

Creoles

Updated on 3 June 2008

Profile

Nicaragua's Creoles are the descendents of English-speaking people, of mainly mixed African and European descent who settled the Caribbean Coast beginning in the mid-17th seventeenth century. The Creole population has three main streams: 18th and 19th century settlers from the West Indies who were mainly of Jamaican origin; 'Creole' families who are frequently lighter-skinned and whose ancestry can be traced back to European settlers and traders, 'Samboes' or 'Zambos' who are working class Creoles, many of whom have married for generations within the indigenous population of the coast.

Creoles are mainly located in the RAAS towns of Bluefields, Corn Island and Pearl Lagoon. There are also smaller Creole communities in the rural areas of the RAAS such as Monkey Point. In the RAAN, Creoles make up a small but influential minority in the main city of Bilwi.

Most urban Creoles are fluently bilingual and have higher levels of education than most other costal groups. The more educated continue to play an influential role in regional business and politics, particularly in the RAAS where they are most numerous. There are also a number of Creoles who have moved to the capital city Managua and many more who have chosen to migrate to the United States in search of economic opportunity. However many Creoles in the rural communities and the low-income barrios of the RAAS towns, are poor and badly educated.

Creole culture is essentially Afro-Caribbean and similar to the other English speaking Caribbean countries and enclaves along the Central American Coast that are a direct result of large scale 19th century US export based enterprises.

Like most residents of the region Creoles are chiefly Protestant belonging either to Moravian or Anglican congregations.

Historical context

Around 1786 many enslaved Africans who were being transferred to Belize escaped and settled on the Caribbean coast and were later joined by other maroons from Jamaica and San Andres. Those who did not assimilate into Miskito society formed a distinct English speaking minority for which the term Creole became popular. Their lifestyle at the time differed little from that of the indigenous groups. They lived by fishing and cultivating small-scale plantations.

By the time of emancipation in 1841 most of the Creoles born on the Caribbean Coast as well as the incoming West Indies immigrants were people of African descent who had already experienced freedom for several generations. They were then joined by emancipated slaves from nearby Atlantic coast

settlements, who, were gradually integrated into the already established Creole community.

Towards the end of the 19th century, North American entrepreneurs entered the area to export coconuts, bananas and precious woods. To service this growing business, two new groups of black workers were brought in from Jamaica and New Orleans. These Africans gradually mixed with the Europeans and also with the small Mestizo, Indian and Chinese populations already settled in the region by then.

The Creoles of the Atlantic Coast were as mistrustful of the Sandinistas as the indigenous peoples. Sandinista economic policies, designed to reduce economic inequality and economic dependency, undermined Creole status in the ethnic hierarchy and therefore their identity. The legitimization of MISURASATA by the Sandinistas as the sole representative for the coast also undermined Creole organizations, such as the Southern Indigenous and Caribbean Community (SICC).

In 1980, SICC organized strikes and demonstrations against the arrival of Cuban teachers and technicians to work in Bluefields. Some of these escalated into the first ethnic violence of the revolution and were forcibly repressed by the government. The autonomy process increased Creole confidence in the revolution with a revival of black consciousness and the Creole language through the bilingual education programme. Educated Creoles became very instrumental in drafting various sections of the Autonomy Law and its regulations and in establishing the regional universities of URACAAN and BICU.

In both the 1990 and 1994 regional elections, Creoles took key posts on the executive board of the RAAS Council. However they were unable to greatly advance either regional or ethnic rights due to the marginalization of regional government by Pacific Coast dominated national policies and the increasing influence of national political parties in local elections.

Due to the slow implementation of the Autonomy process Creoles now have mixed feelings about its usefulness but continue to view it as an important instrument for cultural survival. Creoles are very involved in the political process and still actively strive to make the regional councils more effective and responsive to their special needs. Three Creoles, two of whom were women, were elected as national representatives to Central American parliament in the country wide elections of 2007.

Current issues

During the last decades of the 20th century Creoles ceased to be a majority in their traditional areas. Creoles current minority status has resulted from substantial Mestizo economic migration to the main RAAS centres of Bluefields and Corn Island.

The rapid urban increase of mestizo migrant populations with no knowledge or interest in local cultural norms or standards has placed a strain on the environment and urban infrastructure. Housing densities already exceed acceptable limits putting an ever-greater strain on already limited potable water supplies and garbage and sewage disposal capacity. This further threatens the local marine environment on which many Creole residents still depend for subsistence.

The negative affects of racial discrimination also continue to be an issue among Creole minorities. The use of the Caribbean Coast of Central America as a transshipment point by international drug cartels has prompted an increased military and law enforcement presence in both the RAAS and RAAN. It has also added to an already negative national perception of the culture and people of the Coast. Security force members are predominately from the Pacific region and arrive with strongly held prejudices and no prior orientation. This often results in unwarranted stereotyping and racial profiling especially of Creole

populations. Consequently Caribbean Coast Creoles have experienced a significant rise in the frequency and degree of official harassment both in their home areas and especially when travelling in and out of the region.

YATAMA's decision to field candidates from the other ethnic groups - such as their ultimately successful Creole woman representative - was a significant step towards rebuilding strong inter-cultural understanding and avoiding conflict; especially given the tensions that had emerged in the post civil war years when Atlantic Coast communities increasingly begun to divide along exclusionary ethno-political lines.

Rural Creoles as well as indigenous Rama in the Caribbean Coast community of Monkey Point continue to be concerned about proposals to construct a \$2.64 Billion. 'Dry Canal' corridor of pipelines, rails and highways across the country to the Pacific; beginning in their community.

Monkey Point is an isolated settlement located in the Municipality of Bluefields, in the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS) that has existed as a mixed indigenous Rama / creole community since at least 1815. As the site of a proposed deep-water port, it is a key location in all of the planned ventures and the local community has already been affected by preliminary work.

Engineers and environmental experts from various organizations have been showing up at Monkey Point for nearly a decade to gather information and continue with design and engineering work, however the community has consistently complained that they are kept in the dark.

The demarcation law (Law 445) passed in 2005 obliges builders to consult with those who hold traditional rights to land in the path of these projects, nevertheless there is a perception that events are proceeding without community involvement.

Two US-based companies were given concessions and authorised to commence feasibility studies and the World Bank has already conducted a US\$2 million environmental impact study. This was immediately followed by a land invasion that has brought serious problems to the community.

Wealthy off-shore land speculators, claiming to have purchased Indigenously titled land in the vicinity began logging on the fragile rainforest soils already threatened by encroaching farmers and cattle rearers from the Pacific.

Community resistance has already produced a violent response including several armed attacks, assaults, and at least one murder.

Complaints to the National Assembly's Committee on the Environment, made by the community have met with little success. The Monkey Point community wants legal rights recognized to roughly a half-million acres before any proposed work commences. They also seek the establishment of a multisectoral commission to oversee negotiations that will include the Regional Council of the RAAS , the Municipalities of Bluefields and Nueva Guinea, and the indigenous and Creole community at Monkey Point.

Whether or not US companies proceed with the entire project, the plan still seems set to be implemented in stages. As part of the new international partnerships being developed by the Nicaraguan government, Venezuela and Iran announced a plan in early 2008 to help Nicaragua finance a \$350 million deep-water port at Monkey Point. This is envisioned as the first step towards realizing the "Dry Canal. Moreover the Venezuelan Army Corps of Engineers is studying construction of a highway between Puerto Cabezas in

the RAAN and Rio Blanco in the central department of Matagalpa which could also form part of a Dry Canal network.