



alliance for global justice

August 31st, 2023



NICANOTES

By Nan McCurdy

Published by the Nicaragua Network, a project of Alliance for Global Justice!

“We are building the Caribbean Coast of our dreams”

By Susan Lagos

(Susan Lagos is a retired teacher from California and retired farmer from near Dario, Nicaragua, where she has lived for 19 years).



Here the delegation meets with Caribbean Coast historian and Delegate of the Presidency Johnny Hodgson (front row in pale yellow shirt) at the regional council (legislature) building.

Recently I returned from a two-week delegation trip to the Southern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCS) of Nicaragua with Friends of the ATC (Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo or Rural Workers' Association) with 25 multi-cultural young first-time visitors from the US and England. I have lived in Nicaragua for 19 years, and like most Nicaraguans from the populated Pacific area, I have wanted to experience the Caribbean region, but previously access was very difficult to both the Northern and Southern Autonomous Regions, taking days, and even weeks during the rainy season, to arrive there.

First, the group spent three days at the ATC's IALA (Instituto Agroecológico Latinoamericano or Latin American Institute of Agroecology) near Santo Tomas, Chontales, (famous for cattle raising, where they say the rivers are milk and the rocks are cheese). We were able to milk cows, make fresh cuajada cheese, learn how to make organic fertilizer, and how to propagate pitahaya (dragon fruit) by hand at night when the huge flowers are open. We learned with the young students from cooperatives around Nicaragua, Central America, and the Dominican Republic, who are earning two-year degrees in agroecology to improve production and entrepreneurship back home in their communities. They learn to eliminate harmful pesticides and replace them with earth-friendly methods. Women and youth develop value-added products that help their family economies

beyond the basic beans, corn and squash, such as making chocolate from cacao, exporting pitahaya, augmenting their diet with tilapia in a fishpond, making wine from hibiscus tea flowers, etc. Nicaraguan small and medium-scale farmers produce about 90% of the food consumed in the country.

We headed east on the three-year-old concrete highway which now connects Nicaragua's two coasts, with a travel time of eight hours from Managua to Bluefields, thus making it possible to easily travel to sell products, study, work, etc. Finally, international shipments can be easily sent by truck from Pacific ports to the east side of the country, instead of detouring through Honduras, Panama, or Costa Rica, saving about half the cost of transportation. Also, a Dutch company will soon be starting the construction of a deep-water port for international trade in Bluefields Bay.

The next day in Bluefields (named after a Dutch pirate named Blauvelt) we heard a fascinating summary of the history of the area from Johnny Hodgson, Caribbean Coast historian and delegate of the presidency for the region. The Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua was a British Protectorate in the 1600's, with Mosquitia kings trading precious timber, turtle shells, and animal skins for metal and clothing. In 1783 with the Treaty of Paris, the British officially left the area to Spain. In 1894 it became part of Nicaragua, but it remained mostly under military control

in order to control the resources, with no importance given to the people.

It wasn't until 1987 with the Autonomy Law under the Sandinista government that there was a recognition of historical rights for a pluricultural Caribbean coast. Before, the Spanish language was imposed; but now other languages are official: creole English, Miskito, Mayangna, Ulwa, Garifuna, Rama, with a six-star autonomy flag. The old song "Brown skin girl, stay home and mind baby" became "Pretty black gal, let's build a free country." The construction of autonomy and interculturalism, within the context of national unity, is what Johnny Hodgson said is allowing Nicaragua to "build the Caribbean Coast of our dreams." Hodgson concluded by assuring us that heaven is pluricultural, and that anyone with an ethnocentric attitude is in for a big surprise....

That afternoon we visited three museums about the Afro-descendant and Indigenous history of the area, depicting the Miskito kings who ruled in the mid-1600s during the British Protectorate, the Moravian churches that founded schools starting in mid-1800's, and Carib Garifunas who were expelled by the English from the island of Saint Vincent arriving in coastal Honduras and then, in 1898, in Orinoco, Nicaragua. The next day we travelled by motorboat to Rama Cay, where the Rama people, originally from the Chibcha area of Colombia,

have preserved their language and traditions on the island and surrounding areas.

One morning at breakfast in our hotel dining room, I was surprised to recognize Orlando Pineda, famous since the 1980's for his many years of work with the National Literacy Campaign, first in the central Caribbean area, then along the Rio San Juan (where illiteracy was brought from 96% down to 4%). He then directed the "Yo Si Puedo" literacy program for adults, created in Cuba, mobilizing this method for the Miskito and Mayangna people in the North Caribbean, and is now bringing computers to the Rama communities. His book is titled "La montaña me enseñó a ser maestro" (The jungle taught me to be a teacher). I congratulated him for his life-long dedication.

We made a longer hour-and-a-half trip by fast motorboat north past the town of Pearl Lagoon to Orinoco, founded in 1898 by John Sambola and his family, from Honduras. Finally, I saw the connection between the cassava flat bread (bami or hereba) I had seen made near Angel Falls, Venezuela, near the Orinoco River, and the same cassava flat bread in the Garifuna area of coastal Honduras, and in the museum in Bluefields. The Caribs evidently moved from the Orinoco area in South America to Saint Vincent Island, where they intermarried with afrodescendants. When their brave hero Joseph Chatoyer (the Sandino of the Garifuna people) was killed

in 1795 by the English who coveted St. Vincent islands, the Garifunas were forcibly removed to Baliceaux (one of the Saint Vincent islands) where half of the population starved, and then to Roatan Island and the Honduran coast. Later John Sambola founded Orinoco in 1898, on the shore of Nicaragua's Pearl Lagoon, where they have preserved their language and customs, including the name of their town, their flat bread, and the punta dance.

We stayed at the Garifuna Hostel owned by Kensy Sambola and her Finnish husband Mateo. Since 2007 under the Sandinista government, each ethnic group on the Caribbean coast has its own autonomous government of its territory, allowing the inhabitants to follow their ancestral customs and language on communal lands, with the central government making multiple improvements to eradicate poverty. In Orinoco, school classes are in Garifuna, Creole, and Spanish. We visited the newly installed solar panels that provide electricity instead of part-time diesel generators. Walking over to Marshall Point, we visited another community with a Moravian Church and a factory that makes gifiti (rum with medicinal herbs).

Upon return to Bluefields, we were given a tour of the Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University (BICU) where classes are in Spanish, but professors and students also speak one or more other languages, an amazing

multicultural experience. Students from each culture (Rama, Creole, Ulwa, Miskito, Mayangna, and Garifuna) talked to us about their studies and experience there, with Professor Rodney Sambola as master of ceremonies. I was especially impressed because the original languages on the Pacific coast of Nicaragua - Chorotega, Nahuatl, and Matagalpa among others - have basically disappeared. A Matagalpa IALA student travelling with us told students that he felt sad comparing the loss of his native culture and language, seeing how well the Caribbean languages and culture have been preserved.



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Some of us stayed on to spend the last two days on Corn Island, a tropical paradise where I enjoyed Mari's rondón (traditional seafood soup made with coconut milk). Everyone left reluctantly after absorbing Nicaraguan hospitality, solidarity, and peace, observing how Nicaragua has been fighting poverty by guaranteeing free education, free health care, road access, electricity, water and 50% women in government. Please come see with your own eyes, and don't believe the lies in the US media by people who try to destroy the advances of Nicaragua, "the threat of a good example."