

# Miskitu Identity in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, Honduras

Laura Hobson Herlihy

“We are *sambos*, *mestizos*, and *mulattos*, we are mixed. We are Miskitu because we speak Miskitu” (Enemecia Ferrera, Kuri).

## *Abstract*

This article examines how Miskito individuals construct their ethnic identity in the inter-ethnic relations of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, an internationally designated protected area in Honduras. The field research focuses on the ethnic terms of reference and stereotypes that Miskito speakers use to distinguish between themselves and Others. The presented data illustrate the situations in which Miskito individuals manipulate cultural markers to define themselves as “Sambos” (stressing their Black ancestry) or “Indians” (stressing their Amerindian ancestry). Conclusions suggest that the Miskito people’s ability to construct situational ethnic identities during social interactions, while remaining essentially Miskito, may be a key factor in the success of their population group within and beyond the reserve.

The bi-national Miskito peoples reside along the Miskito Coast (Moskitia). Their historic homeland extends from Black River, Honduras, to just south of Bluefields, Nicaragua. While other Latin American Native Peoples have

disappeared or experienced culture and language loss as a result of the colonial encounter,<sup>1</sup> the Miskitu have expanded their territory and population and have developed a strong ethnic identity.<sup>2</sup> Presently, approximately 175,000 people culturally identify themselves as Miskitu with two-thirds of the population residing in Nicaragua, where they gained international attention during the 1980s as rebel soldiers in the Contra-Sandinista wars. The smaller and lesser-known Honduran Miskitu population (about 35,000) have worked peacefully with the nation-state to create several environmentally protected regions, such as the pluri-ethnic Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (RPBR), a bounded region administered by COHDEFOR, the Honduran forestry agency.

While much of the existing scholarly literature defines ethnic identity as a product of the nation-state,<sup>3</sup> this study privileges the local and regional levels of social life where collective identities are first mobilized.<sup>4</sup> This research examines how Honduran Miskitu identity is constructed, maintained, and negotiated in the pluri-ethnic RPBR where the Miskitu frequently interact and intermarry with the neighboring Tawahka Sumu, Pech, Garífuna (Black Carib), Ladinos, Creoles, and Isleños populations. Analyzing Miskitu identity through interactions with Indigenous and ethnic Others is a unique contribution to the study of Miskitu identity which, since the Nicaraguan wars, has mainly been defined in relation to the *mestizo* state.<sup>5</sup> Miskitu identity, as articulated by interactions with the state, is but one important part of their identity as a whole. Anthropologist Frederick Barth conceived of nationhood as an “empty vessel” to be filled with an individual’s other identities, including those played out locally and regionally.<sup>6</sup> The presented analysis also considers some of the linkages between locally, nationally, and internationally articulated identities.<sup>7</sup> Most significantly, the reserve plays an increasingly important role in the lives of its Miskitu residents and in their interactions with the outside world.

This article breaks methodological ground by examining how Miskitu identity is constructed within the boundaries of an internationally designated, conservation region. A point of departure is the theoretical perspective of social interactionism, whereby individuals construct their self identities during social interactions with Others. Miskitu identity in the Plátano Biosphere can be seen through the variety of identities they construct during interactions with ethnic and Indigenous Others. These situational identities formed at the regional level are, therefore, part of their group’s total social identity.<sup>8</sup> Field research consisted of participant observation and interviews with Miskitu residents along the reserve’s north coast and with individuals from all other ethnic groups in the Plátano Biosphere. This research focused on inter-ethnic relations, ethnic terms of reference, and the Miskitu view of the social status hierarchy. The analysis reveals the reserve’s unique system of identity and ethnic classification, and how the Miskitu articulate their identity within that system.

## The Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve

Biosphere Reserves are internationally recognized conservation regions. UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (UN-MAB) program is responsible for the creation of 300 Biosphere Reserves around the world. Biosphere Reserves are dedicated to protecting these regions' natural and cultural heritage for all humankind.<sup>9</sup> The Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (RPBR) is the first of five such reserves established in Central America. The RPBR includes over 8,000 kilometers of beautiful rainforest and coastal-lagoonal habitats. Additionally, it is home to three Indigenous groups, Miskitu, Pech, and Garífuna, totalling about 20,000 individuals, to over 20,000 Ladino colonists, and to other minor ethnic groups including the English-speaking Creoles and Isleños.<sup>10</sup> The Indigenous Tawahka Sumu people reside just outside the reserve boundaries along the middle Río Patuca.<sup>11</sup>

Historically, the RPBR's major Indigenous and ethnic groups, the Miskitu, Pech, Garífuna, and Ladinos inhabited different regions, separated by cultural buffer zones. Today, however, these Indigenous and ethnic groups are no longer physically isolated from one another, but live in a complex distribution whereby patterns of settlement and resource exploitation overlap. In the northern zone, the Miskitu extend into all other ethnic group's culture regions and live in mixed villages. In the southern zone, the recent arrival of the large population of Ladino colonists has heightened the effects of hegemonic influence from the national culture, and modernization and westernization in the reserve.

Spanish functions as the reserve's *lingua franca* because of its stature as the national language and is taught locally in elementary schools. Miskitu, the most widely spoken Indigenous language in the reserve, is spoken in all of the villages in the northern zone where Miskitu people intermarry and reside alongside Indigenous and ethnic others. The Pech, Tawahka, Creole, and Isleño children are generally tri-lingual, speaking their own language at home, Miskitu in the village, and Spanish in the classrooms. Pech, incidentally, is one of the most threatened languages today due to assimilation to Miskitu language and culture. While the Miskitu, for the most part, dominate the Pech, Tawahka, Creoles, and Isleños within and just beyond the reserve, they do not exert the same influence over their Garífuna and Ladino neighbors. The Garífuna and Ladinos are the only two groups in the reserve that resist being assimilated and dominated by the Miskitu.

### Peoples of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve

#### *The Miskitu*

The Miskitu (pop. 17,874) are the largest, most expansive Indigenous population in the Plátano Biosphere. Their villages and agricultural and hunting lands lie along the north coast and the three main rivers in the reserve—the

Patuca, Plátano, and Tinto-Paulaya. Although smaller in total population, the Barra Patuca (pop. 2,237) and Brus Laguna (pop. 1,811) have the largest communities with several town populations around 1,000. Most Miskitu settlements, on the other hand, are small villages of around two hundred people or dispersed families settled along the river's shore.<sup>12</sup>

The Miskitu, who speak their own Miskitu language (a Misumalpan, Macro-Chibchan), trace their ancestry to an Amerindian group that intermarried with African and European populations during the colonial era. They expanded during the colonial era by "absorbing" ethnic Others along the coast. The Honduran Miskitu continue incorporating outside elements into their culture today; they exchange resources and intermarry with the Tawahka Sumu, Pech, Garifuna, Ladinos, Creoles, Isleños, and even "Gringos" in the reserve. Because the Miskitu are such a mixed population, *being* Miskitu in Honduras is far from a "primordial" category based solely on ancestry. In the words of a woman from Kuri, "we are *sambos*, *mestizos*, and *mulattos*, we are mixed. We are Miskitu because we speak Miskitu." Individuals differ in physical appearance between "*taya siksa*" (black skinned), "*taya pauni*" (red skinned), and "*taya pihini*" (white skinned), categories that correspond to local racial constructions of Black, Indian, and White. Despite physical differences, all groups speak Miskitu, identify themselves as Miskitu, and have a strong sense of ethnic identity and pride. Being Miskitu, therefore, is mostly defined by cultural and linguistic criterion, most important of which is speaking the Miskitu language.<sup>13</sup>

The Miskitu call themselves "Miskitu" or "Waikna" (meaning man or human) in their own language. When speaking in formal Spanish, all groups in the reserve use the term "Miskito" to refer to the Miskitu, but use the term "Sambo" in everyday Spanish. Technically defined, "Sambo" is the offspring of an Indian and a Negro. But, in the reserve, "Sambo" is used in a derogatory way to refer to the whole Miskitu culture group and its individual members. From the Ladino perspective, the Miskitu were a brutish people who they racialized as Blacks and Indians, a mixture of the two least prestigious social groups in the colonial legacy of Latin America.<sup>14</sup> Whitten and Corr contend:

Black and Indian mixes produced the *zambo*, or "black Indian," a cultural status that permeates colonial accounts of dangerous people. The danger emerges because of the absence of genetic mediation of whiteness and, consequently, a blend of savagery in a conjoining of ethnic antipodes.<sup>15</sup>

While the Miskitu also have White or Anglo ancestry from inter-marriages with the British, other Europeans, and Creoles on the coast during the colonial era, their ethnic label stresses only their less prestigious Black and Indian ancestries.

### *The Pech*

The Pech, an Indigenous rain-forest tribe, live in two different regions of the Biosphere with a total population of 479.<sup>16</sup> The Pech are perceived by Others in the reserve as being the oldest and “purest” Indigenous group, existing prior to European contact. They reportedly remained relatively un-mixed during the colonial era, intermarrying little with Blacks and Europeans. In the last 100 years, however, the Pech have intermarried with Ladinos and, more recently, with the Miskitu. Their main villages are located in the Las Marias area, along the middle Río Plátano. The other segment of the Pech population lives in the southwestern corner of the reserve.<sup>17</sup> Here, the Pech live in the two settlements of Jocomico (pop. 110) and Culco (pop. 152) where about three-fourths of the residents in each village consider themselves Pech.

The Miskitu crossed the cultural boundary of the historic Pech zone in the early 1940s. Miskitu men entered the Las Marias area of the Plátano to work as laborers for foreign companies that were extracting rubber. Since then, the Pech society has adopted much of Miskitu language and culture. Despite miscegenation and Miskitu infiltration into the Las Marias zone, the Pech culture is still strong because of recent wider Indigenous movements that inspired a resurgence in Pech pride. The immigration of twenty Pech families (42 people) from Olancho in 1990 also has helped reinvigorate a culturally distinct identity of the Las Marias zone. Today, bi-lingual programs teach the Pech language (a Chibchan) in the Las Marias communities. Resurgence in ethnic pride is most evidenced in the Pujulak neighborhood where children of mixed marriages trace descent primarily through their Pech ancestors.

The Las Marias Pech trace their ancestry to the remote headwaters of the Río Plátano, claiming to be descendants of the ancient residents of Ciudad Blanca (the White City) and other archaeological ruins hidden deep in Moskitia’s rain forest. Although they have always called themselves the “Pech” or “Pech-ca,” meaning people, while speaking in their native language, the term “Pech” has only recently been adopted for broad use through their political organization. All other groups in the reserve use the terms “Paya” in informal and “Pech” in formal conversations. “Paya” is a derogatory term that means wild savage. Spanish-speakers use the term “Paya” because they say the Pech are more primitive and “pure,” being the most physically “Indian looking” group in the region, with copper-colored skin and straight black hair.

### *The Garífuna*

The Garífuna trace their ancestry to a mixture of Island Caribs on St. Vincent of the Lesser Antilles who intermarried with African slaves and who were later deported to Honduras in 1797. The Garífuna people’s Afro-Caribbean culture and their Arawakian language, called Garífuna, thrives in Plaplaya, the only Garífuna village within the reserve’s western boundary. Other Garífuna villages lie just west of the boundary and use lands within the reserve. Additionally, Plaplaya is a mixed village with 421 residents; 71 percent Garífuna, 22 percent

Ladino, and 6 percent Miskitu. Plaplaya includes a historic Miskitu neighborhood, “Sambal,” which has maintained Miskitu culture and language since the early 1900s. Miskitu-Garifuna marriages are only common in this one neighborhood and, as a result, Miskitu culture is not wide-spread throughout the Garifuna-dominated village.

The Garifuna and Miskitu, two of the biggest Indigenous groups in Central America, have overlapping settlement patterns in the northwestern corner of the reserve. The historic cultural buffer zone between the Garifuna and Miskitu consists of a four-mile stretch of beach and lagoonal lands between Limon, the Miskitu’s most western coastal settlement and Plaplaya, the easternmost most Garifuna village. Therefore, the Garifuna only occupy lands on the northwestern fringe of Moskitia.<sup>18</sup>

The Garifuna were widely known as Black Caribs or “Caribe Negro” in the past, but younger generations have adopted the term “Garifuna” for all legal and political matters. More recently they have embraced a racialized identity as Blacks in Latin America and see themselves as part of the African American diaspora. Spanish-speakers in the Plátano Biosphere use the term “Moreno” to refer to Garifuna individuals and the group, a term used by all ethnic and Indigenous groups. “Moreno,” meaning brown or dark, is not necessarily a derogatory term when used in endearing greetings or expressions, such as, “Hola morenito,” between Garifuna friends. It is, however, disrespectful when used to refer to another’s ethnic identity. The ultimate term used in Spanish to show disrespect to a Garifuna person is “Negro.” The Garifuna are perceived by all groups in the reserve as the most racially and culturally Africanized.

### *The English-Speakers*

A small number of mixed Black and White English speakers are also found scattered throughout the north coast of the Plátano Biosphere where they intermarry with local Indigenous groups. They speak a variety of Central American English dialects and are subdivided into two principle groups.<sup>19</sup> English-speaking Blacks call themselves “Creoles” and English-speaking Whites call themselves “Islanders.”<sup>20</sup> Many of the Creole and Island families have connections to the Honduran Bay Islands (Roátan, Utila, and Guanaja). The northern coast’s one historic “Creole” village, called Payabila, has a population of approximately 60,<sup>21</sup> however, residents are rapidly assimilating to Miskitu language and culture.

All groups in the RPBR refer to the Creoles as “Inglés Negros” (Inglesas de habla Español) in polite contexts and “Negros” when speaking in informal Spanish. The Creoles consider both of these terms derogatory because they racialize their identity as Blacks. In their own English language, they call themselves “Creoles,” which they prefer because it focuses more on their European cultural heritage. Creoles consider the Spanish terms “Ingleses” (British) or “Islenos” (Islanders) more polite ethnic terms than “Ingles Negro” (English-speaking Blacks).

Spanish speakers refer to the second major group of English speakers in the reserve as "Isleños" (Islander), referring to their previous home and heritage in the Bay Islands. In Spanish, they are also called "Ingleses" (British). However, the term "Caracol" is used when speaking in informal Spanish. The locals claim that Isleños, who live and work along the coast, look like sea shells because of their lighter, sunburned skin and bleached-out hair.

### *Ladinos*

Ladinos are part of the national, *mestizo* culture that resulted from the mixing of Amerindians with Spaniards on the Honduran mainland during the colonial era. Three Ladino populations occupy different parts of the reserve. Along the Paulaya River, a Ladino population of 5,019 can be found in the southwestern corner of the reserve. An estimated 15,000 residents live near the Wampu and Paulaya Rivers' headwaters.<sup>22</sup> In the northern part of the Plátano Biosphere, Ladino families live dispersed among the Miskitu, Pech, and Garífuna villages. The Ladino population along the Río Paulaya has grown due to the many new colonists entering the Paulaya valley. However, the most dramatic increase in the Ladino population occurred due to the recent colonization of the southwestern corner of the reserve. This new, larger segment of Ladinos enter into the Plátano Biosphere as part of an active colonization front, cutting roads, clearing forests, and establishing cattle ranches. Here, Ladino culture also threatens to overwhelm remaining Pech families living in the two communities. Ladinos, in general, are known for exploiting reserve resources. Their actions in the southern zone threaten the entire reserve.

The Río Plátano Miskitu along the northern coast have limited interactions with the Ladino colonization front in the southern zone. However, Ladino settlements in the Paulaya valley extend into areas of historic Miskitu villages along the Sico River.<sup>23</sup> Recent feuds over land have occurred between long-term Miskitu residents and more recently settled Ladinos working for ranchers and lumber companies along the Paulaya River. Conflicts in Chiquirito resulted in the Miskitu and Ladinos living in separate neighborhoods and the Miskitu fear their encroaching and armed Ladino neighbors.

### **Ethnic Terms of Reference**

This study first examines how RPBR individuals break up their social world and classify Others by collecting ethnic terms of reference.<sup>24</sup> The prescribing and ascribing of the ethnic terms is based on a subjective process of identification where one assigns an ethnic label to distinguish between themselves and Others. Ethnic terms of reference used by members of a society are important markers of identification that reveal inter-ethnic relations and the history of cultural differences in a society.<sup>25</sup>

In the pluri-ethnic reserve, each group has its own set of ethnic terms of reference when speaking their own languages. Yet, when speaking in Spanish, all groups use the same respectful and/or derogatory ethnic terms. These terms vary depending on the context of a conversation. The use of particular terms of reference imply higher or lower perceived status between groups and display inter-ethnic relations at the reserve. Presenting a variety of ethnic slurs and racial and behavioral stereotypes should help to capture the nuances of living in this pluri-ethnic reserve.

Polite	Derogatory
Miskitu	Sambo
Pech	Paya
Garífuna	Moreno/Negro
Ladino	Indio
Ingles Negro	Negro
Isleño	Caracol

Table 1.: Polite and Derogatory Spanish Terms of Reference

The polite terms are usually the terms groups use to identify themselves when speaking in Spanish. Generally, the impolite terms are ascribed by others in informal Spanish discourse. These derogatory terms of reference (especially “Indio,” “Sambo,” “Moreno,” and “Negro”) refer to the group’s least prestigious origins, such as the Indian ancestry of the Ladino and the African ancestry of the Miskitu, Garífuna, and Creoles. Helms (1977) claims that the Spaniards tried to subjugate non-Spaniards by using racial slurs that emphasized what they perceived as non-prestigious ancestry. These Spanish terms, therefore, illustrate how Spanish-speaking Ladinos in the reserve and in national society perceive and categorize Others in the reserve. The fact that all groups use these Spanish terms reveals the presence of national language and culture in the region.

The following analysis also details how the Miskitu people are assigned to different socio-racial categories by English and Spanish speakers respectively. The Miskitu are called “Sambo” by all groups in the reserve when speaking Spanish, an ethnic term that refers to their Black ancestries, but are called “Indian” in English (and at times, Indios in national Spanish), an ethnic term that refers to their Amerindian ancestry. Helms detailed how the colonial Miskitu were assigned to different socio-racial categories depending on with whom they were interacting—the Spanish emphasized their Black ancestry while the British stressed their Indian identity. Spanish and British colonial struggles continue to play out in the reserve, where groups like the Miskitu participate in multiple systems of social identity creating a unique ethnic landscape.

Analysis of the broad spectrum of ethnic terms reveals a locally constituted system of identity that operates in the reserve. Although ethnic terms of reference



are spoken in Spanish, they are often defined and used differently in the reserve than in Honduran national and social scientific parlance. Most significantly, all other groups in the reserve call *mestizo* individuals both “Ladinos” and “Indios,” depending on the context. This means that the reserve’s Indigenous groups—all having Amerindian ancestry—call the Ladinos, not themselves, “Indios.” Using the term “Indio” both degrades and ethnicizes the Ladinos by calling attention away from their European ancestors—the Spanish—and focusing on what is perceived as their less prestigious, Amerindian ancestry.

The Miskitu, Garífuna, and Creoles are all given the common identity of Blacks in the diaspora because of their mixed ancestries. Research documents that they use the terms “Sambo,” “Moreno,” and “Negro” to refer to each other in informal Spanish, calling forth and essentializing an African identity of the Other. These terms may be used in an affectionate way by insiders, while being considered a derogatory term when used by an outsider. Therefore, when a Miskitu calls a Creole, “Negro,” or a Garífuna calls a Miskitu “Sambo,” there seems to be a case of inverted identities, where they are trying to distance themselves from their own Blackness by emphasizing it in the Other.<sup>26</sup>

Looking at the Miskitu as a case in point, they refer to Garífuna peoples as “Morenos,” the Creoles as “Negros,” and the Ladinos as “Indios” when speaking Spanish. The Miskitu, then, seem to be trying to distance themselves from both their Black and Amerindian heritage and ancestry. This would support the assumption that colonial prejudices against Blacks and Indians are still being reproduced in the reserve. Indeed, colonial stereotypes of the lazy Black, backwards Indian, and civilized European permeated the interviews.

All of the reserve’s culture groups refer to the Spanish-speaking *mestizos* in the reserve as “Ladinos” when speaking formally, and “Indios” when speaking informally in Spanish. The Indigenous Miskitu, Tawahka, and Pech, for example, do not refer to themselves, nor are they referred to by others as “Indios” when speaking informally in Spanish, but refer the *mestizo* population as “Indios.”<sup>27</sup> This research, therefore, documents a Latin American socio-linguistic anomaly—the term “Indio” is not used to refer to the Indian population as elsewhere in Latin America. Social scientists, if not the Latin American citizenry in general, consider the categories of “Ladino” and “Indio” as structurally opposed.<sup>28</sup> “Ladinos” are the Spanish-speaking “hybrid” or *mestizo* population that has more socio-economic power than the “Indios,” the lower class or sub-altern peoples with their own cultures, languages, and “pure” ancestry. “Ladinos” and “Indios,” then, are inverse images in Latin America; their meaning arises out of contrast with the Other.<sup>29</sup>

Since Spanish-speaking *mestizos* are called both “Ladinos” and “Indios,” this implies that Spanish America’s “Indio/Ladino” identity dialectic may never have fully developed in eastern Honduras. This region remained largely outside of Spanish colonial and post-colonial cultural influences, first as a British Protectorate, and then as a resource area exploited by North American companies.<sup>30</sup> Research illustrates, however, that Indigenous-*mestizo* conflicts

over land, culture, and language persist within the context of the Honduran state.<sup>31</sup>

**The Miskitu View of Social Status Hierarchy**

Social status hierarchies were collected from Miskitu individuals during interviews. Individuals ranked all culture groups in the reserve from highest to lowest in social prestige. Interestingly, Miskitu people always assumed “Merikis” (North Americans) to be part of the reserve’s social landscape. Even though most are visitors, many “Merikis” can always be found on the north coast, including tourists, researchers, Peace Corps representatives, missionaries, and other workers for governmental and non-governmental development organizations.

Meriki (Anglos)
Musti (Islander/Isleño)
Kriol (Creole)
Miskitu (Misquote)
Paya (Pech)
Sumu (Tawahka)
Karibi (Garífuna)
Ispael (Ladino)

Table 2.: Miskitu view of social status hierarchy

The “Meriki,” “Musti,” “Kriol,” and “Miskitu”

The Río Plátano Miskitu view of the social status hierarchy displays what Hale calls an “Anglo affinity,” a natural or immediate inclination toward English speakers and North Americans.<sup>32</sup> The four groups with the highest rankings all have British ancestry and cultural features. The Miskitu primarily ranked English-speakers and North Americans, who they call “Meriki” or “Gringo,” as having the highest social status, followed by Isleños, Creoles, and themselves. Miskitu individuals claim their people’s ancestry and culture as being part British. When interacting with “Merikis,” they even project a kinship with them based on the historic alliance with the British during the colonial era. One Miskitu man said to me in English with a strong Caribbean accent: “I’m an Englishman, like you.” He went on to claim that as a Miskitu, he should be a recognized citizen of the United Kingdom. Trying to make his point, he added, “Queen Elizabeth is my real President, not President Reina” (who was President of Honduras at the time). The British have greatly influenced Miskitu culture and language, even at the level of their kinship and ethnic terms. “Paya” and “Sumu”

The Miskitu ranked the Pech and Tawahka as lower than themselves in the social hierarchy based on the idea that the Pech and Tawahka were backwards Indians who participated less in outside economies and cultures than the Miskitu. Miskitu individuals also held other stereotypes about each group including that the Tawahka harm others with "*sika saura*" (evil potions). Tawahka Sumu "*sika*" was feared because no local counteractive remedies existed on the Plátano Biosphere's northern coast, far from the Tawahka homeland where the potions were made. Many Miskitu individuals complained that the Pech were "*slabla*" (stingy) and "*upla wal aisaia apia*" (snobbish and egotistical). The Miskitu claimed that the Pech preferred not to talk to, interact with, or marry them. In general, the Miskitu categorized the Pech and Tawahka as "*upla saura*" (bad people).

#### "Karibi" and "Ispael"

For a Miskitu person, the most important criteria that determined the assignment of a low status ranking for a culture group was if they had a disregard for human life. Most of the Miskitu interviewed said that both the Garífuna and Ladinos were "*upla ikisa*" (murderers) and "*huba setan*" (evil people). They claimed that Ladinos kill with guns and machetes, while the Garífuna use "*mana negra*" (black magic). The Miskitu called these types of people "*kupia siksa*" (black-hearted), "*min*" (mean), or "*upla saura*" (bad people) and believed they should be avoided at all times.

Interactions between Garífuna and Miskitu are often shrouded in accusations of witchcraft and both groups fear the other and have a mutual distrust. Although some Miskitu are even darker skinned than many Garífuna, the Miskitu deride the Garífuna's more African or Black physical appearance. The Miskitu refer to the Garífuna as "Karibi" and mock what they call their "African" dance (the "*punta*"), "unintelligible language," and "loud way of talking." The Miskitu often stereotype Garífuna men negatively and say, "they are lazy Blacks who sit around and eat cassava all day." The Miskitu also resent the Garífuna for their greater participation in Spanish-speaking national culture, including the fact that many school teachers in the region are Garífuna who generally speak Spanish better than the Miskitu. Conversely, the Garífuna view the Miskitu as mixed Blacks and Indians who are less modernized and educated.

The Miskitu produce contradictory stereotypes about the Garífuna, claiming that the Garífuna are lazy Blacks and also that they have better jobs than the Miskitu people. Laura Lewis found similar contradictory stereotypes about Blacks produced by the Indian and *mestizo* populations of Costa Chica, Mexico.<sup>33</sup> She indicated the "*morenos*" (black residents of San Nicolás Tolentino) were called lazy and poor businessmen, while the Indians were thought of as hardworking. However, the "*morenos*" had a higher socio-economic status than the nearby Indians. Lewis concluded that these stereotypes parallel colonial and national ideologies that "repudiate blackness while idealizing Indianness."<sup>34</sup> The Miskitu similarly have adopted colonial ideologies regarding Blackness

and Indianness, simultaneously projecting representations of Blackness on the Garifuna and, in this case, Indianness on themselves.

While the Miskitu dislike the Garifuna because of what they perceived as their Africanized appearance and different way of speaking, they avoid the Ladinos' cowboy culture even more.<sup>35</sup> The Miskitu stereotyped all Ladino men as being cattle-raising cowboys, who ride horses and carry guns (they were gun-slinging murderers), despite the fact that most in the area are more involved in agriculture than with cattle ranching. The Miskitu even claim Ladinos do not bathe and "smell like horses." In contrast, the Miskitu stereotype themselves as travelling by foot and canoe, as not having guns, and as bathing in lagoons and the sea at least twice a day.

Today, the RPBR Miskitu distrust and hate the Spanish-speaking Ladinos. When speaking in their own language, Miskitu people derogatorily refer to the "Ladino" individuals and their Spanish language as "*Ispael*." The Miskitu perception is that the *Ispael*s have no respect for the environment or other human beings—they kill people and destroy their lands. They often say, "*Ispael usus pata*" (or "*Ispael Aras Pata*" in Nicaragua), literally meaning "Ladinos are food for the vultures." This expression comes from the Miskitu claim that Ladinos commonly kill each other and leave each other's bodies to rot like an animal in the "*monte*," eventually to be eaten by vultures. Thus, the Miskitu dehumanize the Ladinos by claiming they even kill their own. Another ethnic slur that the Miskitu-speakers use to refer to a Ladino is the term "*Ispayul*," combining the term "*Ispael*" or Ladino with "*yul*" (dog), invoking their sub-human qualities.

Miskitu women stereotype Ladina women as submissive and lazy, suggesting, "they sit around the house flipping tortillas all day." They characterize themselves as women working their own agricultural fields, heading households, and going out in all female groups to socialize or "*kirbaia*" (to stroll). The gender-power complex in the Ladino "machismo" culture contrasted sharply with the Miskitu vision of a matrifocal culture, where women had more personal freedoms and a higher level of female autonomy. Lewis also found that black Mexican women ("*morenas*") were thought of as tough and strong-willed by "*mestizos*."<sup>36</sup>

Ladinos living in the Miskitu coastal villages often act as economic middlemen or cultural brokers between the reserve residents and the outside world's market economy and own stores or other coastal businesses. Ladino merchants expressed their higher social class, compared to the Miskitu peoples, by only marrying other Ladinos and refuse to learn the Miskitu language. A few Ladino merchants, who had lived in Moskitia for more than ten years, even pretended not to understand the Miskitu language when attending to customers in their stores

The RPBR Miskitu people largely define themselves by their two biggest enemies—the "*Karibi*" (Garifuna) and "*Ispael*" (Ladino). Both of these groups

have had historic conflicts with the Miskitu. The Spanish never controlled the Miskito Coast during the colonial era. This was mostly due to the presence of the bellicose Zambos-Mosquitos (the colonial Miskitu) who became allies with the British and helped them fight the Spanish to the west. The Garífuna joined forces with the Spanish to fight against the Miskitu and British allied forces in the early 1800s.<sup>36</sup> Thereafter, the Miskitu and Garífuna fought against each other at times as tools of the English and Spanish. Colonial struggles continue to be played out in the reserve, as seen through rival relations between the Garífuna and the Miskitu, and the Ladinos and the Miskitu.

Analysis of the social hierarchy from the Miskitu perspective reveals British Caribbean influences in the reserve. Most strikingly, the Miskitu value English culture, while at the same time, they dislike *mestizo* culture and those with Spanish heritage. Thus, the Miskitu have a love-hate duality, loving Anglo culture and individuals with North American and British descent and hating national culture and those of Spanish ancestry. This love-hate duality is the basis for the social hierarchy where Merikis or Gringos (the closest thing to an Englishmen on the coast today) are perceived as the highest social status and “Ispael” or Ladino as the lowest. Thus, the Miskitu display both an “Anglo affinity”<sup>37</sup> and a “Ladino aversion.”

### **Situational Identity**

The Miskitu are a mixed group living in a pluri-ethnic region. This creates the social space for them to be many things to many people—individuals are often assigned to different socio-racial categories depending on the participating ethnic Others and the context of the interaction. The strength of Río Plátano Miskitu identity seems to lie in its fluid nature, which allows individuals to construct situational ethnic identities. The ability to use situational identities, all the while remaining “essentially” Miskitu, may be a major reason for their cultural survival.<sup>38</sup>

The Río Plátano Miskitu regularly interact with Non-Governmental Organizations, Honduran governmental agencies, ethnic Others, and the forces accompanying supralocal economies. Thus, the Miskitu in the Plátano Biosphere may construct their identities situationally as Indians, Blacks, Indigenous People, Biosphere and Moskitia residents, and Hondurans as the need arises. The situational use of identity may prove to be a useful social skill for the RPBR Miskitu who are increasingly involved with national and international Others through the global discourse of natural and cultural conservation. When interacting with national and international Others, for example, the Miskitu now stress their unique culture and language that differs from the larger, national population. They stress their primordialized ties to Moskitia, their historic homeland, dating to a time before the establishment of the Honduran state. As a result of living in a protected area for more than twenty years, the RPBR

Miskitu now articulate their identity at the national and international levels as natural and cultural conservationists.

### Notes

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2. The Miskitu population has grown from 1000 in the mid 1600s to probably around 175,000 today, being the third largest Indigenous group in Central America today. Charles Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction; Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894-1987* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). Peter Herlihy, "Indigenous Peoples and Biosphere Reserve Conservation in the Mosquitia Rain Forest Corridor, Honduras," in *Conservation through Cultural Survival; Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas*, ed. Stan Stevens (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1997), 99-129. Peter Herlihy, "Central American Indigenous Peoples and Lands Today," in *Paseo Pantera: The Natural and Cultural History of the Central American Landbridge*, ed. Anthony Coates (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Karl Offen, "The Miskitu Landscape and the Emergence of a Miskitu Ethnic Identity, Northeastern Nicaragua and Honduras, 1600-1800" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, Austin, 1999).

3. Alison Brysk, *From Tribal Village to Global Village: Indian Rights and International Relations in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Bartholomew Dean and Jerome Levi, eds., *At the Risk of Being Heard: Identity, Indigenous Rights, and Postcolonial States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003). David Maybury-Lewis, *Indigenous Peoples, Ethnic Groups, and the State* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon Press, 1997). David Maybury-Lewis, ed., *Identities in Conflict*. Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer, eds., *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991). Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 1997).

4. Anthropologists have studied local identities that are not defined by the political institution of the state elsewhere along the Central American Atlantic Coast, but these studies do not fully consider regional discourses of identity. See Donna Bonner, "Garífuna Town/Caribbean Nation/Latin American State: Identity and Prejudice in Belize (Ethnicity, Postcolonialism, Hybridity, Transnationalism, Sociolinguistics)" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, 1999). CIDCA/Development Study Group, *Demografía costeña: notas sobre la historia demográfica y la situación actual de los grupos étnicos de la Costa Atlántica nicaragüense* (CIDCA: Managua, 1982). Sheila Cosminsky and Mary Scrimshaw, "Carib-Creole Relations in a Belizean Community" in *Frontier Adaptations in Lower Central America*, eds. Mary Helms and Frank Loveland (Institute for the study of Human Issues, Philadelphia, 1976), 95-112. Claudia Garcia, *The Making of the Miskitu People of Nicaragua; The Social Construction of Ethnic Identity* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia Sociologica Upsaliensia, 1996), 41. Mark Jamieson, "Kinship and Gender as Political Process among the Miskitu of Eastern Nicaragua" (Ph.D. diss., London School of Economics, 1996). Mark Jamieson, "It's Shame that Makes Men and Women Enemies: The Politics of Intimacy among the Miskitu of Kakabila," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6 (2000): 311-324. Mark Jamieson, "Compassion, Anger and Broken Hearts: Ontology and the Role of Language in Miskitu Lament," in *The Anthropology of Love and Anger; The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*, eds., J. Overing and A. Passes (London: Routledge, 2000), 82-96.

5. Richard N. Adams, "The Sandinistas and the Indians: The 'problem' of Indians in Nicaragua," *Caribbean Review* 10 (1981): 23-25. Philippe Bourgois, "Class, Ethnicity, and the State Among the Miskitu Amerindians of Northeastern Nicaragua," *Latin American Perspectives* 8 (1981): 23-29. Philippe Bourgois, "Nicaragua's Ethnic Minorities in the Revolution," *Monthly Review* 36 (1985): 22-44. CIDCA/Development Study Group, *Ethnic Groups and the State: The Case of the Atlantic Coast in Nicaragua* (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1987). Philip Dennis, "The Costenos and the Revolution in Nicaragua" *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 23 (1981): 271-296. Martin Diskin, "Revolution and Ethnic Identity: The Nicaraguan Case" in *Conflict, Migration, and the Expression of Ethnicity*, eds. Nancie Gonzalez and C. McCommon (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 11-27. Martin Diskin, "Ethnic Discourse and the Challenge to Anthropology: The Nicaraguan Case" in *Nation States and Indians in Latin America*, eds., Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 156-180. Charles Hale, "Institutional Struggle, Conflict and Reconciliation: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State (1979-1985)," in *Ethnic Groups and The Nation State*, 101-28. Charles Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction*. Bernard Nietschmann, *The Unknown War: The Miskitu Nation, Nicaragua and the United States* (Boston: University Press of America, 1989). Carlos Vilas, *State, Class and Ethnicity in Nicaragua: Capitalist Modernization and Revolutionary Change on the Atlantic Coast* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989). Research on Indigenous peoples elsewhere in Central America also focuses on "Indian" identity in relation to "mestizo" nationalism and the state. See, Philippe Bourgois "Conjugated Oppression: Class and Ethnicity among Guaymi and Kuna Banana Workers," *American Ethnologist* 15 (1988): 328-348. Les Field, "Who are the Indians? Reconceptualizing Indigenous Identity, Resistance, and the Role of Social Science in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 29 (1994): 237-248. Les Field, "Constructing Local Identities in a Revolutionary Nation: The Cultural Politics of the Artisan Class in Nicaragua, 1979-90," *American Ethnologist* 22 (1995): 786-806. Charles Hale, "The Cultural Politics of Identity in Latin America," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997): 567-590. Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer, eds., *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991). Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 1997). Kay Warren, *The Symbolism of Subordination: Indian Identity in a Guatemalan Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978). Kay Warren, "Transforming Memories and Histories: Indian Identity Reexamined," *Americans: Interpretive Essays*, ed., A. Stepan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

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13. Eduard Conzemius, *Ethnographic Survey of the Miskitu and Sumu/Indians of Honduras and Nicaragua* (Smithsonian Institution. Bureau of American Ethnology. Bulletin 106. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1932). Mary Helms, *Asang: Adaptation to Culture Contact in a Miskitu Community* (Gainesville: University Press, 1971). Mary Helms, "Introduction" in *Frontier Adaptations in Lower Central America*, 2-15.
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19. The Creoles are known locally to speak "*ingles fino*" (proper English).
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21. Peter Herlihy and Laura Hobson Herlihy, "La herencia cultural de La Reserva de la Biosfera del Río Plátano: Un area de confluencias étnicas en La Mosquitia," in *Herencia de nuestro pasado: La Reserva de La Biosfera Río Plátano*, ed. Vincente Murphy (Tegucigalpa: ROCAP (USAID), Fondo Mundial para La Naturaleza (WWF), COHDEFOR, AID, 1991), 9-15.
22. Herlihy, "Indigenous and Ladino Peoples of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, Honduras," 104-106.
23. Some of the Paulaya Ladinos, however, have historically lived in the region. These Spanish-speakers, or so-called "*bananeros*," are the descendants of Ladinos who worked in the banana industry during the first half of the 20th century. They are descendants of United Fruit Company workers who remained after banana production declined. Many of these Ladino families live similarly to the Indigenous groups, farming, hunting and cash-cropping. Other Ladinos in the valley are more recent immigrants who came in search of open land to farm and raise cattle.
24. To investigate ethnic terms of reference, interviews were conducted in one of each ethnic group's village using a representative sample set of fifteen Miskitu and non-



Miskitu residents. To collect social status hierarchies, 33 Miskitu individuals were interviewed along the coast.

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31. David Dodds, "The Ecological and Social Sustainability of Miskitu Subsistence in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, Honduras: The Cultural Ecology of Swidden Horticulturists in a Protected Area" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1994). David Dodds, "The Miskitu of Honduras and Nicaragua," in *Endangered Peoples of Latin America*, 87-99.

32. Some Miskitu men who travel across the Caribbean as lobster divers thrive on learning English words and phrases. A popular slang expression among Miskitu divers mixes English and Spanish: "Sí, Man" (yes). "Sí" is Spanish, and "man" is English. Like Anglo wannabes, Miskitu individuals also enthusiastically point out the many English words in the Miskitu vocabulary when talking to North Americans.

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34. *Ibid.*, 905.

35. The center of the Ladino region, "Sico," has a striking frontier town appearance, aligned with the national culture's "*vaquero*" (cowboy) lifestyle and market economy. One *vaquero* in Sico rides the river on a jet ski. More commonly, they have four-wheel drive vehicles used during the dry season when the roads connect Sico to the north coast cities of Honduras.

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