Chapter 2

Nicaragua’s Two Coasts

In the pre-Columbian period human populations in what is now the country of Nicaragua occupied three distinct ecological zones: (1) the Pacific Lowlands, (2) the Central Highlands, and (3) the Caribbean Coastal Plain (Newson 1987, 42, 88). The Pacific Lowlands, made fertile by the volcanic deposits left by the chain of thirty volcanoes that split the lowlands from north to south, contained a climate that was ideal for maize agriculture. It received plentiful rainfall, although the long dry season between November and May necessitated the use of irrigation (ibid., 43). Although in the present these lands are heavily deforested, evergreen and deciduous forests formerly flourished in the Pacific Lowlands.¹

The Central Highlands contain peaks that rise as high as 2,000 meters, making the climate more temperate. The highlands, composed of a number of east-west cordilleras divided by valleys that drained to the Caribbean coast, received limited and inconsistent rainfall, and had relatively poor soils and an uneven topography. These conditions discouraged large-scale agriculture. In contrast to other highland areas of Mesoamerica at the time of the Conquest (such as Guatemala and central Mexico), the Nicaraguan highlands did not sustain very large human populations. Newson estimates that the pre-Conquest population density of the highlands was only one-fourth that of the Pacific lowlands.²

The Caribbean Coastal Plain, an extensive lowland strip that at its widest point stretches for 150 kilometers, contained (in the 1500s) the largest tropical rain forest in Central America. In this region, one of the wettest in the Americas and which experiences only brief (and not very dry) dry seasons, the boundary between land and water is often quite porous (Nietschmann 1973, 64). Chronically flooded, the region has a
large number of large, slow rivers that, before flowing into brackish lagoons, swamps and deltas, commonly spill over into vast floodplains.

Beyond the coast, the shallow marine shelf (also the largest formation of its kind in Central America) extends as far as 100 kilometers into the western Caribbean, providing ideal feeding conditions (in the form of underwater marine pastures known as turtle banks) for marine life—particularly sea turtles (Nietschmann 1973, 92). Along the marine shelf lie a veritable swarm of thousands of small banks, cays, and reefs (a geographical feature that was immediately taken note of by the seafaring English, who called them the Mosquito keys).

A great diversity of flora and fauna abound in the region, but, as is common to most tropical rain forests, the underlying soils are leached by heavy rainfalls and are of very poor quality (P. Sanchez 1976; Newson 1987, 47). With the exception of riverbanks, which are made fertile by yearly deposits of silt, the region's soils are more apt for swidden agriculture than extensive agriculture.

Primarily as a result of these marked geographical differences, the inhabitants of these different regions practiced different productive strategies. Natives of the Pacific Lowlands engaged in extensive maize agriculture that was supplemented by hunting, fishing, and gathering. This agriculture sustained upward of one million people in a relatively small area (Newson 1987, 88). Cacao was used as a medium of exchange in the busy markets (tianguez) of the region in which a wide variety of manufactured goods were traded, including cotton textiles, rope, pottery, basketry, and gold and silver ornaments, as well as tools and weapons of stone, wood, and obsidian (Moscoso 1991, 80; Newson 1987, 49–56). Pacific societies manifested a significant degree of social stratification in which caciques sat at the top of a hierarchical system of nobles, commoners, and slaves. A powerful and educated clergy practiced an elaborate ritual calendar (which included human sacrifice and self-mutilation—practices associated with their Central Mexican ancestors and neighbors) at large manmade temples.

In contrast to the Pacific regions, the Caribbean Coastal Plain was peopled by native groups that used less-elaborate technology, had a lesser degree of social stratification, cultivated different major crops, and lived in settlements that were often seasonal and were absent of elaborate permanent structures. Inhabitants of the Caribbean Coastal Plain mixed
hunting and gathering with shifting cultivation of plantain and roots crops of South American origin, such as manioc, a crop that was favored over maize. The groups that resided closer to the coast took advantage of coastal protein resources such as manatee, fish, and turtle (Newson 1987, 65–78). Archaeologist Richard Magnus, one of the few researchers to take up the challenge of conducting excavations and surveys in this region where the heat, humidity, and rain are hostile to archaeological research, argues that Caribbean Indians relied more on riverine swidden agriculture and hunting and gathering than on fishing and coastal agriculture.

In contrast to the colonial period, which witnessed the proliferation of coastal villages in response to intensified market demands for forest and coastal products, natives in the immediate pre-Columbian period constructed permanent settlements primarily in inland areas, building temporary settlements near the coast (Stone 1964, 214; Magnus 1978). Permanent markets seem to have been absent from the region, as well as money (Newson 1987, 77).

Caribbean natives did produce pottery, stone tools, and cotton goods, although they used clothes made of bark. Interestingly, many native groups, particularly those on the coast, abandoned and lost these skills during the colonial period as they became more dependent upon Caribbean networks of trade. This is ironic because Pacific and Highland groups, which during the colonial period came to be known as non-Indian Ladinos, Mestizos, and campesinos, retained and elaborated many of the skilled crafts that had been associated with Indian communities. Their Caribbean counterparts, in contrast, continued to be known as Indians in many contexts but left their crafts behind in favor of manufactured goods acquired through an expanding system of global trade.

**Ethnonyms and Toponyms**

The association of the peoples of the Mosquito Coast with primativism on the part of dominant groups predated the Spanish conquest of the Americas. In lower Central America, dominant groups lived on the Pacific and claimed central Mexican descent. These groups in almost all cases represented large, relatively sedentary populations that engaged in intensive maize agriculture. In contrast to the South American-derived
Chibchan languages spoken by central and eastern Nicaraguan Indians, the predominant languages of the Pacific came from two separate central Mexican language families: Uto-Aztecan and Otomanguean (Stone 1964, 210).

In the six centuries prior to 1492, the Nicaraguan Pacific region had received a series of large-scale migrations from central Mexico and Chiapas, resulting in the displacement or incorporation of previously autochthonous groups, some of which receded to the east (Guerrero and Guerrero 1982, 15). The establishment of Aztec trading colonies represented the most recent revival of central Mexican influence in lower Central America—a resurgence that was primarily, but not completely, cut short by the Spanish conquest. In light of Nicaragua’s history of contact with the central Mexican Nahua languages, in conjunction with the fact that the Spanish conquerors used many Nahua-speaking troops (followed by Nahuatl-speaking Spanish missionaries) to overpower the peoples of both central Mexico and Central America, it is not surprising to find that the Spanish incorporated central Mexican and central Mexican–derived biases into their colonial practice. This is particularly true with regard to naming practices.

Based on both archeological evidence, as well as the testimonies collected by the earliest Spanish chroniclers in Central America, it is commonly held that the first wave of northern immigrants arrived in Pacific Nicaragua from Soconusco (Chiapas) around the ninth century AD, establishing themselves in western Nicaragua and the Nicoya Peninsula. They spoke a variety of related Otomanguean languages that, although possessing a number of names, were generally referred to as Mangue by the Spanish. The Spanish generally referred to groups that spoke these languages as Chorotega, although some of these groups were mutually hostile and were divided into competing factions (Newson 1987, 28).

The first wave of Uto-Aztecan migration occurred slightly after the Otomanguean migration. The first Nahau-speaking people arrived in the ninth and tenth centuries, and settled in what is now El Salvador and northwestern Nicaragua (Fowler 1985). The second wave, whose descendants eventually came to be known by the Spanish as the Nícarao, arrived in the twelfth century and settled on the western shore of Lake Nicaragua (Arellano 1993, 12). They, like all other Nahua-speaking peoples in Central America, were at times referred to as Pipil (meaning...
Mexican Nahuatl speakers who accompanied the Spanish on their expeditions into Central America held the Nahuat languages of Nicaragua in contempt, labeling them *Mexicana Corrupta* or *Pipil Corrupta*. \(^9\) Hence, Francisco Vázquez, a Spanish chronicler, referred to the Pipil language “... as we would say the language of children or that spoken by those of little intelligence” (quoted in Newson 1987, 30).

Just as Nahuatl-speaking Mexicans who accompanied the Spanish conquistadores denigrated the Nahuat dialects of Nicaragua spoken by the Nicaraos as base and inferior, so did these Nahuat-speaking groups denigrate the language and culture of non-Nahua groups. Given that Nahuatl-speaking groups (both Mexican and Nicaraos) had been dominant groups in their respective areas, the names and concepts that they used to apply to other groups often were adopted by the Spanish.

The Spanish early colonial modus operandi, which they successfully implemented in both central Mexico and Pacific Nicaragua, was to subjugate the most populous, dominant, and hierarchically organized native societies. As a result, the Spanish often adopted the ethnonyms and toponyms that the dominant native groups used to refer to subordinate groups. These names often reflected a lack of understanding and even contempt on the part of the dominant groups. In the case of central Mexico, the homeland of Nahuatl-speaking Mexicans, Eric Wolf concisely described this process:

To groups who could not speak Nahua, the Nahua applied contemptuous epithets that have remained to serve as their official designations to this day—epithets such as *chtal* (“foreigner”), *popoluca* or *popoloca* (“unintelligible”), *totonac* (“rustic”). Thus we find today linguistically quite unrelated groups like Chontal (in Tabasco and Oaxaca), Popoluca (in Puebla, Veracruz, and Guatemala), Totonac (in Veracruz, but also in sixteenth-century Spanish reports from Jalisco and Oaxaca), to the confusion of the investigator. Nahua names have also become the standard designations of other populations, such as the Mixtec (from *mixtlán*, “cloud land”), the Zapotec (after the zapote tree, *Achras Zapota*), and the Otomi (apparently from Nahuatl *totonatli*, “man who wings birds with arrows”). The Mixtec call themselves ñusabi; the Zapotec, *di’z̃*, with a suffix...
designating the territory they inhabit; the Otomí, *nhyú* (Wolf 1959, 41).

In the case of Nicaragua, the Nicaraq used the blanket term *Chontal* (foreigner) to refer to those groups that did not speak a related language and lived to the east in the area now known as the Central Highlands and the Mosquito Coast. Just as the Mixtec, Zapotec, and Otomi had a variety of names to refer to themselves, undoubtedly so did the indigenous inhabitants of these regions have their own vocabularies of self-reference. However, the Spanish did not generally recognize these terms during the early colonial period.

Not only did Nahua-speaking Pacific groups use value-laden terms in their labeling of their eastern Nicaraguan indigenous neighbors, but they also seem to have looked down at these groups as inferior. This posture was noticed by the Spanish, who in turn adopted both the referential terms used as well as a similar attitude with regard to eastern Nicaraguan native groups. Ironically, these were precisely the Indians whom the Spanish found themselves unable or unwilling to subdue, notwithstanding their alleged inferiority (Newson 1987, 37). Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa, a sixteenth-century Spanish chronicler, noted that Pacific coastal Indians manifested this perspective towards the Indians of the eastern provinces when he wrote, “The Indians of those provinces are particularly rustic to the degree that when others [Indians] want to insult someone, they call that person a Chontal—which is a way of calling someone an idiot” (Incer 1990, 250). The Spanish chronicler Fernandez de Oviedo, writing in 1528, described the “chondales” as “villainous people who live in the mountains or in the foothills” (Guerrero and Guerrero 1982, 18). Another Spanish historian, Father Francisco López de Gómara, described the Chontal language as “*grocero y serrano*” (coarse and boorish) (18). In addition to Chontal, the Spanish also adopted the Nahua terms *Popoluca* (unintelligible or stuttering), *Xicague* (wild), *Lenca*, and *Caribe* as generic terms to refer to the natives that plagued the eastern and northern fringes of their Nahua-speaking strongholds (Incer 1990, 258).

On his fourth voyage to the New World in 1502, many years before the Spanish invaded and occupied the Pacific Coast, Columbus visited what is now the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua and Honduras. The name
that he gave to the region, *Costa de Orejas* (Coast of Ears—from the ear elongation practiced by the region’s inhabitants), did not enter into widespread use (Conzemius 1932, 29; Potthast 1988, 15). Rather, the Spanish borrowed two terms used by the Aztecs to refer to this region: Taguzgalpa (place of gold) and Tologalpa (place of tule). Although Taguzgalpa was often used to refer to both of these unconquered “provinces” (to use the ambitious term of the Spanish), it specifically referred to the area delineated by the Coco River, which emptied at Cape Gracias a Dios, and the Aguán river east of the modern Honduran city of Trujillo (Incer 1990, 255). Tologalpa referred to the area between the Coco River and the San Juan River that, not coincidentally, corresponds with the modern limits of the Nicaraguan Atlantic Coast.

According to Vázquez de Espinosa, the Aztecs manifested a sustained interest in Taguzgalpa, “. . . where many Mexican Indians live . . . who owing to the richness of the place were sent every year by Montezuma to collect tribute in the form of gold and other precious items” (Incer 1990, 248). The Aztecs referred to the Indians of Taguzgalpa (the tribute-paying regions actually seem to have been located primarily in what is now southeastern Honduras) as Jicaques. Later the Spanish adopted this term to refer to the “unfaithful Indians” (*indios infieles*) of Taguzgalpa and used the term *Chontal* to refer to the equally unfaithful Indians of Tologalpa, although the distinction, inconsistently applied, was most definitely one of a geographical rather than sociological nature (ibid., 265). Twentieth-century ethnology continues to use the terms *Jicaque* and *Lenca* to distinguish Indians of eastern Honduras from their Nicaraguan counterparts across the border (see Kirchoff 1948, 219).

Although the Aztecs began to draw Taguzgalpa into the far reaches of their empire, they did not exercise colonial control over the indigenous groups of the region. However, they left tribute-collecting and trading colonies in Taguzgalpa. Although the Spanish area of control slowly intruded eastward into the Pacific slope of the Central Highlands, the sixteenth-century Spanish attempts to conquer Taguzgalpa, which took the form of three separate armed expeditions, all failed as so-called Jicaques and Caribes attacked and destroyed the Spanish garrisons and mining camps established in remote Atlantic Coast areas (Incer 1990, 252).

In the seventeenth century the Spanish then turned to the Franciscan order to subjugate the indomitable Indians of the region. Nahuatl was
often the language of early Christian proselytization in early colonial Mesoamerica, and therefore the Franciscan friars hoped to first Christianize and settle the Nahuatl-speaking groups in _reducciones_ (permanent settlements used by Europeans to settle and convert natives as well as harness their labor). The Franciscans, however, were frustrated by the tremendous social diversity they encountered in the region—a diversity that stood in contrast to the more familiar sedentary and hierarchically organized societies of central Mexico and the Nicaraguan Pacific. None of these groups spoke Nahuatl, they lacked large permanent settlements, and, most importantly, they were often hostile to the Spanish.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century Francisco Vázquez wrote about the century-long Franciscan attempts to pacify the region's inhabitants:

> The names of the known nations, many of which are mutually hostile from one family ["agnación"] or tribe to another, are these: lenca, tahuas, alhatuinas, xicaques, mexicanos, payas, janas, taupanes, taos, fantasmas, guálas, alucás, aguncualcas, yguales, cuyes, bocayes, tomayas, bucatacuacu, quimacas, panamakas, itziles, guayas, motucas, hanucas, apzinás, nanaicas and many others; and it is known among these as well as others there are many whites and blonds, others more or less black according to the mixtures of nations and foreign peoples [referring to pirates and merchants] that come to this land to mate and trade trinkets and machetes for provisions and very good gold nuggets that are taken from the rivers. (Incer 1990, 256)

The segmentary nature of Atlantic Coast social groupings, combined with the remoteness of the region and the hostility of its inhabitants, made the Franciscans’ task extremely difficult. Unlike supposedly more advanced areas where Europeans used the institutional authority of high-level indigenous leaders, the Franciscans found no accurate way to identify Indian groups, let alone their leaders. “Without law nor king they roam around in herds like wild beasts,” lamented Francisco Vázquez (ibid., 258).

Although the Franciscans achieved considerable success in setting up _reducciones_ among the Nahuatl-speaking Mexicans in Taguzgalpa, these settlements were subject to constant attack by other groups (Stone 1964, 214). When they did succeed in attracting Taguzgalpan people to their
settlements, the Indians frequently abandoned the settlement or violently mutinied, killing a series of Franciscan missionaries (Incer 1990, 259–266). As further proof of the barbarousness of the region’s occupants, the Franciscans were unable to locate permanent native settlements, concluding, to their dismay, that they practiced a tropical forest version of nomadism. Vázquez wrote that the Indians of Taguzgalpa were ungovernable because “their lands are naturally impenetrable and the Indians have becomes untamed, living in free villages [behetrias], camping today in one place and then tomorrow in another, without holding lands as their own, and at any moment fleeing and retreating to the most difficult of bush and god-forsaken [incultos] mountain plains” (Incer 1990, 258).

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, after more than a century of failure, the Spanish abandoned their attempts to control Taguzgalpa. However, they did manage to expand the area of Spanish control further eastward into the Central Highlands, leaving only the Atlantic slope of the Highlands and the Atlantic Coastal plain in the hands of the infidel (Incer 1990, 253). In Spanish colonial documents, unconquered eastern groups were, in addition to the above-mentioned pseudo-tribal names, often referred to as “indios de guerra” (literally, Indians of war) and “indios infieles” (literally, unfaithful Indians), as opposed to the subdued “indios cristianos” (Christian Indians) of the Pacific Coast (Romero Vargas 1995, 221). Throughout Latin America the Spanish, once they recognized that Americans had souls and were capable of understanding and embracing Christianity, distinguished Christian Indians, who deserved a greater level of consideration, from non-Christian Indians, who as enemies did not deserve the so-called legal protections provided by the Spanish Crown. During the seventeenth century, Atlantic Coast Indians situated themselves within an expanding world market, establishing regular trading ties with English merchants and colonists such as those that occupied the failed Providence Island colony (Parsons 1956, 11).

The names that the Spanish used to describe Atlantic Coast groups gradually became more specific after a century and a half of frustrated contact. The general and geographically vague names like indios de guerra and indios infieles were replaced over time. The slightly less generic terms Chontal, Jicaque, Lenca, and Caribe came to be more consistently applied to specific large regions. Lenca and Jicaque were used to describe groups
north of the Coco River, and Chontal and Caribe for groups south of the Coco River. At the most specific level, a large number of ethnonyms (names of human groups) came into limited use that were often applied to natives who inhabited specific sections of the major Atlantic-flowing rivers of the region; hence native groups tended to be identified with specific river valleys (Incer 1990, 255). For example, colonial sources mention the following “nations” among the inhabitants of Taguzgalpa (in what is now the eastern slope of the Nicaraguan Segovias): the Bocayes of the Bocay River; the Tomayes of the Tuma River; the Bucataguacas (or Taguacas) of the Butuk/Patuka River; the Taupanes of the Waspuk River; the Nanaicas and Guayaes of the Pantasma River; and the Tahuas or Taguacas of the upper Coco River, as well as the Jaras, Quimacas, Iguyales, Cujes, and Alaucas of the Olancho River valley (Incer 1990, 257). These are a few of the wide variety of names that appear in the Spanish colonial documents that refer to Taguzgalpan Indians.

This practice of identifying and naming indigenous groups according to river valleys stood in contrast to the Pacific, where groups were most frequently identified and named according to the name of a particular cacique (chief). This difference in naming practices resulted from two related factors: (1) the lack of Spanish colonial success on the Atlantic Coast, and (2) the differences in social organization between Pacific and Atlantic societies that were related to different ecological conditions in each region.

Borrowing from pre-Columbian institutional arrangements, the Spanish organized Pacific Indian society into a system of hierarchically named groupings. At the lowest level was the galpón (a Spanish word that tellingly means communal slave dwelling), which consisted of an extended group of agnatic kin. A number of galpones constituted a plaza, which was led by a cacique or teyte. A pueblo indio, in turn, consisted of a conglomeration of plazas. Using this institutional structure, the Spanish were able to quite rationally extract labor and tribute from the pueblos indios (Romero Vargas 1993a, 15). The entire system depended on the existence of clearly defined communal ties on the part of Indians. Nicaraguan historian Germán Romero Vargas explained:

Communal life was the main feature of Indian society in Nicaragua under Spanish rule. The “pueblo indio” was its concrete manifestation.
Every Indian was a “natural” of a pueblo. If an Indian from another place were to establish himself in that pueblo he would be known as a “laborío” . . . Being a “natural” was like the proof of citizenship of an Indian. It was on the basis of being a “natural” of a particular place that one had a series of rights and obligations in one, and only one, pueblo. By not being a “natural” an Indian escaped those rights and obligations. (Romero Vargas 1993a, 11)

In the Pacific region, the Spanish colonial administration carefully documented and promoted the group identifications of Nicaraguan natives in order to maximize and rationalize the exploitation of these Indians. In contrast, European colonial governments (Spanish and English) did not institutionalize Indian group identity in the Atlantic region in the early colonial period. That is to say, their inability to subjugate Atlantic Coast Indian groups contributed to their inability to invent or discover ethnonyms for them that corresponded to the contours of their social world. Whereas in the Pacific the process of extracting resources (in the form of labor and tribute) from indigenous people necessitated the existence and perpetuation of named communal groupings, the Atlantic Coast successfully resisted the Spanish imposition of this process. Thus in the Atlantic, identification as part of a native group carried with it different meanings and consequences than such identification had for the Indians of the Pacific.

The irony of this history lies in the fact many of the peoples of the Atlantic that were labeled, in one way or another, as wild, rustic, and uncivilized (by both the Spanish and Pacific Indians) were able to successfully resist the cultural, social, and biological devastation brought on by the Spanish. The so-called civilized and Christian societies of the Pacific were shackled throughout the colonial period by oppressive tribute taxation and outright enslavement, not to mention European diseases. According to Newson’s estimates, which she admits are conservative, the aboriginal population of Nicaragua declined a staggering 93 percent in the first fifty years of European contact, from 546,000 to 44,000. The corresponding figure for the same period in the Atlantic zone is 33 percent, dropping to 145,000 from a pre-contact population of 217,000 (Newson 1987, 336). Although Atlantic populations did suffer from European diseases and enslavement, apart from the coastal
settlement at Black River in today’s Honduras, Europeans did not directly control any portion of the Mosquito Coast in the colonial period.

One strategy for escaping the negative consequences of being an Indian in Pacific Nicaragua was simply not to be an Indian any more. By breaking ties with indigenous polities and in turn being recognized as Mestizo, Ladino, or campesino, Pacific Indians stood to improve their status within colonial and republican society, societies that in many ways lived parasitically off organized indigenous communities. The early Spanish colonial institutions (including the encomienda and later repartimiento) assigned the labor or tribute of specific native groups to Spanish overlords, who most frequently extracted this labor and tribute through the use of indigenous leaders, los principales (Romero Vargas 1992, 25). This practice depended upon the existence of a legitimately constituted indigenous hierarchy and a corporately organized indigenous population. With the onset of the Republican period and the subsequent growth of a liberal export-oriented economy, the Indian communal lands, which the laws of the Spanish colony had self-servingly protected, came into the covetous gaze of national elites. Thus the last advantage of Indian status (communal lands) was largely eliminated in the Pacific, driving the nail into the coffin of Nicaragua’s Pacific Indian communities.

Mestizaje is popularly regarded primarily as a biological phenomenon in which Indians and Europeans, driven by the lack of white women in the Americas, produced Mestizo offspring. In contrast to this common-sense notion, however, the process of racial mixing must also be understood as an institutional phenomenon in which natives broke corporate affiliations and slowly mingled into a Mestizo mainstream that lacked Indian corporate obligations. Viewed in this light, biological mixing was not a precondition for the shift from Indian identification to non-Indian that happened in Pacific Nicaragua. It is important to recall that the Spanish population (Spanish-born peninsulares and American-born criollos alike) never represented more than 5% of the population of the colony (Romero Vargas 1993b, 153). For this and other reasons it is important to view mestizaje as a sociological and institutional phenomena as well as a biological one.
In the Atlantic Coast during the colonial period, the population remained almost entirely free from colonial institutions such as the encomienda and other forms of tribute. Costeño communities both maintained and developed old and new strategies of corporate unity, strategies that were different from those encountered by the Spanish in Pacific Nicaragua. In contrast to the Pacific region, there were few institutional pressures to sever ties with native communal groups and enter into the non-Indian peasant class, or campesinado. Although the colonial record, as well as twentieth-century ethnography, is full of references to the intermixing of Atlantic Coast Indians with Europeans and Africans, the Latin American prototypical (Indian-European) process of mestizaje simply did not occur in Atlantic Nicaragua (Taguzgalpa and Tologalpa). The Atlantic Coast did not witness the formation of a class of putatively racially mixed people that lacked the social status and the institutional rights and obligations of inclusion as either Indian or European. The communal organization of Atlantic society into explicitly non-European (neither White nor Mestizo) groupings in fact accelerated. According to the common-sense view of mestizaje, which takes racial mixing at face value as a biological process, this fact would seem a paradox, the paradox being that equal or comparable levels of European, Indian, and African intermixing would lead to a Mestizo population in one area and a predominantly Indian population in another. However, this is exactly what happened in Nicaragua, and in order to understand and interpret how this happened, we must discard perspectives that in anthropologist Raymond Smith’s words, “biologize social relations” (Smith 1992, 263).

Most of the tribal terms mentioned above (tomayes, quimacas, etc.) had disappeared by the nineteenth century. There was a major restructuring of Mosquito Coast society in which a new system of group classification began to emerge, which had two principle ethnonyms: (1) Creole, a term used after the eighteenth century that identified English-speakers of putative African descent; and (2) Miskito, a term used to identify Miskitu-speakers of putative Indian and mixed (Sanbo) descent. Both terms are absent from use in the early colonial period. Conspicuously absent from the colonial and modern system of group classification was a Mestizo or Ladino category such as that used in the Pacific, where the great majority of Nicaraguans are classified today as Mestizo.
The Shipwreck Theory of Miskito Origins

The appearance of the Miskito as a presumably distinct socio-racial group has been attributed to two features of Mosquito Coast history: (1) the influx of African and Afro-Caribbean slaves and escaped slaves, and (2) trading ties established in the seventeenth century and continued until the end of the nineteenth century between the British and coastal Indians. Each factor has been commonly perceived, in the historical and ethnographic literature, to have resulted in the emergence of the Miskito, Sumu, Rama, and Creole groups—an emergence that has been portrayed as a process of cultural differentiation in which each of these groups developed its own particular culture and race. In other words, the appearance of a new set of ethnonyms is perceived to have been precipitated by the separation of a corresponding number of culture-bearing groups whose boundaries are constituted by racial and cultural features particular to each group. This is a misleading assumption that does not do justice to the complexity of social relations in the Mosquito Coast.

The first of two standard causes cited for the emergence of the Miskito Indians as a distinguishable group was the influx of African slaves and escapees to the region. The shipwreck of a slave ship in the area of the Mosquito Keys in the 1640s is presumed to have begun a long-term migratory trend in which escaped slaves of African descent trickled into the Mosquito Coast. This trend ultimately resulted in the rise of the Miskito as a new “raza mixta” (mixed race) (Gamez 1939, 57) or “hybrid” (Conzemius 1932, 17) Indian group. Hereafter I refer to this explanation as the shipwreck theory of Miskito origins.

The shipwreck theory appears in one form or another in almost all academic and journalistic accounts of Miskito origins and history. According to this theory, the region was populated by related but highly localized Indian groups (which later would come to be known under the collective term Sumu). The intermarriage of Africans with a Sumu group that lived around the mouth of the Coco River at Cape Gracias a Dios is presumed to have led to the rise of a dominant group that eventually expanded throughout the Mosquito Coast, either destroying or incorporating Sumu groups as it expanded. The shipwreck theory of Miskito “genesis” assumes that race, particularly African race or “blood,”
becomes a self-evident feature of human bodies that inevitably precipitates a transformation in social and racial categorization. This assumption, relying on a model of biological determinism that does not give sufficient attention to the social construction of race, cannot be sustained in this case.\textsuperscript{22}

In the historical record (in this case primarily the published accounts of northern European traders, pirates, and colonists),\textsuperscript{23} the perception that the inhabitants of the Mosquito Coast were the product of African and Indian miscegenation appears more or less simultaneously as the use of some variation of the term \textit{Mosquito} to denominate a nation or tribe.\textsuperscript{24} Before the mid-sixteenth century, \textit{Mosquito} was used exclusively as a toponym (place name) that, depending on the source, referred to the Coco River, the island-like delta at the mouth of this river (the cape Gracias a Dios), and the densely packed group of small islands and keys that dot the shallow sea shelf beyond the cape Gracias a Dios. These islands today are known as the Mosquito Keys or \textit{Cayos Miskitos} (Houwald 1990, 203; Incer 1990, 292; Romero Vargas 1995, 125). Over the centuries both Europeans and Americans have offered countless interpretations as to the origin of the use of the term \textit{Miskito} and its variants in Central America, some of which assume that the term originated as an ethnonym and some of which assume that the term originated as a toponym. According to the most recent historical research by Nicaraguan and other scholars, it appears most likely that the term was first applied to the Mosquito Keys (Incer 1990, 292), which because of their density and small size reminded the seafaring Europeans of a swarm of mosquitoes. Later this term was applied to inhabitants of the adjacent mainland (Potthast 1988, 66; Romero Vargas 1995, 125; Offen 2002).

In the earliest English accounts of the region (1630–1650) the inhabitants were referred to generically as Indians or as “Cape Indians”—the term “Cape” deriving from Columbus’ geographical term Cabo Gracias a Dios (Romero Vargas 1995, 125). The English did not adopt the term \textit{Guaba}, which the Franciscans (whose last attempt to pacify the region resulted in the execution of three Spanish missionaries by the feared “Albatuinias” of the inland portion of the Coco River in 1623) had in the early 1600s applied to the coastal Indians of the region between the Cape and the Caratasca Lagoon to the North (Incer 1990, 271). English Puritan colonists who had settled on Providence Island in
1629 were the first Europeans to extensively interact on peaceful terms with the indigenous people of the region. Under specific instructions to ingratiate themselves with the Indians of the adjacent coast, they set up trading posts on the Cape and the Mosquito Keys in order to acquire provisions and items of trade for their precarious island colony (Naylor 1989, 30). The Spanish destroyed the Providence Island colony in 1640, sending English refugees and their Negro slaves to the shores of the Spanish Main, primarily to the area that is today Belize but also to the Bay Islands, the Cape Gracias a Dios and Mosquito Keys region, and the Bluefields Bay region (Naylor 1989, 30–34; Parsons 1956, 10). Although historians and so-called ethnohistorians of the Mosquito Coast and the eastern Anglo-Caribbean, such as Dennis and Olien (1984), Naylor (1989), Olien (1983) and Parsons (1956), have portrayed this early (1630–1670) interaction as having occurred between the English and the Miskito Indians, Romero Vargas has convincingly demonstrated that Europeans referred to the inhabitants of the region as Zambos, Mulattoes, and Indians before they used Mosquito as a tribal term (Romero Vargas 1995, 125; also see Incer 1990, 360). In later accounts (1670s) the terms Zambo (Spanish for the offspring of a Black and an Indian), Indian, Mulatto, and Negro came to be used in both English and Spanish sources to describe the coastal dwellers around the Cape. Although these sources inconsistently applied these four terms to inhabitants of the Cape Gracias a Dios region, they uniformly explained the African presence as having resulted from the shipwreck of a slave ship (Helms 1977, 158). In the 1670s Europeans referred to the inhabitants of the region as Zambos, Mulattoes, Negroes, or Indians from Mosquito (or “the Mosquitos”) (Incer 1990, 360; Romero Vargas 1995, 125). The Spanish continued to refer to the aggressive groups that plagued the eastern border of Nicaragua as both Carives and Zambos del Mosquito until well into the eighteenth century (Incer 1990, 378–380); tellingly, the Spanish colonial officials also referred to the inhabitants of the region as el enemigo zambo (the zambo enemy) (ibid., 375).

The first European reference to the Mosquito Indians as a “small nation” (Exquemelin 1685, 93) came from English, Dutch, and French, pirates who visited the area in the 1660s and 1670s. They noted the well-established social, commercial, and military ties between European pirates and the inhabitants of the Cape Gracias a Dios area (Dampier
All of the seventeenth-century non-Spanish sources regarded the Cape Gracias a Dios area of the Central American shoreline (or Spanish Main as it was known by the covetous English) to be typified by its friendly and resourceful natives—a feature that attracted northern European newcomers to the Caribbean. After a century and a half of Spanish monopoly, they started preying upon these rich colonies from their bases in Jamaica and Tortuga Island. For example, Alexandre Exquemelin, a Dutch pirate based in Jamaica, regularly stopped at the Cape with the intention of safely acquiring provisions. He wrote: “We direction our course towards the Cape of Gracias a Dios, where we had fixed our last hopes of finding Provisions. For thither do usually resort many Pirats [sic], who entertain a friendly Correspondence and Trade with the Indians of those parts” (Exquemelin 1685, 91).

He added:

Through the frequent Converse and Familiarity these Indians have with the Pirats, they sometimes use to go to Sea with them, and remain among them for whole years, without returning home. From whence it cometh, that many of them can speak English, and French, and some of the Pirats their Indian Language. They are very dextrous at darting with the Javelin whereby they are very useful to the Pirats, towards the victualling their Ships, by the fishery of Tortoises, and Manita’s [manatees]. . . . For of these Indians, is alone sufficient to victual a Vessel of an 100 persons. We had among our Crew, two Pirats, who could speak very well the Indian Language. By the Help of these men, I was so curious as to enquire into their Customs, Lives and Policy. (ibid., 92–93)

In the above quotations, it is apparent that as of the 1670s, northern European pirates and the Indians of the Cape Gracias a Dios region dealt with each other extensively, extensively enough to speak one another’s languages, accompany one another on long voyages, and learn about one another’s customs. One of the “Policies” that most encouraged these Europeans with regard to their native allies was their unwillingness to “entertain any Friendship, or Correspondence, with other neighbour-ing Islands, much less with the Spaniards” (Exquemelin 1685, 93).
Exquemelin’s pirate contemporary William Dampier echoed this statement: “It is very rare to find Privateers destitute of one ore more of them, when the Commander, or most of the men are English; but they do not love the French, and the Spaniards they hate mortally” (Dampier 1698, 8).

The seemingly benign nature of the relationship between the English and the Cape Gracias a Dios Indians had less to do with, as the English claimed, the affinity of Mosquito Coast peoples for the English and more to do with the precarious legal and military position in which the English found themselves in the western Caribbean mainland. Indeed, throughout the 275 years of English activity in the region (starting with the foundation of the short-lived Puritan Providence Island Company in 1629 and ending with the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty between England and Nicaragua in 1905), the precariousness and volatility of the English presence greatly mitigated the negative impact of their presence on certain segments of Mosquito Coast society.

These early sources depicted the Mosquito Indians as a small, sea-oriented, highly localized, and loosely organized group with a population from about 200 (Dampier 1698, 7) to 2,000 (Exquemelin 1685, 93). M.W., an English trader and pirate who visited the Cape in 1699, described the Indians he encountered in the following manner: “They live peaceably together in several families, yet accounting all Indians of one tongue, to be the same people and friends, and are in quality all equal, neither king nor captains of families bearing any more command that the meanest, unless it be at such times when they make any expeditions against the Alboawinneys; at that time they submit to the conduct, and obey the orders of their kings and captains” (Olien 1983, 199).

Driven by seventy years of growing opportunities for trade with the English, the inhabitants of the Cape had extended the sweep of their raiding activities to as far south as the Matina cacao plantation district of Costa Rica, where, according to M.W., they “carry away many of their Indians [Costa Rican Indians], of which they kill the men, but the women, and boys they reserve to trade with to the Jamaica-men, who take off their hands all their cocoa-nuts, moneloes, turtle-shell, amber-greese, plate, slaves, and what else they get by such rapines, which with them is a fair war” (Helms 1983, 183). It appears that this process resulted in the emergence of higher levels of social stratification in which certain “captains” assumed leadership positions with influence
above and beyond local kin groups, which in modern Miskitu are known as *taya* (bi-lateral kin groups) and *kiamp* (uni-lateral kin groups; the word itself probably derived from the English “camp”). In her ethnography of Asang, a twentieth-century Rio Coco Miskito village, Helms identified fifty of these groups, which she described as “a loose kindred” that includes “all living relatives to a distance of third cousin from ego” within the riverine village of approximately 700 (Helms 1971, 72). Although these terms are completely absent from the historical literature, most of the historical sources, such as M.W. above, mention the importance of multiple kin groups within Mosquito Coast settlements, Zambo and Mosquito alike.

With regard to the relationship between the Blacks and Indians of the area, historical sources provided consistently contradictory accounts. Exquemelin claimed that the Mosquito Indians (referring to the Indians of the Cape whom he perceived to be typical of the “Island Caribes”) cohabited the “Island” with “Negros,” some of whom were held as slaves (Exquemelin 1685, 93, 98). According to Exquemelin the “Negros” lived in separate settlements where they lived “according to the Customs of their own Country” (ibid., 100). Other sources, such as the English pirate M.W. and early eighteenth-century Spanish officials Luis Antonio Muñoz and Santaella Melgarejo, claimed that the Black slaves promptly blended into the Indian groups of the Cape (Conzemius 1932, 17; Naylor 1989, 230). Still other sources argued that the Negroes and Indians entered into bloody warfare, with the Negroes eventually vanquishing the Indians, taking Indian women as mates. Take, for example, the following testimony of Fray Benito Garret y Arloví, Bishop of Nicaragua, who in 1711 wrote:

In the year 1641 a ship carrying Blacks [negros] was wrecked on the coast of the North sea . . . they took shelter in the bush of those mountains which was occupied by Carib Indians [indios caribes] who, threatened by their new guests, made war against them and for many years held the upper hand. With time the Blacks defeated the Caribs who withdrew to mountains towards the Segovias and Chontales . . . with the women of the defeated the winners multiplied and, because the first people there had died, today their descendants are called zambos because they are the children of Black
men and Indian women. This story was told to me by a Black man called Juan Ramón who lives in this city [Granada], and whose advanced age makes plausible his recollection of the events that he narrates. (Incer 1990, 294)

Variations of this story have continued to be recounted, both inside and outside of the Mosquito Coast, to the present day and, not surprisingly, the specific details of these stories tend to reveal more about the prejudices and interests of the sources than they do about the fate of the survivors of the legendary seventeenth-century shipwreck.

For example, consider the variation in the versions of the story found in diplomatic correspondence between the United States and Great Britain. In 1842 US Diplomat William Murphy reported to Secretary of State Daniel Webster that, according to his understanding, the “Indian-Negro mixture” found in the Mosquito Coast had resulted from the extermination of native men (and subsequent union with native women) committed by shipwrecked Negro slaves. In the late eighteenth century the British superintendent to the Mosquito Shore provided an opposite version in which the African men were killed by Mosquito Indians, who then procreated with African women (Naylor 1989, 231). In light of the efforts by US diplomats to discredit British claims on the mainland of Central America by asserting the Negro (and therefore illegitimate) origins of the “Mosquito Kingdom,” the American account corresponds with the goals of US foreign policy at the time. By emphasizing the Indian racial makeup of the Mosquito Shore, the British account supported British claims to the legitimacy of the inclusion of the country of Mosquito as a protectorate.

Just as the interpretations that various actors make regarding the details of the shipwreck reveal something about their interests and biases, the various theories regarding the origin of the term Miskito are similarly revealing about their authors and supporters. The common explanation among today’s Miskito is that the term derives from the name of a mythical leader, Miskut, who is said to have brought the Miskito from Honduras to a place around Bismona Lagoon. This version has become the official theory of the modern Miskito Indian movement (see Nietschmann 1989, 16, and 1993, 29). According to Stedman Fagoth, contemporary Miskito politician, former military leader, and historian,
At the turn of the century, Moravian linguist George Heath collected an origin myth from a Miskito informant who claimed that Miskito was derived from the Miskitu phrase “Dis-kitwras-nani” (“they who cannot be dislodged”) (Heath 1913, 49). Heath himself speculated that the term came from the Spanish phrase “indios mixtos” (ibid., 51). He wrote: “Through the importation of slaves by former British settlers (who afterward removed to Belize), and through more recent immigration of negroes of more or less pure African blood, chiefly from Jamaica, the Miskuto people have come to present Sambo characteristics in nearly all of their villages. May it not be that the much-discussed name ‘Miskuto’ has originated in the phrase ‘Indios Mixtos,’” used perhaps at first of the Sambos?” (ibid., 51).

His theory lends support to the racial determinism of the time. Along these lines, J. Dyneley Prince, an American Anthropologist editor of Heath’s 1913 article, used a racial metaphor to describe the “mongrel nature of the present Miskuto idiom” (ibid., 62). Another early twentieth-century German Moravian linguist, Walter Lehmann, speculated that the term was the product of the region’s South American cultural roots, deriving from a Columbian Chibchan language in which “Muyska” or “Muisca” means “men” (Lehmann 1920; also see Valle 1944, 102, and Guerrero and Guerrero 1982, 98; see Smutko 1985, 73, for another variation of this theory).

Mary Helms favored Charles Gibson’s theory that “the term may be derived from the idea of ‘musket’ since the population in question was distinguished from its neighbors literally as a musket-bearing group” (Helms 1971, 16). This was thoroughly in line with Helms’s emphasis on the socio-economic roots of Miskito origin as a “purchase society.” Following with this theme of the economic and occupational roots of ethnic identity, linguist John Holm linked the term to the Miskitu verb miskaia (to fish) (Holm 1978, 306). Presumably the Miskito came to be identified as a tribe as a result of their coastal adaptation.

Nietschmann’s less polemical pre-Sandinista Revolution work supported this position (Nietschmann 1973, 26). In accordance with his
staunch primordialist position with regard to the Miskito (which he developed even before the Miskito-Sandinista crisis), he insisted, in contrast to the “colonial tribe” camp, that the Miskito constituted a distinct tribe, albeit with a different name, on the basis of their unique “coastal orientation” before European contact (ibid., 26).

Since at least the nineteenth century, European visitors to the Coast have speculated that the term derives from the abundance of mosquitoes (the insect) in the region (Guerrero and Guerrero 1982, 98). Throughout the colonial period and continuing to the present, the terms Mosco and Mosca (fly in Spanish) are frequently used, often in a derogatory fashion, to refer to the Miskito. Clearly these last usages represent after-the-fact rationalizations that incorporate negative images of the Miskito. In all of this speculation as to the origin of the term Miskito, each of the theories reflects the varying perspectives and agendas of those involved.

Although the seventeenth-century sources are not unanimous with regard to the group labels of the Cape Gracias a Dios people, they are unanimous in regarding these people as having a distinctive relationship with Europeans. Regardless of whether these sources referred to the inhabitants of the coast as Zambos, Mulattoes, or Indians, they observed that all of the inhabitants of the area were available, willing, and useful trading and raiding partners. Herein lies a key to understanding the transformation and consolidation of Mosquito Coast society.

**Zambos, Mosquitos, Zambos**

**Mosquitos: Slavery and Mixed Race**

In the eighteenth century, sources began to describe the Mosquito and Zambo as subgroups or “branches” (Naylor 1989, 41) of an expanding and increasingly hierarchically organized Mosquito Indian population. At times the groups that were considered to be “pure Indians” were referred to as Tauría (straight-haired in Miskitu) or simply as Mosquitos, while the groups that were portrayed as mixed with Africans were referred to as Sambos (in English) or Zambos Mosquitos (Offen 2002). Whereas in the seventeenth century the application of the term Mosquito, as both a toponym and ethnonym, was confined to a very circumscribed referent, in the eighteenth century the term started to be applied to larger and more dispersed groups. Also as a toponym it came to be applied to a much larger area. In the seventeenth century the term
was used to describe a small population that cooperated with the English, but in the eighteenth century it was used to describe what were perceived to be, at some level, a broader population that was divided into geographically centered subgroups, which were united by a common language.

The region was witnessing a transformation, not only in the system of tribal terminology, but much more significantly in economic orientation—a transformation that directly affected the process of group formation and social stratification (Romero Vargas 1995, 157). Mosquito Coast society in the pre-Columbian and early colonial period was characterized by a relatively dispersed system (in comparison to the Pacific) of socio-political organization. Although widespread groups did possess cultural and linguistic affinities with one another, they were not organized into region-wide institutional structures. In the eighteenth century, however, this situation changed as a coastal “trading and raiding” population began to increase in size, strength, and political integration (Olien 1988a). These social and economic transformations have been commonly viewed as having directly resulted from a change in the racial composition of the region’s Indians.

In the eighteenth century, as the inhabitants of the Cape Gracias a Dios region began to expand, internal and external power struggles emerged within splinter groups that, according to colonial sources, were composed of about ten families (Incer 1990, 371). In order to consolidate their position within their own communities and cement their ties with English merchants and pirates, native leaders sought recognition of self-bestowed English titles such as admiral, governor, captain, general, and king. Initially this process lacked the systematicness and hierarchy that these titles imply. In the early 1700s, for example, Spanish documents refer to many different “Kings” (Olien 1983, 204). But as the century progressed, a set of regional leaders emerged, each of whom held a title that was officially recognized by the British authorities in Jamaica. These authorities in Jamaica frequently issued “commissions” as well as diplomatic gifts that helped to legitimate the authority of the titleholder (Romero Vargas 1995, 164). The English, encouraged by Mosquito aggression against Spanish territory, claimed that all of the Mosquito leaders considered themselves subjects of the British king and loathed Spaniards. Among themselves, however, they ridiculed as savage and
gullible the aspiring Mosquito Coast leaders whose authority they selectively bolstered—at times even going to the lengths of “educating” them in England and Jamaica.

Notwithstanding the historical antipathy between Spaniards and Costeños that has so often been cited in the modern literature as lying at the root of the modern Sandinista-Costeño conflict, the fact that at different times Miskito leaders solicited Spanish support (from the colonial governments of Costa Rica and New Granada) in order to enhance their positions speaks to the tactical and contingent nature of the Mosquito alliance with the British. In her book on Anglo-Spanish politics in the Mosquito Coast, Historian Barbara Potthast devoted a chapter to this little-known history in which Mosquito Coast leaders attempted to solidify Spanish support (Potthast 1988, 253–303; also see Olien 1983, 213; Helms 1986, 512; Romero Vargas 1995, 188; Offen 1999). Miskito leaders consciously manipulated European sources of power and prestige in local and regional political negotiations (Olien 1983, 204; Offen 1999).

In Mosquito Coast society, power came to be marked by British symbols and goods. In the words of linguist John Holm, “The Miskito began to think of themselves as partly European (as indeed they were becoming, both culturally and genetically) and thus less vulnerable than ‘wild’ Indians to destruction at the hands of the Spaniards” (Holm 1978, 38). The Mosquito kings displayed their ties to the British through a silver crown and scepter given by the governor of Jamaica. Later, Mosquito titleholders were known to dress in British naval uniforms (Dennis and Olien 1984, 727). An Indian and African-influenced Creole English, which Holm described as “one of the oldest varieties of English spoken outside of England,” was used along with Miskitu as the two lingua francas in the region in the eighteenth century (Holm 1978, 95). Local and regional leaders also legitimated their authority on the basis of their mastery of English, the prestige language of the Coast. These and other symbols played a central role in Mosquito political structure, where “at least as early as 1687, the Miskito believed that in order for an individual to legitimate his claim as king, he must first be recognized as the group’s leader by the English” (Olien 1983, 200).

The Miskito king never ruled over a “state-type political structure” (Dennis and Olien 1984, 718). The king, governor, admiral, and general
represented the highest level of their authority in their respective regions, and at different times the latter three wielded more power than the king. In 1740, for example, the general ruled from Cape Cameron to Cape Gracias a Dios in what is known as the Honduran Mosquitia; the king ruled from Cape Gracias a Dios to Sandy Bay; and the governor ruled from Sandy Bay to Pearl Lagoon (Olien 1983, 208; Potthast 1988, 174). According to Robert Hodgson, first British superintendent of the Mosquito Shore, “Three chiefs ruled over separate Mosquito provinces, or ‘guards’” (Olien 1983, 209). On many occasions these leaders made treaties with foreign interests and issued land grants to foreign investors (Romero Vargas 1995, 163–169).

At no point did the English establish a large-scale plantation economy (such as those created in Jamaica, British Honduras, and other parts of the Caribbean) on the Mosquito Coast. From 1740 to 1786 Mosquito Coast society started to move in that direction, but in 1787 Britain signed a treaty with Spain in which it agreed to abandon the Mosquito Shore. This treaty precipitated the flight of the English residents and their slaves, who had been used primarily in the logging industry, to the logging areas of Belize. African slaves and freemen represented three-fourths of the 2,214 evacuees (Bolland 1977, 40). Even in the height of African slavery in the Mosquito Coast (1740–1786), African slave numbers were low and export-oriented agricultural plantations were few (Gabbert 1992, 46; Parsons 1956, 12). In the Mosquito Coast, as opposed to Spanish Central America where Indian chattel slavery had long been abolished, African slavery actually seems not to have been significantly more prevalent than Indian slavery. Romero Vargas estimated that before the end of eighteenth century, more than 20,000 Indian slaves had been captured by the Mosquito Indians and sold to buyers, primarily in Jamaica but also Belize and the Mosquito Coast (Romero Vargas 1995, 290).

Although African slavery existed in comparable levels in both Pacific Nicaragua and the Mosquito Coast, the Spanish institutions of encomienda, repartimiento, and Indian tribute and taxation created a form of Indian semi-slavery in the Pacific that was quite different from the Indian and African slavery in the Mosquito Coast. These Spanish institutions relied on the communal organization of Indian groups. In contrast, African and Indian slavery practiced on the Mosquito Coast.
was predicated upon wrenching the slave from aboriginal communal affiliations.

The regionally specific nature of slavery in the Mosquito Coast profoundly affected the construction of race in the Mosquito Coast. To be defined as in some way African in the Mosquito Coast did not carry the same social and legal ramifications as it did in the slave-holding strongholds of both English and Spanish America. Throughout Latin America, the Spanish placed a host of restrictions on the movement, dress, marriage, political aspirations, and self-defense of different categories of African Americans (whether Negro, free “Pardo,” or Zambo) (Helms 1977, 163). In the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua such institutional disincentives to Black identification played a much less important role. Indeed the capture of the Indian slaves for sale continued, although at a much reduced pace, until the second half of the nineteenth century—well after African slaves received their formal emancipation in the British West Indies (1838) (Bolland 1977, 4; Naylor 1989, 93). Although Mosquito leaders had been known to hold some African slaves during the eighteenth century, the supply of African slaves was never replenished after the British evacuation of the Coast in 1787 (Olien 1988b, 44). A few of the White settlers who pledged allegiance to the Spanish Crown, rather than relocating to British Honduras, continued to hold a limited number of slaves. However, by 1800 African slavery in the region, no longer economically viable, was all but over (Olien 1988a).

For this reason the distinction between Sambo and “pure Indian,” although an important distinction within Mosquito Coast society, was quite irrelevant with regard to the matter of slavery. As Karl Offen notes, “The Miskitu elite thought of themselves as ‘a free and unconquered people’ and the only comparative people who also fit this description were elites of other powerful nations” (Offen 1999, 276). Miskito Indians of the eighteenth century knew that they were free men and women regardless of their physical appearance or whether they belonged to a community that was defined as Sambo or Indian. In light of their successful raiding of Spanish settlements and their extraordinary successes in defining the terms in their interactions with the British, their freedom was indeed never in question.

In the Pacific region the system of racial categorization was simultaneously taking a very different path in which an African or
mixed-African racial category disappeared entirely (Romero Vargas 1993a; 1995). This categorical shift, and the subsequent historiographical erasure, has been so complete that today in Nicaraguan popular imagination it is not recognized that there ever was a significant African presence in the Pacific region. It is common knowledge in Nicaragua, despite evidence to the contrary, that African slavery characterized the Atlantic Coast, not the Pacific. Vargas identified this process of erasure in the following manner:

We should emphasize the importance that the African element of colonial society acquired in the Nicaraguan province particularly in the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, this society tried to hide and disguise this presence—terrorized by a complex of legal transgression. At this time the myth that _mestizaje_ occurred only between the Spanish and the Indians was created. This myth survives in modern Nicaraguan society. In contrast to what happens in the Atlantic Coast, people [from the Pacific] conceal the African elements of Nicaraguan social formation. (Romero Vargas 1993b)

As Romero Vargas’s archival investigations have revealed, the Spanish colonial elite in the Pacific region not only imported very significant numbers of African slaves, but also they imported far more African slaves than their colonial counterparts on the Atlantic Coast. In the mid-sixteenth century, after fifty years of human devastation wrought by the Indian slave trade, Africans became the main source of forced labor in the Spanish Colonies from Mexico to Peru. African slaves continued to be imported into the province of Nicaragua throughout the colonial period, but by the early eighteenth century they represented a very small amount of the population. Their descendants, however, who the colonial society sought to officially identify as Mullatoes and Zambos, represented as much as half of the population of the colony (Romero Vargas 1993b, 163). Ironically, these free Mulattoes and Zambos primarily worked in the colonial militias, defending the Pacific region against Mosquito Zambos raids. In the major colonial cities this figure was even higher. For example, in 1790 Granada the population (12,400) possessed the following official racial profile: 400 Spanish, 1,500 Mestizos, 8,000 Mulattoes and Zambos, 400 Negros, 100 slaves, and 2,000 Indians (ibid., 159). After independence, however, the percentage of the population
considered African (Zambo, Mulatto, or Negro), both in official statistics and popular usage, drastically declined such that by the end of the nineteenth century the African had disappeared in name from the Pacific Nicaraguan population. They had been categorically shifted into the Mestizo majority. That is to say, the official as well as unofficial systems of racial categorization in the Pacific region became transformed such that individuals were much less frequently categorized as Zambo, Mulatto, and Negro.

In 1740 the English, newly at war with the Spanish, began to place the Mosquito Shore more firmly into their colonial grip.\(^3\)\(^9\) The Governor of Jamaica appointed an English “superintendent” to oversee and formalize British interests in the region as well as to direct English and Mosquito incursions against Spanish settlements (Romero Vargas 1993b, 170).\(^4\)\(^0\) During the period from 1740 to 1787, after which the British withdrew from the region, the leadership hierarchy within the Mosquito Shore became increasingly rationalized. According to Robert Hodgson, the first British superintendent of the Mosquito Shore, the chain of command was as follows: (1) at the top, the three major leaders—the king, governor, and general; (2) historically established captains and leaders of tribes and smaller districts; (3) recently elevated, either by the Mosquito or British authorities, captains and others “with similar influence”; (4) quartermasters, which was the lowest title of distinction; (5) foot soldiers; and (6) individuals of “little importance” (Romero Vargas 1995, 162).

European sources characterize the internally stratified “guards”—districts within the territory of each king, governor, or general that were led by a local leader—as racially distinct because they were presumed to contain differing relative levels of Indian vs. Black “blood.” By the late eighteenth century and continuing into the nineteenth century, historical sources consistently claimed that the Northern guards contained Samboes that possessed a greater amount of African “blood,” while the Southern guards were peopled by “pure Indians” (Olien 1983, 209). Bryan Edwards, late eighteenth-century British historian of the West Indies, described his perception of the racial makeup of the region in the following manner: “The general’s people are Samboes, and stretch from Black River to near Cape Gracias-a-Dios. The king’s chief residence is about twelve leagues south of the cape, his people are also Samboes, and
his immediate precinct reaches to the cape, and runs far up the country. The governor’s precinct joins to the king’s, and extends between twenty and thirty leagues to the southward, till it meets the admiral’s. The people under these chieftains are pure Indians” (Olien 1983, 209).

Edwards explained that these separate “tribes” could be differentiated as distinct “both by nature and by policy: by nature, from the general distinction of pure Indians and Samboes; by policy, as living and acting under several chieftains” (Helms 1977, 159). Edwards’s contemporary and fellow historian Edward Long stated that the “Mosquitos” (a term that he regarded a “general name”) were composed of several “tribes” composed of either “Samboes” or “Pure Indians” (Long 1972 [1774], 316).

Not only did the eighteenth-century sources, as well as the nineteenth-century sources, describe the political divisions as corresponding with racial differences (“nature”), but, more significantly, the sources infused their characterizations of these sub-tribes with the racial prejudices and stereotypes of their day. English sources typically attributed what they perceived to be the most negative features of the Mosquito Indians to their African ancestry, and they consistently characterized the Sambo wings of the Mosquito as being subject to those character traits (laziness and treachery) that they most used to describe the Negroes of their own slave societies.

Take, for example, Edward Long’s description of the Samboes of Mosquito: “Among them is a mixed race, called Samboes, supposed to derive their origin from a Guiney ship; which traditions says, was wrecked on the coast above a century ago; certain it is, that their hair, complexion, features, and make, clearly denote an African ancestry; from whom they have also inherited some of the true characteristics of the African mind; for they are generally false, designing, treacherous, knavish, impudent, and revengeful” (Long 1972 [1774], 316).

Contrast this statement to Edwards’s portrayal of the pure Indians whom he differentiated from the “treacherous” Samboes: “The pure Indians are so called, because they are free from any mixture of negro blood; and their general conduct gives a very favourable idea of Indian nature. They are seldom guilty of positive evil, and often rise to positive good, when positive good does not require much exertion of mind. Their modesty, docility, good faith, disposition to friendship and
gratitude, ought to engage equally our regard and protection” (Helms 1977, 159). Here Edwards portrays the Mosquito Indians as being culturally degraded on the basis of their racial admixture with Africans in a fashion that is typical of the eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century accounts of the Mosquito Coast.

Nineteenth-century and twentieth-century accounts of the Mosquito Coast continue to emphasize the degrading effects of the African admixture in the region. Take for example the following quotation from early twentieth-century economic historian Samuel Crowther:

The Mosquito Coast is a strip of land stretching some two hundred miles along the shore of Nicaragua from Cape Gracias a Dios to Bluefields Lagoon and once upon a time was the home of the Mosquito Indians. In the latter part of the seventeenth century a slave ship was wrecked on the coast. The Africans intermarried with the Indians, were joined by Jamaica negroes and escaped slaves and these together with a few renegade whites combines to form a polyglot race of utter worthlessness. It was a nation only in the sense that its people were quite unlike the people of any other nation. (Crowther 1929, 113)

In an academic article, geographer Wolfgang von Hagen wrote in 1940: “In fact, the social retrogression described by Earl Hanson as occurring in the Orinoco basin is beginning in the Mosquitia of Honduras. There is further complication for the reason that, as times grow worse in the Caribbean, more Jamaican Negroes come to the Coast, intermarry with the Miskito, and add to the Negroid inheritances of the tribe: the more or less pure-blooded Indians who live to the south of Caratasca will be absorbed” (von Hagen 1940, 259). In these accounts the Indian part of the Miskito Indian admixture is seen as that which is valuable and worth preserving, while the Negro element is seen to be corrupting.

The attempt to discredit the Mosquito government on the grounds that their populations of Miskito Indians were actually “Negroes” was consistent with the US foreign policy goal of discrediting the English-allied government of the country of Mosquito. Not surprisingly in light of racial ideologies in the United States at the time, the US government and its agents fervently linked the perceived backwardness of the country...
of Mosquito to the African influence of its people. Anthropologist Michael Olien exposed the lengths taken by a US diplomat and ethnologist, E. G. Squier, in the mid 1800s to discredit the government of Mosquito on explicitly racial grounds (Olien 1985).

Traces of this negative portrayal of Africaness have seeped into the modern historiography of the region, and more importantly, Pacific Nicaraguan views about Costeños. Take, for example, the following quotation from contemporary Nicaraguan Historian Jaime Incer, whose book, *Nicaragua: Viajes, Rutas y Encuentros—1502–1838*, represents one of the few histories of Nicaragua to simultaneously treat the Atlantic and Pacific coast:

When the 17th century pirates described the Misquitos they undoubtedly were referring to the pure indians. As generations passed and the African features began to increasingly manifest themselves phenotypically, the term Misquito did not just cover solely Indians but also their Zambo descendants which had been raised as Misquitos by Misquita mothers. The colonial documents of the 18th century and the beginnings of the 19th century frequently mention the “Zambos-Mosquitos” as if they were a single nation.

The Misquitos emerge as a distinct people coincidentally with the infusion of African blood and although they conserve many of the ancient customs that they shared with the Sumus they came to dominate and enslave them thanks to the firearms that they acquired from their English allies. Those friendly and scattered natives that the pirates found living primitively and precariously in Cape Gracias a Dios were, in the following centuries, converted into an aggressive and expansionist nation which neighboring tribes as well as the Spanish had to suffer. Their leaders, the Mosco Kings, exchanged *mishla* (native alcohol) for Jamaican rum and in their alcoholic deliriums terrorized the coasts of Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama in complicity with the English. (Incer 1990, 295)

This quotation reveals both a strong Hispanicist bias manifested by Pacific Nicaraguans against Costeños, as well as the proclivity to equate Indians with “noble savages” and Africans with brutality and unbridled aggression. Consider the following quotation from contemporary
historian Flor Solórzano: “It is obvious that during the 17th century survivors of the shipwreck mixed with the aboriginal population of the place [Cape Gracias a Dios]. In this remarkable miscegenation, the product of an accident, the black race contributed physical durability and warrior traditions while the miskito contributed cunning and natural abilities which together was unleashed on the region in the form of the fearful race known as the ‘zambos-mosquitos’” (Solórzano 1992, 38).

Although less openly contemptuous of the mixed Mosquitos, Solórzano operates under the assumption that each so-called race contributed a distinct quality to the resulting hybrid population. Once more, she reproduces commonly held beliefs, historically rooted in New World slavery, that associate Africans with brute physical strength and Indians with harmony with nature.

This approach towards the role of Africans vis-à-vis Indians in Mosquito Coast history, however, also resonates in North American scholarship. US historian Robert Naylor, for example, employs a form of racial determinism in his explanation of the rise of ascendency of the Miskito Indians. For example, he wrote:

The Sambos had come a long way from their origins at Cape Gracias a Dios some seventy-five years earlier, when the survivors of a wrecked slave ship had taken up life among the Mosquito Indians. Their descendants had increased in number and expanded territorially. They were generally darker in color than the Indians, although they came in all shades; they were also a little taller than their Indian counterparts, and were noted for their frizzy hair and African features. They had tended to become even more bellicose, arrogant and adventurous than the pure Mosquito Indians, and before long they had emerged as the dominant element at the cape. (Naylor 1989, 41)

US Anthropologist Charles Hale recapitulated this view in 1987 when he wrote:

_Africanization_ of the Indian population at Cabo Gracias occurred during the same period that the tribal name _Miskitu_ (with various spellings) first appears in historical documents, and that these coastal Indians developed a reputation as outstanding warriors and traders.
Having managed to escape the arduous conditions of slavery, these Africans must have been worldly-wise and aggressive. Intermarriage produced Miskitu offspring, but would also have transformed the ethnic identity, strengthening their orientation towards assertive relations with outsiders. (Hale 1987a, 37)

Much of the scholarship on the Mosquito Coast has reproduced an unsubstantiated correlation between Africanness and aggressiveness. More fundamentally, statements such as these can too easily be read as committing the fallacy of viewing race and miscegenation as being at the root of the social transformation of the region, thereby conflating social processes with biological processes. The emergence of a Costeño pattern of “assertive relations with outsiders” can be explained in terms of political and ecological factors without recourse to racial determinism. In the seventeenth century, inhabitants of the Cabo Gracias a Dios region of the Mosquito Coast, regardless of their biological origins, adopted a common set of political and economic strategies that entailed cooperation with the English and hostility to Spanish and Indians from the interior.

THE CASE OF THE CREOLES:
IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE MOSQUITO NATION

Mosquito Coast anthropologist Michael Olien, whose work on Afro-Caribbean populations of lower Central America precedes his historical work on the Mosquito Kingdom, has written extensively on the origins of the Creole category (1987, 1988b, 1988c). According to Olien, inhabitants of the Mosquito Coast, all of whom were racially “mixed” to a varying degree, decided in the nineteenth century to gravitate toward one of two poles: the Mosquito-Zambo or the Creole.

The Mosquito-Zambos “were beginning to emphasize their Indian characteristics at this time and to de-emphasize their previous categorization as a zambo [Afro-Indian] population” (Olien 1988b, 45). The descendants of ex-slaves who “followed Miskito cultural traditions . . . continued to be known as Miskito.” He added, however, that “another mixed group” that was “emulating English customs” came to be known as the Creoles (ibid., 44). The term Creole (borrowed from Jamaicans who were beginning to come to the Central American coast in search
of wage labor) was used in the Mosquito Coast to distinguish Blacks who had been born in the region from Miskitos. In Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole during the colonial period, the term *Creole* distinguished native-born people of all races from European-born people.

With the evacuation of the English from the Atlantic coast at the end of the eighteenth century, the term became, according to Olien, an ideal “signifier” to differentiate the native-born descendants of slaves from the “foreign”-born Jamaicans. Olien therefore argued that the term “had essentially become a linguistic category in search of an ethnic group” (ibid., 45). In this sense, the existence of the “signifier” Creole brought about the existence of the “signified,” the Creole group. Olien described this as a dialectical process in which changes in the political dynamics on the coast precipitated this symbolic change.

Olien implied that what distinguished Creoles from Miskitos was a set of entirely different customs, one oriented toward being Indian and the other toward being English. Olien glossed over the fact that identification with English symbols, be they language, commodities, or “customs,” had long been associated with prestige among all groups on the Mosquito Coast. The Miskito king had since the seventeenth century used British symbols such as military uniforms, swords, and other British naval regalia as tools with which to legitimate their power to their subjects.41 Since the administrative structure of the Kingdom was not rigidly formalized, many other regional Miskito leaders acted within the same symbolic universe, adopting British titles such as admiral, general, and commander. These regional leaders often had free reign within their region and often negotiated with foreign governments and investors autonomously. Hence, Helms has suggested that the British represented an “important new political resource” that was brought to bear on internal power struggles (Helms 1986, 510).

I argue that the Creole “ethnogenesis” did not result from Creoles choosing to adopt English customs instead of Indian customs. Rather, I contend that groups that later would be called Creoles increased in prominence as they were able to form stronger alliances with the British who began to return to the Coast in the 1820s. The importance of the Creoles in regional power structures increased in the next years, especially after 1848 when the gold rush in California brought the Mosquito Coast into global focus. Britain, the United States, France, and even
Spain had long hoped to build a canal that would connect the Atlantic and the Pacific. The port of Greytown, at the mouth of the San Juan River on the southern edge of the Mosquito Coast, was considered the ideal entrance point for a passage across the isthmus. Britain, therefore, moved the seat of the Miskito Kingdom south from Sandy Bay to Bluefields, which was much closer to Greytown. Later, the Mosquito government was moved to Greytown itself, far from the centers of Costeño population—particularly Miskitu-speaking Costeños whose concentration was greater in the northern Mosquito Coast. This tip in the scale of regional importance toward the south favored the inhabitants of Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon, where Creoles had recently become the dominant term of racial identification.

At this time the United States, following the Monroe Doctrine, attempted to dislodge Britain from the coast of Central America. As part of this effort, the United States engaged in an active propaganda campaign to discredit the Mosquito government. US diplomat and ethnologist E. G. Squier was a key player in the effort. He ridiculed the Mosquito king as a drunken “Negro” puppet of British imperialist interests. Central American governments, in turn, echoed these and similar assaults on the Mosquito king. This hostility towards the Mosquito government increased the pressure on the Mosquito government to present itself as a legitimately constituted Indian government. For this reason the Mosquito government began to officially note the racial make up of its members, in effect institutionalizing racial categories such as Indian and Creole. For example, the election protocol of 1865 systematically categorized the race of the electors as either “Creoles,” “Indians,” or “Half-Indians.” This classification was introduced in the official protocol because “every document of the Reserve was under pressure to display a specifically Indian legitimacy” (Oertzen, Rossbach, and Wunderich 1990, 67). The practice of socio-racial identification in the region cannot simply be viewed as a matter of the assertion by individuals or groups of customs or culture, however defined, without placing adequate emphasis on the political (and indeed geopolitical) contexts in which these assertions were made.

Olien’s approach to Creole ethnogenesis tends to regarded mutually exclusive cultural difference as the substance of regional ethnic diversity. However, it is worth noting that the Miskito Indian elite, some of whom
were educated in Jamaica or Great Britain, regarded their knowledge of English, as well as their sustained relationships with the British and Germans, as civilizing influences that distinguished them from the “wild” Indians of the interior. They resisted incorporation into the Nicaraguan state on the grounds that their government was more progressive and civilized (to use their terminology) than that of Nicaragua. They self-consciously adopted British laws and customs, and regarded themselves as loyal subjects of the British Crown. To regard the substance of regional diversity as consisting of separate cultures is to misunderstand the status variables operating in the Mosquito Coast. The specific system of socio-racial identification in the Coast must be understood in part as the product of the conflict between the increased status afforded by English identification and the political advantages of Indian identification. The way different groups juggled these variables in response to the changing political situation in the Coast influenced the nature of the identification of its residents as Creoles or Miskito Indians.

In the nineteenth century, the matter of racial identification of the inhabitants of the Mosquito Coast consistently entered into geopolitical struggles between Britain, the United States, and Nicaragua over the status of the region (Bolland 1992). In 1860 the British, heavily pressured by the United States, decided to politically and militarily reduce their activity in the area. The trade in mahogany had declined, and London had become very dependent on American cotton. Already at war with Russia, Britain could not afford a war with the United States (Olien 1987, 281). In 1860 Britain signed the Treaty of Managua with the government of Nicaragua, in which Britain agreed to withdraw its Protectorate from the Mosquito territory. The Mosquito Reservation, as it later came to be known, was thus created. The respective governments of Britain and the United States signed the Treaty of Managua without the input of the residents of the Coast. The treaty stated: “The Mosquito Indians . . . shall enjoy the right of governing, according to their own customs, and according to any regulations which may from time to time be adopted by them, not inconsistent with the sovereign rights of the Republic of Nicaragua” (Olien 1987, 316).

The treaty provided the Indians the option to choose, if they so desired, “absolute incorporation into the Republic of Nicaragua.” The Miskito king was hereafter to become the Mosquito “Chief,” and
became a salaried employee of the Nicaraguan government, earning $5,000 per year. Greytown, now Britain’s major interest in the area, was declared a free port where no taxes could be levied on international trading vessels. Britain hoped to withdraw active presence in the region without losing its advantageous economic arrangements. The British counted on being able to continue to freely exploit the natural resources of the area under the new Mosquito government. The previous Mosquito governments, as we have seen, were by “custom” receptive to British economic interests.

In 1861 Hereditary Chief George Augustus Frederick called “a Public Convention of the Headman of the Mosquitos, and of the mixed population” in which a government was formed and a constitution drafted (Olien 1987, 318–326). Of the fifty-one delegates that arrived, the majority, thirty-nine, came from the southern parts of the Mosquito Coast: Bluefields, Rama Key, Corn Island and Pearl Lagoon. The delegates that came from these places undoubtedly represented the “mixed population.”

Since the early 1800s Jamaicans of African descent had come to the Mosquito Coast, settling primarily in the southern communities of Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon, and Corn Island. These areas had been the primary site of English residence and therefore had been populated by the descendants of slaves brought by the English. These people came to refer to themselves and be referred to as Creoles. Before 1880 the Creole population was estimated to be around 2,000, far fewer than the Indian population of 10,000 to 15,000. Half of these Indians were known to the Miskito as Sumu, a general term they used to describe inland Indian groups (Vilas 1989, 32; Laird 1972, 21).

A “General Council” of forty-four men was formed, consisting of all of the southern delegates, excluding seven of the eleven delegates who were presumably identified as Miskito Indians. George Augustus Frederick was officially elected chief and president of the General Council, and Henry Patterson was elected vice president and John H. Hooker, secretary. Patterson was the Pearl Lagoon–born son of a Scottish trader and Miskito mother who, according to Oertzen, spoke Miskitu, “although, culturally, he undoubtedly was a Creole” (Oertzen, Rossbach, and Wunderich 1990, 68). Note Oertzen’s apparent equation of racial difference with cultural difference.
Apart from the chief, the majority of rural village leaders (who were generally regarded at the time as Indians) were marginalized from taking part in the administration of what was nominally an Indian government. In the south, English-speaking leaders, who increasingly came to be identified as Creoles despite their extensive cultural and kin ties to the Miskito (as Patterson’s case above illustrates), took the reigns of the Mosquito government. They represented a local upper class who maintained their status by monopolizing trade with the British and North American companies in the area. However, it is crucial not to mistake this situation (as many historians and anthropologists have done) for a situation in which a culturally distinct racial group exercises power over a subordinate racial group. Rather, a regional shift in power was occurring—a regional shift that undoubtedly had racialized implications.

According to the logic of the relevant treaties, the Miskito nation was to be an Indian nation, which functioned according to its “own customs” and “regulations.” Inhabitants of the region created a government based on a model of the modern liberal state, derived explicitly from the British. The regulations that they enacted were distinctly British. This fact, given the highly Anglicized nature of the region, does not represent a contradiction. In 1874 Hereditary Chief William Henry Clarence, in an address to the “Chiefs and Headmen and Representatives of Mosquito,” stated: “In turning to domestic affairs, my residence in Jamaica, and my acquaintance with its institutions, and trade, and people, show me much that is necessary among us, and I am sure the best means to consolidate and execute the laws, to educate and protect the people, to encourage and control honourable trade, to secure and increase the revenue, require speedy attention. . . . I wish to see Mosquito respected by other States, and recognized amongst the nations” (Oertzen, Rosbach, and Wunderich 1990, 338).

Some of the first acts of the Mosquito government were to declare the ports and rivers as open for duty-free commerce, levy a personal income tax, and enact legislation regulating the use of public lands. A public land office was created that was empowered to “let and lease the public lands, and to regulate the sale and disposition of its natural productions.” Another law was enacted that forbid obtaining “from any Mosquito Indian, within the Reservation Tassa [rubber], or other
property, by misrepresentation, false weight or measure, or by fraud or violence” (Oertzen, Rossbach, and Wunderich 1990, 332).

In a significant reversal by the late nineteenth century, both insiders in the Mosquito government, as well as English, North American, and Nicaraguan outsiders, no longer portrayed the Miskito Indians as a fierce and dominant people. Rather, village-oriented Miskito Indians were often portrayed as passive, vulnerable, and economically insecure in contrast to Creole and Miskito city dwellers. Anthropologist Nancie Gonzalez, who conducted fieldwork among the Garifuna of Honduras, noted that “the Miskito image changed from fierce warrior and entrepreneurial raider and trader during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to that of backward and harmless savage in the nineteenth century” (Gonzalez 1988, 32). For example, Chief William Henry Clarence, in a late nineteenth-century speech, expressed his outrage at the treatment of Indians by foreigners:

I have to call your attention to the oppressions under which the poor Indians suffer from those who trade amongst them. I am of their blood, and feel it my duty in every way to vindicate the wrongs committed amongst them. Regulations should be made to free them at once from the slavery under which they labour. I cannot understand, that men who profess to be civilized should so far forget themselves as to dare to flog and otherwise ill-treat those poor inoffensive people. Gentlemen of the Council, I expect that you will assist me to protect the interests of the welfare of the people. (Oertzen, Rossbach, and Wunderich 1990, 167)

Apart from the law mentioned above, the government passed other laws aimed at decreasing the exploitation of Indians and “natives” (the term used to describe all residents of the Reservation). Natives often accrued large debts to foreign merchants. In 1883 the government abolished the debtor’s prison and cancelled debts not paid by March 1884. It put debtors on the payroll at fifty cents a day, half of which went toward the service of their debt. A maximum interest rate was fixed, and household goods were declared free from confiscation. All of this was condemned by foreigners as a “fiasco” (Vilas 1989, 32).

Although the majority of Miskito Indians did not participate in the highest levels of government, this is not to say that the government was
run only by Creoles for Creoles. The Mosquito government integrated all villages into the government through their village headmen. The Mosquito government constituted village headmen as local governmental authorities who served as arbiters for local disputes. Under the civil and penal laws of the Reservation, they became rural judges (Vilas 1989, 32).

Nicaragua viewed the existence of Mosquito as an affront to national sovereignty and planned to annex its territory. Nicaragua refused to comply with the stipulation of the Treaty of Managua wherein they were obligated to pay the king a stipend. This was bitterly resented by the Mosquito government. In 1877 Chief William, in a letter to the Earl of Derby, outlined four reasons why “The Mosquito Indians are not willing to enter into closer connection with Nicaragua”:

1. The Reserve has maintained during the above-mentioned period a peaceful Government, whilst in Nicaragua there are continued revolution, wars . . . 2. There are established on the coast of the Reserve seven Mission stations, with schools, where the people are educated, and instructed to become good members of society, but nothing has been done by the Government of Nicaragua to improve the places or instruct the Mosquito people given over by the Treaty. 3. The religion, customs, manners, and laws of Nicaragua are in no way compatible. 4. The malicious conducts and disposition of transient Nicaraguan subjects in the Reserve. (Oertzen, Rossbach, and Wunderich 1990, 349)

These reasons are particularly interesting when viewed in contrast to those of the modern Miskito nationalist leaders, who have emphasized their aboriginal rights and culture in their political struggles against the modern Nicaraguan state, which I will explore in chapter 6.

For Chief William the Nicaraguan nation was not a progressive nation; therefore, to become part of this nation would represent a step backward. Indeed, the Mosquito government approximated European governments of its time more than the Nicaraguan government. For example, the Mosquito government printed a national currency before Nicaragua had a national currency (Vilas 1989, 31). The chief’s statement as to the incompatibility of cultures is particularly interesting. For him, this incompatibility was not the product of an opposition
between Indian culture and Nicaraguan and Spanish culture. Rather, it stemmed from the incompatibility between English and Spanish culture: the religion of the Mosquito nation was Protestant not Catholic, and its customs, manners, and law were based on those of the English.

In 1894, using a border dispute with Honduras as a pretext, General Rigoberto Cabezas and a contingent of armed men occupied Bluefields, taking charge of the government buildings. They declared the sovereignty of the Nicaraguan state and unfurled the Nicaraguan flag. The Nicaraguan government began to levy import and export duties and to grant concessions for the exploitation of natural resources (US Department of State 1894, 85). Spanish was declared the national language, to be used in government and education (Vilas 1989, 40). Within days, warships from Great Britain and the United States were sent to the region to “protect the lives and property” of their respective citizens.

American corporate enterprises, which by then controlled 90 percent of the capital invested in the area (Hale 1987a, 42), protested the move by Nicaragua (Dozier 1985, 141–162). Beginning with the rubber boom in the 1860s, American capital had become very active in the Mosquito Coast region. Gold was extracted from mines in the interior, but by far the most important product was bananas. In 1893 Bluefields was the world’s leading banana exporter (Olien 1983, 235). American companies had good relations with the Mosquito government and saw no advantage to the establishment of a new government. The British vice-consul explained the motives of this attitude well: “The whole foreign population has come to Bluefields simply and solely on the chance of making money rapidly, and they care nothing for Mosquitos or Nicaraguans as long as their trade in not interfered with” (Oertzen, Rossbach, and Wunderich 1990, 402). In light of this prevailing US sentiment, Nicaragua acted cautiously and deliberately in order not to incur the wrath of the American or British investors, who could in turn call upon their governments to protect them. The Zelaya government, which at this time was encouraging modernization through the investment of foreign capital, had no desire to scare away foreign business interests.

The outraged inhabitants of the Coast categorically refused to accept Nicaraguan domination, and the Mosquito government made appeals to both the British and American governments to come to their
aid. In a petition to the queen, the reigning chief Robert Henry Clarence pleaded: “We will be in the hands of a Government and people who have not the slightest interest, sympathy, or good feeling for the inhabitants of the Mosquito Reservation; and as our manners, customs, religion, laws and language are not in accord, there can never be unity. . . . We most respectfully beg to lay before you Majesty . . . to take back your protection of the Mosquito nation and people, so that we may become a people of your Majesty's Empire” (Oertzen, Rossbach, and Wunderich 1990, 369).

This petition was signed by 1,800 natives, Indians and Creoles alike. Britain and the United States, however, refused to support the re-installation of the Mosquito government. In fact, on various occasions British and US forces were deployed to keep the peace between the Nicaraguan forces and rebellious Creole and Indian factions. In July of 1894 a rebellion succeeded in driving the occupying Nicaraguan army from Bluefields for three weeks. The rebels reinstated Chief Robert Henry Clarence and raised the Mosquito flag (ibid., 380). When the Nicaraguan forces returned, the chief and many “natives” fled aboard a British naval ship. The chief lived the rest of his life in exile in Jamaica.

The clamor of American and British merchants and local diplomats for intervention in favor of the Mosquito government was unheeded by their respective governments for a variety of reasons. The first and most important reason for the United States was that Nicaragua was a possible site for a canal (Dozier 1985, 154). The existence of a weak British-friendly Indian government could only complicate matters. By supporting Nicaragua they also achieved their long-held goal of ending all British influence in the area. Britain did not act on the “trace of responsibility for the personal safety of a feeble remnant of an inferior and deteriorating race who were once under her protection” (ibid., 154). Instead, it allowed the United States to dictate policy in the region, only ensuring the safety and transport, should they desire, of Jamaicans and Mosquitians. The inability to acquire support from foreign powers doomed the Mosquitian insurgency.

The Nicaraguan government subsequently convened a meeting with Costeño delegates. The agreement signed by Costeño delegates was aimed chiefly at clarifying the status of the ex-Mosquito Reservation
and placed the region strictly under the sovereignty of Nicaragua. Nicaragua would henceforth exercise absolute political and administrative control over the Mosquito Coast. Although the armed resistance to the Nicaraguan annexation subsided, the protests from natives about the violation of the Treaty of Managua continued for many years to come. They protested Nicaraguan presence on the grounds that “our political rights have been destroyed,” “schools have been closed, because it was impossible to teach only the Spanish language,” and taxation on imports had increased greatly (ibid., 433–435). The Nicaraguan government, while not declaring void Mosquito government land grants, insisted on verifying all titles to land. Land whose ownership was not verified by the original title would revert to the Nicaraguan state.

Despite the changing valences of Indian and Creole self-identification, Costeños asserted political rights in an international context as members of a single nation that had aspirations to independent status vis-à-vis the Nicaraguan state. In the scholarship on this period, the categorical distinction between the Miskito and Creole has been emphasized unduly to the exclusion of other kinds of social differentiation that operated at the time. Charles Hale, for example, citing the fact self-proclaimed Creoles occupied the higher levels of the Mosquito Reservation, concluded that “Mosquitian nationalism, like the Mosquito government itself, was a Creole-dominated political construct” (Hale 1987a, 46). Creoles, according to Hale, affixed Miskito signatures to their post-reincorporation protests only in order to disguise the contradiction that the Mosquito government was legally supposed to be run by Indians. Hence, he hypothesized that the main reason that Mosquitian nationalism never prospered in the early twentieth century was because “Creoles must have found it distasteful for the legitimacy of their political claim to be dependent on ancestral links with members of a socially subordinate ethnic group” (ibid., 45).

Contrary to the implications of this formulation, the inhabitants of the Mosquito Coast cooperated in their attempts to protest the political dissolution of the Mosquito Reserve well into the twentieth century. In 1926, for example, representatives of the “Miskito Indian Patriotic League” sent a letter to the secretary of state of the United States (Oertzen, Rossbach, and Wunderich 1990, 454–456). The delegates, identified as both Creoles and Miskitos, protested the illegal presence of
the Nicaraguan government that had “forcibly misappropriated and misused over Thirty million dollars of our Revenues and have also debarred and denied us of every political and local right, thereby inflicting undue universal punishment which has pauperized and crippled our race” (ibid., 455). Their claim to nationhood was phrased in terms of their race and of their “civilization” (what we now sometimes call “culture”), both of which they presented as being incompatible with the Pacific Nicaragua government. The signers of the document identified themselves as “Indians” and “natives of amalgamated Indian ancestry,” and claimed their “civilization” to be mostly “Anglo-Saxon” (ibid., 454):

Having always been in constant intercourse with the nations of Anglo-Saxon civilization training and religion and being of a different race we cannot under existing conditions assimilate or amalgamate with the people of Latin civilization. . . . We beg that for the future economic prosperity and universal welfare of our race that the consideration solicited be duly granted to this Petition, and the United States Government will in the name of Christian civilization, Progress and Humanity, hearken to the pleading voice of a helpless race, for relief from untold suffering and misery. (ibid., 455–456)

This alliance of Creoles and Miskitos, claiming unity of race and civilization, should not be looked upon as anomalous. Costeños had long known that if they were to enjoy any amount of control over their affairs, it would be achieved politically only through the means of the Mosquito government. As we have seen, Mosquito was both a racial and tribal, and a geographical term. Regardless of whether they identified themselves (or were identified by others) as Creoles or Miskitos, Costeños throughout their history had participated with one another and with the English in opposition to Spanish-speaking Spaniards and Nicaraguans. They often worked side by side as wage laborers and practiced similar professions, such as fishing and turtling. They also intermarried extensively and participated increasingly in the Moravian missionary church, particularly after the “Great Awakening” of the 1880s.43 The differentiation between Creole and Miskito, although undeniably important at some level, was not the product of mutually exclusive racial or cultural systems. Or, to put this in the appropriate
Barthian terms, the boundaries between these ethnic groups was not constituted by distinct cultural content (Barth 1969).

**Nicaragua's Two Coasts**

**Nicaraguan Indian Policy: Culture and Communal Land**

The official status of Mosquito remained cloudy until Great Britain and Nicaragua signed the Harrison-Altamirano treaty of 1905, abrogating the Treaty of Managua. The treaty obliged Nicaragua to make various concessions to Great Britain in favor of the inhabitants of the region because the Mosquito Indians were “at one time under the protection of Great Britain.” Although the two-page text of the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty, a document intended to resolve the status of the former Mosquito Reserve, primarily used the term Mosquito Indians to refer to the region’s inhabitants, it explicitly identified Mosquito Indians and Creoles as the inhabitants of the area whose legal status needed to be resolved.44 In other words, as far as the Harrison-Altamirano treaty was concerned, the distinction between Creole and Miskito was not significant.

The treaty granted both Creoles and Miskitos (indeed as well as “the other inhabitants of the former Reserve”) a special set of rights and obligations which would smooth their transition into full Nicaraguan citizenship (Oertzen, Rossbach, and Wunderich 1990, 437). As far as the recognition of these special rights within Nicaraguan law was concerned, the salient distinction was between inhabitants of the former Reserve (whose status needed to be clarified) and Pacific Nicaraguans to whom the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty did not apply. For example, take the following quotation from the text of the treaty: “The [Nicaraguan] Government will submit to the National Assembly a law exempting, for fifty years from the date of the ratification of this Treaty, all the Mosquito Indians and the Creoles born before the year 1894, from military service, and from all direct taxation of their persons, property, possessions, animals, and means of subsistence” (ibid., 436). The treaty did not grant any special rights and obligations to the Mosquito Indians that it did not also grant to Creoles. In this sense, Nicaraguan Indian policy applied to all natives of the Atlantic Coast—all Costeños.

In the transition from limited Nicaraguan sovereignty over the region to full Nicaraguan sovereignty, the question of land ownership
and titles represented the most controversial issue. The terms of the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty provided that the Nicaraguan government should “allow the Indians to live in their villages . . . following their own customs, in so far as they are not opposed to the laws of the country and to public morality” (ibid.). The treaty also stipulated that “public pasture lands will be reserved for the use of the inhabitants in the neighborhood of each Indian village” (ibid.). Again, it is important to note that despite the fact that the wording of the treaty referred to the residents of the region using the blanket term Mosquito Indians, it clearly intended to cover both Indians and Creoles.

According to the terms of the treaty, Indians and Creoles were given two years to legalize under Nicaraguan law their claim to all the property that they had acquired before 1894 according to the laws of Mosquito (pre-1860) and the Mosquito Reserve (1860–1894). If they could not present such a legal title, they would be granted eight manzanas (roughly 2 acres) of land per family, the location of which would be chosen by the government. With regard to the lands that in the last ten years had been stripped from Creoles and Indians and given to foreigners and Pacific Nicaraguans, the government agreed to “indemnify them by the grant of suitable public lands of approximate value as near as possible to their present residence” (ibid.).

Over the next twenty years the situation of land titles was a matter of constant confusion and conflict. The Nicaraguan government, having achieved its goal of governing the extraction of resources from the Mosquito Coast, raised taxes and intensified concessions to foreign companies. Although the Atlantic coast contained only about 10 percent of the country’s population, it contributed 40 percent of the duties collected by the government (Dozier 1985, 161). The government, however, neglected to spend these revenues on maintenance of government offices and infrastructure, which allowed foreign companies to act as the de facto government. Lumber and banana companies built railroads strictly for resource extraction with no intention of creating a sustainable system of regional transportation, and built other forms of temporary infrastructure aimed at cost-efficient plunder. Foreign companies were granted monopolies on resources and transportation, thus eliminating competition and putting independent planters at the mercy of the company (ibid., 158).45