

# Property, Households and Public Regulation of Domestic Life: Diriomo, Nicaragua 1840–1900\*

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*Abstract.* This article examines changes in gender relations in an Indian *pueblo* in south-western Nicaragua between Independence and the coffee revolution, when the nation-state was weak and municipal governments exercised considerable power. It analyses landed property, household headship and public control over so-called private morality, and considers how these were influenced by the coffee economy. First, it argues that public regulation of domestic life was important in the consolidation of municipal authority. It legitimated the power of the ladino peasant elite, a key aspect of state formation at the local level. Second, the article examines how the rise of private property altered gendered arrangements. It analyses the relationship between expansion in female land rights and the incidence of female headed households and argues that peasant women's acquisition of land accentuated a pre-existing tendency towards non-marrying behaviour. The study is based on archival sources.

Between independence and the coffee revolution, when nation-states were weak throughout Central America, municipal governments exercised considerable power. Central to their rule was the public regulation of domestic life. This essay examines changes in the gender order in an Indian *pueblo* in Nicaragua in that interregnum. It analyses landed property, household headship and public control over so-called private morality, and considers how these were influenced by the coffee economy. I argue, first, the rise of private property significantly altered gendered arrangements in the Indian pueblos of southwestern Nicaragua; second, public regulation of domestic morality was pivotal in constructing state power at the local level.

Scholars of Central America agree that the rise of coffee was a historical

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turning point, particularly in the development of land and labour systems and in the process of state formation, although for the most part they have agreed to disagree about how to interpret those changes. Virtually absent from those debates has been the question of how the coffee revolution affected prevailing gender regimes, and whether this was of any great importance.<sup>1</sup> This article addresses these neglected issues, and concludes that a gendered analysis significantly broadens our understanding of how the coffee revolution altered land tenure, household composition and everyday state formation in rural Nicaragua. The question of labour systems I treat elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

First some definitions are necessary. The analytical distinction between household and family is clear: the former refers to residence, the latter to kinship. This is a study of the household, the social unit in evidence in census materials. The second caveat concerns the meaning of headship. The category 'female household headship' was popularised by social policy debates. All too frequently, however, there was ambiguity about what headship meant.<sup>3</sup> In this study imprecision regarding 'headship' derives from the historical sources; the censuses indicate household heads, but fail to define the category. I am confident, therefore, in quantifying female and male headship, but cautious in assigning meaning to those statistics.

<sup>1</sup> Lowell W. Gudmundson is among the few historians of Central America who analyse this issue; see *Costa Rica Before Coffee: Society and Economy on the Eve of the Coffee Boom* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1986). Verena Stolcke calls attention to this lacuna in 'The Labors of Coffee in Latin America: The Hidden Charm of Family Labor and Self-Provisioning', in William Roseberry, Lowell Gudmundson and Mario Samper Kutschbach (eds.), *Coffee, Society and Power in Latin America* (Baltimore and London, 1995), pp. 65–93. For gendered analyses of other Latin American coffee economies see Verena Stolcke, *Coffee Planters, Workers and Wives: Class Conflict and Gender Relations on Sao Paulo Plantations, 1850–1980* (Basingstoke, 1988); and Heather Fowler-Salamini, 'Gender, Work, and Coffee in Córdoba, Veracruz, 1850–1910', in Heather Fowler-Salamini and Mary Kay Vaughan (eds.), *Women of the Mexican Countryside, 1850–1990* (Tucson, 1994), pp. 51–73. For analyses of gender and state formation in Latin America see Donna Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1990); E. Bradford Burns, *Patriarch and Folk: The Emergence of Nicaragua, 1789–1858* (Cambridge, MA, 1991); Mark Szuchman, *Order, Family and Community in Buenos Aires, 1810–1860* (Stanford, 1988); and Marjorie Becker, 'Torching La Purísima: Dancing at the Altar: The Construction of Revolutionary Hegemony in Michoacán, 1934–1940', in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (eds.), *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, 1994), pp. 247–64.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Dore, *Nicaragua: A Myth of Modernity; Property, Gender and Patronage in Rural Granada, 1840–1990* (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> For a critique of the category 'female household headship' see Ann Varley, 'Women Heading Households: Some More Equal than Others?', *World Development*, vol. 24, no. 3 (1996), pp. 505–20; Sylvia Chant, *Women-Headed Households: Diversity and Dynamics in the Developing World* (Basingstoke, 1997).

Finally, state formation is the politics of legitimating rule. Generally, historians of the state focus on the apparatus of government with its overt manifestations of pomp and power. Corrigan and Sayer break from this convention. In *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution*, they emphasise the hidden history of state formation, particularly of the bourgeois state.<sup>4</sup> In this approach, state formation is the process of constructing particular social relations and identities and destroying others. Largely through regulation of the mundane activities of life, the state – the organised power of the ruling classes – naturalises a specific form of class, gender and ethnic domination. In most cases this has been accomplished insidiously. Gradually one historically unique form of rule came to be thought of as normal, as the only way society could be organised. Alternative social relations and identities were rendered abnormal, made to seem subversive, and were suppressed.

With the absence of viable nation-states in Central America between independence and the coffee boom, municipal governments took the lead in regulating the social order. As such they were central to the consolidation of secular authority in the public sphere; they were the vanguard of the emergent Liberal State. There are vast differences, theoretically and historically, between the consolidation of the bourgeois state in England and the patronage state in nineteenth-century Nicaragua. Nevertheless, ‘state formation as cultural revolution’ allows us to understand how, following the collapse of the Spanish colonial state, a *ladino*, male peasant elite consolidated its class, gender and ethnic domination: it remade its ‘world’ – an Indian town in Nicaragua – in its own image. This study of the regulation of gender in a rural society forms part of the history of everyday forms of state formation in Latin America.

This is a case study of Diriomo, an Indian community radically transformed by the coffee boom of the late nineteenth century. The town of Diriomo and its rural *caseríos* (hamlets) are located on a *meseta* formed by the Managua–Granada–Jinotepe triangle in southwestern Nicaragua. It is in the cluster of villages and towns today known as ‘Los Pueblos’. The history of Diriomo is, with certain variations, the story of the Meseta de los Pueblos.

The argument is developed in four parts. Part One describes the gendered nature of common property regimes and the regulation of domestic morality before the rise of coffee. Part Two treats transfor-

<sup>4</sup> Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford, 1985). Corrigan and Sayer analyse the particularities of bourgeois state formation in England. I adopt aspects of their theory in studying the non-bourgeois state in nineteenth-century Central America.

mations in land tenure. Land privatisation had a different meaning for the women of the Indian community than for its men. The revolution in landed property expropriates land from some Indian men, albeit a minority. In contrast, it expanded female land rights and facilitated women's acquisition of land. Part Three examines the relationship between changes in the social organisation of land and household headship. Land privatisation may have accentuated a pre-existing tendency towards non-marrying behaviour in the *pueblo*. Part Four analyses public regulation of domestic life and how this fortified the local elite and their instrument of rule, Diriomo's municipal government. The conclusion argues that public regulation of gender was an aspect of state formation in Nicaragua.

*Patriarchy and common property*

In Diriomo the coffee revolution altered the nature of property, local power and the gender order more, perhaps, than anything else since the cataclysm of conquest. In the colonial period the Crown granted Diriomo, a rural community on the outskirts of the city of Granada, the status of *comunidad indígena*, and with this about one square league of common land (4,350 acres). Until the middle of the nineteenth century that land, *el común*, which included fields, pastures, forests, rivers and lakes, was held in the name of the community, and administered by its leaders. Although land was not privately owned, by the nineteenth century differential wealth in the form of *mejoras*, or improvements to the land, such as hedgerows, fruit trees, crops and cattle, stratified Indian society.

Stratification by wealth was modest and sometimes difficult to discern; in contrast, property differentiation by gender was stark and transparent. Common property rights were male rights, membership in the *comunidad indígena* was restricted to adult males and *mejoras* were owned by men. Evidence for this comes from three sources. In the first, a land claim from the 1860s, the claimant described the old system of rights to *el común*.<sup>5</sup> In the second, the mayor of the municipality itemised property in *mejoras* owned by individuals within the Indian community in the 1840s. No

<sup>5</sup> Archivo Municipal de Diriomo (AMD), Rama: Corporación Municipal, Sección: Alcaldía Municipal, Asunto: Tierras Ejidales, Diego Cano pide al Alcalde Municipal, 18 May 1868. Similar male property systems have been found in Indian peasant communities in Chihuahua, Mexico, and the Central Highlands of Peru. For Mexico see Daniel Nugent and Ana María Alonso, 'Multiple Selective Traditions in Agrarian Reform and Agrarian Struggle: Popular Culture and State Formation in the Ejido of Namiquipa, Chihuahua', in Joseph and Nugent (eds.), *Everyday Forms of State Formation*, pp. 209–46. For Peru see Florencia E. Mallon, 'Patriarchy in the Transition to Capitalism: Central Peru, 1830–1950', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Summer 1987), pp. 379–407.

women were on that list.<sup>6</sup> In the third, petitions for private land filed in the throes of the coffee revolution, Indian women invoked fathers' traditional usufruct rights to the commons; no mention was made of mothers' land rights.<sup>7</sup>

It seems then, that *indias'* formal access to the commons derived from male kin. This contrasts with men's membership in the *comunidad indígena*, which inherited through matrilineal descent. In other words, in this and probably other *comunidades indígenas* in nineteenth-century Central America, rights to common resources passed through women, yet passed them by.<sup>8</sup> *Cofradías*, which owned and administered an important part of the collective wealth of the community, in particular herds and pastures, also concentrated power in domains from which women were excluded. In summary, women's formal access to the material resources of the community was mediated through kinship relations with men.

Political power within the *comunidad* was another masculine domain. As community members, only adult males had voice and vote in communal deliberations.<sup>9</sup> Governance of the community was entrusted to a male civil-religious hierarchy, led by the *alcalde indígena*, which allocated usufruct rights, adjudicated disputes, administered the treasury (*caja de comunidad*) and organised religious fiestas.

The relationship between these male-dominated economic–political institutions and conjugal–residence patterns in Diriomo's Indian community prior to the coffee boom remain something of an enigma. Information on family forms in Nicaragua's Indian townships between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries is scarce. Some evidence about marriage behaviour prior to independence is found in the Bula de la Santa Cruzada of 1776, a census administered for religious purposes

<sup>6</sup> AMD, Correspondencia, Prefectura Departamental al Alcalde Constitucional de Diriomo, 3 March, 6 May, 11 June, 26 July 1849. In response to requests from the Prefectura Departamental in Granada for information about individual wealth for the purposes of levying a war tax, the Alcalde of Diriomo sent lists of owners of property and *mejoras*, which included members of Indian community.

<sup>7</sup> AMD, Rama: Corporación Municipal, Sección: Alcaldía Municipal, Asunto: Tierras, 19 Oct. 1864, 8 Dec. 1865, 9 March 1865; Libro de Demandas Verbales, 1867, 'Entre Josefa Ramírez y Víctor Ayala por la compra de una huerta,' 19 July.

<sup>8</sup> It would be foolhardy to generalise about 'indigenous' gender relations in Latin America from one or two cases. Nevertheless, there may be a certain romanticism in the so-called theories of 'pre-Western' or pre-capitalist gender equality. For the first see Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock (eds.), *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York, 1980), pp. v–vi; for the second, Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Documents from a near-by Indian community, Nindirí, indicate a practice of collective male decision-making. An incomplete record of deliberations, about whether the community should sell its lands, documents participation by men only. AMD, Ramo de Agricultura, 1978, Deliberaciones: Comunidad Indígena de Nindirí, 18 Feb. 1878.

throughout Central America. According to the Bula about 30 per cent of Indian men and women in Diriomo were unmarried.<sup>10</sup> This is consistent with the pattern of non-marrying behaviour found throughout Latin America at that time, especially among the popular classes.<sup>11</sup>

In the late colonial period *ladinos*, people of mixed Spanish, Indian and African heritage, settled in the *pueblos* of southwestern Nicaragua, renting land from the Indian communities.<sup>12</sup> In 1776, seven per cent of the population of Diriomo was described as *ladino*.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, Indian and *ladino* identities gradually blurred, contributing to a process of *ladinoisation* in the region. Yet by the 1850s, this process was not far advanced in Los Pueblos. In Diriomo, the major signifier of indianness remained men's usufruct rights to the commons. As long as the *comunidad indígena* controlled access to land, Indian identity survived.<sup>14</sup>

After Central American independence, ethnic categories were abolished in law; in practice they did not disappear. In Nicaragua, with a vacuum of power at the level of nation-state, political authority devolved to the regions and locales. Municipalities with their governing body, their *junta municipal*, were superimposed on *comunidades indígenas*, a prior ethno-political jurisdiction. Tensions inherent in the co-existence of the Indian and municipal jurisdictions intensified in Diriomo when it became apparent that municipal politics was *de facto* a *ladino* sphere. Nicaragua's first constitutions conferred citizenship and the vote exclusively on men of property.<sup>15</sup> Although those charters did not explicitly exclude Indians from citizenship, as they did women, no man of the *casta indígena*

<sup>10</sup> Archivo General de Centro América (AGCA) A.39 (5), Exp. 28130, Leg. 1749, Bula de la Santa Cruzada, 3 July 1776. This population count was administered by ecclesiastical authorities for the purpose of selling indulgences. According to the Bula, in Diriomo 64 per cent of the adult Indian population was married, 31 per cent was single and 4 per cent widowed. It is not apparent what the categories 'married' and 'single' meant, for instance, whether people in consensual unions were considered married or single. Also, it is unclear whether the data refer only to the town centre, or whether it includes rural hamlets.

<sup>11</sup> For a critical analysis of the Latin American historical literature on female household heads in the 18th and 19th centuries, see Elizabeth Dore, 'The Holy Family: Imagined Households in Latin American History', in Elizabeth Dore (ed.), *Gender Politics in Latin America: Debates in Theory and Practice* (New York, 1997), pp. 101–117. Also Silvia Marina Arrom, *The Women of Mexico City, 1790–1857* (Stanford, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Following Spanish convention, *ladino* and *indio* refer to men, *ladina* and *india* to women. I use the masculine form (*ladino/indio*) to refer to collectivities of men and women.

<sup>13</sup> AGCA, A.39 (5), Exp. 28130, Leg. 1749, Bula de la Santa Cruzada, 3 July 1776. A total of 1,116 adults lived in the township in 1776. 1,027 (92%) were Indian, 73 (7%) were *ladino* (*mestizo* and mulato) 1% were Spanish.

<sup>14</sup> On *ladinoisation* see Jeffrey L. Gould, "'!Vana Ilusión!'" The Highlands Indians and the Myth of Nicaragua Mestiza, 1880–1925', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 73, no. 3 (Aug. 1993), pp. 393–429.

<sup>15</sup> On the Constitutions of 1826 and 1838 see Burns, *Patriarch and Folk*, p. 133.

participated in Diriomo's *corporación municipal*. Indian and *ladino* political spheres were separate and increasingly unequal, the former subordinated to the latter.

Diriomo's *ladino* citizens, fifty or so men of the rich peasantry, elected the *junta municipal*. At its head sat the *alcalde municipal*, the main political force in Diriomo. He was simultaneously the town's mayor, civil and criminal judge, bailiff, notary, and sometimes scribe. No man on the *junta municipal* claimed private ownership of land, yet all fulfilled the property requirement for citizenship. Like the Indian leaders they owned *mejoras*, or the products of labour; unlike Indians their property included more substantial items such as mills and carts.<sup>16</sup> Property in the products of labour, modest as it was, formed the economic basis of class stratification within the *pueblo*. Most men, whether Indian or *ladino*, had little property besides their clothes, rustic houses, small domestic animals and machetes.

By the middle of the nineteenth century ethnic differentiation in this region of Nicaragua was only remotely related to racial origin. Whether families were Indian or *ladino* increasingly depended on a mix of wealth, culture and politics. The first provided the possibility of social mobility which could effect ethnic transubstantiation. The second, a question of self-identification and labelling by others, was manifested concretely in land rights. The third, municipal power, was at the heart of increasing ethnic, as well as class and gender, disparities in the *pueblo*. The *junta municipal* became the motor of peasant differentiation, although in the middle of the nineteenth century this process was still at an early stage.

Gender relations, both within and between the Indian and *ladino* communities, rested on a mixture of material, ideological and biological elements. In the first two, the material and ideological, control over property was central to gender differentiation, although it was ruled by different customs and laws in the two ethnic communities. In the case of *indias*, exclusion from direct access to property was customary and pertained to all females of the *comunidad*, regardless of marital status. In the case of *ladinas*, exclusion from property reflected Hispanic law, which differentiated women by marital status. According to Nicaragua's civil code, single women and widows could control property, if they were fortunate enough to have any, married women could not.<sup>17</sup> In conclusion,

<sup>16</sup> Until the 1860s property transactions in Diriomo involved the buying and selling of *mejoras*, improvements to the land, not land itself. This system of ownership is apparent in bills of sale, wills and disputes over property, which recorded frequent transactions involving animals and crops, none involving land. See, for example, AMD, Juzgado Unico Constitucional de Diriomo, El Sr Tiffer intentando la prohibitoria a Don Vicente Espinosa sobre una huerta..., 23 Jan. 1864.

<sup>17</sup> For details on gender differentiation in Nicaraguan property law, see Luis Zuñiga Osorio, 'Patria Potestad', tesis para el doctor en derecho (Managua, 1935), pp. 32–8.

social relations of patriarchy, understood as senior male authority over everyone in the household, were substantively different in the two ethnic communities in Diriomo.

As the *junta municipal* consolidated its power in the *pueblo*, it eroded pre-existing ethnic differences in gender regimes. This might be called the *ladinisation* of gender. Like the process of *ladinisation* itself, it was still in an incipient stage in the middle of the nineteenth century. Tribunals, comprised of the *alcalde* and two '*hombres de bien*', adjudicated disputes involving honour, domestic violence, and rape. Thus, before conflicts over land and labour engrossed the attention of the *junta municipal*, a small group of rich *ladino* peasants increasingly imposed their moral ethos on the community at large. This fraternity normalised two codes of conduct for women of the *pueblo*: one for elite *ladinas*, another for poor women, mostly *indias*. The *junta* enforced an honour code for the former, which included sexual purity before marriage and monogamy afterwards. For the latter, Diriomo's elite *ladinos* encouraged a different model of sexuality.

Both gender regimes precipitated an assortment of struggles within the juridical sphere. In one case, a *ladina* matron spent months and a small fortune to defend her honour. In a trial that polarised the elite of the *pueblo*, Juana Carballo accused Olaya Vásquez of 'bringing about the loss of my publically recognised honour as a good wife and mother'.<sup>18</sup> The heart of the dispute was whether Vásquez initiated the rumour that Carballo had had sexual relations with Vásquez's husband ten years earlier. At the trial Carballo declared, through the intermediation of her husband, that 'as the public judges people's honour, I cannot allow the evil that directly spoiled my person and reputation to pass in silence'. Seventeen male witnesses provided testimony about the character and conduct of Carballo and Vásquez, as well as about their husbands and families. In the end, the *juzgado* ruled that Vásquez defamed Carballo and sentenced her to prison.

The case is interesting for a number of reasons. It demonstrates the power of the *pueblo's* male elite to regulate gender norms, an authority gradually appropriated by the *junta municipal* from the Church. Furthermore, it underlines the public nature of a woman's honour, and its importance to the extended family. The litigants, witnesses and judges all repeatedly described honour as a public virtue. This stood in stark contrast to the fact that a married woman had virtually no public legal persona. In the eyes of the law she was for most purposes her husband's

<sup>18</sup> AMD, Juzgado Municipal de Diriomo (JMD), Demanda verbal motivada por Juana Carballo y Olaya Vásquez por difamación de delito, 14 Nov. 1865. For a similar case see JMD, Libro de Conciliaciones, 1843, Demanda motivada por La Sra Juana Isabel López, 14 March 1843.

chattel. Finally, married women's invisibility was evident in the courthouse drama. Both women stood silently; their spouses spoke for them. The court room was a Kafkaesque theatre where married women had no voice, where their existence was acknowledged through the words of their husbands, and where the town's patriarchs sat in judgement on domestic morality.

In a different vein the *alcalde* and his appointees regulated the sexuality of poor women. Not infrequently, humble women accused wealthy *ladinos* of sexual assault. Although the majority of those charges were dismissed by the tribunal for insufficient evidence, the accusations alone stand as evidence that some women of the popular sectors did not accept the elite's bifurcated morality.<sup>19</sup> Few plaintiffs were as successful as Gertrudis Banegas, who accused a member of the *junta municipal* of raping and kidnapping her daughter. In line with local custom, Banegas' denunciation was dismissed by Diriomo's tribunal. However, the case was transferred to Granada, possibly because Banegas had access to cash or to a political patron.<sup>20</sup>

In the period the *junta municipal* was consolidating its power in the community, there were numerous accusations that elite *ladinos* sexually abused poor *indias*. This raises the question whether the patriarchs' routine, possibly systematic, violation of poor women, mostly poor *indias*, was one means of fortifying *ladino* authority in the *pueblo*. There are at least two possible explanations for the increased visibility of what today we call sexual abuse. First, such practices had been endemic to the exercise of class and ethnic domination in Latin America since the conquest.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, in the *pueblos* of Nicaragua it may have assumed a more public dimension with the social transformations that accompanied the coffee revolution. Alternatively, the post-independence establishment of municipal tribunals in the Indian *pueblos* might have precipitated public denunciations of elite male behaviour, something which in the past attracted little official attention.<sup>22</sup>

Another case sheds light on the ways in which class and gender hierarchies were sustained in rural Nicaragua. In 1869 Marcelino Cano

<sup>19</sup> AMD, Libros de Terminaciones Verbales, 1851–73. In twenty-three years, 102 accusations of rape, sexual assault and battery were lodged by women. Eighty-three of those charges were dismissed by the *alcalde* for insufficient evidence.

<sup>20</sup> AMD, Libro de Terminaciones Verbales, Gertrudis Banegas expone que el Sr Tomás Vasconcelos ha perpetrado los delitos de raptó y estrupo en mi hija... 11 June 1869.

<sup>21</sup> Cecilia Salinas, *Virtud sumisa, amor rebelde* (Santiago, Chile, 1994); Sonia Montesinos, *Madres y huachos* (Santiago, Chile, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Eugenia Rodríguez Saenz suggests this might reflect democratisation of power. See, 'Civilizing Domestic Life: Women, State, Catholic Church and Community Strategies Against Domestic Violence in the Central Valley of Costa Rica, 1750–1850', mimeo, 1996.

accused Diriomo's parish priest of illegally detaining his wife.<sup>23</sup> On two occasions, when Cano tried to remove his wife from the priest's house, the curate struck him. At first, Cano took no action against the clergyman because, in his words, 'the priest is a person of dignity'. However, Cano complained to the Bishop of Granada the second time, after he lost the use of his left eye and could not work. Angered by the Bishop's lack of response and the priest's on-going mistreatment of townspeople, Cano denounced the priest to the town's civil tribunal. The *juzgado* refused to adjudicate the case – not, however, because it fell within an ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Permitting the case to proceed, said the *alcalde*, 'would encourage men of Cano's social standing to show disrespect for people in authority'.<sup>24</sup> This is local state-making. Extending his authority to regulate morality, the *alcalde municipal* reproduced the class-gender domination of the township's elite.

In the interim between independence and the coffee revolutions power was exercised mostly at the local level in Central America. This was an era of municipal government formation and the consolidation of regional ruling elites. Central to these processes was the public regulation of sexuality by municipal authorities. With the emergence of the Liberal state, weak though it was in Nicaragua, the middle of the nineteenth century saw early moves towards the secularisation of society. Where, before, the Church monopolised the regulation of marital relations and sexual behaviour, incipient municipal governments took on this role as their own. In so far as this legitimated municipal political authority in an area so central, yet traditionally sacred, as control over the body and the sacrament of marriage, this was a bold move. In Diriomo the *junta municipal* united the customary powers of the Church and the family patriarch. In this process the male *ladino* elite became in two senses the town fathers.

We know little, in the case of the *ladino* minority, less in the case of the Indian majority, about gender relations with the household. I am not suggesting, therefore, that social control over women or regulation of gender norms (and the two are not the same thing) occurred mostly within the public sphere. My argument is that the patriarchal household was not the only, probably not even the primary, site of regulation and contestation of gender relations. The construction of gender is a social, as opposed to an individual, process. In rural Nicaragua that process was an important part of the everyday formation of municipal government in the last century. *Juntas* regulated gender norms and sexuality, and in exercising

<sup>23</sup> AMD, Libro de Terminaciones Verbales, Sr Marcelino Cano contra el cura de almas de este pueblo Parroco Don Aureliano Gutierrez, 18 Feb. 1869. <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

that authority fortified their political power. This was an important part of the process of state formation in Nicaragua.

*From common to private property*

The privatisation of coffee lands in Diriomo began in the 1860s, ended sometime around 1930, and can be roughly divided into three periods.<sup>25</sup> In the first, almost before anyone in Diriomo understood what private property in land meant, oligarchs from Granada appropriated some of the best coffee lands in the *pueblo*. Next, Diriomo's rich peasants – its *ladino* elite – became aware that the tide was turning towards private property in land, and claimed what they could of the Indian commons and the municipality's *ejidos*. Finally, realising that a revolution in landed property had changed the nature of their world, poor Diriomeños, Indian and *ladino*, struggled to acquire title to the plots they and their ancestors had cultivated.

This political upheaval fortified the authority of Diriomo's *junta municipal*. The process involved little buying and selling of land. Wealth and power lubricated what was on one level a legal procedure, but more profoundly a political system built around patronage and clientelism. Taken as a whole, by 1930 that process created a socially differentiated peasantry in Diriomo, as it did in the other regions of western Nicaragua. A central element of that upheaval was a transformation in gendered property relations. Within the Indian community, it broke the male monopoly on land rights and ushered in female landholding. In the township at large it was associated with women's expanded participation in the cash economy and a rising proportion of female household heads.

Nineteenth-century liberalism in Nicaragua was not the political arm of a bourgeois revolution.<sup>26</sup> It was associated, nonetheless, with consolidation of the nation-state, land privatisation and codification of individual rights, all differentiated by gender. Civil codes enacted as part of a Liberal agenda throughout Latin America confirmed the Hispanic legal tradition of bi-lateral or partible inheritance. Latin American women in the middle of the nineteenth century could own, inherit and bequeath property. For married women this right was heavily encumbered, more so even than in the colonial period. With the rise of private land, marriage took on particular importance as a property relation, and the codification

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Dore, 'Land Privatization and the Differentiation of the Peasantry: Nicaragua's Coffee Revolution, 1850–1920', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 8, no. 3 (Sept. 1995), pp. 303–26.

<sup>26</sup> David McCreery calls this aborted liberalism. *Rural Guatemala, 1760–1940* (Stanford, 1994).

of private property in land in the late nineteenth century went hand-in-hand with a redefinition of marriage. Paternity and maternity, to an extent fluid categories in colonial law, were defined more explicitly and restrictively in Latin America's new civil codes.<sup>27</sup>

Nicaragua's Civil Code of 1867 spelled out the terms whereby a husband controlled his wife's property and sexuality. Property a woman owned before marriage she retained; however, its control passed to her spouse. Wealth acquired during marriage (*gananciales*) was jointly owned, administered by the husband, and divided equally upon the death of either partner. In several ways death emancipated married women. Widows and deceased wives acquired 'male' rights to property: the former to control it, the latter to bequeath it.

Largely for reasons of property, Nicaragua's Civil Codes of 1867 and 1871 legislated sexuality. To facilitate inheritance the law sought to simplify identification of biological parents. To that end it granted a husband legal control over his wife's womb, and by extension her sexual practices.<sup>28</sup> First, a wife's legal rights, such as they were, pertained only if she was 'decent', defined as monogamous and obedient to her husband. In cases of marital separation, a husband could confine his wife 'con una familia honrada' for ten months. Although the code does not elaborate on this point, it seems clear the objective was to ensure that if she gave birth, the child would be the husband's offspring. In addition to provisions protecting the right of the father, the code legitimated homicide. If a husband could prove his wife's adultery, he had the legal right to kill her. If he was the adulterer, as long as his infidelities were not flagrant, his wife had no legal recourse to redress the situation. Whereas a wife's infidelities were grounds for murder, a husband's did not justify separation. A man's right to murder his wife was struck from Nicaragua's civil code in 1904. However, for a further fifty years male adultery was legally sanctioned. This may explain, in part, why extra-legal polygamy remains widely tolerated in Nicaragua at the end of the 20th century.<sup>29</sup>

Nicaragua's civil code in 1867, particularly its property provisions, had unintended consequences for the gendered order in rural society. Around

<sup>27</sup> Silvia Arrom, 'Changes in Mexican Family Law in the Nineteenth Century: The Civil Codes of 1870 and 1884', *Journal of Family History*, vol. 10, no. 3 (Fall 1985), pp. 376–91.

<sup>28</sup> Although the Nicaraguan Code does not explicitly refer to 'the womb' as such, it was not uncommon to do so at this time in Latin America. The Rio Branco Law of 1871 in Brazil was called 'the Law of the Free Womb'. It decreed that children born of slave mothers would be free upon reaching the age of majority.

<sup>29</sup> The 1904 amendment to the Civil Code of 1867 stated that a wife could be granted a divorce on grounds of 'el concubinato del marido, siempre que tenga a la mujer en su propia casa, o notoriamente en otro sitio, o cuando en el hecho concurren tales circunstancias que constituyan una injuria grave para la esposa y finalmente el abandono manifiesto.' Zuñiga Osorio, 'Patria Potestad', p. 40.

1880, when middle and poor peasants in Diriomo came to realise they could not reverse the property revolution, they sought to join it. Men and women of the rural poor embarked upon the lengthy and bewildering legal process of titling land. This began with a claim of prior possession. For men of Diriomo's Indian community this was relatively straightforward as it rested on their usufruct rights to the commons. For women of the community it was more ambiguous. As they did not have parallel land rights, their petitions regularly invoked the rights of their fathers.<sup>30</sup>

Following an assortment of affidavits, testimonies, surveys and fees – all facilitated by a patron – the *junta municipal* awarded fortunate claimants *derecho de posesión*. Many people who petitioned for land rights, especially poor Indians and *ladinos*, were unsuccessful. Some were unable to muster the support of a patron, others sold their claims, many others never had that opportunity. Someone with more power or a more powerful patron simply appropriated their land. What is unexpected, however, especially given the emphasis in Nicaraguan historiography on peasants' wholesale loss of land in the coffee revolution, is *not* that many small peasants never acquired land, but that so many did.<sup>31</sup> Even more surprising, is the number of women who succeeded in their claims.

In the early stages of land privatisation in Diriomo, dominated by the formation of large holdings, women who acquired land were elite *ladinas*. Poor women became active participants in the property revolution at a later stage, in the creation of a landed peasantry with small *parcelas* (plots). Land records indicate that by 1920 about 15 per cent of small holdings in Diriomo were owned by women. Given *indias'* former exclusion from land rights, and women's absence from the formal political sphere, female land ownership was relatively high. The question, and one not easily answered, is what enabled poor peasant women to engage in the process of land privatisation in Los Pueblos? I suggest that the answer lies in a combination of factors: the decline of the Indian community, the ethnic blindness of property law, and a rise in female-headed peasant households.

It is evident from the historical record that the whole idea of private

<sup>30</sup> AMD, Rama: Corporación Municipal, Sección: Alcaldía Municipal, Asunto: Tierras, 19 Oct. 1864, 8 Dec. 1865, 9 March 1865; Libro de Demandas Verbales, 1867, 'Entre Josefa Ramírez y Víctor Ayala por la compra de una huerta,' 19 July.

<sup>31</sup> Influential historians of Nicaragua argue that the coffee revolution created a rural proletariat. See Jaime Wheelock Román, *Imperialismo y dictadura: crisis de una formación social* (Mexico, 1979) and Oscar René Vargas, *La revolución que inició el progreso, Nicaragua, 1893–1909* (Managua, 1990). For a counter interpretation see Dore, 'Land Privatization and the Differentiation of the Peasantry'. For analysis of land privatisation in Carazo see Julie A. Charlip, 'At their own risk: Coffee Farmers and Debt in Nicaragua,' in Aviva Chomsky and Aldo Lauria Santiago (eds.), *At the Margins of the Nation-State: Identity and Struggle in the Making of the Laboring Peoples of Central America, 1860–1950* (Durham, forthcoming).

property in land, especially of female land rights, was new in Diriomo and not readily understood. Repeatedly *alcaldes* spelled out why and how a woman could own and bequeath land. On one of many such occasions, the *alcalde* invited the public to the *chagüite* (farm) of a deceased *ladina*. There he explained in detail how the law regarding private property worked.

the deceased Antonina contracted matrimony with Juan Evangelista, neither one brought any property to the marriage, but they acquired, during their union, the goods listed above... These should be divided equally, as they are the product of the marital union, and one half will be given to the surviving spouse and the other half divided between the two children.<sup>32</sup>

The property revolution in Nicaragua altered the gendered system of landholding among the rural majority. With the rise of private property, the regime of male common property rights gave way to a peasant society in which men and women owned plots of land. This change in the gender order was not a consequence of the revolution in landed property; it was central to it.

Coffee production for export contributed to the commercialisation of the local economy, a process the *junta municipal* struggled to manage. It required merchants and artisans to buy commercial licences and pay taxes to the *junta*.<sup>33</sup> An 1883 census of Diriomo indicates that women played an active role in the emerging cash economy. An equal number of women and men were listed as artisans and merchants.<sup>34</sup> About 65 per cent of female artisans and merchants in the township were unmarried, either single or widowed. Two factors might explain the preponderance of unmarried women among economically active females. The first is the feminisation of poverty: women in households without an adult male had to earn cash to supplement the household economy. But these same data can be read differently; because females could earn cash, they could head households. They had less need to be economically dependent on a man. In addition, the legal requirement that a married women have her husband's explicit consent to enter into contracts might have had a dampening effect on married women's activities in the cash economy.

As to artisanal work, it was gendered along lines we have come to expect: cooking, sewing, baking and washing clothes were 'female' occupations; carpentry, woodworking, quarrying, and smithing 'male' ones. In commerce, however, the gendering of work was less in evidence.

<sup>32</sup> AMD, Inventario y tasación de los bienes...de Antonina Jiménez, 6 April 1861.

<sup>33</sup> AMD, Actas de la Junta Municipal, 16 Jan., 18 Feb. 1873.

<sup>34</sup> Archivo Municipal de la Prefectura de Granada (AMPG), Caja 191, Leg. X7, Fol. 152, Censo de la Población: Diriomo, Año 1883. Approximately 7% of adult women and the same percentage of adult men worked in the cash economy. For women, 48 out of a total of 716; for adult men, 51 out of a total of 676.

Of the town's 25 licensed merchants, ten were women. As many authors have pointed out, commerce on a grand scale in Latin America was the province of men, petty trade of women. This pattern was reproduced in Diriomo. Men were wholesale and long-distance merchants; women were shopkeepers and local market traders.<sup>35</sup>

Land privatisation gradually ate away at the Indian communities on the Meseta de los Pueblos. There was a decline in Diriomo's Indian population in a period of little more than one hundred years. In 1776, 92 per cent of the population of Diriomo was listed as Indian; in 1883, 74 per cent was recorded as Indian.<sup>36</sup> Notwithstanding decline, the important point here is how Indian the *pueblo* remained in 1883, even after the onslaught of the coffee revolution, not how *ladino* it had become. The preponderance of Indians is striking, particularly in light of the tendency in nineteenth-century Central American censuses to under-report the Indian population.<sup>37</sup>

In conclusion, the coffee revolution was associated with a significant transformation in gendered property relations and ethnic identity in Diriomo. The male monopoly on land which characterised the common property regime gave way to an agrarian system in which women as well as men were peasant proprietors. In addition, the expansion of the cash economy was associated with an increase in women's participation in commerce and artisanal work.

#### *Private property and household headship*

The social upheavals that accompanied the coffee revolution left their mark on household headship in Diriomo. In 1882, 40 per cent of households in the *pueblo* were headed by women and it appears that marriage was less widespread than it had been a century earlier.<sup>38</sup> Whereas 31 per cent of the adult population was single in 1776, 51 per cent was single in 1883.<sup>39</sup> Although we do not know whether for census purposes

<sup>35</sup> For details on women's participation in the cash economy see Dore, 'Patriarchy and Private Property in Nicaragua', in Valentine M. Moghadam (ed.), *Patriarchy and Development* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 56–79.

<sup>36</sup> AGCA, A.39 (5), Exp. 28130, Leg. 1749, Bula de la Santa Cruzada, 3 July 1776; and AMPG, Caja 191, Leg. X7, Fol. 152, Censo de la Población: Diriomo, Año 1883. Although ethnic labels in censuses are notoriously unreliable, I consider census data before the twentieth century useful as a gross indicator of ethnic identity in Diriomo.

<sup>37</sup> Gould, '¡Vana Illusion!'; Justin Wolfe, 'Becoming Mestizo: Ethnicity, Culture and Nation in Nicaragua, 1850–1900', paper presented at the Tercer Congreso Centroamericano de Historia (San José, Costa Rica: 15–18 July 1996).

<sup>38</sup> AMPG, Caja 175, Leg. 486, Fol. 121, Censo del Departamento de Granada, Año 1882.

<sup>39</sup> AMPG, Censo de 1883. Of all adults 40% married, 51% were single, 9% were widowed.

‘married’ meant in a conjugal union, legal or otherwise, the comparative data indicate a rise in non-marrying behaviour. Combined with the high incidence of female-headed households in 1883, we have a very different picture of peasant society in rural Latin America from the one we have been routinely offered. The traditional view of the peasant household as male-headed, extended and with at least two working adults is not applicable to Diriomo or, as I have argued elsewhere, to most of rural Latin America in the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup>

This evidence suggests a link between the coffee revolution and disintegration of the traditional patriarchal household. That strong conclusion merits careful scrutiny, however. Such a premise rests on the notion that the patriarchal household was pervasive in the preceding historical period. While that might have been the case, as indicated by a higher incidence of marriage in 1776, I believe the evidence here remains inconclusive for a number of reasons, not least that the 1776 census was administered by the church, the institution charged with ensuring the population married. Instead, I offer a weaker hypothesis. Women’s landownership and participation in the expanding commercial economy provided certain material possibilities for female household headship that did not exist previously. It is also possible that an inclination towards non-marrying behaviour on the part of women of the upper and middle strata was enhanced by patriarchal law. A single woman retained control over whatever resources she might possess; married she forfeited control. Yet, for most women such advantages of marital independence may well have been off-set by disadvantages, both economic and social, associated with remaining unwed.

While the image of the female household head may bring to mind unwed mothers, the stereotype of contemporary policy debates, in nineteenth century Diriomo widows headed about 35 per cent of female headed households. This means, of course, that 65 per cent of those households were headed by single women, mostly mothers. In another epoch both widows and single mothers might have been subsumed into a male-headed household. It is possible, however, that expanding opportunities for female landholding and participation in the cash economy gave those women the wherewithal to maintain a separate residence.

The evidence of female household headship combined with a tendency towards non-marrying behaviour underlines connections between women’s economic dependence and male control over female property, labour and sexuality. When women enjoyed some degree of economic independence, modest though it might have been among the peasants of

<sup>40</sup> Dore, ‘The Holy Family’.

Diriomo, we find a society in which marriage was not a universal norm, nor male household headship all-pervasive.

The fact that almost 40 per cent of households in Diriomo were female-headed in the late nineteenth century is of major significance for understanding the unfolding process of peasant differentiation. It may partly explain the relatively high percentage of peasant land titles held by women, and women's active participation in the cash economy. While more research is needed to understand the ways in which gender affected social differentiation and *vice versa*, the story so far suggests a strong link between male monopoly over productive resources and the male-headed household. When women became small peasant landholders and participated in the cash economy there was a very high incidence of female-headed households in the *pueblo*. This history sustains the idea that property relations are sexual relations in another form. Engels pointed this out, but his formulation of the connection was flawed by romanticism about gender equality in 'primitive' societies and ahistoricism about capitalist development.<sup>41</sup>

#### *Family patterns and local state-making*

Faced with a large and seemingly growing number of single mothers in the *pueblo*, the governance of gender norms took on a different character. Before the rise of coffee, municipal tribunals expended their efforts in policing sexual behaviour. With the changing property regime, local government became more involved in the regulation of paternity and maternity. Adjudicating cases of child support and inheritance reinforced the authority of the elite in the conflictive processes of elaborating family values and sexual identities. The tribunals' role was particularly conspicuous in many cases involving single women who claimed child support from wealthy *ladinos* of the *pueblo*, cases which reveal the mechanisms of public regulation of so-called private life.

At least 128 child support claims were logged in Diriomo's civil tribunal between 1850 and 1875. In one case, Señora Josefana Bermúdez asked the *alcalde* to compel Sr Eufreciano Alfaro to supply food for his infant son, the offspring of their illicit union. The Civil Code required fathers to provide food for their children after the age of three, the customary age of weaning. Sra Bermúdez asked the judge to waive the law on account of her poverty; she requested child support in the form of foodstuffs immediately.<sup>42</sup> The señora recounted how, as a single mother,

<sup>41</sup> Frederick Engels, *Origin of the Family*.

<sup>42</sup> AMD, Juzgado Municipal de Diriomo, 30 April 1866, La Sra Bermúdez contra el Sr Eufreciano Alfaro.

she struggled to support her four children in conditions of extreme poverty. Although Señora Bermúdez testified that she had never been married, the scribe titled her señora in the court record. He did the same for all mothers, regardless of marital status. Whether this was common practice in rural Nicaragua or his own idiosyncrasy remains a mystery. However, it served to reinforce the elite's moral code of universal marriage.

In the course of the trial the defendant, Sr Alfaro, struck a bargain with the *alcalde*. He offered child support in return for custody. Such bargains were commonplace; elite men of the *pueblo* regularly bartered recognition of paternity for custody, especially of sons. For some men, willingness to assume responsibility for out-of-wedlock children might have stemmed more from material than sentimental attachments. The aspiring entrepreneurs of Diriomo frequently complained to the *junta municipal* about the labour shortage. They found extra-familial labour hard to come by because most of the population worked within a household economy. In this milieu, where children were productive assets and paternity gave men control over the labour of their progeny, it is possible that elite *ladinos* regarded paternity, at least in part, as a social relationship of production.

In the Alfaro–Bermúdez dispute, the town patriarchs presented the señora with little choice. She could keep her son, but he might go hungry, or she could collect child support and surrender him to his father on his tenth birthday, the age of majority. Bermúdez' dilemma was shared by many of the rural poor. Parents frequently gave away or sold the most valuable asset they had, their children. In another case, Santiago López, representing himself and his wife, asked the *alcalde* to order the return of their two sons. In López' words, 'a year before they had given away (*regalado*) the children, but the two young boys were continually working, from morning to night, in tasks too heavy for their ages'.<sup>43</sup>

State regulation of parental obligations was not always pro-patriarchal. Luiza Vallecío, a *ladina* artisan and single mother, demanded that Andrés Marcía, Diriomo's former mayor, recognise paternity of his two *hijos naturales* and 'pasarle alimentos' (provide them with food).<sup>44</sup> Marcía agreed, with the usual patriarchal bargain: food now for custody later. Throughout the trial Vallecío flaunted the gendered arrangements normalised by the town fathers. First, she refused to accept the patriarchal

<sup>43</sup> AMD, Libro de Conciliaciones, Reclamo de Santiago López, 18 June 1860.

<sup>44</sup> AMD, Libro de Terminaciones Verbales, Luiza Vallecío contra Andrés Marcía por alimentos, 21 March 1874. Child support cases in the previous decade were about providing food and firewood. Although the language of this case refers to providing food, 'pasarle alimentos', payment was commuted to money. This reflected the monetisation of the economy associated with the coffee revolution.

bargain. Second, she dispensed with the charade of presenting her behaviour in terms of the feminine ideal. After two years of litigation, the tribunal ordered Marcía to pay child support and awarded Vallecío permanent custody of the children. Yet justice remained beyond her reach because Marcía ignored the ruling. Beyond issuing several writs demanding he comply with the sentence the tribunal did nothing either, maybe because Marcía was part of the *ladino* fraternity that governed Diriomo. Marcía's sexual exploits apparently inflicted no long-term damage to his political career. Several years later he was re-elected mayor for a second term.<sup>45</sup>

Local government in Diriomo was actively engaged in constructing families and domestic values. Interpretation and implementation of the civil code, with all its intricacies, gave the *junta* wide berth to legitimate particular class, gender and ethnic concepts of family, motherhood and fatherhood. Family law was explicitly differentiated by gender; in practice it was differentiated by class and ethnicity as well. As a result, the tribunals' regulation of paternity and maternity consolidated the patriarchal households of the rich peasantry. This patriarchal ideal was a privileged household, an institution to which the less privileged may have aspired, but rarely achieved.

The municipal government's regulation of motherhood was contradictory. Their decisions fortified an ideal of the patriarchal family, a model that did not fit the life experiences of the numerous single mothers of the *pueblo*.<sup>46</sup> Despite the tribunals' bias in favour of the patriarchal model, single women – and not exclusively those of the middle and upper strata – continued to turn to the legal system to resolve conflicts in their domestic arrangements. Women who appealed to the *junta municipal* hoped the patriarchs would redress situations the plaintiffs considered unjust. Their expectations were grounded, in part, in the tensions within family law, in particular between provisions which fortified patriarchal authority and those designed to protect women and children from arbitrary rule. In addition, in a milieu in which peasants habitually turned to their patron for support in time of need, women appealed to the benevolence of the town fathers. These tensions – both legal and social – made the tribunal an arena of struggle over the ideology and everyday practices of family life. In Diriomo municipal intervention did not always have negative consequences for the individual women embroiled in the

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Legally neither single mothers nor widows exercised *patria potestad* (paternal authority over children). They had legal responsibility to support their offspring, but not the authority that, for fathers, accompanied it.

judiciary. Yet class, race and gender biases so infused the law and the entire social order that the overall effect of municipal regulation was to fortify the gender, class and ethnic domination of the *ladino* elite.

*Conclusions: Gender, class and state*

Politics in the rural *pueblos* of Nicaragua was not high in the sense that it was some rarefied sphere that touched only the lives of the elite. Municipal politics dominated by rich *ladino* peasants regulated people's everyday practices of birth, child-raising, work, marriage, sex and death. This gave the local elite wide-ranging powers to regulate family values, which, in turn, fortified their expanding political power. The governance of gendered norms was an important aspect of everyday state formation in Nicaragua in this era.<sup>47</sup>

The emerging local state, with its ample powers of regulation and surveillance, reshaped the mundane activities of people's lives. The authority of the *juzgado* to call in endless witnesses to testify about the sexual behaviour and family mores of their neighbours was a daily reminder of the sway of local politicians. People knew that the powers of the *alcalde*, the *junta municipal*, the 'hombres de bien' and the tribunals were not limited to regulating land and labour, as extensive as this was. They also had the capacity to intervene in the routines of domestic life. Some behaviours and customs they encouraged, others were tolerated, and quite a number were branded as deviant.

The coffee revolution was a period of great social upheaval. The fabric of community, family and household within the Indian *pueblos* of rural Nicaragua became unravelled; it was rewoven under the direction of the municipal government. The process of negotiation and consolidation of power at the local level was as much about reconfiguring the gender order, as it was about reconstructing class and ethnic relations. The society that emerged in Nicaragua in the early twentieth century was seigneurial, sustained by patron–client relations far more than by commodity relations.<sup>48</sup> In a social order where patronage provided the major link between society and the state, municipal institutions became central actors. They expanded the political powers of the *pueblo's* patriarchs. As part of the process of peasant differentiation, the upper

<sup>47</sup> For analysis of state control over gender and sexual practices see R. W. Connell, 'The State, Gender and Sexual Politics: Theory and Appraisal', in H. Lorraine Radtke and Henderikus J. Stam (eds.), *Power/Gender: Social Relations in Theory and Practice* (London, 1994), pp. 142–4.

<sup>48</sup> On the seigneurial nature of rural society in Nicaragua see Dore, 'Land Privatization and the Differentiation of the Peasantry'. For the case of Brazil see Richard Graham, *Patronage and Politics in Nineteenth Century Brazil* (Stanford, 1990).

strata of the *ladino* peasantry fortified the *junta municipal* and made it into an instrument of class, ethnic and gender rule.

Within the municipality, tribunals became a major focus of gender politics. Public contestation over gender norms took place predominantly within the judicial sphere, which enhanced and legitimated the powers of the municipal state. Possibly of greatest significance, the tribunals fortified – ideologically and materially – the patriarchal family at a moment when 40 per cent of households in Diriomo were female-headed.

This history of gender offers a new way of thinking about the coffee revolution and state formation in rural Nicaragua. Gradually, in what once were Indian *pueblos*, a *ladino* peasant elite established its authority. With a hold on municipal government, they reshaped social relations and regulated people's everyday lives. Through the array of regulatory agencies at their disposal – *juzgados*, land registers, state labour drafts – the municipal elite suppressed communal relations and consolidated relations of subordination to the emerging patrons of Nicaragua. Petty *caudillos* in the countryside forged bonds with politicians in regional and national government.<sup>49</sup> This was part of the everyday formation of Nicaragua's patronage state which was swept away by the Sandinista Revolution in 1979.

<sup>49</sup> This interpretation of the Somoza dynasty is developed in Elizabeth Dore, *Nicaragua, A Myth of Modernity*.