcanoes but, since 1987 is also a country that claims to recognize and protect the multicultural and multiethnic nature of its society – as long as it is viewed through the Mestizo worldview. As such, this model of Mestizo nationalism is geared towards conservatism and to protect the status quo. There is one variant in Nicaragua to Mestizo nationalism. Revolutionary (or Sandinista) Nationalism was born as a response to American intervention, was itself radical and advocated for a system of government that maximized sovereignty and self-determination but, still under the guise of Mestizaje as a nation-building force.

The contending brand of Nicaraguan nationalism argues that the country is both indigenous and afro-descendant. This is the Nicaragua that actively resisted the centripetal forces of Mestizaje; a model of nationalism that understands that “indigenous” does not only exists in the Coast but also in Masaya and Matagalpa. This model includes the Rama and Miskítu as well as the Nahuas and Sutiavas. This old indigenous form of Nicaraguan nationalism takes pride in its different cultural and historical path of development, understands the differences are not only real but clearly documented. Even in face of its multitudinous nature there is one central commonality to all of the indigenous experiences in Nicaragua: they all actively resisted assimilation. As such, indigenous nationalism is radical and geared to oppose Mestizaje, which it sees as not only a myth but inherently destructive to all that means indigenous. To indigenous peoples, this natural resistance against all of that Mestizaje implies becomes a unifying, and real, political identity (Gould, 1994). The afro-descendant component of this form of nationalism includes the experiences of African Diasporas. This is the unique reality of the Creoles and Garífunas of the Coast. Unlike the other relevant political identities (Mestizo and Indigenous) the Afro-Descendant term relates to a racial category.
Both of these models of nationalism overlap each other, in a relationship that can be as commonplace as it is chaotic. Nonetheless, this is the crucible from whence Nicaraguans must forge the identity of their nation. Thus far, Mestizo nationalism, based on the “natural” quality of the forced homogenization of the Indigenous and the European identities, has proven effective only in assuming that it is only the synthesis of both that will define what it means to be a Nicaraguan and, therefore, effectively removed the former as the “poorer” version of the two – after all that is the goal of modernity, as much as it was the goal of Christianization. In the Coast, this homogenizing project has always been a failure and, data seems to point out that it continues to be so. Nonetheless, the political elite (and the Mestizo population at large) continue to expect that the only way to birth a unifying identity as Nicaraguans will be through the crucible of Mestizo nationalism. The troubling part, to me, is that this should no longer be the case.

The idea that, beginning in 1987, Nicaragua would begin the process of being a “born-again” multicultural and multiethnic nation was appealing, particularly in the Coast and to Costeño scholars (Kwarts, 1987, Hale, 1994, Offen, 2003 and Hooker, 2005). But, in the end, it is proving to be yet another failure. That is not due to a stubborn unwillingness from the peoples of the Coast to work towards a unifying national identity but, instead, it is due to the surprising inability of Sandinista political elites to recognize the inherent failures of their brand of Mestizo nationalism, namely the Revolutionary Nationalism. In doing so, the idea of forging a Multiethnic State has had the unintended consequences of entrenching the perceived legitimacy of Mestizaje. In truth, the idea that was born in 1987 died in 2014 when the National Assembly passed Law 840 and effectively removed sovereignty over indigenous lands from the Regional

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103 In no small way neither is effective in navigating many of the other smaller identities present in the country – Chinese and Jewish in particular.
104 See Charts 1 through 3 for details.
105 See Pablo Antonio Cuadra for further details.
106 The rich ethnic and racial context of the Coast demands a broad definition of citizenship but, they continue to push instead a very narrow and limiting definition.
Councils and rendered it at the hands of the national government when “reasonably necessary” for the Nicaragua Canal project.\textsuperscript{107} From this point forward, any attempt at pluralism and for an open discourse on the value of Indigenous and Creole nationalism was no longer a goal for the political elites in Managua. Of course, this legislature does not change the cultural realities of the Coast. This is the nature of the new “problem of the Coast.”

As the Cottams (2001), and Hale (1994) argued, ideologies of legitimize efforts to limit full citizenship of political minorities weaken the identity composition of the polity. In doing so, they leave Nicaragua in an unfavorable position from which to forge nationalistic predisposition in the Coast. Given that, as has already been discussed, the discourse of Mestizaje denies the value, and even the existence, of non-Mestizos, it has the effective results of pre-emptively removing any possibility of a complimentary identity.\textsuperscript{108} Non-Mestizos, especially outside the Coast, tend to be omitted from visions of the nation. In spite of expected transformations in legal frameworks, that would have allowed the room for a possible complimentary identity in the Coast, the reality is that Revolutionary Nationalism only served to limit the number of doors available for political participation of the peoples of the Coast. One implication of this paradox, as pointed out by Costeño scholars is that, there were strong connections between the constitutional drive for multiculturalism/ multi-ethnicity and the various Mestizaje ideologies that preceded it (Gordon, 1998, Offen, 2003, Hooker, 2005, Hale, 2005, and Woods et al, 2007).

The true nature of Revolutionary Nationalism did not begin to be configured until the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Ortega administration of 2007. The nationalistic discourse of that emerged following the end of the neo-liberal administrations of V. Chamorro, A. Alemán and E. Bolaños appeared to affirm

\textsuperscript{107} Law 840 goes as far as stating the central government now, beginning in February 2014, was no longer required to notify, indemnify or establish any legal procedure in expropriating communal or private land in the autonomous regions.

\textsuperscript{108} See Charts 1 through 3, PUND and Woods and Morris (2007) for further details.
that racial and cultural diversity were complimentary to Mestizo nationalism but, even as they are recognized to be “an integral part of what it means to be Nicaraguan,” this new model of Revolutionary Nationalism “does not create an alternate national identity.” Instead, like its predecessor, it discourages the assertion of “subnational identities except when they contribute to the national identity.” In spite of its alleged revolutionary nature, this variant of Mestizo nationalism shares one key element with its ideological predecessor: the exclusion from full citizenship of the peoples of the Coast. This doomed the project from its inception because, as we have discussed previously in this work, the peoples of the Coast enjoyed de facto autonomy and have historically resisted Mestizo nationalism which demanded the assimilation and dismantling of cultural heritage from the Coast.

Nationalism scholars emphasize (Deutsch, 1966, Anderson, 1983 and Cottam and Cottam, 2001) the constructed character of nations. Nations are the product of nationalist discourses and movements, even as these nationalisms may differ in character and degree on intensity. Official nationalism, according to Benedict Anderson, is “an anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups [when] threatened” (Anderson, 1983). It is partly due to this that the behavior of the peoples of the Coast have been perceived, at different times in their history, as potential agents of foreign powers, by Sandinista elites, and as a balkanization threat, by the three neo-liberal presidents of the 1990s and early 2000s, all while the Coast (and, most importantly, her natural resources, are claimed as an integral part of the nation. Furthermore, in the case of Nicaragua, as the Cottams (20001) correctly point out, the chaos of the post-

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109 Daniel Ortega on a speech given on 8/11/2008 concerning the way in which Nicaragua would move beyond the era of neo-liberal administrations “Nicaragua: Energía Con Visión Integracionista.” EVERY single one of Ortega’s speeches are transcribed and available online at http://www.lavozdelsandinismo.com/discursos-daniel-ortega/


independence period prevented the political elites in Nicaragua from articulating a vision of nationalism until well into the 20th century – primarily because 19th century Criollo political elites were predisposed to infighting and along conservative and liberal political ideologies and also due to the pernicious years of American military intervention (1917-1933).

If it is true that political identity and nationalism actively shape relations between citizens and the state; then the failures of Revolutionary nationalism are crucial to understanding the way in which the peoples of the Coast have been unable to forge a national identity. Revolutionary nationalism incorporates many elements of the older Mestizo discourse it claimed to replace, particularly the idea that Mestizaje is the crucible from which to forge a national unity.
Thus, in agreement with Hooker, this work argues that Revolutionary Nationalism, given that it is more of a reaffirmation than a departure from Mestizo nationalism, it only serves to provide a roadblock to the creation of a national identity in the Coast.

THE CONTRA WAR AND INDIGENOUS INSURGENCY

As has been discussed throughout this dissertation, from the perspective of the peoples of the Coast have always autonomy and self-determination is their birthright (especially for the Miskitu-nani) and their version of indigenous nationalism continues to directly compete with the version of Mestizo Nicaragua and its long attempts at overt and covert assimilation of the Coast and her people. After independence from Spain, Nicaragua broke her ties with her indigenous identity and created the foundation for a nation being Mestizo was analogous to becoming Nicaraguan. In the Pacific, Mestizaje is commonly seen as a nation-building force (Cuadra, 1971 Ortega, 2007-2015) while in the Coast, however, Mestizaje was blocked by the presence of British colonialism and de facto autonomy, systems which proved minimally disruptive to established ways of life of the peoples of the Coast.
The critical explanatory factor behind the initial acquiescence of the peoples of the Coast to incorporate into the Nicaraguan national identity appears to have been the axiomatic absence of the national state in their daily lives that was expected under Law of Autonomy (Frühling et al, 2007). The increasing presence of the national state, over the last 10 years, appears to produce a corresponding intensification of indigenous and afro-descendant militant mobilization and a strong assertion of their ethnic identity (Baracco, 2011). Political autonomy itself appears to have played a constructive role in the formation of the indigenous politics and their subsequent difficulty in incorporating into the overarching national identity. Rather than promoting acculturation and inclusion, the struggles of the political autonomy process sparked a self-awareness amongst ethnic groups in the Coast, often resulting in xenophobic fears rather than assimilation (Hooker, 2001 and Baracco, 2011).

This dissertation has already looked at the decision of the Miskítu-nani to join an armed insurgency as the only viable option against the Sandinistas’ anti-imperialist nationalism and their dreadful domestic policies in the Coast following the 1979 Revolution. What emerged from the Contra War was not the incorporation of the Coast into the Nicaraguan identity, but separate notions of nationalism that competed directly with the Mestizo ideologies of the dominant core community. During the years of the Contra War, the Sandinista perception that indigenous militancy was the result of manipulation by the regional hegemon initially restrained the options for a way out of the conflict. But, from the perspective of the Miskítu-nani, armed conflict was the only option to protect their group and traditional ways of life. This was the beginning of the emergence of the indigenous and afro-descendant nationalism of the 1980s. Sandinista fears about separatism were inflamed by the words and deeds of a number of Miskítu leaders, particularly Steadman Fagoth and Brooklyn Rivera. The critical factors arising from this period
were the increasingly clear distinction between the ethnic agenda of Miskitu fighters and the Mestizo Contras; a recognition that opened the door for the Sandinistas government to postulate for regional autonomy from the counter-revolution, making it an acceptable basis for peace negotiations. On the other hand, for the Miskitu fighters, autonomy allowed them to negotiate for incorporation into the national identity on their own terms.

While the Sandinista Revolution was born as a reaction against a brutal dictatorship that preserved unequal and awful class-based oppression in Nicaragua, the Contra War presented a different set of problems in The Coast. The combination of group-based discrimination and the oppression and suppression of traditional Miskitu status and cultural traditions forced the Miskitu-nani to organize in order to confront the perceived renew of “insults” from the central government. In 1980, at the start of the Contra War, the Miskitu were left at the bottom of (what they perceived to be) an upside-down group hierarchy in The Coast, they had returned to pre-colonial small-scale subsistence and the wage-labor economies of the early 1900’s. They faced economic hardship coupled with long-held collective “memories of a higher standard of living.” Their efforts to improve their lot were faced with ethnic oppression by the Sandinista and discrimination by the Creole hierarchy of The Coast. This social malaise provided the impetus for unity and action and gave rise to the Miskitu-dominated indigenous-based political movement called MISURASATA a politico-military coalition of the three indigenous groups of The Coast.

Immediately following the end of the revolution, MISURASATA spoke of supporting the Sandinistas and were optimistic on the idea of extending the

112 Hale, 1994.
113 Miskitu, Sumu, Rama and Sandinista, All Together.
“revolutionary struggle” to The Coast.114 But, shortly thereafter, these lofty goals were impeded by internal tension between the Miskítu leaders of MISURASATA and the Sandinistas. First, the Sandinista subsumed their perspective on the problems in The Coast mostly in terms of Marxist class-struggle, as opposed to ethnic discrimination as viewed by the Miskítu and the Costeños. This separate analysis proved impossible for the Sandinista central government to digest given that “they had not developed an analysis of pure ethnic-based oppression.”115 Instead, the Sandinista party continued to rely on old-fashioned (and foreign to the Miskítu) symbols of Nationalism (i.e., Mestizo nationalism). Finally, the central government limited its solution to “The Coast Problem” in terms of “assimilation” into the dominant culture and economic development.116 This was met with significant friction from the indigenous leaders who, spurred by the Sandinistas’ own agenda of removing old Somoza hegemonic institutions while fostering grass-roots political involvement, began to demand political autonomy.

The two main leaders of MISURASATA, Steadman Fagoth and Brooklyn Rivera, began to advance two separate solutions to the impasse between The Coast and the Sandinistas. The former fostered the “armed alternative” while the latter pushed for a “political alternative.” The decision was made by both when, during public ceremonies commemorating the end of the very successful “literacy campaign” of 1980, the group made a very public demand for official recognition of a “single territory within the Atlantic Coast belonging to the Miskitu”117 and designating MISURASATA as its political wing. The Sandinista government reacted by arresting the whole

114 Molero, 1988
116 Molero, 1988, Hale, 1987
117 La Prensa, July 19 1981.
MISURASATA directorate and nearly every community-level activist.\textsuperscript{118} It was within this political and ideological maelstrom that the Contra War arrived in The Coast.

By this time the counterrevolution was well under way. The remnants of Somoza’s old National Guard had set up camps across the Coco River in Honduras and were receiving funds and training by the Reagan administration\textsuperscript{119} with the sole intention of overthrowing the Sandinistas from power. Adolfo Calero reached out to Miskitu leaders at the time and planned for an attack on small towns along the edge of the Coco River.\textsuperscript{120} This took place on December 1981 and, by all accounts, the perpetrators were all Miskítu-nani.\textsuperscript{121}

The Sandinista Army reacted by a military occupation of the Coco River and forced relocation of entire Miskítu villages to Mestizo urban centers in Matagalpa province. A large portion of the Miskítu-nani living in the region fled to Honduras (nearly 12,000 by multiple accounts) while the rest reluctantly took part of the relocation plan. Understandably both groups held deep resentment towards the central government and the decision only served to foment the viability of the “armed solution.” The Contra War presented similar risks and opportunities for the Miskítu as those experienced during their interaction with the British colonials. The U.S. government seized on the relocation of the Miskítu and accused the Sandinistas of genocide. This situation even provided the forum for North American Native Activists

\textsuperscript{118} Hale, 1987.
\textsuperscript{119} Adolfo Calero, Eden Pastora, Humberto Ortega, Jaime Wheelock, Monica Baltodano, Hugo Torrez, Victor Hugo Tinoco and Dora Maria Tellez, interviews, Managua, July, 2008.
\textsuperscript{120} Adolfo Calero, interview, Managua, 2008.
\textsuperscript{121} Hale, 1987.
to join the “fray” and lent a sense of legitimacy to the Contras who were “fighting against people that were other than humans.” For the Miskitu (who undoubtedly suffered great injustices during this time) the discourse provided an opportunity to once again put the onus on the central government to recognize that their struggle was, in fact, not based on class. Ráfaga, a well know Miskitu fighter during the Contra War explained that:

“In the Indian villages on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, we have our own way of living. Since the ancient days, we the Miskito Indians have possessed great strength and wisdom, which have served to preserve and protect our traditions, our lives and our dignity as a nation. But now, in my lifetime, we have been robbed of our rights as an indigenous people. We have been disowned by our neighbors; the Nicaraguans...the government treated us like lower animals. These men put my brothers in jails, now full of the broken spirits of once free Indians. They stole from us, raped our women and beat our young men and boys. To treat us that way was not right at all. After all, we are not intellectually or morally inferior to the Spanish.”

**ALLIANCES FOLLOWING THE END OF THE CONTRA WAR**

It was in the mist of one of the most brutal periods in the history of Nicaragua that the notion of political autonomy was introduced as a vital part of the peace process. The Sandinistas came into negotiations from a weak military and economic position and saw a benefit into providing the Miskitu-nani with autonomy in return for their

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122 Russell Means, a Lakota Sioux and founding member of the American Indian Movement, well-known for his role as Chingachgook in the movie *The Last of the Mohicans*, pledged (on Nov. 10, 1986 from San José, Costa Rica) “to recruit 90 to 100 warriors from North America to join Miskitu fighters to oppose the Sandinista Government.”

123 Adolfo Calero, interview, Managua 2008.

124 Wilson and Reyes, 1992
departure from the ranks of the Contras. The Contra War and the subsequent economic embargo proved particularly damaging to reconstruction efforts of the Sandinista government and, by the end of 1984 the situation was dire.

The period from 1980 to 1985 was marked by extreme exigencies of the Contra War and forced the Sandinista Army to significantly divert their efforts, training and resources into the Contra War.\textsuperscript{125} Consequently they acted largely as a militarized police; loyalty to the Sandinista (Mestizo) government was inculcated, expected and demanded. The point here is that perceptions towards the Miskítu and their demands for autonomy did not arise in a vacuum. Armed institutions come to assume they possess the inherent right, both formal and informal, to maintain effective control over the populace\textsuperscript{126}.

By 1985 the Sandinistas took a different approach to the problem in The Coast. First, they began to promote (and most importantly, protect) Miskítu leadership and traditional communal governance. Secondly, they replaced leadership in the Sandinista Army with more moderate individuals and furthered the development of the Sandinista Police as a separate, domestic-security institution. Third, they reversed the relocation program and opened the northern border so that Miskítu refugees could return to their ancestral homes. Finally, and most importantly, they officially began talks on recognizing regional autonomy. The Miskítu realized the opportunity and returned to the path of peace and alliance with the Sandinista administration.

The Sandinistas introduced a new term to Nicaraguan lexicon, “Revolutionary Nationalism” meaning the notion that, “to be a Nicaraguan, it means to be both a

\textsuperscript{125} Ruhl, 2003.
\textsuperscript{126} Stepan, 1997.
The political foundation for this sentiment is rooted in the armed insurgency of Augusto Cesar Sandino and his struggle against military intervention by the United States in Nicaragua during the 1930’s. To the people of the Pacific Coast, this version of nationalism demanded the integration into the post-conflict era of the revolution as well as a specific socio-political strategy known as “El Programa de Liberación Nacional,” a comprehensive plan for the reconstruction of Nicaragua formulated beginning in the latter months of 1979 following the end of the war against Somoza. This ambitious and vast program included new pedagogy for all levels of formal education, new grass-root political institutions, (e.g., Comités de Defensa Sandinista), military institutions (e.g., Sandinista Army and the Sandinista Police), a national literacy campaign and a counter-hegemonic foreign policy. For the people of the Pacific Coast and Central Regions, this narrow definition of nationalism had a galvanizing effect (especially during the early years of 1980 and preceding the escalation of the Contra War) and helped to strengthen an already-existing superordinate identity based on Mestizaje.

**POST-CONFLICT PROBLEMS IN THE COAST**

The post-conflict era in Nicaragua, and the Law of Autonomy, brought a new attempt at creating a super-ordinate identity in the peoples of the Coast. This time

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127 Eden Pastora, interview, 2008
128 To the “true” revolutionary, the revolution does not end with the end of the armed conflict, it continues well beyond the war. See Salvador Allende’s “Nuestro Camino al Socialismo” (1971) for details.
129 Principios Generales de la Revolución Sandinista, 1980
130 Baltodano, in Marenin and Das (editors), 2010.
131 See appendixes K through N
multi-culturalism was its vehicle and the driver was, alleged to be, multi-ethnic.\textsuperscript{132} This multi-cultural space exists within and in relation to the core-community of Nicaragua: the Mestizos. For Nicaraguans, the Law of Autonomy represents an intervening variable affecting the implementation of this new idea, of NOT a Mestizo nation but one that is multi-cultural and multi-ethnic.

The Law of Autonomy appears to be positively correlated with the manifestation of primary political attachment to the national community or nationalism in the Coast, to the extent that it is the only mechanism that effectively advances the goals of all the indigenous and ethnic groups in the region (particularly in terms of land titling and education). The Law has had no effects to the extent that it hinders effective cooperation amongst groups in the Coast and failed to protect the primacy of regional councils as the ultimate decision-making body. Under this conditions the Law of Autonomy has, in fact, served to do little more than keep the people of the Coast as subservient to the Nicaraguan central government.

The Cottams (2001) define a nation state as “a state wherein the citizenry identify more strongly with the idea of the nation than with any other salient political identity.” Under that definition, nationalism is the emotional, real, tangible manifestation of terminal attachment to the national community.\textsuperscript{133} Within this context, autonomy and self-determination are inherently antithetical to the creation of nationalism and to a true nation-state.

On the one hand, indigenous autonomy is a tool for the protection of primary-group identity. It was only through the Law of Autonomy that indigenous and afro-

\textsuperscript{132} These are the terms created under the 1987 Constitution to describe the nation of Nicaragua.

\textsuperscript{133} Cottam and Cottam, 2001.
descendent communities were finally able to exercise self-governance, protect their
culture, language, traditional ways of life and create new political institutions (like the
municipal and community governments) with which they can protect these new political
rights. These have had the results of giving peoples, and communities, a sensible
feeling that they are part of a larger community that not only belongs together but has a
future together. On the other hand, the autonomy model used in Nicaragua has had a
centrifugal force on the idea of being Nicaraguans.

As previously discussed, time and time again we see cases where the Regional
Councils are either left relatively powerless to oppose the mandates from Managua but
also co-opted by Mestizo political parties, which leads to the minimization of
indigenous power and a renewed feeling of marginalization from both the political
arena and from the community at large. Additionally, the fact that political autonomy
challenges and erodes national sovereignty, even during a period of relative peace
between the peoples of the Coast and the central government, represents tangible
limitations to the creation of a superordinate identity – which is vital to nationalism. In
other words, even as the autonomous regions in Nicaragua are not, by nature,
separatists. Having stated this, it must be acknowledged that their simple existence
challenges the centralization of power typical of a true nation state. It is because of this
that the impact of the Law of Autonomy on the overall structures and political
institutions of Nicaragua is of central concern.

Given that it was born, primarily, as a bargaining tool at the peace treaties that
ended the Contra War, political autonomy in Nicaragua was crafted specifically with
the primary goal of giving minority groups self-determination and control over their
traditional/ancestral lands. As such, the Law has had poor results in advancing the constitutionally-mandated goal of multi-culturalism within a multi-ethnic nation. This is, primarily due to the fact that autonomy was not granted to individual groups and in 2 separate regions, decisions that have led to conflict between groups for control of the regional council AND for establishing which group holds traditional control of a particular area.\footnote{Hook, 2010} Under these conditions, and given the history and images held of groups towards each other,\footnote{As discussed in the previous chapter} group cooperation is hindered instead of aided.

## CHALLENGES TO NATIONALISM IN THE COAST

Currently, the largest demographic group and politically hegemonic group in the North autonomous region are the Miskítu-nani.\footnote{See Appendixes C and K} This condition, not natural but a direct result of Miskítu political maneuvers, is being ardently challenged by all groups, but more so by the Creole.\footnote{Hook, 2010} Mestizo settlers, and the central government of Nicaragua, impinge upon Miskítu regional hegemony. It seems to this writer that the Sandinistas expected to create the necessary conditions where other groups would naturally balance Miskítu power. It did not work.

Another complication to the development of a multi-cultural nationalism of a multi-ethnic state is the fact that the 1987 Constitution enshrined equal rights to all the “communities of the Atlantic Coast,” while the Law of Autonomy established a model of autonomy wherein “members of the communities in the Atlantic Coast are guaranteed absolute equal rights and responsibilities, regardless of size of the population of level of
development of their land.” As a consequence, the same guarantees that the indigenous peoples and ethnic communities of the Coast for so hard to protect are now also enshrined for Mestizos that live in the Coast. Combining the populations of both autonomous regions it is the Mestizos who are the current demographic majority in the Coast. So, as a result, Nicaragua is in fact becoming less multicultural and less multiethnic.

Finally, multiple individual communities (cities, villages or individual families) belonging to different groups from the Coast typically share a territory. This had led to challenging claims to land-holding. How do we know which group has held control of a region since time ancestral? If a region has a Rama name but is only inhabited by Creoles, to whom should that territory be titled? This matter is further complicated because, to this day, the central government of Nicaragua has yet to implement Law 445 (Land Demarcation) the question of who has claim disputed land remains unresolved. According to the Constitution, that power should rest with the regional council, but, in some areas, the National Police (who has more perception of legitimacy than the new political institutions) is the one responsible for the cleansing, in other areas, the group responsible for the cleansing is the Land Commission (created by the central government and ran exclusively by Mestizos). Given the relative weakness of the (new) regional political institutions, Mestizos continue to dominate regional government and, as a consequence, the viability of the multicultural nationalism and of a unifying identity is compromised now and in the foreseeable future.

CONCLUSIONS

\[ ^{138} \text{See Appendix K} \]
During most of its life as a nation-state, the Nicaraguan story has been narrated with a predominant perspective: that of the Mestizo population of its Pacific Coast. Fundamentally, this has marginalized the unique idiosyncrasies of the indigenous and ethnic communities that live in the (relatively) vast regions of the Caribbean Coast. It is interesting to note that, regardless of multi-generational efforts to “assimilate” the Miskito into the core-community (Mestizo), traditional local structures and communal strategies remain significantly strong to this day.\textsuperscript{139} Census data provides evidence that, currently, the Miskítu (as well as the other indigenous people of the Caribbean Coast) hold poor cohesion with the national identity.\textsuperscript{140}

The Miskítu-nani are the largest (from a demographic perspective) and most dominant (from a political perspective) of the three indigenous communities and are the focus of this paper. This work presents the Miskítu as a dynamic group, imbued with complex identities that allow them to shift alliances in accordance to perceived benefits and threats to the group. Their relative success in the political and military arena not only represents a positive link to transnational indigenous activism but also embodies the possibility of tribal communities into enacting promises and forcing changes from their central government.\textsuperscript{141} Additionally, this brief case study highlights the role played by indigenous communities in changing official state policies, creating and reforming institutions in order to account for indigenous rights. The transformation of MISURASATA from a political action group to a military insurgency and then to a

\textsuperscript{139} Hale, 1994.
\textsuperscript{140} See Appendixes H through J for details
\textsuperscript{141} For an example of the latter see the 1996 case of Awas Tingni vs. Nicaragua that was decided in favor of the Coastal indigenous community and marked the first time in the history of the Inter-American Court of Justice that the property rights of indigenous populations were upheld against those of a nation-state.
political party impacts the extent to which the Miskítu-nani are willing to go in order to actively become involved in the “reinventing” of Nicaragua as a multi-ethnic state.”

The Nicaraguan indigenous movement is not only interested in “reinventing” the old concept of Nicaraguan nationalism, it demands a new kind of citizenship. While this paper focuses analysis at the level of the group, this new citizenship assumes a re-definition of the political arena not only at the group level but also at the level of the state and the international system of nations. To this extent, political institutions and group identities mutually reinvent each other within the context of indigenous autonomous movements. “Then inhabitants of the autonomous regions…wish to be actors of the progress and of the Nicaraguan democracy. But they wish to do so within the framework of their own collective memory, self-identity and of their particular understanding of autonomy.” Given that the Law of Autonomy was passed and ratified under Sandinista administrations and vetoed under three consecutive neo-liberal governments, solely in order to protect advancing Latifundios, the central question for the future of the country remains: How long-lived will autonomy prove to be?

CHAPTER 5: GROUP DYNAMICS IN THE COAST
SOCIAL IDENTITY AND IMAGE THEORY

Perceptions and images related to political behavior in the following manner:

- Individuals are driven to act by *internal* factors – like personality and attitudes.
- Individuals evaluate their environment, and the behavior of others, via *cognitive* images of others.

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142 Actual wording of the Nicaraguan Constitution (1987)
143 *Informe de Desarrollo Humano: Las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe*. Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, Managua 2005
144 See Appendix G for details
145 Cottam and Cottam, 2001
Their decision-making is based upon the combination of these elements.

The case of the peoples of the Coast of Nicaragua allows us to see images at play, within their historical, cultural and political context. Social Identity Theory and Image Theory explain not only the consequences of categorization of Sumus and Ramas by the Miskitu-nani, but also how the series of critical historical events (explained above) led to the development of drastically different worldviews in the Coast and – when changes in status between Miskitu, Sumu and Rama is perceived as a threat, coupled with impermeable group boundaries – the adoption of intergroup conflict and the use of political violence as a strategy to resolve the perceived asymmetry.

Most, if not all, political behavior occurs within the context of social groups or social institutions. For this reason, the role of group membership and identity in the Coast plays a paramount interest in the politics of the region. From social identity theory we know that groups can engage in comparison and that there are strategies available for groups interested in “improving” their status vis-à-vis the dominant group.\textsuperscript{146} From image theory image theory we know that perceptions of the intentions of a political actor as hostile or friendly are directly derived from the images held of said actor by others, leading to the adoption of specific response strategies vis-à-vis the perceived capabilities held of the group.\textsuperscript{147} In general, these theories illuminate the following themes:

1. Group membership can create, and exacerbate, differences between groups.
2. People tend to seek information that confirm, rather than challenge, our beliefs.
3. Group loyalty can contribute to the rise of group conflict
4. Addressing issues of group identity can lead to resolution.

\textsuperscript{146} Tajfel and Turner, 1986
\textsuperscript{147} Cottam, 1986, 1994
Social identity theory articulates the processes by which individuals come to identify with some group and develop a sense of differentiation from and prejudice towards other groups.\textsuperscript{148} The theory suggests that prejudice does not result from organic, personality defects (as had suggested by earlier research on authoritarianism) nor solely as a byproduct of competition for scarce resources (as claimed by realistic conflict theory) but instead argues that people tend to draw a sense of their own self-worth from the memberships on any given group. Given that they depend on the group to establish self-worth, they are encouraged to seek positive comparisons between the group they belong and the one used as a rubric. The capacity for salient groups to shift the attention of the members from the individual to the collective comes then to regulate their social behavior. In other words SIT, provides us with information concerning how people see the groups that they belong to and those that they do not belong to – in-groups and out-groups (Cottam et al, 2010). We classify others into groups and, axiomatically, we also classify ourselves into groups. Groups we belong to are called in-groups and those we do not belong to are out-groups (Tajfel, H., & Turner, J.C., 1970, 1979 and 1986). Conflict among political groups is, of course, a central issue in the study of the politics of the Coast. Whenever individuals find themselves in a situation in which there exists clear evidence of an “us” and a “them,” they are likely to discriminate against them and in favor of us (Tajfel, 1970).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that intergroup discrimination is a result of our motivation to evaluate our own group more positively than a relevant out-group. Additionally, the necessary precondition of social categorization into in-group and out-group, Tajfel and Turner (1979) maintained that there are at least three additional

\textsuperscript{148} Tajfel and Turner, 1986
variables of concern in intergroup behavior. First, members of a group clearly perceive themselves as a member of the in-group and will describe themselves as a group member.\(^{149}\) Second, group members must be able to make group comparisons, in order to perceive their in-group as positively distinct from the out-group. Third, members of an in-group do not compare their group to any available out-group. Additionally, SIT illustrates how individuals might react when their primary identity is threatened (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). If an individual’s social identity is threatened he/she will attempt to dissociate themselves from the in-group by joining a group that is higher in status. A second reaction to threatened social identity is creativity, which includes three strategies: (1) comparing the in-group to the out-group on a different dimension; (2) reevaluating the comparison dimension; and (3) comparing one’s in-group to a different or lower status out-group. Finally, social competition is another reaction to a threatened or negative social identity. In-group members might directly compete with the out-group to attain positive distinctiveness or positive social identity, or at least with the intention of attaining a positive social identity.

During a visit Melba McLean a communal leader from the Awas-Tingni Sumu community near Bilwi, we discussed the nature of the relationship between the Miskítu-nani and the Sumu-Mayagna. “The Miskítu is well adapted at land grab,” she stated, “one terrible case occurred on the eve of the Land of Demarcation (Law 445) when Miskítu leaders directed their people to move deep into the land of the Awas-Tingni. We went from holding the largest territory to the least.” I asked her, “What was the approach you took to resolve the problem?” She replied, “We Sumus like to follow the

\(^{149}\) Strong in-group identification has been reported by all racial and indigenous groups in the Coast. See Tables 1-3 for details.
rule of law. We like to resolve problems in a legal manner. So we have been waiting ever since for the government in Managua to respond to our legal claims.”

In this case, social identity theory corroborates the importance of group identity as an explanatory variable for McLean’s statement: namely, even as their calls for legal resolution have not yielded the desired results, her own self-esteem and the perceived status of her in-group is enhanced. That is to say the concept of social identity helps researchers to understand why individuals respond favorably to in-group influence and reject it from out-groups. Most importantly, the realization that “one is not alone but can count on the group” for solidarity, helps to strengthen the boundaries of the group and enhance self-worth of the individual. In other words, with high levels of social identification, the group’s well-being becomes closely connected to one’s own sense of well-being. (150). The importance of social identity theory to group conflict in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua is found in the fact that group identity in the Coast is inherently exclusionary151, clear in-group boundaries in the Coast (both perceived and as enshrined in the 1987 Constitution) serve to secure both inclusion and exclusion of groups and give rise to out-group hostility.

**IMAGE THEORY AND GROUPS IN THE COAST**

Image theory describes how individuals process information during decision-making and is also applicable to the study of groups and nation-states (Blanton, 1996; Cottam, 1986, 1994; Cottam, 1977; Herrmann, 1985a, 1985b, 1988, 1991; Herrmann Voss; Schooler, & Ciarrochi,1997; Holsti, 1962; Schafer, 1997; Shimko 1991). IT argues that groups are classified into cognitive categories (or images) and that they

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150 Brewer, 1991
151 A possible perception can be made here for the Sambo-Miskitu, who are perceived to be indigenous by the Miskitu-nani and the Sumus and Ramas but, nonetheless, are perceived to be Creole by Mestizos
provide decision-makers with the necessary information about a group’s capabilities, culture, intentions and the capacity to label them as a threat or an opportunity.\footnote{Cottam, 1986, 1994} Images are categories of other political actors that help us to make sense of the world around us. Out-groups are evaluated based on the perception that their capabilities and culture are equal, inferior, or superior to that of the in-groups. Additionally, groups can be seen as threatening or as an opportunity. We expect consistency in our world, prefer information that conforms to our preexisting knowledge and create categories that are applicable to our daily life and which enable us to make decisions based on as little mental effort as necessary. People also categorize the political world. The value of images to group conflict lies in the argument that they simplify the decision-making process. There are seven different images that characterize how a group is perceived and they are: The imperialist, colonial, ally, barbarian, enemy, rogue, and degenerate.\footnote{See Table 3 for further details}

These Images provide a guide to understand the reasons for the behavior of other actors and, most importantly, provide us with tactics likely to be used in response (Cottam et al, 2010). People organize and simplify the world around them based on the way they understand it; and they search for causes in the behavior of others. Since Images contain information about another actor’s capabilities (economy, military, stability), level of cultural sophistication, intentions (good or bad), and perceptions of threat or opportunity Images can also provide us with concise strategic patterns for responding to the behavior of another actor (Cottam and Cottam, 2001).\footnote{See Tale 4 for further details}

An imperialist is perceived to be superior in culture and capability with intentions that can be either harmful or benevolent. Imperialists are domineering,
difficult to oppose and represent a threat. The imperialist is viewed as having the capacity to orchestrate developments of extraordinary complexity and to do so with great subtlety (Cottam, 1994, Cottam and Cottam 2001 and Cottam et al 2010). The style is often described as sinister and secretive which is what gives the imperialist superiority in capability. Also, the image is sometimes associated with strong perceptions of injustice and illegitimacy People who collaborate with the imperialist are viewed by those resisting it as profiting hugely from the relationship and are judged as having betrayed their group. Newspaper accounts and UN survey data of incidents of intercommunal violence between Sumu-Mayagna, Rama and Mestizos seem to point out that the operative image held of the Mestizos (and of the central government) by these two indigenous groups is that of an imperialist. One possible strategy available for the Rama and Sumu, when dealing with an imperialist, is, first, to revolt. This is not likely as these two groups are the most disenfranchised and poor of all the peoples of the Coast. A more likely strategy is submission.

“Los pueblos de la Costa deben aceptar que, por el bienestar de la nación, el gobierno expropiara cualquier inmueble que sea necesario para proteger la patria potestad. Esto incluye tierra que sea privada o comunal.”

(The people of the Coast must accept that, for the wellbeing of the nation, the government will appropriate any real estate that is needed. This includes land that is either held in private or communal titles.)

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155 This is one of the reasons why Steadman Fagoth, one of the most respected Miskitu leaders during the Contra War, lost prestige within his peers. First, he aligned himself with the Mestizo Contra groups and, currently, he serves in the National Assembly as an member of the Sandinista Party.

156 See La Prensa (2005, 2012), PUND, 2005

157 Daniel Ortega speech, Presidente-Comandante Daniel en la Clausura del 17 Congreso Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Estudiantes, CLAE (21/08/2014) (Entire text)
“We cannot stop a canal, we cannot stop a canal, what we have to do is sit-down, if it’s to come, to negotiate. Because we can’t say ‘no, no!’. That would be lack of wisdom. You have to think a big project, the government project, we community cannot stop it. What we have to do is negotiate it.”

The behavioral tendencies available to the indigenous people are self-protection and avoiding conflict with the threatening imperialist, or minimize further aggressive acts. This behavior is likely to be seen as evidence, from the perspective of the Mestizos, that these groups are in fact easy to control and inferior, which is likely to increase the disenfranchisement and oppression of the Sumu and Rama.

A colonial, is perceived to be inferior in both capability and culture with benign intentions, they are typically ruled by a small elite that is usually corrupt and thus presents an opportunity. Colonials are child-like and must be told “what to do.” This image arises when an opportunity is identified to gain control over another polity or group perceived as significantly inferior in capability and culture (Cottam, 1994, Cottam and Cottam, 2001 and Cottam et al, 2010). Members of the colonial group are viewed with disgust and contempt, but also with pity. Strategic behavior associated with this image includes moving forcefully against them to punish bad behavior and wanting to avoid contamination from contact with the inferior. The Mestizos, both the people and the central government, hold this image of all the peoples of the Coast. During my return flight from Bilwii to Managua in 2010, a well-dressed, vibrant Young Mestiza lost her seat in the lobby, while she got a coffee, to a poorly-dressed, demure

158 Luis Castillo, Bangkukuk Taik Rama tribal elder, CALPI, 2015
159 See following for further details: La Prensa, La Invasión Mestiza, Daniel Ortega speech, Presidente-Comandante Daniel en la Clausura del 17 Congreso Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Estudiantes, CLAE (21/08/2014) (Entire text)
Miskitu old man. Upon noticing this, the woman, squinted and covered her nose with her perfumed kerchief and, loudly uttering “Que INDIO!” (What an Indian\textsuperscript{160}), walked over to the opposite end of the lobby to get a seat. Another example of evidence of this image was an interview given by Telemaco Talavera, the Nicaragua Canal spokesman for the Nicaraguan government, to a Nicaraguan TV channel on 9/11/2014 in which he expressed his frustration with the reception that Law 840 has had in the Coast:

“\textit{And we have no further need to talk to the Rama and the Creole, to inform them of the need for these laws. We know what is best for the nation, we have the right to decide and we did. They had all the time to review the studies and to look at the written authorizations. We know it will benefit all Nicaraguans.}”\textsuperscript{161}

Given that this image produces behavioral tendencies that are coercive and non-compromising (after all, one does not negotiate with one’s children, one tells them what to do). The consequences are exploitation and rigid control on the life of the peoples of the Coast. This behavior serves to reinforce noxious images of Mestizos. Interestingly, the Miskitu hold this image of the other indigenous groups of the Coast\textsuperscript{162}

The image of an ally is similar in both culture and capability as well as perceived to have good intentions and to be very similar to your own group in values. The intentions of an ally are believed to be good. The Rama, Sumu-Mayagna and the Creole hold this image of each other.\textsuperscript{163} Given the similarities to one’s own group the ally represents an opportunity so the common strategy for these three groups is to negotiate agreements and forge a common strategy for dealing with Mestizos and with the more

\textsuperscript{160} The term “indio” in Nicaragua, as in most of Latin America, is not only a determinant of ethnic membership but also meant as an insult.
\textsuperscript{161} De la Trinchera, Noticia TV. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7pf8cjloQ
\textsuperscript{162} See http://www.lavozdelsandinismo.com/discursos-daniel-ortega/, PUND and CALPI for more details.
\textsuperscript{163} See Calpi and Acost 2015 for more details.
aggressive indigenous group in the Coast: the Miskítu-Nani. Speaking to the National Assembly on February, 2003, Brooklyn Rivera said the following:

“Nuestro enfoque de autonomía no ha sido entendido, y lo rechazan los Mestizos porque lo consideran separatista. Pero los pueblos indígenas y los Creoles hemos dicho que estamos juntos en la lucha, sabemos que no es sustentable un modelo autonomía regional multiétnica, pues los Mestizos nos marginan en ese esquema. La autonomía se basa en la identidad, la cultura y el territorio que nos une a los indígenas y a los Creoles contra los Mestizos”

The barbarian is perceived to be superior in capability but inferior in culture and aggressive by nature. They are also aggressive in intentions, which make them very frightening. This combination makes the group exceedingly threatening to others. The enemy is perceived to be equal in culture and capabilities, harmful by nature. Gains by the enemy are perceived to be unfair, given similarities to one’s group. The rogue is perceived to be inferior in capability and culture but harmful in intentions. Rogues violate rational behavior and, coupled with their perceived weakness, they represent a threat that must be punished until they have been put back in their “place.” The degenerate is more powerful in terms of capabilities and culture but is also perceived to be undisciplined and thus, represents an opportunity.

In the Coast, images at play are complex in nature and, without the benefit of conducting field survey, images of groups in this work were derived and operationalized from data published in news, images of some elite leaders (like Daniel Ortega) were derived from speeches attributed to the person and from news reports where the leader was quoted. Of particular interest were examples of recorded behavior
from one group to another (like the accounts of Miskítu leaders directing communities in Awas Tingni to move into Sumu territory immediately upon the drafting of Law 445 and of Miskítu elders renaming territories using Miskítu names in order to have claim of land holding prior to the beginning of demarcation). Public records that illustrate behavioral pattern were of particular interest because of the possibility to contrast and compare verbal statements. Group identity and political identification was derived from survey data collected by the Instituto de Desarrollo Humano, Managua, during their Ethnicity and National Identity study from 2004.

Currently, Mestizos see all peoples of the Coast (the Miskítu, Sumu, Rama, Garífuna and the Creole) as Colonials. This is consistently evident in the behavior from the political elites in Managua, especially as it relates to the proposed Grand Canal in Nicaragua where, as per Constitutional Law, the government was supposed to get prior approval from the regional councils before entering into a contract with a Chinese corporation (Hong Kong Nicaragua Development). Instead, the National Assembly simply drafted a new law (Law 840) that gave Managua the right to create a commission with sole control over the evaluation process of the canal (in violation of the sovereignty of the regional councils) but also created the previously-non-existing law of eminent domain in indigenous land where “any reasonable amount of communal land will be expropriated, as decided by the commission.” There was one short period, during the Contra War and in the post-conflict period, when Mestizo perceived the people from the Coast as Rogues. In the late 80s and to the mid-90s, political groups in the Coast (like MISURASATA and, later, YATAMA) actively and violently demanded indigenous political rights. For Mestizos (especially political elites) this behavior

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164 Awas Tingni v. Nicaragua and conversation with Melba McLean.
looked not only threatening to the population in general but brought fears of balkanization of the national territory (Baracco, 2011).

**GROUP IDENTITY AND REVOLT IN THE COAST**

This situation explains why the people of the Coast remained as detached observers during the Sandinista revolution. On the one hand the Somoza administration had disrupted group hierarchy and worsened life but, to the people of the Coast, the Sandinista revolution was little more than a conflict between Mestizos.165

The revolution was met with little enthusiasm from the indigenous peoples of the Coast. With the exception of a few radical student groups, few participated in the overthrow of Somoza. Although the Indigenous and Creole communities had experienced a sharp demotion in the social and cultural status for the benefit of Mestizos, the Somoza regime nonetheless was perceived differently than in the Mestizo half of the country – largely because of Somoza’s disinterest with the indigenous peoples. Additionally, the people of the Coast were unsure what to make of these left-wing *Guerrilleros*. So, they took a “wait and see” attitude towards the revolution.166

Following their victory against Somoza, the Sandinistas tried to apply a Marxist “class warfare” model to the Coast and failed to realize the importance of group identity. Furthermore, the Sandinistas regarded the historical sense of self-determination and “Anglo-affinities” of the Coast as politically ignorant and ideologically regressive to the revolutionary process.167 Moreover, the largely Mestizo

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165 Reyes and Wilson, 1992.
Sandinista leaders were wholly unprepared to deal with ethnic and racial minorities and their initial attempts at solving “the problem of the Coast” proved effective only in alienating and becoming intrusive to the people of the Coast. Their initial policies – including a literacy campaign in Spanish – fell short of meeting the regional needs and security demands of the Coast.

To make matters worse, the early Sandinista political agenda towards what they referred to as “the problem of the Coast,” called for strengthening political participation in grassroots communities and, accordingly, they set up a new local infrastructure permissive to local political mobilization. The three indigenous groups joined into one single organization called MISURASATA which initially proved an effective instrument in promoting the interests of the indigenous population and succeeded in compelling the central government to a number of pro-indigenous legislation that included a bilingual education law and an increase of land titling to Indigenous communities. Unfortunately, this acquiescence to the demands of MISURASATA increased agitation on the Creole community and they began to demonstrate in the streets of Bluefields against the lack of government consideration for their own political interests and the government’s refusal to officially recognize their own organization.

Although the Sandinistas seemed to voice concern about the plight of Nicaragua’s indigenous population, their main goal for the new government was to avoid, at all cost, decentralization of power. This position demanded subjugating any single group’s claims to political autonomy. As has been discussed throughout this dissertation, from the perspective of the peoples of the Coast have always autonomy

\[168\] Miskitos, Sumos, Ramas, Sandinistas Unidos

and self-determination is their birthright (especially for the Miskítu-nani) and their version of indigenous nationalism continues to directly compete with the version of Mestizo Nicaragua and its long attempts at overt and covert assimilation of the Coast and her people. After independence from Spain, Nicaragua broke her ties with her indigenous identity and created the foundation for a nation being Mestizo was analogous to becoming Nicaraguan. In the Pacific, Mestizaje is commonly seen as a nation-building force (Cuadra, 1971 Ortega, 2007-2015) while in the Coast, however, Mestizaje was blocked by of British colonialism and de facto autonomy, systems which proved minimally disruptive to established ways of life of the peoples of the Coast.

The critical explanatory factor behind the initial acquiescence of the peoples of the Coast to incorporate into the Nicaraguan national identity appears to have been the axiomatic absence of the national state in their daily lives that was expected under Law of Autonomy (Frühring et al, 2007). The increasing presence of the national state, over the last 10 years, appears to produce a corresponding intensification of indigenous and afro-descendant militant mobilization and a strong assertion of their ethnic identity (Baracco, 2011). Political autonomy itself appears to have played a constructive role in the formation of the indigenous politics and their subsequent difficulty in incorporating into the overarching national identity. Rather than promoting acculturation and inclusion, the struggles of the political autonomy process sparked a self-awareness amongst ethnic groups in the Coast, often resulting in xenophobic fears rather than assimilation (Hooker, 2001 and Baracco, 2011).

This dissertation has already looked at the decision of the Miskítu-nani to join an armed insurgency as the only viable option against the Sandinistas’ anti-imperialist
nationalism and their dreadful domestic policies in the Coast following the 1979 Revolution. What emerged from the Contra War was not the incorporation of the Coast into the Nicaraguan identity, but separate notions of nationalism that competed directly with the Mestizo ideologies of the dominant core community. During the years of the Contra War, the Sandinista perception that indigenous militancy was the result of manipulation by the regional hegemon initially restrained the options for a way out of the conflict. But, from the perspective of the Miskitu-nani, armed conflict was the only option to protect their group and traditional ways of life. This was the beginning of the emergence of the indigenous and afro-descendant nationalism of the 1980s. Sandinista fears about separatism were inflamed by the words and deeds of a number of Miskitu leaders, particularly Steadman Fagoth and Brooklyn Rivera. The critical factors arising from this period were the increasingly clear distinction between the ethnic agenda of Miskitu fighters and the Mestizo Contras; a recognition that opened the door for the Sandinistas government to postulate for regional autonomy from the counter-revolution, making it an acceptable basis for peace negotiations. On the other hand, for the Miskitu fighters, autonomy allowed them to negotiate for incorporation into the national identity on their own terms.

THE PROBLEM OF THE COAST FROM THE OTHER PERSPECTIVE

As we have already discussed, the Miskitu insurgency movement during the Contra War did not originate as an externally-created organization, the first wave of fighters were mostly refugees that, as a consequence of a proxy war started by the Reagan administration, were directly first linked to the violence as victims. Their initial goals were simple: survival and safe return to their traditional homelands. Their alliance with the forces of the FDN provided them
with resources and military strategy (Calero interview, 2008, and “Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare” aka “Contra Manual,” CIA, 1984). This is an important point to understand. Given that MISURA forces drew a vast majority of its recruits from Miskítu refugees (94% by Oxfam and UN accounts) it was axiomatic that the group would come to see itself as the moral authority\(^ {170} \) in the struggle against the Sandinistas during the Contra War. This is an important point regardless of how the group was perceived by the society under which they operated – which was not in a benign manner.

In December 1981, the Sandinistas claimed to have discovered a CIA plot referred to as “Red Christmas” involving a general uprising of Miskítu communities along the Río Coco that would be joined by MISURA fighters crossing into Nicaragua from Honduras (Baracco, 2011). The uprising was expected to lead to independence and separation from the nation, and invite recognition and military support from foreign governments (Carrión, 1983). On the basis of these suspicions, the Sandinistas forcibly removed the entire Miskítu population from the Río Coco region, destroying their villages and resettling them in the new inland settlement of Tasba Pri. The removal of the Miskítu from their ancestral homeland was counterproductive and only served to increasing the number of recruits to MISURA, and give legitimacy to the group’s struggle. The roots of the Miskítu insurgency were the insistency of the Sandinistas to apply their “revolutionary nationalism” and a policy of national modernization to the “problem” of the Coast. What emerged from this program was not the assumed assimilation of the peoples of the Coast into the Nicaraguan nation, but instead a refocusing on group identity and a version of indigenous nationalism that competed directly with the Mestizo plans for Nicaraguan.

\(^ {170} \) The concept of “moral authority” was defined during conversations between the author and the former Sandinista leader, Humberto Ortega Saavedra in Managua, Nicaragua, 2008. He defined moral authority as “tangible proof that the group is fighting for the oppressed,” this foundation provides legitimacy of action.
The vision that comes out from an analysis of the problem of the Coast from a Miskítu perspective is that of a group with a clear purpose and rigid group boundaries. The Miskítu Contra leaders, Stedman Fagoth and Brooklyn Rivera, portray a rigid image of the Sandinista government as a willing puppet of the communist power (the Soviet Union). “The Sandinistas are unwilling to liberate themself from the control of the Cubans and the Soviets that keep them in power” (Barocco, 2011, Dunbar-Ortiz, 2005). Given the image held of the Mestizo by the Miskítu-nani it was no surprise to them when the abuse by the Sandinista military begun. To the Miskítu, abuse from the Sandinistas took many forms, including the forced removal from their land, the attempt to assimilate them into Mestizo culture and their insistence of installing a revolutionary form of nationalism in the Coast. Not only did the Sandinistas policies make them seem unmistakably “Spaniard,” but their peculiar brand of anti-imperialist nationalism proved doubly alienating given its explicit condemnation of Anglo-American culture, which is “natural” to the Miskítu (Hale, 1987, Barocco, 2011). A number of conclusions can be drawn from these observations. The critical explanatory factor for the aggressive behavior of the Miskítu-nani appears to be abhorrence to the Sandinista version of national identity (based on class struggle, anti-Americanism and based on Mestizo identity as the norm). Thus, the “Problem of the Coast” to them was, and continues to be based on group identity, illegitimacy of condition and mistreatment. Add to this legal political autonomy and the continued ill-treatment, neglect and abuse of the region experienced during the Post-Conflict era and we can see that the marked increase in the presence of the central government in Miskítu life after the revolution appears to be positively correlated to an intensification of the Miskítu aggressiveness and a strong assertion of their ethnic identity. Rather than promoting assimilation, the attempts by the Sandinistas to
instill revolutionary nationalism in the Coast instead had the unintended effect of increasing indigenous self-awareness and xenophobic conflict.

Even as the autonomy “experiment” is 28 years old, the central government of Nicaragua continues to draft policies (like Law 840 or *imminent domain*) as if the Coast remained a backward colonial territory. Decisions that affect the peoples of the Coast are not taking part in the region nor are Costeños given full access to the political arena. For all intended purposes, there is no viable pluralism in Costeño politics but one party, the FSLN, with one integrationist vision and with the demographic and political mandate (given to them by the Mestizo majority) to dismantle all the institutions and all the work done by the Law of Autonomy. The FSLN controls 65% of the Regional Councils in Both autonomous regions, 75% of all municipal and local government in the Coast. This level of political control ascertains that the Sandinista Party is the clear hegemon in the region with little room for effective opposition.

Moreover, the 2015 version of Costeño politics is one that is more and more closely integrated to Mestizo political culture. This represents the “new” problem of the Coast. To the indigenous and afro-descendant communities, the prospect of pluralism is dead. To create an effective option and opposition to Mestizo political culture was the reason for which the Miskitu fought the Contra War, the reason why Creoles and indigenous forged alliances. Instead, political autonomy has resulted in strong ties with Managua, and it is not an even relationship but one with the clear hint of renewed domination and forced integration. This is very threatening to the peoples of the Coast and particularly to the most politically effective group; the Miskitu-nani.

On the other hand, the Coast is also a different place than the one that gave birth to the Miskitu armed insurgency. It has engendered a whole new set of indigenous rights. Currently, the total amount of communally held, titled, land is approximately 30% of the total national
In 1987 they held 0% of titled land. This creates the possibility of better governance, of closer local and municipal types of government and the opportunity to regain control of the Regional Councils. At least they have an opportunity. To protect this opportunity demands an open access to the political arena, it demands pluralism.

For the imagined Costeño identity, Nicaragua has always been the interior of the country, distant and foreign. To the Mestizo half of the country, the Coast has been an imagined territory in need of guidance and modernity. The legacy of the autonomy process is still left to be crafted.

CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed concepts in cognitive and social psychology, and it has briefly introduced their application the identity politics of the Coast. It began with a look at the importance of in-groups and their reactions to groups to out-groups. We moved on to a discussion of image theory, which describes relationships with out-groups in the domestic politics of the Coast. We moved on to an analysis of the current nature of the 28 year-old Nicaraguan “experiment” with political autonomy and a discussion of the new “problem” that it created for the peoples of the Coast. I mentioned that, even as autonomy fostered a period of new legal political inclusion, the reality has in truth become an impediment to the implementation of indigenous self-determination and to the proper life of autonomous institutions like the Regional Councils. These, in addition to municipal and local governments, have been impeded from full, pluralistic, participation in Nicaraguan civil society. Finally, this work clarifies that autonomy will not prosper in a state where democratic, pluralistic representation is deliberately violated.

The new problem of the Coast is one wherein the political rights of indigenous and afro-descendant communities are marginalized. This is evident in 21st century Nicaragua. It becomes increasingly difficult not to be cynical about the FSLN’s ability to create the level of political

171 La Prensa, 2015.
consensus in the Coast that will ensure its capacity to advance its modernist goals. Politically, the Coast is severely under-represented in the politics of Managua. Even as the region holds 12% of the population (2005 census) it only has 5 (out of 92 or 5%). As has been mentioned before in this dissertation, this means that the peoples of the Coast do not have true decision-making power within its own territory (which stands against the spirit of the 1987 Constitution). This much is true: the peoples of the Coast are, once again, voiceless: voiceless within their own territory and voiceless at the national level. This is a travesty given the fact that Nicaragua, based on constitutional law, is one of the most progressive in terms of recognition and legal protections for the rights of indigenous and afro-descendant peoples. The silence of their voice, within the context of legal political autonomy, is the 21st century version of the “problem of the Coast.” This new problem leaves the peoples of the Coast facing an existential dilemma: to go back to the days before autonomy is not an option; the only option is to find a way to create strength in unity and cooperation within the autonomous territories. Given the nature of images in the Coast this has never been an easy proposition.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

CONSEQUENCES OF DWINDLING PLURALISM

It seemed clear to me that, in addition to an issue of dwindling pluralism, the “problem of the Coast” has always been, and continues to be one of overlapping, ungoverned spaces172. By this term I mean that the Coast lacks effective central government presence and her inhabitants must rely upon traditional governing structures in order to protect their own societies and culture.

172 See appendix G for a brief example of what I call overlapping, ungoverned spaces. This will be discussed in more details later in this work.
Over the years, this lack of government outreach has existed either as a byproduct of negligence or as the bastard child of the misunderstanding of the cultural dynamics of the regions. Either way, the consequence has been first a disconnect to the central imagined community of Nicaragua from the indigenous peoples of Nicaragua (i.e., the people of the Coast have always felt that, since the government does not care then, they are not really part of the country) and a tangible distrust for Mestizos, whom the indigenous people of the Coast still refer to alternatively as “Spaniards” or as “Nicaraguans.” The question, for me, became: how does political autonomy, this new political structure, affect the “problem of the Coast.”

In 2008, I travelled to Nicaragua as part of a research team to study coalition formation and cooperation among Sandinista factions. During an interview, Adolfo Calero, the former Contra leader, made comments about the Miskítu-nani which reminded me of why the people from the Coast have a difficult time incorporating into the national identity. Even as he commented on the deep commitment and positive contributions of Miskítu Contra leaders, he referred to people from the Coast as “different from me.” This reminded me of numerous newspaper accounts of instances where the people of the Coast, especially the Miskítu, openly challenged the validity of the Nicaraguan nation-state by comparing it to a new form of “colonization.” Once we returned to the United States I made contact, via electronic emails, with Heizel Law (a former member of CONADETI currently working as a defense attorney of the Regional Court of Appeals in the RAAN), Ray Hooker (a former member of

173 He specifically mentioned Brooklyn Rivera, Jenelee Hodgson and Stedman Fagoth.
174 Adolfo Calero, interview, Managua 2008.
175 The National Commission for Demarcation and Titling (Comisión Nacional de Demarcación y Titulación – CONADETI) is the body responsible for overseeing and implementing the process of demarcation, as set forth by Law 445 (2003).
Nicaragua’s National Assembly, representing the RAAS, and current director of FADCANIC\textsuperscript{176} and Francisco Bautista (a Mestizo who, as Major Commissioner of the Nicaraguan National Police, had worked closely with government institutions in the Coast) and a research idea began to crystalize.

In one of our electronic exchanges, Ms. Law explained the “problem of the Coast” in this manner:

“It should be understood that Nicaragua is a Caribbean nation, and that our Caribbean heritage is just as precious as the common cultural ties that unite Mestizos. Autonomy is a process for building a new national identity nourished by cultural diversity. Autonomy is a tool that the peoples of the Pacific and the Atlantic must use to build a united Nicaragua, one based on a multiethnic identity.” (Italics mine)

In May 2010, I returned to Nicaragua to for a two-week visit, this time I travelled alone. I stayed in Managua for only one night before boarding a small plain at the airport heading out to Bilwi, the provincial capital of the RAAN, which used to be called Puerto Cabezas before the days of autonomy and a city that Creole still refer to as Port. I chose Bilwi instead of Bluefields (in the RAAS) because it seemed to that its three different names crystalized the “multi-ethnic and multi-cultural” hopes of the new Nicaraguan constitution.

The only domestic airline company in Nicaragua, “La Costeña,” employs small, single engine, Cessna Grand Caravan plains that sit 12 passengers and carry a maximum of 8,750 lbs. After weighing one’s luggage, and oneself, they hand you an old car license plate that serves as your boarding pass. The only attendant in our plane was the

\textsuperscript{176} The Foundation for development and autonomy of the Atlantic Coast in Nicaragua (Fundación para la Autonomía y el Desarrollo de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua - FADCANIC), is one of the largest NGOs in the autonomous regions. USAID is its major sponsor.
pilot. Prior to my arrival in Bilwi I had made arrangements to meet Heizel Law, Rodalina Gonzales (a Miskítu woman and president, secretary and treasurer of the Association of Indigenous Women of the RAAN), Yuri Baez (a Mestizo and the Regional Chief of the National Police), Melba McLean (a Sumu-Mayangna and in charge of CIDCA-RAAN177) and Arélis Barbeyto, a Mestizo Ph.D. Candidate at the Universidad Central de América, who was conducting research on gender violence in the Coast. They all had agreed to meet with me informally for personal talks so that I may understand the current problem of the Coast through their eyes. Ms. Gonzales had also made arrangements to take me to a Miskítu community not far from Bilwii.

Having never been to the Caribbean Coast in Nicaragua, and with the afternoon free, I hailed a taxi that took me to a dilapidated sea-side restaurant with “the best food in town” (according to the taxi driver, a Mestizo who came to the Coast to serve his military years during the Contra War, fell in love with a local girl and never left). Angry Miskítu words exchanged between the cook and the waitress, strange and unfamiliar dishes in the menu and my taste buds screamed when I first tasted the fried rice – they only use coconut oil to cook in Bilwi. It felt like a different country indeed.

In town I also visited with Mestizo government officials and indigenous leaders of NGOs, in the nearby community of Tuapí I met Miskítu council elders. My conversations with them were informal and centered on their personal impressions of life in the Coast since the implementation of the Law of Autonomy. I learned many a thing during my short stay in the Coast, like stay away from the local wild pig offered in the menus in Bilwi, but one aspect of political behavior that truly surprised me was

177 Center for Research and Documentation of the Atlantic Coast (Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica)
the inordinate number of indigenous-led grassroots groups. From my conversations with the people of Bilwi this is a new phenomenon, and while it is partly outside of the scope of this dissertation, I see it as hopeful sign of the growth of political participation.

THE PROCESS OF LAND DEMARCATION

In early March 2012, a commission of religious leaders returned to Bilwi from a trip to the indigenous community of Lapan in the RAAN without 18 Mestizos taken hostage by the members of the communities of Lapan and Supkatin. Leaders of the commission said that they were able to verify that the hostages (local police officers and civilians) are in good health after nearly a month in indigenous custody. A communiqué from the family members of the hostages said, “We demand the immediate turning over of our family members.” The statement added that they would not be responsible for what might happen if the hostages were not released. That same day, indigenous leader of Twi Waupasa, Simon McDavis said that Mestizo settlers burned three indigenous houses in the community of Acawasito, among them the community center of the indigenous Miskítu in the village. He denied that any indigenous had sold land titles to the settlers, noting that communal lands cannot be sold or mortgaged.

This incident is an example of the growing crisis of violence between ethnic groups in the Coast. Beginning with the administration of Violeta Chamorro, group relations in the Coast have become exceedingly volatile and, more often than not, land rights stand at the center of the conflict. Historical evidence from group relations in the Coast links the rise in violence to increase in competition among ethnic groups for power, resources and autonomy. In the good times of the Coast (immediately preceding annexation to the Nicaraguan nation state) all five groups were able to forge a superordinate identity under the guidance of the Moravian Church.
Cooperation and the pursuit of common goals was a clear possibility. On the other hand, during the bad times of the Coast (during the Somoza regime and the Contra War) competition for resources, power and status was fierce and even led to the Sumo-Mayangna joining the Sandinista Army en mass to fight the Miskítu-nani.

Nicaragua is riddled with social stereotypes, a long history of group conflict and social comparison. Throughout the history of the Coast, the Miskítu-nani were the hegemonic power in the Coast, until the Somoza family deliberately upset their social hierarchy. The Sandinista revolution set up in motion the wheels to return traditional group hierarchy to the Coast, until misguided decisions made during the Contra War placed the newly politically-mobilized Miskítu-nani became threatening to the group. Old stereotypes and social identity patterns appeared in the Coast and the response from the Miskítu-nani was engage in open war against the Mestizo government and its allies, the Sumu-Mayangna. Following the Awas-Tingni v. Nicaragua landmark case of 2001, a study commissioned by the Nicaraguan central government for the purpose of demarcating land titles found a large number of third-party loggers and Mestizo settlers. All of the individuals were ex-combatants from the Contra War who had been awarded, as promised under their separate peace accords, portions of ancestral Awas-Tingni land by the Mestizo-majority municipal government. The extent of their encroachment into indigenous land is symptomatic of the major problem in the Coast at this moment: Implementation of Law 445 (which delineates communal land titling rights) has been directly undermined by the local and central government by illegally issuing permits for settling and logging in indigenous land.

From the perspective of the central government, granting indigenous land to Mestizo settlers is one of the only available options to fulfill promises made in 1988 as
part of the Esquipulas peace accords under which Mestizo Contras laid down their arms. It is purely a political consideration central not only to the burgeoning pluralism in Nicaragua, but also demanded by the World Bank as part of conditioned disbursement of funds earmarked for the development of the “Mesoamerican Biological Corridor.” All of this occurs within a context of land scarcity in the western half of Nicaragua where large cattle-raising states suffocate any possibility of finding land for sale to grant to the ex-combatants.

From the perspective of the municipal governments of the Coast, the problem of land demarcation is symptomatic of institutional violence given the fact that it is Mestizos who now enjoy de facto autonomy as the demographic majority in the Coast. The real consequences of this are the continued and systematic discrimination against indigenous peoples and the continued intrusion in their land by even more Mestizo settlers. The behavior of the Mestizo elected officials occurs within an environment where the perception is that these indigenous lands are co-owned by the central government, that they are replaceable resources and, as such, are natural resources to be exploited for the benefit of the homeland and without regards to considerations for the cultural and political context of the indigenous peoples.

As mentioned before, another major obstacle to the implementation of Law 445 and of the Autonomy Statute are overlapping, competing claims to specific lands by other indigenous communities. One example of these competing claims or “Multi-

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178 The WB sought to establish “legal certainty” in the codices of Nicaraguan property right, as defined by Core nations and with the ultimate goal of protecting the movement of foreign investment.
179 Acosta, M. L., 2003
180 See Appendix K for details
181 A view that was actually tried to be codified into law by the Bolaños administration in 2005.
182 For details see Appendix G
community blocs”\textsuperscript{183} lies in the Bosáwas natural reserve, an area of vast biodiversity and rich forest of mahogany. The conflict arises from a group of three Miskítu communities that, even as they are not originally from the area in dispute, nonetheless they were awarded portions of the land by the Somoza family as part of their displacement from Honduras. The land is in ancestral Sumo-Mayangna territory. Despite the lack of support for the competing claims by the Miskítu, local officials continue to press the issue given that it may open up more land to Mestizo settlers.

In the final analysis, the factors compounding the rising inter-group violence and the failure of building a super-ordinate identity in the Coast are both varied and complex. The peoples of the Coast continue to struggle for self-governance and recognition of indigenous rights that precede the birth of the Nicaraguan nation. They are doing this in an increasingly volatile environment where, given the fragmenting nature of the Law of Autonomy, competing groups must vie for status even as the Mestizo core-community has already become the demographic majority in the region.

In this form of pluri-ethnic autonomy there is not one single path to autonomy, instead the current system demands three components: 1) Dialogue between competing ethnic groups. 2) Negotiation between competing groups and, most important, 3) Tolerance of other groups. This is no simple task under ideal conditions but the peoples of the Coast must do this under conditions of institutionalized violence and the encroachment of an aggressive group – the Mestizo majority. Evidence from the Contra War and the Somoza period in the Coast seems to show that, when groups feel threatened (particularly the traditional hegemonic group of the Coast: the Miskítu-nani) then group competition can quickly escalate into intergroup violence.

\textsuperscript{183} See Appendix L for an example.
POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The grand idea of promoting cooperation and pluralism in the Coast demands a burial of the proverbial hatchet. The conflict that led to open war in the Coast was indeed political but it all began with misperception and misunderstanding of group dynamics in the Coast. The Post-Conflict years gave rise to a meteoric number of Costeño grass-root organizations; the expectation in the mid-1990s was that pluralism and democracy would surely follow. Instead, what followed were frequent abuses from Mestizo administrators sent to the Coast, and a series of agrarian reform, geared toward increasing foreign investment, that threatened the viability of the newfound legal category of “communal lands.” This set up the conditions under which Sandinistas, who returned to power in 2006, placed a strong focus not on the process of autonomy but on fostering Revolutionary nationalism as a means with which to counter the decentralization of power central to political autonomy. In 2015 the Sandinistas have built nearly absolutist power in the Coast.

This paper argues that, even as the factors exacerbating intergroup relations in the Coast are varied and complex, in the absence of a pan-Nicaraguan nationalism, there are three central areas of concern that, if left unattended, can lead to escalation of violence in the Coast.

1. **Affirmation of Indigenous Culture:** Given that the Law of Autonomy failed to stipulate who is the subject of autonomy (it is currently given to the region) the
possibility remains that the Mestizo majority will try to instill a one-way assimilation program. Mestizo political leaders have been extremely effective in stirring the emotions of the people of the western half of the country against alleged attempts at “separatism” from the country. This sentiment was particularly poignant during the three Neo-Liberal administrations that were sandwiched by the two presidencies of Daniel Ortega. Given that only Sandinista administrations have been receptive to the idea of political autonomy, the possibility that another Neo-Liberal president not only veto the Statute but even decides to amend the Constitution could lead to renewed fears of cultural genocide.

2. **Increased Mestizo encroachment and loss of communal territory:** Under the current system of autonomy, the scope and limit of political autonomy are not delineated. This means that there is a gap between de facto and de jure rights and protections. The people of the Coast gave a tremendous sacrifice during the Contra War to gain autonomy; it is one of their most proud accomplishments. Nonetheless, the usurpation of representative power by the increasing number of Mestizo settlers renders them as the de facto governors of the Coast, a condition that all other groups resent and distrust. Historically, there is poor to no evidence that the Mestizos can consistently act with the best interest of the peoples of the Coast in their heart. To the extent that they continue to abuse centralization of elected power for their own gains (e.g., illegal logging permits) this will continue to make them appear less than trustworthy and can stymie cooperation, dialogue and tolerance from the other groups in the Coast. Deterioration of these three conditions proved to have horrific consequences during the Contra War.
3. **Creation of a superordinate national identity**: One of the main goals of the central government of Nicaragua must be the forging of nationalism in the Coast. According to surveys conducted in 2004, the indigenous people of the Coast are more likely to grant primary loyalty to their own group than to the nation of Nicaragua.\(^{184}\) Their strategy towards the “problem of the Coast” must address this issue. Currently, Mestizo nationalism is ridiculed in the Coast as being out of touch with the realities of the region of economic dissonance (in a region of rich natural resources the people are abjectly poor) and marginalization from the rest of the country. A way to inculcate multi-ethnic nationalism must be found. Paradoxically, I posit that this must begin with the Mestizo population and not in the Coast.

The Nicaraguan Constitution claims that “*the Nicaraguan people have a multiethnic nature*”\(^ {185}\) and, most importantly, that they must protect the right of the “communities of the Atlantic Coast to have autonomy over the regions in which they live.”\(^ {186}\) For more than a century, the people of the Coast tried to forge a path towards self-determination, the “multiethnic” nation of Nicaragua finds itself at a crucial moment where conditions in the eastern half of the country are volatile and in the cusp of escalating into violence. In a region where national sovereignty is a priced and rare commodity, the central has the greater responsibility of putting the people first. On the example of the Contra War, serves to illustrate of how quickly (and badly) conditions can deteriorate into horrific violence. On the other hand, it also serves as an example of how the central government can increase popular investment in the creation of La Nicaragua Nueva – if I may be allowed to borrow a concept from the euphoric days of

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\(^{184}\) See Appendixes H,I and J.


\(^{186}\) Ibid, Article 181.
life following the end of Somoza rule in Nicaragua. None of the problems discussed above have a simple solution. The peoples of the Coast do not have the capability to exist on their own, without the central government. But, even with that realization, the inherent spirit of self-determination and autonomy of the peoples of the Coast will continue to show up, every time the sun rises on Yapti Tasbra (the Mother Land).

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

I was born in Nicaragua and was raised under the shadow of the Sandinista Revolution so, I have always been proud of what it accomplished: namely, the end of one of the most brutal and sadistic dictatorship in our hemisphere. Additionally, I felt joy at the witnessing the early years following the end of the revolution. For the first time I felt *part* of something larger than myself, I identified with those your political activists that held sovereignty in such a high regards. I felt a sense of purpose, of belonging, of positive energy. It was the beginning the process of group identity.

There were so many promises made by the revolutionary years and so many of them were broken; national self-determination, social equality, *La Nueva Nicaragua*. I know well enough that the reasons why they were dashed as irreparably as the shell of a broken egg was not solely the responsibility of the Sandinistas, of the Revolution. Ronald Reagan and his interventionist doctrine and economic embargo had a lot more to do with it. Nonetheless, to me, whenever I take even a passing glance at Nicaraguan politics I see one big contradiction: the Sandinista Revolution could not have happened without that realization that all Nicaraguans were active protagonists in the political arena. It asked every single one of us to invest, something. Dora María Tellez told me once, during a meeting in Managua, that the Revolution represented a moment in time
when to be a Nicaragua meant that one had to be a Sandinista. Those two political identities became fused, to some degree, in all of us. The contradiction that I speak of is two-fold. First, the Revolution never stopped asking her children to sacrifice themselves for the sake of a future that, well, never came and which always seems like the proverbial moving target. And, last, the Revolution depended on increased political participation in order for it to succeed and thrive but, nine years into the “Presidency of the People” (as Daniel Ortega labeled his administration) the scions of the Sandinista Revolution have become adept at the political game of limiting the political participation of one’s opposition, adept at attacking the legitimacy of other actors in order to bolster one’s own, adept at the politics of marginalization of minorities. For me, these contradictions are painfully devastating because they signal that the Revolution made a full circle to the very conditions that is fought so hard to remove.

True indigenous political autonomy rests upon the foundation of pluralism in Nicaragua, upon the belief that there should be diverse and competing centers of power in civil society. The problem is that pluralism is not a strong component of Mestizo political culture (discussed earlier in this dissertation). In other words, the autonomy “experiment demanded from its inception a deliberate challenge to the powers of the State. The inability and unwillingness to make this a reality has made indigenous autonomy in Nicaragua a chimera. If this process is to survive, it will require action from the National Assembly in order to protect some room in civil society for pluralism for groups other than Mestizos. Moreover, it will require the understanding that pluralism also must account for a multitude of interests (indigenous and afro-descendant communities, women, workers, young, old and campesinos). Diversity is
indeed a broad concept in Nicaragua. Although heavily focused on Miskítu politics, this work identifies various constraints to the creation of a unifying model of Nicaraguan nationalism. Additionally, it also highlights current problems with governmental policies that were supposed to foster pluralism. Nonetheless, this dissertation also explore examples of progress in the model of political autonomy even as it must exists within a national context of forced political integration and marginalization.

It seems that the autonomy experience in the Coast has only been successful at promoting the increase in group identity and intermittently successful at fostering cooperation between indigenous and afro-descendant groups against Mestizos. At the same time, it is clear that the reasons for cooperation are selfish. It remains to be seen if a model of autonomy that allows the creation of a group-based autonomy would work best in the Coast. In the final analysis, if there is one thing that this case study illustrates is that there is a clear value to examining the Nicaraguan experience with autonomy: It may provide a model of how for other countries facing claims of political autonomy in the region. For this reason, if nothing else, it is vital that we fully understand the consequences to true multi-ethnicity and an imagined national identity. One thing is true from all of this, the peoples of the Coast are far more likely to continue the attempt at creating a system of autonomy that allows them true self-determination and self-governance.
There was a young girl of Nicaragua
Who smiled as she rode a Jaguar
They returned from the ride
With the young girl inside
And the smile on the face of the Jaguar

Anonymous


Awas Tingni v. Nicaragua, Inter-America Court of Human Right, 2001. (Ser.C) No. 79 (2001)


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