

Cowboys vs. Indians in Nicaragua's 'WILD EAST'

By Nathaniel Morris

THE ROAD FROM MANAGUA TO BONANZA, a mining town in the autonomous north-eastern part of Nicaragua, is long and for the most part unpaved. Every summer, clouds of dust accompany the brightly painted buses that run to and from the capital, choking the passengers and turning hands, faces and clothes a startling white, while during the rainy season the same dirt road becomes a sea of mud, slowing traffic to a crawl and making the fifteen-hour journey yet more uncomfortable.

But it is the region's isolation that has allowed the ten thousand or so Mayangna Indians, second largest of Nicaragua's indigenous populations, to survive here with their language and culture largely intact, despite the pressures exerted on them by the conquistadores and slave-raiders of the colonial period, the North American mining companies who succeeded them in the early twentieth century, and the constant efforts of the Nicaraguan state to absorb the nation's Indian groups into a homogenous, 'national' mestizo culture.

However, while Bonanza and the neighbouring municipalities of Siuna and Rosita remain remote, pressure on the region's lands has been building since the 1950s, when thousands of mestizo

peasants, displaced by the Somoza dictatorship's land reforms aimed at 'modernising' agriculture, first began to migrate towards the supposedly 'virgin lands' of the Atlantic Coast. The problem is that the region's rainforests, far from being 'wasteland' ripe for conversion into 'productive' cattle pastures by entrepreneurial mestizo farmers, are essential to traditional Mayangna life, which continues to revolve around hunting, gathering and small-scale slash-and-burn agriculture. While the violence that wracked the Atlantic Coast during the Nicaraguan Civil War in the 1980s largely halted the eastward expansion of what is locally known as the 'agricultural frontier', since the early 1990s the economic policies of successive Liberal and 'neo-Sandinista' governments, with their emphasis on growth in the agro-exports sector, has accelerated mestizo migration to the area, making new land conflicts inevitable.

On the road from Rosita to Wasakín, a large Mayangna village of wooden houses on stilts surrounded by tropical fruit trees, the devastation caused by mestizo 'colonists' is obvious. The virgin jungles that once surrounded Wasakín have been illegally logged, the wood sold for profit and the land transformed into cattle pasture. But as the dry soil becomes exhausted, the colonists,



having laid claim to the land by ‘improving’ it in this way, sell up at profit and move on. Through this process Nicaragua is losing an estimated 75,000 hectares of forest cover a year,¹ and despite Wasakín’s legal title to a large, inalienable and communally-held territory, the ranchers have begun to carve out plots for themselves within this area, claiming that the traditional Mayangna use of forest resources is ‘unproductive.’ And as in other areas contested between the Mayangna and mestizo colonists, the result has been a permanent state of confrontation between the two groups and a series of bloody murders.

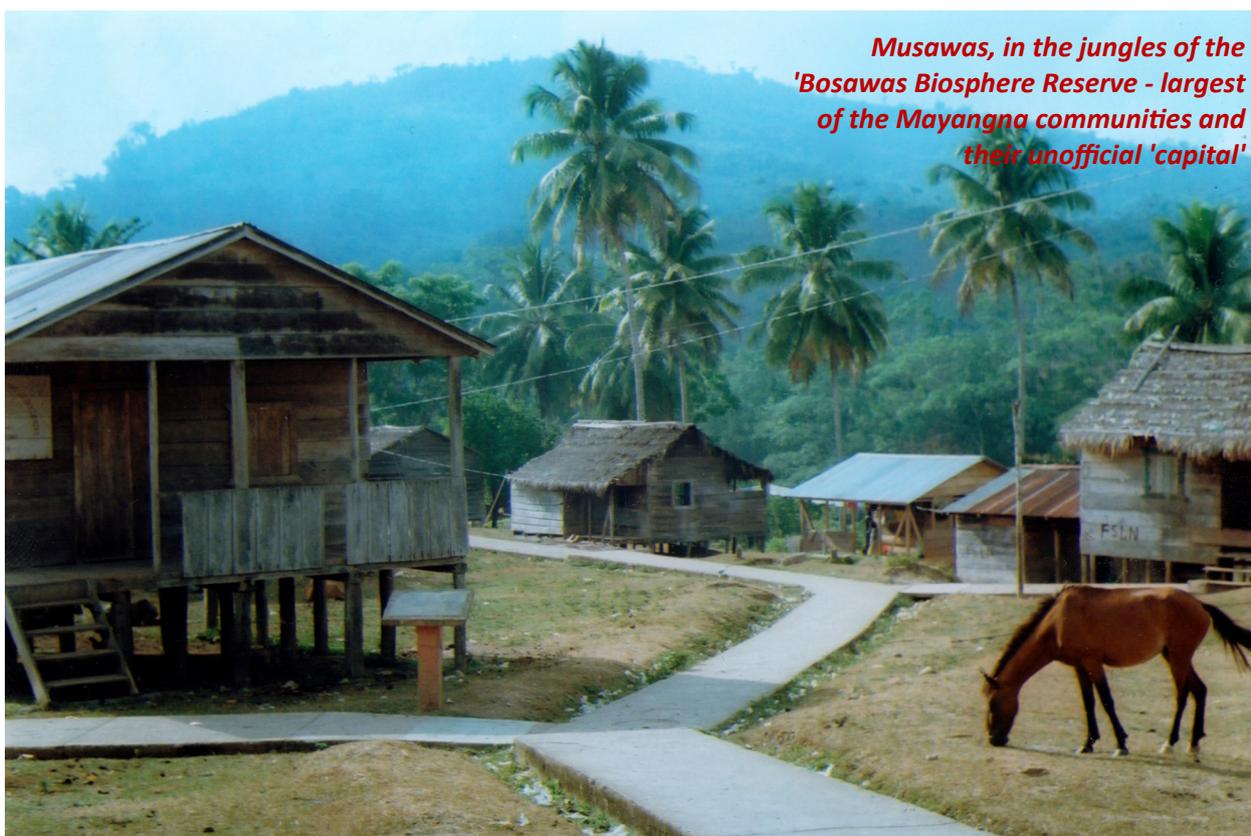
In March 2011, for example, two Mayangna youths were killed on the Bambana river near Wasakín, apparently in revenge for the earlier death of a mestizo rancher during a fight with a group of Mayangna farmers. According to Cornelio Fenly Pins, Wasakín’s Protestant religious leaders – one legacy of the colonial-era British domination of the region – have explicitly forbade any further violence, and have tried to arrange a dialogue with the Catholic priests of the mestizo settlements.² But he warned that the young men of the village are angry and increasingly impatient, as so far the central government’s only response to these killings has been to blame them on “armed criminal gangs”, refusing to deal with the root cause of the violence – that of the invasion of communal lands and the illegal destruction of the forests.

It is not only the central government’s inaction that angers the Mayangna. They also feel neglected by the region’s autonomous government, dominated by the YATAMA party, which represents their Miskitu Indian neighbours – the largest and most important indigenous group in Nicaragua. Traditional enmity between the Mayangna and the Miskitu dates back to the Colonial era, when the latter, allied with the British, became the main power on the coast and displaced, enslaved and massacred the former. Despite this, however, during the Nicaraguan Civil War in the 1980s many Mayangna joined Miskitu guerrillas in the fight against the Sandinista government. Although peace negotiations between the Sandinistas and the Indian rebels eventually resulted in the central government granting autonomy to the Atlantic Coast in 1986,

the current autonomous political system is far from ideal in the eyes of the Mayangna, who feel that despite their own sacrifices during the war, the Miskitu leaders now ignore their distinct problems as a people and yet continue to portray themselves as representatives of all of the ‘Indians’ of the Coast, depriving the Mayangna of the chance to make themselves heard. Nicaragua’s Liberal party and its allies, despite granting official land-titles to several Mayangna communities in the 1990s, have also largely alienated the Mayangna, ignoring issues of indigenous rights, regional autonomy and environmental conservation throughout their time in power, instead prioritising accelerated economic development (prompted in part by IMF and World Bank ‘structural adjustment’ programmes).

Since the mid-1990s, the Mayangna have therefore regarded Daniel Ortega’s Sandinistas as their only political ally, which has made the lack of the Sandinista-run central government’s intervention in the territorial conflicts on the Atlantic Coast doubly frustrating. In Wasakín, as in many other Mayangna communities threatened by the advance of the ‘agricultural frontier’, the inaction of the central government is blamed on one thing; the November 2011 general election, in which the Sandinistas were re-elected for a second term. As Cornelio explained at the time: “The ranchers are all government supporters. And the government doesn’t want to lose their votes.





And let me put it this way, it's not just the votes of the ranchers they're worried about – there are a lot more mestizos than Indians in this country”.

The small size of the Mayangna population means that, despite the promises of Sandinistas politicians, there is little political will on the part of either central or regional governments to put an end to the problem of the land invasions, even though the majority of Mayangna communities now have legal title to their lands. Meanwhile, despite the differing economic policies of the Somozas, Sandinistas and (neoliberal) Liberals, the continued importance of agricultural exports to the Nicaraguan economy, and the same broad international trends that have long put indigenous communities across Latin America on a collision course with ‘national development’ by favouring the transformation of ‘unproductive’ forest into ‘productive’ pasturelands open to exploitation by domestic capitalists, make finding a definitive political solution to Mayangna’s problems yet more difficult.

Thus the Mayangna find themselves trapped between a ‘Revolutionary’ central government that depends on mestizo farmers for votes and

economic growth, an ‘Indianist’ regional administration that largely ignores them in favour of another Indian group, and an international economic system that actively promotes the destruction of their forests and thus their traditional way of life. However, in Musawás, the largest Mayangna community in Nicaragua and the unofficial Mayangna ‘capital’, the leadership believe that another international trend may hold the key to saving their territories from the advance of the ‘agricultural frontier’. They hope that UNESCO’s declaration of much of the forested region in which they live as the ‘Bosawás Biosphere Reserve’ in 1997, together with the growing political clout of the international environmentalist movement, will force the State to act to halt the invasion, colonisation and deforestation of their territory within it.

In line with their new alliance with the international Green movement, the Mayangna have begun to rearticulate their traditional demands for territorial, political and cultural autonomy as the struggle of “the last pure Indians in Nicaragua”³ to preserve their forests. Borrowing from the rhetoric of environmentalist NGOs, the Mayangna now describe their





homeland as “the lungs of the Americas”, and themselves as “the guardians of the forests”.⁴ Furthermore, by taking advantage of the expansion of the Nicaraguan education system – one of the main achievements of the Revolution – and entering their children into secondary schools (a level of education that before the Revolution only two Mayangna had ever completed), community leaders plan for the new generation to go on to train as forest engineers, BOSAWAS Reserve administrators, or as the ‘Forest Guards’ tasked by the central government with protecting the Reserve’s forests – thus allowing for a kind of *de facto* Mayangna autonomy as control over the defence of their lands within the Reserve passes into their own hands. For Econayo Taylor, a Mayangna leader who has played a key role in these efforts, “it is only as masters of their own forests, rivers and mountains that the Mayangna can be masters of their own destiny.”⁵

The Mayangna believe that, with help from international environmentalists – and perhaps even the World Bank, which has at last begun to emphasise the benefits of ‘sustainable development’⁶ – they will be able to persuade the Nicaraguan government that the defence of indigenous territories is in the national interest. Whether they can achieve this before land invasions and deforestation deal a death-blow to

their traditional culture, however, remains uncertain, and largely depends on Daniel Ortega, now in his second term as President (and with a strengthened mandate following Sandinista successes in last November’s general elections), finally making good his promises to the nation’s indigenous communities. The founding this February of the Nicaraguan Army’s ‘Green Battalion’ – the first military unit in the world charged exclusively with fighting illegal logging – is certainly a positive sign, indicating that the government recognises the threat that deforestation poses to the country’s water supplies, and its own ambitious plans to build a national hydroelectric power network. But a definitive solution to the problem will depend on Ortega having the courage and political strength to face down an alliance of mestizo peasants, big landowners, local capitalists, and crooked lawyers and politicians, who see in the destruction of Nicaragua’s forests a route to money and power.

In the meantime, the Mayangna will have to hope that the gamble they have taken – with the self-conscious adoption of environmentalist rhetoric and with the education and empowerment of their youth – pays off, providing the next generation with the tools needed to protect and preserve their traditional way of life for themselves, before it is irreversibly eroded by the increasing pressure on their lands, and the violence that comes with it.

NOTES:

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1. A. Acevedo Vogl, *Nicaragua Country Report* (Social Watch, 2012)
2. Author’s interview with Cornelio Fenley Pins, *síndico* of Wasakín and in charge of the community’s land titles (Wasakin, 18/04/11)
3. Author’s interview with Rolando ‘Chaoling’ Davis, pro-Sandinista Mayangna community leader (Bonanza, 22/04/11)
4. Cornelio Fenley Pins

