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In the Shadow of the Empire – The Emergence of Afro-Creole Societies in Belize and Nicaragua

Resumen: Este artículo persigue dos objetivos. En su primera parte, se analiza la historia de los afro-americanos de habla inglesa (criollos) en dos regiones de Centroamérica, dando especial énfasis en su rol en la sociedad regional y su relación con los hispano-hablantes. En la región caribeña de Nicaragua (la Mosquitia) los criollos siempre han sido una minoría numérica, en Belice por lo contrario, se convirtieron en el pueblo nacional desde el siglo XIX. En estudios anteriores se ha tratado a los criollos de ambos países como comunidades étnicas y se ha destacado su carácter de grupos urbanos, protestantes, educados y de clase media. En una segunda parte, a diferencia de lo anterior, este artículo insiste en su heterogeneidad cultural y social. Adicionalmente se subraya lo penoso y contradictorio del proceso de su etnogénesis enfocándose en los criollos de Nicaragua.

Summary: This article has two primary aims. The first part discusses the history of English-speaking Afro-Americans (Creoles) in two regions of the Central American mainland, focusing on their role in regional society and their relationship to Hispanic Central Americans. Creoles have always been a numerical minority in the Caribbean coastal region of Nicaragua (the Mosquitia) but since the nineteenth century they have become the national people in Belize. Earlier studies of the Creoles in both countries treated them as ethnic communities emphasizing them as mostly urban, Protestant and educated middle-class groups. In a short second section, the article stresses, in contrast, the cultural and social heterogeneity among the Afro-American population, and the protracted and contradictory process of their ethnogenesis, focusing on the Creoles in Caribbean Nicaragua.

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1. Introduction

In the sixteenth century the Caribbean Sea became the battleground of two colonial empires. The Spanish attempted to consolidate their monopoly on the riches of Latin America, while the British tried to secure “a slice of the cake” for themselves. Among other things, they employed pirates and buccaneers to weaken Spanish influence, and Barbados and Jamaica were ultimately conquered by the British in mid-seventeenth century. The Caribbean coasts of Central America provided convenient hideouts for pirates and their rich stands of logwood were an attraction for woodcutters. In addition the prospect of contraband with Spanish towns further inland drew traders to these places. From the 1630s, the different groups established numerous small colonies between the Bay of Honduras in the north and Panama in the south (including Belize, Black River, Cape Gracias a Dios and Bluefields). These settlements, whose political and legal status was long disputed, were repeatedly subjected to both diplomatic and military attacks by the Spanish, claiming sovereignty. However, Spain was unable to establish permanent political control over most of the area (Floyd 1967; Sandner 1985: 67-120).

The British settlements emerged as private ventures independent of the official colonial policy, and for a long period Britain made no formal territorial claims. It was only after the “War of Jenkin’s Ear” (1739-1748) that the British crown established a superintendent in the Mosquitia and in 1749 officially made the territory a protectorate. In the Treaty of Paris (1763), Spain underlined its claim to sovereignty but granted the British residents at least the right to cut logwood in the Bay of Honduras and elsewhere along the Caribbean coast. Thus, the British settlements were consolidated in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and settlers brought along African slaves to work for them. When slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century, the number of people of African descent increased as new immigrants from the West Indies came to work on the construction of railways in Panama (1850-1855) and Costa Rica (1871-1890), of the Panama Canal (1880-1889, 1904-1914), and on the developing banana plantations (1880-1940) on the Caribbean coasts of Central America. While many returned home after a couple of years, others remained. The slaves and later the Afro-American immigrants are the ancestors of a sizable population of African descent (Creoles¹), which has decisively shaped the social and cultural make-up of the region to this day.

1 Up to the nineteenth century, the term “Creole” referred to those who did not belong to the Indian population, but were natives of the Caribbean. While the term became a designation for the descendants of Spaniards in Spanish America, it has been used since the 1840s to categorize English-speaking Afro-Americans in the Caribbean (Gabbert 1992: 9, 78s.).

According to rough estimates, in the early 1990s approx. 450,000 Afro-Americans lived in the ports and rural settlements of the narrow strip of land along the Atlantic coast of Central America (see table 1). Whereas the languages of the groups just mentioned are variants of a creolised English (Creole), Amerindian elements predominate in the idiom of the 100,000 to 150,000 Garínagu (Garifuna, Black Carib). These people of partly African ancestry are descendants of a group that emerged from the mixing of African slaves and Amerindians on the island of St. Vincent in the Lesser Antilles during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Garínagu became involved in violent conflicts with the European colonialists. Finally defeated, they were deported by British troops to the island of Roatán off the northern coast of Honduras 1797. They later moved to the mainland and established settlements in the coastal regions of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.² Moreover, Panama and the province Guanacaste on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica are the home of Afro-Americans whose ancestors were slaves to the Spanish conquerors.³ Largely assimilated into the Hispanic-Catholic culture of the majority of Central America's population, they are consequently referred to by English-speaking Afro-Americans as "Black Spaniards" (Bourgeois 1986: 161, note 11).

Table 1: Creoles in Central America

Belize	58,441	(Census 2000)
Honduras	13,000	(Grimes 2002, estimate 1998)
Nicaragua	30,000	(Grimes 2002, estimate 1986)
Costa Rica	50,000	(González 1997: 35, estimate 1991)
	55,100	(Grimes 2002, estimate 1986)
Panama	299,000	(Grimes 2002, estimate 1998)

In the following, I will concentrate on the history of the Creole groups in Belize (formerly known as the Bay settlement or British Honduras) and in the Atlantic region of Nicaragua (also known as Mosquitia⁴). I will pay special attention to the emergence of the English-speaking Creole population during slavery and sketch their development up to the present, focusing on their position in the regional societies they lived in and their conflictive relationship to Hispanic Central Americans. A comparison of the two regions seems particularly interesting since they have experienced a somewhat

2 See Solien González (1988); Davidson (1980); Mohr de Collado (this volume).

3 As early as 1575, 8,600 African slaves lived in the area of Central America controlled by the Spanish (Peralta 1883: 536; Holm 1978: 174s.).

4 Geographically and historically the Mosquitia comprises the Atlantic coasts of Nicaragua and Honduras from Cape Honduras in the north to the San Juan River in the south. However, the region was divided politically between Honduras and Nicaragua in 1859/60. My discussion will concentrate mostly on the Nicaraguan part.

different fate despite their close historical relationship. The local Maya population in the Bay of Honduras had already withdrawn to the interior before the arrival of the British and for the most part avoided contact with them later on (Bolland 1977: 20-22.). In contrast to Belize, the European settlers established intense trade and working relations with different Amerindian populations in the Mosquitia, especially the Miskitu, who became the dominant indigenous group as a result of their privileged access to firearms and other European commodities.⁵ Thus, the Creoles have always been a numerical minority in the Mosquitia, where indigenous groups constitute the bulk of the population. In Belize, on the other hand, Afro-Americans became the largest population group in the eighteenth century and have been identified since the nineteenth century as the “national people”.

In the second part of the paper, I will question widely held interpretations of Creole history that underestimate the social and cultural heterogeneity within the group and overstate their integration as an ethnic community. Focusing on the Afro-Americans in Caribbean Nicaragua, I will argue that Creole ethnogenesis is a fairly recent and contradictory process and that Creole culture has remained heterogeneous up to the present day.

2. The development of slave societies on the margins of two empires

Small numbers of Africans had arrived on the eastern shores of Central America as survivors of shipwrecks or runaway slaves as early as the sixteenth century. They were either killed or integrated into the Amerindian groups residing in the area. It was only after the 1630s, when people of African descent were brought to the Mosquitia in substantial numbers to cut logwood or work on the indigo and sugar plantations of the British settlers, that they were able to survive as a recognizable social group.⁶ In mid-seventeenth century about one hundred African slaves worked on the plantations along the Coco and Escondido rivers (Floyd 1967: 21). Between 1751 and 1758, with the rise in plantation production, the expansion of the mahogany trade and the consolidation of British presence, the number of black or coloured slaves increased in the Mosquitia from 423 to 1,891.⁷

In Belize, the British settlers initially employed Miskitu Indians to cut logwood. It was not until the 1720s that they began to import African slaves to satisfy their labour demands. However, in less than twenty years Africans had outnumbered Whites by 2.5 to 1 in the Bay settlement (Moberg 1997: 2). Most of the slaves were imported to both regions via Jamaica.⁸ Although the number of slaves born in the West Indies was

5 See Helms (1983); Gabbert (1985: 24-32, 73; 1990); Offen (1999).

6 See Conzemius (1932: 17); Holm (1978: 181); Gabbert (1992: 40-44; 1995a: 204s.).

7 See Potthast (1988: 384); Brown (1990: 53-56, 62s.); Gabbert (1995a: 205).

8 See Henderson (1809: 59); Bell (1899: 24s.); Grant (1976: 41).

considerable, African-born slaves still posed the majority by the time slavery had come to an end. In 1823, for example, they constituted three-fifths of the 2,500 slaves in Belize (Bolland 1977: 50, 95). This helps to understand why certain cultural patterns of African origin persisted in creolised form among the Afro-Americans of Central America.⁹ Beyond this, affiliations based on a common origin from the same region or on the speaking of related languages – misinterpreted by European observers as “tribal” allegiance – played a key role in moulding the new Afro-Creole society. These affiliations remained important in the Mosquitia, at least until the 1820s, as evidenced by the continuous rivalry and occasionally violent clashes between the groups (Dunham 1850: 78; Bell 1899: 19). The following description of Christmas celebrations is another example of their significance in Belize in the early nineteenth century:

The morning of Christmas day is invariably ushered in by the discharging of small-arms in every direction, very thing now from established custom being free and unrestrained; and the master’s house (where the festivity commences) and whatever it contains is now open to all. *The members of the several African tribes, again met together after a long separation, now form themselves into different groups, and nothing can more forcibly denote their respective casts of national character than their music, songs, and dances. The convulsed rapid movements of some, and the affectedly reluctant steps of others, appear inconceivably ludicrous; whilst the occasional bursts of loud chorus, with which all are animated, contribute greatly to heighten the singularity of the entertainment.*¹⁰

Indeed there is evidence that from 1819 to 1850 a certain area of the town of Belize was reserved for free Eboes, as those who originated from the Niger river delta were called. Beyond this, other supposed tribal identifications, such as Congoes, Nangoes, Mongolas and Ashantees, persisted long after emancipation (Bolland 1977: 100s.).

The debate on the extent to which African cultural traits have survived among the New World’s African populations is still ongoing.¹¹ Despite the linguistic and cultural diversity of slaves in the Caribbean, there were certain commonalities among the cultures of West Africa, from where most slaves had originated. These features were a radical contrast to the way of life of the white masters and became the starting point

9 Examples of this are *obeah* (religious practices often portrayed as a kind of sorcery or magic), wakes (funerary rituals), *gombay* (specific forms of music and dance) and mythological themes such as the stories of the spider culture hero “anancy”. See, e.g., Bell (1899: 19); Keeley (1894: 166); MB (1902), Jahresbericht 19; MB (1916: 11, 123); PA, II, 88 (1919: 314); Anonymous (1848: 30); Dunn (1829: 18); Crowe (1850: 195); Bolland (1977: 95-98).

10 Henderson (1809: 76s.), emphasis WG; see also Bolland (1977: 99-101) for Belize and Anonymous (1848: 30; PA I, 21: 158) for the Mosquitia.

11 For different positions on this question, see, for example, Mintz/Price (1976: 4-11, 27-31) and Abrahams (1977) or Abrahams/Szwed (1983); see also the discussion in Hensel (this volume).

for the cultural adaptation of Africans.¹² African slaves developed new forms of thought and action. However, they departed from their African backgrounds, modifying and adapting inherited cultural forms to the new American environment (creolisation).

The possibility of cultural continuity and the development of kinship and group structures depends to a large extent on a certain amount of stability in interpersonal and family relationships (Mintz/Price 1976: 35-39). This continuity seems to have been present in the Mosquitia and in Belize to a considerable extent so that the image of the slave as a human being entirely robbed of history, traditions and a cultural past, held for example by Jenkins (1980: 51, note 14), seems highly questionable. The small size of the Central American British settlements, the constant threat of Spanish attacks and the relative independence of many of the slaves, who frequently worked for months in isolated camps in the forests, distinguished local slave societies from larger plantation systems in other parts of the Caribbean (Bolland 1977: 68-85, 102s.; Gabbert 1992: 50-54). The following description of the Belizean situation is also applicable to the Mosquitia, where conditions were similar:

[O]ne of the ways aspects of African culture could be sustained in Belize was through the existence of stable families, sometimes including several generations. [...] though no relevant law existed, it was considered contrary to custom to sell slaves in such a way that families would be broken up. Since the slave proprietors in the settlement had a greater degree of interest in their slaves than did the sugar planters, and since the expense of importing and maintaining slaves in the Bay settlement was greater, some masters may even have encouraged the development of stable families. Not only would familial stability have encouraged the slave women to have, and care for, children, but it would also be a way of tying the men to the town of Belize and discouraging them from escaping into the interior. [...] there are many instances of families who may have had the opportunity of living together, sometimes through several generations (Bolland 1977: 102).

In contrast to the more typical plantation societies such as Jamaica, where slaves made up approx. ninety per cent of the population between 1770 and 1820 (Horowitz 1973: 530-538; Holm 1978: 188), the share of African slaves in the populations of Belize and the Mosquitia was considerably less. A significant number of Amerindian slaves also lived in the Mosquitia (Helms 1983; Gabbert 1992: 84).

12 In contrast to Herskovits (1943), who even derives cultural forms strongly influenced by environmental conditions, such as family forms or marriage patterns, from West African origins, Mintz/Price (1976: 5) do not locate the common cultural heritage of slaves in such overt forms. Instead they stress unconscious "grammatical" principles that influence behaviour. West African languages, for example, differ considerably in their lexicon but share specific grammatical structures (Todd 1974: 38).

Table 2: Population Structure of the Mosquitia, 1757

British Settlements	Negro slaves	500	44%
	Indian slaves	300	27%
	Mulattos/Mestizos	170	15%
	Whites	154	14%
Total		1,124	14%
free Indians		7,000	86%
Total		8,124	100%

Source: after Hodgson (1766: 23, 36).

However, the Mosquitia and the Bay settlement shared several demographic features with other Caribbean slave societies, which had vital consequences for the development of their social structure. While the proportion of women was always relatively small among the white population, they were also underrepresented among African slaves.¹³ The situation was similar in Belize. Male slaves greatly outnumbered female slaves, generally at a ratio of two or three to one (Bolland 1977: 52, 86s.).

Since white women were rare in both regions and power differentials between European men and African women extreme, sexual abuse of female African slaves by their white masters was widespread.¹⁴ In addition, a remark made by the British superintendent suggests, at least for the Mosquitia, that some of the white women maintained relationships with black or coloured men: “[...] the proportion of white children being so small proceeds from the women having lived with too much freedom, the half whites breed fast enough” (Hodgson 1766: 24). Thus, a growing group of people of mixed ancestry emerged. In part, they were freed by their fathers. Together with other manumitted slaves (freed by their masters for different reasons; some had bought themselves out with money earned by selling products from their provision grounds) they began to form a significant part of the free population. This group expanded from 116 to 200 individuals in Mosquitia between 1751 and 1771.¹⁵ In Belize, the number of free Coloureds and Blacks also increased steadily. Between 1790 and 1832, for

13 In 1757, for example, there were 16 white females but 133 white males in the British settlements of the Mosquitia, an imbalance that showed no sign of improvement later on. A census of seven settlements (Cape Gracias a Dios, Sandy Bay, Brangmans, Pearl Key Lagoon, Bluefields, Punta Gorda, Black River and Lagoon) from the same year that included information on the sex of the slaves shows that women were in the minority among African slaves, with 41 males to only 24 females (Hodgson 1766: 23; Potthast 1988: 234).

14 See Henderson (1809: 92); Dunn (1829: 20); Bolland (1977: 52); Gabbert (1992: 65; 1995a: 206s.).

15 Numbers from Potthast (1988: 384). For a more detailed discussion, see Gabbert (1992: 64-67). In contrast to Belize, relations between the British, Afro-Americans and Amerindians in the Mosquitia were quite intense and mixed unions common.

example, it rose from 371 to 1,788, or from fourteen to forty-eight per cent of the population (Bolland 1977: 86-88).

Some of the free Coloureds and Blacks were able to acquire considerable wealth in the course of time, some even became slave owners themselves. In 1786, about five per cent of the free population in the Mosquitia were considered Blacks and at least two members of this category owned slaves (Brown 1990: 63; Gabbert 1992: 68; 1995b: 265). The situation was similar in Belize. According to a contemporary observer: "The people of colour and freed blacks [...] all possess some property; a few are rich" (Henderson 1809: 24). Of the twenty most powerful slave owners at the end of the eighteenth century, at least three were "free people of Colour" (Bolland 1977: 45s.).¹⁶ Many free Afro-Americans worked as craftsmen or owned small stores (Dunn 1829: 12). However, most of the free Coloureds and Blacks were poor (Bolland 1977: 32-36).

As this brief sketch of slave society in the Mosquitia and in Belize has shown, the population of African descent or part thereof was split by fundamental cleavages during the eighteenth century. This category included people of different legal status – free and unfree – but also with vastly different cultural backgrounds and degrees of wealth (some were born in the New World, while others were born in various regions of

Africa). Although skin colour played a significant role in the social hierarchy, legal status was decisive. Phenotypic differences were significant primarily *within* these broad categories. Slave status was closely related to African ancestry. However, a growing number of Afro-Americans were free. They tried as far as possible to dissociate themselves both socially and culturally from their African heritage and to conform to the European standards imposed. It seems that the free Coloureds were particularly prone to mistreating their slaves, a reflection of their ambiguous social situation (Bolland 1977: 57s., 82s.; Grant 1976: 45). In their petitions to obtain legal equality on a personal basis from the British government, they emphasized their personal qualities, their white ancestry and their remoteness from the slaves. When they were granted equal rights in 1831, the white racist ideology had permeated their sense of identity to the extent that they were glad to have finally achieved social differentiation from the Blacks (Bolland 1977: 94; cf. also Gabbert 1992: 111s.).

16 This situation largely corresponded with similar developments in other West Indian societies during slavery. It is estimated that no less than twenty per cent of all land and slaves was in the hands of free Coloureds in Saint Domingue in 1791. In 1826, approximately a sixth of the total number of slaves in Jamaica were owned by "mulattos" (Mintz 1971: 445; Campbell 1976: 62).

3. The rise of the Creole elite in the nineteenth century

The year 1787 marks a fundamental change in the histories of Belize and the Mosquitia, leading to the almost complete disappearance of the white planter class in the former and a temporary strengthening of slave society in the latter. However, as economic and political intervention by the British metropolis increased in the course of the nineteenth century, the local white elite gradually lost its power. After the war of independence of the North American colonies, which Spain had joined as an ally of the Americans, the Peace of Versailles (1783) and the Anglo-Spanish Convention of London (1786) led to the evacuation of the few British troops and 2,650 settlers and slaves from the Mosquitia in 1787. Most of them found a new home in Belize, which had consolidated following the concession to cut logwood and after British presence had been confirmed by the peace treaty of 1783 (Bolland 1977: 31). Beyond this, Spain's last attempt to assert their claim to sovereignty by violent means failed miserably when 2,000 Spanish soldiers suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of no more than 350 British settlers and their slaves in the battle at St. George's Cay on 10 September 1798.

3.1 *Afro-Americans in the Mosquitia after slavery*

When the British had to leave the Mosquitia in 1787, many of their slaves and a considerable number of free Coloureds remained. Many slaves managed to flee in the general turmoil, others were left behind for various reasons.¹⁷ Although the Convention of London guaranteed all Catholics who swore allegiance to the Spanish the right to remain, few of the British did so. One of them was Robert Hodgson, the wealthy son of the first Superintendent in the Mosquitia, who remained in Bluefields under Spanish rule. These British men were also allowed to continue using their slaves on the plantations and woodcutting camps (Dawson 1986: 43; Potthast 1988: 321). However, after Hodgson and his family had been ousted from Bluefields by Miskitu Indians in 1790 and Black River had been destroyed in 1800, no slave owner of any prominence remained in the Mosquitia, and slavery lost much of its significance as a structuring element of regional society. It was only offshore, on Corn Island, that slavery continued to play an important role until it was finally abolished in 1841 (Roberts 1827: 108; Dunham 1850: 76).

On the mainland, the lower section of the population consisted of the descendants of former slaves of British settlers, recently freed slaves, and runaways who had fled from San Andrés or Corn Island (GBFO 1862: 645; Bell 1899: 24-26). The position of runaways on the coast was insecure up to the abolition of slavery. They were frequently persecuted by itinerant traders or Indians, who tried to capture them by order

17 See Bolland (1977: 40s.); Potthast (1988: 240s.); Brown (1990: 56s.).

of their masters (Gardner to Stephens, 14.3.1788, Public Record Office, ADMI/243; Dunham 1850: 77s., 87s.). Even when slaves had been emancipated, the newly freed Afro-Americans remained part of the lowest stratum of the social hierarchy. They were held in disdain and often harassed by wealthy Coloureds and the few Whites residing on the coast (J. S. Bell to Fancourt, 21.10.1843, Foreign Office, London, 53, 1, pp. 154s., 158). For decades, the vast majority of Afro-Americans in the region, whose number was augmented by immigrants from San Andrés, Curaçao, and Jamaica, lived a simple life sustained by turtle fishing, subsistence agriculture (cassava, yams, maize, rice, bread fruit, plantains, sugar cane, oranges), and hunting (tapir, monkey, deer, warree, iguana).¹⁸

With the white planter class almost completely gone, other representatives of the British colonial system absent, and Spain (as well as the newly independent Central American republics after 1821) unable to bring the Mosquitia effectively under political control, a new elite of people of Afro-American descent were able to rise to a level of economic and political importance unknown in other parts of the Caribbean. They were engaged in trade and the cutting of mahogany, and largely controlled local politics.¹⁹ This group managed to consolidate its position when Britain's interest in the region revived in the 1830s as a result of the international trade in mahogany and the possibility of using the San Juan River as the point of entry for a canal that would link the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Britain therefore renewed its protectorate over the region in April 1844. Claims by woodcutters, traders and businessmen speculating in land grants as well as by the British government were legitimised with reference to a sovereign "Kingdom of Mosquitia". According to the British interpretation, the latter was the embodiment of the rights of the native Amerindian population. The "king" of the Miskitu Indians, one of several native war leaders during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had in theory become the sole representative of the Indian population. However, in the hands of foreign businessmen and British diplomats he was no more than a puppet (Gabbert 1990; Offen 1999).

The long and intense quarrels between the Central American republics supported by the United States and Great Britain with its protectorate were temporarily settled in 1860. The "Treaty of Managua" recognized Nicaraguan sovereignty over the Atlantic region and brought the "Kingdom of Mosquitia" to an end. On the other hand, it also granted "Mosquito Indians" the right to self-government in the newly created "Reserva Mosquita" (cf. the text in Oertzen/Rosbach/Wünderlich 1990: 315-317; see also Naylor 1967).

¹⁸ See Roberts (1827: 109); Dunham (1850: 80); Bell (1899: 17, 27, 36s., 40s.); Martin (1899: 9s.).

¹⁹ See GBFO (1862: 676-678, 689-692); Roberts (1827: 108s., 132); Dunham (1850: 70, 89); Naylor (1967: 56). For the changing relationship between Afro-Americans and the local Amerindian groups, see Gabbert (1992: 83-92).

British activities were accompanied by the taking up in 1847 of the first systematic mission work in the region by the Protestant Moravian Church. In addition to establishing a congregation, the missionaries supplied secular schooling for the local population. The education they provided gave Afro-Americans an indispensable resource for social mobility. As the only native group on the coast accustomed to a sedentary life and with a significant number of people in possession of at least some formal education, Afro-Americans played a major role in regional politics and dominated government institutions both in the “Kingdom of Mosquitia” and the “Reserva Mosquita”. Beyond this, they controlled skilled occupations and some became comparatively wealthy. The Miskitu and other Amerindian groups, in contrast, were largely excluded from formal political institutions in the Kingdom and to an even greater extent in the “Reserva” (Gabbert 1992: 89-92, 118-125, 134s.; 1995b: 267-269).

3.2 Belize in the nineteenth century: the consolidation of slave society and colonial rule

The arrival of 2,214 evacuees from the Mosquitia (537 free people and 1,677 slaves) in 1787 greatly changed the demographic profile of the Bay settlement. The census of 1790, which listed 2,915 inhabitants (738 free people and 2,177 slaves), shows that newcomers outnumbered the original residents by five to one (Bolland 1977: 31s., 40s.). The slaves, most of whom had been brought from the Mosquitia, now made up three-quarters of the population; in addition there were several hundred free Coloureds and Blacks. The poorer white settlers, most of them also from the Mosquitia, owned very little property. The fourth group were the richest of the evacuees and the established Baymen who owned most of the slaves and political influence (Bolland 1977: 32).²⁰

In contrast to the Mosquitia, therefore, the slave system in Belize remained strong and the British colonial system even consolidated in the nineteenth century. A supreme court was established in 1820 without either prior consultation with or subsequent complaint from Spain. This amounted to an effective and unchallenged assertion of British sovereignty (Bolland 1977: 169).

Even under these conditions Afro-Americans became more influential and more wealthy. Around 1827, the population of Belize was between 5,000 and 6,000 people composed of 2,400 slaves, 1,400 free Blacks, 1,000 free coloured Creoles and 300 to 400 Whites (Dunn 1829: 11; Stephens 1841: 15) Hence, the coloured population was

²⁰ In 1787, a mere twelve of the old Baymen claimed possession of four-fifths of the land between the Rio Hondo and the Sibun River. In 1790, twenty estates owned over a thousand slaves between them, or approximately half the slaves in the settlement, while over a fifth of the free heads of families possessed no slaves at all (Bolland 1977: 158, 164).

three times that of the white and more or less equal to that of the free Blacks. Furthermore, free Coloureds owned almost two-thirds of the slaves and private land, and some used their wealth to educate their children in England (Henderson 1809: 24; Grant 1976: 45; Stephens 1841: 17s.).

Nevertheless, even wealthy Coloureds met with the discrimination of the white elite, who considered them to be a “degraded caste” (Dunn 1829: 19). They were subject, for example, to specific disabilities. The “pride of place” was legally reserved for Whites in the seating arrangements of the government-financed Anglican Church. Coloureds were debarred from prestigious public offices such as the magistracy or jury service, and their qualifications for membership in the legislative body (the Public Meeting) were more demanding than those of Whites.²¹ Among the last in the British West Indies to gain civil rights equal to those of the white settlers were the freemen of Belize in 1831 (Grant 1976: 45; Bolland 1977: 89-94).

In June 1833, the Abolition Act formally ended slavery in Belize and other parts of the British West Indies. A system of “apprenticeship” was nonetheless established, according to which registered ex-slaves over the age of six had to work for their former masters without pay. The system was abolished in 1838 (Bolland 1977: 106) but most of the freemen continued to work in the mahogany camps. Since most of the land had been claimed by white settlers in the course of the eighteenth century and grants from the extensive Crown lands were no longer gratuitous, they were unable to become independent subsistence farmers. Beyond this, labourers remained bound to their employers by strict labour laws and the payment of wages in “advance” (generally at Christmas holidays) resulting in a system of debt servitude (Bolland 1977: 118-122, 149-151).

Agriculture had never been important in Belize since, among other things, the cultivation of commercial crops was forbidden by the treaties with Spain. It only began to develop after the rapid depletion of the mahogany reserves following emancipation and the huge influx of Maya Indians and Mestizos who had fled from the so-called Caste War of Yucatán after 1847. Some of them began to cultivate cane commercially. Five companies in the hands of large landowners who used Maya and Mestizos as labourers soon dominated the field. The refugees from Yucatán doubled the population and established the basic racial/ethnic structure of present-day Belize (Bolland 1977: 136s., 140s., 146, 197).

21 In 1808, Coloureds had to prove five years of residence and possession of 200 Pounds in visible property to be eligible for the Public Meeting compared to one year and 100 Pounds in the case of Whites. In 1820, one year’s residence and 500 Pounds was required of British males, while Coloureds had to be born in the settlement and in possession of 1,000 Pounds. In 1827, the Public Meeting had 28 white and 12 coloured members (Bolland 1977: 172).

The authority of the British Crown's representative had increased particularly since the 1830s, as the magistracy and Public Meeting, made up of the old settler elite, decreased. In the 1850s, several factors contributed to a long period of economic depression in Belize: the decline in the mahogany trade and in the transit trade with Central America due to the opening of the Panama Railway in 1855 that was to alter trade routes radically. Foreign competition, a decline in the market and a drop in prices led to bankruptcy and the centralization of capital and land ownership. Consequently, economic control shifted decisively towards the metropolis, since many of the old settlers had lost their property to London banks and others were forced to accept direct partnerships in land ownership with London merchants. In the 1860s, about half of the freehold land was owned by one enterprise, the British Honduras Company (Stephens 1841: 15; Bolland 1977: 176s., 182).

In the mid-1850s, the political power of the old planter class was further undermined by international considerations that had sufficiently altered to allow Britain to drop its restraint in openly asserting sovereignty. In the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850, both the USA and Britain agreed to promote the construction of an inter-oceanic canal and to refrain from colonizing any part of Central America. However, the USA claimed that Britain was obliged to evacuate all its possessions in the area. The British government, in contrast, interpreted the treaty as merely referring to any future occupation. While it eventually yielded on the Bay Islands and the Mosquitia, it provided a formal constitution for its possession in Belize in 1854. The Bay settlement was formally recognized as a British colony on 12 May 1862 (Bolland 1977: 184, 189).

The consolidation of the metropolitan ownership of the colony's economy and the British government's growing intervention in local politics meant the almost complete elimination of the settler class as a major component of Belize's social structure. The portion of Whites declined from four per cent of the population (399 individuals) in 1845 (before the huge influx of Yucatecan refugees) to a little over one per cent (375 people) in 1881. Beyond this, very few white families settled in Belize and most of the Whites were probably transient adult males (Bolland 1977: 188).

Thus, in contrast to the Mosquitia, where Afro-Americans were always a minority, and Amerindians, especially the Miskitu, made up the bulk of the population, Creoles have been the largest group in the multi-ethnic society of Belize since at least the eighteenth century. Moreover, sharing an anglophone identity with the British caused Creoles to be identified as the "real" Belizeans or the "national people" when Belize gained independence in 1981. Up to now, Creoles have occupied key intellectual, economic and civil service positions in the country (Moberg 1997: 12, 86; Brockmann 1977: 249, 255).

4. The Hispanicization of the Mosquitia

In 1894, Nicaragua forcibly deposed the government of the “Reserva Mosquita” and officially established political control over the Atlantic Coast. The fact that this event has been termed “re-incorporation” (*reincorporación*) by Hispanic Nicaraguans and “overthrow” (*uovatrúo*) by Afro-American Creoles is a clear indication of the conflicting perspectives adopted by each group on the national history.²²

The position of the Creole-dominated “Reserva Mosquita” government had already begun to erode in the 1880s when primarily US firms started investing in banana plantations, woodcutting and mining in the region. The attempts of the “Reserva” government to protect small holders and middle-range entrepreneurs clashed with the interests of foreign companies and the growing colony of, frequently racist, US Whites, who mostly welcomed Nicaragua’s annexation of the “Reserva” (Gabbert 1992: 139-144). The growing presence of foreign capital also prevented the Creoles from becoming a regional bourgeoisie. The Afro-American population lost most of its control over the means of production. The turn of the twentieth century saw the cultivation and commercialisation of bananas, which had contributed to the economic prosperity of many Creoles since the 1880s, almost completely dominated by a few North American companies (Gabbert 1992: 97s., 168-178). Thus, the year 1894 not only marked the triumph of Nicaraguan nationalism but also, and possibly even more so, the victory of foreign companies.

Although a great many Afro-Americans were able to fill middle-level positions in these large enterprises, in the commercial sector and in professions that required a high standard of education, they were barred from access to leading posts in the regional economy of the US-owned enclaves in banana production, mining and lumbering. Up to the 1930s, when foreign investment declined, these positions were mostly filled by North Americans. In addition, Creoles were excluded from leading positions in local political and administrative institutions established by the Nicaraguan government after 1894, most of which were held by Mestizos from the Pacific areas of the country (cf., e.g., Ruiz y Ruiz 1927: 72s., 100, 126). Creole culture and the English language also came under attack from the Nicaraguan government, which tried to generalize the Spanish language and Hispanic culture among the inhabitants of the Mosquitia. In Bluefields, for example, special policemen were sent to scout for school children to put into Spanish public schools. The government’s Hispanicisation efforts, however, brought only limited results, since they were not accompanied by extensive integration of the region into society and the national economy. English remained the prestige language of the region during the company period and a good command of the language

22 On “reincorporación”, see Rossbach/Wünderich (1985); Gabbert (1992: 138-167).

was indispensable to gaining qualified positions in the economy.²³ Apart from this, government Hispanicisation policies met with Afro-American resistance, since the Creole elite considered themselves infinitely more cultured, educated and civilized than the Hispanic Nicaraguans.²⁴ Many Creoles refused to send their children to public Spanish schools. For generations they taught their children at home or sent them to small private schools run by the more educated members of the community.²⁵

With the collapse of the banana and lumbering enclaves in the 1930s, the Atlantic region, and particularly its southern part, suffered a deep economic crisis. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Nicaraguan state initiated a number of development projects but failed to solve the economic problems, and genuine integration of the region was not achieved. The intense efforts of the Moravian Church in matters of education as well as public and private development projects contributed to an increase in social differentiation within the Miskitu population and led to the emergence of an educated Amerindian elite, which has played a leading role in creating an Indian social movement in Nicaragua since the 1970s (Gabbert 1992: 251-289).

From the mid-1970s, Creoles met with growing competition from the emerging Miskitu elite for qualified positions in the region. The downfall of the Somoza dictatorship and the take-over of the government by the Sandinist liberation movement (FSLN) in 1979 led to a hardening of the conflicts between nation and region, but also of the competition between Miskitu and Creoles. In its attempt to genuinely integrate the Atlantic Coast in the Nicaraguan nation state the FSLN initially relied on the Amerindian organization MISURASATA. With the new opportunities for organization and government support, this Miskitu dominated association prospered and became a powerful movement capable of mobilizing a substantial part of the Miskitu. The Creoles had nothing comparable to offer. Since 1981, when differences between the central government and MISURASATA spiralled into armed conflict, and social and political dynamics were more and more determined by military considerations, the Creoles had become politically marginalized. In addition, the country's economic decay following the US-sponsored counter-revolutionary (*Contras*) war against the FSLN government coupled with the US embargo weakened the economic position of the Afro-American population further. The existing ethnic

23 The enclave economies of the United Fruit Company in Limón, Costa Rica and the construction of the inter-oceanic canal in Panama for the most part by US companies showed similar results in this context (cf. Olien 1977: 139-145; Conniff 1983: 3; Gabbert 1999).

24 With the exception of government officials, most Hispanic Nicaraguans were poor and frequently illiterate peasants and day labourers who came to work for foreign companies. For similar attitudes of the Belize Creoles towards Hispanic Central Americans, see Brockmann (1977: 249) and Moberg (1997: 87).

25 See Sujo Wilson (1991: 34); Gabbert (1992: 179-184, 206-208); Gordon (1998: 56, 70).

hierarchy was increasingly challenged by Miskitu, who now claimed the leading position in the region for their own ethnies (Gabbert 1992: 292-330).

When the FSLN lost the elections in 1990, the Nicaraguan government reverted to pre-revolutionary politics. It treated the Mosquitia as a marginal and neglected region, regarding it as an area to be freely colonized by poor Mestizo peasants and as a source of natural resources, such as timber and minerals, to be exploited by foreign firms. Since the collapse of the enclave economy in the 1930s, many Creoles were forced to migrate to the Nicaraguan capital of Managua, the USA or elsewhere in order to find jobs. Thus, their numerical and political importance in the region was reduced even further (Gordon 1998: 257; Gabbert, in press).

5. The slow decline of Creole influence in twentieth-century Belize

Two developments changed the social structure of Belize decisively and contributed to the slow erosion of the Creole position in the country. On the one hand, between 30,000 and 40,000 Mestizos and Maya fleeing civil wars and economic crises in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras have been immigrating to Belize since the 1980s. This means that at the beginning of the 1990s a sixth of the Belizean population was born in these three countries (Moberg 1997: 83-85; Woods/Perry/Steagall 1997: 76-82). The process was intensified, on the other hand, by Creole emigration to the USA. It is estimated that between 40,000 and 80,000 Belizeans, mostly Creoles and Garifuna, have left the country since the 1980s (Daugaard-Hansen 2002: 44, 47-49; Woods/ Perry/Steagall 1997: 77). This resulted in a fundamental shift in the demographic balance of the small multi-ethnic country. The census of 1991 indicates that Creoles had lost their status as the largest population group, which they had held since the eighteenth century. The Mestizos had now taken over this position.

Table 3: Population of Belize

	1980	%	1991	%	2000	%
Creoles	57,700	39.7	56,439	29.8	58,441	25.2
Mestizos	48,100	33.1	82,575	43.6	113,045	48.7
Garifuna	11,050	7.7	12,500	6.6	14,061	6.1
Maya	13,850	9.5	21,022	11.1	24,501	10.6
Mennonites	4,800	3.3	5,871	3.1	8,276	3.6
East Indians	3,050	2.1	6,629	3.5	6,868	3.0
Others	6,800	4.7	4,356	2.3	6,919	3.0
Total	145,350	100.1	189,392	100.0	232,111	100.2

Source: Census 1980, 1991 and 2000 according to Moberg (1997: 85) and Daugaard-Hansen (2002, appendix B). Percentages do not always add up to 100 due to rounding errors. Data on Creoles includes figures for the category "Black/African" in the census of 2000 only; figures on Mestizos include those for the newly introduced "Spanish" category.)

Although the relationship of Belize to its Central American neighbours has always been strained, to say the least, and some Creoles and Garifuna have lost their jobs in the country's banana industry (Moberg 1997: 88s., 169s.; Sutherland 1998: 84s.), major conflicts between the population groups are rare. Belize's public has shown great understanding for the Mestizo immigrants, especially during the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador. Beyond this, a large section of the Belizean population regard themselves as the descendants of immigrants.²⁶ The majority of the more recent Mestizo immigrants settled in the rural areas of the north to work in the sugar industry (Corozal and Orange Walk) or in the south to work on the citrus and banana plantations (Stann Creek, Toledo) (Woods/Perry/Steagall 1997: 77-79). Hence, they have not yet become a direct threat to the economic position of the mostly urban Creoles.²⁷

However, this may change in the future. In 2000, Mestizos were close to becoming a majority in the country (see table 3). If this becomes real it could change Belizean politics profoundly. Up to now, all population groups in independent Belize have been numerical minorities. Thus, political parties were obliged to gain the support of several ethnic groups if they wanted to win democratic elections and a form of multi-ethnic nationalism became the dominant political ideology. A Mestizo majority might be considered a threat to the anglophone character of Belize by Creoles and smaller population groups, who are well aware of the marginalized situation and discrimination faced by ethnic minorities in the neighbouring Mestizo controlled countries of Central America. In fact, recent incidents suggest an ethnification of political life in Belize.²⁸

6. Two cultures or one? Afro-Americans after slavery

Notwithstanding Fredrik Barth's (1969) insight that ethnicity is not related to cultural sameness in any immediate or simple way, many authors still tend to concentrate on cultural differences *between* certain populations and to lose sight of the cultural diversity *within* these groups when studying ethnicity. In my view this perspective is rooted

26 The first Chinese and East Indians came as contract labourers after the abolition of slavery. As already mentioned, many Mestizos and Yucatec Maya arrived in the north of the country as refugees from the Caste War of Yucatán in the mid-nineteenth century. Numerous Mopan and Kekchi Maya established themselves in the southern and western parts of Belize between the 1880s and 1940s to escape debt peonage in the coffee plantations of Alta Verapaz in Guatemala. Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians sought refuge in Belize in the first part of the twentieth century, having fled from the political unrest in their home countries (Woods/Perry/Steagall 1997: 69s.; Daugaard-Hansen 2002: 21).

27 In 2000, almost sixty-five per cent of Creoles lived in the district of Belize, most of them in Belize City (Daugaard-Hansen 2002: 73-75).

28 Cf. Moberg (1997: 14-17); Sutherland (1998: 80-85); Gabbert (in press).

in the (generally implicit) adoption of a culture concept based on functionalism. It is assumed that societies or ethnic groupings have one culture conceived of as a highly integrated, largely harmonious whole. These ideas are, of course, even more prominent in political and everyday discourse.

When dealing with the Afro-American populations of Belize and the Mosquitia we encounter a similar attitude. Creoles in both regions are primarily depicted as urban, Protestant, educated middle-class groups.²⁹ This type of image can have serious consequences. In 1979, members of the Sandinist movement, who had just overthrown the Somoza dictatorship, were confronted with the question of how to organize the different ethnic groupings of the Atlantic Coast. They worked towards the establishment of two political organizations: one, MISURASATA, for the Miskitu, Sumu, and Rama Indians and another, SICC, to represent the Afro-American population. This measure was the outgrowth of a widespread perception of the region's ethnic stratification. As a group the Indians were seen as poor and exploited, and hence as "natural allies" of a revolution carried out in the name of the poor. The mainly urban Creoles, in contrast, were regarded with suspicion as bourgeois or petty bourgeois (Gabbert 1992: 304-310; Gordon 1998: 203s., 225-234).

In my view, however, it is seriously misleading to treat groupings we now describe as Creoles in Nicaragua and in Belize as homogeneous. I argue instead that these Afro-American populations have always been characterized by deep social and cultural cleavages and that this is by no means restricted to the period of slavery. To make this point I will discuss, as an example, a period of regional history that is crucial to the development of the middle-class image of the Afro-American population in Nicaragua.

The period between the late eighteenth century and the 1880s is characterized by many scholars as one of prosperity and power for Afro-Americans *as a group* in Caribbean Nicaragua. Gordon states, for example:

In the absence of direct colonial oppression, in the first four decades of the nineteenth century the Black community began to flourish. What later became known as Mosquito Coast Creole culture was consolidated. [...] The Black population also began to consolidate economic, political and social control over the Mosquitia. [...] By the 1860s the Creoles had consolidated their hegemony among the Mosquito Coast ethnic groups, a position they were able to maintain to the 1880s.³⁰

With reference to the period discussed, I would make two major objections. Firstly, it is heavily misleading to describe the Afro-American population in all as "Black". In the Mosquitia the term Creole referred not only to Blacks and Coloureds but also to

29 Cf., for example, Gordon (1985: 128, 130s.; 1987: 142s.); Yih/Hale (1987: 192).

30 Gordon (1987: 136s.); see also Chavez Alfaro (1981: 92s.); Yih/Hale 1987: 191; Wunderlich 1990: 76s.; Gordon (1998: 43).

the offspring of unions between Whites and Indians, provided they spoke English and lived outside the Indian communities (e.g., PA I, 22: 349). What is more, many Afro-Americans did not perceive *themselves* as Blacks but as Creoles or British subjects, in an attempt to downplay or deny their African ancestry. Secondly, Afro-Americans cannot be treated as a community during this period, since the prerequisite for community is the existence of a consciousness of kind which in my view did not exist at that time.

When slavery was abolished in 1841, the basic division within the Afro-American population between slaves and the free disappeared. However, historical evidence shows that Afro-Americans as such differed considerably in many aspects. That social difference was reflected in different forms of language is suggested in the following statement by a German immigrant who lived in Bluefields, the largest Afro-American settlement in the Mosquitia, in the 1840s. He wrote with great contempt for the Afro-American lower class: “The language of the noblemen [der Vornehmen] is English, that of the others a gabble of Negro English [negerenglisches Geschnatter]” (Anonymous 1848: 29, transl. W. G.). African derived dances and other cultural practices such as *obeah* were common and funeral practices like “wakes” played a key role in religious life (PA I, 21: 158; 22: 514; Bell 1899: 19, 30s.). As in other parts of the Caribbean, Christmas was celebrated for three weeks with drumming, dancing and heavy drinking. A British long-term resident describes Christmas in Bluefields as follows:

Christmas Eve is announced by firing guns. A good deal of rum is being drunk, and much fighting is going on among men and boys; but it is taken in good part, and bunged-up eyes, bleeding noses, and cut off lips are soon forgotten in the general merriment. Soon as the evening shades prevail the drum takes up its wondrous tale, and together with the fiddle inspires the mad capers of the jig, the carabini, the punta, or the country dance; while the horse’s jaw-bone, the teeth rattled with a stick, and two other sticks beating time on a bench, with the drum and the wild snatches of song by the women, provide the stimulus for the weird and mystic African dances [...].³¹

The Protestant Moravian missionaries were greatly concerned with the elaboration of religious ethics and stressed the importance of work. Diligence, frugality and punctuality were considered essential virtues. The Moravian Church held a pietistic view of Christianity and placed extensive demands on the moral lifestyle of their members. Their ideas obviously clashed with the cultural practices clung to by lower-class Afro-Americans, including celebrations such as described above (Gabbert 1992: 106-109, 116-118). Thus, for decades the Moravian congregation remained a sect in the sociological sense of the term. Religion was considered a social experience whereby the

31 Bell (1899: 28s.); see also Anonymous (1848: 30); MB (1850: 36; 1856: 86s.; 1857: 65s.; PA I, 22: 244).

faithful were bound together in a community of brotherly love but at the same time separated from the rest of mankind (Helms 1971: 240s.). The congregation in Bluefields initially consisted of about twenty members and was slow to increase. Even in 1859, more than ten years after missionary work had begun, it claimed no more than forty communicants (PA I, 23: 380; Martin 1899: 11). Hence the Moravian congregation became the organizational focus for members of the Creole elite, who tried hard to dissociate themselves from the less well-off Afro-Americans. It was not until the religious revival in the Mosquitia in 1881/82 that the Moravian Church began to integrate the Black and Indian masses.³² This movement, which showed many similarities with the “Great Awakening” in Jamaica in 1860/61, should be seen as an attempt by the less prosperous Blacks to gain access to a status-providing asset: membership of the Moravian congregation, which up until then was under the strict control of European missionaries and the Creole elite.

Another crucial dimension for the ascription of status was phenotype. Afro-American pigmentation varied from black to almost white (Bell 1899: 20s.). In 1847, for example, European observers noticed a pronounced distinction between Coloureds and Blacks in Bluefields and on Corn Island. Classes held by a newly arrived Anglican catechist were frequented by coloured children only. As contemporary sources put it: “High school fees prevent the numerous negro children in the area from coming. Moreover, factionalism [Partheigeist] between Coloureds and Blacks is very strong” (MB 1848: 204, transl. W. G.; see also 1848: 244; 1859: 123).

However, although skin colour was important for the ascription of status, the analysis of political institutions in the “Kingdom of Mosquitia” and the “Reserva Mosquita” demonstrates that social groups were not merely formed on the basis of different shades of colour (Coloureds versus Blacks). Wealth and education seem to have been more significant criteria for membership of the elite. The Kingdom’s “Council of State” built at Bluefields in 1846 for the British consul consisted mainly of Afro-Americans. Two of the five Creole members were described as “black”, i.e., as having an appearance “quite [like that of] an African”, or “very slightly removed from the African”, the remaining three (George Hodgson, James Porter and William Halstead Ingram) were in all probability dark Coloureds (“First meeting of the Council of State”, 11.9.1846 and Christie to Palmerston, 5.9.1848, in Oertzen/Rosbach/Wünderich 1990: 109; 121). Key political positions in the “Reserva Mosquita” were almost exclusively held by Afro-Americans, some of whom were of dark complexion. The same holds true for other Afro-Americans who played a leading role in the political, social, and economic life of the region. Despite their phenotype, their wealth, education and manners rendered them esteemed members of the Creole elite. All of them belonged to the Moravian Church or at least maintained close relations with the

32 For a detailed account, see Gabbert (1992: 102-118, 125-134; 1996).

congregation. They were engaged in the rubber trade, owned large mahogany works or were active as businessmen and artisans.³³

Apparently it was not too difficult for Blacks or Coloureds of dark complexion to become accepted members of the Creole elite, provided they were educated or wealthy and showed attitudes sufficiently adapted to European standards. Social boundaries were drawn along social, cultural, and economic lines and not primarily according to shades of skin colour or, as the presence of more recent immigrants among the Creole elite indicates, the duration of residence on the coast.

The period between the 1880s and the 1930s, a time when social and economic life in the Mosquitia was dominated by North American companies, saw massive immigration of Afro-Americans. They left their homes in the West Indies or the southern USA due to sugar production crises and periodic damage to subsistence agriculture through drought, to work for the newly established companies.³⁴ In contrast to the majority of immigrants who had been coming since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the majority of Afro-Americans who reached the Mosquitia were now from the Caribbean rural lower classes. The newcomers strengthened the African element of Afro-American culture, such as *obeah*, as against the “European” influences fostered by the missionaries and the Creole elite.³⁵

As a result of massive immigration since the 1880s, the social and cultural gap between “poor Blacks” and the Creole elite broadened. In 1916, for example, the Moravian missionaries complained that their work was greatly hindered by the “caste spirit” of Afro-American families (MB 1916: 125). It is important to note here that the Afro-American population was conceptualised as consisting of two separate ethnic groups, “Creoles” and “West Indian Negroes”. What separated the two categories was not geographic origin but social and cultural differences.³⁶

33 See MB (1869: 144; 1874: 243; 1883: 141; 1890: 211); Thomas to Baker, Bluefields, 28.4.1894, in Oertzen/Rosbach/Wunderlich (1990: 375-378); “Petition from Mr. Lewis Cuthbert”, Confidential Prints, Foreign Office, London, No. 6757 (1895: 29s.); Martin (1899: 147s., 198). One of them was James Willy Cuthbert, a dark mulatto who had immigrated to the Mosquito Coast from Jamaica around 1853. He was a carpenter and an educated man. The legal code of the “Reserva Mosquita” was based on his work and he himself was a leading figure in the government for more than thirty years. He was also an active member of the Moravian congregation (Martin 1899: 147s.). Another was businessman John Oliver Thomas, an educated mulatto from Jamaica, who was active among other things in the mahogany trade. He claimed to have invested 65,000 dollars in the “Reserva Mosquita” (Thomas to Commodore de Horsey, Pearl Lagoon, 23.10.1874, Confidential Prints, Foreign Office, London, No. 4014, 1875-1877, pp. 8s.; Martin 1899: 162-165).

34 See MB (1887: 175; 1893: 244-246, 334s.; 1894: 156, 274; 1895: 93; 1932: 39; PA II, 5: 257); Schneider (1899: 126-128).

35 See MB (1886: 187; 1902, Jahresbericht: 19; 1916: 11, 123); Proceedings (1919: 79); Kalb (1893: 281); Keely (1894: 166); Gordon (1998: 67).

36 Cf., e.g., Conzemius (1932: 7); Mueller (1932: 56s.); Wilson (1975: 109).

The withdrawal of almost all foreign companies after the 1930s brought the vast waves of immigration to an end and a gradual process of assimilation among the different social groups within the Afro-American population set in. Integration and individual upward social mobility in the context of the local society became vital to many poor Afro-Americans. They increasingly adapted their overt behaviour to the Creole elite and their cultural standards.³⁷ This process is analysed by Gordon as follows:

Within the urban setting, the black population made use of the educational opportunities available, particularly the Moravian church schools, to occupy increasingly the petty bourgeois positions in Coast society – as professional people, skilled workers and office workers. At the same time they withdrew from the ranks of unskilled wage and agricultural labour [...] (Gordon 1987: 139).

This description of the Creoles as a Protestant, educated middle class fits in well with the self-image of the Afro-American population, at least with that of the dominant sector.³⁸ There is evidence, however, that adaptation to the standards of the elite is far from complete and that today Afro-Americans in the Mosquitia are much less homogeneous socially and culturally than has frequently been suggested. Indeed, in the mid-1980s, fifty-three per cent of the Afro-American economically active population were classified as middle class. But almost forty per cent were unemployed or listed as lower class (Gordon 1987: 161, table 5.2). Furthermore, marked cultural distinctions are evident in the different quarters of Bluefields. Beyond this, there is a linguistic continuum within the Afro-American population that extends from the strongly creolised forms of the lower class to the standard English variant of the elite.³⁹

Afro-American magical practices and ancestral beliefs could not be eradicated and are still present in many Creole communities today. They are frequently combined with Christian elements in syncretistic religious forms.⁴⁰ Those who publicly attend the Moravian service in the morning can discretely consult the *obeah* man in the evening. Even today there are different sets of cultural practices within the Afro-American population. Some of them have been adapted to European (or North American) values and are accepted by the Creole elite and practised in public, while others are hidden and socially disapproved of by the elite.

37 See Interview with Michael Gray, Bluefields, 30.9.1986 (Ms.); Interview with Edmund Gordon, Managua, 3.10.1986 (Ms.); Vega Centeno (1981: 12s.).

38 See, e.g., MB (1900: 283, 288, 295, 298; 1902: 82, 85; 1905: 294); Mr. Thomas to Mr. Baker, Bluefields, 28.4.1894, in Oertzen/Rosbach/Wünderich (1990: 375-378); Cuthbert, Wilson and Howell to Kellog, Bluefields, 27.3.1924, The National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group No. 59, Publ. No. M-632 roll 94; Bräutigam-Beer (1970: XX).

39 See Ministerio de Cultura (1983: 63); Vega Centeno/Gander (1987: 102s.); Gordon (1998: 22).

40 See Vega Centeno (1981: 21, 28s, 32-37); Ministerio de Cultura (1983: 27); Gordon (1998: 19-21).

The fact that cultural and social differences within the Afro-American population are not conceptualised as those between two separate ethnic groupings is due, on the one hand, to the common experience of discrimination by Nicaraguan officials, Hispanic labourers and their North American bosses in the enclaves after 1894. On the other hand, the Moravian Church has played a decisive role in developing community structures that integrated Afro-Americans of different origins and social standing into parishes, boy scout groups and other associations (Gabbert 1992: 219-230; 1995a: 213-216).

Up to now, public attention has focused on the public, European and middle-class side of Central American Creole culture, while its ambiguity and contradictions have for the most part been neglected. Much work still needs to be done on this subject in the future, as well as on the history and culture of the Creole lower classes.

7. Conclusion

As the material presented here has demonstrated, Afro-Americans played rather different roles in Nicaragua and Belize. While they have always been a minority in Nicaragua, they became the national population of Belize. In recent decades, however, their political and economic position in both countries has greatly declined. As in Costa Rica and Honduras, they have been hard hit by an almost permanent economic crisis following the withdrawal of US companies and the corresponding loss of jobs for skilled workers and clerks. Emigration to the USA on a large scale has been one solution to the problem. While it seems probable that the political role of Afro-Americans will deteriorate further in most of Central America, it remains to be seen whether they can maintain their dominant position informally in Belize, despite having lost their status as the largest population group. While many Creoles have left their homes in Central America – permanently or temporarily – to live and work abroad, others have begun to raise consciousness of and pride in their African roots. Some are working towards the development of a pan-Afro-Belizean identity among Creoles and Garifuna to develop common strategies against the perceived threat of racist treatment by *Mestizos*.⁴¹

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