

## Of Kings and Contexts: Ethnohistorical Interpretations of Miskito Political Structure and Function.

By: Mary W. Helms

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### **Abstract:**

Recent articles dealing with the Miskito "kings" and Miskito "kingdom" of eastern Nicaragua are reassessed and their conclusions reconsidered. Using the same data, the existence of a Miskito "kingdom" is questioned and the nature of the "kingship" and of the roles filled by Miskito kings and other regional leaders is reinterpreted. The influence both of the English and of traditional councils of elders is emphasized, and the kings' activities seen as those of traditional Big Men writ large.

**Keywords:** Miskito | Nicaragua | kingdoms | kingship | Miskito kings | regional leadership | traditional councils | ethnohistory | anthropology

### **Article:**

The problem:

In several recent articles Michael Olien (1983) and Philip Dennis and Olien (1984) have debated and discussed the concept and expression of kingship among the Miskito Indians of eastern Nicaragua and Honduras (the Miskito Coast) from approximately the mid-17th century to the present time, taking issue with interpretations of this phenomenon by earlier writers and advancing another set of theories. Though they consider a number of issues, the gist of their argument appears to be that previous writers dealing with the Miskito Coast have misrepresented the meaning and significance of the role filled by a series of individuals known in the English and Spanish documents of the time as the "Miskito kings."

According to Dennis and Olien, some writers, particularly those influenced by E. G. Squier, have viewed these so-called kings as politically ineffectual tools or "puppets" who had only nominal authority themselves and were controlled by English diplomats and imperialists who put them in and turned them out of office as they wished. Other writers have viewed the Miskito kings as

functioning predominantly as middlemen between native society and foreigners. According to Olien and Dennis, these interpretations are either incorrect (the puppet theory) or insufficient (the middleman theory). In their opinion, the Miskito kings were not politically ineffectual tools of colonial interests. Nor were they involved only with external economic and political brokerage functions. Instead the kings are said to have represented an indigenous political development in which a single figure (the "king") held authority over a hierarchy of political positions and in which a new centralized political structure, called the Miskito Kingdom, came into being "although it is probable that contact with the English, and perhaps Africans as well, influenced the nature of the structure and the titles associated with it" (Olien 1983:198-199).

In support of their argument, Olien and Dennis review various pieces of ethnohistoric and ethnographic data. Their research has been valuable in that it has brought to light new data and provided some useful correctives and better balance to our understanding of the nature of Miskito political organization. In this paper, however, I wish to suggest that, while Dennis and Olien introduce significant new perspectives to an admittedly complex question, their own interpretations are sometimes marred by preconceived expectations and by failure to consider sufficiently the context of their sources. The two papers under consideration specifically address two particular problems. That by Olien (1983) deals with the line of succession of the Miskito kings from approximately the middle of the 17th century to the end of the 19th century. That by Dennis and Olien (1984) is particularly concerned with the question of the intrasociety legitimacy and authority of the Miskito kings. In discussing their major themes, however, certain background assumptions concerning the nature of Miskito political life are addressed that also require comment here.

In his 1983 paper Olien demonstrates that for about 240 years, from at least 1655 to 1894, the line of Miskito kings was consistently derived from one and the same kin group. Noting that English interests and influence in the Miskito Coast varied considerably over this same time period, he concludes that the stability of the line of succession indicates that "the structure of the Miskito Kingdom remained remarkably stable for about 240 years," that this "one family group controlled Miskito politics," and that the stereotype of Miskito kings as English puppets is thereby proven erroneous (1983:199,237). In their joint 1984 paper Dennis and Olien argue that the validity of the Miskito kings not only rested in their middlemen position and the resultant pragmatic conduct of foreign affairs but also in the ideological legitimacy of their roles as rulers of the Miskito populace-rulers "whose word carried authority, who visited [their] people to make judicial rulings, and whose presence was treated with respect" (Dennis and Olien 1984:730). Dennis and Olien then argue that the Miskito kingship, although perhaps introduced from outside, was "built on well-established cultural precedents, and not simply foisted on the Miskito by the English" (1984:735, 718).

With respect to the matter of succession, although the data presented by Olien do indeed indicate that the line of men holding the title of "king" derived consistently from the same family, often standing in relationship of father-son, I feel that he overextends his conclusions. Throughout this

article, and to some extent in the Dennis and Olien 1984 article, Olien appears to confuse the existence of individuals called “kings” with the existence of a centralized political structure called a “kingdom.” He seems to assume that the presence of titled personages (kings) can be logically extended to mean the existence of a centralized political entity or structure; that holding a title also means incumbency in an office or official position designated as such by a formal political organization. His reasons for making this assumption appear to rest on evidence that persons holding other political titles—specifically “governor,” “general,” “admiral”—also “governed” on the coast, and on his argument that the “king” held authority over these others, indeed over the coast as a whole.

Here again, the question of whether titles also indicated formal offices and a formal political structure is crucial, as is the question whether these positions or titles were hierarchically ranked with that of the king at the top and whether, in fact, the king exercised such extensive influence. There is also the question whether stability in line of succession means independence from external influence. It is a quantum jump to assume both that consistent inheritance of high title within one family means that one family “controlled Miskito politics” and that the title-holding “kings” and their activities were not subject to significant English interest and involvement, particularly since, as Olien himself amply documents, the title of king and the legitimation of his claim required recognition by English authorities in Jamaica and Belize (and, by extension, recognition by the Monarch in England, at least as far as the Miskito were concerned – recognition entailing commissions, official regalia, and formal and elaborate coronation proceedings.

With respect to the matter of the internal authority of the Miskito kings (that is, the king as “real king” and not just middleman—cf. Dennis and Olien 1984:727), I again feel that Dennis and Olien overextend their conclusions. The admittedly “spotty and inconclusive” ethnohistoric evidence provided (1984:727) can be interpreted in other ways, and, judging at least by the data presented, the authors may be claiming too much authority of the wrong kind for their kings. I feel Dennis and Olien do not sufficiently consider a more compelling locus of recognized authority and that they fail sufficiently to take into account the one traditional area (warfare) in which kings (as well as generals and governors) probably did hold real authority. I also find their claim that the pattern of leadership evidenced by the Miskito kings rests on “well established cultural precedent” to be somewhat misleading.

In examining these points further I will consider several specific issues presented by Dennis and Olien, including the origins of kingship, the extent of the authority of the king over other “titled” men of importance and as judicial authorities in village life, the distinction and connection between foreign “economic” interests and foreign “political” interests, and the empirical basis for the purportedly “well-established” lower Central American leadership pattern. I will use the same data presented by Dennis and Olien, beginning with the question of the “origins” of the Miskito kingship that is most fully discussed in Olien 1983 (see also Dennis and Olien 1984:72-1-722).’

## the origins of kingship

The earliest references to political positions and political authority among the population of the Miskito Coast refer to the mid-to-late 17th century and come from several sources. On the one hand is the description of sociopolitical organization by M. W., an anonymous Englishman who traveled the Rio Coco in 1699 (M. W. 1732); on the other the stories of the origins of kingship as told “secondhand” by the eminent English doctor, Sir Hans Sloane, in Jamaica, who reported what the first “historical” Miskito king, Jeremy I, who visited Jamaica in 1687, reputedly told the Duke of Albermarle concerning events that had transpired some 50 years earlier involving the Cape Gracias area (the mouth of the Rio Coco) (Sloane 1707).

According to Sloane’s account, and in brief, in the reign of Charles I (1625-1649) English colonists of the offshore islands of Providence contacted natives of Cape Gracias a Dios and persuaded them to send a native “king’s son” or “prince” to visit England, which he did for three years in company with the Earl of Warwick. Meanwhile the native leader (“king”) died and the natives had become considerably impressed with the importance of English contacts (“Friendship and Commerce,” according to Sloane), with the “Grandeur” of the king of England, and with the usefulness of protection by the English crown. Consequently, they persuaded the “prince” on his return to “resign up his Authority and Power over them” and declared themselves subjects of the King of England (Sloane 1707:lxxvi-lxxvii, quoted in Olien 1983:201).

According to Olien, “the important points of this account are that a king was already ruling the Miskito in the reign of England’s King Charles I (1625-49)” and that his son went to England and then returned to succeed to the kingship himself (Olien 1983:201).<sup>2</sup>

Clearly Olien considers this account evidence for the early (precontact?) existence of a “ruling king” with line of succession established. Perhaps it is, but let us consider further the historical context of this report. The incidents were reported, some 50 years after they transpired, to the Duke of Albermarle, the governor of Jamaica, by “one King Jeremy [who] came from the Mosquitos” who “pretended to be a King there” and who was sent by others of his country to ask that a governor be sent to his lands to war on the Spaniards and on pirates (Sloane 1707:lxxvi, quoted in Olien 1983:204). To bolster his request he argued that his country had submitted itself to the protection of the Crown of England by virtue of the events narrated above. Clearly Jeremy is seeking help. His emphasis basically is on external contacts between Miskito leaders and foreign powers rather than on the kingly nature of the internal “rule” (if such there was) of Miskito leaders. He is emphasizing the right (and apparently the perceived need) for political protection by England by reference to previous contacts and to the purported submission to English authority by an earlier leader. (According to another account by Robert White [1789:7], quoted in Dennis and Olien 1984:722, Jeremy himself had requested that control of Miskito territory be ceded to the British several years prior to this visit.)

In addition, the report as we have it was not written by Jeremy but by Hans Sloane, who must be held accountable for the style of prose and choice of words. Sloane’s account, written as it was

by a socially prominent physician, gracefully notes how the benefits of colonial contact and the “Grandeur of his Majesty of Great Britain” persuaded the native leader (“prince”) to give up his own “Authority and Power” and become subject to the English monarch (Sloane 1707:lxxvi-lxxvii, quoted in Olien 1983:201). Just as we must consider the reasons behind Jeremy’s report to understand his alleged description of earlier events, so we must consider the significance of the alleged “Authority and Power” of the native “prince” of that earlier time within the context of Sloane’s socially prestigious position and of the style of writing a person of his position might employ. It is useful here to digress briefly to consider the effusive manner in which influential English writers of the day represented their sovereigns, particularly in light of the foreign contacts and expansion of knowledge that the European Age of Discovery was producing.

Generally speaking, contact with foreign places became symbolic of newly emerging monarchical/national prestige and power in Europe. From the 15th century on, many rulers included new lands and seas within the expanding political and ideological universes they symbolized, and were appropriately eulogized, in lush prose and poetry, within this new “global” context by fashionable writers of the times. Within the English sphere, for example, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the elaborate imperial (and antipapal) symbolism associated with Elizabeth I included imagery of the Virgin Queen as divine, sacred, and supreme monarch of an expanded universal realm that included lands and seas reached via the “Perfect Arte of Navigation and a good navy” (Yates 1947:46-48). In various panegyric lyrics maritime discovery and adventure is seen to extend Elizabeth’s sacred empire to include new worlds, hitherto unknown, and hence glorifies the queen (Yates 1947:52-55). Similarly, James Boon has discussed the symbolism of overseas travel as a legitimizing association for kings, specifically James I, as evidenced in the exuberant prose of Samuel Purchas’ multivolumed tome of world travels. In Purchas’ flowery writing the worthy monarch, set at the center of the global stage, is hailed as the wise sponsor of navigation and discovery whose fame is spread far and wide and who associates with other splendidly exotic, semidivine rulers, particularly of the Far East (Boon 1982:154-168).

Hans Sloane’s comment on the power and authority of local Miskito leaders, though on a far lesser scale, could nonetheless be considered in such a vein and seen to contain a not insignificant measure of hyperbole designed to amplify the considerably greater glory of English monarchs, whose widening fame (as a measure of their growing power) spread even to such distant places as Cape Gracias a Dios and with such an effect that local “lords” hastened to resign their own independence and accept the supreme command of this illustrious monarch (in this case Charles I). Obviously, the greater the power of native rulers, the greater the glory of the English monarch for whom they were willing to forfeit their own authority. Consequently, reports such as Sloane’s should not be taken automatically to signify the real extent of such indigenous power, and should be suspected of possible exaggeration.

In this case there is additional reason to question whether a “king” was truly “ruling the Miskito” either during the reign of Charles I or 50 years later at the time of Jeremy’s visit to Jamaica, for ethnographic and ethnohistorical evidence indicates very clearly that no single person controlled

or "ruled" the Miskito territory or its people. In Olien's own interpretation, Jeremy's visit to Jamaica may have been an attempt "to consolidate his power and legitimize his position" vis-à-vis competing leaders, several of whom (another "king" and a "governor") are mentioned in Spanish documents which, interestingly enough, do not mention Jeremy at all (cf. Olien 1983:204). In addition, we have the brief but concise statement of the English traveler M. W., who visited the Cape Gracias-Rio COCOa rea and described the population as follows:

They live peaceably together in several families, yet accounting all Indians of one tongue, to be the same people and friends, and are in quality all equal, neither king nor captains of families bearing any more command than the meanest, unless it be at such times when they make any expeditions against the Alboawinneys; at that time they submit to the conduct, and obey the orders of their kings and captains IM. W. 1732:293, quoted in Olien 1983:1991

M. W.'s statement clearly emphasizes the egalitarian nature of Miskito society and identifies "kings and captains" as essentially raid and warfare leaders. Yet Olien chooses to view this passage not as a reference to an egalitarian situation but as a reference to a Miskito king, albeit one with little authority: he prefaces his presentation of M. W.'s quote by saying, "In one of the earliest references to a Miskito king, an Englishman known only as M. W. described him as having little authority" (Olien 1983:199). Obviously M. W. mentions the terms "king" and "kings," but to emphasize kingship, even one with little authority, is to imply at least an incipient internal ranking to Miskito society that I do not feel M. W.'s passage indicates or justifies. Similarly, to interpret Sloane's version of Jeremy's reputed account of the origins of Miskito-English relations as evidence of the early existence of a king who ruled the Miskito area seems to me to be stretching the data too thinly.

Perhaps the problem is one of semantics, for Olien says nothing about what the term "king" might really signify, other than to opine in one sentence, with no further elaboration, that the Miskito kingdom was more like a chiefdom emerging from a tribe than like a state (1983:199). In Dennis and Olien (1984) the authors simply state that "these leaders [kings] never ruled a state-type political structure. Nevertheless . . . we use the loan word 'king', since it is used both throughout the historical literature to describe these leaders and by the Miskito themselves today" (1984:718). Nonetheless, in the absence of further discussion or clarification of the matter, this comment can be taken to imply that, in spite of their denial of a Miskito state, Olien and Dennis accept the meaning of such terms as "king" and "prince" as used by Sloane and by M. W. (and by the numerous writers using them later) at face value to mean literally for the Miskito what they meant for Englishmen—that is, that a single, highly placed personage occupied the highest office of authority and ruled over a ranked political hierarchy and a body of people. Yet, as we have seen, there is no firm reason to believe that such was the case on the Miskito Coast, at least not by 1700. I would suggest, therefore, that in the absence of further clarification by Olien and Dennis and in light of M. W.'s report at the turn of the 18th century, "king" and "prince" may be interpreted more safely to mean "leaders" of people living in the Cape Gracias

region, although leaders of how large or small a group or groups is left unindicated except for M. W.'s description of Jeremy's settlement, which seems to indicate a community composed of an extended family with additional personnel numbering about 50 persons, in other words, a nice-sized "tribal" community (M. W. 1732:287, cited in Olien 1983:203).'

In sum, by 1700 we are left with the general and admittedly very sketchy picture of Miskito political organization (with reference to the Rio Coco-Cape Gracias area) as being composed of egalitarian kin-based communities whose "men of importance" served mainly as war leaders. Some of these leaders affected English titles of high status after contact with English colonists and authorities in nearby locales (Providence, Jamaica) and emphasized external ties with regional English authorities or even occasionally ventured to England itself as guests of English noblemen. This leadership pattern suggests to me a number of individual competing Big Men seeking personal prestige and influence by control particularly of external sources of power, sources that have now come to include a new and potent font of external power-to wit, English influence and identification with English authority as represented by her monarch and his representatives. This new "resource" hopefully could be controlled and used in a number of ways, including the legitimation of local leaders and military assistance at time of need. In this interpretation, Jeremy's account may be taken as an origin tale that, for the Miskito, identifies and legitimizes the important fact that some years earlier the leaders of the native inhabitants of the Cape Gracias area had located and tapped into this important new political resource. Which is to say, instead of seeing the "king" in Jeremy's account as an already existing royal ruler, as Olien apparently is inclined to do, Jeremy's account and the reasons why he told it in Jamaica can be seen as recounting the identification of foreign contacts that could henceforth be used by local leaders to enhance their influence. (It is noteworthy that Jeremy was himself identified as one such "king." In recounting his tale he was, in fact, describing to the English the source or "origins" of his own political legitimacy.)

Since, judging from M. W.'s on-the-spot, "firsthand" account (which is contemporaneous and also refers to the Cape Gracias area), Miskito leaders had precious little authority of their own outside of warfare, reference to association with distant English governors and monarchs could well enhance the stature of those local leaders able to make such contacts. As Olien himself states,

at least as early as 1687, the Miskito believed that in order for an individual to legitimate his claim as king, he must first be recognized as the group's leader by the English. Several of the kings actually went to England; others received commissions from the governor of Jamaica and later from the English representative in Belize. In addition, some of the princes were taken to England, Jamaica, or Belize to be educated. English became the prestige language of the coast . . . and their followers expected the kings to become fairly fluent in the language [Olien 1983:200; cf. Dennis and Olien 1984:725].

Recognition of foreign titles and commissions, however, says nothing of the indigenous existence of an office of king or of the nature of the authority of individuals now called king. It is noteworthy, too, that no native term for a single "head of state" or "king" appears to exist. If kingship was indeed indigenous and present at an early time, one might reasonably expect to find some mention of a native term somewhere in the ethnohistoric literature. Yet only English titles are recorded.

a Miskito "kingdom"?

The question of the title versus the office of king and of the extent of authority of a king also requires consideration of whether a centralized and hierarchically ranked political structure existed in indigenous Miskito society. Dennis and Olien appear to believe one did. "Since the Miskito did not have a centralized political system, it has been argued, the Miskito kings necessarily represented something new and imposed entirely from the outside. The historical data (Olien 1983) suggest other possibilities" (Dennis and Olien 1984:725). They do admit, however, that "the hierarchy of Miskito political offices and their interrelations are still poorly understood" (1984:722).

Data relevant to this point are presented by Olien (1983). Olien notes that by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century "the Miskito Kingdom" had become organized around three leadership positions with titles bestowed by the British—the "general," the "king," and the "governor"—each of whom controlled a separate region of the coast; that is, the general controlled the north, the king the central, and the governor the southern part of the coast (Olien 1983:199). Olien also indicates that these three regions may have been differentiated by ethnic contrasts. The population of the northern region was Indian and zambo (Black-Indian mix), that of the central region mainly zambos, and that of the south, Indian. A report, written in 1757 by one Robert Hodgson who served as an English superintendent of the Miskito Shore, described the situation as follows:

The power of these three principal men (which is hereditary) is nearly equal; a small difference only being in favour of the king, . . . but none of these chiefs have much more than a negative voice; and never attempt any thing without a council of such old men as have influence among those of their countrymen who live around them. When any thing of importance is to be done, the people of consequence meet, and argue, each as he pleases, but are seldom unanimous, except when they think their country is immediately concerned [Hodgson 1822[1757]:47, quoted in Olien 1983:199].

This passage indicates to me that the three "principal men" had limited authority, that the permission of councils of elders was essential for them to act, and that among the three the king was essentially "first among equals." Olien's interpretation of this material, in contrast, again shows a tendency to exaggerate the power and authority of the king. In the lines following this quote, he states that



by at least 1759, the king had assumed ascendancy over the others. . . . The basic organization then included a king who controlled the entire kingdom, yet who also seems to have continued to deal with the local problems of the central area. Under the king were three sub-leaders: the general . . . , the governor. . . ,and the admiral [Olien 1983:199-200, my emphasis].

(Olien, referring again to Hodgson, notes that admiral was a "lesser title," along with "captain," and that these titles were bestowed by the British superintendent [1983:199]). Olien does not further justify why or how Hodgson's description of "a small difference only" in favor of the king's power vis-A-vis other principal men can be interpreted to mean that the king "had assumed supremacy" and "controlled the entire kingdom." Yet he goes on to declare the emergence of a chiefdom by 1800 "with one individual clearly in authority over a hierarchy of political positions" (Olien 1983:200). 9

That the tripartite division of what might be termed "areas of influence" continued into the early 19th century is indicated by Orlando Roberts (1965[1827]:147), though Bryan Edwards (1819:210) identified four domains by this time (both cited in Olien 1983:209,215). Yet there is no evidence of centralized hierarchical structure. On the contrary, data presented by Olien indicate that "governors" and "generals" and "admirals" had a tendency to act rather independently both with respect to the king and even with respect to colonial powers. To be sure, in their joint paper Dennis and Olien recognized this point, too, though they still place the king above the rest.

Struggles for power between the various Miskito leaders did occur, although it appears that theoretically the king held power over the others. Powerful generals and admirals several times threatened the king's authority [Dennis and Olien 1984:722].

The nature of this opposition is in itself interesting. For one thing, the generals, admirals, and governors appear quite amenable to independent external political support of the sort enjoyed by the king. Thus, in November 1721, a Miskito governor, along with 507 followers, took an oath of obedience to the Spanish king and promised to have the Miskito king and a general submit to the Spaniards, too. (The English from Jamaica quickly put a stop to this notion-see Royal CCdula 1913[1722]:439, cited in Olien 1983:204.) Similarly, about 1770 the Spaniards made an attempt to win the support of an "admiral" named Dilson (whom Olien probably rightly views as a "strong man" who improved his status to become a major leader) by appointing him "ruler (gobernador) of the Miskito nation" (Fernandez 1907:23-25, quoted in Olien 1983:211). This action led to factioning among Miskito leaders with the king and the governor opposing the move and Admiral Dilson receiving support from his closest ally. The matter was ended with the mysterious death of the Admiral and his friend (Olien 1983:211).

This event occurred during the "reign" of the Miskito king George I, who also "had problems controlling his general, Tempest" (Olien 1983:211). Here again the matter involved independent outside contacts with European authorities. General Tempest "became a powerful force" because

of his close ties with the Shoremen (as English settlers were called) of Black River. He then went to London with one of these settlers "to request establishment on the coast of a government independent of Jamaica" (Olien 1983:211), (a statement strongly implying that the current government definitely was not independent of Jamaica). The king feared that the general upon his return would plan to assassinate him, whereupon he sought the help of the governor and the admiral. The governor agreed to support the king; the admiral (the same Admiral Dilson described above) did not. In another incident some years later, about 1793, the next king (George II) engineered the death of a rival leader, "his chief adversary," who ruled at another place to the south (Pearl Lagoon). According to a Spanish visitor's account, George intended to do the same "with all the Chiefs of the other tribes, and thus remain the absolute despot" (Rio 191 311 793]:542, quoted in Olien 1983:212), a comment indicating that the king in reality was not yet the absolute despot. Indeed, Olien notes that this murder "was one in a complex chain of hostilities among the different Miskito leaders" as "the admiral and governor both made overtures to the Spanish for support and feuded with one another" (1 983:212,213).

Feuds and questions of support continued. When King George II died, Olien tells us, his brother, Stephen, assumed "the title of prince or king-regent" (George's son was only seven years old), but was not able to claim "the office of king" because the current general "would not let him" (1 983:215). The general's power also prevented the king-regent from succumbing to Spanish enticements for honor. This general, in fact, became "both powerful and rich" (he owned a large herd of cattle) and it is said that he "even called himself king." He readily "could challenge the authority of the new young king," George III (son of George II, now grown up) (Olien 1983:218). When, following George's coronation at Belize (1816) the British sloop returning him to the Miskito Coast accidentally landed at the general's locale, the king quarreled with the general, who apparently did not go to the coronation and did not agree to submit to the king. Meanwhile, in the southern reaches of the coast, the incumbent governor was also angry with and hostile to the king. Nor was the relationship between the admiral and king very cordial; the king, in fact, raped one of the admiral's favorite wives. The admiral then married a sister of the governor by way of forming an alliance. The king, fearing civil war, made some effort to improve relations with the general, admiral and governor (Olien 1983:218).

The general picture that seems to emerge regarding higher positions of leadership on the Miskito Coast in the 18th and early 19th centuries do not seem to support Olien's claim that by 1800 the king had assumed ascendancy over other regional leaders or "sub-leaders" and thereby "controlled" the entire "kingdom" or "chiefdom" with its "hierarchy of political positions." On the contrary, even if, as Dennis and Olien claim, the king's power over the others was "theoretical," the incidents that Olien himself records suggest that power on the Miskito Shore was divided among several regional leaders, including the king, each of whom held a prestigious English title and each of whom seemed more or less susceptible to, or at least interested in, the possibility of establishing independent outside ties with colonial (Spanish or English) authorities,

presumably for purposes of legitimation and enhanced prestige (cf. Olien 1983 passim for additional evidence).

There is no evidence that the king was able to reduce friction among regional leaders; if anything, on occasions individual kings seem to have acted in ways designed to exacerbate problems, suggesting they themselves were keenly aware of the power of other leaders. It is interesting to note that Dennis and Olien conclude that, although regional leaders like General Tempest, “attempted to become dominant leaders on the coast at different times, [they] were never successful” (Dennis and Olien 1984:725). If one assumes, as Dennis and Olien do, that a centralized political structure existed, then the significant fact is that regional leaders never supplanted the king, implying that the king maintained control. If one assumes, as I do, that centralization was more political myth than political reality, and that the situation was one of rivalrous Big Men with the king at best first among equals, then it is not a matter of replacing the king but of eclipsing him, either by acquiring independent outside titles or commissions or foreign experience (see below) or by threat of assassination. The situation seems to entail a system of rivalrous checks and balances more than jealousies among persons of unequal rank. Certainly there is no clear evidence that the various titles were ranked in any hierarchical fashion. It is quite possible that at least to governors, admirals, and generals the high status of their own titles was not seen to be significantly surpassed by that of the king even if the English tended to place the “king” above them (for example, note the general’s alleged declaration of also being “king”). For Olien to suggest that the king stood at the pinnacle of a centralized coast-wide hierarchical system of ranked offices suggests that he himself may be viewing the situation through European eyes to a disproportionate degree. Yet it is not unlikely that incumbent Miskito kings also accepted the English interpretation that their title, backed up by elaborate English coronations, placed them above all other Miskito leaders. This does not mean, however, that the other Miskito regional leaders accepted either this view or the political supremacy of the king, or that there really was a functioning coast-wide hierarchical political structure (a “kingdom”) for the king to head.

succession and meaning of kingship

Let us now consider Olien’s argument (1983) that the stability of the line of succession of the Miskito kings serves as evidence of an internally functioning indigenous kingship. There can be no question that the evidence Olien presents of a smoothly continuing line of succession spanning two-and-a-half centuries is a clear and necessary correction to the view of those writers (largely 19th-century commentators who followed the opinions of E. G. Squier; cf. Olien 1985) who have claimed that British interests removed and replaced Miskito kings at will. Yet it does not necessarily follow that the stability of the line of succession of Miskito “kings” disputes the “stereotype of the Miskito kings as puppets of the English” (Olien 1983:201), for inheritance of title within one extended family need not be in and of itself antithetical to foreign diplomatic interests. Indeed, such stability could well be encouraged and recognized as politically valuable for English diplomacy. Olien, however, argues that England’s interests in the eastern reaches of

Central America were “exclusively economic, not political.” Declaring that “a detailed discussion of the English involvement in or control of the politics of the Miskito kingdom is beyond the scope of this article,” he simply proclaims that “the English had little, if any, interest in the organization or operation of the Miskito Kingdom. The Miskito controlled their internal affairs, at least until the Treaty of Managua (1860) which marked the demise of the kingdom. England’s interests were almost exclusively economic. It is primarily in that realm that the English intervened in Miskito affairs” (Olien 1983:200).

Some 15 years ago I, too, stated unequivocally that British authorities had little political control over the Miskito and that English interests were oriented to obtaining coastal resources and to the conduct of contraband trade (Helms 1971 :20). It is a well known fact of colonial history, however, that European interest in a foreign territory (involving, in this case, limited settlement and trading agents) may be strongly supported and enhanced by quiet diplomatic means including, most particularly, concern with the political stability of the pertinent territory concerned. One could argue, then, that it would have been clearly in the interest of British and Miskito “economic contacts” that political stability be maintained if at all possible, and that English interests would be predisposed to encourage such stability. One could argue, too, that so long as Miskito kings were cooperative and did not actively oppose English interests there would be no reason to (try to) depose or, more accurately, decommission, them. This point is supported by the fact that when opposition did emerge British efforts at control do appear. Consider, for example, an incident described by Olien in which, in 1778, a former British subject, a Mr. Terry, was “hired by Spain” to induce the Miskito of the southern region to depose the then king, George It, and crown his cousin in his place. The mission failed, but during Terry’s stay on the coast King George refused to cooperate with the English superintendent, James Lawrie, in attacking Terry. Superintendent Lawrie then decommissioned George as king, although the Governor of Jamaica renewed the commission a few months later (Olien 1983:213).

Another incident some years later, in the 18405, is also interesting in this respect. As Olien describes the situation, at this time the English superintendent of Belize, Colonel Alexander Macdonald, interested in the mahogany stands of the Miskito Shore, convinced then King Robert Charles Frederic to appoint a special commission “to govern his domains” with Macdonald as the king’s chief advisor and other Belizean officials composing the rest of the commission. The Colonial Office disapproved the commission, but Macdonald was not deterred. He took under his care the youngest son of the Miskito king, a young boy 8 or 10 years old named Clarence. He then had the king sign a new document establishing the same advisory commission that England had earlier disallowed but which this time was not conditional upon approval of the British government. Macdonald also convinced the king to change the succession to the title from his eldest son to Clarence, his youngest, with the advisory commission serving as regent until Clarence was old enough to rule. Shortly thereafter the king died, and Macdonald was named regent. Young Clarence was then sent to England for education, while the older son, George Augustus, was left in the care of James Bell, an English “sheriff and commandant of the

kingdom.” Macdonald was replaced as superintendent a year later, and the governor of Jamaica wrote an opinion to the new superintendent that the “people” should be allowed to choose the next king from the family of the previous king. The eldest son, George, was then crowned at Belize (Clarence was still in Europe) while the indomitable Macdonald managed to have his secretary in Belize, a Mr. Walker, appointed to the post of “British resident” on the Miskito Shore. Since the new king, George, was also still a minor, he was now advised by Mr. Walker, who called himself the king’s regent (Olien 1983:223-226).

In Olien’s opinion, the important point in this incident is the choosing of the eldest son, George, by the Miskito, thereby showing that the choice of king was “entirely controlled” by the Miskito. In Olien’s words, “in at least one case, that of George Augustus Frederic, . . . the English preferred his brother Clarence, but were unable to keep George Augustus from becoming king” (1983:200). This statement sounds as if Miskito concerns won out over colonial authority. According to events described above as Olien himself presented them, however, this statement, though not exactly false, is again definitely slanted toward expressing a degree of self-determination that the Miskito did not really have. Different parties of English supported different views: Macdonald, who appointed himself advisor to one king, clearly attempted to have Clarence succeed to the title. George, the other son, was also in the care of an English “commandant.” The Colonial Office preferred to leave the matter open, provided the choice came from the proper family, that is, fell to one or the other son. George, who was then chosen (probably by a council of Miskito leaders-cf. Olien 1983:209, 215) found himself advised again by an English regent. Perhaps ultimately the Miskito did have the man of their choice holding title, but if so it seems to have been by virtue of the wishes of the Colonial Office rather than by their own demand for self-determination.

One additional incident is enlightening. A few years later the British decided to leave Nicaragua and, via the Treaty of Managua (1860), the Miskito Reserve was formed as an autonomous entity within the state of Nicaragua. The title of Miskito “king” was now changed to “chief” and the positions of king, general, admiral, and governor ceased to exist. If, as Olien alleges, the Miskito kingship and the “Miskito kingdom”-was an indigenous political structure uncontrolled in its internal organization and operation by colonial foreigners, its instant dissolution by these same foreigners is curious indeed. On the other hand, it is important to note that the new title of “chief” continued to be passed down (though no longer from father to son) through the same family line that had provided kings; the titleholder was apparently selected by the council of headmen that was now officially recognized as the legitimate authority for the new Reserve. I take this continuation to be even stronger evidence that heretofore the title of king or chief had not been associated significantly with a formal office or with a formal political hierarchy. It does strongly suggest, however, that, as Dennis and Olien argue in their 1984 essay, the personage of a chief or king held at least symbolic significance for the Miskito populace.

Regarding the stability of the line of succession to the title of king, a few final comments. It can be argued that stability in succession of title made the Miskito kingship appear to be

authentically indigenous, the appearance of which could be useful to British Central American dealings vis-a-vis the Spaniards. It could also be argued, as Dennis and Olien do, that maintaining a line of kings accepted by the English helped the Miskito acquire the European weaponry, trade goods, and economic advantages of foreign contact that they so badly wanted; hence stability could have been encouraged by Miskito interests, too (cf. Dennis and Olien 1984:726). Finally, there is the possibility that, for the Miskito, acknowledgment of succession within a single “royal family” of their own was to some extent an imitation of that British monarchy which, through its governors in Jamaica or Belize, so generously provided titles, commissions, and colorful uniforms to their Miskito “counterparts.” Native imitation of foreign authority figures and their trappings was a common occurrence worldwide during the colonial era. Identification not with the English political structure but with the British kings as individuals, with their families, and with their lifestyles as men of power would not have been at all surprising even for those Miskito kings, generals, governors, and so on, who did not actually visit England but who were familiar nonetheless with the personal trappings of British imperialism as expressed in Belize and Jamaica.

Stability in line of succession to the title of king does not automatically mean, or correlate with, (effective) rule or continuity of (effective) rule. It means just what it says: continued transfer of title from person to person. Contrary to Olien’s conclusion (1983:237), I assert that the fact that all of the Miskito kings were relatives does not mean in and of itself that for over two hundred years “one family controlled Miskito politics” or that the English did not have an interest in the operation of Miskito politics. Unfortunately, there is much more to colonial political intervention, even of the “indirect rule” variety, than purposeful interruption of lines of succession.

kingship and authority

Let us turn now to the question of the type and degree of local authority held by the Miskito kings, one of the major points discussed by Dennis and Olien (1984). As we shall see, this is not a simple subject. First, however, let us consider Dennis’ and Olien’s approach. The authors present their case in large part by means of a series of incidents that are intended to testify to the expression of significant local authority on the part of the king. Dennis’ and Olien’s interpretations of these incidents seem to me to be unsupported by the data presented. Alternative interpretations of the data or a closer look at the context of the incident suggests either a less authoritative “local” stance for the king or expression of authority in a nonlocal context.

Let us begin with the evidence of The Work Group (my label) as presented by Dennis and Olien .

In the mid-1800s Miskito villagers near Cape Cracias a Dios were reported as contributing labor, one or more days a week, to help the English build a fort. The labor was given as ordered by the king, whose authority was recognized by showing his silver

king's medal or his gold-headed scepter. . . . Similarly, in 1851 Julius Froebel. . . . encountered a group of Woolwas Indians on the Nicaragua-Miskito border who had retreated further into the interior to avoid service to the Miskito king. Decentralized though the political system may have been, these events show an impressive ability to marshal a labor force. Communal labor is common in Miskito villages today, but the kings could apparently command work for their subjects at a rate which they sometimes found onerous, thus indicating a sort of authority not easily dismissed [Dennis and Olien 1984:727].

By lumping these two examples the authors conclude that the king's authority forced villagers to work even if they didn't want to. These two episodes, however, are not comparable. Nor need they reflect a king's authority. On the one hand is the group labor by Miskito villagers in the heart of Miskito territory (near Cape Gracias a Dios) (see Young 1847: 12-13). As Dennis and Olien note, communal labor is common in Miskito villages, villages with no higher authority than a village headman and/or a lay pastor. Thus communal village labor by Miskitos in and of itself says nothing regarding the king's authority. On the other hand is the avoidance of labor by Woolwas Indians of the interior on the border of Miskito territory (see Froebel 1859:130-131). The Woolwas were a group of Sumus, interior tribes that for centuries had been subject to slave raids and warfare by Miskito war parties. In response to these pressures, Sumu tribes had moved away from Miskito territory in an effort to avoid direct interaction with Miskito in general (see Helms 1983 for further details). Woolwas most likely were fearful of any Miskito contact; their avoidance may well have signified that the Miskito in general were a problem, not that a king's command was onerous per se. Returning to the Miskito villages near Cape Gracias, it is not unlikely that work for the English was rewarded by some form of payment. For centuries Miskito men have eagerly sought, or at least readily accepted, work opportunities by Europeans in exchange for wages or goods. By the mid-1800s this pattern had been well established (cf. Helms 1971 :20-23, 27-29). Kingly orders may have identified the specific job assignment, but it is not necessary to assume that such authority provided the sole, or even the most significant, motivation.

Next let us consider The Trial, again as reported by Dennis and Olien:

An interesting report of a trial . . . shows the king as judicial authority. The trial took place "English fashion," with the king presiding and with the officers of a visiting British man-of-war present. The defendant was accused of killing the king's aunt and two Englishmen, as well as of being a general miscreant. The English residents and the king himself both had a personal interest in the case, which complicates the issue. Nevertheless, the interesting point is the outcome of the trial: the man was judged guilty and the king sentenced him to hang, over the violent protests of the accused man's kinsmen. The king stood firm, however, and did have him hanged, giving at the same time a stern warning about putting a stop to evil behavior. This was his job as king, he

stated, and the case would serve as a demonstration that he stood ready to hang evildoers [Dennis and Olien 1984:728].

In discussing this incident Dennis and Olien argue that the inflicting of capital punishment by the king indicated the power of his centralized authority above and beyond what a strictly kin-based society would have tolerated. Although they admit that the case is complicated by English interests, presumably by the presence of the English themselves, they feel that “the Miskito King here did seem to have the recognized right to inflict capital punishment” (Dennis and Olien 1984:728). Again I take a very different reading of the matter. In my opinion, the presence of the English, as well as the “English fashion” of the trial and the charge of killing two Englishmen, cannot just be dismissed as a “complication.” I would suggest that the extreme mode of punishment of the defendant was also done “English fashion”; the king was not exercising a “recognized right” to capital punishment but rather took the right, or was assigned the right, by the British. It would have been far more indicative of real kingly authority if, with the British officers present, he had refused to hang the culprit, or if he had successfully ordered and carried out the penalty without any Englishmen on the spot. The possibility that the presence of the English constituted the real authority requiring capital punishment certainly cannot be dismissed. At best this case is inconclusive with respect to kingly expression of real local authority. At worst it shows the king under the direct influence of the English, at least in this situation. It is important to note, however, that major leaders (Big Men) in general inspired a measure of fear through punishment. Juan Francisco Irias, describing the Miskito in a letter written in 1842, comments that

though there are among them some bad and disorderly Indians, yet there are a very few who will offer any violence to the traveller, principally, however, on account of the fear in which they stand of their chiefs, to whom they pay great deference. For any fault of obedience on any crime they are severely punished, so that traders may carry on their traffic with little fear of insult or injury [Irias 1853:164, quoted in Dennis and Olien 1984:728].

Apparently leadership in general (chiefs in the plural) was respected, especially where the safety of foreign traders, a highly valued type of contact, was concerned. In addition, and in fairness to Dennis and Olien, regardless of the details of these particular cases, it is well for us to remember that in a kin-based society, which the Miskito have always been, social misdemeanors can be hard to handle in a definitive manner at the local level and, as colonial history has often shown, the presence of an outside authority may be gratefully received for the added weight that may be given to settlement of local disputes. There is some evidence that Miskito kings served this purpose (cf. Dennis and Olien 1984:728 and discussion below). What is specifically at issue in the case of The Trial, however, is whether the king’s authority as expressed in his mandate of capital punishment was indeed his own or was derived from foreign officials.



The next two examples provided by Dennis and Olien do not seem to me to evidence any real authority on the part of the Miskito king either. In the case of The Carib Commission,

each of the Black Carib (Carifuna) towns to the west of Cape Gracias is reported to have been under the control of a "captain," who was responsible to the Miskito king and had a commission from him. Young. . . reproduced one such commission. He remarked that although none of the Carib captains could read such a document, both they and their subjects believed it to be absolutely necessary, and no captain would be able to rule without a commission. Each Carib captain also had two quartermasters who punished delinquents and could be summoned by the king at any time [Dennis and Olien 1984:729].

The commissioning of Carib "captains" by the Miskito kings sounds very much like Miskito imitation of their own commissioning by the English. It may be taken as an effort on the part of the king to indicate that he had greater legitimacy than Carib leaders and that he was, as it were, an "English-like" authority figure. Such behavior would be fully consistent with the very strong penchant of Miskito leaders to imitate English dress, customs, and official trappings. Similarly, in the case of The Letter (not quoted here but see Dennis and Olien 1984:730), the English trader, Orlando Roberts, was at one point captured by the Spaniards and taken to Leon and Granada. Upon returning to the Miskito Coast, he saw an angry letter from the Miskito king demanding his release and threatening border attacks if he were not. Roberts was gratified by the letter, commenting that he "could not but feel pleased with this spirited conduct of his Miskito majesty" (Roberts 1965:259-260, quoted in Dennis and Olien 1984:730). Clearly this incident deals with foreign affairs, not local Miskito affairs, and therefore is irrelevant to the local authority issue. In addition, there is no evidence as to whether the letter was sent or, if it were, whether it had any bearing on Roberts' release. It requires more than written evidence of "spirited conduct" to indicate the expression of real authority.

Finally, Dennis and Olien offer commentary on the highly polished, well-educated demeanor of Miskito kings, whose English could be impeccable and whose command of English poetry and literature quite admirable. The material again seems irrelevant to the question of the exercise of local authority, though it does indicate that Miskito kings were "remarkable men by European standards" (Dennis and Olien 1984:730), and to the extent that the Miskito in general admired foreign, English ways, which they did for reasons discussed below, such Anglicization may have been applauded by the general population, too.

In short, these particular lines of evidence marshaled by Dennis and Olien to support their argument that the Miskito king exercised significant local authority fail to do so. On the other hand, Dennis and Olien, somewhat in passing, note other incidents indicating that kings often exercised (or tried to exercise) excessive personal power. Some kings were brutal toward their numerous wives, some apparently high-handedly commandeered things they wanted (for example, turtles from a passing canoe), and there are frequent references in English sources to

kings and "chiefs" as "despotic" and engendering immediate obedience through fear of punishment (cf. Dennis and Olien 1984:728; Olien 1983:212, 214, 227). Personal power exercised for good or evil, however, is not the same thing as accepted legal authority derivative from a formally structured office. Dennis and Olien note that personal power and aggressive behavior as an important attribute of successful Big Men is applauded as such even today by the Miskito, whose current political organization is "based on competition between local headmen" (Dennis and Olien 1984:731). "The pattern is for an ambitious strongman to gather around him a circle of relatives and supporters and to rely on eloquence, persuasion, and skillful manipulation to accomplish his ends" (1984:731). In addition, "the Miskito admire successful strongmen and expect a leader to be able to enforce his decisions" (1984:731).

As Dennis and Olien point out, the ability to enforce decisions confers "rightful authority" (1984:731). I suggest that such was the source of whatever internal or local authority the Miskito kings and other regional leaders were able to exercise during the colonial centuries, and that in so doing they were evidencing (sometimes to extremes, in that apparently on occasion brutalized wives or their relatives killed the king; cf. Olien 1983:214,219-220) the aggressive personal behavior expected of Big Men or such authority as could be derived from the presence of colonial officers or from the official English commissions that all titled leaders seemed so very anxious to acquire.

Yet, there were at least two other important areas where Miskito kings and probably other regional Big Men played important roles implementing not only personal whim or English authority but traditional areas of authority in Miskito society. Let us consider titled Miskito leaders as war leaders and discuss the relationship between Miskito kings and local councils of elders.<sup>4</sup>

The earliest ethnographic description of sociopolitical organization among the Miskito is found in the few sentences penned by M. W. that have been quoted above. M. W. makes it clear that the "kings and captains of families" had no particular influence except during raids against the "Alboawinneys," which was the term used to designate the "wild Indians" of the interior (Sumus we would call them today; the Woolwas mentioned above were one such group) who lived on the borders of Miskito territory and with whom the Miskito alternately traded and raided (cf. Helms 1983: 183,190). The ethnohistoric data cited by Dennis and Olien also repeatedly mention the activities of Miskito men as raiders against foreign groups, including other native peoples on all sides and Spanish frontier settlements (see also Olien 1983:204- 205; Helms 1983), and note in particular the leadership given by Miskito kings or other regional leaders as war leaders. Thus we find that in the 1720s the Miskito king reportedly could muster 500 warriors in a fleet of canoes and King Jeremy agreed to send 50 warriors to Jamaica to assist the English in the Maroon wars (Dennis and Olien 1984:719-720; Olien 1983:205); that in 1780 a force of 400 Miskito fighters under the leadership of George I fought with the English in a major campaign against the Spanish (Dennis and Olien 1984:720); that in 1782 Governor Briton, with English, Miskito, and Carib troops, led an attack on the Nicaraguan frontier (Olien 1983:213); and that in

the late 18th century George II had engineered the enslavement of many Sumu Indians, and his successor, Stephen, led Miskito attacks against the Spaniards (Olien 1983:214-215). Clearly the Miskito kings and other regional leaders were continuing to exercise the traditional role of influential men as war leaders, and clearly they were able to amass impressive fighting forces. Indeed, I submit that to the extent that Miskito regional leaders, including kings, appear as men of action and influence in Miskito society it is primarily in this capacity. By this means these Miskito Big Men (as I prefer to see them) were able to provide a major avenue for profitable European trade (cf. Helms 1983 for discussion of the relationship between trade and raid in Miskito society), as well as enhance their own prestige and personal power.

The traditional “institutional” counterbalance to the aggressive self-assertion of Big Men war leaders in Miskito society seems to have been the council of elders. In the description of Miskito regional leaders left by Robert Hodgson in the mid-18th century (also quoted above), we read that none of the three regional “principal men”

have much more than a negative voice; and never attempt any thing without a council of such old men as have influence among those of their countrymen who live around them. When any thing of importance is to be done, the people of consequence meet, and argue, each as he pleases, but are seldom unanimous, except when they think their country is immediately concerned [Hodgson 1822[1757]:47, quoted in Olien 1983:199; my emphasis].

Another description written about 1780 mentions the principal residence of “the Mosquito King and his chiefs,” suggesting a support group of some sort associated with the king (Olien 1983:21). In addition, the very limited data presented concerning the steps by which a new king was chosen mention “election” by “the Miskito chiefs,” which may or may not refer to a council of headmen or elders (cf. Olien 1983:209,215).

An account left by Charles Napier Bell in the latter part of the 19th century gives the clearest (though still limited) evidence of the association of groups of elders with the king and as local authority and advisory figures. In a description of a visit by the king to the village of “Duckwarra,” we learn that the king and his retinue have arrived on an annual visit to “do law,” that is, to admonish the population concerning their bad behavior, take young men to task publicly for their alleged (or actual) failings (by administering floggings of varying degrees of playfulness or severity), and to encourage the villagers to pay heed to their headmen. During the proceedings, one of the king's associates (his “quartermaster”) made a speech, part of which is of interest to us. He said:

“People, the King is here; he is in the house *talking with your old men*. [The King heard you were misbehaving]. Then the King said to *his old men* and to his [quartermasters], “Let us go to the people of Duckwarra; let us put law into their hearts, *that they may listen to their headmen . . .*” [This young man here is very proud]. He laughs *at the old*

*men when they teach him; [he chases other men's wives. . . .]* [Bell 1899:27&281, quoted in Dennis and Olien 1984:729; my emphasis).

Judging from this excerpt we can assume that the village was represented by a group of headmen and elders (with whom the king conversed), who served as the recognized advisory body for the community and who were expected to (or tried to) teach respect for (presumably) traditional customs and proper social behavior. Yet the king, too, apparently had his group of "old men" with whom he consulted and with whom he associated himself. It is hard to escape the conclusion (one that fits well with general understanding of the organization of local authority in many "egalitarian" or "tribal" societies) that local authority basically fell to village councils of elders and headmen, who managed more or less (probably in combination with community gossip) to handle the ordinary enthusiasms and excesses particularly of exuberant youths. (In fairness to the young men, remember that in Miskito society strong individuality is respected as much as adherence to proper social behavior; cf. Helms 1971 : 169,226.)

As Dennis and Olien note, the most difficult cases apparently were brought, probably gratefully, to the attention of the king on his annual visits to villages. According to Bell's account, however, the king's approach was to encourage the populace to obey their own local authority figures (perhaps as he obeyed his own council of elders?). In other words, though the king apparently could serve as an "outside authority" (I think this states the matter better than saying "higher authority"), he encouraged acceptance of the traditional, decentralized, local authority mechanism, the council of elders, and accepted similar counseling himself. In this respect the king can be seen as setting an example for proper Miskito behavior; that is, personal power and strength may be exhibited but within limits or contexts set by traditional guardians of social living.

It is in the context of this interpretation of the king's activities that I see him playing a significant role within the traditional authority structure of Miskito society. To the extent that the king was a significant factor in matters of local or internal authority it was a reminder that individual behavior should be curbed by respect for traditional customs as reflected and expressed by community elders. To the extent that the king and other regional Big Men also represented the expression of individual personality, it was in areas external to Miskito everyday life (that is, war leaders against foreign or outside peoples, or contact points for colonial authorities) or in acts of personal power that people feared and which they apparently, in some cases of excess, curbed themselves. In other words, I do not see the emergence of regional kings, governors, generals, and so on as indicative of a new hierarchical political structure but rather as a new means for the expression (now writ large by virtue of English modes of political legitimation) both of traditional "tribal" (communal) political organization (the council of elders or headmen) and of traditional political tensions (the strong assertion of personality admired in "successful" men as individuals and the need to maintain social order and settled community life via councils).

As Dennis and Olien note, and as contemporary ethnography and even current events have shown, this duality and its resulting tensions are still a characteristic feature of Miskito life. They are evidenced, among other things, in the maintenance of a diversified economic base. Miskito women, the stable core of village life, have been horticulturalists, but Miskito men have always provided economic support by some form of individual activity-as hunters, fishermen, fighters, or wage laborers for foreign entrepreneurs. A Miskito man needs to develop and express personal skills and abilities and individuality as much as he can or as much as can be tolerated by others; his success as a provider and as a participant in the competitive world of man-to-man activities has always required it. The Miskito kings and the various governors and generals can be seen as expressing this traditional aspect of a Miskito man's life in heightened form and with new dimensions for individual expression through association with English customs and personal trappings of power. As we have seen, at least some Miskito kings and other regional leaders also excelled in the more traditional role of war leader (and the accumulation of numerous wives and women) and as hunters (George Augustus Frederic was described as "the best shot and canoe's man in the whole country"; Olien 1983:227; see also note 4 below). Finally, as authority figures and "law doers" they exemplified, again on a grander scale, the proprieties expected of men as community leaders and elders.

#### Miskito kings and patterns of Central American leadership

It is in this context of traditional male individuality versus the authority of councils of elders that I would agree with Dennis' and Olien's conclusion that the phenomenon of the Miskito king and other regional leaders had roots in indigenous coastal culture patterns. Dennis and Olien, however, consider other components of Miskito leadership to be the salient characteristics indicative not only of an indigenous basis for the Miskito kingship but of a "general lower Central American pattern for leadership" (Dennis and Olien 1984:734). They refer specifically to the prestigious esoteric knowledge and long-distance contacts associated with the involvement of Miskito leaders with powerful, prestigious, and presumably wise foreigners (that is, English and, apparently for some, also Spanish officials).

Their argument derives directly from my earlier publication, *Ancient Panama: Chiefs in Search of Power* (1979), in which I examined the external interests and foreign associations of the postcontact San Blas Cuna Indians of eastern Panama, and on the basis of Cuna materials offered speculations and hypotheses concerning the nature and significance of long-distance contacts for the pre-Columbian leaders of the chiefdoms of indigenous Panama, using such data as the early contact literature presented to assist my interpretations. In summarizing my argument, however, Dennis and Olien have combined the data and conclusions derived from contemporary Cuna ethnography and ethnohistory with those suggested by or sometimes attributed to the early contact literature in such a way as to make it seem that the pre-Columbian situation, particularly with respect to the nature of the training and long-distance travels of 16<sup>th</sup> century chiefs, was much more positively known and in more definite detail than I in fact indicated (cf. Dennis and Olien 1984:732-733). Dennis and Olien then use their version of my conclusions as support for

their hypothesis that there was “well-established cultural precedent” for the pattern of foreign relations and foreign imitations developed by the Miskito kings, and that, given this precedent, the Miskito kingship could not have been simply “foisted on the Miskito by the English” (1984:735).

To be sure, there are clear and fascinating parallels between the Miskito approach to foreign contacts and those of the colonial- and republican-era Cuna, and there are hints in the early ethnohistoric literature for 16th-century Panama and perhaps evidence (depending on our interpretation) in Isthmian archaeology allowing the hypothesis that a comparable orientation to foreign contacts may have existed in Panama prior to European contact. We may speculate, too, that there was a “general lower Central American pattern for leadership” (indeed, not only Central American) of the sort described and speculated about in Ancient Panama and summarized by Dennis and Olien, but it is too early, in my opinion, to see this proposed general pattern as providing direct and well-established cultural precedent for the Miskito kingship. While I concur with Dennis and Olien that we may well consider such a hypothesis and find it intriguing and enticing, I believe the best line of argument at this time is to recognize the parallels between the Miskito reaction to the presence of Europeans and that of the San Blas Cuna and to consider the possibility of earlier precedent, but to withhold judgment on the nature or extent or impact of the precontact situation until we have a much firmer sense of lower Central American prehistory, particularly that of the still virtually unknown Miskito Shore.

#### notes

’Many sources cited by Olien and Dennis will not appear in the list of references appended to this paper since this essay is intended as a commentary on the general substance and conclusions of their papers and is not a detailed page by page critique. Interested readers should consult the excellent bibliographies accompanying Olien’s and Dennis’ papers for further references to relevant primary and secondary sources from the 18th to 20th centuries.

\*Olien further notes (1983:201) that Jeremy, Sloane’s Miskito informant, gave a slightly different account of Miskito history to M. W. some ten years after his (Jeremy’s) visit to Jamaica. In this version, England was visited by Jeremy’s father, who received a crown and commission from the English king. Since Jeremy did not mention whether the Prince in Sloane’s account was his father or any other relative, Olien assumes that the Prince and the father are not the same individual and that several kin groups must be vying for power, with that of the father successfully usurping that of the Prince (Olien 1983:201,203). Possibly so, but much is being made of negative evidence. The discrepancies in Jeremy’s accounts need not necessarily be reconciled this way. The relationship between the Prince and the father simply is not known.

3 The use of the term “king” also goes unexplained by M. W., an Englishman, who presumably was using the term to refer to Miskito leaders (“kings and captains”) in terms that English-speaking travelers used and English readers would recognize. Since he clearly describes the

egalitarian nature of Miskito society, he apparently does not intend the term to connote differential social rank.

4 At least one Miskito “prince” was also recognized as a sukia (“Succhea”) or shaman, a not unlikely source of traditional authority as well as personal prestige and power (Olien 1983:205).

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