

# On the Boundaries of a Culture



Miskitu Migrants between Tradition and Modernity

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## Miskitu Migrants between Tradition and Modernity

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<sup>1</sup> The photograph on the cover (author's collection, 12/4/'12) depicts a welcome sign for travelers visiting Pearl Lagoon. It also demonstrates which are the three main ethnic groups in Pearl Lagoon ("Welcome to": Creole; "Bienvenidos a": Spanish; "Yamni balram": Miskitu) and how these group are ranked in the social classification system; Creole at the top, Miskitu at the bottom.

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## POEM WITHOUT A NAME – CRISTÓBAL RAÚL ALVAREZ

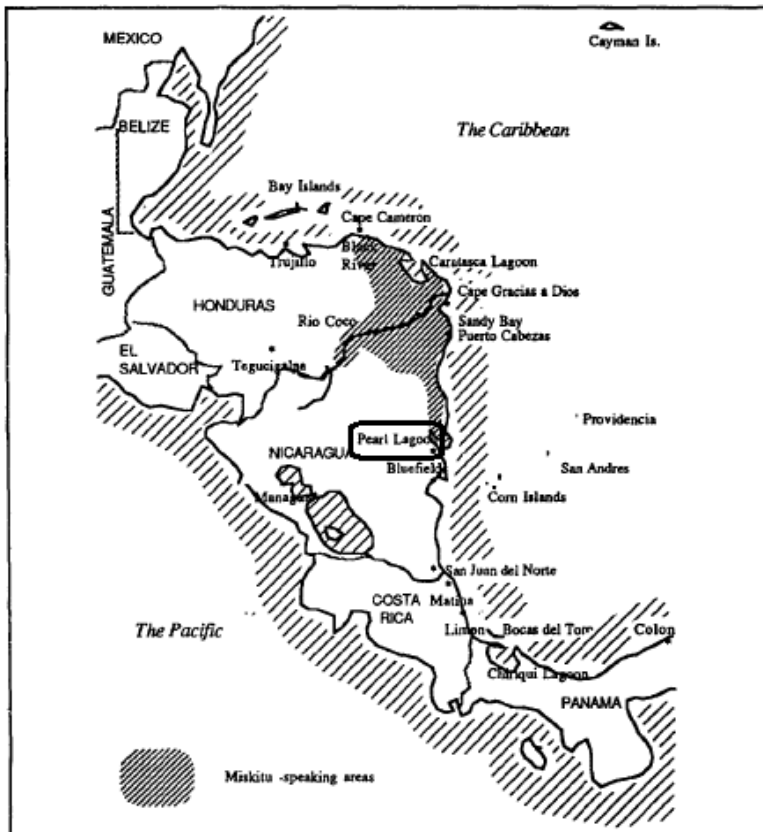
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Sip apia sna aya mai tikaia	<i>I will not forget you</i>
Yang wini bilara mai brih auna	<i>I carry you in me</i>
Kabu ai binka wal baku	<i>like the sea in the tiding</i>
Rip nani ai lukaika wal baku	<i>like the foam in the waves</i>
Trai kaiki bara sin aiklabisna	<i>and though I try and struggle</i>
Kup bila wina mai sakaia	<i>to tear you away from my soul</i>
Latwan kay mai kaikisna	<i>I want you more</i>
Witin nani yang wal, yakan bara sarikira	<i>They and I, lonely and desolate</i>
Aikuki asla pali taukan sa yabal ka	<i>we will walk jointly the route</i>
Mark munam anira mangkan ba kanka	<i>that destiny has shown us</i>
Barâ yawan alki brih wabia	<i>and with us we carry</i>
Wan kupia nanira	<i>captured in our hearts</i>
Latwan laka aihka lukanka kum	<i>an endearing love</i>
Bara wan uaya tiwras tnata apu sin	<i>and an infinite memory</i>

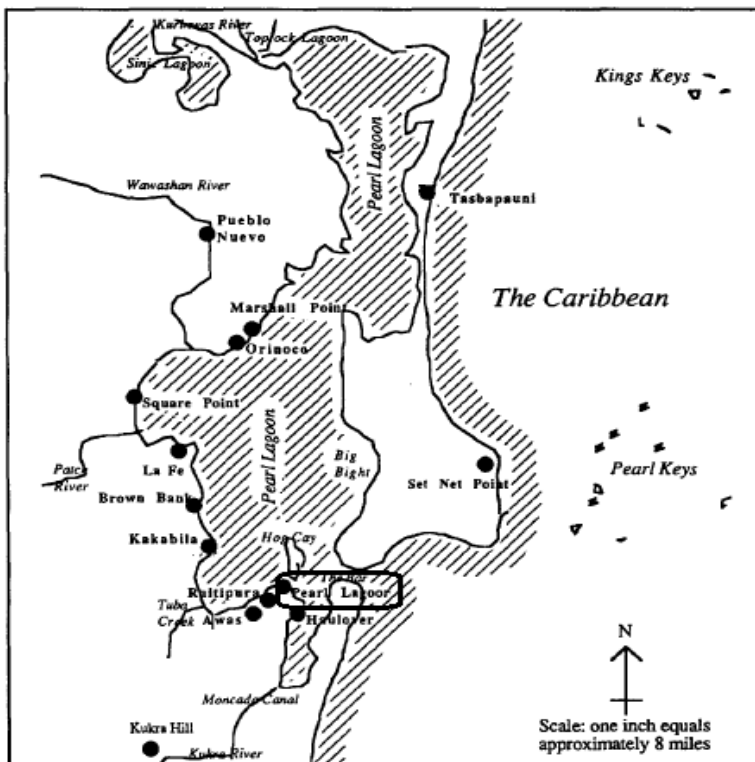
*(translation by author)<sup>2</sup>*

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2 I have chosen to open with a poem by the Nicaraguan Miskitu poet Cristóbal Raúl Alvarez as his poetry touches upon many of the themes I will discuss in this thesis. I was introduced to this poem by one of my Miskitu informants in Pearl Lagoon, who showed me the Miskitu poetry book 'Miskitu Tasbaia' (Silva Mercado, 1997). The poem was written in Miskitu but came with a Spanish translation, and together with my informant I have been able to translate the verses into English. I interpret this poem as a depiction of how man interacts with his tradition. The connection between the two is self-evident and inescapable, yet at the same time often contested and denied. The tradition enables man to look back on the past, to reflect on the present, and it provides a window into the future.



Map 1: Miskito-Speaking Areas on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (Jamieson, 2000:715)



Map 2: Pearl Lagoon within the Pearl Lagoon Basin (Jamieson, 2000:719)

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This thesis could not have been written without the help of others. Though this list is by no means exhausting, I would like to thank some of the people who helped me to conduct this study and to organize and transform a chaotic collection of data into the structure of this final thesis.

Foremost I thank all the people in Pearl Lagoon who generously shared their time with me. I owe a great deal to Mister Adolga, Ana Maria, Mister Melendez and all the other Miskitu people of Pearl Lagoon whom I interviewed. I am inspired by their lives and humbled by the openness and warmth with which they have welcomed me into their lives. I am grateful to all those families who welcomed me into their homes and shared with me not only their food but also their wisdom. I have sought to present your points of view as accurately as possible. I thank Miss Elsa, who has welcomed me into her house and has taught me right from wrong in Pearl Lagoon society, and Chris, who has helped me more than he could possibly know by allowing me to let off steam now and then and by generously introducing me Cuyo, Andrew and other friends who have made my stay in Pearl Lagoon into an amazing experience.

I owe gratitude to Ger Houben and Stichting RaMa for helping me prepare me for my fieldwork, introducing me to their local connections in Rama, and providing me with valuable information on the country and its people. Also I would like to thank Oniel Toledo Urbina and his team for being so kind to assist me in finding a new research location and driving me there on the back of his motorcycle; it was a memorable journey! I want to thank my parents for instilling in me a passion for travelling and for encouraging me to open up to the world in order to take in as much as possible. My thanks also goes out to Roel Brouwers who has had to bear with me during the times of social isolation that came with the writing of this thesis, and who always supported me in doing the things I love. To conclude I want to thank Marc Simon Thomas, my mentor, for his uplifting and reassuring messages during my fieldwork, for his enthusiasm and for his critical readings. He has encouraged me to tell a story while at the same time keeping me grounded by providing invaluable comments and insightful critiques.

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

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Ever since Nicaragua became a republic, and even more so after the Sandinista Revolution, ethnic groups in Nicaragua are various, widespread and politically salient. Especially on the Caribbean Coast societies can be seen as a complex mixture of Mestizos, Garifunas, Miskitus, Sumu, Rama and Creole, even without taking into consideration migrants from other countries. Ethnic groups in this country are never uncontested; they have to struggle for their legitimacy vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, the state and even international social groupings. An overall question relating to this struggle would be: How do these ethnic groups manage to consolidate their ethnic identity in this tangle of competing social identities?

This thesis will focus on processes of ethnic identity construction of the Miskitu Indians in Nicaragua. The Miskitu Indians are the largest Indian group in the country and even though they have had intensive interaction with people from other ethnic groups since time immemorial, starting with the British during colonial times, they have maintained a strong ethnic identity. Because of the high level of contact the Miskitu have had with other ethnic groups, they have become an interesting field of study for researchers interested in processes of ethnic identity construction (García, 1996; Pineda, 2006; Baracco, 2005; Dennis, 2004; Hale, 1994).

A process that is often seen by anthropologists as essential to the continuation of ethnic identification with an ethnic group, is the re-actualization of a shared past of this group. By reinterpreting the traditional culture of a group in its contemporary context, a process that is often termed *social memory*, a connection is created between the past and present, which in turn is likely to promote the survival and continuation of the ethnic group (Nash, 1989; García, 1996; Eriksen, 2002; Jackson, 2011). By individually reinterpreting their collective past, the Miskitu can find historical justification of their existence as an ethnic group and of their personal identification with this group. For this reason I have decided center my research around the following question:

*In which ways does social memory influence the processes of ethnic identity construction among the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon in their everyday lives?*

By answering this question, I hope to contribute to the production of knowledge on ethnic identity construction processes among Miskitu migrants in their daily lives. Social scientists studying identification processes of the Miskitu have tended to focus on the period of the Sandinista Revolution or directly afterwards. Certainly, this period was interesting for scholars as ethnic



identification at this time was particularly salient and identity politics played a large part in the positioning of the Miskitu either on the side of the Sandinista or on the side of the Contra rebels. During and shortly after the war years of the 1980s a large, at times highly politicized, literature emerged about the role of the Miskitu in this conflict.<sup>3</sup> By the late 1990s, however, many of the researchers turned away from the Miskitu Coast as things calmed down and identity politics became less obvious. For this reason, a rather limited amount of knowledge exists on processes of ethnic identity construction among the Miskitu in Nicaragua in the period after the Revolution.

A second element that in my opinion needs more consideration, is that while much literature has been published on Miskitu identity construction in times of war, struggle or in a political context, far less research has been dedicated to the processes of ethnic identification of the Miskitu in the context of their normal day to day lives. These everyday processes may be less tangible or politically salient, but they are nevertheless fascinating, as Paul Rabinow argues: “it is in the less explicitly shaped and less overtly significant areas of day-to-day activity and common-sense reasoning that most cultural differences are embedded” (Rabinow, 2007:58). Lastly, scholars have almost invariably focused on communities where the Miskitu people formed the majority ethnic grouping, and for whom ethnic identification was therefore to a large extent self-evident. This limited focus neglects the possible additional value of studying Miskitu people in a context in which their ethnic identity is more contested, such as in a situation in which Miskitu people form a minority in a multi-ethnic society. In a situation like this, the Miskitu are forced to reflect actively on their own ethnic identity by evaluating how their traditional cultural customs can be positioned meaningfully in their 'modern' lives, making this a highly interesting topic of investigation.

This thesis aims to contribute to filling the abovementioned knowledge gaps by focusing on the post-war daily lives of a group of Miskitu people living as a minority grouping in Nicaragua. The location that offered me the opportunity to perform this research is called Pearl Lagoon, which is a small town on the Caribbean Coast where about 70 Miskitu people live as an ethnic minority amongst an ethnically mixed population of around 5000 people. For a period of two months I resided in Pearl Lagoon and gathered research data by performing 21 qualitative interviews and by participating in daily activities, having casual conversations, 'hanging out', and writing fieldnotes. An extensive reflection on my fieldwork experience and on the methods I have used can be found in Appendix II.

The Miskitu people that live in Pearl Lagoon proved to be a highly interesting research

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<sup>3</sup>Jeffrey Gould focuses on Nicaraguan Indians in the period of 1880 to 1965, Charles Hale about the Miskitu's struggles with the Nicaraguan state from 1894 to 1987, and also García limits her book to describing processes of identity formation to the direct aftermath of the Sandinista Revolution.

population as they consisted of migrants that had moved individually from their traditional Miskitu home towns to the larger city of Pearl Lagoon in search of work, or education, or because they fell in love with someone who lived in Pearl Lagoon. The investigation of social memory and ethnic identity construction within this research population was very interesting as these people had been confronted with a significant cultural change due to their migration. Through this they were prompted to reflect consciously on their previously taken-for-granted ethnic identity more than could be expected in a population that did not undergo this cultural change. Processes of defining a 'self' as opposed to the ethnically different 'other' were particularly tangible in this specific population and this made it a highly relevant and interesting location for performing fieldwork.

This thesis is divided in a theoretical and an empirical section. In the first section I will provide a theoretical framework on identity, ethnic identity construction, migrant identity and social memory. Subsequently I will sketch out a contextual overview of the Miskitu in Nicaragua and in Pearl Lagoon. Then, I will present the data I have gathered during my fieldwork period in three empirical chapters. The first empirical chapter will present the reader with a general impression of the daily life of the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon. The second chapter will focus on the ethnic identity construction of this group, and the third chapter will center around the re-actualization of a shared past in their daily lives by discussing three main themes: language, healing practices, and autonomy. In the last chapter I will weave the theoretical and empirical chapters together by returning to my central research question and providing a general conclusion based on my findings. The bibliography is followed by Appendix I which contains an abstract of this thesis, and Appendix II which discusses various methodological considerations and reflects on my identity as a fieldworker.

# CHAPTER 2

## Theoretical Framework

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The concept of identity is an important theme in contemporary anthropological research, and the acknowledgment of its salience has been on the rise together with the emergence of globalizing markets and media, the worldwide flow of people, cultural artifacts, ideas and values, the ethnic revival and the re-drawing of political frontiers. Scholars are using the identity concept to discuss patterns of boundary maintenance as well as bridge building, to analyze feelings of belonging as well as exclusion, and posing questions such as: what constitutes a specific identity, and how does it emerge, persist or perish? What makes a person identify with a particular group or with several groupings at the same time? And how do people cope with balancing these various and changing identities in their daily lives? (Moore & Sanders, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:1) In this section I will map out some of the main discussions in the contemporary identity discourse in anthropology and I will position myself within it. First I will discuss the concept of social identity, then I will focus on ethnic identity construction and migrant identity, and finally I will elaborate on the concept of social memory.

### 2.1 “Identifying the Identifications” - Identity as an Anthropological Concept

Identity is a concept that has long been neglected in anthropological studies. Traditionally, it was not considered particularly relevant as anthropology deals with processes taking place between people, and identity was seen only to exist inside each individual. Until the 1970s, discussions of the 'identity'-concept remained within the confines of social psychology and micro-sociology (Erikson, 1968:61). It was not until the rise of anthropological studies on ethnicity and gender in the 1960s and 1970s, with the 1969 publication of “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries” edited by Fredrick Barth as its prime example, that the idea of examining identity as a cultural construction became grounded in the field of anthropological studies. Increased recognition was given for the fact that understanding who is the 'self' for a large part is determined by understanding who is the 'other'. Scholars began to realize that through asking: *Who am I?* it becomes salient to investigate *Who is she or he?* or *Who are they?*.

By asking these questions, scholar began connecting personal identity to its social surroundings, and the study of identity was re-imagined as “the defining of an individual as a social actor in specific situations” (Driessen & Otto, 2000:21). In this way, the identity concept became

anchored in the realm of anthropological research and since then it has more and more become a central concept in contemporary anthropological studies. Identity, now no longer confined to “the depths of the individuals mind” (Eriksen, 2002:60), started being studied as an individual process that is influenced by one's social surroundings. This aspect of identity is what anthropologists have termed *social identity* (García, 1996; Driessen & Otto, 2000; Eriksen, 1992). The concept of social identity is based on two central premises: the interaction *between* members of different social groups, and the agency of individuals *within* a certain social group.

In daily life we are confronted with a myriad of social groupings (based on nationality, class, ethnicity, age, and political affiliation, amongst others) which together construct our social reality. Through interaction with members of the different groups around us, we continuously create and reaffirm the shared understanding of what is 'us' and what is 'them', who are the same and who are different (Nash, 1989:7). These processes demonstrate that social identification needs interaction between groups in order to come into existence; it cannot exist in a social vacuum. In fact, as Eriksen already argued, it can be said that identities are in effect *created* through contact (1993:10). However, by distinguishing who is 'us' and who is 'them' boundaries are created between these different groups. In this way, social identity must be seen not only as inclusive, but also as inherently exclusive.

When the individual recognizes him- or herself as belonging to a social group, it can be said that to a certain extent the “I” materializes in the “we”. Yet the awareness of this collective self cannot simply be equalized with the individual's self-consciousness. The belonging to a specific social group is just a part of the entirety of one's everyday identifications, and it is more than likely that the individual will maintain feelings of belonging to more social groupings at the same time. Also, it is important to note that every social group is inevitably constructed by non-identical individuals, each of whom is unable to view the group from anything but their particular personal perspective. The members of a social group will never be “carbon copies or 'one size fits all' models”, each member being exactly similar to the other (Guadeloupe, 2009:205). Therefore instead of viewing the individual members of a social grouping as passive carriers of the group's identity, they must be regarded as social actors (García, 1996:29). As social actors they identify with multiple groupings at the same time and they are (consciously or unconsciously) involved in a highly individual continuous process of evaluating, comparing and remolding the meaning they attach to belonging to a social group.

These above mentioned tensions between 'us' and 'them', and between the individual and the social group, demonstrate that social identity is not a fixed feature that a person can possess, but rather is a continuous process of identification taking place within each individual. Claudia García

meaningfully links these various aspects of social identity together in the following definition:

Social identity is defined as the individual's consciousness of belonging to a special group with all the emotional content (in the form of positive and negative values) that this implies. The concept of social identity is also defined by the individuals' subjective appreciations when evaluating the group itself through social comparison with other groups. (García, 1996:22)

This definition demonstrates that social identity is not a fixed feature but rather an inherently dynamic and flexible construction as it is continuously evaluated by the individual. The meaning that is attached to particular social group is constantly modified over generations, in different political-economic contexts, and overall by the 'outside world' (Anderson, 2006:83, Nash, 1989:8). Werner Sollors even goes as far as stating that social identities must be understood as *inventions*, as collective fictions that are continually reinvented by each generation and by each individual (Sollors, 1989:xi). Recent anthropological studies (García, 1996; Eriksen, 2002; Anderson, 2006) have for this reason shifted their focus from group identification to conscious agency and reflexivity in the construction of social identity. The understanding of identity has shifted from what anthropologists call the *primordial stance* (identity is an innate, permanent and essential dimension of the individual) to the *constructivist stance* (identity is a public, flexible and negotiable construction) and even *instrumentalist stance* (identity can be actively implemented by a social group to bring people together for a common purpose) (Otto & Driesen, in Otto & Driesen, 2000:14; García, 1996:22; Eriksen, 2002:59). Scholars thus have become interested in analyzing the processes of social identity *construction*, or otherwise put in “identifying the identifications” (García, 1996:24). This individual process of interpreting one's identification with a social group will be one of the central themes of this thesis. When linked to the Miskitu Indians of Pearl Lagoon this means that this study will focus on the ways in which the Miskitu identity is being constructed, both actively and passively by the individual Miskitu people living in the area.

## **2.2 “The Culturally Discrete” - Ethnic identity construction**

The concept of social identity construction can be applied to numerous social levels of a society, such as national, regional or small-scale social groupings. When performing a study on the Miskitu people in Nicaragua one can be said to study an ethnic group, a social grouping that bases its existence on the sharing of a certain ethnicity among its members (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996:34). Ethnicity within anthropology is a somewhat disputed term as much confusion exists about how to

define it, and more importantly, how to use this concept in performing anthropological research. Quarrels concerning this concept have even led some scholars to discard the concept of ethnicity altogether (Chapman et al., 1989, Snyder, 1983). Many anthropologists, including me, however, still find the concept useful as it helps understand the ways in which individual people can feel connected on the basis of a shared culture (Hutchinson, 1996; Banks, 1996; Sollors, 1989; Eriksen, 1992; Nash, 1989). In this thesis I have chosen to define ethnicity as “the systematic and enduring social reproduction of basic classificatory differences between categories of people who perceive each other as being culturally discrete” (Eriksen, 1992:3). In this way, ethnicity can be seen as being based on culturally relevant differences and the awareness of the existence of these differences is continuously reproduced among the members of the ethnic groups in order to maintain their discreteness within society.

An important aspect of ethnic groups is that they are almost invariably imagined as natural, real, stable and static units, both by their members and the outside world. Ethnic categories are defined as fixed by static criteria such as common ancestry and common biological characteristics. In this case we can see that a primordial stance is taken up not by the anthropologist, but by the members of an ethnic group themselves (Sollors, 1989:xiv). As we have seen in the previous section, most contemporary scholars argue that this claimed rigidity and authenticity must not be seen as an absolute truth but rather as something that itself is inherently flexible and changes over time. Eriksen stresses the point that “although ethnic differences are usually considered by the agents as being biologically founded or otherwise ontologically fixed, they are from an analytical point of view *contextual*; they are always historically and ideologically determined, and they are therefore changeable” (Eriksen, 2002:72). Thus while boundaries between ethnic groups might seem as if they have existed since the beginning of time, they are in fact subject to continuous negotiations and redefinitions taking place as a response to changes in situation and context.

By incorporating the dichotomy between the perceived timelessness and the proven flexibility of ethnicity, Sollors arrives at a more complex definition of ethnic identity that interprets the concept as being:

[...] an acquired modern sense of belonging that replaces visible, concrete communities whose kinship symbolism ethnicity may yet mobilize in order to appear more natural. The trick that it passes itself off as blood, as “thicker than water,” should not mislead interpreters to take it at face value. It is not a thing but a process – and it requires constant detective work from readers, not a settling on a fixed encyclopedia of supposed cultural essentials. (Sollors, 1989:xv).

Sollors hereby seems to send a message to those interested in investigating ethnicity, reminding them of the fact that they are in fact studying a cultural construction, an 'invention'. However, as I have discussed earlier when arguing that the individual members of a social group can evaluate their connection to this group, the interpretation of ethnicity does not necessarily have to be confined within the realms of scholarly research. This 'detective work' is a process of interpreting ethnicity that can also be found to exist among those 'living' this ethnicity, the members of an ethnic group.

### **2.3 “The New Elite” - Migrant Ethnic Identification**

The interpretation of their ethnicity by members of an ethnic group is a process that has not escaped the eye of contemporary anthropologists. It is more and more becoming a field of interest for those trying to understand the ways in which interaction takes place between an individual and his or her ethnic identity (Jackson, 2011; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2011; García, 1996; Eriksen, 1992). A field of study that is particularly interesting when performing this kind of research is that of *migrants living as an ethnic minority in a multi-ethnic society*. When members of a certain ethnic group move into a society in which their ethnicity is underrepresented, they will directly be confronted with a whole range of cultural practices that are not their own (Barth, 1998:30). This makes the situation of ethnic migrants and how they encounter, negotiate and make sense of their own ethnic identity an exceptionally interesting field of study. When compared to members of a hegemonic ethnic group, the migrants living as an ethnic minority often appear to have an increased awareness of their own ‘otherness’. Instead of interacting mostly with people who share the same ethnic identity, they are confronted with one or more significantly 'other' ethnic groups with which they interact, to a varying extent, in their everyday lives. This daily interaction exposes to them not only the indisputable ‘otherness’ of the society outside of their social group, but also forces them to look inside and to reflect on their own ethnic group (Barth, 1998:32).

Through their migration the members of an ethnic minority are stimulated to consciously position themselves within the new ethnically-diverse social universe that constitutes their everyday reality. In this way, the awareness of the cultural boundaries between them and their ethnic 'others' is increased. This awareness leads to a higher level of *objectification* of one's own ethnicity, often higher than would occur if the individual would live in a situation in which the population was more or less ethnically homogenous. The members of the ethnic minority become aware of the cultural differences and “begin to conceive their own conventions as an integrated, closed 'system'” (Comaroff & Comaroff, in Moore & Sanders, 2011:385). These cultural differences do not

necessarily have to exist objectively, but rather have to be commonly agreed upon as being socially relevant (Comaroff & Comaroff, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:390).

This process of boundary creation and maintenance is not only stimulated by the cultural objectification that occurs by members of the ethnic group themselves, but also by the people outside their ethnic group. Often, characteristics are ascribed to the ethnic minority by the people outside their group and a stereotype image is created that does not necessarily have to be in line with the image the members of this group have of themselves. This ascription of characteristics often leads to standardized, culturally accepted ways of relating to other ethnic categories. Relevant ethnic stereotypes become commonplace and in this way the ethnic group becomes connected to a certain place in the social pyramid (Barth, 1998:27). These taxonomic divisions are the result of what social scientists have termed *ethnic classification*, a process following the interaction of members of different ethnic groups within a society that leads to the ranking of ethnic groups on a power-spectrum. In the case of an ethnic minority, the rank of this group is often relatively low compared to the ethnic majority, and the power ascribed to members of this ethnic group is considered to be minimal. In this way it can be said that ethnic minorities are often dominated by an ethnic majority with a hegemonic culture (Comaroff & Comaroff, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:392).

As we have discussed in the previous section, identification with an ethnic group, or any other social group for that matter, is a highly individual process. The 'I' does not automatically materialize in the 'We' as soon as one becomes member of an ethnic group. While ethnic classifications and cultural objectification connected to a certain ethnicity are shaped by society, the way the individual members reflect on this objectified culture is highly individual and can vary depending on the context in which they find themselves. According to Jean E. Jackson it can even be said that at any time, the members of an ethnic group evaluate their personal position in relation to the image created of their ethnicity, and they are continuously involved in a process of contesting and negotiating what cultural forms they wish to retain, modify, or discard (Jackson, *in* Moore & Sander, 2011:568).

At this stage, I feel it is wise to step back and look at the concept of culture we are creating by studying ethnic groups as consisting of individual members who are able to reflect on their culture and attach value to it. We re-encounter culture as something that cannot simply be “had” or “possessed”, but as “something dynamic, something that people use to adapt to changing social conditions – and as something that is adapted in turn” (Jackson, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:580). This understanding of culture helps us to comprehend how culture operates in situations in which it is objectified and evaluated in relation to its context. Jean E. Jackson clarifies this image of culture by comparing it to a jazz musician's repertoire:



[...] the individual pieces come out of a tradition, but improvisation always occurs and the musician's choices at a particular performance take into consideration the acoustic properties of the hall, the qualities of the instrument(s) played, and the (inferred) inclinations of fellow musicians and the audience [...] We cannot speak of a jazz musician as “having” jazz”. (Jackson, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:580)

The image of culture Jackson has outlined not only incorporates the understanding of culture as a process, but also stresses the agentive and interactive aspects of culture (“the musician's choices at a particular performance”). Also, it shows us the way it can culture be evaluated differently in differing contexts. Culture is seen as an interaction between people and their tradition, and by using this definition an understanding can be created of the role any individual member can play in modeling and constructing the personal meaning they attach to their ethnicity.

When members of an ethnic group are placed in the context of being a minority within a multi-ethnic society, their individual responses can be manifold. We have seen that while their culture “comes out of tradition”, each individual has to find his or her own way of “improvising” on the meaning and value he or she attaches to this culture in a multi-ethnic context. This process of interpretation can lead to not only changes in the way these individuals *think and feel* about their ethnicity, but it can also influence their *behavior* in everyday life. According to Fredrik Barth, ethnic groups only persist if membership implies marked differences in behavior, i.e. cultural differences will only persist when these are expressed in behavioral differences. When we are trying to understand the processes of ethnic identification it is therefore essential that we study not only the verbal expressions of identification, but also the behavioral patterns of the members of an ethnic group within the multi-ethnic society (Barth, 1998:16).

Regarding these processes of ethnic identification, Barth argues that while one might assume that cultural differences will be reduced in situations where persons of different cultures interact on a daily basis, in fact it is equally possible that these differences persist or even become emphasized and that the boundaries are maintained. In order to explain these tendencies to cultural homogenization as well as differentiation, Barth proposes to focus on the agents of change, a group he defines as 'the new elite'. The new elite, he argues, are “the persons in the less industrialized groups with greater contact and more dependence on the goods and organizations of industrialized societies” (1998:33). I argue that, even though the differentiation between industrialized and non-industrialized societies is somewhat outdated, the concept of the new elite is useful for the purpose of this thesis as it describes the position in which many migrants have found themselves after

moving to a multi-ethnic society. Often the motivation for them to leave their home towns (“the less industrialized groups”) is for obtaining better education or job opportunities, and therefore the societies they move to can indeed on these aspects be regarded more 'modernized' or industrialized.

The new elites, when confronted with the differences between their traditional culture and that of the modern society they have moved into, are presented with a multitude of strategies and choices to make in their daily lives. Do they (consciously or unconsciously) maintain their traditional practices, or do they adapt their behavior in order to participate better in the new society? Barth argues that there are three main strategies the migrants are likely to follow: (1) adapt to and become incorporated in the pre-established society, (2) accept minority status and seek to reduce their 'minority disabilities' through non-articulation of their cultural differences, (3) emphasize ethnic identity in order to organize themselves and obtain a better position (Barth, 1998:33).

While in many cases the first two strategies are seen as most beneficial by the members of the minority grouping, this does not necessarily imply that all members of the ethnic groups will enter in this process of adaptation and modernization. In fact, Abner Cohen argues that objectification of ethnic identity often leads members to choose the third strategy: an emphasized expression of ethnic identity, a process which is termed *identity politics*, in which encapsulation by an ethnic majority may lead to conscious *formation* of ethnic identity in such a way that modernization or adaptation is resisted. This (often politically informed) *instrumentalist* strategy aims to increase group cohesion and targets to obtain recognition, legitimacy, or even control over other groups, organizations or states (Cohen, 1969:198). When applied to the case of ethnic minorities, identity politics could be seen as the overt communication of the distinct 'otherness' of their group in order to increase internal cohesion and possibly resist assimilation into the hegemonic culture.

In this thesis I will focus on the ways in which migrants *maintain* their ethnic identity after being placed into the context of a multi-ethnic society. The processes of ethnic identification discussed by Barth and Cohen show a highly conscious and active use of ethnicity by the ethnic minority. Comaroff and Comaroff however argue that the concept of *identity politics* is not always accurate in depicting the processes of resistance against incorporation in the modern society. They state that the totality of acts of resistance to adaptation encompass more than solely the active and overt emphasizing of the migrants' ethnic identity. Comaroff and Comaroff pose the following question: “does an act require *explicit* consciousness and articulation to be properly called 'resistance'?”(2011:390).

As a response to this question, they propose to add more nuance to the phenomenon by regarding resistance as a spectrum; at one end there is organized protest, explicit moments and

movements of dissent that are easily recognizable as “political”, in other words: identity politics. At the other end are “gestures of tacit refusal and iconoclasm, gestures that sullenly and silently contest the forms of an existing hegemony” (2011:392). The latter side of the spectrum does not imply direct and conscious resistance to the dominance of an ethnic majority, but rather largely unconscious processes such as resisting modernity through the continuation of minority culture and tradition in daily practice. The acts on both sides on this spectrum should be seen as efforts to fashion an understanding of, and gain conceptual mastery over a changing world, be it consciously or unconsciously (Comaroff & Comaroff, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:392).

James H. Mittelman further elaborates on the importance of studying this 'unconscious' side of the spectrum of resistance, a phenomenon which he terms “infrapolitics”, by stating that through silent resistance seemingly weak subordinate groups can carve out their own space and develop a so-called “counter-hegemonic consciousness”. Mittelman argues while it is relatively uncomplicated to recognize signs of identity politics in the way described by Cohen, the real focus has to be placed on the everyday, unconscious processes of resistance to modernization. “Resistance has to be read as the ways in which people live their everyday lives. Submerged networks affirm that even though resistance can be manifestly political and economic, it is shaped by and shapes ways of life” (Mittelman, 2000:171). In this thesis I attach value to these forms of 'silent resistance' by paying special attention to the study of *everyday life among the Miskitu*, and the way they resist modernization through their *daily practices*.

At this point however it is important to keep in mind that the concepts of 'modernity' and 'tradition' themselves should always be understood in a context of social interaction. Linnekin argues that in the current modernization discourse the word 'traditional' is often interpreted as being connected to societies that are relatively resistant to exogenous influences and internal contradictions, and in this way it is regarded as more or less fixed. According to Linnekin this is an over-simplified understanding of the concept, and it would be more accurate to view 'tradition' as a model of past practices, as “a selective representation of the past, fashioned in the present responsive to contemporary priorities and agendas, and politically instrumental” (1992:251). Thus, the tradition referred to both by scholars and by the members of an ethnic group, is invented and re-invented by the social actors themselves. The individual takes an active role in reformulating his or her tradition (Linnekin, 1992:255). This process of re-actualizing the past in the present, the traditional in the modern, is what anthropologists have termed *social memory* and it is this concept that will be discussed more elaborately in the following section.

## 2.4 “Bringing the Past into the Present” - Social Memory

In the previous sections, the concepts of social identity and of minority ethnic identity have been discussed. Migrant minority ethnicity was placed within a context of resistance to adaptation to the hegemonic culture within a multi-ethnic society. Resistance to adaptation can be found both in concrete acts of identity politics, but it can also be encountered in the more unconscious, everyday processes of silent resistance, for example by the continuation of traditional cultural practices of the ethnic group into the present. In order to understand more thoroughly what makes it that people (either consciously or unconsciously) want to maintain their ethnicity in spite of the apparent advantages of adapting to the hegemonic culture and thereby modernizing, we need to delve more deeply in the ways in which people stay connected to their tradition.

Manning Nash argues that in each ethnic group certain *continuity* exists in the common grounds on which their ethnic identity is based. One of the most important “building blocks” of ethnic identity that constitute this continuity is the existence of a *tradition*, in this sense being “the past of a culture” (Nash, 1989:31). The importance of tradition in the creation of an (ethnic) identity has been recognized by various scholars (Friedman, 1992; Tonkin, 1989; Leach, 1989; García, 1996; Nash, 1989). In this thesis I will follow García's interpretation of tradition, being “the historical events that make up a common past, cultural practices and the customs that most contribute to reaffirming the individuals' identification with the group to which they belong” (García, 1996:35).

But why does this tradition matter? How does it influence ethnic identity construction among the members of an ethnic group? According to Nash the awareness of sharing the same history and traditional practices “gives the sense of shared struggles, shared fate, common purpose, and the implication that personal and group fate are one and the same thing, with personal fate being itself dependent on group survival” (Nash, 1989:6). The past is given a certain authority as the very fact that their traditions have survived and persisted provides legitimacy and rightness to the existence of these practices in their contemporary lives. In this way, tradition does not only look back on the past, but also has a forward, future dimension.

Other scholars have further elaborated on the connection tradition creates between the past, present and future of an ethnic group. John Peel states that “present practice is governed by the model of past practice, and where changes occur, there is a tendency to rework the past so as to make it appear that past practice has governed present practice” (Peel, 1984:113). This statement shows us that present and past are not only tightly connected, but that the past can be said to be interpreted according to the needs imposed by the present. Moreover, the past can be “reworked” in order to make it fit better into the line of present practice. Important to note here, as Bruce Lincoln

also stresses, is that the events that are interpreted thus do not necessarily have to meet any criterion of veracity, but rather ought to be considered true by the members of the group itself. In this way the past becomes a social construct that is practiced by members of a social group in the present (Lincoln, 1992:853).

The way in which the past is constructed in the present through individual interpretation has been an interesting topic of investigation for many scholars (Friedman, 1992; Peel, 1984; García, 1996; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2011). A central concept in studying the manner in which individual members connect the tradition of their ethnic group to the present is termed *social memory*. Social memory should be seen as the way in which the past of a group is brought up to date through interpretations of its individual members. This memory refers to all the forms in which past existence is made part of the lived world of the members of an ethnic group; it encompasses memories of historical events experienced by the group, but also the knowledge of 'traditional' cultural practices such as traditional religious or healing practices that are still referred to in the daily lives of the members of the ethnic group (García, 1996:24). According to Lincoln, social memory acts in a creative and dynamic way, relating the past to the present, and selecting what is important to the individuals in a specific social moment (1989:124).

This thesis will follow the line of thinking of Friedman, Peel and Lincoln by studying how an individual actively or unconsciously decides which aspects of the collective past of his or her group are to be *remembered* and which aspects are not. This process of remembering transcends individual recollections of group members by revealing the ways in which we remember as *social beings*. While many memories exist that we share with no one else, there are also specific recollections that are commonly shared by entire groups. These recollections do not necessarily have to refer to first-hand experiences or "lived past events", but can also be knowledge on historical events or traditions that stem from before they were born. The social aspect of remembering thus also enables members of the group to experience things that happened to the group in the distant past as if they were part of the member's own personal 'lived' past (Lincoln, 1989:124).

According to García, the selection and occasional manipulation of past events or traditional cultural practices of an ethnic group by its individual members is a key process in both the negation and reaffirming of the ethnic identity of these members, and of the validity of the group as a whole. Both processes are often found to occur among the members of dominated ethnic groups who feel their ethnic identity to be endangered. At times, an appropriate reaction might be to invert their traditional cultural guidelines by rejecting their common past or traditional cultural values and by ascribing higher value to that which is not one's own, which is often the 'modern' in contrast to their

'tradition'. This process can be regarded as a negative or ambivalent strategy of social memory (García, 1996:37). However, in other situations social memory can act as referential unit and as an argument against adaptation to the hegemonic culture, in this way strengthening identification with the ethnic minority. George Scott stresses the importance social memory can have for ethnic groups by stating that:

What is important for an ethnic group's persistence is an interpretation of historical events that is personally meaningful to the individual and the group, even though this interpretation may not coincide with the views of genuine historians. (Scott, 1989:159)

Social memory in this way becomes an important element in reaffirming the ethnic identity both on the group level and individual level. Eviatar Zerubavel further argues that familiarizing members with their past is a major part of groups' efforts to strengthen the identification of its members to the group (Zerubavel, 2003:3). This means that participating in the construction of a shared past is not only a natural process that occurs when one belongs to a social group, but that this process is also an important *instrument* in consolidation the existence of the group itself (Zerubavel, 2003:7). In particular when an ethnic group finds itself in a context of domination, the members of the minority are likely to start searching for a discoverable, fixed and historically continuous set of historical bonds to which they can relate when reflecting on their ethnic identity (Olick et al., 2011:6). Eriksen states on this topic that: "Like nationalism, modern ethnic associations and networks seek to emulate a politically useful and emotionally satisfactory *gemeinschaft* in an historical situation" (Eriksen, 2002:141).

In the previous section I have already discussed the importance of studying processes of ethnic identity construction in the sphere of everyday life as this is to a great extent "the locus where ethnicity is created and recreated" (Eriksen, 1993:1). However, when social memory is investigated on the level of everyday interaction between members of an ethnic group, it is important to consider the power distributions and levels of knowledge existing within each (ethnic) group. Robert M. Keesing argues that not every individual has the same understanding of their shared culture, the same access to knowledge that can serve as a base and allow them to 'read' their own culture more deeply (Keesing, in Moore & Sanders, 2011:259). According to Keesing, knowledge about one's own culture is read differently by men and women, young and old, experts and non-experts, and the knowledge and depth of understanding are unevenly spread. Because of this phenomenon, which Keesing calls 'the distribution of cultural knowledge', interpretations and modifications of ethnic identity by the members of a same ethnic group can differ significantly:

While anyone *can* know genealogies, tales of ancestors and old battles, procedures of ritual, major complexes of societally oriented magic, in fact most people only command superficial knowledge. Experts know more, more deeply, because they have sought out knowledge, memorized, more reflectively sought connections between surface details. (Keesing, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:260)

Thus when studying social memory, one should always take into consideration that the way an individual member interprets his or her ethnicity is influenced to a certain degree by the level of cultural knowledge this persons has, and this can vary significantly from the other members.

In this theoretical framework, I have subsequently discussed the concept of social identity, minority ethnic identity, and social memory as an anthropological concept that can be used to further our understanding of how resistance to cultural adaptation is motivated among members of an ethnic minority. In the following ethnographic chapters, I will meaningfully connect these theoretical concepts to the empirical data I have collected during my fieldwork among the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon, Nicaragua. In the first empirical chapter I will present a general impression of the daily life of the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon, the second chapter will focus on the ethnic identity construction of the Miskitu, and the third chapter will center around the re-actualization of their shared past in daily life by discussing three main themes: language, healing practices, and autonomy.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Miskitu people of Nicaragua and Pearl Lagoon

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The first thing I noticed after leaving the bus that drove me from the Western part of Nicaragua to my first stop on the Caribbean Coast, was the warm, heavy smell lingering in the air, as if a tropical cloudburst was just about to happen. It was a smell I quickly found out to be characteristic for the Eastern Coast of Nicaragua, where the humid climate stands in sharp contrast with the dry and at times relentlessly hot climate of the Pacific Coast. Climate is just one of the many contrasts that exist between the 'two halves' of Nicaragua: the Pacific and the Caribbean. Now that I had made the cross-over between these two fundamentally different parts myself, I suddenly understood why my Nicaraguan friends had said that it feels like 'entering a different world': different smells, atmosphere, nature, and most of all the people made it feel like I had traveled 12 days instead of the 12 hours it had taken me to reach my fieldwork location.

Whereas the Pacific Coast is a relatively homogeneous region in which the vast majority of the people speak Spanish, the ethnic composition of the Caribbean Coast is many times more complex. Its population consists of an intricate mixture of native Indians (subdivided in the Rama, Sumu, and Miskitu), Creole and Mestizo identities, linked together and influencing one another in a myriad of ways (Pineda, 2006:7). The *Costeños* (inhabitants of the Caribbean Coast) have experienced a long history of power struggles and shifting loyalties, starting in the colonial times and lasting until their current state. While the western region was being colonized by the Spanish *Conquistadores*, the Caribbean Coast was conquered by the British, who gave the native population of the area a large amount of freedom and fought alongside them against their common enemy, the Spanish (Dennis, 2004:23). Resulting from this period, most *Costeños* still feel significantly different from the *Spaniards* (Spanish speaking Nicaraguans from outside the Caribbean Coast) and both groups regard each other with suspicion.

The Miskitu people are the largest ethnic group on the Caribbean Coast, and their reach spans a large part of the Coastal area. During colonial times, the embracing of Anglo culture and institutions not only enabled the Miskitu to distinguish themselves from Spanish colonizers, but also provided an ideological basis which justified their hegemony over other indigenous and ethnic groups (Baracco, 2005:108). For this reason the Miskitu historically have identified themselves more with the Anglo culture rather than with the Nicaraguan, being the favored allies of the major imperialist powers present on the Coast, Britain and the US. After Nicaragua became a Republic in



1905, the British were forced to withdraw from the Caribbean Coast, but they were quickly replaced with US imperialism during 'Company Time' which allowed the Miskitu to establish trade relations with the United States without much interference of the central government (Baracco, 2005:107).

The *Costeños* were able to organize themselves relatively autonomous until the Sandinista Revolution started in 1979 which tried to overthrow the dictatorial Somoza regime and at the same time wanted to incorporate the Caribbean Coast into national policy. However, the essentially *Mestizo*-nationalist discourse of uniting the nation initiated by the Sandinistas did not receive a warm welcome in the Miskitu communities and led some Miskitu to participate in the US-supported Contra-Revolution against the Sandinista regime. Eventually their struggle led to the establishment of the autonomy and the granting of multicultural citizenship rights in 1987. However, while officially they have been granted regional autonomy, many Miskitu still hold a grudge against the current central Sandinista government and remain unsupportive of their policy of national incorporation (Baracco, 2005:34).

After having adjusted myself to the initial culture shock of living on the Caribbean Coast, I was about to be surprised once more as I drove into the small town of Pearl Lagoon. Sitting on the back of a ragged motorcycle, I saw the landscape change from the savannah grounds of the Caribbean interior to the impenetrable rainforest and mangrove areas that characterize the Coast area. But what struck me more than the changes in landscape was the Creole-English language that was spoken as soon as I entered Pearl Lagoon and the overall Caribbean atmosphere. Loud reggae music was blasting from the speakers, Black Creole people filled the streets, and a strong sea breeze greeted me as I watched the fishermen on the lagoon haul in their nets. Pearl Lagoon's population of about 5000 people is a complex mixture of Creole, *Mestizo* and Miskitu. It is one of the few areas in which the Creole people constitute a majority and Creole-English is the dominant language.

Pearl Lagoon is located on the outer boundary of the Miskitu-speaking region on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (See also *Map 1*). The few Miskitu people that live in Pearl Lagoon are not its original inhabitants, but migrants who have moved from their traditional Miskitu villages and settled in Pearl Lagoon at a later stage in their lives. They have in many ways conformed to their new social reality as they speak the Creole-English instead of their Miskito language, and also in their appearance they are hard to distinguish from the Creole. However, after residing with these people for two months, and participating with them in their everyday lives, I started to notice some interesting ways in which these Miskitu still identify with their traditional culture. In the subsequent chapters I will elaborate on this by discussing the processes of ethnic identification of the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon and the ways in which social memory is manifested in their daily lives.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Hustlin', Coconut bread, and Liwa Mairin*

#### **Everyday Life among the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon**

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Days start early in Pearl Lagoon. Sun sets around 5 o'clock in the morning, and it is at this time that Bitmar<sup>4</sup>, father and husband of the Alvaros family, prepares himself to head to the city centre. Normally he would meet some friends at his boat and they would be out all day fishing shrimp in the lagoon. However, this year's shrimp season has passed, and since Bitmar's family does not own a piece of land, he has to *hustle*, to look for small jobs in order to bring home some cash at the end of the day. This morning Bitmar heads to the wharf, the local centre of commerce where opportunistic wage labourers gather and try to find a day job by loading and unloading boats and freight ships, resupplying stores, helping out at the lumber factories, or any odd job that is offered that day.

*Hustlin'* is a frequent phenomenon in Pearl Lagoon as unemployment rates are 80 to 90%, and official employment in shops or local institutions are scarce. The men at the wharf spend their days waiting and complaining, sighing about how official jobs are only available for the Creole, while the others are struggling to make ends meet working the unofficial, lesser-paid jobs, such as fishing, *planting* (producing cassava, rice, beans, sugar cane, and similar products on their own small plots of land), or cleaning 'white man toilet'. However, shifts are starting to become increasingly visible as more and more Miskitu are 'starting to prepare themselves', working themselves up through better education and obtaining jobs as priests, shopkeepers or hotel-owners.

While Bitmar is out looking for work, his wife Elvira is making sure the children and grandchildren are getting ready in time for school. Like in most Miskitu households, the Alvaros family is large and even though some of their seven children now have children of their own, most of them still live with their parents or on their parents' property. While Elvira's youngest son is finishing up 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the oldest grandchildren have already reached primary school, which means that at six o'clock in the morning the household is full of life. Children are running around trying to find their school uniform, eating their rice and beans breakfast, and catching up with the assignments they were supposed to do the day before.

When the grandchildren have finally left to go to school and Elvira's children have gone off to work, she begins her daily routine of cleaning the house and cooking lunch and dinner. She also

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4 All names of informants mentioned in this thesis are anonymized in order to protect their identity.

bakes coconut bread which she sells in a small shop in the front of their house, together with some home-made *bush medicine* for curing cuts, scars, headaches and sore muscles. As she sits on the porch in front of the shop, friends and neighbours continuously walk by and sit down for a chat. Conversation usually centre around the weather (either too hot or too humid), politics (land rights, the *alcaldia*, complaints about corruption) or gossip (“did you see what Miraila wore to church yesterday?”).

While Elvira is listening to a local broadcast on the radio, her granddaughter Chavela joins her and sits down to study for Sunday school, a service offered by the Moravian church the Alvaros family visits every week. Aside from the family, church is an important binding factor in Pearl Lagoon society. It offers schooling and prayer meetings, promotes social control and looking out for the needy and disabled and more generally brings the people together as a religious network. Moravian church is not the only church in Pearl Lagoon, and while others go to other churches such as Anglican, Adventist, Tabernacle or Pentecostal, most agree that this is trivial as long as they all believe in the same God.

At 11 o'clock granddaughter Chavela is surprised by the early return of two of her brothers who were supposed to be still in school. They explain to her that their teacher did not show up for class that day, a phenomenon that occurs regularly as schools struggle with a motivational problem amongst their teachers, whose positions are one of the least paid jobs in society. Before Elvira can tell them to sit down and start doing their homework, the three of them have already ran off to play their favourite game: an improvised version of baseball that is popular among the younger generations in Pearl Lagoon.

Around 5 o'clock in the evening Bitmar returns to his family, and while Elvira makes him a plate of food, he tells her a story he heard from the men at the wharf: “Three men were out on the lagoon fishing for shrimps and lobster, when all of the sudden the front man heard a splash. He turned around, and as he looked he saw both of his friends disappear between the waves.” “What happened?” asks Norlan, one of the grandchildren that have gathered around Bitmar to hear the story. “He cried out for them”, Bitmar continues, “and just as he was taking his clothes off to jump after them, one of his friends was able to reach the water surface. He was holding up the third man who appeared to be unconscious, and with help of the frontman the two friends were able to hoist the body of their motionless companion back into the boat. The front man asked what had happened and why the third man wasn't moving, but his friend was in too much of a shock to explain what he had seen. They quickly steered the boat back to the Pearl Lagoon harbour where the men took their sick friend to the Health Clinic, but the doctors present were unable to find a cause for his symptoms. Then the men realized they had to go to Miss Alicia, an old lady living at the edge of the

village. She is known to have special healing powers, and she told them to leave their friend with her for three days. After three days and three nights, their friend finally woke up. When they went to visit him he told them he had seen a stunningly beautiful young woman with clear skin and long hair, sitting at the bottom of the lagoon. She had pulled him towards her, spoke to him lovingly and caressed his hair, but when he tried to touch her, he had felt an incredibly strong pain in his stomach, and that was the last thing he could remember.” “So was it a *Liwa Mairin*? [red. Miskitu term for a mythical sea creature, comparable to a female mermaid]”, Chavela asks her grandfather, and the other children look up curiously. Bitmar shrugs his shoulders and is unable to give her a definite answer “I really don't know sweetheart... You know, you can never be sure unless you have seen it for yourself”.

While the Alvaros family in many ways is similar to many of the families I encountered during my stay in Pearl Lagoon, it does not represent an actual family. Rather, it is a fictive family composed from the many Miskitu people I have met during the course of my fieldwork and it is based on the extensive fieldnotes I took during this period. By describing a day in the life of a fictitious Miskitu family like the Alvaros family, I was able to touch upon many aspects of Miskitu daily life and I was able to weave in complexities within their group resulting from generational, gender and class differences. It is important to understand their everyday lives and routines of the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon as it provides valuable insights required when reading the consequent empirical chapters on the processes of ethnic identity construction and social memorization in everyday life.

Although outlining daily life might seem to be a fairly straightforward and descriptive task, it has shown to be a considerable challenge to condense a multitude of daily routines and practices of a less-than-coherent group of informants into a consistent image that renders justice to their divergent lives. The Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon are as diverse as can be said of any ethnic group in a multi-ethnic society, and although they share the same ethnic identity this does not lead them to structure their lives in the same way. Besides the fact that the daily lives of the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon cannot be described as a coherent whole, it is also important to note that the everyday routines and practices described should not be seen as characteristic exclusively for the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon. The Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon live in a thoroughly ethnically mixed society, in which the Miskitu are only a small minority. This multi-ethnic setting has led to the extensive interconnectedness of these ethnic groups, and their daily lives can be said to be fairly similar on some accounts, while other elements still are specific for this particular group. In this description it is therefore important to note that some of my remarks about the daily life of the Miskitu can be applied to the Creole and Mestizo inhabitants of Pearl Lagoon as well.

Understanding the daily life of the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon provides us with an endless list of interesting topics with regard to their processes of ethnic identity construction. During my research, I have narrowed my focus by concentrating on the analysis of the topics that most clearly illustrate the sharp contrast between their daily lives *before and after their migration*. By localizing the aspects of their daily life that confront the Miskitu migrants with a modern alternative for their traditional cultural practice, with what Mittelman has termed a ‘counter-hegemonic consciousness’ (Mittelman, 2000), I have been able to study the various motivations that can be said to influence (either consciously or unconsciously) their individual decisions to either modernize and adapt to their new social reality, or to maintain their cultural tradition.

## CHAPTER 5

### “It is in our Blood”

#### Ethnic identity construction among Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon

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*One of the first times I sat down with Delia to do an interview, she directed me to her veranda overlooking the lagoon, where we drank some frescos and talked about her family life. Daughter of two Miskitu parents, but married to a Creole man and able to speak Creole-English as well as Miskito, she was fully integrated in the ethnically-mixed community of Pearl Lagoon. She told me about a curious conversation she had with her middle daughter Slilma the other day while she was standing in the kitchen. Slilma asked her: “Mama, what am I?” Delia said she did not understand the question, and asked Slilma to explain herself. “Am I Creole? Miskitu? Or both? Or a mix? What Am I?” Delia explained to Slilma that she had a Miskitu mother, but a Creole father, so Slilma could choose one of those two identities, but she couldn't be both. Later that afternoon, Slilma returned to the kitchen, looking confident, and Delia asked her if she had already decided what she was going to be. Smiling, and hardly able to hide her pride, Delia told me Slilma's answer: “I am a Miskitu, 100%”.*

*During one of my later visits I accompanied Delia while she was resting in one of the hammocks in front of her house. While we were chatting, her daughter Slilma joined us and crawled up her mother's lap. Suddenly reminded of the story she had told me earlier, Delia decided to prove to me that Slilma really identified as a Miskitu, and she asked her the same question: “Slilma, what are you?”. Slilma sat up, thought for a while, and said: “Well you know, I liked being a Miskitu, but all the kids in school are Creole, and I can speak Creole too, so I think for now I'll just be Creole”. Then she jumped up, waved at her little brother and ran after him to start a game of hide-and-seek, leaving Delia astonished, and slightly embarrassed. “How is that possible? Since when did you decide it is even possible to switch?”, Delia shouted after her, but Slilma just looked back, shrugged her shoulders and put her index-finger in front of her mouth, indicating to her mother to stop talking in her direction as it would give away her hiding place.*

When I sat there on the veranda with Delia and her daughter and listened to their conversation, it suddenly became clear to me how typical the process of ethnic identification was for first generation migrants such as Delia. To me the situation clearly demonstrates how Miskitu like Delia

position themselves between the 'tradition' of their home town and the 'modernity' of the new home they found in Pearl Lagoon. Delia in many ways exemplifies a typical first generation Miskitu migrant; she has partially adapted to her new society (e.g. by marrying a Creole man instead of marrying endogamously, by speaking Creole-English) but has also stayed in touch with her Miskitu roots (by speaking the Miskitu language and by identifying as a Miskitu woman). Moreover, while her daughter Silma has no problem with switching identities between Creole and Miskitu, Delia regards shifting from one ethnicity to another as impossibility. The way Delia discusses the ethnic identification of herself and her daughter shows a high level of ethnic consciousness which is typical for her generation of Miskitu migrants in Pearl Lagoon. This consciousness in many ways influences the choices they make in their everyday lives: which language they speak, which church they go to, with whom they make friends and so on. In order to illuminate how this increased ethnic awareness came into being, it is important to understand the processes that took place before, during, and after their migration. I will delve deeper into the past of this group of people by looking into their journeys from a 'traditional' Miskitu village to the 'modern' society of Pearl Lagoon.

As I have already discussed, the large majority of the Miskitu people living in Pearl Lagoon were born in Miskitu villages and moved to Pearl Lagoon at a later stage in their lives. Their home towns are 'traditional' Miskitu villages located all over the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, some even in Honduras, which are in general inhabited by a relatively homogeneous Miskitu population. In these villages the dominant language is Miskito and as many informants told me identification as Miskitu is self-evident as most people came from long lines of Miskitu ancestors. This self-evidentness of being Miskitu can in fact be seen as a affirmation of the *primordial stance* that according to Sollors often exists within an ethnic group as criteria for belonging to the group are seen as fixed by static criteria such as common ancestry and common biological characteristics (Sollors, 1989:xiv).

When the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon individually left their home towns and moved to Pearl Lagoon, be it for better education, more employment opportunities or marriage, they were confronted with a society that in many ways was different from the town in which they were born and raised. Instead of living in an ethnically relatively homogeneous society, they now lived in an ethnically diverse community consisting of a large Creole majority and just a few Spanish and Miskitu inhabitants. As Comaroff and Comaroff already described, in a multi-ethnic society such as this separate ethnicities are often connected to a certain stereotype and are ranked in an ethnic classification (Comaroff & Comaroff, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:392). This is also what the Miskitu migrants experienced when they arrived in the city of Pearl Lagoon. In this new society, being Miskitu meant that they were part of a small ethnic minority, and connected to their minority status

was a negative stereotype that portrayed the Miskitu as lazy, uneducated and unwilling to 'prepare' themselves, to advance in life. This stereotype was partially confirmed by the fact that most Miskitu indeed had received less education than the people already living in Pearl Lagoon because of the isolated location of their home towns.

Because of this negative stereotype, the Miskitu when they arrived in Pearl Lagoon had more difficulty in obtaining a well-paid job and often were only able to find work as cleaning ladies, fishermen, planters, or gardeners. The Miskitu realized that in this new society they were ranked at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy and in interviews and casual conversations they often expressed feelings of being discriminated against in school, in the workplace, and in the social realm in general. Seraila, a young Miskitu woman who migrated to Pearl Lagoon from her Miskitu home town in Honduras, expressed the feelings of stereotypification, discrimination and inferiority that many first generation Miskitu migrants in the following way:

**Seraila (30/3/'12)**

*Seraila When I came to Pearl Lagoon I was 16 years old, and it was nice, but the Creole people were very racist. Those people felt they were superior, and Miskitu people were seen as very low. [...] to live here in Pearl Lagoon was very traumatic because girls were very sicknin', they teased me, called me names because I was Indian [...] Little by little my mother got to know other Miskitu people in town, but they kept by themselves. They were influenced by their many years living in a Creole community, they were ashamed to talk to us, because that is how the Creole people made us feel, as if we were inferior to them and they are superior.*

In this quote Seraila describes not only how the Creole discriminated against the Miskitu, but also how the Miskitu migrants in Pearl Lagoon interacted amongst themselves. I found that the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon show very little sign of group coherence and in fact often are not even aware of the existence of more than a few of the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon. As several informants explained to me, after migrating to Pearl Lagoon they did not find an existing group of Miskitu people, and those who did show signs of being Miskitu were seen as so fundamentally different from themselves that they did not feel connected to them.

One of the reasons that were given for the fact that the Miskitu do not feel connected as an ethnic group is because they all come from different Miskitu villages and speak different versions of the Miskito language. Illustrative of this point is an excerpt of an interview I conducted with the Marcos family, originally from a Miskitu village in Honduras, during which I asked them if they often had contact with the other Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon:



### **Marcos family (12/4/'12)**

Boyd: *No, well we have Miskitu visitors from other places, but not from Pearl Lagoon.*

Maira: *They don't come visit, only when we pass them in the street we greet. They are not friends with us.*

Trina: *What happened is that this family is a different crowd, we are called different. The Miskitu people from here are different, they have their own ways.*

Me: *So Miskitu people from Honduras are different from Miskitu people from Nicaragua?*

Trina: *Yes, they have their own ways. We still have the ways how we used to live.*

Boyd: *That makes us different from the Miskitu from here.*

By saying that they are seen as different by the other Miskitu people, and also that they see themselves as different, they effectively create boundaries between themselves and the people that prevent them from forming a group. Among the Miskitu migrants I found that many families or individuals distance themselves from the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon in general, even though they do identify with Miskitu culture on a larger scale. The way the Marcos family experiences a distance between themselves and the other Miskitu shows that while Nash focuses on the creation of boundaries *between* groups (Nash, 1989), in this case it is also apparent that boundaries *within* groups are being created.

Another element I found to significantly counteract group formation, an element that the participants were less eager to admit, was the feeling of shame of being Miskitu that many Miskitu people felt after moving to Pearl Lagoon. As discussed by Barth in the section about migrant identity, one of the possible strategies migrants can opt for in a minority situation is to accept their minority status and seek to reduce their 'minority disabilities' through non-articulation of their cultural differences (Barth, 1998:33). In the case of the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon, their ethnic identification was negatively affected by the stereotype that was connected to being Miskitu in this new society, and because of this many Miskitu wanted to reduce their visibility as a Miskitu. Through non-articulation of their Miskitu culture they tried to reduce the cultural differences between themselves and the dominant culture. They therefore avoided contact with other Miskitu people and instead tried to mingle with the non-Miskitu population of Pearl Lagoon.

In short, we can state that the Miskitu migrants individually entered into a society which in many ways was radically different from the society they grew up in: Miskitu people are a minority, they are attached to a negative stereotype, and they did not find an existing coherent Miskitu group with which they could connect. Daily interaction with people of other ethnicities forced them to look inside and reflect on their Miskitu identity, and they began to conceive their own conventions as an integrated, closed 'system' (Comaroff & Comaroff, in Moore & Sanders, 2011:385). Their appearance, language and behaviour suddenly became *objectified* as 'typically Miskitu', and

boundaries between themselves and the non-Miskitu inhabitants of Pearl Lagoon were solidified.

Like Scott already argued, and as we have also seen with Delia, ethnicity is often seen by the members of this group as something *primordial* (Sollors, 1989:xv). Almost invariably the Miskitu migrants I interviewed in Pearl Lagoon agreed that being Miskitu is unchangeable, it is “in your blood”.<sup>5</sup> However, they also pointed out that in daily life it is often convenient, and sometimes even unavoidable, to adopt certain characteristics of the 'modern' society. This corresponds to the agentive aspects of identity discussed by Jackson in his comparison to a Jazz musician's repertoire: while the “pieces come out of tradition” (being Miskitu is *in your blood*), the “improvisation” is dependent of the individual's choices and is related to his or her social surroundings (Jackson, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:580). While Delia has married a Creole man and is able to speak Creole fluently, she still proudly proclaims she is a Miskitu woman and is utterly amazed when her daughter suddenly decides to switch from being Miskitu to being Creole. The example of Delia is just one of the many examples to be found amongst the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon that demonstrate how they balance tradition and modernity through the choices they make in their daily lives. Their continuous interplay between cultural adaptation and (unconscious) resistance to adaptation is exemplary for the 'resistance spectrum' as discussed by Comaroff and Comaroff and the different positions individual members of an ethnic minority can take in on this spectrum (Comaroff & Comaroff, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:390)

But what motivations lie behind the choices between adaptation and resistance, between modernity and tradition, which the Miskitu make in their everyday lives? And why do they make different choices in different realms of their lives? How come Delia's daughter, having grown up in an ethnically-mixed society, finds it unproblematic to shift between two ethnic identities, while her mother sees this as inconceivable? In this thesis I will argue that part of the answer to these questions lies in the concept of *social memory*, in the way in which tradition is brought up to date and is reinterpreted in a modern context. The next chapter will explore more extensively the continuous interaction between tradition and modernity in ethnic identification processes among the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon by considering the following three themes that manifested themselves as relevant during my fieldwork period: (1) language, (2) healing practices, and (3) autonomy.

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5 Mister Adolga, interview on 13/3/12

# CHAPTER 6

## Social Memory

### *Language, Healing Practices, and Autonomy*

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“A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it,  
bearing within him the image of a cathedral.”

- Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*

We have seen in the previous section that the ethnic identification processes of the Miskitu were significantly influenced by the migration from their home towns to Pearl Lagoon. They experienced stereotypification, discrimination, and the absence of a coherent Miskitu group in their new social reality. A 'logical' reaction to these experiences would have been to adapt to the new hegemonic culture and to abandon their Miskitu roots (strategy 1 and 2 of Barth (1998:31)). Yet even though Miskitu identity is connected to a negative stereotype at the bottom of the social pyramid, I noticed that in many cases the Miskitu have found ways to maintain their traditional cultural practices and in this way they balance tradition and modernity in their everyday lives. I argue that the process of *social memory* has been a central factor in maintaining the Miskitu identity since the migration. Through *social memory* the Miskitu were able to individually re-actualize the past in the present in such a way that it becomes 'workable' in daily life in Pearl Lagoon.

During my fieldwork, I encountered three clear examples of how *social memory* influences the processes of ethnic identification in the everyday lives of the Miskitu. I selected these three examples by focusing on those elements of daily life in Pearl Lagoon that according to my informants were significantly different from the 'tradition' of their Miskitu home towns. In this way I was able to locate those differences that according the Miskitu people were socially relevant (Comaroff & Comaroff, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:390). This chapter will center around the following three main themes: language, healing practices, and autonomy. I argue that the awareness of socially relevant differences for each Miskitu individually has spurred a process of *re-evaluating* the 'old' traditional practice in the context of the 'new' modern practice. This re-evaluation in turn has influenced their *behaviour* and the choices they make between adaptation and resistance to adaptation in various ways. Strikingly, while in the literature it is often silently assumed that adaptation to one cultural element demonstrate a larger tendency for adaptation to the culture in

general, I found that in reality this frequently did not appear to be the case. Among the Miskitu, someone can adopt a certain cultural aspect of the hegemonic culture, and at the same time he or she can reject adaptation to another aspect. These choices therefore must not be seen as axiomatically following the same line of reasoning, but rather must be regarded as fragmentary and based on personal and contextual considerations that can change over time.

### **6.1 Language - “Now I have opened my eyes”**

The first cultural element that proved to be significantly different for the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon after their migration was language. In their Miskitu home town the mother language and the language spoken in everyday life is Miskito, the traditional language of Miskitu people. While in school classes were sometimes taught in Spanish, the conversations in their daily lives almost invariably took place in Miskito language. However, the individual Miskitu people who decided to move to Pearl Lagoon were confronted with a new social reality in which nearly everybody spoke Creole-English, a variation of Standard English that is typically spoken by people African descendants on the Caribbean Coast of Central America (Pineda, 2006:53). In this new environment, the Miskitu migrants were presented with a choice: either to adhere to their traditional culture by continuing to speak Miskito, or to adapt to the majority culture by learning Creole.

During my fieldwork research, I found that the choices made were various and that these choices were grounded in an individual reflection and interpretation of Miskitu tradition when compared to the options offered in their new social reality. For migrants, language is often considered as a key cultural element that separates them from their new social society as it facilitates recognition as a member of another ethnic group, and can often function as a barrier to more intimate contact (Nash, 1989:10). In Pearl Lagoon I found that most Miskitu migrants had decided to adapt by acquiring the Creole language and in this way they were enabled to communicate more easily with the non-Miskitu inhabitants of Pearl Lagoon in their daily lives. The effect learning the Creole language had on gaining entrance into Pearl Lagoon society really became clear to me when I had a conversation with Mister Ardon, who told me that:

#### **Mister Ardon (25/3/'12)**

*Ardon When I just came here, I couldn't understand and couldn't speak, I couldn't understand so I felt I had to hide [...] I used to pray too, I'd say: 'Master I'm blind, so put something in my head!', I couldn't speak Creole. But now I can, now I have opened my eyes.*

This citation illustrates a feeling of being able to connect with the majority culture through language which I found to be similar among many of my informants. By learning Creole-English, they were

able to understand and speak to the non-Miskitu population, and perhaps more importantly, the non-Miskitu people were able to talk to them. Language thus became a main cultural element that had to be adopted if one wanted to gain entrance into the society of Pearl Lagoon. How acquiring the Creole language could change the established connections of an individual Miskitu migrant with his or her social environment was explained to me in the following manner by the Carlos family:

**Carlos family (12/4/'12)**

*Boyd: When you talk their language, they appreciate you more.*

*Maira: But if you don't talk their language they don't want to talk to you. You have to talk it, even if you don't want to talk it. When I am walking with my mother and we pass someone, they rather want to talk to me than to her because she doesn't know how to talk the Creole. She can understand it and she can talk it a little bit too, but they don't like it.*

*Trina: Yes, it has been better since we all learned how to speak Creole. It has been easier to live here.*

In short we can say that for those able and willing to learn and speak the Creole language of their new society, living in Pearl Lagoon became easier. For some Miskitu, blending into the new society was given such great importance that they decided to abandon their mother language altogether. They made the decision to speak Creole-English exclusively and to stop speaking the language they were raised in. This can be seen as a clear example of the first strategy mentioned by Barth: adapt to and be incorporated in the pre-established economy (Barth, 1998:33). While the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon told me about others who had decided to stop speaking Miskitu, I did not find anyone in Pearl Lagoon who had indeed made this choice. The cause of this might be that there were no people who had decided to abandon their language. More likely however is that those who have stopped speaking Miskito have shed their Miskitu culture altogether and no longer want to identify as Miskitu which makes them difficult to locate. The Miskitu who had decided to stop speaking Miskitu in order to become Creole were generally frowned upon by the other Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon. Miss Cora and Mister Norlan were able to explain to me most clearly what kind of processes were involved in this shedding of Miskitu identity:

**Miss Cora (21/3/'12)**

*Cora Some Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon don't like to speak the language, it's their own language but they don't want to speak Miskitu anymore, only English they will talk. [...] Some people in Pearl Lagoon say they are not Miskitu but Creole, they don't want to talk the language. They will go out and study and get a big puesto, a big job, they say they are not Miskitu, plenty of them. When they become richer, they say they are Creole or Spanish. That is how they are carrying down the culture.*

**Mister Norlan (20/3/'12)**

*Norlan Some people choose English and stop talking their own language. And when they start talking English, they get out of their old Miskitu setting, so they can be with the dominant language [...] Of course social climbing is also part of it. Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon have a low position in society, in school and at work, to speak a Creole is a way of entering the society.*

These quotations show what many informants have told me during my fieldwork, namely that the people who stop talking Miskito and try to become Creole often do this because becoming a member of Creole ethnic group is seen as equal to social climbing. By abandoning their language the Miskitu detach themselves from the negative Miskitu stereotype and link themselves to an ethnic group with a higher socio-economic status, in this case the Creole majority. Becoming Creole also matters on the job market as through discrimination against Miskitu in the working field Creole are more likely to get a well-paid job than Miskitu. Miss Cora's remark shows it could also occur the other way around: a Miskitu person gets a university degree, a good job or marries into a Creole family and thereby acquires a higher socio-economic position, resulting in the Miskitu to stop talking the traditional language in order to fit in better with the non-Miskitu majority in this class. In my opinion this is a clear example of how members of an ethnic minority will adapt to the hegemonic culture by inverting their tradition and attaching higher value to that what is not one's own (Scott, 1989:159). Social memory in this case is the way in which tradition is negatively evaluated in the context of the demands imposed by the present (García, 1996:37).

While some Miskitu choose to resist adaptation to their new society by refusing to speak the language, and others completely abandon their traditional language and in order to identify as Creole, the large majority of the Miskitu migrants I spoke to make a more nuanced choice between this part of their tradition and modernity. Many agree that learning and speaking a new language does not necessarily mean they have to give up speaking their principal language, so after migrating they chose to learn Creole, but continued speaking Miskito in other realms of their daily life. This is an option not discussed when looking at the adaptation-resistance spectrum discussed by Barth and Comaroff and Comaroff (Barth, 1998; Comaroff & Comaroff, in Moore & Sanders, 2011). The Miskitu in this case do not make a choice between either tradition or modernity, but rather opt for a combination: they adjust to modernity by speaking Creole, but remain connected to their culture by also speaking Miskitu. However, language of course is a special case when studying the maintaining of an ethnic identity as acquiring the 'modern' language does not mean one will or should forget the 'traditional' one. I therefore decided to look not only at whether the Miskitu themselves continued to speak Miskitu, but also at whether they attached importance to transmitting their language to their children.

During my research I found that the Miskitu almost invariably continued to speak Miskito, and that they wanted to transmit their language to their children. As in schools Miskito was no longer taught, some parents had even bought lesson books in order to teach the language to their children on their own. I argue that the main reason why many Miskitu have maintained their traditional language is because through *social memory* they found new ways of making their language useful in their new social reality. They realized that while learning Creole-English was a necessity to gain entrance to society, maintaining and transmitting their mother language also had certain benefits that should not be underestimated. During many of my interviews the informants mentioned advantages of speaking Miskito, such as expressed by Mister Norlan and the Carlos family:

**Mister Norlan (25/3/'12)**

*Norlan [...] I tell my children they have to learn their language, because maybe sometimes I will carry them to my family, and they have to know the language and the culture.*

**Carlos family (12/4/'12)**

*Boyd: The Creole used to see the Miskitu as lower than them, but it is not true. Normally in the region the Miskitu are 75%, more than the Creole, and the Creole are just a small community. The Miskitu have always been on the whole coast, nearly the whole coast has always been Miskitu. Only here in Pearl Lagoon they do not really respect the Miskitu because here the Creole are a majority.*

*Maira: Yes so for me it is really important that my children know the Miskitu language, because you do not live all the time in one place. Maybe you will move sometimes to a real Miskitu village, and they will speak Miskitu there. That is why I teach them, because some other time they will have to use their language.*

These citations show two central arguments for the resistance to shedding the Miskitu language. The first is the awareness that the negative stereotype that is connected to the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon is nothing more than a social construction. By referring to the position of the Miskitu people outside of Pearl Lagoon, Boyd shows that the discrimination and marginalization of his ethnic group is a local phenomenon. *Social memory* here functions as a way of constructing what Mittelman calls a 'counter-hegemonic process', a way of contradicting locally accepted ways of classifying their ethnic group (Mittelman, 2007:171). By stating that the Miskitu are a regional majority that has always been on the coast, Boyd creates an image of the Creole being the minority invading 'their' territory. In this way the past of the Miskitu is re-actualized in the present. Also, by referring to the way it was in their home towns where everybody speaks Miskito they used their 'lived experience' of tradition as a referential unit in which the Miskitu find legitimacy for their choice to maintain their traditional language. They attach importance to maintaining the language

and to transmitting it to the next generation as this might be useful as they grow up. In this way the past is not only connected to the present, but it also has a forward, future dimension. By familiarizing members of the group with their past, as mentioned by Zerubavel, the identification of its members to the group is strengthened. Thus, even though the Miskitu have adopted the Creole language, they continue to speak Miskitu and transmit it to their children. By referring to their traditional past in which it was useful and powerful to speak Miskitu they find legitimacy for wanting to transmit their language. In this way, social memory clearly strengthens ethnic identification with the Miskitu culture.

## **6.2 “Into the Bush” – Healing Practices**

A second cultural element that needed reinterpretation after migration is the traditional way of healing that is part of Miskitu culture. The Miskitu villages in which the Miskitu were born and raised often through their location were relatively isolated from 'modern' Western medicine and hospitals. If someone got sick, my informants told me, they would either go “into the bush” to get ingredients so that they could make the medicines themselves, or they would consult a *bush doctor*. After migration, the Miskitu were presented with the option to consult a 'western' doctor, as Pearl Lagoon has a Health Clinic that offers modern health services to the local population free of charge. For the Miskitu this means that when someone becomes ill, they are presented with a choice between relying on their traditional healing methods, either by implementing these by themselves or by visiting a *bush doctor*, or consulting a western doctor from the clinic.

I found that among the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon using traditional healing is seen as an important part of their culture. It is regarded as something typically Miskitu, as was explained to me by Miss Alin, a Miskitu woman who moved to Pearl Lagoon from her home town in the North of Nicaragua at the age of 12:

### **Miss Alin (25/3/'12)**

*Alin We still have a lot of people in this community who use natural medicine, my mother when she feels sick she doesn't go to the doctor but she drinks bush and burns herbs. So we are still maintaining a certain part of our culture, our tradition, even though we are sometimes acting like a different set of people*

While this example demonstrates an awareness of traditional healing practices being an important part of Miskitu culture, this does not mean that all Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon will opt for consulting this traditional way of healing when they become ill. As is the case with the choice between speaking Miskitu and speaking Creole, the decision to choose traditional or modern healing



practices is all but uniform and it is dependent on a myriad of personal considerations. Some people, like the Carlos family, are opposed to consulting western medicine and continue to rely on their traditional ways of healing unless it really is the only way of curing a disease.<sup>6</sup> People like the Carlos family thus completely reject this part of the hegemonic culture and resist adaptation much like is described by Mittelman in his discussion of “infrapolitics”.

During my fieldwork however I found that the majority of the Miskitu people did believe in the advantages of consulting a modern doctor in the Health Clinic, but at the same time argued that there existed occasions in which they would still rather rely on traditional healing. They were open to consulting a Western doctor as well as using traditional bush medicine or to consulting a bush doctor, and the choice they made between these two options mainly depended on the type of illness that needed to be cured. In some cases someone would catch a disease that the Miskitu themselves know how to cure by making their own *bush medicine* (medicines that are made from ingredients that can be found in nature). Many (often elderly) Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon have built up a significant amount of knowledge on how to make *bush medicine* and on how to cure common diseases and injuries. The knowledge on how to make and use these medicines is transmitted from one generation to the next as parents or grandparents teach traditional healing practices to their children. As the Miskitu have witnessed in their home towns that these medicines in fact can heal people, they are provided with evidence that *bush medicine* can serve as a valid alternative for western medicine. These lived experiences of the effectiveness of *bush medicine* in their home towns in this way confirm once more Lincoln's argument that “lived past events” can constitute a legitimization for the continuation of these practices in their modern setting (Lincoln, 1989:124). Thus instead of adapting to their new society by consulting the western clinic, many continue to rely on their tradition by producing their own medicines and curing diseases the traditional way.

While home made *bush medicine* is said to be able to cure many small diseases, there are also diseases that cannot be healed with these home made medicines. Yet this does not necessarily have to mean that the Miskitu necessarily will have to consult a western doctor. Aside from making their own medicine, the Miskitu in the traditional villages namely also have their own doctors who practice medicine in a way significantly different from western doctors. These doctors are called *bush doctors*, and they can be described as a man or woman who specializes in healing people from diseases by using medicines he or she make from natural ingredients collected in the *bush*. I found that in many cases the choice whether to consult a *bush doctor* or a western doctor depended on which method offered the best cure for a certain disease.

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6 Boyd, informal conversation 12/4/12

In many cases my informants told me that they had tried both western medicine and traditional medicine, and that they had found traditional medicine to work better in healing certain diseases. In this case I would like to refer to a conversation I had with one of my close informants, Niraida. One day when Niraida and I were chatting about relationships and starting a family, she suddenly fell quiet. She studied me for a while, and apparently decided she trusted me enough to tell me about the way in which she had started her own family. She told me about how she had become pregnant of her first daughter Eeva: “When my husband and I first started to try to have a baby, it was a very stressful time as I just couldn't get pregnant. We went to the Health Clinic several times but it did not show any results, and after a year we started thinking that God did not want us to have a family”. Then her mother, a Miskitu woman, visited her and reminded Niraida that many ago when she was a little girl, Niraida had become very ill and lost consciousness for long periods of time. Her mother then took Niraida to the bush doctor in their village, and by treating her with bush medicine and leaves they were able to cure her without leaving any permanent damage. “So” Niraida said “when I was trying to get pregnant and all the doctor treatments didn't work, my mother told me: “Why are you so stubborn? Go to the bush doctor who knows about this!” And I went, and the bush doctor massaged my womb and gave me large amounts of medicine to drink each day. After a while, the bush doctor told me I was ready, and indeed, I got pregnant after two months, and I was so happy”.<sup>7</sup> The process of finding the right treatment described by Niraida is in no way unique to her specific case. Many of Miskitu people I have spoken to were able to present me with similar stories, consulting both western doctors and *bush doctors* in order to eventually get cured. Much in the same way as the choice between speaking Creole or Miskito, the Miskitu did not choose either to fully adapt or to completely reject adaptation, but rather steered a middle course by practicing both options at the same time. While the choice itself seems highly opportunistic (they simply go for the practice that gets the best results without actively thinking about the consequences this will have for their ethnicity), the fact that many Miskitu still consider traditional medicine as a valid alternative shows us that this part of their past has successfully been re-evaluated positively in the present.

In cases such as that of Niraida in which both traditional and modern practice offer a cure for the disease, the choice is mainly based on which method offered the best treatment. However, some Miskitu also told me about the existence of other diseases that cannot be cured by anything else than traditional healing practices. According to some of the Miskitu informants, there are certain diseases that simply cannot be cured by modern medicine as the causes of these diseases are

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7 Niraida, informal conversation, 13/4/12

not to be found within the body. Claudia García on this topic proved to be a valuable source of information as she has written a chapter about the curing of diseases among the Miskitu in Nicaragua. She states that according to the Miskitu illnesses can have either a physical or a *metaphysical* cause. The metaphysical diseases are believed to be caused by spiritual possession or witchcraft, and can only be healed by *bush doctors* who know how to cure these kinds of illnesses (Garcia, 1996:120). I too found the existence of this belief in metaphysical causes among the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon. An example of this is described in the first empirical chapter of this thesis in which a Byron tells a story about a man who became ill after falling into the water. The fact that the doctors in the clinic are unable to cure this man, and that after he is cured he remembers seeing a mystic woman at the bottom of the lagoon, would lead some of my informants to assume that his illness was caused by a *Liwa Mairin* (spirit of the water, a female sea creature that lives on the bottom of the water that can fall in love with you, but can also harm you by making you ill or stealing your soul).<sup>8</sup> A significant amount of the Miskitu I spoke to in Pearl Lagoon, were able to tell me about experiences they or their family or friends had had with a *liwa mairin* or with other spirits that can inflict you with diseases. Also, I encountered stories of people who were said to have become ill because someone had cast a spell on them. As the example shows, western doctors are often thought to be unable to heal illnesses brought about by these metaphysical causes, and a healer or *bush doctor* must be consulted who specializes in curing these kinds of diseases. The belief in these metaphysical causes for diseases instead of solely physical causes shows us another way in which Miskitu traditional practices finds continuation in the present.

Most Miskitu, like Miss Erna in the following quotation, admit to believe in the possibility of illnesses being caused by spirits and witchcraft. When asked to explain where this belief comes from, she gave the following answer that in my opinion represents the opinion of many of the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon:

**Miss Erna (12/4/'12)**

*Erna* My mother still believes that if you go into the lagoon and something happens to you like you get sick, it is the fault of a spirit. A lot of old people still believe that, and because of that people of our age still believe in it too. [...] I saw girls who would get an attack and they would say that is was a spirit who poisoned the girls, and through this I started to believe. [...] Then one time I got sick and my parents had to take me to a bush doctor [...] I was cured, and the bush doctor said there was some kind of spirit that wanted to take me, but it didn't so I survived.

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<sup>8</sup> Similar descriptions of the *liwa mairin* can be found in earlier studies on Miskitu culture (García, 1996; Dennis, 2004; Renne, 1991).

This conversation demonstrates that the belief in metaphysical causes for diseases is rooted in experiences in one's life, such as hearing about or seeing people in your environment becoming ill, or becoming ill yourself. It is transmitted from one generation to the next, much in the same way as the making of home made *bush medicine*. As the Miskitu believe in metaphysical causes of diseases, they still attach importance to traditional healing methods in their 'modern' lives.

In this section on healing practices I have shown that while Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon have access to modern medicine free of charge, they do not uniformly adapt to using these practices and abandoning their traditional way of healing. Rather, they critically review the type of healing practice needed depending on the type of disease that needs to be cured. If it is a disease which can be cured by taking in home made *bush medicine* or if the disease is thought to be caused by metaphysical causes, they will choose to rely on traditional healing practices. Knowledge on whether or not a disease should be cured by traditional medicine is transmitted from one generation to the next, and by re-evaluating this knowledge in the present-day context of Pearl Lagoon they maintain a connection with their past through social memory (Peel, 1984:113). They do not completely adapt to the modern society by giving up traditional healing altogether, but they do not completely reject adaptation either as they do consult western doctors in some cases. Rather, they have reinterpreted the healing practices in such a way that both can exist at the same time without being mutually exclusive.

### **6.3    Autonomy – “Yapti Tasba”**

The last theme that I will discuss in this section is the way social memory influences the choice to support the political struggle for autonomy. I argue that the process of migration and subsequent objectification of the traditional 'autonomous' way of living influences the way the Miskitu evaluate their current lifestyle and in some cases also steers their political affiliation.

When looking at the home towns of the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon, these can be seen as being relatively isolated from the national government, both on political and economical level. Land in these communities is 'free', meaning that the territory of the community is seen as “communal land”; land cannot be bought or sold by individuals, but plots of land are assigned to community members or families, and on these plots the Miskitu build their houses or do planting. People can freely go into the *bush* and collect fruits and vegetables, use the wood to build houses, go hunting, or head for the lake or river to catch fish and lobster. Often these villages also have an exchange economy that to a certain extent relies on the sharing or exchanging of goods without interference of money.

In Pearl Lagoon governing practices are entirely different as instead of an exchange

economy people depend on a cash economy. The concept of communal land no longer exists in Pearl Lagoon and all its territory is owned privately. Also, restrictions have been placed on fishing so that fishermen have to abide strict rules when they go fishing as to the amount of fish they are allowed to catch and the species they catch. In general I found that nearly all of the Miskitu migrants I spoke to were aware of the differences between the traditional Miskitu way of living and the lifestyle they were confronted with in their 'new' society. As the individual migrants entered their new society and saw that the community of Pearl Lagoon was governed in an entirely different fashion, they started to re-interpret the way in which Miskitu traditionally govern their communities. In order to survive, the Miskitu realized that in Pearl Lagoon they had to adapt to the modern lifestyle, which meant that they had to find ways to produce food and earn money without having access to communal land and without depending primarily on exchange. Most Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon do not own a piece of land and instead of exchanging they have become fully dependent on the cash economy.

However, even though they cannot exercise their traditional practices, I found that many Miskitu migrants still highly valued the traditional 'autonomous' lifestyle they connect to the Miskitu culture. They see the concept of communal land as genuinely Miskitu, or as Miss Tina explains: "Communal land is typical for Miskitu, that is what our ancestors taught us, land is free. It is our mother land, in Miskito we call it *yapti tasba*, and it belongs to all of us".<sup>9</sup> When compared to the situation they have in Pearl Lagoon, according to the informants their autonomous lives in the Miskitu home towns were qualitative much better. They describe that way of living as "poor but happy",<sup>10</sup> "peaceful and in harmony with nature",<sup>11</sup> and, most of all "free".<sup>12</sup> The idealization of this 'autonomous' Miskitu past is contrasted with the life they are living in Pearl Lagoon. They state that their exchange economy is replaced by a "If you don't pay, you don't eat"<sup>13</sup>-mentality and that instead of being granted a plot of communal land, people in Pearl Lagoon have to "fight for their land"<sup>14</sup>.

The positive evaluation of the autonomous lifestyle attached to Miskitu culture is not only rooted in the personal life experiences of the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon, but also in the knowledge they have of the history of their ethnic group. However, while first-hand experience of autonomy among the Miskitu was widespread, the knowledge of the historical past of their group was much less evenly distributed. Keesing has argued that not every individual has the same understanding of

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9 Miss Tina, informal conversation 26/3/12

10 Miss Tina, semi-structured interview 12/4/12

11 Niraida, semi-structured interview 26/3/12

12 Mister Hitch, semi-structured interview 12/4/12

13 Mister Boyd, informal conversation 30/3/12

14 Maira, semi-structured interview 15/4/12

their shared culture, the same access to knowledge. While I found that on Miskito language and traditional healing practices knowledge was spread relatively evenly, in the case of historical events the knowledge of the Miskitu is distributed more unequally. Keesing explains this fact by differentiating between experts and non-experts, with experts being the people who “know more, more deeply, because they have sought out knowledge, memorized, more reflectively sought connections between surface details” (Keesing, *in* Moore & Sanders, 2011:260).

Keesing's discussion of 'cultural experts' is consistent with my findings that show that the Miskitu who know about the historical events indeed are the ones who claimed to read most about Miskitu history and who had actively contacted elder Miskitu people in order to get more information about the historical past. However, what struck me is that the 'experts' on Miskitu historical past were not necessarily experts on traditional healing practices or other cultural elements. Thus while I agree with Keesing that experts exist who know more about their culture than non-experts, it is important to add that the expertise of a person on one element of a culture does not necessarily indicate an expertise on all or even most cultural elements.

During my fieldwork I found that the 'historical expert' Miskitu when talking about autonomy often referred to a certain period in Miskitu history in which they were at the top of an autonomous kingdom: the Mosquito Kingdom. Historical literature describes the era of the Miskitu Kingdom as a period that followed out of the Miskitu's alliance with British colonists who fought alongside each other against the Spanish *Conquistadores*. In 1687, the British created a Miskitu dynasty called the Mosquito Kingdom in order to reinforce their power in the Caribbean Coast region (García, 1996:46). In this Kingdom the Miskitu people were given the status of governing group with a Miskitu king heading the monarchy, but Great Britain made sure that it maintained its power and influence in the region. The Kingdom existed more than 200 years, until in 1905 the Harisson-Altamirano Treaty was signed and the Mosquito territory was officially incorporated in the national territory of the new republic of Nicaragua (Baracco, 2005).

Among some of the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon knowledge of the existence of the Mosquito Kingdom is existed, and those who knew about it interpreted it as an ideal time during which autonomy was at its peak. The Miskitu of this Mosquito Kingdom are regarded as having been powerful, free, and most of all having had complete control over their natural resources. Mister Hitch gave a following description of the Mosquito Kingdom:

**Mister Hitch (10/3/'12)**

*Hitch First all this was ours, all of the Coast was Miskitu. At that time, the Creole people were slaves, the Miskitu had the power at that time. [...] The Miskitu Kingdom was the best time, we were happy. We were poor, but anything you wanted to do you could do, we were free.*

In general the Mosquito Kingdom can be said to have been transformed into a symbol of self-government. Claudia García, an anthropologist who has studied the Miskitu people since 1982, shows largely similar results as she discusses the way in which the Miskitu conceptualize the Kingdom as “the moment in which everything was ours” contrasted with their current situation in which “now one has to struggle for our land.”(García, 1996:59) In this sense the process of social memory re-interprets the 'traditional past' (in this case the Mosquito Kingdom) as an ideal time, contrasted with the present situation in Pearl Lagoon. Important to note here is that, as Peel already has argued, that the events interpreted do not necessarily have to meet any criterion of veracity. This is also the case with the Mosquito Kingdom, which is has been transformed in a symbol of self-government while historical literature shows that in reality the autonomy of the Miskitu at that time was limited as the King himself stood under direct control of the British colonists. By leaving out some 'inconvenient truths' and emphasizing the positive aspects of this period in history, the past in effect is reworked according to the needs imposed by the present (Lincoln, 1992:853; Peel, 1984:113).

At this moment it is important to note that while migration to Pearl Lagoon has played a significant role in the objectification of the 'autonomous' aspect of Miskitu culture, this was not the only change that triggered this process. Ever since the Mosquito Kingdom was incorporated into the republic of Nicaragua, there have been political parties that have fought for regaining this autonomy on the Caribbean Coast. During the '80 and '90, especially at the time of the Sandinista Revolution and the subsequent Contra-war that followed it<sup>15</sup> lasting from 1979 until 1990, Miskitu politicians have stressed the importance of becoming autonomous again. This political struggle for Autonomy reached a break-through in 1987 when regional autonomy was granted to the Caribbean Coast. Since the autonomy accord the area a been governed by a regional council and the *Costeños* have been granted the right to reclaim their natural resources and to defend, preserve, and promote their identity, history, culture, and traditions (Baracco, 2005).

It is important to mention this recent history of revolution and the granting of autonomy as I argue that this period has stimulated the Miskitu people living in Pearl Lagoon to reflect more actively on their situation. As autonomy especially in recent years has been a matter of contestation and political debate, it is likely that for those people outside of the political spectrum autonomy has also become an increasingly relevant topic of discussion. While the Caribbean Coast officially can claim to be regionally autonomous from the Nicaraguan central government, I found that in Pearl

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15 Unfortunately the length of this thesis does not allow for an extensive discussion of the position the Miskitu people occupied during the Sandinista Revolution and the subsequent contra-war. It suffices to say that in general the Miskitu people did not side with the Sandinistas led by Daniel Ortega, but rather lined up with the Contras and with anti-Sandinista Indigenous parties such as MISURASATA, MISURATA and YATAMA.

Lagoon the autonomy declaration is not regarded as amounting to a significant change in policy. One of the 'historical experts' Mister Pineda, a Miskitu man who fought alongside the Contras during the contra-war, discusses the granting of regional autonomy in 1987 in the following way:

**Mister Pineda (12/3/'12)**

*Pineda* Eventually there came talk of autonomy, but they wrote it on what is called 'wet paper', it has no value in real life. The declaration of the autonomy changed nothing for the Miskitu people, it was just words, we do not have any autonomy, not like in the time of Miskitu Kingdom. At that time the people were free to use natural resources on the coast [...] Now they say we are autonomous but we cannot do anything. That phrase is just meaningless, it is written on wet paper, no use.

This citation demonstrates not only that the regional autonomy granted in 1987 is not seen as effective ("written on wet paper"), but it also shows that the political struggle for autonomy for some Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon is directly linked to the image of self-government that is seen to have existed during the Mosquito Kingdom. When the Miskitu make a comparison between the current situation in Pearl Lagoon and the autonomy during the Miskitu Kingdom, they would still attach more positive value to that first period of 'real autonomy'.

The continuous political struggles for self-government have further increased the Miskitu's awareness of the connection between being autonomous and being Miskitu. For this reason, most of my informants have political ties to and vote for the YATAMA (short for *YApti TAsbaya MAsrika*, which means as much as: "children of mother earth"), an indigenous political party that fights for the advancement of autonomy of the Caribbean Coast. The positive connotation to the concept of autonomy that stems from the *social memory* of the Miskitu thus does not only influence the way they think and feel about their current situation, but it also influences their behavior as their political affiliation is motivated by a desire to regain this autonomy. One of the examples in which this connection between political affiliation and autonomy is expressed, is in an interview with my informant Leida:

**Leida (2/4/'12)**

*Leida* For instance me, I vote YATAMA because I do believe that if we were completely autonomous, if we were separate from Nicaragua, we would be in a better place. But no government has come yet that really works together. I do believe it would be better.

*Andrée* And do you think the Coast is ready for that, for complete autonomy?

*Leida* Yes! I believe so yes.

In this way we can see that through social memory the traditional past (in this the 'typically Miskitu' autonomous way of living) is reinterpreted and not only seen as an ideal time, but also projected as a desired future. By discussing the political struggle for autonomy it demonstrates that social memory is not only a process that motivates thought but also can serve to instigate action.



In short we can say that this section on autonomy has discussed yet another way in which social memory can influence the way the Miskitu people think and feel about their ethnic identity and how this affects their behavior in everyday life. The traditional 'autonomous' Miskitu governing system has become deeply ingrained in the way the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon objectify their ethnic identity. Most have experienced this autonomy first-hand in their Miskitu home towns, and some 'experts' have also acquired knowledge of the existence of a 'free', 'independent' Mosquito Kingdom that existed before their time. Reflection on the autonomous element of their culture has been stimulated by migration to Pearl Lagoon and by the Sandinista Revolution and the subsequent granting of the “wet paper” regional autonomy. Overall we can say that the autonomous past is evaluated positively when compared to the current 'restricted' situation in Pearl Lagoon, and that this past is also given a future dimension as most Miskitu express a desire to return to autonomy in actions by voting for the YATAMA political party. In this way ethnic identification with the Miskitu culture is strengthened as social memory gives them a sense of a shared past and of shared struggles.

# CHAPTER 7

## Conclusion

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We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
- T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

What happens to members of an ethnic group when they move from their home towns into a 'modern' society in which their culture suddenly is seen as 'backward'? Do they adapt, hide or do they maintain their culture? What motivates this choice? This study has sought to identify the ways in which everyday processes of ethnic identity construction take place among the Miskitu of Pearl Lagoon, and how these processes are linked to the remembering of a shared past. I have aimed to contribute to the existing knowledge on the Miskitu people by studying them outside of their traditional sphere: as migrants living as an ethnic minority in a 'modern' society.

Social identity is not an entity but a construction, and one that is in fact *created* through interpersonal and intergroup contact. It is as much inclusive as it is inherently exclusive, and its boundaries themselves are continuously modified through the social interaction that creates them. The social groups one belongs to can be multiple and shifting, and within each group continuous interpretations of individual members make the meanings attached to these groups dynamic and flexible (Eriksen, 1992; García, 1996; Nash, 1989; Sollors, 1989). Ethnic groups such as the Miskitu are especially interesting as while these are no less a social construction than other social groups they are often imagined as natural and static units, connecting its members through primordial ties (Hutchinson, 1996). When members of an ethnic group are placed into a situation in which they constitute an ethnic minority, the processes of reflection on their own ethnic identity often will be stimulated (Barth, 1998).

We have seen in the empirical chapters that the Miskitu in Pearl Lagoon after their migration entered into a personal process of intensified objectification of and reflection on their culture. These processes were stimulated by the fact that their ethnic identity after migration suddenly had become connected to a negative stereotype, and because they did not find much support in the form of a

coherent local Miskitu group this stereotype was not contradicted in daily life. Using Barth's typification of strategies employed by migrants ("the new elite") when they enter a new society (Barth, 1998), I found that among the Miskitu reactions ranged from complete resistance to adaptation to downright negation of the Miskitu identity. However, the large majority of my informants indicated that they maintained their Miskitu identity as this was "in our blood" (hereby adopting a primordial stance (Sollors, 1989)), but individually decided to adapt to certain aspects of the hegemonic culture when this was seen as convenient or necessary. While in the literature it was often silently assumed that adaptation to one cultural element would mean adaptation to the culture in general, in reality this frequently did not turn out to be the case. While some new cultural aspects were uniformly adapted by the Miskitu migrants, other elements were not seen as capable of replacing traditional Miskitu practices. Also, it was possible that the Miskitu would adopt an element of the new hegemonic culture but at the same time found ways of maintaining the traditional version of this element. In short, each socially relevant cultural element was continuously evaluated and compared within its social context, which made ethnic identification a highly individualized and flexible process.

Having acquired this knowledge about the processes of ethnic identification construction, I narrowed my focus to studying one of the main ways in which choices between tradition and modernity are being shaped, namely social memory. I wanted to know how the remembering of a shared tradition can influence processes of ethnic identification in a situation in which this tradition is no longer naturally ubiquitous. According to Peel, the past of an ethnic group can provide legitimacy of the existence of traditional cultural practices in daily life. Social memory in this sense should be regarded as the way in which this past is re-actualized (and sometimes reworked) according to the needs imposed by the present (Friedman, 1992; Peel, 1984).

During my fieldwork I found three main themes that each showed in different ways how social memory influenced the ethnic identification processes of the individual Miskitu migrants, both in thought and in practice. After migration the Miskitu learned the Creole language. Through this some started to re-evaluate their language as something negative that should be renounced if one wanted to climb socially. This in some cases even led to the shedding of Miskitu identity in general, in which case social memory led to inversion of their traditional culture as a whole (also see Scott, 1989). A majority however aside from speaking Creole also continued to speak Miskito and transmitted it to their children. The memory of the importance of being able to speak Miskitu in their home town stimulated the Miskitu to maintain this aspect of their culture in their present lives, which shows that social memory also can lead to the strengthening of ethnic identity.

Concerning healing practices, the Miskitu ethnic identity is strengthened through social

memory as they have found ways to make traditional Miskitu healing practices 'workable' in their new social reality. The Miskitu have started to consult the western doctors in some occasions, but at the same time they continue to partially rely on *Bush* healing practices by stating that with some diseases the Miskitu way of healing is more efficient or even the only viable option (in the case of metaphysical causes for illness (see also García, 1996)). In this fashion, western medicine and traditional medicine can both exist as accepted healing practices without being mutually exclusive.

Lastly, the traditional autonomous lifestyle of the Miskitu is re-actualized in the present as autonomy continues to be seen as something to be desired and in some cases something to fight for politically. Most have experienced this autonomy first-hand in their Miskitu home towns, and some 'experts' have also acquired knowledge of the existence of a free, independent Mosquito Kingdom that existed before their time (on experts and the distribution of cultural knowledge, also see Keesing, 2011). Through social memory this knowledge of the traditional past is positively re-evaluated and ethnic identification is strengthened as it gives the Miskitu a sense of a positive shared past and of shared struggles.

This thesis has demonstrated that social memory in many ways can contribute positively to the ethnic identification of the Miskitu migrants living in Pearl Lagoon. Even though adaptation to the hegemonic culture often seemed to be a beneficial strategy as discrimination and stereotypes were manifest in everyday life, nearly all Miskitu stayed true to their Miskitu roots and (unconsciously) resisted adaptation by continuing Miskitu ideas and practices in their daily lives. Social memory stimulated the continuance of these traditional practices (such as the Miskito language, traditional healing practices, and the autonomous lifestyle) by functioning as a referential unit and as a counter-hegemonic consciousness (Mittelman, 2002). The 'lived past' and knowledge of historical events served as a legitimization of traditional practices, and in some cases also gave these practices a future dimension. Strikingly, the Miskitu often found ways of circumventing the making of a definitive choice between tradition and modernity by adapting the modern while at the same time maintaining the traditional. In this way the Miskitu of Pearl Lagoon were truly able to position themselves on the boundary of their culture, one foot wandering over and tip-toeing on the possibilities of modernity, while the other still firmly rooted in the tradition of a shared past.

In this last section I would like to return to the situation I sketched out of Delia and her daughter Slilma. Slilma confused her mother by carelessly switching between identifying as Miskitu and identifying as Creole. While Slilma ran off to find a hiding place, her mother looked at me with astonishment, baffled by the way her daughter in one sentence had been able to leave behind the Miskitu cultural luggage her mother had collected over a lifetime. Most of the Miskitu from who I have gathered data were first-generation migrants like Delia. This thesis has attempted

to provide insight in the situation of this particular group by studying the way they identify as Miskitu through the remembering of their shared past. A next step would be to find out how members of the new Miskitu generation such as Slilma, carrying a different cultural load, interpret their connection to the Miskitu tradition in their everyday lives. The fragment of T.S. Eliot's poem mentioned at the beginning of this chapter illustrates how ethnic identification can be seen as an 'exploration'. However, in reality we will never 'arrive where we started' as this place itself has become a dynamic, ever evolving “moving image of the past” (Rabinow, 2007:xxiv). Ethnic identity is always intrinsically contextual, and its interpretation lies in the hands of those who live it by either continuing or refusing to bring traditions of the past into present and future.

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# APPENDIX I

## Abstract

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This study has sought to identify the ways in which everyday processes of ethnic identity construction take place among the Miskitu of Pearl Lagoon, and how these processes are linked to the remembering of a shared past. I have aimed to contribute to the existing knowledge on the Miskitu people by studying them outside of their traditional sphere: as migrants living as an ethnic minority in a 'modern' society. Even though adaptation to the hegemonic culture often seemed to be a beneficial strategy as discrimination and stereotypes were manifest in everyday life, nearly all Miskitu stayed true to their Miskitu roots and (unconsciously) resisted adaptation by continuing Miskitu ideas and practices in their daily lives. Social memory stimulated the continuance of these traditional practices (such as the Miskito language, traditional healing practices, and the autonomous lifestyle) by functioning as a referential unit and as a counter-hegemonic consciousness (Mittelman, 2002). The 'lived past' and knowledge of historical events served as a legitimization of traditional practices, and in some cases also gave these practices a future dimension.

## APPENDIX II

### *Masks, Methods, and Making mistakes*

#### **Reflection on Fieldwork and Methodology**

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*"In the security of our studies and in the classroom, we claim that anthropology is a social science [...] But, at its source, in the midst of the people with whom the anthropologist lives and works, field research involves the practice of an art in which emotions, subjective attitudes and reactions, and undoubtedly subconscious motivation participate [...] Each anthropologist is a distinctive personality and each undoubtedly handles in his own way his dual role as a sympathetic friend to key informants and as scientific observer of a society and culture which is not his own."*

- Charles Wagley, 1960:414

My first week 'in the field' was not what I had expected. In fact this week became one of the most stressful weeks I was to have during my two-month fieldwork period. I started this research project by choosing a location, El Rama in Nicaragua, because I had connections there via an organization in my home town. After that, I began to look for an interesting research population which became the Miskitu people. However, when I started e-mailing the contacts in El Rama about my research plans, I received the discomfoting news that they were unsure if I would be able to find any Miskitu people in their town. I had naively assumed that because literature said the Miskitu people were present in the broader region, they would also be represented in the town where I would be performing my investigation. When I found out this was not the case it had already become too late to find another research location, so I decided to go there anyway and see for myself if I could localize some Miskitu people or else I would start from there to look for a better research site.

After having arrived in Nicaragua and staying in El Rama for a few days I had to acknowledge that finding Miskitu people was impossible in this town and I had to start looking for a new research site. I headed to the region's capital Bluefields for a few days to do some research on a better fieldwork location and there it was by mere chance that I met the director of the CIDCA, a regional research institute on the Caribbean Coast. I was able to discuss my dilemma with him, and to my great relief he presented me with a more than agreeable alternative: Pearl Lagoon. Pearl Lagoon, he said, had a Miskitu population living as an ethnic minority in a Creole society, and he immediately started calling some of his contacts living there who could help me with finding a place to stay after arrival. I decided to trust on my instincts, and after making arrangements and

saying goodbye to my contact in El Rama, I packed my bags and left for Pearl Lagoon.

When I arrived in Pearl Lagoon, no longer living in a society in which I had contacts I was able to rely on like when I was living in El Rama, I had to start all over again with the process of 'entering the field'. The first thing I encountered was the fact that the Spanish classes I had been taking for two weeks proved to be redundant as the entire community spoke Creole-English. While this was frustrating, it also was a big relief as my Spanish still was far from perfect and I soon found out that my academic English proved to be sufficient to have conversations with the local people without many difficulties. More problematic than the language barrier was the fact that I did not know anybody in this new society and had to start all over with localizing and introducing myself to local leaders and organizations. Luckily, I found an elderly Creole lady who was willing to rent out her top floor to me, and she also proved to be an essential local gatekeeper during those first few weeks. While I was busy introducing myself to 'influential people' in and around Pearl Lagoon, she continuously helped me get around town, introducing me to people and essentially learning me the rights from wrongs in her society. A second key gatekeeper who I met during that first week was Chris, a Peace Corps volunteer who had been living in Pearl Lagoon for a year already and who in many ways had gone through the same process of acculturation I was going through during my fieldwork. We soon became friends and he offered to help me where he could by introducing me to his friends and teaching me as much as he could about the new society we both had entered in. Throughout my stay, Chris and my host mother were able to give me numerous valuable insights in understanding the social rules of Pearl Lagoon society, such as greeting everybody on the streets with a simple 'mernin', 'evenin', 'alright' or 'right there', or the rules of reciprocity by sharing food with friends and neighbors.

After having initiated contact with what later on turned out to be gatekeepers, I realized it was time to get back to my research and I started to search for Miskitu people to do interviews with. This was less simple than how the director in Bluefields had portrayed it because while he had spoken of the Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon as an easy to detect, coherent group, in reality they turned out to be rather hidden and difficult to find. The Miskitu people I met during my first week were convinced they were the only Miskitu in their town, and they made me realize that the coherent group I was looking for in fact did not exist. Trying hard not to stress out as I was afraid that I had made the same mistake I had made in El Rama by not doing enough research about my location in advance, I began an accelerated search for Miskitu people in Pearl Lagoon. Eventually, as I got to know more people I was able to find more and more Miskitu people by using the snowball-method so that each informant could lead me to one or two new informants, so that I was able to achieve and exceed my goal number of 20 informants.

During my two-month fieldwork period, I used several qualitative research methods in order to try to get an emic, inside view of the population I was studying. I performed qualitative interviews, did literature research, practised participant observation, I observed, took daily field notes and photographs, drew maps, participated in casual conversation, and transcribed, coded and analysed interviews. One of the main methods I used was qualitative interviewing. In two months time, I performed 21 qualitative interviews, most of these interviews with Miskitu informants, with an average length of two hours. The interviews, tape recorded in Creole-English, almost invariably took place on the porch of the houses of my informants, surrounded by family, small children, pets, stray dogs, traffic and curious visitors. My questions were open-ended, and processes of interviewing varied widely: while some informants needed to be prompted with specific questions, others needed little guiding and were able to speak for long periods without me asking additional questions. By clearly explaining the topic of my research at the beginning of the interview, I attempted to avoid informants wandering off or losing track of their line of reasoning while telling me their story, which not always was successful. I found that tape recording the interview did not seem to bother the majority of my informants, as my device was rather small and discreet and I felt that continuously taking notes during the interview, as strategy that I simultaneously used during the first few interviews, was more distracting. Preceding each interview I asked permission to tape-record the conversation, and I explained that the recording would only serve for private use to help me memorize the conversation, after which my informants complied without hesitation. I have protected the anonymity of my informants by using fictive names wherever informants are mentioned in this thesis.

Aside from these interviews, I used several more informal research methods which can be seen as part of the umbrella term participant observation. I lived in the same community as my informants for two months and during that time I spent my days participating in everyday activities, visiting their church, trying to learn the local dialect (Creole-English) and their mother language (Miskito), hanging out, participating in casual conversations and writing fieldnotes. I found that participant observation in this way, as is also mentioned by DeWalt and DeWalt, became not only a research method, but also an approach to getting deeper, more solid contacts with people and build greater rapport (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011:110). While doing research, I performed several researcher roles, varying from passive to active participant. Most of the time I assumed a position somewhere between that of a moderate and an active participant as I was engaging in the acts of my informants to a varying degree, but never became a member of the group. I accompanied informants to church sermons, visited their houses, farms and work, hung out with them on a daily basis. However, in no event I was seen as a real Miskitu. In this period I was able to relate much of what I was

experiencing to the following text:

Every ethnographer, when he reaches the field, is faced immediately with accounting for himself before the people he proposes to learn to know. Only when this had been accomplished can he proceed to his avowed task of seeking to understand and interpret the way of life of those people. (Berreman, 1963:138).

As Berreman argues, before I would try to understand and investigate the social reality around me, I had to be introspective and position myself in the society I was trying to enter. DeWalt and DeWalt mention four main personal characteristics that may make it difficult or even impossible to participate: gender, age, class, and ethnicity (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011:22). For me, all of these characteristics played an important part in determining my identity in the field in comparison to those I was investigating.

I realize that the different identities that were assigned to me and that I could negotiate to varying degrees not only influenced the level of rapport I was able to establish, but also have affected the process of data collection itself. As a fieldworker I was the main research instrument, and this inevitably has had an impact on the quality of the data I have collected as my observations “always come from a particular theoretical position and a certain gender, class, ethnic, etc. perspective” (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011:112). When I arrived in Pearl Lagoon, I was immediately confronted with an identity that was ascribed to me: a young, rich, naïve, white girl. While some of these identifiers I had already taken into consideration, others did not seem salient until my arrival in Pearl Lagoon. More than I had experienced in other locations in Nicaragua, being a white woman in Pearl Lagoon proved to be challenging as I was seen as something exotic and therefore desirable. While at times this made me feel highly uncomfortable, I found that in many cases it also provided me with access to more information from the field as I found ways of deploying my femininity. By sometimes positioning myself as a naïve and subordinate young woman, sometimes acting fun and flirty, and at other times acting like 'one of the guys', I was able to negotiate this ascribed aspect of my identity, both consciously and unconsciously (Mazzei & O'Brien, 2009). While performing qualitative interviews I often acted somewhat naïve in order to accentuate my position as an eager-to-learn researcher, I acted tougher and less 'girly' during more informal activities like hanging out with some of the younger local men I had become friends with.

Aside from this gender aspect, I also found that presenting myself as a devout Christian helped me gain entrance into the society. By going to church at least twice a week, most often the Moravian church but also the Anglican, Tabernacle or Pentecostal, I found it was easier to connect

to the people in Pearl Lagoon because they started to recognize me as someone dedicated to the same things as them in one of the central aspects of their lives: religion. This role of devout Christian however sometimes clashed with me being 'one of the guys'. While as a Christian I was expected to refrain from staying up late and going to the local bars, I often felt more comfortable in my role as a friend of some of the younger men in town who enjoyed going out. Both roles enabled me to establish rapport with a different group of valuable informants, but at times it was difficult to balance the two as they were sometimes seen as mutually exclusive. An illustrative example is when I accompanied some friends to a picnic organized by the Moravian church. At the end of the picnic, all of the guests were called together for a closing prayer, but the friends I was accompanying 'deviantly' decided to go to ride their horses. When the ladies from church asked me if I would join them in prayer, I decided to go horse-riding with my friends as at this occasion I felt choosing to go to church in front of all my friends would increase the distance between us. At other times I chose church over friends and in this way I feel I tried to balance the at times conflicting ties I had with different members of society in order to establish and maintain rapport.

While I had already heard about the difficulties of leaving the field from fellow anthropology students, I was still surprised at how hard it was to come to terms with the fact that the period of data collection had ended. While my fieldwork was relentlessly reaching its end, I continued to meet more and more interesting people and I was starting to get glimpses of practices and opinions that earlier during my research had remained hidden. This frustrated me, but at the same time I realized that there was probably never going to be a 'perfect' time to leave the field, and there would always be 'hidden knowledge' waiting to be discovered.

It was not until I re-entered the more familiar field of my home town, that I came to an important realization about my time in Pearl Lagoon. All the time I spent *being there*, trying to adjust to this new society and trying to find ways to balance the different identities that I ascribed to myself and that were ascribed to me, I was essentially experiencing the same process the Miskitu went through during their migration. In this new social reality I had to reflect on my own identity and to emphasize those aspects that made living in this community possible, without losing what I saw to be at the core of 'being me'. The realization of this linkage between me and my informants has since become a valuable source of understanding from which I could draw during the writing of this thesis. It enabled me to reach a deeper level of understanding and, to be sure it has deepened my esteem for the resilience of the Miskitu people living in Pearl Lagoon.