SOCIAL UPHEAVALS AND RELATIVE DEPRIVATION: THE "AWAKENING" IN LATE 19TH-CENTURY CARIBBEAN NICARAGUA

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1. Introduction

A major part of the indigenous and Afro-American inhabitants of Nicaragua's Atlantic region, also known as *Mosquitia*, converted spontaneously to Christianity in 1881 an 1882. During this religious salvation movement, which came to be known as the "Awakening", numerous people came into ecstatic states and local prophets emerged. The Awakening coincided with a generalized feeling that the end of the world was near. The movement had the character of a collective catharsis where spiritual death was followed by the symbolic resurrection and the departure into a new era. A missionary of the pietistic Moravian Church described the Awakening as follows:

> "[T]he movement expressed itself in each of the people seized … in a violent trembling of the whole body ... They lay down speechless, even unconscious, like the tetanus infested, and consumed no food .... Some individuals also perceived all kinds of light phenomena, dreams and visions ...."[1] "The afflicted came .... all in great anxiety and fear. All they done wrong in their life, old and new sins were in vivid colours before their eyes and weight on them as an intolerable burden. ... Once the awakened spent a few hours or days in this unhappy and restless state, they became assured of the forgiveness of their sins on reason of Christ's merit and death, and a blessed peace filled them. Then poured their mouth over by the most eloquent and sublime effusions of their hearts, thanks for the grace received, praise and glory to the Lord formed the content." [2]

2. The Causes of Millenarian Movements

With the exceptional physical states, the cathartic character and the belief that the world would soon come to an end, the "Awakening" is reminiscent of other religious movements that have been classed under the term millenarianism. According to Worsley millenarianism refers to religious movements that anticipate and prepare for the coming of an era of supernatural blessedness, the readiness to take off and the preparation for the coming salvation being central elements.[3] Millenarian movements have emerged in situations characterised by extreme power imbalances, repression, exploitation, culture clash or colonial relations. They are interpreted as reactions to social crises or relative deprivation resulting from rapid social change.[4] The speed and extent of social change are indeed relevant for the experience of the affected groups. However, if change originates from the group itself or is imposed from without is decisive. Disorientation and anxiety are not the result of social or cultural change as such but of the perceived loss of the capacity to control one's environment.

Millenarianism is just one of several reactions to repression, colonialism and culture clash possible. Why is the protest articulated in religious form? Bruce Lincoln considers the temporal structure of millenarian ideas responsible for their attractiveness. They give an adequate description of the present state of misery with its social, political or economic grievances, and conceive them as necessary throes of a new era.[5] Millenarian ideologies are thus not just explanations for the present but provide a prospect for the future. They thus create hope without which human existence would be unbearable.

3. The Historical Context of the "Great Awakening"

The salvation movement in Nicaragua in 1881/82 is closely related to processes of social change caused by the activities of European missionaries, the spread of the commercial economy and the increasing penetration by the government administration. However, these developments affected the Miskitu Indians and the Afro-American Creoles differently. The English-speaking, stratified and mostly urban Creoles were the most important native group in the southern part of the region, concentrated around the major settlements Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon. The rural, relatively egalitarian Miskitu mostly settled in the northern parts instead, living in small scattered groups based on kinship and reciprocity.

The Spanish conquerors did not succeed in subduing the indigenous inhabitants of the Mosquitia during the colonial era. The region became a hideout for mostly British pirates in the 17th century. With rich stands of logwood and mahogany it attracted woodcutters later who were joined by a few settlers engaged in trade or sugar production. The region lost some of its independence in 1860 when the Treaty of Managua established the Mosquito Reservation and granted it certain rights. Up to this time, the local population had been able to secure its political autonomy to a large degree by establishing friendly relations with Great Britain, the second colonial power in the region.[6]

Around 1880 the struggle about the region's status between the Reservation government and the Nicaraguan state had reached a critical state. Many inhabitsnts feared that incorporation to Nicaragua was imminent. Armed encroachments and real or supposed conspiracies produced a general climate of uncertainty.[7] In addition, the decline of the rubber prices resulted in economic crises. Rubber collection was an important source of income for large parts of the local population since the 1860s.[8]

The effects of economic decline were aggravated by the impact of several thunderstorms resulting in famine.[9]

The presence of the Protestant Moravian Church, which began to work in the region in 1847, was a key factor for the emergence of the Awakening.[10] The missionaries decided to organize their mission work separately for both groups in reaction to the hierarchical relationship between Miskitu and Creoles.[11] The missionaries' success was extremely limited for a long time. Their pietistic Christianity, which condemned carnal desire, the consumption of alcohol, dancing and other "debaucheries" stressing diligence, punctuality, frugality and Christian family life instead, clashed head-on with both the Afro-American folk culture of the lower class and the Miskitu way of living.

Moravian religiosity provides another clue for understanding the Awakening. It stressed the personal experience of God and was frequently close to exceptional states of mind. Christian enthusiasm, which was one of the foundations of the Moravian Church, was familiar with convulsions and trance that frequently accompanied the Awakening in the Mosquitia.[12] Therefore, Creoles, Miskitu and missionaries could conceive actions and ideas that contained a considerable portion of Afro-American or indigenous elements as Christian. While the missionaries would see numbness and speaking in tongues, which frequently accompanied the Awakening, as indications for redemption (based on Marc 9, verses 17-27), such phenomena were also part of the initiation of indigenous shamans (*sukia*).[13] The notion of a Day of Judgement was spread by the missionaries but similar ideas can also be found in the indigenous mythology of the Miskitu.[14]

Thus, the missionaries considered the Awakening a "marvellous, divine effusion of the [holy] spirit leading to Christ".[15] At the same time, they were anxious to "remain master of the movement".[16]

4. The Awakening among the Creoles

The growing inequality among the Afro-American population contributed to the emergence of the Awakening in this group. While most Afro-Americans were still poor, a few Creoles had become comparably wealthy by engaging in commerce, the exploitation of lumber and the rubber trade since the mid-century. Against this background missionaries and Creole elite managed to establish their ideological hegemony and condemned elements of Afro-American folk culture, such as obeah, wakes, or feasts with drumming, drinking and dancing. What had been common and acceptable practice was now disapproved as bad and godless.

The small Moravian congregation remained a sect in the sociological sense of the term until 1881. Due to the extensive demands placed on the moral lifestyle of its members, the congregation became the organizational focus for members of the Creole elite, who tried hard to dissociate themselves from the less well-off Afro-Americans. As Moravians they could consider themselves "chosen people" not just for their wealth or education but also for being morally superior. In combination with the European missionaries this small group of Afro-Americans determined the social and political life of the region. [17]

The Awakening seized especially people who had no access to the closed elite group in its most extreme forms, including visions, dreams, numbness, speaking in tongues etc.[18] The missionaries decided alone about acceptance in the congregation and thus access to the prestigious Christianity. People affected by the Awakening claimed a direct relationship to God sidelining the missionary mediation. It was common believe

that symptoms such as "the tremble" were evidence for having received the Holy Ghost.[19] The missionaries had to accept at least some of these claims if did not want to put the entire conversion movement at risk. [20] Many new converts claimed a higher prestige than even long-term members of the congregation.[21] Thus, the Awakening among the Afro-Americans should be seen as an attempt by the less prosperous Blacks to gain access to a status-providing asset, the membership of the Moravian congregation, which up until then was under the strict control of European missionaries and the Creole elite.[22]

5. Crisis among the Miskitu

The Awakening meant a much more profound change in lifestyle and world view for the Miskitu than for the Afro-Americans who had participated in the commercial economy since long and already experienced the restrictions imposed by formal government. In addition, most Afro-Americans had some contact to Christianity before, being baptised by the captains of trading vessels (a baptism Moravians did not recognize, of course, considering them merely "Christians by name"). Most Miskito still clung to their own religious concepts and were "heathens" in the missionaries' opinion.

While a few Miskitu had become Christians before the Awakening, induced by dreams or visions, larger groups of Indians began to convert only in 1881.[23] Trembling and speaking in tongues became widespread phenomena in Miskitu villages and prophets emerged preaching abstinence and conversion to the new faith. The converts began to construct meeting places, gave up drinking, cut their hair and donned according to the missionaries' conception.[24]

Conversion was basically a collective process focussed on a restructuring of social communities and not individual redemption or quest for prestige in the Miskitu case.

In the following, I want to discuss additional factors for understanding the Awakening which are particular to the Miskitu case.

a. The advance of government administration

The Mosquito Reservation did not comprise the entire Atlantic Coast which meant that the majority of the Miskitu lived outside its boundaries, formally under the direct administration of the Nicaraguan government. However, even there state presence began only to be felt in the late 1870s when the first Nicaraguan officials took up residence in the region.[25]

Miskitu representation in the Reservation's government was minimal and the institutions created after the Treaty of Managua corresponded more to the situation in the few urban settlements with their overwhelming Creole population than to the rural areas.[26] However, in the settlements where a mission station was established, missionaries attempted to make the local population obey the government. They tried to collect taxes (mostly in the form of rubber) and to enforce school attendance made obligatory in 1875.[27] They also made efforts to suppress the indigenous custom of blood revenge and to deliver the culprits to the competent authorities.[28] These attempts to "civilize" the Miskitu were experienced as repressive and as intrusion into their internal social arrangements.

The suppression of blood revenge had dramatic consequences it pitched the Miskitu involved into a serious moral conflict. The soul of a deceased person had to travel a long and difficult way from the grave to the Great Mother Scorpion, Yapti misri, in a land of plenty, according to Miskitu believe. The soul has to pass a bottleneck built by two trees on its way. But the passage between the trees will close and the soul will definitely perish if her death had not been avenged.[29] Thus, the Miskitu faced a dilemma. Obeying the orders of the missionaries or Reservation authorities meant to

become guilty of the relative soul's doom. This was not only morally problematic but also dangerous since the Miskitu were convinced that the ghost of a deceased could harm the living by illness or even death if they failed to comply with their traditional obligations towards him (e.g., avenging his death or destroying his personal belongings).[30]

b. Changes in the region's ethnic hierarchy

Another factor that contributed to the crisis of the Miskitu was the changing ethnic hierarchy. The Miskitu had been the dominant indigenous group since the 18th century due to the guns they acquired from the British. Their fighting power made them the strongest military force in the Mosquitia. Beyond this, they also played an important role as mediators between the British and the other indigenous groups of the region. The Miskitu lost much of their ground as middlemen in the contraband trade with the Spanish and as military allies after the wars between the colonial powers had come to an end in the 1820s. The Creoles, on the other hand, became the leading local group on the coast due their urban lifestyle and English language skills, which were qualities that had gained importance under the new circumstances.[31]

Millenarian ideas were especially attractive for the Miskitu against this background. Converted Miskitu could consider themselves members of a chosen people which would rule over the earth, or at least the Mosquitia, after the arrival of the Lord. Present suffering and oppression were thus merely necessary ordeals on the route to redemption.[32]

c. The spread of the commercial economy and changes in the status system

The decades after 1850 were a period of upheaval also in the economic sphere. Miskitu had traded with British merchants since the 17th century. However, barter was

increasingly replaced by transactions involving money. Indians were subject to extreme exploitation as rubber gatherers or lumber-men under circumstances characterised as "debt peonage" or even "slavery" by contemporary observers. The sale of rum to Indians played a disastrous role in this context.[33]

In addition, the commercial economy' increasing importance changed the prestige order. In the past, older married men enjoyed high status due to their merits as warriors and their generosity. Polygamous men were in a favoured position controlling the labour of several women who did most of the plantation work and prepared the alcoholic beverage *mishla* that was a major attraction during feasts. Now, in contrast, the money obtained by collecting rubber or cutting lumber allowed even young men to demonstrate their generosity by lavishly distributing rum bought from European traders. Indeed, mostly younger men worked in these occupations.[34]

The importation of rum grew especially during the rubber boom of the 1860s and 70s. This beverage began to replace the traditional *mishla* which affected the status of women.[35] Other articles made by Indian women, such as pottery or bark cloth, were also increasingly ousted by imported goods such as iron pots or cotton cloth.[36] The decline in the importance of female labour probably contributed to the missionaries' long term success in suppressing polygamy. But this created additional social problems since polygamy had been a means to provide for the maintenance of widows.[37]

d. Consequences of the mission: end of wealth redistribution, weakening of authority structures and of social cohesion

The work of the Moravian missionaries had a deep impact on indigenous social relations. They fought infanticide, polygamy and the custom of burying or destroying the belongings of the deceased.[38] In the indigenous world view this meant "robbing

the dead" so that his ghost was hindered from coming to rest, doing any kind of mischief instead.[39] Therefore, to abandon this custom was a fear-producing affair. Beyond this, the destruction of a deceased person's belongings was one of several mechanisms to prevent the enduring accumulation of property.[40] The missionaries thus weakened the customs that had prevented a marked social inequality. Since there were no established forms to deal with surplus, conflicts about property were inevitable. Consequently, Indians began to fight about the partition of the inheritance, especially if the deceased owned cattle.[41]

Epidemics of measles, smallpox and whooping cough had devastated the Mosquitia from time to time claiming numerous victims especially among the indigenous population. While the *sukia* were helpless against these European diseases, the missionaries developed an intense and successful curative activity. The missionaries' medicine and religion proved to be more powerful than the indigenous cures and rites. [42] Therefore, it comes as no surprise that many *sukia* wanted to become church members during the Awakening to gain access to the new sources of knowledge and power.[43]

The Moravian missionaries also played a major role as providers of imported goods since they developed extensive commercial activities.[44] Missionaries were increasingly invited by Miskitu to act as mediators in disputes due to the prestige they acquired in curing and trading and their access to the powerful Christian religion. They thus impinged on the Indian headmen's (*wita*) field of responsibility.[45]

Changes in the mechanisms that produced social cohesion are critical for understanding the Awakening among the indigenous groups. The Miskitu began to abandon their dispersed settlement pattern and live in larger villages frequently near trading posts. The missionaries did their best to foster this process which made

proselytisation easier.[46] The inhabitants of the new settlements came from different places so that the established norms regulating the conduct among relatives by blood or marriage were insufficient. In addition, distance between dwellings was much smaller in these villages which contributed to an increase in neighbourly conflicts.[47]

e. The Moravian alternative

The Moravian missionaries contributed significantly to the weakening of the established Miskitu social structures. Nevertheless, their pietistic Christianity attracted many Indians who had to cope with a complex economic, social and ideological crisis. The Christian teaching promised salvation from present sufferings, provided explanations for the new situation and offered norms that seemed more adequate than the established ones under the changed circumstances. With its stress on brotherly and sisterly love the Moravian congregation provided an alternative bases for the establishment of trust and solidarity, while the existing net of mostly kin-based social relations was disrupted by the developing commercial economy. The Moravians assigned each member his place according to gender, age and marital status. The congregations stress on order and discipline gained attractiveness in a situation of general uncertainty. [48] Beyond this, Christianity offered access to spiritual forces more powerful than those the *sukia* controlled.

6. Conclusion

Millenarianism can emerge in quite different contexts as the Mosquitia case demonstrates. Although massive social change, induced by missionary work and the spread of the commercial economy, provided a common background, the Awakening had different causes in the cases discussed here. Whereas the movement can be interpreted as a reaction to the growing social differentiation and the discrimination of lower class culture in the Afro-American case, it was an attempt to overcome a deep

social and cultural crisis by the Miskitu Indians. A generalized climate of uncertainty and fear, resulting from the threat of a Nicaraguan invasion and the consequences of a deep economic bust, was necessary for the emergence of the movement in each case. The resulting anguish was responsible for the physical stress reactions observed among many converts.[49] Wallace has already indicated that revitalization movements are not direct answers to crisis, disaster or deprivation, but attempts to cope with the social and cultural dislocations, which are exacerbated and disclosed by the (material) degradation: "... it is loss of confidence in a familiar and expectedly reliable pattern of social relations, rather than deprivation of food, shelter, and other economic wants, that stimulates the innovation ...".[50] This argument helps to understand why such movements appear not at the peak of economic crises or disasters but with some lag of time. It can also explain the aims of these movements which focus on the mental reconstruction of a moral order that is more suitable for the changed reality and not on the immediate solution of tangible problems.

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Notes

[1]Schneider 1890:2f. This and the following translations are mine.

[2]Schneider 1888:16 f.

[3]Worsley 1973:20; Mühlmann 1964:325; Lanternari 1966:463;Schwartz 1987:524.

[4]While Wallace (1956a:269f; 1957:24-26; 1968:75), Mühlmann (1964:331-333) and Lincoln (1985:277) stress crises, Aberle (1962), Adas (1979:44f, 183f) and Worsley (1973:337, 342) emphasize the importance of relative deprivation.

[5]Lincoln 1985:277; see also Schwartz 1987:524.

[6]See, for example, Gabbert n.d.

[7]*Missionsblatt* 1876:74, 130, 157f; 1878:101f; 1879:163, 208f; 1880, Jahresbericht:15f; 1882:69f, 101f; *Periodical Accounts* I, 31:263f; 32:310.

[8]*Missionsblatt* 1869:100; 1880:90, 103; 1885:15; *Periodical Accounts* I, 31:264, 343.

[9]*Missionsblatt* 1880:103, 163; 1881:69; 1882:52, 176; Schneider 1899:121.

[10]An extensive discussion of the Moravian mission and the Awakening among the Creoles can be found in Gabbert (1992:102-118, 125-134).

[11]Gabbert 1992:229f.

[12]See, for example, Knox 1957:14-17, 348.

[13]Schneider 1888:15; Conzemius 1932:141f; Großmann 1940:40f, 44f; Rossbach 1987:89f.

[14]*Missionsblatt* 1860:46; 1886:74; 1915:256; Conzemius 1932:130f.

[15]Schneider 1899:109.

[16]Schneider 1888:4.

[17]See a discussion of the Creole elite's political role in Gabbert (n.d.).

[18]*Missionsblatt* 1884:13; *Periodical Accounts* I, 33:49f; Schneider 1888:27f.

[19]*Missionsblatt* 1887:141; see also Schneider 1888:26; Rossbach 1987:89.

[20]The Moravian congregation grew only by 546 members in the 17 years before the Awakening (from 1863 to 1880). From the end of 1880 to late 1881 it augmented from 1,146 auf 1,711 and reached 2.834 in 1883 (Martin 1899:209; Schneider 1888:23; 1899:106; Rossbach 1987:87).

[21]Martin 1899:190, 198, 200f; *Periodical Accounts* I, 32:311; *Missionsblatt* 1885:48f; 1886:75f; 1893:98f, 101; Schneider 1888:26f.

[22]Of course, most converts probably did not employ a conscious strategy for social advancement. What is at stake here are the social and motivational dynamics that underlie individual actions.

[23]*Missionsblatt* 1865:200; 1869:85f; 1875:93f; 1878:66; 1880:103f; 1881:70; Martin 1899:160-162.

[24]Schneider 1888:10; 1890:36, 42f, 58f; 1899:107, 112; *Missionsblatt* 1882:51, 104; 1884:16, 34f.

[25]The expansion of colonial or state administration into hitherto marginal regions and the threat of loosing local autonomy were also important for the rise of millenarian movements in other world regions (see, for example, Reed 1964:48; Adas 1979:184).

[26]Gabbert n.d.

[27]Martin 1899: 92; *Missionsblatt* 1876: 125.

[28]*Missionsblatt* 1877: 98 and 1884: 108f; Schneider 1890: 53.

[29]Großmann 1940:47.

[30]*Missionsblatt* 1858:215; 1935:199; Conzemius 1932:155-160.

[31]Gabbert 1990 and 1992:85-91.

[32]See also Cohn (1988:15-26) for a general discussion of these implications of millenarian ideologies.

[33]*Missionsblatt* 1860:164; 1864:159f; 1869:45f, 143; 1871:197; 1875:17, 158; 1878:194; *Periodical Accounts* I, 24:517; Kalb 1893:283; Girsewald 1896:31; Martin 1894; 1899:54; Großmann 1940:29-31; Schneider n.d.:12f, 41f.

[34]*Missionsblatt* 1878:192; *Periodical Accounts* I, 31:318; Großmann 1940:30. An interesting discussion of the consequences of the money economy on native prestige systems can be found in Burridge (1969:41-46, 114f, 145-149).

[35]*Missionsblatt* 1874:144; Rossbach 1990:51.

[36]*Missionsblatt* 1858:209f; *Periodical Accounts* I, 22:512.

[37]*Missionsblatt* 1884:14; Conzemius 1932:146, 149.

[38]*Missionsblatt* 1859:249; 1877:100; Conzemius 1932:155f.

[39]Conzemius 1932:155f.

[40]Another was the *sikro*, or feast for the dead, where surplus food was collectively consumed (*Missionsblatt* 1910:59; Großmann 1940:32, 45).

[41]Großmann 1940:31; see also Helms 1971:163f.

[42]*Missionsblatt* 1851:165; 1855:179-181; 1861:250; 1877:367; 1880, Jahresbericht:17; 1897:198; 1907:221; 1909:75.

[43]*Missionsblatt* 1884:17, 50, 111f, 178; 1887:155; 1889:169, 189; 1891:366f, 373; *Periodical Accounts* I, 32:575-577; 34:503-505.

[44]Martin 1899:127; see also *Periodical Accounts* I, 22:512; 32:311; *Missionsblatt* 1858:209; 1879:112; 1882:103; 1892:309; Rossbach 1987:84. See Adas (1979:54f, 60f) for similar processes among the Maori.

[45]*Missionsblatt* 1886:12; 1891:379.

[46]See, e.g., *Missionsblatt* 1857:104.

[47]*Missionsblatt* 1898:250; Schneider 1890:58.

[48]Gabbert 1985:55-57; Rossbach 1987:82.

[49]The role of indigenous or Afro-American possession cults in the Awakening has not been thoroughly investigated yet, but see Dennis (1981).

[50]Wallace 1956b:19.