The Binds of Indigeneity on the Miskitu Coast of Nicaragua

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Background

My research examines indigenous forms of political and economic organization in the Miskitu Coast of Nicaragua in the context of two momentous transformations currently taking place in the region. The first of these is the escalating militarization of the coast by the neo-Sandinista regime of Daniel Ortega, allegedly in response to high levels of cocaine trafficking. The second is the concession to the Chinese company HKND of the rights to build a transoceanic canal across Nicaragua, which would require the expropriation of vast expanses of Afro-indigenous communal land. These large-scale political and economic interventions are being enacted without popular consultation in the affected regions and against the expressed wishes of elected indigenous and Afro-Creole leaders. With memories of the 1980s war between Afro-indigenous groups and the revolutionary Sandinista government still very much alive in the region, tensions are high and the stakes of political and economic transformation in the region are enormous. Deadly shootouts erupted recently between mestizo (non-indigenous) settlers and local indigenous residents demanding that the state fulfill its obligation to remove non-indigenous peasants and wood cutters from indigenous communal land.

Key Findings

While my research is still ongoing, I am finding that the Miskitu people in Nicaragua have been systematically put in various “binds” by the dominant political and economic powers in Nicaragua. These binds place the Miskitu in the impossible position of having to choose between various options that always result in their delegitimization or their outright subordination to the interests of the Nicaraguan state. I have identified 3 binds in particular:

1. “You must organize in parties, but your parties are not representative.” In 1990, following a bloody civil war between Afro-indigenous groups and the revolutionary Sandinista government, the peoples of the Miskitu Coast agreed to organize in political parties as a condition of the peace process. However, when their foremost political party, YATAMA, organizes indigenous assemblies, their resolutions are written off as “partisan” and therefore unrepresentative of indigenous interests.

2. “You are free to choose indigenous leaders in Miskitu villages and territories, but indigenous electoral methods are illegitimate.” A 2002 Nicaraguan law passed in response to a 2001 Inter-American Human Rights Court ruling ratified the right of Miskitu Coast peoples to select local and regional leaders according to “their custom and tradition.” The Miskitu have historically elected their representatives in annual village assemblies. The Nicaraguan government of Daniel Ortega, however, recently began to claim that this method is illegitimate and that the only legitimate mode of election is the secret ballot, supervised by the Supreme Electoral Council. Ortega’s government is known to have complete control over this Council and accounts of electoral fraud are widespread throughout Nicaragua, including the Miskitu Coast. As a result, many Miskitu villages and territories now have two parallel, competing ruling bodies: one appointed at indigenous assemblies and favorable to the indigenous party YATAMA, and a second one favorable to Ortega’s ruling party, “elected” in a government-supervised vote.

3. “Accept ‘cohabitation’ with non-indigenous settlers or be labeled advocates of inter-ethnic violence and segregation.” A 2002 Nicaragua law mandates the government to remove mestizo settlers who arrived on the Miskitu Coast after 1987. Many of these settlers, peasants and wood cutters from the country’s Pacific region, have purchased communal land illegally. Ortega’s government is now publicly advocating that the Miskitu accept “cohabitation” with these settlers rather than insist on their removal. Miskitu leaders, however, insist that the record shows these settlers do not come to “share” the territory, but to take over. Ortega’s government now accuses these Miskitu leaders of advocating violence and “segregation”—a word that does not sit well to most commentators in the contemporary era.

Methods

In classic anthropological fashion, my research is based on participant-observation fieldwork. My research entails long stays in various parts of the Miskitu Coast (both rural villages and larger towns), where I observe local forms of governance and conduct interviews across many sectors of Miskitu society: indigenous judges, indigenous economic regulators, soldiers, villagers, elected officials, NGO representatives, pastors, teachers, students, etc. This method strives to obtain as wide a perspective on Miskitu society as possible to then condense the data around a small number of analytical themes. I prioritize the themes of Miskitu economic and political governance and their relationship to the Nicaraguan state. My research will eventually take me to the Honduran side of the Miskitu Coast, where I will compare Honduran Miskitu conditions to the Nicaraguan context, paying close attention to cross-border dynamics. Examining regional variation is important in order to account for intra-Miskitu differentiation, as well as to account for differences in forms of power that develop in accordance with differential access to resources, distinct histories of relationship to the state, and differing relationships among the various ethnic groups that inhabit the region.

Left: Victims of mestizo settler violence at an indigenous congress in February 2016.
Right: A recently militarized Miskitu village.