The Miskitu People of Awastara (review)

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The colonists organized Guaraní males into militia units which served throughout the greater Río de la Plata region, not just on the famed Jesuit missions. In Part II, Ganson relates how the Guaraní population on the seven affected missions organized armed resistance to prevent coming under the authority of the Portuguese, as provided in the 1750 Treaty of Madrid. No Jesuits joined the armed resistance nor were any killed in the battles. Ganson finds that the 1767 expulsion of the Jesuits had an even greater impact on the Guaraní mission population. Many fled to towns and ranches rather than into the countryside. When colonial authorities attempted to round up the fugitives to force them back onto the missions, most eluded their pursuers because they preferred working as free-wage laborers. In 1800, the Spanish government exempted some mission Indians from providing communal labor. The goal of the Bourbon rulers was now to secularize the missions and to make the Guaraní into independent small farmers. To that end colonial officials even encouraged miscegenation.

Ganson's book represents a successful effort to bring the study of the colonial Guaraní into the active scholarly discussion that is taking place about so many indigenous societies, especially in Mesoamerica and the Andean zone. Ganson's relentless work in numerous archives both in the Americas and in Europe has enabled her to reach that goal.

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The Miskitu People of Awastara. By Philip A. Dennis. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. Pp. viii, 312. Maps. Illustrations. Figures. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. $55.00 cloth; $22.95 paper.

Swashbuckling, resilient ethnic militants are the protagonists of this excellent historical ethnography of a Miskitu village. For the last 300 years the Miskitu people have tenaciously defended their lands, protected, they feel, by water ghosts and magical spells that divert hurricanes and enemy bullets. Miskitu kin networks stretch along much of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. Miskitu in dozens of villages have made the sea and shorelines their own for centuries. Dennis, a medical anthropologist with a musician's ear for the faint sounds of history, has lived and studied the area off and on for more than 20 years.

Besides natural disasters and civil wars typical of Central America, Nicaragua and the Miskitu have also been cursed with a spectacular succession of corrupt national leaders. From Anastasio Somoza senior, of whom Franklin Roosevelt reputedly said that "he may be a son-of-a bitch, but he's our son-of-bitch," to Somoza's son, who pocketed most of the foreign aid that arrived after an earthquake flattened the capital in 1972 to Arnold Alemán, who was sentenced in 2003 to 20 years in jail for corruption and moneylaundering, *caudillos* have contributed to making this the poorest country in the isthmus. The Sandinista National Liberation Front tried to convert the nation to a form of socialism during the 1980s while fight-

ing a bloody war against the U.S.-backed contras. Sadly, the Sandinistas have been dogged by corruption scandals since they left office. The GDP per head is barely a quarter that of El Salvador, which suffered an even bloodier civil war between leftist revolutionaries and the U.S.-backed right-wing military.

Throughout these events, the Awastara villagers have cultivated distinctive cultural traditions and practices. A great virtue of Dennis's analysis of Miskitu persistence is the scrupulous fairness with which he treats controversial matters (e.g., the Sandinista-Contra-Miskitu war, land disputes and Miskitu identity). He carefully defines concepts in plain English, assesses their range of applicability and limitations, and avoids posturing and cheap rhetorical devices. Thus, Dennis's book is more than just an attempt to understand ethnic history and militancy along the Caribbean Sea. Even to readers with no interest in either indigenous politics or social movements in Central America, this book can serve as a model for the anthropological study of the impact of cocaine consumption and trafficking. Other key issues include turtles and farming, kinship and daily life, work, school, Protestantism and belief systems, illness, disease, magic, politics and leadership, economic growth and the Nicaraguan state. Dennis shows that many of the Miskitu have relied on an uncanny mix of militancy and foot-dragging to limit state and development agencies' abilities to enforce usually ill-founded reform schemes (water wells, sí; pigs and toilets, no!).

The four fields of anthropology receive ample treatment in this eclectic volume, with even historical archaeologists benefiting from the author's discussion of settlement patterns. Dennis is a bridge builder between the science end of anthropology—politics, medicine, botany—and interpretative perspectives. He focuses on empirical findings in medicine and land/sea production systems, guiding readers through the cultural construction of the categories he measured. Dennis' delight in Miskitu rhetoric, humor, and storytelling provides insightful linkages between meaning-based and behavior-based arguments. His explanations about politics, leadership, and economic growth are based on cross-cultural data and comparative theories. Pages 265-272 and most of Chapter 11 are a "must read" for students of Nicaragua's regional political economy. The author could have benefited from the work of Michael Taussig on shamanism, Roger Lancaster and David Stoll on Protestantism, Lancaster on power in Nicaragua, Arturo Escobar about development and social movements, and Pete Wilson about "crab antics" and social stratification among Caribbean peoples. Yet, overall the research is thorough.

The book is appropriate for undergraduate courses in Latin America Studies and anthropology. The chapters on "Christianity," "Health and Curing," "Public Affairs and Community Development," and "Concepts of Personhood" are ideal for graduate seminars on Protestantism, magic, economic growth in Latin America, and indigenous intellectuals, and social movements. Since the book's publication, new information has emerged. Readers interested in Central America will want to also consult Charles Hale's 2004 article in the *NACLA Report on the Americas* and John Burnett's 2004 radio report on the worst aspects of global events—drug trafficking

and its impact on Miskitu ethnicity. I strongly recommend this deeply researched, evocative history of the Miskitu people.

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Pueblos, comunidades y municipios frente a los proyectos modernizadores en América Latina, siglo XIX. Edited by Antonio Escobar Ohmstede, Ramona Falcón and Raymond Buve. Amsterdam: CEDLA, 2002. pp. ix, 283. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $27.50 cloth.

This well put together volume addresses the influence of subaltern politics in state building during the transition from colonial to republican rule in Latin America, stressing the complex relationship between ethnicity and new nationalist sensibilities. The contributors share a common interest in the politics of memory and strategies for recovering underrepresented voices in this critical period.

Andrés Guerrero's provocative but problematic essay dissects the tension between constitutional ideals and existing practices in his analysis of two revealing events: the failed attempt to replace Indian tribute with a universal "contribution" applied to all Ecuadorians in 1843 and the adoption of legal equality in the constitution of 1857. He posits an essential question: Does domination change when the constitutional order promotes universal rights? Guerrero's answer is negative. Ecuador's landowners recreated a system of symbolic domination that placed class and ethnic conflict firmly in the hacendado pater *familias*' "private sphere." How this domination functioned is unclear and the evidence he provides is often misleading (see his discussion of censuses, pp. 41-42). While Guerrero finds that the new order and even the archival record silenced indigenous actors, other co-authors provide skillful studies of plebian interactions with the state. The essays by Martha Belchis and Ramona Falcón explore how indigenous actors adopted sophisticated "symbolic" strategies of their own. Belchis carefully demonstrates how illiterate and unassimilated tribal leaders made their voices heard in the documents. The actors emerge as deft manipulators of Argentine factionalism and rhetoric, adopting diverse strategies to confront the rising nation state. Falcón seeks to chart a middle road between a romantic image of peasant liberalism (a "leyenda rosa" [p. 141]) and the traditional pessimistic views of villagers as the "cannon fodder" of elite conflicts. She uses petitions during Mexico's Second Empire to demonstrate their considerable savvy in negotiating their survival. Unlike the rhetorical repertoire of republican citizenship, the Empire allowed villagers "to claim moral authority merely by the virtue of being Indians" (p. 141).

Guy Thomson's commentary on memory demonstrates how local legends evolved in the Sierra de Puebla (Mexico). Thomson explores how national identity is seen through the lens of municipal politics and concludes that for peasant actors national history takes on meaning when local rivalries are at stake. Rounding out the