Matrifocality and Women's Power

on the Miskito Coast

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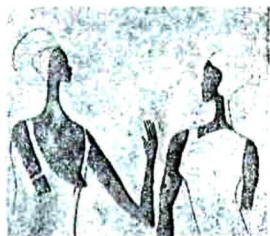
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Miskitu women in the village of Kuri (northeastern Honduras) live in matrilocal groups, while men work as deep-water lobster divers. Data reveal that with the long-term presence of the international lobster economy, Kuri has become increasingly matrilocal, matrifocal, and matrilineal. Female-centered social practices in Kuri represent broader patterns in Middle America caused by indigenous men's participation in the global economy. Indigenous women now play heightened roles in preserving cultural, linguistic, and social identities. (Gender, power, kinship, Miskitu women, Honduras)

Along the Miskito Coast of northeastern Honduras, indigenous Miskitu men have participated in both subsistence-based and outside economies since the colonial era. For almost 200 years, international companies hired Miskitu men as wage-laborers in "boom and bust" extractive economies, including gold, bananas, and mahogany. During boom times, men worked away from the villages, while women and children lived in matrilocal residential groups where, in the absence of adult men, women passed down language and identity to the children (Helms 1971). Conversely, patrilocal residential patterns were restored during bust phases of the economy, when men returned to their subsistence labors. While men became more acculturated to outside cultures, Miskitu women stayed behind as society's conservative cultural core. Therefore, the Miskitu people's practice of matrilocal residence proved to be a successful social adaptation to boom times in the coastal economy (Helms 1971:23–28).

Helms's research (in the late 1960s) in the community of Asang, along the Río Coco in Nicaragua, was completed just after a decline in the mahogany timber industry (Helms 1971:31, 232). Asang men then did agricultural labor close to home, and residence was patrilocal. In contrast to Helms, my research along the Honduran Miskito Coast in the late 1990s depicts Miskitu society during a boom in the international (Honduras-US) lobster economy. In Kuri, a Miskitu village (pop. 175), men lived away from their communities on lobstering boats, and women and children lived in matrilocal groups. Helms (1971) would attribute the different social and gendered practices in Asang in the 1960s and Kuri in the 1990s to the effects of the boom and bust economy. My work supports and furthers Helms's analysis by demonstrating that the most recent

boom in the lobster economy (1970s to the present) has caused Honduran Miskitu society to develop increasingly female-centered social practices.

While other researchers have reported matrilocality among Miskitu peoples (Dennis 2004; García 1996a, 1996b; Helms 1971; Jamieson 2000; Peter 2002), this is the first time in the ethnographic literature that a researcher can demonstrate that Miskitu society has become matrifocal and even matrilineal. Analysis suggests that women's power has increased in Miskitu society due to changes in residence patterns, domestic organization, and descent that have developed along with the lobster-diving economy.[2] The present article views Miskitu women's main power as vested in their ability to craft everyday social identities and kinship relations (Blackwood 2000:7, 187). Their power lies beyond the scope of the Honduran state, which recognizes male surnames and males as legitimate heads of households.

This article first identifies matrifocal characteristics found in Kuri, including male absenteeism and matrilocal residential patterns. Then it compares Helms's 1960s data to my 1990s data to show that matrilineal descent practices have taken hold along the Honduran Caribbean coast.

MATRIFOCALITY

Smith (1956) coined the term matrifocal to refer to black Caribbean families in British Guyana that lived in consanguineal households and practiced post-marital matrilocal residence.[3] Gonzalez (1970, 1988), who worked among the Garífuna (Black Carib) on the Guatemalan Caribbean coast, characterizes matrifocality by two predominant features: "consanguineal co-residential kinship" and "mother-centered" families, whereby mothers are dominant in the family and play the leading role psychologically. Many other researches have identified mother-centered families as a predominant feature of matrifocality (Belmonte 1989, Blackwood 2005, Brøgger and Gilmore 1997, Mohammed 1986, Scott 1995, and Tanner 1974).

In Kuri, consanguineal households and mother-centered families prevail. Young couples in Kuri almost always live near the wife's family after marriage. A Miskitu song, originally performed in the Miskitu language by W. Suarez and E. Guevara, reveals local attitudes toward marriage and residence. The song title below refers to a future mother-in-law and father-in-law.

Taihka, Taihka, Tahti, Tahti (Auntie, Auntie, Uncle, Uncle)

Auntie, Auntie, Auntie, Uncle, Uncle, Uncle
I want your daughter to be mine
I will buy her a chicken, a pig

and build her a house close to your home
Auntie, Auntie, Auntie, I want your daughter to be mine
I will build her a house close to your home

Miskitu couples often choose to live in the wife's parents' house for a short time while the husband accumulates money and resources to build a house on land given to them by the wife's mother. Thereafter, the home is called or referred to by the name of the wife using the possessive; e.g., Tomassa's house. Similarly, in Sumatra, land is inherited in Minangkabau society through the female line; even when men build a house for their family, the house is immediately understood to be the woman's property that she will pass on through the female line (Blackwood 2000, 2005; Sanday 2002).

The land given to daughters in Kuri typically surrounds the mother's house, and eventually a group of sisters and their families' homes would encircle the mother's patio. In 1997, the village geographically divided itself into five matrigroups that account for 22 out of 25 houses (Herlihy 2006:45–46). Mothers, daughters, and sisters form the core of the matrigroup, living near each other their entire lives. The social and economic ties between these women are the most enduring and important in Miskitu society (Garcia 1996a, 1996b; Helms 1971; Peter 2002). With time, the mother becomes known as a *kuka* (grandmother and respected elder). Grandmothers possess pharmaceutical knowledge and are responsible for keeping members of the matrigroup emotionally, spiritually, and physically healthy. A kuka rules over all her descendants as the local expert and enforcer of correct kinship, social, and economic behaviors.

A kuka can be both respected and feared. In the matrigroup where the researcher lived, everyone called Kuka Denecela by the nickname "Doña CES." CES, an acronym, stands for the police force that worked in the region. Others called her "kuka militar" (military grandmother). The author also heard sons-in-law jokingly referred to as *albahuina* (literally, slave meat) because of their subservient position as resource providers to the households of their mothers-in-law. Stivens (1996) and Peletz (1994) refer to the power of mothers-in-law in Malaysia as "queen control." This refers to the psychological effect on Malaysian (related to Minangkabau peoples) sons-in-law who are teased about their weak position in their wife's family.

Female-Headed Households

In 1998 women headed most Kuri's households (Table 1). Single mothers headed ten households where no man lived permanently in the husband-father

role. Women also headed 11 households while their husbands were away working (Herlihy 2006:47–48).

Table 1
Household Composition

	1991	1998
Total households	22	25
Total female-headed	19	21
Husband away working	11	11
Single	8	10

Table 2
Single Mothers and Household Structure in Kuri

Total number of mothers	32
Total number of single mothers	14
Single mothers heading households	10
Single mothers living in their mothers' households	4

Nearly half of all mothers were not married (see Table 2), and some of these women continued to live with their mothers (Herlihy, 2006:47–48). These households were similar to the Garífuna "consanguineal" households described by Gonzalez (1969, 1970), where mothers, daughters, and their children formed the domestic group. Gonzalez (1970:1–12) called these groups "matrifocal units," where a senior woman, a single mother herself, lived with her unmarried daughters, their children, and at times, some unmarried sons (see also Tanner 1974:132). In Kuri's female-headed households, the mothers' brothers and older sons contributed money to the households and held positions of authority over the children.

Male-Absenteeism

Since the early 1970s Miskitu men have worked as deep-water divers on boats owned by businessmen from the Honduran Bay Islands (Dodds 1998). The divers hunt spiny lobsters (*Panulirus Argus*) that are sold in Florida to restaurant chains in the United States, such as Red Lobster, Inc. During the 1997–98 season, 35 of 39 men in Kuri were employed as canoe men (*cayuceros*) and lobster divers (*buzos*). The buzos usually earn from US$150 to US$300 on each trip; but diving

for lobsters, like hunting, relies on luck, and men can return empty handed. During the diving season (from August to March), men usually take two trips to sea every month, staying in their villages just a few days before leaving again. In the off-season (from April through July), men work upriver in seasonal agricultural and hunting camps. Only four of 33 men over the age of 13 were present on a daily basis in Kuri (Herlihy 2006:47).

Kuri men, then, participate in both migrant wage-labor and migrant subsistence activities, where coastal villages are located a day's distance from Plátano Miskitu agricultural and hunting lands. Each year, men rebuild their seasonal agricultural and hunting camps (*champas*), where they live during the off-season (Herlihy 2005:37–38). Not only does the lobster industry take men offshore for long periods of time, but men also live much of the year up-river in their camps that are one or two days travel away from the villages.

Kuri had 25 houses and 175 people in 1998. Tables 3 and 4 depict those claiming to be permanent residents in Kuri households, but do not indicate a major characteristic of village life—the missing men. The actual population by age (see Table 5) reveals that Kuri is mainly composed of women and children less than 12 years of age.

Many researchers have stressed the fact that with matrifocal units, men are often absent from their household for long periods (Brøgger and Gilmore 1997; Gonzalez 1969, 1970; Mohammed 1986; Rasmussen 1996; Scott 1995), which in turn causes the formation of female-headed households. Among the Tuareg of northern Africa, matrifocality is an adaptive mechanism, whereby groups of women band together when the men are gone for work or on trading expeditions (Rasmussen 1996). Under similar conditions, female bonding also is reported for Mediterranean cultures (Brettell 1986, Brøgger 1992, Cole 1991).

Most all of the characteristics that researchers note for matrifocality revolve around the central role of the mother when there is a "missing man," where the father plays a limited role in the family. But Blackwood (2005) contends that women's power with matrifocality is not caused by or contingent upon men's absence. Building on Butler's (2002) argument that Western notions of kinship are based on heteronormative assumptions of kinship as based on a man-woman marriage, a nuclear family, and the "Patriarchal Man" as the main wage-earner and head of household, Blackwood (2005:8–10; see also Lamphere 2005) believes that these views cause anthropologists to emphasize marriages as aberrant or weak in matrifocal communities, while ignoring the women's other forms of relatedness, such as partnerships.

Blackwood's (2005) and Sanday's (2002) analyses of Sumatran society did not consider the effect that male migration has on women's power. My analysis differs with theirs because I examine the direct influence of male absence caused

by the global economy on gendered power. Blackwood's (2000) data show that about 30 percent of the men were gone in her community, whereas in Kuri, 90 percent of the males over the age of 13 were absented from the village daily.

Table 3
Claimed Population by Sex, 1998
(Herlihy 2002:170)

Total Population	175
Males	79
Females	96

Table 4
Claimed Population by Age and Sex, 1998
(Herlihy 2002:171)

Age	Sex		Total
	M	F	175
5 and under	20	29	49
6–12	24	18	42
13–15	17	26	43
26–39	8	12	20
40–55	7	7	14
56–	3	4	7

Table 5
Actual Population older than 13 by Age and Sex, 1998
(Herlihy 2002:172)

Age	Sex		Total
	M	F	
13–25	0	26	26
26–29	0	12	12
40–55	3	7	10
56–	1	4	5

Serial Monogamy

The high rate of divorce and desertion in Kuri also adds to the absence of men in the community. A Miskitu song (also performed by W. Suarez and E. Guevara) about men who come from afar to marry women along the coast and often return home after their marriages have fallen apart, tells of what frequently occurs in Kuri: women have sexual liaisons with men while their husbands or boyfriends are away at sea. As such, marriages between Kuri women and men are unstable. By the time a woman is approaching the end of her reproductive years (around 40), she generally has had a series of quasi-monogamous relationships with men that resulted in children. Men seem to have more spouses over their lifetime than do women, but this could not be verified because their children lived in other villages (Herlihy 2006:49).

Young women in Kuri generally begin having romantic relationships around age 15 or 16; they are mothers by the time they are 18, and have six to eight children on average. Most have no access to birth control. Table 6 displays the number of spouses with whom women in Kuri claimed to have produced children. "Of 32 mothers in Kuri, 13 claim to have had children from only one man; 12 claim they have had children from two to three spouses; and seven admitted to having had children from four to five different spouses" (Herlihy 2006:48). The numbers are conservative because women often lied during interviews to hide the fact that some of their children were produced from outside or illicit unions; and most of the women who claimed to have had only one spouse were young and just beginning to have relationships with men.

Gonzalez (1969, 1970) and Wekker (2006) both argue that low male salience among the Garífuna and Surinamese Creoles has to do with unstable unions (weak marriages) between husbands and wives. Wekker (2006) finds that Surinam women have several short relations with various men, and even other women, who may temporarily become domestic and sexual partners. She (Wekker 2006) claims that because men and women have multiple and temporary unions, a woman's lover has no permanent ties to the household and is not necessarily the father of her children.

Adopted Kin

Cook (1992:156) says the weaker role that men play in matrifocal families is due to low male salience, and thus they have little influence over family members when a high incidence of illegitimacy occurs and men are not the biological father of children in the household. With the constantly shifting membership of

Table 6
Number of Women's Marital Unions

# of women	# of spouses that produced children
13	1
6	2
6	3
4	4
313	51

matrifocal households and the high incidence of temporary boarders, Stack (1974) reported that men in the husband-father role often felt no legal or moral right to control the behaviors and actions of household members. Fonseca (1991) found a similar situation in Brazil, where poor families had many non-permanent adoptions of children. In these situations, men who live only for a short while in the household have little control over the actions of their wife's relatives.

Children in Kuri are often given to the care of their grandmothers or aunts. Teenage girls were especially in demand to cook, wash clothes, and help with child care. Many mothers lent their daughters to their mothers and sisters, even from birth. These female children grow up using dual systems of kinship, calling two or more women "Mama" or "Yapti," and assuming the corresponding terminology for all others in the two households. Thus, a child may call many women "mama" throughout life (see also Stack 1974).

Three of Kuka's daughters were the closest of sisters, despite being raised in different houses. A system of "keeping-while-giving" (Weiner 1992) occurred where the exchange of daughters maintained ties between households of the matrilocal group. It mattered little in which household one was raised; all descendants of the Kuka inherit land from their parents and share in subsistence, game meat, and other resources. Adoptions can be temporary or last a lifetime, but are not usually legally sanctioned.

Almost 40 percent of Kuri households in 1998 had half-siblings as members and 36 percent of the households included adopted children. In almost all cases, the children are adopted from the mother's side, coming from within the matrilocal group. Half of all households claimed to have had an adopted child of a female relative living there in the past, and many more households had children as temporary borders over the years. Households constantly changed and children often lived between two or more homes (see also Stack 1974).

Exogamy

That matrifocality occurs when men from other regions emigrate for work and then experience seasonal unemployment (Cook 1992 , Brøgger and Gilmore 1997) holds true for many Kuri men. They go to the coast to find work as lobster divers and live with local women. Later, the men return to their families up-river or in other regions, leaving behind their coastal wives and children. I interviewed 32 women to find out where the fathers of their children were from, before coming to Kuri (see Table 7). Most Kuri women (60 percent) marry men from outside of the north coast villages, between Barra Plátano and Ibans, and up the Plátano and Paulaya Rivers.

Table 7
Women's Level of Exogamy

Women who had children with someone from within the village	3
Women who had children with someone from within the reserve region	24
Women who had children with someone from outside the reserve region	38

Because women married men from outside of the village, region, and ethnic group, women knew more than most men about village histories, genealogies, and local folklore. Significantly, men typically did not know local kinship relations, the proper terms of reference, or reciprocity obligations in their wife's family. Both male absenteeism and exogamy created a situation where women of the matrigroup became the primary transmitters of language, culture, and kinship practices to the children. (Herlihy 2002).

Matrifocality in urban Brazil places emphasis on close ties with one's matrilineal kin and where a complex web of relations [is] constructed around the domestic group in which, even with the presence of a man in the house, the woman's side of the group is favored. This is evidenced in mother-child relations being more solidary than father-child relations, in the choice of residence, in the identification of known relatives, in exchange of goods and services, in visiting patterns and so on. All are stronger on the female side. (Scott 1995:287)

MATRILINY

A comparison of kinship data from Asang and Kuri demonstrates the trend toward matriliny in Kuri. Patrilocal residential patterns in Asang were combined

with a patrilineal system of kinship and descent (Helms 1971). The nuclear family household (headed by a male in the husband-father role) tied into the larger or patrilineal descent group (*kiamp*), which included all members related through the male line. Fathers, brothers, and sons lived near each other throughout their lives. With patrilocality and patrilineality co-existing, all men and children of the patrilocal group claimed membership in the same kiamp, and had the same surname. The kinship term kiamp, used with its male surname, such as Ferrera kiamp, referred to all members of the patrilineal descent group and to the area of the village where the family lived:

> . . . Asang can be identified as groups of people related to each other through kinship. In this sense the village loses a common unity and is seen instead as composed of many kiamps—kinship groups to which an individual belongs by virtue of having the same family name. Because of the pattern of marital residence, the kiamps tend to occupy separate geographical locations within the village. (Helms 1971:54–55)

At the time of Helms's study in the late 1960s, Asang residents conceptualized the village as consisting of 27 kiamps with separate geographical locations (Helms 1971:55, 74). Helms shows on a map of the village that the Sanders, Joseph, and Bobb kiamps occupied the largest family grounds, although she states that the kiamp does not hold property.

García's (1996b) later study of Asang found that the male surname shared by a man and his descendants continued to define the kiamp. But sisters of the matrigroup who share a male surname uphold ties of the kiamp, and that "households connect to the other households of the community with whom they share a common surname. In this way the Asang kiamp is formed and is generally located in the same delimited space as the maternal line" (García 1996b:7). García's conclusions differ from Helms's in finding Asang to have matrilocally organized patrilineal groups. Comparing village social organization in Asang and Kuri reveals that different forms of marriage and household composition occur, causing Kuri to have a more female-centered domestic organization.

In the larger community of Asang, 27 kiamps (symbolized by male surnames) occupied separate areas; in Kuri, the village could be divided into five neighborhoods, each dominated by a matrigroup. The basic kinship group in Kuri is the household, which is tied into the matrilocal group, the main socioeconomic support network. Each matrigroup is called by a kuka's name, such as "Lyvian kiampka," and cannot be identified by a male surname.

Table 8
Marriage Trends in Kuri and Asang

	Coastal Kuri	Riverine Asang
Level of Exogamy		
Family	✓	✓
Village	✓	
Region	✓	
Ethnic Group	✓	
Post-Marital Residence		
Matrilocal	✓	✓
Patrilocal		✓
Union Type		
Monogamy	✓	✓
Serial Monogamy	✓	

Table 9
Household Composition Trends in Kuri and Asang

Household Composition		
	Coastal Kuri	Riverine Asang
Nuclear	✓	✓
Extended	✓	✓
Female headed	✓	
Male absent	✓	
Single mother	✓	
Outside children	✓	
Adopted children	✓	
Monogamy	✓	✓
Serial Monogamy	✓	

Table 10
Kuri and Asang: Household Composition

	Coastal Kuri		Riverine Asang	
Household Composition	1991	1997	1969	1993
Single nuclear family	32%	16%	54%	50%
Any combo w/nuclear	55%	36%	86%	90%
Female headed	36%	40%	4%	10%
Half-siblings in household	23%	39%	1%	
Adopted child of mother, daughter or sister	32%	36%	2%	

Loss of the Kiamp

Where the kiamps, or patrilineal descent groups, in Asang occupied different areas of the village, Kuri residential groups were composed of many different kiamps, demonstrated by the presence of many different surnames in households of the matrilocal group. The Plátano Miskitu women give the father's surname to their offspring, whether or not she marries the child's father. The combination of serial monogamy and patronymy creates families where brothers and sisters, related through their mother's side, often have different surnames. The half-siblings and any additional adopted siblings all retain different surnames. As a result, Kuka Denecela's matrigroup (composed of five households) had 35 individuals with 20 different surnames in 1998 (Tables 11 and 12). Thus, the kiamp, as described by Helms and García, has diminished or never existed on the coast.

Table 11
Number of Surnames per Household in Kuri

Households in *Kuka* Denecela's matrigroup	1991	1998
Kuka Denecela's household	4	4
Delfina's household	5	5
Ilabia's household	2	2
Enemecia's household	3	3
Tomassa's household	4	6

Table 12
Number of Surnames per Matrigroup

	1991	1997
Surnames per matrigroup	17	20

Most significantly, the kiamp no longer functions to create ties between members of the patrilineal descent group. Many men who emigrated to the coast to work married locally and later returned home, thus deserting their wives. In these cases, children were raised almost entirely by the mother's side of the family and rarely knew their father's relatives. In other cases, members of the same kiamp on the coast can be in conflict. For example, if a man has or has had different wives along the coast, his children from these women can all have the same surname. Yet, these relationships can breed jealousies and rivalries between would be co-wives. These families (technically of the same kiamp) do not share resources and try to avoid each other, often attending different churches.

Older residents of Kuri still understand the word kiampka to refer to one's father's family, such as Ferrera kiampka. Younger ones, however, use the term kiamp (without the suffix) to refer to one's seasonal agricultural camp. Work there is shared by members of the matrigoup and people increasingly also use the term kiamp to refer to a matrigroup, such as "Lyvian kiampka," a land-owning residential kin group that traces descent through females.

For the coastal Miskitu, the kiamp or patrilineal descent group no longer functions to create society's most important social and economic ties. Instead, the socioeconomic ties between members of the matrigroup have greater import. Matrilineal descent seems to thrive in Kuri beneath a facade of patronymy, where children inherit their father's surname. Therefore, matrilocal residence, matrifocal families, and increasingly matrilineal kinship practices co-occur in Kuri to create an intensely female-centered society.

GENDER, POWER, AND CULTURAL CONSERVATION

Contradictory gender and power relations propagate in Kuri, where matrifocal structures exist alongside strong patriarchal norms. Matrifocal societies cross-culturally report similar gender and power relations (Smith 1956, 1996; Gonzalez 1984; Brøgger and Gilmore 1997). Miskitu society interacts with masculinized discourses of the Honduran state, patriarchal Western religions, and transnational economies. These interactions have caused sexual segregation, a gendered division of labor, and a male-dominant gender ideology to develop in Miskitu

society. Men's power has been solidified over the last 200 years through a political economy where employment opportunities have existed for men only. However, migrant-wage labor and male absenteeism have led to an increase in women's power. Miskitu women's power lies in the multiplicity of everyday constructions of social relations and practices, and is vested in their ability to create and recreate "traditional" knowledge, kinship relations, and social identities. Using a Foucaultian perspective, Blackwood (2000:14) defines power as the control over social identities in rural communities. This is

expressed in the construction and reconstitution of social relations and in the ability to construct and maintain social identities. Rather than imagining single nodes of power, such as those vested, for instance, in positions of authority (titled men, chiefs, or elders), I envision power residing in a multiplicity of nodes and interlinkages that together constitute the processes and practices of social life.

Power, then, should be viewed not only as a public phenomenon, as in Western narratives, but also functions in the crafting of everyday social relations. Indeed, eco-feminists and indigenous feminists believe that women's power comes from their roles as maintainers of tradition, spiritual advisers, and healers, none of which yields economic power in capitalism (Cunningham 2003:1). Similarly, indigenous Miskitu women's power rests in their ability to control cultural and linguistic resources.

Cross-culturally, women's roles as mothers provide them the venue through which they pass down culture and language to children. For indigenous and ethnic peoples making their living in an expanding global market economy, mothers take on a value-laden responsibility as cultural transmitters. Neoliberal economic policies are believed responsible for driving down prices in national markets, making it harder for indigenous men to earn a living in agricultural labor. These men then seek work in foreign economies and migrate from their homes to earn wages. In these cases, indigenous women become stewards of important resources and the primary transmitters of autochthonous practices. Indigenous women play central roles in the conservation of world-wide cultural diversity, especially regarding disappearing languages and healing knowledge. Conservation and development organizations specifically seek out Plátano Miskitu women as participants in their projects.[4] Indigenous Miskitu women in coastal Honduran communities increasingly assume responsibility for the social reproduction of identities and ultimately for preserving worldwide cultural and linguistic diversity.

NOTES

1.   This field research was supported by an IIE Fulbright Grant to Honduras (1997) and a Tinker Foundation Field Research Grant (2002), through the Center of Latin American Studies, University of Kansas.

2.   Anthropological theories of kinship and gender, beginning with Martin and Voorhies (1975) and Friedl (1975), build on the premise that women have higher status in societies with matrilocal residence and matrilineal descent than in societies characterized by patrilocality and patriliny. This view applies to horticulturally based societies like the Miskitu, where womenparticipated in subsistence activities.

3.   Interest in matrifocality flourished since the 1970s, when female-headed households increased dramatically in the United States. Brøgger and Gilmore (1997:13) recount the variety of terms that researchers have used to refer to matrifocality, such as "women-centered kinship networks" (Yanagisako 1977, Cole 1991), "matricentric" (Brettell 1986), and what Willems (1962) called "matripotestal." Mohammed (1986) claims that definitions of matrifocality in the social science literature include a general emphasis on women having high status, those who are the main wage earners, women controlling the household economy, and situations of male absenteeism.

4.   This is especially true for the Miskitu that live in Kuri, within the boundaries of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, an internationally designated protected area. Here, women control many cultural and natural resources that the Plátano biosphere was established to protect. MOPAWI (Moskitia Pawisa) is the largest development organization in the reserve. Its early programs addressed economic and health needs of the residents, but now focus on bilingual education, land legalization, and resource rights. Many MOPAWI programs are designed specifically to assist indigenous women to maintain their community's cultural practices. For example, women record medicinal plant use and healing techniques, arts and crafts, and music and dance (Herlihy 2002).

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