



Contracts with Satan: Relations with ‘Spirit Owners’ and Apprehensions of the Economy among the Coastal Miskitu of Nicaragua

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the ‘spirit owners’ or *dawanka* who among the Miskitu control supplies of fish and game, as well as access to other goods. Whereas the existing literature on relations between similar beings and other Amerindian peoples tends to demonstrate a balanced or generalised reciprocity emphasising social reproduction, those between *dawanka* and the Miskitu of Kakabila are often mutually exploitative and destructive. The article considers the region’s socio-economic history, changing conceptions of personhood, and materials gleaned from fieldwork, concluding that present-day perceptions of *dawanka* and other ‘mythical’ beings frequently represent a fear of the individualistic and selfishly motivated forms of exchange which many see as having come to replace those that are socially reproductive.

Keywords: Miskitu, Nicaragua, anthropology, economy, belief

Introduction

Most anthropologists working among the Miskitu-speaking peoples, ‘indigenous’ hunter-horticulturalists and fishermen of eastern Central America, have at one time or another encountered the term *dawanka*, used variably to mean in different contexts ‘owner’ or ‘master’.³⁸ *Dawanka* is a bi-morphemic word, composed of two constituents *dawan* and *-ka*. The first morpheme, *dawan*, bears the semantic load, capturing the meaning of ‘master’ or ‘owner’, while the suffix *-ka* modifies the noun, in this case *dawan*, to show, in simple terms, that its semantic scope is limited, either by discursive context or another associative or possessive noun. A *dawanka* is thus the ‘owner’ or ‘master’ of something. Without the limiting suffix *-ka*, Miskitu nouns tend to acquire an absolute semantic scope, in that their meanings are potentially linguistically and philosophically unrestricted in an almost Platonic sense. *Dawan* is an excellent example, since this term, without the limiting *-ka*, is only ever used to mean ‘God’, the absolute ‘master’ or ‘owner’ of everything, whereas *dawanka* necessarily means ‘owner’ or ‘master’ of something specific.

³⁸ See Conzemius (1932: 126-132), Helms (1971: 187-188), Barrett (1992: 219-220), and Dennis (2004: 211-216).



Dawan or ‘God’, in this conception, is the absolute master or the absolute owner, while human beings, as *dawanka*, are masters and owners of the particular (objects, houses, property and so on). Somewhere between ordinary human *dawanka* and the Dawan God of Miskitu Christian belief, there exist extraordinary non-human *dawanka* who control or influence aspects of the world over which humans (other than shamans - *sukia*, *prapit* or *spirit uplika*) have little influence. It is these non-human *dawanka* with whom I am concerned.

The Miskitu of Kakabila, a small village in the Pearl Lagoon basin of eastern Nicaragua where I have been conducting fieldwork over several years, recognise the existence of a number of these spirit owners, the mostly widely talked about being Duwindu, the *dawanka* of all the animals (especially the game animals) in the bush (known in some Miskitu communities as Swinta), and Merry Maid (known elsewhere as Liwa Mairin), the *dawanka* of the fish and animals in the lagoon, the rivers and the sea. Both control the movements of the fauna in their respective domains and allocate the numbers which hunters and fishers may catch. Duwindu wears a big-brimmed pointy hat and may be recognised by his lack of thumbs. If one shakes hands with him, one should only offer him four fingers in case he steals the thumb. In some accounts, he also has feet turned backwards, producing footprints which cause hunters following him to lose themselves in the deep and trackless Nari Forest west of the village.³⁹ Merry Maid has a voracious sexual appetite and will entrap unwary fishermen, drawing them into her underwater domain where they become ensnared. Some say that she has a golden hairbrush and mirror, which if successfully stolen from her, will enrich the thief.⁴⁰

Besides these figures, there are other *dawanka*, the most notable of which are Sisin Dawanka (cotton-tree owner) and Kwah Dawanka (fig-tree owner). As with Duwindu and Merry Maid, both of whom are described as *science uplika* (persons with magic), in other words, humans or of human type rather than spirits strictly speaking. Sisin Dawanka, according to some, snares its victims by offering them secret knowledge located in its roomy boughs. Kwah Dawanka, employs the pungent scent of its tree, the fig, to ensorcell his hapless victims. Hills too are often said to contain *dawanka*, and these too are often said to be dangerous. Finally, plants and animals deemed to have special properties are said to have *dawanka* of their own. In Kakabila the manatee (*palpa*) is said to be one such animal, Palpa Dawanka regulating the success of the hunters who seek it at the mouths of the lagoon creeks in the June night (see also Jamieson 2001: 261).

Relations between dawanka and human beings

Among many Amerindian peoples, relations between ‘owners’ of the flora and fauna of the wild are represented in terms of a necessary reciprocity. Shamans mediate between these ‘owners’ and human beings and ensure, as far as possible, that human beings are supplied with adequate supplies of meat and so forth. Hunters are urged to treat the spirits of the animals they kill with respect, while the shamans themselves ensure, in some cases, a reciprocal flow of human ‘souls’. In return the ‘owners’ of these animals release enough animals to ensure that the needs of humans beings are fulfilled. Relations between humans and the spirit ‘owners’ are thus organised around a symmetrical reciprocity which is socially reproductive and ultimately benign.⁴¹ Inspired by Kindblad’s (2001) use

³⁹ Some villagers claim that the individual with these backwards feet is Aubiya, another ‘mythical’ figure.

⁴⁰ According to a few Kakabila people Merry Maid is male.

⁴¹ Hallowell 1976 and Brightman (1993) are particularly good ethnographic accounts which emphasise this aspect of human-animals relations.



of Parry and Bloch's (1989) conceptual apparatus, one might say that human relations with the 'owners' of these animals and other resources constitute 'cycles of exchange' within the 'long term transactional order', meaning that they effectively reproduce social and cosmic order. As such they are worthy of human respect.⁴²

Among the Miskitu of Kakabila, apparently similar beliefs are widely held. Duwindu determines the available supply of game animals, Merry Maid the supply of fish, Palpa Dawanka the appearance of manatee, and so forth. However, in spite of the fact that villagers have elaborate discourses about the importance and significance of 'respect' (*rispik*) between humans and between humans and Dawan (God), they in no way express the need to respect Duwindu and the other *dawanka* who control access to resources. Indeed I have never seen killed animals treated with the respect reportedly accorded animals by hunters in other Amerindian cultures. Only cooked food, which as villagers say Dawan supplies, receives *respect*.⁴³ Gratitude is thus reserved for the absolute, morally impeccable 'master' or 'owner', Dawan, rather than for the *dawanka*, the 'masters' or 'owners' who control the particular domains from which foodstuffs come.⁴⁴ In other words, the supply of raw *upan* (meat and fish), made possible by the *dawanka*, is nothing to be particularly thankful for.⁴⁵ By their own accounts, the Kakabila hunters and fisherman have few dealings with the 'owners' who manipulate the supply of meat and fish, who, they deem, are unpredictable beyond their understanding, and they feel, therefore, that they have little reason to be grateful if they are fortunate enough to be successful. Rather it is specifically the gift of cooked food (*plun* or *pata*), made possible by God, which demands 'respect'; specifically, it is the set of circumstances which produce the cooked meal - notably the existence of people in particular relationships to oneself - that excites thankfulness before Dawan.⁴⁶

While relations with Dawan are represented in terms of unconditional gratitude, those with the *dawanka* - Duwindu, Merry Maid, and so on - are understood in terms of amorality, for while Dawan's bounty is invariably given to 'the good', scarcity and misfortune often being rationalised in terms of 'sin' and the 'worthless' behaviour of 'the bad'. The favours of the *dawanka* on the other hand seem to be given out almost at random with little regard to the 'goodness' of the beneficiaries. *Dawanka* are thus seen to be almost capricious in their relations with humans, and most certainly amoral insofar as it is they who are responsible for the good fortune enjoyed by 'the bad'.

Not only do *dawanka* frequently privilege the undeserving; often, villagers intimate, the undeserving approach *dawanka* seeking advantage in a variety of ways. Particularly powerful *dawanka* such as Duwindu and Sisin Dawanka can offer individuals wealth, fortune with members of the opposite sex, misfortune to enemies and so on. In the case of Sisin Dawanka, I was told, the supplicant only has to approach a cotton-tree in which he is supposed to reside and a door in the tree will open to admit him or her, at which point negotiations (*deal takaia*) begin. The *dawanka* may grant the supplicant a major request but usually demands a price. For example, he may grant the supplicant his or her wish

⁴² For example, Brightman (1993: 103-135).

⁴³ Children who play around inappropriately with their plates are sternly told: '*Respect your food!*', while villagers finishing their meal invariably say out loud: '*Tingki, Dawan!*' ('Thank you, God!')

⁴⁴ Dawan, equated with the Christian God, is male.

⁴⁵ *Upun* is a category encompassing meat and fish. *Breadkind* or *tama* includes root crops, breadfruit, bananas and plantains. Kakabila people sometimes say, '*Upun apu, plun apu*' ('No *upan* is no food'), meaning that a meal without meat or fish is no real meal.

⁴⁶ The gift of cooked food implies a closer relationship (usually one of consanguineal kinship, close affinity, or *compadrazgo*) than a gift of raw foodstuffs.



on the understanding that he will later claim his or her first or next child, an aspect of the contract which the human party may, in his or her greed, disregard. Later, the *dawanka* may return for what he claims is his by right of contract, sometimes if he feels the supplicant has tried to cheat him, as it supposedly usually the case, killing or harming him or her in some way. Fulfillment of the *dawanka*'s promise inevitably entails an eventual counter-claim, as the *dawanka* eventually presents the beneficiary of his previous work with the deal's 'small print'. The hapless victim now finds himself or herself unable or unwilling to fulfill the *dawanka*'s side of the bargain and pays the price. *Dawanka* in this aspect thus represent to Kakabila people the dangers of engaging in selfish, individualistic and anti-social forms of exchange; those characterised by Kindblad (2001), following Parry and Bloch (1989) as 'cycles of exchange' which benefit only the 'short term transactional order' (Jamieson 2003, 2007, 2008).

Dawanka thus have two sides to their nature. On the one hand they are responsible for the supply of whatever goods they control (animals in the bush, fish, knowledge and so on) and are therefore necessary for the reproduction of social life; while on the other they offer opportunities to the unwary, greedy and unwise for fulfillment of individualistic and antisocial desires. It is this second aspect which makes *dawanka* so dangerous; so dangerous in fact that only shamans (*sukias* and *prapit*) have techniques for dealing with them without becoming ensnared themselves.⁴⁷ It is this danger and immorality that Kakabila Miskitu say makes them 'satans' (*setan nani*).

And it is not only *dawanka* who provide individuals with opportunities to advance their interests. Dar, a vine or (in some accounts) a small bird, can make one invisible if it is caught and held.⁴⁸ The interesting point about Dar is that people who mention it, almost all of whom say that they would love to catch it, usually talk at length about the ability it confers on its captor to steal from others and rob banks. It is, in other words, a hard-to-find good which all too easily corrupts the weak of will. The so-called Black Heart Book provides other means of obtaining goods by illicit means. This volume, well known to my informants but only through secondhand accounts, is said to contain a multitude of spells, all of which promise to benefit the reader in the short term. These, however, are ultimately evil and inevitably lead to Dawan's wrath and the reader's comeuppance.⁴⁹

***Dawanka* and the historical emergence of asymmetric relations**

As I noted above, in many 'traditional' Amerindian cultures relations between humans and spirit owners are by and large represented by anthropologists as socially constitutive and benign, exchanges between the two domains being organised around reciprocal flows of energy; for example, meat and other goods for either human souls or respect. As I have also indicated, relations between the Kakabila Miskitu and *dawanka* are by and large anything but benign, exchanges between the two benefiting only individuals, often at the expense of others. I now turn to the question of why this might be so.

⁴⁷ Often, when wealthy and well-known personages in Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon and elsewhere meet an unexpected death, it is rumoured that they were *dealing* with a *dawanka*, the assumption being that extraordinary wealth is readily obtained illicitly through Faustian contracts with such figures.

⁴⁸ It was described to me in one account as a bird who cries 'Dar! Dar!'. The man who told me this said that his wife nearly caught one on one occasion.

⁴⁹ Mention should also be made of Bloodman, said by Kakabila people to be a white man wearing large white boots, a long white coat and a beard, who comes to steal the blood of children (Jamieson, in press). Nietschmann (1979: 110), in his book *Caribbean Edge*, characterises Bloodman as 'a symbol of the Miskito's past experiences with outsiders'.



In many ‘traditional’ Amerindian hunting and hunter-gatherer cultures relations between individuals, or at least adult males, are egalitarian, and relations between such individuals are imagined in terms of reciprocity, whether balanced or generalised. The idea is that the successful hunter gives to the less successful hunter who in his turn will give meat when he is more fortunate. While in fact many hunters are perpetually unsuccessful and others regularly successful, due to differentials in skill and application, it is nevertheless true that notions of this kind are widely held. Similarly relations with others more distant are frequently imagined in terms of a generalised or balanced reciprocity, groups living some distance away being imagined as partners with whom one exchanges wives (or husbands) and other goods. In these contexts relations of this kind are often indexed through classificatory cross-cousin marriage and Dravidian-type kinship terminologies in which brothers-in-law and male cross-cousins are exchange partners, and vice versa. Relations of production and reproduction with other human beings are thus thought of as being symmetrical, a notion which finds expression in understandings of the relations of production and reproduction with those non-human beings who control supplies of game, fish and other goods.⁵⁰

Amongst the Miskitu, however, relations of production and reproduction are imagined in very different terms. These, I have argued elsewhere (Jamieson 1998, 2000), are best understood, at least in the domain of kinship, in terms of the notion of ‘capture’ in which mothers-in-law ensnare sons-in-law, wives’ brothers sister’s husbands, mother’s brother’s sister’s sons, and so forth. Relations between individuals are thus predicated on the understanding that they are intrinsically asymmetrical. Furthermore, relations of production in the broader regional economy are also evidently asymmetrical and have been for much of the Miskitu people’s history. These asymmetries, I argue later, colour much of what the Miskitu have to say about their relations with *dawanka* and similar figures.

We already know that Miskitu engagement with merchant capitalism was already well advanced by the end of the seventeenth century. English traders had, as early as the 1630s, begun to bring goods to exchange with the Miskitu, and by the end of the century, this trade had become indispensable to the Miskitu. The English traders, most working out of Jamaica, wanted slaves, mules, sarsaparilla, turtle shell, and the services of Miskitu guides, mercenaries and provisioners. The Miskitu for their part wanted guns, iron tools, cloth and other manufactured goods. The Miskitu, whose relations with their Indian neighbours had been mainly organised around symmetrical trade and raiding, now took on an asymmetrical cast, as they forced the latter into tributary relationships, frequently enslaving them. Meanwhile, relations with the new trading partners, the English, were also asymmetrical, in terms of both the content of the trade and relations between the two groups. The English, at least in regional terms, considered themselves the superior partners insofar as they validated the aspirations of Miskitu leaders by taking them to Jamaica and Belize, and by giving them titles and ceremonial regalia. The Miskitu leaders, for their part, seem to have regarded the English as sponsor ‘brothers-in-law’ (*waika*) to be (at the local level) cultivated and ‘captured’, often through marriage.⁵¹

By the 1850s companies, principally North American, were coming to the Mosquito Coast in search of natural resources. A rubber boom was quickly followed by the arrival of logging and banana companies, while in a few districts mining companies began the exploitation of gold and silver.

⁵⁰ In this regard Brightman (1993: 163-169) has an interesting discussion of human-animal affinal relations among the Rock Cree.

⁵¹ See Helms (1971: 14-25, 1983) for accounts of this history, and Dennis and Olien (1984) and Helms (1986) for accounts of Miskitu titles. Jamieson (1998) contains discussion of the perceived brother-in-law relation between the Miskitu and the English.



Miskitu men became workers in these enterprises, selling their labour to the companies for contracts typically lasting several months at a time, sometimes moving to find work elsewhere when the company moved on, sometimes returning with a little money or goods bought at company stores to their home villages.⁵² These men, who learned to be mobile, came to be known as *mani uplika* ('one year people') or *sulyar* ('employees' - from 'soldier').

These relations with the companies, however, were very different to those previously enjoyed with the traders. With the traders the Miskitu had controlled the terms of their own labour, specifically their time, place of work and output, and they were also able, presumably, to negotiate in terms of price. Now, however, they were proletarians, selling their labour to companies who controlled their place of work, the time they worked, output and wages (Noveck 1988). The English-speaking brother-in-law (*waik or waika*) had turned into the boss (*bas*), and relations of production and reproduction, as experienced by the Miskitu, became markedly more asymmetrical, as they came to depend on cash and company stores. Economic relations now became markedly more exploitative, as the cash economy and its 'digital logic', in which all values became reducible to the cash price, began to displace the 'analogic' nature of transactions, whereby goods were valued in terms of social and use values, which had constituted the focus of social relations beforehand (Kindblad 2001).⁵³ Later, particularly after the decline of company activity in the region after the Second World War, the Miskitu began to project a much reported perception of their own poverty in relation to others (e.g. Helms 1971: 156), one which informs, I believe, their ideas about the illegitimate generation of wealth.

In many Miskitu-speaking communities, the withdrawal of the companies from the region since the 1950s has meant a prolonged recession. Many Miskitu are now too young to remember the wealth that the presence of the companies supposedly brought to their villages, but all have heard that the early and middle years of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua (*somoza taim* - 'Somoza time') were prosperous and work was readily available. Only in some coastal communities since then, has the extraction of marine resources - turtle, fish, shrimp and lobster - generated significant income, but even in these the ethos of post-*somoza taim* poverty is wide-spread. Interestingly, in these latter coastal communities, of which Kakabila is one, this new market demands not the alienation of one's labour (as the companies did) but the (over-)exploitation of resources taken from the commons, which are then taken out of intra-village networks of reciprocal exchange and sold instead for cash to commercial buyers. In the meantime the diversion of labour away from agriculture has occasioned the emergence of a market (among specialising fishermen) for *breadkind* (horticultural foodstuffs) and game meat where once there was none. This has brought about a further 'digitalisation' of the moral and cash economies of the Miskitu, exacerbated by perceptions that the over-exploitation of the commons for the market place, and of fish in particular, is generating shortages (see Nietschmann 1973 and Kindblad 2001).

⁵² See Helms 1971: 25-33.

⁵³ Kindblad's (2001) imaginative and entirely convincing analysis of the displacement of 'analogic' encodings of exchange by 'digital' one, following Wilden's (1973) establishment of these terms in social science analysis, is focused on the coastal Miskitu of the period after 1960. I hope that he would agree with me that the process of 'digitalization' of exchange relations in the region predates this period, albeit with respect to phenomena other than those (marine resources) which he examines.



Discussion

The accelerating rate of changes to the fragile environment and, more importantly, an (apparently) capricious economy are, I suggest, responsible for the particular nature of Miskitu perceptions of their relation to the individuals who supposedly monitor these domains. The *dawanka*, responsible for regulating the supply of meat, fish, plants and so on, are, it seems, losing control of their domains, as market-oriented practices and shortages render redundant their performance of ‘traditional’ roles, the allocation of game and fish to hunters and fishers. They have, however, found another niche; one in which they are called upon not to account for relations between human and human, and human and non-human in terms of socially constitutive cycles of exchange, but rather to explain the mysteries of wealth generation within an opaque cash economy that favours amoral individualism, accumulation and secrecy over the morality of socially constitutive exchange relationships (Jamieson 2008).

The Miskitu of Kakabila thus present us with a context in which the scenario described by Parry and Bloch (1989) - that individualist ‘short term cycles of exchange’ are imagined to have displaced socially reproductive ‘long term cycles of exchange’ - has materialised. This is exactly the kind of context in which discourses lamenting the evils of money are likely to be found, according to these authors. What we find in Kakabila, however, are not accounts of the evils of money; only, rather, complaints by individuals that they have too little of it. Rather it is the little-understood processes which put money into the hands of the few, regardless of their social worthiness, and not into the hands of the more deserving, which are demonised; presented as contracts with ‘satans’, among which *dawanka* like Duwindu are prominent.

My reading of this material suggests that we Americanists may have something to learn from Africanists, especially those focused on witchcraft beliefs as these come to be reconstituted in terms of modern political economies. These Africanists have embraced the idea that relations with the ‘supernatural’ are usefully understood in terms of present-day economic realities, and they have produced an important body of work to demonstrate this (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, Moore and Sanders 2001).⁵⁴ Miskitu notions of relations with *dawanka* can usefully be understood in the same terms. Although very different in so far as they tend to be either non-human or semi-human figures, the Miskitu *dawanka*, like their African witch and sorcerer counterparts, have moved with the times, rationalising their businesses to accommodate new forms of what Marx famously calls ‘the relations of production’. This new way of understanding the business of *dawanka*, in terms of a model that is readily comprehensible and widely shared, makes sense of the generation of disparities in wealth produced by an increasingly complex regional economy which, as far as ordinary people can see, favours accumulation and hoarding over ‘traditional’ forms of gift-giving.

Coastal Miskitu experience relations of reproduction nowadays in terms of their positioning as petty commodity producers and occasional proletarians, subject to exploitation and incomprehensibly volatile and apparently capricious market prices, and many consequently have come to see their relations with the *dawanka* who supply natural resources and other goods as being founded on similar principles. Furthermore, relations with *dawanka*, like relations between humans, are imagined in terms of a zero-sum logic, in which supplicant and *dawanka* are positioned as unequally situated adversaries, each trying to outwit the other, the former seeking to get away with the wealth or whatever else is offered by the *dawanka*, the *dawanka* trying to enforce his or her claim to the

⁵⁴ The similar ideas of Nash (1979) and Taussig (1980) for the Bolivian tin miners have yet, it seems, to be embraced in Lowland American contexts.



supplicant's soul, first child, or whatever. Goods are not therefore reciprocally exchanged in a great, mutually beneficial cosmic loop, as for example among the Tukano described by Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971) but are, instead, obtained through thoroughly asymmetrical antagonistic encounters with dangerous and unpredictable others, often referred to as 'satans' (*setan nani*).

With the generation of wealth nowadays so obviously framed by encounters between antagonistic others (commodity producer versus buyer, capitalist versus proletarian, worker versus fellow worker) in an increasingly competitive market place, Miskitu have come to imagine the generation of wealth as a 'limited good' (Foster 1965), goods bound for others inevitably entailing the impoverishment of others (see Jamieson 2002a, 2002b).

Conclusion

I have tried to show in this article that analyses of beliefs centred on 'spirit owners' are usefully served by historically sensitive models. 'Spirit owners' in many Lowland Amerindian societies are frequently described as gatekeepers to resources, and ethnographic accounts frequently emphasise their custodial, benign nature, often rendering them static and ahistorical. The materials presented above, however, suggest that the social lives of these beings, at least those known to the Miskitu, are in fact complex and responsive to changing economic circumstances.

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