

## NICARAGUA

# Homeland

*Angela Russell (Crow from Billings, Montana) traveled to Central America with a group of North American Indians in the spring of 1985 on a trip sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. Following are some of her thoughts on her experience.*

It was suddenly dark. The night swallowed the beautiful warm cloudless day. Our 16-foot motorboat was puttering along a maze of ribbon-like rivers, rivers separated by bushy tropical growth, more swamp than land. We came to a huge lagoon, now loaded with five-inch sprimp because it had not been fished for three years. Everyone had been forced to go to a refugee center further south or flee north to Honduras.

Our Miskitu brothers expertly moved the boat along pathways they knew as well as we know the streets and roads of our home communities. We had no lights. That is a luxury in these parts, as well as a risk. By moonlight we traveled.

Again, more rivers to choose from, all looking the same to me. We were heading east to the sea, to the Atlantic, there on the coast of Nicaragua just a few kilometers south of the Honduran border. We were now at the bay. Just a short distance now was our ship, a Sandinista medical ship that brought us here fewer than twelve hours earlier.

Suddenly, there was gunfire. Three shots rang out. We all crouched down toward the floor of the boat. Two more shots. We were in total silence except for the puttering of our boat as it edged along the southern tip of the bay. It was like time suspended—slow motion.

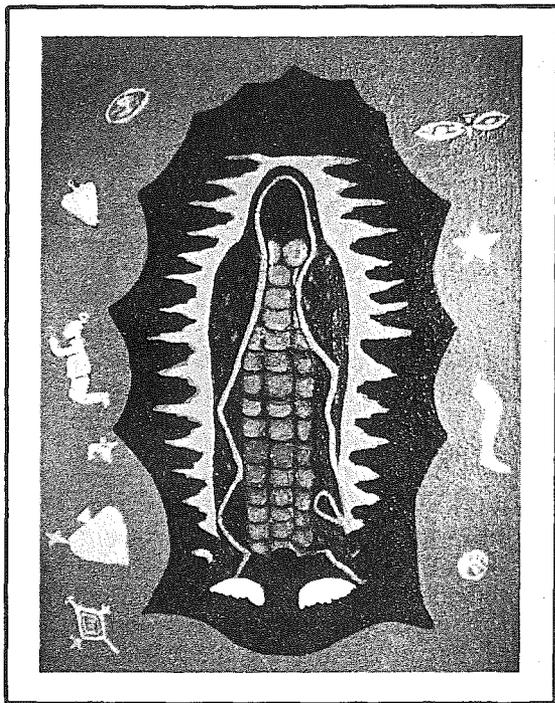
What was I thinking? What were we all thinking?

My thoughts were immediately of home, my special part of the world that I love so much and is part of me. I prayed, if I am to die let me die in my own homeland.

It's been nine months since that incident on the river. Looking back, perhaps a better, well-developed perspective has finally come to birth.

Why did I go? What motivates us to do the things we sometimes do? Adventure. Boredom. A new experience. A belief. A cause.

For me, as a Native person of this country, entrenched in the survival spirit of our people to exist as a people, there are linkages or bonds to other Native peoples of this continent. They are brothers and sisters—be they Miskitu, Sumo, or Rama. What happened to us just a century ago is happening to our Miskitu, Sumo, and Rama brothers and sisters today. Many of the



*"Corn Mother" acrylic. © 1973 Ester Hernandez*

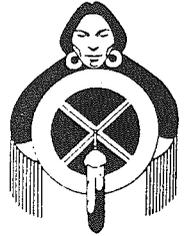


reasons are the same—expansionism, dominance of one group over another, land, natural resources, greed.

And, our country, the United States, is not an innocent bystander. It was no doubt U.S. bullets that fired that night on the river for that area is full of anti-Sandinista rebels, often all lumped together under the name “contras.” The war in Nicaragua is complex. It is not simple like our country would like us to believe. It’s not good guys versus bad guys.

That night on the river when my foremost thoughts were of my homeland, that identity is not dissimilar to that of the Miskitus, Sumos, and Ramas of the Atlantic Coast. They are fighting for their homeland—their identity.

*Since returning from Central America, Angela, who is a social worker, has looked for ways to lend support to Indians in Central America. She writes, “In October, 1985, the National Indian Social Workers meeting in Tulsa, Oklahoma, passed a resolution condemning the genocidal policies against the Indian peoples in Guatemala and calling for a forum to discuss the situation in an effort to seek ways to end this oppression, and to raise the issue in the United States.” For more information on the Guatemalan forum, contact Angela Russell, Box 333, Lodge Grass, MT 59050.*



## COLOMBIA

# Indians Caught Up In Climate Of War

In Colombia, with a population of 28 million people, there are 1.2 million Indians who speak more than 130 different languages. In the 1970s, as was occurring in many indigenous areas in South America, an organization was founded in the Cauca Valley called the Cauca Regional Indian Council (CRIC). CRIC was born out of the need for indigenous people to confront the continuous repression placed on them by large landowners who take indigenous lands and force Indian people to pay rent.

Inspired by Manuel Quintin Lame, an Indian leader who was killed at the turn of the century for defending Indian land, CRIC began to take back land and stop paying rent. This was very successful, but the large landowners responded by employing mercenaries (called *pájaros* or birds) who have killed over 100 Indians. At the same time, with anti-government guerrilla activities increasing in Colombia, especially in the Cauca area, which is mountainous, the Colombian army has become very repressive toward Indian people. Many have been jailed, some for as long as one year, as they await trial. Usually there is no case against them and, under international pressure, most are eventually set free.



(Reproduced from *Como Nos Organizamos*, published by CRIC, Nov. 1983.)