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Resistance And Contradiction: Miskitu Indians And The Nicaraguan State, 1894-1987



Synopsis

A mere eighteen months after the Sandinistas came to power in Nicaragua in 1979, Miskitu Indians engaged in a widespread and militant anti-government mobilization. In late 1984, after more than three years of intense conflict, a negotiated transition to peace and autonomy began. This study analyzes these contrasting moments in Nicaraguan ethnic politics, drawing on four years of field research in a remote Miskitu community and in the central town of Bluefields. Fieldwork on both sides of the conflict allows the author to juxtapose Miskitu and Sandinista perspectives, to show how actors on each side understood the same events in radically different ways and how they moved gradually toward reconciliation. Since 1894, Miskitu people have faced an expansionist nation-state and have participated as well in a U.S.-controlled enclave economy and a civil society dominated by U.S. missionaries. The cultural logic of contemporary ethnic conflict, the book argues, can be found in the legacy of Miskitu responses to this dual subordination. While resisting the Nicaraguan state, Miskitu people drew closer to the Anglo-American institutions and worldview. These inherited premises of "Anglo affinity," combined with militant ethnic demands, motivated the post-revolutionary mobilization. Sandinista revolutionary nationalism, in turn, had little tolerance for ethnic militancy, and even less for Anglo affinity. Only with autonomy negotiations did both sides begin to address these underlying causes of the conflict. Though portraying autonomy as a major step toward peaceful conflict resolution and more egalitarian ethnic relations, the book concludes that this new political arrangement did not, and perhaps could not, fully overcome the contradictions from which it arose. The book offers a critique of existing approaches to ethnic mobilization and to revolutionary nationalism in Central America, putting forward an alternative framework grounded in Gramscian culture theory. This permits a grasp of the combined presence of ethnic militancy and Anglo affinity in the Miskitu people's consciousness, a previously unexamined key to Miskitu collective action. The same notion of "contradictory consciousness" illuminates the Sandinistas' thought and practice: They too espoused a determined political militancy fused with assimilationist premises toward Indians, which created contradictions at the core of their egalitarian revolutionary vision.

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Customer Reviews

In this book, Hale analyzes the reasons for the ethnic conflict between the Miskitu Indians and the Sandinistas. His approach is interesting in that he was constantly traveling between two very different sites on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. In all, it's a fantastic work that provides a history and insight of a population in Latin American that is not often given center stage in academia. I would highly recommend it to anyone studying the social sciences as related to indigenous populations, government/politics in Latin America, Latin American studies. As great as it is for content, it's also fantastic to read as a student because it really demonstrates the importance and role of methodology in conducting research. So whether you intend to go to grad school or simply are simply wanting to learn more about this, it's really a great work.

Charles Hale gives a plea for activist anthropology; not letting the anthropologist remain aloof from the people that he or she is studying. He does that to some extent in his work with the Miskitu. However his avowed affinity with the Sandinista cause causes him to miss much in the process. He ignores some of the more glaring Sandinista atrocities that would paint the Sandinistas in a less pleasant light than Hale presents. In placing himself as a sort of go-between between the Miskitu and the Sandinistas, he contradicts the very premise he is espousing. He doesn't want to alienate himself from either group, so he never really becomes totally trusted by either. He wants to have his cake and eat it too. This is a good look at the 1980s Nicaraguan situation, activism issues aside.

Hale delves into the movements and motivations of Sandinista policy and Miskitu resistance. This reads more like a book written by a journalist however. The personal engagement of an anthropologist presenting a people and exploring their life is missing, making the book read like a reporter getting a scoop rather than an anthropologist doing participant observation. I think the book would have been much better if Hale just took the chance of choosing a side and not worrying so much about trying to appear neutral.

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