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2023

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Anticolonial Landscapes: Land and the Emergence of Miskitu People's Territorial Resistance in the Moskitia

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by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2023

Dedication

To the Indigenous peoples of Moskitia and the world: Your wisdom, courage, resilience, and resistance inspired this work.

Acknowledgements

I want to honor and acknowledge the Alabama-Coushatta, Caddo, Carrizo/Comecrudo, Coahuiltecan, Comanche, Kickapoo, Lipan Apache, Tonkawa, and Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo, and all the American Indian and Indigenous Peoples and communities who have been or have become a part of the lands and territories in Texas, where I was a graduate student from 2017-2023. This dissertation was completed in between ancestral homelands that surpass national borders, in between Lenapehoking, the homeland of the Lenape people in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and the ancestral Miskitu and Mayangna lands in Moskitia, where I also conducted my ethnographic research.

This dissertation could not have been possible without the support and guidance of my committee. I am deeply indebted to my dissertation committee chair, Professor Luis Cárcamo-Huechante. You have not only guided me through this academic journey but also inspired me to continue exploring and learning. I am honored to have been under your mentorship and look forward to carrying forward the values, lessons, and skills I have learned under your guidance.

Words cannot express my gratitude to my dissertation committee members, Dr. Pavithra Vasudevan, Dr. Carlos Ramos-Scharrón and Dr. Edmund T. Gordon. I am profoundly thankful for your intellectual guidance. Each of you brought unique perspectives and expertise that have significantly enriched this work. I am immensely grateful for the human connection and support that you all have provided. Professor Vasudevan, you've been there through the highs and lows, making time for conversations that have eased the solitude of this journey, and offering words of encouragement when the end seemed elusive, for that I am forever grateful.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my former academic advisor, Dr. Gregory Knapp, who embarked on his well-deserved retirement during the course of my dissertation. Your continuous support, even in retirement, has been a source of strength and encouragement at critical moments. My heartfelt gratitude also goes to the Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) community at UT Austin, particularly to professors Kelly McDonough and Luis Urrieta and all the professors and staff at the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies (LLILAS).

I owe gratitude to Dr. Charles R. Hale whose encouragement and support led me onto the path of academia, and for that, I am eternally thankful. Special gratitude is reserved for Rose Mary de Loor, Tony Jackson, Erick and Tim, whose unwavering support was instrumental in my journey of mastering English, the initial step that paved the way for my graduate studies. A sincere thanks to Ruth Rubio-Gilbertson for her valuable editing work on this dissertation

This endeavor would not have been possible without the valuable support of my family. To my beloved parents, Jorge Matamoros Bushey and Ruth Mercado Sanders. No words can sufficiently express my profound gratitude for your unconditional love, endless encouragement, countless sacrifices and for always reminding me that my dreams are worth pursuing. To my loving husband, Larry Montenegro-Baena, thank you for standing beside me. You have been my confidant and my rock during the most challenging of times. Your belief in my capabilities, even in moments when I faltered, and your constant efforts to make sure I was balancing work and selfcare kept me going. To my precious children, Noah and Ariadna. Your joy, curiosity, and unconditional love have been the fuel that propelled me forward. Your radiant smiles and unexpected hugs have had the power to lighten and illuminate the heaviest and darkest days. Thank you for your patience and understanding during days when you needed me and I was not

available, and for the little notes and drawings that became a source of encouragement. To my siblings Nidia and Jorge. We may have pursued different paths, but your belief in my journey, your empathy during the tough times, and your celebrations of even the smallest victories have been an invaluable source of strength. To all of you, this accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine and I am eternally grateful for having you by my side every step of the way.

I extend my heartfelt thanks and deep appreciation to my friends, Amanda Minks, and Fernando Montero. Your presence in my life, both academically and personally, has been an immeasurable source of strength. Thank you for your invaluable contribution to this journey. I would be remiss in not mentioning my cohort, colleagues and friends, Raquel Buelto, Pablo Millalén, Kathy Tairo-Pisque, Jermani Ojeda, Fatima and Montserrat Valdivia, Jorge Choy Ana Braconnier and Alexandra Lamiña. You have each, in your unique ways, contributed to this accomplishment. Your generous spirits, our shared laughter, companionship, and intellectual camaraderie have lightened the burden of this journey and I am incredibly grateful to you all.

My heartfelt gratitude extends to the Miskitu community in Houston and Port Arthur, Texas, especially Mildred, Saul, Sandra, Tania, and Gloria. In a moment where I had no family to rely on, your collective support became my rock as I took the crucial steps to apply for my doctoral program. I am also profoundly thankful to Mari Carmen, Teresa, and Johanna, who, although not part of the Miskitu community, stood by me during these initial steps. Your kindness and encouragement have left a mark on my journey, and I hold each of you in the highest regard. To my chosen family in Austin, Tristan Mercado, Casta Calderon-Haren, Stacey Ann Stoler, and Irene Conrad, I owe you all a debt of gratitude that words cannot adequately express. Your generous spirit eased the sense of displacement that comes with being far from

home. You welcomed me and made me feel a part of your family when my own was miles away and for that, I am profoundly grateful.

Through different stages of my doctoral research, I received funding support from different entities. I am deeply grateful to the Graduate School, The College of Liberal Arts, the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies (LLILAS), and The Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) at UT Austin. To the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research (CNAIR) and the Mellon Foundation Native American Scholars Initiative (NASI) Predoctoral Fellowship at American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. To the Philanthropic Educational Organization's (P.E.O) International Peace Scholarship (IPS), the Charles Wilson Hackett Memorial Scholarship from the Pan American Round Tables of Texas and The Jacobs Research Funds.

Abstract

Anticolonial Landscapes: Land and the Emergence of Miskitu People's Territorial Resistance in the Moskitia

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2023

Supervisor: Luis E. Cárcamo-Huechante

This dissertation investigates the Miskitu people's understanding of land and the natural environment in the Moskitia region of Nicaragua, rooted in indigenous worldviews and shaped by historical and ongoing colonial influences. Central to this exploration is the notion of *Yapti Tasba* (Mother Earth), a critical component of the indigenous knowledge framework that inspires a communal understanding of land ownership. Using a blend of ethnographic and archival research, the study examines Miskitu perspectives on land and the natural environment, the effects of colonialism and racial structures on these perspectives, and the significance of centering these views in Miskitu territorial struggles, transcending traditional legal paradigms. The investigation is guided by three key questions: how are territorial rights and indigenous identity influenced by specific understandings of land and the natural environment? How do these understandings contribute to life sustenance in the community and, how are gendered forms of knowledge manifested in everyday ecological practices related to *Yapti Tasba*? This dissertation proposes that despite external pressures reshaping Miskitu people's interactions with their land, their core beliefs are still grounded in traditional values and meanings linked to their landscape, predating colonial impositions. Furthermore, it highlights the unique nature of Miskitu People's resistance, which is deeply tied to their land, serving as a cornerstone for

survival and differentiating from conventional notions of indigenous activism and social mobilization. The insights garnered from this research contribute to the broader discourse on indigenous land relations and environmental stewardship worldwide.

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Introduction

This is a story of colonialism, but it is also a story of resistance, resilience, and survival. For over 15 years, I have been working with Miskitu people and in the Moskitia, which has inspired me to engage with a collective examination of Miskitu people's understanding of land and natural resources. This Miskitu engagement offers me a point of reference to envision my research project as one, theoretically and methodologically, rooted in Miskitu worldviews, in dialogue with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous views on land politics, indigeneity, and the environment worldwide. Subsequently, the notion of *Yapti Tasba* (Mother Earth) is central to my critical endeavor, which speaks to my engagement with an "indigenous knowledge framework" (McGregor, 2009). McGregor based on the Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) approach claims that we need to "move beyond the human-centered approach to one of understanding, accepting, enacting, respecting, and honoring relationships with all of creation" (McGregor, 2009, p. 33). This approach has also been discussed by other Native American and First Nation scholars (Whyte, 2013; Reo &Whyte, 2012) to address the question of the land and territory.

In this dissertation I do not "apply" TEK as an overarching framing of my discussion but rather I specifically engage the idea that, within engaged Indigenous research, is critical to articulate Indigenous knowledge-centered approaches to epistemologically invigorate the reconstruction of Indigenous lifeways. The proposal put forward by TEK scholar McGregor views on this issue help me elaborate my own focus on key tenets of Miskitu worldviews, such as the concepts of *Yapti Tasba* and *Klauna Laka*.

The Miskitu people's relationship with the land, encapsulated in the concept of *Yapti Tasba*, is characterized by communal ownership, a stark contrast to the settlers' perspective of

the land as individual property. This ongoing issue of territorial ownership versus property rights is particularly evident in the Moskitia region of Nicaragua, where it has been a point of contention since the mid-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth centuries. The distinction between "communal territorial ownership" and "property" is not unique to the Miskitu. Māori scholar Muru-Lanning (2012) provides a valuable perspective on this issue, differentiating between these two ways of relating to the natural environment. For the Māori, particularly the tribes of the Waikato River, "communal territorial ownership" is about fulfilling obligations to kin members and taking responsibility for local resources. Disputes over ownership often revolve around the duty and obligation to care for the Waikato River (Muru-Lanning, (p.72). In contrast, according to Muru Lanning, the English common law typically privileges property rights, which are vested in individuals (p.73). The Miskitu people, much like the Māori find this individualistic perspective at odds with their views of *Yapti Tasba*, which is based on communal territorial ownership. Thus, the Miskitu's relationship with the land, like the Māori's, is rooted in collective responsibility and obligation, rather than individual property rights.

Miskitu people's land strugles are rooted in a complex history resulting from entangled colonial processes. Osage scholar Dennison (2012) keenly employs the term “colonial entanglement” to unveil the complex and ongoing relationships, tensions, and influences that Indigenous nations have with/within colonial powers that once, or even today, directly controlled them or continue dominating or subordinating them. Dennison focuses on the Osage Nation and their interactions with the United States arguing the Osage Nation's present condition cannot be detached from its historical experiences of colonization. The structures, policies, and ideologies of colonial rule, she argues, have lasting impacts as they continue to shape the realities of the Osage people today. Building on Dennison’s arguments, within the particular context of the

Moskitia, I contend that Miskitu people's history of land struggles is deeply intertwined with the history of colonialism, Nicaraguan state formation, colonial subject formations, and cross-racial relations.

Nicaragua's state formation was heavily influenced by the country's divided colonial past. The Pacific coast of Nicaragua was colonized by the Spanish, while the Atlantic Coast was under British influence which paradoxically allowed the Miskitu to maintain a considerable degree of autonomy until the late 19th century. By this time, the Nicaraguan state incorporated the Moskitia into the Spanish-colonized Nicaraguan state, leading to enduring tensions due to the differing socio-political systems. The distinct identity developed by the indigenous and Afro-descendant communities of the Atlantic Coast, under British influence, has resulted in long-lasting resistance against the cultural and political imposition by the Spanish-speaking criollo and mestizo majority. Thus, the region exemplifies the enduring impact of colonial entanglements, influencing state formation, subject formations, and cross-racial relations. As a Miskitu woman, I bear a unique relationship to this history, one that is both intimate and academic. Through this Dissertation, I contextualize the Miskitu people within these broader historical developments, demonstrating the ways in which the Miskitu have navigated, resisted, and shaped these processes.

Particularly significant is the interaction between the Miskitu and the British, which diverges from traditional colonial narratives. The British/Moskitia relationship can be characterized more accurately as "trade colonialism," or "mercantile colonialism." According to Shoemaker (2015) in trade colonialism the colonial periphery feeds the metropole with raw materials, and the metropole manufactures guns, cloth, and other goods to sell in its colonies, but it does not necessarily entail permanent occupation. Following this logic, rather than large-scale

permanent settlement in Moskitia, the British primarily engaged in commerce, often in the form of extractive industries like logging, as well as engaging in military alliances with the Miskitu People against Spanish forces. These relations were formalized with the creation of the Mosquito Coast protectorate in the 17th century, which was marked by indirect rule. This way, the British did not assert full control or widespread settlement over the region but maintained a strategic alliance with the Miskitu people against other European powers, particularly Spain (Offen, 2007).

As note by Offen, the British influence on the Miskitu society, was significant but did not translate into full control or widespread settlement over the region. This interplay of British and Spanish interests in the region led to a complex colonial experience for the Miskitu people. British influence and protection gave the Miskitu a degree of power and autonomy in the region, unlike many other indigenous groups under Spanish rule. This relationship led to a distinctive colonial experience for the Miskitu and shaped their contemporary identity (Offen, 1999).

The unique colonial experience of the Miskitu underwent a significant transformation towards the end of the 19th century with the annexation of Mosquitia into the Nicaraguan state in 1894. This event marked a significant shift in the region's history, which had been shaped by the commercial and political activities of Anglo officials, settlers, traders, and later, Moravian missionaries and North American capitalists (Offen, 2007. P. 3). These Anglo interventions, coupled with the region's geographical features, led to a clear division between Nicaragua's criollo/mestizo, Hispanic, and Catholic west coast and its Indigenous, Afro-Creole, and Protestant east coast.

The complex dynamics of colonialism and land invasion as part of Nicaragua's nation state formation and following the annexation of the Moskitia into the Nicaraguan state can be

better understood through the lens of "settler colonialism" (Wolfe, 2006). According to Wolfe, Settler Colonialism is a structure not an event, and it's primarily about the elimination of indigenous populations to gain access to their territory. This elimination can take various forms, not just physical extermination, but also assimilation, and the creation of conditions that lead to the decline and disappearance of indigenous cultures and societies. The aim is not just to exploit the indigenous people as a labor force, but to eventually eliminate them to free the land for use by the colonial power.

Speed (2017) contends that Latin American nations are "settler colonial states," a viewpoint she believes is frequently neglected in scholarly discussions. She asserts that "settler logics" - the strategies and mindsets employed by European settlers, including indigenous dispossession and resource exploitation - continue to influence how these countries operate today (p.6). This includes ongoing exploitation and inequality, which are often rooted in those original settler logics that underlied and continue shaping criollo/mestizo nation-state formations in Latin America, including the case of Nicaragua.

Although Nicaragua has been a post-Spanish colonialism for nearly two centuries, patterns reminiscent of "settler colonialism" and other new waves of colonization (i.e., extractive capitalist colonial processes) have emerged as Miskitu lands are increasingly invaded and settled by criollos (people of European white descent) and mestizo (mixed ancestry) Nicaraguans from the western regions of the country. This process has involved the often-violent displacement of Indigenous communities, deforestation, and environmental degradation. This way, while the historical British colonial presence in Nicaragua was characterized by trade colonialism, today's invasion of indigenous lands, including those of the Miskitu, reflects some key attributes of Settler Colonialism such as being a land-centered project that seeks the elimination of the native

either through physical extermination or cultural assimilation, and the imposition of colonizing socio-economic changes that undermine indigenous ways of life. The critical difference between the historical British presence and contemporary land invasions is the permanence of the criollo/mestizo settlers. While British colonial power relied more on trade and alliances with Miskitu people, contemporary criollo and mestizo settlers are creating long-term settlements, causing a physical and cultural displacement of the Indigenous populations, mainly Miskitu and Mayangnas, reflecting the core characteristics of settler colonialism. Though the settlers are not foreign, they are external to the indigenous Miskitu and Mayangna societies and are driven by similar incentives of land acquisition and resource extraction that characterized historical settler colonialism. This displacement leads to cultural erosion, economic marginalization, and often, forced assimilation.

According to Shannon Speed, understanding Latin American states as settler states is crucial for indigenous peoples' resistance because it acknowledges the inherent, ongoing structures of colonial occupation.[1] This recognition is important because it highlights the fact that the racial and gender logics that justified native dispossession, slavery, and successive waves of labor exploitation are not historical relics, but rather ongoing, structuring logics inherent to these systems. Indeed, recognizing the settler colonial logic of current indigenous land invasions in Nicaragua, can help shape strategies for resistance, as it underscores the need for fundamental changes in the structures of power that can help indigenous peoples in Nicaragua to better strategize their resistance and fight for their rights in a more effective and targeted way.

Within this history of ‘colonial entanglements,” which I understand as the overlapping of multiple and disparate forms of colonialism over the centuries, in my study the term 'settler' is

[1] On the question of "colonial continuity" after the formation of nation-states in Latin America, see also Cárcamo-Huechante (2023).

understood as individuals or collectives originating from divergent cultural and geographical backgrounds, mainly mestizo inhabitants from the Pacific side of Nicaragua, who have migrated and established residency in territories historically inhabited by Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples in the Moskitia. These settlers do not possess rights over these lands as per the Nicaraguan legal framework pertaining to Indigenous Peoples' land rights. Locally, these settlers are referred to as *colonos*, a synonym for colonizer. Throughout this work, 'settler' and 'colono' will be used interchangeably to denote the same group and dynamic of individual and collective power relations in and around the Moskitia.

Following annexation of Moskitia into the Nicaraguan state in 1894, there has been an enduring political, territorial, and sociocultural resistance from Indigenous Peoples to achieve holistic recognition of their territorial rights. My project draws from ethnographic research and archival research to examine the formation of Miskitu people’s views of land and natural resources through different social, economic, political, and cultural settings. The project has a threefold trajectory. First, it centers Miskitu people’s views regarding land and natural resources. Second, it examines the colonial and racial structures against which Indigenous Peoples' land views have been created and shaped. Third, it outlines the importance of placing Indigenous people's land views at the center of Miskitu people’s territorial struggles beyond the legal framework often used to address Indigenous Peoples’ rights to the land.

My academic work is the result of a long learning process that started when I was a child. I am a Miskitu indigenous woman born in 1980, just one year after the triumph of the Sandinista[2] Revolution in Nicaragua. Shortly after their victory, Nicaragua entered a decade-long civil war

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[2] The Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, FSLN) is a left-wing Nicaraguan political party, which came to power in 1979 after overthrowing the dictator Anastasio Somoza. The Sandinistas were voted out of office in 1990 but came back in 2007 and have been in power since then, despite ongoing accusations of human right violations and being labeled as a dictatorship by the US government and the international community.

which confronted the Sandinistas who led the government, and the Contras, a coalition of anti-Sandinista factions including former Somoza guardsmen. The Miskitu, the largest indigenous population in the country, took part in it by joining the resistance against the Sandinista government and aligned themselves with the Contra. However, the Miskitu resistance maintained its own identity and agenda centered on the rights of the Miskitus and other indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples of the Moskitia region of Nicaragua, particularly the right to communal land ownership. Those were the first ten years of my life. As a child, listening to adults' conversations about battles and people dying was common. But there were also conversations about how we, the Miskitu people, could not give up because our communities were fighting for ancestral lands and political autonomy.

Two important moments in my life defined my career path and why my work now incorporates indigenous research frameworks to understand human-environmental relations and current environmental laws and policies. The first moment was in 1987, seven years into the civil war. That year the war was coming to an end, and as part of this process, the Miskitu people and the Sandinistas negotiated a peace agreement through the approval of Law 28[3], a law that granted autonomous status to the Northern and Southern Caribbean regions of Nicaragua, that is, to our territory which we know as the Moskitia. In essence, the Autonomy Law acknowledged the rights of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples to preserve and develop their cultural identity, access their traditional lands, and participate in local resource management and political decision-making. The law set up a framework for regional self-governance, including the election of two regional councils and two governors, one in the north and another in the south. It

[3] Law 28, officially known as Statute of Autonomy of The Regions of The Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, was approved in October 1987. https://www.calpi-nicaragua.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/LAW-No-28-with-reforms-2016.pdf

sparked high expectations among the indigenous and Afro-descendant populations of Moskitia, promising greater control over their own affairs, cultural and linguistic preservation and strengthening, and management and benefit from the resources of their traditional lands. However, implementing the law has proven challenging. The Miskitu and other groups have reported issues with non-compliance from the central government, conflicts over land demarcation and natural resource exploitation, and a lack of resources and support for the administration of the autonomous regions.

When the war ended, all the people displaced from their communities and in refugee camps in Honduras could finally return, including my maternal grandmother, aunts, and their spouses, whom I had not met until then. Before the war, they lived in Asang, a community on the banks of the Wanky river. After the war, they had no home to return to, so they came to live at my parent's house while they could get back on their feet. Most of my aunt's spouses were directly involved in the armed conflict. I remember asking them why they decided to enlist, and they would reply "*Yawan wan tasbaia dukiara aiklabisa, yawan Klauna Laka dukiara aiklabisa*." (We were fighting for our lands; we are fighting for autonomy).

After the war ended, Law 28 became the center of attention for the people of Moskitia. From radio programs to news outlets to people's day-to-day conversations, Law 28 was everywhere. The name of the law was translated into the Miskitu language as *Klauna Laka,* which made sense to us. As I will show later, for the Miskitu people, *Klauna Laka* evokes the idea of "self-sufficiency," or doing something on your own. For many Miskitu, this Nicaraguan law became a source of hope for the present and future of Moskitia.

As a result, I grew up thinking that *Klauna Laka* meant Law 28. However, my research has proved otherwise. In those years, my father, a sociologist, started to work in a local research

institute called Centro de Investigación y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica (Center for Research and Documentation of the Atlantic Coast, CIDCA). He would bring home every research paper or report they produced at CIDCA. Given the context, most of them were related to Law 28 and the best way to make it work; reading those reports and research papers was one of my favorite activities. I was just a child, and there were many things I couldn't understand in those reports. All I knew was that Law 28 was good for us and that people who understood it were trying hard to make it work.

My mother is a nurse. At the time, she was working for the Ministry of Health. As part of the reconstruction process, her job consisted of traveling to rural communities to provide health services and help people reorganize their lives. She would take me on those trips whenever I was not in school. I questioned why rural communities had to endure such precarious living conditions, marked by the scarcity of essential necessities like clean water, health care, and educational infrastructures. I would comfort myself by thinking that we were coming out of a war, and since we now had the Autonomy Law, eventually, things would get better. That's when I decided that I would attend Law school, so I could understand Law 28 and help my people make the most out of it, and so I did.

The second moment that defined my career path occurred in 2003 with the approval of Law 445[4] for the communal titling and demarcation of Indigenous territories. I had just graduated from Law school. Upon returning home, I started volunteering at the Centro Por la Justicia y Derechos Humanos de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua (Center for Justice and Human

[4] Ley del Régimen de Propiedad Comunal de los Pueblos Indígenas y Comunidades Étnicas de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua y de los Ríos Bocay, Coco, Indio y Maíz. (Law of the Communal Property Regime of the Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Communities of the Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua and of the Rivers Bocay, Coco, Indio, and Maíz) https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/92476/107759/.

Rights of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, CEJUDHCAN), a local NGO that promoted Indigenous people's rights, particularly those related to land. My work involved holding community workshops about the national and international legal framework that assisted Indigenous Peoples. Law 28 and Law 445 were central themes in my workshops. However, something felt wrong. It had been 16 years since the approval of Law 28, and the living conditions in these communities remained the same. I remember the conversations I often heard as a child *yawan wan tasbaia dukiara aiklabisa, yawan Klauna Laka dukiara aiklabisa* (We are fighting for our lands; we are fighting for autonomy). And I kept asking myself: why have the conditions of Indigenous Peoples not improved? We went to war for a law that gives us autonomy and a law that provides us with titles for our lands. However, the current reality dictated otherwise.

Law 445 established five stages of land demarcation. Although the Nicaraguan State carried out the first four stages of the demarcation process and provided land titles to 23 Indigenous territories, it has failed to carry out the fifth stage, the *Saneamiento*[5] process, which implies the removal of settlers illegally occupying land in Indigenous territories. The State has instead suggested a cohabitation project which, if approved, would allow settlers to legally occupy lands in Miskitu territories. One of the proposed cohabitation strategies requires settlers to pay a rental fee for the land they occupy and maintain a peaceful coexistence with Indigenous Peoples. However, the violence exerted by the settlers on the native population has shown that peaceful coexistence is unlikely. As documented by recent reports from CEJIL[6] &

[5] *Saneamiento* is the last step of the demarcation process established in Law 445. Saneamiento could be translated as “title clearance” and requires removing settlers living in indigenous territories without a lease agreement with the community.
[6] Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional (Center for Justice and International Law, CEJIL,

CEJUDHCAN, 2020[7], as well as The Oakland Institute (2020), there has been a dramatic increase in the arrival of settlers since the enactment of Law 445. The state has neglected numerous reports of violence perpetrated by settlers against the native population. With the absence of state authority, the surveillance and control of the lands falls on the native population. However, they are at a disadvantage as they lack the necessary resources and tools such as adequate infrastructure and trained personnel for effective control and surveillance. In addition, they are overwhelmed by settlers armed with high-caliber weapons, which gives them a considerable advantage in imposing their will and exercising control over the communal lands.

As a result, Indigenous Peoples are left vulnerable to armed settlers who migrate to these territories in search of gold, wood, and land, not only occupying Indigenous communally owned land and destroying the ecosystems in these communities but also kidnapping, torturing, raping, and murdering native people. This situation has forced Indigenous people to leave the only land they know and have inhabited, searching for refuge in other communities or urban areas. Many of those who stay cannot access their land for farming, hunting, or fishing, which they usually do to sustain themselves and their families. Additionally, the discrepancy between the settlers and the native's way of relating to land further challenges the cohabitation initiative.

As I was trying to reconcile the discrepancy between the seemingly progressive laws that the Nicaraguan state had approved and the precarious living conditions in the communities, I once asked a community elder how he felt about the cohabitation project the Nicaraguan state was trying to put forward. He emphatically replied:

7 Centro por la Justicia y Derechos Humanos de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua (Center for Justice and Human Rights of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, CEJUDHCAN),

yawan sip colono nani wal wan tasbaiara iuras, witin nani tasbara yawan kaiki ba baku kaikras (We cannot share our land with the colonos. They don't see land the way we do).

The elder's response to my inquiry about the cohabitation project and its strong epistemological and ontological component resonated in my mind as an inspiring point of reference to think of our Miskitu perspective on the land and, in many ways, has invited me to pursue the goal of studying the principles of land relations that the Miskitu worldviews entail and the challenge for the Miskitu people to engage them as a response to settler colonial nation state and private capital agents in Nicaragua. The elder states, "settlers do not see land the way we do." This statement encompasses a series of questions related to Miskitu people's knowledge and concepts around land and territory and its various racial, cultural, and power dimensions. Therefore, my research addresses the following questions: What are the more specific views on land relations that the Miskitu People embrace? How has it been constructed or modified over time under the influence of external settler colonial and racial powers? How are territorial rights struggles and indigeneity shaped through the configurations of these notions of land and natural resources? I engage these questions by analyzing communal land politics and environmental views among the Miskitu Indigenous in Nicaragua. I claim that despite external colonial and racial power relations, the core of Miskitu People's conceptions of land and natural resources is built around the values and meanings they assign to the surrounding land. This way, my dissertation examines the views of Miskitu people regarding land and the natural environment, and how these views have been shifting over time in a context of ongoing colonial pressures.

To better understand the ways in which identities and knowledge relate to land and the natural environment at these key sites, my research draws on the concept of "resistance" (Scott,

1994). Resistance, in its various forms, provides a framework to examine land and the natural environment through the daily practices and non-discursive means of those resisting external incursions to their lands. Specifically, resistance helps me examine Miskitu's daily interaction with conceptualizations and discourses of land uses or relations through quotidian practices. In this sense, I align with the observation made by Black scholar Robin Kelly, as cited in Biolsi (2019), who characterizes being Black as "not just political struggle but the struggles of everyday life: fighting, dancing, begging, teaching, thinking, loving" (p. 77). For me, then, the Miskitu's relationship to the land is series of everyday practices, the daily Miskitu lifeways and, ultimately, shows that the discourse and practices of resistance are embodied in multiple sites.

While working in the Moskitia with Miskitu people, I repeatedly heard about the sharp contrast of land as "property" and exploitation against the Miskitu notion of *Yapti Tasba,* which encompasses relations of reciprocity and solidarity between humans and non-humans based on land and the resources it provides. Additionally, Miskitu people maintain communal ownership of their territory and mark their boundaries using natural elements such as sacred places or geographical markers like trees or rivers, passed down to through generations through oral communication. whereas the settlers appropriate the land individually and fence what they consider to be their property within the communities. Additionally, the settlers claim rights to occupy those lands because they view it as available national territory to be taken by whoever needs it. This understanding, however, ignores the way Miskitu people use their land according to their customs.

While Indigenous communities in Nicaragua have been able to secure property titles for their lands, this titling has occurred in the context of rising capitalist interests in the lands and natural resources held in these territories associated with lucrative industries such as mining,

cattle ranching, and forestry. Under these circumstances, the ability of Indigenous communities to maintain and reproduce social dynamics and exercise their self-determination on these titled territories remains uncertain. I argue that Miskitu people conceive *Yapti Tasba* and ownership rights as the basis for exercising broader prerogatives over the land, resources, and population. This re-conceptualization of Miskitu land relations challenges a view held by the Nicaraguan State. For the Nicaraguan government, the lands, resources, and population continue to be under the jurisdiction of colonial laws and institutions. In this sense, I contend that the legal framework addressing the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Nicaragua and elsewhere needs to incorporate and acknowledge Indigenous People's knowledge systems regarding land and the natural environment.

Although the arrival of settlers on Miskitu territories has sharply increased over the last two decades (CEJIL & CEJUDHCAN, 2020) it is important to highlight that colonos' immigration to Miskitu territory both in Nicaragua and Honduras has been historically bounded to the racial discourse of mestizaje (Mollett, 2011). According to scholar Matamoros-Chavez (2014), towards the end of the 19th century, conservative governments in Nicaragua dispossessed the Matagalpa indigenous people of large amounts of fertile lands. These lands were then given to Creole oligarchs and foreign settlers interested in coffee production. Moreover, these indigenous people were subject to servitude to provide the necessary labor for the coffee farms. The annexation of Moskitia to Nicaragua in 1894 marked the beginning of a new land dispossession process, this time affecting indigenous and Afro descendant peoples in the Moskitia. In this context, Matamoros-Chavez highlights the convergence of four factors: the migration of mestizo peasants dispossessed of their lands and indigenous identity, the perceived

superiority of mestizo culture, the struggle for territorial rights of indigenous communities, and the establishment of local power groups. (Matamoros-Chavez, 2014, pp. 2-3).

Afro scholar Sharlene Mollet (2011) further refines this perspective by highlighing the often-overlooked racial dynamics of Miskitu-colono land disputes in Honduras. Accordin to Mollet, these disputes, in essence, mirror a predicament, where indigenous communities across the globe lack legally recognized claims to their territories (p.1). This vacancy is perceived by settlers as an invitation to occupy these, ostensibly vacant lands. Some of the most relevant aspects of these conflicts as highlighted by Mollet, include cultural contrast in land utilization in such a way that the Miskito people's lifeways of hunting, fishing, and frequent movement within their territories present a stark contrast to the agricultural practices of the 'colono' (p. 6). Additionally, Miskitu people's bond with their lands extends beyond mere material resources, incorporating significant cultural and spiritual elements. (p. 9). These disparities are often leveraged to legitimize the invasion of Miskito territories, as both settlers and the state depict Miskito land usage as 'inefficient' or 'unproductive.' Furthermore, the intricacies of land ownership and agriculture are not simply connected to the livelihoods of 'colono' settlers but are also deeply intertwined with their cultural identity and national sentiment. These settlers, identifying as the 'authentic' farmers and citizens, often perceive their incursion onto Miskito territories as an affirmation of their identity (p. 12). Moreover, Mollet argues that the state and settlers frequent depict Miskitu people as savages to diminish their land utilization practices. These depictions serve as justifications for the invasion of Miskito territories and the imposition of settler land use practices.

The perceived cultural superiority of the mestizo population, who themselves were indigenous a few decades prior to their migration to Moskitia, has significantly influenced the

region's social dynamics leading to the social and economic marginalization of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in Moskitia. Currently, this perceived superiority exacerbates land disputes, as mestizo populations feel justified in encroaching upon indigenous territories. This way, Colonos' migration to Miskitu's territory both in Nicaragua and Honduras, represents geographical interest that has also influenced and shaped the minds of Indigenous Peoples with deep cultural and racial implications where the mestizo representatives of the Nicaraguan nation-state impose their language, practices, and beliefs upon the Miskitu population.

This insight has led me to question the relationship between self-determination and the implementation of notions and knowledge of land and the territory. With this critical view in mind, my project explores how the Miskitu way of looking at land relations and the natural environment invites us not only to describe but to imagine and envision forms of land politics and native autonomy, while at the same time acknowledging and engaging the complex intergenerational, racial and gender relations that have shaped and continue shaping the Moskitia. In this context, it is also critical to consider the relevance of Black communities in and around the Moskitia.[8]

The process of identity negotiation among the Miskitu also involves their relationship with Afro-descendant populations. As noted by Afro scholar Juliet Hooker (2009), both groups have shared experiences of marginalization, have often cooperated politically, and have contributed to a unique Afro-indigenous culture in the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. Although Hooker emphasizes the political alliances between Indigenous, particularly the Miskitu, and Afrodescendant peoples through their political organizations YATAMA (Miskitu) and Black Power (Kriol) (Hooker, 2009, p. 148) other prominent experiences of Indigenous and

[8] On the presence of Black communities in the region, see (Morris, 2023; Goett, 2016; Gordon, 1998)

Afrodescendant solidarity exist. For instances, (Gonzales, 2006) reports the alliances made by the Rama Indigenous peoples and Afro descendant population of Monkey Point, a community shared by Indigenous Rama and Afrodescendant peoples in the Southern Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua to resist attempts to build an interoceanic canal. The canal aimed to link the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and if built would have significally impacted the ancestral lands of these communities. The Indio Maíz Biological Reserve was particularly threatened by the. The Indio Maiz Biological Reserve is adjacent to the Rama and Afrodescendant territory and is part of their ancestral lands which they use for subsistence farming and have a deep cultural and spiritual connection to it. The construction of the canal would have likely caused irreversible damage to this critical ecosystem, affecting both its biodiversity and the communities that rely on it for their livelihoods. The Indigenous Rama and the Afrodescendant actively collaborated to voice their opposition to the project and where particularly concerned about the lack of consultation and transparency in the planning process, which they felt infringed upon their rights to free, prior, and informed consent as stipulated by international conventions (like ILO Convention 169) to which Nicaragua is a party.

Within this complex context of territorial, racial, economic, social, gender, and cultural interactions, I ask: What specific views do the Miskitu People hold about land relations? How have external colonial and racial powers influenced or altered these views over time? How do concepts of land and natural resources shape Miskitu's territorial rights conflicts and indigeneity? I address these questions in three parts. First, I propose that Indigenous Peoples not only struggle to defend their territories, but they do it in the name of a balanced relationship with the land and the environment that is different from the one imposed by the settler Nicaraguan state and from capitalist notions of “modernity” and “progress” that have been propagated and imposed upon

the Moskitia. Next, I suggest that despite external social, cultural, political and economic conditions that shape and transform Miskitu people's interaction with land, the core of their notions around land and natural resources are built around markers that have been inscribed in the values and meanings assigned to the landscapes that predate colonial impositions. Finally, I propose that Miskitu people's resistance struggles are formed in their relationship to land as a vital element for their survival. Miskitu Peoples' quotidian resistance is different from the common notion of Indigenous Peoples' resistance in terms of activism and open social mobilization (Bebbington, Bury & Gallagher, 2013*)*.

To engage with a Miskitu theoretical, epistemological, and methodological framework, my research departs from the following assumptions: a) Contemporary ecological knowledge in Miskitu communities is influenced by the interaction of precolonial systems of knowledge and land ownership; b) these systems of knowledge and land ownership were rooted in diverse local ecosystems and therefore are diverse depending on community experiences and geographical location; c) these systems epistemologically entail principles and practices differentiated from Western approaches to development, even though have been certainly permeated by Western influences as part of the entangled colonial processes and histories in which we the Miskitu have been historically immersed. They encompass the relationship between humans, non-humans, and supra-natural entities directly associated with caring for land and the natural environment; d) Miskitu Peoples' ecological knowledge and systems are being actively endangered as part of colonization; and e) the subsistence of Miskitu people is deeply connected to the resources in their ecosystem, thus their lifestyles and interactions with the environment are being adversely impacted by ongoing processes of colonization. This situation is exacerbated as their access to

lands - upon which they rely on for sourcing materials - is constrained by violence and intimidation inflicted by colonos.

The British Empire and the Nicaraguan State and North American Capitalism have played an important role in the long-term history of colonization and commodification of people, land and the natural environment. This project examines the emergence of contested notions of land and the natural environment in three indigenous communities in the Moskitia: Wasla and Saklin in the territory of Wangky Maya; and Santa Clara in the Territory of Tasba Raya. In these communities, Miskitu people negotiate their territorial rights in the face of land dispossession. I chose these communities by carefully taking into consideration their historical, political, economic, and cultural specificities. Geographically, Wasla and Saklin are located on the banks of the Wangky River that serves as the border between Nicaragua and Honduras and close to Tronquera, one of the major operating sites of transnational companies during the 50s, 60s, and 70s. These communities are surrounded by a pine forest which continues to attract extractive companies for pine resin exploitation. The community of Santa Clara, along with the rest of the Tasba Raya Territory, is among the most affected areas by settlers' invasion.

By documenting the intricate relationships between quotidian practices of Miskitu peoples' understandings and productions of land and landscape, my research contributes to debates on the co-production of knowledge (Khan-Perry & Rappaport, 2013; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010; Solano & Speed 2008; Hale, 2008; Escobar, 1995). I identify and highlight forms of transformative knowledge that address social issues of Indigenous Peoples within the wider framework of self-determination, decolonization, and social justice, aiming to modify how we create and give meaning to knowledge (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). This approach is relevant in a context in which the economies of many countries in Latin America, not only Nicaragua, rely

heavily on extractive industries. Therefore, it is vital not to romanticize the beliefs or practices of Indigenous Peoples. It is necessary to examine how Miskitu People question the basis of extractive economies, which will help us reframe how that knowledge improves practices related to the use of land and natural resources.

Previous Studies of Miskitu People's Land Rights

While Miskitu mobilization for land rights has been the subject of other social scientific research in Nicaragua, they have primarily been analyzed as an ethnic conflict (Hale, 1994; McDonald, 1988; Nietschmann,1989). Scholarship addressing Miskitu People's Traditional Ecological Knowledge and relations to land is limited (Nietschmann, 1973; McDonald, 1988; Cupples, 2012; Hale, 1994) and they have generally neglected the broader and deeper concerns about the colonial contexts in which Miskitu People's land rights struggles are embedded.

A significant number of works have been written about the Moskitia region and the Miskitu people, but very few address the Miskitu people and their landscapes specifically. Primarily, these works deal with the period following the withdrawal of Europeans, the emergence of nation-states, and the incorporation of Moskitia into the Nicaraguan State in the second half of the twentieth century. The scholarship acknowledges the varied issues that arose during this period, where new forms of colonization and domination from the nation-state led to the differentiation of ethnic identity, militancy, nationalism, and the development of subaltern and revolutionary consciousness (García, 1998; Gordon, 1998; Hale, 1994; McDonald, 1988; Nietschmann,1989). These authors chronicle the history of revolutionary change in Nicaragua and the ethnic resistance of the Moskitia, a narrative that continues to profoundly influence patterns of land appropriation.

The struggle for land rights has also been examined within the context of legal processes. However, such studies often inadvertently incorporate the claims of Indigenous Peoples within the apparatus of the State's legal system. Consequently, the Miskitu people are erroneously portrayed as political subjects strictly tied to state institutional processes, and their resistance is construed solely in terms of overt mobilizations and demonstrations (Brook & Offen, 2009; Bryan, 2019; Gonzales, 2007).

There is limited scholarship that addresses the epistemic, cultural and political perspectives of the Miskitu people. A relatively recent study explores the biopolitics of climate change and capitalism as experienced in the Moskitia region (Cupples, 2012). Cupples pays particular attention to the economies and ecologies of the Miskito Keys, specifically their devastation by Hurricane Felix in 2007. Moreover, she acknowledges the influence of Indigenous, supernatural, and nonhuman entities on how Miskitu people understand and interact with their landscapes. Cupples concludes by arguing that "the everyday biopolitical productions that are imagined and enacted by the people (…) also constitute a challenge to capitalism's global dominance and to the exertion of biopower by the nation-state and development NGOs" (p. 24). While I agree with Cupples' assertion that Indigenous Peoples' practices and worldviews can indeed challenge dominant paradigms and power structures, including capitalism and state authority I also believe that this alone is insufficient to dismantle the dominance of these entrenched systems. I emphasize the need for broader systemic changes that include, but also go beyond, the practices and perspectives of indigenous communities.

An article by McDonald (1988), discusses the "moral economy of Miskitu people" emphasizing land and natural resources as vital elements of their subsistence and framing land in its religious and spiritual dimensions as the heart of Miskitu resistance struggles. Likewise, Hale,

(1994), explores the meaning of land for the inhabitants of Sandy Bay Sirpi, a coastal Miskitu village in the Southern Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. He focuses on understanding the community's notions of land and how these meanings evolved throughout the 19th century. Although Hale's work offers the closest approximation to comprehending the Miskitu people's concepts of land, it narrowly interrogates the shifting narratives of a specific group over a defined period and set of circumstances, and it lacks a deeper analysis of the origins of these narratives or their connection to the environment they inhabit.

Examining the cultural and historical antecedents of the Miskitu people of Tasba Pauni, located on the Southern Caribbean Coast, Nietschmann (1973) adopts an ecological approach to frame the Miskitu relationship with the natural environment, considering elements of the physical environment such as rain, wind, sun, and moon. He concludes that these physical elements are crucial to the Miskitu's organization of their subsistence activities, with specific times and seasons assigned for each activity. Some other works investigate the construction of Miskitu identity in relation to their inhabited spaces. Garcia (1998) emphasizes the concept of territorial identity as tied to specific locations that foster a sense of belonging. In a similar vein, Offen (1999) proposes that identities tethered to distinct places stem from unique interpretations of socio-environmental significance. Both studies suggest that life experiences can reinforce a sense of territorial identity.

These works constitute a few references to the politics of land and natural resources in Moskitia. However, they have generally neglected the broader and deeper concerns of the social, historical, political, and cultural contexts in which Miskitu people’s land-rights struggles are embedded. Moreover, existing literature lacks contributions from Indigenous academics, thereby continuing the longstanding trend of marginalization and exclusion of Indigenous scholarship

(Nahuelpan, 2013). As the first Miskitu scholar to delve into the land politics of the Miskitu people, I am uniquely positioned to provide an insider's perspective. By incorporating our Miskitu views on land and the environment, I enrich the academic discourse with a more nuanced understanding of our lived experiences and traditional wisdom, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and comprehensive body of knowledge.

In this context, my research draws on theorizations of resistance to grapple with the uneven and complex scenarios in which notions of land and natural resources have been addressed. Thus, building on these previous analyses, I examine at a local level the ways in which land and natural resources embody ancestral values and meanings that permeate Miskitu peoples' present-day quotidian practices. I present the nuances of the conflictive and contradictory engagements between Miskitu communities and capitalist commodification of nature in the ongoing colonial relations of power. In so doing, I move away from Western liberal-centered debates and engage closely with the Miskitu notion of *Yapti Tasba* (Mother Earth).

Theoretical Engagements

My dissertation incorporates diverse theoretical perspectives to address the intersection of land, people, and the environment. Drawing from decolonizing, feminist, indigenous geographies, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), I explore indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives on land and natural resources. Moreover, I employ the concept of indigenous "counter-conduct" (Smiles, 2018) to illustrate indigenous quotidian practices as forms of resistance.

Decolonizing and Indigenous geographies, as fundamental theoretical foundation help to deconstruct dominant narratives of knowledge production and authority. Scholars like Daigle

(2018), Escobar (1995, 2010), and Gergan (2015) have critically examined the ways in which knowledge, particularly regarding land and natural resources, is traditionally produced, owned, and disseminated. Their work challenges the dominance of Eurocentric and settler-colonial perspectives, arguing for a recognition and appreciation of the diversity and plurality of worldviews.

In my dissertation, I build upon the theoretical foundations laid by these scholars to consider how the Miskitu's relationship with the land is not only ecological but also sociopolitical, spiritual, and historical. For the Miskitu people, the land is not a passive object but an active participant in our daily lives, a repository of memories, a symbol of our cultural legacy, and a significant part of our identity. This way, my work entrenched within the lived experiences of the Miskitu people, further emphasizes the need to disrupt the traditional epistemologies that have historically marginalized Indigenous voices and knowledge systems. I argue that decolonizing and indigenous geographies serve as compelling mechanisms for understanding Miskitu's land relations. These perspectives dismantle dichotomous thinking around nature, and culture, and highlight the power structures that shape land access, usage, and rights. Consequently, they illuminate the social dimensions of land dispossession and resistance, aspects that are often overlooked. Moreover, I contend that Indigenous geographies, woven from our ancestral wisdom, provide unique insights into land stewardship. Indigenous geographies, such as the Miskitu's, reframe land from being a resource to exploit, into a relation to nurture. This worldview, I argue, offers solutions to the ecological crisis our world faces today, reminding us that our future is intertwined with the land we inhabit. Through the examination of Miskitu's land relations, my work seeks to center Indigenous knowledge and experiences. This endeavor goes beyond merely adding to the diversity of perspectives. It is an act of decolonization, contesting

the universalization of Eurocentric narratives and championing the many ways in which humans can relate to the land.

Gudynas (2011), Johnson and Larsen (2013), and LaDuke (2017) further underscore the situatedness of knowledge, underscoring that ways of knowing and understanding the world are deeply embedded in specific social, cultural, and environmental contexts. This emphasis on the importance of ontological diversity paves the way for a more nuanced engagement with Indigenous epistemologies. Nirmal (2016) and Simpson (2014), for instance, argue that Indigenous epistemologies must be respected and engaged with on their own terms, resisting the urge to translate, assimilate, or appropriate them into Western knowledge systems.

In my dissertation, I employ these premises as a guiding principle in examining Miskitu land relations. I strive to highlight the distinct ways in which the Miskitu people engage with and perceive their lands, which are deeply interwoven with our unique cultural narratives, societal norms, and spiritual beliefs. Moreover, I argue that engaging with Indigenous epistemologies, like those of the Miskitu, does not merely serve to enrich our collective understanding of human-nature relations. It also holds potential for challenging and transforming dominant paradigms, which have often resulted in environmental degradation and social injustice.

However, a recurrent critique of this body of work is its tendency to overlook the gendered dimensions of ecological knowledge. Many studies privilege male-dominated activities and perspectives, neglecting the ways in which gender shapes the creation, transmission, and application of ecological knowledge. Recognizing this gap, my research explicitly integrates feminist epistemologies and feminist political ecologies to highlight the gendered dynamics of knowledge production. Influenced by the works of Blidon and Zaragocin (2019), Di Chiro (2008), Elmhirst (2011), Gomez-Barris (2017), and Zaragocin (2019), I argue that gendered

ecological knowledge is not static but continuously shaped and reshaped by complex, dynamic, and relational contexts. I emphasize the role of women and other gendered identities in generating, maintaining, and transforming ecological knowledge, and interrogating how this knowledge influences their relationships with the land. Through a feminist lens, my research illuminates the intricate web of social relations, power dynamics, and cultural practices that inform the production and re-articulation of ecological knowledge among the Miskitu people in the Moskitia.

In adopting a decolonizing political ecology perspective, my research aligns with the work of scholars such as Leff (2015) and Schulz (2017). This theoretical approach permits a nuanced exploration of local struggles for self-determination and the reclamation of nature, especially as it pertains to the Miskitu people. As Gonzales Casanova (2003, 2006, 2009) illustrates, understanding indigenous ideologies and conceptions of land, ownership, and community is central to this exploration. These frameworks, steeped in long-held traditions and practices, form the bedrock of indigenous identities and ways of life, and have a profound influence on their relationships with the land.

However, my engagement with decolonizing political ecology extends beyond this. I also utilize this perspective as a tool to challenge dominant modes of knowledge production. Through this lens, I aim to recenter knowledge within the Moskitia region, highlighting the validity and richness of local epistemologies and contesting the hegemony of Western knowledge systems. This decentralization of knowledge production is not just about valuing different forms of knowledge, but also about acknowledging and challenging the power dynamics that shape which knowledge is valued and why.

Engaging with scholars from cultural and political ecology (Butzer, 1976, 1989, 1990; Knapp, 1991; Zimmerer,1991; Peluso,1992), my work interrogates the intersections between culture and environment during periods of socio-economic and political transformation. These scholars propose that decisions regarding resources are made within the framework of beliefs and values shaped by environmental interactions. Furthermore, my work is informed by the insights of cultural geographers such as Cosgrove (1984), Cosgrove & Daniels (1988), and Schein (1997), who delve into how societies influence and are influenced by the cultural beliefs and values embodied within local landscapes.

These scholars, within the framework of political ecology, recognize that landscapes are not merely physical spaces but are imbued with meanings and symbols that shape people's identities and consciousness. Such symbolic landscapes, in turn, significantly influence how people relate to their environment. While I concur with this perspective, I argue that it is crucial to consider the impact of external factors such as colonialism and racial power relations on the formation of these perspectives.

In this regard, my research engages with literature that critically interrogates the influence of racial and colonial power relations on indigenous perceptions of land and natural resources. I argue that the Miskitu people's relationship with the land cannot be fully understood without considering the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization and racialization. Therefore, by integrating these perspectives, my research aims to provide a more comprehensive, nuanced, and critical understanding of the Miskitu people's relationship with the land.

My research is deeply embedded within the discourse of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), a concept which not only encapsulates indigenous understandings of the environment but also engages with broader debates on epistemic violence against Indigenous and

peasant knowledge systems. As Johnson (2010) and Whyte (2013) discuss, the incorporation of TEK into Western scientific frameworks often results in the oversimplification, distortion, or erasure of Indigenous knowledge, leading to a form of violence against these epistemic systems. This phenomenon results in power imbalances, shaping environmental and territorial disputes and affecting how conservation strategies are implemented at the local level.

The work of Reo & Whyte (2012) highlights the complexity of these dynamics, indicating how the standardization of environmental understandings can have tangible impacts on local circumstances. By incorporating Western scientific perspectives, conservation strategies can inadvertently marginalize indigenous knowledge, perceptions, and practices, further exacerbating environmental and territorial disputes. This occurs even as there is an increasing recognition of the value of TEK within Western conservation discourses.

As Whyte (2013) aptly notes, significant tension arises when attempts are made to reconcile TEK with Western science. TEK is recognized as a crucial contributor to environmental knowledge, yet major disparities persist. The contrast lies in the fact that TEK is not just a "body of knowledge" in the Western scientific sense but is deeply interwoven within multiple relationships among living beings, non-living things, and the environment. The profound relationality of TEK, unlike the more compartmentalized, object-oriented approach of Western science, underscores the complexity of reconciling these two knowledge systems.

Therefore, my research seeks to engage with, understand, and highlight these complexities. It is my aim to contribute to the discourse around TEK in a way that recognizes its richness and depth, challenging the dominant Western frameworks and addressing the power imbalances that persist in these epistemological exchanges. Furthermore, my work intends to

emphasize the importance of TEK in shaping Miskitu people's land relations, advocating for more inclusive, equitable, and locally grounded practices of environmental stewardship.

My research also seeks to build on and further the conversation on "environmental injustice" as framed by Indigenous scholars such as McGregor (2009) and Whyte (2018). The term "environmental injustice", as used by these scholars, offers a significant departure from conventional conceptions that focus predominantly on human-centric impacts. In this expanded view, "environmental injustice" encompasses relationships among all living entities, incorporating animals, celestial bodies, the Creator, and ancestors. McGregor (2009) compellingly asserts that "environmental injustice […] is not solely the harm inflicted by mainstream society onto Aboriginal peoples, people of color, and those in low-income neighborhoods but also onto Creation itself" (p. 28). The call here is for a profound paradigm shift, one that moves beyond a narrowly anthropocentric perspective towards a more holistic and interconnected view of the world that respects and honors all of creation.

This broadened perspective of environmental injustice echoes in my research, as I explore the Miskitu people's complex relationships with their land. Their traditional worldview, rooted in interdependence and respect for all living entities, challenges Western dualistic paradigms and invites a more inclusive understanding of environmental justice that considers the health of the entire ecosystem, not just humans.

Furthermore, Whyte (2018) introduces the concept of "collective continuance," for understanding and combating the environmental injustices perpetuated by settler colonialism. This concept, drawn from the Anishinaabe social tradition, weaves together three intertwined elements: interdependence, a system of responsibilities, and migrations. This idea aligns closely with the Miskitu practice of Klauna Laka, embodying a reciprocal responsibility of giving and

receiving. *Klauna Laka*, much like Whyte's "collective continuance", extends beyond human relations to include all living entities, providing a culturally grounded framework for understanding environmental justice in the context of the Miskitu people. In centering these indigenous conceptions of environmental justice, my research strives to highlight the unique and profound insights that indigenous epistemologies and practices offer. It contributes to a growing body of scholarship seeking to challenge dominant discourses and practices, advocating for more equitable and holistic approaches to understanding and addressing environmental injustices.

In addition to investigating the discursive aspects of knowledge production, my research delves deeper into the practices of the Miskitu people concerning land and natural resources through the lens of the concept of "counter-conduct," as articulated by Smiles (2018). Counter-conduct is a significant theoretical construct that allows us to conceptualize everyday practices as forms of resistance, emphasizing the agency embedded in everyday lived experiences. Rather than focusing solely on the formation of knowledge, counter-conduct probes the instances of disagreement and defiance, pointing to actions that challenge and subvert dominant power structures.

According to Smiles (2018), counter-conduct implies that Indigenous Peoples are not just passive recipients of dominant ideologies but are acutely aware of the expectations within these power structures and consciously choose to behave differently. This offers a perspective that acknowledges Indigenous Peoples' active engagement with, and often resistance to, the encroaching influences of dominant cultures.

Importantly, this resistance, or counter-conduct, does not always take the form of explicit, confrontational defiance. More often, it manifests in the form of quotidian practices, social traditions, or political behaviors that, in their continuation and embodiment, subtly resist and challenge colonial power structures. For the Miskitu people, land and natural resources are not only essential for their physical survival but also deeply entwined with their cultural identity and social structure. Therefore, their everyday practices concerning these elements can be viewed as forms of counter-conduct that actively resist assimilation and uphold their cultural autonomy and sovereignty.

Additionally, Smiles' (2018) concept of the malleability of colonial structures and the concurrent adaptability of indigenous resistance is distinctly observable in the context of the Miskitu people. Colonial impacts on the Miskitu have been manifold, influencing their sociopolitical organization, territorial autonomy, economic systems, and cultural expressions. However, the community has continually evolved their strategies to resist these intrusions, maintaining cultural continuity while negotiating the dynamics of power.

A notable aspect of Miskitu resistance is the exercise of their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and practices in the management of their land. Despite colonial pressures to adapt to Western-centric agricultural practices or resource extraction methods, the Miskitu have largely sustained their customary practices. Such continuance of TEK is not just a preservation of indigenous knowledge, but also a form of resistance against the imposition of alien systems and paradigms on their territory.

By focusing on these forms of counter-conduct in my research, I shed light on the nuanced ways in which the Miskitu people negotiate, resist, and navigate the power dynamics imposed by colonial influences. This focus also underscores the importance of considering indigenous agency in understanding the complex interplay of knowledge, power, and resistance in the context of indigenous land relations.

The notion of resistance, as manifested by Indigenous and other marginalized communities in contexts of colonial oppression, has also been a point of inquiry for other scholars, who offer diverse perspectives that illuminate the many ways these groups assert their agency. Drawing from the works of authors such as Smiles (2018) and Kelley as cited by Biolsi (2019), we gain insight into the power of everyday practices and routines as forms of resistance. This "everyday resistance" disrupts the prevailing narrative of resistance as something only grandiose or violent, highlighting the quieter, yet equally potent, acts of defiance embedded in the regular activities of Indigenous and marginalized peoples.

Scott's (1990) introduction of "infra politics" further emphasizes the more subtle forms of political conflict employed by suppressed groups. His work highlights the "hidden discourses" that these groups generate when they feel unsafe openly expressing their views. The visibility of these struggles is deliberately controlled in response to power dynamics, and their nuanced manifestations often go unnoticed in the broader political arena.

Scott's concept of "infra politics" is of relevance to the Miskitu people's experiences under colonial and post-colonial pressures. The Miskitu have developed intricate ways of practicing resistance in everyday life, largely obscured from the view of dominant society but profound in their implications for cultural survival and political resistance. In this sense, Miskitu people's land relations and reluctance to share the land with the settler respond to a form of infra

politics as they continue to adhere to their communal land tenure systems. These practices, while not overtly political, constitute a form of resistance to dominant norms and an affirmation of Miskitu autonomy. Additionally, Scott's concept of infra politics also underscores the importance of traditional ceremonies, which provide a covert arena for the Miskitu to express their resistance and reaffirm their cultural values. These ceremonies might seem innocuous or even incomprehensible to outsiders, but within the Miskitu community, they represent a symbolic refusal to submit to dominant cultural and political norms.

Additionally, by engaging in traditional practices such as subsistence farming, fishing, and hunting, they assert their rights to their land, resist displacement, and underline the value of their ecological knowledge. These practices are not just about survival but are political acts that reaffirm the Miskitu people's place within their ancestral lands.

In the context of my research, acknowledging the infra politics of the Miskitu allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their land relations, beyond what is immediately visible or explicit. By integrating these various perspectives into my research, I elucidate the multi-faceted nature of resistance of Miskitu people beyond open mobilization.

Methods and Limitations

This is a study of Miskitu people's territorial resistance, their responses to land dispossession in a context of colonial relations of power, and their interaction with land across a range of historical, economic, political, social, and cultural contexts. To look at these issues and histories, I resort to the lens of an "Indigenous research methodology," as proposed by Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (2012), and an “Indigenous knowledge framework," as developed by Deborah McGregor (2009), to address the meaning of "land" from an Indigenous perspective.

Smith (2012) advocates for Indigenous scholars to reclaim the knowledge process, assert their unique ways of understanding the world, and participate in the "social transformation of the colonial relations between the native and the settler" (p. 88). Similarly, McGregor compels us to "move beyond the human-centered approach to one of understanding, accepting, enacting, respecting, and honoring relationships with all of creation" (McGregor, 2009, p. 33).

For Miskitu People, a land-based knowledge framework entails two key concepts: *Yapti Tasba* (Mother Earth) and *Klauna Laka* (*KL*). *Klauna Laka* does not have an accurate translation into English, but it generally evokes the notion of self-sufficiency resulting from a complex network of reciprocity between humans and non-humans based on *Yapti Tasba* and the resources it provides. Focusing on indigenous knowledge and land-based practices can bring a different perspective on the legal framework used to address indigenous people's rights and ultimately help dismantle the colonial context in which these laws have been created and used in Nicaragua and elsewhere. From the many variations of Indigenous land-based practices, I chose to focus on the *Klauna Laka* and the belief in supra-natural entities, because, as stated by the elders I interviewed, it is at the core of Miskitu people's sociocultural traditions. Written information about the *Klauna Laka* tradition is non-existent; therefore, I rely on fieldwork research.

My approach to these issues is based on my long-term work and research experience in Miskitu communities as a lawyer and advocate for Indigenous Peoples' rights. My dissertation fieldwork was conducted over two years. Due to the restrictions of the Covid pandemic during the first nine months, September 2020-May 2021, when possible, I conducted interviews over Zoom. During this period, my father also stepped in and helped me conduct in-person interviews when zooming was impossible due to the lack of electricity or a Wi-Fi connection. The

interviews were conducted in the Miskitu language and subsequently transcribed and translated into Spanish and English.

In the summer of 2021, when COVID restrictions eased, I traveled to Nicaragua to complete the ethnographic component of my research in remote communities in partnership with the NGO I volunteered for when I graduated from Law School and with whom I still maintain a close relationship of mutual collaboration in working to advance Indigenous Peoples land rights struggles. I conducted a total of 23 semi-structured interviews and three focus groups. The interviews were carried out in four different locations: Bilwi, the main town on the northern Caribbean Coast, where I was born and raised; the Indigenous communities of Wasla and Saklin in the Indigenous Territory of Wangky Maya, located on the banks of the Wangky River, and Santa Clara in the Indigenous Territory of Tasba Raya, which currently is one of the territories most affected by settlers' invasions. The number of people I could interview was limited by the risks of the COVID pandemic. However, my access to these people and places benefited from my ability to conduct interviews in our shared Native language and a lifetime of cultural experience in this region. In Bilwi, with the help of my father and Zoom, I conducted interviews with prominent Miskitu cultural specialists, thinkers, elders, spiritual leaders, and renowned political leaders who have been directly involved in resistance struggles.

The first set of interviews was conducted with well-known Miskitu cultural specialists, thinkers, elders, and spiritual leaders. These interviews aimed to explore the cultural views of Miskitu people regarding land and the natural environment. The second set of interviews was conducted with community leaders who are or have been directly involved in resistance struggles. This opened a broader understanding of their territorial resistance, relying on the collective memory of their protagonists. These interviews were crucial for understanding how

Miskitu people's resistance struggles are shaped by issues of land and the natural environment. These interviews were complemented by observation and informal conversations with community members in Wasla. For a month, I observed the day-to-day lives of community people to identify different forms of land use in subsistence activities such as farming, hunting, fishing, and sacred land use, as well as spiritual and healing practices in order to gain a better understanding of the way they relate to the land.

In addition to the interviews and observations conducted in Wasla, I incorporated storytelling as a methodological approach an essential tool in indigenous research. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has suggested that "Storytelling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of women have become an integral part of all indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful. But the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every indigenous person has a place" (p. 144). In reflecting upon my research methods with my people, the words of Tuhiwai Smith resonate deeply. The Miskitu's own testimonies, much like those of other indigenous populations, serve not only as a narration of events but also as a mechanism to grapple with and communicate the profound pain stemming from our historical experiences. As Tuhiwai Smith has accurately pointed out "intrinsic in story telling is a focus on dialogue and conversations amongst ourselves as indigenous peoples, to ourselves and for ourselves" (p. 145).

Storytelling, as emphasized by Tuhiwai Smith, plays an essential role within the Miskitu culture and research paradigm, weaving together the rich tapestry of our history, beliefs, and values. These narratives serve not as isolated tales but as pieces of a larger, communal narrative. Each story, whether it narrates resistance and survival against colonial processes, or our deep connection to our lands, contributes to the collective Miskitu memory and identity. Such

storytelling practices are not merely descriptive but rather serve a transformative purpose, intending to effect change in both consciousness and conditions (p. 144).

As Tuhiwai Smith suggests, the stories and the storytellers connect "one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story" (p. 145). Our land relations, as Miskitu people, are intimately tied with these stories. The stories passed down through generations have enabled us to resist entangled colonial processes maintaining a deep-rooted connection to our ancestral lands.

The relevance of storytelling as a research method has also been highlighted by authors such as Kovach (2021). According to Kovach, stories originating from oral traditions engender personal and social meaning. Within Indigenous knowledge creation beliefs, there two general forms of stories, there are stories that hold mythical elements such as teaching and creation stories, and there are personal narratives of place, happenings and experiences as the *Kókumus* and *Mósumus* (aunties and uncles) experienced them and passed them along to the next generation through oral tradition (Pag. 157)

Building on the ideas presented by Kovach (2021), the Miskitu people, too, have a rich tradition of storytelling that draws upon two distinct forms: myths that encompass spiritual beliefs related to the land and natural deities, and personal narratives that encapsulate experiences of pain and loss. These stories, both mythical and personal, are a testament to our enduring connection with the land. They reinforce our understanding of the world and shape our identity as Miskitu people.

In a time of accelerating environmental challenges and the enduring colonial processes, these narratives take on an even more crucial role. They remind us of the sacredness of our lands, inspire our resistance and resilience. Thus, the act of recounting these stories, of listening and

passing them on, is not only an act of preservation but also one of resistance, affirming the Miskitu's continued presence and resilience in our ancestral lands.

My Dissertation calls for a decolonizing framework to address Indigenous Peoples' land rights struggles and acknowledge their unique knowledge systems. **Chapter I: "*Yapti Tasba* and the Complicated Legacy of Colonial Domination,"** traces the idea of the Miskitu Nation that predates the European arrival and the formation of the Nicaraguan nation-state. It highlights the idea that the Miskitu People's sense of nationhood is deeply linked to the land and the territory they inhabit and how the historical dispossession of their land has led to epistemic, cultural, and political subjugation, which affects their indigenous lifeways and self-determination. The chapter documents three central historical moments of dispossession: first, under the rule of the British Empire (1633-1894), 2) Under the Nicaraguan State from 1894-1979 and the influence of North American transnational companies, and 3) under the national and international neoliberal policies and multicultural reforms that have developed from the late 80's to the present. I place particular attention to the first encounters with Europeans, primarily the British, and the impact these interactions had on Miskitu society and its evolving relationship with outsiders. The chapter continues examining the nuances of the Spanish and British colonial rule exploring the effects of colonial policies and institutions on the Miskitu, particularly regarding their territorial rights, political autonomy, and social structure. In so doing this chapter scrutinizes the process of colonial subject formation and how it played out in the context of the Miskitu. Additionally, through a case study of the Territory of Tasba Raya, I address the most recent stage of land dispossession in Miskitu communities and the dramatic impact on Indigenous people's lives and the natural resources they rely on for their survival.

Chapter II: "Wasla. Tracing The Lasting Impacts of an Entangled Colonial History on a Miskitu Community" offers an in-depth discussion of the social, cultural, and economic conditions of Wasla, the main community I worked with. Based on oral histories with elders from the community, I describe its foundation, challenges, and changes that Wasla has undergone under the influence of colonial and racial power relations. I also offer a detailed description of the communal land's physical characteristics, including the hills, rivers, swamps, forests, and the various forms of land usage for the community's subsistence activities, such as farming, hunting, fishing, and sacred lands for spiritual and healing practices. This description provides meaning to the cultural and epistemological value derived from the interaction of community people with their natural environments that gave place to the configuration of reciprocity networks and spiritual practices prior to their encounter with Christianity and the introduction of money in exchange for services.

Chapter III: "From Colonization to Indigenous Resistance: A Chronology of Miskitu Peoples Resistance Movements and the Struggle for *Yapti Tasba*. 1950-1980" documents Miskitu People's resistance movements covering a period of 30 years, from 1950, when the first Miskitu organization was created, to 1980, when the last Miskitu organization was created which survives to the present day. I emphasize the deeply marginalized, racialized, and colonized context in which these resistance movements started and how land was a central element that motivated their creation. Throughout this chapter, I highlight the knowledge produced through these organizational experiences that can benefit current land rights struggles and the need to bring land rights/use to the center of current resistance movements.

Chapter IV: **"Land is Life: Towards a Political Reconfiguration of Miskitu People's Relationship with *Yapti Tasba*"** examines the philosophical, ontological, and cultural meaning

of “Land” for the Miskitu People, placing the concepts of *Yapti Tasba* (Mother Earth) and *Klauna Laka* (self-sufficiency), at the center to unveil a complex network of reciprocity relations between humans and the non-human. In this chapter, I also discuss the centrality of this relationship for the survival of humans and non-humans, as well as the beliefs in supernatural entities in Miskitu People's worldview and its relation to environmental stewardship.

These chapters and the underlying research have been generated based on my long-term work and experience in the region as a lawyer and advocate for Indigenous Peoples' rights, and from pre-dissertation fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2018 and 2019. I am native to the Moskitia, and a native speaker of the language spoken in these communities. I am highly familiar with the local customs and culture of the communities I work with. This facilitates my interactions with people and gives me privileged access to information and spaces. Still, my educational background, as a Miskitu woman studying abroad in a US university, places me in a position of privilege that is not always easy to mediate. In that sense, I approach my research with a reflexive stance (Macbeth, 2001; Dowling, 2006) to better understand the differences in which I am also immersed, and which inherently shapes the knowledge constructed through the research. Acknowledging that the research process entails risks of epistemic extractive relations with local knowledge and ways of being, I stand in solidarity with community members’ interests which to some extents are my own.

I draw on decolonizing perspectives that problematize not only research privileges but also the political commitment of researchers. I use these approaches to build a stance of creative respect towards my collaborators, which calls for carefully recognizing people’s request to remain anonymous or be fully identified depending on the experience or information they are sharing. I also follow this framework as a means of shaping a collaboration based on political

commitment to inhabitants' struggles across multiple scales. The latter entails generating knowledge that is significant to local people's interests and concerns, Tuhiwai-Smith, (2012); acknowledging the differences that permeate Miskitu communities and the specific histories of collaborators.

The examination of indigenous research methodologies or methodological principles would be incomplete without acknowledging the influence of Linda Tuhiwai Smith and her seminal work, "Decolonizing Methodologies." Tuhiwai Smith urges Indigenous Scholars to "take back the knowledge process and participate in the "social transformation of the colonial relations between the native and the settler" (Smith, 2012, p. 88). In my academic work, I strive to embody Tuhiwai Smith's words.

Through his work at CIDCA, my father collaborated with numerous foreign anthropologists and sociologists who paraded through this center and produced academic literature exploring and analyzing the multifaceted life and culture of the indigenous populations of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. The Center also produced native children's stories which my father would bring home and employ as a resource to encourage a reading culture amongst us, his children. Along with them, he also brought home more scholarly publications from CIDCA. Although my father did not expect us to venture into that type of reading due to their complex nature, my curiosity led me to them, consequently, to explore a world about us, about me, about my people, but seen and understood from other people's eyes and perspectives.

While I appreciated the academic rigor involved in these writings, they somehow didn't resonate with my personal and collective understanding of our identity. There was something about the way these writings represented us, described us, and understood us that did not

completely fit in with the way I felt and understood myself and my people. This collective understanding was rooted in the shared experiences I had with people from isolated and remote communities, which I had the chance to visit accompanying my mother on her work trips.

Over time, our house hosted various academics who came to Moskitia for doctoral research stays. On many occasions, I had the opportunity to talk and even collaborate as a research assistant with the researchers. These conversations and collaborations served to sharpen in me the feeling that something was not being done well, to the point that I could no longer contain the need to do it myself, to get out of my world from what had surrounded me all my life and what I had already internalized and naturalized; to detach myself a little and see things from another perspective. I needed to acquire methodological tools to see my reality, a reality that I possibly no longer saw because I had naturalized it. Perhaps the one who was not right was me because I lacked the theoretical and methodological tools to understand myself, to understand my people, their history, and their struggle. Paradoxically, one of those non-indigenous academics opened the doors of academia for me.

The course of my doctoral journey has taught me that, after all, that visceral feeling I had been experiencing since childhood was not so wrong after all. I was not so wrong to feel something was not being done right, that the way the stories were being told did not correspond entirely to the way those stories had been lived. That it is not the same to analyze a situation provided with methodological and theoretical tools as to analyze it because you have also experienced it firsthand. No, it's not the same, having methodological and theoretical tools but lacking lived experiences often neglects key nuances, resulting in a skewed representation of

Indigenous Peoples. Academia has also taught me that this feeling does not nest only in me. On the contrary, it is a collective feeling shared by many colonized peoples worldwide.

Tuhiwai Smith suggests that from the point of view of the colonized, the term "research" is intimately linked to European imperialism and colonialism by the way in which research has been framed, developed, and classified and then presented to the colonized through the eyes of the colonizer. As Tuhiwai-Smith has noted, Western research agendas, grounded in Western philosophy and the use of Western epistemologies, come with a cultural orientation, a set of different values, conceptualizations of things like space and time, different theories of knowledge, highly specialized language, and power structures that represent the Western worldview. Reductionist methods are used, models are developed, and evaluations are carried out according to the criteria determined by the researcher. In other words, from the Western point of view, the production of knowledge has been a product of exploitation, like other natural resources.

The alternative, Tuhiwai Smith suggests, is to address Indigenous Peoples' social issues within the broader framework of self-determination, decolonization, and social justice to create indigenous research, indigenous research protocols, and methodologies that prioritize Indigenous people's problems and needs. This new framework and approach require a historical and critical analysis of the role of research in the indigenous world so that it can provide alternatives in terms of knowledge and its social construction, as well as research methodologies and policy.

My exposure to critical academic debates has also taught me that perhaps the alternative is not a total rejection of these non-Indigenous theoretical and methodological constructions. As Tuhiwai Smith proposes, perhaps a more balanced alternative is, on the one hand, to make indigenous communities aware of the importance of research and, on the other, to make research

institutions see the importance of actively involving Indigenous Peoples in the research process rather than approaching them as simple objects of study.

Placing *Yapti Tasba* at the center of Miskitu people's knowledge production process is important in order to conduct research that understand Miskitu people's perspectives. For the indigenous Miskitu people, their relationship with *Yapti Tasba* (Mother Earth) transcends the mere notion of communal land for subsistence and domestic economy, as suggested by McDonald (1988). Rather, it comprises their interaction with an all-encompassing ecological, symbolic, spiritual, and mythical system where humans and non-humans coexist and engage with one another. *Yapti Tasba*, to the Miskitu people, is perceived as a space where various life forms engage and interrelate, from the mycelium found amongst forest tree roots to the supernatural deities protecting the natural environment. This intricate understanding is sustained through a collaborative dialogue between humans and non-humans, establishing a knowledge triangle consisting of divinity, nature, and humanity.

Envisioning a reconfiguration of social research that incorporates these elements could yield forms of knowledge that challenges Westernizing standards. As Tuhiwai-Smith articulates, it would "account for social injustices, recover subjugated knowledge, create spaces for voices that have been silenced, and confront racism, colonialism, and oppression" (Tuhiwai Smith, p.198). Tuhiwai-Smith suggests that reclaiming the history and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples is an essential part of the decolonization process and does not necessarily imply the rejection of all theory, research, and knowledge produced by the West. On the contrary, it is about focusing on indigenous demands and their ways of seeing the world to understand theory and research from an indigenous perspective adapted to the interests and needs of Indigenous Peoples.

Tuhiwai-Smith suggests that the goal of this decolonized research agenda goes beyond survival and encompasses recovery, development, and, ultimately, self-determination. It transcends politics in the realm of social justice and involves a wide range of terrains, including psychological, epistemic, social, cultural, and economic. The agenda presented by Tuhiwai-Smith includes the processes of transformation, decolonization, healing, and mobilization of people. However, for these elements of the indigenous research agenda to gain credibility, they must be grounded in indigenous frameworks and worldviews.

In a context such as Nicaragua, where interactions with land and natural resources are heavily influenced by Eurocentric and capitalist concepts of "progress" and "development," indigenous people are often denied the necessities for survival. This is primarily due to the incessant encroachment on their lands and irrational exploitation of their natural resources. Reconfiguring academic research agendas to align with the parameters previously discussed can enable the development of a political agenda that is more in harmony with how the Miskitu people perceive their territory.

Through this Dissertation I attempt to subvert the colonial narratives, not only by shedding light on the often-overlooked histories and experiences of Miskitu peoples but also by emphasizing our resilience, our capacity for resistance, and our continuing contributions to the societies in which we live. By doing this, I hope not only to contribute to the "social transformation of colonial relations" that Tuhiwai Smith speaks of, but also to inspire future generations of Indigenous scholars to continue this important work.

Broader Significance

This research contributes to extending recent debates on co-production of knowledge. Specifically, this dissertation contributes to and reworks a growing literature concerned with how notions, knowledge and practices related to land and natural resources are shaped through epistemic and ontological encounters. Indeed, the current academic landscape has largely overlooked the unique insights and perspectives of Indigenous scholars. This exclusion not only perpetuates a cycle of marginalization but also limits the depth and breadth of our scholarship. As the first Miskitu scholar to explore the land politics of the Miskitu people, my work challenges this paradigm. By incorporating our Miskitu standpoint, I seek to enrich the academic discourse with a more nuanced understanding of our lived experiences and traditional wisdom, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and comprehensive body of knowledge.

Additionally, my work explores the dynamics of knowledge production and the practices related to using land and natural resources in an understudied area of Nicaragua. In so doing my project provides concrete ethnographic and ethnoecological knowledge of a little understood territory and landscape, where land and natural resources have become arenas for the Miskitu people to claim better conditions and alternative futures. This approach becomes relevant in a context where many economies in Latin America, not only Nicaragua, depend, to a large extent, on extractive investments such as mining, livestock, forestry, and agribusiness. Therefore, it is imperative to think about indigenous epistemology not only because they are practices or beliefs of a given group, as cultural anthropology has long done, but also because they question the dualistic rationality on which the capitalist mode of production and the free market is based. Doing so helps us to reframe this knowledge in the face of the reconfiguration of Indigenous Peoples as political subjects in the field of research. To achieve this, it is necessary to start from

a knowledge generated from research agendas that prioritize the knowledge and needs of Indigenous Peoples against the hegemonic agendas of the Western academe. Therefore, this type of analysis becomes relevant because it enables the possibility of proposing a political and territorial agenda that is more aligned to the way Miskitu people conceive their territory. It opposes Eurocentric and/or settler capitalist forms of development and governance that dominate this region and that in the context of the early twentieth-first century, rely heavily on extractive industries. The knowledge generated through this research is imperative for Indigenous peoples' epistemologies and land engagements.

Chapter I: *Yapti Tasba* and the Legacy of Colonial Domination

The lands that are currently referred to as Moskitia in Nicaragua, were originally known by the names Tulu Walpa, Tologalpa, and Taguzgalpa before the arrival of European colonial powers. These names suggest the vital connection between land and territory in shaping the identity, life, and history of the Indigenous People that inhabit them, including the Miskitu People. For the Miskitu people, this territory represents their ancestral territory or *Yapti Tasba* (Mother Earth), according to ownership rights based on ancestry. For the Miskitu People, the connection between *Yapti Tasba* and communal life has been violently interrupted due to the overlapping of multiple colonial processes. The history of land occupation and Miskitu struggle has oscillated between colonial entanglements (Dennison, 2012), settler colonialism (Wolfe, 1999), and Indigenous resistance. Dennison's use of the term colonial entanglement to describe the complex and intertwined context in which the Osage Nation struggles to construct its nationhood in the 21st century within the context of historical and ongoing colonial impacts. The concept of settler colonialism, as understood by Patrick Wolfe (2006), delineates the process by which the original population of a colonized territory is replaced by a new society of settlers. Wolfe's conceptualization of settler colonialism examines various aspects and dynamics of settler colonialization. Firstly, he emphasizes the land-labor divide as a defining characteristic of settler colonialism, indicating a connection between the exploitation of bodies and the dispossession of territory (Wolfe, 2011). Wolfe also suggests that settler colonialism can be comprehended as a form of structural genocide, a prolonged process employing diverse institutions and mechanisms to remove the native population, not only through physical elimination but also through their cultural assimilation into the settler society (Wolfe, 2006, pp. 387-409).

Despite the complexities associated with applying the framework of settler colonialism to comprehend indigenous land occupation in *Abya Yala,* a growing body of literature (Speed, 2017; Loperena, 2017; Zaragocin, 2018) advocates for its use in understanding indigenous land dispossession in Latin America due to the processes involved and the implications for Indigenous Peoples. Speed argues that in much of Latin America, colonialism has been characterized by both land dispossession and labor extraction, simultaneously affecting Indigenous Peoples (Speed, 2017, p. 784).

The land dispossession-labor extraction binary is particularly true in the case of Moskitia. First, the European colonial process in Moskitia was characterized by land dispossession for extracting natural resources. Second, the North American enclave in Moskitia that followed the British withdrawal from the region is usually remembered as a period of economic prosperity thanks to the work in these transnationals and the access to money it entailed. However, a closer examination reveals that Indigenous Peoples were used as cheap labor at the service of transnational companies and worked in precarious conditions. Additionally, the impetuous introduction of money in exchange for goods and services permanently damaged the non-monetary reciprocity networks on which the social fabric of Miskitu society rested before the colonization process. Further, the irrational exploitation of natural resources altered the ecological balance on which these communities' social and economic relations were based. The contemporary occupation of Indigenous lands by settlers is the latest modality of the colonial settler process.

In this chapter, I cover three historically defining moments of territorial dispossession coupled with processes of cultural assimilation. These processes have translated into epistemic, cultural, and political dispossession that, I argue, have downplayed the ability of the Miskitu

people to achieve self-determination and denied the native peoples of the Moskitia–territorial autonomy. For the Miskitu people, having ownership and control over their lands has proven to be a precondition for exercising autonomy. These defining moments include the precolonial period, followed by British colonization spanning from 1633 to 1894, and subsequently, the internal colonial era under the Nicaraguan nation-state. The latter period is characterized by the arrival and persistent presence of North American transnational extractive companies from 1894 to 1979, as well as the implementation of national and international neoliberal policies and multicultural reforms since the late 1980s until the present day.

To conclude this chapter, a focused ethnographic examination is conducted on the present-day experiences of Santa Clara and the broader Tasba Raya territory. As mentioned in the introduction, these communities are currently grappling with the ongoing occupation of their ancestral lands by settler colonial forces in Moskitia. By delving into these contemporary circumstances, the enduring consequences of colonialism and territorial dispossession become evident, perpetuating barriers that hinder the Indigenous Peoples' exercise of their rights to autonomy and self-determination.

By situating the Miskitu people's current land rights struggles within its historical and current colonial contexts, this chapter reveals the lasting effects of colonialism that have translated into environmental degradation and, consequently, the destruction of the social fabric that rested on land-based practices. These consequences have extended to the present and have translated into the inability of the Miskitu people to exercise autonomy and self-determination effectively.

The Ancestral Territory of *Tulu Walpa* and the Configuration of Miskitu People's Territorial Identity

There are few written records of the Miskitu people's history before encountering Europeans. Instead, these stories have been passed down orally through generations that serve as knowledge sources regarding the origin story of the Miskitu People. These stories pass down ancestral knowledge and social memory and contribute to constructing the sense of identity of the Miskitu people. Miskitu elders have passed three different origin stories regarding Miskitu People and Territory. These are the stories of "*Waitna" (man/male), "Lakya Tara" (bright star), and "Miskut" (the name of a Miskitu patriarch)*. In all three origin stories, the guides led, independently and at different times, a group of wandering people to *Yapti Tasba* (Mother Earth) as their destination. The search for a destination concludes with encountering the ancestral territory: *Tulu Walpa* and the people *Miskut Uplika* (The People of Miskut*).* According to Avelino Cox Molina, a Miskitu elder and thinker and one of the most representative specialists of Miskitu history and literature today, the stories of *Waitna, Lakya Tara, and Miskut* narrate the wandering life of the Miskitu people in search of *Yapti Tasba*.

Waitna, the first guide, led the wandering people until he found the destination land or *Yapti Tasba,* which they named "*Tulu Walpa."* Once established in *Tulu Walpa, Waitna* devoted himself to instructing his people in the techniques and designs of house construction and fermented beverage making: Misla, Sihkru, and Twalbi. *Lakya Tara,* the second guide, was a priest warrior. The story of *Lakya Tara* suggests that he led the village *Muihka* (Brother) from Rivas in what is today known as Nicaragua across Lake Cocibolca. They crossed Lake Cocibolca to encounter the Land of *Tulu Walpa.* Upon their arrival in *Tulu Walpa,* they devoted themselves to the foundation of the settlements of *Sita Awala* (River of Oysters), *Bihmuna, Uskira, Dakura, and Awas Tara.* The third and final guide was *Miskut*. This is the most popular story, according

to which, many centuries ago, a group of people, led by their warrior leader Miskut, traveled along the Caribbean coast, and settled in a place where a river, a lagoon, and the sea converged. They called this place *Sita Awala*, which means "lagoon or river of oysters." The river would later be called *Wangki*, and the lagoon, *Kip Almuk* (Cabo Gracias a Dios or Cape Thank You, God). Upon reaching their destination, they established settlements, and Miskut died.

Today, Sita Awala is in *Auhya Yari* (Puerto Lempira), the current department of Gracias a Dios in Honduras. The people called themselves *Miskut kiamka* (descendants of Miskut) or *Miskut uplika nani* (the people of Miskut). This identification-relationship between the people and their guide was eventually transformed into the name Miskitu, thus explaining the origin of the name of the Miskitu people (Cox, Molina A, 2003: 17). According to oral sources, when meeting with the Spaniards, "*Tulu Walpa,"* the ancestral name of the territory, was modified to Tologalpa and Taguzgalpa by the Spaniards, then to Moskitia by the British.

While the origin story of the Miskitu people as outlined previously provides invaluable insights into the ethnogenesis of the Miskitu people, it is also worth examining the interpretations offered by anthropologists. Considering this, the origins of the Miskitu people have been the subject of extensive debate, with a variety of perspectives proposed by various scholars. According to Claudia Garcia (2007), the Miskitu, as we know them today, did not exist prior to the arrival of Europeans, but rather emerged as a distinct social group in the 17th century. García suggests that the Miskitu identity is the result of a process of racial mixing between Europeans (primarily of British, French, and Dutch descent), Africans, and indigenous American peoples (García, p. 27). Similarly, Eduardo Conzemius (1932) suggests that the Miskitu origin derives from racial mixing, particularly of the Bawihkas, with Dutch or French pirates and African slaves during the first century of European presence in the region.

Illustration 1. Central America, 1842, In Maps of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (Great Britain) Vol. 1. London: Chapman and Hall.

The colonial period, spanning approximately four centuries from 1502 to 1894, is marked by significant events that shaped its beginning, progression, and conclusion. These events include the accidental arrival of Christopher Columbus to *Sita Awala* in Tulu Walpa, the subsequent development of the colonial process, and the forceful annexation of the *Tulu Walpa* territory into the emerging Nicaraguan state in 1894. Shortly after his arrival at *Sita Awala*, Columbus regrouped his men and embarked on his final voyage, sailing along the Caribbean coast of Central America from Trujillo in Honduras to Panama between May and July 1503 (Conzemius, 1932).

The sudden encounter of the native peoples of *Abya Yala* with the European colonizers represented an enormous challenge to the survival of native populations in the face of colonization. The European colonial powers, mainly Spain and Great Britain, sought to gain

territorial control of indigenous lands, allowing them to plunder the colonies' natural resources. Between 1529 and 1765, the Spanish continuously attempted to secure territorial control in Tulu Walpa by subjecting the region to Spanish colonization, which relied on violent subjugation and religious submission.

Both methods were resisted and rejected by the native peoples of *Tulu Walpa* with the help of the British, who were also invested in securing the territorial control of Tulu Walpa. Garcia Añoveros, a Spanish chronicler, writes: “All attempts to contact with Caribs, Miskitus, and Zambos were rejected and resisted by the natives who count on the support of the British (…) who have their colonial agenda (in the region)” (Añoveros, 1988, p. 26). Additionally, the geographical and climate conditions of the region, characterized by large jungles, vast tropical forests, rivers, swamps, and copious rains almost all year round, made it more difficult for the Spaniards to advance. A Nicaraguan Bishop, Morel Santa Cruz, reported that it was impossible to maintain the religious enterprise and conquest of the people of Tologalpa. He notes: “Penetrating the mountain was terrible because of the heat, the thickness, and weeds that did not let you see the sun” (Cited by Añoveros, 1988, p. 29). The above quote portrays *Tulu Walpa* as a land difficult to conquer because of the climate conditions that made the territory impossible to penetrate by the Spanish colonizer.

In 1675, after multiple failed attempts, the Spaniards desisted from conquering the people and land of Tologalpa. Nevertheless, the Spaniards did succeed in conquering the Pacific coast of current Nicaragua (Añoveros, 1988, p. 28). At the time of the Spanish desisting their colonial ambitions in *Tologalpa,* the territory remained in colonial control of the British. During this period, the native peoples of Tologalpa were subjected to two European imperial powers that used different methods of colonization. The presence of the British in Tologalpa strengthened the

native people's rejection of the Spanish and their Christian missions since the British offered the native population some autonomy, whereas the Spanish represented blatant suppression. Nevertheless, the British did not care for the native peoples of *Tulu Walpa*; what they sought was to secure their dominion along the Caribbean coast, which they did by pretending to be allies of the native peoples, particularly the Miskitu, while at the same time making sure the native people continued to reject the Spanish colonizing attempts. Jesús de María notes, ″Misquitos, and other groups, by far, preferred the methods used by the British in terms of their lifeways and customs instead of the submission to the Spaniards" (Añoveros, 1988, p. 77).

Starting from the 17th century, Jamaica, due to its advantageous geographical position, emerged as Britain's primary Caribbean hub. From this base, the British identified three key locations on the Central American Caribbean coast that were strategically important for their colonial objectives. Firstly, Belize was used as a hub for exporting mahogany wood to various Central American ports. Secondly, Roatan Island in the Bay Islands of Honduras was of military significance as it was crucial for ensuring Belize's security. Lastly, the formidable region of Tulu Walpa, located between Trujillo in Honduras and Rio San Juan in Nicaragua, was identified as the third strategic point. This region presented an opportunity for the British to forge strong relationships and establish local alliances with the indigenous population. The British recognized the potential of the Miskitus as valuable allies in their efforts to counter threats from the Spanish colonial system. Furthermore, the alliance between the British and the Miskitus could serve as a foundation for expanding British colonies and trade in the Caribbean (Ghotme, 2012, p. 17)

With such pretensions, the British soon began friendly commercial relations with the Miskitu to counter the Spanish projects of religious submissions that tried to penetrate the Tologalpa (Ghotme, 2012, p. 17). In this scenario, Tulu Walpa was simultaneously exposed to

two colonial projects: on the one hand, the Spanish and, on the other, the British, who aimed to convert Tulu Walpa into a British protectorate and reproduce a British-inspired monarchy using the native government structures. Within the framework of commercial relations, the British acquired a wide range of natural resources agricultural production and Miskitu handicrafts, pineapple, bananas, sweet potatoes, cassava, yams, taro, coconut, papaya. Also, honey, fish, seafood, bushmeat, salt, turtle meat, and oil. It also included handicrafts important for the British buccaneers, such as canoes, hammocks, leather products, pumpkins, and tortoiseshell; later, the Miskitu served as sailors and soldiers through temporary contract agreements with the British (Bourgois & Grunberg, 1981, p. 12), (Ghotme, 2012, p. 9). On the other hand, Miskitu people acquired from the British machetes, axes, hooks, iron pots, carpentry tools, tobacco, cotton fabrics, ornaments, mirrors, glass utensils, cane rum, and firearms, especially muskets, rifles of that time (Bourgois & Grunberg, 1981, p. 12).

Access to firearms was transcendental for the Miskitu people as it marked a before and an after in their life and subsistence economy. It meant transitioning from using bows and arrows in hunting to using firearms. In addition to providing firearms, the British also provided Miskitu people with military training, which improved Miskitu people's capacity to resist Spanish colonization (Ghotme, 2012, p. 19). As history reports, they were very skilled in handling the musket. Some historians have suggested that the Miskitu people's mastery of the musket gave place to the denomination of "mosquitoes," which over time became the namesake of the territory, first, the Mosquito Coast, and in the present, Moskitia. For the Miskitu, the correct name for the territory is Miskitu, which references their leader, Miskut. With the domination of Jamaica and the neighboring islands and strengthened commercial and military relationships with the Miskitu, the British began their colonial process over Moskitia (Ghotme, 2012, p. 17).

The British colonial rule over Moskitia went through three stages depending on the political strategy they implemented: Monarchy, Protectorate, and Reserve. (Ghotme, 2012, pp. 9, 17, 19, 23).

From the Miskitu Kingdom to Settler State Domination

The Miskitu Kingdom[9] was initially established in Cabo Gracias a Dios, former *Sita Awala*, close to the current border of Nicaragua and Honduras. Later, the Court was moved to Bluefields on the region's southern border (Hale, 1994). Carlos Thomas Hendy, who considers himself a descendant of the last Miskitu King, Robert Hendy Clarance, notes:

> The kingdom was rather symbolic. The king was more like a tribal leader who became the interlocutor with the British to legitimize the British colonial interests over *Tulu Walpa* and control the territory at the convenience of the British metropolis. This way, the British promoted the Miskito Monarchy, recognizing as a king the pre-existent figure of a tribal chief. The British main interest was to launch the Miskitu to resist the Spanish attempts to penetrate the Tulu Walpa.

Between 1625 and 1687, the monarchy, more symbolic than real, comprised a dynasty of ten kings. The first of them had such an unpronounceable name that the British preferred to call him Old Man I. Historical evidence suggests that Old Man I was the son of a Miskitu tribal chief who was the first to establish relations with the British and that he was invited to visit the King of England, Charles I. He also traveled to Jamaica in 1661 to formalize diplomatic and commercial relations with the British. The son and successor of Old Man I also traveled to Jamaica to be

[9] During the 17th century, British settlers formed economic connections with the Miskitu Indigenous people and established a system of governance called the Mosquito Kingdom, characterized by indirect rule.

crowned as Jeremy I in 1686 [10] (Olien, 1983, pp. 4, 9, 18). The alliance between the Miskitu and the British led to a significant expansion of territorial boundaries for Tulu Walpa, reaching as far as the Chiriquí Lagoon in Panama. This expansion was recognized as the jurisdiction of the Kingdom of the Mosquitia and served as a countermeasure to the colonial aspirations of the Spanish (Bourgois, 1986, p. 13)

The Kingdom of the Miskito Nation reached its twilight at the convenience of England, transitioning from a Monarchy to a British protectorate in 1749. The king's titles were substituted for those of Hereditary Chiefs. Both figures, Kings and Hereditary Chiefs, were symbolic as the British continued to rule the territory. Before its implementation in Moskitia, the Protectorate system was a political practice employed by the British Empire in various regions across the globe. Originating in the early sixteenth century, this institutional framework served as a means of colonial control over overseas territories, allowing the British Empire to safeguard its interests during imperial colonial disputes. The Protectorates were territories that remained outside the formal annexation to the British crown. In Moskitia, the Protectorate was a commercial, military, and political relationship of the British Empire with the Miskitu natives of *Tulu Walpa.*

However, this status of Protectorate did not last. It ended with the American Independence War between 1775 and 1783. The war ended following the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, which formalized the independence of the United States (Paterson et al., (2014). In one of its clauses, without consultation or consent from the Miskitu Hereditary Chiefs, Great Britain promised to evacuate its settlements on the Mosquito Coast, agreeing to recognize Spanish sovereignty over the territory in exchange for allowing British settlers to continue to extract

[10] For a detailed examination of the line of succession, refer to Olien (1983).

timber from Belize. In other words, the ties of the Protectorate with England were formally broken. Simultaneously, the emerging nation-states of Nicaragua and Honduras consolidated as independent states in 1821 (Ghotme, 2012, p.14).

As the geopolitical landscape of the region transformed so did the interests and subsequent actions of the parties involved. The depletion of mahogany in Belize, and the possibility of an interoceanic canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans revived the British interest in Moskitia (Ghotme, 2012, p.23). The San Juan River, which partly flows through the Moskitia, was seen as a good alternative for the canal route. In 1837, the Superintendent of Belize, Col. Alexander McDonald, convinced the Miskitu Chief to request a renewal in the protection of his kingdom from the British Monarch against possible aggression from the emergent Central American republics (Ghotme, 2012, p.9). The following year, with McDonald's supervision, Chief Robert Charles Frederick notified Costa Rica that Port Moni and the adjacent territories belonged to the Miskitu Kingdom. Subsequently, the Superintendent of Belize warned Costa Rica that the Kingdom of Moskitia was an ally and that any attempt to take a position from what they considered their territories would not be allowed by the United Kingdom. Thus, in 1844 and under British influence, Miskitu Chief George Augustus Frederick II again declared the independence of the Miskito Nation from Nicaragua, Honduras, and Colombia. The United Kingdom was the only country to recognize its sovereignty (Ghotme, 2012, p.19).

The afore mentioned scenario unfolded concurrently with the ascension of an emergent North American power on the continental stage. As the United States made its foray into this dynamic geopolitical landscape, the nascent government chose to mark its arrival with a clear declaration: the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, a policy best summarized as "America for the Americans" (Naylor, 1960). This doctrine, while incipient, signified a pivotal shift in the balance of power

and set the stage for the United States' future involvement in regional and international affairs. This doctrine was a direct message against England in the Moskitia and against Spain and any other imperial power to prevent European expansion and influence on the continent. In such circumstances, the North American power, in the process of expansion and boosted by the recently inaugurated Monroe Doctrine, did not approve of the continued advance of Great Britain in Moskitia and Central America (Gilderhus, 2006).

Faced with the aggressive American expansionism embodied by the Monroe Doctrine, British interests in Central America came under increasing scrutiny and pressure. As a result, the United States' emerging geopolitical influence began to decisively shape the future of the region by forcing England to sing the Clayton-Bowler Treaty in 1850. In this Treaty, England and the United States committed to not having exclusive predominance over the canal built through Nicaragua (Encyclopedia Britanica, 2013). The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty meant that Britain would gradually abandon its presence and influence in Moskitia. To signal their recognition to the United States, the United Kingdom endorsed the Treaty of Managua, otherwise referred to as Zeledón Wyke, in 1860 a full decade later (Frazier, 2007). This formal agreement acknowledged Nicaragua's dominion over Moskitia while simultaneously stipulating that the region would remain under the autonomous rule of the local Miskitu Chiefs. Consequently, the treaty led to the establishment of an Indigenous reservation encompassing parts of Moskitia, transforming a segment of the traditional *Tulu Walpa* territory into a fully autonomous region within the emerging Nicaraguan state.

Because of the Clayton-Bowler Treaty of 1850, the United Kingdom focused more on its British Honduras (Belize) colony, so the USA gradually occupied the space left in Moskitia. Ten years later, because of the Treaty of Managua between England and Nicaragua, the United

Kingdom renounced its Protectorate over Moskitia and gradually withdrew. On the other hand, Nicaragua was forced to grant autonomy to the Moskitia. The British, seeking a way to avoid the total rupture of its link with the Moskitia, continued to insist that the rights of autonomy of the Moskitia be included in the Treaty. As a result of these insistences, in 1861, about fifty mayors met in Bluefields to approve the creation of an Indian Reserve under British legislation, which would be the only one applicable in Moskitia. King Miskitu George IV officially made this known to his consular offices in Kaiman and Jamaica (Laird, 1972. However, the reserve was reduced to a small extension of the vast ancestral territory of *Tulu Walpa, Tologalpa, or Taguzgalpa*.

At the time of the Treaty and the transition from the Protectorate to the Reserve, George IV-George Augustus Frederick was the Hereditary Chief. He continued automatically as Tribal Chief until he died in 1865. The British maintained control over the Tribal Chief, securing trade in the Caribbean. George IV was succeeded by his nephew, Chief William Henry Clarence (from 1866 to 1879), minor educated as a minor in Kingston, Jamaica, appointed under the name of William I. He was ten years old at the time of his appointment on May 23, 1866. The Nicaraguan government refused to recognize him because of his young age and how he had been elected giving place to decades of tense relations between the Nicaraguan government and the Reserve.

During this period, the role of the Miskitu King was reduced to that of a Tribal Chief. However, there was still British influence, whose laws enacted by Miskitu elites would be aligned with British interests. This would change during the presidency of José Santos Zelaya, who in 1894 enforced the incorporation of the Moskitia into the Nicaraguan State, inaugurating the Internal colonial period of the Moskitia, now at the hands of the Nicaraguan State. In 1905, shortly after the incorporation, Nicaragua and the British signed The Harrison Altamirano

Treaty[11], which required the Nicaraguan state to provide legal titles to indigenous territories however, the Nicaraguan State didn't comply.

This way, the British colonization of Moskitia lasted over three centuries and ended through significant territorial dispossession events involving two distinct forms of deprivation. Firstly, the British denied the original property rights of the indigenous population, disregarding their historical and ancestral connection to the land. Secondly, physical limitations were imposed, substantially reducing the vast expanse of the *Tulu Walpa* territory, once recognized as the Kingdom of the Moskitia Nation, ultimately reduced to a meager reserve within the confines of Nicaraguan territory.

The moments of dispossession, wherein original property rights were denied, coincide with the signing of treaties. The first instance occurred in 1783 when England relinquished the territory's sovereignty to Spain by signing the Treaty of Paris. However, Spanish attempts to assert control were resisted by the Miskito people. The second moment occurred in 1860 when the Treaty of Managua was signed, acknowledging Nicaragua's sovereignty over the Moskitia while allowing the Miskitu to maintain self-government under their king. Nicaragua, however, could not effectively exercise sovereignty over the territory. The third moment took place in 1861 when, with the support of England, an assembly of mayors decided to establish an Indigenous Reserve within Moskitia as part of Nicaraguan territory. The fourth moment occurred in 1894 when the Reserve was violently annexed, and the indigenous autonomy status was completely dissolved through a military operation by the Nicaraguan government led by José Santos Zelaya.

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[11] Great Britain., Mosquitia., Nicaragua. (1906). Harrison Altamirano treaty and Mosquito convention. Managua: Tip. "La informacion". https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044103159489&view=1up&seq=6

These consequences are a poignant example of the colonial entanglements the territory of *Tulu Walpa* endured. The British-Miskitu alliance is a prominent illustration of the deliberate exploitation of asymmetrical colonial power dynamics. The British colonizers assumed a dominant role, and the Miskitu people were subjugated. In such circumstances, the indigenous "rulers" never held political autonomy. The English had exclusive jurisdiction over territorial political matters, and these decisions were always subordinate to British interests.

As I will show in detail in chapter four, the period between the incorporation of the Moskitia in 1894 and the triumph of the Sandinista revolution in 1979 was characterized by the conversion of the Caribbean coast into an enclave economy open to unmitigated exploitation by transnational fruit, mining, and logging, mainly US-based, companies that obtained massive concessions on indigenous lands. During the Somoza family's dictatorship (1936-1979), American and national investment fueled the dispossession of land and exploitation of natural resources in Moskitia. Like the British Empire, the Nicaraguan state was also interested in the natural resources of Moskitia, but above all, it had a political and cultural interest in the assimilation of Indigenous Miskitu. The assimilation project has seen many forms, from various methods of cultural oppression to centralized educational models. As I will examine later, the most vivid example of the latter was the Fundamental Education Project implemented throughout the 1960s. This project aimed to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into Nicaragua's larger mestizo (Spanish-speaking population) by suppressing Indigenous Peoples' beliefs, traditions, and languages.

In this way, the "colonial entanglement" that *Tulu Walpa* endured over centuries translated into the fragmentation of the ancestral territory and the transformation of its name to Tologalpa

and Taguzgalpa. Over time and by the influence of the British, these names were substituted by Moskitia, which persists to these days. Despite the fragmentation of the territory of *Tulu Walpa,* unity persisted among the native peoples of this territory until 1957. During that year, and in the heat of the Mokorón War[12] between Nicaragua and Honduras, the International Court of Justice ruled to establish the Wangky River as the border between Nicaragua and Honduras, dividing the Moskitia territory into two nation-states. The fragmentation of the ancestral territory and the legacies of these "colonial entanglements" continue to affect the Miskitu people's ability to exercise autonomy. As I will show later, the ability to exercise autonomy is closely linked to having access to land and natural resources.

More recently, following the triumph of the Sandinista revolution in 1979 and the decade-long civil war that followed, the Nicaraguan state's settler colonial project has approved a package of multicultural reforms. In 1987, the Nicaraguan Constitution was changed to recognize Nicaragua as a multicultural state and accepted and promoted the use of Indigenous languages. This scenario meant that for the first time, Nicaragua acknowledged the existence of Indigenous Peoples, marking the shift from assimilation to multiculturalism. In addition, that year, as part of the negotiation process to end the war, the Nicaraguan state approved Law 28, granting autonomous status to the indigenous territories. Law 28 established the current Northern and Southern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region. With the Sandinistas stepping out of power in 1990 and during the years of right-wing governance that followed, the Moskitia has been the object of massive logging and mining activities. One of the logging concessions issued during

[1212] The Mokoron War was a military campaign that took place from May 14 to May 23, 1957, between Nicaragua and Honduras. It was initiated by the Nicaraguan government led by Luis Somoza. This conflict was an attempt by Somoza to divert public discontent and solidify his power following the execution of his father, Anastasio Somoza. The war occurred in Honduras, and it resulted in a victory for Honduras and continued social discontent in Nicaragua.https://elsoca.org/index.php/america-central/movimiento-obrero-y-socialismo-en-centroamerica/4390-centroamerica-la-guerra-de-Mocoron-y-la-division-de-la-nacion-misquita

this period became the basis for a dramatic shift in the legal status of Indigenous lands in Nicaragua and throughout Latin America. The Mayangna[13] community of Awas Tingni sued the government over a logging concession granted to the Soles del Caribe SOLCARSA company in Mayangna territory, specifically the community of Awastingni. After years of litigation, in 2001, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights favored Awas Tingni in a binding decision, the Court ordered Nicaragua to demarcate and title these lands. As a result, in 2003, Law 28 was soon complemented and reinforced by Law 445 for the demarcation and titling of Indigenous lands. In 2002, to create the conditions for the approval of Law 445, the Nicaraguan Constitution was modified again to include communal property, granting it the same status as other forms of property recognized until then, such as private and public property. Communal property is directly related to the communal ownership of Indigenous territories, as opposed to the individual appropriation of lands in other parts of the country.

Law 445 mainly aimed to regulate the communal property regime of the Indigenous communities' lands and guarantee the full recognition of communal property rights through a five- stage process for land titling and demarcation. Although the Nicaraguan State carried out the first four stages of the demarcation process and provided land titles to twenty-three Indigenous territories, it has failed to carry out the fifth and last stage of the demarcation process, which implies the removal of settlers illegally occupying land in Indigenous territories. Additionally, even after Law 445, these communities continue to face central government interventions, extractive industries such as forestry and mining that cause violence and displacement of indigenous peoples while also causing serious health and environmental

[13] The Mayangna is the second-largest indigenous community in Nicaragua. The Mayangnas gained national and international prestige in 2002 after winning the lawsuit against the Nicaraguan.

hazards; illegal settlers also have cleared out precious rainforests to establish cattle ranches and lumber operations.

Consequently, Indigenous People are left at the mercy of armed settlers that migrate to these territories in search of gold, wood, and lands, not only occupying the indigenous communal property and destroying the ecosystems in these communities but kidnapping and torturing, raping, and murdering native people. According to a recent report prepared by the Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho International (Center for Justice and International Law CEJIL) and the Centro por la Justicia y Derechos Humanos de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua (Center for Justice and Human Rights of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, CEJUDHCAN), the arrival of settlers has dramatically increased since the approval of Law 445, making Indigenous People leave the only land they know and inhabit in search of refuge in other communities or urban areas. Those who stay cannot access their land for farming, hunting, or fishing activities that they usually do to sustain themselves and their families. This situation leads to a food crisis especially affecting children, elderly people, and pregnant women.

Tasba Raya: A Present-Day Miskitu Story of Land Struggle

Tasba Raya, meaning "New Land" in the Miskitu language, was established in the 1970s when seven communities were relocated from flood-prone areas near the Wangky River. This led to the adoption of the name Tasba Raya (New Land). The region is divided into two sections: Tasba Raya Sur (South) and Tasba Raya Norte (North). Tasba Raya Sur encompasses Francia Sirpi, Santa Clara, Esperanza, and Wisconsin, while Tasba Raya Norte comprises Tasba Pain, Miguel Bikan, and Polo. The four communities in Tasba Raya Sur are situated along a secondary road, roughly a two-hour car journey from the main route connecting Bilwi to Waspam. As one travels along this road, the communities unveil themselves in sequential order: first Francia Sirpi,

followed by Santa Clara, then Esperanza (also known as Wawa Esperanza, owing to its strategic location near the Wawa River), and finally, Wisconsin.

Tasba Raya forms part of the Wangky Twi-Tasba Raya territory, comprising 21 communities. The Wangky Twi Tasba Raya region, along with Wangky Maya and Wangky Li Aubra, constitutes the broader Wangky River territories. Wangky Twi refers to the communities near the Wangky River, specifically on the plain rather than directly on its banks like Wangky Li Aubra. Meanwhile, Wangky Maya is situated upstream and Wangky Li Aubra downstream, with the central point being the city of Waspam. Waspam serves as the head of the municipality bearing the same name and the head of the broader Wangky region.

Subsistence activities in Tasba Raya consist of agriculture, freshwater fishing, hunting, gathering of wild species, small livestock, and artisanal use of forest resources of several broadleaf species. The main agricultural products include beans, rice, corn, cassava, bananas, plantains, taro roots, sweet potatoes, other tubers, and fruit trees, including coconut and citrus, such as oranges and lemons. Most of the agricultural production is used for the family's self-consumption, and the rest is transported by road and sold in the markets of Bilwi and Waspam. The preceding depiction of Tasba Raya's agricultural practices reflects the traditional livelihood that was once prevalent in the community. However, presently, the economic activities of the community have significantly diminished due to the occupation of their lands by settlers. Consequently, the communities are facing a severe food crisis. One of the participants in the focus group in Santa Clara described this situation: "...before we did that job very well (hunting). But now the whole forest is taken over by the settlers, so it is a problem now to go hunting; We don't have meat anymore. We have nothing. Right now, that you arrived, you could be eating a *Guardiola*, but we cannot give you that because we have nothing but life in crisis."

The communities of Tasba Raya share the border with the Mayangna Territory of Amasau, where the iconic village of Awastingni is located. Before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for a concession granted to the Soles del Caribe SOLCARSA company in Mayangna territory, specifically the community of Awastingni. Before the conflict with SOLCARSA and the State of Nicaragua, there was another much less known and documented conflict between Tasba Raya (Miskitu) and Awastingni (Mayangna).

The conflict consisted of a dispute over 42,000 hectares of land that both Awastingni and the communities of Tasba Raya Sur claimed as their own. The authorities decided to grant 21 hectares to the community of Awastingni and distribute the remaining 21,000 hectares among the communities of France Sirpi, Santa Clara, and Wawa Esperanza. Today, more than 20 years after the iconic victory of Awastingni, the same territory previously disputed by Miskitu and Mayangna peoples and then defended from the extractive pretensions of the State of Nicaragua and SOLCARSA, has been invaded by settlers, equally affecting Miskitu and Mayangna communities.

My first contact with the Tasba Raya area occurred in 2003. At that time, I had recently graduated from law school and started collaborating with the Centro por la Justicia y Derechos Humanos de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua (Center for Justice and Human Rights of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, CEJUDHCAN. At that time, Law 445 had just been approved. The law's approval resulted from a long process leading to Awastingni's victory. In its judgment, the Court determined that the Nicaraguan State should include a law providing legal protection to indigenous territories in its legal framework.

In this context, CEJUDHCAN was intensely working on introducing the law into the communities so that the community members knew the rights that protected them. Our scope of

action was mainly the Wangky Maya and Tasba Raya Sur communities. As part of my work at CEJUDHCAN, I regularly traveled to these communities assisting another colleague who was the primary facilitator of the workshops. My work included taking photos, guarding, and delivering the teaching materials to the workshop attendees, and taking charge of the logistics as needed.

Illustration 2. Santa Clara

I fondly remember an incident during our workshop development in Wisconsin. In Miskitu communities, it is customary for people to express their gratitude; on that occasion, a lady approached me carrying a bunch of bananas. Given my secondary role in the work team and my relatively younger age compared to the colleague who facilitated the workshops, I assumed the bananas were meant for her. I expressed my thanks and promised to deliver them promptly. However, the lady quickly clarified, saying, "No, they are for you." Those words filled me with

deep gratitude and an unexpected sense of joy. Receiving such a kind gesture made me blush because I didn't feel deserving of it. I didn't believe I had done enough to warrant such kindness from the lady.

This experience gave me a sense of great affection not only for the lady but for all the communities of Tasba Raya Sur. They were my first entry point into Indigenous Peoples' land rights struggles, and I received such a beautiful gesture in one of those communities. Although I no longer collaborate directly with CEJUDHCAN, we maintained good communication over the years. In such way that on my return to Tasba Raya in the summer of 2021, I first contacted CEJUDHCAN via email months in advance. I talked to them about my interest in visiting the area, and once I arrived in Nicaragua, I visited their office. They kindly assisted me in facilitating my return to Tasba Raya by providing names of people to talk to and places to stay.

Before arriving in Tasba Raya, we spent some time in Wasla and the larger Wangky Maya area. On the trip, I was accompanied by my father, my 12-year-old son, and my husband. The latter is a mestizo (a term used in Nicaragua to refer to non-Indigenous People, primarily Spanish speakers) and a great ally and defender of indigenous rights.

We set out on a bus from Waspam to Bilwi, with our destination being Tasba Raya, strategically positioned midway between the two. We arrived around noon in the community of Buenos Aires, where we were told we should wait for the truck that would take us to Tasba Raya Sur. We were only told the truck travels on Thursday afternoons, but we were unsure about the time. We put our belongings in an abandoned house to protect them in case of rain and had lunch in a nearby dining place. After eating, we hung our hammocks in the trees to rest while waiting. Around five o'clock in the afternoon, the truck finally came. It was a truck for transporting cargo rather than passengers. Passengers would be accommodated on top of the cargo consisting

mainly of wood, bananas, cassava, and the passenger's luggage. We boarded the truck, settled on our backpacks, and embarked on the journey.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly until my husband's, clearly non-Miskito, physical appearance began to be a problem. It was obvious that the four of us were strangers among the rest of the people who mostly knew each other. It was impossible to go unnoticed, especially my husband. A few minutes after embarking on the journey, a group of men began to murmur in Miskitu, hinting at their discomfort at the presence of my husband. My husband naturally didn't understand the conversation, but my father and I did. The men began to make plans to apprehend him and hand him over to the authorities claiming that at this time, the mestizos (settlers) should know that they cannot use that road and much less the means of transport used by the community, as a sign of their rejection of their presence in that territory.

When we heard the plans, we intervened to calm things down. We addressed the men in Miskitu, explaining who we were and our mission in the community. We also explained that the mestizo who accompanied us was not a settler invading the community lands but an ally. At that time, other passengers, including a religious leader, intervened to scale down tensions and avoid problems. The men accepted our explanation, and we continued our journey.

About two hours later, we arrived at the community of Francia Sirpi, the first of the four. The passengers who had arrived at their destination got off the truck, and we continued our journey. Approximately 20 minutes later, we arrived at the community of Santa Clara, the second of the four. It was already dark. Although I had the name of the person recommended by CEJUDHCAN, I did not know how to find that person. After the incident with the men in the truck, we were a little concerned about our safety, especially my husband's. Therefore, our

priority was to find shelter as soon as possible so we could spend the night and introduce ourselves to the community authorities the next day.

The religious leader who helped us along the way suggested that we take shelter in the *Wihta's* house (Wihta can be translated as judge, and in the structure of the communal authorities, the Wihta oversees the administration of justice). The religious leader suggested that the *Wihta* could help us contact the person CEJUDHCAN recommended. Fortunately, the vehicle stopped right in front of Wihta's house, and the same religious leader accompanied us to the house and left us in the hands of the *Wihta's* wife.

The *Wihta's* wife explained that he was not home, but she would send someone to let him know we were there. She offered a place for us to sit, and we did. While we waited, several men approached and surrounded the house, attentive to us and our actions. The *Wihta's* wife came over and whispered in my ear that under no circumstances should we leave the house on our own, that the men who are surrounding the house are still not very convinced of who we are and what our mission is, therefore they do not trust us and could potentially harm us. After what seemed to be twenty minutes of waiting, the *Wihta* arrived, and following the protocol, we introduced ourselves, explained our mission, and told him the name provided by CEJUDHCAN. He informed us that that person was not in the community and that he would return on Saturday. However, he offered to take us to where CEJUDHCAN recommended we stay. The place was the family home of a renowned Catholic priest.

While talking to the *Wihta,* the men who had surrounded the house approached and intervened by asking questions about our presence in the community and clearing up their doubts. Once they cleared their doubts and a bond of relative trust was established, they offered to accompany us to the place where we would stay. It was already dark. We were a large group

of people between them and us. I took out my flashlight, but it was not enough for all of us, so they also facilitated their flashlights and offered help with our luggage, to which we agreed and began to walk to the house where we would be staying. Upon arriving, the *Wihta* left us in the hands of our hosts and went back to his house, asking us to visit him at his home the next day early in the morning to see how he could best help us with our work. Our hosts took us to the place where we would sleep and left. We were exhausted, so we proceeded to set up our beds, took a shower, and went right to sleep. The next day when we were getting ready to go to the Wihta, he came to our place to tell us that he had requested some men from the community to accompany us and indicated people and places of interest to visit. At that time, the relationship with the community was less tense, and there was more trust. I was first taken to a former community *Síndico.* The *Síndico,* within the structure of communal authorities, oversees the protection of the community's natural resources.

He accompanied us on a tour of the community and told us about the difficulties that the community was experiencing due to the presence of settlers. He told us that the settlers do not live with Miskitu people within the community but have occupied lands approximately four hours from the community traveling along the Wawa River. The community used these lands to cultivate their food and other activities. Now the settlers had taken over them, denying community people access even to their food plantations, which caused a food crisis in the communities and deprived them of their only livelihood since part of the food produced in those lands was sold in Bilwi and the money from these sales was used to meet the basic needs of their families. The *Síndico* also accompanied us to the graves of some of the people killed at the hands of settlers. Two of them are buried in the premises of the community's communal house to pay tribute to their courage and resistance as they died defending the community. After visiting the

graveyards, he took us to the place where the first armed confrontation took place in which two people from the community died, including the Wihta of that time, and while we walked, he told us how it happened.

The road connecting the communities of Tasba Raya with the main road leading to Bilwi and Waspam has been used for many years by all the inhabitants of these communities without any conflict. As settlers overran the area, they began to use the road to access Bilwi. This situation caused indignation among the community's members because they believed that after all the mistreatment and violence exercised by the settlers, they should not be forced to share their means of mobilization with them. As tension between Miskitus and settlers grew, the four communities along the narrow road ruled that the settlers should have their own access route to the main road, thereby sealing the Miskitus refusal to share the road and means of transportation with the settlers. They decided to place guards at checkpoints to protect the community from the influx of settlers. The settlers, being prevented from accessing the road, threatened to do whatever was necessary to regain access. The presence of settlers is extensive in Tasba Raya.

> They are everywhere," told me a community member. This problem is known even to the central government, but no one is on our side. There seem to be racial preferences. We face all kinds of threats but cannot abandon our lands. In 2015 there were two armed clashes with settlers. The first was on September 3, and the second was on September 7. I was the victim of a shot, but even with all that, we have not abandoned our community. We can't repel them because they are well-armed with heavy weapons; they shoot us like animals. They do not respect our lives.

Illustration 3: A memorial site is under construction in Santa Clara, marking the location of the 2015 settler's attack

In the courtyard of the communal house, there are two well-kept tombs. They say the tombs correspond to the fatalities of the settler attack against the community in 2015. ″You can take pictures of those graves,″ suggests one of the participants in the focus group. They recall, without specifying a date, that one day in 2015, at dawn, about 4:30 AM, an armed group of 60-70 settlers entered the community and attacked them. At that time, *Síndico* Rosmeldo Solórzano and the community's *Wihta* Benito Francisco were on duty at the checkpoint and in charge of the community surveillance, "they offered their lives for us," says one of the participants in the focus group. Two other men were also injured during the attack. These crimes still go unpunished. The people of Santa Clara feel trapped and surrounded by settlers that prevent them from doing their traditional subsistence activities and seriously threaten their lives.

Illustration 4: Tombs of the two fatalities of the attack on 2015.

Listening to this account, I understood more clearly the events of the day of our arrival. For example, I understood the hostile attitude and distrust of the community members, particularly towards my husband and, to some extent, my father and me, despite being Miskitu and speaking the same language. However, despite the tense moments, my husband and I admired and respected the community's attempts at self-defense in the face of abandonment by law enforcement authorities and the Nicaraguan state.

Aware that my efforts to help amplify the voices of these communities would not bring a solid solution to the drama they are experiencing, I had no intention of interviewing people directly affected by the settlers. I wanted to avoid the frustration of hearing their stories without being able to give a solution or at least hope. I planned to meet only with the communal authorities and gather some general information about their situation. I was more interested in

visiting the settlers' settlements to photographically document the land grab and environmental damage resulting from the indiscriminate forest clearing for the construction of paddocks.

However, the leader who accompanied me, fearful of the settlers, did not want to accompany me to their settlements and recommended that I not go alone. Instead, he was very interested in visiting a woman in the community of Wawa Esperanza whose husband was kidnapped by settlers and was never returned to his family. Somehow, like me, he seemed to harbor the hope that the more efforts made to make this drama visible, the more likely it is to get support. He even offered to take me on his motorcycle. All he asked me to do was to give him some gas money. I agreed.

In the afternoon, we set off on a motorcycle trip of approximately 20 minutes. He took me to a lady's house, briefly told her I wanted to talk to her, and left. The lady greeted me cordially but seemed to have little hope that telling her story to one more person would bring some solution to her problem. As she pointed to a wooden chair for me to sit in, she regretted the number of people who had visited her, including reporters, representatives of human rights organizations, and police authorities, asking her to share her story, creating false expectations of justice and reparation. I wonder why she agreed to talk to me. I suspect that being a Miskitu woman just like her and speaking to her in her language established some affinity and trust between the two of us, which is why she opened to me and shared her story:

> It was the year 2015, a day like any other. My husband, son-in-law, and son went to their plantation about four hours from the community to perform their routine tasks. While they were working, a group of settlers came from behind, pointed their guns at them, and ordered them to walk. They were taken to their settlements, tied to a tree, and physically and psychologically tortured. They were

> told to abandon their lands and plantations because they (the settlers) had taken over them. Meanwhile, I anxiously awaited here because it was getting dark, and they had not returned. Several hours later, the settlers decided to let my son go but retained my husband and my son-in-law. My son was told to take the message to the community that if we wanted to rescue the two men, we should go and get them. My son brought us the news. However, fearing it was a trap, my family and other community members decided not to go alone. Instead, we tried to get help from the police authorities, but they ignored us. I never saw my husband and son-in-law again. The settlers deny they killed them, but my husband and son-in-law never returned home, and their bodies were never found. The police and the rest of the authorities have done nothing to bring justice and reparation to my family.

Today, the lady gets by with a small pulperia (a kind of convenience store). It has become impossible for her and her family to access her plantations. She resents that she can no longer grow food for her family. Having that pulperia is not her preferred economic activity, nor is it the economic activity in which the Miskitu people are usually engaged in. Still, those who resort to it do so out of necessity because they have no other way to meet their needs. All she asks is that the authorities help her recover the remains of her husband and son-in-law so they can give them a dignified burial and have a grave where she and her family can visit them.

This time, as in 2003, when I left her house, she gave me a pineapple and a piece of sugar cane. However, this time the feeling was the opposite. Instead of euphoria and gratitude, I felt anger, frustration, sadness, and helplessness for not being able to do something more meaningful to improve the living conditions of that lady and her family. My part is to tell her story, to help amplify her voice. Still, I am aware that it is a contribution that will go unnoticed, that she and

her family need a more effective response to improve their living conditions, bring the comfort and peace that justice provides, and give them back their lands and their ways of life.

Under Settler Nicaraguan Colonial Rule: Abandonment and Impunity

These two cases have resonated the most in the memories of community people. But they are not the only ones. In the community of Wawa Esperanza, with a population of a little over 2,000 people, eight have died at the hands of settlers, and many more have been injured or have been affected in some way, such as threats, intimidation, and lack of access to their plantations. All this happens with total impunity. To date, none of the crimes have been punished, and the situation is similar in Mayangna communities and other indigenous territories throughout Moskitia.

The settler-colonial project in Moskitia has caused the displacement of thousands of people, including women, children, and elders, who have been forced to go as refugees to the border of Nicaragua and Honduras. Besides the violence generated by settlers in Miskitu territory, there is also profound cultural implications. There is a sharp contrast between the Miskitu people and the settlers regarding the land ownership system. Most Miskitu people support the idea of communal lands and have a clear idea of the boundaries of these lands. While the Miskitu maintains the communal property of their territory and marks their boundaries using natural elements such as sacred places or geographical locations like trees or rivers, the settlers appropriate the land individually and fence what they consider their property within the communities.

The settlers argue that they have the right to occupy those lands since they are part of the available national territory and could be taken by whoever needs them to make good use of them. This perception, however, ignores the way Miskitu people use their land according to their

customs. For instance, this leader noted that the community's territory has areas designated for cultivation, raising animals for consumption, hunting, fishing, timber cutting areas, spiritual use, and recreational areas, i.e., sports and traditional performances. Each community has a traditional land management system that provides each family with a significant piece of land for cultivation and other subsistence uses. The right to use such lands may be moved and inherited among the families that make up the community. This way of life is evidence of the balanced relationship between the land and natural resources.

Conclusion

Due to the Miskitu people's commercial and political partnership with the British empire, there is a prevailing belief that Moskitia has never experienced colonization, which continues to this day. Nonetheless, upon careful analysis of the "colonial entanglements" outlined in this chapter, it becomes evident that the ancestral land of Tulu Walpa was initially caught between two European colonial powers and later forsaken at the mercy of the emerging Nicaraguan state and its settler colonial project.

The events that have shaped the history of the ancestral territory of Tulu Walpa, such as the British Protectorate in the Moskitia, the establishment of the Moskitia Reserve in 1860, the forced integration of the Moskitia into the Nicaraguan state in 1894, the signing of the Harrison Altamirano treaty in 1905, and the implementation of multicultural reforms by the Nicaraguan state from 1987 onwards, all contribute to what can be described as a complex web of "colonial entanglements." Throughout this process, the territory has been fragmented, and its inhabitants have been dispersed between two separate nation-states, Nicaragua and Honduras. The most recent manifestation of these colonial entanglements and the ongoing construction of the settler

colonial project is evident in the Nicaraguan state's refusal to carry out the fifth stage of land demarcation and remove settlers from indigenous territories.

Although *Tulu Walpa* managed to avoid Spanish colonization, it fell under the control of the British Empire, which exerted its colonial power over the territory and its inhabitants. The British employed a strategy of "alliances" in the Moskitia region, effectively serving as a form of colonization. Assimilation of the native populations was never a priority for the British; instead, they focused solely on exploiting the area's resources and raw materials. Even after the British departed and Moskitia was forcibly annexed by Nicaragua, the exploitative model persisted. Moskitia subsequently became a crucial supplier of raw materials for an enclave economy dominated primarily by North American transnational corporations.

Presently, the Moskitia region is confronted not only by large-scale projects and multinational corporations but also by the detrimental influence of settlers. These settlers embody a new form of colonialism aimed at eradicating the indigenous population to gain control over the land. While this eradication does involve instances of direct violence and killings, it also encompasses a systematic deprivation of the natives' livelihoods, ultimately leading to their gradual physical extinction. Consequently, the settlers can establish themselves in these ancestral territories, ensuring their permanent occupation.

The Cohabitation project as proposed solution implies that the final stage of the demarcation process will be omitted, and Indigenous Peoples will be compelled to share their land and coexist with the settlers. However, enforcing cohabitation between settlers and natives presents two significant problems. Firstly, it jeopardizes the lives of Indigenous Peoples due to the threats posed by the settlers. Secondly, it clashes with their distinct ways of life and knowledge systems. These differences appear irreconcilable, and settlers often assert their ways

of life onto the native population for various reasons: their armed superiority, economic productivity, wealth creation from a capitalist extractive standpoint, and the backing of the state. Regardless of the motives, when settlers appropriate native lands and impose their ways of life on the indigenous population, it results in the tragic fate of genocide as it erases their land-based lifestyles and knowledge systems. In this scenario, the articulation of our native lifeways goes through reconnecting with Tulu Walpa, our ancestral territory, our *Yapti Tasba.*

Chapter II: Wasla. Tracing the Lasting Impacts of an Entangled Colonial History on a Miskitu Community

A long time ago, a Miskito chief named *Niki Niki* ruled in the Kingdom of Sita Awala, a kingdom that he dearly loved. It was a kingdom of people who worshiped many Gods. Their ceremonies were highly respected because if they did not do so, they would confront the anger of the Gods.

One day, *Niki Niki's* son *Lakia Tara* (Big Star) went hunting in the forest and never returned to his father. The saddened father waited for two days and decided to go looking for him. As his son liked eating pine seeds, the old Indian in the unfortunate search watered many pine seeds where he passed, hoping that his son would come out to meet him.

The inhabitants of the area heard *Niki Niki*'s bellows from afar - they were like thunder, and he made the earth tremble when he walked. In its wake, *Niki Niki* left a deep and serpentine furrow filled with tears of sadness. After a long time, he came to a community. There he looked for his son and did not find him. He then scattered pine seeds, thinking his son would arrive when he smelled the aroma, but *Lakia Tara* never did.

He left the community and continued his search, walking toward the sea and spreading the pine seeds, but *Lakia Tara* never returned. Unable to find his son, *Niki Niki* died of sadness. Of the seeds that were scattered, beautiful green pines grew, and from the deep furrow *Niki Niki* made in his walk, a huge river of crystalline waters arose: the Wangky River.

For this reason, the inhabitants of Wanky are the owners of the river *Niki Niki* formed and the pine trees he planted. At dusk, when the wind blows through them, the inhabitants of these communities lie down on the floor of their corridors and listen to the whisper of the pine trees like a beautiful melody while Elders begin to tell their grandchildren the beautiful story of *Niki Niki*.

The foundation story of the *Wangky* River and the surrounding pine forest is one of the many stories I read as a child in the Miskitu tales compiled and produced at the Centro de Investigación y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica (Center for the Documentation and Research of the Atlantic Coast, CIDCA) that my father would bring home. "Our pine forests were once a blessing but now seem to be a curse because unscrupulous people exploit them for personal gain, neglecting the greater good of the community," said Elder Wilbin during my visit to Wasla in the summer of 2021.

This chapter delves into the history of the Wasla community, drawing on oral histories collected from its Elders. By examining the case of Wasla, this chapter seeks to highlight the significant impact of an entangled colonial history manifested through state interventions and colonial power relations in Miskitu communities. Rather than relying on traditional Western research methods, which have been seen as inappropriate and ineffective by Indigenous communities, this chapter uses storytelling as a research method to better align with Indigenous worldviews. Indeed, "storytelling, oral histories, the perspective of the elders and women have become an integral part of all indigenous research" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 144).

The chapter is structured into two parts. The first is based on the oral histories of Oracio Rojas and Ermelinda Jackson, two elders in Wasla. I describe Wasla's foundation, challenges, and changes that it has undergone, since it was founded in 1835, influenced and shaped by state intervention and colonial power relations, particularly the encounter with Christianity, the arrival of transnational companies, and the Civil War in the '80s. By tracing the changes, evolution, and adaptation in Wasla, I highlight the social dimension of colonialism and land dispossession for Indigenous Peoples, as in most cases, land dispossession is directly linked to the destruction of Indigenous people's social fabric and the erasure of their knowledge system that is closely linked to the land.

As I will demonstrate in Chapter four, for the Miskitu people, this land-based knowledge is expressed through *Klauna Laka,* a collective practice in the Miskitu people's social fabric expressed through a system of reciprocity. The *Klauna Laka* is a deeply meaningful practice that greatly influences Miskitu people's social relations. The configuration and reproduction of the *Klauna Laka* are closely linked to having access to the *Yapti Tasba* (land) and its resources; without access to *Yapti Tasba,* the *Klauna Laka* cannot be maintained or perpetuated. Therefore,

the disconnection from *Yapti Tasba* resulting from an entangled colonial process entails more than just the deprivation of agricultural land; it also signifies the erosion of the foundation that nurtured human connections in Miskitu communities, and the erasure of their spiritual practices derived and reproduced from their close relation to *Yapti Tasba.*

In the second part of this chapter, I delve into a comprehensive portrayal of Wasla as an Indigenous geography of the communal land. This indigenous geography encompasses hills, rivers, swamps, forests, and various land usages for subsistence activities such as farming, hunting, fishing, and sacred lands for spiritual and healing practices. This elaborate description sheds light on the cultural and epistemological significance derived from the community's interactions with their natural environment. These interactions gave rise to reciprocity networks and spiritual practices that existed before the introduction of Christianity and the use of money for services. By examining land relations through the lens of oral histories shared by elderly members of the Wasla Wilbin Valenciano and Norbelina Panting, this part aims to unravel the historical and territorial memory associated with the views on land relations in Wasla.

The community of Wasla in the Miskitu territory of Wangky Maya was established in 1835, just before the arrival of the Moravian Church in 1849. Wasla is situated in the municipality of Waspam, on the banks of the Wangky River, which forms the border between Nicaragua and Honduras on the Northern Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. Wasla is one of the 21 communities that comprise the *Wangky Maya* Territory, located along the road that connects Bilwi, the head town of the Puerto Cabezas municipality, with Bihmuna, a Miskitu community on the northeastern coast of Nicaragua, along the Caribbean Sea. The communal authorities in Wasla hold demographic information estimating that there are approximately 280 families, 225 households, and 1,800 inhabitants, with an average of eight members per household. However,

this data does not provide disaggregation by sex or age groups. It is worth noting that many families have emigrated and currently reside elsewhere within the country or abroad. Over time, housing architecture and materials in Wasla, like other Miskitu communities, have undergone significant changes. According to Conzemius (1932), the Miskitu and Sumu-Mayangna families lived in large communal or multi-family houses called palenques. However, in recent times, single-family homes have become more common. Conzemius further notes that the old-style longhouses used to be divided into compartments based on the number of family units residing in them (p. 52). Presently, approximately 20% of the houses in Wasla are still multi-family households. Typically, the house is owned by the parents of one of the newly married couples, who provide housing for the couple while they build their own home. These contemporary multi-family dwellings follow a different style than the previous ones described by Conzemius, as they are built as single-family houses but occupied by the parents and the newlyweds.

Illustration 6: Design of a typical house in a Miskitu community. Wasla 2021.

Contemporary Miskitu and Mayangna houses are made of separate units built on poles. A small bridge links the two units together. The first unit, *Utla Tara* (big house), is a rectangular-shaped larger unit with 2-3 bedrooms, a living room, and a corridor. *Utla* Tara is the main dwelling and holds the family's possessions, and the family meets for leisure in the corridor. In contrast, the second unit is a smaller structure designed exclusively for the kitchen. It houses a stove in one corner, with a dining table opposite it, and an open space in the middle dividing the two areas. The interior walls of the kitchen are equipped with horizontal shelves for storing kitchen utensils, supply bags, water containers, and other miscellaneous items. Additionally, Miskitu and Sumu kitchens often have an attached appendix that serves as a dishwasher. The *Utla Tara* and the kitchen units are accompanied by two additional structures built in the courtyard: a bathroom closer to the *Utla Tara* and a toilet room situated further away in one of the back corners of the yard. Despite concerns about water quality, access to water is typically obtained from artesian wells or nearby creeks.

In Wasla, the *Utla Tara* is typically constructed using pine wood for poles, columns, walls, and floors, with zinc sheets commonly used for the roof. The practice of *Klauna Laka*, where community members come together to help each other in house construction activities, has diminished, and families now struggle independently to build their homes. Any assistance required from others now involves monetary remuneration. In the past, before the decline of *Klauna Laka,* community members used to support each other in house construction activities spontaneously. As elder Ermelinda recalls, "It was spontaneous; as soon as someone started building a house, other community members joined and provided support voluntarily. The men sawed the wood, and the women wove the palm for the roof; everyone collaborated spontaneously.”

Housing lots in Wasla typically range from 1 to 1.50 hectares. They are used not only for housing but also for growing fruit trees such as mangoes, citruses like oranges, mandarins, and lime, as well as coconut, breadfruit, avocados, guavas, and cashew. Additionally, the housing lots are utilized for breeding domestic animals, primarily pigs and poultry, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys. These backyard crops, domestic animal husbandry, subsistence agriculture, livestock rearing, fishing, hunting, and species gathering collectively form the community's economic structure. This small-scale economic activity enabled Miskitu communities to achieve economic self-sufficiency, especially during cyclical crises in formal economies and paid labor. The economic structure of Wasla, as previously described, is reminiscent of a bygone era that exists only in the recollections of the community's elders. Although it may have once facilitated a certain degree of self-sufficiency, it is now susceptible to the effects of climate change, plagues, and escalating insecurity due to rising crime rates and land dispossession by settlers.

The social structure of Wasla is primarily homogenous, without significant economic stratification. Despite this, the local traditions often recognize family groups or trunks, which are distinguished by their moral prestige. These family groups are often referred to as '*Kyamkas*' (lineages; Helms, 1971). Each *Kyamka* is identified by its surname, prefixed with the word *Kyamka.* The most prominent *Kyamkas* in Wasla include the Williams, Vans, Benjamin, Lampson, and Kelliham. Several other lineages of lesser prominence are also present.

Furthermore, Wasla's internal physical division reflects a changing social dynamic—brought about by colonial nation building processes—within the community. Local information reveals two types of division: traditional and contemporary, corresponding to pre-and post-war periods. Before the 1980s conflict, the traditional division separated the community into *Lalma* (East) and *Muna* (West). After the Sandinista Revolution in the 1980s, the community adopted a

more urban concept of *barrios* (the Spanish word for neighborhoods). However, the neighborhoods in Wasla do not fully meet the criteria of urban neighborhoods, and the word *barrio* is not a native Miskitu term. The current division has transformed the old *Lalma* and *Muna* areas into four neighborhoods, labeled Barrios 1, 2, 3, and 4. Barrio 1 replaced Lalma, while Barrios 3 and 4 replaced Muna, with Barrio 2 between them. Although the changes to the community's demographic division may seem insignificant, they exemplify the erasure of local traditions resulting from a colonial nation-building process.

Stories of Pain and Loss

I arrived in Wasla on a Monday afternoon after a long, tiring 11-hour bus ride from Bilwi that passed through Waspam. Thankfully, I had a friend named Maura who kindly offered to host me during my stay. As soon as I arrived, she greeted me warmly and showed me around the place and where I would be sleeping. Since she was my only contact in Wasla, I relied on her to introduce me to the community elders so that I could learn more about their way of life. "You must talk to Elder Ermelinda," she says, "she is a wise woman, ancestral knowledge keeper, and one of the oldest members of our community. When you are ready, I can show you where she lives."

The next day Maura showed me the way to Elder Ermelinda's house, introduced me, and left. Elder Ermelinda's house stands next to the only elementary school in the community built by the Nicaraguan state. The school's vibrant blue and white colors mirror the colors of the Nicaraguan flag. On the other side of the school, just a 15 min walk from Elder Ermelinda's house, runs the Wangky River. The school serves as a painful reminder of the detrimental impact of colonialism on the educational dynamic between Miskitu elders and their invaluable wellspring of wisdom and knowledge embodied by the Wangky River.

Illustration 6: The only elementary school in Wasla built by the Nicaraguan State.

Elder Ermelinda welcomed me and gestured for me to sit on a wooden bench in front of her, and we began talking spontaneously. Shortly after, another respected community elder named Oracio Rojas happened to stroll by, and Elder Ermelinda invited him to join us, "he knows a lot too," she said, "and we both enjoy passing our knowledge down to younger generations, but it is them who do not seem interested in listening to what we have to say." After this, Elder Ermelinda, Elder Oracio, and I embarked on a conversation about the history and challenges of Wasla.

Elder Ermelinda told me the lands where Wasla was established were previously occupied by people of Mayangna ancestry. The name of Wasla is traced back etymologically to the Mayangna language, and means *was* (water) and *lah* (hot). The community's name should have been Waslah (hot water) from this etymology. However, when transferred to the Miskitu language, it transformed into Wasla. The foundation story suggests that when the first Mayangna

people arrived at this site, they found various clay pitchers filled with water; they tasted it by submerging their fingertips into the water and felt that the water was hot and decided to name the place Waslah. The foundation story also identifies Henry Pasin as the founder of Wasla. According to the elders in Wasla, he was a spiritual guide who practiced ceremonies and invocations, advocating for kindness and peaceful coexistence. This way, he came to be known by his followers as Henry *Pasin* (spiritual guide).

Henry Pasin arrived in the area, accompanied by a group of Miskitu people, and first established in the vicinity of the neighboring community of Koom. The stories tell that upon the arrival of the first Miskitu groups, they expelled the Mayangna population due to differences in spiritual practices, giving place to the first Miskitu settlements. Elder Oracio emphasized that during their initial interactions, the Miskitus and Mayangnas followed distinct spiritual ceremonies and lacked familiarity with the Christian concept of a heavenly God or the Bible as a sacred text. As observed by Smutko (1985), the spiritual beliefs of the Miskitu people revolved around supernatural deities and the spirits or guardians of nature. Although Henry Pasin was likely accompanied and supported by others, he is widely regarded as the undisputed community founder. As Ermelinda says, "Today, we are occupying this community as descendants of the patriarch Henry Pasin."

The Christmas Eve of 1981 is etched in the memory of the residents of Wasla as one of the most shocking events in their history. Along with numerous Miskitu communities along the Wangky River, Wasla was forcefully and violently evacuated by the Nicaraguan army during a military operation amid the civil war. This traumatic event, now famously referred to as "Red Christmas," entailed forcibly displacing over 100 communities scattered along the Wangky River

against the backdrop of escalating hostilities between the contra militia, which included Miskitu men, and the Sandinista revolution, which had assumed power in 1979.

Elder Oracio recounts these events and his deeply traumatic experience:

> It was a very sad experience because it took away the possibility of our individual and collective survival. Suddenly, all living conditions and livelihoods were profoundly disrupted, causing me anguish and emotional distress. I had a small herd of cattle, about 17 heads; I also had several milking cows and little calves, and I had to leave all of them behind. I heard intense gunfire at dawn, and I ran out to protect my animals; when I got out, I saw soldiers pointing rifles at me and demanding that I not leave the house. Military troops had surrounded the entire contour of our community. They ordered me to remain in the house, threatening to shoot me if I tried to flee. I felt a deep helplessness and anguish almost impossible to bear. Before leaving my home with my family, unable to grab a single belonging, I untied my little calves so they could escape. In the kitchen, I had some rations of smoked, salted meat; I gave them to my two puppies; I said goodbye to them and told them to survive on those rations as long as possible. I never heard from my puppies again. These were harrowing times; The tension I was going through was the same throughout the community. At dusk, the military arrived in our community with rifles, demanding that we all gather at one point. They instructed us to form a single file and demanded that we start walking, which we did, carrying our children, pregnant women, sick people, and disabled elderly towards unknown destinations. I thought they were going to execute us. I had no appetite and did not eat any food on the way. I didn't feel tired; I felt absent from myself and life. We were taken to *Trus Laya*, and my poor wife was almost unconscious with grief beside me. We arrived at night, and many others

> from different communities joined us. The Miskito people are a bit strange: we were all going through the same situation of anguish, but when we came together, we started to talk and comfort each other. Meeting people from other communities helped to ease the pain. This experience was terrifying and indescribably sad. We were violently driven out of our homes like animals. We suddenly lost everything we owned as a family and in the community. (My translation)

Tuck and Wayne (2012) suggest that colonial violence on land and violence on human beings are connected. Indeed, Elder Horacio's words capture one of the complex and multifaceted effects of entangled colonial processes in Miskitu communities: the disruption of traditional lifeways express an intricate sense of collective loss involving human and non-human lives, leading to anguish, sadness, and distress. These losses have resulted in the detachment from *Yapti Tasba,* which generates an ongoing and relentless cycle of shared mourning that echoes *Niki Niki*'s anguish for losing his beloved son.

Wasla and other evacuated communities were resettled in four established human settlements, *Tasba Pri* (Free Land) in the *Kuka Laya* River area and refugee camps in Honduras. As a result of this event, community members were dispersed, and families were torn apart, leading to disintegration. In 1990, ten years after the displacement and at the end of the civil war, Honduras and *Tasba Pri* refugees returned to their communities under the Esquipulas Agreements I and II, [14] which aimed to pacify Nicaragua and the broader Central America region. Upon their return, community members had to work hard to rebuild their homes and

[14] The Esquipulas Nicaraguan Peace Agreement, also referred to as the Central American Peace Accords, was a peace initiative implemented during the mid-1980s. Its aim was to resolve the longstanding military conflicts that had afflicted Central America, some of which had persisted for several decades. See Oliver, J. (1999). The Esquipulas Process: A Central American Paradigm for Resolving Regional Conflict. Ethnic Studies Report, 17(2), 153.

restore their living standards, as the area had been reclaimed by vegetation and wild animals during their absence. Therefore, the current state of Wasla reflects the challenges faced during the first three decades of post-war reconstruction.

Before the events of Red Christmas, the arrival of the Moravian Church to Moskitia in 1849, and the later encounter with the community of Wasla are among the most relevant events in the memory of the elders in Wasla. Indeed, the encounter with Christianity through the Moravian Church was a transformative event that altered the Miskitu people's perception of life, death, and nature. Although the Church's main headquarters was in the distant Community of *Yulu* in the Puerto Cabezas Municipality, this did not deter Henry Pasin from his role as Wasla's spiritual leader. After the Moravian Church's arrival, he continued his duties in coordination with and under the influence of their teachings.

Henry was soon joined in Wasla by Danary Downs, a Miskitu Moravian leader native of *Yulu.* Elder Ermelinda reports: "Henry and Danary took on the task of proclaiming a heavenly God's existence and preaching God's word. On successive visits and cooperation with Henry Pasin, Danary built a small church as a place of worship in Wasla. As a result of his work, the Moravian-style religious celebration soon thrived and consolidated." This paved the way for various North American missionaries to visit the community and carry out religious missions. Elder Ermelinda remembers some of the last American Moravian missionaries, such as Stortz, Greg, and Beafus, for their contributions to the growth of the Moravian Church in Wasla. It is noteworthy that these white North American missionaries are predominantly remembered by their surnames alone. This contrasts with the native Moravian Reverends, such as Mendiola Taylor, Pedro Mercado (my maternal grandfather), Castilian William, and Sinclair Vanegas, among others, who are consistently remembered by both their first and last names. This

discrepancy in categorization is not merely incidental but indicative of an underlying hierarchy. The exclusive use of surnames for the white missionaries, suggests a level of respect and deference accorded to them that was perhaps not extended to their native counterparts. This differential treatment subtly underscores the power dynamics and racial disparities that were prevalent during this period.

Elder Ermelinda reports that, as the Moravian Church strengthened and gave the community's strategic location and abundant natural resources, many foreigners of different nationalities, mainly Americans, Chinese, Canadians, and Belizeans, soon arrived and settled permanently in the community. These foreigners developed different economic activities taking advantage of the available natural resources. The presence of foreigners in Wasla also modified the community's ethnic profile, as is evidenced in the current diverse phenotype among the population, such as Chinese, Creole, and North American (whites), as well as the predominance of foreign surnames such as Lampson, Keillingham, Law, Jackson, and Valenzuela.

In the next Chapter, I will expand on the complex and contentious role the Moravian Church played in colonizing the Miskitu people. While the church founded schools, taught literacy, and supported the Miskitu people's pursuit of autonomy, it also introduced Christian values that eroded their traditional spiritual beliefs and practices. Furthermore, the Moravian Church collaborated closely with British colonial authorities and, later, with American transnational companies, assisting in implementing their exploitation strategies on the Miskitu people, often exploiting labor and resources from Miskitu people leading to poverty and economic inequality and disconnection from *Yapti Tasba.*

Despite religious and cultural colonization, the elders in Wasla possess knowledge of their community's history and traditional ways of living, which their ancestors passed down

orally. Elder Oracio Rojas recalls: "There were no canoes; people assembled rafts with floating sticks and used them as floating devices for traveling waterways. They also crossed and explored the Wangky River swimming and on foot. Wild species, such as peacocks and wild pigs, were abundant and roamed freely because there were no humans to disrupt their habitats. However, as the population grew, these animals moved deeper into the forests and became less common in the community."

Upon their arrival in 1849, the Moravian missionaries and foreign companies introduced new tools to the community, including the large manual saw, machete, axe, file, hammer, and saw. These tools enabled people to build canoes and significantly changed house construction methods and materials. In addition to this, the arrival of transnational companies accelerated the use of money in exchange for goods and services, replacing the traditional *Klauna Laka* practices. As a result, the encounter with the Moravian Church and transnational companies brought about profound changes in the community's overall conditions. It marked a clear division in its history and evolution, separating it into two distinct periods: before and after this encounter.

Elder Oracio regrets this incursion of Miskitu people into the Market Economy:

> When our people were dragged into a market economy, they were forced to adjust their lifestyles without the training, knowledge, resources, or means necessary to survive. They found themselves swept into a new lifestyle for which they were unprepared and forced to face a completely new and unknown world. The elderly, who had preserved millenary knowledge and generational transmission capacity, were the last bastions of tradition. However, the younger generations, strongly

> influenced by Westernized education, have become increasingly disconnected from our ancestral knowledge system (my translation).

Elder Oracio's statements highlight the difficulties faced by the Miskitu people during their abrupt shift from reciprocity networks like the *Klauna Laka* to a market-based economy. Accustomed to a self-sustaining way of life, they were suddenly confronted with the complexities of engaging in buying and selling, along with monetary transactions they were unfamiliar with. Traditionally, the economic activities in Wasla revolved around subsistence agriculture, fishing, hunting, gathering, logging, and small-scale trading of agricultural products. In addition, people in Wasla engaged in backyard gardening, raising fruit crops like oranges, limes, mangoes, cashews, and trees, as well as poultry breeding and small livestock. Currently, families in Wasla primarily engage in the annual production of grains, such as rice, beans, corn, musaceae, tubers, and some vegetables. The yearly production cycle spans from February of one year to February of the following year.

Elder Ermelinda regrets the significant decline of the *Klauna Laka* tradition in agricultural activities. She notes, “In the past, around 20-30 individuals from different families would gather to plant a hectare of rice and finish the job within an hour using the *Pana-Pana* system, which involved exchanging labor without monetary payment. Nowadays, people must work alone for several days to complete the task that used to take only a few hours with the help of other community members.” The erosion of *Klauna Laka* practices reflects the contrast between the past collective way of life and the current focus on individual growth driven by capitalism.

Although fishing, hunting, and gathering have little commercial value and make only a minimal contribution to the domestic economy, they are an essential part of daily life for many

communities, including Wasla. The primary purpose of these activities is to provide food for self-consumption and supplement the family diet. While only a small proportion of the catch or harvest is traded, men, women, and children participate in fishing activities in creeks, rivers, lagoons, and wetlands containing freshwater fish. Though fishing in Wasla is primarily for self-consumption, it is a vital economic activity in other communities, especially those along the coast of the Caribbean Sea. Fishing in Wasla stands out as an ecologically responsible activity for several reasons. Firstly, fishing is limited to self-consumption, resulting in low fishing volumes. Secondly, fishing methods, such as fishhooks and mosquito nets, are non-invasive and do not harm the ecosystem.

While fishing is a shared labor, hunting is predominantly a male activity that occurs either during the day or at night. While some men hunt exclusively at night, most combine it with daily agricultural activities. After completing their daily agricultural tasks, they dedicate time to hunting. Common prey includes deer, wild pig, armadillo, wild boar, peacock, wild hen, and iguanas. On the other hand, women are primarily responsible for gathering.

Livestock can be divided into major and minor, or backyard livestock. Before the 1980s, major livestock farming focused on raising cattle and horses, but this practice has significantly declined. Presently, only a few families engage in major livestock farming; but even they don't own many cattle. On the other hand, small-scale or backyard livestock farming primarily involves raising pigs and poultry, especially chickens, ducks, and turkeys. Before the 1980s war, the community classified cattle owners into three groups based on the size of their herds: large, medium, and small. Elder Oracio remembers:

> The largest cattle owners could have between 80 and 100 heads of cattle, medium owners had 40 to 50 heads, and small owners had 15 to 30 heads. It was a common sight to see

families milking 3-5 cows every morning, with little terns tied to the poles of their houses. Almost every family had a certain amount of cattle. However, nowadays, only one major cattle owner in Wasla has between 45 and 60 heads. Unfortunately, Wasla's post-war recovery is hindered by large-scale crime, such as cattle rustling. (My translation)

As stated by Elder Oracio, livestock is greatly affected and endangered by insecurity and theft. Many people are discouraged from raising cattle because it is tedious and futile, with the added risk of others taking advantage of their hard work without repercussions. These criminal activities are perpetrated by groups within the community and those from neighboring communities. Unfortunately, this problem is not unique to Wasla, as other communities also face similar issues stemming from the deterioration of the *Klauna Laka* tradition. Elder Oracio continues, "Due to the decline of the *Klauna Laka*, young people have lost their connection to the land, and now they prefer to steal other people's labor instead of working the land; besides, access to land is becoming increasingly difficult due to settlers' invasion" (My translation).

The most common animals in yards are pigs, hens, ducks, and turkeys. Unfortunately, this activity has also been affected by crime. In contrast to past decades when families could raise 100-120 hens or turkeys, current poultry breeding rates are much lower, typically limited to 20-30 birds. However, raising pigs is still a popular option since they are less prone to theft. Additionally, small-scale breeding of ox peel has been introduced recently as another option for yard animals. Fruit trees like coconut, orange, cocoa, cashew, breadfruit, among other, complement the backyard economy.

Additionally, Wasla and neighboring communities are surrounded by vast forests of broadleaf species and high-quality pine trees on the plains. Traditionally, forest resources in

areas close to the community were utilized by people to construct canoes, houses, furniture, and coffins, using artisanal tools like hand saws, machetes, and axes relying on the *Klauna Laka* reciprocity networks for this labor. Unfortunately, the introduction of the chainsaw enabled people to cut down more trees in less time, leading to the exploitation of forest resources for commercial purposes. Consequently, the introduction of chainsaws marked a shift in how people utilized forest resources from a collective, rational, and ecologically balanced activity that served people's subsistence needs to an individualistic, profit-driven, and unsustainable model that disregarded ecological concerns.

In Wasla, chainsaws are a scarce commodity, owned only by a select few families due to their high cost. These six families have specialized in commercializing pinewood, employing outside workers to operate chainsaws. Consequently, the benefits of logging activities are now concentrated within this small group of families and community leaders, failing to meet the subsistence needs of the broader community. Although a small amount of tax is collected from logging, it is not invested back into the community, except for some limited financial aid given to the most vulnerable families in case of illness.

The current logging practices in Wasla are detrimental to the community's economic, social, cultural, and ecological landscape. From an economic perspective, the forest resources once shared among the community for subsistence needs are now being exploited by a few families for personal gain. This has led to a petty bourgeoisie within the community, as chainsaw owners use the profits from logging to invest in other ventures such as livestock, agriculture, and commerce. The resulting socioeconomic gap between the chainsaw owners and the rest of the community is causing social stratification and a departure from the traditionally homogeneous social configuration. Culturally, the shift from the traditional practice of *Klauna Laka* and

manual saws to individual and profit-driven logging activities has caused a loss of cultural heritage and identity. Ecologically, the depletion of forest reserves close to the community has forced them to access reserves that are further away, impacting their ability to manage their resources sustainably.

This new form of forest use has led to tensions and social conflicts. Community members are unhappy about the depletion of pine forests close to their houses, as these forests provided easy access to resources for their subsistence needs. Additionally, the elders lament that private use of the forest's resources disregards the collective ownership of these resources, which may lead to the depletion of the forest reserve.

Both men and women contribute to the labor involved in agricultural activities. While certain tasks that require heavy tools, like machetes and axes, are typically performed by men, such as slash, clearing, and cleaning, most agricultural activities are shared equally. These include planting, weeding, monitoring crops, harvesting, and transporting produce. On the other hand, single mothers and widows must manage the entire work process themselves or hire others to help them. In the past, these women received support from their community through reciprocity networks practiced through the *Klauna Laka*; however, as these networks have declined, these women are left alone to tackle the exhausting and arduous agricultural work.

Although in the current climate of land dispossession, women mainly produce food for family consumption using backyard gardening techniques because they can no longer access the traditional parcels that settlers have taken over. On the other hand, single mothers and widows must carry out the entire work process on their own or pay for other people's labor. Previously such women were helped by the rest of the community members through the reciprocity networks practiced through *Klauna Laka*. Regrettably, the decline of Klauna Laka has resulted in

a significant shift in the dynamics of communal support which not only lightened community members individual workload but also fostered a sense of collective responsibility and cohesion within the community.

Food, *Yapti Tasba*, and Communal Survival

As Elders Ermelinda and Oracio have accurately noticed, the economic state of agriculture and other community-based economic activities in Wasla have declined for several decades. This downward trend began in the 1950s when transnational corporations arrived and employed Miskitu people in wage labor. Various factors exacerbated this economic downturn in the following years; by the 1980s, it had peaked. During this period, the community's economic activities and self-reliance plummeted to an unprecedented level due to the war and the population's displacement during the Red Christmas events.

Following their return to Wasla in the early 90s, at the end of the Civil War, community members faced several challenges that prevented them from bringing the community to previous living conditions. These included high crime rates, climate change, and land dispossession. Chapter four will explore the positive impact of *Klauna Laka* practices on the community, revealing how these practices fostered peace, trust, and solidarity, which in turn helped to reduce crime rates. Unfortunately, the decline of these practices in Wasla has led to a rise in crime and insecurity, affecting people's social, economic, and cultural relationships over the past few decades.

The primary challenge is not food scarcity but insecurity and the lack of suitable land for cultivation due to settlers' invasion. The presence of these settlers has led to violence, making it increasingly difficult for indigenous women and their families to access land they have occupied

for decades, several miles away from their homes and across the Wangky River, to grow and harvest food. As a result, settlers' intrusion has disrupted the traditional indigenous agriculture model that has ensured food security for generations.

Amid a challenging community environment, the Center for Justice and Human Rights of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, initiated a backyard gardening project to benefit families residing in various communities of the Wangky Maya territory. This initiative provides women with the resources to establish their financial and economic security by providing tools and materials so women can fence their backyards and promote diversified crop cultivation. The project supports women in overcoming territorial conflicts and environmental challenges they face in providing for their families. According to Julia Emiliano, a resident of the neighboring community of Klar, who is involved in the initiative, the decision to erect fences around their homes does not derive from a customary practice. However, due to the threats posed by settlers who had taken over their lands for cattle grazing, the community had no choice but to take this step to feel secure and grow food near their homes.

> We had to do it because it is the only way for us to feel safe and be able to plant our food close to our homes rather than having to walk for miles and face threats from settlers that have taken over our lands. We had no food because no one could get to our plantations. We almost reached the point of starvation (My translation)

Julia's words capture Miskitu people's challenging circumstances and how women have had to adapt their perceptions and use space to confront them. For generations, these women had viewed their homes as a place for family leisure, where children could play, and their backyards were used for growing fruit trees and raising domestic animals to complement their diet. While these women are grateful and enthusiastic about the project, they are also regretful that they now

must produce their food in a significantly smaller space than the areas they had access to on the other side of the Wangky River before the settlers occupied their lands.

Illustration 9: Two houses in Saklin exemplify the use of fenced areas as backyard gardens

To grasp the intrinsic meaning and understanding of communal land, I draw on the wisdom of the elders in Wasla, who have actively utilized and overseen the preservation of communal lands and are deeply connected to it. By drawing on the knowledge and experiences of Elder Ermelinda Jackson, Elder Wilmer Valenzuela, and Oracio Rojas, I gained valuable and nuanced understandings of the multifaceted connotations attached to communal land from the perspective of community members.

According to Elder Ermelinda, communal land is a space the community has delimited for itself. It is passed down through generations as an ancestral inheritance and is distinct from the lands of neighboring communities, which have their own designated spaces of communal

lands. The term "delimited for its use" emphasizes the value of the communal land as a crucial space for subsistence activities and a means for community members to maintain and sustain their material well-being and cultural identity over time.

Elder Wilbin views communal land as the encompassing borders of Wasla's living space. He explains, "it represents a delimited land extension for our community that exists within the larger territory of the Miskitu people, our *Yapti Tasba*." For him, communal land is more than just a piece of land. It encompasses the identity and cultural heritage of his community. This broader perspective highlights the significance of communal land to the residents of Wasla and the larger Miskitu territory.

Oracio Rojas explained that Miskitu people's understanding of communal land differs from that of settlers. While settlers view land as a commodity that can be individually appropriated, communal land holds a different meaning for the Miskitu people. For them, it encompasses their ancestral inheritance of land and natural resources. This understanding of communal lands has a dual meaning. First, it implies that communal land is a legacy to be passed down to future generations as an ancestral inheritance. Second, it denotes the collective and rational use of natural resources serving only the subsistence needs of community members. In the Miskitu understanding of communal lands, natural resources, including water sources, flora, fauna, hills, soil, designated areas of use, forests, and minerals, are considered the collective heritage of future generations. In essence, the approach to resource utilization adheres to the principles of enduring stewardship, striving to balance subsistence activities with guardianship of ancestral lands.

The prior comprehension of communal land reveals its significance in two dimensions. First, the elders perceive land as an essential source for their livelihoods, encompassing the

natural elements such as the atmosphere, water bodies, hills, forests, and diverse species of animals and plants. Second, its value as an inheritance from the ancestors and, as such, a precious legacy directly linked to their cultural identity. Further, these understandings of communal lands include various coinciding aspects, such as ancestral heritage, collective use and ownership, subsistence space for present and future generations, and land as a defining feature of ethnic identity. These concepts are highly valued by the elders who recognize communal land as an important inheritance for future generations. Additionally, they value communal land's resources and goods, ensuring subsistence for current and future generations and providing a sense of freedom and dignity. Elder Ermelinda Jackson explained: "Currently, the pine forest represents an important source of income. That is why we attach great importance to communal land." The elders emphasize that communal land is not just a space for subsistence activities. It is also a site for the reproduction of cultural practices and a source of security and dignity. This recognition of the abundance of communal land is further underscored by metaphorically referring to it as *Yapti Tasba.*

Given this understanding of communal lands in which land is greatly valued in the memory of the Elders, they regret how currently, communal land faces grave threats from various sources, including state interventions, foreign extractive companies, and younger generations' indifference toward their cultural heritage. In the following quote, Elder Wilbin expresses his concern about the current generation's lack of interest in communal land and questions their love for it.

> It appears that the Miskitu people have lost their connection to the land. The younger generations do not appreciate the value of their forest and rivers and fail to understand the significance of these resources. Instead of cultivating the land, they migrate to cities,

> undermining the community's ability to sustain itself. Additionally, our communities are being increasingly colonized by settlers who devastate trees and contaminate rivers in exchange for money, symbolizing a new generation centered around money rather than the love for the land and its resources. This shift in values is alarming, as it leaves the fate of future generations uncertain and plagued by misery. We once enjoyed long lives without needing hospitals or medical services, relying solely on the healing properties of mountain leaves and wholesome food. However, adopting foreign customs has led to consuming processed food resulting in chronic and terminal diseases such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart attacks, prostate issues, and cancer. Sadly, life expectancy has decreased drastically.

Elder Oracio also observed this trend, expressed in the following quote:

> The notion of communal land faces serious threats mainly due to the infiltration of the so-called modern costumes and practices, particularly political parties, into our traditional community systems. This problem is deeply rooted, and pervasive, as political affiliations have allowed extractive companies to exploit resources without fear or opposition. These companies enjoy political support and protection, making it difficult for anyone to raise their voice against them. Money's influence has also become a generational factor, impacting communities adversely. In the past, the Miskitus lacked formal education but possessed a deep understanding of sustainable resource management. However, despite increased levels of education among current Miskitu generations, this vital knowledge has been overshadowed by the pursuit of immediate monetary gains. The focus has shifted towards accumulating wealth and leaving a monetary inheritance, resulting in a cultural shift prioritizing material wealth over responsible resource utilization for future

generations. This new culture is shaping people's values and behaviors, leading to a dangerous disregard for the importance of preserving natural resources.

These quotes highlight the complex factors contributing to the Miskitu people's detachment from their communal lands, such as the encroachment of modern practices and political alliances. The adverse effects of political backing and security granted to resource extraction companies result in a situation where resource exploitation proceeds without restraint, making it difficult for individuals to express their concerns or resist these activities. Additionally, the impact of money negatively affects communities, especially in terms of their values and behaviors. This drives a focus on short-term financial gains, which eclipses traditional land-based knowledge and practices once firmly embedded within the community.

Indigenous Geographies of Wasla: A Landscape Shaped by Indigenous Knowledge System

Various geographical features, including hills, creeks, rivers, plains, lagoons, and wetlands, characterize Wasla's communal lands. As demonstrated earlier, these features play a vital role in the livelihoods of Wasla’s inhabitants. In the past, these landscapes not only shaped the social fabric in Wasla by enabling the configuration of the Klauna Laka practices but also informed their inhabitant's spiritual beliefs, including their worship of the supernatural deities of nature.

Wasla is home to several iconic hills, including *Hil Yari* (large hill), *Hil Pauni* (known for its red color), *Tutus Hil*, and *Rip Hil* (wave hill), which is a group of three hills that resemble a wave, hence the name. Of these, Hill Yari is the most prominent and provides stunning views of the Honduran side of the Wangky River from its peak. Tutus Hil is also noteworthy; these hills contribute to Wasla’s landscapes. The valleys surrounding these hills are ideal for agriculture, while mineral deposits can also be found within them. However, their most

significant contribution to the community is through the water streams and rivers that originate from them, providing vital irrigation to the communal lands. The hilly terrain offers fertile ground for growing cassava, cultivated by community members on a seasonal basis. During the summer, they establish temporary camps and plant various crops, including cassava and tomatoes, primarily for personal consumption. In addition to agriculture, the slopes are also utilized for raising livestock, such as cattle and pigs.

The forest constitutes another valuable resource in Wasla's landscapes. Wasla's forest is home to a diverse range of flora and fauna. It has many tree species, other plants, and numerous wild animals such as mammals, reptiles, rodents, and birds. The dominant tree species in the forest is the Pine (*Pinus Caribaea*). Unfortunately, the significance of these forest resources has made them a target for predatory companies, who collaborate with community leaders to exploit them. One such resource is the abundant pine forests on Wasla's communal lands. When I conducted fieldwork, a Chinese extractive company exploited Wasla's pine reserve, employing community members as cheap labor.

Illustration 11: A miskitu man observing the extraction of pine resin in the pine forest of Wangky Maya

The Wangky River, the border between Nicaragua and Honduras, is significant for Miskitu communities settled along its banks, including Wasla. These communities rely on the rivers, creeks, and lagoons for fishing, laundry, bathing, and leisure activities. The water bodies contain a diverse range of fish and other aquatic animals, including crocodiles and lizards. Additionally, the river meadows are rich in fertile soils, which facilitates the growth of crops such as rice, beans, cassava, taro, bananas, plantains, tomatoes, cabbage, and squash. During rainy seasons, the rivers sometimes overflow, leading to floods that attract new fish species and other wildlife.

Illustration 11: The *Wangky* River

Besides the Wangky River, Wasla's communal lands are home to several other important significant rivers, including *Trike*, Dakban, and Kis Laya, located near the Wangky River. Numerous other creeks and rivers, such as Wasla Tara, Ukaka Laya, Yak Tara, Li Wauhta, Muna Mapa, Laya Pauh Tara 1 and 2, Kwirku Aihtaban, Awala Sirpi, Yul Tnata, and *Sukrik Awala* (Lake of the Ancestors). Sukrik Awala holds particular significance as it is regarded as the dwelling site of the ancestors and is named accordingly. Kauh Kauya is another essential river for the community, where locals use it for washing, bathing, and as a recreational site for swimming. Other notable rivers include *Sikiring Tingni, Bilam Laya, Kurhnuk, Kyahras, Swauhra, Klibi Laya, Anslar,* and *Kuhrnuk.*

In Wasla's landscapes, the wetlands are another significant feature. Despite being breeding grounds for mosquitoes, these areas offer a rich and diverse ecosystem that plays a crucial role in fostering ecological relationships among various species of flora and fauna. The

wetlands are home to various aquatic life, including fish, river turtles, and large and small reptiles. They also serve as a bathing spot for wild ducks and domestic pigs, who rely on the wetlands' vegetation for their food. Some of the most notable wetlands in Wasla include *Lat Muk, Sinamigo, Walpa, Itakuku, Swain Laya, Kara Bila, Twi Bila, and Syakwa Laya.*

The communal lands contain subcategories called areas of collective use, which are crucial to the community's economic activities by providing abundant high-quality resources. Collective land use is crucial in several activities, such as agriculture, fishing, hunting, forestry, and sacred purposes. These areas and the surrounding geographical features are the backbones of diverse economic and subsistence activities in Wasla, including agriculture, fishing, hunting, logging, and gathering. Frequently, these areas serve multiple economic purposes concurrently. In keeping with communal customs, each area is given a specific toponym that reflects its unique geographic features.

Communal lands designated for agriculture are typically situated in the forest or along riverbanks, with Bilbans being the most significant site for farming in the Honduran section of the Wangky River. Other notable agricultural areas include *Sik Laya, Kakamuk Laya, Krahbani, Ki Dakura*, an island in the middle of the Wangky River, *Silang Tara*, and *Lat Mukra.* Fishing areas are designated for fishing in nearby rivers, lagoons, and distant locations. Among these fishing spots, Krahbani is particularly renowned. On the other hand, hunting areas are primarily used for hunting purposes and are usually located in wetlands or areas lacking large trees. During the summer, when vegetation dries out, these areas are burned to promote regrowth, attracting deer and other animals. The main hunting areas are *Laya Siksa* and *Dahpat Tara.*

In Wasla, people name the forest areas they use for agriculture, logging, hunting, and recollection. Popular names include *Unta Tara, Wasla Sirpi, Lila Bila, Dakban, Sithsir, Kahra*

Bila, Laya Siksa, and *Kipru Wihta.* These areas are rich in forest resources and diverse tree species used for various purposes, such as building houses, canoes, coffins, and firewood. Other popular forest areas in Wasla are *Auk Aukya, Ahwat Dakura, Kakamuk Laya, Prahbani, Kiwa Sirpi, Kyahbras, Kurhnuk, Slilan Tara, and Lat Muk.*

Multipurpose areas are highly valued within communal lands due to their versatility and significant contribution to the local economy. These areas are designated for fishing, hunting, agriculture, and logging, making them central hubs for economic growth. In Wasla's communal land, notable multipurpose areas include Bilbans, Krahbani, and Kyahras, all situated along the banks of the Wangky River. People often set up temporary campsites in these areas while they work, and the river provides a refreshing spot for swimming and leisure. The meadows adjacent to the riverbanks are also ideal for agricultural pursuits, while the Honduran side of the river supports forestry activities, providing a source of wood for the construction of housing and canoes. Finally, sacred areas in Wasla are typically stunning natural landscapes that serve as a venue for religious ceremonies and spiritual retreats. *Hil Yari* is one of the most renowned sacred areas in Wasla.

Additionally, Wasla and other Miskitu communities often see traditional medicine as a benefit from the region's natural resources and geographic features. The local population derives their understanding of health and illness from their everyday engagement with the various resources available. By utilizing leaves, roots, flowers, husks, and vines, the people in Wasla can identify the root causes of diseases and develop remedies for prevention and treatment. Elder Ermelinda described the forest as “the natural pharmacy of these communities.” Wasla's communal land boasts a unique set of geographical features that create opportunities for various economic activities when combined with the designated areas of use. Beyond their economic

importance, these features and areas are integral to the community's traditional medicine practices and cultural identity.

Before the introduction of Christianity, the Miskitu people's spiritual beliefs and practices were closely tied to the natural elements in their landscape. These same landscapes continue to serve as important sites for spiritual practices and communication with the divine, albeit from a Western-Christian perspective. Moreover, the natural beauty of these landscapes makes them ideal destinations for leisure and recreation, which fosters a deep and ongoing connection between the community and their communal land. Ultimately, the communal land and designated use areas are central to shaping the community's sense of identity and belonging.

The Spiritual Dimension of *Yapti Tasba*

For Wasla and other Miskitu communities, the communal land holds value beyond its essential function of sustaining life. Communal land is perceived from an ontological perspective as a space for cultural reproduction. The role of land as a site for cultural reproduction results from the close and ongoing relationship that community members develop with the varied geographical features of their surrounding landscapes, the diverse forms of land use, and the encompassing natural environment.

In this regard, the detailed description of the physical characteristics of the communal land presented in the previous section does not respond merely to a descriptive purpose. Instead, it provides meaning to the cultural and epistemological value derived from the interaction of community people with their natural environments and landscapes. The community's knowledge of the land and its resources, methods of using them collectively, and the spiritual connections to the natural environment are all important aspects of their culture. Therefore, understanding the

physical characteristics of the communal land is essential for understanding the community's cosmovision and livelihoods.

Miskitu people developed a complex system of supernatural beliefs and practices based on their interaction with the natural environment. Before encountering Christianity through the Moravian Church, they conceptualized deities of nature as part of their ancestral religious thought. According to this belief, the communal land and natural elements such as clouds, watersheds, and forests were inhabited by a hierarchy of supernatural beings, including *Yapti Misri* or *Pura Yapti*, the Heavenly Mother, who held the highest position. These deities, masters, and spirits were thought to protect and defend the natural world against humans' irrational exploitation of resources. However, due to colonization, these beliefs declined sharply, and today they exist only as remnants of the past rather than contemporary religious thought.

In present-day Wasla, most of the inhabitants do not believe in the existence of nature spirits and masters. Only a few entities, such as *Liwa Mairin* (The Mermaid), the *Swinta* or *Duhindu* (The Goblin), and to a lesser extent, the master of the mountains, which can have many names, are still considered part of the local worldview. Interestingly, the mermaid and the goblin also appear in Western ideas of supernatural beings, suggesting a process of knowledge erasure where those entities that resembled the colonizer's beliefs were allowed to survive.

The people of Wasla have a rich tradition of storytelling that draws inspiration from the masters and spirits of nature. However, these stories no longer hold significant spiritual value for many and instead are viewed as ancestral beliefs or relics of the past that are passed down through oral transmission. Unfortunately, these beliefs have been stigmatized as diabolical due to the influence of contemporary Christian practices and beliefs. This is largely attributed to the

encounter with Christianity through the Moravian Church, as previously described, which has played a significant role in undermining the supernatural deities once revered by Miskitu people.

After collecting the stories of Wasla's foundation and evolution, I wanted to talk about spiritual beliefs associated with land and the environment. Unfortunately, Elder Ermelinda emphatically denied these beliefs and refused to talk about them "We do not believe much in the masters of nature; they were past beliefs. Some people still believe in mermaids, goblins, and masters of the mountain, but I don't, I believe in God," Elder Ermelinda told me. However, Elder Oracio said he knew some stories and could talk to me, but he recommended I talk to Elder Norbelina Panting, a traditional healer, and offered to take me to her house, and I agreed.

Masters of the Atmosphere and the Clouds

The stories about the master of the spirits were among my favorites among the many different Miskitu stories compilations produced at CIDCA. At the time, my child's mind could not tell there was something wrong with how these deities were represented and how their physical attributes were influenced by Western ideals of beauty, particularly skin color, and hair. According to these stories, two deities govern the sky: *Yapti Misri* (Mother Scorpio), Heavenly Mother, *Pura Witshka* or *Pura Sisikni*. While Yapti Misri was once a prominent figure, her influence has diminished. She is described as a beautiful young woman with long blonde hair, residing in luxurious mansions among the clouds. As the highest authority among deities, spirits, and humans, *Yapti Misri* also judges the souls of the deceased based on their earthly deeds. Those found worthy receive a place beside her in the mansions, while those deemed unworthy are cast out to a place of punishment. Pura Witshka or Pura Sisikni, on the other hand, is a male deity who resides in the radiant stripes of the sun and is associated with lightning and thunder. His actions can bring about destructive gales and storms that affect people of all ages and

genders, causing various physical afflictions such as headaches, loss of vision, and epilepsy. Unlike the Christian God, these deities are believed to be hostile toward humans, yet they safeguard the land and natural elements against irrational human exploitation. At times, their actions against humans may stem from love, but even in those instances, they can cause illness or death. [15]

The Masters of the Forest

We arrived at Elder Norbelina's house at around 1:00 PM. She sat in her corridor, greeted us with a smile, and invited us to sit. Our conversation was constantly interrupted by people who came to buy groceries from her little *Pulperia.* Pulperias, until very recently, were not common in Miskitu communities, which motivated me to ask her what motivates her to have one instead of relying on traditional Miskitu economic activities such as agriculture, she replied.

> There is too much theft, it is not worth it, the labor is too intensive for an old person like me, and most of the time, I don't get to enjoy the results because other people steal it before I can harvest my food. Things are not the way they used to be. When I was young, we took care of our elderly. They didn't have to work, but now, even the elderly and the disabled must work because no one cares for people like us. Now I complement the income from my little pulperia with my services as a traditional healer; you see, not all illnesses can be treated and cured with Western medicine. Those caused by supernatural beings need another type of treatment. I received this knowledge from my elders through oral transmission, but now, no one is interested in receiving the knowledge from me (My translation).

[15] For a nuance explanation of supernatural deities in Miskitu peoples cosmovision see Cox Molina, (2003) and Offen (2014) Offen, K. (2014).

Listening to Elder Norbelina talk about her role as a traditional healer evoked memory of my paternal grandmother. She would frequently gather her grandchildren and cleanse us with decoctions of various leaves. She said it would drive away evil spirits and dispel any negative energy or ill intentions directed our way. I also remembered when one of my paternal aunts, who inherited my grandmother's herbal knowledge, brewed me tea made from the root of a plant to heal my broken heart and alleviate the sorrow resulting from my first heartbreak "before boiling the roots, you have to tie them in the shape of a cross, once it boils, you have to offer the tea, raise the cup and present it to the four cardinal points, and after drinking it, you have to thank nature for sharing its healing properties with you" my aunt told me. I was certainly able to heal my broken heart and move on. To date, I wonder if my aunt's tea played a role in my process. I like to think it did.

Elder Norbelina states:

> Masters of the forests mean evil spirits. When they rage against a person, they possess and eventually kill the person. As humans, we cannot see them; they are spirits, invisible beings, except when they manifest themselves to us. The masters fall in love or get angry with us because of our attitude toward nature; then, they manifest themselves. Forest masters are devils who live in forests. They cause diseases to people, such as fainting. Sometimes, they take their victims into the forest, and we never see them again. These beliefs in the master of the forest are not very strong among us today; they are only a small remanence of ancestral beliefs. Yet people continue to request my services to cure illnesses that Western medicine has failed to cure. In ancestral traditions, yes, the belief was strong. We stopped believing in those masters due to our encounter with the Church

> and the word of God. Today people believe in God. I cannot assess whether the loss of those beliefs is positive or negative, but now people's faith rests in God.

Mrs. Norbelina describes Wakambay in her own words as follows:

> It is a being in the shape of a man; he is very tall, almost ten meters. He walks on one leg, and because of his height, he needs a cane to swing while moving; he does so by leaning on big trees. He leaves traces of his only foot, marking the foot's footprints in the opposite direction; the heel marks the step forward, and the foot's tip points to the opposite side. This way, when people see the footprints, they can tell they are not human footprints because of the size; however, they get confused about what direction Wakambay is going. The trick is to make people think he is going in the direction of the foot tips when he is, in fact, going in the opposite direction. This way, people walk in directions opposite the foot tips thinking they are walking away from the Wakambay when they are, in fact, walking toward the encounter of the Wakambay. There are both male and female Wakambay. They usually walk in solitude, not in pairs. They inhabit the jungles among the great trees. When they encounter a human of the same sex, they catch their victim, causing their death by strangulation and devouring them. When the victim is of the opposite sex and inspires a romantic interest in the Wakambay, the Wakambay takes the victim into his cave and forces him into a romantic relationship. If the victim manages to escape, the Wakambay emits a noxious body odor for the victim to inhale, which later causes illnesses. This illness cannot be cured with Western medicines; in these cases, the victim is treated by a traditional healer within the community.

The diminishing belief in the master of the forest reflects the dominant influence not only the influence of Christianity but also the dominance of Western medicine in contemporary

Miskitu communities. However, Elder Norbelina's words evidence that people still encounter situations where Western medicine alone may not provide satisfactory solutions. This raises the importance of acknowledging and valuing alternative approaches to healthcare. The ancestral knowledge the elders hold is crucial in fostering an environment where different belief systems are respected.

While the belief in the master of the forests has waned, the belief in *Liwa Mairin* remains strong in Wasla and other Miskitu communities. Reports of sightings and illnesses after encounters with *Liwa Mairin* are common. She is considered a perverse, cruel, and terrifying deity who can affect people of any age and gender. *Liwa Mairin* is typically depicted as a female deity with a body that is half woman and half fish, white skin, and long blonde hair. Unlike western mermaids associated with the sea, the Miskitu Liwa is believed to inhabit rivers and lagoons primarily, and coastal communities do not report as many encounters with her.

Liwa Mairin is said to appear when people are engaged in subsistence activities such as fishing or domestic chores like laundry or washing dishes. According to accounts of those who have encountered her, the mermaid emerges from the water seeking a place to sunbathe. She perches on rocks or fallen tree trunks amid rivers and lagoons. However, upon being seen by humans, she disappears suddenly and with great force, plunging into the water and creating turbulent waves. As a guardian of the fish, Liwa is known to protect certain species more than others.

The belief surrounding *Liwa* holds that she acts against overfishing by creating disturbances in the water, such as shaking canoes and generating large waves at the fishing site. These events are interpreted by local communities as signs of Liwa's presence, prompting them to halt fishing and vacate the area. Liwa is said to hypnotize and cause her victims to dive and

disappear into the water, even if it is not deep. Following a disappearance, the community will organize and mobilize a search team, which typically finds the body in the same location where the victim drowned or in another section of the river.

Along with *Liwa*, the Goblin is considered one of the most credible and distinctive mythical beings in terms of its physical appearance and actions. "The *Swinta* (Goblin) does exist and bothers people a lot," says Elder Horacio. The Swinta is described as a short, hairy male or female figure with dark hair and a preference for wearing a large palm or leather hat. Although it can be found almost anywhere, the Goblin inhabits palm trees, pine forests, and hills while occasionally appearing within communities. Its presence is particularly associated with clouds and water.

The effect of encountering a goblin varies depending on the gender of both the goblin and the victim. A romantic relationship may develop in opposite-sex encounters, whereas same-sex encounters tend to become hostile. Victims who enter a romantic relationship with a goblin may continue living with their family and receive visits from the goblin in their dreams or in person, visible only to the victim. The goblin may provide the victim with material wealth, musical instruments such as guitars, and lessons on how to play them with extraordinary skill or teach them the secrets of traditional medicine to become a respected healer in their community. In contrast to hostile beings like Liwa or Wakambay, goblins often treat their victims with promises of prosperity and beauty.

When the encounter does not lead to a romantic interest, it can turn hostile, causing victims to escape unconscious into the forest. If victims are kept at home, they often experience various symptoms, including hypnotism, fainting, convulsions, hysteria, and other discomforts. Western medicine is typically ineffective in treating these symptoms, and instead, traditional

medicine is relied upon, which is often successful in helping the victim recover. There is a prevalent belief that goblins hold power over certain wild species, such as deer and armadillos, leading hunters to encounter goblins when they overhunt.

In ancestral and contemporary beliefs, certain lower-ranking deities are considered guardians of precious trees, including cedar, mahogany, pine, laurel, and others. Although these deities are not particularly powerful, their existence continues to be recognized in present-day Wasla. Elder Norbelina explains, "Yes, there is a belief in the masters of trees. Men extracting pine resin have reported falling seriously ill upon encountering a tall, brown-skinned man." Although the people of Wasla believe in multiple deities associated with the care of the trees, they cannot provide a concrete physical description of most of them, except for the master of the Pine tree. Instead, they view these deities as versatile spirits capable of manifesting themselves in various forms based on the situation. As for the master of the Pine tree, he is described as a tall, brown-skinned man who acts as the guardian of the pine forest and is known for his intense attachment to the trees.

Encounters with the masters and deities of nature are most reported in areas of subsistence activities such as hunting, fishing, forests, and agriculture. The mermaid dominates in fishing areas, while the Uhlak and the Wakambay are more frequently encountered in hunting areas and the forest. It is worth noting that the impact of these masters differs by gender, with the mermaid primarily affecting women and the Uhlak and Wakambay affecting men. The gendered division of labor in subsistence activities seems to be a contributing factor, as men are typically responsible for hunting and therefore spend more time in the forest and mountains, while women are more involved in fishing, as well as domestic tasks such as washing dishes and laundry, which require them to spend more time in the water.

Elder Oracio and his Encounter with the Master of the Deer

Krihbani and Kiwanis are two large areas within the community limits that people frequently visit for hunting or agriculture. These are areas crossed by abundant rivers and water streams. As soon as someone starts walking in those areas, they often hear hisses and see silhouettes passing by. These are not healthy manifestations; they are murmurs of evil spirits. People fear those places and usually walk accompanied or in groups. There are places where goblins and mermaids, females and males, and many other types of evil spirits live. While hunting, people also encounter deer masters; these species also have masters and spirits for their protection. I have personally experienced these encounters. I once went on a night hunt and was surprised by the master of the deer. At night, you must illuminate the forest areas where you sense or hear the movement of animals with a flashlight. The eye of the animal reflects the light of the flashlight, making it visible and easy to capture. Depending on the animal, the eye shines in different colors, yellow, green, blue, red, and light blue. An expert hunter can quickly identify the animal based on the color of its eyes and recognize the difference between birds, mammals, and reptiles. As I was shining my flashlight, I suddenly saw the twinkle of the eyes of a well-posed deer, with his neck stretched out and his bright eyes fixed on me. I could even see the horns; it was a male deer. I got very excited, pointed my rifle, and shot. The animal jumped forward toward me and fixed his eyes on me again. I pointed my rifle and shot again; he took another leap forward and fixed his eyes on me again; I missed several attempts as I continued trying. I did not realize that each time the deer jumped toward me, it made me move backward, pushing me to the cliff's edge. When I realized I was one step away from falling off the edge, I decided this was not regular prey; instead, it was

> strange being leading me to my death. I gave up and started running away from it. I was aware of the path I had followed through my persecution, so it was easy to return to my starting point following the same path. I felt he was chasing me the whole time, but I did not look back. I fixed my mind and heart on God and his angels and muttered prayers as I walked until I returned home. I got severe headaches and other rare symptoms two days after the encounter. There was a man, who is now deceased, named Rabisin. He knew how to treat illnesses caused by the masters of the forest, and I asked my dad to go and ask him to come and see me. When the old Rabisin visited me, I explained what I had experienced and my headaches. He assured me that I had an encounter with an evil spirit. He looked for remedies and returned with several leaves and roots; he chopped up them up and rubbed the mixture all over my body. I felt immediately relieved, and my headache was gone. The strange being that appeared to me was not a deer but the master of the deer protecting his herd by keeping me from hunting them.

As evidenced in Horacio's experience encountering the master of the deer, in Wasla and other Miskitu communities, illnesses' origin and treatment are conceived from a Western and traditional approach. This way, the pathology of illnesses in the community's beliefs can be natural and paranormal. Diseases of natural origin are those caused by microbes, viruses, and bacteria, whose prevention and treatment are found in Western medicine through local health staff and clinics. In the event of a significant complication, they travel to a larger hospital elsewhere. Meanwhile, the pathology of paranormal origin comes from the anger of the spirits and masters of nature. In these cases, the treatments include prevention or protection ceremonies, healing practices, and ceremonies for overcoming the possession of evil spirits performed by traditional healers in the community.

Elder Horacio comments:

> I do not share this belief, but I know them from stories my parents and grandparents told me. The trees are of God; the masters have no trees. They are ancestral beliefs; they are not current. Everything on earth, from stones to trees, are of God. Nothing would happen if they did not practice these ceremonies, but they do it only because they are rooted in traditions. These beliefs and traditions come from three or four generations ago or even longer. Even if nothing happens if they do not practice them, there is a commitment to ancestral knowledge, which is why people still practice them today as remnants of ancestral knowledge and traditions.

Elder Oracios' rejection of the notion of nature's masters appears inconsistent with his account of encountering the master of the deer and his affirmation that "the goblin does exist and bothers people a lot." Similarly, during fieldwork, I came across other accounts of people who claimed to reject the belief in these beings due to their Christian faith yet shared anecdotes of their encounters. This is a testament to the persistence of Miskitu ancestral knowledge, which is firmly rooted in their relationship with nature and endures despite colonial efforts to erase it. Despite Christianity's imposition of a monotheistic narrative and attempts to discredit indigenous spiritual beliefs, communities like Wasla and other Miskitu communities continue to practice and pass down these beliefs through everyday experiences and practices.

The primary forms of traditional medicine include treatments prepared from herbs, roots, seeds, and leaves found in the bush, accompanied by ceremonies and invocations. However, most community people are inclined toward Western medicine. Although Miskitu people have relied on traditional medicine for centuries, Elder Norbelina regrets that this valuable knowledge is gradually disappearing: "People prefer to believe in Western medicine because all the healers

that know about traditional medicine are dying without passing their knowledge to the new generations."

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that entangled colonial processes have shaped and transformed the life and history of Wasla and have negatively impacted the production and reproduction of land-based knowledge and spiritual practices such as the *Klauna Laka* and the belief in supernatural deities. The erasure of these traditions has had significant consequences, including social fragmentation, elevated crime rates, and a disconnection between the community and the land.

I have demonstrated that daily interaction with land and nature produced a unique knowledge system in different life spheres that enabled a different understanding of the natural and non-human environments. This interpretation of Wasla's relationship with land and nature facilitates understanding of Miskitu Peoples' worldview and responds to ongoing debates that advocate for a dialogue with other forms of knowledge.

For the case of Miskitu people, the primary conception of land as an inheritance from the ancestors, the shared use of certain areas for subsistence activities, and the forms of land appropriation and inheritance constitute a social institution of customary value that legitimize communal, collective, and private property, within a Miskitu community. This social institution enables a peaceful coexistence and ensures the effectiveness of the land tenure system without the intervention of written or legal paperwork. Various forms of supernatural beings inhabit clouds, the geographical features in the landscape, the areas of collective use, and the natural environment of the communal land. These beings are spirits, masters, and guardians of nature

that regulate people's behavior concerning using natural resources. Additionally, the relationship between land and nature and the belief in supernatural beings create the conditions for producing and using traditional medicine.

These knowledge systems have endured a long history of colonial erasure. However, as the Wangky River continues to flow steadily despite external forces such as human intervention, this ancestral indigenous knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation and has persisted despite entangled colonial processes. Just as the Wangky River is deeply engrained in the livelihoods of the communities of Wangky Maya, ancestral indigenous knowledge is deeply rooted in the culture, history, and experiences of the Elders who have carried it over time. Even when colonial processes sought to erase or suppress this knowledge, it continued to flow beneath the surface, finding ways to adapt, evolve, and survive. Just as a river can shape and transform the land through which it flows, ancestral indigenous knowledge has shaped and influenced indigenous communities' cultural landscapes and identities. In this way, the persistence of ancestral indigenous knowledge is a powerful and enduring force that continues to flow and shape indigenous communities' cultural and social fabric despite centuries of colonial intervention and erasure.

Today, as the elders mourn the loss of their ancestral wisdom, their lament echoes the heart-wrenching cry of *Niki Niki*, mourning the loss of his beloved son. Their sorrowful sighs carry the weight of a lifetime of memories, now fading into the abyss of forgotten history, leaving behind only a faint whisper of what once was. Yet, as *Niki Niki's* anguished cry and tireless search birthed the majestic Wangky River and a serene pine forest, the mournful cries of the elderly, too, hold power to create something new and beautiful, even in the face of profound loss and sorrow caused by an entangled and violent colonial process.

Chapter III: From Colonization to Indigenous Resistance: A Chronology of Miskitu Peoples Resistance Movements and the Struggle for *Yapti Tasba* (1950-1980)

It is November 11, 2022. I am looking out a window at my apartment in Philadelphia, PA; it is cold and raining outside. My heart is filled with sorrow as I go through my dissertation fieldwork notes and interviews and try to work on my dissertation. It is a mournful awakening to the intricacies and hardships endured by my people throughout their extensive history with the Nicaraguan State. Concurrently, my Facebook news feed was awash with posts commemorating the 36th anniversary of *Yapti Tasba Maraka Asla Takanka*'s (The Organization of the Sons and Daughters of Mother Earth, YATAMA) foundation, the most recent Miskitu resistance organization. Reports of police brutality shared widely made it to news outlets and documented the struggles of the Miskitu people in Waspam and Bilwi as they strived to gather and commemorate this significant day.

A couple of weeks earlier, on October 30, my Facebook news feed also witnessed the commemoration of the 35th anniversary of the adoption of Law 28. This law recognized Autonomous Status for the Northern and Southern Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast. The sanctioning of Law 28 marked the cessation of the civil war between the Miskitu people and the Sandinistas. It was a landmark shift from an era of assimilation and mestizaje to one of multiculturalism in Nicaragua. Various institutions, including the Nicaraguan Congress and two local universities, celebrated this historic event with cultural performances encompassing local dance and cuisine. Law 28 was succeeded by Law 445 for the demarcation and titling of Indigenous lands passed in 2003.

In the summer of 2021, while conducting dissertation fieldwork in rural communities, I was confronted with extreme poverty, escalating presence of settlers, and food scarcity, primarily

attributed to insufficient land for agriculture. Upon inquiring about the community's perceptions of Law 28 and Law 445, I found that people's responses were indifferent. For the majority, these legislative measures seem detached from their lived experiences, rendering them inconsequential for better living conditions. The consensus indicates a perceived failure of these laws to safeguard their land rights and ensure autonomy. How did Yatama go from being a prominent Miskitu resistance movement to being unable to commemorate its anniversary? How has the Autonomy Law that Indigenous people so eagerly received and celebrated when I was seven been reduced to folklore and remains irrelevant for those whose lives were supposed to improve?

Drawing on oral testimonies from individuals directly involved in Miskitu people's political mobilizations, this chapter explores the political, economic, social, and cultural landscapes that precipitated the emergence of Miskitu resistance organizations and political mobilization during the 1950s. I argue that the prevailing racialized and colonial environment compelled indigenous communities to adapt to the norms dictated by the legal and educational institutions of the Nicaraguan State, thereby perpetuating and reinforcing racial hierarchies. Consequently, the Miskitu people underwent three decades of organization, resistance, and learning to navigate the Nicaraguan State's institutions and policies before clearly articulating their demands.

This chapter offers a geographical contextualization of Waspam and Bilwi as the epicenter of Miskitu people's political mobilization. Next, based on stories and oral testimonies from people who participated in resistance movements, I offer a social, cultural, economic, and political context of these two places in the mid-20th century. My analysis proceeds chronologically, introducing five resistance movements that emerged and contested hegemonic notions of nationhood, autonomy, land, and natural resources. I will show how Miskitu people's

political mobilizations went from simply looking for commercial alternatives in the 60s to having a well-articulated demand for autonomy and territorial demarcation at the end of the 80s. This will allow a further examination of the evolution and progressive alignment of their demands towards *Yapti Tasba* and Autonomy and the ensuing difficulties of coherently articulating these demands in an alien legal and institutional system. Finally, I will demonstrate that the laws emanating from these mobilizations have predominantly facilitated the objectives of neoliberal multiculturalism[16] (Hale, 2005), without effectively impeding the continual extractivism land dispossession, persecution, murder, and forced displacement (The Oakland Institute, 2019).

Examining the development and progression of these resistance movements provides insight into the Miskitu viewpoint on their land rights, a concept they refer to as *Blasi pyua wina wan raitka nani ba* (Our historical right). This perspective reveals inadequacies in domestic and international legal structures they have been compelled to depend on. Comprehending this Miskitu viewpoint towards the legal framework addressing Indigenous Peoples' rights challenges the colonial context within which these laws were crafted, mainly Law 28 & Law 445 and implemented in Nicaragua and beyond.

This chapter adds to the literature on Indigenous People's political mobilizations in Latin America (Yashar, 2004). While previous scholarship has demonstrated the organization of Indigenous political actors in the Moskitia, (Brunnegger, 2007, Hawley, 1997, 1996, Hale,

[16] According to Hale (2005), neoliberal multiculturalism is a process that opens up spaces for certain forms of cultural rights, particularly for indigenous communities. However, these rights are often framed within the context of neoliberal economic structures, which can lead to complex and sometimes contradictory outcomes.

1994), less has been done to understand the centrality of *Yapti Tasba* in Miskitu people's political mobilization.

In examining Miskitu people's resistance movement over 30 years, I trace how these organizations placed *Yapti Tasba* at the center of their political mobilizations. I also address the intersections between race and political mobilizations, as noted by Mollett (2006) "natural resource struggles are also racial struggles" (p. 96). The aspiration of Latin American nation-states, post-independence in the 19th century, to emulate European progress is well-documented (Yashar, 2004). The predominant view among local elites was that demographic resemblance to these European nations was the only way to achieving such advancement. In the specific context of Nicaragua, this objective translated into an augmentation of mestizo populations and a corresponding decline, if not outright eradication, of indigenous communities. Consequently, the Nicaraguan government, starting in the middle of the 20th century, formulated strategies aimed at assimilating Indigenous peoples and privatizing territories and natural resources.

Waspam and Bilwi: Geographical and Cultural Contextualization

The Moskitia in Nicaragua is divided into the Northern and Southern Autonomous regions. The main towns of each region are Bilwi and Bluefields, respectively. The communities in the north are subdivided into two subregions: communities of the Wangky River or *Wangky wina* (from Wangky) and communities along the coastline of the Caribbean Sea or *Sal wina* (from salt). The terms *Wangky wina* and *Sal wina* are local constructions of the communities referring to freshwater communities located on the banks of the Wangky River and saltwater communities along the coastal line of the Caribbean Sea. The head cities of each subregion are Waspam and Bilwi, respectively. This chapter spotlights Waspam, the expansive Wangky River area, and Bilwi. In the prevailing local historiography, Waspam has been identified as the

catalyst for the emergence of the Miskitu people's political mobilization, followed by Bilwi. Waspam represents the communities of *Wangky wina* and Bilwi, the communities of *Sal wina*.

The position of Waspam as the hub of Miskitu peoples' political mobilization responds to several factors. First, Waspam's geographical location is on the banks of the Wangky River. The Wangky River was declared the border between Nicaragua and Honduras in 1954, heavily and negatively impacting the communities along the river's banks on both sides. These communities were the hardest hit by the border demarcation, losing access to agriculturally rich lands across the river, which now fell under Honduran jurisdiction. Furthermore, Waspam was the administrative center for the Pilot Project of Fundamental Education and Castellanization. Additionally, Bilwaskarma, a prominent Miskitu community located in *Wangky Maya* (downstream), served as the primary base for the Moravian Church in the *Wangky River* area, with an auxiliary base established in Wasla. Bilwaskarma also accommodated a Moravian seminary and a hospital run by the same institution. The initial impulses of resistance emerged primarily from indigenous religious leaders educated at this seminary. In addition to these factors, the Wangky region, known for its fertile soil, is predominantly agricultural. This distinguishes it from coastal communities, where the economy relies on fishing more than agriculture. These agricultural activities were the starting point of the Miskitu people's mobilization and later evolved to become organizations for political mobilization.

The Border Division and the Legacy of the Nation States' Expansion

In Chapter One, I showed that the British-Miskitu political alliance crafted in the early colonial periods did not intend assimilation or extermination. Instead, the British implemented a form of trade colonialism to extract vast natural resources. This alliance served as an anti-Spanish strategy that allowed the indigenous people of Moskitia to resist Spanish colonization

and extermination taking place on the Pacific side of current Nicaragua (Harff & Gurr, 2004). This alliance ended when the British withdrew from the region, and the emerging Nicaraguan State forced the incorporation of the Moskitia in 1894. In the late 1800s, following the incorporation of Moskitia into the Nicaraguan State, Nicaragua and Honduras had an ongoing dispute over the Moskitia Territory. In 1957, this dispute led to a fleeting war between the two states, known as the Mokorón War. At the time, Nicaragua was under the administration of Luis Somoza Debayle, the second of the Somoza dynasty, known for its direct political and economic link with U.S. administrations and the U.S. transnational companies in Moskitia. The dispute ended in 1960 with an International Court of Justice recognizing the *Wangky River* as the border between the two countries.

The Court's ruling impacted the communities' material, political and cultural life in various of of ways. First, the territory of Moskitia was divided between the Honduran and Nicaraguan nation-states. The division caused the dispersion of communities, family disintegration, loss of fertile lands for cultivation, and submission to the military that arrived in the area to protect the newly delimited border. Reflecting on these events, Rufino Lucas points out:

> These events ignited the resistance in the Wangky for land rights. The border division raised awareness of the need for legal protection of our lands according to the parameters imposed by the Nicaraguan State. Until then, we based our rights on our ancestry and firstness in these lands but had no written documents to prove our ownership." (My translation)

Before this point, these lands lacked written titles, despite the mandates of the Harrison Altamirano treaty of signed 1905, between Nicaragua and Great Britain, compelled the

Nicaraguan government to confer such titles. In this scenario, Rufino's emphasis on “the need for legal protection of our lands according to the parameters imposed by the Nicaraguan State” takes on greater significance considering the historical context where Indigenous communities, for centuries, inhabited these areas guided by their principle of communal land ownership, which did not require written land titles. The requirement for these legal documents emerged from the interference of the Honduran and Nicaraguan states.

In compliance with the Court's ruling, the Somoza administration relocated the Wangky Maya communities from the now Honduran terrain to Nicaragua and founded the community of Santa Marta in the plains of the municipality of Bilwi. Meanwhile, in Wangky Kla (upstream *Wankgy*), many other communities independently left Honduras and resettled on the Nicaraguan riverbanks. The most fertile traditional lands of the Wangky remained on the Honduran side of the river. Ana Rosa Fagoth, founder and director the Tininiska museum in Bilwi noted: “The river, on the side of Honduras, was sparsely populated, and people used to cultivate there because it is lower in elevation. When the river flooded, the land became very fertile. People harvested large bunches of bananas; there were plenty of bananas. There were also a lot of fish because when the river flooded and receded, numerous lagoons formed along the riverbanks with plenty of fish. But when the border division happened, the Honduran government sent military troops to safeguard the area, so people were afraid of going there. The relocation prevented communities from accessing these lands, causing food insecurity, and diminishing the communities' capacity for self-subsistence.”

Ana Rosa's words highlight the intricate interplay between colonialism and nation-building processes. In this context, establishing political borders and deploying military forces served as crucial mechanisms to exert control over the indigenous peoples with far-reaching

consequences. The use of military forces as a tool of control not only reinforced the power dynamics between the Honduran Nation State and the Miskitu population but also perpetuated a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness within the Miskitu communities of the Wangky River, producing adverse effects, particularly the disruption of their livelihoods, marginalization, land dispossession, displacement, and alienation. The border imposition also marked the beginning of the erasure of the idea of the Miskitu nation. Those who stayed in Honduras and those who chose to relocate to Nicaragua had the Nicaraguan and Honduran nationality imposed on them, respectively.

Additionally, the Court ruling, and the new border delimitation marked the beginning of the assimilation era in Nicaragua. Following the Court ruling, the Nicaraguan State started to provide services in the Wangky area. However, those services were plagued by oppression and marginalization. Throughout the assimilation era, the Nicaraguan State employed various mechanisms to facilitate assimilation, predominantly through establishing educational institutions and enacting laws. Notable examples include The Pilot Project of Fundamental Education and Castellanization and The Instituto de Fomento Nacional) (The Institute for National Promotion INFONAC).

***Kip*-Cabo Gracias a Dios**

Kip is currently a picturesque Miskitu community at the mouth of the *Wangky* River, facing the Caribbean Sea, in the northeastern tip of Nicaragua. In the Miskitu origin story, *Kip* is identified as the convergence point of a river, a lagoon, and the sea. These location characteristics motivated the warrior Miskut to guide his people to settle there, naming it *Sitawala*. The official history of Nicaragua references *Cabo Gracias a Dios* as the location where Christopher Columbus arrived on October 12, 1502. After surviving a storm during his

voyage to India. Columbus landed on this cape's beaches at dawn and thanked God for his survival, giving the cape its name.

According to oral accounts, in the late 1800s, Cabo Gracias a Dios was a region within the Department of Zelaya.[17] The annexation of the Moskitia to the Nicaraguan State led to a significant influx of mainly U.S. transnational companies. These companies, including the Standard Fruit Company, La Luz Mining Company, the Nicaraguan Long Leaf Pine Company (NIPCO), and Bragman Bluff Lumber Company (Villas, 1992), were attracted by the region's lumber, gold, and maritime resources, such as lobster and turtles. These companies continued the British's previous pattern of indiscriminate natural resource exploitation. Ana Rosa Fagoth recalls that despite being a rural region due to its strategic location, *Kip* had facilities such as a customs house, a dock, a civil registry office, and a lighthouse to assist these companies and guide international maritime transport.

Mestizo people from the Pacific side of Nicaragua held positions of power in these institutions, overshadowing traditional local authorities like elders and *Wihta*. According to Fagoth, these local authorities were limited to resolving minor community issues and had no voice or decision-making power in these institutions. “All the authorities there were not from the communities; all of these institutions and infrastructures were alien to the Miskitu people's traditions; they were not accustomed to having governors, a civil registry, or using lighthouses." This way, Cabo Gracias a Dios inaugurated the incursion of state institutions in Moskitia and the continuation of foreign extractive companies.

17 In Nicaragua's political-administrative structure departments form the country's primary territorial units like states in the US or provinces in Canada. Departments are further divided into municipalities and have a town hall and mayor's office." Department of Zelaya was the name given to the newly annexed territory of the Moskitia in honor of Rigoberto Zelaya, who directed the annexation operation. Currently the Moskitia is known as the Northern and Southern Caribbean Coast Autonomous regions.

In 1935, while the territorial dispute with Honduras was still pending, Cabo Gracias a Dios was hit by a hurricane. Following the hurricane, foreign merchants relocated to Waspam, a previously sparsely populated town. According to Rufino Lucas director of the Comisión Nacional de Demarcación y Titulación (National Comission for Demarcation and Titling, CONADETI[18]) "the arrival of these merchants transformed Waspam into a semi-urban area which rapidly escalated to the status of a municipality within the Zelaya department and inaugurated its first town hall and mayor's office. Additionally, Chinese trade thrived in Waspam due to the presence of transnational companies exploiting natural resources."

Lucas's memories, testify that after Moskitia's annexation by the Nicaraguan State in 1894, the region primarily functioned as an enclave economy, primarily benefiting foreign companies. After this period and before the border division, the Nicaraguan State did not provide education or health services in the Wangky area and the rest of the Miskitu communities. However, the communities were filled with institutions and infrastructure at the service of transnational companies. Although it was not an official church policy, the lack of State services was compensated by the voluntary services of Moravian missionaries who taught classes at the elementary level (Assies, 2005). According to Marcos Hoppington, a Miskitu lawyer who was actively involved in Miskitu resistance movements during the 80's, the Moravian missionaries continued providing basic education until 1960, when the Nicaraguan State launched the Pilot Project of Fundamental Education, introducing schooling in the Wangky area.

[18] CONADETI was created by Law 445 and is the body responsible for overseeing and implementing the processes of demarcation and titling Indigenous territories in Nicaragua.

Pilot Project of Fundamental Education and Castellanization

The colonial project to disenfranchise Indigenous communities intensified as nationalist strategies focused on assimilation pursuits. The intention of the liberal elite to advance industrial modernization acted as a catalyst for forceful initiatives aimed at resolving the so-called 'Indian issue' through a process of 'civilizing' education (Farriss, 2018; Rama, 1996; Rappaport, 2011; Ramos & Yannakakis, 2014; Urrieta & Landeros, 2022). These methods essentially used education to assimilate Indigenous populations in Latin American countries. In the context of the aforementioned scenario, in 1960 following border delineation, the Nicaraguan government initiated the Pilot Project of Fundamental Education and Castellanization, conceived and designed primarily for the *Wangky* communities. This project ostensibly symbolized State support for the communities, yet it essentially functioned as an assimilation mechanism. Rufino Lucas, a former student of this project, eloquently described it:

> After the Mokorón War and the court ruling, the Nicaraguan government sought to create in the Miskitu people a sense of Nicaraguan citizenship since the Miskitus did not feel that citizenship due to the influence of British colonization and the absence of state services in communities for more than a century.

Lucas' insights reveal the enduring impact of British colonization on Miskitu people's identity politics, leading to their alienation from the Nicaraguan national identity. Additionally, the Nicaraguan state's neglect, reflected in its inadequate provision of key services such as infrastructure, health, and education, only reinforced Miskitu people’s marginal status within the Nicaraguan State and exacerbated their detachment from the national identity. Ironically, while formal annexation intended to erase their identity and assimilate them into the Nicaraguan State, it did not lead to the actual benefits of citizenship, thereby exacerbating their marginalization.

In this scenario, the Nicaraguan government, through the Fundamental Project, undertook the endeavor to foster a sense of national citizenship within the Miskitu population. Reflecting on his experience, Lucas states: “The government introduced education, but instead of education appropriate to the Miskitu culture, it turned out to be a colonizing education aimed to eradicate the sense of Miskito identity in us and inculcate the sense of Nicaraguan-mestizo nationality.” Because of this and despite its well-intentioned facade, community members perceived the project as demeaning and humiliating. To this day, many former students recount a harrowing picture of the Project's methods, where classes often involved experiences characterized by physical and psychological distress. In this context, attending school was irrelevant for children in these communities due to community members' unfamiliarity with formal schooling, affecting parental endorsement and children's participation. Amalia Dixon, a Miskitu educator, said:

> Education and schools were something new and alien in the life of the communities and were not a priority in their daily lives. So, it was more important for the children to accompany their parents to agricultural activities than go to school. I think 75% of the population felt that way, and it was because that was the only life we knew.

Dixon's reflection on these communities' responses to State-implemented schooling eloquently captures the tensions and challenges inherent in implementing assimilationist educational models within indigenous communities. They also reflect community members’ shared views of such schooling as a foreign imposition and a potential disruption to the continuity of traditional cultural practices, which include important subsistence activities such as agriculture. The state educational model neglected to recognize and accommodate the unique socio-cultural fabric of these communities, which inevitably led to resistance and non-participation. Similarly, Ana Rosa Fagoth recalls: "The communities had no academic

knowledge or experience and did not attend." Her observations, again, underscore a disconnect with the school system, exemplified by the communities' lack of engagement with the State-imposed school system that was considered irrelevant for the community's livelihood. Consequently, both parents and children refused to attend.

Simultaneously, in 1953, the Nicaraguan Legislature approved Law 11, creating the Instituto de Fomento Nacional (Institute of National Promotion, INFONAC). Through this Law, the Nicaraguan State requested that the administration of, what they considered, national lands and other forest resources be transferred to the Institute. This meant that the Nicaraguan State, through INFONAC, exercised absolute control over Indigenous communities' land and natural resources, endangering the Miskitu people's ways of life. For Avelino Cox and Armando Rojas, this Institute represented the dispossession of communal lands to a maximum degree within the euphemism of forest protection. It was an act of colonization whereby the Somoza government declared all the communal lands in Waspam and Bilwi a forest reserve. For Avelino Cox, it was a dispossession of land, but “not in the form of settlers invasion, it was in the form of institutional control." The state forestry initiative entailed safeguarding, managing, and commercially utilizing pine and broadleaf species in the Bilwi and Waspam plains and forests. This endeavor, undertaken jointly by foreign entities and Somoza's companies, persisted until the late 1970s. Key activities encompassed harvesting pine for timber and extracting resin from pine trunks to produce varnish, turpentine oil, and other derivatives.

The creation of INFONAC occurred in a highly disadvantageous legal context for indigenous communities. Up to that moment, the communities' relationship with the land was based solely on customary law, which they regarded as *blasi pyua wina wan raitka nani ba* (our historical rights). Despite the 1905 Harrison Altamirano Treaty’s stipulations, which obligated

Nicaragua to grant legal land titles to indigenous territories, the government remained largely non-compliant with this obligation after more than seven decades. Only a handful of instances saw the provision of titles over minor land areas, as Rufino Lucas noted:

> They provided some titles here and there, 1800 mz. [19] in Waspam; 1900 mz in Kisalaya, and so on. With those insignificant titles, the Nicaraguan government pretended to silence the voices of community leaders who demanded the fulfillment of the Harrison Altamirano Treaty. However, the majority of indigenous lands had yet to receive titles. Then the Somoza government created INFONAC. Since indigenous peoples could not provide land titles to claim ownership of those lands, INFONAC controlled them along with the natural resources contained in those lands.

By providing limited and seemingly insignificant land titles to select areas, the Nicaraguan government aimed to create an illusion of compliance and appeasement while effectively disregarding the broader demands of Indigenous Peoples. In this context the creation of INFONAC provided a mechanism for the Nicaraguan state to consolidate its control over indigenous lands and their natural resources. By asserting that indigenous communities could not claim ownership of the lands without land titles, the Nicaraguan state effectively positioned INFONAC as the intermediary authority with the power to administer and exploit these territories. This approach allowed the government to exploit the economic potential of the lands and resources, often to the detriment of the indigenous communities whose livelihoods and cultural practices relied upon them.

[19] In land measurement, 'manzana' (mz) refers to a unit used in certain countries in Latin American roughly equivalent to 0.6-1.7 acres. Given the lack of a direct English translation or equivalent, 'manzana' is retained, supplemented with an acre equivalent for clarity.

This way, the Nation-State approach towards the indigenous lands was structured on the assumption that Indigenous lands were idle lands and had to be put to work through a capitalist and extractive logic. Further, Indigenous people had to be civilized and incorporated into Nicaraguan society through education, reinforcing racial hierarchies across the country. These events configured adverse economic, political, social, and cultural contexts that threatened the living conditions of Miskitu communities. These adverse contexts helped people raise awareness of their colonial condition *vis à vis* the Nicaraguan State.

Economic Context: The Massive Presence of Foreign Extractive Companies

As mentioned earlier, the annexation of Moskitia into Nicaragua led to the establishment of large extractive industries in the region, forming an enclave economy. This influx of corporations was supplemented by a mixture of mid-sized and small enterprises, both foreign and local mestizo owned. This new economic structure provided temporary paid employment opportunities for Miskitu people, thus creating a sense of economic prosperity (Bourgois, 1986).

Additionally, Miskitu people gained access to commodities like oil, flour, sugar, coffee, tobacco, and salt, which were not part of the culinary tradition of the communities. This transformative phase, characterized by an economic surge and upliftment in Moskitia in the middle of the 20th century, is referred to as the "boom and boost" period (Helms, 1983).

Starting in the early 1950s, transnational companies witnessed a downturn (Hale, 1994). This decline hampered people's capacity to make a living through paid labor in these companies, negatively affecting the perceived economic prosperity, including the once flourishing urban middle class who thrived amidst transnational corporations and commerce (Solis, 1989). Such a circumstance disrupted the living standards across all societal layers, urban and rural alike,

notably affecting indigenous communities who had integrated wage labor with traditional subsistence activities, primarily agriculture.

Despite the initial disorientation caused by the changing landscape, the communities exhibited no signs of dissatisfaction. As per Armando Rojas, a Miskitu lawyer who actively participated in Miskitu people's resistant movements and later helped to draft Law 28, the Moravian Church's efforts were instrumental in maintaining this social equilibrium: "The Moravian Church served as a buffer cushion by offering donation products from the USA to calm the complaints of indigenous communities." The shift in economic dynamics prompted communities to revert to traditional agricultural activities, thereby optimizing production. However, this agricultural production no longer served the subsistence requirements of these communities through the *Klauna Laka* practices. Instead, the produce was directed towards the urban market in Waspam, controlled by Chinese merchants and mestizo economic and political elites. In addition, the services facilitated through the free of charge *Klauna Laka* reciprocity networks were now subject to monetary remuneration. This situation compelled people to explore new income sources as wage labor in transnational companies was no longer an option. The emergent economic landscape posed notable disadvantages for community members, primarily due to the influence of Mestizo and Chinese intermediaries who monopolized the urban market in Waspam and presumably the lack of capital or credit for Miskitu peoples. The Mestizo and Chinesse intermediaries dictated the purchase price of community-sourced agricultural products and marked up resale prices to achieve a higher profit margin. These exploitative and unfair trading practices soon precipitated an economic downturn in the communities. Lucas reflects on this situation: " They had so much production, but they did not enjoy the benefits; others benefited. This led to growing discontent within communities that

demanded direct access to urban markets and eliminating the Chinese and Mestizo intermediaries." During the early 1960s, expressions of this discontent escalated into intense protests and riots against the existing market dynamics, further inflamed by the retreat of transnational corporations.

Political and Socio-Cultural Context: Somoza's Dictatorship and its Implications for Moskitia

At the national level, the 1960s were marked by the rise in power of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the third of the Somoza dynasty. Somoza's ascension to power was marked by notable political ties to the U.S. administrations started by his father and his brother who preceded him, and affiliations with U.S. multinational corporations in Moskitia. This engagement facilitated a proliferation of stereotypes about Moskitia in official discourse and everyday perceptions. According to Armando Rojas, one of the most deeply rooted perceptions was that "Moskitia was a different nation within Nicaragua, thereby challenging the notion of national homogeneity." This perception, as asserted by Rojas, remains valid today, particularly when considering the contrast between the predominantly Spanish-speaking Catholic population of Pacific Nicaragua and the culturally diverse Moskitia, home to three indigenous and two Afrodescendant ethnic groups. six distinct ethnic, groups, each with a unique language and primarily affiliated with Protestant Christianity via the Moravian Church. In this context, the center of political and economic power converged on the Pacific side of the country. Concurrently, the Moskitia became primarily a servile outpost for transnational corporations, experiencing considerable neglect from the State regarding service provision. The manifestation of this ideological and socio-economic structure consequently resulted in the disenfranchisement of the Moskitia region.

Armando Rojas offers an insightful interpretation of the social structure in Moskitia up until the late 1970s portraying a society steeped in hierarchical stratification. In his view, a

stratified social architecture prevailed, with foreign businessmen crowning the structure. Underneath them, appointed by the central government, were the mestizo political elites who served as the administrative arm of the state in the Moskitia. Rojas recalls: “the political elite were the national mestizos who represented the central government and were appointed directly by the central government; there were no elections, not even for mayors.” An intermediary layer was constituted by foreign executives managing multinational corporations, along with mestizo political elites and mestizo corporate administrators. Below them were Creole and indigenous workers, mainly considered cheap labor in these corporations. According to Rojas, Indigenous communities resided at the base of the social pyramid, signifying the lowermost stratum of the hierarchy. Rojas’s recollection of those times' social structure speaks of a social stratification whose extremes were occupied by foreign whites at the top and indigenous people at the lowest scale, inevitably leading to unequal distribution of power and resources.

Marcos Hoppington argues that the marginalization of the Miskitu people resulted in their absolute isolation, a phenomenon that eventually precipitated the onset of resistance struggles. According to Hoppington, this isolation process started in 1894, following the annexation of the Moskitia to the Nicaraguan State. Hoppington suggests that the isolation process occurred on both sides: “not only did the state neglect the Moskitia, but the Moskitia also did not feel part of the Nicaraguan State. They did not feel incorporated into the Nicaraguan national identity.” Thus, Hoppington considers this sense of self-isolation not just an outcome of the marginalization process but also a form of strategic resistance to it. Following the departure of transnational companies, the social hierarchy was reconfigured, leaving only the political elites linked to Somoza and the Indigenous population at the bottom.

Despite these events, the 1960s and 1970s were characterized by a fragile equilibrium maintained by the populace's seeming passivity in the face of severe resource exploitation and environmental degradation caused by foreign companies and governmental maltreatment toward the population of Moskitia. Contemporary analysis suggests that this passive state can be attributed largely to the role of the Moravian Church. Armando Rojas notes:

> There was no agitation or discontent in the communities because the Moravian Church served as a buffer cushion by offering products providing goods donated from the U.S. and facilitating basic health and education services to calm the grievances of indigenous communities.

Upon its establishment in 1849, coinciding with the inception of extractive activities by multinational corporations, the Moravian Church's leadership and missionary endeavors were undertaken by American missionaries. These missionaries ingrained in the indigenous communities' values of humility, diligence, and renouncement of material wealth to spiritual salvation. Thus, whether intentional or not, the Moravian Church paved the way for people's submission in the face of brutalities and savagery committed against the environment and people.

This perception of the Moravian Church's role is strengthened by the fact that the departure of the Church's American personnel coincides with the departure of the last transnational corporation. After the withdrawal of the Church's American personnel, the Church's leadership was assumed by native people trained and educated by the Church. In the Church's

history, this process is known as the *autoctonización de la Iglesia* [20] (indigenization of the Church. My translation) (Wilson, 1990).

The Bilwi area also lacked state-provided services, including elementary schools. The Moravian Church filled this gap by establishing the first schools in urban and rural areas starting in the 1960s. These services, however, only extended to the 4th grade in rural communities and to the 6th grade in urban regions. By the mid to late 1960s, the Moravian and Catholic Churches expanded education services to encompass urban high schools, catalyzing an educational surge that increased the number of high school graduates among the indigenous peoples. This educational expansion produced significant sociopolitical repercussions. Since mestizo political and economic dominance stemmed from their literacy advantage, the educational expansion destabilized their political hegemony. Armando Rojas notes:

> With the proliferation of high school education, the traditional mestizo status quo declined, marking the onset of a downturn in mestizo political dominance; the mestizo people were displaced from spaces of power in state institutions and were replaced by the native population.

Therefore, the Moravian Church in Moskitia paradoxically played a dual role. On the one hand, it served as a colonizing institution by suppressing indigenous spiritual practices, enforcing Christianity, and mitigating societal unrest by cushioning the impacts of natural resource exploitation by transnational corporations and the State's mistreatment. On the other hand, the Church provided the native population basic literacy, which the Nicaraguan State had

[20] In this context the word *autoctonizacion* could be interpreted as "local leadership transition of the Church" or "transition to indigenous church leadership". The word suggests the idea that the church leadership transitioned from foreign missionaries to local religious leaders.

overlooked. Notably, the initial sparks of resistance arose among the earliest men and religious leaders educated by the Moravian Church (Hawley, 1996).

From ACARIC to YATAMA: Resistance, Survival, and the Struggle for *Yapti Tasba*

In the context of the marginalization and exclusion of the Moskitia discussed in the previous section, Miskitu people were subjected to enduring pressures from the Nicaraguan state over seven decades, starting with the annexation of Moskitia into Nicaragua in 1894. Additionally, the national government's education policies further contributed to these pressures. Consequently, in the 1950s, Miskitu people started to mobilize to assert identity-based claims, seeking to claim their rights as indigenous peoples. Over nearly 30 years, five resistance movements emerged, collectively striving to defend *Yapti Tasba* and various other rights encapsulated in the notion of *Blasi wina wan rait ka nani ba* (Our historical rights). These organizations can be classified into three categories based on their chronological sequence, accomplishments, and sociopolitical influence: pioneer, relevant, and circumstantial. Throughout the '50s, '60s, and '70s, they battled assimilation initiatives, dictatorships, and authoritarian regimes. In more recent times, since the 1980s, they have confronted the challenges posed by neoliberal policies.

Some scholars have questioned why indigenous movements emerged in Latin America at a particular time (Geertz & Stack, as cited in Yashar, 2004). In the case of Nicaragua, the rise of indigenous mobilizations can be traced back to the Nicaraguan State's racially biased and marginalizing policies against the Moskitia population by the middle of the 20th century. This explains why the Miskitu people chose not to oppose British or North American multinational corporations but instead resisted the Nicaraguan State. Unlike the Nicaraguan State, neither British nor American transnational companies imposed forced cultural assimilation or other

forms of mistreatment on the Miskitu population. Though a form of assimilation, the Christianization of the Miskitu by the Moravian Church was perceived differently due to the Church's more "benevolent" methods, which illuminates the Miskitu people’s resistance towards the Nicaraguan State rather than foreign colonial powers.

Pioneering Organizations ACARIC and APROMIS from 1960-1970

This group of pioneering organizations comprises the Asociación de Clubes Agrícolas del Rio Coco (Association of Farmers' Cooperatives of Rio Coco, ACARIC) and the Alianza para el Progreso Miskitu (Alliance for the Progress of the Miskitu, APROMIS). These organizations originated separately in the Wangky area during distinct periods in the 1950s and 1960s. ACARIC, being the pioneering organization, exhibited greater dynamism and made a more significant impact. To this day, people emphasize the role of the Moravian and Catholic Churches in the emergence and prominence of these pioneering organizations of resistance and political mobilization.

As discussed in the previous section, the Wangky communities were characterized by a notable dichotomy between extreme poverty and abundant agricultural production and natural resources during that period. On the one hand, the area boasted plentiful reserves of *tunu*[21], chewing gum, and other forest species, subject to unsustainable exploitation by transnational corporations since 1945. On the other hand, the communities cultivated substantial quantities of staple crops like rice, beans, musaceae, and tubers, along with non-traditional products such as cocoa and avocado. However, the absence of a market hindered their ability to sell these products, consequently depriving the communities of any financial gains beyond personal

[21] https://issuu.com/thecriticalpulse/docs/tcp_issue_6/s/17895041

consumption within their households. Reflecting on his memories of these days, Armando Rojas recalls:

> At the end of the 60s, the communities' economic conditions were dramatic, especially in the Wangky area. There was an evident contrast between the agricultural potential and the lack of a market for indigenous communities. In this context, ACARIC emerges as a pioneering community organization experience as a cooperative for agricultural production and marketing.

Per Rojas's words, ACARIC did not emerge as an organization for political mobilization. Rather, it aimed to be a community organization focused on agricultural production and market strategies to help Miskitu communities in the Wangky navigate the depressing economic landscape more effectively by providing means to generate income and sustain their livelihoods. Before the introduction of money through waged labor in transnational companies, the communities' economic relations were based on the *Klauna Laka* practices. This system operated through reciprocal networks, wherein individuals fulfilled their needs collectively by leveraging the resources acquired from the land without any monetary compensation. However, following the arrival of transnational companies and the Moravian Church, people started to require money in exchange for services and access to products not part of *Klauna Laka's* reciprocity networks, such as flour, coffee, sugar, oil, and candles. These products had been recently introduced to the communities through the Moravian Church and transnational companies.

During this period, the presence of Gregorio Smutko, a German Capuchin priest, in the region held significant relevance. Moved by the dire conditions faced by the communities, Smutko took the initiative to convene meetings with leaders from the Moravian Church. These collaborative meetings ultimately led to the inception of a market project designed for the

communities, eventually evolving into the establishment of ACARIC (Villa, 1992, p. 60). Consequently, Father Gregorio Smutko, alongside the leaders of the Moravian Church, assumed a distinctive and instrumental role in the foundation of ACARIC. Among the Moravians, Rafael Dixon is remembered as a prominent leader who actively championed the cause of ACARIC within the Wangky area.

ACARIC had a set of objectives that aimed to enhance the economic conditions of the communities along the Wangky River while also challenging the dominance of Chinese commerce in the region. In addition, ACARIC also aimed to establish a reliable and efficient river transportation system for the Wangky region seeking to further bolster the economy and overall well-being of the Wangky communities by improving their connectivity and facilitating trade along the river. Inspired by the principles of *Klauna Laka*, ACARIC devised strategies that involved the exchange of agricultural goods for non-traditional consumer products, including sugar, flour, salt, oil, butter, coffee, and soap. As ACARIC progressed, it began to raise awareness of the communities' political demands. This encompassed shedding light on the systematic oppression imposed by the Nicaraguan State, which manifested through the encroachment upon communal lands and the suppression of the communities' cultural, social, economic, and political rights.

ACARIC had a broader vision that extended beyond local concerns. One of its objectives was to amplify the voices of the Miskitu people and facilitate communication with other indigenous communities engaged in resistance movements across the continent. This objective aligned with a larger wave of indigenous mobilizations sweeping across Latin America during that period. For instance, indigenous communities in Ecuador organized themselves to confront transnational oil companies exploiting their territories (Cepek, 2018). Similarly, in Colombia, the

Nasa people of the Cauca region revitalized ancient organizational structures and formed the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRIC) or Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca, symbolizing their collective identity and aspirations.

People today remember that ACARIC's impact and accomplishments were noteworthy, as it achieved its objectives relatively quickly. By the mid-1970s, ACARIC experienced significant success in its commercial activities. Additionally, ACARIC successfully implemented motorized water transport units that efficiently served the transportation needs of the communities along the Wangky River. These units facilitated the movement of goods and people, improving connectivity and accessibility within the region. These water transport units played a crucial role in enhancing trade and socioeconomic activities, benefiting the communities through economic growth and improved mobility.

In alignment with its second objective, ACARIC played a pivotal role in amplifying the voices of the Miskitu people and advocating for their increased participation in political spheres of power. As a result of these efforts, Amalia Dixon, a young Miskitu woman, was elected as the mayor of Waspam. According to Rufino Lucas, “Before ACARIC, there was no possibility of a Miskitu individual occupying the Mayor's Office. Miskitu people did not even dream of holding the mayor's seat since it was reserved for the mestizo elites.” This historic achievement marked the first time a Miskitu woman had assumed such a prominent political position. Following Amalia Dixon's term, Enrique Morley, also a Miskitu individual, succeeded her, further exemplifying the growing political influence and representation of the Miskitu community in spaces of political power.

Parallel to its political accomplishments, ACARIC implemented an effective information and communication policy. This policy manifested through the dissemination of a bilingual,

Miskitu-Spanish monthly newspaper, *Wangki Karma* (The Voice of Wangki). The newspaper was under the editorial direction of Enrique Morley, who later succeeded Amalia Dixon as the mayor. With its editorial headquarters in Bilwaskarma, Wangki Karma reached communities throughout the Moskitia, addressing various social, political, and economic aspects of Wangky and the wider Moskitia region. Having a newspaper in the Miskitu language, addressing issues pertinent to the communities positively impacted people's collective identity and sense of community by providing a means for community members to stay informed about local issues and participate in discussions on matters that affected their lives, fostering a greater understanding of their rights, aspirations, and challenges.

ACARIC's wide-ranging activities and accomplishments played a crucial role in achieving its ultimate objective of raising awareness about the discriminatory policies enacted by the Nicaraguan State upon the indigenous population of Moskitia. Through its multifaceted endeavors, ACARIC effectively brought attention to the injustices endured by the indigenous communities, ensuring that their voices and concerns were recognized and acknowledged. The organization's advocacy efforts, political achievements, development of transportation infrastructure, and establishment of the bilingual newspaper *Wangki Karma* all contributed to this broader objective of shedding light on the systemic challenges faced by the Miskitu people, ultimately working towards the goal of social justice and equitable treatment for the Miskitu people within the broader context of Nicaraguan society.

Despite its significant growth, ACARIC started to decline towards the end of the 1970s. In the commercial sphere, ACARIC faced unfair competition from Chinese and Mestizo traders in Waspam. Mestizo politicians and Chinese merchants in Waspam perceived the barter relationships facilitated by ACARIC as an opportunity for personal profit. They established

intermediaries between themselves and the Miskitu communities, effectively controlling the trade dynamics. This resulted in a manipulative practice where the Chinese-Mestizo urban trade in Waspam overvalued the prices of products sold to the communities while undervaluing the costs of the communities' products.

While most people attribute ACARIC's decline to commercial issues, Leonel Panting introduces an additional factor related to cultural dynamics. According to Panting, the cooperative model employed by ACARIC did not align with the economic model of Miskitu people dictated by the *Klauna Laka*: "People worked together to grow their products. In this sense, the cooperative model worked well because it was aligned with the *Klauna Laka* working model in which people worked together, but when it came to distribution, it did not work. The cooperative should have followed the *Klauna Laka* distribution model." Leonel's viewpoint suggests that ACARIC faced inherent challenges from its inception because the cooperative model, while successful in terms of production, did not align with the Miskitu people's traditional distribution model dictated by the *Klauna Laka* reciprocity networks. Leonel's preference for the *Klauna Laka* approach highlights the importance of a comprehensive understanding of cultural nuances and economic traditions when designing and implementing economic activities within indigenous communities.

During the mid-1970s, following the dissolution of ACARIC, its leaders decided to establish a new organization with a broader scope of political action, giving rise to Alianza para el Progreso Miskitu (The Alliance for the Progress of the Miskitu APROMIS). Although APROMIS had a relatively short existence and had no significant impact, its formation helped acknowledge that the Sumu-Mayangna people faced similar challenges. This way, Miskitu leaders promoted a new multiethnic organization encompassing both Miskitu and Sumu

communities. This initiative led to the establishment of Alianza para el Progreso Miskitu and Sumu (The Alliance for the Progress of Miskitu and Sumu[22] ALPROMISU). Although the term "alliance" was likely inspired by the Alliance for Progress initiative, [23] which was advocated by the U.S. administration under President John F. Kennedy (Burns & Siracusa, 2015, pp. 33-34), adopting the term "alliance" in the name of ALPROMISU reflects the aspiration of bringing different indigenous communities together to address common challenges and pursue shared goals. Although the APROMIS initiative had limited impact, it served as a historical reference for the formation of ALPROMISU, emphasizing the collective effort and cooperation necessary for advancing the progress and well-being of Miskitu and Sumu communities.

Today, ACARIC's endeavors are widely acknowledged for their pioneering approach to utilizing market management strategies to address social and political demands. Through its innovative practices, ACARIC established itself as an exemplary organizational model and became recognized as a pro-indigenous organization within the collective consciousness of Miskitu. In addition, by successfully integrating market-oriented approaches with their social and political objectives, ACARIC demonstrated the potential for economic activities to be harnessed to advance indigenous rights and interests. This unique approach not only contributed to the economic development of the Wangky communities but also catalyzed the strengthening of collective consciousness, identity, and unity. Furthermore, ACARIC served as a platform for collaboration and collective action paving the way for broader advocacy organizations supported by religious ecumenism from local churches and traditional community leaders. Today,

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[22] Sumu is now an obsolete alternative name for the Mayangna Indigenous Peoples.

[23] The Alliance for Progress was as a decade-long initiative introduced by President John F. Kennedy to promote economic collaboration between North and South America. Its primary goal was to address the perceived communist influence emanating from Cuba. The program was officially ratified during an inter-American conference held in Uruguay in August 1961.

ACARIC is remembered as a transformative force, symbolizing the shift from a monoethnic organization focused on Miskitu communities of the Wangky area to a later multiethnic resistance movement. Its impact was instrumental in igniting the flame of organized resistance and fueling the emergence of ALPROMISU (Alliance for the Progress of the Miskitu and Sumu), a broader organization that succeeded ACARIC.

Prominent Organizations: ALPROMISU, MISURASATA, AND YATAMA from 1970-1990

ALPROMISU was the first attempt to create a multiethnic resistance organization. Two great community assemblies preceded its foundation. The first was in Bilwaskarma, Wangky Maya, and the second in the community of Sin Sin in the plains of Bilwi. Both assemblies had massive and enthusiastic participation of delegates from all the communities of Moskitia, as remembered by Amalia Dixon:

> The first assembly was held in Sisin. We could feel our indigenous force united. We spent several days in meetings, talking about different topics, and we just stopped to eat. All the communities sent their representative, two or three people. They came in with their sack of beans and rice. Some communities offered a cow, others provided pigs, and others provided supplies such as firewood and additional food items such as bananas, cassava, and plantains. We had everything available in Sisin. All the communities came together to have these great meetings where all the Miskitu communities participated, both from the Wangky River and the ones in the coastal line.

Through Dixon's words, we see the demonstration of the unity of the indigenous communities sparked by ACARIC, this time including community representation and

participation from the *Wangky River* and the coastal areas. Additionally, the shared responsibility and mutual aid of all the communities manifested in how they collectively contributed to the success of the assembly by providing food and other supplies, reinforcing the collective practices of mutual collaboration practiced in the Miskitu communities through the *Klauna Laka.*

Such a display of unity and strength caught the national press's attention and unsettled the Somoza dictatorship's military forces, who responded with intimidation, persecution, repression, and separatism accusations. Dixon recalls, “Armed soldiers, helicopter gunships, and government representatives arrived at the community during the assembly. Despite this, the assembly served as a space for expressing communities' concerns and the need for a more cohesive resistance movement.” The presence of Somoza’s military forces was a stark and active demonstration of force designed to suffocate Indigenous communities' growing unity and strength against decades of colonial abuses.

One characteristic of prominent organizations is that they typically involve extensive community mobilization, communicate decisions directly with community assemblies, and put significant social and political demands on the State. In this regard, ALPROMISU successfully institutionalized the tradition of communal assemblies by conducting five such events over ten years. Today, ALPROMISU remains recognized as a genuine community organization with widespread prestige.

Furthermore, ALPROMISU sought a multiethnic community resistance movement in the Nicaraguan Moskitia. ALPROMISU's objectives evolved to emphasize land rights, political participation, and social and economic services through better education, health, and transportation and the cessation of the Fundamental Education Project. As Amalia Dixon observes, "Communities had access to only elementary education up to 4th grade, and state

health services were scarce. People relied mainly on traditional knowledge and health services provided by the Moravian Church to meet their health needs." Regarding political participation, ALPROMISU campaigned to expand the inclusion of Miskitu and Sumu-Mayangna people in local and national political spaces and respect for indigenous traditional knowledge, values, and organization. They also demanded the conditions to build a stronger community organization structure and connection with global indigenous movements without the fear of repression, intimidation, and false accusations.

In this sense, ALPROMISU continued and expanded the demands initially presented by ACARIC. Nonetheless, the focus of Indigenous resistance organizations evolved from ACARIC to ALPROMISU to encompass land rights. However, at this point, ALPROMISU's demands for lands only responded to the intrusion of INFONAC and logging companies, including NIPCO's small local subsidiaries managed by local individuals. Despite its stated role in monitoring, controlling, and protecting forests, INFONAC enabled medium and small businesses to subsidize NIPCO, severely restricting community access to the land. Avelino Cox recalls: "Community people could not cut down a tree to build their houses or to make their canoes; if they did, they were criminalized and imprisoned" In this context, ALPROMISU voiced its protest against such exploitative control over indigenous communal lands.

Regarding outcomes, ALPROMISU emerged as a prominent indigenous resistance movement, fostering multi-ethnic-regional unity and awareness as part of a collective resistance strategy. It achieved relative success by mobilizing Miskitus and Sumu-Mayangnas against discrimination, marginalization, oppression, and severe poverty. ALPROMISU also strengthened Moskitian regional identity, facilitating an understanding of the economic, political, social, and cultural disparities between the Nicaraguan ruling elites and the indigenous communities.

Amalia Dixon also recalls that ALPROMISU managed to break down the dominance of political parties and bring communities together around their organization with a great sense of belonging and ethnic consciousness. In so doing, ALPROMISU successfully disrupted the hegemony of political parties as the sole form of political organization imposed by the Nicaragua State and effectively rallied communities around their organization, fostering a profound sense of belonging and ethnic consciousness. Moreover, ALPROMISU demonstrated substantial convening power and capacity for social mobilization, so much so that it was perceived by both regional and national mestizo political elites as a threat to the unity of the State. Amalia Dixon recalls: “the State feared this organization would be strengthened and more so for Miskitu unity and responded in various forms. First, violent repression, later, with negotiation for some concessions, and finally, persuasion so that the organization became a cooperative hoping to limit its scope of political action.”

Due to ALPROMISU's social and cultural advocacy, Somoza's government granted scholarships for Miskitu and Sumu-Mayangna individuals to access higher education, a privilege previously reserved for mestizo people. Furthermore, ALPROMISU secured teaching positions for the first Miskitu and Sumu-Mayangna individuals, marking significant progress in their campaign. Regarding political demands, for the first time, Adolfo Bushey, a Miskitu person, became a congressman in the national Congress. Additionally, Miskitu people began considering autonomy as part of their political participation aspirations. In this sense, the limited socio-economic demands of the predecessor organizations (ACARIC and APROMIS) paved the way for a stronger stance on political and socio-economic demands in 1973. This was the year when the notion of autonomy was initially broached at a meeting in Wasla.

ALPROMISU's Understanding of the Origin of the Territorial Conflict

The leadership of ALPROMISU gradually shifted their focus from merely securing positions of power within state institutions and focusing their land rights advocacy agenda on resisting the intrusion of INFONAC and logging companies to recognizing that their struggle for *Yapti Tasba* and Autonomy entailed asserting rights over the section of the Moskitia territory that was declared an Indigenous Reserve following Moskitia's annexation to Nicaragua in 1984. Post-annexation, the State segmented these ancestral lands into communal and national segments. In the early 1970s, when INFONAC entered the scene, it declared forest reserves on sections of indigenous reserves classified as national lands. However, indigenous communities were restricted from accessing the resources even within the remaining indigenous lands. In such a way, "ALPROMISU understood that the claim for the land implied claiming the Indigenous Reserve as their ancestral land as their *Yapti Tasba* and establishing a project of autonomy on those lands."

ALPROMISU's most notable accomplishment was redirecting their efforts from securing political power to asserting rights over ancestral lands, a claim grounded in their identity and pre-existence in those lands. Ensuring access to *Yapti Tasba* was expected to meet social, political, and economic needs. However, this assertion of rights based on pre-existence, although valid from their perspective, lacked legal recognition from a Western viewpoint and was not endorsed by the Nicaraguan State.

The official narrative concerning Moskitia's history has been subject to manipulation, distortion, truncation, and suppression, leading to a confused and fragmented understanding of the land issues within the collective memory. As Armando Rojas expressed, "people were asked: What does it mean to defend the land? They could not answer other than to say: these lands are

ours. When they say: ‘I am fighting for the land,’ it is for the whole territory. It is not for a piece of land. It is for the ancestral territory, *Yapti Tasba*, that they feel they are entitled to because it is their own based on “*blasi pyua wina wan raitka nani ba*” (our historical rights). Hale (1994) points out that at the triumph of the Sandinista revolution in 1979 and the beginning of the MISURASATA movement, the discourse of struggle for defending the land was a big incognita.

MISURASATA

In November 1979, ALPROMISU transitioned into Miskitu, Sumu, Rama, Sandinista Asla Takanka (Organization of Miskitu-Sumu-Rama and Sandinistas, MISURASATA) The shift was prompted by political upheavals in Nicaragua in the context of the Somoza dictatorship's fall and the Sandinista Revolution's triumph. From 1978, the Somoza regime faced an escalating crisis due to the rising influence of Sandinista guerrillas. Amidst this turmoil, ALPROMISU leadership paused their activities, falling into a dormant state until the Sandinista’s victory in July 1979. The victory of the Sandinista Revolution and the consequent collapse of Somoza's regime dramatically altered Nicaragua's social and political landscape, posing challenges for ALPROMISU to resume its operations. Three Miskitu University graduates—Stedman Fagoth Muller, Hazel Law Blanco, and Brooklyn Rivera—seized this opportunity and coordinated with the Sandinista leadership to convene the VI General Assembly of ALPROMISU in November 1979, hoping to navigate through these turbulent times the best way possible.

Armando Rojas recalls that the establishment of MISURASATA coincided with a visit by Daniel Ortega Saavedra, leader of the newly formed National Reconstruction Board and Boby Holmes, a Miskitu man and Sandinista guerrilla fighter. However, the organization's leadership was absent. At the time, Armando Rojas, Adolfo Bushey, Herta Monsanto, Mildred Levy, and Jose Chow were leading ALPROMISU. Ortega proposed that ALPROMISU could be disbanded,

as its focus on education, health, and social welfare dovetailed with the revolution's objectives (Smith, Boyer, & Diskin, 1988). He assured the revolution would address these needs (Cleary, 2000), leading to an alliance between the Miskitu and the Sandinistas. The assembly ended with the dissolution of ALPROMISU to pave the way for MISURASATA. University graduates Hazel Law, Stedman Fagoth, and Brooklyn Rivera, esteemed for their education, assumed leadership of this new entity, symbolizing competence, aptitude, and integrity. At the time, being a university graduate was a particularly relevant trait associated with capability, suitability, and honesty. MISURASATA mirrored trends in other Latin American indigenous movements aligning with leftist social groups. Despite this, there remained a tension between claims based on class and those based on identity. However, as Armando Rojas recalls: "the Sandinistas ignored that the organization's struggle aspired to processes of broader emancipation." (My translation).

The evolution from ALPROMISU to MISURASATA wasn't due to the former's decline, as had been the case with preceding organizations. Instead, it was triggered by external circumstances. Some views suggest that the transition was motivated by ALPROMISU's need for more solid plans and practical execution capabilities. After MISURASATA was established and solidified, the land claim efforts initiated by ALPROMISU continued and strengthened. (Sollis, P, 1989). However, the ambiguity surrounding the genesis of the land conflict remained unresolved.

In 1984, the Sandinistas convened Mexican and local anthropologists to investigate the dichotomy of National Land versus Communal Lands (Díaz Polanco & López y Rivas, 1986).

Their findings traced the origin of the conflict to the Harrison Altamirano treaty and the declaration of Moskitia as an indigenous reserve. As a result, the Miskitu people sought to fully

reclaim this Indigenous reserve, their ancestral lands, the *Yapti Tasba*. From the Miskitu's perspective, these lands were theirs under "*Blasi wina wan raitka nani ba*" or "our historical rights." However, given the intricate legacy of nation-state expansion, the Miskitu understood that invoking "*Blasi wina wan raitka nani ba*" was insufficient for land ownership claims. Their new relationship with the nation-state required legal safeguards over these lands, conforming to its legal and institutional parameters, such as documented land titles and maps. The objective became securing legal guarantees for the *Yapti Tasba* and establishing an autonomous governance system on these lands to foster political, economic, social, and cultural rights for community wellbeing. Once the confusion was cleared, MISURASATA called for creating a *Yapti Tasba* map and delineation, titling, and reclamation of these lands.

In addition, as part of the literacy program initiated by the Sandinista revolution, MISURASATA insisted on native-language literacy campaigns in Moskitia communities, with school curriculums adopting a bilingual teaching approach. This demand was an act of resistance against, and a means to compensate for, the impact of the forced Spanish assimilation project. Additionally, MISURASATA advocated for a culturally adapted security body for Moskitia rather than being subjected to the Nicaraguan security forces, thus addressing the specific needs and interests of the region.

MISURASATA successfully produced the map of *Yapti Tasba*, known as the Polanco Map, named after the cartographer Mauricio Polanco, who supervised its creation. The map was used by MISURASATA to define the territory over which they claimed autonomy. However, the central government did not favorably receive this autonomy request, which perceived any autonomy project as threatening national integrity and unity. As expressed by Marcos Hoppington, "from the nation-state perspective, a concession of autonomy also meant losing part

of the national territory." The conflict between MISURASATA and the Sandinista government resulted in a decade-long civil war triggered by the imprisonment of Indigenous leaders accused of undermining the revolution. This war displaced numerous Miskitu communities, forcing them to seek refuge in Honduras (Dennis, 1993). The Miskitu people's struggle gained global recognition during the war, leading to a demand for the Autonomy Law (Law 28) to resolve the conflict.

MISURASATA's decline can be attributed to several key factors. One of the most influential factors was the displacement of its leadership and social support base, internal conflicts, lack of clear objectives and effective strategies amid war, and mutual distrust between the organization and the Sandinistas. Initially, MISURASATA enjoyed significant trust and hope from communities who believed in the capabilities and virtues of its three young university graduates. However, as the war progressed, the leadership distanced themselves from the movement's social base and prioritized their interests, including involvement with national political parties. This distancing resulted in internal conflicts, divisions, and dishonesty within the leadership, exacerbating the already complex situation of war and exile. Consequently, MISURASATA fragmented, with a portion of the organization relocating to Honduras and forming smaller factions such as Misura, Kisan, Faukan, and Astros. The remaining faction sought refuge in Costa Rica, embraced the Sandinistas' revolution, and advocated for indigenous rights within that framework (Harff & Gurr, 2004).

To address the issue of fragmentation within MISURASATA, a community assembly was held in Rus Rus, Honduras. The outcome of this assembly led to the formation of Yatama (*Yapti Tasba Maraka nani Asla Takanka*-Organization of the Nations of Mother Earth). Despite emerging in exile, YATAMA initially gained significant prestige and the population's trust due

to its ability to preserve the sense of ethnic belonging and collective identity established by ACARIC and ALPROMISU. YATAMA enjoyed prominence for nearly three decades, making it the longest-surviving organization. However, over time, it has lost some of the prestige and confidence it once held, as certain population segments have expressed dissatisfaction with its performance.

Guided by YATAMA's leadership and amidst the challenges of war and exile in Honduras, the Miskitu leadership negotiated with the government a ceasefire in exchange for the Autonomy Law, translated into the Miskitu language as *Klauna Laka,* initiated by ALPROMISU and MISURASATA (Hale, 1994). The passage of Law 28 in 1987 represented a significant milestone, signaling a shift from assimilation to a multicultural approach in Nicaragua.

Over time, YATAMA transformed from its original role as an indigenous community organization to become a political party. As a political party, it has achieved some successes in regional elections, securing seats in regional political positions and the Nicaraguan Congress. Furthermore, in 2002, YATAMA successfully filed a lawsuit against the Nicaraguan State before the Interamerican Court of Human Rights. However, the shift to a political party has led YATAMA to form alliances with various governments and their leadership to pursue personal political ambitions. These factors have caused YATAMA to lose its community-focused identity and become absorbed into the institutional and political structures of the State, resulting in a lack of a coherent political agenda aligned with the community’s needs. Despite these changes, YATAMA remains the most prominent organization representing the Miskito communities in the Nicaraguan Moskitia. It has also strengthened connections with the Honduran Moskitia through the widely popular *Sihkru Tara festival*, attracting people from diverse cultural groups on both sides of the Wangky River. (Matamoros, 2009).

Transitory Organizations: MISURA, Faucan, Kisan (for Peace and for War) MISATAN, Astros, and Asla

Except for MISATAN, established in Nicaragua, the other transitional organizations emerged in Honduras during the 1980s amidst a war-torn environment. During this time, MISURASATA experienced internal struggles and divisions within its leadership, reflecting the fragmented state of Miskitu society. Families were torn apart and scattered between Nicaragua and refugee camps in Honduras. These organizations had short-lived existences, characterized by a focus on military actions and lacking substantial demands. Eventually, they faded away, paving the way for the emergence of YATAMA as the dominant organization.

MISATAN, despite its relatively brief existence, possessed a well-defined structure and action plan. It was established through the joint efforts of Catholic, Moravian, and Evangelical religious leaders who supported the displaced Miskito populations in settlements known as *Tasba Pri* (Free Land) in Sahsa, Sumu Bila, Columbus, and Wasminona. Miskitu leaders from Nicaragua also played a role in founding MISATAN, including Bobby Holmes, Hazel Law, Fornes Rabonias, Minerva Wilson, Rufino Lucas, Armando Rojas, Simeón Rocha, Jorge Dixon, Oscar Hodgson, Elena Hodgson, and Mary Bushey. Some argue that MISATAN's strength stemmed from the approval of the Sandinista government. Amid the war, the Sandinistas viewed MISATAN as a potential bridge for peace talks to end the conflict, dismantling the refugee camps in Honduras and facilitating the return of displaced individuals to their respective communities.

Regardless of the reasons behind MISATAN's strength, its objectives and achievements are noteworthy. The organization's main goal was to serve as the voice of the Miskitu people during the ongoing war and facilitate peace dialogues between the Miskitu leadership and the Sandinistas. MISATAN also aimed to bridge communication between families separated in the

Tasba Pri settlements in Nicaragua and refugee camps in Honduras, assist in repatriation and reunification efforts, and oversee the relocation of *Tasba Pri* settlements back to their original communities along the banks of the Wanki River. Furthermore, MISATAN sought to uphold the territorial and bilingual education demands of MISURASATA. The organization successfully established contact between the government and rebel Miskitu groups to initiate peace negotiations. It also played a crucial role in coordinating the process of relocating displaced communities from *Tasba Pri* back to their respective communities along the *Wanki River* and actively supported the repatriation efforts of Miskitu refugees in Honduras.

Indigenous Resistance and the Trap of Multiculturalism

The emergence of Indigenous political movements in the Moskitia, as specified earlier, have had a significant impact, particularly on the laws enacted in Nicaragua concerning indigenous peoples. A milestone in this respect was the sanctioning of Law 28 in 1987, concurrent with the modification of the Nicaraguan Constitution to identify Nicaragua as a multiethnic society. The updated 1987 Constitution, which was later amended in 1995, identifies the heterogeneous ethnic composition of Nicaragua in Article 8, asserting the existence of Indigenous communities and their rights to cultural, linguistic, and identity recognition as per Articles 5 and 11. Furthermore, it validates the rights of these communities to an intercultural education in their native language (Article 121) and recognizes their collective land ownership (Article 89). This represented a shift from assimilation to multiculturalism in Nicaragua as it formally acknowledged the presence of Indigenous populations for the first time. Even though Law 28, responsible for granting autonomy, and its related Constitutional Amendments were enacted in 1987, the regulations demarcating the autonomy statute were not ratified by the Parliament until late 2003. Furthermore, in the same year, the Communal Property Regime Law

No. 445 was instituted to address Indigenous apprehensions pertaining to land demarcation and natural resources.

Following the Sandinistas' departure from power in 1990 and subsequent years of right-wing governance, the Moskitia region experienced extensive logging and mining activities. The legal status of Indigenous lands in Nicaragua and Latin America underwent a significant shift based on one of the logging concessions issued during this period. The Mayangna community of Awas Tingni filed a lawsuit against the government concerning a logging concession granted within their traditional lands. After years of legal proceedings, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled in favor of Awas Tingny in 2001. In a binding decision, the Court ordered Nicaragua to demarcate and title these lands. Consequently in 2003, Law 28 was complemented and reinforced by Law 445. The primary objective of Law 445 is to regulate the communal property regime of Indigenous lands and ensure the full recognition of their communal property rights. Prior to that, in 2002, the Nicaraguan Constitution was modified again to include communal property, granting it equal status to other recognized forms of property, such as private and public property. Communal property is directly associated with the collective ownership of Indigenous territories, as opposed to the individual appropriation of land in other parts of the country. Nicaragua has also ratified the ILO Convention 169, the Escazu Agreement, and adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

However, enacting Laws 28 and 445 within the framework of multiculturalism has presented challenges regarding autonomy and the legal security of lands. Law 445 established five stages of land demarcation, with the Nicaraguan State completing the first four stages and issuing land titles to twenty-three Indigenous territories. Unfortunately, these titles remain unfulfilled promises due to ongoing land invasions and violence perpetrated by settlers against

the communities. Furthermore, the government has failed to carry out the fifth stage, the *saneamiento* process, which involves removing settlers illegally occupying Indigenous territories. Additionally, even after implementing Law 445, these communities continue to face interventions from the central government and the adverse impacts of extractive industries such as forestry and mining, leading to violence, displacement, and severe health and environmental hazards. Illegal settlers clear-cut rainforests to establish cattle ranches and logging operations, while a Chinese corporation based in Wasla exploits pine resins in the pine forest along the Wangky River (The Oakland Institute, 2020) In this context, Law 28 and Law 445, conceived and approved within the parameters of the Nicaraguan State, disregarded the Miskitu people's pristine concept of Autonomy (*Klauna Laka*) and confined it to the realm of the Nicaraguan state institutions and the legal system.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the resistance movements of the Miskitu people originated from the context of colonial violence, which hindered the articulation of their demands to the Nicaraguan State. It took years and a gradual organizational and resistance process to overcome this confusion and develop a well-defined request for territorial autonomy. These resistance movements have led to some legal victories for indigenous peoples, primarily through the approval of laws. However, multicultural policies have largely shaped these laws and have overlooked the indigenous knowledge framework that informs the Miskitu people's rights and relationship with *Yapti Tasba*.

Over time, the demands and ethnic composition of the organizations evolved positively. ACARIC initially focused on the Miskitu communities along the Wangky River to address commercial needs but eventually recognized the need to incorporate other marginalized and

subjugated indigenous groups in Moskitia. While ALPROMISU, MISURASATA, and YATAMA embraced a multiethnic perspective, the practical implementation fell short. In practice, these organizations remained predominantly Miskitu, with limited inclusion of other ethnic groups. The leadership of MISURASATA and YATAMA prioritized individual ambitions and privileges over collective political aspirations. Nevertheless, the content of political demands progressively evolved with each organization. The focus shifted from seeking commercial alternatives with ACARIC in the 1960s to a well-articulated demand for autonomy and territorial demarcation by the late 1980s. This well-defined demand for land and autonomy facilitated peace negotiations with the Sandinistas, making autonomy a precondition for ending the war in 1987.

To reach this point, the organizations underwent a long learning process, particularly in understanding the root causes of the territorial conflict. ACARIC initially did not delve into land rights issues, but ALPROMISU started addressing the recovery of lands declared as forest reserves by INFONAC and confronting logging companies. Towards the end of ALPROMISU's existence, the demand to reclaim ancestral lands, *Yapti Tasba,* and the call for autonomy emerged. MISURASATA further understood *Yapti Tasba* as the ancestral territory taken when Moskitia was incorporated into the Nicaraguan State. Moreover, MISURASATA's accomplishments included elaborating the *Yapti Tasba* map and establishing a link between *Yapti Tasba* and the emerging demand for autonomy inherited from ALPROMISU. With these demands clarified and strengthened, YATAMA was able to negotiate a peace agreement with the Sandinistas, leading to the end of the war after the approval of the Autonomy Law in 1987. As discussed in the previous chapter, the passing of Law 28 signified a transition from assimilation to multiculturalism in Nicaragua.

Chapter IV. Land is Life: Towards the Reconstruction of Miskitu People's Relation with *Yapti Tasba*

"We cannot share our land with the colonos. They don't see land the way we do." This is what a Miskitu elder told me two years ago when I asked him how he perceived the presence of colonos from other parts of Nicaragua in his ancestral territories. In 2003, the Nicaraguan legislature approved Law 445, which established five stages of land demarcation with significant repercussions on land governance for the Miskitu Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples on the Caribbean Coast (historically known as the Moskitia). *Saneamiento* is the last step of this demarcation process defined by Law 445. Saneamiento could be translated as "title clearance" and requires removing settlers living in indigenous territories with no lease agreement with the community. Subsequently, the saneamiento implied the removal of settlers illegally occupying land in Indigenous territories. Although the Nicaraguan State carried out the first four stages of the demarcation process and provided land titles to twenty-three Indigenous territories, it failed to carry out the fifth stage.

Accordingly, Indigenous people have continued raising their voices and demanding respect for their lands and natural environment. Unable to solve the conflicts caused by the presence of settlers in Indigenous territories, the Nicaraguan State is now trying to put forward a cohabitation project which, if approved, will allow settlers to occupy lands in Miskitu territories legally. Miskitu people have opposed this idea, arguing that settlers do not see and relate to land like Indigenous people do. In contrast, settlers argue that those lands are national and should be occupied by whoever needs them.

This chapter is devoted to unpacking the epistemological, cultural political and historical meaning of Land for Miskitu People to better and much more deeply grasp what has been the

core theme of this dissertation: the critical role of the notion of *Yapti Tasba* (Mother Earth). I discuss the communal and environmental meaning of it through the scrutinization of Miskitu Peoples' interactions with land. *Yapti Tasba* is placed at the center to demonstrate a network of reciprocity between humans and non-humans and the belief in supra-natural entities in Miskitu Peoples' cosmovision- as detailed in Chapter Two- and its implications for their social, cultural, and political survival.

I propose that Miskitu people's relations to land are twofold: first, the *Klauna Laka* as the main source through which the ancestral system of reciprocity for survival and autonomy is understood and practiced in Miskitu communities. According to Miskitu elders, the *Klauna Laka* is the core of Miskitu people's eco-social traditions. The *Klauna Laka* includes reciprocity and solidarity networks among community members relying entirely on the subsistence resources obtained from the land. I offer a Miskitu conceptualization of *Klauna Laka*, its various forms of expressions, its social effects, its connection to Good Living (Buen Vivir), and autonomy, and the interdependence of both *Klauna Laka* and Good Living to Miskitu people's access to land and natural resources. Second, I analyze the belief in supernatural entities documented in the previous chapter to demonstrate that the reciprocity networks practiced through the *Klauna Laka* transcend into the non-human and how it translates to environmental care. Additionally, I highlight the value of communal land ownership, discussed in the previous chapter, for the configuration of these reciprocity networks and why communal land ownership practiced in Miskitu communities differs from land views held by settlers.

Kyle Whyte notes that "Settler colonialism is a form of domination that violently disrupts human relationships with the environment. Settler colonialism is ecological domination, committing environmental injustice against Indigenous peoples and other groups... through

strategically undermining Indigenous collective continuance" (Whyte, 2018, p. 1). Based on Whyte's analysis I interpret "collective continuance" as the survival and adaptation of indigenous communities as self-determining collectives which is deeply connected to the relationships these communities have with their environment. In this vein, this chapter critically examines how colonialism puts Miskitu people's survival at risk by analyzing the social dimension of land dispossession. For Miskitu people, *Yapti Tasba* is at the heart of their social, spiritual, and cultural fabric and livelihoods. By violently disrupting this relationship, colonialism destroys the social and cultural relations that maintain survival and balance for the Miskitu.

I propose that the institutional policies of the Nicaraguan State towards Miskitu people endanger the *Klauna Laka* tradition and interrupt its connection to Good Living in two ways. First, State policies deny access to land—that is understood as the basis for reproducing sociocultural traditions—by failing to remove non-Indigenous people illegally occupying land in Indigenous territories. As a result, Indigenous people are left vulnerable to armed settlers who migrate to these territories in search of gold, wood, and land, not only occupying Indigenous communal ownership and dismantling the ecosystems of communities, but also exercising colonial violence against Native people. According to a recent report presented by CEJIL and CEJUDHCAN and The Oakland Institute, the arrival of settlers has dramatically increased since the approval of Law 445, making Indigenous people leave the only land they know and have inhabited, in search of refuge in other communities or urban areas. Those who stay cannot access their land for farming, hunting, or fishing—activities that they undertake to sustain themselves and their families.

Second, the interruption of Indigenous peoples' relations to land also interrupts the capacity for intergenerational transmission and reproduction of traditional knowledge. In turn,

Miskitu people's identity, which had grown around land-based practices for centuries, is placed at risk – younger generations have less understanding and knowledge on how to relate to land or refuse to do so. To examine this, my analysis draws upon Traditional Ecological Knowledge theories and debates that discuss epistemic violence against Indigenous and peasant knowledge while also speaking to incorporating this knowledge into Western parameters to better steward natural resources and adapt to climate change (Whyte, 2013). Such literature emphasizes how epistemic differences and knowledge communication contribute to environmental and territorial conflicts (Reo & Whyte, 2012).

This chapter also recommends a proposal for action, namely, restoring the *Klauna Laka* tradition to strengthen Indigenous peoples' resistance and resurgence. Eurocentric notions of progress and development and economically extractive approaches to the land, opposed to Native epistemologies (Escobar, 2016), continue to put the Miskitu and other Indigenous peoples at risk. The voices of Indigenous peoples have for centuries been excluded, and yet their worlds have survived and adapted using different conceptions of nation, language, spirituality, laws, institutions, and values. Practicing the *Klauna Laka* helps in reframing Indigenous peoples' knowledge in terms of the production of new political subjects and political agendas that are more aligned with the ways Indigenous peoples conceive their territories. I also highlight the importance of placing concepts of land and the environment at the center of Miskitu people's territorial struggles, going beyond the legal framework, specifically Law 28 and Law 44, often used to address Indigenous peoples' land rights in Nicaragua.

To engage with a Miskitu epistemological and methodological framework, this chapter is based on several assumptions that recognize the complex interplay between historical knowledge systems, diverse ecosystems, and the ongoing challenges faced by the Miskitu people due to

colonization. Firstly, it acknowledges that contemporary ecological knowledge in Miskitu communities is influenced by the interaction of precolonial systems of knowledge and land ownership. Secondly, it recognizes that these knowledge systems are rooted in diverse local ecosystems, resulting in variations depending on community experiences and geographical location. Moreover, it highlights that Miskitu knowledge systems are epistemologically distinct from Western ecological assumptions. These systems embrace a reciprocal relationship between humans, non-humans, and supernatural entities directly associated with the care of land and natural resources. This worldview emphasizes the interdependence and interconnection of all elements within the ecosystem. Furthermore, the chapter acknowledges that the ecological knowledge and systems of the Miskitu people are actively endangered due to ongoing process of colonization that disrupts their ways of living and interacting with their natural environment, posing a significant threat to their well-being and livelihoods.

While Miskitu mobilization for land rights has been the subject of other social scientific research in Nicaragua, scholarship addressing Miskitu People's eco-social relations and notions of land is limited, (Bryan, 2019), (Finley-Brook & Offen, 2009), (Hale, 1994), McDonald, 1988). Even fewer studies of this nature have been conducted among the Mayangna and the Rama indigenous peoples. (Perez & Longboat, 2019), Garth Medina & Ruiz Calderon, 2018). Thus, literature from other places have helped me to shed light on the Miskitu situation, considering that colonialism does not occur in a vacuum; it affects Indigenous peoples around the globe in very similar ways. In this sense, the *Klauna Laka* establishes a compelling link between grassroots politics of Miskitu communities struggling with land dispossession and ongoing debates in Critical Indigenous Studies and theories of the epistemic need for Indigenous knowledge-based frameworks.

Because of foreign and state exploitation of natural resources and the role of Miskitu labor in boom-and-bust cycles, the *Klauna Laka* ceased to be practiced and was held in the elders' memories. The number of elders I was able to interview was limited because of the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Different elders may have different interpretations, which might limit the generalizability of collective practice. My access to these elders and my ability to conduct interviews in our shared Native language was, however, a benefit of conducting research in an area where I have a lifetime of cultural experience.

A growing number of academics and activists describe colonial domination as violent and disruptive. (McGregor, 2014, 2009; Watts, 2013; Tuck & Wayne, 2012), Although this violence is multi-faceted and can take many forms, for the purpose of this study I will direct our attention to violence inflicted upon Indigenous peoples' ecological environments and the effects of this violence on their knowledge and cultural practices. I will also offer some insight into the power dynamics that permeate access to land in contexts of colonial power relations and the ways Indigenous peoples resist these forms of violence through their everyday practices.

Several authors suggest that ecological violence inflicted by colonialism interrupts the reciprocity relationships between humans and non-humans that are vital for the survival of both. This approach suggests that humans take from nature the resources needed for their subsistence and in return they provide nature with the care and protection it needs to ensure its continuation and availability for future generations. In her work with Josephine Mandamin and the Anishinaabe women's water movement, Deborah McGregor (2014) elaborates on this by analyzing the different lives that water sustains (e.g., plants, animals, people) and invites us to think about the life that sustains water (e.g., land, rain, trees). The system is based on responsibilities such that "water has a role and responsibility to fulfill, just as people do." In

conclusion, according to McGregor, "all beings have responsibilities to fulfill." (McGregor, 2014, p. 8). Although she specifically refers to water, her work opens the possibility of considering the broader networks of coordination and responsibilities that Indigenous peoples have with the land and its natural resources, which ensure their survival and continuity. This reciprocal relationship of benefits, however, is disrupted by colonialism.

Lee Maracle (2015) notes that "violence to land and violence among human beings are connected" (Maracle, 2015, p. 53). This violence occurs through the irrational exploitation of the natural environment that denies Indigenous people the basic conditions for their survival due to the pressure on their lands and territories. When land is violently commodified through colonialism, it becomes a source of profit rather than a source of life. Accordingly, the resources that Indigenous people depend on for their survival and shape their identity are also destroyed. Therefore, as Maracle notes, a direct link connects ecological violence to violence against human beings. Jules M. Bacon (2019) refers to "colonial ecological violence" as a process of "disrupting Indigenous eco-social relations." (Bacon, 2019, p. 1). From the many effects of colonial violence described in my study, this is probably the one that best speaks to the way the violence inflicted by the Nicaraguan State against Indigenous peoples led to the destruction of the *Klauna Laka* and the land-based spiritual practices tradition as the epitome of Miskitu people's eco-social relations. Discourses regarding Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) have been part of the debates around epistemic violence against Indigenous and peasant knowledge, while also speaking to ways of incorporating this knowledge into Western parameters (Whyte, 2013). This literature emphasizes how epistemic differences and knowledge communication contribute to environmental and territorial conflicts. Whyte proposes addressing TEK as a "body of

knowledge (…) embedded within multiple relationships among living beings, non-living things, and the environment" (Whyte, 2013, p. 4).

Tuck and Yang (2012) provide a profound analysis of the impact of settler colonialism on Indigenous peoples. They argue that the disruption of Indigenous relations to land is not merely a physical or economic act, but one that inflicts deep epistemic, ontological, and cosmological violence. This disruption is not just about the loss of physical territory; it is about the erasure of knowledge systems, ways of being, and spiritual connections that Indigenous peoples have with the land. The author's state:

> In order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there. Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place - indeed how we/they came to be a place. Our/their relationships to land comprise our/their epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies. For the settlers, Indigenous peoples are in the way and, in the destruction of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous communities, and over time and through law and policy, Indigenous peoples' claims to land under settler regimes, land is recast as property and as a resource (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6).

The previous quote suggests that Indigenous peoples' relations to land represent one of their main sources of knowledge. Consequently, the disruption of Indigenous people's relations to land is a deliberate strategy of settler colonialism, which seeks to erase Indigenous peoples and their claims to land to recast the land as a resource or property for settler use. This process involves the erasure of Indigenous creation stories and the imposition of settler colonization narratives, which fundamentally alter the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their lands. This perspective is critical in understanding the full scope of the impacts of settler

colonialism on Indigenous peoples. It challenges us to consider the deep-seated and far-reaching effects of land dispossession, beyond the physical and economic dimensions, and to recognize the profound damage done to Indigenous knowledge systems, ways of being, and spiritual connections to the land. This understanding is crucial for any meaningful discussion on decolonization and Indigenous rights.

Expanding these debates, Vanessa Watts states that "colonial interaction with land has historically been one of violence where land must be accessed, not learned from or form a part of (Watts, 2013, p. 26)." The construction of exploitative economic models through extractive industries aims to destroy Indigenous Peoples' knowledge that are grounded in their land-based practices. This perspective contrasts with Indigenous understandings of land as a living, thinking entity with which humans have a reciprocal relationship.

The different forms of colonial violence described by these authors, such as the disruption of Indigenous relations to land and the transformation of land into a resource for settler use, confirm the multi-faceted effects of ecological violence produced by colonialism. This ecological violence is not just physical, but also epistemic, ontological, and cosmological, disrupting Indigenous knowledge systems, ways of being, and spiritual connections to the land. Restoring Indigenous peoples' relation to land is crucial for their resistance and resurgence. This involves not just the return of land, but also the revitalization of Indigenous knowledge systems, ways of being, and spiritual connections to the land. It involves recognizing and respecting the wisdom and value of Indigenous ways of relating to the land, which offer important insights for addressing the current ecological crisis, while at the same time challenges the settler colonial structures and narratives that continue to perpetuate ecological violence.

Klauna Laka: An Ancient System of Reciprocity, Survival, and Self-Determination

Within this theoretical and historical context, I approach Miskitu People's eco-social traditions expressed through the practices of the *Klauna Laka* and the belief in supranatural entities. According to prominent Miskitu leaders, cultural specialists, and intellectuals, the *Klauna Laka* represents the core of Miskitu people's eco-social traditions and, until recently, represented a key element of their identity and collective survival.

Klauna Laka can be broadly translated as the practice of self-determination. Combining the opinion of different local experts, *Klauna Laka* could be defined as follows: an eco-social tradition of Miskitu people consisting of practices of reciprocity and solidarity among members of a given community, regardless of family bonds and without the intervention of money. The tradition is based on the subsistence resources obtained from the land, and is manifested through sharing labor, goods, and services in subsistence activities, community work, festivities, and emergencies, including sickness and death.

Klauna Laka emerged in the context of a subsistence economy before the incursion of Miskitu people into wage labor following the arrival of transnational companies in the late 1800s. Land was the essential feature that enabled the configuration of the *Klauna Laka* as the core of Miskitu people's eco-social relations, but not the land as such or by itself. Rather, a form of land ownership, communal ownership, as opposed to individual property, made the social configuration and reproduction of the *Klauna Laka* tradition possible. When asked about the Cohabitation project that the Nicaraguan State is trying to implement, which will inevitably lead

to private land appropriation, William Webster, a Miskitu spiritual leader strongly emphasized: "There is no individual property!"[24]

As described in Chapter Two, within a system of communal land ownership, vital areas are reserved for various uses, such as fishing, hunting, and harvesting. These areas are collectively owned and shared by all members of the community. Because of this form of land ownership, community members experienced a deep sense of solidarity and reciprocity that enabled the conditions leading to the configuration of the *Klauna Laka* tradition. I will describe how communal ownership of land works for Miskitu people later. For now, I seek to stress that collective land ownership enables the configuration of particular social and cultural mechanisms, such as *Klauna Laka,* which provides equal access to all the resources land offers to all community members.

Reciprocity is a core value within *Klauna Laka* practices, as it entails a sense of mutual responsibility of giving and receiving, not only among humans but also among other living and non-living things. Local experts identify eight reciprocity modalities manifested in different community activities. These modalities are *Pana-Pana, Tawi-Tawi, Yuwi-Yuwi, Pruwan Bikaia, Bakahnu Yuska, Latwan Laka Kum, Maihsa Wilkan Daknika and Taika nani Daknika.* These eight modalities as a group are named *Klauna Laka*.

(a). Pana-Pana**:** Can be broadly translated as "I give you and you give me" a hand, so to speak. It consisted of community people voluntarily agreeing to help each other. This form of reciprocity was mainly practiced through all stages of agricultural activities including harvesting and transportation of harvested products to people's households.

[24] William Webster (Miskitu elder and spiritual leader), interviewed by Jorge Matamoros, May 2020.

(b). Tawi-Tawi**:** Broadly speaking, the *Tawi-Tawi* evokes the idea of returning a favor. It is another form of mutual collaboration mainly practiced for house and canoe construction activities. All members of the community help each other in these types of activities. In both *Pana-Pana and Tawi-Tawi*, the recipient of solidarity does not provide any monetary remuneration to the people who collaborate. The only commitment is to provide food while they work.

(c). Yuwi-Yuwi**:** It could be translated as "distribution" and consists of sharing edible products obtained from harvesting, hunting, and fishing. Widows, single mothers, orphans, and people with disabilities are given priority in the distribution process.

(d). Pruwan Bikaia**:** It literally translates to "burying the dead" and it refers to the support the community members provide to a grieving person or family. While the mourning lasts, the entire community ceases all activities in order to provide support to the grieving family in a variety of ways, including coffin construction, preparation of the burial site, preparation of food for the funeral, and spiritual support through songs and prayers during the funeral and burial.

(e). Bakahnu Yus Munaia**:** It represents one of the main expressions of *Klauna Laka*. It literally translates as "to use collectively" and it refers to the goods for collective use within the community's land. Therefore, it is directly linked to the communal ownership of the land. The goods for collective use include areas of abundant resources such as fertile soils to be used for agricultural purposes, water sources, fishing banks, forests, spiritual sites, and beautiful landscapes used for recreational purposes. These are areas of collective use, and therefore shared among all community members.

The elders identify a variety of lower-ranking expressions of solidarity practiced in various areas beyond subsistence activities. These include *Latwan Laka Kum* (a love bond) intended to aid widows, sick people, single mothers, and orphaned or helpless children. *Maisa Wilkan Daknika* is a team that unifies efforts toward achieving a specific goal. *Taika Nani Daknika* is similar to the previous one but includes only family members.

These eight modalities of reciprocity are collectively conceived as *Klauna Laka.* It can be inferred that *Klauna Laka* embodies Miskitu people's ability to autonomously assume the satisfaction of the economic, social, cultural, and spiritual needs of community people provided that they have access to the material resources that land provides to sustain these practices.

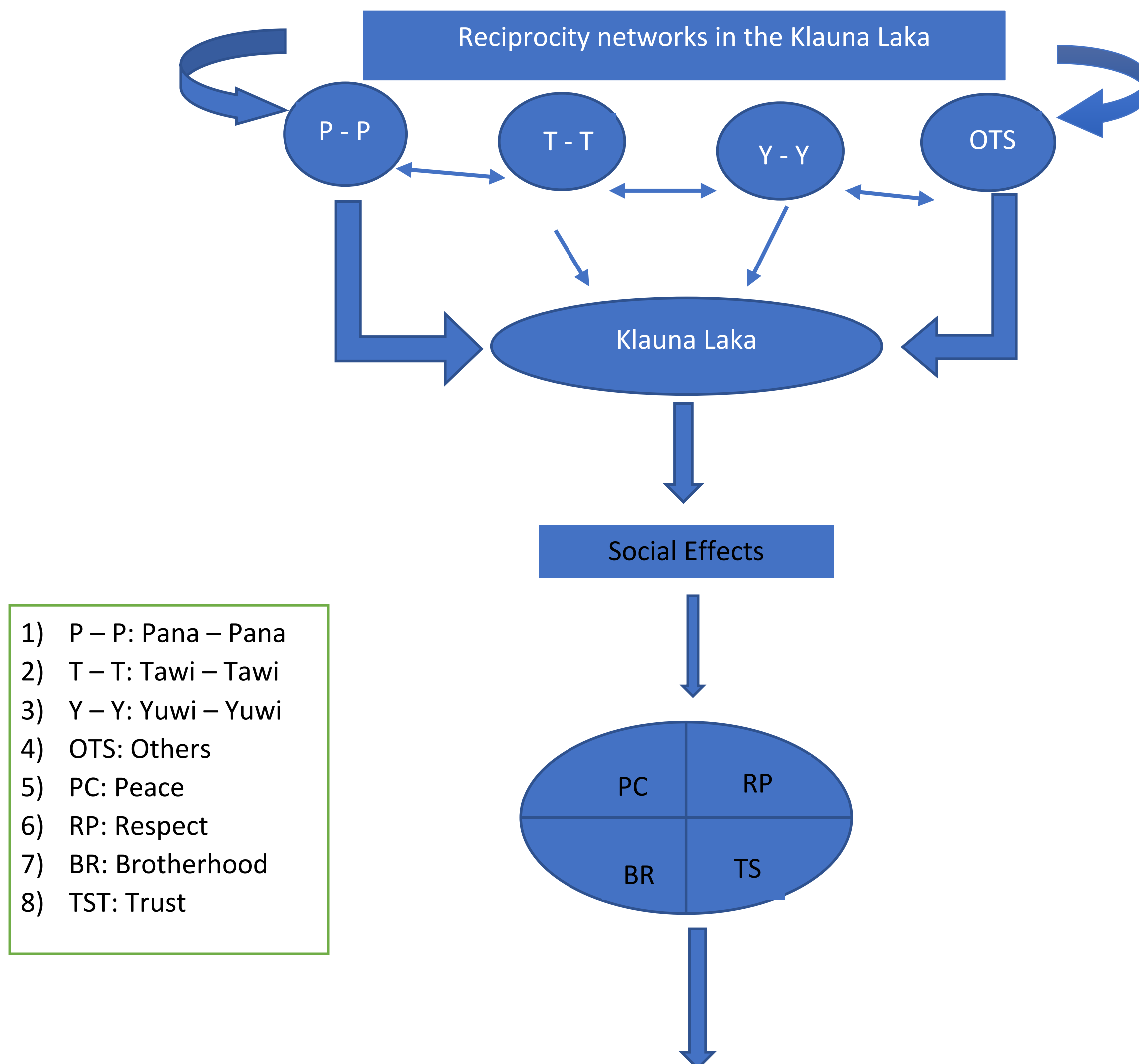

Figure 1. Conceptual Map of the Klauna Laka Tradition

When practiced, the *Klauna Laka* generates strong tangible and intangible social effects. It ensures the conditions for food self-sufficiency. It strengthens social ties such as trust, mutual respect, a sense of solidarity, and unity. Practicing *Klauna Laka* also results in decreased rates of violence and criminality. It produces a collective climate of security, peacefulness, and freedom. These conditions contributed to constructing a sense of cultural identity built around the practice of the *Klauna Laka* and Good Living (Buen Vivir).

The practice of the *Klauna Laka* shows that Miskitu people's economic, social, cultural, and spiritual system depends on a deep interaction with the land and the entire natural environment. As stated in Chapter Two, due to the interaction with their natural environment, Miskitu people conceptualized and conceived supernatural deities of nature as an ancestral religious thought before encountering Christianity. This way, *Klauna Laka,* as the system of reciprocity at the center of the Miskitu people's social fabric, does not only occur between humans. It transcends into the non-human and the supernatural in exchange for receiving the resources for their subsistence. According to this conceptualization of the relationship between the human and non-humans, the natural environment, including the clouds, lagoons, rivers, swamps, forests, hills, and trees, are all part of *Yapti Tasba,* but they are also the realm of supernatural deities who are included in the reciprocity network practiced through the *Klauna*

Laka. It supposes a relationship of interdependence in which humans receive sustenance from nature for survival and, in return, protect nature by not taking more than what they need.

In such a way, Miskitu people perform ceremonies before engaging in subsistence activities. There are different types of ceremonies. The one that impressed me the most consists in offering presents in exchange for what can be used and is given by the land. The offering usually consists of an old machete and a file. The ceremony commences with the individual kneeling in front of a tree and burying the gift, while reciting, "I give you these items in offering because I want to utilize what this (name what is to be obtained) provides; I promise to use it wisely and only to fulfill my needs." From the moment the presents are buried, no one else can touch them again. This approach opposes Western vertical conceptions of nature which place humankind at the top of a hierarchy and conceive the natural environment as commodities. From the *Klauna Laka* perspective, the natural environment is limited exclusively to satisfying people's needs and are not seen as commodities. Once the gifts are interred, they are not to be disturbed again. This practice contrasts with Western perspectives that view nature from a hierarchical stance, with humans at the pinnacle, and treat nature's offerings as marketable goods. According to the Klauna Laka worldview, the bounty of the Earth is strictly for fulfilling human necessities, and not regarded as tradeable commodities.

Klauna Laka traditions began to deteriorate, though not as intensely, with the arrival of transnational, mainly U.S. corporations. This economic shift forced Miskitu people into the market economy as they engaged in wage labor in these companies (Helms. 1983). This marked the beginning of the deterioration and gradual abandonment of the *Klauna Laka* by introducing money in exchange for products and services as opposed to the previous form of reciprocity without monetary remuneration. Additionally, these corporations continued the exploitation of

natural resources for nearly a hundred years which caused the physical elimination of many thousands of trees, massive contamination of water sources, destruction of local ecosystems, and extinction of wild species of birds, reptiles, and mammals. This capitalist exploitation of Yapti Tasba denied Indigenous people the basic conditions for their survival due to the pressure on their lands and territories.

Although there is no written account, local experts agree that the *Klauna Laka* deteriorated drastically during the 1950s and the 1960s. It is worth noting a combination of factors during these decades that exacerbated the deterioration of the *Klauna Laka*: first, the transformation from a subsistence economy to a market economy; second, the educational institutions and land policies implemented by the Nicaraguan State through the Fundamental Educational Project and the Instituto de Fomento Nacional (Institute of National Promotion) INFONAC, respectively.

***Yapti Tasba* As Politics of Resistance and Resurgence**

As noted in the previous chapter, accelerated the decline of the *Klauna Laka* and Miskitu beliefs in supernatural entities also prompted some communities to organize themselves for the first time to defend their rights. This organizational effort led to the creation of the Alianza para el Progreso de Miskitu y Sumus (Alliance for the Progress of Miskitu and Sumu, ALPROMISU), the first Indigenous organization that brought together the Miskitu and the Mayangna.

ALPROMISU was the first organization that emerged from within Indigenous communities to meet the needs of Indigenous peoples. It facilitated cultural synergy among the Miskitu and Mayangna communities and planted the seed of resistance. ALPROMISU later evolved into various Miskitu resistance movements leading to today's *Yapti Tasba Masraka* (The Sons and Daughters of Mother Earth YATAMA). These organizations have been the voice of

Indigenous peoples throughout the last seventy years, including during the armed conflict with the Sandinistas during the 1980s. This conflict ended when the Government approved Law 28, which granted Autonomous Status to Indigenous territories. There are still controversies within and around the different factions of these organizations in the political sphere, but the formation of Indigenous political movements has had a significant positive impact on indigenous lives.

Due to these resistance movements, there have been some legal victories. In addition to Law 28 and Law 445, in 1987 the Nicaraguan Constitution was changed to recognize Nicaragua as a multicultural State and accepted and promoted the use of Indigenous languages. This meant that for the first time Nicaragua acknowledged the existence of Indigenous peoples, marking the shift from assimilation to multiculturalism. In 2002, to create the conditions for the approval of Law 445, the Nicaraguan Constitution was modified again to include communal property, granting it the same status as other forms of property recognized until then, such as private and public property. Communal property is directly related to the communal ownership of Indigenous territories, as opposed to the individual appropriation of lands in other parts of the country. Nicaragua has also ratified the ILO Convention 169 and the Escazu Agreement and adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Nicaraguan government takes pride in having one of the most comprehensive legal frameworks on the rights of Indigenous peoples throughout Latin America. However, this legal framework does not translate into improving the living conditions for Indigenous communities. When asked about the level of satisfaction in achieving these laws, most of the Miskitu people I interviewed said they were deeply unsatisfied because the results do not correspond to people's needs and demands. They describe the Autonomy Law and Law 445 as a failure and regret the

decreasing access to their traditional lands due to ongoing settlers' invasions that have erased their identity built around land-based practices. For example, Amalia Dixon states:

> We began resistance movements for our land which was our first right (the most important one) but we did it under the influence of external forces. We were disoriented, (our efforts) were not oriented correctly. We have lost (our path) over time by external forces, those external forces that have come upon us. We did not know how to handle them, and that is why we have fallen into acculturation (assimilation). Yes, working the land is one of our rights but we no longer know how to do that. Younger generations don't know how to work the land.[25]

Indeed, it is evident that the colonial institutions and policies enforced by the Nicaraguan State within these territories have devastatingly eroded the social fabric of the Indigenous peoples. There is no respect for Indigenous peoples' knowledge and ways of life. While this persists, it will be impossible for the laws to contain this wave of violence, racism, and colonialism. This scenario is combined with the imposition of an external education system that does not include teaching traditional practices, threatening to gradually exterminate Indigenous communities by depriving them of their livelihoods and suppressing their knowledge. As Theodoro Downs states:

> Our identity trait that is still striving is our language, but we are in bad shape as far as our land-based practices go. Our language is only one aspect of our identity. The most crucial part is our relationship with the land, but we miss that part of our identity. Losing *Klauna Laka* is a tragedy. It is the main value of our Identity. It is like being orphaned by the death of a mother.[26]

[25] Amalia Dixon (Miskitu educator) interviewed by the author, October 2020

[26] Teodoro Downs (Miskitu elder and spiritual leader), interviewed by Jorge Matamoros, October 2020.

A strong theme that emerges from the interviews is that of younger generations falling into a state of self-denial. They express that the identity crisis is more common among young people who do not want or do not know how to relate to land because it is not being taught to them. As Alvaro Cirilo noted:

> Education is an opportunity for our improvement, but at the same time, it is the cause of our regression. The education system has these two opposite effects. It means that education is very advanced today. But this same educational advance brings bad consequences for us. We experience the erasure of our identity, which is a consequence of the advancement of education. Our youth who study reject the use of our language and other traits that form part of our identity, like our food.[27]

This quote manifests the main characteristic of cultural oppression. When everything around you is built to make you feel that your language, culture, appearance, and skin color are wrong, eventually, you will want to free yourself from that burden. You will seek to blend in with what you are taught is good, i.e., the identity of the mestizo, the language of the mestizo.

Assimilationist Education

Through the Fundamental Educational Project, the Nicaraguan government implemented a vast education plan to assimilate the Indigenous population into the larger non-Indigenous/Spanish-speaking Nicaraguan society. The methods used in this project included hiring and bringing to Miskitu communities only Spanish-speaking professors who lacked knowledge of the Miskitu language and culture. Classes were delivered only in Spanish, and a Miskitu language ban was enforced, severely punishing children for speaking Miskitu in the classroom and during recess. Naboth Zacarias, a Miskitu elder spiritual leader, described the

[27] Alvaro Cirilo (Miskitu elder), interviewed by Jorge Matamoros, October 2020.

project as "an instrument to twist the Indigenous mindset by fostering in children and youth an aversion to the values of Miskitu identity and replacing it with a sense of Nicaraguan-mestizo identity."[28] His words are a telling testimony on how Nicaragua's education system, imposed on the Miskitu people, resulted in the imposition of a different cultural identity. This is evident not just from the enforcement of Spanish as the sole language in the classroom but also from the emphasis on historical narratives, values, and worldviews rooted in the Nicaraguan Mestizo context, to the detriment of Miskitu people's knowledge systems. In essence, the Fundamental Education Project forced the Miskitu people to strip themselves of their Indigenous social, economic and traditional ways to then join "civilization" represented by the Nicaraguan Nation-State. In this context, disappearing meant that their only chance of becoming part of the nation was to abandon their identity, abandon their language, abandon their ways of life, and, above all, abandon their lands.

In their interviews, the elders described different types of punishments, including the following: being beaten with wooden rulers, chalkboard erasers, leather straps, and tree branches; placing children beneath the sun holding heavy books and forcing them to keep their arms raised and extended, forcing them to kneel over rocks or graters; having their ears and hair pulled; being shaken violently and struck on the head. Attending school in these conditions was torturous and resulted in high dropout rates. Fidel Wilson, a Miskitu language specialist, noted:

> […] the educational experience was one of suffering. A few endured the suffering and could continue, but most of us could not. When I started first grade, we were a group of around 20 children, and only five of us reached sixth grade because of the language

[28] Naboth Zacarias (Miskitu elder and spiritual leader), interviewed by Jorge Matamoros, October 2020.

barrier and punishments. Those who continued resorted to memorizing the class content without further advancement. [29]

Fidel's words, once more, evoke the suffering inflicted by colonialism upon indigenous peoples, in this case, in the educational context. His words: "the educational experience was one of suffering," speaks of a harsh and hostile learning environment that led Miskitu children to emotional, psychological, and physical distress. Additionally, Fidel's word's "few endured the suffering and could continue, but most of us could not," speaks of high drop-out rates resulting from the suffering but it also speaks to the resilience of those who reached the sixth grade. This anecdote speaks to the strength of Indigenous peoples who have managed to withstand the adversities of colonialism and push through an alien world imposed upon them through westernized laws, institutions, and educational models.

Additionally, this project replaced the elders in their educational role by forcing children to attend school instead of receiving knowledge passed on to them by the elders in their household. As a result, elders could no longer transmit traditional knowledge, including the *Klauna Laka*, from one generation to another. Implementing an exogenous educational model had an alienating rather than beneficial effect. A Miskitu educator, Amalia Dixon, recalls: "It was more important for children to take care of their food plantations than to go to school. I think 75% of the population felt that way because that was the only life we knew."[30] The sentiments expressed by Amalia underscore the frequent shortcomings of Western-style education systems in contextualizing learning within the unique settings of indigenous communities and their intertwined relationships with the land, nature, and traditional practices essential to their

[29] Fidel Wilson (Miskitu cultural specialist), interviewed by Jorge Matamoros, October 2020.
[30] Amalia Dixon (Miskitu educator), interviewed by the author, October 2020.

livelihoods. By not incorporating these elements into the curriculum, this project perpetuated a disconnect between education and the lived experiences of Miskitu people.

As noted by local experts, this project represented a tragic loss of Miskitu people's knowledge and eco-social traditions since it did not include any of these topics in its educational curriculum. Today's educational model may not be as abusive, but it remains alienated from Indigenous peoples' cultural perspectives and knowledge. As a result, children and young people are detached from their land, history, and social and cultural practices, forming the foundation for constructing a Miskitu identity. Naboth Zacarias, a Miskitu elder and spiritual leader states:

> If the educational system included teaching topics related to the *Klauna Laka* traditions, Miskitu peoples' history, the Miskitu way of life, it would be very good. But their teaching isn't like that. They teach only what the government cares about. In this way, education came to us, but when it comes to our practices, traditions, and our *Klauna Laka* we are left behind. Our youth don't understand the problems of our communities. Only a few of them still preserve their sense of Miskitu identity after graduating.[31]

Elder Naboth's words speak of a one-sided educational system that prioritizes the dominant mestizo culture and neglects the narratives and histories of Miskitu people. As is the case of other indigenous peoples, and as has been widely discussed through this work, Miskitu people's knowledge systems are often closely tied to the land and environment. This knowledge system encompasses reciprocity networks such as the *Klauna Laka,* which translate to sustainable living and self-sufficiency, the development of spiritual practices, and traditional medicines. By displacing this knowledge system, the Nicaraguan educational model has disrupted Miskitu people's ability to sustain themselves, endangering their survival. Local

[31] Zacarias interview. Interviewed by Jorge Matamoros. August 2020.

experts unanimously agree that the capacity for intergenerational transmission of Miskitu knowledge and traditions is almost nonexistent.

Historically, settler legal frameworks have strengthened what the assimilationist education system has done to the Miskitu land relations in Nicaragua. In 1953, the Nicaraguan Legislature approved Law 11, creating the Instituto de Fomento Nacional (Institute of National Promotion) INFONAC. This law enabled the Nicaraguan State to request that the administration of what they considered national lands and other forest resources be transferred to the Institute. Rufino Lucas, one of the elders interviewed, remembers:

> Many people were imprisoned on charges of setting the forest on fire, but that was not true; there was a contradiction (between the law imposed by the Nicaraguan State and the Miskitu people's ways of life). Miskitu people's subsistence depended partly on the consumption of *Kakamuk* (a Black spiny-tailed iguana) and Siakwa (plain turtle). In the months of January and February, when the *Kakamuk* and Siakwa are suitable for spawning and consumption, they use the plains and sandy terrains for spawning so that people would set part of the plains on fire not on a whim but to find and follow the footprints of these animals. The livelihoods of Miskitu communities also depend on hunting and fishing. When hunting deer, people use fire to attract deer that feed on the ashes and grass sprouts. Because of this, many people were imprisoned under INFONAC's policies.[32]

Rufino's words show how through INFONAC, the Nicaraguan State, exercised direct and absolute control over Indigenous land, showing total disregard for Miskitu people's livelihoods and further endangering their survival. Additionally, INFONAC started to control access to other

[32] Rufino Lucas (Miskitu elder), interviewed by Jorge Matamoros, October 2020.

forest resources, mainly lumber, limiting Miskitu people's ability to obtain wood to construct houses and canoes. As a result, the Nation-State was structured on the assumption that Indigenous lands were idle lands and had to be put to work through capitalist and extractive logic; Indigenous people had to be civilized and incorporated into Nicaraguan society through education. In this way, the Nicaraguan State consolidated its territorial dominance to the complete detriment of Indigenous peoples. This damage was physical and political, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual, as it destroyed their ways of life and ongoing damage to their land-based knowledge and the foundation of their identity. That same logic is used for the current invasion of Indigenous people's lands. Those mechanisms were not dismantled; they continue to be reproduced today with the support and protection of new laws approved and enacted by the Nicaraguan State, such as the Cohabitation Project. Yurintin Toledo, a Miskitu Elder and spiritual leader, noted:

> The ability to transmit the *Klauna Laka* tradition is closely linked to controlling natural resources. Having ownership over these natural elements gives great capacity and power to our communities. There are abundant resources on the ground and underground. But ownership of these resources is denied to our people.[33]

Elder Yurintin's reflections express colonial violence to land and the "deep epistemic, ontological and cosmological violence," Tuck and Wayne Yang point out (Tuck & Wayne, 2012). Disrupting Miskitu people's relations to land and its resources, combined with the current lack of access to their lands that have been occupied by settlers, make it impossible to sustain and reproduce Miskitu people's eco-cultural traditions and their sense of cultural identity built around land-based practices. As Bacon (2018) has accurately described, "colonial ecological violence" is a process of "disrupting Indigenous eco-social relations."

[33] Yurintin Toledo (Miskitu elder and spiritual leader), interviewed by Jorge Matamoros, October 2020.

Yapti Tasba: Communal Land Ownership and Life Sustenance

As explained in Chapter Two, within the local tradition of Miskitu communities prevails the conception that the land is a communal property inherited from the ancestors. The communal land is divided into different areas for subsistence activities depending on the resources they contain and is identified as areas of collective use and ownership. These include areas for agriculture, hunting, forestry, fishing, mining, and recreational use. Access to these areas is open to all community members with the only condition being that they use what the land makes available moderately.

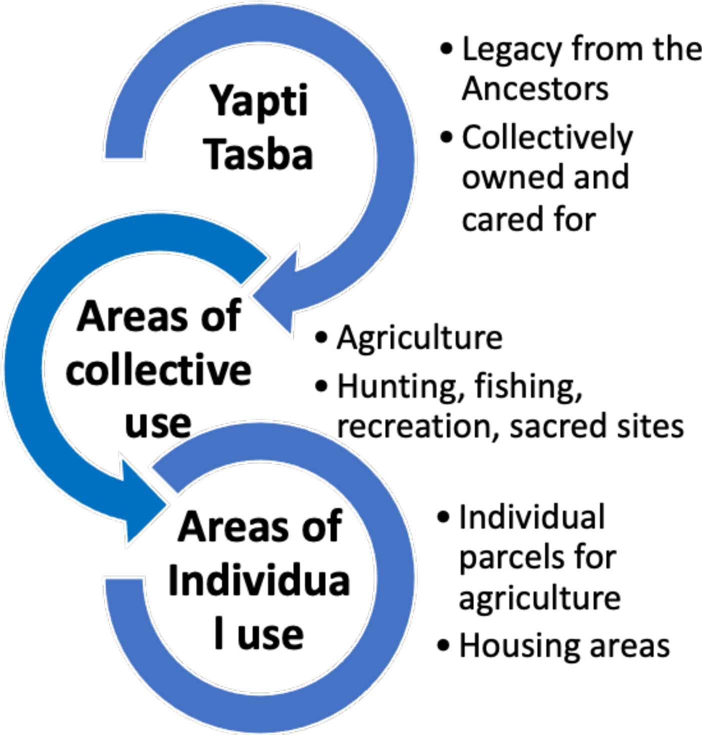

Figure 2. Miskitu peoples communal land ownership model

The areas for agricultural and housing purposes are considered private property. However, the mechanism through which they become private property does not involve legal formalities or paperwork before communal authorities or state public institutions. When a

community member does agricultural work in areas designated for agricultural purposes or builds a house on an available piece of land, this community member becomes entitled to own that specific piece of land, being the person who first invested work, time, and energy on it. In this sense, the only requirement to privately own a piece of land is to work or build on it; this way, the land belongs to whoever works for it, and work is the only condition that legitimizes private property in a Miskitu community. From that moment on, the person can inherit the land to future generations without the intervention of written documents. In this way, local knowledge produced through the relationship with land gives place to the social institution and principles that regulate land tenure. This form of land ownership opposes how settlers occupy land in indigenous communities, which involves written and notarized documents and ultimately disables the configuration of social institutions such as the *Klauna Laka* based on reciprocity networks rather than paid services.

In a practical and materialistic approach, Yapti Tasba provides material sustenance for Miskitu livelihoods. Furthermore, this is where the metaphor of the Yapti Tasba as Mother Earth is fully realized. In this regard, Avelino Cox, a prominent Miskitu thinker and educator states,

"*Yapti Tasba* is a like mother who provides for their children. *Yapti Tasba* provides the means for our existence and survival; she cares for us as a mother. From our standpoint, an Indian without Land is a dead Indian since the land is the source of our livelihoods and is where we practice agriculture; it has different forest species that provide the wood for our houses and a variety of plants and herbs that constitute the basis of our medicine and fruit trees that also constitute food sources. *Yapti Tasba* also contains water sources that nourish life; the subsoil contains precious minerals. *Yapti Tasba* covers everything: water sources, agricultural and livestock production, fishing, forest resources, etc."

In a more symbolic and spiritual approach, *Yapti Tasba* sustains the well-being of indigenous peoples. *Yapti Tasba* produces and informs indigenous people's culture. As Amalia Dixon noted:

> *Yapti Tasba* is a source of life and culture; it keeps our people with their heads held high; it is their land, their Yapti Tasba. The indigenous without their land is not indigenous, so the land goes beyond its material value; it is not an object for commerce but the object of our respect. Yapti Tasba is an ancestral heritage that gives our people a sense of dignity and pride and gives us a sense of belonging and identity. Because the Yapti Tasba represents the core of our ancestral memory. For indigenous people, land has a spiritual and symbolic meaning because, in addition to being the mother provider and sustenance of life, it is also the sustenance of culture, social relations, and the configuration of spiritual thought.

The quotation above illuminates the multi-faceted symbolism of *Yapti Tasba,* which goes beyond its material value as a mother who sustains life. It also sustains and informs cultural practices, social relations, and the configuration of spiritual thought, so the land is understood and conceived in two ways: As an indispensable physical space for survival, as it gives housing, food, and medicines. On the other hand, in a more symbolic and spiritual approach, the land sustains and nurtures Good Living. It is the one that produces and gives life and informs indigenous peoples' practices and spiritual beliefs. In this sense, the relationship of the Miskitu people with the *Yapti Tasba* is as much a material phenomenon as an ontological one. Yapti Tasba informs key aspects of collective and individual identities and shapes collective social consciousness.

These two conceptions of land also highlight the relevance of *Yapti Tasba* not only for the *Klauna Laka*, the center of Miskitu people's eco-social traditions, but also for the *Klauna Laka* originating from the autonomy statute delineated in Law 28. This relevance of *Yapti Tasba* is better explained by Armando Rojas:

> When we began our struggle for autonomy, we understood autonomy as full participation in decision-making in all areas of community life to counteract the domination of mestizo people in the region. This was achieved by accessing places of power in public institutions like a seat in the Nicaraguan Congress or the mayor's seat in our municipality's councils. However, after a long learning journey, we now understand that autonomy comes from autonomously managing our lands and its resources. Despite the regime of autonomy established in Law 28, our people do not feel comfortable because we continue to feel like a colony, as if the mestizos continue to have control of our destiny because they still hold control of our lands and resources. Real autonomy starts by gaining control of our lands.

As previously discussed, the *Klauna Laka*, at the core of Miskitu peoples' eco-social relations, represents the ability of Miskitu communities to autonomously satisfy community needs as long as it has access to land and to what it does give to people. On the other hand, to carry out all the mandates emanating from the autonomy regime contained in Law 28, it is imperative to have access to *Yapti Tasba* to autonomously satisfy the population's needs without depending financially on the State of Nicaragua.

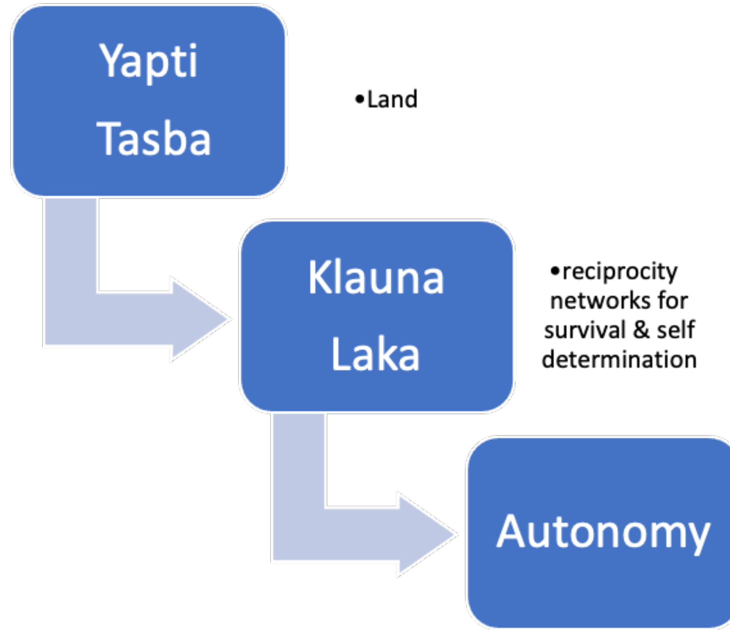

Figure 3. The dependency of both Autonomy and Klauna Laka on Yapti Tasba

Yapti Tasba is also conceived and claimed as the physical space that the Miskitu people consider entitled to. This understanding of *Yapti Tasba* refers to the physical territory lost over time, including the part of the territory that is now under the jurisdiction of Honduras. Armando Rojas points out that the right to land refers to recovering the territory annexed to Nicaragua in 1894. Similarly, Marcos Hoppington suggests that the demarcation process as understood by Miskitu people, implies recovering the ancestral lands detailed in the Polanco map. In this way, understanding *Yapti Tasba* as a physical space means recovering access to the land not in family-individual lots or territorial blocks but the territory annexed to Nicaragua in 1894. The current territorial demarcation process failed to adhere to the criteria of demarcating and titling the ancestral territory. Instead, it is limited to the recognition, demarcation, titling, and certification of 23 so-called indigenous territories. These indigenous territories are blocks of land traditionally comprised of groups of communities. The remaining lands included in the Polanco map but not in these territories are considered national lands. In this way, the current demarcation model, far

from reaching or recovering the Ancestral Land, continues to fragment and reduce the ancestral territory.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused on how the *Klauna Laka* and the belief in supra-natural entities configure a system of reciprocity between humans and non-humans that oppose notions of development and progress imposed by the Nicaraguan State. Through the *Klauna Laka*, Miskitu people collectively use the land and its resources to meet their material, social, spiritual, and cultural needs, ensuring enough resources for everyone. Meanwhile, the beliefs in supra-natural entities give place to dialogical and horizontal, and reciprocal relationships between humans and the natural environment they inhabit, where humans receive from nature the resources they need for their subsistence and, in exchange, provide care for the natural environment by not taking more than they need.

I have also highlighted the centrality of *Yapti Tasba* in the configuration of these reciprocity networks and the development of spiritual practices that positively impact the care of the natural environment. In this sense, *Klauna Laka* and the belief in supra-natural entities serve as an authentic mechanism of self-determination to protect their ways of life and natural resources. Therefore, *Yapti Tasba* is not just an economic resource but part of the cultural and spiritual identity of Miskitu people. The loss of land and natural resources due to colonialism manifested through the Nicaraguan State, laws, and educational institutions have profoundly and negatively impacted Miskitu people's social fabric and ability to exercise autonomy.

The current struggle for land restitution that Miskitu people are undergoing and their refusal to share the land with the settlers shed a light of hope for reconfiguring their identity in a way that reclaims the *Klauna Laka*. In this sense, current land struggles must be accompanied by

recognition and respect of Miskitu people's views of land and natural resources as well as the recognition of the rights of Miskitu people to control their lands and resources as the only way to achieve an authentic autonomy.

Yapti Tasba, what it gives and the collective ownership that entails have played a key role in the reproduction of *Klauna Laka* as the representation of Miskitu people's eco-social traditions. Therefore, practicing the *Klauna Laka* represents a “hidden discourse” that embodies expressions of resistance (Scott,1990, p.17) against the colonial state. The *Klauna Laka* disrupts Nicaraguan colonial policies by opposing the legal processes used to address Indigenous peoples’ struggles for land, absorbing their claims within the State´s legal apparatuses linked to institutional processes. In this sense, I follow what Black scholar Robin Kelly points out, referring to being Black: "not just political struggle but the struggles of everyday life: fighting, dancing, begging, teaching, thinking, loving.”[34] This way, Miskitu people’s relation to the land and their everyday practices manifested in the *Klauna Laka* inform the bases of their resistance and ultimately provide insights into how the discourses and practices of resistance are embodied at multiple scales.

Therefore, it is essential to recover the ownership of these lands to facilitate the restitution of *Klauna Laka* practices, reaffirming the ancestral form of political agency for Miskitu people. The restoration of the *Klauna Laka* can only be achieved by recovering the land and restructuring the educational model. This, in turn, will lead to the conditions that generate the sense of Good Living aligned with Miskitu people’s worldview. Avelino Cox expressed this succinctly:

[34] Cited in Thomas Biolsi, “Racism, Popular Culture, and the Everyday Rosebud Reservation,” *NAIS: Journal of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association* 6, no. 1 (2019): 77.

> We cannot talk about Good Living from a Western perspective. Good living for us does not translate to having luxurious cars and houses; money in the bank is not that! Good Living is having our *Yapti Tasba* and sharing everything we have.

Avelino's words speak to the interconnectedness of life - people, animals, earth, and spirit - a worldview held by the Miskitu and many Indigenous peoples. This perspective can counter destructive, unsustainable practices and beliefs and guide the way toward a more life-centered world.

CONCLUSION

Through this Dissertation I have illuminated the complex and multifaceted relationship between the Miskitu People, their land, and the ongoing struggles they face in their pursuit of self-determination. From the early days of British rule to the influence of transnational companies and the implementation of neoliberal policies by the Nicaraguan state, the Miskitu People have endured a legacy of land dispossession that has resulted in profound social, cultural, and political subjugation. The Miskitu's sense of nationhood is intricately tied to their ancestral territories, and the loss of their lands has had far-reaching consequences for their indigenous lifeways and survival.

Through case studies and oral histories, we have examined the specific experiences of inhabitants of Wasla, Saklin and Santa Clara in the Northern Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, I highlighted the profound impacts of land dispossession on their lives and the natural environment they depend on. I have also drawn attention to the transformation of communal lands and the erosion of traditional practices in the face of colonial and racial power dynamics.

However, amidst the challenges, the Miskitu People have demonstrated resilience and a fierce determination to reclaim their land and assert their sovereignty. On Chapter three I documented the history of Miskitu Peoples resistance movements and the knowledge produced through these organizational experiences. Land relations have emerged as a central element in these struggles, evidencing the importance of bringing land relations to the forefront of current resistance movements.

Finally, this dissertation has also unfolded the mobilizing ontological, epistemological, cultural, political, and historical forces encapsulated in a concept like Yapti Tasba. For the

Miskitu, this concept has provided a profound engagement in land relations and communal ownership, which have played a vital role in the reproduction of *Klauna Laka* as the representation of the Miskitu people's eco-social traditions. I have argued that the *Klauna Laka* principle disrupts Nicaraguan colonial policies by opposing the legal processes used to address Indigenous peoples' struggles for land. The *Klauna Laka*, as a system of reciprocity between humans and non-humans, also opposes notions of development and progress imposed by the Nicaraguan State from a capitalist standpoint. I have also argued that for the Miskitu people Yapti Tasba and Klauna Laka offer a profound lens through which to view and engage in land relations and communal ownership. Such engagement has emerged as a critical element in the ongoing reproduction of Klauna Laka, the embodiment of the Miskitu people's eco-social traditions.

Further I have suggested the principles encapsulated in the *Klauna Laka* and *Yapti Tasba* challenges and disrupts Nicaraguan colonial policies by standing in opposition to the legal processes commonly applied to navigate Indigenous peoples' struggles for land. This opposition underlines a critique of traditional legal frameworks and suggests the need for more nuanced, culturally sensitive approaches.

Klauna Laka and *Yapti Tasba*, as a system, symbolizes reciprocity between humans and non-humans. This symbolism extends beyond a simple human-nature binary and encapsulates a more holistic view of interconnectedness. It highlights a coexistence and mutual dependence that is often overlooked in mainstream discourses. Furthermore, this system presents a counter-narrative to the dominant notions of development and progress propagated by the Nicaraguan State from a capitalist standpoint. By rejecting the singular focus on economic growth and

material accumulation, *Yapti Tasba* and *Klauna Laka* encourage a broader understanding of prosperity that incorporates social, cultural, and environmental aspects.

In this way, *Klauna Laka* serves not only as a symbol of Miskitu eco-social traditions but also as a challenge to the prevailing paradigms of land use expanding the discourse surrounding Indigenous land relations. The advantage of the proposal by Anishinaabe scholar Deborah McGregor becomes relevant here. McGregor advocates for the development of responses to the degradation of land relations by turning to indigenous knowledge. This approach guides us towards understanding, accepting, enacting, respecting, and honoring relationships with all of creation.

The examples illustrated in this dissertation are specific to the Nicaraguan context. However, as climate change remains a universally shared challenge, progress will necessitate incorporating global voices into the dialogue. By embracing diverse perspectives from around the world, the discourse can be enriched, fostering a more comprehensive and effective response to the climate crisis. Scholars, including Kyle Powys White, suggest indigenous responses to this crisis as potential strategies to grapple with it. These responses extend beyond mere protests or open mobilizations. Often, indigenous reactions are rooted in cultural frameworks and centered around the resurgence of cultural and political sovereignty through the practice and reproduction of land-based knowledge systems, such as the Klauna Laka.

Within this paradigm, *Yapti Tasba* and *Klauna Laka* propose a novel perspective regarding the relationship between humankind and the environment. They also provide illuminating insights into the social dimensions of land dispossession for indigenous peoples. In

many instances, land dispossession is directly associated with the unraveling of Indigenous people's social fabric and the erasure of their land-linked knowledge.

Miskitu people’s land politics, based on the principles of reciprocity and solidarity networks expressed through the *Klauna Laka* also presents an intriguing challenge to prevailing norms of racial inclusion. The collective identity shaped in this shared struggle of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples of Moskitia for Yapti Tasba enhances the political agency of these groups, carving out space for inclusive dialogue and action centered on a common goal. This engagement goes beyond mere political cooperation, as it has been the case of Miskitu and Afrodescendant peoples. Instead, it requires a cultural and socio-political synergy that both embodies and demands a radical reframing of Indigenous and Afro-descendant rights and relations and collaborative resistance towards achieving enduring indigenous land relations.

The struggle of the Miskitu People for land and self-determination carries broader significance in the global pursuit of social and ecological justice. In this context, the fight for *Yapti Tasba* transcends the local struggle of the Miskitu people. In an era marked by global colonial and capitalist influences, it resonates with the struggles of numerous indigenous communities across various regions and continents. It is my hope that this Dissertation will contribute to a deeper understanding and inspire ongoing dialogue and action.

For Further Investigation and Critical Reflection

Through this dissertation I have provide a comprehensive exploration of Miskitu peoples land relations and indigenous rights in the Moskitia. However, it has also highlighted several areas where future research could yield valuable insights to understand the complexity of the region's

socio-cultural, environmental, and economic interplay. Therefore, the scope for further research is vast and multilayered. Through the course of writing this dissertation it has become evident that the mosaic of relations, histories, and perceptions of land and the environment is intricated. One profound distinction that became evident throughout this research was the differing land relations between the colonos and the Miskitu peoples. Understanding the inherent nuances that differentiate their respective attitudes towards the land leads to a deeper inquiry: where does one delineate the boundaries between the indigenous and the colono? In a landscape teeming with cultural overlaps and socio-political intricacies, this question requires more in-depth exploration.

Another challenge encountered throughout this research pertains to the Miskitu concepts of development which rises questions that demand further research: Do the Miskitu people stand in opposition to prevalent notions of development, gravitating more towards counter-development? Or do they envision alternative trajectories, more aligned to their cultural values? Moreover, their unique standpoint raises questions about whether they exhibit resistance to modernization or an inclination towards non-modern paradigms. Furthermore, the economic and social history of the Moskitia region, especially with respect to the various phases of Nicaraguan capitalism, remains an area with potential for further exploration. A thorough analysis of the economic context could provide a more holistic picture of the land "individual property"/"communal ownership" paradigm and shed light on the complex interplay between capital, land tenure, and the experiences of the Miskitu people. Finally, a more nuanced exploration of the Miskitu people's engagement with these economic forces, both historically and in the present day, could further illuminate the ways in which these dynamics shape the broader context of indigenous land rights.

Another significant aspect that requires further examination is the role of gender, and more specifically patriarchy and women's agency, in shaping land relations. This dissertation has touched upon women's roles in these dynamics, but a deeper, relationally focused investigation into how gender structures and influences these interactions could offer invaluable insights, both within the context of the Moskitia and in comparable settings worldwide.

Additionally, the specificities of the environmental issues faced by the communities in the territories of Wasla and Saklin (Wangky Maya), and Santa Clara (Tasba Raya) are also areas for further research. A more detailed exposition of these issues would aid in deepening our understanding of the environmental crises that indigenous communities are grappling with, particularly in the context of land dispossession.

In essence, while this dissertation has strived to shed light on the complexities of land relations in the Moskitia, it has also highlighted an array of potential avenues for further investigation. Such inquiries would not only enrich the academic discourse on the Moskitia but could also have practical implications, informing policymaking and advocacy efforts aimed at supporting the region's indigenous communities in their quest for land rights and environmental justice. This dissertation, therefore, serves not only as a summation of the current understanding but also as a catalyst for further inquiry into the multifaceted dynamics of land relations in the Moskitia region.

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