

Nicaragua:

Colonial History Repeats Itself on the Atlantic Coast of Central America

by Amalia Dixon

In 1821, the *Criollo* governors of the Central American countries met in Guatemala to celebrate their political independence. At the same time, they defined the border demarcations of their respective states, overstepping the previous historic demarcations of the ancestral Miskitu, Sumu, and Rama peoples. By arbitrarily deciding where national borders would be, the new states violated our territorial rights. What already existed between our peoples was distorted. It remains impossible to accept these impositions.

Part of the southern Caribbean coast of Honduras is Miskitu territory. It was crossed by the Rio Coco, which today serves as a dividing border line between Nicaragua and Honduras. After the *Criollo* Independence, what remained on the Honduran side was considered disputed territory. It was added to Honduras in 1959 by the World Court at The Hague. This separated the Miskitus into two countries: Nicaragua and Honduras. A first attempt at relocating all the Miskitus to Nicaragua precipitated the deaths of many Indigenous peo-

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ple, both young and old. Banished from their ancestral land, deprived of their natural medicine, they suffered from scarcity of food, clothing, and animals. In short, the migration had a tremendously negative physical and emotional impact. Some decided to return to Honduras, their birth place, traumatized and insecure about their future and way of life.

The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, representing almost half of the country, was officially incorporated into Nicaragua in 1894. Today this area is inhabited by Miskitus, Sumus, Ramas, Garifonas, Afro-Nicaraguans, and *mestizos* who came from the Pacific. Until 1894, the English recognized this land as "Mosquito" territory. The English arrived on these coasts during the time of the buccaneers (English pirates that preyed on Spanish trade ships), and they intermarried with the natives. They influenced our culture by giving us English last names, imposing a new religion, and promoting their monarchy. History tells us that the English imposed four kings and eleven chiefs on the Miskitus.

History was repeated in 1982 when the Sandinista government in Nicaragua relocated people from the Rio Coco by force, in accordance with a unilateral decision guaranteeing its own political interests.

This resulted in an uprising in defense of our ancestral Indigenous rights.

As a move towards autonomy, the Congress under the Sandinista government approved the Autonomy Statute Law for the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua in September of 1987. The government of President Violeta Chamorro ratified the Autonomy Law, but did not consider it a priority. As a consequence, its enforcement stagnated. Nevertheless, for the people of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, it provided the answer to our struggle for ancestral rights. Soon after in Honduras, Indigenous people began to question their real identity, since they are of the same origin as those in Nicaragua. This illustrates that the Rio Coco border line makes no sense for us as Indigenous peoples.

The Autonomy Law needs to have a serious program of implementation. Buying seeds for agricultural production, either for household consumption or for the market, is a priority for the region. Until now, the presence of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the communities has partially alleviated their immediate needs. By contrast, economic activities that affect natural resources like agroforestry and concessions for the exploitation of lumber, minerals, and marine life, are



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all in the hands of the central government. Today, mining companies have returned to this area and are repeating the past history of exploitation. The central government and multinational companies have also signed several accords that do not contain positive development plans for Indigenous communities. The presence of these companies means minimum wage work, conditions of economic exploitation, and ecological destruction for Indigenous peoples. The Sumu people, for example, have endured serious environmental impacts. Several rivers like the Bambana are already contaminated. In the end, the Autonomous Government has very little participation and decision-making power in these negotiations.

Meanwhile, the subscription of the Nicaraguan government to the new policy of the ESAF (Economic Structural Adjustment Facility) has deepened the economic crisis of the Atlantic Coast peoples. The government subordinates all deals and national resources, like minerals, lumber, and marine life to privatization. In other words, it does not offer alternative strategies for the betterment of our people. Only 20 percent of the taxes that the companies pay are given to the Autonomous Governments of both the southern and northern regions for their administrative expenses. Recently, unemployment there has

reached 90 percent. This means profound limitations in agricultural production and little economic income for families. These economic limitations do not allow the autonomous government of the region to plan an appropriate development strategy that could produce qualitative changes.

In response to the economic fragmentation of Indigenous peoples caused by the war and the cultural confrontation with the Sandinista government (only since 1990 have our people begun to return to their places of origin from refugee centers located in

Honduras), the autonomous leaders of the Atlantic Coast are studying the implementation of a production system that would solidify our traditional economic system as an alternative strategy. It would attempt to alleviate our urgent survival needs, but keep us a unified community for years to come. What keeps us together as a people is our spoken language and our social structure in which community practice persists. We have lost our traditional way of dressing (many costumes have disappeared), but our struggle for self-determination is still ongoing. ☺



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