

Protestantism and Indigenous Mobilisation: The Moravian Church among the Miskitu Indians of Nicaragua*

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Abstract. This article examines the role of the Protestant Moravian Church in the politicisation of Miskitu ethnic identity, and on the mobilisation of the Miskitu against the Sandinistas during the 1980s. It argues that changes in the institution of the Church during the 1960s and 70s, as a result of state policy, socio-economic context and internal conflicts within Miskitu society, led to Moravianism becoming a cultural marker of Miskitu ethnicity. At the same time, the encounter with and appropriation of the pastoral tactics of a Catholic priest resulted in a radicalisation of Miskitu Moravian pastors on indigenous issues. When the Miskitu came to mobilise against the Sandinistas, the Moravian Church was the expressive vehicle and the institutional means through which the mobilisation took place. The article reveals how politicised ethnic identities find their expression in religious institutions.

‘Many [Moravian] pastors were in the war themselves. For this reason many were punished by the Sandinistas and even killed by them. . . . They preached that the war was holy – that God was with us, and that God was not going to desert us.’

Miskitu Elder, 1992

‘*Kupia Kumi Paz, Paz Dukiara*. Only Peace, Love and Unity. This is what the church taught. But the Sandinistas, they always shouted ‘we want peace, peace’, but no, they brought us war.’

Moravian Miskitu Reverend, 1992

In 1981, the Miskitu Indians took up arms against the fledgling, revolutionary Sandinista state in Nicaragua. Many commentators focused solely on the ethnic content of the conflict, or read the tension as resulting

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from the supposedly inevitable incompatibility between left wing governments and indigenous agendas. However, it was immediately apparent to more perceptive observers and to the Sandinista government itself that this mobilisation had a profoundly religious dimension. Moravian Protestant Miskitu pastors were involved at high levels of the indigenous political organisation and later acted as chaplains to the armed Miskitu bands that joined the Contras in Honduras and received funding and training from the CIA. As a result, several pastors were imprisoned by the Sandinista government when the conflict broke out, and many had their sermons and their movements monitored.

The aim of this article is to show, by looking at the case of the Moravian Church among the Miskitu Indians, how religious institutions and identities provide the ideological ignition for political and ethnic mobilisations and the expressive vehicle through which such mobilisations are realised. It thus has two goals: first, to examine the politics of religiosity – that is, how the religious sphere gives rise to politicised identities; and secondly, to analyse the religiosity of politics – that is, the role religious discourses and institutions play in the translation of politicised identities into actual political mobilisation.

Recent work on the articulation of religious beliefs and practices with the political sphere within Latin America has tended to look for those forms within religion that have intrinsic political potential.¹ For Nash and Higgins, it is religious rituals that provide ‘an autonomous, liberating consciousness’,² while for Lancaster it is popular religion, and for Burdick, spiritism and pentecostalism, which have ‘an inherent potential to suspend and invert nonreligious roles and statuses’.³

However, such an approach to the interaction between religion and politics is both insufficient and problematic. It ignores three important dynamics that affect the way in which religious forms interpenetrate with political processes. First, the role of religious institutions⁴ and of

¹ J. Burdick, *Looking for God in Brazil: the Progressive Catholic Church in Urban Brazil's Religious Arena* (Berkeley, 1992); M. J. Higgins, ‘Martyrs and Virgins: Popular religion in Mexico and Nicaragua’, in L. Stephen and J. Dow (eds.), *Class Politics and Popular Religion in Mexico and Central America* (Washington, 1990); R. Lancaster, *Thanks to God and the Revolution: Popular Religion and Class Consciousness in the New Nicaragua* (New York, 1988); J. Nash, ‘Cultural Resistance and Class Consciousness in Bolivian Tin-Mining Communities’, in S. Eckstein (ed.), *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements* (Berkeley, 1989).

² Nash, ‘Cultural Resistance and Class Consciousness’, p. 196.

³ Burdick, *Looking for God*, p. 224.

⁴ See D. F. Eickelman, ‘Changing Interpretations of Islamic Movements’, in W. R. Roff (ed.), *Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning: Comparative Studies of Muslim Discourse* (London & Sydney, 1989), p. 25 and D. H. Levine and S. Mainwaring, ‘Religion and Popular Protest in Latin America: Contrasting Experiences’, in Eckstein, *Power and Popular Protest*, p. 205.

pastoral agents⁵ is critical in shaping and organising religious responses to the political sphere. Secondly, religious institutions and identities, far from being static and thus inherently prone to any particular political alignment, are reorganised and recreated as they interact with state policies and international economic contexts.⁶ And thirdly, religious forms and movements are often elaborated as responses to internal power dynamics such as the development of class, generational and gender conflict within communities.⁷

The first two sections of this article will argue that the Miskitu began to reinterpret their relationship as an ethnic group to the national and international political arenas, as a result of transformations in the institution of the Moravian Church brought about by economic recession, state encroachment and internal conflicts within Miskitu society. Local appropriations of the innovative pastoral strategies of a Catholic priest, particularly by indigenous Moravian pastors, led to a further politicisation of ethnic identity among the Miskitu.

The next two sections of the article will show that as an educated indigenous elite began to elaborate a more conscious ethnic politics when the Sandinistas came to power, it drew upon the re-interpretations of Miskitu ethnicity that had been developed in the religious sphere. Furthermore, in order to organise successfully, indigenous political leaders had to operate within the local religious hegemony of the Moravian Church, and to translate their political strategies into the vernacular of Moravian Protestantism. As a result, when political mobilisation evolved into armed confrontation, religious narratives and practices provided the cultural framework of the conflict.

⁵ See M. W. Foley, 'Organising, Ideology and Moral Suasion: Political Discourse and Action in a Mexican Town', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 32 (1990); Levine and Mainwaring, 'Religion and Popular Protest', p. 212; and Richard Wilson, 'Machine Guns and Mountain Spirits: the cultural effects of state repression among the Q'eqchi' of Guatemala', *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1991).

⁶ See Stephen and J. Dow, *Class, Politics, and Popular Religion in Mexico and Central America* and C. van der Burg and P. van der Veer, 'Pandits, Power and Profit: religious organisation and the construction of identity among Surinamese Hindus', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1986).

⁷ See T. A. Diakon, 'Peasants, Prophets and the Power of a Millenarian Vision in Twentieth-Century Brazil', *Comparative Study of Society and History*, vol. 32 (1990); D. Earle, 'Authority, Social Conflict and the Rise of Protestantism: Religious Conversion in a Mayan Village', *Social Compass*, vol. 39, no. 3 (1992); and S. J. Stern, 'The Struggle for Solidarity: Class, Culture and Community in Highland Indian America', *Radical History Review*, no. 27 (1983).

The institutional dynamics of the Moravian Church and religious change

The Moravian Church had worked on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua since 1849,⁸ and in 1970 estimated its membership there to be 30,000 – that is, under half of a total regional population of 75,000.⁹ Meanwhile, the North American-run Catholic Capuchin mission among the Miskitu, claimed 35–40% of Miskitu as Catholics,¹⁰ and whole villages in the Río Coco region have Catholic majorities to this day. From the 1950s onwards, pentecostal churches, such as the Church of God and Seventh Day Adventists, also began to make minor but significant inroads into Miskitu communities.¹¹

Despite the ‘polyreligious’¹² nature of the religious arena among the Miskitu, the stature of the Moravian Church in the region dramatically exceeded its actual monopoly on religious practice and denominational affiliation. This had led several commentators to assert that the Moravian Church is the only church among the Miskitu,¹³ and to describe Moravian Protestantism as the ‘national’ or ‘popular’ religion of the people of the Coast, ‘similar to the influence of the Catholic Church in mestizo society in other regions of the country’.¹⁴ The prominent stature

⁸ The Moravian Church arrived on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua at a time when the region was under a British Protectorate, but its missionaries were largely unsuccessful until the 1880s when the British had left, the Nicaraguan state was making strong claims to the region – leading to outright invasion in 1894 – and US companies started arriving in droves (see S. Hawley, ‘Does God Speak Miskitu? The Bible and Ethnic Identity among the Miskitu Indians of Nicaragua’, in M. Brett (ed.), *Ethnicity and the Bible* (Leiden, forthcoming)).

⁹ *Viewpoint from Distant Lands*, no. 178 (1970), p. 106. *Viewpoint* was the Moravian missionary journal, earlier known as the *Periodical Accounts*, which gave full information about each mission-field once a year, collated particularly for the consumption of the home congregations.

¹⁰ G. Smutko, *Los Capuchinos entre los Miskitos, 1915–1995* (Cartago, 1995), p. 1; Bishop Schmidt, interview with author in Managua (1994).

¹¹ M. Helms, *Asang: Adaptations to Culture Contact in a Miskitu Community* (Gainesville, 1971), pp. 206–9 and R. Reyes and J. Wilson (eds.), *Rafaga: the life story of a Nicaraguan Miskito Commandante* (Norman and London, 1992), pp. 20–21.

¹² Burdick, *Looking for God*, p. 226.

¹³ See for instance D. Haslam, *Faith in Struggle: The Protestant Churches in Nicaragua and Their Response to the Revolution* (Epworth, 1987), p. 25; and E. von Oertzen, ‘Protestantism and Ethnic Identity’, unpubl. manuscript, 1990, p. 1. In Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, p. 19, Rafaga states categorically that ‘all Miskitos are born into the Moravian faith’.

¹⁴ See J. H. Moore, ‘The Miskitu National Question in Nicaragua: Background to a Misunderstanding’, *Science and Society*, vol. L, no. 2 (1986), p. 139; L. Rossbach, ‘El papel de la iglesia morava en los conflictos entre los indígenas Miskito y el gobierno sandinista en Nicaragua’, in R. Rausch (ed.), *Europe and the Crisis in Central America and the Caribbean: Proceedings of the ASERCCA Annual Conference* (Marburg, 1987), p. 396; and C. Vilas, *State, Class and Ethnicity in Nicaragua: Capitalist Modernisation and Revolutionary Change on the Atlantic Coast* (Boulder, 1989), p. 53.

of the Church among the ethnic minorities of the region¹⁵ is a result of its institutional reach and the ideological role it has played in local processes of identity formation.

During the twentieth century, the Church expanded into the Miskitu villages, putting up church buildings and training local leaders. By the 1970s, the Church had congregations in 115 different communities, even predominantly Catholic ones. In these communities it had a church building, a pastor's house, and occasionally a school. By 1971, the Church had 107 pastors, the vast majority of them Miskitu, of whom 26 were ordained.¹⁶ The Church's institutional influence in the regional society stemmed furthermore from its role in three areas normally associated with the functions of the state: education, healthcare and arbitration. In 1970, for instance, the Church ran 17 grade schools and three secondary schools, as well as two hospitals and three clinics.¹⁷ Indigenous pastors, meanwhile, had become community leaders who administered ecclesiastical discipline for transgressions ranging from theft, adultery and murder, to dancing, drunkenness and visits to local shamans.¹⁸

During the 1960s and 70s, two processes were at work which profoundly affected the way the Church was to function as an institution, and how it articulated with the local cultural identity of the Miskitu. These processes were: the withdrawal of the US companies, and the increased presence of the Nicaraguan state. As a result of these processes the Church evolved from being a missionary-run, externally-funded institution, to a locally directed establishment, responsible for finding and administering its own resources. At the same time, the Church became a cultural mechanism within Miskitu society with which to respond to the internal crisis and the development of local class relations, as well as gender and generational conflicts, which these socio-political processes brought with them.

US companies, which had controlled most of the commercial activity in the region for the larger part of the twentieth century, began to pull out shortly after 1960.¹⁹ This had contradictory effects on the Moravian Church. On the one hand, their departure potentially strengthened the monopoly of the Church in the social and cultural sphere. With them

¹⁵ Although the majority of the Church's members are Miskitu, the majority of the 25,000 Creoles, 8,000 Sumu Indians and 800 Rama Indians in the region also belong to the Church.

¹⁶ *North American Moravian* (Dec. 1971).

¹⁷ *Viewpoint*, no. 178, (1970), p. 106.

¹⁸ Helms, *Asang*, p. 168.

¹⁹ Helms attributes the withdrawal of banana and lumber companies to over-exploitation and deforestation, leading to a decline in quality of products, as well as to the World Court decision to hand over part of the northern Atlantic region to Honduras (see Helms, *Asang*, p. 114). The Nicaraguan Long Leaf Pine Co. (NIPCO), one of the last employers in the region, closed down in 1964.

went the ready availability of Western consumer goods, and other accoutrements of what the pietist US missionaries saw as the competing and corrupting world of western ‘civilisation’. The withdrawal of the companies also meant that the Moravian Church was the last remaining institution in the region which offered a link to, and represented a connectedness with, the English-speaking white world for the Miskitu, who since the arrival of European buccaneers in the 1600s had both esteemed and grown accustomed to such contact. The Church was, thus, the only entity left, besides the Catholic Church, which brought in external goods and a constant stream of foreign visitors, whether they be Reverends, Doctors or summer missionaries.

On the other hand, the exit of US commercial ventures plunged the Church into financial crisis. The Church had received a lot of funding and infrastructural support from the foreign companies, and the livelihood of its members was dependent upon the work they provided. Since participation in the Church required wearing decent clothes and giving tithes, economic slumps – of which that of the 1960s was not the first – often resulted in marked decreases in attendance and offerings at church. In the slump of the 1960s, the Church began to insist that congregations pay for most of their pastors’ salaries, and that they plant ‘Lord’s Acres’ – the produce from which could be sold to make money for the Church.²⁰ Thus the Church became more closely bound to the local economy, and the fate of its pastors more directly connected to the circumstances that their congregations found themselves in.

These shifts in the institution of the Moravian Church occurred alongside a more generalised cultural crisis among the Miskitu caused by the departure of the companies.²¹ In looking for alternative sources of income, young Miskitu men turned increasingly to the commercialisation of natural resources. This led to ‘major disagreements between generations over the means and methods of livelihood’,²² as traditional values of communal labour and reciprocity were eroded. Commercialisation of subsistence crops also meant that men began to undertake agricultural labour – previously a female domain²³ – thus instituting changes in the gendered division of labour. The sense of crisis among the Miskitu during this period was observed by Helms, who described how:

almost any topic of conversation is introduced with the statement: ‘We are poor,

²⁰ *Viewpoint*, no. 168 (1960), p. 41.

²¹ Helms, *Asang*, p. 115; S. Howard, ‘Ethnicity, Autonomy, Land and Development: the Miskitu of Nicaragua’s Northern Atlantic Coast’, unpubl. PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1993, p. 112; B. Nietschmann, *Between Land and Water: the Subsistence Ecology of the Miskito Indians, Eastern Nicaragua* (New York, 1973), p. 202; R. Dunbar Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas: Human Rights and Self-determination* (London, 1984), pp. 222–6.

²² Nietschmann, *Between Land and Water*, p. 202. ²³ Helms, *Asang*, p. 123.

we are miserable people; we have no money, we have no work, we have no food'.²⁴

The second factor affecting the Church's operations was the increasing impingement of mestizo society on rural Miskitu villages, particularly through the institutions of the state. During the 1950s and 60s the state began to build schools in all parts of the Coast, thus usurping one of the Moravian Church's main social functions. However, the missionaries reported that government schooling resulted in increased sales of Miskitu translations of Bibles and hymnbooks.²⁵ This suggests that the government's policy of pushing Spanish-speaking through state education, in order to integrate the Miskitu into Nicaraguan society, actually had the opposite effect. The Miskitu response was to read texts in their own language, and fortuitously, the only texts available were Christian ones translated by the Moravians. The Church, partly from fear of losing its sway over the Miskitu, actively published Miskitu literacy at this juncture, through the publishing of magazines such as *The Miskitu Moravian*, which consisted of eight pages of 'news, items of interest from the congregations, and outlines of the coming month's Sunday School lessons'.²⁶

Additionally, the establishment of government schools meant that there was an increase of Nicaraguan mestizo personnel in Miskitu villages, a factor which began to heighten Miskitu consciousness of themselves as a separate ethnic group. The intrusion of mestizo society upon these villages also led to the development of local class relations, as Miskitu merchants pursued upward social mobility by reneging on their Miskitu identity, and passing themselves off as Mestizo.²⁷ These merchants often spoke Spanish, joined the Catholic Church, and attempted to place themselves outside of kinship-based values of redistribution and reciprocity. This defection of Miskitu into mestizo society generated a sense of internal crisis, especially since socially mobile Miskitu were seen to be collaborating with external forces of change.²⁸

In such a context, the Moravian Church provided a source of identity and prestige for the Miskitu that could counteract that of mestizo society. Becoming a Moravian pastor, for instance, was one means of upward social mobility within Miskitu society which actively precluded absorption

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

²⁵ *Viewpoint*, no. 172 (1964), p. 21.

²⁶ *Viewpoint*, no. 69 (1961), p. 46.

²⁷ P. Bourgois, 'The Problematic of Nicaragua's Indigenous Minorities', in Thomas Walker (ed.), *Nicaragua in Revolution* (New York, 1982), p. 314; Vilas, *Class, State and Ethnicity*, p. 85.

²⁸ Diakon, 'Peasants, Prophets and the Power of a Millenarian Vision', p. 508.

into mestizo society.²⁹ For the Miskitu, meanwhile, the Church represented a public domain in which their language was extensively spoken and written, and even sacralised in its application to the religious sphere.³⁰ Participation in the Church was, thus, a means to forge community solidarity and to push for collective loyalties at a time when external forces threatened to bring fragmentation and intra-community conflict.³¹

During the 1960s and 70s, as the financial strength of the Church diminished and its ascendancy in matters of social welfare was eroded, Moravian missionaries increasingly withdrew, and the Moravian Church was finally nationalised in 1974.³² Concurrently, as the Miskitu experienced the disruptive effects of Nicaraguan state involvement in the region, and of the departure of the US companies who for nearly a century had been the major source of employment and consumer goods, the Moravian Church ripened into an institution that was far more intrinsic to Miskitu society. Such an institution, with its contingents of Miskitu personnel, and its chain of church buildings, had three distinctive but inter-locking properties for the Miskitu. It was a means by which each village was connected to a wider network of Miskitu villages, thus creating a loose conglomerate of 'Miskito-dom'.³³ It engendered a bounded community offering unity against an encroaching state, and against the defection of socially mobile Miskitu into the ranks of mestizo society. And it represented an establishment symbolising Miskitu embeddedness in the wider and particularly 'Anglo' world, at a time when the Miskitu felt deserted by their traditional allies, the English-speaking whites.

Pastoral innovations and the formation of a politicised ethnic identity

For the Miskitu, as the previous section has shown, the implicitly political dimensions of being Moravian were that it provided a strong oppositional identity to the Catholic state and mestizo society, as well as a 'self-

²⁹ See P. Dennis, 'Costeños and the Revolution in Nicaragua', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1981), p. 278, and C. Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894–1987* (Stanford, 1994), p. 127.

³⁰ B. Muratorio, 'Protestantism and Capitalism Revisited, in the Rural Highlands of Ecuador', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Oct. 1980), p. 50.

³¹ Stern in 'The Struggle for Solidarity', p. 21, argues that the formation of 'closed corporate communities' among indigenous groups in Latin America was the result of the local class forces created by colonialism and the attempt to build 'solidarity and unity against the forces of fragmentation'.

³² Nationalisation had been the goal of the missionaries since the beginning of the twentieth century, but was more or less forced upon them in 1974 by the lack of missionaries ready to run the church, pressure from educated Creole pastors in Nicaragua, the general move among Protestant missions towards self-governance, and the financial instability in the region.

³³ Helms, *Asang*, p. 158.

righteous ideology of moral and upright behaviour',³⁴ arising out of the participation in external 'Anglo' forms. Thus, both opposition to the 'Spanish' and affiliation with the 'Anglo' world were integral elements of the religious identity of the Miskitu that was historically emergent in the socio-political context of the 1960s and 70s.³⁵ That is to say, in a process similar to that which Watanabe observed with regard to the use of Catholic Saints in the formation of Mayan ethnicity, Moravianism became the shibboleth of a local Miskitu ethnicity negotiated in response to external and internal forces.

However, during the 1970s, an additional factor came into play which led to the articulation of a more self-conscious and politicised ethnic identity among the Miskitu. In the late 1960s a North American Capuchin priest, Father Gregory Smutko, arrived in the region, with ambitions to implement the ecclesial reforms of Vatican II, and to undertake the 'evangelisation of culture' recommended by Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.³⁶ He began to train delegates of the Word from Catholic congregations in the region in conscientisation courses based on Paolo Freire's liberating education.

Father Gregory, who had studied anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, began to do research on, and to use in his pastoral work information about, Miskitu history and the 'Miskitu Nation'. One of his most influential undertakings was consciousness-raising workshops on 'The Salvation History of the Miskitu' in 1970.³⁷ These workshops, written up by Catholic evangelists in Smutko's *Pastoral Indigenista*, fused Miskitu History with Old Testament narratives. They emphasised in particular the dominion of the Miskitu kings, and the bravery of the Miskitu as warriors in fighting against the Spanish. A summing up statement from the workshop stated that:

As God, with his powerful arm, liberated the people of Israel from the slavery of the Egyptians, in the same way, he gave strength and courage to our fathers to defend themselves against the Spanish who were never able to conquer them.³⁸

And the final conclusion stated that:

The nations that do not fight to control their own destiny are the slaves of others. The Miskito must continue to fight in order to overcome.³⁹

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

³⁵ That is to say that Moravian-ness rather than being any essential or permanent aspect of Miskitu identity, was a diverse and flexible symbol with distinct nuances at different periods within Miskitu history.

³⁶ G. Smutko, 'El Apostolado con los Miskitos', unpubl. chapter of the history of the Capuchin Vicariate of Nicaragua, 1994, p. 13.

³⁷ G. Smutko, *Pastoral Indigenista* (Bogotá, 1975), pp. 49–59.

³⁸ Smutko 'El Apostolado', p. 12. ³⁹ Smutko, *Pastoral Indigenista*, p. 59.

Catholic evangelists who took part in this workshop asked for copies of the course to distribute in their communities. Moravian pastors soon heard about the Salvation History and requested copies from Father Gregory. According to Father Gregory it was immensely popular among the Moravian pastors, who used the material from this course for the following ten years in the villages of the Río Coco.⁴⁰

At the same time, with the help of a Peace Corps worker, Mary Hamlyn,⁴¹ Father Gregory began to promote organised political action by setting up a cooperative organisation on the Río Coco, which became known as the Association of Clubs of Agricultural workers of the Río Coco (ACARIC). ACARIC sought to control market prices of crops, but it also began to lobby local representatives of the Nicaraguan state for the removal of abusive National Guard soldiers, and for the representation of Miskitu in local and national politics.⁴² In each community where ACARIC worked, its local representative was usually the Moravian pastor.

In various parts of Latin America, Catholic pastoral agents and missionaries, radicalised by Vatican II and Medellín, have played an important role in promoting pan-Indian political organisations.⁴³ While in many areas such activism was met by a studied avoidance, and even hostility,⁴⁴ Father Gregory's relative success in organising the Miskitu was predicated on various factors. Firstly, Father Gregory was a North American, and thus respect for him as a powerful English-speaking outsider was more important than his denominational affiliation. Furthermore, since the Capuchin mission was totally separate from the Catholic Church in the rest of Nicaragua, Father Gregory's religious work was not perceived as being in any way related to the 'Spanish' from the Pacific Coast.

Secondly, Father Gregory's methods were distinctly Protestant and ecumenical. In keeping with the changes in the Catholic Church after Vatican II, he placed no emphasis on the saints or sacraments, he began the

⁴⁰ Smutko, 'El Apostolado', p. 13.

⁴¹ See the interview with Hamlyn in R. Ridenour, *Yankee Sandinistas: interviews with north americans living and working in the new Nicaragua* (Connecticut, 1986), p. 20.

⁴² Smutko, *Los Capuchinos*, p. 19.

⁴³ J. Jackson, 'Being and Becoming an Indian in the Vaupés', in Urban and Sherzer, *Nation-States and Indians*; E. Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: an Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London, 1984), pp. 131–2; R. Pace, 'Social Conflict and Political Activism in the Brazilian Amazon: a case study of Gurupa', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1992); D. K. Pollock, 'Conversion and "Community" in Amazonia', in R. Hefner, *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley, 1993); J. Shapiro, 'From Tupã to the Land without Evil: the Christianisation of the Tupi-Guarani Cosmology', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1987); and Wilson, 'Machine Guns and Mountain Spirits', p. 35.

⁴⁴ Pollock, 'Conversion and "Community"', p. 182.

training of local delegates of the word and catechists,⁴⁵ and he advocated the reading of the Bible as a basis for faith and religious practice. And thirdly, Father Gregory's message resonated strongly with the implicitly political identity that had been developing among members of the Moravian church, particularly pastors, during the 1960s and 70s. His emphasis on the bravery of the Miskitu against the Spanish, in his use of Miskitu history, and his encouragement towards lobbying organs of the Nicaraguan state in political organising, both echoed and articulated the resentment that the Miskitu felt towards the Nicaraguan state and mestizo society.⁴⁶

Father Gregory's role in the emergence of a politicised Miskitu ethnicity was thus catalytic rather than causal. He provided organisational tools and a repertoire of ethno-historical symbols which the Miskitu, particularly Moravian pastors, appropriated in a regeneration of latent ethnic-nationalist aspirations.⁴⁷ When Father Gregory left the region in 1972, and ACARIC folded in the same year, owing to financial difficulties, Moravian pastors, such as Wycliffe Diego and Silvio Diaz, began to agitate for a new indigenous political organisation. And in 1974, ALPROMISU (the Alliance for the Progress of the Miskitu and Sumu) was founded.

Because of the involvement of the Moravian pastors in ALPROMISU, the Moravian Church became the main institutional means by which an indigenous political agenda – essentially the same as that which ACARIC had pursued – was disseminated. Moravian Church services and youth conferences were important social spaces which were used both by ALPROMISU activists to inform people about their rights as indigenous people, and by Moravian pastors to report back on regional ALPROMISU conferences which they had attended. Moravian youth conferences were particularly important in this regard, because they

⁴⁵ As Father Gregory noted himself at the time: 'the program of formation [of native evangelists] adopted by the Catholics was clearly influenced by the success of the Moravian Church in the formation of evangelists from the country' (Smutko, *Pastoral Indigenista*, p. 23).

⁴⁶ Miskitu anger about their oppression was directed solely against the Spanish, thus leaving untouched and unanalysed one of the most fundamental relations of exploitation that affected the Miskitu: the transnational companies that had seriously depleted the resource base of the region, causing Miskitu impoverishment.

⁴⁷ Helms noted in the 1960s that 'a few informants claimed that the king would some day be restored to his position and that the Miskito would again be an independent nation' (Helms, *Asang*, p. 83). Dennis, meanwhile, observed that during his fieldwork in the late 1970s, Old Testament passages about the Israelite kings were read avidly by the Miskitu (P. Dennis, 'Coronation on the Miskito Coast', *The Geographical Magazine* (July, 1982), p. 395). Whether this interest in the Miskito king was as a result of the growing ethnic-nationalist movement, however, or represent a continuation of an older practice is unclear and perhaps unascertainable.

brought together the youth of various communities, thus providing a form of intra-village solidarity and a sense of a wider 'ethnic communitas'.⁴⁸

It was not just the institutional resources of the Church that were important to ALPROMISU, however. Moravian pastors at this time also began to fuse Moravian and politicised indigenous identities by preaching on such themes as Miskitu self-rule and the return of the king,⁴⁹ with reference to biblical passages and Moravian Church history. For instance, Reverend Mullins Tilleth, a prominent activist in ALPROMISU, began to preach a millenarian message that the Miskitu king was about to return to the region, and that Queen Elizabeth of England was going to sail up the Rio Coco to help the Miskitu.⁵⁰ According to Wycliffe Diego, Tilleth

was preaching about the kings and the land. He said that the Miskitus had to rule the land because it says in the dictionary that the word 'indigenous' means 'the owners'.⁵¹

Those who wished to partake in the new ethnic movement that began to take shape at this time had to participate in the Moravian Church, and those who were in the Moravian Church were inevitably drawn into at least hearing the message of this movement. Thus, during the 1970s the Moravian Church became the medium through which a new identity for the Miskitu was constructed, and a heightened and politicised consciousness of what it meant to 'be Miskitu' was produced and maintained. With help from powerful outsiders the ethnic aspirations for the re-establishment of the Miskitu kingdom were dressed up in religious terms by the Moravian pastors. This had the effect of elevating these aspirations from merely political claims to divinely ordained rights.

These aspirations remained somewhat limited in scope and muted in expression, however, owing to the lack of political space in which to

⁴⁸ See J. Howe, 'The Effects of Writing on the Cuna Political System', in F. McGlynn and A. Tuden (eds.), *Anthropological Approaches to Political Behaviour* (Pittsburgh, 1991), p. 341; B. Muratorio, 'Protestantism, Ethnicity and Class in Chimborazo', in Norma Whitten (ed.), *Cultural Transformations and Ethnicity in Modern Ecuador* (Urbana, 1981), p. 528.

⁴⁹ Bourgois, who conducted fieldwork in the region from 1979–80, noted that 'in the 1970s under Somoza there were repeated rumours that the Miskitu king had returned and was circulating throughout the lower Coco River preparing his people for secession'. P. Bourgois, 'Nicaragua's Ethnic Minorities in the Revolution', *Monthly Review*, vol. 36, no. 8 (Jan. 1985), p. 30.

⁵⁰ Joaquin Swaso in an interview with the author, Waspam (1994). Swaso, now the local judge of Waspam on the Río Coco, was himself involved in the founding of ALPROMISU.

⁵¹ Interview with author, Puerto Cabezas (1994). Tilleth's monarchist message, and the theme of the return of the Miskitu king in general should not be seen as an atavistic nostalgia for past glories but rather as conjuring up a potent political symbol of Miskitu political autonomy protected by external forces.

pursue them, and to lack of grassroots involvement in the production of the new politicised identity.⁵² But with the Sandinista revolution, the political space opened up, and Miskitu nationalist expectations developed into a fullscale mobilisation, followed close on its heels by open conflict.

The Moravian Church and indigenous mobilisation

The year 1979 was not just the year of Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, which toppled the Somoza family's 40 year long dictatorship. It was also a year of rapid expansion for the Moravian Church. The Church established 16 new congregations and grew by some 3,000.⁵³ After the Sandinista revolution in July 1979, the Church expanded again: in just over a year, it set up 12 more new congregations, and added some 2,500 new members.⁵⁴ This unprecedented growth came despite the further erosion of the Church's institutional control over social welfare in the region, caused by the dwindling of resources since nationalisation, and by the new government's provision of competing sources of education and health.

Soon after the Sandinista victory, a new indigenous organisation named MISURASATA (Miskitu, Sumu, Rama, Sandinista, *Asla Takanka* – United) replaced ALPROMISU, whose leaders were discredited for having compromised with Somoza.⁵⁵ The new leaders were a group of young Miskitus – some of the first to receive university education – who were just emerging from the UNAN (National Autonomous University of Nicaragua) in Managua as the Revolution broke out. The three main leaders in this group were: Hazel Lau, Brooklyn Rivera and, most influential of all, Steadman Fagoth. These leaders gained almost immediate credibility and respect among the Miskitu because of their education, and because of their connections with the new government. They were thus perceived as, and were able to act as, brokers between the Miskitu and the Sandinistas.

The main body of activists and representatives from the communities, upon whom the new leadership were dependent for the activism needed to sustain the movement, and for the communication of their objectives, remained Moravian pastors. Meetings of MISURASATA were held in

⁵² Several people observed during the 1970s that ALPROMISU was a top-down organisation with little grass-roots participation. M. Ashby, 'The Mosquitia of Honduras', unpubl. fieldtrip report, CIIR, London, 1976, p. 34; Helms, in a letter to Richard Adams, quoted in Dunbar Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas*, p. 240.

⁵³ *North American Moravian* (May, 1980), p. 26.

⁵⁴ *North American Moravian* (May, 1981), p. 20.

⁵⁵ D. Saunders, 'Mosquitia and Nicaragua: An Incomplete Revolution', in J. Brosted et al., *Native Power: the Quest for Autonomy and Nationhood of Indigenous Peoples* (Oslo, 1985), p. 82.

village churches and the pastors used their sermons both to report back on the latest developments, and to rally the Miskitu into action. Furthermore, those pastors who had been key figures in ALPROMISU retained their influence in the new movement, particularly Wycliffe Diego, Mullins Tilleth and Silvio Diaz. For instance, in 1980 Mullins Tilleth was elected as President of the Council of Elders within MISURASATA.

Meanwhile, the discourse that MISURASATA began to promulgate bore a 'striking resemblance'⁵⁶ to the conscientising courses of Father Gregory, emphasising the prowess of the Miskitu against the Spanish, the ancient and autochthonous nature of Miskitu culture, and even the similarity between the Miskitu and the Israelites. Father Gregory, himself, was appointed by the new leaders as anthropological advisor to MISURASATA. At the same time, MISURASATA 'general directions' and public statements played heavily on the notion of the Miskitu as good Christians, despite certain tensions this created with their claims to 'aboriginal purity'.⁵⁷ In 1982, for instance, one document stated that:

we inherit and live by the ethnic values of our millennial peoples ... We emphasise the following as being of importance for our brothers: *Christian society*, communal property, family-oriented society, unity of feeling and unyielding willpower.⁵⁸

The same document also placed land claims within the biblical tradition as a legitimating device:

We follow a system of land use based on social principles ... in perfect accordance with Biblical teachings both of the Old and New Testaments, relating to the ownership and the use of the land.⁵⁹

The leaders of MISURASATA, went even further in promoting a christianised Miskitu nationalism, by appealing to the religious imagination of the Miskitu in speeches they gave in the rural communities. According to one Miskitu intellectual, the leaders:

said that we were going to have our own flag, our own money. That England was going to help us, that the US was going to help us. The people had a lot of faith in them and when they said things, the people believed that it was the truth. They said that when we won, the old people would be able to go to Jerusalem to see the tomb of Christ.⁶⁰

Thus, in the first few years after the Revolution, the unprecedented

⁵⁶ Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, p. 126.

⁵⁷ M. Diskin, 'Ethnic Discourse and the Challenge to Anthropology: the Nicaraguan Case', in G. Urban and J. Sherzer (eds.), *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America* (Austin, 1991), p. 169.

⁵⁸ Ohland & Schneider, *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, p. 51, emphasis added.

⁵⁹ K. Ohland & R. Schneider (eds.), *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity: the Conflict between Sandinistas and Miskito Indians of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast* (Copenhagen, 1983), p. 52.

⁶⁰ Interview with author, Managua (1994).

growth of the Moravian Church among the Miskitu accompanied the rapid rise in ethnic consciousness promoted by the new indigenous leaders. Through the Church and with the cooperation of Miskitu pastors, the indigenous leaders promoted strong ethnic antagonism towards the 'Spanish' or mestizos, and articulated the 'Moravian-ness' of the Miskitu in order to pursue ideological and cultural differences with the government. The importance of the Moravian Church in the development of MISURASATA is revealed in the fact that the three main leaders, none of whom were actually Moravian (Rivera was Baptist, Lau was Catholic, and Fagoth's family, and indeed most of his community, belong to the Church of God), took, the decision to 'become' Moravian in the first year of their leadership.⁶¹ That this was a deliberate strategy both to assert their Miskitu ethnicity, and to have access to the institutional resources that the Church provided is revealed in Rivera's description of his relationship to the Moravian Church:

At heart I am a Baptist because I have had that experience of God within the Baptist Church. But for the sake of ethnicity, for ethnic identification, I am tied to the Moravian Church. When one is involved in the indigenous cause ... the Moravian Church plays an important role. ... Many of the activities that one has to do as an activist, one does within the Moravian Church.⁶²

Fagoth (who, it was later discovered, had been an agent for Somoza's state security) then introduced a new element into the discursive context of ethnic mobilisation which led to an even more urgent hardening of boundaries against the Sandinistas. According to Rafaga, from early in 1980 onwards, Fagoth began to announce:

that the government was bringing a bad law to Nicaragua – the law of communism – and that this law would eventually incapacitate us as an Indian nation ... Fagoth told us that the countries of the United States, West Germany, Israel, and Argentina were ready to give assistance to us if we would initiate a war against our government in Managua.⁶³

Thus Fagoth played cleverly on two elements of Miskitu self-indication: that of themselves as good Christians, and that of themselves as important actors in the geo-political arena, always as allies with Britain or the USA, and particularly at junctures of international conflict.⁶⁴ That the fear of communism was one of the last straws which pushed the church more

⁶¹ According to Myrna Cunningham in an interview with the author, Puerto Cabezas (1994), Hazel Lau later told her that they had taken this decision.

⁶² Interview with author, Managua (1994).

⁶³ Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, pp. 38–9.

⁶⁴ Helms, *Asang*, p. 221. Helms notes that during the Vietnam war, the Miskitu on the Río Coco looked out avidly for aeroplanes 'feeling that it was a mark of importance and recognition to have a war on the river, or in other words, if warfare were part of the modern world, the Miskito should be involved also'.

vehemently into mobilising the Miskitu against the state was also suggested by the wife of Reverend Mullins Tilleth:

On top of it all, the Sandinists wanted to bring in communism, and that's why the church stood up – we believe in God and we grew up with that and you can't get that out of us ... on the Atlantic Coast, we are not communist, we are Christians, Protestants.⁶⁵

The Miskitu were accordingly thrust into a cosmological battle in which the fight against the Sandinistas was not just to fight for the Miskitu 'nation' against the invading 'Spaniards', but to fight against the forces of evil. Moravian Christianity, meanwhile, provided the symbolic scheme through which the Sandinistas were perceived as pollutants of a Miskitu sacral community and harbingers of chaos, against whom the Miskitu had to struggle in order to protect their religious and ethnic purity.⁶⁶ Government programmes such as vaccination campaigns, for instance, became symbols of Sandinista efforts to contaminate the Miskitu, and were rumoured to be attempts to inject communism into Miskitu children.⁶⁷

It was thus through religious discourse that the Miskitu political leaders and Moravian pastors invoked an ethno-religious moral community which was essential for the successful translation of political goals into large-scale political mobilisation.⁶⁸ At the same time, the indigenous leaders showed themselves adept at operating various discourses – both ethnic and religious – side by side, to establish at one and the same time the widest possible bases of solidarity, and multiple means of pursuing differences with the forces of opposition.

From indigenous activism to Holy War

Just a year and a half after the revolution relations between the Sandinistas and the Miskitu leaders deteriorated drastically, reaching their nadir in the arrest of the MISURASATA leaders in February 1981, on charges of separatism. The government had learned of the leaders' plans to lay claim to one large contiguous land title for 42,000 km², or 32% of the national territory, over which they demanded almost sovereign rights. However, within a week, the Sandinistas released all the leaders apart from Fagoth. When Fagoth was released after two months on condition that he take up a scholarship to study abroad, he left straight for Honduras, where

⁶⁵ Interview with author, Puerto Cabezas (1994).

⁶⁶ M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966).

⁶⁷ The accusation of communism against the Sandinistas, many of whom were practising Catholics, was confirmed in the eyes of the Miskitu by the presence of Cuban teachers in the communities, and of convinced atheists on some of the international brigades sent to the Coast.

⁶⁸ Foley, 'Organising and Ideology', p. 455.

he joined up with former members of Somoza's National Guard and the CIA.⁶⁹ On the way, he had time for a flamboyant marriage service in the Moravian Church in Puerto Cabezas, the main town in the northern region.⁷⁰

Groups of young Miskitu men began to gather around Fagoth in Honduras. Some of them, led by Cerilio Tirilo, a pastor who had been head of the Moravian Church's youth wing (AJECIM) in 1979–80, formed into a unit called the 'Astros' or the Stars. This unit was subdivided into two bands, the Seven Evangelists and the Troops of the Cross, who wore white crosses on their clothes, and claimed to be inspired by angels. According to one of the members of the Seven Evangelists, this group rejected an offer from an indigenous shaman to help destroy the Sandinistas in favour of working with white angels, who provided them with protective amulets:

the seven angels of the seven churches of the apocalypse helped us. [They] came to us by air in the bush where we were ... They handed over seven white stones to each one of us, they gave a cross to each of us. So that even though the bullets came at us 'prum, prum prum', they never touched us...⁷¹

It was the Astros who carried out the first Contra attacks of the whole war against the Sandinistas in December 1981, during which some 60 people were killed. One of these attacks took place in the frontier village of San Carlos, on the border between Nicaragua and Honduras, where a squadron of Sandinista soldiers were based. All 35 soldiers based there were killed, and according to Rafaga, Lucho Chevarria, the Commander of the squadron, was 'found tied to a tree, disembowelled. His heart had been removed'.⁷² These attacks also targeted those Miskitu who dared to work with the Sandinistas, and who were thus seen to have reneged on their ethnicity, suggesting that political boundaries had become co-terminous with ethnic ones in the process of mobilisation.

The Sandinistas, in response, took the decision to move all the Miskitu villages along the Río Coco, which formed the border with Honduras, to settlements inland. In the process, the Sandinistas burned most of the villages, including churches, to the ground, with the rationale that they would otherwise provide camps for the Contras. This destruction fulfilled in the eyes of the Miskitu the political prophecy that the Sandinistas were communists, who, as the missionaries had always told them, had no respect for private property nor the Church.

⁶⁹ Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*, p. 97.

⁷⁰ Fagoth, according to one source, took his girlfriend to the Sunday service and, in the middle of it, marched up the aisle with her and demanded that the Pastor marry them.

⁷¹ Interview with author, Wasipam (1994).

⁷² Reyes and Wilson, *Rafaga*, p. 44.

As the conflict intensified, religious motifs were used pervasively by the Miskitu combatants. Pastors and lay preachers began to pronounce that the Miskitu were the Israelites fighting a holy war for their land against the Canaanites, that they were the Hebrews fleeing the cruel tyranny of Pharaoh, that they were Daniel in the lion's den, and that they were the Maccabeans fighting against the despotic Antiochus Epiphanes. One combatant recounted to a pastor that, while in Honduras:

a pastor ... brought me a huge rock and from this rock he began to talk of Israel, that the Miskitu were the people of Israel, and that ... whoever dies in the war – receives salvation because their captain is God.⁷³

Biblical motifs pervaded the daily discourse of the combatants. Comandantes were referred to as Moses, Joshua, Gideon and David while the Río Coco was alluded to as the Red Sea.⁷⁴

The conflict was thus permeated by Moravian religious discourse and structured by Moravian ritual and organisation. Moravian hymns were sung into battle, and, as one Miskitu, who was kidnapped and forced to fight, recalled:

every night there was a church service when they talked a lot about Joshua and how he'd won a war, and about the kings. Then in the morning, in training, we had to sing hymns.⁷⁵

Moravian pastors (of whom there were 24 in Honduras, out of 166 in total⁷⁶) along with Catholic deacons, and church elders, acted as chaplains to the combatants. One pastor who was in Honduras remembered that:

each military group had to have a pastor with them ... they had to have an arm in one hand and a Bible in the other in order to give prayer services to the troops.⁷⁷

This sometimes resulted in the pastors actually fighting, and finding creative biblical justifications for doing so, as is suggested by Rafaga's account of one battle in which the pastor with his battalion:

got on his knees and started to pray. He told me later that while he was on his knees, God reminded him of 'the "Pistol" of the Apostle Paul'. He immediately got up and started firing the little pistol he carried but had never used.⁷⁸

⁷³ Interview with author, Managua (1994).

⁷⁴ M. Wilde, 'Faith and Endurance in Eastern Nicaragua', *Christian Century* (Nov. 1989), p. 974.

⁷⁵ Interview with author, Waspm (1994).

⁷⁶ D. Stoll, *Is Latin American Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 256. Although most pastors stayed in Nicaragua, the majority were implacably opposed to the Sandinistas and tacitly sympathetic to Miskitu combatants. The hierarchy of the Moravian Church in Nicaragua publicly condemned the activities of the Contras, and the intervention of the USA, and acted as mediators with the government. However, they were rejected by much of the grassroots in the Moravian Church for doing so.

⁷⁷ Interview with author, Río Coco (1994).

⁷⁸ Reyes & Wilson, *Rafaga*, p. 101. Presumably the Pastor was thinking of the 'Epistle of Paul'....

Religious rituals and practices, therefore, provided the organising framework, and religious narratives, the legitimation and cultural template, through which the Miskitu experienced, and acted upon the unfolding context of conflict. This became particularly important as power struggles between the political leaders and conflicting agendas threatened to tear apart the fragile unity of the Miskitu forces. The involvement of Moravian pastors and the moral consensus that they invoked among the combatants, helped to maintain the discipline of the Miskitu troops, and to guard against total entropy.

Conclusion

This article has argued that religious institutions and identities give rise to political action, not through any innate political properties that they may have, but as they are reinterpreted and reinvented in negotiation with particular contexts and social processes. As it has shown, the Moravian Church became a cultural flag of Miskitu ethnicity in response to external and internal forces of change within Miskitu society during the 1960s and 70s. Politicised Miskitu ethnicity, meanwhile, evolved out of changes within the institution of the Church, as well as Miskitu interaction with, and appropriation of, the pastoral strategies of a Catholic priest. As the case of the Moravian Church among the Miskitu reveals, in order to understand the politics of religiosity, it is essential to chart the ways in which attitudes to the political sphere are shaped by contextually-located religious processes, and the ways in which political identities receive their meaning from their articulation within the religious realm.

This article has also set out to show that when political identities are transmuted into political action, the religiosity of politics is frequently implicit to that process. Religious institutions and specialists are often at the forefront of political mobilisations in translating political agendas into local terminology. As this article has shown, Miskitu political leaders had to operate within the local religious discourse of Moravian Protestantism in order to appeal to their political constituency, and to maintain their legitimacy. Thus religion came to be the cultural framework and the ‘internal politics’⁷⁹ of the Miskitu mobilisation against the Sandinista state. And this resulted in the fact that, as mobilisation gave way to armed confrontation, in the words of a Miskitu doctor, ‘the Moravian Church was the ideology of, and the moral behind, the war’.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Van der Berg and van der Veer, ‘Pandits, power and profit’, p. 521.

⁸⁰ Interview with author, Puerto Cabezas (1994).