

Manuel Morales\*

## African Christian Culture on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: Does It Really Exist?

The concept of "African Christianity" in reference to the form of liturgy and the practice of the Christian faith among the ethnic groups of the Black race in Central America is a totally new idea — as is the African influence from which it derives. At the present time there exists a Black characteristic which is implicitly African. This is not so in liturgy, theology and in the Christian religion. They are still determined by the traditional scheme of Moravian, Anglican and Catholic churches and even more recently by the Pentecostal churches and the sects that they create.

The fact that just about five days ago I received a letter requesting me to do research on this topic in Central America makes it impossible for me to give those findings. The long hours of study and research that this subject will require is no secret to you. Nevertheless, having promised to send the work by December to the directors of this conference, I would like to share briefly some details about the situation of Christians of the Black and Miskitan races on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, a crucial place with respect to the historical turning point of the Central American experience today.

### Historical Background

In the eighteenth century, the English occupied the Atlantic Coast. They exploited its natural resources and subjugated its indigenous population,

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\*A minister for Calzada, Havana, Cuba, who is presently assigned to Nicaragua.

artificially creating the Kingdom of Mosquitia with its rulers in the pay of the British crown. However, this most picturesque and dramatic story spread very little, and the great socio-political and economic changes of Central America, during the nineteenth century and the present century, practically ignored the story of the Atlantic Coast and its inhabitants — a fact which explains in large measure the peculiar situation of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, but which when all is said and done, is essentially no different from other instances of the incorporation of originally indigenous territories into the world market and the hegemonic interest of capitalism.

The Nicaraguan territory was strategic for European interests during the colonial period. The Spanish galleons that carried American wealth to Europe, passed in front of its shores, and the Caribbean was the bridge between the two continents. Already in the sixteenth century, the Atlantic region officially belonged to the Spanish crown. Thus, the first non-Spanish Europeans who arrived in the region, aware of this fact, carried out their activities surreptitiously and conspiratorially — because they knew very well what would befall them if they were to be caught by the Spaniards. This anti-Spanish attitude so early in the history of the Atlantic was just one more example of the cultural differences already present among the native settlers of the country, that reinforced the divergence in the bimodal development of the Province of Nicaragua, namely: Atlantico-Pacific, Meso-American, circum-Caribbean, Spanish-English, Catholicism-Protestantism, extermination-alliances.

The original settlers of the region were the indigenous people. From among them, the Miskitos over a period of time, became the great kingdom of Moskimia that occupied the regions of Nicaragua and Honduras. The Miskitans became the dominant group among the other ethnic groups (Mayas, Ramas, Sumus) for not only did they have the support of the pirates and mercenaries, but they also possessed firearms.

### The Black Population

As the aforementioned interchange was taking place, the Atlantic Coast was also sheltering people of Black origin whose cultural contribution was initially less significant than the European; however, by virtue of their becoming residents and their being so numerous, the Blacks contributed more to the definitive structure of the Miskitans. They first arrived as castaway fugitives, or as slaves of pirates, and later of businessmen and early English colonists. They had already suffered an intense process of cultural eradication and mixing, either among the slave-traders or in the Caribbean. Because of the fact that they proceeded from diverse places in Africa, they brought neither a uniform cultural tradition, nor one single language which could have perpetuated itself.

The shipwreck of a Portuguese slave-trader's boat in the Cayos Miskitos in 1641 is often cited as the best-known event concerning the arrival of Blacks on the Atlantic shores of Nicaragua, specifically in the region of Cape Gracias a Dios, where they mixed with the Aborigines. The cultural syncretism that followed the crossbreeding between the natives and the Africans is evident in the African influence on the Miskitan language.

In 1633 the Providence Island Company imported over four hundred Black slaves, some of whom were taken to Cape Gracias a Dios or Bluefields, places that were in frequent contact with the English people. In 1778, the English seats of government on the coast, particularly in the lumber cutting regions, were scattered around Cape Gracias a Dios and the interior; other areas were Morgantown, which was situated nine miles south of the Cape, Brackman, Sandy Bay, Wawa, Rio Grande, Rio Sixa, Halower, Laguna de Perlas (the Lake of Pearls), and San Juan del Norte. It was estimated at the time that there were four hundred and fifty English masters of four thousand, five hundred slaves. The indigenous population was estimated to be about ten thousand.

Immigration of the Black population from the Caribbean, the North

American coast, and Belize, continued sporadically in the decades that followed, thus contributing to the reinforcement of the Afro-Caribbean cultural patterns among the African residents in Mosquitia. This irregular flow was later encouraged by the opening of new places and types of work, such as the rubber extraction sites, the banana plantations, etc. A heightening of various Afro-Caribbean cultural values, customs and traditions resulted, and eventually became the culture of the Creoles (or Criollos of the Atlantic.

The inclusion of the Black element in the Miskitan group played an important part in the social role that the Europeans, particularly the English, assigned to the two groups. The Blacks were at the bottom of the social ladder, while the natives enjoyed false esteem from the Europeans who needed the experience of the natives for maximum exploitation of the region and its resources.

Although the social structure of the Miskitan culture was still forming, it was quite well-advanced, yet the African population fitted in perfectly, almost as if it were an integral part of it. There were no significant conflicts except on very rare occasions. The process seemed like a natural cultural blend.

The different ethnic groups that make up the Black coastal population are as follows:

- Descendants of Negroes and Mulattos brought as slaves from Jamaica by English colonists in the eighteenth century. They speak English, and are very cultured and less riotous than the Negroes from the West Indies.
- Blacks who speak French and are from the West Indies: Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Santa Lucia, and Dominica.
- Blacks from Central America and the Columbian coast.
- Caribbean Negro, a mixture of Caribbean Indians and fugitive Black slaves. They still preserve the language of their ancestors and have kept many indigenous customs.

### Manifestations of the Christian Faith on the Atlantic Coast

The Prussian princes Karl and Schoenburg-Waldenburg sent Fellechner on a mission to Mosquitia to explore and survey Mosquitia with a view to undertaking colonization in those territories. Among the reports he submitted to the princes was news of the lamentable religious state in which the natives lived.

Based on this report, and thinking that Mosquitia would lend itself best to missionary work, Prince Schoenburg-Waldenburg won the approval of the Moravians of Herrnhut (Sajonia), to send an exploratory mission from Jamaica which arrived in Bluefields on May 2, 1847. It included Abraham Amadeus Reinke and Heinrich Gottlob Pfeiffer. In Bluefields the missionaries were jubilantly received by the Consul Patrick Walker and the young Miskitan King George Augustus (George IV), both of whom put everything the former needed at their disposal. The Moravian missionaries arrived in Bluefields on March 14, 1849, after a four-day voyage from Jamaica. They went to work immediately on their evangelical mission, mainly among the Creole population. It was clear that a mission of evangelization had to suit the interest of the latter to a large extent. The evangelization among the indigenous population, far from posing a danger to the power structure, could be translated into taming the natives and contributing positively to the strategy of colonization that the English used — alliances rather than confrontations. According to Bishop Wilson, "Great Britain's support of the missionary work in Mosquitia, from the very beginning, was the determining factor in the transplantation of Protestantism to the Central America region." Owing to the favorable atmosphere, religious services soon spread through most of Mosquitia among the Creoles, Moskitos, Ramas, Garifonas, Mulattoes and Ladinos. Throughout the period the Moravians kept in constant touch with the English authorities around the areas that were most conducive to the establishment of religious missions. Bishop Wilson divides the work into the following three periods:

1. Herrnhut (1847-1915)
2. Under the North American Moravians (1916-1949)
3. Beginning of the indigenization of the Church (1949-1974)

### **1. The North-Americanization of the Work in Nicaragua**

The first World War interrupted relations between Herrnhut and the missionary fields. Consequently in 1916, J. T. Hamilton, the North American representative to the Junta Misionera de Herrnhut, arrived in Nicaragua via the United States and covered considerable ground in Mosquitia. Afterwards Hamilton established himself and thus became the consultant for the Society for Propagating the Gospel. He was retained by the directors in their effort to turn the mission into North American sponsorship.

### **2. Beginning of Indigenization**

This was the point at which the work of the Moravians gradually passed into the hands of the natives.

For one century (1849-1949) the Moravians evangelized nearly the entire Caribbean coast of this country and even part of Honduras. These hundred years include two sub-periods: (a) Herrnhut's time which started in 1849 and lasted until 1915 and (b) the time of the North American Moravians, from 1916-1949. The German era lasted almost twice as long as the North American. The Germans labored for a total of sixty-six years. Despite this long period there is almost no indication of incipient indigenization. It was a period of evangelistic expansion. The German missionaries had covered the stretch from San Juan del Norte to Honduras.

The North America era lasted for thirty-three years and was more of a period of consolidation. To that end they tried to give more recognition to the native workers and to increase their involvement.

It was at the first general conference of the Church in 1952 that the first Nicaraguan was elected to participate in the Junta Provincial (i.e. the Junta Ejectiva de la Iglesia Morava en Nicaragua).

### 3. Theological Education

The missionaries were very eager to give their workers a good theological education. They sent many of them to the United States to study in their seminaries. Towards the end of the twenties, the Moravian denomination succeeded in exercising a great influence on the coastal population, especially the natives, thus becoming a significant part of the social structure of its communities. They inculcated a religious ideology which gradually became a significant part of the social structure of the country. Moravian religious ideology gradually became part of the Miskitan social order and way of life. This ideology had a historically anti-Catholic content and within the context in which it developed, served more as the ideology of foreign domination than of national integration. Credit goes to the missionaries for converting the Miskitan language into a written one. Some religious people devoted several years of their lives to this task. From the beginning English was the vehicle through which contact was made, and its gradual acceptance by the natives signified the adoption of the ideological mold of the colonizer, a fundamental fact which opened the way to a new form of expression and exchange of experiences. Through the educational system established along the coast, the Moravians shaped a consciousness that was alien to the Nicaraguan social reality of openness and conformity to Anglo-Saxon cultural values.

### Conclusion

Presently it is not possible to speak of Christianity with African features among the groups of the Negro race that live along the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua and Honduras. Given the complicated historical and social circumstances that we have just discussed, one can imagine the difficulty involved in retrieving those features of "African Christianity" within the context of Atlantic Central America. The long night of cross-mixing has already effected an irreversible erosion of the African essence in the Negro

slaves that populated the region and has left in their children and in their children's children, only remnants of the negritude (covertly present or perhaps totally extinct) of a beloved continent. Neither the Moravians, nor even the Episcopalian or the Catholic Churches have favored the search for what is truly African by transforming their liturgy or praxis to one better suited to the Negro faith and closer to the reality of that Mulatto, Criollo, half-caste or Negro Christ who agonizes over the lashes of new forms of Latin American oppression. The great financial centers turn a deaf ear to the cries of abandonment and isolation of the American Black. However, for Nicaragua, it is significant and encouraging that the Sandinista Revolution is urging the Church to consider ways and means to salvage the national identity and indigenous culture of the people through theology. This fact assumes additional significance on the Atlantic Coast where a process is in place to achieve an autonomy that would enable the Church to articulate a new theological program based on the ethnic realities in which it operates, as well as to undertake a praxis consistent with the Indio-African congregations it serves.