



THE NICARAGUAN CARIBBEAN: CULTURAL DIVERSITY, AUTONOMY AND UNITY

**THE NICARAGUAN
CARIBBEAN
COMMEMORATES THE
25TH ANNIVERSARY
OF MULTIETHNIC
AUTONOMY WITH
THE PUBLICATION
OF COLECCIÓN
IDENTIDADES
Y PATRIMONIO
CULTURAL**

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The recognition of ethnic pluralism in the 1986 Political Constitution of Nicaragua laid the foundations for the preservation and development of identities and cultures of indigenous and Afro-Descendant peoples. The Political Constitution also recognizes the right of indigenous and Afro-Descendant peoples and ethnic communities to preserve and develop their cultural identities, free speech, languages, art, and culture. It highlights the duty of the State to develop special programmes for the exercise of such rights.

Against this background, a first step involved the establishment of the Multiethnic Self-governing Status in the Atlantic Coast Regions (Law No. 28)¹. Its functions include enriching national culture through the recognition of, respect for and strengthening of the diversity of ethnic and cultural identities in the Atlantic Coast communities. The Regulations under Law No. 28 define Cultural Autonomy as the right of self-governing regions to preserve and promote their multiethnic culture.

This national process was further enhanced with the adoption of the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of UNESCO and, especially, with the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which reaffirms that



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cultural diversity forms a common heritage of humanity and should be cherished and preserved, especially because it nurtures human capacities and values, and therefore is a mainspring for sustainable development for communities and peoples. The Convention makes reference to cultural pluralism, the right to difference, and the need for States to enact cultural policies aimed at protecting and respecting diversity and contributing to the understanding between cultures.²

In this context, a cultural mapping process for indigenous peoples and Afro-Descendant communities in the Autonomous Regions of Nicaragua was undertaken as one of the activities included in the United Nations programme jointly undertaken with the Regional Self-Governments and the Government of National Unity and Reconciliation, known as Cultural Revitalization and Creative Production Development along the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. It was supported by the Spanish Government Fund for the Millennium Development Goals and by the Spanish International Development Cooperation Agency (AECID).

The Joint Programme focuses on culture and makes emphasis on the strengthening of cultural revitalization, management, production and administration capabilities of indigenous and Afro-Descendant peoples. It also seeks to enrich culture by promoting economic and productive

opportunities in the Autonomous Regions along the Caribbean Coast.³

The cultural diagnosis and mapping of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples in the Autonomous Regions on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua consisted of several phases and processes:

1. Identifying cultural resources and a baseline to facilitate the programme impact assessment based on key Joint Programme indicators: Cultural Revitalization and Creative Production Development along the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua; and
2. Inventorying and mapping over 2,400 tangible and intangible cultural expressions and resources, as well as cultural companies and infrastructures of indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities in the North and South Atlantic Autonomous Regions (RAAN and RAAS, respectively).

An open, flexible methodology was applied to help each team introduce adjustments in keeping with the peculiarities of every indigenous people and Afro-Descendant community. The way research teams were established provided for increased legitimacy and appropriation because they were backed up by local authorities. Various cultural stakeholders and authorities



Tuahka women working the tunu

were given access to participation spaces and mechanisms, and their cultural knowledge and practices were respected throughout the process. This methodology made it possible to conduct research into social practices that show the will to prevail and the cultural resilience of indigenous and Afro-Descendant peoples. At the same time, measures were identified to facilitate a positive, harmonious, respectful interrelationship of coexistence among cultures, and to improve living conditions. A constant learning process was organized for the work of all teams and for comprehensive programme coordination.

The process reaffirmed the rich, diverse cultural heritage of our peoples, including knowledge, language, values, traditions, customs, symbols, spirituality, organization modalities and rules for coexistence, views of the world, and development concepts that provide a basis for our heritage. Such knowledge and practices are part of the so-called collective memory and take the shape of short stories, songs, folklore elements, proverbs, dances, myths, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language, taxonomy, agricultural practices, tools, materials, animal and plant species, and sacred sites. They are mainly expressed, however, through daily activities unfolded by men and women.

All these inputs laid the foundations for the development and adoption of the Cultural Policy of the Regional

Autonomous Councils at RAAN and RAAS, and for the formulation of the Cultural Plans of the indigenous and Afro-Descendant peoples and another ten indigenous and multi-ethnic territories in the two autonomous regions. This was also a participatory process. The guidelines set forth in the Cultural Policy provided a frame of reference for cultural plans, including:

1. Preservation and promotion of the cultural diversity, rights and wealth of the indigenous and Afro-Descendant peoples.
2. Strengthening of the individual culture of each people.
3. Formulation of a National Cultural Policy.
4. Enhancement of the role of culture for the "well-being" of indigenous and Afro-Descendant peoples.
5. Respect for and protection of intellectual property rights and certificates of origin for autochthonous products.

The process concluded with the strengthening of the Secretariats for Culture at the North and South Atlantic Regional Self-governments, the training of cultural managers, and the publication of cultural revitalization studies on specific issues under Colección Identidades y Patrimonio Cultural. These studies included:



- Cuadernos Culturales del Caribe nicaragüense (a seven-work series):
 1. Cuaderno cultural introductorio: Riqueza cultural de la Costa Caribe;
 2. Cuaderno cultural Creole: La memoria de nuestros ancestros es sagrada (In the old days);
 3. Cuaderno cultural Garífuna: Tambor, tierra, sangre... Soy garífuna (Garawaun-muwa-hitaü garífuna wagia);
 4. Cuaderno cultural Miskitu: Antes de los días tristes (Sari laka apu kan piwara);
 5. Cuaderno cultural Rama: Debajo de cada piedra vive un espíritu (Ngaling tupki yubusuk aakari);
 6. Cuaderno cultural sumu-mayangna: La naturaleza está poblada de espíritus (Sauni sangnika bitik adika sangnika didawan duwi);
 7. Cuaderno cultural ulwa: El idioma de los ulwa duerme, no está muerto ni olvidado (Ulwa balna yulkana ya, amaya; iwasa dapi dakatna bik kahdasa).
- Historia oral de Corn Island (The richness of our identity and tradition).
- Alimentos tradicionales del pueblo rama (Traditional Rama Food).
- Tras los pasos de Aupalk (Aupalk kiuna yabaln munh), an educational material for tuahka language teaching.
- Arte culinario tradicional. Identidad y patrimonio de las culturas de la costa Caribe de Nicaragua.
- Cuentos, leyendas y tradiciones indígenas del Caribe nicaragüense.

A selection of oral stories, traditions and research works such as *Inventario sistematizado de los estudios culturales en el Caribe*; *Mestizos costeños y sinodescendientes en la diversidad cultural del Caribe nicaragüense*, and *Memoria del Foro de Arquitectura tradicional costeña*, were also published in specialized magazines of the Nicaraguan

Caribbean.⁴ Intangible oral expressions such as the traditional festivals of Miskitu and Creole peoples were also documented in pieces like *Historia oral de Waspam, Sihkru Tara*, and *La fiesta tradicional del May Pole*.

These publications summarize a three-year work process headed by autonomous regional authorities and carried out by dozens of coast residents, researchers, local authorities, scholars, and wise men and women of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples who participated as full holders of individual and collective human rights, in a position to share their cultural resources with other people. They have thus established true intercultural relations and developed dynamic community-based economies through free interaction and exchange on an equal footing. These publications also show that the knowledge and living memory of our peoples are linked to their territories and settings, that their ways of life and spiritual beliefs are related to their lands, territories and national resources, and that their survival relies on the protection of natural and cultural diversity. The visibility of cultural resources under the Cultural Mapping exercise highlights the strength of the indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities, and helps raise further awareness about multicultural citizenship, which strengthens the autonomous institutional system.

The 25th anniversary of the self-government of indigenous peoples and ethnic communities in the Autonomous Regions of Nicaragua was commemorated in 2012. These have been years of struggle, dreams, hopes and sacrifice to implement a form of government and a legal, political, administrative, economic and financially decentralized system within the Nicaraguan State, empowered to effectively exercise the historical rights of the indigenous peoples and ethnic communities along the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, as enshrined in the Political Constitution of the Republic, in Law No. 28 and in other pieces of legislation.

On this occasion, we celebrated the living memory, shared ancient practices, and recognized the intrinsic value of indigenous and Afro-descendant cultures. Ancient knowledge will make it possible for the new generations to learn to respect and enjoy diversity, while contributing to making our societies truly multiethnic and capable of overcoming discrimination and racism which are, one way or another, still posing a threat to our coexistence, sustainable development and “well-being”, that is to say, to living well in integrity and full harmony with nature and humanity. This requires other civilizations to adopt a new paradigm guaranteeing sustainable livelihoods at the local level, community solidarity, capacity-building, and strengthened adaptation and self-sustainable capability for survival **C&D**

Notes

¹ The Right of Autonomy is enshrined in Article 4 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which reads: Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.

² This statement was endorsed by the Government of National Unity and Reconciliation (GRUN), whose cultural policy undertakes to recover, validate, promote and defend all the features of national identity and culture, including multiethnic expressions, languages, and distinctive signs of different peoples. It also seeks to recover tradition and customs, languages, rites, beliefs, and manifestations still visible and alive, as well as those relevant to their identities, of which they have been deprived under various colonization and domination processes.

³ The Joint Programme was implemented by the Governments and Councils of the Autonomous Regions along the Caribbean Coast and the Government of National Unity and Reconciliation (GRUN), with the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture playing the leading role; also involved were the Development Secretariat for the Caribbean Coast Region and INTUR. There were six United Nations agencies (UNESCO, UNDP, UNIDO, UNICEF, ILO and WTO) participating in the Programme; they were headed by the World Tourism Organization.

⁴ In Wani, *Revista del Caribe Nicaragüense*, and Sahlai, *Revista del Centro Cultural Ditalyang y Fundación Tuahka*.