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Women's Strategies in Northern Honduras

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SEXUAL MAGIC AND MONEY: MISKITU WOMEN'S STRATEGIES IN NORTHERN HONDURAS

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This article highlights Afro-indigenous Miskitu women's position and agency on the increasingly cash-oriented Miskito Coast (northeastern Honduras). While Miskitu men (the main breadwinners) work as deep-water lobster divers, women live in matrilineal groups and use sexual magic to beguile men into giving them their earnings. The women's discourse of sexual magic contests, but does not subvert, the male-dominant gender ideology of the lobster-diving economy. Nevertheless, Miskitu women have refashioned their gender identities, and their views of money, into empowering and strategic practices for domestic security. (Gender, magic, money, women's strategies)

Afro-indigenous Miskitu men along the Honduran Caribbean coast work as deep-water lobster divers and provide the principal means of support to matrilineal households, where Miskitu women utilize sexual magic (plant-based, supernatural potions) in an attempt to control men and their money. Ethnohistorians Conzemius (1932:145) and Helms (1971:86) have reported the historic use of sexual magic among Miskitu women and men to win the affection of someone they desired. This article reports for the first time the Miskitu women's strategic use of sexual magic to gain access to men's wages.

The research draws primarily from a feminist perspective, focusing on Miskitu women's position in society and the strategies they use to garner resources and power (Lamphere, et al. 1997). Field research (1997–98, 2001) in the village of Kuri, in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (RPBR), an environmentally protected area that was established UNESCO's Man and Biosphere (MAB) program in 1980, combined participant-observation and household interviews with the collection of supernatural potions.

Men's participation in migrant wage-labor in the lobster diving industry has given them access to cash resources that are not, for the most part, available to women. The fact that men alone earn wages establishes men's power and a male-dominant gender ideology in Miskitu society, and women must use their own resources (particularly with magic potions) to survive in a progressively monetized economy. This analysis asks whether Plátano Miskitu women's use of sexual magic is a form of resistance to patriarchal ideologies fostered by the lobster-diving economy. While overstating the trivial as forms of resistance is problematic in anthropology (Brown 1996; Goldstein 2003), viewing sexual magic within this paradigm should not be ignored when resistance appears to be a useful way to understand Miskitu women's voices. Indeed, research on

indigenous and Afro-Caribbean religions in Middle America, such as *hechiceria* (witchcraft) in Latin America (Behar 1987, 1989; Romanucci-Ross 1993; Rosenbaum 1996; Quezada 1984, 1989) and *obeah*, *Santeria*, and *voodoo* in the Caribbean (Bush 1990), has viewed magic as resistance to colonial society's racist, class, and sexist structures.

GENDERED AUTHORITY

Male Breadwinners

During the colonial era, Afro-indigenous Miskitu society developed along with foreign economies. For the last two hundred years, Miskitu peoples participated in agricultural and migrant wage-labor economies. International companies have used Miskitu men as wage laborers to extract local resources, including gold, bananas, sea turtles, and most recently, shrimp, conch, and lobsters, in a series of boom and bust economic periods (Helms 1971; Herlihy 2005:36).

Plátano Miskitu men have worked for the last 40 years as deep-water lobster divers on boats owned by businessmen from the Honduran Bay Islands (Roátan, Guanaja, and Utila). The lobsters they extract from Caribbean reefs are exported to the United States. Research has documented the health hazards that lobster divers (*buzos*) experience. Boats lack decompression chambers and safe diving equipment, and divers have poor training and living conditions (Herlihy 2002a, 2005; Dodds 1998; Nietschmann 1997; Meltzoff, et al. 1999). *Buzos* make their jobs more dangerous by using cocaine and marijuana before dives. Nearly 15 percent of all lobster divers in the RPBR have died or been injured or paralyzed due to decompression sickness—*liwa mairin siknis* (mermaid sickness)—yet they continue to hunt lobster in order to provide money for their families.

Lobster divers contribute “an estimated U.S. 3.2 million dollars per year into the economies of the Plátano reserve's north coast villages” (Herlihy 2005:37). Kuri lobster divers with a few years of experience earn around U.S. \$6,500 annually, taking two 12-day trips per month for eight months of the year. Dodds (1998:13) estimates that lobster divers can earn as much money in 12 days as they can in one year of agricultural work. As a result, horticultural practices have declined and locals now purchase their food from stores. Nearly 100 stores and *bodegas* (small stores) saturate the Plátano reserve's three-mile coast between Ibans and Barra Plátano, an area that still does not have running water or electricity.¹

Despite the region's lack of infrastructure and amenities, village economies have become highly monetized. While Miskitu households here continue to rely on some subsistence staples (like yucca, sugar cane, bananas, rice, and beans),

most necessities are purchased in stores. Even families that plant rice and beans upriver sell much of what they harvest for cash to boats and merchants from outside the region. They then buy their rice and beans daily at an inflated rate. Store-bought items are generally twice as much as what one pays in Honduran cities. High costs of transporting merchandise to the remote region and price gauging by Ladino merchants are blamed for these elevated prices.

Most Kuri households (averaging around seven people) need about US \$150 to survive each month. Women earn small amounts of cash selling produce, fruit, plants, and medicines, and by baking bread, working in the fields or shops, housekeeping, or washing and ironing clothes. What they earn, however, cannot pay for the costs of store-bought foods to feed their families. Their households depend on money and gifts provided by the divers. In general, women with divers in their households, especially as husbands and sons, acquire the most money, while women in households without divers get much less.

The lobster economy has caused many characteristics of capitalist society to arrive along the coast, such as the idea of man the breadwinner (Blackwood 2005; Lamphere 2005). The Honduran state also contributed to the development of male-dominant gender ideologies in the region. The national government's bureaucracy recognized male surnames, men as heads of households, men as property owners, and men as authority figures, disregarding matrilineal practices of inheritance and domestic organization. In 1890, Moravian missionaries introduced various patriarchal norms, encouraging monogamy, nuclear families, male heads of households, and surnames passed down male lines. Both colonial and modern Latin American gender ideologies also revolve around the idea of a patriarchal authority that maintains firm economic and social control over his household, and over his wife's and daughters' sexuality (Gutmann 1996, 2003; Jackson 2001; Johnson and Lipset-Rivera 1998; Twinam 2001). In Plátano Miskitu society, however, the Latin American model of the patriarchal male does not completely take hold. While men have power as the main breadwinners, more Caribbean kinship and gender ideologies prevail: women head households, make all child rearing and economic decisions, and eventually gain control of the men's winnings (Herlihy 2005:37). Caribbean sexual ideologies also play out in Miskitu society, where men and women have various spouses over their lifetimes and men do not exert strict control over women's bodies (Gonzalez 1988; Kerns 1997; Wekker 2005).

Matrilocal Bonds

Socio-economic data illustrate that Miskitu women in the village of Kuri (pop. 175 in 1997) maintain positions of power in matrilocal residential groups. In 1991, five matrigroups account for 18 of 22 houses, and 22 of 25 houses by

1998. The strongest ties develop between mothers, daughters, and sisters who stay together throughout their lives (Garcia 1996a, 1996b; Helms 1971; Jamieson 2000; Peter 2002). These matrilocal groups are the most important kinship and economic units. The solidarity of members of a matrilocal group expresses itself in the natural and constructed spaces dividing residential compounds, giving each family a separate neighborhood (*barrio*) with its own name.

Coastal residential compounds are centered on a central house and patio of the *kuka*, the powerful grandmother figure, village elder, land owner, and head of the matrilocal compound. Her house is surrounded by her daughter's homes, who trace their heritage and status back to her. Related women visit each other daily via the paths between households, and individual households of the matrigroup are like rooms of one greater house, bound together by a well in the center. This is the central social station where related women and children meet, gossip, and joke with each other throughout the day while washing clothes, bathing, and drawing water.

Women of the matrigroup share raising the children. Miskitu kinship terminology corresponds to this pattern, whereby cousins, brothers, and sisters are all called by the same terms, *muihki* (same sex, same generation) and *lakra* (different sex, same generation). Cousins and siblings are raised together, and their grandmother, maternal aunts, older sisters, and older female cousins play the role of mother to children.

Trees and Land

Matrilocality provides rights of every daughter to settle on her mother's land in coastal villages, and to family agricultural lands upriver. Sons also have rights to these properties, but the Miskitu practice of matrilocality dictates that he move to and work his wife's family's land after marriage. Only a few men settled locally in Kuri, working on their family's agricultural lands. In these cases, their wives were from outside of the reserve and had no land of their own. Men were normally named as village and neighborhood founders because they had physically cleared the land. After being cleared, however, the land is inherited, mainly through females. Many husbands also purchase their own terrain and pass these lands to their children.

Disputes over land titling have occurred in the last 20 years. Few families have the resources to travel to the Municipality (Brus Laguna) to obtain legal documentation of their land. Some family members contest individual claims, saying that family members do not have rights to family land. These contestations remain unresolved in the legal arena, given that the lands are in a Biosphere Reserve.

Fruit trees are also inalienable in Kuri. Even after families move to another part of the village, they retain ownership of their trees and their fruit. Owners of trees return seasonally to claim their fruits no matter who currently owns the land. Villagers say about trees, “If you planted it, it’s yours.”

Coconut trees (*kuku dusu*) are important. They yield fruit year-round that women use in their cooking three times a day—in rice, soups, or broths. Mothers typically plant a coconut tree with the birth of each female daughter. By the time the girl has children herself, the tree should be bearing fruit steadily. Many mothers pointed out trees to me indicating which daughter would inherit them; looking to the future of their matrigrup. No mother ever pointed out a tree indicating that it was for a son, as it was assumed that a son would move to his wife’s home.

Missing Men

Few men are present on a daily basis in coastal villages because they participate in migrant wage and subsistence labors. During the diving season (from August to March), men usually make two trips to sea every month, staying in Kuri 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. The Miskitu women in Kuri call this phenomenon *waikna apu* (without men).

Female solidarity and authority are heightened by the absence of men (Scott 1995). With the men away, women make daily household economic and child-rearing decisions and participate in an economy based on reciprocity between kin. They also work together using their common resources. They till the coastal yucca fields, clean the well, and unload commercial merchandise that arrives twice a month by boat. Miskitu women also have become central players in Miskitu cultural conservation, passing down Miskitu language (a Misumalpan, Macro-Chibchan language of South American origins), culture, and identity to their children (Herlihy 1996, 2002a). Following Evelyn Blackwood (2005), my research views male absenteeism (and low male salience) as not causing but heightening female solidarity and power in an already matricentric society.

Female-Headed Households

Almost all of Kuri’s households were headed by females (21 of 25) in 1998. Ten households were headed by single mothers with no permanent man in the husband-father role, and 11 of the households were headed by women whose husbands were away working. The other four households were headed by couples with the man present on a daily basis. Research also reveals that half of

all mothers (16 of 32) were single mothers (with no male in the father-husband role). Some single mothers still lived in their mother's household. Male authority in Kuri households was often vested in the roles of brothers or sons, rather than legal husbands. Brothers are important to single mothers because they contribute cash resources to their households. I overheard one man proudly asking his sister, "Who brings you meat, who brings you flour? Are you going to say that I'm not a good brother?" Most single mothers receive no money from the fathers of their children. One of the Kuka's daughters said, "I have no regrets. I am glad to have my children, be in my mother's house, and be protected by my sisters." She justified this: "The men in our lives are unstable."

Motherhood

Motherhood and having many children are highly valued in Miskitu society, and mothers play important roles in maintaining sharing networks between domestic units (Garcia 1996b:14; Helms 1971). Soon after having a child, married mothers usually move into their own homes and become the head of the household. This ties a young woman into social networks with other women in the matrigroup.

Young girls are socialized to become mothers at an early age, usually around ten, when many begin taking care of a baby or toddler, who is referred to as their *luhpia* (child). By the time a girl is 13, she is usually finished with school and working in her mother's kitchen, supervising younger siblings. Within a few years, she will give birth, passing through the most important rite of passage, motherhood. All women over the age of 18 are mothers in Kuri.

Women gain status and power in Kuri with the birth of each child; and having children is thought of as economic resources within the matrigroup. Female children help with cooking and other domestic chores, while males work the fields and earn money. Kuri women over the age of 25 have six children on average. Dodds (2001:96), however, had a sample of 200 indigenous women in the RPBR averaging eight children.

A mother's main responsibility is keeping her children healthy. Women of the matrigroup share information constantly to diagnose, cure, and care for their children's illnesses and ailments caused by supernatural forces. Mothers teach their daughters herbal remedies and prayers when a child becomes sick. Because these remedies vary between families, each matrigroup has its own specialized knowledge. Some women called *sukias* (shaman) have exceptional healing skills through supernatural means.

Serial Monogamy, Conflict, and Divorce

Although monogamy is the ideal, most adults had more than one spouse over their lifetime. Locals distinguish between different types of marriage, including church, legal, and common law. The highest social status is accorded to those who had both church and legal marriages. Marriages in Kuri were mainly sanctioned by local common law, where couples who live together call each other *maia* (spouse). This kinship term is put into use frequently during courtship, as soon as the man moves into the woman's house; conversely, divorce is common, sanctioned by the man moving out and dropping the term.

Lobster divers often have more than one wife and family at the same time. They live with one family on the coast during the diving season, and return during the off-season to other wives and children who live upriver, in the interior villages. However, serial monogamy more commonly prevails.

With little practice of birth control, women usually have children from different men. 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. Women normally have fewer marital unions throughout their lifetime than men.

Married men also commonly seek outside lovers. The following song jokes about a married man having an extramarital affair.

Your wife or your lover, which one do you want?
 When you come home your wife asks you
 Where have you been you old worn out man?
 With her face all mad like a piece of wood
 Like a horse, only anger in her face

When you come home your lover says,
 Come here my little love, where are you coming from?
 I have your candy, your cigarette, little love
 Naked like a baby, she says come here
 Your wife or your lover, which one do you want?

The song makes light of a man finding his girlfriend more appealing than his wife. Women buy into this and claim not to care if their husbands have outside flings, commenting, "He's a man, isn't he? He's supposed to have other women." Yet a double sexual standard exists—women are looked down upon for the same behavior. Some Kuri women who took such liberties are said to have been eviscerated by men. Kuri men claim that these women acted like men.

Most conjugal conflicts and divorces have to do with the double sexual standard. Men claim their wives were *huba waikna laik* (boy crazy). Kuri women say that their husbands were *huba wanina* (really jealous) and beat them when

they talked to other men.² Arguments that remain unresolved are often the reason for a couple's divorce or separation. Divorce and desertion are common not only among the young and immature. Two *kukas* (grandmothers) threw their husbands out of the house during my stay in Kuri.

All agree that Kuka Denecela and *Dama* (grandfather) Octavio had the most successful marriage in Kuri. Denecela and Octavio had been married for 45 years, but they did not wed in a church until the youngest of their eight children was 16 years old. More recently, Denecela and Octavio have also legally registered their marriage. Kuka Denecela told me, "Those that find a good one [man] are lucky, whether or not they get married in a church." Both Kuka Denecela and *Dama* Octavio have children from other spouses. Kuka has a daughter from a Creole man and Octavio has two other Miskitu families and wives. Once Denecela confided in me, "Octavio went up river to Liwa Raya for work and started chasing my *muihki* (sister or female cousin), Ritana. They had several children, but it's all over now. The Kuka won," she said proudly about herself. When asked if she became enemies with Ritana, she laughed and asserted, "No man can ever come between *muihkis*."

The above data reflect gender-power relations in Kuri. Men's access to migrant wage-labor establishes their authority, but the male absenteeism it causes increasingly strengthens matrilineal practices and women's power. Most significantly, Kuri women owned their homes, headed households, domestic compounds, and lineages, inherited village and rainforest lands, and almost single-handedly transmitted Miskitu language and identity to the next generation. This included the autochthonous knowledge associated with natural and supernatural curing techniques (Herlihy 2002a).

SEXUAL MAGIC

Miskitu speakers along the north coast of the Plátano biosphere use the term *praidi saihka* (Friday's medicine) to refer to sexual magic. Sexual magic is one part of the larger Miskitu belief system in *sika* (medicines) used for healing physical, emotional, and psychological illnesses.³ Both men and women wholeheartedly believe in the effectiveness of these potions to control the emotions and actions of others, to influence marriage and divorce, and to determine a household's welfare and standard of living. The belief in *sika* and supernatural plant-based remedies are one of the fundamental characteristics of Miskitu identity.

The use of *praidi saihka* potions is one of the most highly guarded realms of Miskitu cultural practices, and locals vehemently deny that they utilize sexual magic. This is mostly because Moravian, Catholic, and Pentecostal churches tell their congregations that these potions are sacrilegious. Some Miskitu people

claim that they are too educated (modernized) to believe in magic healing techniques (Dennis 2004). Yet, most Honduran Miskitu people infer that they do not use potions because fear of “black magic” runs high in their society. For example, elders teach their children to never admit to using a potion, explaining that a person who discovers that you are using a potion on him may become suspicious that the potion is intended to harm and may retaliate with poison to harm or kill you. Elders also contend that if someone discovers that you are using a potion on him, the potion is rendered ineffective. For these major reasons, sexual magic is shrouded in secrecy.

Some Kuri men did talk openly about sexual magic, admitting that they lived in fear of being manipulated by women’s potions and avoided women known for having this expertise. A few of these men even confessed to having purchased counteractive potions and charms to defend themselves against certain women in the past, while others claimed to regularly take counteractive potions as a prophylaxis. Indeed, much tension arises between the sexes in Miskitu society based on men's distrust and suspicions of women's sexual magic.⁴ Miskitu men's fear of women's supernatural powers, as seen through their use of counteractive potions, serves to reinforce the idea that women’s potions are an effective part of their power.

Types of Sexual Magic

The potions presented below are types commonly used in the north coast villages. Incantations and recipes can vary widely between matrigroups, even for the same type of magic potion. Particular matrilineal groups become specialists in certain potions.

Frequently used to charm men, women, elders, children, and even dogs into loving or desiring them is a love potion called *yamni kaikan*. Women most often use this or other potions to charm lobster divers into giving them cash or presents, like cokes, snacks, or clothes. Women chant an incantation that boasts about the love potion’s power. *Ai lihkan*, like *yamni kaikan*, has power to attract, but it focuses mainly on men. Women use *ai lihkan* to seduce a particular man and garner his resources. Another love potion, called *stand-bai* (stand-by) has power to coerce a man into being attentive to a woman's every need. This medicine must be used with caution because the man becomes so attached that he will not let the woman out of his sight, even following her to the bathroom! Women consider this highly undesirable; they value their free time away from their husbands to socialize with other female friends and relatives.

Kupia ikaia (literally, to kill the heart) is a Miskitu anti-jealousy potion that prevents men from being jealous of their wives. The potion coerces men into doing household chores and child-care while their spouses have trysts with, and

accept money from, other men. Kupia ikaia provides for a woman to have it all—a husband and a boyfriend, and access to both their resources.

Kaiura ikaia means to kill the *yucca* (yam, Dioscorea); yucca is a metaphor for the male penis. This is an anti-infidelity potion that takes away a man's virility, and women use it to prevent their spouses from having infidelities. Although a man will still be able to have relations with his wife, this potion aims to prevent him from giving his money away to another woman. Even if he feels attracted to a beautiful woman, when the moment comes to have sexual relations with her, he will be unable to attain an erection. Knowledge of how to concoct kupia and kaiura ikaia potions is highly guarded, and women who know these potions are considered especially threatening and treacherous.

Misbara is a hate potion that deludes a man or woman into abandoning his or her home. When a woman desires to live with a married man, for example, she may use misbara to make him leave his wife. The incantation accompanying the potion describes how the potion will cause the man to despise his home and physical surroundings, particularly an offensive odor to the point that he has to leave. A few women were known for using yamni kaikan (love potion) to attract a man during the lobstering season and misbara (hate potion) during the four month moratorium on lobster extraction enforced by the Honduran Government.

Amia tikaia is a potion to erase memories of former relationships. Women often combine this with a hate potion to steal a man away from his wife and family. While the hate potion insures that a man will leave his wife and children, the amia tikaia furtively wipes out his memory of them. Many men born and raised in other regions come to the coast to work as lobster divers and marry locally. Their Miskitu wives may give them amia tikaia so that they forget their former families and, more important, do not send money to them. "He won't even remember his own mother," one woman declared. For a wife already on the coast, amia tikaia secures a man's constant presence in order to have his labor and resources for her matrilineal group.

Waowisa (whirling through the air) is a potion that beckons from afar. If the wind is blowing in the right direction, the intended will be touched on the cheek by the waowisa, which then tantalizes the person into coming directly to the man or woman who sent it. Women are said to use waowisa when men are involved with migrant wage-labor to entice a man into returning home before he spends his pay on, or falls in love with, another woman. Some elderly women claim that they utilized this potion in the past, when Miskitu men worked in Belize for lumber and fruit companies.

SEXUAL MAGIC AND AGENCY

The importance of women in society as healers and plant specialists has been well recognized (see e.g., Cunningham 2003; Mankiller and Wallis 1993; Moreton–Robinson 2000; Udel 2001). This applies to the Miskitu, where women have expertise in supernatural potions, and where grandmothers are respected and feared for possessing the knowledge to manipulate the emotions of others. Jamieson (2000), for example, reports that older Miskitu women control the sexuality of their adolescent daughters and these girls' suitors by determining who will be the proper mate for their daughters. Similarly, the older women in Kuri also secretly control young men and their daughters with potions to chase off unwanted suitors. The grandmothers pass on their guarded secrets of sexual magic to their daughters and granddaughters within the matrigroup.

As indicated in the above data, women's magic potions most typically bewitch men into falling in love with them, beguile them into giving them cash and gifts, and bewilder them by erasing their memories of former wives and families. Men and women are convinced that gifts of money are induced by the magic potions that women use on men. Kuri women say that lobster divers give them between US \$50 and \$200 per month.⁵ Therefore, supernatural potions are perceived by both sexes to be a practical way for women to achieve their economic goals, not just as ritualistic practices that release some frustrations (Price 1993). This suggests that Miskitu women have found a culturally relevant solution to their social and economic problems. Comparably, Bell (1993) notes that Australian aboriginal women use sexual magic to control mate selection, to maintain marriages, and to inherit land.

Theories of modernization and women in economically developing societies link rural women's loss of power and resources with their societies' increased participation in market economies. That is, women lose power because primarily men gain access to jobs and money (Bose and Acosta–Belen 1995; Visvanathan, et al. 1997). Yet, other theorists argue that their epistemology assumes that all rural women experience development in a similarly negative way; and they recommend that scholars examine how minority and indigenous women actually respond to development (Bhavnani 2003; Hamilton 1998; Marchand 1995; Mohanty 2003). In studies of Latin American indigenous women who obtain cash, scholars have focused primarily on their roles as market vendors, weavers, and producers of small handicrafts (Babb 1989; Brenner 1998; Duncan 2000; Ehlers 2000; Herlihy 2002b; Stephen 2005; Tice 1995). Miskitu women, however, gain economic assets through capabilities learned in female-centered kinship groups; i.e., using sexual magic to acquire money they need to survive.

Researchers have also viewed magic or witchcraft as resistance to colonial society's racist, social stratification, and sexist structures. In colonial Mexico,

Behar (1987) and Rosenbaum (1996) found that Nahua women used sexual magic to contest and subvert the patriarchal ideology imposed by the Spanish. Rosenbaum (1996:330) argues that Nahua women practiced witchcraft to gain some control and power over their lives because church, state, and Spanish ideologies attempted to keep Nahua women submissive. Behar (1987) argues that the double sexual standard drove indigenous women in central Mexico to stupefy their husbands with potions, beguiling them to end their outside relationships (see also, Romanucci-Ross 1993). Nahua women also employed sexual magic, called *magia amorosa* (love magic), when experiencing insecurity in their relationships. They often relied on this to save their marriages and regain their economic security (Quezada 1984, 1989).

In coastal Belize, Garífuna and Creole women use *obeah* (the Creole English word for magic) to contest their society's double sexual standard (McClaurin 1996:121). Garífuna and Creole men, like Miskitu lobster divers, exercise their economic power over women by having various girlfriends and wives. Belizean women fight back by bewitching their husbands into falling in love with them again. McClaurin (1996:68) reports that "a man who seems overly solicitous to a woman is thought to be under the influence of 'obeah'." Kerns (1997:91) observes that Belizean women "tie" men to them by putting water used to wash their genitals or menstrual blood in the men's food. As with the Miskitu use of *kupia ikaia* and *kaiura ikaia* potions (see above), other types of obeah beguile men into becoming impotent with other women. Belizean women consider their use of sexual magic a justified recourse for the men's common infidelities (Kerns 1997); but Miskitu women are less concerned with their men's behavior and more concerned with their wages.⁶

Because Miskitu women use magic potions to economically empower themselves vis-à-vis men, the analysis asks whether this is a form of social resistance (Scott 1992). Ethnographic research suggests that women do not use sexual magic to upend the social order; their sexual magic incantations are not intended to give the women access to wage-earning jobs. Instead, the women seek to manipulate the men who have jobs and money, thus reinforcing male dominance by avoiding the problem instead of confronting it. As such, the women simultaneously contest and reinforce society's male-dominant gender ideology.

The Miskitu women's application of potions at one level operates as a critique of the capitalist social order and the idea of man the breadwinner. At the same time, women's incantations support the hegemonic gender ideology. Therefore, the way that women manipulate magic potions represents both resistance and accommodation to the patriarchal ideology.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the postmodern feminist critique of women in development societies theory by examining how indigenous Miskitu women have responded creatively on their own terms to the long-term presence of the lobster economy that helped shape Miskitu women's position in society and their strategies to control resources. Marxism would argue that indigenous Miskitu women's position in society is not equal to the men's because they do not have the same control of economic resources. As applied to the analysis of gender-power relations, however, Marxist feminists tend to over-emphasize material resources and under-emphasize the social relations that are part of and surround women's economic activities (Blackwood 2000:13–14). The research reported here envisions power by focusing on the more social aspects of Miskitu women's economic activities and their control of the cultural and linguistic resources that this entails.

Incorporating Foucault's (1980) ideas into gender theory creates a conceptual place from where Miskitu women's power can be theorized. Foucault views power as accessible to those in society not only through the state's controls, but also from subordinate, marginalized, or subaltern discourses. Similarly, this research illustrates how power is negotiated and protested in female-headed households in a remote region of Honduras. The power that Miskitu women have in society lies outside the domain of the Honduran state but within women's discourse surrounding supernatural potions in small communities along the Caribbean coast. Knowledge of sexual magic recipes and incantations has become a central component of Miskitu cultural identity and female authority in coastal villages.

Analysis suggests that the Miskitu women's use of magical potions is not a form of resistance. It is not intended to subvert the male-dominant ideology that the lobster economy supports. Most significantly, women are not using sexual magic in an attempt to find wage-earning jobs. However, Miskitu women's private voices surrounding sexual magic do counter the male-dominant discourse of patriarchal ideology. Coastal Miskitu women often say in front of others, "*waikna kau pain nusa*" (men know best), and "*Dawan pas, baha wina waikna nani, mairin nani an tuktan nani las*" (God first, men second, and women and children last). Both sexes buy into the public discourse of male authority, which is spoken by men and women in stores, discotheques, and village patios, while the subordinate discourse of magic potions is spoken by women in the private and secretive context of their households. Miskitu women choose to secretly contest the gender ideology by never openly critiquing men. The secretive nature of women's speech practices highlights their subordinate position to men (Menon 1995). Women learn both the shared ideological idiom and the subordinate

discourse, leading some scholars to refer to this as a kind of women's heteroglossia (Abu-Lughod 1985:246.)

Viewing Miskitu women's verbal performances as a subordinate discourse is helpful for understanding gender politics on the coast. Gal (1991:176–178) believes that marginal, subordinate discourses represent one of the many sites of struggle about kinship, gender, and power definitions in societies with patriarchal gender ideologies. Safa (1995) found that women head households in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico and are primarily responsible for making ends meet. However, the women continue to reinforce the dominant ideology in society that men are the main breadwinners. The women repeat expressions that claim men are the heads of households, all the while defying this in daily practice. In similar ways, Miskitu women make statements about men being the main providers and household heads. These cultural expressions are a public display of women's participation in the hegemonic discourse on gender, power, and kinship; they are part of the formal and public transcript that belies women's autonomy in matrilineal groups and their manipulation of men through magic potions.

NOTES

1. The RPBR's north coast is cut off from the Honduran nation-state; it is geographically separated from the Honduran interior by a large stretch of rainforest, and is reachable only by airplane or boat.

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2. The Miskitu word *aisaia* (to talk) is a euphemism for having sexual relations.

3. For medicines used to cure psychological, emotional, spiritual, or physical illness, see Barrett 1992, Fagoth 1998, Dennis 1988, Garcia 1996a, House and Sánchez 1997, and Salamanca 1988.

4. Similarly, McClaurin (1996:68) points out that in nearby Belize, Creole men also fear women's sexuality and use of sexual magic (see, also, Bell 1993).

5. Women do not report how much money they derive from using sexual magic. However, it is understood but never admitted that women rely on potions to maximize men's gifts. Thus, the details of sexual magic and household incomes remain secret information.

6. Abu-Lughod's (1985, 1990) and Gal's (1991, 1995, 2001) interpretations of discourse as social practice are useful to understand Miskitu women's voices surrounding sexual magic.

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