

Indigenous Masculinities in the Global Lobster Economy

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Indigenous Miskitu men have worked as deep-water divers in the international lobster economy for the last forty years. Because of the long-term “boom” in the lobster economy, Miskitu society has become increasingly involved with monetized economies, agriculture has declined, and families now purchase their subsistence foods from stores. This article’s main research question asks how the global lobster economy has helped shape Miskitu masculinities on the Honduran Caribbean coast. Ethnographic fieldwork draws from the author’s doctoral research (1997-1998, supported by a Fulbright grant) in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (RPBR), Honduras. The research combines participant observation with the collection of oral texts.

The research is unique because it highlights indigenous men’s sexuality, a topic for which there is relatively little anthropological information (Gilmore 1990; Gregor 1985; Jamieson 2000a; Lancaster 1988, 1992). The research also uses oral texts as primary data to examine male sexual identity (see also Basso 1990; Howe 1986; Jamieson 2000b; Sammons and Sherzer 2000; Sherzer 1983, 1990). The oral texts collected are songs that Miskitu men sing about themselves and their livelihoods, as participants in various coastal economies. The songs include Miskitu standards from the “old days” (a Caribbean English phrase now used widely along the coast) and the newer hits that focus mainly on men’s lives as lobster divers today.

Analysis and comparison of the older and newer songs reveals that Miskitu manhood is defined consistently throughout the texts. Despite the economy in which men have participated, masculinity is defined as the ability to provide resources and money to women. Therefore, this article argues that local constructions of Miskitu manhood have not changed dramatically as a result of the lobster-diving industry. However, song texts and ethnographic data recorded reveal that relations between women and men have become highly commodified. Conclusions suggest that the commodification of Miskitu identities and gender relations has intensified during the latest “boom” in the coastal economy, but that this commodification has developed alongside the globalization of western values and monetized economies that have influenced the Caribbean coast since colonial times (see also Connell 1995; Gutmann 2003; Jackson 2001; Kimmel, Hearn and Connell 2004).¹

Socio-Economic Background

The indigenous Miskitu people speak their own Miskitu language (a Misumalpan, Macro-Chibchan language of South American origins) and trace their ancestry to an Amerindian group that intermarried with African and European populations in the sixteenth century (Helms 1971). Their homeland—called La Moskitia in Honduras and the Atlantic Coast in Nicaragua—extends from Black River, Honduras to just south of the Pearl Lagoon area in Nicaragua. During the colonial era, when other indigenous groups were experiencing death, destruction, and de-territorialization (Gould 1998; Newson 1986; Stonich 2001), the Miskitu expanded their numbers and territory, while developing a strong cultural identity (Conzemius 1932; Helms 1971; Herlihy 1997; Offen 1999). They have continually expanded their population and established their identity through interactions with the British, North Americans, and other foreigners who have come to the coast.

The interconnectedness of global and local social identities is not new to the Miskitu peoples, who have participated in foreign economies since colonial times. Classic Miskitu scholars such as anthropologist Mary Helms (1971) and geographer Bernard Nietschmann (1974) describe historic and modern-day Miskitu economy as a combination of subsistence agriculture and wage-labor economies. In the last two hundred years, for example, the Miskitu people have participated in a series of “boom and bust” (in the terminology of Mary Helms) economies along the Honduran and Nicaraguan coast. International companies have employed Miskitu men as laborers to extract a variety of local resources, such as gold, bananas, mahogany wood, sea turtles, and most recently, shrimp, conch, and lobsters. (Conzemius 1932; Dennis 2004; Dodds 1998; Helms 1971; Nietschmann 1974, 1997).

Miskitu domestic organization is Caribbean in nature: the men are absent earning money in migrant wage labors, while women raise children in female-headed households and matrilineal groups. The village of Kuri, where the author lived and completed her research, is geographically divided into five family residential groups composed of members related through the female line.² *Kukas* (or grandmothers) are heads of larger matrilineal groups and hold the highest leadership positions in the village. Mothers, daughters, and sisters in Kuri live near each other throughout their lives and create the most important kinship and economic sharing networks in society. With the men gone, related women also play heightened roles in transmitting Miskitu language and culture to the children. Other scholars have documented these historic and modern-day matrilineal residential patterns (Garcia 1996a; 1996b; Helms 1970; 1971; 1976; Jamieson 2000a; Peter Espinoza 2002).

Río Plátano Miskitu men and women experience ambiguity in their local conceptions of gender ideology (see also Blackwood 2000; Menon 1995; Scott 1995). Men maintain authority as society's main wage-earners and hold all positions of leadership at the regional and national levels. Yet, male absenteeism brought on by men's participation in migrant wage labor has augmented women's power and control of resources in an already matrilineal society (Herlihy 2002).

Miskitu women's high status in relation to men is evidenced when compared to Latin American women's positionality in *mestizo* societies with "*machista*" gender ideologies. Since the colonial era, Spanish and *mestizo* families have revolved around the patriarchal male as the main breadwinner that maintains a firm economic and social control over his household and its members. In Plátano Miskitu society, however, this is not entirely the case. While men earn the money, women living in matrigroups and female-headed households ultimately gain control over the money and make all household economic and child-rearing decisions.

The Lobster Diving Economy

Since the early 1970s, Honduran Miskitu men have worked as deep-water lobster divers, harvesting lobsters that are mainly sold to U.S. companies. The sea-workers contributed an estimated U.S. 3.2 million dollars per year into the economies of the Plátano reserve's north coast villages, primarily between Ibans and Barra Plátano. Twenty-five lobster boats operated during the 1997-98 season, employing 700-800 lobster divers and canoemen. At the time, local divers and the Honduran Ministry of Public Health both claimed there were about 4,000 divers and canoemen in the entire Honduran Moskitia (Proyecto Nautilo 1993:6). Thus, about one-fifth of all Honduran Miskitu divers and canoemen hailed from the north coast of the RPBR.

Dodds explains (1998:11):

Boats based in the Bay Islands come to pick up Miskitu men and boys as divers and canoemen. The boats then search for spiny lobster (*Panulirus argus*) in the continental shelf waters off Honduras and Nicaragua, and as far away as Colombia. After an excursion, the Miskitu sea-workers are then dropped off along the coast at their respective villages while the boats continue on to the Bay Islands; there, the catch of lobster tails is frozen and packed for shipping, mostly to the United States.

The lobster tails are exported from the Bay Islands to Florida and purchased by United States companies, such as the restaurant chain, Red Lobster, Inc. Through this venue, Miskitu men from the RPBR are linked to the national and international economy.

Miskitu men have become internationally known as skilled deep-water divers and lobster hunters. The men gained fame for diving without tanks as the economy first developed, a time when lobsters were plentiful and the divers found them in shallow waters. In the late 1970s, lobster divers began to use tanks that enabled them to dive deeper and stay underwater longer. Divers were forced to dive deeper to find lobsters because they over-exploited and diminished the natural resource.

Over-exploitation of the lobster caused the Honduran government to take action, placing an annual moratorium on lobster diving from April through July to protect the resource. The moratorium occurs at a fortuitous time during the yearly

agricultural cycle, when the locals burn and replant their fields. Men normally are able to combine some agricultural work with lobster-diving.

During the diving season, men usually take two trips a month, each trip lasting about ten to twelve days. Most inexperienced and younger *buzos* (lobster divers) make between one-hundred and fifty to three-hundred U.S. dollars on each trip, but older, more experienced divers can earn about twice as much. All divers, however, claim their take-home pay depends largely on luck. When “lucky,” they can make between \$200 to \$400 U.S. dollars, but when “unlucky,” they may come home empty-handed.

Only the tails are taken from these relatively small, spiny lobsters and divers are paid by the pound, between U.S. \$3.50 and \$4.00 during the 1997-98 lobster-diving season. Dodds (1998:13) states, “One successful 12-day outing can provide as much cash income to a diver as a year of working diligently in the fields to produce and market a cash crop.” Accordingly, locals prefer to work as lobster divers and purchase their household’s daily subsistence foods and material goods from stores. These economic changes have put increasing pressures on men to risk their lives as they dive deeper and deeper to bring up the elusive lobster that means more money for their families.

Lobster-diving is an incredibly dangerous occupation. Divers are forced to live and dive in unsafe conditions on boats. They are given little training, use old diving equipment, have no depth gauges, and the boats have no decompression chambers on board (Meltzoff and Schull 1999; World Bank 1999). The divers also use cocaine and marijuana on boats, often before they descend into deep waters to hunt for lobster, which increases their chances of injury.³ Many have developed serious health problems related to their work, including the “bends” or decompression sickness, an affliction that they call “*liwa mairin*” or “mermaid sickness” (Barrett 1992; Dennis 2004; Garcia 1996a; Perez 2000).⁴

When a diver has symptoms of decompression sickness, such as paralyzation of the legs, the boat Captains do not always take him directly to the nearest sites with decompression chambers in Roatán, Awas, or La Ceiba. Captains may simply drop off the injured diver on shore for treatment by local healers and plant specialists, shirking their responsibilities to the injured diver.⁵ Although lobster diving is dangerous, where men lack proper training and equipment, they continue to risk their lives in order to provide money and store-bought goods to their families.

Lobster Diver Songs

Buzo (lobster diver) songs, as locals refer to them, include both older and newer songs that men sing about their lives. These songs are called lobster diver songs because the men perform them together, while off-shore working on lobster boats and when socializing back on shore. The songs presented in this article were originally performed by Wilinton Suarez and Eucevio Guevara, lobster divers and musicians who live in Kuri.⁶ *Buzo* songs are part of a broader category of Miskitu

music called *tasbaya lawanka* (“earthly or profane songs”), that locals distinguish from *dawan lawanka* (“church or sacred songs”). Many more songs that the author recorded were documented in her 2002 dissertation, “The Mermaid and the Lobster Diver” (Herlihy 2002).

The newer *buzo* songs commonly lament the emotional hardships that lobster divers endure working off-shore, away from home and loved ones. These songs describe the dangerous and life-threatening work conditions (about 15% of divers are injured, paralyzed, or killed while deep-water diving). But the saddest songs have to do with the way women use and abuse them for their money. Two songs presented below, “Money Tree” (“*Lala Dusa*”) and “Flat Broke” (“*Zero Man Zero*”), are recently written *buzo* songs. Textual analysis of these two recent lobster-diver songs reveals different aspects of Plátano Miskitu masculinity. Ethnographic data adds an element of thick description to the linguistic data to illustrate how Miskitu men experience gender, power, and sexuality in their everyday lives.

The first song, “*Money Tree*,” explains how *buzos* feel about themselves when they have money in their pockets. The lyrics mention how they garner prestige and status by bringing home money to their families and girlfriends. This prestige comes at a price, as the *buzos* continue to risk their lives in order to earn cash needed by others.

Money Tree

<p>we are who we are we are the money trees we are who we are</p> <p>we work for an important company we do important work we are who we are we live on the sea shore we are who we are</p> <p>there was a guy on the coast I am that guy we are who we are</p> <p>we rule the big fishing boats we rule the big towns we rule the great Miskitu people we are who we are</p> <p>the grandfathers are happy the grandmothers are happy the elders are happy when the money trees arrive the children are happy the elders are happy when the money trees arrive</p>	<p>the grandmothers are happy the teenage girls are happy because of the money trees we own the big ravine we own the great Miskitu people we are who we are</p> <p>“where did you come from?” “where do you work?” I’m a Kuri man I came to build a house I’m the money man the elders are happy the teenage girls are happy the elders are happy the grandmothers are happy when the money tree arrives when the company’s boats came to the coast the grandmothers were happy the elders were happy</p>
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The text of “*Money Tree*” reveals how Miskitu men’s self identity is intricately related to their wage-earning occupations. Miskitu men are extremely quick to define themselves as lobster divers in any interaction. Men are proud to be divers because they are internationally recognized as skilled divers, and the entire coastal Miskitu population’s economic and emotional well-being depends on the money they earn.

Money gained by Miskitu men in the lobster export industry has been the primary source of income and cash flow into the Río Plátano’s north coast villages since the early 1970s. Besides some subsistence staples, almost all of the household’s daily necessities are purchased in stores. With the additional costs above basic food stuffs, an average Kuri household (around seven people) spends about U.S. \$150.00 per month. Mothers visit stores and send their children daily to buy beans, rice, lard, flour, salt, pepper, coffee, sugar, chips, cookies, and candy. They also buy meat about twice a month at spontaneous markets. In addition to foods, they less frequently buy clothes, school supplies, health care and medicines, household items like pots, buckets, knives, jewelry, perfume, and hair accessories. On special occasions, larger items such as bicycles, mattresses, and jam boxes are purchased.

Helms (1969) stressed the emotional dependence on cash and commodities that Miskitu individuals had developed. She called Miskitu society the “purchase society,” explaining that foreign goods had become cultural necessities to the indigenous families. She believed that during “boom” phases of the economy, the Miskitu were happy when outside industries worked in the region and locals had access to money and foreign goods, but that they acted emotionally depressed during economic “bust” times when they were unable to acquire precious goods.⁷

Even with the long-term “boom” in the lobster economy, mini-bust occasions arise when men have unlucky trips. They use the words “*lala apu*” (“to be flat broke”) to describe their sad and downtrodden emotional state. Locals act depressed during these times and are left without a way to earn money they need to survive. The next song, “Flat Broke” (“*Zero Man Zero*”), demonstrates Miskitu men’s self identity during economic “bust” situations.

Flat Broke

Say hello to my father-in-law
 say hello to my mother-in-law
 I’m going out to sea
 I’m looking for my children’s clothes
 looking for my wife’s clothes
 I’m leaving right away
 I’m going out to sea
 I left from the beach
 I saw all kinds of boats
 I saw airplanes above
 the first work that I found
 was work on a lobster boat

say hello to my father-in-law
 say hello to my mother-in-law
 I'm going out to sea

when I finished 12 days
 I turned back for home
 when I figured out my earnings
 there was zero man zero
 say hello to my father-in-law
 say hello to my mother-in-law
 I'm going away again
 I have to return to the sea
 tell them to buy a pound of sugar
 tell them to buy a pound of salt
 I'm a poor man now
 what can I send them?
 I'm a poor man now
 what can I send them?
 I'm a poor man now

"*Flat Broke*" tells the story of a man who found work as a lobster diver. He wants to earn money so that he can buy clothes for his children and store-bought goods for his wife and her parents. The diver works at sea for 12 days, but when it comes time to figure out his pay, he realizes he has earned next to nothing. The diver has had bad luck on this trip to sea and sings apologetically to his in-laws—he can only buy them one pound of salt and one pound of sugar. In these personal "bust" situations, a Miskitu man's self worth is low because he cannot even put food on their kitchen table. When the men are *lala apu* (or broke), they complain that no woman would want them. This is often the case, as women often claim not to want a penniless man hanging around their house.

Together, the two songs illustrate much about Miskitu manhood in the Plátano Biosphere. The first song, "Money Tree" ("*Lala Dusa*") celebrates the Miskitu men's concept of self as a cash earner in the "booming" lobster-diving economy—men feel brave and macho, like heroes in their communities. When the divers have money in their pockets, they arrogantly refer to themselves as "*millionarios*" (in Spanish). The second song, "Flat Broke" ("*Zero Man Zero*"), laments the men's concept of self during an economic "bust" situation—men feel impotent and useless. Combined, the two songs illustrate the importance of accessing money and being a good provider to the self worth and self esteem of Miskitu men.

Lobster-Diver Songs from the "Old Days"

The following three songs, performed by Wilinton and Eucevio, are ones that they classify as being from the "old days." These songs describe Miskitu men's lives and relationships in subsistence and canoe-making economies. The first song is narrated

from the perspective of a young man who wants to marry a girl. He sings to his in-laws, using respectful terms of reference, "Aunti and Uncle."

Aunti, Aunti, Aunti

Aunti, Aunti, Aunti, Uncle, Uncle Uncle,
 I want your daughter to be mine
 I will buy her a chicken, a pig and
 build her a house close to your house
 Aunti, Aunti, Aunti, I want your daughter to be mine
 I will give her pigs and I will give her dogs
 I will give her a house close to your house

The prospective son-in-law reassures the girl's parents that he will not take her away to live somewhere else. After marriage, mothers give each of their daughters land on her property. Husbands prove that they are good providers by building a house for their wife and giving her small animals. The song illustrates that even when men participated in subsistence labors, earning and giving resources was a fundamental component of a Miskitu man's concept of self. The following song from the "old days" further demonstrates this:

Beautiful Darling

Beautiful Darling
 This arm will be your yucca field
 This arm will be your banana field
 This arm will be your banana field
 Beautiful darling
 This arm will be your house
 This arm will be your money
 This arm will be your clothes
 This arm will be your orchid
 This arm will be your bean field
 This arm will be your yucca field

In the above song verse, a man sings to his wife about how he will provide her with subsistence and cash resources. The text demonstrates how men give to their wives both agricultural items and money earned in the local agriculture markets. Men involved in subsistence labors have gained access to cash by selling their beans, rice, and in local markets for the last 100 years.

The next song tells of a man that goes into the forest to build round-bottom, wooden canoes. He plans on selling the canoes in order to give the money to his wife, Arelita. Canoe-making has been an historic and modern-day Miskitu wage-earning activity, one for which the neighboring Tawahka Sumu people are today better known (McSweeney 2000).

Arelita

Wait for me for a day or two
 I'm going to the river
 I will stay for weeks
 I will stay for months
 Arelita woman
 I will be away for weeks
 Arelita woman
 I'm entering the forest
 I'm going to make *cayucos* [Spanish for round-bottom, wooden boats]
 Arelita woman
 I have two or three *cayucos*
 Arelita woman
 Wait for me
 This *cayuco* is your money

Men from coastal villages like Kuri must leave their communities and travel up-river into the rain forest to find the trees needed to make *cayucos*, sea-faring canoes. The song text tells the story of a man departing for the forest. The man asks his wife, Arelita, to wait for him. He promises that he will bring her money when he returns. The text demonstrates that men historically made money in the canoe-building industry, which they in turn provided to the women. The three songs combined demonstrate that the definition of Miskitu manhood by the ability to provide resources to women dates back to before the lobster-diving industry developed.

Despite the economy in which men have participated (subsistence, cash-based subsistence, canoe-making, or lobster diving), there appears to be more continuity than disjuncture in the textual construction of Miskitu masculine identities.

Commodified Gender Relations

Fieldwork demonstrates that relations between women and men have become highly commodified in the Plátano reserve's north coast villages. Combining interviews and first hand field observation, this section will discuss four examples of the ways in which gender relations have been commodified. Most noticeably, cash and commodity-orientated obsessions ("commodity fetishism") continue on the Honduran north coast, and have been augmented by the long-term boom in the lobster economy.

Cash-Oriented Obsessions

The lobster economy provides steady work to men from August through March but a moratorium exists on lobster diving during the *veda* (or off-season in Spanish). During the *veda*, many individuals fall into a dreary emotional state and have

withdrawal symptoms from the gifts of cash that they have been receiving all year. Women, who buy almost all of their subsistence foods from stores, feel especially helpless trying to feed their children with no money available. They subsist on the few agricultural items that men provide to them, with little dietary diversity.

Grandmother or *Kuka* Denecela and her daughters, members of the community in which I worked, looked defeated toward the end of the 1997 *veda*. They had not eaten anything but beans, rice and bananas for weeks; their world was monotonous, their outlook on life, bleak. Meat, now a coveted resource and a prestigious cash item, was the resource that *Kuka* Denecela and the Plátano Miskitu women most highly desire. Men once provided meat to the women through hunting, but forest animals—such as spider monkeys, deer, *teposquintli* (a type of nutria), and tapirs—are increasingly scarce today. During the *veda*, *Kuka* Denecela often lamented, “No meat, no men, no money, I’m going to die.”⁸

Women like the *Kuka* remained depressed for the entire *veda*. And with the opening of the lobster-diving season that August, she and her daughters returned to their more highly spirited selves. Excitement prevailed as the lobster boats, merchandise boats, and advance payments to the divers all arrived together. Just before the first boats reached the coast, *Kuka* and her daughters Delfina and Tomassa looked out to the sea. Delfina raised her nose to the wind and said, “the smell of money is in the air.” Her sister Tomassa began to rub her hands together in anticipation and responded, “any minute now.” Women’s desires for cash and store-bought goods that only men can provide, reinforced the power that men had in society, and underscored the male-dominant political economy that operates on the Honduran Miskitu Coast.

Conspicuous Consumption

Being a Miskitu man in the RPBR has to do with one’s ability to earn money lobster-diving and by one’s generosity in giving presents away, especially to the women. Indeed, if a woman were to return or not accept a gift from a diver, this would insult his manliness and his ability to be the good provider. Those regarded as the most masculine members of society are the divers who killed the most lobster, made the most money, and gave the most away. These rich, “macho” men are treated like heroes. They draw crowds at stores because they regularly buy cokes, beers, and other luxury items for family members and friends. Locals may follow them to stores, hoping to receive a coke or more. Some tag-a-longs may get angry and call the diver *slabla* (stingy) or *min* (mean) if they receive nothing.

Lobster divers now participate in conspicuous consumption, where they give away purchased goods and money to family and friends. In these situations, the men exchange gifts of cash for social prestige within their diver’s culture. The younger Miskitu divers often spend their money celebrating in a ritualized activity known in Spanish as “*vagando*” (carousing together). As discussed above, lobster-diving is a dangerous and life-threatening occupation—over 100 men in the region have

been injured, paralyzed, or killed while deep-water diving (Herlihy 2002:257). Because of this, divers in large groups celebrate each safe and healthy return to shore by *vagando*. Divers buy rounds of drinks (rum and beer), cigarettes, marijuana, and even cocaine for each other,⁹ and they give gifts of money to women, often after sexual liaisons. After two or three days of *vagando* and womanizing, many young divers end up hung over and broke, with little or no money to bring home to their families.

Tice (1995), among the Kuna of Panama, reports a similar pattern of lobster-divers spending their wages partying before they return home. Many gender scholars interpret the added element of spending wages on alcohol and other luxury items (and withholding winnings from the household) as pathological (Jackson 2001). Yet, Miskitu men spending money on themselves and each other appears to be part of their initiation to manhood. Participating in male-bonding activities is an essential element in becoming a man, as noted by scholars cross-culturally (Adams and Savran 2002; Chant 2001; Gilmore 1990; Herdt 1982).

In contrast to the younger and more irresponsible divers, the older and more experienced divers tend to spend their money more wisely. Daugoberto (*Kuka* Denecela's grandson), a *buzo* in his early-thirties, usually brings home between 300 and 500 U.S. dollars per trip. Daugo splits the money about equally between his wife and members of his mother's matrilineal group. He claims to spend 50 to 100 dollars partying or *vagando* after returning to shore, but then gives the lion's share of his earnings to his wife, children, mother, sisters, or grandmother. Daugo also has outside girlfriends and a semi-permanent concubine, but he does not routinely give money to these women. Instead, one year he waited for the biggest trip of the season and then gave one of his girlfriends enough money (U.S. \$700.00) to build a house.

Monetized Sexual Transactions

Female-headed households with small children and no permanent men in residence struggle to survive on the cash-oriented coast. Many mothers stay on the coast, living off of what cash they can acquire in gifts from their husbands, outside boyfriends, sons, and brothers that earn wages in the diving industry. Men regularly give *prisant nani* (presents) to their wives, mothers, and sisters. There is a strong belief that a present is, indeed, a present. Once the money passes from male to female hands, the money enters a "no man's land" of the strictly female domain of household cash. Divers do not inquire about how women spend the money they give to them. The divers would be considered un-manly for meddling with the day-to-day running of a woman's household.

Men customarily exchange money for sex, paying women *mairin mana* (literally, women's pay or salary), which refers to the cash exchanged for sexual relations. The commodification of affection in Miskitu society is most apparent in *mairin mana* encounters.¹⁰ However, the locals do not perceive these exchange-encounters as acts

of prostitution, although many consider it a bad habit. Locals consider prostitutes those women who make a living exclusively (or nearly so) by receiving cash for sex, take birth control, and have a set price for, and get paid prior to, sexual relations. They do not view community women that accept *mairin mana* as prostitutes because these women only participate in these behaviors a few times a month, do not use birth control, and do not attach a set price to sex, usually being given the gift of cash after the sexual encounter. *Mairin mana* seems to be a part of the divers' ritualized behavior of giving: a modern-day and monetized manifestation of a more traditional economic system where men provided resources and cash to the women.

Sexual Magic

Miskitu divers frequently give their lovers cash, exchanging between 10 to 30 U.S. dollars for sexual relations, but a man can give much more if the woman successfully bewitches the man with magic potions. While once used primarily to gain the affection of a love interest, women now use potions to manipulate men into giving them inflated sums of cash. Women's use of magic potions to access cash reveals women's agentive capacities within the male-dominant lobster economy (Herlihy 2002).¹¹

Miskitu women use their agency to fight back against patriarchal structures in their society. Indeed, men often claim that women are deceitful and devious, that women use and abuse men for their money. Commonly, women stay with a man while he has money and then abandon him as soon as his funds are depleted (see also Fonseca 2001). The women then find another man with money, and the pattern repeats itself. Men fear women because they are known for bewitching men with secret potions to gain access to their winnings. These potions are learned and transmitted in matrilineal groups. Indeed, *kukas* or grandmothers were known for possessing these powerful remedies.

The following song is a newer song that describes how a diver falls in love with a woman named Minerva and spends all of his money on her (partying and giving gifts.)

Minerva

I went to Tuman disco
 And saw a lot of women
 And from them I chose one
 It was the beautiful Minerva
 My little pigeon, my little flower
 I liked the way she walked and the way she talked
 Minerva the beautiful woman
 When the sun began to rise
 I was in the patio of Tuman

Minerva had picked up another man
And was still with him at daybreak
The next day I came back to the house
I didn't have a cent
Not one Lempira
And a hangover that is killing me
You did me wrong
Minerva

The song ends with Minerva betraying the diver when she chooses another man to stay with for the night. After the first diver spent all his money, she found another man with funds. The first diver ends up penniless, heartbroken, and with a hangover. In these situations, locals assume that Minerva has been using sexual magic to beguile the divers. If a woman is ugly (as most agree that Minerva is), this would only increase the belief that her gains came through the use of sexual magic. Through magic potions, women now manipulate men and gain access to their winnings.

Cash-oriented obsessions, conspicuous consumption, monetized sexual transactions, and the use of sexual magic to access money are all examples of the highly commodified gendered and sexual relations that have emerged in the last few decades. During interviews, elders often commented about the “old days” when these behaviors were not the norm. Elders attribute the development of these newer behaviors to the long-term “boom” in the lobster economy.

Conclusions

This article brings into focus the inter-linkages between global economic forces and local level identities. Through textual analysis of the Miskitu men's songs, we see that Miskitu manhood is largely represented through its relationship to the coastal economy. Being a man has to do with earning and sharing money. Songs from the old days and from the present reveal that men have continuously worked in various cash-based labors to earn money for their wives and girlfriends. This suggests that indigenous gender ideologies have not dramatically changed during the latest boom in the coastal economy. Continuity in Miskitu manhood prevails.

The first two songs presented, “Money Tree” (“*Lala Dusa*”) and “Flat Broke” (“*Zero Man Zero*”), reveal how the gendered and sexualized identities of Plátano Miskitu men are linked to their historic and present-day “boom-and-bust” economic patterns. While earning money most of the year, the Miskitu men felt like heroes, but during times when they were broke, they felt like losers. Combined, the two songs reveal that historic “boom-and-bust” economic patterns have become manifest in the concept of selfhood among Plátano Miskitu men.

My conclusions suggest that indigenous notions of sexuality and power are profoundly affected by global economic forces. In the case of the Miskitu people, these effects started long ago and have remained constant. However, textual analysis

of the songs illustrates that Miskitu men's sexual identity, and their interactions with women, have become intensely monetized. There is no doubt that the long term boom in the lobster economy and the expanding market economy have augmented commodified relations between women and men in the RPBR.

Field research illustrates that being a Miskitu man now has to do with earning money as a lobster diver and providing it to others, while being a Miskitu woman means beguiling men into giving them their wages. Men construct their gender identity as a rich and generous "macho-man," while women construct their collective identity as a money-hungry "femme fatale." My findings on Miskitu sexualities describe what some social scientists call the "glocal" connections.¹²

Notes

1. Scholars recently have focused on how the globalization of western values and neo-liberal economic restructuring have affected Latin American masculinities and men's behaviors (Almeras 2001; Chant 2001; Pineda 2001). Most significantly, men's role as provider has come into question as women have entered the workplace and more informal economic sectors. The new research also focuses on the fact that men must frequently migrate to find work and are losing control of their lands and resources. Yet, research demonstrates the ways in which Latin American men are still trying to maintain a hold on their domestic patriarchy.

2. These five female-centered residential groups accounted for 89% (22/25) of the houses by 1998. Even in the cases of the four marriages that occurred between young men and women within the village, these couples live near the wife's family.

3. Phillip Dennis (2003) describes cocaine use in Miskitu villages.

4. The Liwa Mairin is the main Miskitu goddess. She is believed to be the owner of all resources from rivers, oceans, and lagoons. When men overexploit her resources, such as killing too many lobsters, they are faced with the wrath of the mermaid, who may capriciously punish them with death and illness. Many divers claim to have seen or felt the mermaid or her hair before being stricken with decompression illness.

5. Dennis (2004:142) states: "Decompression sickness results from breathing compressed air, in which nitrogen is the major component, and then rising from the depths to the surface too rapidly." Dennis (2004:143) goes on to argue that because many Miskitu people (besides divers) claim to have seen mermaids, the divers' mermaid sightings can not be simply explained as hallucinations associated with decompression sickness. I also have spoken with many Miskitu individuals that claim to have seen mermaids, often while bathing at sundown in the lagoons. Many locals describe how the mermaid's hand, which pokes out from beneath the water's surface, only has two fingers (the fore finger and the small finger).

6. The songs were translated from Miskitu to Spanish by Eucevio Guevara, and from Spanish to English by the author.

7. Nietschmann (1974) described the Miskitu people's dependence on wages. Nietschmann focused on Nicaraguan Miskitu men that worked turtle-diving. He predicted that Miskitu communities would be left feeling impoverished, economically and emotionally dependent on cash resources that no longer existed after the turtle industry "busted" (due to over-exploitation of the resource) and left the region.

8. When I asked the *Kuka* which scarce resource on the coast that she wanted the most, she answered, “huina” (meat). She explained, “Look out the window, you see lots of men pass by, sure to have money in their pockets, but when’s the last time you’ve seen a piece of meat walk by?” Accessing a man, and subsequently, his money would have been merely a means to an end.

9. Philip Dennis (2003) describes cocaine use by the Miskitu in more detail.

10. My research findings are similar to other scholars that focus on prostitution and the tourist industry. Many have found that foreign men with money seek to take advantage of local women for sex, but that women are also manipulating the men for money, attempting to transform sexual encounters into more long term alliances based on romance and affection. See, for example, Brennan (2004); Brenner (1998); Kempadoo (1999); and Kempadoo, Sanghera, and Pattanaik (2005).

11. See McClaurin (1996) for similar findings in Belize.

12. Babb (2001) similarly examines the relationship between global economic restructuring and Nicaraguan women’s gender ideologies.

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