Shipwrecked Identities
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Chapter 4

Company Time

Puerto Cabezas is even more American than Bluefields. It is an industrial village of some 1,200 people, situated on a broad, flat plain overlooking the Caribbean. It looks and is precisely like a lumber mill village in some southern US state. It is operated like a tiny principality by the Standard Fruit Company and its subsidiary, the Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company, which possess vast banana and lumber lands in the interior, tapped by a small privately owned railroad.

—Harold Denny 1929, 263

From the time of the establishment of Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company until the Sandinista Revolution of 1979, which effectively drove away North American enterprises, the port city of Puerto Cabezas served as a base to a series of US and Canadian lumber, mining, rubber, and fishing companies that operated in the “boom and bust” (Helms 1971) economy of the region. The operation of these resource-extracting industries radically transformed the natural environment of the Mosquito Coast within a short period of time. Lumber companies left behind extensive grass-covered savannas littered with tree stumps where extensive subtropical forest had once flourished. Mining companies contaminated long stretches of Atlantic Coast rivers with pollutants (T. Adams 1981). While the activities of these companies have left at times irreversible reminders of their devastating impact, it is perhaps more difficult to assess their social and cultural impact.

The companies’ residential and labor practices served to institutionalize racial and ethnic categories and helped to channel collective action within Costeño society into a racialized idiom. These practices and the resulting “class-ethnic hierarchy” have been well documented by researchers (Bourgois 1985, 209). But in addition to this centrifugal
effect that caused the entrenchment of racial categories, the activities of
the companies also had a centripetal effect on the process of socio-racial
group formation. While contributing to the institutionalization of racial
categories, the companies also transformed consumption patterns of all
Porteños (inhabitants of Puerto Cabezas) regardless of their racial
identification, thus creating a single overriding “consumer culture” that
should play a key role in understanding the role of racial distinctions in
the social life and conflicts in Puerto Cabezas, and the Mosquito Coast
region as a whole, today.

From its inception, Puerto Cabezas fit the classic pattern of a US
company town. The company planned, built, owned, and managed
every aspect of the city. Far beyond simply providing employment to its
workers, the company provided government, transportation, entertain-
ment, health care, recreation, infrastructure, police, and stores. Given
that the company was so deeply involved in every aspect of social life in
the city, it in many ways represented a so-called total institution not
unlike the sugar plantations of the Caribbean. However, the economic
system of Puerto Cabezas (unlike sugar plantation areas) relied both on
the production of its work force and the work force’s consumption of
US products. This stage in Mosquito Coast history is now remembered
as “company time”—a term commonly used by Costeños (in English
and Miskitu alike) that refers to the period in which US companies were
active in the city (1920–1979).

Labor, Machete Men,
and Municipal Self-Image

After having persuaded the Nicaraguan government to issue a grant of
over 50,000 hectares of land, much of which had been claimed as “pasture
land” by a number of Miskito Indian villages, Bragman’s Bluff Lumber
Company’s next challenge was to bring laborers to the region and insure
that they would continue to work in the region as long as the company
needed them. At the level of management, the company used White
American workers almost exclusively. At the height of company oper-
ations, White Americans never numbered more than two hundred workers
and their families. The companies also sought “skilled” laborers in con-
struction, railroads, sawmills, and creosote plants. They filled these positions
primarily with Black West Indian workers, many of whom were recruited
directly from the Panama Canal Zone and Jamaica at the company’s expense. It also recruited a significant number of Black American workers who had experience in lumber and railroad companies. Nicaraguans performed the most physically demanding and poorly paid labor.

In the period between the mid-1930s and World War II, the banana industry dominated the economic life of the port. According to the US consulate that operated in Puerto Cabezas from 1931 to 1940, White workers (other than top managers and “superintendents”) were divided into six occupations: overseers, timekeepers, foremen, stockmen, yardmen, and cooks. These workers were paid monthly in US dollars and worked on yearly contracts. The lowest and most poorly paid tasks, called “farm work,” were carried out by about 1,500 laborers, almost all of whom were Nicaraguans (Costeños and “Spaniards”) who were paid on a daily or weekly basis in cash or company script. The company did not recruit or house this reserve labor force, and the demand for these laborers fluctuated drastically. For example, in 1935, US Consul Eli Taylor in Puerto Cabezas noted that Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company reduced its labor force by 60 percent, “most of whom have returned to places of origin in the interior” (US Department of State Records, Correspondence of US Consulate—Puerto Cabezas, 1937).

“Farm work” was divided into six branches: (1) cutting and carrying fruit to the railroad, (2) cleaning the banana lands of weeds and brush, (3) making bridges over drains, (4) constructing “fruitroads” for mules, (5) constructing “corduroy roads” (used for access to the interior of plantations), and (6) digging drains (US Department of State Records, Correspondence of US Consulate—Puerto Cabezas, 1931) Not surprisingly, workers strove to acquire less grueling and more “skilled” jobs such as lower-level clerical and supervisory positions, as well as railroad and construction jobs. These mid-level jobs were often held by West Indian and Costeño workers who spoke English and had experience in the banana, railroad, and lumber industries—a fact that inspired resentment.

According to many of my older Porteño informants, “farm” workers were disparagingly referred to, in English, as “machete men.” They described “machete men” as illiterate agriculturalists from the interior of the country who, attracted by wage-labor opportunities, found their way to Puerto Cabezas. One of my informants, who worked as a
carpenter and later a lumber-mill operator, described the “machete men” in the following way: “The company give job to bitcha [a lot of] machete men. Them boys work hard man . . . all day long in the plantation them swing machete and carry load like mule. I worked here in Port man, tranquilo, sin problema. Them boys no like Port . . . want to go back to their own place cosechar [to harvest] corn and all them things.”

Although the skill of the “machete men” was legendary, Porteños did not envy the backbreaking and low-paid work that they performed. Porteños took pride in their ability to avoid this work and often attempted to involve themselves in the auxiliary industries that proliferated in the port to serve the companies’ diverse needs. Also, many entered into commerce, opening stores that filled economic niches (such as providing loans and credit) that the company commissaries did not monopolize.

As the term indicates, “farm work” occurred not in the city but rather in banana plantations, owned and operated by the Standard Fruit Company, that lined the banks of the Wawa River. In the Wawa River area, the Standard Fruit Company attempted to control much of the productive process, from planting to weeding to transportation (O’Brien 1996, 71). This practice stood in contrast to the Coco River to the north, where smaller banana companies functioned primarily as buyers that purchased bananas from local villagers-cum-small-scale independent growers (Helms 1971, 113). To control the productive process, the company built a hundred-kilometer-long railroad line that connected Puerto Cabezas with inland “camps” located along the rail line that followed the Wawa River. Each camp had its own commissary and office. The camps were completely dependent on provisions sent from Puerto Cabezas by rail, and they were staffed by two kinds of workers: overseers who were based in Puerto Cabezas (Whites and mid-level Jamaicans and English-speaking Costeños), and a large and highly transitory body of “machete men” who stayed for long periods at a time in makeshift structures. Porteños who worked in the camps took pride in their ability to maintain a permanent residence in Port and looked down at “farm work.”

I found in my interviews that Porteños (regardless of any self-identification as Black, Creole, Miskito, or Spanish—or any combination thereof) sharply distinguished themselves (and by extension their work) from “machete men” whom they viewed as rural peasants who
were not suited or prepared for city life. As I will describe in greater
detail in the next chapter, Porteños strongly valued their own
identification with the jobs and lifestyle of city life in Puerto Cabezas.
They have long perceived of themselves as a cosmopolitan people who
enjoy the advantages of urban life, such as access to items of foreign
manufacture and a consistent contact and exchange with the United
States and the Caribbean. In their recollections of “company time,” they
contrasted their own cosmopolitanism (“good living”) with the scarcity
and self-reliance of peasant life.

According to the popular perception, Puerto Cabezas was a place
where, as long as one had the money, any product could be acquired. In
the countryside, on the other hand, peasants were viewed to be in the
unenviable position of having to manufacture locally many of the goods
that they consumed in their daily lives, such as soap, rope, baskets,
brooms, and cheese. In the words of one Porteño informant, “Cuando
Puerto realmente era Puerto, aquí se encontraba todo” (“When Port
was Port, you could find anything here.”). I found that in the 1990s, the
great majority of my informants, even young ones, agreed that “Port was
no longer Port,” by which they meant that after years of a war-imposed
isolation, Puerto Cabezas no longer possessed an essential quality that
had historically defined it: extensive commercial and cultural ties with
the rest of the world, particularly the Caribbean and the United States.

In Puerto Cabezas the salaried work force was overwhelmingly
male. As Cynthia Enloe has convincingly argued, banana plantation
work, because it involved machete work and transportation to often-
isolated camps, was regarded as “men’s work” by US corporations (Enloe
1989, 133). In her discussion of the role of gender in the banana plant-
tation complex, Enloe wrote:

One of the conditions that has pushed women off the banana repub-
lic stage has been the masculinization of the banana plantation.
Banana-company executives imagined that most of the jobs on their
large plantations could be done only by men. Banana plantations
were carved out of wooded acres. Clearing the bush required work-
ers who could use a machete, live in rude barracks, and who, once
the plantation’s trees were bearing fruit, could chop down the heavy
bunches and carry them to central loading areas and from there to
the docks, to be loaded by the ton on to refrigerator ships. This was men’s work. (ibid., 134)

Enloe emphasized that despite the absence of women’s plantation labor in the first stages of development of banana regions, women’s work played a key role in the overall banana plantation complex. This work, however, did not occur directly on the plantations.

There is an interesting paradox with regard to racial identification of “machete men” that arose during my interviews with Porteños about “company time.” I found that, in what on the surface appeared to be contradictory statements, my informants identified “machete men” as both “Indians” and “Spaniards.” Although they recognized that many “machete men” were Miskito Indians “from the communities,” they also recognized that others of them were monoglot Spanish speakers “from the Pacific.” Because these non-Miskito “machete men” were from the Pacific and, for that reason, taken to be non-native to the region, Costeños described them as “Spaniards.” But because they were also dark-skinned campesinos with rural skills and orientations, traits that Costeños associate with Indians, they also regarded them, somewhat disparagingly, as Indians. Thus Porteños described this contingent of “machete men” as being simultaneously “Indians” and “Spaniards,” the term “Spaniard” serving primarily as a geographical referent to distinguish the Atlantic coast from the Pacific coast, and “Indian” being used as a term that in a complex way (particular to Costeños) indexed both race and class.

In the present, the term “Indian” connotes rurality—a rurality that contrasts with Porteño cosmopolitanism. Even Porteño informants who described themselves as Miskito or recognized their “Miskito blood” distinguished themselves from Indian “machete men” because they did not perform that sort of labor and because they did not have a rural orientation. In this sense, to be Porteño represented, and continues to represent in the present, a social identification that crosscuts ethnic identification. Within Costeño society it is perfectly reasonable for a campesino from the Pacific to be both a Spaniard and an Indian, and it is reasonable on the other hand for a Porteño to proudly “be” an Indian and disparage, in certain contexts, being Indian.

Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company and the companies that replaced it in the 1940s practiced a policy of strict residential segregation (Karnes
White American workers and their families lived inside a fenced area in well-constructed family housing with running water and electricity. (In the present, most residents of Puerto Cabezas do not have access to these amenities). The American area, known as the “zone,” represented a distinguishing feature of the city that, in often very complex and controversial ways, stands out in the memory of present-day Porteños. The zone included both the industrial installations of the company and the residences and much of the “human resource” infrastructure (to use a term from modern-day corporate America) for US company employees. In my interviews with Porteños, they manifested a profound ambivalence with regard to the zone and, by extension, the role of US companies.

On the one hand, the massive installations of the zone embodied US wealth, progress, and technological prowess. When asked to describe Puerto Cabezas during “company time,” Porteño informants universally mentioned the massive engineering and architectural projects initiated by US companies in and around Puerto Cabezas. They contrasted this technological and infrastructural advancement to the present atraso (backwardness). Informants explained how during “company time,” the pier extended twice as far into the ocean as it does now and it accommodated large tankers. One informant nostalgically described these ships as the “biggest in the Caribbean” and contrasted them to the lamentable present situation in which “only lobster boats and Moskeeta velas [sailboats]” dock at the pier. For this informant, the small sailboats that Miskito fishermen use to catch and bring their haul of turtles, fish, and shrimp to market represented the polar opposite of the oceangoing tankers that during “company time” stopped at Puerto Cabezas: one was Indian, small, backward, and local (concepts that in the minds of Porteños, including self-proclaimed Miskitos, are in certain contexts closely associated); and the other was American, large, advanced, and international (also tightly associated concepts).

In the context of explaining to me the past importance of Puerto Cabezas, even young Porteños recalled nostalgically when the railroad tracks extended from the zone (situated on the bluff) down to the end of the pier. The rail line no longer functions in Puerto Cabezas and the rails were long ago removed from the pier. Today the pier continues to deteriorate to the point that it has become hazardous for its users. The
government is unable to finance the maintenance of the pier. Now the
government, in line with a long precedent of turning to foreign extractive
industries for basic infrastructure, finds itself in a dispute with a US
company that balked on its commitment repair the pier (López 2004;
López and Urbina 2004).

In the present, severely rusted buildings and heavy machinery litter
the area that used to be occupied by the zone. On walking tours of the
area, Porteño informants brought my attention to these ruins in the con-
text of illustrating to me the former grandeur of Puerto Cabezas and
its present backwardness. In their presentations to me, planned and
impromptu, my informants invariably referred to the irony of the pres-
ent situation in which the great majority of the people of Puerto
Cabezas lack the most basic infrastructure and services—infrastructure
and services that were available (for some) thirty years ago. In a city that
in the present can only be approached by two deteriorating dirt roads
that accommodate only the most intrepid of vehicles, my informants
showed me the gutted locomotives that once carried people and provi-
sions a hundred kilometers into the interior. In a city in which only a
small percentage of the population has access to running water, Porteños
showed me the rusted and dangerously wobbly water tank that domi-
nated the horizon of Puerto Cabezas and that once provided the water
that poured out of chrome faucets in all the buildings of the zone.

Coincidentally, during my stay in Puerto Cabezas, this abandoned
water tank finally fell to the ground in a windstorm, narrowly missing a
family of squatters who had built a house in its shadow. The incident
produced three principal responses in the city, the variations revealing
the ambivalence of Porteños with regard to “company time.” Some
Porteños viewed the falling of the tank, which had not been functional
for decades, as a symbolic marking of the end of US industrial influence
in the city. This ending of US influence, in turn, signified the decline in
the importance of Puerto Cabezas as a port city and a bustling hub of
economic activity. The event signified for others the indifference of
the present government that, in defiance of previous protests by concerned
citizens, neglected to demolish the decaying structure in spite of the
tank’s threat to the public. The third reaction that I recorded was indig-
nation on the part of Porteños who viewed the event as the most recent
of a long line of negative consequences (such as the pollution from
mining and the massive silting resulting from years of deforestation) that followed years of reckless exploitation at the hands of US companies. In a comment infused with bitter irony, one Porteño remarked to me that “the gringos aren’t even here anymore but they continue to shit on us.”

Roberto Flores, the unabashedly Sandinista journalist of the leftist FM radio station in Puerto Cabezas, summed up the anti-US sentiment in a passionate radio broadcast in which he blamed the US companies for the near tragedy. In the broadcast Flores noted that US and Canadian mining companies whose Atlantic Coast properties had been nationalized by the Sandinista government were now petitioning the Nicaraguan government for indemnity. Flores regarded North American claims for indemnity shocking and absurd in light of the environmental and social destruction brought about by these companies. He vigorously protested that “the North American companies should pay the Costeños and the Nicaraguan people for all the damage that they did and not the other way around.” Flores insisted that the near tragedy of the fallen water tank was a product of the exploitation of Nicaraguans during “company time.”

The large artificial ponds that are situated on the eastern edge of what was once the zone represent another distinguishing feature of Puerto Cabezas that was left by the companies and that continues to spark polemics. In the 1990s, after fifteen years of rapid population growth caused by the influx of civil war refugees, the ponds lay at the center of densely populated neighborhoods. Porteños recall that during the heyday of the lumber industry in the region (in the 1950s and 1960s), the ponds were created and used by the US lumber company NIPCO (Nicaraguan Long Leaf Pine Company) to treat pine logs. NIPCO applied powerful chemicals to the logs to kill pests and prepare them for transportation.

One of my informants who had worked for NIPCO described the appearance of the ponds in the 1950s: “In those times those ponds were full of wood. You could have walked from one side to the other without getting wet walking only on pine logs. Later they brought mahogany and cedar. And right there to the side were the sawmills which in the high season for wood were working all day long making all that noise. In those times there was noise everywhere, with those big gringo trucks,
not like the Soviet ones now which are worthless. Puerto Cabezas was like a beehive.\textsuperscript{10}

In the present the rusted out metal frames of the old sawmills and newly-built one-room houses surround the ponds, which eerily lacks vegetation. Women can be seen in the morning and afternoons washing their clothes in their waters, disregarding warnings issued by institutions of public health. Like the water tanks, the ponds stand for both the best and the worst of “company time.” They epitomize for Porteños the past importance of Puerto Cabezas and the technological defiance of the US companies against an unforgiving natural environment. At the other extreme they provide yet another example of the hazards callously left behind by US companies.

The examples of the water tank and the lumber treatment ponds illustrate the ambivalence of Porteños with regard to the historical role of US companies. Their accounts of “company time” were full of both approval and contempt. Porteños recall with awe and admiration the exploits of the companies, but they also recall, at times with acrimony, their second-class-citizen status vis-à-vis North Americans—a status that was most apparent in the zone. Some Porteños remember that Nicaraguans (Costeños and “Spaniards” alike) were not allowed in the zone unless they could demonstrate a good reason to be there. This was particularly true in the residential area of the zone, which overlooked the ocean to the north of the pier. Here, the “gringo bosses” lived in well-painted two-story wooden structures with screened-in second-story verandas. Mister Adams, one of my chief informants, a Belize-born “Hindu” man who had lived in Puerto Cabezas since the late 1940s, recalled:\textsuperscript{11} “You know where the CIDCA house is? Well that was where the big boss man lived. Them people sit up there and drink gin and whiskey . . . they no like rum. They make big parties only for gringos . . . if you Nicaragua . . . no way, and if you black man . . . never. You can never go. They no like mix with no black man. You go to the zone only to work and when you finish you gone.”\textsuperscript{12} Other Porteños, aware of the common charge of racism leveled (in retrospect) against the companies, denied the severity of the segregation in Port during “company time.”

Down the road a few hundred yards north of the American zone, the village of Bilwi swelled as Costeños, “Spaniards,” and West Indians flooded the region. Workers, attracted by relatively high salaries, erected
shacks. The companies housed many of the foreign workers in large company-owned barracks. On the opposite side of the zone lived a colony of American Blacks who had been brought in by the company to manage the mule trains and make railroad ties. As the years passed, these different areas of the nascent city acquired names, which have survived to the present as neighborhood names. However, after 1979 the Sandinista administration replaced many of the earlier neighborhood names with “revolutionary” neighborhood names. Some of my older informants recalled when American Blacks, or “American darkies,” as they were called in Puerto Cabezas, lived close to the beach in “Mule Town.” (While I was in Puerto Cabezas, Joe Taylor, a man that many reputed to be the last surviving American Black, died.) West Indian workers and other experienced workers stayed in a series of barracks on the opposite edge of the sawmill. Mid-level Pacific Nicaraguan workers were also housed in separate barracks and ate at segregated dining halls (Karnes 1978, 112).

“Mule Town” was bordered by “Spanish Town,” another Black settlement populated originally by West Indian workers. “Spanish Town” apparently got its name from the Jamaican city and not from having “Spanish” inhabitants. As the city continued to grow, other neighborhoods, such as “Silver City” and “The Beach,” emerged. In general, as the city grew in size, the company was no longer able or willing to pay to house workers, and so the strict residential segregation created in the company zone started to disintegrate.

Nevertheless, the rigid labor hierarchy in which Black Caribbean workers, some of whom were Nicaraguan citizens from Bluefields (headquarters of the United Fruit Company’s Nicaraguan division), occupied a higher position than “Spaniard” workers became institutionalized and entrenched in other areas of port life. The institutions of the Standard Fruit Company contributed to the increase in the social salience and political ramifications of socio-racial identifications (Black, Indian, and Spaniard) in the daily lives of Costeños. This does not mean, however, that the company successfully erased competing categories of social differentiation, such as those based on regional, occupational, and linguistic differences.

One of the legacies of the company-dominated social configuration of the city of Puerto Cabezas was the persistence of separate leisure,
recreational, and religious institutions for the different “races.” For example, my informants recall that each “nation” in the city, with the exception of Miskito Indians, had its own social club. The White North Americans were members of the “Standard Club,” which operated a bar, dance hall, and ice cream parlor, and which also hosted the “wives” bridge club (US Department of State Records, Consular Records, Puerto Cabezas, 1935). “Spaniards” participated in the “Social Club,” which later became the “Club de Leones” (Lion’s Club). West Indians founded the “Literary Society,” which later became the “Atlantic Club.” Interestingly, the club came to be known as a “Black man’s” or Creole club, and not a West Indian or Jamaican club.

Indeed, by the 1950s the Afro-Caribbean population of Puerto Cabezas, the majority of whom had arrived within the last generation, increasingly identified itself as Creole, a category that was understood in the popular imagination to refer to the descendants of slaves brought to the Mosquito Coast by English colonists. Nevertheless, I almost never came across a “Creole” who did not trace at least one side of his or her family to twentieth-century immigrants from the West Indies. The same was true for many self-proclaimed Miskitos in Puerto Cabezas.

Even on those occasions when White women chose to live in Puerto Cabezas with their husbands, they rarely worked for wages in the zone. Very few other women accompanied their male family members to Puerto Cabezas. In addition to women’s own productive work in their respective countries, they frequently received remittances from their distant husbands and brothers, who in most cases were contracted on a yearly basis and fully intended to return to their homes in Colón (Panama), Limón (Costa Rica), Jamaica, the Cayman Islands, and the Virgin Islands. The same was often the case with Nicaraguan workers from distant parts of the Atlantic and Pacific regions, who most frequently did not intend to place permanent roots in Puerto Cabezas. These workers, almost always men, used wage labor in Puerto Cabezas and the company “farms” as just one part of a larger, cyclical economic strategy that included subsistence farming and, in some cases, hunting and gathering in or near their respective homes.

Puerto Cabezas during “company time” was notorious for its abundance of brothels. The abundance of women employed as “sex workers” in a plantation and company-town setting is entirely consistent with
other characterizations of similar social situations (Enloe 1989; Bourgois 1989).\textsuperscript{13}

Company Commissaries and the Cultural Impact of Economic Dependence

Especially interesting is the use of script payment and company stores as means of inculcating consumer values, thus a desire to work for a wage, among laborers. The company consistently noted the tendency of the work force to develop a subsistence alternative and become unavailable as wage labor. It used movies, sports, advertising, and company newspapers as more subtle means of encouraging a worker consciousness suitable to its purposes. (Aviva Chomsky 1996, 11)

The Standard Fruit Company in Puerto Cabezas, like the more well-known United Fruit Company, consciously engaged in the creation of “consumer values” among its workforce as a way of shaping them, ideologically and physically, to most effectively suit the company’s needs. In many ways the internalization of this “consumer culture” crosscut the different racial categories used by Porteños. By establishing a system in which workers were paid in company script redeemable at the company-owned commissary and discouraging the formation of an agricultural sector that might have served the food needs of the port, the company created a profound dependence among Porteños on goods imported from the United States and, later, the Coco River region. This dependence, in turn, became naturalized, resulting in Porteños actively valuing the cosmopolitan nature of the region and their own cosmopolitanism. This self-perception of cosmopolitanism stood in stark opposition to the Pacific Nicaraguan perception of the region as isolated and underdeveloped.

As many social scientists have observed, Costeños nostalgically recall the “golden age” (Helms 1971, 113) of the banana boom and the subsequent rubber, lumber, mining, and tuno booms (between the mid-1930s and the early 1960s) when cash and goods were relatively easily attainable from US companies and their commissaries operating throughout the Mosquito Coast (Helms 1971; Nietschmann 1973; Dennis 1981; Bourgois 1981; Jenkins Molieri 1986; Vilas 1989). Puerto
Cabezas was the international transportation hub of the northern Mosquito Coast region through which foreign goods entered and raw materials departed. In the twentieth century Puerto Cabezas eclipsed Bluefields, the historical cultural and political capital of the region, as the most important port of the region. Because of the lower availability of lumber and minerals in the southern region, as well as the shallowness of the Bluefields harbor, only US banana and fishing companies (industries that did not require a modern deep-water port) used the Bluefields port extensively.14 Puerto Cabezas provided the deep-water port that was required by the North American mining and large-scale lumber companies that established themselves in the northern Mosquito Coast in the twentieth century. Puerto Cabezas became the most important and active port of the entire Mosquito Coast and one of the major ports of the Caribbean coastline of Central America. Given that Puerto Cabezas’ raison d’être was to serve as an international port, it is not surprising that Porteños also regarded the agro-industrial boom periods of the twentieth century as “good times” in which life in the port city was best.

One of the defining features of US company towns in the Americas was the company commissary. From the perspective of the American bosses, the company store was a necessity in sparsely populated regions where local food and artisanal production was insufficient and no significant merchant class existed. It also made financial sense (in light of the high costs of transportation) to load bananas, lumber, and rubber for transport to the United States and to unload US products for sale.15 In order to assure a market for its goods, the Standard Fruit Company followed the lead of many other banana companies of its day and paid workers in company script. Weekly steamships, only two days out of New Orleans, docked at the pier in Puerto Cabezas laden with provisions and food. Informants remember that during “company time,” they ate bread made from American wheat, ate meat slaughtered in New Orleans, and enjoyed fresh vegetables from the farms of Louisiana. Country music, another import from the US South, continues to be the music of choice in Port.

The companies paid part of the earnings of their employees with a company script (known as “coupons”) redeemable in the commissaries of the zone and the inland “camps” (Karnes 1978, 116). The remainders
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of the salaries were usually paid in US dollars. In some cases the company would advance merchandise to its workers and then subtract this amount from their weekly salaries (Vilas 1989, 48). Although at the time workers frequently opposed the “coupon” policy and protested the high prices and lack of variety in the company stores (ibid., 112), my modern Porteño informants generally regarded the stores as having played a positive role in the life of the city. One Porteño, who had worked as a mechanic during “company time,” recalled: “Here in Port a person had everything. If the gringos didn’t have it then the Chinos would have it on the commercial strip. Every week ships full of products came straight from the United States and they were good products . . . the same ones that the gringos used—rubber boots, soaps, shirts, you name it. And parts for motors? All kinds.”

German and Chinese immigrants established stores along the “Calle Commercial,” which extended northward for a half-mile from the outer edge of the zone to the residential area of Bilwi. Although these commercial outlets competed to some extent with the company commissaries, this competition was mitigated by the fact that they relied heavily on shipping lines controlled by the companies. The merchants of the Calle Commercial, in contrast to the itinerant North Americans, considered themselves “natives” of the city, and with the profits of their businesses came to represent a local bourgeoisie whose wealth is now legendary.

Porteños greatly valued the ease of communication with the United States, particularly in light of the difficulty of communication with the Pacific Coast. Until recently, no telephone, telegraph, radio, or all-weather road service existed between the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the primary mode of intra-regional communication took the form of a network of radio transmitters set up by US companies. Porteños recall nostalgically the days in which letters to and from the United States would arrive at their destination in less than two weeks. A number of my older Porteño informants had taken advantage of the fast and easy contact with the United States to take mail-order courses that trained them to be electricians, mechanics, carpenters, and so on, all trades that qualified them for jobs in a semi-industrial port city. Porteños subscribed to US magazines and received reasonably current US newspapers. The loss of such ties to
the United States and the Caribbean precipitated by the departure of US companies (punctuated by the foreign evacuations in response the Sandinista Revolution) has created, to modify Helms’s term, an “ethic of isolation” among Porteños.19

At mid-century, regular steamship service existed between Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields on a vessel known as the Bluefields Express. This vessel has been immortalized by the song of the same name performed by the Costeño musical group Dimensión Costeña. The song, infused with an unmistakable Caribbean beat, has become part of the canon of Nicaraguan folkloric music (música folklórica). However, in contrast to Pacific Nicaraguan folkoric music, which has backward-looking rural themes and is played on the marimba by musicians dressed in peasant’s clothing, the nationally-recognized “typical” music of the Atlantic Coast, sung in English and Miskitu by jazzily dressed Costeños, is performed on electric instruments and lyrically addresses themes that emphasize modernity and connection to the Caribbean.20 The lyrics of “Bluefields Express” are as follows:

Come take a ride on the Bluefields Express
Check inside on the Bluefields Express
She’s coming down here quick
She have a hot smoke coming out of the chimney
She is throwing back smoke
Come take a ride on the Bluefields Express.

During “company time” a rivalry developed between Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields. These cities were the two main ports of the Mosquito Coast and also were the base of operation of rival US fruit companies: Standard Fruit in Puerto Cabezas and United Fruit in Bluefields. The waxing and waning of the company labor rolls promoted a constant exchange of people between Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields. This resulted in the establishment of kin ties between the two port cities in which the “big families” of Bluefields (Hodgson, Downs, Cuthbert, Sujo, and Wilson among others) established themselves in Puerto Cabezas.

This lively rivalry manifested itself in the form of massively attended sporting tournaments (baseball and basketball) that were sponsored by the US companies, such as the “Serie del Atlántico” (Atlantic Series).
The trip aboard the *Bluefields Express* lasted less than five hours and people remembered that it was comfortable and safe. As one athlete recalled:

Before Sandino time [the Sandinista Revolution of 1979] Port was *alegre*, man. The Bluefields boys them come up here to play, boy. They play good . . . Lagoon boys too. They come up here with all the *fanático* them. And musicians come too. We play all day and dance all night, boy. All we want was to beat the Bluefields boys them. Nothing else matter. When we go to Bluefields they see about Port people. Next boys them bring their whole family on the boat, man. They bring food and rum and every damn thing. We all stay with our people in Bluefields—all the Port People have family in Bluefields.

The availability of fast, safe, and relatively inexpensive transportation between Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields (and to a lesser extent smaller villages such as Cape Gracias a Dios, Prinzapolka, Pearl Lagoon, and Greytown) made these cultural and athletic exchanges possible. The above quoted informant jokingly contrasted his memories of “company time” to the present, in which “you can’t even go to Lamlaya [a small but important river port two kilometers from Puerto Cabezas] because the road so bad.” The overland route to Managua, described by a journalist as a grueling *odisea* (odyssey), is an infamously difficult route (Treminio Urbina 2002).

Porteños recalled that Puerto Cabezas was an international city in which people of diverse nationalities mingled on a daily basis. In the testimonies of my informants, the constant flux of people between Puerto Cabezas and distant ports of call was highly valued and was contrasted to the provincialism of the Pacific Coast, including Managua. Porteños described Puerto Cabezas as a strikingly multinational city that, in the idiom of Atlantic Coast, contained every kind of “race” and “nation.” One Porteño stated: “During company time many people lived here . . . from the States, from Jamaica, from Germany, from Grand Cayman, from Panama, everything. Every nation came to Bilwi in order to work. Bilwi was a big city [tawan tara].”

In both the English and Miskitu of the Mosquito Coast, the word “nation” does not correspond to its use in North American English. In
the popular usage of the Mosquito Coast, “nation” is a term that can best be described as a fusion of the North American terms “nationality” and “ethnic group.” Costeños generally recognize foreigners as members of their respective “nations” (in this case nationalities), but within Nicaragua they also recognize Indians, Blacks, and Spaniards as “nations.”

In sum, the distinctive feature of Puerto Cabezas, which Porteños most referred to in their narratives of “company time,” was the level of “action” (in English) or movimiento (in Spanish) in the city. Although they recognized that work opportunities were unstable and that pay in the US companies was low, they valued the dynamism of the coastal economy. In their narrative of “company time,” Porteños consistently emphasized the past “action” of Puerto Cabezas that contrasted with its present stagnation or “sadness” (tristeza). My informants constantly lamented that “el puerto esta palmado,” or “the port is busted,” and “No hay movimiento”—“there is no action.” “Action” for Porteños signified the presence of a wide variety of international industrial and commercial interests that directly and indirectly resulted in economic opportunities for Porteños. The perception of action promoted in Porteños a highly valued sense of connection to the wider world.

North American ethnographers have noted that Costeños, particularly Miskito Indians, value their present and historical ties to the English-speaking Atlantic world and overestimate the importance and the centrality of their position within that world. Charles Hale and Edmund Gordon, for example, recognized what they respectively call “Anglo affinity” and “Anglo ideology” as central elements of Miskito and Creole worldviews (Hale 1994, 15; Gordon 1995, 6; 1998, 198).

Based on observations made during her fieldwork in the 1960s, Mary Helms claimed that the Miskito rejected the Hispanic “sphere of influence” and “imitated” the Anglo-American “sphere of influence” (Helms 1971, 221). She argued that the Miskito attempted “to feel psychologically a part of modern times,” but that this created anxieties because “the Miskito do not fully understand the nature of the modern world” (Helms 1971, 220). She wrote:

For example, at the time of this study the news was heavy with the increasing military involvement of the United States in Vietnam. However, reports of fighting in the Far East were interpreted by the
people of Asang to mean that the war would very likely soon affect them, because once they too experienced conflict on their river in which the United States was involved (the Sandino Affair), and if it happened once it could happen again. People talked incessantly about keeping an eye out for airplanes and awaiting an attack. Yet beneath the tension was a feeling that it was a mark of importance and recognition to have war on the river, or, in other words, if warfare were part of the modern world, the Miskito should be involved also. (Helms 1971, 221)

This phenomenon (a certain geopolitical self-importance that leads to an overestimation of their significance in world affairs) is related to the inevitable cultural impact of a regionally specific political economy in which exchange between Costeños and Anglo-Americans has created a profound dependency on interaction with more powerful external actors. This dependency and the ideologies that correspond with it need to be viewed as regionally specific, not ethnically specific.

The US-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in the 1960s was launched from Puerto Cabezas (A. Adams 1992, 145). As a result of the close cold-war-era ties between the US government and the Somoza dictatorship, which was supported by the US-armed and US-trained Nicaraguan National Guard, the US military provided “aid” and “technical assistance” in the construction and maintenance of a paved airstrip on the outskirts of Puerto Cabezas. The airstrip, which was long enough to support civilian and military cargo planes as well as fighter planes, was of strategic importance for the US and Nicaraguan militaries. For residents of Puerto Cabezas, whose precarious economic existence relied on the availability of transportation, the airstrip represented an important and valued link to national and international markets. Indeed, during my fieldwork the rumor that a major airline was going to make a stop in Puerto Cabezas on the main Miami-Managua route spread widely among excited but skeptical residents.

Porteños recalled the brief period before the Bay of Pigs invasion when Puerto Cabezas was filled with “action” as Cuban exiles and their US advisors prepared for the invasion of Cuba. The army provisions and supplies that were left behind at their departure (such as mattresses, tents, and weapons) filled the formal and informal markets of the city. In
general, Porteños welcomed the infusion of goods and capital into the local economy that was caused by the buildup in Puerto Cabezas prior to the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

What was remarkable about my informants’ recollection of the Bay of Pigs invasion was the matter-of-factness with which they regarded their city’s brush with first-order geopolitical intrigue. It did not strike my informants as anomalous or fanciful that Puerto Cabezas should play a major role in an invasion that eventually led to a nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union. In this sense Porteños conformed to Helms’s characterization (of the Miskito) in which she identified the exaggerated need “to feel psychologically a part of modern times” (Helms 1971, 220). Like the Miskito villagers with whom Helms worked on the Rio Coco in the 1960s, modern Porteños manifest what I prefer to call geopolitical self-importance that is absent from the Pacific region.

The Mosquito Coast region has in fact been drawn into the center of US foreign policy on many occasions in the twentieth century. From the US Marine occupation of region in the 1920s and 1930s, to the Bay of Pigs invasion of the 1960s, to the US sponsorship of Mosquito Coast Contras, to the current targeting of the Miskito Coast by the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) in the US “War on Drugs,” Porteños have many compelling reasons to recognize their role in hemispheric politics.

**Booms and Busts: Race and Political Economy in the Mosquito Coast**

In contrast to the traditional sugar and tobacco regions of the Caribbean, where after emancipation ex-slaves and their descendants resisted working for wages on plantations and, whenever possible, attempted to engage in subsistence farming (becoming Sidney Mintz’s “reconstituted peasantry”), a large-scale plantation or slave economy never operated on the Mosquito Coast. Porteños to this day devalue subsistence agriculture and take pride in the fact that they have urban-oriented jobs and lifestyles. Unlike other banana-growing areas like Costa Rica and Colombia, where the US companies occupied lands immediately adjacent to their corporate headquarters, the Standard Fruit and NIPCO banana and lumber lands, as well as the gold, silver, zinc,
and lead mines of the interior, were relatively distant from Puerto Cabezas—a fact that discouraged workers from abandoning wage labor and reconstituting themselves as a peasantry.  

In the twentieth century, rural Costeños significantly increased their production of agricultural products for sale in local and regional markets. This change is particularly noteworthy because the region had historically lacked a significant peasantry. The inhabitants of the Mosquito Coast, regardless of their putative ethnic or racial label, had for hundreds of years traded naturally occurring forest and marine products with Anglo-Americans for manufactured goods (including foods such as flour, cooking oil, and rum). In the trading ports of the region, the demand for food was filled by both regional and international trade; regionally traded products obtained from small-scale swidden agriculture (as well as hunting and gathering) were supplemented by imported international foodstuffs (Helms 1971, 4). In rural areas, Costeños satisfied their food needs by practicing a combination of swidden agriculture, fishing, hunting, and gathering. They regularly obtained manufactured items by participating in intermittent wage labor, barter, and the sale of forest and marine products such as turtle meat (Nietschmann 1973).

In the twentieth century, however, as large-scale lumber, banana, mining, rubber, tuno, and other companies established themselves in the Mosquito Coast, the demand for foodstuffs increased as the non-subsistence sector of the region’s population rapidly grew. Consequently, the agricultural production increased as rural Costeños began to increase their production of “cash crops” destined for regional markets. These cash crops, primarily rice and beans, had not historically been incorporated into the diet of Costeños, who regarded rice and beans as “Spanish food.”

Helms, noting that this shift towards agricultural production for regional markets was relatively new, argued that despite this recent turn to peasant-like production, the Miskito Indians did not represent a classic Mesoamerican peasantry because the region had never been drawn into the surplus-extracting mechanisms of a nation-state. She wrote:

From the point of view of the Miskito, the motivation to participate in such activities was not based on inescapable demands by state officials for a share in their energies and production, as is the case
with peasant-agrarian state relations. Instead it centered on a growing desire for the foreign material goods which quickly became cultural necessities for them over the years, a situation that Kroeber has termed “voluntary acculturation.” Although the introduction of these goods came originally from the outside world, it was the increasing dependence on such items as manufactured cloth, iron tools, sewing machines, and rum that provided the impetus for continued Miskito involvement with the West. (Helms 1971, 6)

Helms observed that rural Costeños, particularly those living along the fertile banks of the Coco River, increasingly met their entrenched demand for foreign goods through the agricultural production of foodstuffs for sale in regional markets. In the decade from 1960 to 1970 this process accelerated as increasing number of Pacific campesinos immigrated to the region.28

Starting in the late 1940s, the populous Coco River region became the breadbasket of the Mosquito Coast, establishing itself as the major supplier of food to Puerto Cabezas (Vilas 1989, 48).29 Waspám, a riverside city one hundred kilometers from Cape Gracias a Dios, became the tawan tara (big city) of the Coco River with a bustling panga (small motorboat) traffic that linked it the approximately seventy villages below and above it (Gomez 1991, 43).30 Major US companies established offices at Waspám and made a major investment in the improvement and maintenance of the Puerto Cabezas–Waspám road. This road became the best and longest intra-regional road in the entire Mosquito Coast.

In the 1940s the US-based Rubber Reserve Corporation, based in Waspám, established more than forty commissaries on and around the Coco River. These commissaries supplied goods to as many as five thousand Costeño rubber collectors in addition to two hundred plant workers in Waspám (Vilas 1989, 48). By the 1960s the World War II-inspired rubber boom had expired as Southeast Asian rubber production returned to prewar levels. In the meantime, NIPCO had established a lumber-processing facility across the river from Waspám in the now-Honduran city of Leimus.31 Pine extraction peaked in the mid-1950s, and by 1963 NIPCO abandoned Nicaragua.

In 1955 Wrigley’s Gum Company of Chicago established a tuno processing plant in Waspám (Vilas 1989, 77).32 The Wrigley company

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functioned primarily as a buyer and technical adviser to Coco River tuno collectors, who bled tuno trees throughout the region and brought their crudely treated blocks to Waspám for sale. Wrigley closed operations in 1979 due to the Sandinista revolution.

The final major company that opened in or around Waspám was ATCHEMCO of the United States. In the mid-1960s, ATCHEMCO (Atlantic Chemical Company) acquired and expanded a large resin and turpentine plant in a virtually uninhabited place twenty kilometers out of Waspám on the Puerto Cabezas–Waspám road (Rivera and Vernooy 1991, 22). ATCHEMCO used as its raw material the resin-rich tree stumps that NIPCO had left behind when it abandoned the region after twenty years of devastating logging of Nicaraguan pine stands (Jenkins Molieri 1986, 203). The industrial complex at La Tronquera, which directly employed as many as five hundred Nicaraguan workers housed in company *barracones*, represented a “miniature social universe” (*micro universo social*) (Gomez 1991, 53) that in many ways conformed to the company-town pattern of Puerto Cabezas in the prewar era. In the memories of Porteños, the “action” of Waspám in the early 1960s and 1970s rivaled the then-dwindling “action” of Puerto Cabezas. This turn of events was particularly galling for Porteños because they had long regarded the Coco River as an underdeveloped Indian backwater.

After the bust of the banana industry in the early 1940s, the second-most prominent extractive industry (behind logging) on the coast was mining. Three Canadian- and US-owned mines operated a hundred and fifty kilometers west of Puerto Cabezas in the jungle mining cities of Siuna, Rosita, and Bonanza. The economic void in Puerto Cabezas caused by the closing of NIPCO in 1963 was for the most part filled by mine-related commerce as Puerto Cabezas played an important role in the transfer of products and raw materials to and from “the mines” (the term used by Costeños). Like the Standard Fruit Company in Puerto Cabezas before World War II, the North American mining companies of the postwar period practiced a policy of residential segregation, dividing workers into neighborhoods based on their place in the labor hierarchy. Given the undeniable correlation between the socio-racial identifications (as grin-gos, Creoles, Miskitos, and Mestizos) of workers and their place in the labor hierarchy, these neighborhoods were perceived to have a particular
“ethnic” constitution (Jenkins Molieri 1986, 204). In the mining town of Siuna, for example, an area called “Jamaica Town” was known as a Creole neighborhood. Rural Costeños, most of whom went to the mines in search of seasonal wage labor, lived in the lowest-quality housing. American technicians lived in air conditioned homes on hillside compounds, complete with tennis courts and swimming pools. Nicaraguans were excluded from these “American zones.”

The Costeño villagers of the region in effect formed a “reserve army” of laborers that could be hired and fired at will according to the vagaries of production (T. Adams 1981, 59). The lowest-level workers, who most frequently came from isolated rural Costeño villages that were considered Indian (Miskito and Sumu), seasonally migrated to the mines in search of wage labor. In the mines these workers suffered an alarmingly high rate of silicosis, a lethal lung disease (T. Adams 1981, 69–71).

North American management often favored English-speaking Costeños, many of whom already had work experience with North American companies, over monolingual (Miskitu-, Sumu-, and Spanish-speaking) Nicaraguans. Costeños who possessed skills, experience, and sufficient fluency in English were often given higher-level positions such as office work or overseer. Given that proficiency in English as well as formal education were, in the racial ideology of the region, associated with the term Creole, Creoles were perceived to enjoy a privileged position vis-à-vis Indians and Spaniards. This division of labor, consciously promoted by foreign companies, undoubtedly contributed to the contextual hardening of the porous division between Creoles and Miskitos. This, of course, is not to say that people who primarily identified themselves as Miskito or Spaniard did not hold some of these positions. Indeed, my Porteño informants, some of whom identified themselves as Spaniards and Miskitos, worked at higher-level jobs in the mines. Although they did not use the term “Creole,” they in effect passed as Creoles because by speaking English, coming from Puerto Cabezas, and having a trade or clerical skills, they could occupy the role that corresponded to Creoles. Clearly, ethnic identification in this context was not an inherent quality of an individual; rather, it intersected in complex and mutually constitutive ways with one’s position within the larger political economy.
With regard to the relationship between education and socio-racial identifications, it is important to note that the official evangelizing strategies of the Moravian Church in the twentieth century recognized and incorporated the distinction between Creoles and Indians into their education policy. This is particularly significant given the fact that until the 1950s the Moravian Church and other missionary churches ran almost every school in the Mosquito Coast region. In some cases the educational policies of the churches helped reinforce the so-called ethnic hierarchy in the North American industries of the region. Take, for example, the following North American Moravian missionary’s description of the Moravian school at Wasla, a small Indian village: “The mission had begun an industrial school [in Wasla] as an experiment. A school which taught reading, writing and perhaps simple arithmetic was all right, but this seldom helped an Indian boy or girl get a job when he was older” (Borhek 1949, 27). The Moravian school taught shoe making to the children of Wasla because “shoes were important for work on plantations” (ibid.). Until the 1960s, the urban schools of Bluefields and Puerto Cabezas were “Creole schools” that used English and Spanish as the languages of instruction, and were superior to rural schools that generally used Miskitu as the language of instruction. The above example represents a classic self-fulfilling prophecy in which rural Miskito children were educated to assume a subordinate position in the labor hierarchy.

What few government positions that did exist were almost exclusively occupied by Hispanic Nicaraguans, leaving Costeños politically disenfranchised. The highest-level political office normally held by Costeños was that of the village “headmen” or “síndico” who served as a link between the state and the local community. Under Nicaraguan rule each village acted as an autonomous unit within the state. The síndico was responsible for collecting relevant taxes and registering civil events such as marriage, divorce, births, and deaths (Helms 1971, 166).

Motivated by the postwar cotton boom and increasing concern about rapid resource depletion, the Nicaraguan government began to make greater efforts to integrate the region into the national governmental and economic structures. Viewed as a vast and underpopulated frontier, the region began to be used as an outlet for campesino migration from the Pacific. In the 1950s many Pacific campesinos, who had
historically engaged in peasant agriculture, were forced from their lands by aggressive cotton producers. These cotton producers, driven by the favorable price of cotton on the world market, rapidly displaced campesinos from Pacific farmland (Vilas 1989, 60–97).

Pacific campesino migration was not a new phenomenon in the Atlantic Coast. Before 1950 many campesinos were attracted to the region by the opportunities for wage labor. However, never had migration occurred on such a large scale. From 1963 to 1971 the population of the Atlantic Coast increased 63 percent (from 88,963 to 145,508), while the overall population of Nicaragua increased only 22 percent (Vilas 1989, 72). The abundance of land and low population, which traditionally had allowed rural Costeños to retain their subsistence base in spite of the presence of capitalist enterprises, became challenged by the influx of the dispossessed peasantry of the Pacific region. This process of Pacific campesino penetration continues to this day, but after the Contra War, Miskito communities have fiercely guarded community lands, as the February 2004 forced eviction of forty campesino families by two hundred armed Miskito residents of Layasiksa (in the mining district) attests (Martinez 2004).

The developmentalist climate of the era deeply influenced the Nicaraguan government during the Somoza dictatorship. With the help of the World Bank, the Nicaraguan government created two organizations aimed at regulating the “colonization” of the region: INFONAC (Institute for National Development) and IAN (Nicaraguan Agrarian Institute). INFONAC initiated a reforestation project in which it created and took charge of immense forest reserves. INFONAC did not consult with the Costeño villagers of the region despite the fact that 12 percent of the reserve land overlapped with lands claimed (both collectively and individually) by Costeños living in villages that had received title to communal lands as a result of the land-titling process initiated by the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty of 1905 (Jenkins Molieri 1986, 290–292). INFONAC placed restrictions and taxes on the use of natural resources in these areas. This practice embittered Costeño villagers who had never experienced a comparable level of government interference with regard to these lands. The affected villagers, threatened by the new measures, set forest fires in protest. A remedy to this conflict was not attempted until the mid 1970s, when IAN gave land titles to sixteen
villages that had been affected by INFONAC’s reforestation projects (Jenkins Molieri 1986, 299–305).

Apart from the reforestation projects, the government attempted to carry out what it called an agrarian reform. However, it is clear that this agrarian reform represented mostly a mechanical transfer of population from west to east, as well as the increased regulation and taxation by the Nicaraguan government of foreign and national lumber companies operating in the region. In 1974 the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza declared: “Once again I repeat to the young people of the countryside who are suffering because all the land is occupied, that here are the Atlantic Coast and the Coast people waiting for them to come to make it part of our country and to make the most progressive and the greatest agrarian reform in Latin America” (Vilas 1989, 78).

At first the government put campesino migrants to work primarily on transforming the western part of the region into a cattle-exporting zone. Later, campesino migrants continued to advance eastward, clearing land for farming. Inland Costeños, mainly Sumu Indians, were often driven from their lands. It has been approximated that during this period, about 300,000 acres of tropical forest were lost per year (ibid., 75). Between 1964 and 1973, IAN gave titles to 2,594,550 acres of land located in the Mosquito Coast to 16,000 families. Half of these grants were given to recent Pacific Nicaraguan campesinos migrants (ibid., 67). The majority of these campesinos cultivated crops for sale in the regional and national markets.

This increase in migration and agriculture was accompanied by a decrease in exports from the region. The 1960s were marked by a rapid decline in the production of wood and minerals as a result of the exhaustion of these natural resources. At the end of the 1960s copper mining virtually ended. This occurred only a few years after copper mining had been the Coast’s most lucrative enterprise. Between 1963 and 1971, 60 percent of mining jobs were lost (approximately 1,800 workers) (ibid., 77). In the period from 1966 to 1975, copper, which in 1966 had represented 59 percent of the region’s exports, declined to only 2 percent.

Seafood production (mostly for export to the United States) (ibid., 76) and resins (derived by ATCHEMCO from the tree stumps left by NIPCO) replaced minerals and wood as the major exports of the region. According to Vilas, in 1975 “shellfish and resin accounted for 75 percent of the exports of the region” (ibid., 83).
Major international oil companies, which previously manifested little interest in Nicaragua, received massive exploration concessions from the Nicaraguan government in the 1970s. More than 90 percent of these concessions were on the lands and waters of the Mosquito Coast (ibid., 77).

The wage labor opportunities offered by these new industries did not replace those lost by the “bust” of the previous industries. As I mentioned above, the unavailability of wage labor, and the associated lack of ability to purchase foreign goods, created an ethic of deprivation in cities and villages all over the region, not simply Miskito villages as the ethno- graphic literature seems to suggest.

The Rise of Indian Institutions and Indian Collective Action

In the 1960s and 1970s the issue of communal land titles, which had been originally guaranteed for “Mosquito Indians” and “Creoles” by the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty of 1905, became a highly charged point of contention between Costeño communities, North American companies, and the national government. The land tenure situation became more contentious as a result of the following two factors: (1) many Nicaraguan Miskito Indian villagers were relocated within national territory when Nicaragua lost a large portion of territory (all in the Atlantic Coast region) to Honduras in a 1960 World Court ruling; and (2) in 1974 the IAN (Nicaraguan Agrarian Institute) granted titles to villages that lay on or near the huge “forest reserves,” which, in the face of opposition by Costeños, were being demarcated in areas claimed by Costeño cities and villages (Jenkins Molieri 1986, 290–306).

Despite the continued controversy surrounding the issue of land titles, political mobilization around this issue was limited, in almost all cases occurring on a village-by-village basis. That is to say, the ongoing struggles by Costeños to acquire and protect land titles did not rely on (1) a collective mobilization of villages claiming distinctiveness as Miskitos, Creoles, or any other “ethnic” category; or (2) any formal legal separation between Indian villages, Creole or for that matter campesino (Pacific Nicaraguan). Villages primarily made claims to land on the basis of having been established villages at the time of the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty or, as in the case of many Rio Coco communities in the early
1970s, on the basis of using land that fell within the forest reserves created by the Nicaraguan government at that time. Thus the individual village or “community” represented the key classification around which collective mobilization was exercised. Interestingly, as far as collective political mobilization was concerned, the racial identification of these villages, although in many contexts recognized, was not a particularly salient characteristic.

However, starting in the late 1960s, after at least forty years in which Costeños remained relatively apolitical, mobilization in the Atlantic Coast region increasingly came to be carried out along self-consciously ethnic and racial lines. During this period a number of organizations emerged that attempted to organize Miskito and Sumo Indians as Indians who shared a common collective interest above and beyond their local communities. Although North American missionary churches promoted these organizations, they represented a departure from the missionary church-dominated civil society characteristic of the twentieth-century post-reincorporation history.

Ironically, the Moravian Church during this period had been instrumental in inculcating both a pan-Costeño identification and providing the main institutional support for the salience of the division between Miskitos and Creoles. On the one hand, the very fact that the Moravian Church represented a Protestant missionary church that almost exclusively operated in the Atlantic Coast (in contrast to the Catholic Church, which had been firmly entrenched in the Pacific since the time of the conquest) helped to provide an institutional basis for Costeño self-identification as Costeños. To be Moravian was to be Costeño, and profoundly not español. The Moravian Church held “provincial synod” meetings every three years in which pastors and religious representatives from villages with churches throughout the region would meet to deal with church matters. Throughout the twentieth century these regional church meetings represented the primary event that, in addition to labor migration, allowed Costeños to tangibly experience their regional unity as a series of communities connected by a common faith and a common religious institution—an institution that was not shared by “Spaniards” from the Pacific.

On the other hand, the Moravian missionaries (whose skill and enthusiasm in learning “native” languages served them in the missionary
activities throughout the Americas) quite consciously divided their missionary activities in two branches: the first aimed at Creoles and conducted in English; the second conducted in Miskitu and Sumu and aimed at Indians.\textsuperscript{43}

The role of Miskito and Sumu organizations starting in the late 1960s differed from role of the Moravian Church in that they were explicitly Indian organizations that did not attempt to create a separate parallel organization among Creoles. ALPROMISU (Alianza para el Progreso de Sumus y Miskitos, Alliance for the Progress of the Miskito and Sumu) was formed in 1974 with the encouragement and guidance of North American Capuchin missionary priests, Moravian Church members (both North American and Costeño), and members of the Peace Corps.\textsuperscript{44} Like ACARIC (Association of Agricultural Clubs of the Río Coco)\textsuperscript{45} before it, a principal goal of ALPROMISU was to organize Coco River growers and collectors of foodstuffs and tuno\textsuperscript{46} into marketing cooperatives that could demand better prices from regional merchants (mostly “españoles” and Chinese) who operated primarily out of Waspám, the capital city of the Coco River. The difficulty of navigating this river, in many ways a social and economic world to itself, often put cultivators (regardless of their ethnic identification) at the mercy of these merchants. In some cases villages that did not have storage facilities found themselves compelled to sell the majority of their rice and beans at harvest time at a low price, only to have to buy them back later at a much higher price. The folding of ACARIC (which in two years of existence had organized fifty-three Coco River communities) in 1972 provided the incentive to create ALPROMISU to continue to combat this process (CAPRI 1992, 58). In addition to this goal, ALPROMISU also aimed to advocate for the Indian villages whose lands were being engulfed by the new forestry projects of the national government.

The impulse to form such organizations was heightened by the economic crisis in the region. By this time the northern Atlantic Coast region was enduring a sustained economic “bust” in which foreign goods and wage opportunities were scarce as a result of the closing and curtailing of major foreign industries. Costeños tended to view their quality of life as having been much higher during the earlier “company time” and bemoaned their current situation in which they found
themselves forced to find viable alternatives to the economic supplement previously provided by wage labor. Mary Helms, who conducted fieldwork at this time in an upriver village on the Coco River, described this Miskito reaction to the economic bust as an “ethic of poverty” (Helms 1971, 156). Given that Costeño representation in Nicaraguan governmental and nongovernmental organizations was almost nonexistent, Costeños turned to regional networks to attempt to address the economic and social problems faced by their communities.

Organizations such as ALPROMISU and ACARIC, although not run directly by churches, were promoted by the social service-oriented wings of religious organizations, many of which were heavily influenced by the Vatican II and “liberation theology” calls to address material poverty as well as spiritual and moral poverty (Hawley 1997, 120). In many ways the Vatican II calls for “social action” represented just one example of a larger shift towards greater economic engagement by both Catholic and Protestant denominations. In the case of ALPROMISU, the organization received funding from CEPAD (Comité Ecuménico para el Desarrollo), an ecumenical organization devoted to economic development in the Atlantic Coast (Sanders 1985, 81).

In May of 1974 ALPROMISU held its first annual meeting, in which five hundred participants from eighty-four Miskito and Sumu communities attended (Hale 1994, 127). The meeting was held in Sisín, an inland village about twenty kilometers northwest of Puerto Cabezas. Many of the leaders who participated in the first meeting were pastors in the Moravian Church, which after the 1974 Synod meeting held in Bluefields abruptly became an independently funded and locally run “associated province” of the international Moravian Church (C. García 1996, 100; A. Adams 1992, 174). Church facilities in Sisín, a community that at the time had no more than five hundred inhabitants, were used by the organization with full cooperation of the church authorities.

According to my informants, the meeting was very similar to the periodic pan-regional church meetings that occurred regularly in the region. Collective kitchens were set up at different homes in the region, and community members were asked to lodge delegates, many of whom had traveled for as long as two days by foot and by river. Christian prayers were offered at the beginning and end of each session, and at the conclusion of the meeting the delegates returned to their respective
villages in order to provide a report to villagers during masses and services at the local village churches (Hawley 1997, 121; Hale 1994, 128).

The main feature that distinguished this meeting from the regular pan-regional church meetings was that it took place outside of the main cities of the region (Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon, Puerto Cabezas, Bilwaskarma, and Waspam) and delegates from southern English-speaking (Creole) villages were conspicuously absent. The location of this meeting was significant because on an ideological level Costeños identify Creoles with urban areas and Miskitos with rural areas. Within the Moravian Church, Miskitu-speaking pastors had long complained that their congregations were considered second class and that Miskito lacked representation in the church hierarchy (Hale 1994, 126, CAPRI 1992, 60). This complaint was grounded in the historical policy of the church to use English-speaking Creole pastors, often trained in the theological seminary in Costa Rica, to evangelize in Miskito regions (Wilson 1975).

It is interesting to note that many of these Creole pastors, most of who were from Bluefields, viewed themselves as superior to the Miskito and perceived their work in the northern (Miskito) regions as “missionary” work in a manner similar to that of North American Moravians performing missionary work among Costeños. To follow Susan Gal’s use of the concept of recursivity, it could be said that from the Creole perspective, the Creole-Miskito relationship recursively mirrored the larger North American-Costeño relationship. This posture taken by English-speaking Creoles on one level would seem to represent an example of the alleged Creole over-identification with North Americans—what Gordon has labeled “Anglo ideology” (Gordon 1995, 6). However, there is an important geographic factor that must be considered.

In the course of my fieldwork I found that a number of Moravian pastors who were raised in Puerto Cabezas but primarily identified themselves as Miskitos also conceived of their service over the years in inland and riverine Miskito communities as “missionary” work: Missionary work among people not only less exposed to God’s teaching but also less “prepared” and less “civilized” than themselves. These Porteño Moravian pastors had been sent by the church to work in small and relatively remote Miskito villages in the 1950s and 1960s.

Their recollections of service in the “communities” were marked by a combination of nostalgia and a kind of ethnographic sensibility, both
of which were infused with a deeply ingrained sense of superiority and paternalism. They recalled the “communities” as idyllic places of great natural beauty where life was easier and more tranquil. In contrast to the city, many vices such as thievery, drunkenness, and violence were absent. Also people were more friendly and approachable. In addition, they described the villagers as highly superstitious and unreflective in their Christianity. They viewed their experiences in the “communities” as an opportunity to learn about the “ways” of the rural villagers. Given that they considered themselves distanced from their Miskito “raíces” [roots], they welcomed the chance to have exposure to a village setting, the ideological center of Miskito life. However, while they and their families were in the field, they made sure that their children did not “mix” very much with the villagers, and they insisted that their children be educated in Puerto Cabezas and Managua so that they could become “prepared.” An inherent part of their ethnological curiosity was a feeling of superiority as Moravian-educated Porteños, Porteños who also identified at some level as Miskitos.

How then are we to interpret this case? Clearly it suggests that some sort of identification with the civilizing project of the Anglo-American and Christian world has occurred among both Creoles and Miskitos, validating the Hale and Gordon notion of Creole “Anglo ideology” and Miskito “Anglo affinity.” On the other hand, this case challenges the analytical value of positing a radical separation between the ideological world of Miskitos and Creoles. In addition to racial and ethnic ideologies, this case must also be understood in the context of regional status hierarchies—namely a rural-urban dynamic in which urbanism is associated with civilization, modernity, and cultural and racial hybridity, while ruralism is associated with a lack of refinement and Miskito cultural purity. It also provides an example of the importance Costeños give to formal education (“preparation”). The Miskito category is crosscut by regionally specific, status-based distinctions. It is precisely such an attention to status differentiation that has been so lacking in the writings on the region—writings that often have ignored these factors in favor of the reification of so-called ethnic distinctions.

The development of ALPROMISU’s institutional philosophies and practices were deeply influenced by trends in both Catholic and Protestant
missionary evangelization that took hold in the late 1960s. In addition to the renewed commitment to social action referred to above, missionaries in the region, influenced by Vatican II, the Episcopal Conference of Medellín, liberation theology, and Paolo Freire’s “liberating education,” devoted themselves to new kinds of culturally responsive methods of evangelization (Hawley 1997, 119). Responding to opponents who criticized missionary work as arrogant and paternalistic, missionaries began to adopt a rhetoric of cultural tolerance, an early version of today’s multiculturalism. Catholic and Protestant missionaries, who in the Atlantic Coast region worked together to a surprising degree, attempted to heed Pope Paul VI’s call to “evangelize cultures.”

Gregorio Smutko, a Capuchin Franciscan friar who worked for twenty-two years (starting in 1967) as a missionary in the region and who served as an adviser to ACARIC, ALPROMISU, and later MISURASATA, was a strong proponent of the need for such an approach that would integrate a group’s culture and history into their evangelization. As an anthropologist with a master’s degree from the University of Wisconsin, he represented an ideal candidate for enacting this approach in eastern Nicaragua among the Miskito Indians. As Indians and therefore as culture-bearing subjects, they fell under the jurisdiction of both missionaries and anthropologists. Smutko was both. He defined “inculturation,” the term used by missiologists to describe this approach to evangelization, in the following manner: “Inculturation . . . is the incarnation of the message of Christ and the Christian life into a culture in such a way that the members of the culture do not consider Christian faith as an imposition from another culture, but rather compatible with the values of their own culture. . . . Gradually Christian values purify the counter values of the culture and a mutual enrichment takes place between cultures (Smutko 1992, 64).

For Smutko this approach was particularly “important in dealing with indigenous groups . . . where many are tempted to consider their culture inferior . . . [and] are tired of being told by outsiders what is wrong with their culture” (ibid., 65). In the name of the battle against intolerance and Euroamerican pretensions of superiority, Smutko strove to merge Christianity and anthropology into what he called “anthropological catechism” (Smutko 1983, 42). Consciously analyzing,
describing and, in a word, objectifying Miskito culture and history as Miskito culture and history then became an integral part of the missionary evangelical project.\textsuperscript{52}

In 1970 Smutko and other Catholic missionaries brought twenty-four “Miskito lay evangelists” from various Coco River villages for an interactive workshop (\textit{cursillo}) titled the “Salvation History of the Miskito.”\textsuperscript{53} During the ten-day workshop the Miskito lay ministers were asked to identify the main features of their history and customs as a nation and then compare these to history and customs of the Hebrew nation as they appeared in the Old Testament. The objective of this exercise was to help the Miskito discover “the seeds of God’s word in their own history” (Smutko 1983, 43). In turn, the Miskito lay ministers, by discovering the parallels between their own history and Biblical scriptures, would more “easily receive God’s word and be seriously committed to better love and serve their communities” (ibid., 45). Smutko wrote: “We are convinced psychologically, anthropologically, theologically and pedagogically it is good to help the miskitos to discover the word of God written in the heart of their people and their ancestors and to discover the salvation history of the miskito nation and then reinforce it with reference to the Biblical similarities between the salvation history of the miskitos and that of the jews” (ibid.).

Clearly, this method took for granted the existence of a discrete Miskito culture and history that was separate from both biblical and modern Christian culture and history. So, for example, the Miskito belief in a single supreme deity called \textit{Wan Aisa} or \textit{Dawan} (a Miskito word probably derived from the English “The One God”) was regarded by the missionaries as an independently derived parallel between indigenous Miskito religion and Christian monotheism (Smutko 1983, 47; also see Conzemius 1932, 129; and Sandoval 1957, 61 for a description of these concepts). The missionaries relied upon a definition of the Rio Coco villagers as an indigenous group (indeed an Indian nation) that possessed a discreet pre-Hispanic culture whose features could be readily discerned from European and Christian contaminants, thereby helping to inculcate in the Miskito a rhetoric of cultural difference and a sense of otherness.

The Miskito lay ministers in conjunction with the Capuchin missionaries constructed a fascinating two-column table, a version of which Smutko partially reprinted in his 1983 article, which visually represented
the parallels between Hebrew history and Miskito history. In the Hebrew column, participants listed elements of Old Testament history, while in the Miskito column they listed the corresponding elements of Miskito culture. Just as the Hebrews “were unaware of their exact origin,” the Miskitos were also said to be unaware of their exact origin (Smutko 1983, 46). Like the Hebrews who regarded Adam and Eve as the first man and woman, the Miskito regarded “Moris Davis” and “Awas Tara” as the first man and woman (ibid.). Like Moses who led the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land, Miskut “came from Honduras with all his tribe to Sita Awala (Cabo Viejo)” (ibid.). The Miskito multiracial heritage in which “the inhabitants of Sandy Bay (Tawira) mixed their blood with that of blacks, englishmen, etc.” was compared to the biblical facts that “many Hebrews married canaanites” and “mixed with other nations [pueblos]” (ibid.). In general, Miskito lay ministers were, through participation in these exercises, being asked to both learn about their history from the missionaries and identify elements of the oral tradition of the region that they, in turn, presented as their own national history.

However, with regard to the issue of the increasing radicalization of Miskito consciousness, by far the most important history lesson that the Miskito lay ministers were supposed to take away from these sessions was that the Miskito not only represented a nation, but that also they had historically been an aggressive and expansive nation that had never been conquered by their Spanish Nicaraguan oppressors. Smutko, in addition to his anthropological and theological interests, was also a historian of the Mosquito Coast. In the 1980s he published a relatively secular history of the region titled La Mosquitia: Historia y Cultura de la Costa Atlántica. At the request of Miskito lay ministers who had participated in his 1987 workshop, the volume was re-published in Miskitu in 1989 (Smutko 1992, 64). During my fieldwork periods in Nicaragua, I noticed that a number of my informants proudly possessed a copy of this bright yellow book.

The title of the Miskitu edition of the book is revealing: Miskitu Nani Aiklabanka, Blasi Piua Wina 1850 Kat, which can be translated as “The Battles of the Miskitos from the Beginning to the Year 1850.” The participants in the 1970 workshops learned the dates and sites of eighteenth-century Miskito confrontations against “the Spanish invaders” that occurred in Pacific Nicaragua and other Spanish-controlled areas of
Central America (Smutko 1983, 46). They noted that just as King David and King Solomon had defeated enemy nations, the Miskitos “conquered more than 20 neighboring tribes” and bested Spanish armies. Eventually, the Miskito nation, of their own volition, “peacefully submitted to Nicaragua but no nation was ever able to conquer the miskitos” (ibid., 47). The 1970 workshop concluded with the following thought: “Nations that do not fight for progress and improvement are the slaves of others. The Miskito must continue fighting for their own progress” (ibid., 48). Although ultimately the goals of these workshops were to aid the missionaries in the lasting Christian conversion of the inhabitants of the region, their methods contributed to the increasing self-perception of Rio Coco villagers as an Indian nation, as well as their increasing self-presentation as culture-bearing subjects.

The Moravian Church (which along with the Catholic Capuchin missionaries in the Mosquito Coast was deeply influence by the current trends in what was called progressive pastoralism) immediately took an interest in the courses and methods developed by Smutko and his associates. These courses later became very popular among Moravian pastors and were offered throughout the 1970s (Hawley 1997, 120). This sharing of materials and strategies between long-time rivals was not surprising in this region where Catholic and Protestant missionaries had been cooperating closely for at least seventy years (Wilson 1983, 55). Based on the analysis of the accounts of ALPROMISU leaders with regard to the self-proclaimed “cultural revival” campaign that they initiated in the 1970s, it seems clear that the methods and ideas they used in their so-called (so-called by outside analysts) “ethnic” mobilization was almost indistinguishable from those used simultaneously in the religious mobilization of the region carried out by Catholic and Protestant churches, most importantly the Moravian church. The religious nature of modern Miskito resurgence is almost completely absent from the anti-Sandinista “essentialist” accounts, which I document in the next chapter, because these are perceived to be incongruous with “indigenous identity.”

Cultural Identity, Gender, and Political Economy

The extreme volatility of the regional economy prevented rural Costeños from completely abandoning subsistence and “cash crop”
agriculture, thereby creating a contentious dual economy in Costeño villages in which, to quote geographer Bernard Nietschmann, a capitalistic mode of production deeply threatened the preexisting “domestic mode of production” (Nietschmann 1973, 193).57 Male rural villagers of the region supplemented wage labor stints that were aimed at earning cash for the purchase of manufactured goods with agriculture on local village lands. The agricultural sector of rural village economies had “traditionally” relied on kin-based reciprocal exchange. However, in the twentieth century reciprocal exchange-based interactions were upset, as rural men became more deeply involved in an international capitalist economy as wage laborers and collectors and hunters of forest and marine products for sale to international buyers.

Although Nietschmann recognized the antiquity of Miskito trading ties with foreigners, he believed the “traditional subsistence system” was in danger of finally being entirely replaced by the “market economy” (ibid., 237). He wrote: “The relationship between subsistence primacy and subsidiary market sales is changing. Through the long history of economic contact between the Miskito and foreigners, the subsistence system was never replaced by a monetary system, yet this seems to be happening today” (ibid., 61).

In the case of Tasbapauni, a coastal fishing village closer to Bluefields than Puerto Cabezas that was Nietschmann’s field site, the final blow to the subsistence system came in 1970 with the establishment in Bluefields and Puerto Cabezas of foreign-owned sea turtle-exporting companies that created an unlimited market for sea turtles in coastal villages (ibid., 199). As a consequence of this change, Miskito and Creole “turtle men,” particularly the younger generation (“de younger race”) (ibid., 201), overfished turtle stocks and reneged on their traditional (non-capitalistic) obligations to distribute turtle meat to kin and villagers.

In Between Land and Water, Nietschmann identified both Creoles and the “younger race” of Miskito men as the capitalistic sector of village society that rejected the domestic mode of production and so-called traditional reciprocal exchange. Although Nietschmann presented his work as a description of “Miskito culture,” he recognized that the village in which he worked (Tasbapauni) had “four major ethnic groupings”: Indian, mixed, Creole, and foreigner (ibid., 59). According to Nietschmann, a significant element of the distinction between Creoles
and Indians was their economic orientation, particularly their respective level of adherence to “traditional social patterns.” He wrote: “In many respects to the Miskito, Creoles personify the outside world with its different economic systems and social responses. The Indians consider the Creoles to be stingy, abrasive and mean, who sell rather than give, who hire people for agricultural work rather than exchange labor communally. If an Indian or a mixed does not honor traditional rules and expected behavior patterns, he or she is thought to have a ‘Creole Way’ in them” (ibid., 59).

By associating Miskito identity with tradition, he defined the Indian as a non-capitalistic group that stood in contrast to the presumably non-traditional Creoles. Nietschmann defined a Miskito villager as a person who “follows traditional customs” and a Creole as a person who “does not conform too rigidly to traditional cultural patterns” (ibid.).

Interestingly, Tasbapauni has come to be generally regarded as a Creole village (Hale 1994, 124). This shift in identification from Miskito to Creole would imply, if we were to accept the given ethnic characterizations at face value, that the economic orientations of the village should have radically changed from “traditional” reciprocity to “stingy” market principles. This does not appear to be the case. Tasbapauni is still a small fishing village that combines subsistence fishing and agriculture with “cash” fishing and turtling, an activity that did not lead to the extinction of the green turtle species and the breaking of all communal ties in the village. 58

Charles Hale, who conducted fieldwork in the southern Atlantic Coast region in the 1980s, attributed this shift in self-identification of Tasbapauni villagers to the tendency of Costeños to shift their socio-racial identification from Indian to “one of the more privileged ethnic groups” (Creoles in the south and Mestizos in the north) as part of a “strategy of upward mobility” (Hale 1994, 123). He argued that the success in the late 1970s of Tasbapuani villagers in the regional lobster and turtle trade (some of them “acquired their own boats and developed direct relationships with companies in Bluefields and Corn Island”) (ibid., 122) induced them to identify as Creole, a higher-status group. Citing Bourgois and Grunberg’s 1980 study (CIERA 1981) of the Coco River villages, Hale made note of a similar phenomena in the northern region in which “upwardly mobile” Miskito villagers increasingly
identify as Mestizo and “scorned Miskitu culture as backward and took every opportunity to emphasize their affinities with Spanish-speakers” (Hale 1994, 125).

In light of these shifts in socio-racial identification in response to socioeconomic success, Hale, with the benefit of twenty years of hindsight, critiqued Nietschmann’s approach to race and ethnicity in Tasbapauni. He wrote: “By presenting ethnic categories as static, however, he misses the relationship between economic and ethnic change. As people ‘made it’ economically in southern Zelaya, they often came to increasingly to identify as Creole” (ibid., 124).

According to Hale, the ethnic switch of economically successful ex-Miskitos “deprived Miskitu people of middle-class allies and accentuated their sense of political-economic deprivation” (ibid.). In the Mosquito Coast village of Tasbapauni, upwardly mobile villagers, according to Hale, changed their race. This phenomenon speaks to the deep interpenetration of racial ideologies and political economic change in Tasbapauni and the Mosquito Coast in general. This case serves to demonstrate the porous nature of ethnic boundaries in the region—indeed the disutility of viewing ethnic and racial categories as corresponding neatly to culturally bounded social groups.

Whereas Nietschmann portrayed an entire “ethnic grouping,” the Creoles, as the market-oriented sector of coastal society, Helms viewed a particular gender within Miskito society, Miskito men, as the market-oriented group. Working along the Coco River, Helms argued that women represented the last bulwark against the total erosion of the traditional economic system. Specifically, she argued that the agricultural work of women maintained the subsistence base of rural Costeño villages and allowed men to engage in “commercial ventures” such as seasonal wage labor, “cash crop” farming, and rubber, tuna, animal hide, or turtle hunting and collection (Helms 1971, 231). The continuous agricultural production of women mitigated, according to Helms, the disruptive negative effects of the boom and bust cycles of the region and allowed a gendered dual economy (which she labeled a “basic familial division of labor”) to persist (ibid.). She wrote:

The very recurrence of economic cycles, what has at times led to insecurity, restricted sociability, and economic depression is perhaps
also responsible for the maintenance of the Miskito subsistence economy. . . . The periodic return to depression conditions after more or less short-lived booms has meant that the Miskito have had to continue to fall back on their traditional economic practices to tide them over depression periods. The relative frequency with which boom-and-bust have followed each in the last sixty or seventy years has meant that there has not been an extended period of time such that an entire generation would be divorced from subsistence activities long enough to begin to forget relevant techniques. The division of labor between men and women makes this even more unlikely. As long as women remain relatively village-bound and are concerned primarily with agriculture, the subsistence cushion will in all likelihood remain. (ibid., 233)

Thus Helms associated the women-dominated agricultural sector with traditional non-capitalistic relations. This traditional sector allowed the Miskito to withstand the boom and bust cycles of the capitalist export-oriented sector, in effect subsidizing the US companies in the region by allowing them to have a standing reserve army of laborers.

Helms described women as the “conservative core” of Miskito society. Miskito women were able to retain “traditional Miskito culture” because they historically “did not come into contact with foreigners as much as men did” (ibid., 230). She wrote:

Women’s conservativism seems to have played an important role in maintaining a stable, definitely Miskito, cultural core, that is, in maintaining Miskito cultural identity. In addition to relative lack of direct contact, villages approximated a matrilocal settlement pattern, so that a nucleus of related women, mothers and daughters, formed the permanent element. Regardless of their husbands’ wanderings, these women formed a stable consanguineal core in and of themselves. Therefore, all children born to Miskito women . . . grew up in a village where the Miskito language was spoken, and where traditional Miskito customs, many of them based on the duties and obligations of kinship, were taught and practiced by a close knit and cooperative group of related women. Whatever the nature of later contact with agents of change, and this applies especially to boys,
there was a solid background of “Miskitoness” already firmly established. This organization pattern is an important reason why Miskito culture still remains viable today. (ibid.)

Although Helms recognized that the intensification of “cash crop” agriculture and wage labor during “company time” disrupted Miskito society, the fact that women remained in the villages practicing subsistence agriculture provided a “cultural cushion to balance the vagaries of Western demands” (ibid., 231). For Helms the role of women's labor within a regional economic system that relied on their surplus agricultural production caused them to serve as the “cultural cushion” of Miskito communities (ibid., 233).

In essence, both Nietschmann and Helms defined the Miskito as a traditional rigidly bounded social group that operated on non-capitalistic economic principles. They regarded Creole and Mestizo social life as operating under very different market-driven modern principles in which kinship was structurally less important. In light of the history of the region in which the group identification of Costeños as Africans and Indians has been highly politicized, contentious, and fluid, there exists a danger of mistaking discourses of African and Indian ethnic difference with the everyday practice of social life.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Costeños have developed a wide variety of economic and cultural adaptations to changing political and economic conditions over time—some more capitalistic than others. In the ethnographic record of the twentieth century, it is clear that Costeños in part understood and interpreted their world through a racial model in which there were parallel economies: an Indian one based on reciprocity and a Creole one based on market exchange. However, after hundreds of years of shared history (fostered, in part, by the geographic and ecological unity of the region as well as its distinctive colonial history vis-à-vis the Pacific Coast), inhabitants of the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua forged themselves into a single society where, contrary to the prevailing social scientific approaches to the region, social “fault lines” did not occur solely on racial terrain (Smith 1996, 175). Within this regional culture, racial ideologies (Costeño ideas about race) are inextricably linked to political
economic conditions. These racial ideologies, at different moments in Mosquito Coast history, have become intensely politicized.

In the case of the Mosquito Coast, it is more productive to view racial categories as, to quote Lee Drummond, “symbols rather than signs.” These categories do not function simply as labels that are attached to a concrete and uncontestable referent. Rather, these symbols (ideas about race and human difference) are integrated into larger ideological systems and “become ideas that men [and women] use to create a social world around them” (Drummond quoted in Brackette Williams 1991, 127). As I will continue to illustrate in subsequent chapters, individual actors, in turn, manipulate and contest ethnic stereotypes and symbols in their everyday status struggles. In the Mosquito Coast, ideologies of ethnic difference are used as after-the-fact rationalizations of class position and mobility, as the above analysis of Helms’s and Nietschmann’s work demonstrates.

It is important to note that the racial ideology that has developed in the Mosquito Coast associates urbanity (the consumption and work patterns of “city life”) with the Creole ethnic category. The Indian category is generally associated with rurality, understood as subsistence production combined with low-level seasonal wage labor and trade.

Throughout the history of the region, all Costeños have adopted a common, but regionally varied, economic and cultural adaptation in which they have actively engaged in trade and labor exchanged with the Anglo-Caribbean world. The agro-industrial penetration in the region (in the form of capital-intensive and foreign-owned logging, banana, rubber, and mining industries) that started in the nineteenth century and greatly intensified in the twentieth century promoted the formation of a large segment of Costeño society that became dedicated to and dependent on their involvement with these extractive industries—most starkly in the port cities of Greytown, Bluefields, and Puerto Cabezas. As a result of the particularities of Mosquito Coast history, this segment of society came to be associated with the Creole category—a putatively Black racial category. To put it bluntly, to be Creole is to be a city dweller. In this sense the meanings of the racial categories in the region are and continue to be inextricably linked to the political economy of the region—a political economy profoundly shaped by the boom-and-bust cycles of North American extractive industries.
What then are the implications of the above conclusions for an understanding of the social life of Puerto Cabezas during “company time”? The most important feature of Puerto Cabezas that is relevant at this point in my analysis is undoubtedly the port city’s extreme dependence on distant regional and international production and trade. Puerto Cabezas has from its inception been a consumer city created and propped up by its international resource-extracting industries. Porteños have in turn internalized their dependence on foreign capital as a positive collective trait that distinguishes them from both Pacific Nicaraguans and Indians. Unlike the iconic Indian of the Miskito woman in Helms’s analysis or the traditional Miskito in Nietschmann’s analysis, Porteños completely lack a “subsistence cushion” of any kind on which to fall back. Therefore, to live and work in Puerto Cabezas is at one level to live, consume, and work like a Creole (at least as Creole is defined in the popular imagination). In this sense, Puerto Cabezas had a strong ideological predisposition to identification as a Creole city, or “Black man city” as some Porteños call it. For this and other reasons Puerto Cabezas has been known in the twentieth century as a center of Creole population.

In the next chapter I will explore the consequences of the tumultuous events of the 1980s, when the political economic underpinnings of Creole identification were rapidly withdrawn as a result of the Sandinista Revolution, in which all North American companies evacuated the Atlantic Coast, leaving Puerto Cabezas in its present “busted” state.