



The indigenous and the agrarian reforms in Nicaragua during the second half of the 20th Century

MSc. Marvin Antonio Villalta Orozco*

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua, Managua

UNAN-Managua

pochoantro@yahoo.es

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5377/torreon.v6i17.6878>

Keywords: *Agrarian reform; Indigenous peoples; Appropriation of lands; State; Miscegenation*

ABSTRACT

The paper “**The indigenous and the agrarian reform in Nicaragua during XX century second half**”, is included in a larger search work entitled: *Chorotegas peoples, present and changes, 1992-2016. The case of the five indigenous peoples of Madriz and Nueva Segovia*. As proposal for PhD thesis. This paper works on a revision about the official discourse and treatment of the indigenous topic and the agrarian reform of XX century second half, done from a methodological perspective of history study, base on a precise documental review. The strength of the paper leans on showing the official discourse about indigenous peoples, the discredit from legal and the intention of appropriation of lands to strengthen the agricultural market and the successive incorporation of national elites to international economy by overtaking resources from indigenous peoples through agrarian reforms.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous people in Nicaragua, from the decade of the 90s of the twentieth century, retake a broad political and legal interest promoted by international and national legal

* The author is beneficiary of doctoral searching funds, FPI. This economic aid has been decisive to develop the searching process, of which this paper represents an important part.

openness, by internal organizational processes and the post-celebration effect of the 500 years of Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance in 1992. This breakthrough envisions the breaking of static patterns within the Social Sciences and of a large part of the Nicaraguan intellectual class that had advocated the triumph of the homogenous mestizo state over cultural differences in each country. This article analyzes the discourse on the indigenous in Nicaragua in the second half of the 20th century and the effects of the agrarian reform of 1963 and 1981 on the possession of indigenous communal land.

The method used is essentially historical. The methodological strength was based on the review of documentary sources (primary and secondary), which allowed us to unravel the state's interest in indigenous lands, assuming a homogenizing discourse on the different social strata of Nicaragua in the mid-twentieth century thus, the data presented here shows the state's position on the indigenous issue, the repercussions of agrarian reforms and the subsequent repercussions for indigenous community life.

DEVELOPING

Under the premise of the backwardness of the natives and the leisure in which their lands were found, the usufruct of them was promoted throughout the twentieth century, causing serious problems in the relations between the State and indigenous communities. Land tenure has been the basis of the various conflicts between the State and indigenous communities.

During the presidency of Somoza Garcia, the siege against the indigenous communities was envisaged with a law issued on June 16, 1935, which maintained the prohibition of selling indigenous lands. Nevertheless, their results demonstrated an undoubted governmental effectiveness since the indigenous communities lost large extensions of their traditional territories¹. It is worth mentioning by 1937, under law issued on September 17, municipal taxes were exempted from indigenous communities, this would generate a condition of tacit isolation on the ethnic subject in the communities; the municipality would not understand basic social services in almost the entire rural area. Thus, indigenous communities would maintain levels of poverty and exclusion.

Gould (1993 and 1997) showed how the Nicaraguan State would have supposed by the middle of the first half of the 20th century, the homogenizing process of the indigenous populations. Coronel Urtecho (in Gould) -a famous national intellectual-, says that "it was there, [...] where the Indians of Nicaragua became Nicaraguans, in the full sense of the word, and where they themselves Nicaraguanized, as it were, creoles and mestizos" (Mesoamerica 30, p.). So, the intellectual, political and economic class claimed a homogenized nation, in which the mestizo component had become one; where the amalgamation of the national was evident in the depth

1. The decree works to conceal lands selling and their usurpation.

of the Nicaraguan expressed in the triumph of the homogenizing policy; where the Indian had assumed the Creole and the mestizo, and right there they had all made Nicaraguans together.

In this way, the Nicaraguan nation would have built its genesis from the claim of the mestizo over the indigenous, subordinated to the expropriation of the land, to the overexploitation of the indigenous work, to the scorn and contempt of the Indian, to a strong and insistent and very clear legislation that harmed indigenous lands and rights, and the supplanting of state institutions over indigenous ones, as was previously presented.

The discourses around the indigenous were related to its splendid past, to the resistant spirit, to its cultural richness, while the reality showed the insistence of integrating them.

“The indigenous people of the interior areas of Nueva Segovia, Madriz, Jinotega, Matagalpa, Boaco, do not have their own language or customs foreign to those of the generality, speak Spanish and live in constant contact with the rest of the population. The coexistence of the indigenous with the other ethnic elements of the country’s population, advises not to make their education a peculiar activity on the part of the State, which would strengthen weakly profiled differences today, to the detriment of the spiritual unity of the nation. On the contrary, the school must tend to fully incorporate the indigenous into Nicaraguan society (Gould, Mesoamerica, p.338).

This fragment of a speech by Modesto Armijo, Minister of Education of 1937, shows the discursive reality of the political class by thinking that the indigenous people were already integrated², not promoting educational policies not to “strengthen weakly profiled differences”, that education and The school that was developing at that time was sufficiently homogenizing to be able to incorporate them into the course of Nicaraguan politics and society.

The dominant premise of the 1940s era of the XX century was perhaps to let the normal course pass, that the daily actions of the State and the development of the activities of the State would be the actions that eventually led to the integration of the Indian, with a tacit knowledge of the presence of indigenous people and communities in the Pacific, Central and North of the country. No differentiated treatment was evidenced, assuming the integration of the same to the course of the economic, political and cultural life of Nicaragua.

Castillo³ in the editorial of the Conservative Magazine of October 1960, mentions the celebration of race day as a legacy of Colonial Spain and the formation of miscegenation, expressing the following.

2. The discursive normalization of the integration, through cultural assimilation, was the result of the politic and intellectual thinking along XX century. Think and act the cultural loss of the indigenous peoples as the result of the assimilation process. The politic and intellectual class never plotted the integration through the articulation of the different cultural of the indigenous peoples.

3. Ricardo País Castillo outstanding La Salle teacher and thinker.

“The greatest event of all time after the birth of our Lord” [...] “the first duty of patriotism is the defense of patriotic, legitimate values against everything that tries to discredit them [...] the missionary and warrior Spain that emptied in the mold of the Indian structure in gestation the best of its cultural content, it is not possible for us to consequently and logically return the sword to history, that is to say the *raison d’être* of our existence in time and space since it it would fatally lead us to the disintegration of the primary factors that contributed powerfully to the formation of nationality, religion, language and customs constitute the being of Hispanishness and to deny it would be to plunge into the unfathomable abyss of not being what we should avoid” (Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 3-4).

The premise that Spain had shaped nationality was already prevailing in the intellectual and political class. To think that another path towards the idea of a nation should be sought was to put at risk what was done, what was built; jeopardize the very existence of the nation; therefore, the language, religion and customs of the mestizos were the very essence of the Nicaraguan nation.

In 1954, the vice-minister of government, Dr. Federico López Rivera, presented before the National Congress a project on indigenous communities that sought to solve the problem of land based on the suppression of indigenous communities, arguing that since the colony the municipality it was put forward as a form of territorial organization and of the land and that the communities had seized land, either by occupying it or at best, buying it from the Spanish crown, or the latter in some cases donating it.

López Rivera based his legal analysis on the different laws from the colony until 1952. He proposed that the indigenous communities had had the favor of the State, that they had been allowed to conserve their land and organize themselves into boards of directors to the extent of becoming legal associations (Nicaragua indiana, No 1. p.7), for the protection of it.

According to Lopez Rivera’s argument, by 1954, the indigenous communities remained extinct, their way of organizing and their way of life had been confused with the rest of the rural population; that the management of idle land in the hands of a few was a serious backwardness to national development.

Evidently, the interest of the executive was to demonstrate that the indigenous communities as a form of representation and management of the land had no place. In the developmental course that represented the incorporation of Nicaragua to the international markets with cotton and the national agroindustry, the liberalization of lands still in the hands of the indigenous communities was imperative for the interest of the political oligarchy. It was the new social conception of the privatization of land against the traditional right of usufruct of it, from the indigenous perspective.

Since 1951, a common market that was required to promote the development of the isthmus was being negotiated with the countries of Central America. This development needed to create solid blocks of growth in national agriculture and industry, incorporate the Indian into the labor market and create consumers of the products derived from the common Central American treaty. Therefore, the discourse of the suppression of the indigenous community was necessary, removing its land and its form of territorial organization.

This bill did not have much impact. Nevertheless, the latent intention of the economic and political classes for the seizure of the land became a reality by allowing land seizures in many territories. In Telpaneca, the mayor Mauricio Madrigal allowed the settlers and third parties to fence off properties, himself would be involved in many cases of land usurpation. They used as pretext laws of 1918 that allowed to denounce lands, to demonstrate their occupation and their economic activities in them, so that the municipalities legalized them in favor of third parties and to the detriment of the communities. It was the end of the “free lands”, as the Chorotega Indians of Madriz and Nueva Segovia affirm.

Montalván (1960) published, in the *Revista Conservadora*, data on the economic and social reality of Nicaragua showing in 1960, 65% generalized illiteracy at the national referent and 89.9% in rural areas; only 7.13% of the rural population of school age attended classes. 70% of the population was concentrated in the Pacific region, the other 30% in the northern and central region and the Caribbean region. There was one doctor for every 2,750 inhabitants, among others (Vol. 1 not 5, p.60).

These data verify what was previously stated. The Nicaraguan economy depended on rural resources and the activities that were generated from them. Although it is true, population concentration was emerging in the Pacific region. Not all of this population lived in the cities, since they settled in the rural areas where the agricultural boom of cotton and banana plantations was brewing. The rural areas far from the urban centers would have a significant weight in the national economy and, therefore, the indigenous economy was important, but very little recognized.

A significant piece of information that helps to understand the rural problem is evident by Gould (1997) when making an analysis of the workers’ movements for the Chinandega area. Between 1920 and 1950, neither land tenure nor the percentage of day laborers working in the PEA changed in the western department of Chinandega. According to Gould (1997), 0.5% of owners maintained a control of 65% of suitable agricultural land and employed a labor force of more than 60% in the 1940s, almost the same as was classified for the 20 years. This shows that the peasant and indigenous rural population lived in precarious conditions despite the fact that it contributed significantly to the national economy.

In the year 1975, the Central American Group for Land Tenure and Rural Development (GCTTDR) was planted, which for the case of Nicaragua, 44% of the land was private, the rest of the land was in the hands of usufructuaries, tenants, holders, precarious occupants, the last one with a representativeness of 18.2% (1975, p.141). Likewise, only three types of land tenure were recognized: private, national and municipal, and the indigenous land communities were ignored.

The departments mostly remote from the Pacific region had rural indicators that were distanced themselves from the urban ones. Thus, for the case of some of the municipalities of the departments of Nueva Segovia and Madriz, the following data from 1976 provide an idea of the abandonment that was had from the cities of the Pacific. For the study region there are revealing data of their conditions of access to welfare.

Table 1. Summary of the conditions of Literacy and PEA in the Region of Nueva Segovia for the year 1976.

Variable	Nueva Segovia	Mosonte	Madriz	Totogalpa	Telpaneca	San Lucas	Cusmapa
Population	Total: 81,357 h	Total: 2,697 h	Total: 60,037 h	Total: 4,770 h	Total: 8.800 h	Total: 7,288 h	Total: 4,537 h
		Total urban 493	Total urban 13939	Total urban 844	Total urban 1.162	Total urban 586	Total urban 537
		Total rural 2,202	Total rural 46.098	Total rural 3,926	Total rural 7,658	Total rural 6,694	Total rural 4000
Education	Percentage of illiteracy. 60.15 %	Total: 80.38	Total of illiteracy: 67.8	Total: 80.75	Total: 78.42	Total: 71.16	Total: 83.5 %
Percentage of illiteracy.		Total urban 51.96	Total urban 41.05				
		Total rural 88.77	Total rural 78.78				
Health**	Year 1976 The national average of infant mortality was 123 per thousand births. There is no data for the municipalities.						
PEA	31% of the total department, 70% PEA in agriculture, hunting and fishing, 1967-1971		80% of the EAP in agriculture, hunting and fishing contributes 1.6 of the national GDP and the primary sector is 63.4% of the department.				

Source: CIERA, 1980. Diagnostics departments Madriz-Nueva Segovia

** Only department data is expressed, not municipality in this region.

Health indicators show extremely high national averages around infant⁴ mortality; Similarly, at the territorial level, there was no infrastructure to serve the health and education sector. Kaimowitz (1984), shares his work experience in the PRONORTE development project, carried out between 1981-1986, in the region of Madriz and Nueva Segovia:

“... a diagnosis was made a few months after the triumph of the Revolution in the central region of Nicaragua known as Las Segovias, a region bordering Honduras and one of the poorest in the country, [...] the team found a picture of misery, very high malnutrition, illiteracy and infant mortality, low crop yields; a semi-arid zone with high risks of drought, except some favored areas with microclimates. In almost the entire region, the lack of road infrastructure limited trade and access to all types of services, for decades in the area there had been a strong emigration to the cities and the wetter regions of the agricultural frontier “(p.127).

In April 1963, an Agrarian Reform Law was promulgated, whose final purpose would be to boost the land market, give greater access to the large producers of the Pacific to the land, open the agricultural frontier and generate production and colonization of territories towards small areas with a difficult access.

President René Schick (1963-1967), in the first National Agrarian Congress held in 1965, stated: “Our regime of land tenure that started from the colony was feudal, the latifundio originated in real cédulas, came to add the occupation of ejidal lands, later the perpetual phenomenon of usurpation (Shick, 1965, p.27). All this demand required State measures that would lead to claims by the parceleros who did not yet have the titles of the mayorships for the appropriation of ejidal lands and of some indigenous communities.

In 1965 there were six claims from indigenous communities that amounted to more than 5,872 families against six large landowners, mainly from Sutiaba, Monimbó and Matagalpa (Revista Conservadora, Vol. 10. No. 59, 1965, p.51).

In 1965; 1,604 titles had been granted and 18 agricultural colonies representing 38,713 manzanas distributed in the North, South and Caribbean Zone of Nicaragua (Shick, 1965, p.27), integrated into national production.

The necessity for land reform was explained as follows: “Of the 100% of the productive land only 10% is in the hands of medium and large producers; 90% of the rural population is scarcely productive and deficient, this constitutes a negative factor in the field of consumption, this forces them to be a burden that stops the progress that time demands (Mejía Ubilla⁵, 1960, pp. 34 -35).

4. Indigenous peoples settled in Nueva Segovia region held a strong ritual related children dying in the communities. As collective memory, some rituals are still done like the Palm Dance.

5. Rodolfo Mejía Ubilla worked as the Agrarian Institute head (IAN in Spanish). In the first National Agrarian Congress, he justified with factual data the necessity of an agrarian reform in Nicaragua.

According to data from Montalván (1960), 97% of exports for that year were raw materials from the agricultural sector settled in rural areas: cotton and coffee generated 72% of foreign currency in dollars (Revista Conservadora 1960, Vol. 1.no 5. p.27). This shows that the work of the field was precarious and poorly paid and the national economy depended on the land, its resources and rural peasant and indigenous labor.

Article 87 of the Agrarian Reform Law stated that tenants, tenants, squatters or precarious occupants who met the requirements of settlers and who had been accredited for possession of these lands for more than three years, were granted the right to acquire ownership of them (Hidalgo, 1965).

In turn, Article 87 stated: “Communities may demand the restitution of lands that have been usurped, which meant an important contribution to the country by the influence of this working population and with rural roots, until now little used, are the best subjects of agrarian reform (idem, p.52).

At that time, Nicaragua had a total national extension of 17 million squares, for 40% of the country’s total; the department of Nueva Segovia owned 6,063 farms on an extension of 28,0695 squares, which represented 7.1% of the national total; On the other hand, Madriz owned 5,284 farms on a 6% extension of farms nationwide. Of these farms, many are derived from those that settled on the lands of the occupied indigenous communities, but there were no documented records.

Thus, the Agrarian Reform of the 1960s would fulfill its objective of freeing land for agro-export production in the Pacific, sharpening the mobility of peasants towards lands of the then agricultural frontier and inserting land from the North and Central region into the conglomerates domestic producers, which would serve to boost domestic and foreign markets; so, they appropriated the lands of the communities, in which settlers and tenants already lived and the slogan of the Agrarian Reform of the 60s was fulfilled: “*Neither men without lands or lands without men*”. A clear and precise campaign to access land and incorporate it into national production.

For a long time, the situation of the rural worker would have fallen under settlements, sharecropping and much precariousness. The weight of the rural population in Nicaragua, at the beginning of the 80s of the 20th century, exceeded by 52% the urban population, as a result of the growth of the main cities of the Pacific region; however, the rural areas were not desolate, they also continued to grow at a dizzying pace and were inserted into agricultural work that left them behind in terms of land ownership.

With the overthrow of Somoza Debayle, in 1979, and the assumption to power of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), a new Agrarian Reform was promoted: *“Now we have come, with this Revolution to re-unite man with the land. That is the deepest sense of the Agrarian Reform that we are going to start today”*⁶ (MIDINRA, 1986, p.3).

The appropriation of the La Máquina farm, on July 16 (three days before the triumph) of 1979, constituted the first act of confiscation of lands by the revolutionary forces against the members of the oligarchy of political-military power (family Debayle) who held at the end of the decade of the 70s, along with the Somoza dynasty and the military, about 62% of the 17 million productive blocks nationwide.

The significance of the act is that this farm was given to farmers of Sutiava, as a feat that would mean the elimination of the exploitation of farm workers. Although the act of protest marked the opening of a process that would broadly modify the tenure structure of land in Nicaragua in the late twentieth century, the visibility of the indigenous in the new revolutionary provisions on agriculture, for the people and communities of the Pacific, Central and North, would have an almost null weight.

Commander Wheelock, who would serve as the main figure of the Agrarian Reform of the 1980s, is not far from the traditional thinking of making the indigenous invisible, treating it as landless peasants. This is shown in his famous book *Imperialism and Dictatorship*, when making an in-depth analysis of the agrarian situation in postcolonial Nicaragua, not making visible the presence of entities with their own organization structures that were exploited by the agricultural large state.

Even though there was an enchantment towards indigenous cultures in the revolutionary elites for the decisive support for the insurrectionary deeds of Monimbó, Matagalpa, Sutiaba and the rest of the indigenous population, there was no clarity in the treatment of land tenure, therefore, indigenous lands claimed by their community members in the Pacific, Central and North regions suffer equally from the effects of Agrarian Reform.

The confiscated farm, located in the ancestral Sutiaba territory, had to be returned to the existing indigenous organization and be claimed as indigenous lands and not expropriated subject to Agrarian Reform. The ownership of the land was thought as a communal property in terms of the creation of cooperatives and agricultural enterprises, but the ancestral rights of the indigenous communities were disrespected, since it was thought that these populations anchored in rural areas were peasants and small farmers. Individual owners without titles.

6. Excerpt of the first act of the agrarian reform in Leon on July 16th 1979 by Jaime Wheelock Roman.

Despite this, the changes in agriculture disrupted the social structure, a few years ago it had been titled more than 1.4 million square (Baumestier, 1997, p.178), evidencing a strong redistribution of the land resource in non-indigenous hands.

Thus, some sectors of the indigenous communities did not reach consensus on their participation in this reform as indigenous subjects, but they would participate as small rural land holders often affected and rarely benefited by titles or training of agricultural cooperatives.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been seen that the State in the search for its consolidation has generated a series of damages to indigenous communities. The context of the relations and the treatment from the state towards the indigenous issue evidences an ideal for the construction of a nation from the mestizo to the detriment of the indigenous.

Added to this, it is the homogeneous discourse from the institutions of the State, in this case, education and the voices of intellectuals throughout the twentieth century devoted extensive pages to the interpretation of indigenous reality from a neo-romantic view, anchoring the prevailing mestizo identity as an achievement of the process of state consolidation and obviating the communities settled in the Pacific, Central and North regions, arguing that they were extinct, and therefore, except for the Nicaraguan Atlantic region. Thus, the Indians had become extinct as a result of the conquest, colony and miscegenation.

Indigenous communities are affected by a series of legal provisions that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and under a modernizing state context and the creation of a homogeneous discourse around the nation, indigenous lands and the indigenous worldview are assumed as mestizas to favor the agroexport development and the sustenance of a national ideology, where from the official narrative was promoted the crossbreeding of the indigenous for the Pacific, Central and North regions as an achievement of the development of the State.

In this way, the agrarian reforms establish the liberation of lands under the figure of the distribution of land in the hands of non-indigenous people, mostly mestizo settlers who move to the interior of Nicaragua; in the same way, establishing the denunciation of lands under the possession of settlers in the indigenous territories, with the legal approval to the detriment of the norms of possession of the indigenous community land.

REFERENCES

- Álvarez Montalván (1960). Indicadores socioeconómicos de Nicaragua. En Revista Conservadora del Pensamiento Centroamericano, 1960. Vol. 1.no 5. Managua Nicaragua.
- Baumestier, E. (1998). Estructura y Reforma Agraria en Nicaragua (1979-1989). Editorial Ciencias Sociales, INIES. Managua.

- CIERA-Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario y Reforma Agraria. MIDINRA 1980. MADRIZ. Diagnostico Socio económico del sector agropecuario. Volumen 8
- CIERA-Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario y Reforma Agraria. MIDINRA 1980. NUEVA SEGOVIA. Diagnostico Socio económico del sector agropecuario. Volumen 9
- GCTTDR. (1975). Nicaragua tenencia y uso de la tierra. Grupo Centroamericano de Tenencia de la Tierra y Desarrollo Rural. Honduras.
- Gould (1992). La Cuestión Étnica en Nicaragua. En Revista Mesoamérica Número 30, 1992. Guatemala
- Gould, J. (1993). Orgullo Amargo: El desarrollo del Movimiento Obrero Nicaragüense (1912-1950). IHNCA-UCA. Managua.
- Gould, J. (1997). El mito de la Nicaragua Mestiza y la Resistencia indígena. 1889-1980. Editorial de Universidad de Costa Rica, San José, Costa Rica.
- Gould, J. (1997). El mito de la Nicaragua Mestiza y la Resistencia indígena. 1889-1980. Editorial de Universidad de Costa Rica, San José, Costa Rica.
- Hidalgo, J., (1965) Normativa Juridica de la Reforma Agraria. En Revista Conservadora del Pensamiento Centroamericano, Vol. 10. No 59, 1965. Managua, Nicaragua.
- Kaimowitz (1994). Sistematización de Proyecto Pronorte: en FIDA (1994). Evaluación del Proyecto de Desarrollo Rural Integrado, PRONORTE en Nicaragua 1982-1986. En Experiencias Latinoamericanas de Seguimiento y Evaluación. Osvaldo Feintein Editor. Ecuador
- Lopez Rivera Federico (1954). Anteproyecto de Comunidades indígenas. En Revista Nicaragua indigena. No 1. 1954
- Mejia Ubilla, Rodolfo (1960) Hacia una Reforma Agraria. 1960. Vol. 1.no 5. Managua Nicaragua.
- MIDINRA. 1986. Con la revolución. 1986 Boletín Informaciones agropecuarias. Día Nacional de la REFORMA AGRARIA". División de comunicaciones, julio 1986. Managua Nicaragua
- País Castillo, Ricardo. (1960). EDITORIAL. Revista Conservadora del Pensamiento Centroamericano, 1960. Vol. 1.no 3. Managua, Nicaragua.
- Schick, R. (1965). Primer Congreso Nacional Agrario. En Revista Conservadora del Pensamiento Centroamericano, Vol. 10. No 59, 1965. Managua, Nicaragua.
- Whelock Román, Jaime. (1979). Reforma Agraria Ministerio de desarrollo Agropecuario y Reforma Agraria. MIDINRA 1980.
- Whelock Román, Jaime. (1982). Imperialismo y Dictadura: crisis de una formación social. Editorial siglo XXI, sexta edición. España.