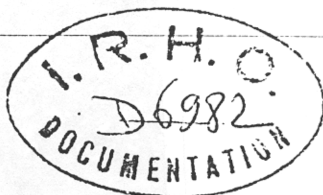
Drift Coconuts



On the beach with a field researcher—who must fight off rats, pigs, and his own cultural load to get the data

Seventy-five yards from the beach, just at the edge of the first surf break, an almost submerged coconut bobs and rolls in the water. Borne by the currents and winds of the Caribbean, it has drifted from an unknown source until by chance it has arrived offshore of the Miskito Indian village of Tasbapauni in Nicaragua. The coconut is a self-contained, long-distance drifter. An impervious green skin shields it from marine elements; its thick, fibrous husk gives buoyancy; and its well-protected seed can retain germination powers for months.

Closer to the beach, a large swell catches the coconut, sucking it into the water wall as the wave form builds and breaks and sends the husked flotsam into foam-speckled shallow waters. Each breaking wave carries the coconut a little closer to shore. Stranded partway up the beach by the ebbing tide, it glistens and dries in the tropical sun. That night, a full-moon spring tide and a heavy wind-generated surf carry the drift coconut high onto the debris-strewn beach, beyond the limit of normal wave reach. It has finally come to rest on the eastern shore of Nicaragua after an uncharted journey.

Lodged in loose sand at the edge of wind-sheared coco plum and sea grape thickets, long trailing runners of beach morning glories, and strand-line rows of domesticated coconut palms, the sea-fresh pioneer is tenuously established in its new environment. Days of wind, rain, and hot sun pass, and the young green colors fade and weather to earth brown.

Some four months after falling and drifting from its parent tree, the coconut's dark brown, desiccated husk may send forth a leafy shoot, while its roots continue to grow inside. If undisturbed, the roots will eventually break through and start to anchor the palm to its new site.

But the morning after a strong storm, the drift coconut has disappeared from the beach. Damp sand and flotsam mark where storm waves undercut the beach berm, scalloping cutouts in the margins of strand-line vegetation. Carried out to sea again before it could be anchored, the drift coconut may soon be washed up on another shore by tides, winds, and currents. Its brief spell on this beach left no marks or indications that it ever passed this way.

In the Miskito language, a drift coconut is called *kuku awra*, a term that also is used to refer to any foreigner who has come to their shores. Vagabonds, transient visitors, culturally and economically displaced persons are all *kuku awra* to the Miskito. They suddenly appear from unknown places, transported by chance and strange fates to lodge with the Miskito. Most stay but a short time before drifting to another place. Yet these *kuku awra* leave a wake, a trail, and memories. And even though only briefly established on Miskito shores, they take with them something too.

Since 1968, I have made several research trips to eastern Nicaragua. Along with my wife, son, and an occasional graduate student, I have studied the Miskito subsistence economy: how it was, how it is changing, and consequent impacts on social and economic relationships; agricultural, hunting, and fishing productivity; diet and nutrition; use of resources and impact on fauna and flora; and how economic inflation and out-migration have affected village livelihood. We have also spent a good deal of time studying sea turtles: their behavior, ecology, and exploitation. In turn, the Miskito have studied us and drawn their own conclusions—thankfully still unpublished.

It takes a lot to surprise the Miskito, but then we often did a lot of surprising things. Equipped with scales of various shapes and sizes, we weighed food crops, food in the pot, and food just before it went into their mouths. It's amazing that they put up with us. With tables and chemicals, we analyzed water, food, and soil samples. We caught or purchased what, to the Miskito, were valuable sea turtles; weighed, measured, and tagged them; then let them go. We brought big aluminum cases filled with gear: still cameras, underwater cameras, 16mm cameras, and videotape cameras. Things were weighed, photographed, categorized, and filed. Questioners gave questionnaires to questionees on household budgets and composition, births, deaths, social relationships, and the like. Back home, copious field notes were cross-indexed, tabulated, keypunched, and fed into computers. Significant relationships were analyzed and conclusions drawn. But much of what I learned isn't contained in the books and papers that resulted from this research. For the first time, I'm going to try to tell how it really was.

The first Miskito Indian I talked to was about 45 years old and had been eyeing me curiously as I walked up the trail to his village. The little diesel boat that brought me had pulled away from the landing and chugged off across the lagoon. I gathered up my belongings and cautiously navigated my way along the muddy path. Sitting on the porch of the first house in the village, legs swinging back and forth, the man watched my every move and, embarrassingly, every slip I made in the mud. I was apprehensive about meeting the Miskito and wanted the first encounter to be socially correct. I wanted to explain to someone in authority, a respected leader in the village, why I had come to this particular village.

"How is it," I asked him, using the Creole phrase for "hello."

"Right here," he answered, impassively.

"That's good. Tell me, where can I find the oldest man in the village?"

"Oldest man? Oldest man? Oldest man, him dead!"

I cherish that moment. It was one of the many philosophical rewards of living with the Miskito. I wrote about that encounter some years ago, but I didn't learn until later that the Miskito of Tasbapauni had also recorded that first meeting as part of their own verbal chronicles.

I ran into my First Miskito on a

subsequent trip. "So you come again, Mr. Barney."

"That's right. How is it this time, Mr. Clemente?"

"Fine. Right here, same as always, life spare. You still looking for the oldest man?"

Studying the particular topic at hand is the easiest part of doing field research. What is difficult is to reorient your cultural load, establish some sort of perceivable role, and maintain body, mind, and equipment. It is impossible to prepare for the many cultural, philosophical, and psychological challenges to your preconceived notions of doing field work. One must cope with frequent frustrations, blind alleys, misgivings, disenchantments, boredom, startling contradictions, and unexpected setbacks. Nor can one prepare adequately for the specific problems that will be encountered: how to deal with a situation in which a person who you thought was your "good friend," the personification and embodiment of the "noble savage," is really cultivating an economic relationship aimed at acquiring the watch your parents gave you for graduation; how to maintain and repair light meters, cameras, typewriters, and the additional discipline-related mechanical contrivances upon which your research depends, but whose reliability factor is nil beyond the place of purchase; or how to live in a fishbowl where privacy doesn't exist; where your every act, mistake, and relationship are immediately known by all, and strange explanations for what you are really up to are manufactured and disseminated with great imagination and speed.

Providing for cooked food, transportation, good health, and occasional private moments are the most time-consuming and frustrating problems involved in field research. But one quickly learns to adapt and cope and persevere. There are other things more bothersome.

Living in the rainy humid tropics and right next to the sea brings with it a host of small-scale challenges. You soon discover that you have been raising secret zoos and gardens. All

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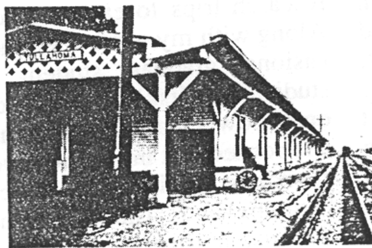

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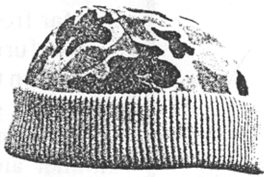

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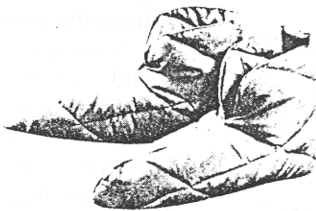

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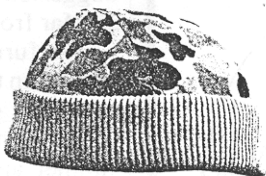

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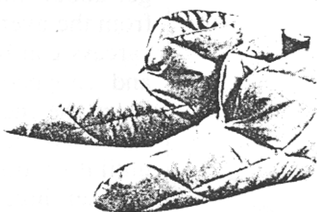

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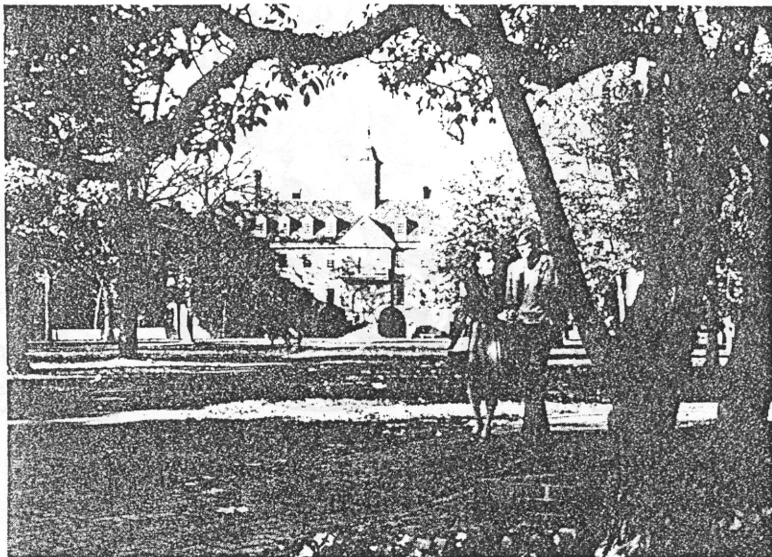

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is quick to sell a pig for money but won't eat it even in times of severe meat scarcity. This is because a pig is worth too much money to eat and because they are rather indiscriminate foragers. To the Miskito, a pig is not only a dirty animal but its meat is also considered unclean. When they sell a pig to a Spanish-speaking buyer, they are happy to get the money, but may grin and wink a bit more than would be expected over just another economic transaction. That's because they know the pig's feeding history and its ultimate fate: the restaurants and family tables of what they consider unsuspecting Bluefields folk.

I was quickly repulsed by pig dining habits. There were only three outhouses in the village, all built under the direction of different missionaries for the "mission houses" where they stayed during visits. As visitors we were offered the use of one of the nearby outhouses. For this we were grateful, as one of the most difficult things that we were trying to adapt to was the nocturnal scheduling of Miskito toilet habits. Ready access to an available toilet is so common in our society that we were quite unprepared for a different waste regimen among the Miskito. One went at night, either on the beach or in the bushes. If mischance should befall you during the day, it was a long and exposed walk to the bushes. That's why we were happy for access to the outhouse, which served as an emergency safety valve during our time of readaptation.

It was because of the outhouse that I became interested in pigs. The outhouse was about twenty-five yards from where we were staying. Built in the ubiquitous style, it stood on wood pilings some two feet off the ground. This elevation, I soon discovered, offered protection from more than just the wet ground of the rainy season.

What was, at first, a disagreeable discovery soon became a testable hypothesis: pigs can tell the difference in your intent before you reach the outhouse. For the sake of the more puritanical readers, I will use the common euphemisms to illustrate this: number one (N1) and number two (N2). If our intent was N1, the roaming pigs displayed no interest. However, if it was N2, they came running. They seemed to be able to tell within five or ten yards of our walk to the outhouse. And pigs are fast; they'd beat us there, crawl under, and be waiting. Some would stand on their hind legs, snouts thrust

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through the wooden hole. That w a bit disconcerting. Somehow th were able to decipher our body la guage. I began to try to fake them o I imitated what I thought was a go N2 walk, when it was really an mission. Nothing. Oh, perhaps grunt or two from one of the larg pigs and a half-hearted trot from young one, but nothing of any cons quence. Try as I might, they nev fell for a fake walk. Unerringly, th knew the difference.

To cope with their amazing di criminatory ability, each of us d vised different defensive strategies. made a club, a "pig stick," 1 inches in diameter and 2½ feet lon With this, I could strike from with the outhouse and inflict enough dan age to discourage pig congregatior for periods of up to five minutes especially if accompanied by my lou imitations of aggressive pig sounds My wife, Judi, hit on an alternativ strategy. She posted me outside th outhouse as "pig guard." I'd g ahead carrying the pig stick and sig nal when the field was clear. It wa my job to keep the pigs at bay. Ou son probably coped with the situatio best. He fancied himself a bombar dier and enacted modern versions o "Thirty Seconds Over Tasbapauni."

I finally decided to follow the pig in retaliation; all in the name of ecol ogy, of course. Anything is grist fo the inquisitive mind. I took notice o their group behavior and dynamics home and foraging ranges, and terri toriality. The thing that interested me most was their foraging patterns and range. During the day, the pigs concentrated on the village itself, making sweeps in small bands around every back kitchen, where refuse and vegetable wastes were thrown at fairly predictable times. Their only competitors for this food supply were chickens. Pigs fared poorly, however, when competing with dogs for waste from butcherings of turtles, deer, and other wild animals. The dogs took the best, and the rest was up for grabs between turkey vultures and pigs.

The periphery of the village was one of the most important foraging zones for pigs. Surrounded on three sides by bush-rimmed forest and on the other by the beach, the village edges were used by the Miskito as nocturnal dumping sites. Pigs patrolled these areas at dusk, two or three times during the night, and in

early morning. During these times, most of the pigs continually circled the village, around and around on the Tasbapauni Beltway.

Pigs make the major contribution in keeping the village clean, but turkey vultures, dogs, and chickens also help; consequently, waste materials do not last long on the ground. There are no waste disposal problems in the village. All organic debris are recycled. The Miskito have no problem with cans, bottles, papers, and the like because they are rarely used—and seldom thrown away. My still unpublished research study came to the conclusion that pigs were the most important consumers in the detritus chain. The pigs were obviously effective garbage engineers, providing a valuable service for the villagers, one that was ecologically and economically sound. They made day and night pickups, didn't belong to a union, never went on strike, were extremely efficient, and could be sold before retirement age.

After many such field trips to the Miskito villages strung along the eastern coast of Nicaragua, I came to know something of the people and to appreciate their life-styles. Coming from an academic background, where many of my colleagues write about native women breaking rocks with wet clothes, I found that it was necessary to reevaluate my first impressions of the Miskito—and their pigs and rats.

The etchings of our scientific incursions are probably as indelible to the Miskito as they are to us. They investigated us, as we did them—each trying to figure out what was really behind the other's strange behavior. There is a lot of interest in a *kuku awra* who weighs carefully what is abundant, writes detailed notes on what everyone else considers obvious, has a rat fetish, and follows pigs around. The undecipherable visits of such a character will eventually be fitted into some logical local context. For this drift coconut, the memories of landing on those shores remain perfectly clear and the lessons learned have proved useful on excursions to other parts of the world as well as at home.

Bernard Nietschmann, associate professor of geography at the University of Michigan, is currently working out of Australian National University as a senior research fellow.

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