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"*¡Vana Ilusión!*" The Highlands Indians and the Myth of Nicaragua Mestiza, 1880–1925

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In 1908, Walter Lehmann, a German linguist, initiated fieldwork in Sutiava, Nicaragua, as part of his research on the Indian languages of Central America. For days he wandered through the village searching unsuccessfully for a native speaker of the Sutiavan language. He eventually met an elderly lady, Victoria Carrillo, who offered to help him record a vocabulary. Carrillo informed Lehmann that the other elderly Indians had feigned ignorance because they were "ashamed of their language."[1] A few years later, another Indian lamented that Sutiava was "without life, without character, and without a future."[2]

This image of the Sutiavan Indians as an ethnic group on the brink of extinction captures an important aspect of a contradictory process that affected one-half of the population of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. In those Central American countries between 1880 and 1950, the Indians suffered dramatic losses of land, language, and identity. Those losses were codified in census returns that reported the virtual disappearance of the Indians into the ladino populations.[3] So powerful was the dominant dis-

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1. Walter Lehmann, *Zentral Amerika*, 2 vols. (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1920), 2:907.

2. *El Heraldo* (Managua), Mar. 21, 1918.

3. For a discussion of how the Sutiavan Indians dealt with biological mestizaje, see Jeffrey L. Gould, "La raza rebelde: la historia de una comunidad indígena, 1900–1960," *Revista de Historia* (Costa Rica) 21–22 (1990), 100.

course that hundreds of thousands of Central American Indians like the Sutiavas became "ashamed" of their ethnic markers as the word *Indian* became a synonym for "ignorant" or "savage."

Jaime Wheelock's explanation for the demise of the indigenous population has been widely accepted since he enunciated it two decades ago. The pioneering social scientist underscored the loss of land and consequent proletarianization as the principal cause of ladinoization. For Wheelock, the decisive moment in this process came in 1881, following the repression of the Matagalpan Indian rebellion, when "the oligarchic avalanche swallowed up morsels of thousands of hectares apiece. The rupture of the communities produced the separation of the Indian from his communal parcel and threw him onto the labor market . . . converting him into a rural worker."[4] The authors of the otherwise excellent agrarian history *Por eso defendemos la frontera* support this perspective, stating: "the indigenous communities near Jinotega and Matagalpa were destroyed . . . before the turn of the century."[5]

Wheelock's perspective reflects a myth of a mestizo Nicaragua, a collective belief that Nicaragua has been an ethnically homogeneous society since the nineteenth century.[6] This myth, a cornerstone of Nicaraguan nationalism, has remained believable precisely because it has both fostered and reflected the disintegration of so many Indian communities through migrations and the loss of communal land. Biological mestizaje has often accompanied such communal disintegration, providing physical evidence to support the myth. Similarly, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, ladinoization gathered force as many Indians (often, like the Sutiavas, living in close geographic proximity to mestizos) were shamed into shedding their dress and language. Yet simultaneously, many indigenous groups have contested this discourse, and in so doing have shaped and reshaped their own identities and their understanding of their relationship to the world beyond their communities.

The primary goal of this essay is to describe the tensions and ambiguities that characterized the relationship between the highlands indigenous communities and the forces of assimilation throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ladinoization entailed an intricate web of both friendly and antagonistic interventions in the indigenous communi-

4. Jaime Wheelock, *Raices indígenas de las luchas anticolonialistas* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1981), 117.

5. CIERA-MIDINRA, *Por eso defendemos la frontera: historia agraria de las Segovias Occidentales* (Managua: MIDINRA, 1984), 107.

6. On myths in history, see Emília Viotti da Costa, *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985). On the myth of Nicaragua mestiza, see Gould, "La raza rebelde"; and idem., "The Buzzard Replied, 'There Are No Indians Here': Politics and Ethnicity in Nicaragua, 1920–1954" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Dec. 1992).

ties by Jesuits, the lay clergy, the state, political parties, and landed elites. That process combined not only real violence involving land expropriation and coerced labor, but also symbolic forms that fostered cultural alienation while enhancing the elites' claim to rule.[7] The acceptance of a mestizo Nicaraguan identity usually involved the withdrawal of indigenous claims to communal land and the loss of communal autonomy. This was not, however, a one-way road to assimilation with the Indian at the beginning and the ladino citizen at the destination. On the contrary, many paths branched off toward interstitial communities and cultures.

This essay seeks to explain a historical process too often viewed with a one-dimensional lens. It suggests that the assimilation of Indians into national mestizo society has not marched in lockstep with the advance of agrarian capitalism. The process might be visualized as a series of encounters and confrontations, played out around the country's geographically disparate indigenous communities.

On these literal and metaphorical fields, the dynamic interaction between Indians and ladinos has shifted over time between peaceful relations and violent conflict. At times, the roles of the players and the rules of the game have changed. Under extreme pressure, the indigenous communities often have split apart, some factions joining agents of assimilation, others resisting such alliances, and still others withdrawing altogether.

Internal splits undermine a community-based sense of indigenous identity and allow for dramatic elite victories, notably the appropriation of important portions of the fields for private use. Ignored by the elites after decades of communal use, the remaining fields become eroded, rutted, and overgrown. Metaphorically speaking, closer to the present the thickening underbrush blocks the local fields from national-historical view. Muffled indigenous voices find no echo beyond the communities. Any assertion of Indian identity or rights is met with blank stares or ridicule. Finally, the discourse of mestizo Nicaragua appears to triumph, enshrined in a political culture as rutted and fractured as the neglected fields.

Census Misunderstandings

Census reports have played an important role in justifying the view that the Indians disappeared around the turn of the century. The 1920 Nicaraguan census, for example, showed that the indigenous population had

7. My own use of symbolic and real violence is inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu. He defines "symbolic violence" as "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity." Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Wacquant, *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 167. Rather than incorporating Bourdieu's overall theoretical perspective, this article is more interested in studying how physical violence creates the conditions for the long-term exercise of symbolic forms.

dropped precipitously from 30 percent to less than 4 percent between 1906 and 1920.[8] These statistics are profoundly misleading, however, for the census recorded no Indians (listed as *cobrizos*, or copper-colored) in the semiurban communities of Sutiava and Masaya, which had highly visible indigenous populations. The miscount did not stop there: not a single cobrizo is listed in 11 out of the remaining 13 comunidades indígenas. Finally, by omission, the census assumed that some 30,000 to 40,000 "indios bravos" (unpacified Indians) had become ladinoized overnight.

Although the census' phenotypical category "cobrizo" included most people defined as "indígenas," biological mestizaje did not automatically affect ethnic definition. A review of birth records in Boaco at the turn of the century, for example, shows that people listed as "indígenas" were sometimes described as "trigüeno" (wheat-colored). If color did not define the indigenous, what did? By 1920, no Indians beyond the Atlantic coast region still spoke a native language, and few wore native dress. To analyze this problem it is useful to begin with Richard N. Adams' definition of an ethnic group: "a self-reproducing collectivity identified by myths of a common provenance and by identifying markers. . . . the sociological salience of an ethnic group emerges most importantly when it is both self-identified and externally identified."[9]

This essay assumes that the internal and external definitions of an Indian involved a sense of belonging to a comunidad indígena, an institution that has been an important site of cultural, political, and economic battles throughout this century. In effect, the comunidad evolved into the last ethnic "marker" for many Indians. Membership in a Nicaraguan comunidad during the early decades of this century entailed notions of group endogamy, common origin, land rights, religious and political autonomy, and a bitter history of conflict with ladino neighbors.[10] An approximation of the size of the indigenous population in 1920 can be obtained through a study of the same census (and election returns) for the villages that be-

8. In 1911 the U.S. State Department estimated, on the basis of the 1906 census, that the population contained 170,000 Nicaraguan Indians out of a total of 520,000 (27 percent—both figures including 20,000 "indios bravos"). Wands to Secretary of State, May 3, 1911, State Department, RG 59, 817.51/31, p. 52. National Archives, Washington, D.C. See also Gustavo Niederlein, *The State of Nicaragua in the Greater Republic of Central America* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Commercial Museum, 1898), 45. Using vital statistics from the mid-1890s, Niederlein cites Indian births as slightly over 30 percent and Indian deaths as 35 percent of the total (not including the Atlantic coast and "indios bravos"). The 1920 census reports less than 4 percent *cobrizos* in the country, 2 percent excluding the Atlantic coast. *Censo general de la república* (Managua: Oficina Central del Censo, 1920).

9. Richard N. Adams, "Ethnic Images and Strategies in 1944," in *Guatemalan Indians and the State*, ed. Carol Smith (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1990), 152.

10. Fourteen communities were still functioning in 1942. See report by Leonardo Argüello, ministro de gobernación, in *Memorias del Ministerio de Gobernación, 1942* (Managua, 1943), 90.

longed to the comunidades. This yields an estimate of the comunidades' membership at between 90,000 and 125,000, or between 15 and 20 percent of Nicaragua's population.[11]

The comunidad has played a defensive role similar to that of the municipio and the cofradías in the other Central American republics. In El Salvador, in 1881, the government effectively abolished the comunidades indígenas and their communal land. In Nicaragua, by contrast, the threats and actions of indigenous resistance in the context of a deeply divided political elite thwarted eight governmental attempts to abolish the comunidades between 1877 and 1923.[12]

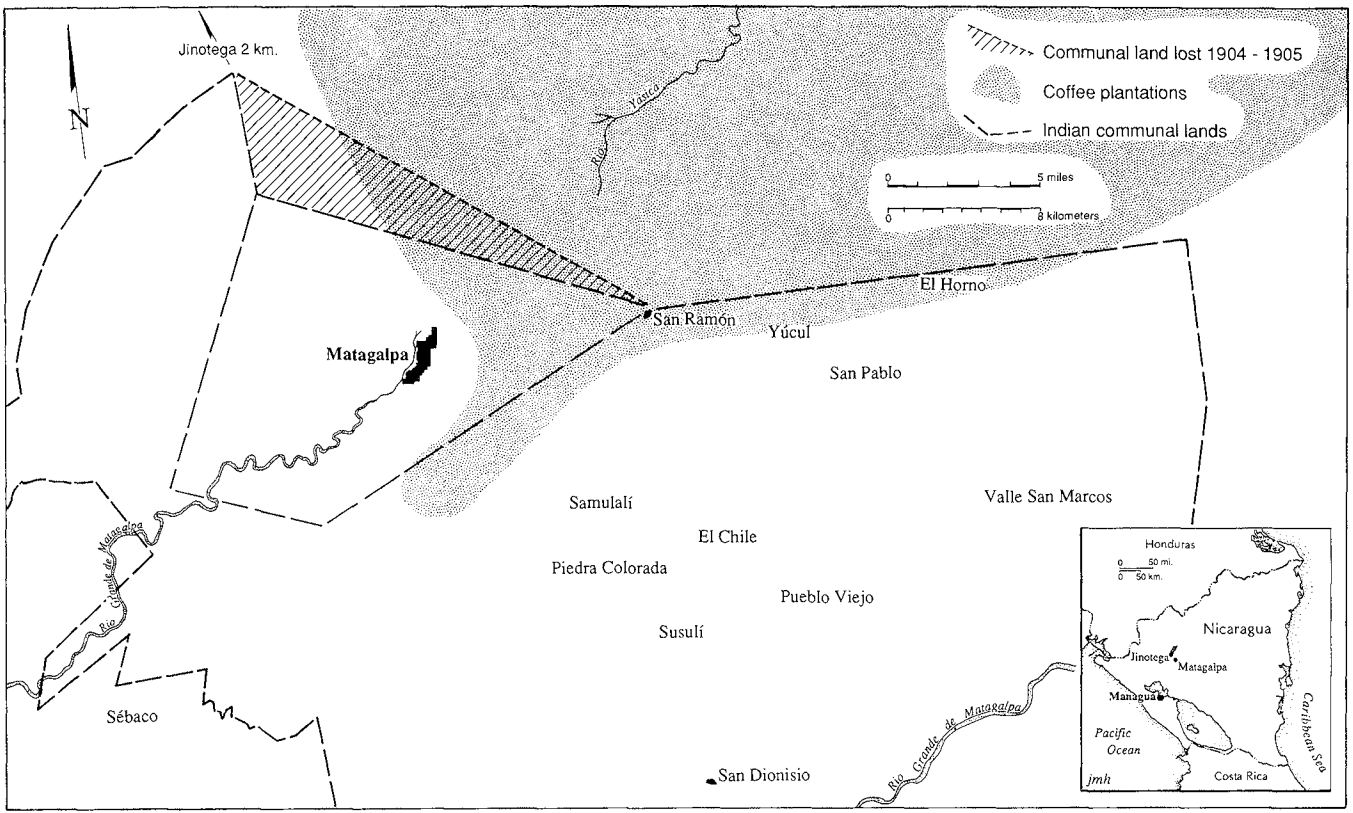
The construction of a myth of an ethnically homogeneous society has involved the appropriation of racial categories that scholars have come to take for granted. Before the 1930s, all sectors of society employed the term *ladino* to refer to non-Indians or to "whites." During the same period the term *mestizo* meant the offspring of unions between Indians and whites (broadly defined). By 1950, however, *mestizo* not only had supplanted *ladino* but had come to describe the whole society. This linguistic transformation symbolized the triumph of the myth of Nicaragua mestiza. Although it reflected a growing trend toward biological mestizaje, the myth also rendered spurious all claims to indigenous identity and rights. The following essay attempts to achieve a critical understanding of the myth's formative years through a narrative history of ethnic relations, the myth's substratum.

The Formation of the Matagalpan Indians

Migrations and ethnic fusions over the previous hundred years created the Matagalpan Indians who rebelled in 1881. During the early eighteenth century three *parcialidades* (lineage groups), residents of the pueblos of Matagalpa, Molagüina, and Solingalpa, united for the purpose of purchasing a large tract of communal land. Between 1750 and 1820 these lineage-based villages apparently disbanded, and their residents moved into the nearby mountains. Although no documents specifically refer to

11. Similarly, the *cobrizos* in the departments of Chontales and Matagalpa accounted for only 15 percent, not 60 percent, of the population. Including the Atlantic coast and the unrecorded estimates of "indios bravos" in the central highlands, the indigenous portion of Nicaragua's total population came to between 20 and 25 percent. For a more detailed explanation of my estimate for 1920, as well as one for 1950, see Jeffrey L. Gould, "Y el buitre respondió, Aquí no hay indios: la política y la etnicidad en Nicaragua occidental," appendixes 1 and 2, in *Las etnias en Nicaragua*, ed. Marcos Membreño (Managua: Editorial de la Universidad Centroamericana, forthcoming).

12. The government decreed the abolition of the comunidades in 1877, 1881, 1895, 1906, and 1918. See *Nicaragua Indígena* 1:4–6 (Apr.–Dec. 1947), 3–20. In 1919 and 1923 abolition legislation was blocked.



MAP 1: The Indian Community of Matagalpa

these migrations, by the 1840s the Matagalpas clearly resided in the mountain valleys.[13] Excessive colonial tribute demands and ladino migration contributed to this apparently slow disintegration of the pueblos. In the mountains, the three *parcialidades* (also called barrios) formed villages or joined preexisting ones.

The Matagalpan Indians also saw the birth of a new barrio, Laborío, composed of converted and resettled "Caribe" (probably Sumo) Indians. These "Caribes" also migrated into the surrounding mountains. By 1816 Laborío, augmented by a flow of "reduced" Caribes, formed the largest *parcialidad* among the Matagalpan Indians.[14] Moreover, it continued to grow at a faster rate than the other groups over the next decades; by 1841, Laborío accounted for 43 percent of all Indian births.[15] This rapid growth suggests a continuous integration of "Caribes" and a quite fluid boundary between the "civilized" and the "wild" Indians.

Throughout the nineteenth century the four *parcialidades* continued to thrive, although their members no longer inhabited specific geographical areas. Two neighbors of the *cañada* of Samulalí, for example, might belong to the same local political structure, led by a *capitán de cañada*, but to different civil-religious hierarchies corresponding to their respective *parcialidades*. The religious function of the lineage groups united barrio members in different villages and thus perpetuated a basic unit of ethnic identity despite the scattering of the original populations. The elders of each lineage group appointed helpers, *regidores*, *priostes*, and mayordomos for each of seven saints. The *alcalde de vara* was the apex of the *parcialidad*'s religious organization; the four *alcaldes de vara* also composed the political directorate of the entire comunidad.

The slow growth of the ladino population in the city of Matagalpa also had a significant impact on the economy of the highlands Indians, well before the introduction of coffee. One writer, recalling a visit in the mid-1850s, described the Indians' economy as "impressive" and "abundant," including the market sale of bread, wheat flour, rice, beans, onions, sugarcane, and potatoes.[16] Market relations between the Indians and the ladi-

13. See, for example, Francisco Ortega Arancibia, *Cuarenta años (1838–1878) de historia de Nicaragua: guerras civiles, vida intima de grandes personajes politicos, formación de la República* (Managua: Banco de América, 1975), 108–9; Bedford Pim, *Dottings on the Roadside in Panama, Nicaragua, and Mosquito* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869), 78; Carl Scherzer, *Travels in the Free States of Central America*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Roberts, 1857), 159–83.

14. See Julián Guerrero, *Monografía de Matagalpa* (Managua, n.p., 1967), 67. Citing a "Tabla de Tributaciones," Guerrero lists Laborío with 447 tribute payers, Pueblo Grande (formerly Matagalpa) with 379, Molagüina 343, and Solingalpa 323.

15. Based on a study of baptismal records in the Casa Cural of Matagalpa for the years 1817, 1841, and 1865. For the last date, births were no longer recorded by *parcialidad* but instead classified as indígena or ladino.

16. Ortega Arancibia, *Cuarenta años*, 108–9.

nos, however, were not harmonious. An indication of the strained ethnic relations is that during the 1860s, townsfolk would travel several miles to meet Indian traders. At one point the Indians, in effect, went "on strike," refusing to sell any produce to the ladinos, "being dissatisfied with the shabby way in which the townspeople had behaved. . . ."[17] A reinforced military garrison eventually persuaded the Matagalpas to resume trade.

The missionary work of the Jesuits from 1871 to 1881 also played an important role in stimulating the ethnic pride and unity of those Indians who rebelled in 1881. The Jesuits' willingness to accept the Indians on their own terms and in their own villages contrasted notably with the attitude of other ladino political and ecclesiastical authorities.[18] The Jesuits' alliance with the Chamorrista faction of the Conservative party when the government was hostile to the order (and to the Chamorristas) added a volatile ingredient to the Indians' view of ladino authority. Moreover, the Jesuits' antidemocratic convictions—a disdain for the progressive Conservative government and for parliamentary democracy—in no way impeded their evangelical efforts among society's most marginalized groups. Whatever their intentions, the Jesuits contributed to the ethnic unity of the Matagalpas.

The Matagalpan Rebellion

On March 30, 1881, about one thousand Indians attacked the town of Matagalpa in protest against many abuses by the local authorities, particularly the Indians' compulsory and underpaid labor building the telegraph from Managua. The rebellion was not, as Wheelock and others have argued, directly related to coffee cultivation; in 1880, only 18,000 coffee trees were in production.[19] Agrarian capitalism contributed to the rebellion chiefly in the form of a rumor that circulated through the Indian villages: "The government wanted to sell their children to the *yanquis* and take five hundred women to Managua to make them pick coffee for nothing."[20] A letter to the Jesuit priest Alejandro Cáceres underscored the Indians' resentment of the labor drafts.

17. Pim, *Dottings on the Roadside*, 78.

18. In one village, a Jesuit reported hearing confession from nearly seven hundred Indians, with only three refusing to confess. Rafael Pérez, S.J., *La Compañía de Jesus en Colombia y Centroamérica*, 4 vols. (Valladolid: Imprenta Castellana, 1898), 3:432–33.

19. *La Gaceta* (Managua), May 5, 1881. A total of five hundred thousand coffee trees on roughly five hundred acres had been planted before the rebellion. The only coffee grower of any importance, a German, repaired the muskets of the Indian rebels. See G. Von Houwold, *Los alemanes en Nicaragua* (Managua: Banco de América, 1975), 270. It is unclear whether the German performed this service out of fear for his life or sympathy for the rebels.

20. Padre P. M. Valenzuela, S.J., quoted in the pamphlet *El mensaje del 24 de febrero y el dictámen del 21 de febrero en el Congreso de Nicaragua en 1882*, by Padre F. M. Crispolti, S.J. (New York: n.p., 1882), 64.

> Since these señores see that we are Indians, they want to hold us with a yoke. But today we cannot stand it anymore because we are not thieves to be carried off, tied up. . . . [21]

The Jesuits' own account, supported by other observers, cited additional grievances: census taking for tax and military purposes and a prohibition against making *chicha* (corn liquor).[22]

Following the attack, the rebels withdrew into the mountains but did not disarm. In late May, the government, bowing to longtime pressure from Guatemala, expelled the Jesuits for their involvement in the March rebellion.[23] Provoked by the expulsion, in July some five thousand Indians initiated a guerrilla war against the government troops. On August 9 the rebels again attacked the town of Matagalpa. After a day of fighting, government reinforcements drove them back toward the mountains, where the Indians continued to engage in armed resistance until November.

During this second phase, the rebels began to broaden their language of protest to include notions of ethnic solidarity and an Indian "nation." One leader wrote to a sympathizer: "We consider and feel you to be at the side of your Indian Nation."[24] An Indian captain used the same term to describe the indigenous forces in a note ordering a rancher to sell steers to his troops, "so that the nation can wage war against the enemy."[25]

Colonel Joaquín Elizondo, the minister of war in charge of antirebel operations, formulated a program that would meet the threat of indigenous political autonomy by establishing "a [political] regime . . . like that of other villages. . . ." A second stage would involve a modern version of the colonial *reducción* policy that would "bring [the Indians] into civilian life, making them live in towns."[26]

The war minister's strategy was congruent with the official view of military repression as "a struggle of civilization against barbarism, of darkness

21. Letter to Alejandro Cáceres, S.J, Apr. 6, 1881, signed "todos en jeneral la gente," reproduced in Pérez, *La Compañía de Jesus*, 3:500–501.

22. Pérez, *La Compañía de Jesus*, 3:491–92. In the same publication, Cáceres also alluded to the effects of a decree that aimed to abolish the comunidad indígena and sell its land (approved in March 1881). It is certainly possible that the Indians heard of this decree, issued the same month as the rebellion; but it is extremely doubtful that the decree was put into effect.

23. On the government view of Jesuit involvement see *El Porvenir* (Managua), June 11, 1881. For a more thorough treatment see Franco Cerutti, *Los jesuitas en Nicaragua en el siglo XIX* (San José: Libro Libre, 1984). On the insurrections see Julián Guerrero and Lola Soriano, *Caciques heróicos de Centroamérica, rebelión indígena en 1881, y expulsión de los jesuitas* (Managua: Librería Loaisiga, 1982); and Enrique Miranda Casij, "La guerra olvidada," *Revista Conservadora de Pensamiento Centroamericano* no. 142, pp. 75–82.

24. Teniente Coronel José Lorenso Pérez to Pedro Garquín, a ladino ally, Aug. 20, 1881, published in *El Porvenir*, Sept. 24, 1881.

25. Máximo Moreno to Isaac Sobalbarro, Aug. 14, 1881, published in *El Porvenir*, Sept. 24, 1881.

26. *La Gaceta*, June 6, 1881.

against light, of idleness against labor."[27] Similarly, government officials justified the execution of Indians as part of the struggle of "civilization versus barbarism."[28] This victory of civilization gave birth to the myth of Nicaragua mestiza.[29]

The defeat of the insurrection brought death, destruction, and disunity to the comunidad. Indeed, what had been in part an expression of ethnic affirmation ended in division. The military defeat exacerbated old divisions and created new ones. The government reported that toward the end of the rebellion many Indians turned on their leaders. Similarly, some *capitanes de cañada* and their followers joined the government troops.[30] Finally, in Managua "an escort of Indians loyal to the government, armed with arrows, [brought] into custody prisoners of their caste."[31]

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to conceive of the defeat as the last battle cry of a dying way of life. On the contrary, the movement's proto-nationalistic rhetoric expressed a strong, if implicit, demand for autonomy. Military defeat did not eradicate those feelings or those demands. In 1884 Indian rebels joined an antigovernment conspiracy. The movement, albeit a failure, underscored a reality the local ladinos understood quite well: many Indians had not accepted their defeat as final.[32]

The Highlands Indians Under the Zelaya Regime

Nicaraguan historiography portrays the regime of José Santos Zelaya (1893–1909) as one that modernized the country, effectively mobilizing resources for the agro-export sector. Scholars disagree about whether such economic growth was "capitalistic" or not, given the extensive use of extra-economic labor coercion.[33] Clearly, however, the regime did foster the expropriation

27. Ibid., Sept. 20, 1881.

28. Ortega Arancibia, *Cuarenta años*, 501.

29. For an excellent discussion of foreign views of the Indian as a progressive figure in the mid-nineteenth century, see E. Bradford Burns, *Patriarch and Folk: The Emergence of Nicaragua, 1798–1858* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991), 143–45. In this sense, the defeat of the rebellion marked a downgrading of the Indian's status to that of "semisavage."

30. *La Gaceta*, Oct. 29, 1881. One official report of a battle at Yúcul on September 24 listed ten Indian rebels dead, two dead and two wounded on the government side; "tres de estos individuos de la casta indígena y recién aliados a las fuerzas nacionales."

31. Ibid., Oct. 29, 1881.

32. On the conspiracy of 1884, see Informe del Prefecto de Matagalpa, Nov. 30, 1884, *Memorias del Ministerio de Gobernación, 1884* (Managua, 1885); *La Gaceta*, Nov. 11, 1884. As late as 1910, former rebels fondly reminisced about the insurrection. See Alberto Vogl Baldizón, *Nicaragua con amor y humor* (Managua: Ministerio de Cultura/Editorial Garco, 1977), 131.

33. On the debate see Oscar-René Vargas, *La revolución que inició el progreso: Nicaragua, 1893–1909* (Managua: Ecotextura, 1991), 25–37; Amaru Barahona, "El gobierno de José Santos Zelaya," *Revista de Historia* 1 (Jan.–June 1990), 90–91. See also Charles Stansifer,

of land and the coercion of Indian labor, although in this regard Zelaya did little more than intensify the policies of his Conservative predecessors.

What the historiography has overlooked is the regime's flexibility in confronting diverse forms of indigenous resistance. The Indian rebellion of 1881 compelled the state to devise methods to contain the Indians' military potential. It also delayed the development of the coffee industry by a decade.[34] In 1890, however, the government sold Americans, Germans, and Nicaraguans more than 13,000 acres of land, which the buyers soon planted with more than 1.2 million coffee bushes. The cafetaleros attempted to create a permanent labor force of Indian *colonos* to clear, plant, tend, and harvest their plantations. The Indians, however, were fairly successful in resisting the imposition of this new labor regime through escape and occasional violence. In 1895, for example, among 196 workers obliged to pay off debts or finish contracts with 9 planters, 92 had escaped.[35]

The Matagalpan Indians also directly resisted church efforts to transform their religious practices during this period. In 1891, for example, the Indian alcaldes wrote to the church authorities asking them to replace the local priest. They claimed that the priest had hidden two of their sacred images and had told them, "the Virgin is a mask of an old face." Underscoring the cultural difference, they declared that the priest was "very tyrannical with our way of being."[36] The ecclesiastical authorities responded favorably to the alcaldes' petition and removed the priest from Matagalpa.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, church policy shifted away from its tolerance of indigenous control of sacred images; and in the 1890s, the church launched an attack on Indian religious practices.[37] Several factors influenced this change from a protective role to a global effort to undermine ethnic culture. Faced with economic retrenchment

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"José Santos Zelaya: A New Look at Nicaragua's Liberal Dictator," *Revista Interamericana* 7 (1977). Benjamin Teplitz points out that Zelaya tried to persuade Sioux Indians to migrate to Nicaragua as farmers, suggesting a nonracist dimension to his indigenous policies. Teplitz, "Political Foundations of Modernization in Nicaragua: The Administration of José Santos Zelaya, 1893–1909" (Ph.D. diss., Howard Univ., 1974).

34. The 1881 movement coincided with other Indian-led rebellions in León and Masaya, raising the specter of a caste war. See, for example, *El Porvenir*, June 11, Aug. 27, and Sept. 24, 1881.

35. See W. C. Newell, *The Handbook of Nicaragua* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the American Republics, 1892), 31. The data on land is confirmed by the *Indice del Archivo Nacional*, Sección de Tierras (Managua, 1916). On resistance, see *Diario Oficial*, June 8, 1895. The leading German planter, Wilhelm Jericho, was assassinated in 1893. Von Houwold, "Los alemanes," 271.

36. Indian Alcaldes to Vicario General, Matagalpa, Apr. 20, 1891, Archivo de la Diócesis de León, Sección de Correspondencia (hereafter ADL, Correspondencia), box 389/1.

37. Letters to Vicario General, ADL, Correspondencia, Rivas, Nov. 26, 1893, box 386/1; El Viejo, Sept. 7, 1896, box 220/3; Sutiava, Sept. 24, 1894, box 220/3.

under Zelaya, the church needed to collect the fees it charged for masses and processions associated with the sacred images. Moreover, triumphant Liberalism probably provoked the church into tightening its ideological control over its flock; the clergy needed to mobilize its forces for the struggle against the Zelaya regime.

In 1893, immediately following the triumph of the Liberal Revolution, the new priest, Alfonso Martínez, ordered the Matagalpan cofradía to deliver four steers to finance the anti-Zelayista "Unión Católica." The Indians refused and, despite the priest's threats, remained intransigent. The priest lamented, "they still think they run the cofradías. You know how the Indians are incapable of deliberating on anything but small matters."[38] Indigenous cultural resistance evidently wore some holes in the church's traditional habit of paternalism.

The Indians' rupture with the church reached dramatic proportions on August 1, 1895, when the government newspaper reported: "A few days ago the Indians who live in the *cañadas* . . . created a movement due to the most absurd spells cast by a few fanatics; recently they have risen in rebellion in several places near the departmental capital."[39] The following day, after announcing the end of the movement, the paper published the Indians' letter to the church, written before the brief rebellion. The Indians recounted 12 apparitions they claimed to have seen since April of that year, declaring that these were figures of the 12 Apostles. The Indians asserted that the church authorities did not understand these miracles and were

> threatening to burn us because they say that we have become witches. . . . [The Apostles appeared] because we had abandoned the Devotions to the Sacred Heart. God has wished to use his forgiveness by having the apostles come down to this earth to give us the Examples and show us that if we do not mend our ways we will be punished with Divine justice. . . . [The authorities] are trying to intimidate us . . . they locked up the Indian Alcaldes. . . .[40]

The Indians also asked the church to send a priest they knew and trusted and "any Jesuit" to aid them. The letter suggests the belief that the Apostles appeared in the Indian villages to purify them. This movement, akin to the Ghost Dance movement of the Sioux in 1890, should be understood in the context of five years of violent changes in the Indians' lives:

38. Alfonso Martínez to the Bishop's Secretary, Matagalpa, Aug. 25 and Sept. 25, 1893, ADL, Correspondencia, box 389/1.

39. *El Diario de Nicaragua* (Managua), Aug. 1, 1895.

40. Ibid., Aug. 2, 1895.

thousands of lost acres of communal land, forced labor, internal economic and political divisions, and conflicts with the church over ownership of their cofradías and possession of sacred images, including representations of the Apostles. The movement both responded to and fomented ethnic strife: the Apostles "appeared" so that the Indians would rectify their own ways. But the ladino authorities were aborting this purification process, violently disobeying the Apostles' message.

The Indians' recreation of the religious symbols—especially the inclusion of women among the 12 apostles—also suggests the existence of a religious belief system analogous in its distinctiveness, if not its complexity, to that of the Mayan Indians. The ladino authorities did not, of course, view the apparitions with much ethnographic curiosity. For the regime, the movement revealed "a social sore that it is necessary to heal as soon as possible . . . an evil to be eradicated at its roots."[41]

Although the Zelaya regime made some attempts to heal the social "sore" through education, its principal cure involved strong doses of repression.[42] General William Reuling, the jefe político of Matagalpa in 1897–98, not only used ample coercion to compel Indians to labor on plantations but also collected tribute in the form of "food contributions."[43] To carry out these policies, Reuling relied on the army and on the *capitanes de cañada.* A treaty (perhaps informal) between the victorious government and the Indian leaders who survived the rebellion of 1881 aided Reuling's efforts to manipulate the *capitanes.* A key proviso established that although the *capitanes* would be elected by the Indians and would be responsible for defending the Indian communities, the state reserved the power to ratify their election and to exert authority over them.[44] More prosaically, Reuling jailed *capitanes* who disobeyed his commands, often burning their huts for emphasis.

Reuling had the support of the military, but the extent to which Zelaya approved of his activities is not clear. For example, the regime did not respond to Reuling's call for the resettlement of the Indians near the cof-

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., Sept. 17, 1895. The Zelaya government proposed the establishment of an "Indian normal school." Although the idea never got off the drawing board, the government did found at least a dozen schools in Indian villages.

43. The labor system in the early 1900s functioned better in Matagalpa (where only 18 percent of the workers deserted in 1900) than elsewhere. Benjamin Teplitz suggests that the Indians' passivity—their compliance with labor laws—derived from their loss of land in the 1890s. "Political Foundations."

44. The treaty document has never been found. For examples of appointing *capitanes de cañada* in Matagalpa, see *Diario Oficial,* Mar. 12, Mar. 15, and Sept. 9, 1898. For references to the treaty and to the role of the *capitanes,* see [?] Beaulac to Secretary of State, Mar. 18, 1932, State Department, RG 57, 817.00/7373, National Archives; and J. A. Willey to Allen Dawson, Oct. 18, 1934, ibid., 817.00/8160.

fee plantations (echoing Colonel Elizondo's 1881 proposal).[45] The central government, however, was surely aware of Reuling's colonial-style policies and his military pressure on the villagers. Indeed, it was the threat of another Indian rebellion in March 1898 that forced Zelaya to remove Reuling from his post.

The Matagalpan Indians resisted Reuling even though they had to confront their own *capitanes*. *El Comercio* reported that the jefe político "had given such scandalous orders to the *capitanes* that every day a murder took place in the *cañadas*. . . ."[46] Several days later the same paper reported that the townsfolk feared for their lives: "The Indians conspire and are planning to attack the city." The attack never materialized, but the Indians achieved their objective: the replacement of Reuling and the suspension of "the forced contributions of goods."[47]

Reuling left his stamp on the political culture of the highlands. He wreaked havoc in the *cañadas*, sowing bitter divisions between those who obeyed and those who resisted his brutal reign. Moreover, despite the key role played by indigenous resistance in toppling Reuling, the Matagalpas' reliance on Zelaya legitimated the regime's power over the comunidades.[48]

The regime formalized its control in 1904 when it approved the statutes of the Comunidad Indígena of Matagalpa. It was surely no coincidence that Zelaya chose to legitimate the comunidad the same year he sanctioned a survey of communal lands, which the Indians had demanded. When the alcaldes bitterly protested the surveyors' methods, the official response was to approve the statutes that eliminated the alcaldes' temporal authority.[49] Before 1904, the four alcaldes, elected by *la reforma* (the council of elders), had formed the political directorate of the comunidad indígena. The statutes, however, mandated the election of a directorate that had no connection either to the communal religious structure or to the *parcialidades*. Although the alcaldes continued to exercise a religious role as well as informal political authority, their removal from the state-sanctioned political leadership eventually led to the secularization of communal authority.

45. On the relocation degree, whose efficacy is unknown, see Informe del Jefe Político de Matagalpa al Ministro de Gobernación, Matagalpa, July 15, 1897, in *Memorias del Ministerio de Gobernación, 1897* (Managua, 1898).

46. *El Comercio* (Managua), Mar. 11, 1898.

47. Ibid., Mar. 11 and Apr. 15, 1898.

48. In 1899, the regime exercised that power with little apparent resistance, and the Indians' nightmare of 1881 became a reality as they were forced to pick coffee in the sierra south of Matagalpa. See Emiliano Chamorro, *El último caudillo, autobiografía* (Managua: Editorial Unión, 1983), 28, 145.

49. On the alcaldes' numerous protests, see the testimony included in the land title of the comunidad, reprinted in *Nicaragua Indígena* 2:7–10 (Jan.–Dec. 1948), 98–246.

Although the Zelaya era was a trying one for the Matagalpan Indians, at times the Liberal government responded favorably to indigenous pressure, as it had in the Reuling case. Similarly, the government chose to loosen its repressive grip on rural labor. In 1903, part of the indigenous population of Chontales backed an abortive Conservative rebellion. During the uprising, the government sought to appease the Indians by abolishing forced labor in that area. The same year, at least partly in response to petitions from highlands Indians, the congress voted 26–1 to abolish the *boleta de ocupación*, a work pass that all adults with capital of less than five hundred pesos had to carry. The *boleta* system, in effect, obliged the majority of rural inhabitants, including smallholders, to work for an employer.[50] The legislators defied Zelaya by overriding his veto, thus revealing serious cracks in the Liberal party. Many congressmen seemed tired of seeing their region's workers shipped off to the Managua cafetaleros, and others probably chafed at seeing artisans treated like peons. Their formal opposition to the *boleta*, however, was based on the principles of the Liberal Revolution of 1893. As one congressman stated, "the system kept the worker tied to the boss's hitching post."[51]

In 1904, compromise legislation once again encouraged coercive labor relations by outlawing vagrancy, requiring a passbook, and sentencing workers to 15 days of public works for breaking a contract. Nevertheless, the new labor code was less coercive than earlier ones, and it prohibited *mandamiento*-style practices. Similarly, the 1905 constitution outlawed imprisonment for debt. This loosening of the system, it seems, stimulated high levels of labor disobedience, despite a police presence on the haciendas and in the *cañadas*.[52] In 1908, the Matagalpan coffee planters' organization complained to Zelaya that the 1904 legislation had "led to immorality and disorder . . . today the workers, whether they owe or not, do not want to go to work, not even those who have debts."[53]

50. On the vote, see *Diario Oficial*, Oct. 25, 1903. On January 10, 1901, for example, the Indian-led municipal government of Boaco sent a protest letter asking Zelaya to rescind orders that sent local laborers to the sierra coffee plantations; he did so. This kind of pressure probably influenced the congressional vote in 1903. See *Libro de Actas y Acuerdos de la Alcaldía de Boaco de 1901*, Jan. 10, 1901.

51. *Diario Oficial*, Jan. 11, 1903.

52. See, for example, the Matagalpan weekly *El Noticiero*, Jan. 12, 1908: "Eight roving police agents will visit the coffee plantation so that there will be no difficulties during the coffee harvest." The same paper had warned on Nov. 7, 1907, that all workers without a passbook would be imprisoned or sent to the plantations "so that the harvest does not suffer." This seems to be an example of Matagalpan exceptionalism insofar as the labor law was concerned.

53. *Diario de Granada*, Sept. 20, 1908. The Matagalpan demand for the reimplantation of forced labor should be taken as evidence of the relative success of the abolition of the 1901 labor legislation.

The government also responded positively to Indian demands when it halted land evictions in Boaco and Jinotega. In 1893, the Indians of Boaco had played an important role in the revolutionary events and had seized on the political conflict to confront militarily the local ladino population.[54] In 1904, following episodes of political unrest, the government sent a commissioner, Rafael Caldera, to resolve land conflicts between the Indians and the ladino-controlled municipal government. The commissioner urged the federal regime to block evictions caused by the municipal government's rental of formerly indigenous lands.

> [A]fter thinking about the Indians' inveterate desire to be comuneros . . . and their lack of intellectual capacity [and] since our enemies would find a favorable political conjuncture and stir up a rebellion . . . we should distribute the land free to the Indian families immediately. . . . [That] would end the ancient system of communal land and the natural negligence of our primitive race that are . . . obstacles to progress.[55]

Caldera's reasoning revealed the racism that flowed through progressive discourse. Especially irksome was the Indians' "inveterate desire" to be members of a comunidad, an institution that both reflected and perpetuated their intellectual inferiority, blocking the nation's progress. But the official's racism did not blind him to the political ramifications of the region's ethnic divisions. The split between Indian and ladino in Boaco, as elsewhere, seemed to derive directly from the existence of the comunidad and its lands.

In 1906, after two years of relative political tranquility, the Zelaya regime fulfilled a decade-old promise by decreeing the abolition of the comunidades indígenas. Following a venerable Liberal formula, the law called for the distribution of one-half of the communal land to individual Indian families and the sale of the remainder to ladinos, using the profit for indigenous education. Despite indigenous resistance, the surveyors began their work in 1908, and as a consequence the highlands Indians lost additional land to ladinos.[56]

The abolition of the comunidades was the culmination of the prolonged attack on the highlands Indians that followed the defeat of the rebellion of

54. On Jinotega, see testimony in land title of the Comunidad Indígena de Jinotega, published in *Nicaragua Indígena* 1:4–6 (Apr.–Dec. 1947), 13–14 and 60–81. On 1893 conflicts, see Julián Guerrero, *Boaco* (Managua: Tipografía Alemana, 1957), 195–98.

55. See Informe del comisionado del gobierno, sent to resolve the dispute between the Comunidad Indígena de Boaco and the Municipalidad de Boaco, in *Memorias del Ministerio de Gobernación, 1904–1905* (Managua: Compañía Tipográfica Internacional, 1905).

56. On the decree, see *Nicaragua Indígena* 1:4–6 (Apr.–Dec. 1947), 81; and *Memorias del Ministro de Gobernación, 1905* (Managua: Compañía Tipográfica Internacional, 1906). On resistance, see *Nicaragua Indígena* 1:4–6 (Apr.–Dec. 1947), 38.

1881 and gathered strength with the development of the coffee industry in the 1890s. This said, it must be added that the common assumption that coffee growers expropriated most of the communal lands in the highlands is simply not borne out by the available data. Coffee growers did appropriate some 50,000 acres of Indian territory in Matagalpa from 1890 to 1910.[57] Indeed, some of the area's leading coffee plantations sit on former communal plots sold as federal land (*terreno nacional*) during the Zelaya era. Yet when Zelaya fell in 1909, the comunidad of Matagalpa was still functioning with five thousand to seven thousand families possessing more than 135,000 acres of land.[58]

The coffee industry eventually stratified Indian society more than proletarianized it. The Matagalpan Indians controlled a large proportion of coffee land at least until the 1930s. Since the dawn of the industry, kin groups had planted coffee as a cash crop on their communal land. Although the elites insisted that they needed to privatize the comunidades to develop export agriculture, often they expropriated not subsistence farmers, but small coffee producers. It should also be stressed that some of the expropriators were themselves Indians. The coffee industry and the Liberal Revolution did not destroy the comunidad indígena, but they did weaken its economic base and divide indigenous society in ways that could not be reversed.

In the end, the comunidades of Matagalpa and Boaco did find the opportunity for revenge against the regime by forming an important component of the anti-Zelayista military forces. Conservative politicians mobilized indigenous support by conjuring up the rumors of 1881 and the nightmare of 1898 in appeals like the following: ". . . they [the Zelaya regime] treated you like beasts of burden . . . they took away your wives and daughters and forced them to go to the haciendas of the sierra of Managua . . . they sacked the cofradías."[59]

57. See Jeffrey L. Gould, "El trabajo forzoso y las comunidades indígenas nicaragüenses," in *El café en la historia centroamericana*, ed. Hector Pérez-Brignoli and Mario Samper (San José: FLACSO, 1992). See also the land title of the Comunidad Indígena de Matagalpa, surveyed in 1904 and published in *Nicaragua Indígena* 1:4–6 (Apr.–Dec. 1947); and *Memorias del Ministerio de Gobernación, 1911–12* (Managua: Compañía Tipográfica Internacional, 1913).

58. U.S. Consul Harold Playter noted in 1925 that the Indians comprised 60 percent of Matagalpa's population (or 46,800). Playter, "Report on Coffee in Nicaragua," National Archives, State Department, RG 59, 817.61333/1, p. 34. Such an estimate probably reflects the comunidad population of Matagalpa, Muy Muy, and Sébaco.

59. "A nuestros coreligionarios indígenas de Boaco, Jinotega, Matagalpa, y Sutiava," handbill produced by the Comité Conservador Indígena, 1920, Archivo del Instituto Histórico Nicaragüense, Universidad Centroamericana, Managua, legajo 573. On the military's role see *La Regeneración*, Sept. 30, 1910.

The Indian-Conservative Alliance, 1911–1924

Zelaya's policies toward the Indians aimed to put into practice what his Conservative predecessors had already codified in laws. From 1880 to 1910, bipartisan elite policy had favored the formula that privatization of communal lands plus education equals civilization. The post-Zelaya Conservative regime questioned and modified that program. The most important change came in 1914, when the congress reversed Zelaya's abolition of the comunidades indígenas. Legalization of the communal lands and organizations proved vital to the survival of many Indian groups.[60]

The policy shift probably had less to do with ideological differences between Liberal and Conservative elites than with a pragmatic recognition by the new, U.S.-backed regime that it needed indigenous support. The anti-Zelayista revolution had already manifested the importance of that support. Similarly, the Conservative caudillo Emiliano Chamorro—and in this he sharply delineated himself from the Liberals and, indeed, most Conservatives—had cultivated longstanding political and family ties with the Matagalpan and Boaqueño Indians. The indigenous population of the highlands represented up to 15,000 votes (some 15 percent of the electorate). Chamorro's political skills and the legalization of the comunidades solidified indigenous support for the Conservatives. Finally, the Conservatives used the legislation as a political entree into comunidades in historically Liberal areas such as León and Jinotega.

The change produced immediate consequences in Matagalpa. Although the alcaldes had lost their legal status under Zelaya, they continued to play an important political role. Nevertheless, their undefined status became a source of internal conflict and external political manipulation. In March 1912, *la reforma* withdrew recognition from the alcaldes and staged new elections, arguing, "without carrying out a legal election, these people appear as . . . alcaldes . . . since the Jefe Político installed them in office without knowing by whose authority. . . ."[61] The elders suggested that the jefe político, through ignorance or design, had intervened in comunidad affairs, arbitrarily naming three of the four alcaldes. Moreover, they said, he had refused to recognize the authority of the *capitanes de cañada.* Whatever the jefe político's motives—and Conservative factionalism was surely one—the problem was exacerbated when the three ousted alcaldes refused to recognize the winners of the new elections, thereby throwing the comunidad into turmoil.

60. *Nicaragua Indígena* 1:4–6 (Apr.–Dec. 1947), 45.

61. *Libro de Actas de la Comunidad Indígena de Matagalpa* (fragments 1911–1913), in private archives of Aurora Martínez (daughter of Bartolomé Martínez), Matagalpa (hereafter cited as PAAM).

In May 1912, as the Liberals unleashed a revolutionary insurrection in León, the government again sent a commissioner, J. Bárcenas Meneses, to resolve the problems of the comunidad. Following his visit to Matagalpa, Bárcenas wrote a report urging the government to call new elections, which he was sure would result in a Conservative victory (he believed that the three alcaldes were allied with the Liberals). More significant, he argued for a reformulation of the comunidad statutes that would legitimate the alcaldes, the captain-general, and other traditional authorities. "[They] play such an important role that I believe it to be extremely useful, indeed indispensable, to include them in the statutes. . . ."[62]

The captains, perhaps for military reasons, did receive government recognition, but the alcaldes never regained the political and cultural prominence they had commanded before 1904. As a direct consequence, the barrio began to lose its importance. Over the next 40 years, as the alcaldes were reduced to ceremonial roles, the barrios lost their function as endogamous kinship units.

Bárcenas, who shared with Emiliano Chamorro an understanding of the Indians' importance to the Conservative party, sought to protect not only the alcaldes' role but also the comunidad's land. He attacked the usurpers, pointing an angry finger at one Antonio Belli, whose "atrocious survey" in 1904 had deliberately left out the communal lands north of Matagalpa. Judging from Bárcenas' report and the land title, Belli's survey had converted perhaps 17,000 of 100,000 *manzanas* of communal land into federal land that was sold to coffee growers. To counteract these effects, Bárcenas urged measures that would impede ladino settlement on communal lands.[63] The commissioner's recommendations were never fully enacted, which reveals the limits of the government's Indian policy.

In 1917, President Chamorro explained his support for the Matagalpan Indians' land claims in the following terms:

> Knowing your feelings . . . the comunidades indígenas that were victims of outrages in past administrations and moreover have been the most loyal . . . when they were called upon to sacrifice for the prestige of the party [deserve retribution].[64]

Chamorro's position yielded political dividends. Although migration from Conservative Granada had somewhat changed the political complex-

62. J. Bárcenas Meneses, Informe al Ministerio de Gobernación, Matagalpa, June 4, 1912, in *Memorias del Ministerio de Gobernación, 1911–1912*, 199–200.

63. Ibid., 204. Bárcenas also noted that 15 properties in the communal territory had already been sold to ladinos. Belli, an Italian and an architect by profession, was the brother-in-law of Emiliano Chamorro.

64. Speech printed in *Memorias del Ministerio de Gobernación, 1917* (Managua: Tipografía y Encuadernación Nacional, 1918), 302.

ion of the Matagalpan elite, Chamorro could still play on the highlands Indians' tendency to identify ladinos with liberalism. Both Chamorro and the local caudillo, Bartolomé Martínez, continued to court Indian support through patronage and favorable responses to Indian petitions. In particular, in 1924, Martínez, as president of the republic, distributed 3,600 *manzanas* of land to the comunidad indígena.[65]

The Indians not only supplied crucial political support for the Conservatives but also created a space, however reduced, in which they defended their comunidades and defined their identity in a hostile ladino world. In 1919, the Matagalpas spurred the land distribution process through occupation. In turn, indigenous mobilizations in Boaco, Jinotega, and Sutiava received Conservative backing.[66]

The case of Jinotega illustrates that continued support. Since 1895 some two thousand Indian families who inhabited small villages near the town of Jinotega, had struggled to defend their 35,000 *manzanas* of communal land against encroaching ladino ranchers and coffee growers. On May 29, 1915, the conflict entered a violent phase. That morning, Captain-general Macedonio Aguilar led 100 Indians in cutting down the barbed wire fences of a señor López Guerra, who had built his cattle ranch on communal land. Several months later the police captured 20 of the Indians, including Aguilar and his sons. Two rebels, Benigno Granados and Abraham González, escaped the roundup, but some time later the authorities killed González.[67]

With the tacit backing of the Chamorristas, the Indians continued to engage in direct action in defense of their land. In 1918, *El Correo* reported that they had "repeatedly engaged in destroying all the properties [of ladinos] on these lands, thus deepening caste hatred."[68] In early 1919, when the court in Matagalpa sentenced 12 Indians to eight months in jail, Jinotegan rebels cut the barbed wire on many ladino properties. The local Chamorrista police chief voiced sympathy for them.

> [O]ur strength has been with the comunidad, and now its chiefs are on trial for destruction of property. The Liberals have done this to prevent

65. *La Gaceta*, May 14, 1924. The 3,600 *manzanas* represented the 15 properties inside the revised comunidad boundaries cited in Bárcenas' report and not the lost 17,000 *manzanas* (100 square kilometers). On Martínez' relations with the Indians, see Gould, "El trabajo forzoso."

66. On the land occupation, see Luis Arrieta, Jefe Político, to Bartolomé Martínez, Matagalpa, June 8, 1919, PAAM. On Camoapa, see *Libro de Actas y Acuerdos, 1920–1923*, in the Municipality of Camoapa. For Sutiava, see Gould, "La raza rebelde," 85–98.

67. Based on untitled court documents in the Juzgado Civil of Matagalpa, Mar. 1–25, 1919; and on Max Borgen to Martínez, July 18, 1918, PAAM.

68. *El Correo* (Granada), Mar. 22, 1918. See also *Memorias del Ministerio de Gobernación y Anexos, 1918* (Managua: Tipografía Nacional, 1919), 342.

> the leaders from helping us; those that are being tried were the true friends of General Chamorro, and they will continue to be so if they are set free. . . .[69]

Chamorrista support of the Jinotegan Indians led to the release of the prisoners and a halt in ladino encroachment on their lands. Moreover, the Chamorristas' pro-Indian policy created a firm base of support for Chamorrismo where none had existed before 1914. In Jinotega, the ladinos' Liberal allegiance created such a clear polarization that by the late 1920s, to favor Chamorrismo often was to express indigenous identity. Thus, for example, a U.S. Marine Corps officer stationed in Jinotega wrote: "We have found that the Indians around here, those who are Conservative, worship only one GOD, and that one is Chamorro. Some of them have letters that they treasure as one would an earned medal of honor."[70]

The political identification, of course, was neither as immutable nor as irrational as observers suggested. Less than two decades earlier it had been nonexistent, and within a year a large number of those same Chamorrista Indians would become Sandinistas. What remained constant in the politics of the Jinotegan Indians was the liberalism of their ladino opponents and their own understanding that cross-ethnic alliances were necessary to the defense of their lands and community.

Varieties of Ladino Discourse

Although they showed decisive support and sympathy for the highlands Indians, neither Bartolomé Martínez nor Emiliano Chamorro ever mounted an ideological challenge to the dominant discourse of ladinoization. At the same time, although they took abolition arguments seriously, neither of the two presidents ever pushed to eliminate the comunidades indígenas. Both demonstrated ambivalence toward the comunidades.[71] In part, this reflected the need to maintain their legitimacy among the national elites. They also shared the positivist view that Indians must become ladinoized or perish as obstacles to progress.

69. Lisandro Moreira to Martínez, Jinotega, Mar. 6, 1919, PAAM. An internal party report underscored the recent origin of that friendship: "The Conservative party barely had five members before the campaign [of 1916]." Borgen to Martínez, Granada, July 22, 1918, PAAM.

70. Julian Frisbie to Major H. Schmidt, Jinotega, July 13, 1928, National Archives, U.S. Marine Corps, RA 127, E220, box 11. Copy kindly provided by Michael Schroeder, Univ. of Michigan.

71. In 1919, the Chamorro administration called for a public discussion on the reabolition of the comunidades. *La Tribuna* (Managua), Mar. 11, 1919. New Conservative abolition legislation was introduced in 1923 but shelved by Martínez in 1924, his public appeal for abolition in 1918 notwithstanding. See *Memorias del Ministerio de Gobernación y Anexos, 1918*, 312.

Ambivalence notwithstanding, Chamorro and Martínez stood alone among Nicaragua's political elite as Indian sympathizers. Their pro-Indian position, traceable partly to individual psychology, had a specifically regional focus and was heavily biased in favor of the indigenous elite. The biography of Bartolomé Martínez bears this out: the illegitimate son of a planter and a Jinotegan Indian woman, he was nicknamed "El Indio." Late in life (and following the birth of several children) he married the daughter of a *mozo* on his coffee plantation in the indigenous area of Muy Muy. Later, perhaps not surprisingly, as jefe político in Matagalpa he developed a rapport with the highlands Indians, a sympathy he did not demonstrate toward other indigenous groups.

Despite his unusual background, Martínez worked with his clients like any other politician. To cite a typical example, he bought an accordion as a birthday present for the son of the captain-general of the Comunidad of Jinotega. His relationship with the captain-general of Matagalpa, Ceferino Aguilar, however, stands out because of its duration and because it often resembled a friendship between equals. Aguilar received numerous favors from Martínez, ranging from scholarships for his children to his release from prison for political and less noble offenses. Aguilar, for his part, offered Martínez incisive political analysis from the grassroots and consistent acts of support that aided Martínez politically and economically. Aguilar promoted his friend's programs, particularly in education. The friendship was strong and fruitful enough to give Martínez a constant awareness of how policies would play among the highlands Indians. Although Martínez never embraced an Indian communitarian political perspective, his friendship with Aguilar allowed him to appreciate the political value of Indian leadership, a value that would erode with the abolition or disintegration of the comunidad.[72]

Martínez juggled his political needs, his sympathies, and his search for a method to "civilize" his indigenous friends, workers, and neighbors. Significantly, during his presidential term of 13 months, in addition to returning the land to the comunidad of Matagalpa, he founded a teacher-training school for Indians.[73] For other members of the elite, however, education posed thorny definitional problems. Ladinos often distorted the characteristics of the "educated." Although "El Indio" understood that the relatively educated Aguilar was an Indian, most ladinos relegated the

72. The preceding paragraph is based on ten letters from Ceferino Aguilar to Martínez between 1911 and 1925, PAAM.

73. On the normal school, see Josefa T. de Aguerri, *Puntos críticos sobre la enseñanza nicaragüense* (Managua: Imprenta Nacional, 1933), 327–29. On the contradictions in government education policy, see *Memorias del Ministerio de Instrucción Pública, 1919* (Managua, 1920), 156–57.

Indian category to distant "primitives." Consider the view of the León municipal government regarding the neighboring Sutiavas, who were fighting for official recognition as a comunidad indígena with territorial rights.

> The castes live in complete separation and never mix . . . in the Matagalpan *cañadas* they live in ignorance of the laws of the state . . . [the Sutiavas] are quite advanced intellectually . . . and cannot be confused with the Indian castes . . . who live in . . . areas inhabited by uncivilized Indians.[74]

Congruent with the discourse of Nicaragua mestiza, the Indian here is defined as uncivilized, as barbarous. Thus the Sutiavas, culturally more advanced and more urbanized than the Matagalpas, no longer qualified as Indians. True Indians were pitiful, static, locked in the past, and incapable of progressing on their own. Education would wrench the Indians out of the past and convert them into civilized ladinos, with the same rights as other citizens; but with the abolition of the comunidades, they would hold no special rights to the land. Elite discourse thereby portrayed the comunidad indígena of Sutiava as a farcical ruse to hold onto territory better suited to elite needs.

The question raised by the Leonese elite is worth pondering. What distinguished the Indian from the ladino, at a time when pressures were brought to bear on the former to change ethnic identities? Few if any Indians west of the Atlantic region still spoke a native language in 1920. Whether in urban Sutiava or rural Matagalpa, the Indians' lives had changed dramatically compared with the language, dress, religion, labor relations, and communal organization of their parents' generation. Nevertheless, indigenous ethnicity had become tightly interwoven with the comunidad indígena and with those political alliances necessary for its defense. Similarly, ethnicity provided the only language of rural class protest that some elites could understand. They could, for example, understand the claims of a comunidad; but a rural labor union was an alien concept.

The highlands ladinos played an important role in shaping national opinion about the comunidades. Modesto Armijo, a progressive Liberal lawyer who for ten years had engineered land grabs in Matagalpa, in 1919 headed a national commission to study "the Indian problem." Another highlands ladino involved in a land conflict claimed that the comunidades perpetuated the Indians' "stubborn way of life, refractory to all progress."[75] A Managua newspaper supported a petition from the Jinotegan ladinos in similar terms: "We judge that the comunidades retard

74. *El Cronista* (León), July 18, 1919.

75. *El Correo*, Mar. 22, 1918. On Armijo's commission, see *La Evolución* (Managua), Feb. 20, 1919.

national progress . . . [the Indians] live hermetically . . . certainly they conserve their racial tradition . . . and the stamp of primitive sovereignty . . . but at the center everything stagnates and petrifies."[76]

Although partisan Liberals (out of power) draped themselves in the same banner of progress, they blamed the Indian problem on Conservative "slave drivers" who manipulated the Indian vote. In 1920, Juan Mendoza, a Liberal, added an important twist:

> For them [the Conservative oligarchs] the ladino was the quintessence of perfection. . . . *The mixing of blood with the Indian was unacceptable.* . . . The ladinos failed to understand what has been resolved by the most advanced sociologists . . . and confirmed by those elements, the product of miscegenation, who today forge ahead with the dynamic force of capital united with expert . . . and progressive leadership.[77]

Mendoza's view of ethnic relations is significant because he articulates the mestizo component of the myth of ethnic homogeneity (later to be radicalized by Augusto César Sandino and then appropriated by Anastasio Somoza). In so doing, he underscored the limits of Conservative indigenismo, particularly the deep-seated racism of its "white" leadership (curiously, both Chamorro and Martínez were mestizo exceptions). At the same time, Mendoza's construction of an ideal mestizaje that would guide Nicaragua to capitalistic progress depended on a dehumanized vision of the Indian.

> Thus we see the Indian move in herds, like beasts, half-naked, like a primitive. . . . And the *patrón* looks at him with disdain; . . . the governments indifferent[ly], with eternal neglect.[78]

The Indian as an autonomous subject simply did not exist in ladino discourse during this era. When Indians achieved education but still desired an indigenous identity, lands, and organization, they were dubbed ersatz, artificial creations, as in Sutiava. When they rebelled, as they did in Sutiava and Jinotega, landowners and editorial writers depicted them as primitive savages and stooges of unscrupulous politicians. Moreover, the class position (as cafetaleros) of even a Chamorro or a Martínez blinded them from seeing any alternative to a ladino road to progress. By 1950, after the ladino state had crippled the institutions that defined indigenous ethnicity, it took but a short leap of faith to declare the Indians dead on the arrival of the twentieth century.

76. *El Comercio*, Feb. 18, 1919.

77. Juan Mendoza, *Historia de Diriamba* (Guatemala City: Staebler, 1920), 78–81, emphasis added.

78. Ibid., 4.

Nevertheless, in 1919 the ladino imagery was still blurry: Indians slothfully vegetated in the past but stirred up ethnic hatred. Although petrified, they could become animated long enough to cut the barbed wire of ladino planters. The ladinos viewed Indians as objects of pity, a degraded race moving in "herds" but redeemable through education. These conflicting images of passivity-violence and bestiality-goodness related, it seems, to conflicting ladino needs and to the bitterness of ethnic relations in the highlands. The highlands elite wished to convert Indians into laborers and Indian land into plantations; but at the same time, they needed to justify coerced labor in ethnic terms. Furthermore, despite the contradictory vision, the violence that surrounded labor relations merely confirmed ladino notions about Indians as a degraded race.

Labor, Authority, and Violence

The Matagalpan cafetaleros therefore had difficulty envisioning this inherently slothful "degraded race" as a free labor force on their plantations. Despite the abolition of forced labor in the 1905 and 1911 constitutions, an informal debt peonage system remained a key feature of the coffee industry in the central highlands until the 1930s. As Dana Munro, the scholar-diplomat, explained in 1918, "the cafetaleros, incapable of enforcing their contracts with the Indians, often have difficulty with their harvest. The fact is that the local authorities, in many cases, illegally have enforced the old laws."[79] Moreover, the cafetaleros lobbied the congress to pass debt enforcement legislation, unsuccessfully in 1910–11 but winning approval in 1919. Finally, the Matagalpan cafetaleros alone lobbied in 1923 against a law that once again abolished all forms of debt bondage and forced labor.[80]

The highlands cafetaleros obtained significant benefits from the debt peonage system. They used its credit advances not only to attract local labor but also to maintain subsistence-level wages despite rapidly rising productivity. Between 1919 and 1925, for example, coffee production in Matagalpa doubled without any corresponding increase in wages or in the labor supply.[81] Thus the cafetaleros' argument that they needed to pay subsistence-level wages because of the high cost of transportation seems weak. Also unconvincing is the argument that Indians would not have re-

79. Dana Munro, *The Five Republics of Central America: Their Political Development and Their Relations with the United States* (reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 94.

80. See Report by Admiral Kimball, Mar. 12, 1910, National Archives, State Department, RG 59, 6369/811. On Matagalpan opposition to abolition, see *La Gaceta*, May 11, 1923. The Managuan cafetaleros favored the abolition of forced labor because they realized it hurt productivity and caused many workers to flee to Costa Rica. For a discussion of this issue see Gould, "El trabajo forzoso."

81. Playter, "Report on Coffee."

sponded to wage incentives because of the conflicting demands of their own family economy. On the contrary, as will be demonstrated, workers did respond to wage incentives and often moved from hacienda to hacienda in search of advances rather than returning to their *milpas*.

A more adequate understanding of highlands labor relations might be obtained by situating them within Alan Knight's innovative typology of debt labor. Knight distinguishes between situations where debt was "an inducement" in the creation of a voluntary labor force (type 1); where debts were a "customary" part of the negotiation between the landlord and resident labor (type 2); and where debts were a central feature of a coercive system of recruitment and retention of labor (type 3).[82]

Matagalpan labor relations, however, seem to spill into all three categories. Although the Indians themselves demanded advances (type 2), they did not resemble a resident labor force (or use hacienda land, as did the Peruvian sheepherders). Unlike the Guatemalan case (type 3), the Matagalpan planters did not face an absolute shortage of pickers in the coffee region.[83] Harold Playter, the U.S. consul in 1925, observed: "Labor is more plentiful in the Matagalpa region, hence cheaper, but the Indian of that section, 60 percent of the population, although a good worker cannot be counted on to report when needed."[84] Finally, despite a degree of labor mobility, highlands labor relations did not resemble those of coastal Peru or Soconusco (type 1) because coercion was used to retain laborers well after their initial recruitment.

Although the Matagalpan case seems anomalous, the array of forces that shaped it was not unique. The highlands laboring class came into existence as the state and the cafetaleros expropriated nearly 30 percent of the indigenous land. The loss of land may have contributed to the availability of indigenous labor, but the nature of that expropriation—by the very cafetaleros who sought the labor—decisively influenced the quality of social relations of production. Moreover, as noted earlier, ladino authorities often treated the Matagalpas as a conquered people. Thus the question of whether or not labor was free can be grasped only in the context of a highly unequal ethnic power struggle. The laborers were at the same time an ethnic group, working for another ethnic group that had imposed on them its own domination.

82. Alan Knight, "Debt Bondage in Latin America," in *Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour*, ed. Leonie Archer (London: Routledge, 1988), 106–7.

83. On Guatemala see David McCreery, "'An Odious Feudalism': Mandamiento Labor and Commercial Agriculture in Guatemala, 1858–1920," *Latin American Perspectives* 48 (1986). On Peruvian shepherds see Juan Martínez-Alier, *Los huachilleros del Perú: dos estudios de formaciones sociales agrarias* (Paris/Lima: Ruedo Ibérico, 1973); and idem., *Haciendas, Plantations, and Collective Farms: Agrarian Societies in Cuba and Peru* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1977).

84. Playter, "Report on Coffee."

If these interconnections of land, power, and ethnicity are not taken into account, highlands labor relations appear to a large degree voluntary, for Indians and planters did share a mutual dependence on the *adelanto* system. Demanding advances worth several weeks' wages at the start of the harvest, the indigenous workers seem to fit the revisionist view of Arnold Bauer and others who argue for a predominantly noncoercive role of debt in rural labor relations.[85] But the planters did use force against those who, like their contemporaries in Guatemala and El Salvador, treated their cash advances as earned wages and sought work on other plantations. According to the cafetalero Alberto Vogl Baldizón,

> With time all the Indians became legally obligated to work with the finqueros. Then they would leave to go work in Managua or Jinotega, where they worked as *ganadores* and not as *desquitadores*. The Indian authorities did not carry out the orders . . . because it would be like capturing their own fathers or brothers . . . in reality it bled the cafetaleros dry and provided an easy source of income for the Indians.[86]

This recollection coincides with documentary sources in one important respect: the Matagalpan Indians usually did not desert the plantation to return to their *milpas* but rather to work on other coffee plantations. Indeed, they played one cafetalero off against another. For example, in 1913 Bartolomé Martínez, then jefe político and owner of a coffee plantation, received a telegram from his foreman: "There are *mozos* registered to you working in the hacienda of Federico Fley."[87] That this indigenous labor resistance involved moving from cafetal to cafetal suggests that the planters' problem with the "reliability" of labor had little to do with the Indians' degree of commitment to seasonal wage labor. Women workers in particular responded to piecework incentives, often earning enough to pay off their debts.[88]

The perpetuation of this system into the 1920s therefore seems to

85. See especially Arnold J. Bauer, "Rural Workers in Spanish America: Problems of Peonage and Oppression," *HAHR* 59:1 (Feb. 1979), 34–63; and Peter Blanchard, *The Origins of the Peruvian Labor Movement, 1883–1919* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1982). For a critical review of the literature, see Tom Brass, "The Latin American Enganche System: Some Revisionist Interpretations Revisited," *Slavery and Abolition* 11:1 (May 1990), 74–101. Knight does point out in a footnote the existence of "additional factors" within a mode of exploitation that induce workers to yield a surplus. "Debt Bondage in Latin America," 116. He would undoubtedly recognize land expropriation by employers as one of those factors.

86. Vogl Baldizón, *Nicaragua con amor y humor*, 129.

87. Telegram from J. L. Fernández to Martínez, Muy Muy, Matagalpa, Jan. 13, 1913, PAAM. In another case from the Matagalpa Juzgado Civil, a worker deserted three different local cafetaleros in two years, running up debts for the equivalent of $75, which yet another cafetalero paid off. Jacinta Hernández v. Florentino Pérez, Mar. 24, 1913.

88. Based on data from the "corte" logbooks of Bartolomé Martínez' coffee plantation, El Bosque, PAAM. In 1918, when Martínez paid less than ten cents a *medio*, women averaged 24.3 *medios* a week, while men averaged 15.8.

derive from the conflict between the cafetaleros' desire to maintain subsistence-level wages and the Indians' defense of "customary" rights to a cash advance that reflected their own concept of a just wage. Vogl's idyllic vision of the advances as a form of welfare notwithstanding, the cafetaleros' reaction to labor resistance brought out the brutality of the *adelanto* system and corroded the bonds of the comunidad indígena.[89] The elite's unwillingness to accept a voluntary labor system also derived in large part from its racist view of indigenous labor. For a benevolent example, consider Samuel Meza, poet, lawyer, landowner, and reputed defender of the Indians. In his opinion, "this disgraced race will never emerge from its abject misery without schooling."[90]

The system legitimized a repressive apparatus that turned foremen and indigenous authorities into police agents. Indeed, this police presence on the plantation makes the problem of free labor even more complex. When foremen jailed laborers for failing to show up for work they put severe limitations on the workers' freedom, even when the laborer might have arrived on the plantation voluntarily. Moreover, the ladinos' racist conception of Indians permeated those relations of production just as did indigenous resentment of the cafetaleros' land expropriations. The ladinos could not see the Indians as worth the higher wages that might end their desire for advances; nor could they conceive of the Indians working in a system that did not depend ultimately on coercion. And in perpetrating the balance of power, the labor system itself generated evidence for this picture of the Indian as a creature submerged in a world of violence.

Despite Vogl's recollection, local indigenous authorities often did capture fellow Indians. Servando Ochoa, for example, complained to the jefe político that a *capitán de cañada* had jailed his sons for not possessing a work pass. Similarly, in 1921 an American cafetalero complained to then-Vice President Martínez that "the *capitán de cañada* was capturing people . . . who owe no money to anybody. . . ."[91] The gradual conversion of Indian village officials into government authorities provided the labor system with its political underpinning. Once the indigenous authorities

89. Despite Vogl's lament, coffee planters earned average annual profits of 35 percent on the selling price and 10 to 15 percent on the investment after five to ten years. See Harold Playter, *Nicaragua: A Commercial and Economic Survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1927), 30.

90. *El Noticiero*, Mar. 2, 1919.

91. Servando Ochoa to Martínez, San Dionisio, Matagalpa, Jan. 14, 1913; Eric Smith to Martínez, El Gorrión, Matagalpa, Nov. 28, 1921, PAAM. Even Ceferino Aguilar probably used his authority to recruit *mozos* for Martínez. In 1919, when his hacienda was short of labor, Martínez received the following telegram from the jefe político, Luis Arrieta: "Capitán-general, Ceferino Aguilar, tiene gente lista para trabajar en su hacienda." Oct. 24, 1919, PAAM.

ceased to derive their legitimacy from the comunidad, the incidence of violent abuses increased dramatically. In a 1910 case, Jorge Pérez, an indigenous captain, received an order to take Ciriaco Obregón prisoner and deliver him to a coffee plantation as a "labor deserter." When the foreman cut his hands loose, Obregón turned to Pérez and said, "Sooner or later you're going to pay for this." Two years later Obregón, by then an Indian village authority himself, captured Pérez and nearly killed him.[92] This case and others mentioned previously suggest that in the highlands the terms *free labor* and *servile labor* have meaning only in the context of the surrounding web of contradictory social relations mediated by ladino authority and power.

Authoritarian violence also erupted over land disputes. Ladino efforts to expropriate property turned indigenous authorities against their own people. Thus, in 1913 Ceferino Aguilar protested to Martínez about Indian leaders' complicity in the loss of communal territory. Aguilar accused the comunidad president of forcibly evicting Indians in order to rent lands to ladinos.

> On March 17 in Matazano, Bacilio Figueroa, accompanied by 20 people, arrived to look over some land . . . that a non-comunero wanted to fence. . . . Since the land belonged to us comuneros we decided to fence it off. . . . When we finished the president came back and had six [Indians] tied up.[93]

Although his tactics were brutal, the president of the comunidad believed that he was acting on behalf of his people. As noted earlier, between 1904 and 1913 the Matagalpas had lost thousands of acres of land to "defense" lawyers and surveyors who charged exorbitant rates to the community, thereby forcing land sales as payment. The president in 1913 wished to rent this land to head off yet another forced sale.

The growing commercialization of the products and structures of the communal land—the crops, fences, buildings, and corrals—also gnawed away at indigenous ties. By the second decade of the century, dozens of Indian kinship groups were planting coffee for the commercial market. Their fences and trees were *mejoras* (improvements) that could be legally seized for nonpayment of debts. Although the land itself could not be expropriated (after the 1914 law), Indians could lose their *mejoras* to other Indians or to ladinos. Indeed, most of the land conflicts during the period 1916–1924 pitted Indians against other Indians allied with ladinos.

92. "Jorge Pérez demanda a Ciriaco Obregón, por lesiones," May 9, 1912, Juzgado Civil, Matagalpa.

93. Aguilar to Martínez, Susulí, Matagalpa, June 10, 1913, PAAM.

The ladino elite's manipulation of Indian authorities, and the divisions it created among the Matagalpas over labor recruitment and land, impeded the kind of unified resistance that formed to the north in Jinotega. Although Chamorrista politics often aided the indigenous communities, politics in general weakened communal solidarity. During the election campaign of 1916, for example, the government and Chamorrista factions of the Conservative party competed for Indian votes. The government's method of "campaigning" consisted of the forcible recruitment of Chamorrista Indians into the military; the jefe político replaced 40 of the 45 captains with anti-Chamorristas.[94] Ceferino Aguilar recounted to Bartolomé Martínez the actions of one Indian authority.

> The captain, Félix Pérez . . . recruited a great many people . . . many were tied up . . . those citizens sadly wait with the hope that he will be removed from that post . . . Pérez caused much disorder . . . with the prisoners bound, dying of hunger, why should we Indians have to die in this way?[95]

Thus the Indian authorities, following ladino orders, unleashed a campaign to terrorize the Chamorristas into submission. They provide yet another glimpse of the epoch's repressed image of indigenous life: the *amarrados* (bound ones), a long file of Indians with their hands tied behind their backs, led by their ethnic brethren on horseback toward an army encampment or to the peons' quarters of the plantation.

The Matagalpan Indians clearly did not wish "to die in this way." In their own defense, they pursued three different strategies to cope with the violence that afflicted their communities. Migration was the response that probably had the greatest long-term consequences for the comunidades, for the coercive quality of politics and labor drove many Indians east into the sparsely inhabited mountains. One captain wrote to Bartolomé Martínez in 1921: "The Indians have been much exploited and have come to these mountains fleeing from the communities."[96]

Although it is impossible as yet to quantify the emigration from the Indian villages, oral testimony suggests that many villages lost more than one-half of their inhabitants to *la montaña* during this period. Of Matagalpa's turn-of-the-century Indian population of approximately 30,000 to 35,000, perhaps 25 percent fled the area between 1910 and 1950.[97] More-

94. Report sent to B. Martínez, Aug. 1916, PAAM.

95. Aguilar to Martínez, Susulí, Sept. 8, 1916, PAAM. Four letters from other Indians the same year asked Martínez for protection from the indigenous authorities Bibiano Herrera and Félix Pérez.

96. *Capitán de Cañada* to Martínez, Guasaca, Matagalpa, Dec. 21, 1921, PAAM.

97. Intramunicipal migration is virtually impossible to quantify, given the nature of census returns and the vast eastern portions of the Indian municipalities. The census does show

over, those who established small farms in the mountains lost contact with the rest of the Indian population. Emilio Sobalvarro commented on a similar migratory process 50 miles to the south during the 1940s.

> As the ladinos acquired more and more lands, the Indians withdrew far away. The law always went against them . . . the immigration was constant and by the hundreds, toward the east where the millenarian trees had never been touched by a hatchet . . . to these mountains . . . they fled.[98]

Self-imposed withdrawal from contact with ladino society was another strategic response. Using the epithet *ladinazo*, which originated during this epoch of violence, one elderly Indian later summarized the perspective of those who remained in their villages.

> When we saw the Indians tied up and dragged off to a hacienda . . . we learned that we had to stay out of debt to the ladinazos. And the only way to do that was to have nothing to do with them. For a long time you never saw a ladinazo around here. We'd go to Matagalpa to sell our coffee and oranges, but we'd stay in the común [the Indian center] and never mix with anybody.[99]

Despite their relative isolation, during the 1940s the Matagalpan Indians suffered new and powerful blows. In 1942, malicious departmental authorities interpreted a wartime agreement with the United States restricting cotton output to include *algodón silvestre*. The National Guard then uprooted the cotton bushes from which the Indians wove their clothes.[100]

Perceiving this action as a ban against the manufacture of their clothing, the Matagalpas stopped wearing distinctive dress (they were the last indigenous group to do so). The second blow fell in the late 1940s when the church, under the early influence of the church-sponsored proselytizing group Acción Católica, removed all of the sacred images belonging to the four *parcialidades* from the homes of the *mayordomos* and placed them in chapels. These two actions had a severely demoralizing effect on the communities but did little to break down their isolation or overcome their distrust of ladinos.[101]

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that the Indian *cañada* population did not grow at the same rate as the national population. See Gould, "Y el buitre respondió." This estimate is based on interviews with members of the comunidad's council of elders, including Gregorio Aráuz, Francisco Arceda, Pablo García, Patrocinio López, Valerio Mercado, and Santos Pérez, Matagalpa, Jan. 1992.

98. Emilio Sobalvarro, in *La Flecha* (Managua), June 17, 1950.

99. Interview with Patrocinio López, El Chile, Matagalpa, Apr. 1990.

100. *La Gaceta*, Aug. 19, 1942; interviews with *la reforma*, Matagalpa, Jan. 1992.

101. Interviews with *la reforma*, Matagalpa, Jan. 1992. The precise date of the church action is unclear, but numerous testimonies agree on the removal of the images.

Los Mozos de Vita: Land Expropriation and Ladinoization

The third and least typical strategic response began with direct resistance to ladino aggression but eventually gave way to relative submission. The most significant example was a case of simple acquisition. In 1881 the village of Yúcul had been the bastion of the rebellion, but between 1911 and 1916 José Vita, the second-largest cafetalero in Matagalpa, conquered the village and its lands. Vita accomplished what most of his elite compañeros had only dreamed about: the abolition of communal land and the conversion of Indians into peons.

In 1910 Vita paid one thousand dollars for 1,000 *manzanas* of Yúcul land at an auction. The comunidad had to sell the land because it owed money to Eudoro Baca, a lawyer who had purchased the debt from Antonio Belli, director of the infamous 1904 survey. Vita manipulated the title to include an extra 1,500 *manzanas* bordering his coffee plantation, La Laguna. Claiming Yúcul as his own, Vita ordered its 35 extended families, who cultivated cash crops and basic grains on some 2,000 *manzanas*, either to leave or to work on his plantation.

By 1913, Vita had persuaded ten extended families who cultivated some five hundred *manzanas* to accept his deal: "Those who have cultivated lots can keep them if they agree to clean one cafetal [three thousand cafetos] three times a year; the owner will pay them what the labor is worth, and those who do not fulfill their obligation will have to leave."[102] This brief accord reveals primitive accumulation at work; in Yúcul, as elsewhere, the process was not peaceful.

Bibiano Díaz, a leader of the Comunidad of Matagalpa, argued that Vita had "used his superiority and influence to do what he wishes with the Indians of Yúcul . . . he founded his *vinculación* through terror."[103] Díaz inverted the sense of the word *vinculación* (entailment), which the elite had been using to question the legality of the comunidades. At the same time, he deftly attacked Vita in ways that would appeal to the ladino elite: he called Vita "*un extranjero pernicioso*" and accused him of reestablishing "slavery in the twentieth century."[104] No ladinos, however, were listening.

Díaz organized more than verbal resistance against Vita. For three

102. The data on Yúcul derive from a series of court cases found in the Juzgado Civil, Matagalpa. Vita's takeover of the Yúcul land is revealed in "Ejecutoria a favor de Eudoro Baca contra los indígenas de esta ciudad," 1909–1910. The quotation comes from "Recurso de Apelación de Bibiano Díaz et al.," July 21, 1913.

103. "Recurso de Apelación de Bibiano Díaz et al.," Sept. 2, 1913.

104. Ibid.

years, most of the Indian families remained on their land while refusing to fulfill their labor obligation to Vita. But the Italian cafetalero was not easily intimidated. During 1913 he managed to evict four families. According to one account, "because they could no longer endure Vita's hostilities against the Indians . . . [16 families] . . . abandoned their fincas."[105] By the end of 1913, only five families continued to resist.

Despite Díaz' prominence in the comunidad, his group fought alone. The comunidad's internal divisions ran deep, and Díaz additionally suggested that its president had aided Vita. Nor was Martínez available in this battle; he had a longstanding friendship with Vita, his next-door neighbor in Matagalpa.

While Díaz argued in the courtroom, Vita ordered his *mozos* to tear down Díaz' fences and destroy his crops. Moreover, as Díaz testified, "Many times [Vita] has slandered me and even whipped me for no motive, only because he has grown accustomed to doing that to *la servidumbre* that he has established." Díaz' travails in court taught him bitter lessons about power and justice: "At the beginning of the trial, out of love for the land I innocently believed in the equality of rights. *¡Vana ilusión!*"[106] Vita's henchmen terrorized the Indian witnesses, and the presiding judge sent them to jail before they could testify. Díaz and the other four families held out until 1916. Finally, rather than become part of Vita's *servidumbre*, Díaz left behind his 50-*manzana* farm and went to live on a relative's land in another village.

The other four extended families joined *la servidumbre*. Soon the victorious Vita confiscated their fincas, leaving them with but one *manzana* per male adult. In return for that parcel, all family members were obliged to pick Vita's coffee and weed eight thousand coffee trees a year, at far less than the going wage. From 1916 to 1963, if a Yuculeño did not show up for work, Vita (and later his son) sent his own "civilian police" to drag the recalcitrant worker off to the plantation jail.[107]

Vita's proletarianization of the Yuculeños was accompanied by a process of ladinoization so thorough that the grandchildren of Bibiano Díaz do not recall that he was an Indian, much less a leader of the comunidad indígena. Between 1916 and 1950 the Yuculeños lost contact with Indian villages but ten miles away. They looked on the Indian women who came to pick Vita's coffee in the thirties and forties as people of a different

105. Ibid. In the "recurso" of July 21, one witness on Díaz' behalf claimed that Vita "shot an Indian for shouting near the casa hacienda."

106. Ibid.

107. Interviews with Delfina Díaz (1990), Blas García (Jan. 1992), Macaria Hernández (1990–1992), Juan Polanco (1990), Urbano Pérez (1990), and Eusebio Urbina (1990, 1992), Yúcul, Matagalpa.

ethnic group. The Yuculeños called them the *mantiadas* for their dress, and people of *lenguaje enredado* for their Spanish-based dialect.[108] Thus in one generation the Indians of Yúcul lost their ethnic identity.

The Yúcul experience seems to support the historical interpretation that links proletarianization and ladinoization. Yúcul, however, is not an open-and-shut case; for the Yuculeños did maintain a separate identity and a sense of their own history, a reflection of their daily, practical experience. They recognized, for example, that although they made up a small minority of Vita's work force, they were highly overrepresented in his jail. Moreover, in 1963, the grandchildren of Bibiano Díaz organized a union that broke the *colonato* system, and by 1965 had won back three hundred *manzanas* of their land. A dim memory of their past informed this and subsequent struggles. Although they did not consider themselves to be "indios," they did believe that "before Vita took it, the land was free."[109]

For decades after Vita's takeover, the local folk referred to outsiders as "ladinos" and to themselves as either "indígenas" or simply "Yuculeños," and ascribed a particular set of character traits to each group.[110] They also continued to practice aspects of Matagalpan Indian traditions that helped to maintain a degree of community. For example, a local *reforma* played a prominent role in Yúcul's religious practices. Furthermore, the people took pride in their pre-Columbian ancestry and their forebears' role in the rebellion of 1881. Although the Yuculeños internalized the dominant discourse so that they regarded "indios" as uncivilized, their contradictory consciousness suggests a more complex relation between proletarianization and ladinoization than a forced detour onto a one-way street.

John Comaroff ends an article on ethnicity with the following challenge: "Much more vexing . . . is the question of when and why ethnic ideologies break down and class consciousness rises to replace it—if indeed this ever happens in straightforward terms."[111] The Yúcul case suggests that the agrarian elite's conquest of indigenous villages may create conditions for such an ethnic ideological breakdown and its replacement by something resembling a rural proletarian consciousness. But as the foregoing examples show, withdrawal into closed communities and migration were far more common indigenous responses to elite aggression. The retreat to marginal communities perhaps did sustain a form of ethnic consciousness. Family migrations, however, led to the breakup of commu-

108. Interviews, Yúcul, 1990–92.

109. Interview with Delfina Díaz, Yúcul, Mar. 1990.

110. Interviews with Blas García and Eusebio Urbina, Yúcul, Jan. 1992. These informants stated that they believed that ladinos were always "altivos" and the indígenas were "humildes" and "respetuosos."

111. John Comaroff, "Of Totemism and Ethnicity," *Ethnos* 52:3–4 (1987), 319.

nities from Boaco to Honduras, and to the erosion of their ethnic identity without a corresponding emergence of class consciousness.

Comaroff's challenge remains unanswered, but the descendants of the highlands Indians have provided some clues for further research. Ethnic identities that died out under decades of ideological, political, and economic harassment generally became atomized into kin-based identities. In Yúcul, by contrast, the violent takeover of the Indian village eradicated the people's ties to the comunidad indígena and dissipated their sense of ethnic identity. But in response to a known and visible history of oppression, the villagers developed a class perspective that hinged to a large extent on an "indigenous" sense of identity.[112] Here, a precondition for rural proletarian consciousness was an autochthonous identity, however muted and removed from "Indianness."

Conclusion

The ladinoization of the Yuculeños and the high level of Indian emigration provide evidence for the view that the highlands communities were, if not dead, at least severely wounded early in this century. One reading of this essay might reasonably point out, then, that it essentially involves a scholarly dispute about chronology with Wheelock and other social scientists. But the differences are more substantial. Wheelock, for example, posits the demise of the Nicaraguan Indians (except for those of the Atlantic coast) before 1900, while the research presented here suggests that many indigenous groups survived as ethnic communities well into this century—indeed, many of their descendants today consider themselves "indígenas."[113]

This essay argues, moreover, that the highlands Indians played such a vital economic and political role from 1880 to 1925 that their absence from the standard historical portrait leaves a seriously distorted image of Nicaragua's social and political development. Without understanding this prolonged, multifrontal assault against the comunidades indígenas, it would be impossible to recognize a buried cornerstone of elite hegemony. Such recognition is important because many interpretations of modern Nicaraguan history have hinged on the bourgeoisie's putative incapacity to construct hegemonic forms of domination.[114] On the contrary, one of

112. In the 1990 elections, for example, the Sandinistas won over 60 percent of the vote in the Yúcul area while losing in the areas of the comunidades indígenas of Matagalpa and Jinotega by margins of 4:1 and 5:1.

113. On indigenous organizing, see *La Prensa* (Managua), Jan. 27, 1992.

114. My previous work questions that view through a study of labor and peasant movements. See Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912–1979* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990).

the elite's most enduring hegemonic achievements is the common-sense notion that Nicaragua is an ethnically homogeneous society.

Why this elite achievement and the ethnic conflicts that produced it have slipped into the crevasses of history is a question whose answer can be found in the construction of ladino discourse. From 1880 to 1920, ladino elites projected images of Indians as marginal primitives who blocked progress through ignorance and wasteful practices on their communal land. These images at once rationalized and reflected policies that led to the expropriation of that land and the exploitation of Indian labor. Depictions of "abject misery" or of an Indian *amarrado* both justified ladino "civilizing" practices and reflected the Indians' changing social reality of land loss, forced labor, and military recruitment. Indigenous resistance merely confirmed the ladino discourse. When Indians evaded debt obligations in order to earn a just wage, they only demonstrated their deviousness and childish irresponsibility. Similarly, the religious-based protests of 1895 in Matagalpa or the agrarian battles in Jinotega from 1915 to 1920 reiterated the need to educate the primitives and to abolish the comunidades. And when Indians did receive an education, they ceased to be "real" Indians and their demands became false by definition.

During this epoch, then, ladino discourse exhibited a remarkable totalizing capacity as it parried and then assimilated every indigenous effort at autonomous expression. But the question remains as to how and when this discourse was transformed from an ideological weapon into a form of hegemony. As Jean and John Comaroff suggest, "Hegemony . . . exists in reciprocal interdependence with ideology; it is that part of a dominant world view which has been naturalized and, having hidden itself in orthodoxy, no more appears as ideology at all."[115]

In the Nicaraguan highlands, the transformation was symbolized by the actions of the Indians' putative experts and defenders. The lawyer-poet Samuel Meza appropriated 1,500 hectares of communal land from the Indians of Sébaco while writing articles in his capacity as Indian expert and benefactor. Meza argued, for example, that the abolition of the comunidades would be "an extremely noble, great act that would save this *raza desgraciada* from the clutches of ignorance and superstition. . . ." The lawyer Modesto Armijo, though perhaps less enriched in the process, aided in the expropriation of Matagalpan lands and then, in 1919, headed a national commission on the issue.[116] Eudoro Baca, the lawyer who, in 1910, delivered Yúcul to José Vita, became in 1923 the defense attorney for the Comunidad Indígena of Matagalpa. And Alberto Vogl Baldizón,

115. Jeanne and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), 25.

116. Armijo later served as rector of the national university and as minister of education. For Meza's remark, see *El Noticiero*, Mar. 2, 1919.

the kindly cafetalero, declared that the Indians had bled his class dry. Not one ironic smile shines through this historical record. These ladinos apparently believed in their own expertise and good will; what's more, the bureaucrats and intellectuals in Managua believed their testimony.

These individual triumphs suggest the intimate connection between "real" and "symbolic" violence. For the discourse of the ladino experts became meaningful only in the context of the real violence waged against the communities. Moreover, the very creation of these "experts" involved the Indians' passive participation, what Pierre Bourdieu calls their "complicity."[117] They were compelled to remain silent about the radical distortions of recent history that these four careers signify. Perhaps their desperate circumstances led the Indians passively to accept these "defenders" because they offered "solutions"—usually a kinder version of the venerable formula "privatization plus education equals citizen"—at precisely the moment when the disintegrating comunidad was under attack from all sides. Compared to some of the thugs dragging people through the mountains, Armijo, Baca, and Meza might have seemed friendly faces indeed. Whatever the cause, these lawyers, poets, and cafetaleros could take advantage of the indigenous silence and invent a version of social history that, notwithstanding a blatant disregard for local facts, rapidly became a canon: Despite the noble efforts of their enlightened defenders, a primitive race tragically died off, victim of its inability to modernize and of unscrupulous outsiders who took advantage of its simplicity.

The ladinos' creation of a mythical history that suppressed the existence of Indians in the twentieth century has had devastating effects on those highlands communities that have managed to survive this epoch of violence. Since 1950, these indigenous groups have distinguished themselves from the rural ladino poor through a collective sense of history. Yet as they lost land, dress, religious symbols, and institutions that allowed them to understand their identity, there remained little that made indigenous history vital to new generations. As one highlands Indian lamented, "The youth do not care about our history."[118]

That lament reveals the depth of the ladino victories throughout this century. But it is also clear that the indigenous peoples of the highlands resisted on many fronts. From the 1870s until the 1940s they blocked church efforts to control their religious practices; they waged an often successful struggle against servile labor relations, and they thwarted elite efforts to abolish their comunidades indígenas. Indeed, a century after their scheduled disappearance, thousands of highlands folk still identify with their comunidades, which survive in the shadows of official history.

117. Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 167.
118. Interview with Mercedes López, Camoapa, Boaco, Jan. 1992.