

## Video: A Conversation with Leaders of the Mayangna Nation

Interview with Mayangna Nation leaders, President Arisio Genaro Selso and Secretary Eloy Frank Gomez, in Siuna, RACCN, November 11, 2020.

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***Tortilla con Sal:*** *What is your perception of the seriousness of the problem of the intrusion of outsiders into indigenous lands, in your case of the Mayangna people?*

**Arisio Genaro Celso:** We need to go back a bit to the past, to remember some negative actions generated by past governments. To explain this simple situation. Bearing in mind, for example, this problem of the invasion of mestizo settlers from the Pacific, towards our lands in the Caribbean, indigenous lands, above all land of the Mayangna and Miskito, but especially the Mayangna, because the Bosawas Reserve is located inside, the Bosawas Reserve is within Mayangna territories because these have been our ancestral lands.

**TcS:** Does that include Miskito or Afro-descendant land?

**Arisio:** More Miskito, we have... there are, for example, the limits of the Mayangna territory border with the Miskito territory, but the problem of invasion is not between indigenous people, it is not between Miskitos and Mayangnas. It is more to do with mestizos coming from the Pacific. Why do I want to mention this? in order to go back to the 90's, to the government of Arnoldo Alemán. Arnoldo Alemán at the time was the one who promoted most, started and promoted the issue of what we call colonization by mestizos of the Caribbean, with the purpose of destabilizing the whole Autonomy project, which was being developed at that time. The Liberals then, led by Arnoldo Alemán, wanted a strategy, and the only way to disappear the Autonomy project in the Caribbean was to invade the Caribbean Coast with a mestizo population. And via that mestizo population take over indigenous lands so as to have control, most especially at election time, so that they would be favored with the votes of the mestizo settlers they were locating in those indigenous territories. I remember at the time the Nicaraguan army once detained about eight or ten trucks belonging to Liberal municipal authorities, full of mestizo people whom the Alemán government was sending to take over the lands on the Caribbean Coast.

Because the problem was also that back then, they made an interpretation and decided that the Caribbean Coast lands were national lands. There in itself was the question of recognition of the culture of the original peoples, we the Mayangna, for example, and the Miskitos too, traditionally ordered the territories into hunting areas, reproduction areas, artisanal mining areas, production areas, fishing areas, that is the way they have been ordered. So for example...

**TcS:** As part of the autonomy process?

**Arisio:** Before that. Before that. That has been the way the territories have been organized. With the Autonomy process, this was reinforced. The issue of ordering the territories well was reinforced. Prior to this, also talking about the years of 1979 after the Revolution, the indigenous peoples also knew their limits, where they could go hunting, where they could not go to cut down trees, because there were already large wooded areas or areas for the reproduction of bird species. So that area was taken care of. So for the mestizo culture of the Pacific, at that time, the people who arrived there said "There are 1200 manzanas of land but nobody lives there". For them, it was understood that they were national lands, because nobody lived there, however those were areas, territories belonging to the indigenous peoples where they went to hunt, they went to....

**TcS:** And they were also protected areas...?

**Arisio:** Correct. Those are protected areas, reserves, historically they are preserved. If you notice, the great Natural Reserve in Nicaragua is in the indigenous territories. For example, the Bosawas Reserve is in our Mayangna territories, which our ancestors, our forebears, our grandparents have been taking care of for generations. Because conservation is also part of the culture. For example, in our culture before, if a boy came and cut down a tree and left it lying down and did not use it, the community was punished. This is a rule designed to protect. In this way, values of protection and conservation of the environment and natural resources were instilled in our communities. Then, from that time on, the issue of the invasion of indigenous lands towards the Caribbean Coast began, that process started in the '90s, in the time of Arnaldo Alemán when he was in the government.

**TcS:** Not with Violeta?

**Arisio:** No, with Arnaldo Alemán. Although in Doña Violeta's time, they also set up kind of land banks to locate some of the Nicaraguan Resistance.

**Eloy Frank Gomez:** Permit me to say, first, we, the Mayangna People, are organized at the communal level, at the territorial level and the structure of the Mayangna Nation of which the compañero is President, and myself as Secretary. We represent nine territories, of which four territories are located within the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve, and five are outside the area of the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve.

What I want to say is that before 1990, we lived in our communities. We did not need to have documents. But with time from '90 around the time of the government of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, we, the Mayangna vision is to live in nature, to live with the relationship between nature and living beings. Life was in the land, rivers and forests. But for them, their interest was power.

They made commitments with their people and at that time in the '90s, they began to organize what they called development poles, without thinking about where, they had no lands there but they sent people on to our lands. On seeing that situation, we the Mayangna Nation organized to seek the title of communal property of the nine territories. Today, after 2007 with the arrival to power of our Commander Daniel, we have achieved the titling of our lands, an area of 8,101 square kilometers, titled and the title handed over by our Comandante Daniel to the communities.

So what happened earlier? As our president just explained, in that period of 15 years, the time of Violeta, the time of Arnaldo Alemán, the time of Enrique Bolaños, there they began promoting the invasion of our lands. But nowadays, we are able to enjoy this space, where we always historically lived with the land, today we have problems because as I was saying we have artisanal mining areas. But those areas, we, as our people use to survive for example at Christmas time, people work there but in an artisanal way, it was not on the scale of large exports but rather to solve basic needs.

Now, when they realize that, then other people, other peoples, in this case the mestizos, are now trying to take over. They go there because there are rivers, there is forest, there is gold, there is wood. We do not live off the export of wood, our life has been agriculture to feed our families, or hunting, fishing.

But now invasion is everywhere, the rivers are drying up, the rivers are drying up and our anxiety is for our government to sustain its interest in maintaining the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve, we all have to unite here at the level of the municipal and regional authorities.

On the other hand, we accuse the invaders, because these people are not poor people. They are individuals who have money and they send their people. They are not being sent by the government because there they not only clear land for pasture but rather they are like traffickers, land traffickers. They come in, they sell.

We don't have resources ourselves because those resources are there, we live with nature. But these people set out boundaries, and then they sell....

**TcS:** How can they sell if they don't have title? You have the title. So how can you sell it?

**Eloy:** That is why I said traffickers, mafia, because sometimes they go armed. For example, there some documents came to light claiming in such and such an area, but they are not in that area, rather they are inside Bosawas, with a rubric that might say Kukalaya, for example, with an area of such and such, but it is not in Kukalaya, instead it's in Bosawas. So there are various documents. There are forged documents, with forged signatures of the authorities.

We don't believe our government is doing that, because we have seen at various times how, rather, it has restored our right to property with title deeds. What happens is that people manipulate things and go out in the media to blame the government. We are convinced that it is not like that, rather it's the other way around and they want to take advantage of this situation for their political aspirations.

**Arisio:** It's worth highlighting some elements, elements of judgment on this issue, as the Secretary says.... It is necessary to see the situation of land trafficking from different perspectives as well. For example, the vision of our people and our communities, is one of respect, of coexistence, of harmonious relationship between the indigenous Mayangna and nature. Someone said to me, "Where do you Mayangnas have your pharmacy? Our pharmacies are the large natural reserves in the mountains, those are our pharmacies. However, in today's situation, with the large clearings that settlers are causing in the indigenous territories, they are also exterminating that material, those resources that we have, that natural pharmacy our communities have, that we have, that we have lived historically from traditional medicine, from the knowledge, from the wisdom of our culture. So, the culture of conservation, as I was saying, has been with us over time, for many

generations.

However, another perspective on the issue means looking at several elements. One is organized crime, because organized crime is fully involved in this issue of usurpation of indigenous property, trafficking of indigenous lands, even the sale of the wealth of indigenous lands. Apart from that, there are also armed groups, armed delinquents who come to harass, threaten the community members and dispossess the communities of their lands. We have this situation too.

Then again, there are political operators. For example, there have been episodes of incidents in some Mayangna and Miskito indigenous territories and there were also deaths in our indigenous territories because of the land issue. The settlers invading the lands, killing indigenous people.

But when we did some work on that and we realized that those who were behind this were regional councilors of Yatama, Yatama mayors, and even some of them, we could even say were deputies of Yatama, also involved in the sale of indigenous lands. The community members didn't know, the mestizos came in big numbers, families after families entering indigenous territories, for example in the area of the Rio Coco.

In certain areas of our communities in the Bosawas Reserve, which borders with Miskito land, many mestizo settlers came to enter our Mayangna lands. But how? Through these sales authorized by politicians from Yatama.

And another issue that is precisely well known, it's no secret is that the Liberal mayors and municipalities with mayors opposed to the government also promoted land trafficking, even financed organized groups, armed groups to invade indigenous lands and to dispossess the indigenous people of their lands. There is evidence of that.

We have spent years following this situation. And we know for example that in El Cuá and in San José de Bocay, the mayor in San José de Bocay, where there is a Mayangna territory, which was invaded and financed by the mayor who was at that time a Liberal. He financed the groups, that mayor. And what did he do? He recruited peasants and told them: get organized, go there, take the land. We will support you. And he gave them weapons and that is not a secret.

The indigenous people, we have been used to it, the Mayangnas if you look at the history of Nicaragua, the Mayangnas are one of the most peaceful people. For example, during the time of the war of the '80s, perhaps some communities got involved in the war in an involuntary and forced way as well. It was not their wish to go to Honduras there with the Nicaraguan Resistance. Many were kidnapped.

They have been a peaceful people, a peaceful culture. We do not go around inciting violence in these types of situations. So, from the political point of view, these political operators came to impose a war on us, that is, there was a personal interest, invading indigenous lands but the effect was unfortunate, because many families were displaced, both Miskito and Mayangna families.

**TcS:** Do you produce cattle on the lands of your people in Bosawas?

**Arizio:** In the lands that correspond to the area of the Reserve where our territories are

located, there is very little cattle ranching, or only recently, one might say. But it is on a minimal scale. In the Caribbean Coast there is cattle ranching, but more in areas that are not indigenous territories, but there is ranching on the Caribbean Coast on private properties, where people from the Pacific have come to buy private property and what they have done is perhaps double the rate of cattle ranching... Look, the issue of the invasions is this, what we are seeing is that the invasion of indigenous lands by mestizos is for two reasons.

Many are dedicated to large-scale production. Indigenous farmers work the land only to sustain their families, for subsistence self-consumption. On the other hand, the mestizo farmer produces more, works the land more because he trades the product. They are dedicated to selling their produce. The indigenous are not. The indigenous Mayangna work, they keep their produce but for their own consumption, their self-consumption. So, yes, work and production have increased, but in the buffer zones which are protected, because as you know indigenous lands are inside the Reserve, but inside the Reserve too is the core zone, so not in the core zone, which has the main concentration of forestry reserves and biodiversity, so we also have the core area near the heart of the Reserve.

But these cases get a different treatment. For example, with the settlers in the buffer zone in the indigenous territories, an agreement has been made, for example, you can stay on those lands but with the agreement that at the same time you are going to remain and produce there, but you are going to protect them so that no more families enter, so that they do not continue causing damage, causing a lot of deforestation.

We should explain that we, for example, the government of the Mayangna Nation, we are an indigenous institution with a national character that covers six territories nationally with 75 communities and we also participate in government decision making. We are members of the National Commission for the Defense of Mother Earth where there is also the Army, the Police, the Attorney General's Office, the Supreme Court, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Regional Government, the Secretariat of the Caribbean Coast, the entire government structure, also MARENA, we are part of it.

Now, what happens? This allows us to do advocacy work, to be able to dialogue, to make proposals to the government, and also to participate in decision making. Before, we did not have that possibility. Before, we were not mentioned. What was the political reality of the indigenous peoples in the Caribbean from the '90s until 2006, for example? That was the period where we lived with racism and discrimination practiced on a large scale. So we can say, there was a situation of terrible discrimination against the indigenous people by the neoliberal governments. And that is not a lie. That is a reality with facts that people lived.

There was a period in the '90s when that situation was very difficult. Why? Because all the functionaries came from Managua, they came to govern here in the Caribbean Coast. Here the indigenous peoples had no opportunities, they had no right to express their opinion, to participate in the decision making process over policies that were made at the whim of the government. So, look now, for example, as of 2006, or before even, from '79 in the first stage of the Revolution, this issue was changed. It was already improving so as to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples.

For example, there are many important elements. The issue of education in the languages of the indigenous peoples, the issue of the restitution of their rights to indigenous territories. This issue was being worked on during the first stage of the Revolution. For example, talking

about a health model that gathers the knowledge and experience and the wisdom of the indigenous peoples' traditional medicine. Examples of this type.

Now, since 2006, the hold up of the Autonomy project has been reversed and it has become more concrete. How? In fact, take the example of the existence of regional government structures. This has allowed the region to manage all its political, social and cultural issues. Everything.

That is what is happening. For example, since 2006, the autonomous institutions have been strengthened. For example, here we have what you mentioned, there is a Regional Secretariat of Natural Resources, SERENA, so here everything is coordinated with Managua, Managua coordinates with these institutions, for example we have here a Regional Secretariat of Education that is working and administering the whole model of Intercultural Bilingual Education, to strengthen the issue of indigenous languages and to rescue the literary culture of our peoples. We have a regional health model, a regional and intercultural health model that also incorporates the knowledge and wisdom of the indigenous peoples in this health model. And in this way, Western knowledge and the knowledge of the native peoples work together. These are some of the experiences, right?

So we have been working on how all this has been restored, how this strengthening of Autonomy has been worked out, and another element that must be highlighted, for example. Before, we can say that indigenous peoples were relegated, there was no recognition by previous governments. Today, since the creation of the Territorial Governments, their territories have been restored. The government is making a broad recognition to all these peoples, to these territorial governments.

As regards what you were saying, about how are they financed, the government is funding the strengthening of these indigenous institutions, the indigenous territorial governments because they have an economic allocation from the government's national budget from the Ministry of Finance. What for? To strengthen capacity and develop capacity in such a way that these structures of the indigenous governments, which are the indigenous institutions, do support some social things but also pay attention to all the organizational matters within their communities. So they also have an economic allocation like other institutions.

**Eloy:** For example, every 2 or 3 months the regional government convenes the territories, the territorial governments of the whole region. There, the communities participate and present their proposals to the government. This is a way, a new way for the Mayangna people to participate in this system of government.

**Arisio:** Something else that is important, we have talked about the issue of the Reserve. During those three neoliberal governments, there was a large project financed by GTZ, the Germans at the time. It was a large project in the Bosawás Reserve. We are often asked this question and I remember that at the time they called a consultation meeting with all the leaders of the territorial governments of the indigenous territories within the Reserve.

It was understood that it was also for the indigenous peoples to make proposals for development programs within their territories and that they were going to be financed by that project for the Bosawas of the GTZ, of the Germans. The question is that the project ended without taking note of various irregularities. And what happened with that project? Instead of stopping, for example, the issue of the invasion of the colonists, it got worse,



expanded, increased the invasion.

So what are we trying to say? It's that there are organizations, NGOs that use the name of the indigenous peoples and indigenous organizations to make accusations against the government, to denigrate the government, to try to destroy the government's image and that of the work it does within the protected areas, for example, in the case of the Río San Juan, for example, or in the case of the Indio Maíz Reserve, and here in the case of the Bosawas Reserve.

However, at the time, when their side had power, there was no decision for indigenous people to participate in decisions so that the decisions would have some real effect. At no time was this the case. For example, right now there is an issue that is very topical now that is under discussion, which is the issue of the Bioclimate, the Green Fund, a project. This is an issue that at least.... What was done? A consultation process was carried out with the territories within the Reserve.

**TcS:** Someone told me that they held 400 assemblies

**Arisio:** That is why I am telling you, there were consultations, at least with the Mayangna territories, they were part of the consultation team as well. With a national team sent by the government, the Mayangna Nation provided a team of personnel to participate in the consultation, so that they could also participate in the design of the project, what they want to do, how it is going to be done, why it is going to be done, where it is going to be implemented and how it is going to be implemented. The point is that now anyway it is possible for indigenous peoples to participate in the decision making process.

For example, there is much mention of the issue of prior, free and informed consultation, where the indigenous peoples also have the right to participate, to be consulted when a program or project is to be implemented and executed in their territories, and this process has been complied with. The indigenous people are taken into account for consultation, for example this project was all about the deforested areas due to the self-same effect of the invasions of the settlers, how they were going to work on the natural regeneration of trees for example, or they are going to work on reforestation projects in all those areas to give life back to those affected areas and this has been coordinated with the territorial governments, with the indigenous institutions.

And it wasn't before. Before, there was this great project for Bosawas, it was worse, there was no consultation, the decisions weren't taken by the indigenous communities. However now things are different, so this is an opportunity for the indigenous peoples, this recognition, this respect of the government towards indigenous institutions, towards indigenous peoples and this also allows indigenous peoples to participate directly and broadly in the decisions that are being taken.

On the issue of artisanal mining in the Mayangna territories, for example, in the Mayangna territories and in the Reserve we don't have problems with mining companies, with the large mining companies that are in the indigenous territories. No. We do not have that problem. The problem is with groups of settlers, because it is known that we have large mining reserves in our territories. So, people, as the compañero said, settlers enter for two reasons. One is to take advantage of the mining reserves that we have, and the other is to try and take over land for production.

**TcS:** But they do it illegally, right? Because in order to do it legally, they have to have a document that allows them to do that work.

**Eloy:** There is a management plan in the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve where the use of this resource by the community members is outlined. That is why I mentioned earlier that our people do not work permanently in the reserve – for example, maybe in December, September, a few people go and work for a week like this ..... That is why nature is virgin in the Reserve and that is why we do not want other people to go there, because other people have other cultures, as I was saying, they make large land clearings and they want to bring in machinery and we do not agree with this....

**Arisio:** With the large extractive mining companies we do not have that problem but yes, for example, over the long term, many of the settlers that are invading come and establish themselves in a violent way, not with the consent of the communities. That is the problem we have had there but we are also working on it and that is another point....

As a result of this whole situation of invasion, an experience is being developed and in the case of the Mayangna territories our territorial governments and the national instance which is us, the government of the Mayangna Nation, we are making an articulated effort with the Army and the Police and also with some groups of indigenous forest rangers in which there is recognition for example from the police to these forest rangers. Even... How is this coordinated?

The rangers do their patrols, the Mayangna indigenous rangers do their patrols of the boundaries and if there are settlers and they are there without authorization or without permission or something like that, they detain them and bring them and hand them over to the police. But there are also joint patrols with the National Police and the Army, the Ecological Battalion. So what exactly are we doing?

So far we have consolidated this working relationship, this inter-institutional coordination on this matter between the Mayangna Nation, the territorial governments, the National Police, MARENA and the Nicaraguan Army. So that is how patrols are carried out, that is how surveillance and protection are carried out. But of course, this requires more effort, an effort between all the parties concerned because it implies resources in order to happen.

Because, for example, the police cannot be there, let's say, for a month. When they go, to set boundaries, to clean up the boundaries or to make patrols. So these are quick interventions, maybe four or five days to see how the area is, if there is more invasion, or if there is more encroachment, if there is more settlement, if there is, for example.... MARENA accompanies these visits, these patrols, to identify the damage that has been caused, and if they identify the people that are going around with chainsaws, these invaders, then on the order from MARENA these people are captured and brought to court, where they are prosecuted and MARENA, for example, accuses them of environmental damage, the indigenous territorial governments accuse them of usurpation of indigenous property. What we feel is that we have made progress in consolidating this working relationship with these institutions.

We have good communication with the National Police in the Mining Triangle, for example here where we have four or five Mayangna territories, which are also within the reserve, and with the Army. So, we work on a plan, we present a joint plan, we have meetings with the police and the Army, with BECO, the Ecological Battalion, with MARENA. A plan is made, the



plan is shared, the necessary resources are negotiated and the patrolling plan is made. Now we don't have many problems with that.

We have overcome that, because before it was difficult, very difficult for the Army to get involved, or for the police to get involved in these issues of indigenous land ownership. But not now. Now they are participating and accompanying the indigenous peoples and the relationship between the police and the Army and the indigenous peoples in our case here, we have a good experience. We always get advised, for example if there is a change of authorities in the Army or the police, they share with us, they invite us, we are always working with them.

**TcS:** Is it fair to say that there has also been an improvement in terms of your relationship with the Attorney General's Office?

**Arisio:** Of course. Look, in this particular, the good things must be highlighted, must be mentioned. That is why I was telling you, during this period of the second stage of the Revolution, as we call it, on the issue of the restitution of rights of the indigenous peoples, in our case the Mayangnas, we feel that there is greater recognition, greater respect, greater opportunity. On that score, for example, we have had some situations.

For example, if the forest rangers or the police brought and captured the settlers and brought them to the courts, it used to happen that after three, four days, they would release them immediately and let them go. Why? So there were some anomalous situations within the system and then we started to raise with the government institutions, with the same government authorities, in the National Commission that we needed more support from the Court, for example, from the Supreme Court of Justice, from the Public Prosecutor's Office, from the Public Defender's Office, even from the PGR itself, and there has been progress on this issue.

Progress has been made. Why? Because the government authorized the creation of a body within the courts, namely the figure of Defenders of Indigenous Peoples was created, wherever there is the presence of indigenous population. What is the function of these Defenders? It is the direct accompaniment these Defenders provide to the indigenous organizations for the judicial process of settlers, those who are destroying the environment, all these types of cases. So there is greater accompaniment.

And the other thing, the other important element is that we have also achieved is that, within the judiciary, our indigenous officials also hold positions in the courts. So now the recent appointments of the Defenders of Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples are also indigenous people who speak the indigenous languages, because that is the other element, which for us is vital, this is important, that there is an indigenous official in the judiciary for example in the courts, because a Mayangna or Miskito indigenous person may arrive who does not speak Spanish so he has communication problems as well as all the problem of procedural delays, perhaps to do with the charges that have to be made or whatever other legal procedures that may need to be carried out?

So now this is an issue that the government has guaranteed, that in all the municipalities where indigenous peoples are present there will also be functionaries who speak indigenous languages. And this is something important because now these Defenders of Indigenous Peoples are accompanying the organizations to file the complaint because sometimes due to technical issues, perhaps the sisters and brothers of the indigenous organizations cannot

lodge an accusation correctly, with the relevant technical criteria, so these Defenders of Indigenous Peoples accompany them to make or place the accusation and prepare all the corresponding process so that the case is formalized, that the accusation is duly filed and that those guilty of the damage being caused in the territories are punished.

**TcS:** How do you view the work of NGOs led by people like Lottie Cunningham?

**Arisio:** Look at CEJUDHCAN, CEJUDHCAN for Lottie Cunningham is like her piggy bank. Maybe you know the term piggy bank, right? That's CEJUDHCAN because CEJUDHCAN is not the institution she claims or as it projects itself at the international level, as an organization or institution defending indigenous rights. Why doesn't she ever consult us? Why doesn't she come to the communities to consult us? Why not our national leadership which is who we are, leading the national government of the Mayangna Nation, or else to the presidents in our territorial governments...? She is not present. She speaks from afar.

She uses the indigenous name. She uses it without having been there, when the events are taking place. For example, when the Alal case occurred, up there in the Reserve, she said that the government was not defending the indigenous people. But there are also other elements we should also mention, so there is the potential of all efforts that have made progress, in which we have advanced together with the government institutions for the defense of Mother Earth, but there are also some weaknesses that we have for example. And what does Lottie do? Lottie works with opposition activists practically. They are people who live as we Nicaraguans say, making accusations against the government, talking badly about the government. So she takes that and exploits it to say that the government does such and such, but really if it were the organization she says it is, she should be open to consultation. But she is not. She just turns up for a short while. And sometimes she exaggerates things. And she makes use of the indigenous peoples. And that is why, as we have always said, that is why Autonomy gave us the right for each native indigenous people to have its own voice.

No one can represent them ever. We were clear and categorical. Brooklyn Rivera said: I am the leader of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean Coast. We have to say that this is not true, this is a lie. Brooklyn Rivera does not represent the Mayangnas. The Mayangnas have our own indigenous institutions, they have their own government of their Nation that is of a national character and at the same time they have their territorial governments in the municipalities.

So each one has its own voice. They give their opinion. They contribute. They can say and decide on the model of government, the governance that is being developed there in the communities, but it isn't that Brooklyn or Yatama can come and say: I represent the indigenous people of Nicaragua. Because that is not true. Because here each people is sovereign. Each people has its autonomy. We have a regime of self-determination so that each people can decide for itself.

**TcS:** In the case of Alal, what is your appreciation of that terrible incident? How do you perceive it?

**Eloy:** At root, there was a problem of settlers who attacked the community, but afterwards the government, its institutions immediately attended to the community, rebuilt the houses, provided care, ensured the presence of the police and the Army to guarantee the security of

the families. So, the government has looked after and continues to look after the families of Alal.

**TcS:** Was it a criminal gang of the type of organized crime? What was it?

**Eloy:** Yes, they were practically organized settlers, criminal gangs. But the police and the army did their job, and that situation has calmed down.

**Arisio:** I think that, as I was saying at the beginning, cattle ranching in the Caribbean has grown, has increased, there's a boom, but as I was saying, for example, the boom in cattle raising is on private properties. Because here, for example, where we are in the Mining Triangle, there have been many people who had private properties with large extensions of land, but they did not make much use of them. The landowner maybe had few animals but they had large amounts of land, then the farmers from the Pacific came and since they are private properties, then they buy and start to put in a lot of cattle.

Of course, after a year there is an valuable production of these cattle and there are many people who will remark how many cattle trucks are leaving the Caribbean Coast for the slaughterhouses because this cattle ranching has really grown. But as I was saying, for example, in our area in the Reserve, we have seen very little extensive cattle ranching. There we have seen more agricultural production, and the artisanal mining activities. Yes, but in fact these things have to be regulated.

**TcS:** In relation to deforestation, are you optimistic that there is slowly a process that will reverse this? Or is it going to be a problem that will become even more acute?

**Arisio:** We consider that this issue is going to improve. Improve because government institutions are paying attention to the issue. An effort is also being made to make large investments in these affected areas, and in fact there are also some local initiatives on the part of the territorial governments in conjunction with some environmental institutions, MARENA, INAFOR. For example, there is a youth group called Guardabarranco and in the municipalities they coordinate with INAFOR, which has large tree nurseries, and they deliver the plants so that they can work for example in some watersheds where they are quite degraded and reforestation work is being done.

So this is important, for example, in all the boundaries, the boundaries marking Mayangna territories, they are planting fruit trees or other types of trees for timber, in order to recover from the deforestation in our Reserve in some cases where there was damage and there are plans for the future to continue working on this.

**TcS:** There are people who criticize the indigenous peoples and say that they themselves or people within the indigenous populations break the rules. How true is this phenomenon in your experience?

**Eloy:** According to our assessment of the matter, yes there are some irresponsible people who commit these types of crimes. But maybe they don't involve the large extensions that get mentioned, because the settlers also have the strategy of using that, those people, to traffic large extensions of land. But we have already proved that there are Mayangnas who are also involved in this illegal business.

**TcS:** Yes, because I imagine that they offer bribes...

**Arisio:** Yes, because there are good children and bad children anywhere, so unfortunately we have cases, for example, of some situations of violence that have occurred in some territories and so on, practically for that very reason. Although within the norms, within the statutes that we have of the constitution of the national organization, it mentions and is categorical in that sense, and it states that any Mayangna, be it an authority or someone from the community that incurs in the crime of buying and selling or trafficking of lands, has to be tried according to the laws of the State of Nicaragua.

And in that particular there are also brother mayangnas who are serving jail time for the sale of land, they are convicted and also there is this other issue that must be mentioned. Namely there are groups, there are mafia, criminal groups that are dedicated to land trafficking, recruiting peasants and putting them on indigenous lands, and then when that's done, it is not the peasants who are the owners of the land but other people who have money.

We were surprised recently when a helicopter arrived in a community and landed near a farm that is near an indigenous community, so everybody was startled, what was going on? Everybody was abuzz, could it be narcos or who could it be? Even the police arrived. The police arrived and they found out that it was a cattle rancher who has many farms here in the Caribbean zone, and he flew over because he had a friend who is also a cattle rancher with land there and he came to visit him on his birthday.

The peasants do what they are told. Someone tells them to take 200,000 pesos, go, get in there, do this, buy, and when the tensions calm down and there is no longer a problem, there he comes with th fancy SUVs, or some fancy thing like that helicopter. So, as often as not there are different situations. They use the peasants, they swindle them too, and there are also cases of indigenous brothers who have dedicated themselves to this. And as I was saying, they have been prosecuted by the law. They are serving jail time.

**TcS:** In general, do you think that the situation is getting better or worse in terms of invasions?

**Arisio:** Well, the situation is quite moderate, there is nothing massive like it was at some point. Maybe there are four or five families, in some sectors, but there are other sectors where they continue to enter from other parts because we have to take into account, for example, the territory of Siquita, this Maynagna territory of ours here in Siuna, but there is a part of this territory that borders with the department of Jinotega with the area of San José de Bocay, so they are border territories one could say, because it borders with Siuna, it borders with Jinotega, it borders with Bonanza, so settlers enter there from all sides and sometimes it is uncontrollable. While in another territory, for example one that is in the center between Rosita and Bonanza, but it does not have much border with other departments with a mestizo population, so there is less of an invasion issue.

**TcS:** And how is your relationship with your fellow Miskitos?

**Eloy:** As Mayangnas, we each have our limits there and we have no problems with them, as people there is good communication. Besides that, I mentioned the Mayangna territories and the Miskito territories through the regional government meet every so often and there they share the situations of their territories. So I consider that there are no problems between Mayangnas and Miskitos.

**Arisio:** Maybe we have to reinforce what the compañero says in the case of the relationship between the Miskitos and the Mayangnas. I think it can be said that the experience of life has marked a direction, a guideline, a route to follow. I believe that the experience that both the Mayangnas and the Miskitos have lived through because of this issue of the invasion of property, has made them more aware of the unity between indigenous peoples in Nicaragua. Because now it's being pointed out that we cannot be divided. It doesn't matter if you are Krioll, Miskito or Mayangna, but here the problem is the same, and we all have to be united to face this situation. If we are more united we are stronger, better able to sit down, to make proposals to the government.

And the government itself sees that we are united. And I think that on that score many achievements have been reached, and it has been because that culture of internal conflicts that there may have been perhaps before...because during the '80s the ethnic war in the Caribbean Coast was also not only against the government, but also between the Miskitos and the Mayangnas there were conflicts, and before of course there has been an history of antagonism. The Miskitos and Mayangnas never got along well because the Miskitos kidnapped Mayangna women and children, stole their property, burned their communities. So the elders as I told you at the beginning, remember we lived like this, we suffered like this because the Mayangna communities in Nicaragua, if you check the map of Nicaragua, the location of the Mayangna communities mostly, maybe ninety percent of the communities, are in the rural areas, in the big mountains.

So many elders say that we are here because they persecuted us, they wanted to exterminate us, and it was a way to defend ourselves, to protect ourselves in the mountains, to protect ourselves in the mountains from the Miskitos so that they would not exterminate us. So there were stories of that kind, but I think we are now living another reality, we are living another situation. Both we and the Miskito sisters and brothers have realized that this is a thing of the past and that the reality is different now and we have to be united as peoples, and that has strengthened us, and has brought us progress and has allowed us to do many things. So we have come a long way and we have overcome the past.

**Eloy:** It might be worth saying that I was talking in a personal sense, because the Miskitos have their organizations and we have to see that. As for the Yatama structure, not all Miskitos are from Yatama.

**Arisio:** And there are internal situations as well. Don't think for a moment that internally they don't have their conflicts and here there is another element that is important. Before there was a feeling... there was a mistrust perhaps on the part of the Mayangnas towards the Miskitos, one might say. The Miskitos were in power during the Liberal governments. Sixteen years they had control of the Regional Council governing body. And during that period the Mayangnas were forgotten, they kept everything for themselves. And it was not all their Miskito people that received those benefits, it was just a group of them. It was a Yatama elite that benefited from that.

But thanks to the second stage of the Revolution, there was recognition and institutionalization of the territorial governments, and the allocation of a budget to each one. This also allowed for greater autonomy and better governance for the territorial governments to administer their own territories.

**TcS:** When did this reorganization of the territorial governments take place, in what year?

**Eloy:** From two thousand nine onwards...

**TcS:** There is a topic that I had completely forgotten about... What do you understand by the phrase “remediation” and what does that mean?

**Eloy:** For example, according to Law 445 there are five stages. Law 445 has five stages for the property titling process. So, we complied with all of them. The last stage is remediation. And that is a legal term. For us at the moment we think that there is another way of dealing with it that can be a reordering of property. For example, in the zone mentioned by our colleague, perhaps people are currently entering there without knowing that this area is a conservation area. Well, neither we nor the indigenous peoples can live there.

So, one way of managing that could be to place them in another part of a buffer zone of the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve. We think that this is the term “reordering”, to bring order to our property. If someone came here, and we don’t want them to be there, we want them to be in another part. But that has to come about through the opinion of the majority of our population through a communal assembly, a territorial assembly of the people themselves. That is to say, there in the assembly they can approve if those people can be there or not.

**Arisio:** We have to understand that the concept of remediation does not directly imply eviction. In other words, it is not only eviction. The issue of remediation also has different concepts from the point of view that remediation also has to do with the way in which we establish the mechanisms for coexistence. We cannot enter a situation where there is already conflict, and go and stoke that conflict even more, but it has to be a strategy proposed by the indigenous peoples.

For example, let’s be clear, when the situation of Alal occurred, we Mayangnas did not go to shout to the four winds, nor make riots or demonstrations against the government, because we have a direct communication channel from the Mayangna Nation to central government. We who speaking to you now are the spokespersons for the problems, the situations in the territorial governments, and we make the national government aware of what is going on. What happened? We said we need to sit down to review this situation of Alal. What was the next step after this situation? Immediately, the government ordered that the police must be there, the army must be there, the PGR must be there, all the structures of the responsible institutions must be there to look for a way out of this problem. To make an analysis of why, what generated, what provoked, that conflict, those deaths. What response we give to that situation. And we directly drew up a balance, an analysis, and we realized that also in certain sectors of Mayangna territory, in the areas of Musawas, Alal, all that area there and also another part, for example, the Betlel River, Suliwas, people had entered in an uncontrolled way, they had taken lands, some even went as far as to fence off part of the properties of the indigenous people, so that cannot be...

In these cases of extreme situations, where indigenous people are no longer allowed freedom of movement, freedom to produce, and feel under siege, we cannot allow it. We have to evict. And so we coordinated with the government institutions and the evictions of the 140-odd families in the area of the Reserve were carried out in coordination with our government institutions. That is why I was telling you that we have no problems with the relationship between the police and the Army and the government and the indigenous communities. And this was an example, a demonstration that yes, we work, we coordinate, we articulate with government institutions. The eviction of these families that had invaded that territory, that area, those 140-odd families, was carried out.



And then, what did we do? Then, their representatives arrived to say yes, we recognize that these are your lands, we respect that, but we want to live there, we want to return, we want to go back. But what was the basic idea? Really to give indigenous peoples the opportunity to decide what they want, how they want to administer their territory. And on that score the government has never denied that. On the contrary, it has said, well, you are free, decide what you want, if you want to, are you going to lease your territory or do you want eviction? An example, right?

And what was done? Immediately the territorial assembly was summoned to know what the decision was. A consultation was made to know the consent of the communities, what they thought about this case. Immediately, 23 communities gathered from that territory. And the communities said well, we want our territory to be cleaned up, but more in the complex zones, where I mentioned, where they no longer allow free circulation because there are zones in the buffer zone, which are being treated differently and there is a different spirit and type of dialogue with the peasants as well. As I was saying... they remain, but under an agreement with the owners of the territories. Some can stay, some cannot, but always maintaining that balance of dialogue, peace and tranquility because what everyone wants is to avoid the type of violent situation that happened in Alal.

These are the strategies that are being used. So, remediation is not only ordering evictions, dialogue is also part of it. And it also has to do with the process of reviewing indigenous properties. For example, there are rural families who once went and bought indigenous lands and went to register them in the property registry of the region, but they cannot, the law says no, it is not allowed, it is illegal. So remediation is also part of that, reviewing all the documentation and if people went and register it when it was indigenous land, well, a revocation is made.

This is also part of the remediation, it is part of the reordering of the territories. So maybe the position of someone like Lottie who goes around saying that the remediation is not being done or that such and such is being done, is not correct. Each person manages their discourse as they please, according to their interests. And we and our people say what we are seeing, what we are living, what we are experiencing, what we are living in the communities. Our vision is different because we are living the experience ourselves. So one can go around with a legal document and it can be made out to mean anything... really...

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