

March 1984  
re-write

THE INDIAN RESISTANCE IN NICARAGUA

Bernard Nietschmann  
Department of Geography  
University of California  
Berkeley, CA 94720

Handwritten notes:  
- Some of your ideas  
- 4/15 his to ideas  
- this runs to [initials]

Eastern Nicaragua's Miskito, Sumo and Rama Indian situation is complex and has attracted wide-ranging and contrasting explanations. In January I visited Indians in refugee camps in Costa Rica and Indians inside Nicaragua who are fighting against the Sandinista government. This was my third "unofficial" trip inside Nicaragua since mid-1983 with representatives of the Indian organization MISURASATA to talk with villagers and Indian military leaders in order to learn firsthand their views on their struggle. The Indian perspective on the Indian resistance is seldom sought and almost totally absent from discussions of the Indian-Sandinista conflict. I would like to share here the rationale and goals of the Indians who are actively resisting, politically and militarily, the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional), and to place these within the context of other interpretations that are often given by the media, the United States, the Sandinistas, and the Indians' supposed allies, the FDN (Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense) and ARDE (Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática).

Miskito, Sumo and Rama Indians have been fighting against the Nicaraguan government for three years. The Indians were the first to militarily oppose the FSLN, beginning in February 1981 (a year before the FDN and two years before ARDE). The resistance is widespread, longterm, determined, and operates throughout Indian territory in eastern Nicaragua and from border areas near Costa Rica and in Honduras. The Indians call it an Indian revolution and do not see themselves as contras (counterrevolutionaries),

but as Indian revolutionaries fighting for Indian objectives. To be sure, their struggle is in many ways part of the overall anti-Sandinista war, but their reasons and goals are not. They say they are fighting to establish their rights for self-determination, to regain their traditional lands, and for autonomy. They are fighting for Indian control of Indian territory, not to overthrow the Sandinista government or to make it more democratic. As one Indian leader told me: "The contra groups like the FDN and ARDE are fighting for democracy and representative free elections. We are fighting for something else. We are not fighting for democracy--we never had it from any government. We are fighting for something that was taken away from us. We are fighting for our land. For an Indian freedom is land, not democracy."

From the Indians' perspective, all governments in the Americas are anti-Indian. Indians are dying in Guatemala and in Nicaragua. Right wing, left wing, military junta, democratic, Marxist, or whatever, Indian lands and cultures everywhere are under attack by the state. However, these Indians have made the decision to resist rather than passively accept decisions forced upon them.

The Miskito have centuries of experience of resisting and are prepared for a prolonged war. Since the sixteenth century the Miskito held back Spanish efforts to colonize Indian territory culminating in 1800 when the Miskito defeated and expelled a Spanish force, effectively reconquering their homeland, more than 20 years before other anti-Spanish Wars of Independence led to the establishment of states from colonies in Latin America. The Treaty of Managua (1860) gave autonomy to what was called the Miskito Reservation--the eastern coast of Nicaragua, but in 1894 a Nicaraguan

military force invaded the area to "reincorporate" it into the nation. During the twentieth century dictatorships, the Miskito, Sumo and Rama maintained effective control over their village communal lands and resources, but government leases given to foreign companies bypassed Indian determination over land and natural resource use in many areas of their territory. After 1979, FSLN agrarian reform aimed to expropriate under state control land deemed to be underused or misused. Because Indians practice ecologically adapted long fallow agriculture, their land use system is dependent on having large amounts of land in fallow and small amounts under cultivation at any one time. Forest reserves, pasture land and surplus land for future population growth are integral parts of each community's territory. What the FSLN saw as surplus land was transferred to state control for eventual development and redistribution. The Indians saw this as outright theft of their lands backed up by a massive military presence, and foreign advisors. The FSLN believed that the revolution gave them the right to "integrate" Indian lands and peoples into Nicaragua; the Indians saw that the revolution gave the FSLN the power but not the rights to do so. The rights to decisions over Indian land and peoples were Indian rights.

The Indians seek to maintain communal ownership of their village lands which collectively comprise Indian nations and to continue their primary allegiance to those nations as distinct peoples. The FSLN seeks to incorporate what they see to be ethnic minorities into the revolution as citizens whose allegiance is to the revolution and whose territories are to be brought under national sovereignty.

Professor John Bodley (Washington State University) writes in Victims of Progress, a world-wide survey of programs and policies to control and

transform indigenous peoples: "It has become fashionable to describe tribal peoples as national minorities, and as such to even speak of them as obstacles to national unity and sources of instability. Newly independent nations have been eager to politically incorporate zones that former colonial governments had left relatively undisturbed, on the theory that such zones had been deliberately perpetrated in order to create division within the country."

The war between the Indians and the Sandinistas began over who was going to control indigenous territory and peoples, the FSLN or the Indians. As such, this is one of the many Fourth World wars currently being waged on every continent. At present there are some 20 resistance movements involving indigenous peoples against states, including the Nagas, Sikhs, Misoran and Kachims in India; the Kalinga and Muslim groups in the Philippines; the Papuans, Timorese and Mollucans in Indonesia; the Mujahedin in Afghanistan; the Maya, Zapotec and Mixe in Guatemala and Mexico; and the Ovimbundu, Harrah and Bantu in South Africa and Namibia. The Miskito, Sumo and Rama are fighting for an autonomous region similar to what the San Blas Cuna have won by force in Panama, the Naga in Assam, and the Nilotic and Sudanic peoples in Southern Sudan.

One Miskito warrior inside Nicaragua asked me, "Why do the Sandinistas want to take over Indian land and my people? We don't want to go to the west coast to force our ways on them. They should have helped us develop our Indian land and people, not compel us to their ways. They started this war by coming here with their policies and military. We will end the war at the borders of our land."

The Indian resistance is hidden and misinterpreted due to the larger international political and military situation involving Nicaragua, Cuba,

the Soviet Union, the United States, and Honduras. Beneath the rhetoric, accusations, condemnations, charges and countercharges, and politically-charged language, the Indian-Sandinista war is an internal conflict between the power of the state to impose and the capacity of the Indians to resist. The Nicaraguan wars are a boxes-within-boxes conflict--Indians against state control, Nicaraguans against Marxist-Leninist control, the United States against FSLN control--which conveniently and simplistically have been interpreted as one war, one conflict, one source, one goal. The FSLN has attempted to transfer the goals of the US, FDN and ARDE to the Indians, and the US, FDN and ARDE have tried to transfer the Indian resistance to their goals.

Because the Indians' limited goals do not fit into the two-dimensional "right vs. left" geopolitical and media analyses of the Nicaraguan conflict, they are made to fit. At the international level the Indian resistance is usually referred to paternalistically as "US-backed disaffected Indian contras," as if the Indians were not fighting for their own reasons (the equivalent of "French-backed disaffected colonists" to describe the forces that opposed the British during the American Revolution). The United States uses the violations of Indians' human rights just to discredit the Sandinista government, conveniently ignoring what the Indians are fighting for and focusing only on what has happened to them. A strong pro-indigenous stance is hardly part of US domestic or international policy. The FSLN, while maintaining that the Indian opposition is externally provoked and manipulated as part of CIA-directed destabilization efforts, recently has admitted mistakes and errors in their Indian policies and has released many Indian political prisoners and announced a general ill-defined amnesty that is to date

unattractive and being ignored by Indians fighting, in exile, and in refugee camps. (Although the amnesty is an important first step toward potential political negotiations, the Indians do not see there is anything to come home to. In fact, since the December '83 amnesty, Indians have continued to flee from Nicaragua. To counter this embarrassment, ARDE and the FDN have been falsely accused by members of the Nicaraguan government of prohibiting Indian refugees from leaving Costa Rica and Honduras.) And the Indians' military allies--the FDN and ARDE--are wary and unsupportive of Indian goals of autonomous control over Indian territory, resources and peoples. In the face of the still unresponsive Sandinista government, the Indian resistance has to continue these alliances to obtain weapons and logistical aid for their own objectives, realizing full well that their tenuous allies are limiting and marginalizing support so as to reduce their military potential to small-scale guerrilla activities and to nullify their political potential so that they do not become a well-armed army of Indian nationalists that would oppose any new government that did not grant them their land and rights. Even if the current Nicaraguan conflict was to be "solved" politically or militarily, if the Indians don't regain their land and achieve self-determination, they will continue to fight. In the midst of this struggle, they actively discuss and plan for what unfortunately may be the next war, Indians vs. non-Indians, eastern Nicaragua vs. western Nicaragua.

As hopeless as their situation may appear, they are determined to continue and they do have many advantages despite the limitations of their "barefoot revolution." Similar to the Afghanistan rebels, the Indian resistance in Nicaragua is based on the cohesive yet decentralized structure

of Indian village societies, cemented by strong cultural and religious identity and the centuries-old warrior tradition and abilities of the Miskito who historically have never been dominated militarily in their extensive and rugged territory. What they see as FSLN oppression has served as a catalyst for political and military resistance. This is the situation inside Nicaragua that continues to fuel their determination to fight on despite the odds: 1) one-fourth of the coast's 165,000 Indians are in military-controlled "relocation camps," or are in refugee camps in Honduras or Costa Rica; 2) one-half of Miskito and Sumo villages have been destroyed; 3) Indian rights to self-government, traditional land and resources have been abolished; 4) subsistence cultivation, fishing and hunting are strictly controlled, and access to staple foods is so limited that hunger is an everyday problem and starvation a real probability in many communities; 5) many villages have had no medicine or doctors for over two years; 6) freedom of movement is denied or severely restricted; 7) more than 35 Indian communities have suffered massive Sandinista military invasions during which civilians have been arbitrarily arrested, interrogated, tortured, killed, raped, personal belongings stolen, and livestock and crops destroyed in an unsuccessful effort to force the villagers to divulge the location of the Indian warriors' secret base camps and to terrorize the villagers so that they won't support or join the warriors. As bad as it was under the Somoza dictatorships, the Indians have suffered much more in the 4½ years of the Sandinistas than they did during the 43 years of the Somozas.

During their three years of armed resistance to the FSLN, the Indians have not lost a military confrontation. In addition to the numerous guerrilla skirmishes, they have also fought several major head-to-head

defeat the Indians' guerrilla forces that are permanently established and supported inside Nicaraguan Indian territory. Furthermore, so-called Indian "leaders" working with the Managua government do not represent Indian interests or the vast majority of Indian non-combatants, certainly not the Indians fighting. While these "leaders" may be important to the FSLN for seeking international support of their Indian policies, they do not represent a viable solution for the actual domestic conflict. On the Indian side of the war, their forces are underarmed and limited numerically by the quantity of arms they can obtain from their FDN and ARDE allies or from Sandinistas they engage in battles. They are willing to continue as limited as they might be for years if necessary. But they also see that their current position--as marginal as it is because of the military superiority of the FSLN and the control exerted by their fictive allies--actually gives them considerable leeway in future decisions and commitments.

Based on my discussions with Indian political and military leaders about the course of their struggle, I want to present four hypothetical situations of varying probabilities for future Indian actions:

1. The Indians could continue as they are, underarmed and under-supported by their allies and simply try to wear down the Sandinistas militarily and economically until it is too costly for the FSLN, and some sort of resolution is achieved, either independently of the FDN and ARDE position, or part of it.
2. The Indians' FDN and ARDE allies could take a strong, pro-Indian position, sign and support treaties for Indian control of Indian land, and provide greater logistical and arms support to help the Indians push the Sandinistas from eastern Nicaragua. The Indians have a potential force of 10,000 warriors and they represent the



quickest way to massively expand military pressure on the FSLN.

3. Another outside interest could step in and provide arms and logistical support to the Indians as a means to establish a political beachhead in the Americas; China, for example.
4. Or, the FSLN could evolve a much-needed pro-Indian policy, recognizing that Indian land and self-determination aspirations are not "counter-revolutionary," and begin negotiations with authentic Indian leaders with the goal of adapting some of the revolution to the Indians, not just the Indians to the revolution. If the FSLN were to guarantee Indian-control of traditional Indian land, help rebuild the destroyed villages, and arm the Indians, they would solve a military problem, isolate FDN and ARDE forces by breaking the connecting guerrilla link in eastern Nicaragua, allow the Indians to defend their territory from contra incursions, and thus be able to concentrate their FSLN forces on the northern and southern borders.

Of the three anti-Sandinista wars--the FDN, ARDE, and the Indians--the Indian conflict would be for the FSLN the easiest to resolve. On the other-hand, it is also the one that would be the easiest to suddenly expand. These options to shut down or open up Indian resistance will be accepted by the Indians to the extent that they see the possibilities to achieve their goals of self-determination and Indian control of Indian land.

-----

Bernard Nietschmann is Professor of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley and has written three books on the Indians of eastern Nicaragua based on research carried out over the last 15 years. He is now working on a book about the Indian-Sandinista war.