MISKITO: ADAPTATIONS TO COLONIAL EMPIRES, PAST AND PRESENT

Mary W. Helms
INTRODUCTION

In the late twentieth century the people known as the Miskito “Indians,” possibly numbering as many as 150,000 persons, are one of the largest ethnic groups in Central America. They inhabit the eastern lowlands and Caribbean coastal regions of Honduras and Nicaragua, the so-called “Mosquito Coast” of eastern Central America.

I first learned of the existence of the Miskito Coast in the early 1960s when I was a graduate student in anthropology. At that time a member of my family, a medical doctor, was serving as director of a small clinic and hospital operated by the Moravian Church in Puerto Cabezas, the major port town of the northern Nicaraguan Miskito Coast, south of the Río Coco, the boundary between Nicaragua and Honduras. Knowing nothing about Nicaragua or the Miskito Coast, I prevailed upon my uncle’s kindness and spent a summer with his family in Puerto Cabezas, occasionally accompanying Moravian missionaries on visits to nearby Miskito villages.

On my return to the university I began to research the history of the coast and the Miskito Indians. I pieced together the general features of colonial history and of native life during the colonial centuries from historical reports and travelers’ accounts and read a very useful monograph of Miskito customs that had been published some thirty years earlier. However, no contemporary anthropological work had been done. Consequently, when in a few years it came time to decide upon a location for fieldwork and a subject for a dissertation, a return visit to the Miskito Coast was the logical and obvious choice. I decided to pursue a general village study that would afford me the chance to observe basic economic, social, political, and ideological features of Miskito everyday life as it was in the mid-1960s. So it was that I found myself once more in Puerto Cabezas and, in a few weeks’ time, again with the assistance of Moravian missionaries, resident in the Miskito community of Asang, a settlement of about six hundred persons located approximately two hundred miles upriver on the Nicaraguan side of the Río Coco, a few miles short of the rapids that severely reduce river travel. I lived in Asang about ten months (from 1964–1965), residing in the home of the Moravian lay pastor and his family (who are Miskito), learning to speak Miskito and involving myself as best I could in daily Miskito life. I describe life in Asang as I found it in the 1960s, and also recount
the considerable influence of European contact in the colonial period and the turmoil brought about by recent political events in Nicaragua.

The Miskito are an example of what has been called a “colonial tribe,” meaning an ethnic population whose sense of group identity and many customs resulted from contact with European or European-derived colonial powers. In fact, it is likely that the names “Miskito” and “Mosquito Coast” are derived from seventeenth-century Spanish, English, or French terms because the spellings used in the earliest European accounts of the coast (Mosquito, Mosquito, Musketo, Mustique) compare closely with contemporary European terms for musket (mosquete, mousquet, musket). As we shall see, access to guns during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries allowed the Miskito to become the most powerful population on the coast.

Prior to European contact the coast was occupied by numerous small groups of natives who hunted, fished, and cultivated small plots of land. In contrast with many other indigenous peoples, Western contact did not lead to the cultural disintegration of these native forebears of the Miskito. Neither did association with European colonial agents force the Miskito to become a rural peasantry living within a larger colonial polity, forced to pay taxes or rents or provide labor services. The Miskito have never paid taxes to a more powerful government and were never subject to forced labor, such as army drafts, though they have, at times, fought vigorously in pursuit of their own interests. In short, though the Miskito have been strongly influenced by Western or European contacts for approximately three hundred years, to date they have maintained considerable social and cultural autonomy and political independence.

Can such autonomy continue? This question is the major issue currently facing the Miskito. It is particularly acute for Miskito living in eastern Nicaragua where pressures that could force them to lose valuable land and become more closely affected by laws and policies of the state of Nicaragua have become much more intense as a result of the Sandinista Revolution that began in 1979. Prior to that time, however, life in eastern Nicaragua and eastern Honduras (the entire region known as La Mosquitia) was only minimally affected by dictates of the governments of Nicaragua and Honduras.

This extensive eastern region has long been more closely affiliated with the Caribbean region as the western edge of the
Caribbean Sea. As such it has also been a frontier region, geograph-
cally part of the Central American mainland but historically facing
to the east and the Caribbean world rather than to the rest of
Central America lying to the west.4

The reasons for this situation are geographical and historical.
The territory of Central America (Guatemala through Panama) is
divided by a central chain of mountains that runs the length of
the land, creating a western or Pacific zone, a central mountain
zone, and an eastern or Caribbean (sometimes called Atlantic)
zone. Because the valleys, plains, and foothills of the western
zone are relatively dry and temperate in climate they were found
suitable for settlement by Spanish conquistadors and colonists
who subdued the indigenous population and developed several
Hispanic colonies.5 These colonies became the contemporary
countries of Central America, whose populations speak Spanish
and are predominantly Roman Catholic and whose capital cities
and major population clusters are still located in the western
zone.6

The eastern zone on the other side of the mountain chain,
however, is a hotter and wetter tropical lowland of forests,
swamps, and savannahs. Spanish conquistadors found nothing of
interest here, and did not settle. Instead, they long regarded the
eastern regions and its native peoples as a very “savage” and
inhospitable “backwoods.” Because the Spaniards ignored this
region and because this land was adjacent to Spanish settlements,
the English, long colonial competitors of the Spanish Crown,
eventually became interested in the east coast as a vantage point
for watching and sometimes harassing their Hispanic rivals.
Consequently, the English became the predominant colonial
power there.7

The English presence was relatively low-key. Only a few settle-
ments were established, and contacts with the local native popula-
tion were basically friendly, cooperative, and mutually satisfactory.
On the Miskito Coast the native peoples came to admire the
English and made some attempt to imitate their customs and even
learn some English. Consequently, though the native language
remained the mother tongue, the predominant colonial language
was English. Eventually various denominations of Protestantism,
most notably (by far) the Moravian Church, became the accepted
religions.

During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries,
therefore, the cultural climate of the east coast of Nicaragua and
Honduras was strongly differentiated from that of western Central America. In fact, adopting the attitude of their English associates, the native population of eastern Nicaragua-Honduras developed a strong aversion toward the Spanish-speaking peoples of western Central America. Many of them have maintained a strong dislike and distrust to this day.

**ORIGINS OF THE MISKITO**

During the latter decades of the seventeenth century the Miskito Coast was a quiet and secluded backwater region. Consequently, it became a zone of refuge for African and mulatto slaves and freed slaves, including survivors of a wrecked slaving vessel and freed slaves from a short-lived English colony on the Caribbean island of Providencia. Many of these new arrivals, presumably mainly men, settled in the vicinity of Cape Gracias a Dios, at the mouth of the Río Coco (known also as the Wangks or Segovia River), the current boundary between Nicaragua and Honduras. There they intermingled with local native women and established a small population (perhaps one thousand) of mixed African-Indian descent known in the colonial literature as the Miskito (Mosquito)-Zambos. This was the beginning of the ethnic group now known as the Miskito Indians, many of whom still consider the Río Coco to be the heartland of their territory.

Because of its isolation and proximity to the Caribbean Sea, the Miskito Coast also became a favorite rest and rendezvous locale for French, English, and Dutch privateers and buccaneers, who could remain safely hidden in its numerous coves and inlets between raids on Caribbean shipping and on Hispanic settlements of the Caribbean region (the Spanish Main). During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the Miskito became willing allies of these pirates, who also enjoyed the amenities of Miskito village life. Miskito men accompanied buccaneers to sea, serving mainly as provisioners because they were excellent hunters and fishermen.

They also received muskets and ammunition (and other types of European goods) from the buccaneers. Armed with these weapons, the Miskito began their own military expansion to the north and south of Cape Gracias, along the Caribbean coast of Honduras and Nicaragua, absorbing some local natives (who had
only traditional weapons for defense) and driving others away, farther into the interior, to seek sanctuary in the wilds of the central mountains. These interior people, whose numbers have gradually declined, are known to us now by the collective term, Sumu.10

The Miskito also found allies in English planters and traders who settled at river mouths along the coast (including surviving buccaneers who had opted to settle down to a safer, if duller, lifestyle). These settlers used the Miskito as trading “middle-men” vis-à-vis interior natives who hesitated to come to the coast themselves now that Europeans and militarily powerful Miskito were on the scene. In return for forest products acquired by the Miskito from “upriver” Sumu Indians, the English provided the Miskito with a range of European goods, some of which the Miskito returned to their interior trade partners. These goods further strengthened the identity and dominance of the Miskito.11

Their English contacts also enabled the Miskito to range even farther afield during the first half of the eighteenth century and to conduct damaging raids against other native populations in the mountains of central Honduras and Nicaragua, in the coastal areas of Costa Rica to the south, and, to the north, in eastern Guatemala and Yucatan. The goal of these raids was primarily to obtain native people as war-captives. Some of these captives (mainly the women) were kept by the Miskito themselves and adopted into their own families, helping greatly to increase the Miskito population. Other war-captives were sold to British settlers for use as laborers on English plantations on the island of Jamaica.12

These raids were greatly feared both by Spanish frontier colonists and Central American native peoples, and the Miskito received a long-standing reputation as fierce fighters. During this time the Miskito were frequently referred to, especially by Hispanic Central Americans, as Miskito-Zambos. The term “Zambo” emphasized the Indian-Black admixture of the population. This mixed ancestry was reputed, by Europeans, to explain some of the ferocity of Miskito raiders. The Miskito continued their depredations until about 1740, by which time labor requirements on Jamaica were adequately met by African slaves who were preferred as laborers by plantation owners. As this market for native laborers declined, Miskito raids ended, too.13

During the remainder of the eighteenth century and through-
out the nineteenth century the Miskito population consolidated their hold over the coast. Their settlements extended up the Río Coco for several hundred miles and along the Caribbean coastline from Río Negro (Honduras) in the north to Pearl Lagoon (Nicaragua) in the south. The Miskito generally lived in proximity to rivers and European trading stations at river mouths and maintained regular interaction both with English-speaking traders and settlers and with interior natives.

The Miskito adjustment to coastal life was made possible only by continuing to serve, as in prior centuries, as middlemen between Europeans and interior tribes. Coastal territory provided excellent fishing conditions but was poor for agriculture, except for manioc, a tuber that can grow in the sandy coastal soils, and a few varieties of fruit trees. The coast proper also lacked forest resources needed for the local manufacture of numerous household items. In order to acquire the necessary range of foodstuffs and domestic products the Miskito tended agricultural plots located along river banks some distance upstream from the coast, periodically traveled south to coastal Costa Rica to harvest quantities of sea turtles from nesting sites on the beaches, traded European goods (axes, adzes, beads, mirrors) and coastal products (salt, turtle meat) with interior tribes in exchange for forest products (game, rough-hewn dugouts, gourds and calabashes, skins, net hammocks, sarsaparilla) and obtained European goods from coastal trading posts in exchange for local coastal resources (turtle shells, skins).14

By the late nineteenth century and during the twentieth century Christianization was begun under the guidance of German and, later, American missionaries of the Moravian Church, who operated small trading posts and eventually introduced small clinics where Western medical care could be obtained. The missionaries developed a written form of Miskito, translated hymns and the Bible, and introduced literacy and Western modes of schooling to train native lay pastors.15

During these years the Miskito Coast also attracted various Western business enterprises interested in the natural resources of the region. Commercial rubber tapping was profitable during the last half of the nineteenth century. Then lumber companies cut valuable mahogany and pine. Mining entrepreneurs sought precious metals in the interior mountains (as colonial Spaniards had done before them), and banana companies established commercial plantations on the lowlands. Banana companies also
introduced, as laborers, a population of English-speaking “creole” persons from Jamaica and the Grand Cayman Islands, whose descendants still form an important component of the few port towns that were established on the Coast.16

These businesses, which replaced the small colonial trading enterprises of earlier centuries, now provided the Miskito with opportunities for wage labor. Miskito men worked as cutters for lumber companies, provided river transport for India rubber traders, worked at the mines, and grew cash crops—rice and beans and bananas—for sale to Europeans. However, these operations were highly speculative, meaning that the businesses remained viable only so long as an immediate profit could be made and were readily abandoned when the resources became depleted or when better investment opportunities beckoned elsewhere for Western owners and investors. Consequently, wage labor opportunities (and the coastal money economy) were of the “enclave” or “boom-and-bust” variety common to frontiers like the Miskito Coast. When a foreign company was operating, jobs and money would be available for native laborers; but when a company stopped operation and left the region, jobs and money would suddenly be gone. Because foreign companies came and went rather regularly, periods when jobs were available alternated frequently with periods when jobs were scarce or nonexistent.

The Miskito handled this situation well, however, by continuing to maintain their own traditional subsistence economy based on horticulture, hunting, and fishing. It was possible to do so because, in spite of centuries of involvement with foreigners, the Miskito had never lost access to the basic land and water resources that provisioned them. Foreign settlements were small and the number of resident Europeans and other non-Miskito limited. Foreign businesses did not obtain permanent land rights but were interested only in movable forms of natural resources such as wood products and metals. Consequently, traditional subsistence continued year in and year out regardless of the vagaries of Western enterprises. Women tended to most of the agricultural work. Men alternated between wage jobs, when they were available, and traditional hunting, fishing, and farming when wage labor was gone. Lack of money meant store-bought items would be in short supply at times, but basic survival was never threatened because the traditional economy continued to flourish.17
Flexibility under boom-and-bust economic conditions was also facilitated by matrilocal marital residence, meaning that married couples lived either under the same roof as the wife’s parents or in a separate dwelling located in the same village as the wife’s parents. This arrangement may have developed in earlier centuries as a response to contact situations in which former slaves and freedmen, settled buccaneers, and other foreign planters and traders took native women as wives. It may also have developed when Miskito men were frequently away from home as buccaneer assistants or as raiders themselves, activities that caused men to be absent for many months or even years at a time.  

When men were away matrilocal residence allowed domestic and village life to continue without disruption as related groups of kinswomen—mothers, daughters, sisters—remained together in residence in their home villages, maintaining traditional language and customs, socializing their children in Miskito ways, and maintaining agricultural production. As a result, no matter what the nature of their later wanderings (particularly with reference to boys), there was always a solid base of Miskitoness firmly established in a child’s formative years of village life. The core of family women remaining at home also meant that there were functioning households for husband-fathers to return to when adventures farther afield were unavailable and that these same men could easily leave at a later time if new work opportunities became available on the coast.

A Village on the Rio Coco

When I lived in Asang in the mid-1960s the Miskito Coast was in an economic depression. Pine lumbering, the latest economic “boom,” had declined and wage labor was hard to find. One of the consequences of that decline was seen in the increasing isolation of communities as logging roads fell into disrepair and small-plane service ended. Travel was mainly by water, as it had been for prior centuries. Although I was able, on a few occasions, to fly by small plane in about thirty minutes from Puerto Cabezas on the coast to a landing strip a few miles short of Asang, about 200 miles upriver on the Rio Coco, the more usual
mode of travel took several days at best; a few hours by land
transport over a lumber road from Puerto Cabezas to the Río
Coco followed by river travel to Asang—a trip of several days
by poled dugout canoe.20 (Canoes were powered upstream not
by paddling but by pushing against the river bottom with a long
pole; the work is easier and faster if several men pole at once.
Travelers, enduring sun or rain, sit cross-legged on a narrow
plank or, more likely, on several sections of bamboo wedged
between the narrow sides of the craft.) The canoe trip took a
mere eight hours if the dugout were equipped with a small
motor. Alternately a seat might be found on one of the commer-
cial barges that traveled from village to village serving as float-
ing commissaries.

The Río Coco is one of the longest rivers in Central America,
flowing approximately 760 kilometers (470 miles) from interior
sources near the Pacific coast to the Caribbean shore (Cape
Gracias a Dios). Like many tropical rivers, its length is a function
of numerous meanders. Traveling upriver from close to the coast,
as I did, the river initially winds through flat, open savannah
where fertile alluvial banks are lined with mangrove, bush, or
bamboo groves. Sometimes a cleared area appeared where ma-
io, maize, rice, and beans were growing, or a small banana or
plantain patch came into view. When a curve loomed ahead a vil-
lage usually appeared, with houses strung along the edge of a
high bank overlooking a gravel and sand beach where cattle and
a few horses might be standing knee-deep in the water to escape
swarms of mosquitos.

It was a peaceful scene, enlivened perhaps by a kingfisher
flashing by with rasping calls of annoyance or a chain of brightly
colored butterflies suddenly erupting from the bush along the
river bank or by a glimpse of a woman fishing as she knelt quietly
in the bottom of her dugout anchored at a sheltered spot. Other
dugouts occasionally might drift past on their way downstream,
men relaxed, freed from the chore of poling, but alert for sub-
merged debris as the current swept them along. Such a canoe was
held steady by a woman kneeling in the stern and trailing a pad-
dle as a rudder. Once I saw a bamboo raft float by carrying a fam-
ily of Sumu Indians who were traveling down river from the iso-
lated interior. They had built a fire on their raft for cooking and
quickly hid their faces behind hands or hats or sleeves when they
saw my camera.

As the river winds inland the land gradually rises and low
mountains form a constant backdrop for the riverine panorama.
Eventually, not too far beyond Asang, the character of the river abruptly changes. Instead of mud banks draped with greenery, stretches of bush and gardens, beaches and a quiet river, the landscape alters to show huge black rocks jutting from the middle of the river, which now roars and churns and foams. More rocks line the banks, the river follows a torturous, twisting path, and swift boiling rapids take control of the dugout, leaving bowmen and motorman little to do except to try to protect the motor from the stones and prevent a broadside crash against the rocks.

Very little traffic is found in these stretches of the river. Those who attempt it generally do so during the dry season, January through April, when there is virtually no rain, the river level drops, and the rapids are more subdued. On the lower river, though, dry season travel can be difficult if the shallower river uncovers extensive sections of gravel beach and loaded dugouts run a greater risk of running aground. This situation alters in May, when rains begin and the heavy downpours turn the river into a ranging torrent carrying huge trees and mobile dams of debris in its swirling path. One blow from a hurtling log can easily capsize a dugout or raft. But a flooding river has its advantages, for as it overflows its banks low-lying gardens and small fields are covered with a muddy liquid carpet that fertilizes and rejuvenates the soil with silt.

Like most Miskito river villages, Asang was situated high above the flood line on top of a small (fifteen- to twenty-foot) bluff with a mud and grass embankment which was climbed by a series of twisting, slippery, narrow paths. It was one of about forty Miskito settlements extending from Cape Gracias to Bocay, above the rapids. The name Asang is a Sumu word meaning “hilly land covered with forest.” When I lived there it was a large community with a population of 665. Some ninety inhabited dwelling units had been built, standing in several parallel rows all facing the river, in addition to a school, a small commissary, and two churches (the larger and dominant one Moravian, the other, Church of God).

It was a picturesque community. Tangled growths of forest and uncleared bush surrounded the village on three sides but grazing animals and periodic work parties kept grass low in the village. Numerous citrus trees provided shade and fruit. A few coconut palms added character along with a considerable variety
of other trees: cashew, rose-apple, papaya, mango, pejivalle palm, zapote, soursap, calabash. Small herb gardens, fenced with rough wood or bamboo against cows and pigs, were cultivated close to homes. Garden flowers and flowering bushes, including gardenias and a wonderfully scented night-blooming lily, were valued for ornament. Slab benches were built along the edge of the bluff, affording a magnificent view of the country across the river. This was a popular spot where young people could “hang out” in the evening. Asang residents also had access to a dozen or more natural springs that flowed from the river bank and afforded clean fresh water, greatly preferable to using impure river or creek water (and one of the reasons Asang was a good choice for me).

A typical dwelling unit was composed of two buildings. One, the larger, approximately 18–19’ by 22–24’, was divided into sleeping compartments for the household, typically a couple with growing children and sometimes the husband’s or wife’s parents. Most of the time people sat or worked on a porch stretching the width of the house or in the cleaned yard in front. A smaller building (about 14 by 19’) served as kitchen and produce center and contained a clay cooking platform—a table-like structure standing on legs with raised sides and filled with white clay on which a fire could be built. Cooking refuse could be tossed out a nearby window where the family’s pigs hurried to eat food scraps. (It was thanks to the pigs as well as to people’s efforts that Asang was a very clean and pleasant village.) The kitchen was joined to the sleeping quarters by a plank and both structures stood about four feet above the ground on wooden pilings. Access to the house was by steps or a notched log. Dwelling units were constructed either of wood planks or of flattened bamboo, and most had thatched roofs, though a few well-to-do families had roofs of corrugated metal, which was prestigious but very hot on sunny days.

The wooden, red-roofed Moravian Church dominated all, and could be seen from several miles downriver. The mission also included a wooden house and kitchen unit built for the use of the lay pastor and his family. The interior of this structure was built along European lines with several separate bedrooms surrounding a large central hall. The lay pastor and his wife and family of young children preferred to sleep together in the largest of the bedrooms, leaving three smaller ones unoccupied. One of these was
used for storage, another as the lay pastor’s office. The third became my home.

**FAMILY AND KINSHIP**

**IN A MISKITO COMMUNITY**

Asang was founded about 1910 by a family whose original home had been destroyed in a flood. The move was not without some danger, for the river below the high bank where Asang was to be built was believed to be the home of an evil spirit (apparently an area prone to whirlpools then), and it was necessary for a shaman to exorcise the malevolent being before the bush could be cleared and a few houses built.

The nucleus of the new village formed around five daughters and two sons of a prominent man. The families of these siblings constituted the major kinship groups of Asang when I lived there. Several of the sisters’ spouses were non-Miskito, and illustrate well the mixing of Miskito women and non-Miskito men that has been a characteristic of the Miskito in general since their origins. One sister was married to an Englishman who originally came from Cornwall, England, and had operated a general store and owned some cattle before settling in Asang. After his death his widow married a Nicaraguan reportedly from Managua. Another sister married a Spanish-speaking Honduran man, while the only child of a fourth sister married a merchant of Jewish background. Another foreigner who settled in Asang soon after its founding was an American (United States) Black originally from Ohio who was involved in mahogany lumbering and owned a chain of three commissaries along the river (one in Asang). This man had two Miskito wives, one of whom had several sisters who, along with their spouses (at least one of whom was a non-Miskito Honduran), moved to Asang, too. Several Creole men eventually moved from the coast to the growing community, married Miskito women, and settled down. Most Asang residents were related either to the original five siblings or to the family of the American; members of these two family groups have intermarried over the years.

One of the social practices that most directly expressed the interrelatedness of individuals and families was the use of
teknonymy, the practice of referring to an adult by the name of his or her eldest child or sometimes, spouse. Girls and women in particular used this type of reference, referring to another adult or directly addressing that person not by personal name but as “so-and-so’s mother” or “so-and-so’s father” or “so-and-so’s spouse.” For example, a woman might call out from her kitchen to her husband, “Alonso popika, dinner’s ready”; Alonso being their eldest child and popika being an anglicized term for father. Men were more likely to use personal names, especially when dealing with other men, probably due to their experience in wage labor jobs where personal names were necessary for payroll and other work relationships.

In the formal kinship system in use in the mid-twentieth century, an individual would use the terms for brother and sister not only for all of his or her siblings but also for all first cousins. Separate terms were used for mother and father, but instead of lumping mother’s and father’s siblings into two categories (aunt and uncle) as English-speakers do, separate terms were also used for mother’s sister, mother’s brother, father’s sister, and father’s brother. This custom was fairly new. In the late nineteenth century terms for father and father’s brother and father’s sister had been basically the same (father was called aisa and both father’s brother and father’s sister were called aisa diura, meaning “father’s sibling”). Similarly, terms for mother and mother’s sister had been basically the same (mother was called yapti and mother’s sister was called yapti diura, meaning “mother’s sibling”). There was a separate term—tahti—for mother’s brother. At that time brother-sister terms were extended only to certain first cousins—the children of father’s brother and mother’s sister (what anthropologists call “parallel cousins”). Other first cousins, the children of mother’s brother and possibly father’s sister (what anthropologists call “cross-cousins”), were given different terms and were considered as possible marriage partners.

In Asang the terms for brother and sister were used in a different way than English-speakers do. Although two terms are used, one—moini—means “person of same sex same generation as the speaker” and the other—lakra—means “person of opposite sex same generation as the speaker.” Thus, a boy or man calls another boy or man moini and a girl or woman calls another girl or woman moini, but boy and girl or man and woman address
each other as lakra. These terms were also extended to include the children of any persons whom an individual’s parents called brother and sister, which included the children of all persons whom their parents had called brother and sister. As a result, brother and sister actually referred to many persons whose specific kin ties to an individual might not be well known, especially since kinship reckoning for an individual generally stopped at about the great-grandparent generation. Stated more accurately, the names of the dead were not mentioned, keeping specific kin-reckonings quite abbreviated.

Use of brother or of sister in effect became a respectful way of addressing even strangers, and could be seen to unite all Miskito into a network of mutual “brotherhood” and “sisterhood.” This practice was also compatible with the traditional Moravian practice of addressing other church members as brothers and sisters. For Moravian Miskito, the majority today, use of brother and sister thus connotes a general social and ideological communality with all Miskito.

Matrilocal residence, in which an Asang woman married a non-Asang man who came to live in his wife’s community, probably in the same household as her parents, had been followed by many Asang families, particularly in older generation marriages. But there was a definite trend toward village endogamy among the younger generation, who preferred to find a spouse within Asang. These marriages also showed a distinct preference for virilocal or neolocal residence within the village. Residence for newlyweds tended to be with the husband’s family with the expectation that they would eventually build homes of their own near the husband’s parents’ home or at the back of the village where more land could be cleared. To help co-resident families keep the peace, mother-in-law and son-in-law as well as father-in-law and daughter-in-law avoidance was practiced (meaning that these persons officially did not speak to each other) after the birth of a child.

People were somewhat defensive about village endogamy, saying that by seeking a mate from within Asang a person at least knew the type of individual he or she would be marrying and could expect a more stable marriage. Asang residents, in fact, were quite proud of their orderly community. Outsiders as spouses were often perceived as potential troublemakers, perhaps prone to drinking or generally unfriendly. Some of this attitude reflected the reality that alcoholism, especially among teenagers, was a major problem in many Miskito villages but not in Asang, where the strict practices of
Moravianism were stringently enforced by church and village elders. Adult villagers simply did not tolerate unruly or drunken behavior, and I saw virtually none. Asang was renowned along the river for this sobriety, and other villagers often had mixed feelings about Asang’s insistence on strict and righteous behavior.

Until the early twentieth century, marriage between cross-cousins was the rule, meaning an individual married a father’s sister’s child or a mother’s brother’s child. The children of two brothers or of two sisters were definitely not to marry, but the children of brothers and sisters were encouraged to do so. (These persons would not have been living in the same village if matrilocal residence were followed, as it generally was then). The prohibition of marriage between offspring of two brothers or two sisters was still followed in Asang when I lived there. People were also troubled if the couple who wished to marry stood as “brother” and “sister” to each other, as was increasingly the case as village endogamy continued. Preference for the security of a spouse from within Asang thus could clash with ideas about proper social or kinship distance between prospective spouses and/or their families.

Wage labor opportunities plus missionary pressures have also increased the age at marriage. Girls used to be betrothed by their parents while still children, perhaps eight or nine years old, and married shortly after reaching puberty. In Asang, however, men married at about twenty to twenty-six years of age and women at about sixteen to twenty-two, when they felt they could adequately support a family. Having children is important to Miskito families and a girl was thought to have reached adulthood when she bore a child, regardless of marital status. In fact, because divorce was frowned upon by the mission churches, couples frequently delayed a church wedding until their family was well established and the compatability of the parents beyond doubt.

Secular marriages were more common among young people, however, who could be married by the village headman, the official representative of the village to the Nicaraguan government. (The headman of Asang was empowered both to conduct civil marriages and to record births and deaths.) Prior to missionary influence polygyny was possible, though not so very common. Well-to-do and influential men were most likely to have two or (rarely) more wives. In Asang, although the days of polygyny were remembered, all families were monogamous. Families in Asang were large, not only because women bore many children but also because in half the Asang households
two or more families lived together. Eighty percent of the women of child-bearing age had borne from seven to twelve children apiece, with the number of living children averaging about eight. Sixty percent of these women had lost children under the age of six either from disease or as stillbirths probably caused by the hard physical labor involved in women’s household and field work.

Respect should be shown between all relatives and was expressed through food sharing. Proper Miskito hospitality required that food be offered to anyone, relative or stranger, who was in the vicinity when food was being prepared or eaten. Food sharing thus served as an integrating mechanism for village society. There was a constant exchange of small amounts of food between relatives and neighbors every day. A cup of coffee and an extra flour tortilla or some *wabul* (a staple beverage made of mashed boiled bananas or plantains mixed with water) might be sent to the house next door anytime. Portions of the catch were also distributed after a successful hunting or fishing expedition or when a cow or pig was slaughtered. The role of women as guardians of the social core was given particular expression and support by food sharing. Although it was the man who was theoretically responsible for providing food for the household, it was the woman who was responsible for distributing food among relatives. Thus it was usually to other women that food was sent, and when food was sent directly to men it was likely that they would be related to the giver on the maternal side.

**Village Economic Life**

Within the operation of the household and related activities there was a general division of labor between men and women. Men were expected to chop wood, clear fields, and build houses but not to carry water, wash clothes, or cook. These were women’s duties. Women, however, were fully capable of almost every type of task either at home or in the field. A husband’s periodic trips to other villages, his absences while working downriver, or desertion by her husband forced many women to learn to take care of themselves and their families almost single-handedly.

Men as a group were casual, laughing, and independent.
They did not complain much about daily matters. They joked readily. Women, on the other hand, usually had something to complain about—health, overwork, general poverty. Women didn’t joke as much, were more serious, and gave the impression of hard and steady work. Men had definite periods of free time, too, after they returned from the day’s work in the fields and they enjoyed longer respite from their work by occasional visits to other villages. Women’s work, in contrast, seemed endless, and they rarely had a chance to enjoy a change.

Much of women’s work involved agriculture. Agriculture was focused on subsistence crops (sweet manioc and other tubers, plantains, and bananas with maize, cacao, pineapple, sugarcane, and tree fruits cultivated on a smaller scale) and on potential cash crops (rice, beans, and certain varieties of bananas). Bananas had been cultivated widely when the commercial banana business was booming, and dry rice and apparently also beans began to be grown to feed foreign lumber workers. By the mid-1960s production of rice and beans had added a major component to the agricultural year and had become food staples for the Miskito, especially because the economic depression had effectively removed the foreign customers for these cash crops. Women, who worked in the fields eleven months out of twelve, handled most of the daily agricultural chores, including the tedious job of weeding rice, while men’s agricultural labor centered more on briefer periods of clearing and, together with women, planting and harvesting rice and beans.

Agriculture in Asang was conducted by slash-and-burn techniques in which fields were cleared by machete, allowed to dry, and sometimes fired. Details of crop rotation and field fallowing were determined by type of crop and field preparation. Annual crops of rice, manioc, and maize were planted in fields that had been burned. Perennial crops of bananas and plantains were planted in unburned fields. Beans, a major annual crop, were also planted in unburned fields, sometimes alone or sometimes among banana and plantain plants. Rice, bean, and maize fields were generally planted for one year and then allowed to lie fallow for one or two years. Manioc fields were used for several years before allowing a year’s fallow period.

Land by itself had no monetary value—to buy or sell land was inconceivable. It was free for the taking. Once cleared, however, a plot of land belonged to the person who had cleared it, who alone directed its use. Sometimes, however, people tried to “steal” another-
er’s land by planting perennial plants, a procedure which was a frequent cause for quarrels.

All agricultural work was done by hand with only digging sticks and machetes as tools. Each nuclear family was basically responsible for its own agricultural plots, though there was considerable cooperation between households of relatives and neighbors during crucial periods of field burning, planting, and harvesting.

Cultivated foods formed the basis of daily meals. Generally two main meals were eaten, one in the early morning shortly after dawn and the other in the late afternoon. A typical meal included rice and beans, boiled green bananas or baked plantains, boiled manioc, perhaps a small fish, and coffee or wabul. Wabul provided a warm and satisfying drink, and no Miskito meal was complete without it. Maize, the Mesoamerican staple, was mainly used in beverages and played only a small, though constant, role in Miskito diets. A piece of meat or fish or perhaps a flour tortilla was a treat and not available every day.

Domestic animals—horses, cattle, pigs, chickens, turkeys, and an occasional muscovy duck—were raised by the villagers, but with little care and in a rather casual manner. Sale of pork or beef or of a fowl brought in a bit of cash. Cattle were kept mainly as an emergency source of money, and because they represent wealth, cattle were also prestige items. An average family had one or two head. Most cattle roamed the bush and often died of old age. Pigs provided more meat and were slaughtered on special occasions, especially to reward people who had helped with cooperative agricultural activities or at Christmas and New Year celebrations.

Agriculture provided most food, but many men still enjoyed hunting and fishing although game, once abundant, had decreased as human population grew and hunting and fishing had become largely recreational activities. Wild game was still considered the best form of meat, however, much superior to that of domestic animals. A wide range of honeys, fruits, and seeds were gathered casually in the bush as people came and went about their tasks, and were eaten as between-meal snacks. Some households kept hives of stingless bees in large bamboo joints suspended from the house porch roof, and enjoyed the honey, which they prepared as a beverage.

A number of forest products were also still used around the
house. For example, annatto provided food coloring and was applied to the face for protection against the sun. Hair oil was made from oil palm seeds. The juice of a variety of sour orange was used to scrub floors and tables and was applied as a bleach to bark cloth as the bark was beaten over a log bench with a grooved wooden mallet. Bark cloth was made from the inner bark of a tree closely related to the rubber tree. It was used for bedding and, before the turn of the century, as clothing particularly for women, who wore a bark cloth wrap from waist to knees. (Under missionary influence cotton dresses replaced the bark cloth wrap.) Gourds and calabashes were used as water carriers. Thin strips of tree bark fiber were invaluable for carrying lines and for tying things together. Large leaves were used for wrapping food packages and made impromptu umbrellas in a sudden downpour. Silk-grass fibers could be rolled into an extremely durable thread and a pierced thorn made a serviceable needle if such sewing supplies were not available at the commissary. All manner of household utensils and furniture were made of wood, and torches of pine provided the only light on dark nights for most families. (Kerosene lanterns were the other lighting option, but were used mainly for community and church events.) Baskets of various sizes were made of vines and twisted fibers.

Wage labor opportunities were limited when I lived in Asang. Work in gold mines in the interior offered the best possibility, but with a surplus of labor available due to the decline of other wage-paying jobs there were many men who simply stayed in the village and did agricultural work. For the same reason cash was scarce. (I found it almost impossible to get change for large bills.) Store purchases either at the two small shops in Asang or in other villages were sharply curtailed. Many people felt frustrated and personally deprived by the decline in the cash economy. They complained frequently of hard times and of the absence of cash and even of food. Although there was plenty to eat, the basis of the diet was the cash crops—rice and beans—which people would much rather have sold in order to be able to buy salt, sugar, lard, flour, and various manufactured household and personal items (soap, cigarettes, cloth, kerosene, tobacco). To have to eat the cash crops because there were no foreigners to buy them epitomized both the economic depression affecting the cash economy and the personal disquietude of the jobless populace.
The people of Asang directed their personal lives and community affairs according to traditional Miskito custom, mission church regulations (primarily Moravian), and statutes of the Republic of Nicaragua. Traditional guidelines for behavior were most important, and were enforced mainly by gossip—highly effective, though productive of a lot of tension, in a rather small face-to-face community. Most traditional behavior involved appropriate fulfillment of kinship responsibilities, and most gossip dealt with alleged infringements of these responsibilities. Accusations of theft of small property were frequent. Snatching chickens at night as they roosted beneath houses in order to sell them outside the village was a frequent charge directed at young men, while children were said (perhaps with some truth) to be stealing eggs to sell to me for meals. Property inheritance at death was another potentially delicate matter that was of relatively recent significance because before the introduction of missions all personal property, including livestock, fruit trees, plantation crops, and personal possessions, was destroyed at the death of the owner or buried with the deceased.

If a problem required additional arbitration, most villagers preferred to consult the Moravian lay pastor (a Miskito man, though not originally from Asang) for advice. The community influence of the lay pastor varied greatly from community to community depending on the strength of individual missions and the personalities and personal abilities of individual lay pastors. In Asang the lay pastor was respected and his advice both sought and heeded. The lay pastor frequently utilized the church Helpers—a group of respected church members acting as community elders—as a community forum for hearing and settling disputes, whether they related to secular or church-related matters.

The importance of the role of the Moravian church as focal point for community affairs in Miskito communities in general can hardly be overstated. Prior to the introduction of the missions in the late nineteenth century, Miskito settlements were very fluid but tended to form around foreign trading stations at river mouths. Missions provided a comparable focal point, especially
when the missionary operated a small commissary, too. In addition, the Moravian missionaries themselves were very community-oriented by virtue of the history of their church, a self-sufficient, separatist, and utopian-oriented communal organization that developed in Europe in the eighteenth century with roots in the fifteenth century Czech Reformation.

On the Miskito Coast, the Moravian congregation, with its assembly of Helpers, served as the focal point for community stability. The church building itself, both as a material symbol and as a meeting place for community activities, became the social core of many Miskito villages. Certainly in Asang, which had become Moravian shortly after its founding only a few generations earlier, to be a good Miskito person and to be a good community member coincided closely, for most people, with being a good member of the Moravian church. The church, in turn, emphasized traditional Miskito respect for kinsmen along with community responsibility and sober living. (A parallel sense of personal worth combined with community and church membership was expressed by the few families forming the small Church of God congregation, too).

Historically the influence of the Republic of Nicaragua had been negligible on the Miskito Coast and was still very limited in the mid-1960s. Most Miskito preferred to avoid representatives of the central government, and government officials detested assignment to stations on the Miskito Coast. A few police stations were kept along the river and Miskito headmen, answerable to the police commandante, kept census records and performed civil marriages. Public schools, taught in Spanish, were staffed by Spanish-speaking Nicaraguans in most villages, but attendance was poor and such schooling was rather ineffectual overall due largely to teachers’ lack of understanding of Miskito culture and to the continued primacy of Miskito as mother tongue. Asang’s school had classes one through six with attendance falling rapidly after grade two. School-learned information seemed very little utilized outside the classroom.

Yet Miskito parents had a high regard for education and wanted their children to become literate, but in English and Miskito rather than in Spanish. Before government schools had been established (in 1952), formal education had been handled by the Moravian church with lay pastors (trained by missionaries) as teachers. Reading and writing of Miskito was taught so
that the Bible and hymns (translated into Miskito) could be read. Villagers greatly preferred this system and wished they could return to it. Generally children and adolescents were the most literate members of the village. Most adult women had forgotten how to read and write, and men’s knowledge, though better, varied in functionality largely because there was not much call for literacy skills in general. Most men spoke Spanish as well as Miskito and some also spoke English; women usually spoke Miskito alone.

THE FATE OF ASANG
AND THE FUTURE

On January 15, 1982, in the middle of the night, Asang was burnt to the ground. For several weeks previous, people had been killed, personal belongings confiscated, food supplies destroyed, livestock slaughtered, and the population generally terrorized by Hispanic militia. The Nicaraguan Sandinista Revolution, begun in 1979 with the ouster of the last dictator of the ruling Somoza family, had reached the village. The destruction of Asang, along with the other Rio Coco Miskito villages, by Sandinista soldiers was intended to create a “sanitized” zone, totally devoid of life and resources, along the river to prevent opposition guerrilla forces from establishing any footholds there. In the confusion of that dreadful night families were separated and children lost as some of the residents of Asang fled across the river to Honduras, ultimately to find safety in refugee communities operated under the aegis of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, while others were marched across country by Sandinistas to refugee communities in Nicaragua. They joined the tens of thousands of Miskito dislocated by the bitter fighting of a revolutionary war.21

The Sandinista revolution, which opposed the longstanding and repressive national government of the United States-backed Somoza dynasty, embroiled the Miskito Coast in harsh and predominantly military activity for several years (especially 1981–1984) as revolutionary leaders sought to strengthen government influence in the extensive Atlantic Coast hinterland that had
remained outside the national life of Nicaragua for so long. The Miskito resented this intrusion, and became actively involved (with considerable United States funding and logistical support) in opposing the revolutionary forces. As the Miskito and other coastal populations became increasingly politicized and as life on the Coast became thoroughly disrupted and traumatized by the violence of war, the issues they pursued came to include not only counterrevolutionary goals per se but also growing demands for government recognition of their distinctive ethnic identity and for the right of coastal peoples to administer their territory and its resources themselves.

Peace was largely restored by the late 1980s, and the demands for regional autonomy and political self-government accorded a hearing by the new Nicaraguan government. A difficult process of forging a political arrangement by which Miskito self-government and Nicaraguan sovereignty might be made compatible has now begun. The villages along the Rio Coco are gradually coming back to life, too. The people of Asang have returned to begin the rebuilding of their community. Like many other returning refugees, they have started the slow and difficult process of shaping their lives for an uncertain future.

NOTES


11. Helms, “Negro or Indian?”


13. Helms, “Negro or Indian?”


20. All information regarding life in Asang is derived from Helms, *Asang*, which should be consulted for full particulars.

21. Ibid., p. 5.


**Suggested Readings**


