Decolonizing Cultural Cooperation, Revitalizing Epistemologies of the South: Indigenous and Black Oral Traditions in Central America

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Artículos y ensayos

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Descolonizando la cooperación cultural, revitalizando las epistemologías del Sur: Tradiciones orales indígenas y afrodescendientes en Centroamérica

Descolonizando a cooperação cultural, revitalizando as epistemologias do Sul: tradições orais indígenas e afrodescendentes na América Central

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Abstract: From 2009 to 2012, the "Cultural Revitalization and Creative Productive Development on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua" program aimed to promote and revitalize cultural expressions, including oral traditions, of Indigenous and Black communities. This paper reflects some of its achievements, contradictions, and lessons. Building from experiences on the UNESCO team, and employing an ethnographic approach, I first expose how these processes underlie the daily struggle of Indigenous and Black people against colonization and Mestizo/Western hegemony in Nicaragua. Second, I delve into how the experience challenged our understanding of international cooperation in Central America, as well as my own positionality as an external and Mestiza researching with (not about) subaltern populations. My argument is that cultural revitalization processes of oral traditions not only entail the emergence of alternative epistemologies (from the South), but also destabilize the colonialist structure of cultural cooperation programs, and the identities of the collaborators.

Keywords: Nicaraguan caribbean coast, UNESCO, decolonizing methodologies, creole people, Rama people.

Resumen: Del 2009 al 2012, el programa multilateral "Revitalización cultural y desarrollo productivo creativo de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua" procuró la promoción de expresiones culturales, incluyendo tradiciones orales, de poblaciones indígenas y afrodescendientes. Este artículo ofrece una reflexión acerca de algunos logros, contradicciones y lecciones de este proyecto. Partiendo de la experiencia del equipo UNESCO y desde un enfoque etnográfico, expongo cómo estos mismos procesos conllevan una constante lucha contra el colonialismo y la hegemonía mestiza y occidental en Nicaragua. Complementariamente, problematizo cómo esta experiencia desafió tanto la comprensión de la cooperación internacional en Centroamérica, como mi propia posicionalidad como mestiza, externa, investigando con (y no sobre) poblaciones subalternas. Argumento que los procesos de revitalización cultural de tradiciones orales no solo permiten la emergencia de epistemologías alternativas (del Sur), sino que además desestabilizan la estructura colonialista de la cooperación cultural y las identidades de sus colaboradores.

Palabras clave: Caribe nicaragüense, UNESCO, metodologías descolonizadoras, comunidad creole, pueblo rama.

Resumo: De 2009 a 2012, o projeto multilateral "Revitalização Cultural e Desenvolvimento Produtivo Criativo da Costa do Caribe da Nicarágua" buscou a

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promoção de expressões culturais, incluindo tradições orais, de populações indígenas e afrodescendentes. Este artigo oferece uma reflexão sobre algumas conquistas, contradições e lições deste projeto. Com base na experiência da equipe da UNESCO e a partir de uma perspectiva etnográfica, explico como esses mesmos processos implicam uma luta constante contra o colonialismo e a hegemonia mestiça e ocidental na Nicarágua. De forma complementar, problematizo como essa experiência desafiou tanto a compreensão da cooperação internacional na América Central, quanto a minha própria posicionalidade de mestiça, externa, pesquisando com (e não sobre) populações subalternas. Argumento que os processos de revitalização cultural de tradições orais não só permitirem o surgimento de epistemologias alternativas (do Sul), mas também desestabilizam a estrutura colonialista da cooperação cultural e as identidades de seus colaboradores.

Palavras-chave: Caribe nicaraguense, UNESCO, metodologias descolonizadoras, comunidades creole, povo rama.

Introduction: A "Culture and Development" Intervention in Caribbean Central America

We think that these expressions of cultures, peoples, and different identities are not just to be recovered, put on display for exhibition, and used to describe who we were, without attention to the present. It is important to think not only about who the indigenous peoples are but, given their differences, how they can provide key motivations for change; change from that other thought, from that thought that, obviously, is in direct contradiction with Western thought... [2]

Fuente: (Macas, 2005, p. 37. My translation) [3].

During my first visit to the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua in 2009, I witnessed how culture and politics are inseparable. People introduced themselves referencing the Afro-descendant or Indigenous culture of belonging: "My name is... and I am Creole" or "I am Mayangna". For me, this was a completely new experience. At this moment, I had the epiphany that self-identification in greeting was an act of agency and cultural resistance [4]. I self-consciously became a Mestiza participating in the power dynamics of international cooperation and its rhetoric of "culture for development". Aside from that, I was from Costa Rica, not only one of the four countries still imagined as White in Latin America (Telles & Flores, 2013), but also a country with a complex history of border and immigration issues with Nicaragua (Sandoval-García, 2004).

My interlocutors –Nicaraguan, Indigenous and Black women and men– were more aware of cultural and identity politics than I was. Among the many lessons about Nicaraguan history, I learned that their "radical" embodiment of culture and politics [5] was not just a performance for executing a mega-project of Cultural revitalization, nor the achievement

of a political instrument to continue building autonomy, it was a "way of being" in the world (Urrieta, 2013).

The program "Cultural Revitalization and Creative Productive Development on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua" took place from August 2009 to August 2012. In the framework of international cooperation initiatives, the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG-F) financed a "Culture and Development" intervention [6], providing $8 864 166 "to help to reduce inequalities in the human, social and economic development of these communities through cultural reclamation, productive development, and a deepening of knowledge of tangible and intangible heritage" (MDG-F, 2008, p. 5. My translation) [7]. The program aimed to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Strengthen the capacities of Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups living in Nicaragua's Caribbean coast (Miskitu, Garífuna, Creole, Ulwa, Mayangna and Rama) in the areas of cultural revitalization, management, production and administration.

2. Strengthen cultural policies aimed at revitalizing and promoting the cultural diversity of the Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups of Nicaragua's Caribbean coast and safeguarding their cultural heritage.

3. The completion, systematization and dissemination of studies on tangible/intangible cultural heritage of the Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups of Nicaragua's Caribbean coast.

4. Strengthen the cultural identities of the Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups of Nicaragua's Caribbean coast through cultural/creative industries.

5. Promote the cultural/natural heritage of the Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups of Nicaragua's Caribbean coast through sustainable cultural tourism, contributing to social development and the safeguard of tangible/intangible cultural heritage (MDG-F, 2008, p. 6. My translation) [8].

The program required collaboration between national institutions, United Nations agencies and authorities from the Caribbean Autonomous Regions of the South (RACS) and North (RACN) of Nicaragua. The main governmental partners were the Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism (INTUR) and the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture (INC). The autonomous authorities included the Regional Autonomous Council of the Caribbean South (CRACS), the Regional Autonomous Council of the Caribbean North (CRACN), the Regional Autonomous Government of the Caribbean South (GRACS), and the Regional Autonomous Government of the Caribbean North (GRACN). In addition, eight local governments, and seven communal and territorial governments, participated in the program, as did two regional universities: the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast (URACCAN) and Bluefields Indian and

Caribbean University (BICU). This intervention prioritized subaltern populations of the Nicaraguan Caribbean as the main beneficiaries of the program. Those populations were the Miskitu, Mayangna, Ulwa and Rama, Indigenous communities; and the Creole and Garífuna, Black and Black/Indigenous[9] communities, respectively.

Among the UN executive agencies, UNESCO was largely responsible for most of the activities and products linked to the first three goals listed above. The Regional Office of UNESCO in Central America is located in San José, Costa Rica. From there, the project was managed and supervised by the Culture Sector Specialist, a White Andorran woman, and a Technical Monitor, myself, a Costa Rican Mestiza. The local team included the UNESCO National Project Officer, an Indigenous Miskitu woman; the Administrative Assistant, a Black Creole woman; the Technical Assistant of RAAS, a Black Creole man; and the Technical Assistant of RAAN, a Mestiza woman who self-identified as Miskitu[10]. As the Costa Rican expert and following guidelines from the Specialist, I visited the site in Nicaragua approximately every three months to assess the team's implementation strategies and achievements. The UNESCO Specialist visited the Coast towards the beginning and the end of the program, sharing UNESCO's expertise in working with diverse cultural heritages with other United Nations agencies and stakeholders.

Given the political, economic and social contexts surrounding the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua[11], as well as the different actors involved, the challenges of intervention and political negotiation were significant. Many questions about power dynamics and colonial legacies arose throughout the process: Who was really leading the "cultural" initiative? Was the program genuinely responding to the communal interests of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples? Were these efforts orchestrated by a programmatic bureaucracy of international cooperation, by Mestizo government interests, or by partisan movements? Responses to these tensions and internal contradictions included an effort to situate the beneficiary communities as the protagonists of the project's interventions. For example and thanks to their networking and experience, the local UNESCO team consulted the Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations on the design and scope of the activities. My colleagues also privileged participatory research, using intercultural, non-academic teams to lead community-based research and workshops. Nonetheless, these decolonizing intentions continually collided with a Western approach to conducting development projects and research amid subaltern populations[12].

My role in this process embodied the challenges of being an intercultural mediator, as described by Jaqolb'e Lucrecia Ximena García and Sergio Mendizábal (2011). From their experience working with Mayan epistemology, they describe intercultural mediation as a crucial aspect of the everyday life of cross-cultural teams. They go on to describe this process of dialogue and exchange as crucial to "building inclusive and emancipatory intercultural identities" (García & Mendizábal, 2011, p.

296). In this sense, I was not only part of an intercultural team, but also the interlocutor between San José, Costa Rica, and the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. This role involved the translation of administrative processes and conceptual approaches for my UNESCO colleagues in the field. My counterparts pointed out the discrepancies between the organization's requirements and the realities on the ground. We faced a constant challenge in finding alternate avenues for building an understanding and productive engagement between two seemingly polarized worlds.

As my contact with the on-site team and Indigenous and Black leaders increased, they taught me to recognize their knowledge production not only as a part of their cultural revitalization processes, but also as a form of continual anti-racist struggle and resistance [13]. Through long meetings and informal conversations in Bluefields, Bilwi, Managua and via Skype, I realized that identification and promotion of cultural expressions may invigorate cultural self-esteem, but also reinforces political mobilization, amid historically marginalized groups throughout the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. The cultural revitalization processes questioned the hegemonic ways of imposing a Western/Mestizo perspective of doing projects, over the endogenous knowledge; moreover, they destabilized the complex relation of power –and coloniality [14] – between the international cooperation system and the regional and communitarian authorities. From that position, the program was claimed not to be just another intervention "from above", but an opportunity for funding and generating dialogue and action around certain Indigenous and Black struggles that were already happening "from below".

Throughout the following sections, I illustrate how the local and non-local UNESCO teams, working side-by-side with representatives from each of the cultural groups, were driven to question the political economy of knowledge [15] (Rivera-Cusicanqui, 2012), and to engage with decolonizing methodologies [16] (Smith, 1999). The execution of cultural revitalization processes in general, and those related to oral traditions and narratives of Black and Indigenous populations in particular, entails the emergence of alternative epistemologies (De Sousa Santos, 2014; Mallon, 2012; Collins, 2000), which not only unveil the contested relationship between the so-called racial and ethnic minorities and the Mestizo majority in Nicaragua, but also the dynamics of colonialism crossing knowledge production and cultural cooperation projects in a broader scope. Ultimately, and following Catherine Walsh's (2012) assessment of "other knowledges" and critiques: "the ways that such positionings cross and build thought, and the ways that such thought orients praxis is of increasing interest to the movements themselves and to their intellectuals; it is constitutive of what we might term as new shifts or turns toward a politics, ethics, and epistemology of decoloniality" (p. 16).

Revitalizing and/or Decolonizing the Cultural Knowledge of Indigenous and Black Populations

One of the activities under UNESCO's supervision required "the revitalization and preservation of at least four expressions of intangible cultural heritage at risk, as emblematic experiences that will nurture the training, management and cultural promotion processes that characterize cultural revitalization actions" (MDG-F, 2008, p. 27. My translation) [17] . The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage (UNESCO, 2003) was the framework for the actions and scope of the revitalization process, understanding safeguarding as: "measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage" (UNESCO, 2003, Art. 2. 3).

During the three years of the program, the team organized various actions for revitalization and heritage protection in a tripartite process. The first phase was devoted to communitarian research for identifying and documenting endangered cultural expressions. The second phase involved inter-generational exchange. This process was executed through workshops with elders, children, and young adults. These meetings were focused on sharing the research results and reflecting on the scope of a shared cultural heritage. The third phase was dedicated to disseminate the cultural expressions of each of the participating groups. This process included a campaign communicating the results of the previous phases, and the publication of the "Identidades y Patrimonio Cultural" [18] collection (Collection Identities and Cultural Heritage).

The three-phase structure echoed the logic behind the intervention, an "inside-out" experience. The goal was to move from working with the cultural identity of the community to facilitating cultural diffusion and promoting initiatives that would ensure the community's self-sustainability. When selecting the forms of cultural expression that required revitalization, we took into consideration UNESCO's criteria. These guidelines suggested a focus on expressions that were rooted in cultural tradition, served as a source of inspiration and intercultural exchange, constituted a unique testimony to cultural traditions, were at risk of disappearing, and possessed exceptional value (UNESCO, 2003). After several workshops and agreements with communal and regional authorities, they activated at least ten processes of cultural revitalization. These programs were all directly or indirectly focused on oral traditions.

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines oral traditions and expressions, including language, as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003, Art. 2. 2). Four Indigenous and Black-Indigenous populations –Ulwa, Twahka, Miskitu and Garífuna– selected their languages and oral traditions as a priority for cultural recovery action. The Miskitu aimed to recover the oral history of the community of the Wangki River and gain recognition of

a transnational cultural community across the borders of Nicaragua and Honduras. The Rama people selected to revitalize their toponymy, as well as the oral stories, myths, and legends linked to their traditional places and place names. In addition, the Rama community chose to recover their gastronomy which, according the UNESCO Convention of 2003, falls within the domain of social practices tied to "knowledge, and practices about nature" (Art. 2). Meanwhile, the Black Creole community chose to revitalize their May Pole celebration. According to the UNESCO Convention, this expression may be catalogued as both a performing art and a festive celebration (Art. 2. 2). It is also considered an oral tradition because it includes the performance of myths and songs.

These various oral traditions are crucial constituents of the cultural distinctiveness of the Indigenous and Black populations we worked with. The participants proudly recognized its cultural value and knowledge: specific worldviews transmitted from generation to generation, and historical efforts to rescue ancestral knowledge as daily acts of cultural resistance against mestizo hegemony. The process generated a dynamic dialogue between elders, youth, and children who shared oral literature (including legends, myths, stories), songs, proverbs, prayers, recipes, memory, and everyday forms of verbal interaction.

The knowledge of Indigenous and Black communities was also gathered through the publication of an intercultural book, Cuentos, Leyendas y Tradiciones del Caribe Nicaragüense ("Stories, Legends and Traditions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean") (Kauffmann, Antonio & Zamora, 2012), and through the publication of the collection "Identidades y Patrimonio Cultural", mentioned above. Additionally, the Wani19 magazine served as a platform for disseminating communitarian research and workshop experiences, while the Sahlai20 magazine was dedicated to publishing the literature of the Mayangna people in their Twahka language. These publications were handed over to the communities' authorities, schools, and cultural organizations at the finalization of the program.

While these were gains in terms of documentation, some methodological and linguistic contradictions emerged throughout the revitalization process. First, the formats for organizing and systematizing the research conducted by communitarian researchers were adjusted to Western academic models; for example, framing the findings and supporting the sources. The transition from oral to written forms contradicted the very nature of knowledge transmission practiced by the Indigenous and Black communities with whom we were working. Additionally, the cultural revitalization approach was supposed to recognize non-Western knowledge systems and promote the visibility of alternative epistemologies. Ultimately, these alternative knowledge systems and forms of transmission were confined by Western scriptural economies (De Certeau, 1984). The paradox is illustrated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's critique who, as a Maori scholar states that research in the West:

is more than just research that is located in a positivist tradition. It is research which brings to bear, on any study of indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time, space and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialized forms of language, and structures of power (Smith, 1999, p. 42).

Smith's critique illuminates the tensions I observed and experienced during the UNESCO program. Western paradigms seemed to prevail by means of external (and colonialist) mechanisms for gathering, organizing and displaying information, and the same linguistic difficulties of the program. While most of the initiatives and activities were executed using native languages, Spanish was used for internal communications, reports, and publications. For the target communities, cultural and linguistic revitalization go hand-in-hand. Therefore, the use of their traditional languages during the program represented an important counter-point to the Hispanic cultural and political impositions mentioned before [21]. There were moments in discussions where language represented a barrier for communication, and Spanish was imposed as the lingua franca. Divulgation of the products was also in the language of the colonizer and the Mestizo majority, and translation worked again as betrayal [22].

How, then, might a relationship between oral traditions and a decolonial shift become central to these cultural revitalization processes? Drawing from the experience of the participants and the local UNESCO team, the answer requires focusing on two levels: first, the content of the tradition being revitalized and the dynamics of its performance; second, the inclusion of the discussions about the cultural and social meanings of cultural traditions and identities within the program government structure. To expand, I discuss two key cases of cultural revitalization which, on the one hand, demonstrate the entanglement of oral traditions and other worldviews and alternative knowledge; on the other hand, and as an epistemological turn, destabilized the project implementation and its political economy of knowledge (Rivera-Cusicanqui, 2012). The first case I present involves the cultural traditions of the Indigenous Rama community and their celebration of Shauda. The second case considers the May Pole festival of the Creole, Black population.

Rama Teachings about the Indivisibility between Humans and Nature

In the case of the Rama, the research team included two representatives of the Rama community and a mestiza researcher. They documented the community's gastronomic expressions by dialoging with elders and participating in their kitchen experiences. The team identified twenty-three recipes, some of which indicate similarities to other regional foods [23]. In their findings, the researchers reported other stories, myths, and legends invoked during the meals preparation. One example of this coupling of gastronomy and oral tradition is the celebration of the Shauda, a cultural expression that includes dances and rituals. The Shauda

allows us to understand the correlation between worldviews, knowledge systems and oral traditions for the Rama people:

> The Shauda is an ancient celebration related to the cuisine of the Ramas; it is the hunting of the manatee by indigenous Ramas. Once hunted, the manatee was brought to the community, cooked, and distributed in every home, and a manatee rib was given to each house. Each Rama community celebrates it. When the ancestors did not find manatees in Rama Cay, they sought it in any Rama territory, prepared it, and brought it back. The Shauda is a holiday remembered with joy by Rama elders because it celebrates the triumph of a man when trapping the manatee, since the manatee gives enough to feed the entire population who, at the time, lived in the Rama Cay Island. When a fisherman catches a manatee, the inhabitants hear the sound of a cow horn, and they know that the island had to celebrate Shauda. Women then prepare to cook soup with manatee meat and to feed all the people (UNESCO-CRAAS, SP.2012, p. 12. My translation) [24].

The previous description suggests a collective sense of feeding. The individual act of a hunter is recognized as a common experience. His prey is distributed among the inhabitants of the community and several people are involved in meal preparation. Eating become then an experience of solidarity. Complementary, the ritual that accompanies the Shauda includes an apology to the owner of the animals, "because all animals have their owners, who are spirits. If forgiveness is not asked, in a few days the hunter or someone in the community will die. To prevent this from happening you need to celebrate the Shauda" (UNESCO-CRAAS, SP.2012, p. 29. My translation) [25].

While some people may argue that hunting manatees is problematic because these animals are considered endangered species, this act is not for individual consumption, nor conducted for commercial purposes. Instead, hunting is part of the Rama's subsistence economy and preserves community livelihoods. The content and performance of the tradition recognizes that actions of individuals affect nature. For Rama people, as for other Indigenous groups, the indivisibility between man and nature traverse their social practices and offers an alternative and embodied epistemology [26]: if forgiveness is not requested, the act of aggression against the animal returns to the community in the form of human death, as a self-destruction metaphor.

The worldview of Rama people, by which nature is understood as a living entity, is also illustrated by the publication "Ngalingtupkiyubusukaakar: *Debajo de cada piedra vive un espíritu*" ("Ngalingtupkiyubusukaakar: Under every stone lives a spirit"). This document offers the results of the Rama's cultural mapping [27]. The community consider their worldview as an intangible heritage that crosses their cultural resources inventory. Their ancient knowledge may become even tangible in the form of sacred stones with a specific place in their cultural mapping. These traditions and epistemics of nature are also invoked by Rama leaders when defending their territories against Mestizo peasants and the extension of the agricultural frontier (UNESCO-CRAAS, SP.2012, p. 8).

The publication "Stories, Legends and Traditions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean" mentioned above (Kauffmann, Antonio & Zamora, 2012) also included other oral traditions of the Rama, along with the Shauda. The Rama community identified these oral texts, including legends and beliefs as a vehicle for the transmission of the community's values. They also saw them as a way of understanding their lives and those of other non-Western communities. The introduction to this compilation of oral traditions states that when a story references nature, it is normally accompanied by moral values. From this perspective, "the relationship between indigenous people and nature and how to care for flora and fauna is highlighted" (Kauffmann et al., 2012, p. 10. My translation) [28] . Reflections about the place of humans in nature, the relationships with their community, and with other human beings outside of their community also arise in the second example of cultural revitalization.

The Creoles Celebrate Black Solidarity

The second case study turns our attention to Creoles, one of the Black communities of the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua [29] . Representatives of this community in the RACN and the RACS participated in the recovery and enhancement of their May Pole celebration [30] . This ritual is a cultural expression rich in heritage and integrates music, dance, performance, ritual, entertainment, gastronomy, and oral traditions. As in the previous cases, the research team dialogued with the elders and documented their conversations and experiences. In the second phase, they organized workshops to promote exchanges between the elderly, youth, and children. These sessions generated debates about the current meaning of the celebration for Creoles and the inhabitants of the Caribbean coast in general. The participants critically remarked, time and time again, that what was routinely performed on the stages of Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, did not represent Creole culture and reproduced anti-black racist stereotypes [31] . The performance of May Pole has been reduced to a choreography of sensual (and sexual) movements, and to a costume that hypersexualizes the bodies of the dancers, especially (and unsurprisingly) Black women (Morris, 2010). Members of these racialized and cultural community engaged with a cultural revitalization plan distinguishing between a private May Pole celebration that reinforced their Black heritage; and a public display of "another" product rooted in the cultural tradition, but designed for the economic sustainability of the community.

Whereas the second product needs to be revised and validated by the community, the first space of May Pole transcends an artistic performance, and entails an endogenous Creole episteme of the myth, the sacred, and the so-called arch of fraternity. Ms. Lizzie [32] , an emblematic cultural performer of May Pole in Bluefields, evokes this "other" experience of May Pole:

> I can see places in my neighborhood, Cotton Tree, where they danced May Pole, appreciating the dancers with their **long skirts and head ties** moving around the tree like a **sail boat**. I could also appreciate the musician that from time to time entered in the circle, wearing his old jacket, trying to compete with the lady in the circle. The voice of the vocalist and the echoes of the choir sounded loud and clear. When we dancing in the evening and we took down the tree, we ate the fruits, in the meanwhile, the adults went **on the street** with the tree forming the **arch of friendship**, under which they passed asking people on the street to join them with Tulululu (Forbes-Brooks, 2011, p. 16. My emphasis).

The passage reinforces the relationship between May Pole and communality for the Creoles. According to the team of researchers, younger Creole generations are currently being encouraged to engage in a self-consciousness process of being Black within their private spheres (Omier et al., 2012). Their cultural awareness is nourished by the story tellers who recount the roots of the festival during the "celebraciones de barrio" (neighborhood celebrations). The elders insist on the present value of the myths and foundational beliefs that inform May Pole celebrations. They also celebrate other oral traditions such as legends, stories, songs, and riddles. For example, they emphasize the importance of recognizing Mother Earth as the origin of all goods, singing a song in her honor. As Miss Lizzie, explains:

> …May Pole should be one of our traditions, because Maya Ya is the goddess of fertility. In my younger days we celebrated Maya Ya during May. As kids, we used to be the first to start the party, presenting a little dance around the tree … There is a tree especially called May Pole because it gives no fruit. Instead, it only gives flowers, like many humans, men and women, who cannot bear fruits. They had to know which tree to cut: it is called the Pole because its trunk is long and all branches are at the top of the tree. The first song they sang was "Maya Ya laas im key" (Maya Ya lost her key), saying that the goddess of May cannot bear fruit. That is, she cannot have children (Omier et al., 2012, pp. 8-9. My translation) [33].

During the revitalization process, Creole cultural agents constantly referred to the subversive character of this practice. Participants noted that May Pole was a celebration that came to the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua with the British during the nineteenth century. The colonized populations embraced the practice through mimesis and parody, coinciding with the appropriation and adaptation processes of the May Pole celebration that took place within the inland regions of the Caribbean. The enslaved community's transformation of a tradition claimed by the British masters served as a challenge to colonial authority. The European customs, dances, myths, and rituals associated with the May Pole were Africanized, defying the control exerted by Anglo culture and systems over the domestic spaces and bodies of the Black population. The performance of the May Pole celebration was then, and is still considered, an act of resistance (Hodgson-Deerings, 2008). As a celebration in the private sphere, it represents values and experiences of being and surviving as an Afro-descendant community. When May Pole festivities move from house patios (internal) to the street (external), and from one barrio to the next, the community celebrates blackness and Creole camaraderie within the public sphere:

On the last day of May, the "Tulululu" was danced, and they marched through the streets designated by the coordinators for ending in another neighborhood, as the top point. The three participating barrios were Old Bank, Beholden, and Punta Fría. All the public participated in saying farewell to May. In those days, there was no band, and they used instruments they built themselves. These included the drum tub, the maraca, and the trumpet cardboard which was used to gently blow Tulululu. All the participants shouted "pass anda," meaning "passing under the arch of friendship". Sometimes, you may not have seen a person for a long time, but the Tulululu attracted the entire population (Omier et al., 2012, p. 9. My translation) [34].

From a dynamic and transformative perspective, the cultural revitalization of May Pole embodies a rereading of what it means to be Black on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. The festivities introduce blackness in public and private spaces, both symbolically and physically. Participants recognize their celebration honoring life and building solidarity. They identify the relationship between their oral traditions and "other" knowledge. The parade, costumes, dance, songs, and artistic performances function then as an embodied Black epistemology [35] (Collins, 2000) which speaks again about the relationship between humans and nature.

From that stance and through both revitalization processes, the UNESCO team was immersed into other worldviews and systems of knowledge. We also learned that this knowledge is relational, involving interaction and exchange between humans and nature, and humans within communities. For Shawn Wilson, indigenous systems of knowledge are built "on the relationships between things, rather than on the things themselves" (2008, p. 74). Comprehending alternative epistemologies departs, then, from the view that concepts or ideas are not as important as the relationships that went into forming them. It also requires the recognition of a wide range of relationships, including "interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental and spiritual relationships, and relationships with ideas" (p. 74).

Compared with Western epistemics, the experiences of the Shauda and May Pole celebrations create an archive of alternative knowledge. Moreover, they entail a performance of cultural identities that contest Mestizo cultural hegemony. Throughout the account and performance of their traditions, they face –and challenge– the spread of prejudices and stereotypes produced by Mestizo-dominant groups among younger generations of Miskitu, Mayagna, Rama, Ulwa, Creole and Garífuna. Despite efforts to guarantee the reproduction of their inherited traditions within their private spaces and communities, children and young people face the choice to either assimilate to hegemonic culture or participate in cultural resistance on a daily basis. Cultural traditions and their epistemological frameworks become, then, political in relation with the dominant group. Along the same lines, the mere execution of the revitalization processes destabilized the structure of governance and views of the cultural cooperation program, and the positionalities of every participant and collaborator, as explained in the following section.

A Place for the Oral, a Right for a Distinctive (South) Voice in a Cultural Cooperation Project

In his book, T*he Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon urges Third World countries to resolve the global problems caused by Western colonial paradigms. He argues that the invention of a new humanity will emerge from the voice of the wretched, and consequently, from a non- Western perspective (1963, p. 160). Fanon articulates the scope of decolonization not only in terms of political liberation, but also in terms of an epistemological turn. The rise of epistemologies of the South are an example of this shift which, for Boaventura De Sousa Santos, is essentially political as well (2014). As a scholar and activist, he points out that "without a conception of an alternative society, the current state of affairs, however violent and morally repugnant, will not generate any impulse for strong or radical opposition and rebellion" (2014, p. 24). For De Sousa Santos, other non-Western conceptions of the world include grammars of resistance, particularly "those of indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples who have become very politically active in the last thirty years, particularly in Latin America" (2014, p. 21). The revision of these alternative grammars allows societies to craft their own answers for contemporary social struggles, as Fanon (and others before and after him) have demanded. Epistemologies of the South open the possibility to believe that "capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and all other satellite-oppressions can be overcome" (2014, p. 11).

From generation to generation, and despite extensive forms of official and non-official repression [36], Indigenous and Black populations of the Nicaraguan Caribbean have been sharing their cultural traditions and their own episteme via oral transmission. As native minority groups continue to narrate, experience, and perform their oral traditions, they challenge the conception of subaltern populations as passive. They demonstrate their agency by reproducing their worldviews within a contemporary cultural realm and an ecology of knowledges [37]. Additionally, those who share oral traditions are tied to their traditions not just by the act of transmitting them, but through the actualization of their social functions. Bauman (1975) even suggests that performers have the potential "for subverting and transforming the status quo" (p. 305) in their society (e. g. Miss Lizzy in Bluefields). The agency involved in transmitting and reflecting on oral traditions entails a dynamic movement from the individual to the collective, from the private to the public, from the marginal to the center. This movement helps form a path for recognition and transformative politics through a rigorous questioning of the Mestizo order and its Western political economy of knowledge (Rivera-Cusicanqui, 2012).

The execution of each of the cultural revitalization processes questioned the incompleteness of Western paradigms and opened a window to wider epistemological projects. And yet, the participants faced the challenge of validating their knowledge, regularly labeled as folkloric or "local, traditional, alternative, [or] peripheral" (De Sousa

Santos, 2014, p. 200). The prejudices against Indigenous and Black worldviews permeated the planning and strategic meetings of the program. For example, there was a constant questioning of why revitalize superstitions (legends, myths, beliefs) and obstructing community access to "development and modernization". During one of my visits, one Mestizo political leader pointed out that legends such as the Líwa Mairin (for the Miskitu) and the Sea Maid (for the Rama), paralyzed the inhabitants of the communities, rendering them unable to fish or work. Our UNESCO Miskitu officer pointed out the alternative worldviews deployed through the stories "between the lines". She invited him to rethink how ideas about progress and development –Modernity– ignore cultural backgrounds. Although his reductive comprehension of oral traditions was grounded in notions of White and Western supremacy, his way of judging the Indigenous knowledge verbalized *vox populi* which, in Nicaragua, is the Mestizo voice.

The participants involved in the cultural revitalization processes, including the native technicians who were hired by the different United Nations agencies, did not consider their oral traditions as dead and something that needed to be resuscitated. Neither did they consider ancestral knowledge as something that was distancing them from development. They recognized that the Miskitu's Sihkru Tara or Urah-Li, the Garífuna's Walla Gallo, the Ulwa's foundational myths, the Creole's May Pole celebrations, and the Rama's Shauda were part of their cultural identities and experiences of being, doing and knowing in the world (Urrieta, 2013). In other words, their traditions arose not just as an object to intervene with or to be "revitalized". They were an embodied experience through which Indigenous and Black participants called in to question the implementation of a project of cultural cooperation.

In engaging these perspectives, I realized that every time the program participants advocated for their own intellectual framework, they were invigorating the systems of knowledge and grammars of resistance of the South (De Sousa Santos, 2014). By embracing cultural revitalization as an ontological quest, and recognizing the persistence of their oral traditions, they embodied distinctive, autochthonous knowledge systems which contested Western epistemologies, and ways of doing and working with culture (Smith, 1999). For some Indigenous and Black communities in Central America, everyday ways of narrating and interpreting the world rearticulate the South as locus of enunciation, and as a site of agency and political transformation.

I am not romanticizing the situation of Indigenous and Black participants. When navigating Mestizo (and donors) politics, I have also viewed contradictions between their interests, driven by historical clashes between regions and power distribution among the indigenous dominant group, the Miskitu [38], and the Black majority, the Creoles. Yet, through their contingent and somehow counterhegemonic alliances, participants creatively deployed their tactics –through the recurrence of "isolated actions, blow by blow" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37)– of questioning, negotiating, and navigating power imbalances, sometimes

as simple as claiming a "language switching". Counter narratives of their own cultural practices subverted the voices of the external "experts"; particularly during methodological or planning meetings, where they not only demanded the right to be present, but also voiced their ideas and expectations in the institutional sphere.

Participants denounced the racism and patriarchy at play during the so-called validation meetings, pointing out the moments where Indigenous and Black people's opinions –especially those of women– were being undermined. They criticized the paternalistic, colonial approach taken by international agencies that claimed the knowhow, the results, and the intangible products of the program as their own, and then displayed "cultural products" with their institutional logos. Whereas at the end the cultural knowledge was "returned" to the community in a series of publications, other formats of exchange may have emerged through a deeper engagement with the participants' understanding of their traditions; for example, non-written, not in Spanish, and not displayed in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, just to name a few options.

Every day of execution and decision-making was intersected by power relations related to race, gender, class (Collins, 2000) and the pervasive dominance of the western understanding of development and culture. Even though the program's design and its cultural revitalization approach departed from a consultative process, tensions surrounding the distribution of funds and the nature of program activities unveiled the different hierarchies at work. Power structures operated not only at the national, regional, and institutional level, but ultimately through the overall dominance of the White-Mestizo male voice that prioritized the interests of the donor over the expectations of the "target populations".

Despite these contradictions, Indigenous and Black communities recognized that this was a cultural intervention without precedence on the Caribbean coast. From that stance, they embraced the possibilities of having the opportunity and the resources to invest in the revitalization of their culture. But they did it critically, proving that their alternative systems of knowledge represented a viable and pertinent response to current social demands. Their struggle for cultural –and political– autonomy surpassed the script of the donor, the UNESCO conventions, and the neoliberal multicultural apparatus[39] (Hale, 2005). Ultimately, the experience of the program challenged the structural governance of cultural cooperation, and our understanding of alternative epistemologies, traditions and ways of living, knowing, and being in an imagined Mestizo Central America.

In my own experience, the insistence of people offering alternative worldviews triggered a constant reflection about who has the right to define a cultural program's agenda, format, and leadership. Each revitalization process helped me understand the communities' insistence on differentiating their worldviews from those of the Mestizo dominant group (myself included). I witnessed how the program's participants continually and actively claimed the cultural distinctiveness of the six Indigenous and Black populations, the beneficiaries of the intervention.

They invoked the words and knowledge of their ancestors as the foundation of their cultural distinctiveness, while questioning values of freedom, justice and solidarity. After these three years of intensive work and personal growing, some of us "whether Native or non-Native, recognized a certain commonality in our intellectual work as translators, as people who inhabit frontiers between worlds, or as bisagras (hinges) who serve as connections between disparate knowledges, cultures, and places" (Mallon, 2012, p. 4).

I traveled back to Nicaragua in November 2014. I was invited to give a presentation about the relationship between culture and development for the launch of the Diplomat "Gestión Cultural Para el Desarrollo" (Cultural Management for Development) at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in Managua. I was involved in the design of the curricula. During my presentation, I invited the audience to collectively rethink culture and development, recognizing the economic, social, and political urgencies of our Central American countries. This time we tried to name and unmask the colonial legacy of our own understanding of development.

At the end of the presentation, I spent some time in the hotel to share ideas and experiences with my colleagues from the Caribbean coast. I asked them if they were still committed to the cultural revitalization processes that we started together five years ago, or if the efforts had dissipated due to a lack of funding. They laughed, as they normally do when faced with my questions. They asked me: "Why do you think we are here?" They then pointed out the presence of a new generation of "costeños" participating in our forum. One young Miskitu woman of the RACN and one young Creole woman of the RACS are currently supporting the revitalization of their oral traditions, despite not knowing each other. The Miskitu woman is part of an Indigenous women's collective called "Mujeres creativas". The Creole woman is conducting her own research as part of her undergraduate degree at the intercultural University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean coast (URACCAN).

As mentioned in the introduction, their "radical" entanglement of culture and politics surpasses the execution of a mega project of cultural revitalization, even the achievement of legal instruments that "grant" their autonomy, as the Law 28. Their complex and fluid identities inform their political struggles and vice versa. Their interventions keep transforming mine as well. Echoing Mallon and her decolonization project[40]: "I know myself to be part of the system of power yet am also in constant conversation with other forms of knowing, thinking, speaking, and silencing" (2012, p. 87). I also believe that an unexplored Central American Caribbean space is embedded within the systems of knowledge of different Indigenous and Black peoples. This space goes beyond the historical image of poverty and violence that international cooperation tries to redeem. A decolonial epistemic turn is not only ontological for the communities in question, but also an imperative in the pursuit for new

avenues of racial, sexual, gender, ethnic, and class justice(s) for the Central American region.

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Notas

2   "Nosotros pensamos que estas expresiones de culturas, de pueblos y de identidades diferentes, no son para recuperarlas simplemente, y ponerlas en la vitrina de la exhibición, o para decir quiénes hemos sido y quiénes somos sin consecuencias para el presente; sino que es importante reflexionar no solamente respecto de lo que son los pueblos indígenas, sino –en tanto y en cuanto son diferentes– respecto de en qué manera pueden aportar elementos fundamentales para el cambio, desde ese pensamiento distinto, desde ese pensamiento que, obviamente, va en contradicción directa del pensamiento occidental..." (Macas, 2005, p. 37).

3   Luis Macas is an Indigenous intellectual from Ecuador.

4   I am following Doris Sommer's (2006) notion of culture as "the vehicle for agency" (p. 2). Also, I agree with Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar's (1998) understanding of identity and cultural politics "fostering alternative modernities" (p. 9).

5   Nicaragua represents a paramount case of legal empowerment for Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, particularly regarding Law No. 28, through which Caribbean Coast regions gained their Autonomy in 1987. For a comprehensive analysis of the formulation of Law 28, see Chapter 4 of "Race and the Politics of Solidarity" (Hooker, 2009). For an extensive analysis of Black-Creole and Indigenous Miskitu Politics, see Gordon (1998) and Hale (1994).

6   The Millenium Development Goals Fund was created in 2007 through a donation made by the Spanish Government to the United Nations System. The MDG-Fund financed programs in 50 countries, focused on areas such as gender, environment, water resources management, nutrition, youth and employment, and culture and development. "Culture and development" was the focus for the Nicaraguan Program. The Master Plan for Spanish Cooperation 2005-2008 understands culture entangled with development, and as a tool for strengthening social cohesion and promoting creative responses in the face of social, economic, political and ecological challenges within developing countries. See more at http://mdgfund.org/

7   [El Programa tiene el objetivo de] "contribuir a reducir brechas de equidad en el desarrollo humano, cultural, social, económico de pueblos indígenas y afro descendientes de la Costa Caribe, a través de la revitalización cultural, el desarrollo productivo y la profundización en el conocimiento y el ejercicio de

derechos vinculados a su patrimonio material e inmaterial" (MDG-F, 2008, p. 5).

8   1.   Fortalecidas las capacidades de revitalización, gestión, producción y administración cultural de los pueblos indígenas y afrodescendientes de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense: Miskito, Garífuna, Creole, Ulwa, Mayangna y Rama.

         2.   Políticas Culturales fortalecidas para la revitalización y promoción de la diversidad cultural de los pueblos indígenas y afrodescendientes de la Costa Caribe, y la protección del patrimonio cultural.

         3.   Estudios generados, sistematizados y divulgados sobre el patrimonio cultural material e inmaterial y las expresiones de diversidad y creatividad culturales de los pueblos indígenas y afrodescendientes de la Costa Caribe.

         4.   Fortalecidas las identidades culturales de los pueblos indígenas y afrodescendientes de la Costa Caribe a través de emprendimientos culturales y creativos.

         5.   Potenciada la herencia cultural y natural de los pueblos indígenas y afrodescendientes de la Costa Caribe a través de un turismo cultural responsable y sostenible que contribuya al desarrollo social y a la preservación del patrimonio tangible e intangible (MDG-F, 2008, p. 6).

9   See Anderson (2009) for a discussion about the entanglement of Blackness and Indigeneity and its relation with Garífuna cultural politics in Central America.

10   Despite being born in the so-called "Pacífico", with no indigenous ancestors, this woman self-identified as Miskitu. She referred to her identity based on her affective links with the community and the knowledge of Miskitu culture and language.

11   The Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua are called the North Atlantic Caribbean Region (RACN) and the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RACS). Combined, the autonomous regions make up approximately 47 % of Nicaragua's national territory. According to the UNDP Report of 2005, "Does Nicaragua assume its diversity?", approximately 600 000 inhabitants populate the Atlantic Coast. The ethnic distribution of the population includes indigenous Miskitu, Mayangna (including the cultural and linguistic groups of the Twahkas, Panamahkas and Ulwas) and Rama communities, as well as Afro-descendants, known as Creoles and Garífunas. These groups coexist with Mestizo populations, who constitute 72 % of the population of both regions. The Atlantic regions display the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) in Nicaragua (PNUD, 2005). There are historical tensions between these regions and the western half of the country, known as the Pacífico, having to do with Mestizo nationalist state formation and the racialization of the Caribbean space (Hooker, 2005; 2009).

12   Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) grapples with the political and social conditions of research in her renowned book Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples. Despite their good intentions, most of the non-natives researchers "frame their research in ways that assume that the locus of a particular research problem lies with the indigenous individual or community rather than with other social or structural issues" (p. 92). This bias frame indigenous research in terms of the "indigenous problem". She proposes decolonizing methodologies, which privilege "indigenous concerns, indigenous practices and indigenous participation as researchers and researched" (p. 107), as a path for self-determination.

13   As suggested in the previous footnote, the relationship between the Pacific and Caribbean coasts of Nicaragua has been historically problematic. The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, formerly a British protectorate known as the Mosquito Kingdom (comprising present-day Nicaragua and Honduras), has

been historically marginalized in Nicaraguan nationalist discourse, which privileges Hispanic Mestizo identity. A territory of dispute since the colonial era and a contentious space during the Sandinista Revolution (Gordon, 1998; Hale, 1994), the Caribbean region poses a threat to the hegemony of the Nicaraguan Mestizo State. Costeños embrace autonomy as an ongoing political project.

14   Anibal Quijano (2007) argues that colonial structure, understood as a power structure, is a framework within which other social class or state relations operate. His definition of "coloniality of power" considers the relations between dominators and the dominated, where those who are the exploited may be understood in terms of race, gender and class. A racial approach shows that "it is very clear that the large majority of the exploited, the dominated, the discriminated against, are precisely the members of the 'races', 'ethnies', or 'nations' into which the colonized populations, were categorized in the formative process of that worldpower, from the conquest of America and onward" (p. 168).

15   Silvia Rivera-Cusicanqui transcends Mignolo's concept of "geopolitics of knowledge", and proposes "the task of undertaking a 'political economy' of knowledge. Not only because the 'geopolitics of knowledge' in the decolonial sense is a notion that is not put into practice (it rather raises a contradiction through gestures that recolonize the imaginaries and minds of intellectuals of the South), but also because it is necessary to leave the sphere of the superstructures in order to analyze the economic strategies and material mechanisms that operate behind discourses" (2012, p. 102).

16   See note 8.

17   "Revitalizar y salvaguardar al menos cuatro (4) expresiones del patrimonio cultural inmaterial en peligro, como experiencias emblemáticas que nutran los procesos de capacitación, gestión y promoción cultural" (MDG-F, 2008, p. 27).

18   Based on the experiences of the Program, UNESCO published the "Manual Para la Revitalización del Patrimonio Inmaterial de la Costa Caribe" ("Handbook for the Revitalization of Intangible Heritage in the Caribbean Coast"). This text was part of the "Culture for Development Toolkit #3" from the collection Identities and Cultural Heritage.

19   *Wani* is a periodical of the Center for Research and Documentation of the Atlantic Coast, Nicaragua (CIDCA).

20   Sahlai is a local magazine devoted to the promotion of Mayangna culture.

21   See notes 3, 7 and 9.

22   I am echoing the classical expression "Traduttore, traditore", which resonates in this context due to the inequities in linguistic/political power.

23   These recipes were compiled in an intercultural notebook, entitled Arte Culinario Tradicional ("Traditional Culinary Arts") (Kauffman, Antonio, Álvarez & Zamora, 2012).

24   El Shauda es una celebración ancestral que se relaciona con la cocina de los Rama; es la cacería de los indígenas rama del manatí. Una vez que se cuenta con la presa, el manatí era traído a la comunidad, se cocinaba y se distribuía en cada una de las casas, donde además se entregaba una costilla del manatí. Cada una de las comunidades Rama celebra el Shauda. Cuando los ancestros no encontraban manatíes en Rama Cay, lo buscaban en el cualquier parte del territorio Rama, lo preparaban y lo traían de vuelta. El Shauda es una fiesta recordada con alegría por los ancianos Rama porque celebra el triunfo del hombre que atrapa a un manatí, puesto que el manatí proveía suficiente comida para alimentar a todo el pueblo que, en aquellos tiempos, vivía en la isla de Rama Cay. Cuando un pescador atrapa un manatí, los habitantes escuchan el sonido del cuerno de la vaca y sabe que la isla debe celebrar el Shauda. Las mujeres se preparan para cocinar la sopa con carne de manatí y para alimentar a todo el pueblo (UNESCO-CRAAS, SP.2012, p. 12).

25   "porque todos los animales tienen sus dueños que son espíritus. Si no se pide perdón, en pocos días el cazador o alguien en la comunidad morirá. Para evitar que esto pase, necesitas celebrar el Shauda" (UNESCO-CRAAS, SP. 2012, p. 29).

26   As a critique of a Eurocentric epistemology where knowing nature leads to mastering and dominating the world, the alternative epistemologies of Indigenous knowledge systems suggest a sacred kinship between humans and other creations of nature (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p. 43). However, these kinds of images are problematic not only in terms of idealizing or essentializing indigenous communities, but also within current debates surrounding economic and sustainable development in their territories (Anaya, 2005; La Duke, 1994).

27   One of the activities of the program was to produce a cultural mapping of each of the Indigenous and Afro- descendant populations. The results were published as seven cultural notebooks, with the first book introducing the mapping process and methodology, and the remaining six focusing on the cultural mapping of each group: Miskitu, Ulwa, Rama, Mayangna, Garífuna and Creole.

28   "[R]escata la relación de estos pueblos con la naturaleza y las formas de cuidar la flora y la fauna" (Kauffmann et al., 2012, p. 10).

29   Baron L. Pineda in Shipwrecked Identities: Navigating Race on Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast explain that the term "Creole" on Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast refers "to an Afro-Caribbean group whose ancestral ties and contemporary affiliations were with Afro Caribbean populations of Belize, Jamaica, and the Cayman Islands" (2006, p. 8). For Gordon (1998), Creole identities are more complex, related with their "common sense" and suggesting an alignment with black mobilizations. The term differs from the translation of "Criollo".

30   More broadly understood as a dance around a tall wooden pole decorated with colorful ribbons with associated music and stories reminiscent of the European "ribbon pole". The celebration is performed during the month of May among the black communities in the Autonomous Region of the Atlantic South (Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon, Corn Island), but also in the Autonomous Region of the Caribbean North of Nicaragua (Bilwi). May Pole arrived to the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua during the nineteenth century. As a tribute to fertility, the practice reflects the dynamics of cultural and spiritual exchange within the circum-Caribbean suggested by Putnam (2013).

31   For the participants, what is staged at Managua, the Mestizo center, does not represent Creole culture and reproduces stereotypes about black communities. See Morris (2010).

32   Elizabeth Nelson is one of the most important cultural figures of Bluefields. Her oral history was published during the program in the book, Memories of Miss Lizzie (Forbes-Brooks, 2011).

33   ...el May Pole debe ser una tradición nuestra. Maya Ya es la Diosa de la fertilidad. En mis días de juventud, nosotros celebrábamos Maya Ya en el mes de mayo. Como niños acostumbrábamos a ser los primeros para empezar la fiesta, presentando un poco de baile alrededor del árbol (...). Hay un árbol especialmente llamado May Pole, porque no da frutas, sólo da flores, igual que muchos huma- nos, hombres y mujeres, que no pueden dar frutos. Específicamente, tenían que saber cuál árbol cortar: uno llamado Pole, porque su tronco es alargado y todas las ramas están en la cima del árbol. La primera canción que cantaban era "Maya ya, Maya ya perdió su llave", diciendo que la Diosa de Mayo no puede dar frutos o sea no puede tener hijos (Omier et al., 2012, pp. 8-9).

34   El último día de mayo se baila el "Tululú", con el cual desfilaban en la calle designada por los coordinadores y finalizaba en otro barrio donde era el punto tope. Los tres barrios participantes eran Old Bank, Beholden y Punta Fría. Todo el público participaba despidiendo el mes de mayo. En esos tiempos

no había banda musical, usaban instrumentos construidos por ellos mismos, como el tambor de tina, maraca y una trompeta de cartón con la cual soplaban dulcemente el Tulululú y todos gritaban "pass anda", que significa "pasando por debajo del arco de la amistad". A veces, no mirabas a una persona por mucho tiempo, pero el Tulululú atraía a toda la población (Omier et al., 2012, p. 9).

35 Patricia Hill Collins (2000) adheres to a Black feminist epistemology predicated on the everyday theorizing Black women engage with in relation to lived experiences. Collins sees Black feminist thought as giving shape and voice to all Black women who have been systematically suppressed and controlled (p. 11). Black feminist epistemology has different criteria: the credibility of wisdom derived from lived experiences (p. 275); the use of dialogue in the spirit of connectedness to assess the validity of knowledge claims (p. 280); an ethics of caring which privileges emotion and empathy (p. 282); and an ethics of personal accountability wherein the knowledge producer assumes responsibility for their claims (p. 284).

36 An examination of the history of Nicaragua will show the repression of native cultures during the Somoza dictatorship, as well as a context of contingent alliances with the Sandinista governments (Gordon, 1998; Hale, 1994).

37 With the notion "Ecologies of Knowledges", De Sousa Santos recognizes a plurality of knowledges beyond scientific knowledge. "The Ecology of Knowledge is a Counter-Epistemology" (2014, p. 185). In this ecology, the different knowledges interact, not only at the level of the ideas, but also at the level of the everyday praxis.

38 The Miskitu is the second largest population of this area, and historically, a crucial group for understand the politics of the Region (for more information see Hale, 1994).

39 Charles Hale (2005) in "Neoliberal multiculturalism: the remaking of cultural rights and racial dominance in Central America" explains neoliberal governance as the confluence of limited recognition of cultural rights, strengthening of civil society, and endorsement of the principle of intercultural equality (p. 10). The term Neoliberal Multiculturalism emphasizes the integral relationship between these new cultural rights and neoliberal political economic reforms (p. 11). Neoliberal rationalities include the World Bank changing directives in favor of Indigenous peoples: indigenous participation in all facets of project development; respect for cultural difference; and multiculturalism as a forward-looking political sensibility that the World Bank urges member states to endorse (pp. 17-19). However, the welcoming of cultural difference challenges Indigenous and Afro-descendants' mobilizations for cultural rights. Hale warns the implications of what he calls a "shift from protest to proposal", arguing that "when indigenous leaders or intellectuals occupy that authorized space of compromise, they win an important battle in the struggle for recognition. Yet when they exchange protest for proposal, they often lose the inclination to articulate more expansive, utopian political visions with the pragmatic tactics of the here and now" (p. 20). My argument is that the emergence of alternative epistemologies throughout the program execution as well as some efforts to decolonize this cultural cooperation intervention, ultimately challenged neoliberal multiculturalism.

40 "Building from the perception that traditional academic narratives about indigenous peoples are still embedded in a colonial framework, both epistemologically and politically", Florencia Mallon (2012), interrogates "what it would mean to shift ethnography and other forms of research and narrative away from more traditional and vertical forms of engagement toward more symmetrical, horizontal approaches or counternarratives" (p. 3).

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