

Nicaragua's Indigenous Territory Wangki Awala Kupia

Interview with Rose Cunningham Kain, Mayor of Waspám, president of the Territorial Indigenous Government of Wangki Awala Kupia

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Tortilla con Sal: *We came to ask about the problem of so-called invasions of indigenous lands, so perhaps you could tell us a little bit about the reality, perhaps bit about the historical context and what the reality is now?*

Rose Cunningham Kain: I think in today's world, there are so many ways to distort history. There are so many ways to make up stories to believe that sometimes one is amazed at the stories that people tell about one's life. I think they are very disrespectful in that sense. Indeed, in the Río Coco communities, we have had about six communities that have had serious difficulties with people who have invaded indigenous lands.

Indigenous lands and remediation

All these invasions began in the 1990s when the government presided by Doña Violeta assigned some lands to ex-combatants, also violating the indigenous rights over indigenous people's lands. Back then she gave some locations so that indigenous people could subsist who had been in the conflict and many of them returned without a serious process of social reinsertion. “Take your machete, your waterproof boots, and three sheets of zinc and demobilize”. There was no serious social reinsertion process. Therefore, these indigenous people started selling land to non-indigenous people. And that's where all the invasions began... that process began.

But, please note that the dimension of the problem is not the one that is depicted. In other words, as if there was chaos here, as if there was a great conflict here. We have different indigenous territories. In this municipality there are seven indigenous territories and I am president of one of those indigenous territories. In one indigenous territory, the people have been protecting their lands through a model of forest rangers. Forest rangers have been taking care of all the part that corresponds to them as a territory. And that is the Li Lani model.

There is another territory called Li Aubra. So they have their own groups of forest rangers that protect the area. Li Lani is made up of 27 communities. They protect their area and

they do not have any type of conflict to date with non-indigenous people. They have not had any invasion of non-indigenous people on their lands. Their methodology has been working. Then we have the other methodology, the other model, which is the Li Aubra model. Li Aubra is the middle part of the river basin. This model has been developed by the indigenous leaders of 18 communities that have initiated a process with their territorial government of talks with non-indigenous people.

TcS: Is that what is meant by remediation?

Rose: The first remediation we should talk about is remediation via the social reinsertion of the people. In law, remediation has to do with seeing that the territory of the indigenous peoples does not have any type of conflict due to properties overlapping that might exist there. But in the context of our whole history of struggle for rights as indigenous peoples, we have had historical legal achievements that have not been seen in the overall indigenous movement, at least in Latin America, namely to have a law of indigenous peoples' property... that empowers us for the use, enjoyment and enjoyment of our resources.

So, the presence of non-indigenous people in our lands logically creates tension for us because it means that these non-indigenous people are occupying our lands, they are occupying our resources. For this situation, the territorial government of Li Aubra initiated a couple of years ago contact with the non-indigenous people and dialogues, talks. We have been observing the meetings that are held between indigenous and non-indigenous people. Indigenous people meet in their communities and build consensus on whether or not they want to expel them, whether or not they want to lease to them, whether or not they want to live or not to live with them. And then, they get together. There are some mining properties, some mines where there are non-indigenous people, and they have managed to go and make agreements with them in situ.

At this point, the Li Aubra model is a model in which the indigenous families have already been building consensus to discuss with non-indigenous people the legality of their presence on indigenous peoples' lands. And there you have to respect the self-determination of the people and our government does that. It is a door, a window that has been opened to us to be able to exercise our rights. So, some of the communities, in this territory what we want to do is agree a lease, and the law permits that.

In other communities they have said that what we need is to change. To change is for the the non indigenous settlers to go back, to expel them, to remove them. And they continue talking, they continue dialoguing, no consensus is built in a single assembly... in the framework of the indigenous peoples. We always leave for tomorrow another little bit more and we go on talking and going deeper in the effort to reach a consensus. Because that is precisely why it is a consensus. So one of the... one of our basic practices is to build consensus with sincere dialogue and in good faith.

The other model is the model of the territory of Wangki Twi Tasba Raya where you just came from, which is pure forest, beautiful, the pine trees, right? That landscape, the people love their landscape, they love their trees, they love their water, their resources. There the model that is being developed is the judicial model. It is to be able to capture invaders on indigenous lands and put them through a legal process where they come to trial and currently they already have seven people who have been convicted for buying or selling indigenous lands. This is another type of process that is being carried out in this other

territory.

This territory of Wangki Maya, which also belongs to this municipality, is a territory free of invaders. It is free of invaders. In Waspam we could say that we have a territory, the Wangki Awala Kupia territory, which is part of Waspam municipality, here where you are currently. It is a territory where we have a harmonious coexistence. Because we have indigenous Miskito and we always say to the non-indigenous, the mestizos of the Pacific, that we call them hispanes, Spaniards. Now we call them indigenous too, it's just that they lost their identity along their way in life.

But, here in Waspam we are practicing coexistence with those who have come to settle in Waspam. So in this municipality we have different models of relations with non-indigenous peoples, with non-indigenous settlers. At this moment in the context of the hurricane, we have also had news of agricultural losses these non-indigenous people have suffered too. And as the mayor's office we have to listen to them because they are Nicaraguan citizens. They have human rights. They are human too.

What is true is that we always call on them to reach agreement with the indigenous peoples. Either they leave or they come to an agreement with the owners of the land. The last violent activity must have been in about 2013/14. We have not had violent activities in this part of our territory. Here we have seen meetings where people speak their minds. We have documented meetings that have taken place in the mountains between non-indigenous settlers and indigenous settlers where 17 communities, leaders of 17 communities, come together and walk to meet at a certain point.

The NGOs, Lottie Cunningham

I think that, like this person, there are many who take advantage of the poverty and conflict of others. That is not and never has been the spirit of the creation of non-governmental organizations. For me, non-governmental organizations should not want to profit from poverty or people's conflicts. And when I say poverty, it's not that we are poor. We have been impoverished by the same people who have funded the people who say that we live in conflict. Yes, because we have our wealth. And we have the capacity to make decisions about our wealth because that is what the law allows us to do, and this law is a law that we are executing from every point of view.

We are... there are some organizations that you can see here in the shelters, in this emergency mobilization to protect us against hurricanes, organizations that are working together with the State, that believe in the State because they have seen how it works. But there are other organizations that have even reached out to people sheltering against these winds and hurricanes to talk to them suggesting "Isn't it true that the government doesn't feed you? Isn't it true that things are very bad? That kind of harmful, corrupt, underhand manipulation, and those are the same people who then say that we are in conflict.

We have had conflicts. We have had problems. But we have been overcoming all that and trying with the people of the communities to reach our full potential as indigenous peoples. Exercising and living in the exercise of our rights. So, it is a pity that there are Miskitos who found an easy life through those who finance evil. A pity also that they some even say sometimes they are Christians. And that is an issue. Let's not go into that issue but yes, they go to mass, they take communion and they put on their Sunday best but they are incapable of having compassion for their indigenous brothers and sisters who are trying to

get ahead.

It is a big lie and we have not had that kind of conflict for many years. We are building peace. Peace is not just words. Peace is a process. And the social reinsertion after the eighties, when the counterrevolution was also financed from the north, that peace process that led us to Autonomy, we continue to weave it, we continue to build it, and we continue to strengthen it. And today, after 33 years of Autonomy, we feel, and I in particular feel very proud to see how our community leaders are able to give you an interview and tell you the reality. And they know where the bad is and where the good is.

Cattle

TcS: Specifically in relation to cattle, can you give us a profile of how cattle are managed here in the municipality of Waspam?

Rose: The cattle in the municipality of Waspam, the cattle among us indigenous people, I remember my father, who is no longer alive, who used to name each one of the cows. Our cattle were cattle we kept like a piggy bank, like our own bank, so cattle that perhaps we might slaughter maybe would for a wake. Or if we had to send our son to school, or at Christmas time. Cattle here has been like pets in other countries. And little by little we have been making a shift to having more cattle. But here there has been no certification process to permit meat exports. That is not true.

The people here supply the local market and, as often as not with some difficulty, we manage to find someone who wants to butcher their cattle for the local market. Of course, in the last few years we have been encouraging people to improve their cattle stock, so that IPSA can do its work teaching us how to improve our cattle rearing. But we keep animals on a very small scale. So this report saying that settlers are killing us for land to raise cattle on is not true either. That is not true. Not one cattle rancher has died here, not one Miskito involved in any kind of cattle related killing. It's a Disney World story, maybe, a Mickey Mouse story, who knows. But it is not a real story of this municipality Waspam or any of these municipalities where there are indigenous peoples.

Because we love our cattle very much still . I am sure that when you go down the road you will find cattle there walking among the people and that very harmonious relationship between all of us whether we have cattle or not. In fact, cattle are wandering around, in many cases without being fenced off, without a place to keep them, and occasionally we even joke among ourselves because in some cases our people don't like to milk our cows. It is our culture. It is a different way of thinking about cattle raising.

TcS: I understand that because of the communal management of cattle, the IPSA system, which is based on farmsteads, on the registration of individual farms, cannot operate because there are no farms as such.

Rose: There aren't. There aren't. And cattle roam free. The cattle roam free. Among the communities we receive here at the mayor's office, many communities ask us as a priority for wire, barbed wire, to be able to put a wire fence so the community's cattle cannot enter the area where they are cultivating agriculture for self-consumption. But these the cattle of all the people in the community all mixed together and these are not the farms they are talking about.

So, I think their reports have failed really because first they talked about mining, that mining... here we are not going to deny it, on the river there are people who work in artisanal mining and they pan maybe in banana leaves and sometimes in sieves. And they are careful because there's been awareness raising on the issue. But it is not that the case that there's an extractive industry here that's contaminating. So, that lie didn't work and now they coming with the lies about cattle and the lies about the settlers. And it's all untrue just so that those who like weird stories can believe and fall for those stories and pay out money. That's the whole story.

So, in any case, I would say that when in the United States or in any part of the world it is said that indigenous people are killed here in order to promote cattle ranching and that beef from cattle equals indigenous people's blood, that is one of those stories. It is one of those stories. They are inventing and living off stories about indigenous peoples. And in the whole world of the indigenous peoples' movement, we deplore, we condemn this type of accusation involving the indigenous peoples.

From Nicaragua or from any part of the world we are always going to find nefarious people who want to invent this type of story in order to benefit themselves. And they do not really work from the cosmogony vision of our indigenous peoples, respecting our lives, our human rights. Respecting our history, our culture, our dignity. They play with the dignity of indigenous peoples and one feels sorry those who take seriously the people who want to promote that story.

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