

Indigenous peoples

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Profile

The indigenous populations of Nicaragua live mainly in communities on the Caribbean Coast. These are the Rama, Mayagna and Miskitu peoples. They are separated from the majority mestizo population in the rest of Nicaragua by a mountain range that partitions the west and the east of the country.

Rama

In earlier periods the Rama were known to occupy the entire Caribbean coast down to the present day border with Costa Rica including hinterland areas. The Rama population has shrunk very considerably but is again increasing. There are now approximately 1,400 Rama men, women, and children, mostly settled on Rama Cay, which is a small densely populated island in the Bay of Bluefields. Another very small group of Rama live in communities spread along the Caribbean Coast of the RAAS.

Studies place the Rama in the Chibcha language group, making them related to coastal indigenous groups in Honduras (Paya), Costa Rica (Guatuso, Talamanca), Panama (Kuna, Waimi) Colombia (Chibcha) as well as to their Mayagna neighbors.

After several generations of colonial contact the Rama language entered into severe decline. A 1988 study indicated that only 58 mostly older people (25-44) still knew the language. Today the Rama primarily speak Rama-Creole a language form very similar to the Creole English spoken by other coast populations.

Despite language loss the Rama maintain a very distinct cultural identity based on traditional self-sufficient subsistence strategies and a shared history. Mutual assistance remains an important cultural/economic factor in activities such as agriculture, and home building. The traditional Rama lifestyle is based on detailed knowledge of the region's flora, fauna and marine life. The Rama build small boats (dories,) and are skillful navigators. Their knowledge of marine conditions has long earned them recognition as being the best seafarers on the coast.

Mayagna

Until very recently the Mayagna were commonly known as Sumu, This name (which literally translates as 'cowards') was applied to a number of the separate but linguistically related Caribbean Coast indigenous groups who refused to be absorbed into the then expanding Miskito 'empire'. In recent years the group has rejected the name Sumu much preferring to be officially called Mayagna.

There are now approximately 8,000 Mayagna consisting of three separate peoples each with a distinct identity. These are the Twahka, the Panamaka and the Ulwa all of whom still speak related dialects of a

common Mayagna language and mainly live in villages along the rivers of the RAAN in some of the region's most isolated areas.

Large Panamaka and Twahka communities are located in the RAAN. The Ulwa are concentrated in the RAAS. The best-known Ulwa community is near the mouth of the Río Grande de Matagalpa. There are also smaller Ulwa communities further up the Río Grande and in the southern tributaries of the Río Escondido. The Mayagna-Ulwa dwellings are very dispersed and although Spanish is widely used they have little contact with regional officials. In general the Mayagna are among the most marginalized of the Atlantic Coast indigenous people.

Miskitu

The Miskitu are the largest and arguably the most historically influential of Nicaragua's indigenous groups. Most Miskitus today make a living through horticulture, fishing and are involved in the hazardous occupation of scuba diving for shellfish.. The rural Miskito live in small villages in the savannah areas between the RAAN and the Honduras frontier. There are communities as well along the Caribbean coast and up the rivers of the region like the Río Coco which marks the border with Honduras. Many Miskitu live in the regions' urban centres such as Bilwi, the capital of the RAAN, which is predominantly Miskito. There are also smaller Miskito communities in the other urban centres of both the RAAN and RAAS.

Miskitu have their own language, which like the population itself has drawn from many separate cultural sources during its evolution. The group is also strongly influenced by the Moravian church, which was very instrumental in effecting a radical change in social organization that caused the elimination of many indigenous forms of government and the elevation of church pastors into key community figures.

Nevertheless it is this close connection to religious institutions and their leadership development programs of the 1980s that has enabled the emergence of a new generation of confident and more vocal Miskitu leaders.

Historical context

Nicaragua's original indigenous groups reflected the country's geographical divide. In pre-colonial eras there were two basic indigenous streams. In the central highlands and Pacific coast were Chibchas and Nahuatl-speaking people like the Nicaraos who were linguistically related to the Aztec and the Maya. According to oral history they had migrated south from Mexico several centuries before Spanish arrival. In the East were groups who had continuously lived in that part of Central America for nearly 10,000 years.

Spain colonized the Pacific coast but with no precious metals available used it primarily as a source of forced labor to work the mines of South America. The result was near annihilation for the indigenous people. Spanish officials estimated that the population of about 600,000 at the time of the conquest (1523) was reduced to 30,000 by 1544.

The East coast was of much less interest. This allowed Britain to enter, with the first colonists being 17th century British pirates who used it as a refuge between raids on Spanish territories and treasure ships. Ample timber and other natural resources prompted the pirates into establishing trading relations with the local indigenous groups.

Africans escaping from bondage in the British West Indian colonies also began reaching the Nicaraguan

Caribbean coast in 1642 and settling there. They established relations with the indigenous population and out of this Afro-indigenous mixture emerged the so called Zambo stream within the Miskitu culture and people. Like the word Zambo the term Tawira (signifying straight hair) came to be used as a title that indicated lineage.

The British traded firearms and metal tools with the coastal indigenous groups in exchange for marine products and lumber. Having acquired guns these groups began serving as mercenary guerilla forces in British raids against the Spanish in exchange for even more weapons. This may have led to the eventual name of the group. In addition to other possible origins such as a connection with Muisca people of Costa Rica the name 'Miskito' may be more related to the word musketeros, meaning 'the people with muskets.'

More guns allowed the Miskitu to expand. This included conducting very long distance raids into Spanish settlements and along the Yucatan to meet British settler demands for indigenous forced labour. It especially helped to expand and secure an independent state supported by imperial Britain.

By the 1700s the Miskitu had become a regionally dominant mixed culture with various languages and ethnic groups who all lived together. The culture was polygamous and had a form of social organization based on kin groups, Communities were matriarchal, women did the agricultural and community work: property was communal and government was effected by the council of elders.

The growing Miskitu empire developed a monarchy. The king and the royal court were dominated by Zambos and the military was run by the Tawira. During the 18th and 19th centuries the Miskito eventually came to occupy most of the present-day north and eastern RAAN and established scattered settlements in the northeastern RAAS.

in 1845, The British organized proxy colonial rule via the Moskitia Kingdom including crowning of a British educated Zambo king and subsequently claiming the Moskitia territory as a British protectorate. However in 1894 the structure was dissolved following the annexation of the Atlantic region by President Zelaya. For almost 240 years The Miskitu had been able to maintain their autonomy and independence from Spain, the Federation of Central American States as well as from Nicaragua itself and this would prove hard to forget.

From the mid-19th century until the Sandinista Revolution in 1979, the Caribbean Coast experienced considerable economic activity. US companies set up businesses for natural resource extraction that employed many indigenous people like the Miskitu and Mayanga mostly in low wage jobs on the plantations and in the mining industry.

The war led by Augusto Sandino against the US occupation of Nicaragua in the 1920s and 30s included many aggravated miners and peasants and the Miskitu played a decisive role since the war was organized in their areas

By the 1950s and 1960s the extraction companies began to depart and many predominantly indigenous wage earning people were forced to return to subsistence survival strategies. These indigenous groups were also increasingly affected by growing land pressures from incoming Pacific migrants who had been removed from the Highlands during the Somoza regime. However when the 1979 Sandanista revolution finally arrived it did not stimulate widespread participation from Atlantic coast populations.

Although for the first time opportunities were being created for Atlantic Coast minorities to campaign for their rights, the troubled bi-coastal history caused distrust of Sandinista plans. Events were seen as

merely a change of government in the 'Spanish' part of the country and this was compounded by a lack of understanding of the region on the part of the new regime.

For example Government supported social services threatened long-established indigenous community authorities like the Moravian Church; Sandinistas offended Miskitu groups by the imposition of the Spanish language in the literacy campaign; MISURASATA (the Miskitu, Sumu and Rama Sandanista Alliance), a Miskitu-dominated popular organization, which served as the only link between the indigenous communities and the Sandinista government promoted their own Miskitu agenda and was not trusted by the government specially since few MISURASATA leaders and activists were actually Sandinistas.

By 1981 large numbers of Miskitu were in open revolt against the government and war resulted. Some were forcibly relocated by the Sandanistas, Around 40,000 Miskitu went into exile in Honduras during the fighting and others joined the US-backed 'Contras'. The threat of large-scale Miskitu participation in the civil war forced major reanalysis by the national government which led to an initial ceasefire in 1985. This was followed by two years of discussions and the production of the 1987 Autonomy Law of the Atlantic Coast.

On September 12, 1987 the National Assembly of Nicaragua approved the Statute of Autonomy for the Atlantic Coast Regions in a direct attempt to achieve peace in the region and in the country.

Current issues

The foremost issue for indigenous Coast populations is that of land titling. Since almost all indigenous lands are communally held and since these are the very areas that are under invasion by groups from the Pacific it cuts to the heart of the ability of the indigenous groups to continue to survive in a traditional manner including safeguarding the environment.

This continuous process of tree clearance for cattle raising by the invaders in the region of the Boswas Biosphere Resere - already designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site - is posing a serious risk to lands that have long been inhabited by indigenous people . These groups still maintain their traditional forms of cultivation without harming the environment and are fervently opposed to the harmful practices of the cattle raisers and the irreparable long-term damage they are doing.

The indigenous groups are hoping that the recently passed Demarcation Law will provide a much-needed mechanism to halt the process and end their situation of vulnerability and uncertainty.

There is also much to be done in the wake of the devastation caused by Hurricane Felix in September 2007.

In March 2008 Indigenous community leaders requested government assistance in limiting the risk of a potentially huge forest fire that would directly endanger about 60,000 families in 12 indigenous communities in the Puerto Cabezas/ Bilwi area.

Hurricane Felix swept through more than one million hectares of forest, leaving an approximately 100 kilometres long, 75 kilometres wide path of uprooted jungle. This then became an estimated 15 million cubic metres of highly combustible drying or rotting wood including resin rich conifers.

Among a host of other social factors the hurricane disrupted the traditional limited-area controlled slash and burn patterns practiced annually by the indigenous population to prepare the soil for cultivation. The

large number of fallen trees risked fueling the rapid spread of a very extensive fire that could permanently damage the entire Biosphere Reserve.

Direct appeals via radio and secular and religious leaders, warned against field burning. The regional government also took steps to organize and train indigenous community fire-prevention and fire-fighting brigades via the National System for the Prevention, Mitigation and Response to Disasters (SINAPRED). However given the size of the affected area, the onset of rains was seen as a greater guarantee of fire avoidance.

One issue is that the fallen trees cannot be put to use quickly enough in a region that was once a major lumber processing and internationally famous export center.

According to official government statistics, Hurricane Felix destroyed 20,394 homes, 57 churches, 102 schools and 43 health centres, and in April 2008 local leaders indicated that there was now enough lumber from the uprooted trees to rebuild the devastated infrastructure three times over.

However with the departure of foreign owned resource extraction companies in the 1980s and the growing awareness of nature conservation, there is now no capacity to saw up all the lumber. While leaders estimated that thirty industrial sawmills are needed, at the beginning of June 2008 only five were up and running.