The autonomy dilemma

Territoriality and identity in the Miskito-Sandinista conflict

Lena Schubmann
University of Cambridge

Abstract: *This paper explores the emergence of conflict between the Miskito and the Nicaraguan Sandinista government in the early years after the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. Outlining the polarisation of the debate in the late 1980s between supporters and opponents of the Sandinistas and their views of its revolutionary project and noting the lack of agency attributed to the Miskito themselves in these arguments, the article rejects arguments centred around race or ideology as an explanation for the conflict. Instead, use is made of Kate Crehan's development of Gramscian analysis to explore the contrasting meanings ascribed to notions of territoriality and autonomy in public statements by Miskito and Sandinista leadership in the early 1980s.*

Keywords: Nicaragua, Contra war, Sandinismo, Miskito, autonomy, territoriality.

Introduction

When Nicaragua's *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) overthrew the Somoza dictatorship on 19 July 1979, the majority of Nicaragua's population hoped authoritarian repression would be replaced by social and economic development, including the approximately 150,000 Miskito Indians living along the country's Atlantic coast. Shortly after the revolution, Sandinistas and Miskitos agreed to establish a joint Miskito-Sandinista committee, the *Miskito Sumo Rama Sandinista Aslakatanka*[34] (MISURASATA) as a platform to discuss strategies for the development of the Atlantic coast region. Furthermore, the Sandinistas agreed to the Miskitos' request to include the three main indigenous languages in the literacy campaign as well as to respect communal land ownership in the proposed land reform.[35] However, the initial affinity between Sandinistas and Miskitos ended abruptly in February 1981, when MISURASATA key leaders were accused and arrested by the FSLN for conspiring with the CIA-sponsored Contras to overthrow the newly established FSLN government. The conflict soon escalated, causing a total of 43,000 casualties among Sandinista, Miskito and Contra fighters in Nicaragua's eastern territories (Sklar 1988: 393). As a result, the Reagan administration called the FSLN a 'purely totalitarian [organisation] that has committed genocide against the Miskito Indians' (Skinner 2004: 638), which contributed to the justification of another nine years of US intervention in Nicaragua. These seemingly contradictory events in Nicaraguan history thus lead to this paper's research question: What led to the Miskitos' decision to reject the FSLN government and join the Contras in their armed struggle against the Sandinistas?

The first part of this paper will reveal that research on this topic published at the time suffers from ideological bias, either in favour of or against the FSLN government. More recent scholarship, despite providing analysis rather than policy

[34] *Union between Sandinistas, Miskito, Sumo and Rama Indians* in Miskito language
[35] Nicaragua's most spoken indigenous languages are Miskito, Sumu and Rama

recommendations, focuses exclusively on the Sandinistas' behaviour towards the Miskitos, not on the interaction between the two parties, and therefore denies their agency within the conflict. Drawing on Gramscian theory of depoliticisation of certain sets of ideas into *common sense*, this paper will reevaluate the communication between Sandinista and Miskito leaders in the critical period of 1979-1982 and view it in the context of recent anthropological insights into the relation between territory and identity in dominant Miskito and Sandinista discourse. The time period between 1979-1982 was chosen to identify key moments of the initial rupture between Miskito and Sandinista leaders.

This will offer a new perspective on how the Sandinista-Miskito conflict originally emerged: While the Miskitos' claim for autonomy referred to the ability to preserve their cultural identity, the FSLN associated the term autonomy with Somoza's strategy to keep Nicaragua's different regions physically and ideologically separate in order to prevent collective uprising against his regime. Consequently, the FSLN accused the Miskitos of anti-revolutionary separatism while the Miskitos accused the FSLN of internal colonialism. This misunderstanding is underpinned by the different meaning attached to territory in dominant Miskito and Sandinista discourse. Combined with the tense historical reality, this misunderstanding led to a conflict which would soon prove to be fatal for both sides.

Agency and ideological bias

The question of why the Miskitos were fighting against the Sandinistas during the Contra war was the subject of a controversial academic debate throughout the 1980s. The academic literature on the Miskito-Sandinista conflict, however, clearly reveals the underlying ideological bias of the debate at the time.

The geographer Bernard Nietschmann interprets the conflict with the Miskitos as proof that the FSLN is an essentially 'oppressive and aggressive Marxist-Leninist regime' (Nietschmann, 1989: 92). Towards the end of his book, Nietschmann emphasises the 'need for US commitment to change the Nicaraguan regime' (Nietschmann, 1989: 93). He concludes that the conflict shows a general incompatibility between socialism and human rights and encourages governments around the world to increase their efforts to fight communism on an international level (Nietschmann, 1989: 52, 95).

The American historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz on the other hand clearly reveals her sympathy for the FSLN regime. She regards the conflict between Miskitos and Sandinistas as the result of an imperial manipulation by the CIA (Dunbar-Ortiz, 1988: 24). She identifies the Miskito as Nicaragua's most vulnerable population, leading to their manipulation by the CIA in order to serve US interest (Dennis, 1993: 218). Dunbar-Ortiz, however, does not offer any proof for her argument. To date, there is no published communication between Miskitos and the CIA that reveals such a conspiracy.

Nietschmann's and Dunbar-Ortiz' books represent the main body of literature produced on the conflict at the time. Other articles have been published on the topic, focusing on more specific themes. Jorge Jenkins Molieri for instance focuses on the role of US companies (Molieri, 1988: 12) and Calvin Smith on the role of the Moravian church in the manipulation of Miskitos for US interest (Smith, 2007: 8). Klaudine Ohland and Robin Schneider indicate their support for Miskito activism by expressing the view that reconciliation between Sandinistas and Miskitos is only possible if the FSLN recognises indigenous land rights (Ohland/Schneider, 1983: 1-25) and Carlos Vilas blames the conflict on a strong ethnocentric element in FSLN ideology, leading to the exclusion of non-mestizo Nicaraguans (Vilas, 1989:

10-37). Despite looking more closely at different aspects of the conflict, however, this scholarship can be placed in either Nietschmann's or Dunbar-Ortiz' analytical and methodological tradition and reveals either a strong sympathy or antagonism for the FSLN regime.

This paper does not attempt to offer an objective view on the Sandinista-Miskito conflict, or even try to suggest that there is such a thing as an objective view, as opposed to the previous, highly subjective publications. The shortcoming of previous research is not their ideological bias itself, but the analytical short-sightedness that results from the prioritisation of justifying policies over seeking an explanation as to why Miskitos fought with the Contras. In particular Bernard Nietschmann and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz' books show that the aim to provide support for certain policies leads to assumptions for which there is no concrete proof. In terms of analysis, both sides of the debate focus exclusively on political aspects and therefore neglect the broader socio-cultural context in which the conflict took place.

The anthropologist Charles Hale has published widely on the Sandinista-Miskito conflict throughout the 1990s and offers a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics which led to the breakdown of their initial cooperation. Hale exposes the 'deeply ingrained internal colonial relations' (Hale, 1996: 15) between Miskitos and Sandinistas. According to Hale, the simplistic binary classification of people into either victims or agents of US imperialism had the result that the Sandinistas viewed Miskitos as objects in need of FSLN policies and not as potential subjects of the revolution (Hale, 1996: 17). Consequently, Hale identifies the FSLN failure to integrate Miskitos as active and fully constituted subjects into their political ideology as the most important factor in the Miskito-Sandinista conflict (Hale, 1966: 15). John Moore further develops this idea, arguing that the mix between socialist and nationalist elements in Sandinismo clashed and prevented the FSLN from raising national consciousness across Nicaraguan society (Moore, 1986: 3). Luciano Baracco suggests that British influence on the Atlantic coast led the Sandinistas to associate Miskitos with anglo-imperialism which justified violence against them. Baracco refers to the fact that the Atlantic coast was a British colony until 1860 and that creole English is still widely spoken among Miskitos (Baracco, 2004: 12).

Hale's explanation of the clash between Sandinistas and Miskitos as the result of internal colonial relations between the two groups needs to be further examined. Viewing Miskitos as passive objects of the revolution explains why Sandinistas did not implement demands made by Miskitos into their program. However, it does not explain why Miskitos were regarded as a threat to the revolution and to the Nicaraguan state in general by the FSLN. It is therefore necessary to examine in more detail the discourse between key Miskito and Sandinista leaders which led to nearly a decade of armed struggle.

Despite interpreting the Miskito-Sandinista conflict in very different ways, all authors deny the Miskitos their own agency in the conflict. Nietschmann and Hale portray the Miskitos as victims of the FSLN communist or nationalist ideologies. Dunbar-Ortiz sees them as victims of CIA manipulation. However, in all cases the Miskitos are shown as voiceless objects of analysis rather than as subjects with a clear position within the conflict. It is therefore necessary to complement the existing literature with an analysis that grants equal importance to Sandinista and Miskito agency within the conflict. In the following, Sandinista and Miskito discourse are therefore given the same analytical treatment. This methodology emphasises the interaction between Miskitos and Sandinistas rather than the victimisation of one group by the other and therefore offers a new perspective on the conflict.

The politics of cultural difference: an anthropological reading of Gramsci

In order to expose the elements which made Miskito demands incompatible with FSLN ideology and vice versa, it is first of all necessary to contextualise these political claims within the ideological environment in which they were produced. This is possible thanks to recent ethnographic scholarship on both Sandinista and Miskito identity by a variety of anthropologists (Vilas, 1989; García, 1996; Offen, 2002; White, 2007). Considering these anthropological elements, however, this paper however does not intend to portray the violent clash between the Sandinistas and the Miskitos as the inevitable consequence of two fundamentally different ethnic groups, the indigenous Miskitos and the mestizo Sandinistas. It does not suggest a direct causal link between cultural or ethnic difference and the emergence of armed conflict.

In order to avoid offering a simplistic causal link between culture and behaviour, the following analysis uses Kate Crehan's anthropological reading of a Gramscian conceptualisation of culture. It supposes that certain ideas can become so dominant among groups of individuals that they are 'simply absorbed uncritically, as it were mechanically, from the social and cultural environment within which they have grown' (Crehan, 2002: 114). In Gramsci's words, certain ideologies are therefore perceived as *common sense*. The set of ideas perceived as common sense are generally presumed to be homogeneous among individuals and therefore not explicitly articulated in verbal interaction. However, they clearly manifest themselves in any kind of interaction among individuals by determining the perspective through which information is comprehended (Crehan, 2002: 168). Successful communication consequently requires that all individuals involved share a set of cultural, social and political values which determine what they perceive as *common sense* (Gilroy, 2013: 223). Assumptions about common interest and mutual understanding usually require a shared *common sense* among all individuals involved (Barth, 1969: 15). Culture is not an inherent virtue which determines behaviour, but a process of hegemonic struggle between ideas in which certain ideas have become so dominant that they are perceived as objective truths (Crehan, 2002: 115).

Regarding the Sandinista-Miskito conflict, the background knowledge presupposed as *common sense* by both groups differs fundamentally. According to Gramsci, *common sense* emerges as a result of hegemonic struggle among different ideas among a society. Consequently, it requires the constant interaction and interchange of ideas, ultimately leading to the dominance of some over others. In the case of Miskitos and Sandinistas, however, this interchange of ideas has not happened due to the social and geographical separation of the two groups until 1979. Transport between Nicaragua's Pacific and Atlantic coast was only possible by air travel (Sollis, 1989: 3). In addition to the geographical separation, a language barrier also prevented the exchange if ideas between Miskitos and Sandinistas: While Miskito and Creole English is spoken on the Atlantic, Nicaragua's Pacific region, where the Sandinista movement emerged, is almost exclusively Spanish-speaking. The Atlantic and Pacific coasts have therefore remained geographically and socially separate from each other until the Sandinistas made efforts to include the Atlantic region in the revolutionary struggle after 1979.

It is not the aim of this paper to explain the complex mechanisms through which certain ideas among Sandinista and Miskito society have become so dominant that they are perceived as *common sense*. Neither does it try to identify all the ideas and values which are included in the broader concept of common sense among Sandinistas and Miskitos. Instead, it seeks to expose the specific elements which

caused friction when Sandinistas and Miskitos first entered into political dialogue from 1979 onwards. It will then draw on methods of cultural anthropologists to explain why these specific elements have caused friction. Rather than identifying the entire sphere of cultural *common sense*, it only considers the specific *common sense* knowledge attached to the elements causing friction in Sandinista-Miskito dialogue.

The emergence of the conflict can be traced back to between July 1979, when the Sandinista revolution triumphed in Managua, and May 1982, when the first evidence of Miskito fighters among Contra soldiers occurred (Hale, 1996: 141). This time period was chosen to identify the factors which led to the initial break between Sandinistas and Miskitos before foreign intervention in the conflict increased tensions and the conflict was increasingly framed as an ideological battle between the left and the right in the Cold War context. The primary sources that will be analysed are official communication between the FSLN and MISURASATA published in the official FSLN newspapers *Barricada* and *Patria Libre*, statements by Steadman Fagoth Müller and Brooklyn Rivera, the Miskitos' main spokesmen, as well as by William Ramirez, FSLN minister for the Atlantic coast and Sergio Ramírez and Manuel Calderón, key FSLN members involved in the communication with the Atlantic coast. Speeches by FSLN members were held in Managua and broadcasted across the country, targeting the general Nicaraguan public in as main audience. The interviews with Steadman Fagoth and Brooklyn Rivera cited below targeted a national and international audience, seeking support from international organisations concerned with indigenous rights. It should be taken into account that these sources were produced with the intention to gain international support for the Miskitos' uprising against the Sandinistas and therefore should be read critically.

It is necessary to identify the distinct elements of friction in the Sandinista-Miskito conflict. The following section will use methods of discourse analysis to show how the term autonomy is charged with highly political associations by both the Sandinistas and the Miskitos, exposing it as the main element of friction. These political associations attached to the term autonomy differ fundamentally, leading to misunderstandings within discourse. The unspoken associations that Sandinistas and Miskitos make when referring to autonomy will be exposed through identifying terms with which autonomy is contrasted: While in Sandinista discourse, autonomy is frequently contrasted with unity and national liberation, Miskitos contrast autonomy with colonisation and invasion. It therefore seeks to repoliticise knowledge, which has become naturalised and accepted as *common sense* among Sandinistas and Miskitos. Ethnographic insights will then offer an explanation as to why this term is so differently interpreted by Sandinistas and Miskitos. Different interpretations of the meaning of territory for identity, however, are not inherent to either Miskitos or Sandinistas as ethnic groups. Instead, they should be regarded as a result of the depoliticisation and naturalisation of a dominant set of ideas as the result of a constant ideological struggle in the Gramscian tradition.

Misunderstandings of autonomy in Sandinista-Miskito communication

Interaction between Miskitos and Sandinistas changed from friendly cooperation to violent hostility between July 1979 and October 1982. In November 1979, MISURASATA was created to enhance communication and cooperation among Miskitos and Sandinistas. In practice, MISURASATA served two main purposes: the recruiting and training of teachers who could execute the Sandinista literacy campaign in indigenous languages and negotiation of land titles within the agrarian reform proposed by the FSLN. The literacy campaign officially started in October

1980 without any major disagreements between Sandinistas and Miskitos. The negotiation of land titles, however, turned out to be more problematic. Uncertain about what would happen to state-owned land under the FSLN land reform, Miskitos claimed the entire Atlantic coast, one third of Nicaragua, as their land (Ohland/Schneider, 1983: 13). This area was occupied not just by Miskito communities but also by non-Miskito farmers. When MISURASATA handed in their assessment of how land titles should be distributed among the Atlantic coast in February 1981, the FSLN arrested their main leaders, accusing them of anti-revolutionary conspiring. The arrest turned violent, and nine people, four Sandinistas and four Miskitos, died in the conflict (Dennis, 1993: 15). Shortly after, MISURASATA was officially dissolved and a group of former members declared armed struggle against the government (Envío, 1986). Between late 1981 and early 1982, the FSLN decided to resettle 8,500 Miskito from 49 villages against their will from the Río Coco on the border to Honduras to a place referred to as Tasba Pri, *free land* in Miskito language, by the Sandinistas (Diskin et al., 1986: 11). Rather than freeing the Miskitos, however, this forced resettlement had the aim to prevent further cooperation between Miskitos and Contras (Pritchard, 1996: 3). By then, none of the original friendly cooperation between Sandinistas and Miskitos was left and interaction was marked by intense hostility. How could this initially so promising alliance between Miskitos and Sandinistas turn so belligerently violent in such a short period?

First of all, it is necessary to mention that Miskito communities lived in almost complete absence of the Nicaraguan state during the four decades of the Somoza dictatorship (Diskin et al., 1986: 8). In fact, the only constant contact between political representatives of the Somoza dictatorship and the Miskito population was through the export of natural resources from Nicaragua's Eastern territories to international companies via the ports on the Atlantic coast. Other than that, the Miskito population was mostly unaffected by the policies of the Somoza dictatorship and managed political and economic affairs locally. Historian Emilio Montalván notices that inhabitants of the Atlantic coast generally referred to the Sandinistas as 'the Spanish' (Montalván, 2008: 247). This shows that the population of the Atlantic coast did not regard themselves as part of a unified Nicaraguan nation.

The population of the Atlantic coast was hardly involved in the uprisings which led to the Sandinista revolution in 1979. None of the events which led to the revolution took place or got major attention on the Atlantic coast. Furthermore, none of the resistance groups had important establishments on the Atlantic coast prior to the revolution (Diskin et al., 1986 :8-9). Attempts of the FSLN government to integrate the Atlantic coast into a united Nicaraguan nation after the revolution therefore never generated great enthusiasm among Miskitos (Núñez Soto et al., 1998: 400). The triumph of the Sandinista revolution had little meaning for them, because they lived in a *de facto autonomy* from the Somoza dictatorship.

Evaluating the discourse between Sandinistas and Miskitos in this period clearly reveals the question of autonomy to be the main point of disagreement between the two parties. The document that led to the arrest of MISURASATA leaders requested regional autonomy over Miskito land (MISURASATA, 1983c: 89). In a later response to the arrests, Miskitos emphasised that the 'recognition in rights in territory implicitly implies a recognition of the right of autonomy' (MISURASATA, 1983c: 89). In an international press release in late 1981, Brooklyn Rivera, a leading Miskito activist, highlights that the decisive factor for most Miskito's to turn against the FSLN regime was their rejected claim to autonomy of the communities within [Miskito] territory' (Rivera, 1983c: 215). Furthermore, all letters sent by Brooklyn

Rivera and Steadman Fagoth, MISURASATA leader, to government representatives were signed with the phrase: 'For indigenous territory and autonomy!' (Rivera, 1983c: 217).

The importance of the Miskitos' claim for autonomy is clearly highlighted in the discourse that led to the conflict with the Sandinistas. It is not specifically outlined, however, where this claim for autonomy is located in relation to the Nicaraguan nation, state or nation-state. This becomes clear only by identifying how the claim for autonomy is justified, and in particular what autonomy is contrasted with in Miskito discourse. The first official claim for autonomy appeared in a document published by MISURASATA in early 1981. It states that 'the recognition in territory implicitly implies a recognition of the right for autonomy' because 'indigenous territory is the basis of [the Miskitos'] existence' (MISURASATA, 1983a: 48). The 'right to practice music, traditions, and language' (MISURASATA, 1983a: 48) is therefore only possible if the Miskitos are granted autonomy. This is contrasted with the almost 'complete extermination' (MISURASATA, 1983b: 68) of Miskito population and culture during colonisation by the British and Spanish which was the result of the forceful removal of many Miskitos from their land (MISURASATA, 1983b: 68). In MISURASATA's last official statement in 1982, the right for autonomy is contrasted with 'conquest and domination' during colonialism and autonomy is emphasised as a precondition for freedom 'from imposition by dominant groups' (MISURASATA, 1983d: 163). In a speech from 1982, Brooklyn Rivera said that Miskitos are 'working for the autonomy of the Atlantic coast' because 'an Indian without land is not an Indian' (Rivera 1983a: 64).

The Miskitos' claim for autonomy is clearly regarded as incompatible with the Sandinistas' revolutionary project by the FSLN. The first official response by the FSLN to MISURASATA autonomy claims in February 1982 was headlined 'national sovereignty attacked by separatism' (FSLN, 1983a: 106). In a speech in May the same year, Sergio Ramírez emphasised that it would be 'mad' to say that 'there is another country within Nicaragua and that it is therefore necessary to separate off a part of Nicaragua', as it would 'threaten the unity of the nation and the integrity of the state' (S. Ramírez, 1982: 140). In another response to MISURASATA from 1982, the FSLN highlights that 'territorially and politically [Nicaragua] cannot be dismembered, divided or deprived of its sovereignty and independence' (FSLN, 1983b: 179). In an interview from 1981, Manuel Calderón states that the divisions among Nicaraguan society are the result of Somoza's strategy to 'prevent any kind of unity to prevent uprisings' (Calderón, 1983: 142) against his regime, and William Ramírez portrays the Miskitos as victims of imperialist manipulation (W. Ramírez, 1983). Consequently, the FSLN locates Miskito autonomy as something inevitably outside the Nicaraguan nation-state.

At the same time, Miskito discourse highlights that they locate their claim for autonomy inside the Nicaraguan state as well as the Nicaraguan nation. In a response to the FSLN separatist accusations, Steadman Fagoth states that Miskitos are part of the revolutionary movement and does not understand the Sandinistas' accusation of being anti-nationalist (Fagoth, 1983: 75). In the first interview after his arrest in 1981, Brooklyn Rivera states that the arrest was the result of a confusion, because during his interrogation he was asked why he was promoting the separation of the Atlantic coast from Nicaragua (Rivera, 1983b: 120). He makes it clear, however, that this is not the case, and that he regards the Miskitos as 'part of the revolution' (Rivera, 1983b: 120). A statement by MISURASATA after the Rivera's arrest states that Nicaragua's unity must be the result of the recognition of its diversity (Rivera, 1983b: 121). This discourse shows that being part of the

Nicaraguan nation-state and of the revolutionary movement is not seen as incompatible with their claim for regional autonomy by key Miskito leaders.

Territoriality and identity in Sandinista and Miskito discourse

These frictions in Miskito-Sandinista discourse indicate that Miskitos and Sandinistas attach a fundamentally different meaning to the claim for autonomy. This is the result of the disinct cultural and political contexts in which the meaning of autonomy has been constructed.

An analysis of the foundational writings of revolutionary Sandinimso reveals the exclusion of political and cultural values from the Atlantic coast. The FSLN was founded in 1961 by Nicaraguan intellectuals with the aim to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship which had been ruling Nicaragua since 1937 (Borge, 1984: 179). The founders of the FSLN clearly frame their ideology as a continuation of the struggle of former guerrilla fighter Augusto César Sandino to expel United States marines from Nicaraguan territory. Under the pretext to protect United States investments, marines were deployed to Nicaragua between 1912 and 1933 and had a major impact on the country's internal affairs. Sandino was shot by Somoza's National Guard in 1934. Sergio Ramírez, one of the founders of Sandinismo, claimed that Sandino was the first to make Nicaraguans aware of 'the rights to nationality, the right to call oneself a Nicaraguan [...], to be more than just an imperial tenant' (S. Ramírez, 1989: 42). He furthermore refers to FSLN members the 'proud sons of Sandino' (S. Ramírez, 1983: 98). This reveals that Sandinismo is not only treated as a political ideology, but as a national identity.

Andres Baltodano emphasises that the FSLN portrays Sandinismo as the natural reaction to the Somoza dictatorship, felt equally by all Nicaraguans (Baltodano, 2003: 297). Consequently, Sandinismo is articulated as inherent to Nicaraguan national identity rather than a political ideology. Disagreeing with the core values of Sandinismo is therefore not a question of political opinion, but a a challenge to Nicaraguan nationhood and national identity. Nicaraguanness is portrayed as a unified and homogeneous ideology expressed through Sandinismo. Challenging Sandinismo was regarded as a threat to the national consciousness constructed by the Sandinistas and consequently as a therat to the success of the revolution.

The FSLN, however, did not consider that the Somoza dictatorhip was not felt equally by all Nicaraguans. The fact that the population of the Atlantic coast remained largely unaffected by the Somoza dictatorship and had instead developed their own cultural and political values and structures was not taken into consideration by the FSLN. Because Sandinismo was portrayed as inherent to Nicaraguan nationhood, Sandinistas expected all Nicaraguans to mobilise for the achievement of the goals of the revolution. The inhabitants of the Atlantic coast were expected to support an ideology constructed without their participation and support political institutions exclusively on the Pacific coast (Envío, 1989).

In his anthropological work on political identity in Nicaragua, Carlos Vilas describes Sandinismo as a fundamentally nationalist ideology. It was the FSLN aim to build 'the Nicaraguan nation by right of history, geography, and international law' (Vilas, 1998: 106). As Vilas points out, Sandinista nationalism was not built on racial or ethnic homogeneity. The presence of different ethnicities, languages and cultural traditions are therefore not problematic for the construction of the Nicaraguan nation. However, the underlying way that nationalism functions, particularly how it links territory and identity, is identical to most other forms of nationalism. According to George White, the strong emotional attachment to certain territory is the basis for the formation of a group identity (White, 2007: 21-35, 53). Shared

characteristics such as language, religion or history are inseparable from place, making the expression of territoriality inseparable from the expression of identity (White, 2007: 8-11). George White therefore refers to territory as *cultural landscape* in his writings about group identity (White, 2007: 9).

The expression of Nicaragua's sovereignty in the face of former colonial and imperialist powers is regarded as fundamental by the FSLN to revolutionary success (Vilas, 1996: 100-104). This outward orientation reveals that the protection of what the FSLN defined as Nicaraguan territory from physical attack is fundamental to the Sandinistas' revolutionary movement (Knight, 1982: 4). The concept of sovereignty is therefore directly linked to controlling certain territory. Enacting and enforcing a specific set of laws is tied to place and territory in order to be effective, making sovereignty and territoriality inseparable (White, 2007: 37, 50). The importance of physical territory to Sandinista identity is consequently the result of two levels of abstraction of land: the imagining of sovereignty over certain territory and the building of a nation-state around the space over which sovereignty is claimed.

Oscar René Vargas claims that centralism, territorial integrity and internal unity are fundamental to Sandinismo (Vargas, 1991: 56). This is not only the result of the lack of national consciousness under the Somoza dictatorship. It is also a response to the fear that foreign actors would take advantage of internal fragmentations within Sandinismo to impose their own ideologies within the geopolitical context of the Cold War (Jarquín, 2018: 7). Territorial unity is seen as a necessary precondition for national unity, whereby unity is seen as a precondition for revolutionary success. Dismantling this national unity, linked directly to physical integrity, delegitimises the FSLN as Nicaragua's ruling party and makes it vulnerable to attacks from the outside. Seeing territory through abstract principles of sovereignty and the nation-state, autonomy and separatism acquire the same meaning and become identical. It is not the land itself that constitutes Sandinista identity, but the imagining of a sovereign nation-state around certain territory. Combined with the historical reality of the Contra war at the time, their claim for autonomy was associated with US attempts to overthrow the FSLN regime. Consequently, Miskitos were located outside the Sandinistas' nation-building project. Classifying a particular group as enemies of the revolution and therefore enemies of the Nicaraguan nation ultimately justifies violence against them in order to achieve the higher aim of maintaining the national unity Sandinismo requires. The FSLN feared that indigenous demands for autonomy would challenge their attempt to consolidate core revolutionary principles as quickly as possible. The rapid consolidation was regarded necessary to avoid foreign exploitation of the conflict in the politically tense situation of the Cold War (Jarquín, 2018: 15).

Ethnographic work by Claudia García and Karl Offen reveals that the link between territory and identity is not exclusive to Sandinismo, but of equal importance in dominant Miskito cultural and political values (García, 1996; Offen, 2003). However, the way these elements relate to each other is fundamentally different, leading to an essentially different meaning attached to the term autonomy. García looks at the construction of Miskito identity over time, specifically how events such as conversion to Christianity or their incorporation into a capitalist system of wage labour have affected their identity. While elements such as language or different cultural rituals have transformed fundamentally over time, García notes that the high importance Miskitos attach to their land has remained unaffected over these periods (García, 1996: 14). Karl Offen points out that when describing their relationship to their land, Miskitos often refer to it as covered in 'footprints of their ancestors' (Offen, 2003: 3) and therefore the source for their cultural heritage.

Physical territory is therefore seen as a guarantor of cultural identity. The loss of territory is equal to the loss of cultural identity; social and physical space become inseparable. Selling land is regarded as identical to selling people belonging to that land (Hale, 1996: 67).

Frances Kinloch Tijerino highlights that the Río Coco, along which Miskito communities had settled over centuries, had become a fundmental element to Miskito identity. The exact location along the Río Coco individual Miskitos are from is used as an addition to names, revealing the importance of territory to individual identity (Kinloch Tijerino, 1997: 93). Additionally, the distribution of property titles on the Atlantic coast before the revolution was often unclear. Because of the low population and the abundance of natural resources, many families did not acquire official land titles, as it had not been necessary. Other families had acquired land titles by the Miskito monarchy in the 19th century (Hannum, 2011: 205). After the revolution in 1979, it was not made clear whether and to what extent the FSLN regime would recognise these land titles. The agrarian reform of the revolutionary government was consequently perceived as a direct threat to the Miskitos' territorial rights and therefore to their cultural identity (Castillo, 2017: 90). As the Atlantic coast was largely excluded from the processes which led to the revolution, the expropriation of Miskito territory was not seen as necessary measure to secure economic development for the Nicaraguan nation, but a foreign invasion on Miskito land (Kinloch Tijerino, 1997: 95). This fear was consolidated with the forced resettlement during Red Christmas in 1981-1982.

It is noteworthy that Miskitos did not link their claim for autonomy to a separation from the Nicaraguan state. This reveals the fundamental difference in Miskito and Sandinista understanding of territory: While in Sandinismo, territory acquires meaning through abstract concepts of sovereignty and the nation-state, Miskito identity is directly guaranteed by the territory which they live on. It is the physical being on land itself, not the imagining of abstract concepts attached to land, which is fundamental for Miskito identity. The claim for autonomy is linked to the right to live on this land without the risk of forced resettlements which was constantly present during colonialism and the Somoza dictatorship. None of the values promoted by the FSLN, most importantly national liberation and economic development, or specific policies, such as a literacy campaign, the establishment of FSLN institutions, distribution of land titles etc., pose a threat to this autonomy claim, as long as Miskitos maintain the right to live on their claimed land. Rather than political separation from the Nicaraguan state, Miskitos claimed the rights for cultural differentiation, expressed through their own language, traditions, history, and local authorities (Núñez Soto et al., 1998: 397). It is therefore not inherently impossible be be part of the Nicaraguan state and the FSLN revolutionary movement without claiming a separate state. The FSLN feared a challenge of the legitimacy of the integrity of Nicaraguan statehood while Miskitos challenged the homogeneity of Nicaraguan nationhood. Indigenous autonomy on the Atlantic coast could have been achieved within the political framework of a sovereign Nicaraguan state. Initially autonomy and separatism were nor regarded as identical, revealing the fundamental miscommunication between the FSLN and MISURA-SATA at the beginin of their conflict. As the primarily cultural differences were framed within the discourse of sovereignty, however, statehood and most importantly autonomy, the FSLN regime perceived them as separatist nature and consequently a threat to the revolution (Diskin et al., 1986: 2).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has shown that different meanings of attached to territory in dominant Sandinista and Miskito discourse contributed to the emergence of armed conflict between the two parties during Nicaragua's Contra war. A reevaluation of the political communication that led up to the conflict between 1979 and 1982 by considering the cultural and political values dominant in Sandinista and Miskiro discourse has shown that the term autonomy is associated with fundamentally different. Recent ethnographic research on Sandinista and Miskito identity has shown that territory and identity are linked in different ways. In Sandinismo, land acquires meaning through abstract concepts of sovereignty and the nation-state. The Miskitos' claim for autonomy over certain territory which lies within the sovereign nation-state is regarded as a delegitimisation of the FSLN regime, making it vulnerable to attacks from the outside. In Miskito discourse, however, physical territory itself is articulated as a guarantor for cultural identity and the claim for autonomy is therefore identical to claiming the right not to be resettled by force. This misunderstanding led to the FSLN accusation of Miskito separatism, the arrest of MISURASATA leaders and ultimately the outbreak of armed struggle between the two parties. Conceptualizing ideology in a Gramscian tradition makes an anthropological explanation of the misunderstanding around the term autonomy possible without essentializing these different links between identity and territory to the two different ethnic groups and therefore portraying the conflict as inevitable. Instead, the misunderstanding is the result of a clash between two different meanings attached to the term autonomy which have been accepted as *common sense*. By denaturalizing and repoliticizing this particular *common sense*, the emergence of the Miskito-Sandinista conflict can be understood in a way which grants equal agency to both Sandinistas and Miskitos.

This paper sheds light on the question of why the initially friendly collaboration between Sandinistas and Miskitos broke down. However, it does not attempt to explain why the Miskitos eventually joined the CIA-sponsored Contras in their attempts to overthrow the FSLN regime. Whether the Miskitos actively sought CIA support, or whether their anti-FSLN sentiments were coopted, or even manipulated, by the Contras is a question that will remain open until diplomatic communication between Miskito leaders and Contra fighters or the CIA is released by the US government. For now, however, this article revealed the importance of culturally constructed meaning attached to certain key terms and phrases. Furthermore, it has shown the costs of ignorance towards cultural elements in the case of the Miskito-Sandinista conflict. Further academic inquiry into the conflict upon release of relevant diplomatic communication should therefore be sensitive to cross-disciplinary research on Sandinista and Miskito discourse and ideology.

References

Baracco, Luciano. 2004. "Sandinista anti-imperialist nationalism and the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, Sandinista-Miskito relations 1979-1981." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 10 (4): 625-655.

Barth, Fredrik (ed.). 1969. Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of culture difference. Boston: Little Brown.

Borge, Tomás. 1984. Carlos, the dawn is no longer beyond our reach. Vancouver: New Star Books.

Calderón, Manuel. 1983. "We have the job of forging class consciousness [1981]." In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 106-109.

Castillo, Donald. 2017. *Gringos, contras y sandinistas: testimonio de la guerra civil en Nicaragua*, Vol. 2. Bogotá: Tercer Mundo.

Crehan, Kate A. 2002. *Gramsci, culture and anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Dennis, Philip A. 1993. "The Miskito-Sandinista conflict in Nicaragua in the 1980s." *Latin American Research Review* (28) 3: 214-234.

Diskin, Martin, et al. 1986. *Peace and autonomy on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua: a report of the LASA task force on human rights and academic freedom*, LASA Forum. Vol. 16.

Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. 1988. *The Miskito Indians of Nicaragua*. London: Minority Rights Group.

Envío team. 1989. "From separatism to autonomy: ten years on the Atlantic coast." *Envío - Información sobre Nicaragua y Centroamérica* 93, April 1989, accessed 13 December 2018, <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/2693>.

Envío team. 1986. "How to read the Reagan administration: the Miskito case." *Envío - Información sobre Nicaragua y Centroamérica* 65, November 1986, accessed 13 December 2018, <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3245>.

Fagoth Müller, Steadman. 1983. "Unity and Fraternity between MISURASATA and FSLN [1980]." In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 73-79.

FSLN. 1983a. "National sovereignty attacked by separatism [1980]." In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 106-109.

FSLN. 1983b. "Declaration of principles of the sandinist popular revolution with regard to the indigenous communities of the Atlantic coast [1981]." In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 178-180.

García, Claudia. 1996. *The making of the Miskitu people of Nicaragua: the social construction of ethnic identity*. Uppsala: Universitetet.

Gilroy, Paul. 2013. *There ain't no black in the Union Jack*. London: Routledge.

Hale, Charles R. 1996. *Resistance and contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan state*, 1894-1987. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996

Hannum, Hurst. 2011. *Autonomy, sovereignty, and self-determination: the accommodation of conflicting rights*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Jarquín, Mateo C. 2018. "Red Christmases: the Sandinistas, indigenous rebellion, and the origins of the Nicaraguan civil war, 1981-82." *Cold War History* 18 (1): 91-107.

Jenkins Molieri, Jorge. 1986. *El desafío indígena en Nicaragua: el caso de los miskitos,* Mexico City: Katún, 1986

Kinloch Tijerino, Frances. 1997. "Conflicto étnico, geopolitica e identidad: el caso de las comunidades Miskitas del Río Coco en Nicaragua." *Estudios Fronterizos* 40: 95-114.

Knight, David B. 1982. "Identity and territory: geographical perspectives on nationalism and regionalism." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 72 (4): 514-531.

MISURASATA. 1983a. "General directions [1981]." In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 48-63.

MISURASATA. 1983b. "We ask for understanding [1982]." In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 68-72.

MISURASATA. 1983c. "Plan of Action 1981." In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 89-95.

MISURASATA. 1983d. "Proposal on land holding in the indigenous and creole communities of the Atlantic coast [1982]." In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 163-175.

Moore, John H. 1986. "The Miskitu national question in Nicaragua: background to a misunderstanding." *Science & Society* 50 (2): 132-147.

Nietschmann, Bernard Q. 1989. *The unknown war: the Miskito nation, Nicaragua, and the United States*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989.

Núñez Soto, Orlando et al. 1998. *La guerra y el campesinado en Nicaragua*, Managua: CIPRES.

Offen, Karl H. 2003. "Narrating place and identity, or mapping Miskitu land claims in northeastern Nicaragua." *Human Organization* 62 (4): 382-392.

Ohland, Klaudine; Schneider, Robin. 1983. *National revolution and indigenous identity: the conflict between sandinists and Miskito Indians on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast*. Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.

Pérez Baltodano, Andrés. 2003. *Entre el Estado conquistador y el Estado nación: providencialismo, pensamiento político y estructuras de poder en el desarrollo histórico de Nicaragua*. Managua: IHNCA; UCA.

Pritchard, Dana. 1996. "The legacy of conflict: refugee repatriation and reintegration in Central America." In *Central America: fragile transition*, edited by Rachel Sieder, 103-134. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ramírez, Sergio. 1982. "Threat to our National Unity and the Integrity of Our State." *Monitor-Dienst Lateinamerika*, 20 May 1982.

Ramírez, Sergio. 1983. *El alba de oro: la historia viva de Nicaragua*, Mexico City: Siglo XXI.

Ramírez, Sergio. 1989. "The kid from Niquinohomo." *Latin American Perspectives* 16 (3): 48-82.

Ramírez, William. 1983. "The imperialist threat and the indigenous problem in Nicaragua." In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 218-235.

Rivera, Brooklyn. 1983a. "An Indian Without Land Is Not An Indian [1982]." In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 64-67.

Rivera, Brooklyn. 1983b. "'We are part of this Revolution!' Interview with Michael Rediske, Managua, April 1, 1981." In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 120-132.

Rivera, Brooklyn. 1983c. "Problems of the Indians with the sandinista revolution" [1981]. In *National revolution*, edited by Ohland/Schneider, 203-218.

Skinner, Kiron K.; Anderson, Annelise; Anderson, Martin (eds.). 2004. *Reagan: a life in letters,* New York: Free Press.

Sklar, Holly. 1988. *Washington's war on Nicaragua,* Boston: South End Press.

Smith, Calvin L. 2007. *Revolution, revival, and religious conflict in Sandinista Nicaragua*. Leiden: Brill.

Sollis, Peter. 1989. "The Atlantic coast of Nicaragua: development and autonomy." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 21 (3): 481-520.

Vargas, Oscar René. 1991. *Adónde va Nicaragua: perspectivas de una revolución latinoamericana*. Managua: Ediciones Nicarao.

Vilas, Carlos M. 1989. *State, class, and ethnicity in Nicaragua: capitalist modernization and revolutionary change on the Atlantic coast*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Riener Publishers.

White, G. W. 2007. *Nation, state, and territory: origins, evolutions, and relationships,* Vol. 1. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.