

PROTESTANTISM AND ETHNIC IDENTITY MORAVIAN MISSIONARIES ON THE NICARAGUAN ATLANTIC COAST IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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Introduction

When it comes to explaining the cultural differences which separate the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua from the Pacific part of the country, one of the distinguishing aspects always pointed out is the difference in religion: The overwhelming majority of the population in Western Nicaragua is Catholic, whereas on the Atlantic Coast the major part of the inhabitants belongs to some Protestant church, and the Miskito Indians in their vast majority are Moravians¹. Although the Atlantic Coast takes up almost half of the national territory, it is home to only one tenth of the country's population. Great part of its inhabitants are Spanish speaking *mestizos* of rather recent migration, besides Native Americans and approximately 25000 Afroamericans, called *creoles*. Among the native peoples, the Miskito are by far the most numerous (app. 67 000), compared to 5000 Sumu and 650 Rama Indians.

For many Miskito as well as non-Miskito, being Moravian has become almost synonymous to being Miskito, religion has turned into one central element of ethnic identity. But the relationship between religious denomination and ethnic self-definition is much more complicated. After all, there are Miskito who are not Moravians and are still acknowledged as belonging to the ethnic group. On the other hand, Moravianism gains a regional aspect as Miskito and a considerable part of the *creole*

population share religious traditions and liturgy (Rossbach, 1986: 66).

It is almost impossible to establish any permanent elements which constitute ethnic identity. In the case of the Miskito, however, there is a set of features which can, in varying combinations, transform themselves into elements of ethnic distinction and are acknowledged as such by Miskito and outside observers alike. In the first place there must be named the social and cultural background of a Miskito village, a rural or fishing community, as well as fluency in the Miskito language. Ethnic identity is relative, not absolute. It constitutes itself in relation to another person or group, therefore the elements which make it up may change from one situation to the next. (Moravian) Protestantism and the traditional cultural ties with the English speaking Caribbean are more significant to some areas of the Atlantic coast than to others. Against a *creole* from Bluefields a Catholic Miskito from the Rio Coco and a Moravian Miskito from the sea-shore might feel united by language and a shared rural background; a Protestant Miskito and a *creole* might feel bonds of religious and regional solidarity when confronted with a Spanish-speaking *mestizo*.

But the Moravian church does not merely play an important part as a distinctive feature of Miskito self-definition, it has shaped Miskito identity much more deeply than that. Firstly, the material as well as the social structure of village communities today is to a great extent

the result of missionary work: the Moravians not only encouraged larger settlements, and shaped their lay-out (with the church in a prominent place), they also managed to impose their concept of a Christian congregation of brethren and sisters on social relations within the villages. Thus, today the social structure of the Moravian congregation and that of the village as a whole are closely interwoven and almost indistinguishable (Helms, 1971: 172). It could be argued, therefore, that the roots of this important constitutive element of ethnic identity, the Miskito village community, are as much protestant as they are Miskito.

Secondly, this paper will propose the thesis that it was the protestant mission, entering the field in a moment of severe crisis, which allowed the Miskito to survive at all as a recognisable ethnic group, although forced to submit to profound changes in their material, social and spiritual life. In spite of the missionaries' efforts to depict their activities as a work of love (which they certainly felt them to be), we should like to point out that the penetration of Moravianism into the Miskito communities was, among other things, a time of conflict and disruption.

The effort to reconstruct the cultural and social clash between missionaries and Indians is rendered particularly difficult by the fact that all the sources about the period in question were produced by the Moravians. Even when they relate conversations with individual Miskito in direct speech or report an oral tradition or a myth we have to bear in mind that we do not hear the Miskitos' own voice. Their ideas have been filtered first, through the necessity to make themselves understood by the missionaries, secondly, the missionaries' capacity of grasping the meaning of what they heard, and, finally, their need to pass on the information in a way comprehensible to readers in Germany or England.

1. The Mosquitia

When the first Europeans arrived on the Atlantic Coast in the 16th and 17th centuries, they found it inhabited by small groups of Indians who combined hunting, gathering and

slash-and-burn agriculture and who impressed their visitors with their dexterity at catching fish and turtle. Although Spain claimed this area as a part of her colonial empire, the Spanish authorities were not successful in taking possession of this stretch of coast - a fact they blamed on the allegedly "wild" character of the Indians and the support they received from Great Britain. British settlers who produced sugar and raised cattle on the Shore in the 18th century supplied the Miskito with fire arms and occasionally enlisted their support in attacks on Spanish towns or border posts. Although they never openly interfered with the Miskitos' daily life or political organisation, the continual contact with the colonial powers introduced changes of political and social structures which, over time, tuned into a permanent strain on the indigenous mechanisms of social organisation and conflict regulation. We shall return to this point later. Over almost 200 years, attempts at the conversion of the coastal population were sparse and unsuccessful. Occasionally, Englishmen had taught some Indians a few English words and the Lord's Prayer (Sloane 1707: LXXVII). Almost all attempts by Catholic priests to establish mission stations among the Miskito ended with bloodshed. Between 1768 and 1785 a Moravian preacher had lived on what is today the coast of Honduras, but he left because of age and ill health, without leaving any converts (Brieskorn, 1987: 26-32).

In the 1840s the British government tried to tighten its grip on the Mosquito Shore by sending out a "Consul-General and British Resident". The first diplomat on this post, Patrick Walker, attempted to modernise political structures and labour relations among Miskito and Creoles (descendants of Africans who had been brought to the Coast as slaves but had later been freed or had managed to escape). He introduced a labour code, a Council of State, and a militia, as well as initiating laws to protect the natural resources of the region (von Oertzen, 1990: 33-34). Aware of the necessity of an ideological backing for his institutional reforms he also tried to win the attention of the Anglican church for this area, but without

success (37). It is hardly surprising that he warmly welcomed the initiative of the Moravian church to send missionaries to the Mosquito Shore (now frequently called Mosquitia or Moskito). The Moravians' attention had been drawn to the region by a German colonisation project which did not materialize but which had led two missionaries to undertake an initial trip along the Coast to assess the possibilities for establishing a mission post there (Pfeiffer/Reinke, 1848). Based on their favourable report and with the permission of the Foreign Office, in 1849 the first three missionaries were sent to the Shore and installed themselves in the town of Bluefields.

For several years the missionaries worked almost exclusively among the *creole* population (Rossbach, 1986: 71). It was only in 1855 that they opened a post at Pearl Key Lagoon, a settlement of both *creole* and Miskito inhabitants, and in 1857 they started to work among the Rama Indians. Three years later, for the first time they ventured into an exclusively Miskito village. Over the following 20 years, three more stations were set up among the Miskito population. In 1863 the mission boasted approximately 600 converts; in 1880 there were 1145 (Schneider 1899: 97;106). One year later a religious movement, later known as the "Great Awakening" swept over the Coast. Within two years the number of Christians had more than doubled. It was with this movement that Moravian Protestantism finally established itself as a part of coastal identity. But the groundwork for this final breakthrough had been laid in 25 years of mission work, of day-to-day conflict and persuasion, lessons and reproaches. The present paper will deal with this preliminary period.

2. The Moravian church

Before we embark upon a closer examination of the mission on the Atlantic Coast, we have to glance briefly at the religious background of the Moravian church in order to understand the very special brand of Protestantism which they introduced among the coastal population.

The Moravian church or "Unity of Brethren" traces its roots back to the Czech reformation of the 15th century, to the followers of Jan Hus who was burned as a heretic in 1415. Several times they were almost extinguished, but small groups survived in Bohemia, Moravia and Poland. In 1722 the German Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf offered one group of fugitives shelter on his properties in Saxony where they founded the settlement of Herrnhut (Cragg, 1990: 103). The Count himself became increasingly involved with the spiritual life of this model village. In 1727 the inhabitants established themselves as the "renewed Unitas Fratrum" or Unity of Brethren with Zinzendorf as their leader. In its religious ideas the young community drew not only on the traditions of the exiled Moravians, but also on German Pietism. Moravian Christianity combined the emotional and subjective aspects of faith, the rejection of theological argument and doctrine, with a concentration on Christ rather than God, on passion and physical suffering (Cragg, 1990: 102-103). For some years in the mid-18th century worship in the Unity of Brethren took on forms of enthusiasm which were considered excessive by other Pietists, not to mention mainstream Lutherans. The so-called "Sifting Time" ended in the 1760s, but it left its traces in Moravian music and hymn books, and more generally in their language and imagery.

The insistence on the subjective experience of redemption, the conviction that it was impossible to earn divine grace by good works or deep remorse over past sins would later shape the missionary experience. Even though in the 19th century the Moravians laid great stress on religious instruction as a pre-requisite for baptism, conversion was still perceived as a personal revelation which was impossible to measure or to judge for outsiders, except by the intensity of the emotions expressed.

Very shortly after its new foundation (in 1732) the Church decided to focus on mission work (Neill, 1987: 202). In the following years Moravians went to the Dutch West Indies, to Surinam², South Africa, Jamaica, North America and Labrador.

3. The Missionary approach

Earlier visitors to the Atlantic Coast had not shown very great interest in the religious ideas and practices of the indigenous people. Those who made some enquiries agreed that the Miskito did not appear to worship any Superior Being, and if they believed in his existence at all they did not think that he would in any way interfere with their lives (Bell, 1862: 251-252). What they did fear were the actions of various spirits, connected with natural phenomena, certain localities, animals, and the dead. Controlling or placating these spirits was the task of the shamans or *sukias*. In their ceremonies they carried the spirit of a dead person to its resting place, cured the sick and foretold future events (M.W., 1732: 308). Some of these *sukias* apparently were political, as well as spiritual leaders (307). Burials or gatherings in preparation of military excursions were often combined with the ritual preparation and consumption of alcohol, during which, at some moment, the *sukia* would fall into trance to communicate with the spirit world. This was, in very general terms, what the Moravian missionaries may have known about the religious ideas of the people they had set out to convert to Christianity.

From the beginning, the missionaries were not interested in baptising as many people as possible as quickly as possible. For them, baptism and adoption into the congregation could only be the end of a very individual process of revelation. But in order to reach the state of "joyful apprehension of the love of God" (Knox, 1950: 410), first it was necessary to understand and accept the utter sinfulness and futility of human life. The Moravians in the Mosquitia found themselves confronted with the necessity to introduce the Miskito to the concepts of sin and evil in order to make them feel the need for salvation.

More than 100 years of experience had taught the missionaries that anguish and despair made people more receptive to their message³. They therefore visited villagers who were sick or dying or had recently lost a relative. In cases of sickness they employed their limited medical

knowledge and medicines, yet, the purpose of this assistance was not the healing of the body but gaining confidence and ultimately access to the souls. Some missionaries even went so far as to consider epidemics as signs of divine assistance to their work. As one missionary reported of a cholera epidemic which broke out shortly after his arrival in 1855:

"All souls were filled with fear and anxiety and from all sides Indians came in great numbers to ask our advice. Sad as all this was, we could not but see the merciful guidance of our dear Lord behind all this, in making way for the preaching of the Gospel among the Indians who are dead and indifferent. (...) Predicament and fear of dying have made people willing to listen to me." (Jürgensen, 1855: 180-181; Transl. E.v.O.).

But death, to the Moravians, was not only a threat to make people more receptive to their teaching, it contained also, in their eyes, the ultimate proof of faith. As one missionary put it: "I did draw the people's attention to the fact that we had not come to help them to a long life but rather to teach them how to die peacefully and with joy." (Siebörger, 1878: 193; Transl. E.v.O.). If a person died in the "certainty of grace" (Weber, 1978: 538), his relatives could trust that the deceased was redeemed, so they had no reason to grieve.

It was in these situations, preaching to the sick, the dying or afflicted, that old Moravian theology came to the fore: hymns, fervent prayer, a language full of vivid imagery would accompany a process which was often accentuated by haunting dreams, tears and trembling before culminating in the experience of salvation.

4. Missionary work and social disruption

The missionaries not only preached to individuals, of course. They held Sunday services, prayer meetings, Sunday school, day school, and "love-feasts", social gatherings during which the congregation would have a simple meal of bread and coffee with prayers and hymns. In their sermons they spoke out against polygyny, against the *sukias* and, most of all, against alcohol. They demanded that houses should have walls and partitions, and that people should

dress properly, especially when coming to church (Lundberg, 1872: 39). They refused to baptise children whose parents had not been married in church, and they did not hesitate to make use of church discipline, i.e. exclude individuals from the congregation of communicants for alleged offences (Loveland, 1982: 12-17). Even where there were no disciplinary measures taken, the missionaries quite openly showed their displeasure at individual behaviour of Christian and non-Christian Indians alike.

There is evidence for considerable opposition to the missionaries' activities. The first group to obstruct their work were, of course, the *sukias* (Lundberg, 1861: 250) because the missionaries had entered into open competition with them and threatened their position as spiritual leaders. When curing the sick, the missionaries did not attribute their successes to superior scientific knowledge but, not unlike the *sukias*, to spiritual powers which they could summon to their assistance (cf. Ranger, 1981: 262). No remedy was effective on its own account, but "God willing", "with the help of the Lord" etc. Moreover, they not only applied medicines, but also claimed to interpret natural phenomena, to defend the villages against oppression from Nicaraguan officials and to mediate in internal conflicts. The missionaries were quite aware of this competition and did not miss any opportunity to put a *sukia* in the wrong, not realising the similarities between themselves and the shamans they so fervently fought.

"The faith that people used to have in their sorcerers has been weakened a lot and I hope to see it eradicated soon. A few days ago a man suffered from a sore on his leg; the *sukia* told him he had been bitten by an evil spirit and tried to drive it out, but as the leg did not improve, the sick man finally came to see me, and with the help of the Lord, to whom I called, I was able to cure him. These poor people are also very much afraid of the rainbow, they think it is the flag which the water god flies when he is angry. I told them the story of Noah in all detail and explained to them the completely different significance of the rainbow. They were very amazed to hear that." (Lundberg 1861:135; Transl. E.v.O.).

The villagers were not greatly disturbed by these contests which had been quite frequent earlier among *sukias* challenging each other.

Since the end of the 18th century they had also known a few Africans who had introduced their own traditions of healing on the Coast (Bell 1899:24-25; Schneider 1890:50), thus the Miskito had grown used to having a choice between alternatives of spiritual assistance. In some villages people summed up the resemblance of shaman and missionary by calling the latter "parson-sukia" (Schneider, 1899: 77).

The ban on alcohol was at the centre of many of the conflicts created around and by the missionaries. It contained an aspect of protection insofar as it attempted to keep men out of the reach of traders who would treat them to rum before cheating them in the subsequent transactions of buying the Miskitos' products in exchange for manufactured goods. But they rejected the consumption not only of rum, but also of the traditional cassava-beer (*mishla*), and thereby deeply affected Miskito customs. The preparation and consumption of *mishla* was central to events like burials and other celebrations. *Mishla* was also served when a man enlisted his neighbours' and relatives' help in clearing a new garden plot or building a house. Those who had joined the Moravian congregations and therefore could not serve this traditional drink for work parties found it very hard to receive assistance from non-Christian villagers (Lundberg, 1861: 134).

The missionaries' rejection of polygyny also gave rise to conflicts, because the Moravians demanded that a man with several wives would have to choose one and get rid of the others before being accepted for baptism. This not only created resentment between families or villages but also disrupted established households based on the co-operation of several wives.

In sum, there were individual acts of resistance from *sukias* or polygynous husbands, there were converts who, to the missionaries' dismay, joined traditional feasts, but in the end the Moravians were accepted in all the villages where they had initiated schools and services. In the period from 1855 to 1880, in the villages with mission stations between one third and one half of the inhabitants joined the Moravian congregations.

5. Conditions for success

Considering the ways in which the Miskito rejected or ignored former attempts at conversion, one cannot help but ask why they behaved so differently towards the Moravians. Why did they allow outsiders to change almost all aspects of their lives and to attack social institutions like polygyny or communal feasts which lay at the core of their traditional social structure?

The reasons for this remarkable fact lie, in my opinion, in the 200 years of colonial contact which preceded the Moravians' arrival. Due to their delicate position on the borderline between the British and the Spanish colonial empires, the Miskito had been able to maintain a certain degree of independence. They had rejected several Spanish attempts to take possession of the coast, and were considered as allies rather than as subjects by the British. They had refrained from disturbing the British settlers on the Shore who, in turn, had not interfered with life in the Miskito villages. Still, two centuries of contact with Europeans had profoundly changed vital institutions of Miskito society and totally disrupted some of them. I shall name just a few points which I consider to be of particular importance:

1. As a result of continual warfare at the side of the British, the traditional Miskito leaders who had had to attract a following by personal qualities like courage and diplomatic skills had turned into permanent chiefs whose positions even tended to become hereditary. The so called Miskito king, in the 17th century a regional leader among others, had mutated into a mock monarch in the early 19th century. His sons were treated as princes by the British, sent to Jamaica for their education, and finished so estranged from the native population that they had ceased to be fluent in the Miskito language (Roberts, 1978: 87; Pim, 1869: 269). When, in 1786, the British retired from the Coast in consequence of an international treaty with Spain, the Miskito structures of leadership lost their basis. Within a few decades they crumbled and disappeared, leaving only village elders and a puppet king.

The feeling of defeat and abandonment which the Miskito had felt since the turn of the century was still present when they presented themselves to the missionaries as helpless and in need of education and protection.

2. Western manufactured goods had replaced several traditional products and thereby altered the sexual division of labour. Before contact, women had produced bark cloth and earthen vessels, now men received "osnaburg" and metal pots in exchange for meat, skins and other goods they brought back from the forest. In order to host a traditional "drink about", a man did not have to maintain a polygynous household and employ several women in the lengthy elaboration of cassava beer, he could just purchase a barrel of rum from one of the traders. So while on the one hand, polygyny took on forms of extreme privilege for some of the leading chiefs who claimed more than ten wives, on the other, in the early 19th century it had lost much of its material importance for many Miskito men.

3. The introduction of rum had also modified the ritual significance itself of the production and consumption of alcohol (Dunham, 1850: 73,100). Not only did traditional *drink abouts* become more violent, alcohol also became the standard drink on other and less formal occasions. Particularly women suffered from the changing drinking habits of their husbands and relatives.

4. Close contact with the Caribbean plantation economy had shown the Miskito the workings of colonial racism. Although they had been spared slavery, they had acted frequently within the system, chasing runaways or selling war captives to the slave traders. The racist criteria of skin colour and hair texture had been applied to them by almost all European visitors. After 1800 they became increasingly replaced in their position as trading partners of the British by the urban and English-speaking *creoles* until they found themselves below the Afro-Americans in the ethnic hierarchy of the Coast.

Conclusion

For two centuries the Miskito had enjoyed the position of middlemen, bridging the gulf between European values and techniques on one side and the hinterland as well as their own traditions on the other. In the first decades of the 19th century, however, the gulf had become too wide, and at the same time, the Miskitos' social organisation, having been stretched to the utmost of its flexibility, had lost its capacity to maintain an ethnic identity with no material basis to rest on. Unwittingly, the missionaries offered a way out of this crisis. At the price of giving up some of their already eroded social traditions, the Miskito managed to turn the mission efforts into an opportunity to reconstruct their ethnic self-definition.

The new village community, grouped around the church (in its physical layout) and the parson or lay-preacher and spiritually united by common worship, reinvigorated old traditions of social behaviour like respect for older people, fulfilment of kinship obligation, generosity etc., underpinning them with Christian values. The congregations also created new institutions to arbitrate in family and marriage conflicts.

Few years after initiating their work among the Miskito, the Moravians began to preach in Miskito and to translate hymns and prayers into the indigenous language, for which they also designed a system of transcription. By contributing to the preservation and further development of the language, they strengthened one of the central aspects of Miskito identity. At the same time, they helped maintain the distinction between Miskito and Creoles. So, although reinforcing the existing ethnical hierarchy, they also counteracted possible tendencies among the Miskito to assimilate and turn into Creoles.

All through the history of colonial contact, flexibility and the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances had been a salient feature of Miskito identity. For 200 years, this capacity had been tested so often and to such an extent, that it was close to exhaustion in the early 19th century. The reconstruction of

Miskito identity in the slow and painful process of Christianisation revived this flexibility and helped the Miskito survive as a distinctive ethnic group until today.

Notes

1. In the late sixties in Asang, a village on the Lower Rio Coco, out of an estimated population of 600 people only 27 were members of the „Church of God“. All the rest attended Moravian services. (Helms 1971:205). According to estimates in 1985 49% of the urban population of Bluefields were Moravians with 19% Anglicans, 11% Catholics and 9% Baptists (Gordon 1986:170).
2. The history of the Moravian mission among the Saramaka Maroons of Surinam has been documented in detail by Richards Price (Price 1990). After 48 years of mission work (1799-1813) the station among the Saramakas was finally closed down when the last of a handful of converts died. Of the thirty-nine missionaries who had served there, at least thirty died in the field (Price 1990:72).
3. Looking back on the Saramaka mission, one Moravian concluded, that its difficulties had been caused mainly by the fact that „...the Free Negroes (...) have in many regards a favourable situation with which they feel happy.“ (Riemer 1801:429, quoted in Price 1990:362).

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