

# COCAINE IN MISKITU VILLAGES<sup>1</sup>

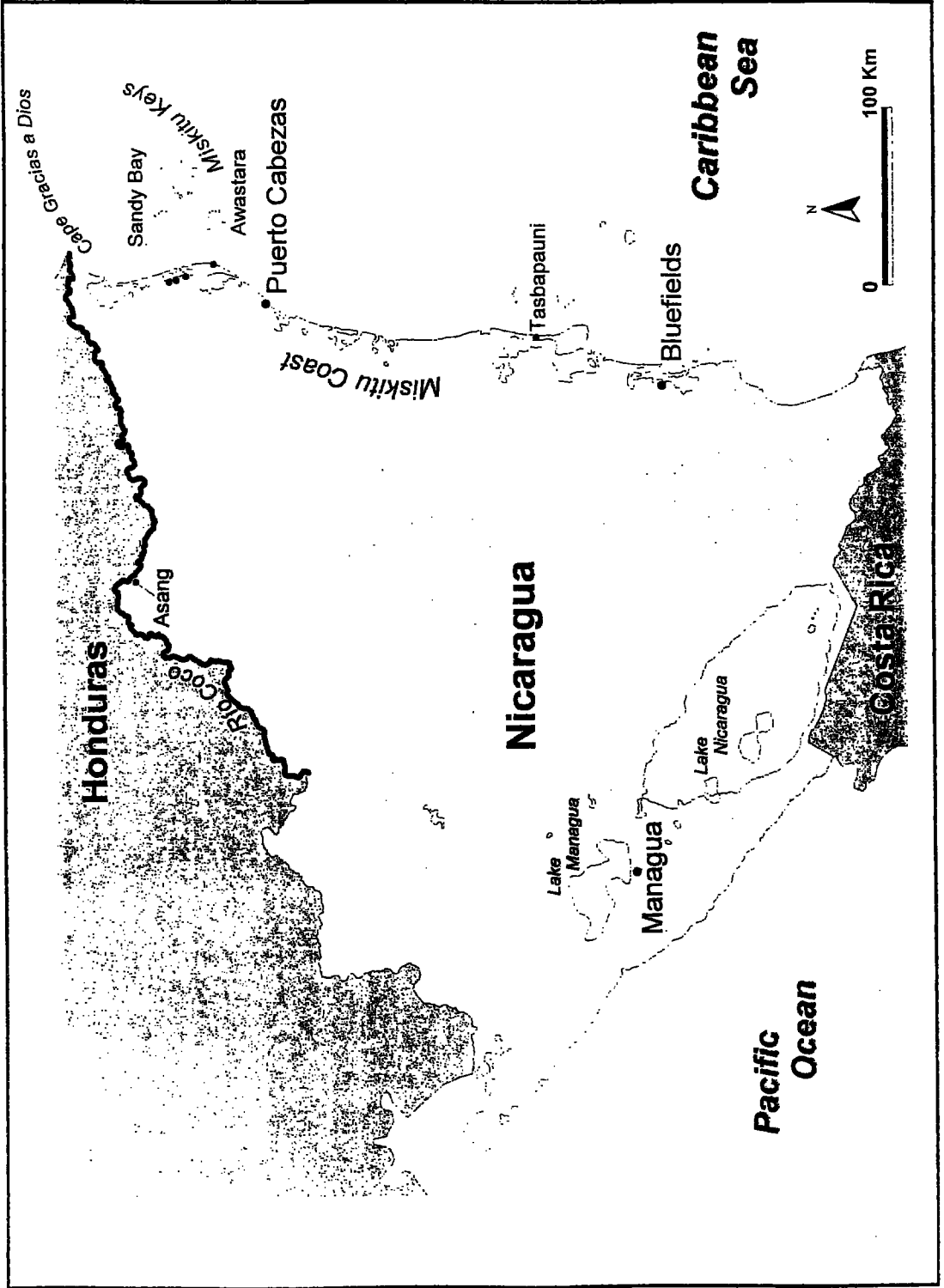


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During the 1990s, Miskitu people in the coastal villages north of Puerto Cabezas began finding cocaine washed up on the beach and on the Miskitu Keys just off the coast. Drug runners carrying the cocaine north apparently dump it overboard when pursued by authorities. Cocaine wealth has been used differently in two local communities. In Sandy Bay, cocaine money has been used to build new houses, schools, and churches, in a project of self-directed development. As a result, Sandy Bay appears prosperous. In Awastara, on the other hand, there is little evidence of new wealth from cocaine. Unfortunately, in all the coastal communities, cocaine finds have also led to deaths from overdoses, cocaine addiction among young men, and increased theft and violence. (Cocaine, drug trade, Miskitu Indians, economic development, violence)

A *Washington Times* story from June 11, 2002 (Sullivan 2002), deals with the cocaine trade in Sandy Bay, 40 miles north of Puerto Cabezas, on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast (see Map).<sup>2</sup> Cocaine has also affected life in Awastara, fifteen miles south of Sandy Bay, where I conducted two separate periods of fieldwork (Dennis 1981, 1988).<sup>3</sup> However, the drug trade seems to have affected the two communities differently. The newspaper article describes the Sandy Bay council of elders commiserating over the social problems cocaine has caused in their community. Six young men have died, robberies plague the community, even the Moravian Church is said to be involved. One of the Sandy Bay elders tells the foreign journalists: "Yes, the tribe is involved in the drug trade. And now they need help. Several years ago, sacks of Columbian cocaine arrived accidentally, floating in on the tides, in what the locals called a 'gift of God.' It has since turned into the devil's own trap, killing young Miskito Indian men and damaging the Miskito culture perhaps beyond repair" (Sullivan 2002:A13).

At the same time, however, the rather sensationalistic article describes the freshly painted new houses in Sandy Bay, suggesting new levels of prosperity. Evidently there are internal contradictions involved in the current drug trade. On the one hand, cocaine creates serious social problems; on the other hand, it brings riches. In the absence of other economic opportunities, is the cocaine trade a form of economic development? After all, other kinds of economic development also have negative consequences. How does cocaine fit into the history of drug use on the Coast? And, how shall the social problems involved in cocaine use be evaluated without lapsing into pious moral judgments?



## ALCOHOL AND COCAINE

Miskitu ethnohistory reports the use of mind-altering substances from the early contact period. A native beer called *mishla* was brewed from fermented cassava and other fruits and vegetables. These homemade beers were drunk in great quantities at *sikru*, feasts for the dead, and on other ceremonial occasions. Distilled liquor, when it became available through trade, was apparently treated in the same fashion. The attractions of alcohol were noted by Bell (1989:96), a perceptive nineteenth-century observer of Miskitu life: "The vice of drunkenness is inherent in all Indians, and when they can get intoxicating drink they have neither the power nor the desire to abstain. Fortunately for them, they seldom have the means to buy spirits, and the intoxicating drinks made by themselves consume too much of their provisions to be indulged in frequently."

In Awastara, drinking is still a seemingly irresistible attraction for adult men, in some circumstances and at particular points in life. Drinking behavior is also strongly gendered: men drink, but women are roundly criticized if they imbibe at all. Drinking behavior is also related to the life cycle: young men often go through periods of binge drinking before they settle down as responsible heads of families later in life. However, even the most sober, church-going adult men in Awastara occasionally overindulge, as recorded in the book of sanctions imposed by the local Moravian Church over a period of many years. The Moravian Church has waged a constant war against alcohol consumption for some 150 years. In her classic ethnography of Asang, on the Río Coco, Helms (1971:173) noted that the Moravian ban on alcohol was quite successfully enforced in that community.

Alcohol continues to affect village life. *Chicha* (corn beer) is brewed regularly in Awastara. The process involves grinding the corn, boiling it in water, adding sugar, and then covering the container to let the mixture ferment. During my periods of fieldwork in 1978-79 and 1999-2000, several households were known for brewing chicha. By 1999, however, two houses on the eastern side of town were brewing chicha almost every day. Many nights were filled with the loud whooping and shouting of drunks gathered at the brewing houses. Licenses to make chicha had been granted by the local authorities, a practice which was controversial among many villagers.

A more potent intoxicant is provided by the small, pocket-size bottles of *guaro* (white rum) which are sold on almost every corner in Puerto Cabezas. Enterprising boat captains often bring cases of rum to Awastara, where it sells out quickly. The most common brand, Ron Plata, is jokingly referred to as *ron pleito*, or "fighting rum." Not only does most violence occur after drinking, households are left without food, clothing, and other necessities when men spend the available cash on alcohol.

In short, use of mind-altering drugs has a long history on the Coast, and has been regarded as a serious problem since the early contact period. The implication of innocence lost, in the *Washington Times* story and other popular sources, seems, itself, quite innocent.

## COCAINE

During the 1990s, a new intoxicant, cocaine, began arriving on the Coast. The cocaine moves from Colombia by sea on its way to markets in the United States. This northbound cocaine trade has developed steadily since about 1990, coinciding with the decline in Sandinista military power and consequent difficulty in interdicting drug shipments along the Coast. The Sandinistas, like Fidel Castro's Cuban government, disapproved strongly of drug use, regarding it as a symptom of capitalist decadence. Today, Nicaraguan coastal patrol is greatly reduced. As the remaining Nicaraguan patrol boats and those of other nationalities chase suspects, the drug runners throw the illegal product overboard. Large quantities wind up on the Miskitu Keys, or wash up on beaches along the Coast itself. One local theory is that drug runners throw the expensive product overboard to purposely increase the drug-consumption market on the Coast, but this seems improbable. The price differential between the United States and Nicaragua is so great that it seems unlikely the drug runners would abandon high profits from U.S. sales in order to give free samples to Nicaraguans.

Over the last 40 years, Miskitu men from coastal villages have worked at catching green sea turtles for the commercial market (Nietschmann 1973) and have worked in the more recent lobster fishing industry. Experience at sea in small boats and intimate knowledge of the Miskitu Keys and the ocean currents and weather have enabled some men to collaborate with drug runners. Some men are rumored to have traded gasoline and other supplies for cocaine. Awastara and Sandy Bay, as well as Tasbapauni, where Nietschmann worked, are among the coastal villages well positioned to participate in this new enterprise. The 40 or more riverine Miskitu villages which line the Río Coco upstream from Cape Gracias a Dios, including Asang, have so far been little affected by the drug trade.

Most cocaine in Awastara is found washed up on the beaches. As described by local people, the cocaine comes in one-kilo blocks, tightly wrapped in waterproof plastic. A box contains 24 kilos, double boxes contain 48 kilos; occasionally whole boxes are found on the beach. In a number of early cocaine finds, the Awastara community shared in the bounty, with small amounts of the drug being parceled out to many different households. In the *Washington Times* story, Dr. Myrna Cunningham, a Miskitu physician and rector of the new Coast university, is quoted as saying that villages usually divide cocaine among the inhabitants, thus "corrupting" entire communities. This seems to have been the case in early finds in Awastara, but not in more recent ones. During 1999-2000, the cocaine finder and the village authorities kept most of the money for themselves. Several Awastara people say the rule is that everyone should share in the finds, corroborating Dr. Cunningham's statement. However, the ideal of sharing seems to have faltered, given the temptations of large amounts of money and local-level political discord. Intense bickering and quarreling among various factions in Awastara make it difficult to enforce such rules at the community level. The result has been local authorities simply appropriating cocaine

finds for themselves. This in turn has led to anger and frustration among the Awastara people who get no share of the wealth.

A previous Awastara headman is said to have connections in Puerto Cabezas which allow quick and easy sale of the cocaine with no problems. His long career as a local political leader allowed him to develop and maintain such connections. Since village authorities as well as higher authorities in Puerto Cabezas get a substantial share of any cocaine find, local people point out that all of them have a vested interest in the cocaine trade. Antidrug programs everywhere face this simple economic fact.

In late 1999, one large cache of cocaine was found at the Keys, and people described its disposition. Two kilos were paid directly to the police, and the finder kept eleven kilos. Local authorities from the eastern side, including the alcalde, got most of the rest. The alcalde and his subordinates were much criticized for taking so much for themselves, especially when the alcalde promptly began construction of a new house. The unit of measure for the drug is a small, empty plastic patent medicine bottle. In 1999, a completely full bottle was said to be worth 1,000 cordobas, about US\$80. A whole kilo was worth 35,000 cordobas (about \$300). The price of cocaine here is thus a small fraction of the street cost in the United States. Supply difficulties resulting from the illegal nature of this agricultural product increase the price enormously in the United States. My Miskitu family was given a small share of this find, with the male family head getting a full bottle and his eldest son half a bottle. For several days after the find, the small Awastara river harbor was full of motorboats from many places, bringing traders who wanted to buy cocaine. The village trails are said to be dangerous at such times, since well-armed cocaine dealers use them, as well as boats, in transporting the drug.

There is an element of luck involved in cocaine finds. Like big wins in gambling, they seem to be random events. The assumption is that the more one walks the beaches, the greater the chances of a find. However, several local men who have made repeated finds have evidently figured out where wind and currents are most likely to have deposited cocaine, or where drug runners are most active. Thus there is also some degree of skill involved.

The cocaine trade has also resulted in cocaine consumption in the villages, and problems of addiction among some young men. Near my house in Awastara, one man made cocaine into crack and sold the "rocks" to local boys for ten cordobas (about a dollar) a piece. Crack is made by mixing cocaine with baking soda, and then cooking it in a spoon over a candle flame until it is hard. Each spoonful of the mixture is then broken into four rocks. It is smoked in a homemade pipe. When my neighbor had a supply of crack for sale, it brought a steady stream of young men to his house. Since he was rarely home, his wife actually sold the rocks to the boys, in much the same way that other households sell freshly baked bread or other homemade products. The boys seemed to take their newly purchased rocks and consume them elsewhere. This behavior is different from local chicha drinkers, who stay close to the house where the product is made. Customers have to be close to

keep returning for another glass. There is thus a cantina atmosphere around the chicha-brewing houses, with many drunks whooping and yelling as they drink late into the night. The crack vendor thus seemed to be providing more of a retail outlet than a "crack house" where the drug is consumed. However, after major cocaine finds, one hears men in various parts of town whooping and hollering, just as the chicha drinkers do. This behavior of wild and unrestrained noise-making in the quiet calm of village evenings seems to be a culturally patterned male response to taking mind-altering substances.

Lobster diving is one way in which young males are introduced to cocaine addiction. The lobster industry in recent years has been the major wage-earning occupation for young men on the Miskitu Coast. Lobster boats recruit divers in the villages and provide tanks and equipment for the young men, who make very high wages by local standards. The work is dangerous. Divers frequently suffer the bends, or decompression sickness, a disease which occasionally kills but often leaves the victim paralyzed to some degree. A World Bank report (1999:46-50) details some of the factors that contribute to the high accident rate among Miskitu divers. Few have depth gauges or diving tables, and thus cannot judge their depth or ascent rate properly; diving equipment is old and in poor repair; many divers use alcohol or drugs while diving, thus impairing their judgment; and most divers have received inadequate training, or no training at all. The report notes that disabled divers number in the hundreds, and one estimate, by the Association for the Integration of the Disabled in Puerto Cabezas, is 1,500 such cases.

One Miskitu explanation for the accidents is that the *liwa mairin*, a spiritual creature who lives in the ocean and in fresh water, guards her natural resources jealously. The crippling attacks are her punishment for taking too many of her lobsters. Some divers report having seen her when they begin suffering an attack of the bends. The World Bank report (1999:43) suggests that these visions may be a result of nitrogen-induced hallucinations, from breathing compressed air at a great depth. In fact, Miskitu people often report seeing the *liwa* in some form while swimming in the rivers or ocean.

Cocaine use among divers at sea is common. As described to me, they work out of small metal canoes (*cayucos*) which are stacked on the bow and stern of the lobster boats. At the lobster ground, the boat drops off a canoe with its two divers every 100-200 meters, in a big circle, with each canoe in sight of its neighbors. One man paddles slowly, while the other dives for lobsters. The men take turns at the two tasks. Before each descent, many divers snort a line of cocaine, since it gives them a high before going down and also helps the body withstand the cold water at the depths to which they descend. This is apparently common practice, with each diver bringing along his supply of cocaine for the day's work. Cocaine use, of course, creates a serious health risk, by impairing judgment and affecting the cardiovascular system. Because the divers make high wages, they are a good market for cocaine peddlers, who use small, fast motorboats to visit the lobster boats one by one and sell their product. There is thus a seagoing retail cocaine trade. Cocaine dealers

reportedly take lobsters in trade for their product, if the divers do not have ready cash.

### VIOLENCE AND COCAINE

As in the United States, the Miskitu drug trade is dangerous and violent. There are many accounts of young men who have died of overdoses in Awastara and neighboring communities. Each case is well known and carefully noted in the local system of drug casualty reckoning. Six young men are cited in the *Washington Times* article as having died in Sandy Bay, and this is probably an accurate figure.

Cocaine use in Awastara has also been associated with a high level of violence toward others. In early 1999, a man who had been drinking and smoking crack was shot and killed by another who had also been drinking and using cocaine. His sister told me that she tried to find justice in Puerto Cabezas, but had no success, since the killer is known to be deeply involved in the cocaine trade on the Coast and to have influential friends. Authorities are reluctant to pursue someone with this kind of connections.

Another violent incident in Awastara in 1997 involved four local men who found and were selling cocaine. Several armed drug runners came looking for the cocaine in the village and killed two young men who tried to defend the stash, riddling their bodies with bullets. The killers were never apprehended. Dealing in cocaine is thus dangerous business, and is regarded as such by everyone. The Miskitu family with whom I lived cautioned me to stay off the paths I normally walk soon after cocaine finds, since there are many armed and dangerous people about. They worried I might become a victim. I made a point of never asking direct questions about the drug trade, although most details are common knowledge and were told to me without hesitation by local people. Cocaine has become a fact of life.

One Miskitu explanation for the high level of violence is that many guns remain from the bitter conflict period of the 1980s, when Miskitu rebel groups fought a bloody war against the Sandinista army (Hale 1994). Many men with years of combat experience are proficient at using automatic weapons, and are said to have a *kupia karna*, a "hard heart." In a sobering article, Nietschmann (1988) describes the militarization of indigenous peoples around the world, fighting to defend their own lands and ways of life. On the Miskitu Coast, the legacy of almost ten years of fighting is still evident. There, the cocaine trade seems to have kept alive the general atmosphere of fear and violence that characterized the 1980s civil war. With weapons still available, and young men skilled in using them, the opportunities to make money through the dangerous cocaine trade make violence an ongoing part of life. The war continues, not between political enemies, but rather rivals in the drug trade.

## THEFT

Drug-related crime has become a major problem in coastal Miskitu villages. In Awastara, accusations of theft were very common in 1978-79. Chicha-makers were accused of accepting stolen plates and kitchen utensils as payment. Seines and turtle nets and other personal belongings were stolen frequently. Accusations written in Miskitu on pieces of notebook paper were taken to the local headman with demands for restitution. The headman's only response seemed to be railing at the accused person and threatening to bring the National Guard to arrest him. Self-help solutions were also mentioned: taking a cow or pig belonging to the thief, or trying to catch someone as he returned from the Keys with turtles and demand a share of the catch.

By 1999-2000, however, things were getting out of control. Constant petty theft was apparently the order of the day. During 1999-2000, boat and fishing equipment was stolen, floor tiles were taken from the new clinic, and lumber was removed from the latrine building project. A neighbor's new house posts were stolen from his building site, and even a big pot of beans cooking on the fire was stolen from a nearby widow. One older woman who lives next to a forest area told me that the drug-addict boys wait in the bush until nightfall and then come to rob her. They have stolen her pots and pans, her radio, and her clothes drying on the line. One night they stole all ten of her chickens. "When you're drinking and taking drugs," she commented wryly, "you get hungry for snacks—especially roasted chicken." She says she is now afraid to live on the edge of town, and worries that if she buys more pots or chickens, they will be stolen again. The stories go on and on. With very low incomes, for the poorest village families such robberies can be disastrous.

Stealing pots and pans, radios, and other household goods is facilitated by two local men who buy the stolen goods and resell them in Puerto Cabezas or elsewhere, thus serving as fences. Little has been done about the situation because both men are prominent and well-to-do by village standards, and are also known to be involved in the cocaine trade. The money (or cocaine) they give to thieves in return for stolen property keeps the level of theft high in the community, and the level of public trust very low. Everyone I talked to has been robbed of something. Awastara seemed to have earned the reputation of being a rogue community, and a spirit of fear and anger was pervasive. "This is not the same place where you lived twenty years ago," several people told me.

## COCAINE AND DEVELOPMENT

Apart from a few brightly painted new houses, there is little indication in Awastara of generalized prosperity as a result of the local cocaine finds. The money from cocaine seems to have disappeared like water into sand. During my fieldwork in 1978-79, the nearby village of Sandy Bay was a very ordinary-looking Miskitu village, a cluster of small communities around a pretty lagoon, with one-room wooden houses set on posts, just like those in Awastara. People were no more



prosperous than those in Awastara. But now in Sandy Bay things are different. Old-style wooden houses are few and far between. Today each of the Sandy Bay communities has dozens of large new houses, made of cement block, the current preferred building material, and all have bright new coats of paint. Some have fancy grillwork, and quite a few are two stories tall. They look more like small hotels than ordinary Miskitu houses. These impressive new dwellings come in a variety of styles and designs, and efforts to build something different from the neighbors are apparent. The new coats of paint and other stylish touches seem to indicate pride in ownership. All of the building materials, of course, must be transported from Puerto Cabezas by boat and are very expensive. People have also constructed their new houses with traditional habits in mind. Bathrooms, which development experts would insist upon for expensive houses, are not part of Miskitu house plans. This follows the traditional custom, and in fact pigs, dogs, and chickens keep Miskitu villages remarkably clean of human as well as animal waste (Nietschmann 1979:79-81).

The Sandy Bay communities also have new school buildings, church buildings, and clinics. The new Moravian church is spacious and would grace any prosperous middle-class suburb in the United States. In one community, there is even a new electric power plant and street lamps. The contrast with Awastara is striking. It seems quite possible that Sandy Bay is the wealthiest community in Nicaragua.

The new wealth seems to have been spent in relatively traditional ways: on houses and new boats, churches, and clinics. Personal luxury spending seems to be minor. Rather, people have invested in things they know will be valuable far into the future. New infrastructure contributes to better educational opportunities (schools), as well as spiritual welfare (churches). More effective instruments of production (motorboats) have also been purchased. In 1978, the Sandy Bay lagoon was filled with the large wooden sailboats or catboats, which are still the standard seagoing means of transportation in Awastara, but they have now been almost entirely replaced by new diesel and gasoline powerboats. These new boats have undoubtedly resulted in larger catches and higher incomes, an ongoing and legal contribution to the high level of prosperity enjoyed in Sandy Bay.

Perhaps the most important point is that people have built for the future. No World Bank or USAID project could have inspired the individual creativity and pride in ownership evidenced by the houses and community buildings here. There is no doubt that the general level of wealth and prosperity in Sandy Bay has increased enormously. Thus, some of the objectives of development are being met. Australian social scientists Kozlowski and Hill (1999:v) write that "development should lead to progress, expressed primarily by welfare improvement in the communities involved. . . ." Earlier social-science writers Rondinelli and Ruddle (1978:v) give a more expansive definition of development:

For us, the essence of development is expansion of participation in economic activities through the creation of social and economic systems that draw larger numbers of people into processes of production, exchange, and consumption, that involve greater numbers in entrepreneurship and employment, that increase levels of income for the poorest groups and reduce disparities between rich

and poor so that a larger majority of people can obtain basic goods, save and invest, and gain access to services necessary to enrich the quality of their lives.


In fact, "cocaine development" in Sandy Bay has done most of these things. Unfortunately, the costs of such development are very high: violence, theft, drug addiction, death by overdose, and involvement in a dangerous and illegal commercial system.

While cocaine is regarded as an evil by local people and condemned by the churches, people also want the wealth it brings. Even pastors from the churches are said to be involved, as mentioned in the *Washington Times* article. Large sums of money can indeed be used in productive ways, as illustrated by the current boom in Sandy Bay.

The prosperity in Sandy Bay, not shared by Awastara just down the coast, poses an interesting comparative problem. Cocaine finds have taken place in both communities, yet Sandy Bay is a boom town while Awastara as a whole remains poor. One story I heard repeated was that the Sandy Bay boom started in 1989, when a boatload of cocaine was found by local men on one of the Miskitu Keys. Thousands of kilos were said to be involved. After paying off various authorities at different levels, Sandy Bay households each got large shares, giving a jump-start to the village economy. Whatever the truth in this story, it seems evident that Sandy Bay has indeed had more volume of cocaine than Awastara, thus in part explaining the differential wealth in the two nearby communities.

But another hypothesis helps explain the contrast. Sandy Bay is reputed to be dominated politically by a shrewd, powerful, and somewhat ruthless headman. He is said to have been involved in the 1989 find, and to have controlled distribution of cocaine money ever since. Strongmen have been important in Miskitu politics for centuries, as discussed in the vigorous scholarly debate about the nature of the Miskitu kingship (Olien 1983, 1998; Dennis and Olien 1984; Helms 1986; Gabbert 2002). Whatever else the kings may have been, all the participants in the debate would probably agree that they attempted to be strongmen, and that their access to outside resources sometimes brought benefits to local Miskitu people. In this regard the Sandy Bay headman seems to have acted quite effectively as a man with access to a completely new, although illegal, economic resource.

Meanwhile, political factionalism in Awastara has reached the point where few community wide decisions can be made. Each of the three sides of town, *lalma*, *muna*, and *pingka*, now has its own local headman, and they collaborate on very few issues. Village trails and bridges go unrepaired because no one can organize the communal work parties. Chicha brewers, formerly licensed to make their product only for specific celebrations, now brew chicha continually with permission from their alcaldes. Village political meetings at which local issues are raised now dissolve into angry groups of quarrelling men, with no one able to maintain order. The four competing churches in town seem unwilling to work toward common goals. In such an atmosphere, it is not surprising that cocaine finds are not shared among community members, or that competing authorities are able to keep what cocaine has

been found for themselves. One wonders whether the economic situation in Awastara today would be more like that of Sandy Bay if there had been an effective strongman in Awastara 

### COCAINE USE IN BROADER CONTEXT

The violence and crime connected with cocaine use today are to be deplored, but alcohol use has also been implicated in violence and theft for a very long time. Perhaps cocaine is simply the latest drug of choice, although its economic impact is greater. A broader sociological perspective criticizes a “pharmacological determinism,” which argues that demon drugs are inherently dangerous. Instead, it suggests that drugs are used in particular social circumstances (setting) and with particular cultural understandings of how a given drug functions (set). Behavior under the influence thus depends on social context and is highly variable (Reinarman and Levine 1997). Scholars of drug use point out that drug scares in the United States typically link troublesome subordinate groups to drug use. According to these sociologists, antidrug scares are about more than drugs; the drugs themselves become scapegoats to detract attention from serious, underlying social problems. Bourgois (1995), in a brilliant piece of fieldwork, has shown how the crack-cocaine trade in New York City is directly related to poverty, hopelessness, despair, and rage at a society from which the crack dealers feel excluded and which mocks them constantly.

On the Miskitu Coast, with its cycle of economic booms and busts (Helms 1971:27-35), the current period seems to be very much a bust. Lobster fishing is one of the few legal employment opportunities, but the unregulated industry is rapidly decimating the lobster population, as well as crippling the divers and contributing to drug addiction. One Internet source (Parenti 1994) describes the dismal economic situation of recent years and relates it to the widespread use of “King Cocaine.”

Cocaine, as the newest boom in the economy, does provide disposable income which can be invested in houses, churches, schools, and motorboats, as has happened in Sandy Bay. Individual and collective prosperity can be gained from contact with this modern devil, but for a price. The *swinta*, a traditional Miskitu supernatural who appears occasionally to offer people instant wealth, always winds up exploiting them sexually or in some other way (Jamieson 2002). Drug overdoses, violence, and the illegal nature of the product all indicate that those seeking easy wealth should be careful of cocaine—perhaps as careful as they would be of the *swinta* himself when he appears, unexpectedly offering riches.

### NOTES

1. A version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, New Orleans, Nov. 20-24, 2002. I am very grateful to David Brooks, Wolfgang Gabbert, Laura Herlihy, Christopher Kindblad, Melesio Peter, and Mary W. Helms for their comments and suggestions. I also thank Gary S. Elbow and Richard A. Nisbett for references on development and Keith Bletzer for references to the cocaine trade.

2. My thanks to Suzy Springborg for bringing the *Washington Times* story to my attention, and to Joel Butler for drawing the map.
3. The 1999-2000 research on which this paper is based was sponsored by a Fulbright Senior Scholar award and by a faculty development leave from Texas Tech University. I acknowledge both with gratitude.

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