

# Miskitu Matriarch in Exile from Yapti Tasbia

by Miskitu Matriarch Reverend Josephenie Hendy Clarence Robertson

as told to and elaborated by Ercell Valcina Monica Hendy Clarence Tawska Fleurima

*"In 1957, my brothers and uncles were killed by the Somoza Government and upon the demand of the Council of Elders and Miskitu Royal family of Kuum and my people, I declared the independence of the Miskitu Nation from Nicaragua and Honduras. In 1960, I was given the option to be exiled permanently or face death. With 72 hours to leave my beloved remaining family and friends in Mosquitia, I left with the belief I would be of better service to my people alive. Ever since, I have been pursuing the full sovereignty and international right to self-determination for the Miskitu People."*

— Rev. Josephenie Robertson, Matriarch of the Miskitu Nation

This story begins with an indigenous princess from a wealthy kingdom. Her kingdom has been living under oppression and threat of extermination since 1894. She dared to speak out against her oppressors and rebuked the atrocities they were committing against her nation. Her bravery was ill received and the Somoza government (Nicaragua) jailed her. She was given the choice of death or exile. To save her life so that she could continue to fight for her people, she went into exile—57 years and counting. The princess, now a matriarch, continues addressing the plight of the Miskitu Nation. Her mission is to strive for a free and independent nation for her people.

I am Ercell Valcina Monica Hendy Clarence Tawska Fleurima, born Princess (in exile) in 1970 to the Miskitu Nation. The princess in the above story is my mother. For a 12-year period, I was also exiled from my family. I chose to not have anything but harsh words for my mother. When I was reunited with my son I chose to make an effort to fulfill his wish of family unity. I gave my relationship with my mother another chance. She and a couple of her close friends were planning a fundraiser to raise awareness for her people. I watched this 70-year old woman tirelessly give out pamphlets, flyers. My heart broke when I saw how

the stress of her mission has exhausted her and affected her health. From that moment, I rediscovered my forgotten purpose on this planet. Indigenous issues have always impassioned me. I did not know why until I joined her steadfast fight for freedom. Blood does call and I am answering it.

## A Matriarch in Exile

My mother, Rev. Josephenie Hendy Hebbert Clarence Tawska De Robertson, Matriarch of the Miskitu Nation, was born in Silver City, Mosquitia on December 10th, 1943. She grew up with her mother, the Crown Princess of Miskitu Nation and father, originally from Sudan. Her parents and the elders taught her the oral history of their nation (in the past, her grandfather, Sir. Andrew Hebbert Sumito Sumu, had a library containing books on the history of the nation but Somoza had it burned down.) Her home was filled with love and respect--a stark contrast to the oppression and neglect by ruling governments both in Nicaragua and Honduras. Her mother was a midwife and holistic healer who traveled from town to town helping those in need. My mother liked to pretend she was a doctor, curing people like her mother did, she also loved to read, write, and sing. Her family - especially her brothers -were the heirs of the Miskitu Kingdom, with

rightful claims to all its mineral resources such as gold, silver, pearls, mahogany, cedar, rubber, and lumber. In 1957 her brothers and uncles were killed by the Somoza Government. She was appointed to take staff in 1960. From town to town she proclaimed the full rights and independence of her nation. She was arrested and sent to jail, where she was treated cruelly. Rather than deterring her efforts, it deepened her conviction and she continued awakening her people to their rights. Again she was arrested and was put in front of a firing squad, given the option to be exiled permanently or face death (since 1894, the Nicaraguan government has murdered, recruited, threatened, bribed, or exiled Miskitu leaders, members of the Royal family, and gifted people – trying to keep the majority of the people “dumbed down” and with no sense of ancestry, dignity, or history). With only 72 hours to leave her remaining family and friends in Mosquitia/Miskitu, she left for Guatemala (where she worked for president Arana and met my Father, a French/Haitian/Arab exiled by François Duvalier who also worked for Arana) with the belief that she would be of better service to her people alive. Ever since, she has been pursuing the full sovereignty and international right to self-determination for the Miskitu People.

Her 2014 book, *Yapti Tasbia: The Miskitu Motherland*, acts as a guide to her people in their struggle. By presenting the state of affairs and sovereignty of the inhabitants of the nation in the book, she emphasizes to her people that they have no choice but to demand their rights through the international referendum or plebiscite decolonization process.

### **Miskitu History**

The Miskitu are the original people on the Moskitia/Mosquito (Miskitu) territory on Central America's Atlantic Coast. Our history dates back to the Mayan civilizations. The

Northern Nahuatl speaking indigenous peoples of Aztec Mexico who accompanied the Spanish to the Moskitu kingdom referred to the Miskitu as “chontal” or “foreigner”, indicating that the inhabitants of the Miskitu Coast were not the same racially as the Aztecs who lived just north of the Mayans and Miskitu peoples. Cristóbal Colón (Christopher Columbus), himself wrote about his 4th voyage in 1502 to the Americas, where his journals described the Miskitu Coast also being inhabited by “dark skinned” people who wore golden circular medallions and dwelled by a large river where there was lots of gold in the sands.

The Mayan culture, which spanned from southern Mexico to El Salvador, recorded history and people in their murals. In those murals, some people have found it strange that the Mayan artists portrayed both black and white people. For example, a Pre-Columbian mural by Mayans who lived in the very same region as the Miskitu there is a depiction of three black skinned men with gold medallions around their necks as referenced in *Yapti Tasbia: The Miskitu Motherland* (Vance, 2012).

The first European reference in 1685 to the Miskitu indigenous peoples as a “small nation”<sup>1</sup> came from English, Dutch, and French pirates who visited the area in the 1660's and 1670's. They noted the well established social, commercial, and military ties between European pirates and the inhabitants of the Cape Gracias a Dios area. Nowhere had it been explicitly acknowledged as fact that black people had arrived in the New World before Christopher Columbus, and so they created a “story” of shipwrecked slaves to accommodate the presence of human beings they never expected to meet.

The Miskitu nation, long before democ-

<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Exquemelin was a dutch pirate who regularly stopped at the Cape Gracias a Dios with the intention of safely Acquiring provisions.

racy was a word in the Americas, was a nation made up of 12 different peoples—with individual languages and customs—and one primary spoken and written language. They coexisted and honored Mother Nature. Their people included holistic and natural scientists who studied the ancestral knowledge of Mother Earth's natural medicines.

One English trader that visited the Cape, in 1699, described the Miskitu Indians he'd met in the following manner: "They live peacefully together in several families, yet accounting all Indians of one tongue, to be the same people and friends, and are in quality all equal, neither King nor Captains of families bearing any more command than the meanest, unless it be at such times when they make any expeditions against the Alboawinneys□ at that time they submit to the conduct, and obey the orders of their Kings and Captains" (Olsson & Robertson, 2014).

They also were great fishermen, ship makers, storytellers, and warriors. Mosquitia was a kingdom with land and water stretching from Columbia to Belize. Miskitu warriors met and defeated Christobal Colombo (Columbus) invaders in 1500. Christobal Colon and his men ran for their lives after the brutal beating they took from the Miskitu warriors. When he reached the other side, now known as Honduras, he exclaimed "Thank God!" The legend says this is how the Miskitu territory beside Honduras "Cabo Gracias a Dios" received its name. The Miskitu were never conquered by the Spaniards.

Author Grin Olsson states in Yapti Tasbia, "Many times historians, nations, governments, and victors of war saturate the real truth of a matter. They use stories to conceal, lie, and deprive people and nations of their rights and dignity."

The European nations, particularly Great Britain, had a military and government

strategy of divide and conquer. Yapti Tasbia details the atrocities that have occurred within the Miskitu Nation. The conquerors saturated the records with false stories. The Treaty Of Versailles granted recognition of Mosquitia as a sovereign, self-governing nation. This continued until 1821. Great Britain, Austria-Hungary, Bohemia, and the United States, in what has been described as a kind of "Imperium in Imperio," adopted a position ignoring the sovereign rights of Mosquitia.

This treaty did not weaken the claim by Spain to title over all of Central America. In the Treaty of 1850, between Nicaragua and Spain, the title was officially renounced by Spain. Nicaragua then claimed sovereignty over Mosquitian territory.

According to British Rule and the British Parliament, the British have a responsibility for the Miskitu Nation. According to article II of the Agreement between Great Britain and Honduras on 27th August 1859, Her Britannic Majesty's Government recognized the middle of the river Wanks or Segovia. This river flows at Cape Gracias a Dios as the boundary between the Republic of Honduras and the territory of the Mosquito Nation. Regulation 4 of Article II of the GamezBonilla (also known as the Tegucigalpa Treaty) provided to fix the boundaries between both Republics. Yet Great Britain continually renounced dominion over the Miskitu Kingdom.

Dating as far back as 1893 the practice of oppression by force has been the people's reality. Government manipulation continues still today. The Miskitu people are supposed to be protected by the various treaties that have been drafted and forced upon them. Yet none of these treaties have produced meaningful results for them. Permanent policies of the governments of Nicaragua and Honduras helped in the forced annexation in 1894. The result of their policies has been an ecological, environ-

mental, and human tragedy.

### **The Miskitu Nation Today**

The Miskitu Nation rejects and condemns the arbitrary and illegal actions of the governments of Nicaragua and Honduras. It rejects their feudalistic effect on the people and their landmass: the mortgage of natural resources of the Caribbean Sea (belonging to the Moskitia) in exchange for war tanks from the Russians, negotiations of the Rama and Creole territory to the Chinese, the continued unjustified use of precious metal mines to the Canadians, and supplying Iran with uranium from Miskitu land.

In addition, the governments of Nicaragua and Honduras have promoted the invasion of settlers, aka "Colonos". They provide the Colonos with weapons (prohibited by state law and UN resolution 650). The Colonos pose as farmers and military civilian clothed soldiers in the Moskitia territories. They kill, maim, kidnap, rape and displace the Miskitu people. They kill livestock and destroy their ability to harvest produce. Since there is no economic and social development for the Miskitu nation, they are left at the mercy of the Colonos.

### **Author's Account of Atrocities:**

While in Mosquitia, I personally witnessed attacks by Colonos (former and present Sandinista commanders posing as farmers) on Miskitu Communities. My colleague Laura Charmaine, an R.N. from Houston, our guides, and I were present when Colonos surrounded our vehicle at gunpoint. We were posing as journalists making a documentary. We conducted interviews and, by the grace of God, were able to gather source evidence. The following day the Colonos attacked Santa Clara Wawa, Wisconsin, and Wawa Esperanza - Mosquitian sovereign territories beside

Nicaragua. Shortly thereafter I contracted parasites and became very ill, resulting in my departure in September 2015. I returned to the Mosquitian Territories with my colleague and filmmaker Saycsar Nehemiah Fleurima in December 2015. Our goal was to begin a documentary about the injustices and the people of the nation. We were met by another attack and kidnapping threats. In addition, Saycsar and I volunteered to sponsor villagers fleeing from attacks. Men had been shot and treated very poorly at the Hospital Regional Bello Amanecer, in Bilwi, Puerto Cabezas, in the north caribbean region of Nicaragua. Some were denied pain medication and others refused treatment altogether.

In 1894 false treaties and forced annexation of Miskitu territories to Nicaragua, Columbia and Honduras began, followed by mass murder and exile. Later the Somozas tried to erase their history and identity, giving them Spanish and English surnames. Since the 1970's, the Miskitu Nation has been fighting to protect itself from Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's Sandinista Army. This army is dedicated to the extermination of the original nations of the Atlantic Caribbean Coast.

In the 1990's, in order to bring peace between the Sandinista and the Contras, the Miskitu Warriors gave up their arms and accepted the protection of the United Nations charters. Today, the Miskitu people have no weapons. They are regularly shot at and are dying from contaminated waters (that run into the Rio Grande) and food<sup>2</sup>. The people are left

<sup>2</sup> 1848-1860 - The Miskituseize the colony of Greytown (now renamed as San Juan del Norte), with British support. The event was noticed by the United States, but the minor action of reprisal in 1854 achieved nothing. The 1850 Clayton-Bulwer Treaty ensures that neither power would fortify the coast or attempt to colonize it and, in 1859, Britain delegates a portion of its Miskitu "protectorate" to Honduras. The Miskitu people

without protection. They are now at the mercy of Daniel Ortega, the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) dictatorship, and the government of Honduras. Their armed forces occupy the sovereign domain of Miskitu territory. Determined to take this land for profit from its natural resources and for political advantage, President Ortega is committing war crimes against the Miskitu Nation (all tribes) that are not unlike those previously committed in the last century.



**Miskitu weapons fashioned to defend villages against Nicaraguan attacks**

People are being starved and/or exterminated by companies owned by Nicaragua, Honduras, Venezuela, Canada, Scandinavia, Europe, China, Iran, Russia and Colombia. These companies have illegal possession of natural resources. They have acquired them through the protection of the Government of Nicaragua, FSLN and Honduran forces. They

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revolted against this decision the following year, when the entire Miskitu coast, less that portion given to Honduras was passed to Nicaragua, with the Miskitu confined to a limited Miskitu Reserve and their kings now recognized only as chiefs, a dictate which has little effect as no outside power was able to exercise its authority along the coast. The British Union Flag is lowered on the Coast for the last time but the Miskitu people continued to de facto rule themselves.

continue to refuse to provide funds for the rehabilitation of Miskitu Nation's land. Instead they have invented laws. These laws are created immorally and illegally to justify the invasion by settlers—and claim to promote a “peaceful coexistence” with the Miskitu. Their goal is to move Nicaraguan citizens displaced by the Interoceanic Canal<sup>3</sup> into Miskito territories, thereby claiming sovereign Miskitu land as Nicaraguan property.

The Miskitu Nation rejects the current regimes of Nicaragua and Honduras—who do not recognize its historical political rights. Thus, at home and in exile, the Nation is seeking a peaceful political referendum. United through mutually cooperative agreements, they wish to see a return of their resources, lands, and autonomy.

### **Miskitu and the Forest**

The Miskitu nation (all tribal languages) does not subscribe to overuse or abuse of the land. We believe in gentle and respectful treatment of Mother Nature and her gifts to us. The words ‘Mother Nature’ is very heartfelt in our shared culture. Like their own human mothers we give the earth the same love and respect. We aren't explicitly against modern development but we do have reservations because of the arrogance that “developed” nations exhibit. Others regard our connection to the earth as “rubbish, witchcraft, savage, superstition or bush medicine.” We want the traditions and knowledge of our indigenous world and it's people to be respected. We are treated as fourth class—as small thinkers. Yet our “primitive” knowledge is the root of modern medicine and technology. We hold knowledge that could be

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3 The Interoceanic Canal is a planned shipping route through Nicaragua to connect the Caribbean Sea (and therefore the Atlantic Ocean) with the Pacific Ocean. Its viability has been questioned by shipping experts and engineers.



the key to our future.

Illegal logging and land seizure by multinational corporations—and corrupt governments that support them—are a regular part of the Miskitu Nation's reality. For example, the Venezuelan lumber company Alba Forestal, America S.A, Mapenic S.A, Prada S.A (in Betena) (Chinese) and HEMCO manipulate the Miskitu, threatens them, harasses land-owners to either give or sell them their land for an unfair amount and then forces them off their land altogether. If the people resist the company has resorted to using a 'land dispute' excuse. They unleash armed pacific coast settlers—some farmers and former/current soldiers—to attack them. These armed settlers shoot, raid, rape, kidnap, and torture the people. They have taken over lands of the Garifuna, Miskitu, Rama, Pech, Tawaska, Creole, Sumu, Prinzipolka, Sambos, and more. These actions are condoned and promoted by the government of Nicaragua, the FSLN, and Honduran Forces. My sources (who will remain anonymous for their own protection) say, President Daniel Ortega, his partner Rosarillo Murillo, and hand picked Miskitu Sandinista leaders (who have been bribed and/or threatened to side with them) authorize these land seizures and killings.

In Nicaragua, new laws that restrict indigenous people's access to the forest are constantly being made. They are not allowed to cut their own wood or lumber (especially mahogany and cedar). If they do they are in danger of being punished by having their limbs broken or cut off, having their lumber/wood confiscated, and/or serving jail time. They are forced to buy their own wood at an unfair rate—driving them into poverty. Since they cannot afford the government hikes in prices, they are forced to live in substandard shelters.

The Alliance for Global Justice 43 inter-

vened in March of 2014 and was assured by the government that the practices would be stopped. As soon as they left the area, the injustices continued. The Nicaraguan government gives unlawful permits to lumber companies. They cut trees on Miskitu sovereign land without consent or ordination by a democratic people's vote. Illegal loggers and land grabbers have invaded the land. They are responsible for massive deforestation. The Miskitu Nation once had pristine nature reserves. The government is ruining their land and threatening the tranquility of the indigenous territories.

My team of activists and journalists recorded forest fires that were created by the Nicaraguan Government and logging companies. They start these fires and then they lay blame them on the indigenous people. The history of the native people is that they burned brush and created clearing for harvesting. The government uses the farming traditions against the people. They create forest fires and after the fires burn out, their workers dig up the roots of the pine and rubber trees. They do this to assure that nothing grows back. These are hate tactics. Their goal is to assure extermination of the Miskitu people. They do not even realize that, without trees, it will be their extermination as well. The only ones that will profit are the company owners.

Despite an abundance of natural resources in their lands, the condition of the Miskitu Nation is unnecessarily poor. They are taken advantage of and/or persecuted by illegal settlers, the military, illegal miners and loggers, and drug traffickers. These problems are compounded by climatic instability.

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to help the Miskitu Nation must understand that Nicaragua has no authority to make any comments or laws that pertain to the Miskitu Lands. The Miskitu Nation is demanding that they listen to the cries of the people who are living this horror that has been created by Mr. Ortega's and Honduran forces terroristic behavior. Their illiteracy, poverty, and ignorance come from oppression and not genetics!

4 This AFGJ Alliance (<http://afgj.org/>) and all people who want



**Miskitu protests go ignored by the government and logging companies.**

## Miskitu Medicine

The Miskitu Nation is well known for its geographically humid tropical forests—that provide a myriad of foods, medicines and other resources. The Miskitu want to work consciously and scientifically to preserve the natural resources for future generations. Their medicinal plants have the potential to solve some health problems and cure diseases that pharmaceutical drugs cannot. In 2005, a study at Purdue University recently found that leaves from the *Graviola* tree killed cancer cells among six human cell lines and were especially effective against prostate, pancreatic and lung cancers; The National Cancer Institute performed the first scientific research in 1976. The results showed that *Graviola*'s "leaves and stems were found effective in attacking and destroying malignant cells." Since 1976, *Graviola* has proven to be an immensely potent cancer killer in 20 independent laboratory tests. The soursop (a fruit native to Mexico and Central America), for example, kills cancerous cells. In fact, it kills, 10,000 more cancer cells than chemotherapy and other natural health remedies.

We have medicines that can aid in the treatment of tumors, diabetes, cancer, nervous and

respiratory diseases, inflammation, and skin disorders. The unjust laws of Nicaragua prevent us from sharing this wealth of knowledge with the world. The deputies working for the government victimize our healers and throw them in jail for practicing ancestral medicine. Human beings with age old traditions that never once shifted or endangered the planet in any way, are being treated as if their lives and knowledge do not matter. We have a duty to these human beings to help them. We should be learning from them-exchanging knowledge.

## Conclusion

The displacement and robbery of the Miskitu Nation and its lands are unacceptable. The continued tradition of conquering and taking land by force must change. History is studied for us to learn from. My hope is that by sharing the story of my mother and her nation, others will join us in efforts for recognition, respect, and political self-determination. The inalienable political, cultural and human rights of the Miskitu Nation can no longer be denied, regardless of state government laws. I believe that the Creator has a positive plan for the Miskity Nation and will see it carried out.

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I am ErCELL Valcina Monica Hendy Clarence Tawska Fleurima, born under thunder, hail, lighting, under the sign of the warrior February 8th 1970 and Princess (born in exile) to the Miskitu Nation. I reside in California. As an artist, entertainer, and human rights activist, I am constantly growing and changing, and advocate for the change I want to see in the world. I am committed to educating the world about the plight of the Miskitu Nation.

#### Cite this article as:

Fleurima, E.V.M.H.C (2016). *Miskitu Matriarch in Exile from Yapti Tasbia*. *Fourth World Journal*. 15(1) pp. 65-72.