Shipwrecked Identities

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Chapter 7

Conclusion

There are, I am informed, about thirty English families residing here [the Mosquito Coast], who possess lands granted to them by the Indians, and have begun to settle plantations, but the quantity of that produce they have hitherto manufactured has not been considerable enough for exportation. Of other commodities sufficient is collected to load a large annual ship for Great-Britain, besides several small ships belonging to Jamaica. . . . But, however extensively these articles may be attended to by the European settlers, I think that more capital advantages might be obtained by striking out such employments for the native Indians as they would be willing to enter into, and pursue to the mutual gain of themselves and great Britain. Preparatory to this, some degree of civilization is necessary; without which, their consumption of British manufactures cannot reach to any great extent. They are rather of an indolent temper; and will not labour, unless when indigent and compelled to it by want. . . . The better to attract these Indians to such objects, it is necessary to open a market, where their crops might find a ready price, and yield a quick return. . . . Their wants will undoubtedly increase in proportion as they grow more civilized; and, in order to gain the costlier articles of dress and convenience, they may soon be taught, that nothing is requisite on their part, than an advancement of skill, and redoubled diligence in selecting and procuring commodities of superior value, or larger collections of the same kind, for carrying on their barter, and due payment of their annual balance.

—Edward Long, The History of Jamaica
[Long 1774, 318]
A few miles up the main river live the Woolvas and Cuckeras Indians. Mr. Henry Corrin, of Jamaica, settled here in 1752, and acquired a large fortune from the luxuriant productions of this district. He exported great quantities of mahogany, tortoise-shell, &c. to Jamaica, and the Northern colonies. He likewise took some pains to civilize the neighboring Indians, for, on his first coming to reside here, they lived in a savage state, and had very little commerce either with the Spaniards or English. This example of success, from the endeavours of a private person, may lead us to conclude on the proportionately greater advantages to be gained by establishing a regular colony in these parts, who might labour to gain the good-will of the Indian tribes, and by fair dealing and a generous communication wean them from a state of barbarism to civility and industry. It seems, I think, probable, that they might soon become reconciled to much of the English manners in their dress and habitations, and gradually induced to take large imports of clothing, furniture, implements, and food, from us. In order to purchase these, they would necessarily apply themselves to procure such commodities of value, for the exchange, as they might find to be most in request. Thus, by a discreet management, it is reasonable to believe, that our British wares and manufactures might be dispersed to many thousands of people on this continent, and so many solid emoluments reaped from the intercourse, as would amply overpay our utmost affinities in the prosecution of it.

—Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica* (Long 1774, 324)

The above observations, written in the mid-eighteenth century by the British historian of the Caribbean Edward Long, speak to the historical depth of the interpenetration of racial ideologies and political economy in the Mosquito Coast. Long’s words also dramatize the profound paradox of being a native of a New World that has for five hundred years been in the process of being conquered and “civilized.” The conquest of the Americas produced an ideological system that, in order to justify European domination, posed Indians as
savage, premodern foils to European progress, civilization, and modernity. Europeans placed Indians in the primitive half of an ontological dichotomy between civilization and savagery, man and nature. In the other half of the dichotomy, Europeans and their North and South American standard-bearers have simultaneously been engaged in introducing a mercantilist-cum-capitalist economic system into the farthest reaches of the Americas. Given that within this ideological system a benchmark of civilization and progress is the degree of involvement with the world economy, a dramatic and often tragic conflict arises between the opposed forces of identity and economy. In this book I have traced the ways in which this conflict has played itself out in the history and social science of the Mosquito Coast, as well as in the Mosquito Coast itself.

The contradictions of this Euro-American drama make themselves particularly manifest in the Mosquito Coast of Central America. The Mosquito Coast lies on the boundary between Mesoamerica and the Caribbean. Caribbeanists commonly refer to the Caribbean as an economically precocious region that at an early date was forged “from scratch” into a center of export production in the wake of the devastation of its indigenous inhabitants. The role of the Caribbean as an exploited peripheral region within an expanding European world system foretold the role that would be forced on the rest of the Third World. The Mosquito Coast unmistakably represents a Caribbean society. The region became an active participant in the growing contraband trade in the western Caribbean from the time of the establishment of the Providence Colony in the early 1600s. Although, as a result of complex historical twists of fate, the region did not become a formal British colony nor did it witness the rise of a typical Caribbean plantation complex, the economy of the region became inextricably linked to a growing world economy. As a result, the inhabitants of the region became increasingly dependent on goods of foreign manufacture, and they adapted their productive strategies accordingly. In Long’s prophetic words, they became civilized.

This process intensified in the twentieth century when a series of US and Canadian lumber, mining, and banana companies began operations, making Puerto Cabezas the most modern and international city of the Mosquito Coast. Porteños looked positively on their own cosmopolitanism, as well as on their reliance on, and access to, high-status international sources of goods and money. This positive self-image
was in part rooted to the strategic alliance made between natives of the Mosquito Coast and the English against the Spanish and Nicaraguans of the Pacific Coast. Costeños valued their contact with the English as a civilizing influence, and they adamantly resisted Nicaraguan “reincorporation” on the grounds that the Nicaraguan rule would place a barrier to their economic progress. In this sense, the inhabitants of the Mosquito Coast region have over time actively and consciously maximized their interaction with the Caribbean and its particular nexus in the world economy. In fact, a number of my Porteño informants, when asked to comment on the ways in which Pacific Nicaraguans perceived them during “company time” when they traveled to Managua, described themselves as “dollar men” because Spaniards, in their opinion, perceived Costeños as having greater access to cash, specifically US dollars. In the continuing climate of economic depression and “abandonment” in which the region has found itself in the years after the revolution, Porteños have a harder time living up to their billing as “dollar men,” particularly in light of the wave of relatively wealthy Pacific Nicaraguans who returned to Managua from Miami after the Sandinista electoral defeat, speaking Standard American English (SAE) and carrying US passports. In complicated and regionally specific ways, these expressions of cosmopolitanism dovetail with Caribbean constructions of Blackness and Englishness—discourses to which insiders and outsiders in the Mosquito Coast have appealed for hundreds of years.

On the other hand, the Mosquito Coast is part of Mesoamerica, a Mesoamerica that is renowned, in the scholarly literature, for its Indian survivals. Again as a result of a number of highly contextual historical twists of fate, the Mosquito Coast is known, both by insiders and outsiders, as a place inhabited by Indians. In this regard, the region stands in contrast to the majority of Nicaragua, Central America, and Latin America, where the great majority of the population is referred to in a wide variety of terms such as Ladino, Mestizo, el pueblo (the people), campesino (peasant), gente humilde (common folk), and del campo (country folk)—all terms that are used in contrast to “real” Indians. As Indians, Costeños have been associated with a series of stereotypical traits, some more insidious than others, that place them on par with a static and unchanging natural world that stands in contrast to a dynamic modern world. David Frye identified this tendency to view Indians as inherently unchanging as a “colonial ideology” (Frye 1996, 10).
The complex and dynamic history of ethnic, tribal, and racial identification of the inhabitants of the Mosquito Coast is not merely a philosophical problem that Euro-American scholars have considered over the centuries. Rather, the contestation and use of these categories has been a highly charged and integral part of the social and political practice of the region. In this book I carefully trace the expressions of these ideologies, and in the process I interrogate both the standard anthropological “other” (in this case the diverse historical actors who have operated in the Mosquito Coast) and our own selves as historians and social scientists. In this respect I am following Andrew Lass’s call to “treat [anthropological] theory . . . as an ethnographic object” (Lass 1997, 722). Literature review, of course, is a standard part of any scholarly work. However, I do not intend the discussion of previous scholarship to simply represent my attempt to situate my argument vis-à-vis that of scholars who have worked on similar issues. Rather, I trace the complicated ways in which social scientists and their concepts have mingled with and influenced and been influenced by their subjects. In the Mosquito Coast, where activist scholars of both the right and left have played significant roles as advisors and policy-makers, this mutual influence warrants such scrutiny.

In some extreme cases the line between scholars and actors has been impossible to draw. One particularly notable example of this phenomena is E. G. Squier, a nineteenth-century US scholar and diplomat, who wrote a highly polemical attack on the Mosquito Government as being composed of “drunken negroes,” while simultaneously encouraging the US State Department to intervene in favor of Nicaragua in the dispute between Nicaragua and Great Britain over the status of the country of Mosquito (see Olien 1985 for a fascinating analysis of “anthropological scholarship and political propaganda”).

Another, more recent, example is the case of the late Bernard Nietschmann, who served as a hawkish adviser to insurgent Miskito groups during the Contra War while publishing, with the help of the arch-conservative press “The Freedom House,” a rabidly anticommunist “scholarly” treatment of Miskito identity. These two examples represent clear cases of what anthropologist Richard Handler condemned in his work on Quebecois nationalism as the “close congruence between actors’ ideologies and observers’ theories” (Handler 1988, 8). In many cases, as scholarly writing attempts to objectify and rationalize “native”
ideology, local social movements incorporate these rationalized interpretations of their culture into their own rationalizations of their culture. This situation creates “two discourses that feed off of each other” (Handler 1988, 9). This process became increasingly charged during the Contra War as cold-war polarization deeply divided the scholarly approaches to the Costeño-Sandinista crisis.

I argue for the importance of consciously resisting the tendency to, in the words of Raymond Smith, “biologize social relations.” I have demonstrated at length the ways in which identification as Miskito Indian and Creole, although undeniably an important matter among Costeños, has been overdrawn in the scholarly literature on the region. In the contemporary period, developments linked to the cold-war struggle between Contras and Sandinistas, the globalization of indigenous activism, the regional autonomy process, and official ethnicity have provided a strong impetus to force an otherwise highly fluid social situation with regard to socio-racial identifications into a standardized and objectivized system that operates on certain anthropologically-derived presuppositions about the relationship between race and culture.

The struggle for regional autonomy in eastern Nicaragua, in addition to representing a struggle for increased political and economic control vis-à-vis the Nicaraguan state, represents also a struggle over the meanings of being Black or Indian. This struggle takes place, not only in formal political contexts, but also in everyday social interaction. Costeños are actively engaged in the process of reworking and creating ideologies of racial difference, which are enacted and transformed in practice. They are trying to sort out what it means to be a Miskito, Creole, or Mestizo in the Mosquito Coast. As Brackette Williams has shown in the case of Guyana, the ethnic stereotypes and syncretic cultural forms that emerge from this process are forged in individuals’ everyday practice. However, this process does not occur in an ideological vacuum where any cultural creation is possible. Rather, it occurs within an ideological arena heavy with the weight of the past’s ideological, which is to say categorical, baggage (Williams 1991).

Apart from a providing a fruitful approach to understanding the roots of the Costeño-Sandinista conflict of the 1980s, the analysis that I develop in this book helps us to assess the future prospects for the Mosquito Coast. Allow me to introduce a final anecdote. In 1992 I attended
the “Indigenous Assembly” of Miskito Indian communities that had been called by Stedman Fagoth, the controversial ex-leader of the largest Miskito faction of the Contras. Representatives from most Miskito villages and neighborhoods had walked, paddled, and driven for days in order to crowd into the large auditorium in the river city of Waspám. Fagoth drew the following two lists on the chalkboard:

1. Texas
2. California
3. Ukraine
4. South Africa
5. RAAN [the North Atlantic Autonomous Region]

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oil</td>
<td>180 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pesca [fish]</td>
<td>150 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gold</td>
<td>150 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lumber</td>
<td>100 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>580 million</td>
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He proceeded to explain, in Miskitu, to his audience that the first list was of the five wealthiest regions in the world in terms of natural resources. The second list represented the monetary value of these resources that would soon be enjoyed by Costeños once the US companies would accept their invitations to return.

For better or for worse, Costeños are searching for viable ways to cash in on the natural resources that exist within the Mosquito Coast. Their cosmopolitan ethos and their experience of environmental dissonance—the nagging sense that they should not be so poor while living in such a naturally abundant region—give them a strong ideological predisposition to attempt to rectify their current situation through recourse to foreign extractive industries. Just like the mythical Indian of Mosquito Coast folklore who could turn the leaves of oranges trees into bills of cash, the modern inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast and their leaders are working on the same magic. The trick will be to benefit from this conversion within a global economic system that rarely rewards the custodians of raw materials.