

**Of Machos and Macheteros:
Men's Lives in the Hills of Nicaragua**

Samuel Brouillette

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Of Machos and Macheteros: Men's Lives in the Hills of Nicaragua

Samuel Brouillette

This thesis examines the lives of men in south-western rural Nicaragua. But contrary to anthropological analyses of masculinity focused on public performance or investigations of gender in Nicaragua centered on the concept of machismo, I use a materialist theoretical framework in studying the everyday interactions of men. Through participant-observation based field research, I was able to scrutinize some of the more important aspects of men's lives that have been overlooked by many scholars of masculinity such as household relations and the world of work. Although I also examined practices more typically associated with men in the literature such as drinking, fighting, and womanizing, I did this from the standpoint of *vagancia*, a local category of meaning used by men to understand such acts as temporary diversions and not as crucial components of their persona.

Through my research, I found that most of the men I encountered in rural Nicaragua derived their sense of manhood more from being able providers for their households or successful agricultural workers than from the performance of symbolic acts in a public setting. Moreover, men developed gender-based identities directly related with their work as *macheteros* (machete workers). Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that if we want to better understand men in specific cultural settings, we should prioritize in our analyses the aspects of their lives they find most important and not reduce them to pre-conceived categorizations such as machismo that have little local relevance.

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1. Introduction:

At around six o'clock on a Tuesday morning in early September, Calixto Dominguez sat on a chair in Dona Antonia's *sala* (living room), holding his head with his hands. "*Ya la cagamos chibito* (Now we've shat it, now we've really messed up)," he said with a smirk. "*si hombre*," I muttered back, not knowing what else to say. "*Ahorra si la cagamos de viaje*," he repeated. "*Lo que mas me aflige*," he continued, "*es que aya en la casa me van a hechar la culpa solo a mi* (What really bothers me is that back home they're going to blame me for this)." "*Y me duele este oido* (And my hearing (ear) hurts)," he said as he started to rub his right ear.

The reason Calixto was so dejected was quite simple. Our poorly timed, expensive, and wholly unproductive two-day drinking binge had just ended. Things had started rather inconspicuously on Sunday morning. Calixto and I had saddled up our horses, loaded them with two fifty pound bags of beans, and ridden down from the hills of La Uva into Escalante, the nearest town. Our original reason for going to Escalante was to bring Leticia her share of the *manzana* (100x100 yard plot) of beans she had planted *a media* (in association) with Calixto. After dropping off the beans, I went up to Rodolfo's to attend a celebration for his son's baptism while Calixto went to Dona Juana's to meet with her son. We had agreed to join up at Leticia's later on that afternoon.

At about five o'clock, I rode back into Escalante, simply called *el barrio* (the neighborhood) by most of its inhabitants, after having downed a succulent meal of fried *pelibuey* (an animal that resembles a sheep), rice, and cabbage salad, all accompanied with a sweet cacao drink. The get-together had been a pleasant affair,

with members of Rodolfo's family coming together to eat and talk the afternoon away. Rather unexpectedly, though, Rodolfo, who has not had a drink in over ten years, sent one of his nephew's back into town to pick up two *medias de guaro* (400ml bags of local sugarcane liquor). Having thus participated in the consumption of the liquor, I went back to *el barrio* with other ideas than simply meeting up with Calixto. On my way over, I ran into Martin Dominguez, Calixto's grandfather, who could no doubt see, or smell, what I was really up to. Don Martin encouraged me to turn back and follow him home. "*Ay dejalo* (Leave him there)," he told me, "*ellos veran como regresan* (they'll find their own way home)." After arguing unconvincingly that I had promised Calixto I would give his daughter a ride back to La Uva, I quit Don Martin's company and headed quickly into town before the sun would set.

I found Calixto sitting on a *tijera* (small bed), helping Leticia separate the good beans from the bad ones. After saluting the people gathered at Leticia's with the customary "*Buenas*," I asked Calixto what he wanted to do. "*Vamonos ya* (Let's go now)," he promptly said. "*No quieres echarte un litro* (Don't you want to down a liter (of beer)," I asked? I could tell by Calixto's lack of a response that the idea was not all that appealing to him. "Let's have just one," I insisted. After a couple of minutes of persuading, Calixto finally relented. He called Leticia over, who besides her agricultural ventures kept afloat by running two buses and selling alcohol, and ordered a liter. We drank our beer quickly. However, as we attempted to mount our horses and head home, it started to rain heavily. Calixto looked over to me and said "*Esperemos que pase la lluvia pues* (Let's wait for the rain to pass then.)" We sat

down again and agreed to have another liter just to hold us through while the weather cleared up. Since I only had seventy-five cordobas ($\approx \pm 4.50$ \$ US, 1 US\$ was equivalent to about 17.25 cordobas at the time) in my pocket, I figured that in the worst-case scenario we would have three more liters (1 liter of beer = 25 cordobas). Calixto repeated once again that he wanted to make it home that night, that we had to weed our rice fields tomorrow, and that the horses needed to eat after being tied up all day. I agreed and promised we would head out as soon as the heavy rain stopped and we could mount our horses without damaging the saddles.

About halfway through the second liter, Juan walked by. A friend of Calixto's, Juan worked with oxen, ploughing fields, hauling trees, and carrying loads in his carts like most of the men in the Dominguez family. "*Oy, veni vez* (come see)," Calixto shouted out. Juan came over and reluctantly agreed to have a glass of beer with us. Now, being three people on a bottle made things go a lot quicker. Calixto's mood had decidedly changed. "*Pidamos la otra?* (Let's get another?)," he asked? "*Dale pues* (give it then, yes)," I answered. After the third liter, Juan said he had to leave. "*Tengo una jugada* (I have a play, I've got something on the go)," he claimed. As Juan walked away in the direction of his own home, Calixto looked at me and said: "*Que va a tener ni verga, lo que pasa es que le tiene miedo a la mujer* (He hasn't got dick all, what's happening is that he's scared of his woman)." After the fourth liter, I was getting ready to leave. However, my companion now had other ideas. "*Y diay,*" he said. "*Ya se quiere ir* (now you want to go)?" "*Es que ando palmado* (It's cause I'm out of cash)," I answered. Calixto smiled and pulled out four five-hundred cordoba bills from his pocket: "*Por reales no se preocupe* (For money

do not worry).” We ordered the fifth liter. The rain had now stopped but we were still there.

Having thus reached the point of no return, the following night and day saw us participate in a variety of activities such as unsuccessfully attempting to recruit laborers to help us weed our rice fields the next morning; riding around *el barrio* with our horses and a couple of other guys, Licho and El Chino; buying guaro at another cantina; firing some shots with Licho’s thirty-eight caliber pistol, the source of Calixto’s ear pains two days later; buying more guaro at another cantina; breaking up a fight between Licho and El Chino who argued over who would take one of Calixto’s horses home; finishing up our bottle of guaro with Mario, Calixto’s wife’s uncle; getting rid of our hangovers the next morning, again with Mario; and finally drinking a bit more moderately while teasing and trying to dance with Calixto’s wife’s two younger cousins on Monday night, again with Mario.

The final tally: Calixto spent about half of the 2,000 cordobas that were not completely his, not yet anyway; we had lost a day of work and things were not looking good for Tuesday either; we had pretty bad headaches; and we had managed to anger our wives and probably a few other people as well. “*Vamos a trabajar* (let’s go and work),” I suggested. “*Adonde* (where),” Calixto answered, “*al Descanso no voy* (I won’t go to El Descanso, where the rice was planted).” We finally decided to go back to La Uva to clear land. Mario was now up and about, looking for someone to lend him ten cordobas so he could get himself *una media* (400 ml) of guaro for *la goma* (his hangover). At about six-thirty we finally started our trek back to La Uva. Since Calixto had lent his mare to Luis on Sunday night and Maria, his wife, had

taken my horse back the night before, going home entailed completing a two-hour uphill walk, the highlight of which being when I almost stepped on a boa snake, something that cheered Calixto up momentarily.

As we rounded the final peak before descending into the Dominguez hamlet, we saw in the distance that a crowd had gathered to watch us stumble home. One of the younger men, probably Ismael, screamed out to us. We ignored his call and kept walking. “*Esa gente anda arrecha* (Those people are mad),” Calixto said. “*Ay vas a ver que me van a tratar* (They’re going to chew me out, you’ll see),” he continued. Calixto seemed really concerned: “*Van a decir que por mi Ud. anda tomando* (They’re going to say that I made you go drinking).” I tried to reassure him the rest of the way, telling him that I had never needed any help to drink in the past and that he did not have to worry about anything. After all, we were both grown men and because of that we could do as we please, right? My attempts at comforting Calixto, however, apparently had little effect. He was already hearing the scathing remarks that would be heaved upon him as we walked down the final hill before reaching the hamlet.

Upon arriving, we were greeted with mock applause and a few negative comments along the lines of “*Uds. son vagos* (You guys are vagrants).” Miriam, Calixto’s mother, scolded him for drinking excessively “*como si tenes reales* (as if you had money)” and neither of our wives seemed interested in talking to us or serving us breakfast. But, on the whole, things did not turn out as badly as Calixto had first expected. Most of the other men seemed amused by our little escapade. Even Don Martin, who Calixto was especially worried about, was in a jovial mood. “*Veni* (come),” he said, as he ushered me over to the kitchen table where a bowl of *pelibuey*

soup was waiting for me. After downing the soup and arranging for Calixto to get a bowl as well, we sharpened our machetes and made off for the fields. It was almost nine o'clock. Despite arriving two hours later than usual at the *huerta* (field), we were surprisingly productive, clearing about two *tareas* of land (an area of about 25x50 yards) of fairly thick vegetation between the two of us. We got back to the hamlet at one o'clock and most people there were surprised with our output, as we were repeatedly told: "*Le hacen huevo Uds. de trabajar con goma* (You guys make egg (testicle), you guys do pretty good to work while hung-over)." Our wives, however, were much less impressed. They still refused to talk to either one of us.

Men, Masculinity, and Machismo: Sorting Through the Social Science Discourse

In the previous passage we caught a brief glimpse of Calixto's life. Through it, we saw that even though my companion is engaged in "hard drinking," one of the "core practices of machismo" (Lancaster, 1992:39), Calixto is never able to completely detach actions and thoughts from the obligations and relations he bears with other people. Although he is consciously engaged in behavior that can ultimately be detrimental to himself and to other members of his household, Calixto is nonetheless concerned about how certain individuals, including his wife, his mother, and his grandfather, will react to his actions. Although such things may seem self-evident, they have often been overlooked by anthropologists examining masculinity and other social scientists who have studied gender in Nicaragua. Unfortunately, most portrayals and analyses of men in Nicaragua have promoted the adoption of a model of gender inequity based on a concept of machismo that has all but become self-explanatory in pinpointing relational problems between men and women or among

men only. Despite having the appearances of an age-old adage, machismo was first theorized in the context of Nicaragua by anthropologist Roger Lancaster some fifteen years ago in his ethnography *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (1992). Interested in unearthing why the Sandinista revolution and subsequent administration (1979-1990) had failed to overturn certain power relations within Nicaraguan society, Lancaster explains the persistence of the daily inequalities between men and women as well as among men, as the result of an improper understanding of machismo by Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) cadres. More than a simple ideology or discourse that legitimates and normalizes unequal relations, Lancaster theorizes machismo as a system of production:

Machismo, no less than capitalism, is a system. Like racism, homophobia, and other forms of arbitrary power, arbitrary stigma, machismo is resilient because it constitutes not simply a form of "consciousness," not "ideology" in the classical understanding of the concept, but a field of productive relations.

Forms of consciousness are precisely what machismo, as a "field of productive relations," produces. In other words, under machismo, relations between men, women and children are structured in certain standard ways. Moreover, what it is to properly be a man, or a woman, or a child, is also defined relationally, within the logic of the system. These relations themselves -not their idealized representations or coarse expression- constitute the system of machismo (1992:20).

Lancaster thus defines machismo as a system that produces relationships and subjectivities between and among different groups of people. In turn, the daily unfolding of these relationships and ways of being reproduce the logic of the system. Machismo, therefore, creates an imbalance in gender relations that favor men and that takes on a veil of "normality" or "common sense" since gender is deeply woven into the societal fabric of Nicaragua and is constantly reinforced through everyday

interactions. According to this logic, machismo is a deeply ingrained social structure that has concrete negative consequences for large numbers of people in Nicaragua. However, because it is embedded in banal acts and encounters and works in a seemingly invisible, impalpable way, machismo is very difficult to pinpoint, yet alone challenge or overturn.

Despite the potential downfalls that the use of such a deterministic train of thought may present, the existence of machismo in Nicaragua has become a theoretical given for many academics. Often replicated and rarely challenged, machismo has been considered both an important obstacle to progress and a powerful explanatory force within the social science literature. We will review a few examples to get a better idea of what this entails. In *Surviving Globalization in three Latin American Communities*, Denis Lynn Daily Heyck refers to “the fight against machismo” in discussing the collective efforts of women to better their lots in a context of pronounced gender inequality (2002:208). Likewise, David Whisnant, in his seminal work on the cultural politics of Nicaragua, formulates a theory of cultural recalcitrance to explain the inability of women activists, despite a sustained struggle, to overturn male dominance at a societal level. According to Whisnant, one of the key features of this perpetual inequality is the presence of a “hegemonic order (of which machismo is a central feature) created in the service of men’s interests (1995:385).”

In “Counter-Revolutionary Women: Gender and Reconciliation in Post-War Nicaragua,” Julie Cupples examines how the gender identities of women are often intermeshed with their political identities, a reality that has both helped and hindered the process of reconciliation in the previously war-torn northern regions of the

country. Attempting to explain why women have not always been able to settle their differences and cooperate in rebuilding their communities, Cupples presents machismo as a key factor in the continuation of factional disputes between women:

In addition, friendship and solidarity between women are often difficult in Nicaragua, since it is a cultural context in which dominant expressions of masculinity in the form of machismo, and the prevalence of both serial polygamy and paternal irresponsibility, encourage women to see each other as rivals and competitors for scarce resources, rather than friends (2005:15).

Jennifer Bickham-Mendez, in *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras: Gender, Labor and Globalization in Nicaragua*, her excellent ethnography on the emergence of an independent women's labor movement in post-Sandinista Nicaragua, makes a similar use of machismo. Wanting to illustrate how the Ministry of the Family's focus on the consolidation of the nuclear family was misguided as most Nicaraguans lived either in informal unions or as/with single parents, Bickham-Mendez uses Lancaster's work to buttress her argument: "In a context of machismo, informal unions coincide with irresponsible sexual behaviour on the part of men, who may have several children by different women and may barely contribute to any of their upbringing (2005:199)."

Cymene Howe, in her article on the emergence of women's rights and gay and lesbian rights movements in Nicaragua during the 1980's and 1990's, also uses Lancaster's conceptualization of machismo as a means of explaining a whole series of social ills:

In the case of Nicaragua, machismo operates in political, social and cultural processes as a day-to-day dynamic and on a conceptual level, to inform the way people speak and think about masculinity, gender, and power. Nicaraguan women regularly exchange horrific experiences that they attribute to the machinations of machismo. Newspaper accounts of domestic violence in Nicaragua often suggest that machismo is the root cause of abuse. By the

same token, many nonheterosexual men and women underscore the impact of machismo in their marginalization (Howe, 2007:232).

As we have seen, many contributors to the literature on Nicaragua understand machismo as an important social structure that causes men and women to relate to each other in specific, standardized ways. Furthermore, the link is often made between the existence of machismo and the proliferation of “macho” men, who are generally categorized as highly self-centered beings with little regard for others and most commonly recognized while engaging in such acts as womanizing, wife-beating, excessive drinking, gambling, and street-fighting. While all of these practices do take place in Nicaragua, as they no doubt do in most if not all contemporary societies, to generalize them as key components of the gendered identity of men in this country brings us dangerously close to cultural stereotyping. Unfortunately this instance of anthropologists facilitating the trafficking of popular clichés through their theorizations of men or gender relations is hardly unique. Examples of this include Joseph Spielberg transposing the works of Mexican writers Octavio Paz and Samuel Ramos to negatively characterize men of Mexican descent living in South Texas (Limon, 1997); the appropriation by numerous anthropologists, including David Gilmore, of ethnographic data put forth by Oscar Lewis to promulgate the image of the Mexican macho (Gutmann, 1995); and the well known characterization by an entire generation of social theorists of the Mediterranean basin as a region where societies were dominated by a single paradigm of gendered behaviour, whereby men achieved honour through public displays of worthiness while women were closely guarded lest they bring shame upon their male-dominated lineages (Abu-Lughod 1993, Cole 1991, Passaro 1997). Anthropological studies of men and masculinity,

then, have more often than not proven to be compatible with the concept of culture areas, where certain common cultural traits, whether real or imagined, are used to characterize often diverse populations. This tendency to use a notion of culture that is rigid and static, and that lacks conceptual space for the accounting of diversity in thought or behavior at the local level, has favored an overwhelming emphasis on structural forces in understanding gender relations and identities. That such a theoretical framework eventually contributed to the creation of generalizing, and at times demeaning, cultural attributes for certain populations is hardly surprising.

Structuring Diversity

To note that I encountered a healthy diversity in the opinions, ideas, and actions of men and women during my fieldwork in Nicaragua is hardly a groundbreaking qualification. Nevertheless, in a situation like the one we are currently faced with, where there exists an obvious tendency on the part of social analysts to overemphasize the way in which people are unconsciously shaped by their cultural environments, it is important to recognize that individuals can and do make an imprint on their own lives. However, we must proceed cautiously. Taken too far, such an argument could result in a “blame-the victim approach,” an intellectual current often favoured in American thought whereby each and every person is held completely responsible for their lot in life without first accounting for the life situations they have had to deal with (Bourgois, 2000:328). We must therefore seek a theoretical framework that brings us balance in considering how the lives of people are impacted by important but not omnipotent social and cultural structures on the one hand and by the ability to make personal decisions that coincide with individual

or group needs and desires on the other. This quest brings us to one of anthropology's most trendy theoretical tendencies: the juxtaposition of the concept of agency to that of structure.

As a discipline, anthropology has long had a structural penchant. Thinkers from schools such as cultural evolutionism, structuralism, functionalism, neo-evolutionism, interpretative and symbolic anthropology, and neo-Marxism have more often than not produced theories of culture, race, and society that have heavily stressed the power of cultural codes, economic and political structures, or social institutions to influence, mould, or even subjugate the individual. Culture was what shaped human beings to act, feel, and think the way they did. It was impossible to recognize, yet alone escape from, the complexities inherent in one's own cultural positioning. Rather, for a culture to be fully understood, anthropologists argued that it had to be examined by an outsider with a specialized education but with limited knowledge of day-to-day interactions. To present an aura of scientific objectivity, the researchers would take themselves as well as any divergent findings out of the final equation. But as we all know, both from fieldwork and everyday life, differences are to be found everywhere. Accounting for this internal diversity has long been one of our main weaknesses and overcoming this shortfall represents a significant challenge.

This is where the concept of agency comes into play. Much like culture, there is no consensus when it comes to defining agency, as the concept has been used in various manners. Matthew Gutmann gives us an example of this:

The term agency, as it has been used in the past two decades or so, has been popular because it has great merit of challenging determinist thinking in the social sciences. With agency, the dispossessed are seen to have a fuller voice in deciding their own fates and even have a hand in human tragedies, an

example being the voluntarist fervor with which German citizens slaughtered Jews in Nazi Germany. More often than not, however, “agency” has referred rather exclusively to politically progressive efforts of the poor and dispossessed only when they are able to break free of structural and systematic constraints (2002:xxiii).

Here Gutmann makes an important point. Once agency is recognized, it cannot be taken away because of a researcher’s particular political preferences. Agency is involved as much in compliance as it is in resistance. I cannot claim, then, that men who defy dominant gender ideals have agency or are acting as agents while those that comply with these ideals are not. Iris Lopez makes this exact point in her analysis of how dominant racial discourses promote sterilization among the Puerto Rican female population of New York City. As she explains: “presenting women as active agents of their productive decisions does not suggest that they are exercising free will or that they are not oppressed but that they make decisions within the limits of their constraints (1997:157).”

Agency, then, is the recognition that individuals and groups do make decisions that impact their lives, no matter what their positioning within existing social hierarchies, and that, consequently, they are to be held, at the very least, partly responsible for the actions they take. Far from being a way simply to shift blame upon people caught up in tough situations for their own misfortunes, I feel that by conceding the existence of the individual’s ability to impact her existence, we are removing the sense of powerlessness that has engulfed the subjects of our analyses. My point here is not to suggest that structures do not exist or that their impact on the lives of populations the world over are minimal. To the contrary, I believe that concepts such as ideology, hegemony, and structural power are essential to any

analysis. What I want to stress is simply that they cannot stand alone if we are truly intent on furthering our understanding of human life.

From Masculinity to Men's Lives

As we will see in the next chapter, more recent ethnographic work on masculinity has somewhat moved away from this heavy reliance on structures. However, one slight problem does remain. By continually placing the focus of our investigations on understanding a concept such as masculinity, we are attempting to uncover some sort of shared cultural code that impacts the actions and ideas of men. In other words, we are assuming the existence of an abstract essence that works to create certain types of human beings and not others. By proceeding in such a manner, we are starting from the general and attempting to fit in the particular. We are not so much interested in men and their lives, preoccupations, priorities, and the challenges they are faced with but rather in deciphering a common ethos, a group of common cultural traits that binds them together.

Considering the thematic, theoretical, and methodological turns that have taken place within the discipline over the last several decades, I find this continued reliance on a deductive framework rather odd. We have to look no further than how the lives of women have been examined by (mainly feminist) anthropologists to find a much more grounded and flexible manner of investigating issues of gender. As McGee and Warms point out, "Much of the research by feminist anthropologists in the early 1970s was concerned with documenting women's lives and their roles in societies around the world (2000: 417)." Furthermore, as Mary Evans states "One of the most obvious results of contemporary feminism has been the establishment of a

new academic subject: that of women's studies," whose role is to assert, describe, and document the existence of women (1997:17-18). Similarly, more recent works on women in Latin America produced by anthropologists such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Maria-Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, Donna Goldstein, and Rosario Montoya just to name a few, have centered on the examination of the lives of women in specific cultural settings and how larger social processes can come to affect their actions. Nowhere is there a focus on femininity or for that matter on marianismo, the cult of the self-abnegating wife/mother even though culturally defined gender ideals are at least as powerful for females as they are for males in Latin America.

Why, then, should anthropological studies of men be any different? As we have seen, a concept such as machismo, a theoretical offshoot of masculinity, can lead to the production of generalizations since it attempts to explain such things as male behavior and gender inequity by uncovering traits that are supposedly shared and esteemed by all men in a particular context. But as Francisco Ferrandiz argues in his study of male life in a Venezuelan shantytown, even the most severe living environments and intense sources of cultural pressures do not create a uniform breed of men:

Of course life in the shantytowns of Caracas, Venezuela, is complex. Conditions are ripe for the emergence of pockets of violence. Residents have to endure the neighborhood professional criminals, the murderous practices of petty and grand delinquents, and many forms of structural violence, not the least of which is wholesale police repression. Many men in Caracas are raised and expected to conform to tough models of masculinity. Yet the presence of criminality in the shantytowns and the dominant cliché of masculinity as a realm of impenitent delinquency does not, as certain public discourses would have it, transform all men into undesirable and menacing offenders, beyond redemption, worthy only of extermination (2003:117).

What I suggest, then, with this thesis is that we shift our focus of analysis away from

masculinity and onto men. Instead of searching for broad patterns that may encompass some hidden key to behavioral trends or ideological currents, why not examine the specific lives of individuals and the social forces that influence them? Keeping this in mind, the question guiding my inquiry will be: In attempting to understand men, is it not more useful to concentrate our investigations on what they actually think and do instead of trying to decode an abstract essence such as masculinity, premised principally on the symbolic analysis of ideological affirmations and public displays of worth? My research question thus has more to do with changing the theoretical methodology used in anthropological enquiries of men than with producing any findings about a specific population. Furthermore, I also wish to use the results of my field investigation to make the argument that, besides helping us to avoid the reinforcement of stereotypes, examining men's daily interactions within the context of the home will help us better locate the very sources of inequality between the genders. Although this last assertion may seem out of place for some, I strongly believe that by stepping into everyday interactions, we have a better chance of learning what men do and understanding why they do it. But, as we will shortly see, my theoretical predecessors have more often than not felt differently about how to best comprehend the impact of gender on the everyday.

How it all Happened: A Word on Methodology

Before moving on to examine the theoretical specificities of this study, I feel it is important to clarify my methodological procedures in acquiring data as well as my own personal relations to the people who provided me with this data. My fieldwork took place from May 2005 until January 2006 and again from March to May of 2006.

Instead of focusing my research on the daily occurrences within one rural community, I opted to analyze the interactions of some of the men in the Dominguez family network, which ranges from Canada to Costa Rica but is centered around Nandaime, a town of about 50,000 inhabitants located in south-western Nicaragua. I preferred this particular approach for two reasons. Firstly, focusing on a network rather than a community allowed me to better understand the range of actions that take place in the lives of Nicaraguan men. Although I did not accompany any of the Dominguez men in their yearly ventures into Costa Rica to cut sugar cane when *verano* (the dry season, from December to May) comes around and the harvests are completed, I was nonetheless able to appreciate the web of contacts they are part of, which transcend the bounds of any particular community. Let us take the example of La Uva, a small farming community to the southwest of Nandaime where many of the Dominguez men live. During the 1980's, most of the large cattle haciendas in the area were transformed into farming cooperatives by the FSLN. The Dominguez family, however, did not participate in this process, in part due to political preferences but mostly out of an inability to get along with rival families that had gained control of the collectives. Older family quarrels thus took on a political dimension and relations with the members of the surrounding cooperatives became extremely tense. Martin Dominguez and Pedro Araujo, his son-in-law, were both jailed and the younger men had to go into hiding to avoid forced recruitment into the armed forces. Legal disputes, sporadic confrontations, and threats replaced the more cordial, if at times heated, relations the Dominguez had enjoyed with their neighbours. As Don Martin once said to me: "*Caminábamos humillados* (We were humbled)

The 1990's brought the end of Sandinista rule and with it a quick collapse of the cooperatives, which then either divided the land they controlled among existing members or sold these holdings at very low prices. The direct result of this development in La Uva was a gradual reduction of tension between political factions but also a general depopulation of the area, as many moved to Managua, the Costa Rican border or Costa Rica itself in search of a better livelihood. Although the political quarrels that erupted during the 1980's are now a thing of the past, the rift between the Dominguez family and the rest of the community has largely remained. Because of this, the members of this family have developed greater ties with people in neighbouring communities. They are more likely to do business with, visit, or invite to a special occasion friends from Escalante, El Descanso, or even Nandaime than their co-residents of La Uva. The children of the Dominguez family now attend school in El Descanso, even if this entailed an extra half-hour of travel to get there. The sense of belonging to any localized community that went beyond the family hamlet was minimal. As a researcher interested in producing informative accounts of specific lives instead of a generalized description of manhood, it thus made much more sense for me to focus on the social networks that the men of this family had built up for themselves and how these connections impacted their lives in terms of work opportunities, the need for mobility, leisure, and identity.

My second motive in concentrating my work on the Dominguez family network was purely practical. In 1997, I visited Nicaragua for the first time as an exchange student and took an instant liking to the town of Nandaime, the local



<http://www.casacafricho.com/regionalmap.htm>

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Figure 1 Map of Western Nicaragua

culture, and more importantly, to many of the people, including my future wife

Kenia, who I met during that first visit. Over the next few years, I was fortunate

enough to return to Nicaragua several times and further develop my relationships with numerous people there. Since Kenia is one of Martin Dominguez's many grand-daughters, my ties to the men of that family were both the strongest and the most obvious. However, despite the evident advantages that such circumstances presented, the most important of which was undoubtedly uncensored access to the intimacy of everyday life, I often felt uncomfortable acting as a researcher in such settings. Having developed strong friendships with many of the Dominguez men that go beyond simple links of affinity, I found it difficult to superimpose the dynamics of social research onto our already existing relationships. Having interacted with these men as a friend, a business partner, a co-worker, a foreigner, an in-law, or a drinking companion, I struggled to develop my own identity as an ethnographer. Furthermore, the idea of using the lives of my friends and family as ethnographic material produced in me a considerable amount of anxiety. Would I be betraying the trust, or as would be said in Nicaragua the *confianza* (confidence), that had slowly been invested in me? I believed that if I collected my information in a formalized setting, such as a structured interview, where my identity as researcher was clear to all, I would be able to sidestep this dilemma. But my strategy was flawed. Formal interviews provided few tangible results and little insight on how men lived their lives. I could tell when people were lying to me or purposely avoiding an uncomfortable subject. One man, who usually revelled in joking about sexual matters, froze up when I started the tape-recorder and attempted by all means to stay away from the topic during our interview. Most of the people I attempted to interview were uncomfortable in such a setting and were embarrassed to talk about things that they would often bring up themselves in

everyday conversations.

The use of participant-observation as my primary means of data collection quickly solved this problem. By blending in and doing more or less what everyone else was doing, with the exception of writing fieldnotes, I was able to collect data that was more accurate and insightful than what had been yielded through the interview process. In spontaneous informal conversations gender relations were avidly debated; countless stories about men's lives were related to me; and the odd incriminating tale was occasionally passed along. Although my notebooks were quickly filled, I was nonetheless still faced with the difficult issue of how to present the lives of people with whom I was so closely associated. There was no switch to turn on or off, no way to decide when anthropology was to be practiced and when it was better left aside. And there was no easy way out of the query at hand. The bottom line remains, however, that the onus is on the ethnographer to remain ethically responsible in his or her representations of others. The point I am trying to make is that it is important to reflect upon issues of representation, issues that were made so evident to me because of my particular positioning in the field. This should not be done to complicate our lives or to launch an endless sequence of existential questioning but rather out of respect for the people who enable us to undertake ethnographic research. Often protected by barriers such as language and academic jargon, our works have more often than not escaped the scrutiny of those whose lives we scrutinize. As with many such productions, my ethnography will most probably not be read by any of the characters included in it. This is not a reason, however, to take a free editorial license over how the lives of these people will be represented. Every ethnographer should be

accountable to those we work with and it is my sincerest desire that my writing does justice to those depicted in the next few pages.

2. The History of Men and Masculinity in Anthropology

Interestingly enough, the study of men and masculinity finds itself in a paradoxical position within the discipline of anthropology. It is by now well known that before the diffusion of some of the insights produced by the feminist and gay rights movements into anthropology in the 1970's, few ethnographers ever considered the gender dimensions of their analyses. The experiences and narratives of men, more often than not powerful ones at that, were used to produce the cultural practices and institutions that anthropologists documented. There were obvious exceptions to this overwhelming trend found in the works of Ruth Landes, Zora Neale Hurston, Elsie Clew Parsons, and Alice Fletcher. However, with the exception of Margaret Mead, who, it is worth noting, never found permanent employment in an anthropology department despite her monumental ethnographic and theoretical achievements, early ethnographers who studied gender relations, gender identities or women's issues more generally were marginalized within the discipline (Mascias-Lee & Black, 2000:8). This analytical deficiency only becomes irony, though, when it is pointed out by Matthew Gutmann recently that few ethnographies have treated men as "engendered and engendering beings (1997:385)." The study of men and masculinity is thus a fairly recent development in anthropology. But, like any burgeoning field of inquiry, it has its own theoretical lineage, which I will now review in order to better situate my own work on the topic.

Prestige and Performance

The first major anthropological study to address manhood and masculinity was a series of essays entitled *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean*

Society (1966), which featured contributions from several well-known ethnographers, including Julian Pitt-Rivers, Pierre Bourdieu, and Joseph Campbell. Although more concerned with creating a structural-functionalist explication of the workings of Mediterranean society, these essays nonetheless represent a first attempt within the discipline at theorizing the social roles of men in a gendered dimension.

The principal thread that brought this collection of works together was the premise that male behavior was constantly fuelled by the quest for honor. Those who acquired honor, usually through public displays of worth and bravery, would be respected and commended while those who did not would be tainted with shame, scorned and ridiculed. But honor and shame did not only divide men, as women were also largely responsible for male honor. Indeed, it was understood that controlling the sexuality of wives, daughters, and other female kin was probably the most crucial determinant in the distribution of honour and shame. Series editor J.G. Peristiany makes this very point in his essay on the dynamics of social life in a Cypriot village:

It is also true that in a country where feminine honour is almost exclusively associated with sexual modesty this attitude assumes a particularly violent and socially significant form. Feminine honour involves not only a woman's total personality but also that of the group she represents. This is apparent when the female is seen not only as the representative of her family and sex but as that of a hostile community and class (1966:183).

By focusing on public performance, sexual ideology, and the male control of women's bodies as the focal points of Mediterranean manhood, the Honour and Shame series set important precedents in how masculinity would be treated by future scholars of the region. Despite moving away from the structural-functionalist approaches of their predecessors and producing a much more nuanced understanding of the social potential of masculinity, the authors of the next few ethnographies

generally stayed within the boundaries first established by the Honour and Shame school of thought.

The first of these ethnographies is Michael Herzfeld's dissertation on male life in Glendi, a village of the Greek province of Crete: *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village* (1985). Examining topics as varied as sheep theft, blood feuds, identity, local politics, and changes in local relations as well as producing a flexible understanding of key notions such as morality and social relationships, Herzfeld centers his analysis on a concept of manhood that holds public performance as the only tangible indicator of male worth. He explains:

The poetics of social interaction proposed here thus has its roots in a combination of semiotic theory and Glendiot cosmology. In Glendiot idiom, there is less focus on "being a good man" than on "being good at being a man" -a stance that stresses *performative excellence* (emphasis in original text), the ability to foreground manhood by means of deeds that strikingly "speak for themselves." (1985:16)

Herzfeld thus argues that what is of importance is not what men do but how they do it. By acting with flare and improvising whenever and wherever possible, the men of Glendi establish their own originality and make claims to social prestige. Daily occurrences such as labor or relationships with members of the household are categorized as bland and devoid of meaning. Women are relegated to the private realm of the home and hold little weight in the ethnographic data or final analysis. Herzfeld's Glendi is a homosocial world dominated by male enterprise.

In *Metaphors of Masculinity: Sex and Status in Andalusian Folklore* (1980), Stanley Brandes probes beneath the surface meanings attributed to Andalusian folklore by its practitioners to find a wellspring of symbolic meaning. More specifically, he focuses his analysis on determining how the messages contained

within folkloric material can influence local attitudes about gender relations, which can be “a strong motivating force in determining relationships between the sexes (1980:76).” Largely staying within the honor and shame paradigm, Brandes substitutes the older functionalist analysis for a symbolic one. He argues that folklore is in essence a series of psychological projections that express the views of a population on numerous issues, including those related to gender. In Andalusia, local lore places men as the weaker of the two sexes. Far from being a simple inversion designed to justify male domination, Brandes explains how legitimate male fears of being emasculated by women are couched in jokes, plays, riddles, and even religious symbols. These fears, however, take on real significance in everyday encounters. Folklore, therefore, contains hidden messages that are unconsciously internalized by Andalusian men. Once again, we are presented a model of cultural transmission where the individual is being molded by existing cultural forces with little ability to put his or her own imprint on this process of social immersion. Brandes explains this procedure in the following passage:

Problems of social status and sexual identity are, on the one hand, individual problems that each man has to work out for himself. Doubtless, there are as many distinctive ways in which men come to define themselves to themselves as there are male human beings in the world. On the other hand, men who are immersed from childhood in the same cultural milieu learn to think and act on the basis of shared assumptions. Each culture provides men with the means to express their sexual and social identities, and through constant reliance on these means, men consolidate and affirm their self-image. It is these culturally shared assumptions and expressions of masculinity with which we are concerned, not the idiosyncratic variations that are a part of every man’s personal experience (1980:10).

The use of psychology in understanding masculinity was taken a step further by David Gilmore in his cross-cultural synthesis *Manhood in the Making: Cultural*

Concepts of Masculinity. Interested in uncovering universal threads that can help us comprehend a “deep structure of masculinity,” Gilmore throws neo-Freudian formulations into the existing theoretical mix. By comparing ethnographic data from different societies, Gilmore comes to the conclusion that there is no single universal standard of masculinity. However, he nonetheless makes the claim that one pan-cultural male concern does exist: the preoccupation with being manly. Gilmore argues that this concern is the result of men having to be culturally created, usually through violent rituals of separation from the female worlds where they spent their first few years of existence. Women, on the other hand, only have to do what comes naturally for them to reach the ranks of womanhood (1990:15). Manhood is thus achieved while reaching the status of woman requires only an enhancement of existing biological and psychological attributes. This divergence is what allows Gilmore to explain the fierce behaviour of men the world over. His logic goes as such: since manhood is achieved, it must be upheld. Men are thus faced with a constant fear of regression to an un-manly state of being. To avoid this, men must constantly prove themselves through highly idealized forms of behaviour. Being a man therefore requires a constant re-enacting of the violent separation by which their initial relation with the feminine sex was broken, making manhood “a defence against the eternal child within... (Gilmore, 1990:29).”

Despite initial appearances to the contrary, Roger Lancaster conceptualizes masculinity in ways similar to Herzfeld, Brandes, and Gilmore in *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of power in Nicaragua*. Even though producing an ethnography filled with the marks of more recent anthropological thought such as

self-reflexivity, multi-vocality, political accountability, and a creative use of literary structure, deep-down, Lancaster's take on Nicaraguan masculinity differs little from the honor and shame precedent. Conducting his research in a mixed working and middle-class neighborhood of Managua during the late nineteen eighties, Lancaster documents popular reactions and individual survival strategies in the context of civil war, growing economic hardship, and state-led social engineering. In attempting to explain some of the failures of the Sandinista revolution, Lancaster stumbles upon *machismo*, a term he uses to describe both the local brand of masculinity and the system of gender relations that dominates daily interactions. According to Lancaster, machismo acts as a critical factor in impeding positive social transformations. In the chapter of his ethnography dedicated to breaking down the workings of machismo and its effects on Nicaraguan society, entitled *Subject Honor, Object Shame*, Lancaster ponders why men have been unable to move on from being irresponsible and domineering beings:

What is machismo? Why do Nicaraguan men behave as they do (as Nicaraguan women vigorously complain): beating their wives, simultaneously fathering children in multiple households, abandoning *compañeras* and children, gambling away hard-earned money, and drinking to excess? And why did a decade of efforts to roll back the culture of machismo achieve so few tangible results? (1992:235)

Lancaster suggests that the ineffectiveness of the FSLN in overturning power imbalances in daily gender relations lies in their misconception of machismo as a simple set of beliefs that guide men in their interactions with others and as a male ideal that most men strive for. In short, machismo was reduced to the level of ideology when it stands for much more than "a set of erroneous beliefs that got lodged in people's heads (1992:236)." Lancaster, though, sees machismo as

constituting a set of power-based relationships that produce their own material conditions:

Machismo, therefore, is more than an “effect” produced by other material relations. It has its own materiality, its own power to produce effects. The resilience of machismo as a system has nothing to do with the tendency of ideological systems to “lag” behind changes in the system of economic production, for machismo is more than a “reflection” of economic practices. It is its own economy (1992:236).

Machismo is thus a system that creates “its own economy” of value. Within this said economy, manly posturing is what brings the highest reward. Men aim to gain prestige and power through exaggerated displays of manliness that put down women and weaker men. If men fail to display their masculinity in socially recognized ways or if they are emasculated by other men, they risk not only of losing their privileged position within the structure of machismo but also their gender.

Lancaster elaborates:

Thus if a man fails to maintain the upper hand in his relations with women, his demeanor might well be judged passive, and he may be stigmatized, by degrees, as a *carbón* (cuckold), *maricón* (effeminate man), and *cochón*. Whoever fails to maintain an aggressively masculine front will be teased, ridiculed, and eventually stigmatized (1992:244).

Men can thus sink to the status of *cochon*, which Lancaster conceives as a third gender that includes persons that are physically male but have lost or been denied their own masculinity. There is thus a latent fear in men not, as Gilmore would have understood it, of regressing to childhood, but of being stripped of their manhood and cast into the stigmatized ranks of the *cochon*. Because of this, Lancaster argues that men “are caught” because “they have to do the honourable thing, the manly thing - even if it is not what they really want to do- or lose face (1992:196).”

Nicaraguan men are thus reduced to performing. They are stuck in a game of

gender survival. They have to distinguish themselves from other men continuously since the prestige associated with being a man must be constantly reinforced if it is to be upheld. Being a man is reduced, once again, to public performance. It is a show put on by men, with real material consequences for themselves and their families.

Once more, we will allow Lancaster to explain:

(Machismo is)... primarily a gestural system, for it is only through the competent performance of certain stereotyped gestures that machismo may be read, both by others and by the actor himself. Every gesture, every posture, every stance, every way of acting in the world is immediately seen as "masculine" or "feminine," depending on whether it connotes activity or passivity. Every action is governed by a relational system -a code- that produces its meanings out of the subject matter of the body, its form, its engagement with other bodies. As a gestural system, machismo has a steep temporal dimension, yesterday's victories count little for tomorrow. Every act is, effectively, part of an ongoing exchange system between men in which women figure as intermediaries. To maintain one's masculinity, one must successfully come out on top of these exchanges. To lose in this ongoing exchange system entails a loss of face and thus a loss of masculinity. The threat is a total loss of status, whereby one descends to the zero point of the game and either literally or effectively becomes a cochon (1992:236).

Faced with such intense scrutiny, it is of little surprise that men would take up destructive habits to step out of this world of extreme competition or would have difficulty establishing positive relationships with those closest to them. However, and may I add luckily, Lancaster's all-encompassing model of gender in Nicaragua is flawed. As I will demonstrate in the upcoming chapters, men do not simply or solely beat their wives, abandon their children, gamble their earnings, or drink to excess. They are not always "caught" into acting honorably, even if it goes against their wills, since they do make choices and do have the freedom to be themselves in their daily interactions. But the first mistake made by Lancaster was in his use of the term of machismo, which holds more in symbolic value with a North American audience than

in local legitimacy with the people of Nicaragua.

Searching for Machismo

One question remains to be asked: when looking at Nicaraguan masculinity or the economy of gender as Lancaster would no doubt put it, why are we talking about machismo? The point here is to uncover why we mention the existence of machismo in certain contexts and not in others and what are the particular reasons for this.

Stanley Brandes does not mention machismo once in his ethnography on Andalusian men. Nor does Michael Herzfeld in his account of Cretan life. Roger Lancaster however insists that all social relations in Nicaragua are to some extent dictated by machismo. This must imply that machismo is some sort of organic development to Nicaragua, Central America or perhaps even all of Latin America. We have all heard of the Mexican macho and other such generalist assumptions. It is easy to make the cognitive link between an andocentric public culture and the words macho and machismo. Lancaster justifies his use of the term as such:

Traditional ideas about masculinity in Nicaragua have been labelled *machismo*. The term was given general currency by AMNLAE's consciousness-raising efforts and by Sandinista discussions of gender relations. Drawn from a politicized international social science literature, the term turns the commonplace macho (man, or real man) into a "system of manliness." The aim of the term machismo is transparent enough: it designates a system in order to diagram and critique it; it elevates to the level of explicitness all that was implicit in the term macho (1992:92).

As Lancaster thus points out, machismo is not an organic concept but a creation of social scientists wishing to characterize the behaviour of men in certain cultures.

Let us draw a comparison here to the work of Jose Limon in *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas*. While looking at how men relate to each other on certain occasions and examining the

existing literature on the Mexican working class male population of South Texas and northern Mexico, Limon noticed an interesting discrepancy. He found that men would often swear at each other, mimic getting into fights, or use ingenious word combinations or double-meanings to mock their companions. However, far from having as goal to humiliate or subordinate their peers through such interactions, Limon argues that these joking relationships reinforced friendship and mutual respect between men. Brandes comes to a similar conclusion with regards to Andalusia: "Jokes and joking are so important, in fact, that they can be said to provide the main fabric by which men are bound to each other on a daily basis (1980:98)." Similarly, I have found, both in fieldwork and daily experience, that people tend to joke with their friends and not their enemies and that the use of ridicule in humour is usually conducted with one's closest friends where it is understood that no malignant intentions lie beneath the verbal jibing. Limon finds, however, that many authors lack the cultural capital to understand these relationships. Coming from a different social strata and/or cultural group, ethnographers and social commentators misinterpret these jovial exchanges as a lack of sophistication or as petty competitions for social positioning.

Octavio Paz's dissection of the interactions among what he calls the *pelado* (peeled or without wealth), the predecessor of the Mexican Macho, is a case in point:

Each of the speakers tries to humiliate his adversary with verbal traps and ingenious linguistic combinations, and the loser is the person who cannot think of a comeback, who has to swallow his opponent's jibes. These jibes are full of aggressive sexual allusions; the loser is possessed, is violated, by the winner, and the spectators laugh and sneer at him (1961: 39-40, as quoted in Limon 1997:65).

Let us now compare Paz's reasoning to Lancaster's, who states that:

In the culture of machismo, the *cochon* is narrowly defined as anal-passive, but the concept of anal passivity serves more loosely as a sort of extreme case of "passivity." The term *cochon* may thus be invoked in both a strict and a loose sense. Which aspect of the concept is emphasized -anality or passivity- will determine whether it encompasses a small minority or a potentially large majority of men. Therein lies the peculiar power of stigma to regulate conduct and generate effects: it ultimately threatens all men who fail to maintain a proper public face (1992:244).

The similarities are quite obvious. However, one important difference does exist.

What Paz interpreted as a lack of class and social etiquette on the part of the lower class Mexican, Lancaster transforms into a system of behavior that engulfs all Nicaraguans. In this instance, men are not necessarily being portrayed as brutish or unsophisticated; rather they are being cast, along with women and children, as hapless victims of machismo.

But despite Lancaster's claim that AMNLAE's (Asociacion de Mujeres Nicaraguense Luisa Amanda Espinoza) consciousness-raising efforts in the 1980's popularized the notion of machismo, few Nicaraguans currently use the concept to understand their own daily lives. If asked directly what machismo was, I am sure most people could vaguely relate it to male dominance or unequal gender relations in some form or another. However, I must also point out that during my eleven months of fieldwork, I heard the spontaneous use of the term only once in a rural setting. Matthew Gutmann's observation that machismo still had "a social science and journalistic ring for most people" in the working class neighbourhood of Santo Domingo in Mexico City becomes even more fitting in the context of rural Nicaragua (2002:32). It is true that Lancaster conducted research in Managua during the late 1980's and that my own fieldwork took place in a rural setting more than fifteen years later. Perhaps the geographical and temporal differences account for this lack of

compatibility between our findings. Nonetheless, I must argue that these factors cannot in themselves explain such a discrepancy. Furthermore, I find it somewhat thorny to attempt to reduce such a broad array of relationships and identities into a concept that holds little local currency and that, as we will see, when it is brought up, can be understood in several contradictory manners.

When I first arrived in Nicaragua, I avidly anticipated the eruption of spontaneous discussions about machismo. I believed such conversations would be recurrent as arguments about what was right and what was wrong for men and women to do were frequent in rural households. Machismo, being a central force in Nicaraguan culture, at least according to many academics, was bound to be a hot topic in any such debate. My task as an ethnographer would be quite simple: all I would have to do to understand how men conceived of their relationships with women or thought about themselves was to wait for them to start talking about machismo and the role it played in their lives. I did remember, on my previous stints in Nicaragua, hearing few uses of the words machismo and macho in the sense we have come to expect but I assumed that it was the result of lacking basic anthropological training or of failing to show sufficient interest in the topic. These much anticipated debates, though, never came. Although Nicaraguans often talk about theirs and other's manliness, or lack thereof, they do so using the rubric of *hombria* (manhood). The simple use of the word *hombre* (man) is sufficient to encompass all that is desirable in a man. In fact, the noun *hombre* is often used as an adjective to discuss a certain set of positive virtues that can change according to the context. In places like La Uva, it would not be unusual to hear the phrase *muy hombre*

el hombre (very man the man, I.e. this man is very manly). As for the word *macho*, it is commonly used in Nicaraguan Spanish to describe a male mule or a woman's sanitary pad. It is also used as an adjective in rural areas, not, however, to ascribe the characteristics of machismo onto a man but rather to create a cognitive link between a particular person's attributes and those of a mule. Therefore, the phrase *Ese hombre es un macho* (This man is a macho), would most likely be understood as *This man is a mule* and a sort of brutish quality would be attributed to that person. Comparisons to a macho could also take on positive connotations. If one were to exclaim *Ese hombre trabaja como un macho* (This man works like a mule), we would be praising him for his remarkable work ethic. The word machismo, however, was much less often pronounced. The one situation in which I did encounter it was somewhat unusual and is worth recounting for the variety of meanings it illustrates.

Semana Santa (Holy Week) usually takes place during the month of April, which coincides with the hottest time of the year in Nicaragua's Pacific coast. Being the last month of *verano* (summer), April sees the sun heat up and burn the landscape dry. Temperatures rise to the high nineties and sometimes crack one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Streams dry up and pasture becomes scarce. Dust rises at every corner and is spread by the warm winds blowing in from the ocean. The trees are left without any leaves and the entire countryside turns to a sandy brown color that reminds everyone that rain has not fallen in over four months. But the burning sun and suffocating heat are not sufficient impediment to stop Nicaraguans from celebrating in style the death and resuscitation of Christ. But more than a religious celebration, *Semana Santa* has become a popular festival of carnivalesque proportions.

Nicknamed *semana sangana* (the week of mischief), *Semana Santa* sees people from all corners of the country flock to the ocean to take part in numerous festivities. Those that cannot make it to the beaches of the Pacific coast usually find a river, a spring, or a lake to dip into and escape the scorching sun. As can be expected, alcohol is consumed abundantly during this time and several vehicular accidents, fights, and tragic forays into the ocean or lakes are reported on the nightly news. Both men and women are important participants in these celebrations as constraints on behaviour and mobility are partially lifted during this time, not without, however, protestations by a few.

On *Sabado de Gloria*, the Saturday before Easter Sunday, Calixto and I had wound up once again at Dona Antonia's house following a day and night of debauchery in Escalante. Originally hoping to go to the ocean, we had met up with a couple of friends and had not made it past *El Barrio*. Ricardo, one of Calixto's uncles, had joined us on Friday night after returning from a three day trip where he visited his *querida* (lover). As is customary on such occasions, we decided to *sacarlos la goma* (get rid of our hangovers) by drinking more *guaro*. Calixto invited just about everyone who passed by to join us and soon, we found ourselves accompanied by about ten other men. Some would come and go, having a couple of *tragos* (shots) before moving on while others would stay until they passed out from the combination of direct exposure to the sun and heavy alcohol intake. Earlier in the day, Chepa, a woman who lived nearby, left her one year old daughter with Keyla, one of Dona Antonia's grand-daughters, as she went off to *el mar* (the ocean) with her mother for the day. At around four o'clock that afternoon, Marcos, Chepa's father, who had

come and gone all day, walked into Dona Antonia's kitchen and took a seat. Taking a puff of his cigarette, he started venting his displeasure. "*No me gusta lo que hicieron esas mujeres* (I don't like what these women have done)," he said referring to his wife and his daughter wandering off to the ocean without his grand-daughter. "If the father's family would see this, they would want to take the baby away from her," he continued. "That's why there used to be machismo here," he finished. Had I heard this correctly? I snapped out of my daze and pressed on. "What do you mean Marcos," I asked him? "There used to be machismo here?" "Yes, he answered, but it was outlawed by the Frente about twenty years ago."

This was an astounding answer. Machismo had existed but it had been banned by the FSLN during the 1980's and had therefore disappeared. Such an optimistic outlook could only come from a man and one involved with the FSLN at that (Marcos was part of one of the now-defunct cooperatives that continued to own land collectively with the other members of the cohort). "But what is this machismo you talk about," I pressed on. Marcos threw out his cigarette, put his hands on the table and explained: "*El machismo es cuando el hombre le pega a la mujer* (Machismo is that when a man hits a woman)." "But has it really disappeared?," I objected. "Yes," Marcos said, "it's now forbidden to hit a woman." "But men still hit women," Leida, another of Dona Antonia's granddaughter's, said. Sitting on the kitchen table and swinging her legs back and forth, she presented us with a different understanding of machismo: "For me it's not just about a man hitting a woman but about men trying to control or decide for women." From Escalante, but having lived in Managua for significant periods of her life, Leida conceptualized machismo in a manner similar to

what is usually found in the social science literature. "*Ademas*," she said, "*todavia hay mucho machismo en Nicaragua* (What's more there is still a lot of machismo in Nicaragua)."

A few minutes later, the conversation shifted back to its original topic. Both Dona Antonia and Calixto were supporting Marcos' stance. "*Esas mujeres son frescas* (These women are fresh, irresponsible)," Dona Antonia commented. After all, a mother and a grandmother should not be out *de vaga* (vagabonding) while leaving their *cargo* (charge) to a young girl. "*Eso para mi es machismo* (This for me is machismo)," Calixto exclaimed. Not being restricted to male violence or control machismo was now being projected as an idiom for female or, more precisely, motherly irresponsibility. Whether or not Marcos' stated concern for his granddaughter's well-being was the real motive of his displeasure, since his wife was out having fun without him, remains a moot point. What we should take note of is how the participants of the conversation accorded different and conflicting meanings to a concept supposedly representing all existing gender relations in Nicaraguan culture. Far from being the cultural juggernaut portrayed by Lancaster machismo seems to have remained a somewhat obscure word that pops up once in a while in workshops, projects, cultural exchanges, or even drunken conversations.

At around six o'clock, Chepa came back from the ocean and picked up her daughter on her way home, relieving Keyla of her duties as babysitter. We had now bought another case of beer and Leida and her sister Monica were now drinking with us. Ricardo turned up the volume on his boom box and even Dona Antonia started dancing. As the party was gathering new life, a short and stocky man wearing shorts,

a tank-top and sandals walked up to the fence that delimited the compound from the road. It was Diego, Leida's *hombre* (man, boyfriend) from Managua, who was not well-liked by the local boys. He called her over and began to talk to her while the rest of us simply watched. After a couple of minutes, Diego walked away and Leida came back to where the rest of us had gathered feigning disdain. "*Eh*," she said, "*quiere que me vaya con el. Esta loco* (He wants me to go with him, he's crazy)." A few minutes later, Diego came back and once again called Leida over, with the outcome being largely the same. Calixto, never missing an occasion to tease others, shouted out to Leida as her boyfriend walked away in a foul mood, "*Oye Leida, existe todavia el machismo en Nicaragua* (Hey Leida, machismo still exists in Nicaragua)?" To which she answered laughing, "*Si, hay mucho machismo en Nicaragua* (Yes there's a lot of machismo in Nicaragua). Diego, came back a third time, now fully dressed with pants and a tee-shirt. "*Vamonos ya* (Let's go now)," he said to her, "*si no me voy a la verga y no vuelvo* (if not I'm getting the fuck out of here and I'm not coming back)." Leida was not impressed. She moved slowly towards the fence. Calixto, now openly goading Diego, shouted out once again: "*Hombre, es que abunda el machismo en Nicaragua* (Man, it's that machismo is abundant in Nicaragua)." Diego, however, did not take the bait and simply walked away. Leida, although she was not happy about it, soon followed.

New Developments in the Anthropology of Masculinity

Machismo should be understood more as an academic import into the cultural vocabulary of Nicaragua than as an organic system of thought and behavior that dominates the lives of the country's inhabitants. As I will show in the following

chapters, men and women do have choices in how they behave. This is by no means a new insight to the anthropology of masculinity. Over the past decade or so, several anthropologists have produced works that have moved away from the over-reliance on the performative paradigm and its fixation with male public life as the only viable source of information and insight. The obvious leader, although by no means unique member, of this push for a more balanced analysis of masculinity is Matthew Gutmann. In *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (1996), Gutmann brings forward a new method in the anthropological investigation of men's lives and their gendered identities, the highlights of which are worth reviewing.

Wanting to move away from the stale cultural categorizations that had plagued anthropological research on men for several decades, Guttmann's most crucial theoretical innovation was the adoption of a more flexible and dynamic conception of culture in his analysis of masculinity. As he explains, "Gender identities in Colonia Santo Domingo, as elsewhere, are products and manifestations of cultures in motion; they do not emanate from some primordial essence whose resilience bears testament to perpetual forms of inequality (1996:14)." Culture, therefore, is understood by Gutmann as a process of continuous transformation, where meanings, cultural practices, and identities are created, negotiated, and changed simultaneously. Such a shift in the formulation of culture has not only allowed us to recognize the constant alterations in the way men live, relate to women, conceive of themselves, and think about the world around them, but it has also enabled us to move away from the static portrayals of male behavior and identity that have polluted the social science landscape for much of the past century. Gutmann

uses the widespread labeling of Mexican men as machos as a case in point. Long believed to be an inherent trait of *Mexicanidad* (mexicanness) by social commentators, machismo and its primary offshoot, the macho male, came to stand for a universal Mexican masculinity. Based on a few destructive practices that were thought to be common among most, if not all, Mexican men, machismo was assumed to be passed along from generation to generation not unlike the Spanish language or the Catholic faith. It was a cultural given that Mexican boys would grow up to become machos. But as Gutmann explains, cultural transmission is not a process of singular reproduction of norms and beliefs. Rather, it is an unpredictable and highly varied procedure whereby individual consciousnesses are formed, which makes the continued reproduction of an unwavering cultural standard such as machismo highly unlikely (1996:76). Gutmann thus regards machismo as “a form of calumny... for labeling a host of negative male characteristics the world over” or as a negative racial and cultural marker used in the United States to “rank men according to their presumably inherent national and racial characters”(1996: 26, 227).

By bringing a more flexible understanding of culture to the table, Gutmann opened the door for several other theoretical and methodological innovations in the study of masculinity. These include recognizing that the gender character of cultural practices can change with time; accepting the importance of women in forcing changes in male behavior; considering the impact of current events and recent trends in shaping gender identities; acknowledging the importance of household relations and obligations in the lives of men; accounting for spatial, temporal, and social differences in the formation of masculinities; and, finally, examining individual

gender identities in relation to dominant discourses of manhood (Gutmann, 1996 and 2003).

Matthew Gutmann's work paved the way for the development of new trends in the analysis of masculinity. My goal in this thesis is to build on the theoretical inroads made by Gutmann and to contribute to the growing literature on men as "engendered and engendering subjects" (Gutmann: 1997:385). To properly understand the lives of men as active members of households, families, communities, or simply as individuals, it is essential that we move beyond the analytical barriers we have contributed to create. We cannot reduce the lives of men the world over to public performance in the context of homosociality. We cannot equate a complex web of gender relations marked by countless variables to a single dominating concept with little local relevance. And we should not limit ourselves in examining how men lead their lives to an essentialist conception of masculinity that often only helps to create misconceptions about those it pretends to explain. Studies of men in the context of Latin America taking account of household relations and responsibilities (Escobar Latapi 2003, Gutmann 1996), social positioning (Fuller 2003), and particular life trajectories (Ferrandiz 2003) in the formation of a gendered identity have already been conducted. However, few have yet made the direct link between men as members of households and men as workers in the creation of male identities. Furthermore, few researchers have taken a gender-based approach to the analysis of male labor and how work and work relations contribute to men's sense of self. Because of my privileged position as both a researcher and as a member of a household and a business partner, I had direct access, not just as an observer put also

as a regular participant, to the world of male labor in Nandaime and its surroundings. Whether because of lack of access (Vale de Almeida, 1996), lack of interest, or assumed lack of meaning, most researchers of masculinity have given little attention to the world of work in their ethnographies. My hope is that by including everyday doings such as going to the field, hauling water, joking with friends, gathering firewood, listening to the radio, playing with your kids, or arguing with your wife, it will be possible to look at manhood as something that can be lived and that does not always have to be performed. But before we can move on, we must, at the very least, mention the historical, economic, and political specificities that have helped to shape the snapshots of Nicaragua we encounter in the upcoming pages.

3. The Roots of Inequality I: a Politico-Economic Briefing

Recent statistics have shown the Nicaraguan people to be among the most destitute in this hemisphere. In 2004, Nicaragua ranked 112th out of 177 nations worldwide on the Human Development Index, nonetheless an improvement of nine places from the previous year. Key human and economic indicators, though, still show that much has to be done if most Nicaraguans are ever to escape the throes of poverty. According to data compiled in 2004, the average life expectancy for Nicaraguans was 69.7 years old. It was also estimated that close to 25% of the adult population was illiterate (Human Development Indicator: 2004). Furthermore, statistics show that almost one in five Nicaraguans are without sustainable access to an improved water source. Economic figures are equally glum. After regression analysis, per capita GDP was calculated at 3,262 US\$ yearly. Actual GDP for the year 2003, however, was only 745 US\$ per capita. As a result, from 1990-2003, 45.1% of the population was forced to manage their daily affairs with a budget of less than 1 US\$ per day. If we increase the cutoff point to 2 US\$ per day, we now include 79.9% of the population. Not surprisingly, in 2004, 47.9% of Nicaraguans lived below the national poverty line. To make matters worse, public spending on health and education have been reduced drastically over the past two decades, standing at 3.9% and 3.1% of the GDP respectively in 2002. As can be expected in such circumstances, income inequality is highly pronounced, with the wealthiest 10% of the population accounting for 33.8% of the nation's earnings while the poorest 20% only received 5.6% of national wealth (Human Development Indicator, 2004). Nicaragua's monetary difficulties are further compounded by an extreme economic

imbalance, where 92.5% of all exports come from the primary products sector (Bulmer-Thomas, 2003:11). Such vulnerability to world market prices is only countered by the work of Nicaraguans living abroad, mostly in Costa Rica and the United States, who sent back 810 million US\$ in cash remittances for the year 2004, an estimated 17.8% of the nation's GDP, which amounts to the sixth highest total worldwide (Migration Policy Institute, 2006).

But have things always been as such for the bulk of the Nicaraguan people? Have they been predestined to hardship and suffering? Is such a fate inevitable for a small country such as Nicaragua? Or are there specific reasons why this Central American nation finds itself where it is today? Only by looking back, albeit briefly, at the historical events that have come to shape Nicaragua can we begin to answer these questions and better understand the material conditions that the people in this study are forced to live with.

From Colonialism to Oligarchy

During the first half of the sixteenth century, the indigenous populations of what is today Nicaragua were forcefully brought under Spanish rule by gangs of mercenaries moving west from the Caribbean and north from Panama. Roger Lancaster characterizes this clash as

...one of the bloodiest conquests in history. From extermination, enslavement, forced marches, overwork, and European epidemics, the territory of what is now Nicaragua lost more than ninety percent of its population within fifty years. A more total destruction would be hard to imagine, and the conflicts it engendered remain as more than mere wisps (1992:224).

According to Spanish archives, the indigenous population of the territories now forming Nicaragua stood at 546,000 at the time of conquest. By 1555, a little over

thirty years later, it had been reduced to 43,700 (Dore, 2006:34). Following their near-total destruction of the local population, the Spanish invaders reorganized Nicaragua culturally, politically, and economically. The Spanish language and the Catholic faith were imposed onto the remaining populations. A system of indirect rule was established where in exchange for tribute and labor, indigenous communities were granted communal land rights by the Spanish Crown. *Alcaldes indigenas* (indigenous mayors or leaders) were even recognized as the legitimate leaders of local communities and often received favorable treatment by colonial officials as long as they kept a steady supply of tribute forthcoming. Finally, an economic model based on the extraction of primary resources and, later, the production of non-staple agricultural crops for export was established. Although colonial rule ended in 1821, many of the social, political, and financial dynamics implemented by the Spanish Crown live on today.

Nicaragua seceded from Spain along with all other Central and South American nations during the third decade of the nineteenth century. Liberated from Spanish authority, local elites were now free from prohibitive colonial legislation and burdensome taxation. Large landholdings were consolidated and expanded and the agro-export economic model first introduced by colonial officials was expanded. But this era of complete political independence was a short one. In 1855, a new epoch in Nicaraguan politics began when William Walker disembarked in Leon with a band of soldiers of fortune at the request of the Liberal party. After burning down Granada and defeating the Conservatives, the American filibuster ruled Nicaragua for two years as its president, making English the official language and legalizing slavery

before being eventually deposed by a united Central American force. Although Walker's venture into Central America had few lasting consequences in itself, it set the stage for future military intervention by the United States government in the region.

Having regained control of the nation following the Walker episode, local elites continued their selfish use of state power for their own self-betterment. Wages were kept low through institutionalized forced labor, internal taxation was generally opposed, and government expenditure fervently denounced. Because the elite classes created such ideal conditions for the success of their agricultural enterprises, they had no pressing needs to reinvest their profits in productive activities and were instead content with splurging their wealth in the consumption of foreign-made luxury goods. The end result of this short-sightedness was the creation of a society structured to perpetuate the privileges of the few at the detriment of building a more diversified economy. Although Nicaragua was by no means the only Latin American nation going through this process, its case nonetheless represents an extreme example of resource stratification (Thorp, 1998:25). Thomas Walker gives us an example of this style of governance:

A set of policies -called the "liberal reforms" in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America but actually introduced by conservatives in Nicaragua- were carried out to help the local elites take advantage of the new international demand for certain primary products, notably coffee in the case of Nicaragua. In 1877 all forms of rural property holdings in Nicaragua were banned by law except for individual rights recognized by legal title. Communal indigenous properties as well as plots held previously under common law by the illiterate mestizo peasantry instantly became "unoccupied" national territory that could be purchased by the agricultural elite. To add insult to injury, the cultivation of plantain, a banana-like staple food of the peasantry, was outlawed and "vagrancy" was made punishable by forced labor in productive enterprises (often the coffee plantations that quickly replaced peasant and Indian

communal farms). The liberal governments that came to power in 1893 and ruled the country off and on until 1979 simply accentuated this cruel and exploitative agro-export system (1997:2).

The uninhibited domination of the agro-export sector had lasting effects on the Nicaraguan economy. Because most of its foreign exchange came from the sale of one or two commodities, first gold and coffee and then coffee and cotton, and since the manufacturing sector had remained negligible due to insufficient investment, a small internal market and no substantial efforts at promoting the model of import-substitution industrialization, Nicaragua remained extremely vulnerable to price fluctuations on the world market as well as to global economic downturns. As such, Nicaragua's economy was one of those most affected by the 1929 stock market crash and the ensuing Great Depression, defaulting on its debt and swerving into a profound financial recession that it would only begin to recover from during the 1950's (Thorp, 1998:113).

From Imperialism to Dictatorship

The Conservatives, who had liberated the nation from foreign domination, held power for several decades during the late 1800's. Their hold on the state was only broken in 1893 by the ascension of liberal statesman Jose Santos Zelaya to the presidency (Babb, 2001:6). Influenced by the enlightenment and the positivist philosophers of the era, Zelaya fancied himself as a modernizer. Among his accomplishments were the abolition of communal property holdings, the secularization of Nicaraguan society, the development of infrastructure and a vast increase in government spending on education. On the level of international politics, Zelaya brought a nationalistic twist to Nicaraguan policy. By preaching for Central

American unity and by courting German and Japanese investors for the construction of a Nicaraguan transoceanic route that would link the Atlantic and Pacific oceans by way of the San Juan River and Lake Nicaragua, Zelaya proved to be an unwanted threat for American interests in the region. In 1909, the US Marines were sent to Nicaragua to support a Conservative rebellion that culminated in the ouster of Zelaya one year later (Walker, 2003: 16-17).

The restoration of Conservative power, though, did not produce the desired political stability. In 1912, under the leadership of Benjamin Zeledon, the Liberals rose up against the foreign-backed government. This time, the US Marines were sent to quell the uprising but their campaign was less of a success as fighting between the different factions continued for over two decades. In 1927, following a US-sponsored power sharing agreement where both parties were granted a share of state control, all of the Liberal generals laid down their weapons except for one, Augusto C. Sandino. Not satisfied with the simple re-establishment of Liberal rule, Sandino pledged to fight until the Marines would leave his native land. Recruiting among disgruntled workers and dispossessed peasants, Sandino and his army headed for the hills of northern Nicaragua and waged a guerilla-style war against the government forces and the US Marines. In 1933, the Marines were finally called back to the United States, leaving national security concerns in the hands of the *Guardia Nacional*, a new military force under the leadership of Anastacio Somoza Garcia. What appeared as an initial victory for Sandino's troops, soon turned into a bitter defeat when the peasant general was tricked and assassinated by Somoza and his henchmen. Following Sandino's death, many of his followers were massacred by the *Guardia*, effectively

ending the rebellious movement.

Having quashed Sandino's menace to traditional authority, Somoza quickly established his own hold on state power and launched what would become the longest-standing dynastic rule in Latin America during the 20th century. Governing Nicaragua as their personal fiefdom, (the elder Somoza was known to exclaim "*Nicaragua es mi finca*," "Nicaragua is my ranch)," Anastacio (Tacho) Somoza Garcia and his two sons Luis Somoza Debayle and Anastacio (Tachito) Somoza Debayle kept control of state power for an astounding forty-three years. Thomas W. Walker comments on the dynamics of the different Somoza regimes:

The personalities and governing style of the three Somozas differed one from the other. The father was a sort of populist dictator; Luis liked the appearance of "democracy" and 1960's developmentalism; and Anastacio Jr. was an intemperate, greedy man more prone to the use of force. Nevertheless, the Somoza formula for governing was simple and fairly constant during most of the forty-three years of family rule. It rested on three pillars: 1) co-optation of domestic elites; 2) direct control of the National Guard; and 3) the support of the United States (1997:3).

Starting with only a small coffee hacienda, the Somoza family was able to build a fortune estimated at 500 million US\$ and land holdings equivalent in size to the state of Massachusetts by the time of Tachito Somoza's overthrow in 1979 (Lancaster, 1992:2). The highpoint of Somoza greed came following the Managua earthquake of 1972, where 80% of the edifices in the capital city were leveled, fifteen thousand people lost their lives, and many more were injured or left without homes. Today, only two prominent public landmarks predate 1972 in Managua: the Central Bank and the Intercontinental Hotel. Florence Babb explains how Tachito Somoza reacted to the crisis:

With Managua in shambles, the international aid that came in was

substantially squandered by the Somoza government. Instead of rebuilding the city, funds were used to further enrich the dictatorship -and the limited reconstruction that took place was monopolized by the family's economic interests (2001:52).

The misuse and theft of international relief funds by the ruling clan helped to galvanize an already expanding opposition to the dictatorship that would come to have important repercussions on the course the Nicaraguan nation would take. Tired of the Somozas' hoarding of state power and of their use of violence and intimidation to achieve their political and economic ends, all sectors of Nicaraguan society began to voice their displeasure with the state during the decade of the 1970's, a dissatisfaction that would eventually erupt with the upheavals of 1979.

Nonetheless, despite their obvious contempt for things such as civil rights, social justice or democratic governance and their readiness to jail or assassinate their political opponents, the Somozas remain to this day well-liked by many Nicaraguans, the memory of their era having become a sort of nostalgic golden age following the upheavals of the previous three decades. Rodrigo, a truck-driver from Nandaime, once spent a whole afternoon discussing with Martin Dominguez and Pedro Araujo the virtues of the Somoza administration: "*Nicaragua era el granero de Centro America* (Nicaragua was the granary of Central America)," he exclaimed. "*Es cierto* (It's true), Don Martin concurred. "*En ese tiempo habia adonde trabajar, habian linduras de hacienda* (Back then there were places to get jobs, there were beautiful haciendas)," he added. "*Y los reales valian* (And money was worth something)," said Pablo. "*No como cuando estaban esos desgraciados Sandinistas* (Not like when those disgraceful Sandinistas were there)." The arguments put forth by these men are well-supported by the country's historical record since the period of Somoza rule did

indeed coincide with Nicaragua's most prosperous economic era.

Following the end of the civil war in the 1930's and with the stimulation in trade and production brought about by the Second World War, the Nicaraguan economy enjoyed three decades of unabated growth where the manufacturing sector, the agro-export industries, and the nation's overall GDP all increased significantly and fairly consistently. A crucial component to this run of monetary proficiency was the gradual economic integration that took part within the region and culminated with the formation of the Central American Common Market (CACM) in 1960. The CACM created a free trade zone where 95% of all goods produced in Central America could travel freely between Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Since all the economies involved were at similar stages of development, with a nascent manufacturing sector and a high dependence on the exportation of cash crops, Thorp argues that the agreement was beneficial to the financial development of all parties. In 1966, interior tariffs were fully eliminated and arrangements were made to set common external tariffs. By 1970, 28% of the Central American nations' exports were to other countries within the CACM. Of these, 96% came from manufacturing activities. By enabling the free flow of goods within their borders, the Central American states had stimulated the development of a manufacturing sector that was now a more attractive target for investment because of the larger market it catered to. In Nicaragua itself, manufacturing rose from 11.4% of the GDP in 1945 to 19.2% of the GDP in 1970 (Thorp, 1998:160).

However, as with most periods of sustained growth, certain negative monetary symptoms began to creep up. With easily accessible credit, a rising money supply,

and excess demand came rising levels of inflation that became increasingly difficult to control during the 1950's and 1960's. Because of this worrisome trend, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stepped in to conduct its first round of structural economic adjustments. The IMF's plan for economic stabilization was, at the time, much less drastic than the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) that would be put in place twenty years later, since it mainly consisted with reducing the role of the state in the economy in order to return financial systems to the self-regulating mechanism of the market. Raising taxes or establishing progressive income tax scales were not considered as means of overcoming these budgetary deficiencies (Thorp, 1998:171). Most states, though, only half-heartedly followed the recommendations of the IMF, being more concerned with re-establishing their credit in the hope of future loans than in re-structuring their economies.

The 1970's, however, brought an altogether different economic climate to the fore. The OPEC oil crisis created increased inflation as well as greater access to foreign capital, in the form of oil-financed bank loans. Simultaneously, the monetary value of many commodities produced by Latin American nations decreased significantly because of over-production. The result of these two conflicting processes was an increasing deficit in the balance of payments of Latin American states that would lead a decade later to an international debt crisis and the complete re-arrangement of several economies through SAPs (Thorp, 1998:206). Yet in Nicaragua, another series of events were about to unfold that would come to have a much greater immediate impact on the lives of the citizens of this country.

From Revolution to Civil War

Despite the relative economic prosperity that some Nicaraguans experienced under the dictatorship, discontent with the regime's dominance of political power and economic affairs resulted in the creation of early pockets of opposition. In 1956, following more political muddling that allowed him to retain his hold on the presidency, Anastacio Somoza Garcia was assassinated by Rigoberto Lopez Perez at a public rally in the city of Leon. In 1961, the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) was created by Carlos Fonseca, Tomas Borje and Sylvio Mayorga. Disenchanted with the farcical political system and inspired by the success of Castro's uprising two years earlier in Cuba, the FSLN began as a clandestine political alternative that struggled to overthrow the dictatorship. Although the initial band of fighters and activists honored Augusto Sandino's memory by adopting the Sandinista moniker, and no doubt hoped to revive some of the rebellious fervor associated with it, the FSLN's political orientation should not be confounded with Sandino's more moderate liberal heritage. Unlike the orthodox socialist parties that preceded it, the FSLN was a hybrid political formation that blended Marxist and Leninist political doctrines and Christian liberation theology as a means of resolving national problems of political injustice and economic dependency.

The FSLN's initial military activities were largely unsuccessful and the bulk of the party's cadres were wiped out by the *Guardia Nacional* during several counter-offensives conducted in the late 1960's. Nonetheless, the pioneers of Sandinismo persevered in the face of great odds and saw the political tide begin to turn in their favor during the 1970's. Anastacio Somoza Debayle's greed and incompetence was

turning more and more people toward the FSLN in the search for a political alternative. As the decade progressed and social and economic injustices became more pronounced due to the destruction caused by the Managua earthquake and growing economic difficulties, the FSLN grew bolder in its military campaign against the dictatorship. Its most audacious and best remembered coup was the storming of the *Palacio Nacional* (National Assembly) by Sandinista guerillas and the holding hostage of the *diputados* (members of the national assembly), which forced Somoza to release several political prisoners, pay a large ransom, and provide safe-passage out of the country to the assailants. But what really brought the dictatorship crashing down was the assassination of Pedro Joaquim Chamorro, editor of the conservative daily *La Prensa*. Chamorro, who had long been critical of Somoza but had never embraced the FSLN's platform for change, became the political symbol in death that catalyzed the uprising by uniting all opponents of Somocismo against the dictatorship. The widespread, multi-class, popular revolt that ensued culminated in the overthrow of the Somoza regime on July 19, 1979. Fifty-thousand lives were lost during the conflict (Walker, 1997:7).

The FSLN, being the only organized military force in Nicaragua following the disbanding of the *Guardia Nacional*, quickly worked to consolidate its position of strength within the revolutionary ranks. After briefly sharing power with more conservative factions, the FSLN monopolized the executive branch of the Nicaraguan state through the installation of a nine-member directorate. To counterbalance the power of the junta, a body of corporate representation, where different social groups were given a voice in a constitutive assembly, was created as a legislative body. If

popular democracy did not easily reach the upper echelons of the state, it was at least partly countered by the mass mobilization of the Nicaraguan populace that had begun during the uprising and continued unabated in the early years of the revolution. The most commemorated campaign undertaken by the *brigadistas* (volunteers or members of a brigade) was the attack on illiteracy unleashed by the state in 1980. Following this educational blitz where thousands of urban volunteers were sent out to the countryside to teach the *campesinos* how to read, Nicaraguans were again mobilized in a much-needed preventative health campaign that aimed to eradicate numerous diseases such as cholera and measles. Other issues and activities tackled by neighborhood organizations or newly-formed national associations included women's rights, worker's rights, local self-defense, and the harvesting of crops on state farms.

As they had promised, the Sandinistas did not implement a full-fledged socialist economy. Rather, a mixed-economic model was pursued, where governmental command never surpassed 40% of the nation's monetary exchanges. This re-structuring of financial affairs was accompanied by an important land-redistribution program in rural areas, where sizable amounts of arable land were appropriated by the state and redistributed to peasants as agricultural cooperatives or transformed into state farms. Upon gaining political power, one of the first moves made by the FSLN was the confiscation of over 1,500 estates held by the Somoza clan and its cronies. This land mass totaled almost 2 million acres and represented roughly 20% of the nation's cultivable land (Thorne & Kaimovitz, 1985:300). Mainly used for cattle herding and agro-export agriculture, Somoza's properties were transformed into state farms with few changes at the level of production in the hope

of maintaining viable levels of foreign exchange.

In August 1981, the Agrarian Reform Law was passed, paving the way for the FSLN to redistribute more land in the countryside. The new land law granted a somewhat ambiguous right to private property as stated in Article 1: “the present law guarantees the rights to private property over the land to all those who employ it productively and efficiently” (Thome & Kaimovitz, 1985:303). It was also agreed that only properties that exceeded 500 *manzanas* (1 manzana = 1.7 acres) in the Pacific region and 1000 *manzanas* everywhere else in the country would be expropriated. Absentee proprietors would be allowed to conserve up to 50 *manzanas* in the Pacific region and 100 *manzanas* anywhere else. Compensation was to be granted on the basis of property values declared for taxation and was paid through government bonds that matured over a fifteen to twenty-five year period. Two years after the implementation of the Agrarian Reform Law, 436 farms totaling 421,000 *manzanas* had been expropriated by the Nicaraguan state. Reasons for expropriation were somewhat ambiguous. Only 18% of the land forcefully claimed by the state was abandoned whereas over 60% was acquired on the basis of “insufficient exploitation” on the part of the original owner. This time, however, the bulk of the confiscated land was redistributed to peasant families in the guise of agricultural and credit cooperatives. In all, 26,000 households received titles to property, completing a significant overhaul of the dynamics of land ownership and social relations in rural Nicaragua. Whereas in 1978, farms over 500 *manzanas* had occupied over 41% of arable land in the country, large farms were reduced to 12% of total acreage five years later. Furthermore, production cooperatives had come to make up 7% of the

national cultivable land mass and state farms 23%. Privately owned farms still accounted for 70% of the nation's agricultural land (Thome & Kaimovitz, 1985:304).

The FSLN was successful in transforming some of the more unequal relations in the countryside without completely offsetting the much-needed productivity of the agricultural sector. Although the production of cattle, bananas, and cotton declined during the first five years of Sandinista rule, local grain production as well as coffee and sugar cane yields augmented. The FSLN was succeeding in creating a national agriculture more in line with the needs of its population. As Jaime Wheelock, then minister of agriculture, stated: "more than control of the means of production, we are interested in controlling the economic surplus in order to distribute justly the nation's wealth" (Thome & Kaimovitz, 1985:310). But not all were pleased with such developments. Large landowners were dispossessed of the bulk of their holdings while small producers often had their hard-earned surpluses confiscated by MICOIN (Ministry of Internal Commerce) officials when they tried to sell them in local market towns. Although much exaggerated by the United States government and parts of the North American media, the FSLN's actions in rural Nicaragua did create legitimate discontent among large segments of the population. Elizabeth Dore, who briefly worked for MICOIN during the 1980's, comments on this issue:

Traveling throughout Nicaragua to interview producers of corn, beans, and rice, I was met with hostility, but not because I was a *gringa* from the country whose president was trying to overthrow the Sandinistas. Rural producers distrusted me because I was from MICOIN. They blamed the Sandinistas for depressing producer prices to benefit the urban population, and they referred to MICOIN's staff as "the rural police." (2006:6)

Most of the existing literature on Sandinista rule has overlooked the conflicts that erupted in rural areas between local producers that did not participate in FSLN-

sponsored projects and agents of the state or members of local self-defense committees (CDS). Martin Dominguez once explained to me the difficulties he and his family faced during the FSLN's stint in power:

I'm going to tell you, in that time I suffered a lot. I was in jail three times. I was in El Astillero (a fishing village close to La Uva), and after that they took me to Rivas. I remember that there was a woman who was a cook and that she was called Mercedes. She used to ask me to help her open up these cans of beans. I was starting to like her. But Maria, my daughter would come and see me and she would cry. And I wanted the whole thing to keep going so I was sad when they let me go but happy because my daughter would no longer cry. After that they took me to Granada. In Granada I only ate after I was there for seven days. And my daughter would come and see me and cry. So I said to the people keeping me: "I don't want *mi gente* (my people, family) to come and visit me." "Why?" they asked me, "*Ud. es enemigo con su gente?*" (You are an enemy of your family?) "No, I said to them, it's because when they come and cry here, I lose all hope."

Why did I go to jail? Because of *la lengua* (the tongue). Do you remember this song by Bienvenido Grande that says: "*Hay una cosa muy mala, Que es? La lengua.*" (There is something very evil, What is it? The tongue.) Because of your tongue they can kill you. These guys were not joking around. They would take someone: *ojos y oidos* (eyes and ears). The CDS would go around and put their ears on the houses. At night we would turn off the *candil* (kerosene powered flame that is used for lighting) and whisper: "Listen, they did this and this and this." And then they would bring you to the *commando* (police headquarters) and they had everything written down that you had said in the night. They would say: "You said such and such a thing." And I would answer: "No sir." And they would say: "Well, We've got it all written down." They would listen at your door until sunrise. And I never went on their side. If I had been on their side, they would have never come.

Before, people did not work much because they would lose their harvests. They would take away even roasted corn in Ochomogo. They never took anything away from me because I did not work much during that time. But those beans that you have right now, one would show up to inspect and say "well, that's too much." They would take them away and leave you with only enough for you to eat. And for me that's not a good thing.

Despite the existence of testimonies like those of Elizabeth Dore and Martin Dominguez, the first few years of Sandinista rule are considered a success by many analysts. They point out how the FSLN minimized bloodshed following the

revolution; how significant social programs that benefited large sectors of the Nicaraguan population were successfully implemented; how the economic policies of the party led to an annual increase of 7% to the nation's per capita GDP between 1979 and 1983; and how the Sandinistas easily won the 1984 elections, capturing 63% of ballots in a contest decried by Washington as a "soviet-style farce" but upheld as legitimate by most of the international observers that monitored the electoral contest. A common argument also posits that all this good work was ruined by the administration of Ronald Reagan, which decided it could not tolerate a second socialist republic "in its own backyard." Although it is doubtful that the Sandinistas would have maintained their original level of popularity for an extended period of time (they never received as much as 45% of the vote in four subsequent elections), it is impossible to deny the role played by the United States government in the demise of the revolutionary state in Nicaragua (Cupples & Irving Larios, 2005:323).

When the Carter administration withdrew funding from the Somoza government in the late 1970's, the FSLN had hoped that good relations could be established with the United States government. Such optimism, however, was quickly put to rest with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Reagan worked quickly to destabilize the FSLN by sponsoring a band of mercenaries commonly known as the Contras that began to operate along the Honduran border. The Contras capitalized on the growing displeasure with Sandinista rule in the Atlantic and northern regions of the country to develop into a sizeable counterrevolutionary force that attacked both civilian and military targets. Besides from financing the Contras, the Reagan administration disciplined Nicaragua through economic means, implementing an

economic embargo, which was quickly followed by the interruption of World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank loans (Walker, 1997:9). A third strategy used by the United States government to destabilize the FSLN was the circulation of negative propaganda about Sandinista Nicaragua through the media. Reagan tried hard to portray the Nicaragua of the FSLN as a “Soviet beachhead” and claimed incessantly that the Sandinistas were sponsoring guerilla bands operating in Guatemala and El Salvador. Thomas Walker discusses the use of these tactics during the election of 1984:

U.S. behavior vis-à-vis the Nicaraguan election of 1984 gives a good glimpse of the use of propaganda as a weapon. Apparently fearing that the still very popular FSLN would win and be legitimized by free elections, the Reagan administration denounced the 1984 election as a “Soviet-style farce” as soon as they were announced late in 1983. Then “teaser” candidate Arturo Cruz, at the time a highly paid CIA asset with connections to the Contras, was employed to show apparent interest in running, campaign without formally registering, and then withdraw with great fanfare claiming that conditions for a free election did not exist (1997:11).

Having failed to overturn the tide of the FSLN’s ascending popularity in 1984, Reagan and his acolytes stepped up the cadence in their efforts at destabilization in the second half of the decade. Although the Contras were never strong enough to march into Managua, they represented a significant nuisance for the financially fragile Sandinista state. Forced to channel an increasing proportion of its thin resources to fight the growing military threat along its borders, the FSLN cut back its spending on social programs, increased the rationing of food and other household goods, borrowed money on unfavorable terms, instituted a highly unpopular military draft, forcefully relocated a few communities in the Atlantic region, censored the press, and even began restructuring its economy by laying off thousands of public

sector workers. The war, however, was only part of the problem. Financial mismanagement combined with the external pressures put on the Nicaraguan economy resulted in a de-facto economic collapse with extreme inflation, going from 300% in 1985, to 700% in 1986, to 1,300% in 1987 before finally peaking at 33,000% for the year 1988 (Arana, 1997:82). During the ten year period of FSLN rule 30,000 people were killed, 500,000 were displaced and between 200,000 and 400,000 left the country (Lancaster, 1992:7). It should therefore come as no surprise that the Nicaraguan population voted against Daniel Ortega in 1990, putting an end to the revolutionary project some ten years after its inception.

From Neo-Liberalism to *El Pacto*

Against all expectations, at least against those of most pollsters, Dona Violeta Barrios de Chamorro and her makeshift UNO (United National Opposition) coalition handily defeated Daniel Ortega in the 1990 presidential elections. The war ended shortly thereafter and a general amnesty was granted to all combatants. Although political divisions were still quite tense, most Nicaraguans seemed willing to move forward and rebuild their country, this time, however, with a helping hand from the United States of America. Dona Violeta's greatest challenge was to rehabilitate the nation's battered economy. Wanting to move away from the state-centered model espoused by the FSLN, the UNO government moved quickly to restructure the economy along neoliberal lines. As Thomas Walker explains:

Neoliberalism came into existence in the 1970's and 1980's as a response to various economic problems generated by the state-dominated systems, including high-inflation, low productivity, and heavy foreign indebtedness. Implemented with much fanfare and apparent success in Chile during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), it had been adopted by virtually every other country in the region by the 1990's (1997:16).

But to make neoliberalism possible, Dona Violeta's team of expert financiers had to transform the economic ground rules by which the country had been operating. This was done through the implementation of an IMF designed Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). As mentioned earlier, the FSLN had begun to restructure the Nicaraguan economy in 1988 when it cut-back thousands of public sector jobs in what is known as *La Compactacion*. The IMF-administered SAP, however, involved much more than reducing government spending. Indeed, the primary purpose of these reforms was to open up the Nicaraguan market to foreign capital, the belief being that increased levels of investment would augment productive activities and regenerate the nation's stagnant economy by creating jobs. Aside from cutting back state expenditures, the SAP program involved privatizing state-owned corporations and retracting prohibitive laws and/or taxation schemes that restricted the activities of the more dynamic private sector. The general belief among financial experts was that this strategy would help curb inflation, solidify the gold Corbova, create economic growth, and stimulate international trade (Walker, 1997:16).

The consensus among neoliberal reformers seems to be that despite creating initial financial setbacks for large segments of the population, such as the loss of employment or the inability to pay for medical care, the long-term benefits of righting the economy far outweigh the initial difficulties. Because Nicaragua was just coming out of two decades of war and social upheaval, American state planners attempted to ease the switch to a new economic model by granting the Chamorro government an inordinate amount of foreign aid. In 1991, foreign donations and loans accounted for 70% of Nicaragua's GDP.

The transition, however, was anything but smooth. Combined unemployment/underemployment rates reached 60% during the early 1990's and a majority of the population had to rely on informal sector activities to survive (Babb, 2001). To further complicate things, the UNO government was saddled with the highest ratio of foreign debt to GNP in the world at 801% (Gelinas, 1994:35). In more concrete terms, this meant that for the year 1991, the Nicaraguan state paid out 500 million US\$ in foreign debt service while the total exports for the country only amounted to 267 million US\$. Asides from the burdensome debt payments, Mario Arana (1997) claims that the decisions made by UNO policy-makers were skewed by three crucial misconceptions about the economy. Firstly, it was widely believed by neoliberal advocates that FSLN mismanagement and incompetence were the only cause for the country's financial decline in recent years. Secondly, Dona Violeta's administrators were under the illusion that high levels of foreign aid would be maintained throughout their term in office, whereas by 1992 loans and donations had already been cut by more than half. Finally, state planners assumed that the agricultural sector would bounce back from its poor performances under the FSLN and that a more dynamic rural economy would emerge to replace the stagnant cooperatives and inefficient state farms (Arana, 1997:87). However, as Jon Joakin points out, the nation's slumping agricultural sector further declined during the Chamorro years due to continuing land disputes and unfavorable policies for small producers (1997:98). Although the war was over and political tolerance was definitely on the rise, Dona Violeta's term in office ended with little promise for the future amelioration of living conditions for the bulk of the Nicaraguan population.

In 1996, Arnaldo Aleman of the Liberal Alliance was voted to the presidency in another one-sided electoral contest. With a fiery personality and a sharp tongue, Aleman, the former mayor of Managua, quickly denounced the misdoings of the FSLN. Seen as a man of action, Aleman's government oversaw the construction or renovation of several bridges, highways, roundabouts, border posts, and even the Managua International Airport (formerly known as the Augusto Cesar Sandino Airport). Revolutionary murals were painted over and the lights that made Sandino's statue glow in the Managua night were switched off. The revolution had to be forgotten if Nicaragua was to move forward and become a modern nation at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Aleman's slogan "*Obras no palabras*" (Works (Actions) not words) was placed on large billboards next to every school, every medical clinic, and every community center built during his administration, with a smaller lettering acknowledging the donors of the funds that had permitted the particular project to come to fruition such as *Con la cooperation del gobierno de Japon* (With the cooperation of the government of Japan).

Yet the only thing that seemed to spread as rapidly as Aleman's promotional signs were his personal assets. Between 1990 and 1999, Aleman's fortune increased an estimated 900%. The nation's president quickly acquired land-holdings in diverse municipalities and allegedly received kickbacks from a cement company, a heliport, and a television station. He also developed ties with several businesses and banks. Wherever Aleman bought land, he used state funds for infrastructural improvements that would benefit his properties. New highways were built and old roads were repaired to access Aleman's ranches. Electrical wires were installed over several

kilometers to bring electricity to his holdings while several communities located less than ten kilometers from urban centers remained without power (Brown & Cloke, 2005:6-8). While Hurricane Mitch devastated the country in 1998, claiming thousands of lives, destroying numerous communities and annihilating important crops, Aleman was busy building a presidential palace at the cost of 10 million US\$ (Cupples & Irving Larios, 2005:8). Overall, the president is said to have accumulated over 100 million US\$ through embezzlement, fraud, and the misuse of state funds.

But not all were oblivious to the president's misdoings. Both national newspapers, *El Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa*, began circulating articles questioning the Aleman administration's use of relief funds and public moneys. In 1999, Agustin Jarquin, the Comptroller General, was briefly jailed by Aleman after he investigated how the president was managing the state coffers (Brown & Cloke, 2005:10). Hoping to escape legal prosecution and hold on to his political power and personal gains, the president concluded a power-sharing agreement with none other than Daniel Ortega, leader of the FSLN, who was also interested in avoiding pending legal conflicts. Following their first electoral defeat, senior FSLN party members had appropriated several public properties and corporations in what is commonly known as *La Pinata*. Furthermore, Ortega had recently been accused by his stepdaughter Zoilamerica Narvaez of sexual abuse. Narvaez claimed that Ortega had molested her since the age of eleven (Cupples & Irving Larios, 2005:12).

The agreement brokered by the two *caudillos* of Nicaraguan politics, though, was much more than a simple swapping of legal immunity. Indeed, *El Pacto* was a package of constitutional reforms that would directly impact how Nicaragua would be

governed in the twenty-first century. Brown and Cloke give us an appraisal of the gains made in *El Pacto* by the Sandinistas:

For the FSLN, the reforms of 1999 guaranteed possession of a series of businesses, farms, agricultural cooperatives and residential properties that they had appropriated in the piñata of 1990. Rent arrears from some 240 state businesses in FSLN hands since 1992, a sum of some US\$50 million, were also written off. The FSLN were guaranteed a seat on the managing committee of the Superintendent of Banks and the Central Bank, as well as seats in the Comptroller General's Office, the Supreme Electoral Council, and 40% of all the offices in regional, departmental and municipal electoral bodies. They were further guaranteed 40% of the electoral budgets for the general and municipal elections and a reduction in the number of votes required for a second round in the presidential elections from 45% to 35%, a change important to Ortega's presidential aspirations... The FSLN also gained seats on the ruling bench of the Supreme Court, posts in all the Appeals Tribunals, Criminal and Local Courts throughout the country and positions in the ruling committee of the national assembly, whilst FSLN-controlled banks were guaranteed participation in the potentially lucrative Wet or Dry transoceanic canal project.

As well as those made by the Liberals:

For the PLC, the pact saw the FSLN agree to stop the disruption of government, using its influence to dismantle unions in the state businesses ear-marked for privatization -ENITEL (the state telecoms company), ENEE (the state electricity company), INAA (state company responsible for bridges and aqueducts), the airport and ports authority. Most importantly, the PLC gained control of the office of the Comptroller General at a time when it was becoming embarrassingly effective. As a failsafe, Arnaldo Aleman also attempted to secure his further immunity from prosecution upon leaving the presidency by the conferral of a deputy's seat in the national assembly as of right.

The PLC also gained control of the Supreme Electoral Council, and thus the national electoral process (from the counting of votes, to setting the electoral budget and the constitution of the local electoral boards), the Supreme Court and other justice tribunals. Finally, the PLC achieved the promulgation of a series of laws privatizing a series of state businesses whilst allowing members of the PLC government to work in them as shareholders or associates. The privatization of ENEE, ENITEL, the international airport, INAA, and the state bank BANIC were all done in ways permitting the PLC and party functionaries to profit from the sale (2005:15).

Although *El Pacto* formally legalized the division of the state between Sandinistas

and Liberals and assured the continued prevalence of Ortega and Aleman in the realm of Nicaraguan politics, the events that followed its inception suggest that the architects of this accord failed to achieve a complete monopoly of power within the country.

In 2001 Enrique Bolanos became the second successive PLC candidate to win the presidency of the republic. Running on an anti-corruption and anti-terror platform following the events of September 11th¹, Aleman's former vice-president defeated Daniel Ortega, receiving 56% of all ballots. It was widely expected that Bolanos would continue to defer to Aleman, who as the boss of the Liberal party, would still rule from the back-benches (The Nicaraguan constitution does not allow any person to serve consecutive terms as president). But the Liberal *caudillo*'s political scheming backfired as Bolanos refused to be a figurehead and enabled a public investigation of his predecessor's misdeeds. In 2003, Aleman was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to twenty years in prison for the theft of over 100 million US\$ in public funds (Brown & Cloke, 2005:10). Because of the Bolanos-Aleman rift, the Liberal Alliance fractured, paving the way for the FSLN to win over two-thirds of the municipalities in the country's municipal elections in 2004.

Two years later, Daniel Ortega was successful in his quest to recapture the presidency, defeating both Eduardo Montealegre, Bolanos' former finance minister, and Jose Rizo, an Aleman loyalist, while collecting only 40% of the popular vote. Although United States government officials were not pleased by the Sandinista

¹ Following 9/11 several commercials were broadcast by the PLC (Partido Liberal Constitucionalista) claiming Daniel Ortega was a friend of Los Enemigos de la Paz (the enemies of the peace), which included the likes of Yasser Arafat, Moammar Gadaffi, Saddam Hussein, and Fidel Castro.

victory, they were not nearly as concerned as they once were with Ortega's return to political prominence. Having shelved his revolutionary rhetoric in favor of a more moderate message of social justice in conjunction with the continuation of the neoliberal economic project, Ortega has pledged to respect the CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) accords brokered by the United States, the Dominican Republic, and the Central American Nations in 2005. As the first decade of the twenty-first century begins to wind down, Nicaraguans are once again being ruled by self-serving politicians as they struggle to make ends meet in a stagnant economy. But people have not simply stood by as political and financial elites have re-imposed their dominance over the country's affairs. Many groups and organizations have taken root since the 1990's to deal with the gaps created in the state's public services by the neoliberal reforms. Among these associations working for change, we find a nascent women's movement that has taken advantage of the political openings of the liberal democratic state to struggle against another of Nicaragua's historical structures of inequality: the inequity between the sexes, a subject we will now turn to.

4. The Roots of Inequality II: A History of Gender Politics

By refuting machismo as an explanatory theory, my goal is not to deny the existence of gender-based oppression in Nicaragua, a phenomenon which is well documented (Babb 2001, Dore 2006, Ellsberg 1999, Howe 2007, Lancaster 1992, Mohr 1994, Molyneux 1985, Montoya 2002, 2003, Wessel 1991, Whisnant 1995). But like the current politico-economic regime and the inequalities it produces, the forms of gender inequity that are encountered today in Nicaragua have historical roots. They were not born in a vacuum, nor have they been in place since “time immemorial”, a point made by Eleanor Leacock in “Interpreting the Origins of Gender Inequality.” Arguing that colonial encounters with European invaders widely transformed more egalitarian relations between the sexes in indigenous societies without class hierarchies, Leacock posits that:

The widely held assumption that female subordination is a universal of human society derives from, and in turn supports, the assumption that primitive communal society was ultimately ordered by the same constraints and compulsions that order class society. Where institutionalized hostility between the sexes exists, it is interpreted as a variant of a universal battle between the sexes, rather than as evidence of emerging status differentiations among men and among women, as well as between men and women. The critical relationship between the development of ranking and the attempt to subvert women’s public and autonomous status is seldom recognized. In sum, gender hierarchy is all too often taken for granted, and both the structure of primitive communism and the basis for its transformation are thereby mystified (1983:433).

Although it is difficult to assess the nature of pre-Columbian relations between men and women among the diverse populations that lived in the territory that now makes up Nicaragua or to verify whether the Marxist conception of primitive communism held any currency within the region, we can piece together several indices from colonial times on that will help us comprehend the types of relationships between

men and women that have been encouraged throughout the years by the nation's ruling class. By reviewing some of the occurrences that have taken place in the past but continue to impact the present, we can also begin to realize that the men and women of Nicaragua live in a culture created through historical processes of domination, contestation, and adaptation in which they have been crucial participants.

The Rise of Patriarchy

The concepts of patriarchy and of the "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti 1998) have been used by Rosario Montoya and Elizabeth Dore to theorize the everyday interactions between men and women in the context of the home in Nicaragua. Even though the use of patriarchy as a guiding theoretical principle may enable us to understand the full gamut of dealings between the sexes that unfold within units of residence in Nicaragua or elsewhere, it is nonetheless important to review the basic tenets of the concept since it does coincide closely with the focus of this study. In "Women's Sexuality, Knowledge, and Agency in Rural Nicaragua," Rosario Montoya uses Kandiyoti's concept of the patriarchal bargain as a frame of reference to analyze husband-wife relations in rural households. According to Montoya, Nicaraguan women gain social prestige by being designated within their communities as "women of the house." Consequently, women who were thought to be "of the street," were chastised and disrespected. The designation of "woman of the house," however, was not universally granted. To join these ranks, women had to entrust themselves to the dominion of a single man and abide to the ground rules of the patriarchal bargain, which Montoya here explains:

In return for protection, respect, and economic stability, the wife was to uphold the respectability of the house by keeping to a set of clearly prescribed

practices. Most importantly,... she should work hard and serve her husband graciously, bear children, using contraceptives only with his permission; stay out of his doings outside of the home; and be sexually available and faithful to him, as men's honor hinged on their wives' sexual fidelity (Montoya, 2002:70).

To her credit, Montoya does not limit her understanding of gender relations to the dictums of the patriarchal bargain, which resemble more a male ideal of marital devotion by women than the actual affairs of most households. Indeed, one of the central arguments to come out of Montoya's work is that women use their vast knowledge of local gender norms precisely to get around them. Through their use of good timing, the application of pressure on spouses or other family members in more intimate settings, and the concealment of opinions or feelings in particular situations, women were able to wield a considerable amount of decision-making power over the dealings of the home or even engage in activities considered as "deviant" within their communities. According to Montoya, Nicaraguan women displayed considerable skill at navigating the course set by the patriarchal regime that subsumes them.

Elizabeth Dore provides us with a more nuanced understanding of patriarchy in *Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua*, her account of the changes in social organization, property laws, and labor relations brought about by the coffee boom of the late 19th century to Nicaraguan society. Although Dore's basic understanding of patriarchy as the "systematic senior male control over and protection of subordinate females and males in society's public and private domains (2006:27)," seems similar to the one put forth by Montoya, by including the interactions of the public domain and the possibility of male/male relations in her theorization of the concept, she expands the explanatory power of patriarchal

relations. As such, Dore divides patriarchy into two sub-groups: patriarchy from above, which, in this case, amounts to the power of male planters to impose their will on workers of both sexes; and patriarchy from below, which is equated to the power of adult males within their homes. Men from poor rural households were thus on both ends of patriarchal power relations, dominating their own households but being subjugated by more powerful social actors outside of them.

But going back to our earlier quandary, can we assume that patriarchal relations have always been the norm in rural Nicaraguan households? Furthermore, have the constraints created by patriarchy always been the same or have they shifted over time? Elizabeth Dore provides us with some of the answers to these questions with her archival research in the town of Diriomo. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the Spanish Crown established a system of indirect rule in Nicaragua where colonial delegates accorded indigenous leaders a great deal of autonomy in the governance of their communities as well as communal territorial rights over substantial tracts of land as long as they provided the crown with the required quotas of tribute and labor. Communal holdings, however, were owned collectively by male heads of household, thus investing adult men with accrued rights over the resources necessary to the maintenance of the home. Furthermore, membership in the *comunidad* (community) was restricted to adult men and all improvements made to the land, such as planting fruit trees, building hedges, or cultivating plots, were owned by men. Patriarchal privilege was also instituted in the form of *patria protested*, a Spanish legal procurement dating to the 13th century that gave men control over the labor, bodies, and property of their dependents, be they male or

female, in exchange for their protection (Dore 2006:54).

But not all colonial legal edicts undermined the standing of women in society. Partible inheritance laws guaranteed daughters an equal part of the family fortune and property acquired during marriage was to be owned jointly by husband and wife. Women were their own *persona juridica* (legal person), allowing them to testify in court or enter into contractual agreements. However, as Dore points out, such rights were mostly enjoyed by widows, as patriarchal relations placed wives and daughters under the mandates of men (2006:55).

The end of the colonial era and the emergence of a private property regime in the 19th century created new ownership opportunities for women all the while weakening their legal positioning. Influenced by liberal ideals from across the Atlantic and spurred by an increased global demand for coffee, the Nicaraguan elite embarked on a project of social transformation to create favorable conditions for the large-scale production of coffee. This re-structuring of society included the privatization, and subsequent takeover, of indigenous lands; the forceful integration of peasant communities into the labor force, mostly through debt peonage; and several important legal amendments. The combined impact of these combined changes should not be underestimated as they put an end to communal land holdings, the political relevance of indigenous leaders, and any semblance of autonomy that indigenous communities had enjoyed. According to Dore, land privatization “transformed landscape and society in Latin America more than any other event since the conquest,” (2006:69).”

The property revolution, however, also possessed a gender dimension. By

dismantling the communal ownership system, Nicaraguan policy makers presented indigenous women with the possibility of acquiring real estate, a privilege formally reserved to men. In the town of Diriomo, women were quick to seize this new opportunity as archival records show that by the late 19th century, women owned 14% of all land holdings. By owning property independently from men, women were now less dependent on husbands and fathers for their economic survival, a change reflected in local residence patterns. By the year 1882, census data reveals that 40% of households in the municipality were headed by women (Dore, 2006:102).

But the legal changes brought about by the liberalization of Nicaraguan society were not all positive for women. State planners believed that the Nicaraguan nation would only progress through the constitution of strong and stable families guided by the steady hand of an adult male leader or *jefe de familia*. As representatives of the state within the home and delegates of their families in their dealings with authorities, fathers and husbands were granted considerable power over their dependents. Patriarchs could sign contracts for dependents, dispense household labor as they saw fit, administer the resources of other household members, and even use corporal punishment to discipline unruly subordinates. Increasingly concerned with the transfer of private property to legitimate heirs, members of the ruling elite produced legal stipulations that encroached on women's control of their own bodies. Included in the Civil Code of 1871 were the following provisions: a husband was now the legal proprietor of his wife's womb; a husband could force his wife to live with an "honorable family" for a ten-month period in the case of separation in order to assure himself that any subsequent child would in fact be his; a husband could murder his

wife with no legal repercussions if he could prove she had committed adultery; and wives had no legal recourse in the instance of male sexual infidelity (Dore, 2006:56). Although the no fault murder clause was later overturned in 1904, male adultery was legally sanctioned for another fifty years. The 1904 legal code further eroded female independence by overturning the partible inheritance law and the joint-property marital regime. Women were then less likely to acquire property through marriage or inheritance. Although some of the provisions included in these legal codes were eventually overturned, the structure of patriarchal dominance within the household was legally upheld by the Nicaraguan state throughout most of the 20th century. Only with the rise of the FSLN did traditional authority within the home begin to be challenged.

Patriarchy Under Attack?

The FSLN has largely been credited with creating spaces for women in Nicaraguan politics by welcoming combatants and cadres of both sexes into their ranks; sponsoring a woman's association concerned with gender issues; and passing a series of laws to "protect" women in their everyday dealings both in and out of the home. During the 1980's, the general sentiment was that Nicaraguan women would better their living conditions by supporting the Sandinista revolution and defending the gains they had made through it. AMNLAE (Asociacion de Mujeres Nicaraguenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza), the FSLN-backed woman's association, adopted this line of thought in their public pronouncements made during the 15th Latin American Congress of Sociology held in 1983:

At this time, when the cowards and traitors are hiding like rats, planning the way to attack our people, the Nicaraguan Women's Association "Luisa

Amanda Espinoza" (AMNLAE) comes before you, participants of the 15th Latin American Congress of Sociology with two basic objectives: first, to share with you what has been the experience of the participation of Nicaraguan women in the historical development of our society; and second, to affirm before you, sociologists of Latin America and the world, our determination to struggle as part of the people to defend at any cost the Popular Sandinista Revolution, the only guarantee of the gains we have made and will make in the future (AMNLAE 1983:123).

During the 1980's, women's struggles for gender equality in Nicaragua became linked with the exploits of heroic women in armed revolts, wars of independence, and other such violent conflicts, with the weeping mothers of fallen combatants representing the ultimate feminine revolutionary sacrifice. AMNLAE, as a state-sponsored mouthpiece, was among the leaders in setting this agenda:

Nevertheless, the glorious history of the struggles of our people against foreign domination has also written in blood the names of thousands of Nicaraguan women, who with the people confronted the oppression and exploitation of the interventionists. Women patriotically [participated] in the bloody struggles of the Indians against the conqueror [from Spain -Eds.], both on the battlefield and in their refusal to bear children into slavery; in the struggle against being a colony and for independence; against the Yankee filibuster in 1856 [William Walker - Eds.]; in the uprising of Benjamin Zeledon in 1912; and in the glorious Army of Defense of the National Sovereignty, led by the Father of the Popular Anti-Imperialist Revolution, General of Free Men Augusto Cesar Sandino, in the years 1927-34 (AMNLAE, 1983:123).

Several scholars, however, including David Whisnant and Karen Kampwirth, have argued that Nicaraguan feminism is by no means a fabrication of the FSLN or of the Nicaraguan Revolution. They posit that feminist thought first made its appearance in Nicaragua during the 19th century. Whisnant provides us with the example of Josefa Toledo de Aguerri. Born in the latter stages of the 19th century, Toledo de Aguerri established contacts with women's movements throughout Latin America and edited two publications concerned with issues such as female emancipation and

the place of women in Nicaraguan society, *Revista Feminina Ilustrada* and *Revista Mujer Nicaraguense*. In a 1919 declaration to the *Congreso Auxiliar de las Americas*, Toledo de Aguerri stated that “Modern feminism...requires transformations in the modern spirit, enabling the woman to provide for herself... to be the owner [mistress] of her own self, to apply her own criterion and direct her influence toward tasks which men possess as if by divine right” (Whisnant, 1995:411). The following generation of women activists in Nicaragua concentrated their struggles on winning universal suffrage, which they finally achieved in 1955.

Although challenges to patriarchy did not start with the Sandinistas, the FSLN was, nonetheless, the first political entity in Nicaragua to include the redressing of gender-based inequalities as a key component of their plan of action. In Section 7 of the Historic Program of 1969, party ideologues declared that “...the Sandinista people’s revolution will abolish the odious discrimination that women have been subjected to compared with men.” Another party goal was to “establish economic, political, and cultural equality between women and men” (Whisnant, 1995:418). Furthermore, the FSLN-led government was the first to issue a package of laws specifically designed to ameliorate the lives of women in Nicaragua. Included in these legislative amendments were: Decree 48, which made the exploitation of female bodies in advertising illegal and outlawed prostitution; the Adoption Law, which enabled single women to adopt children; the Law Promoting Breast Feeding, which criminalized the advertisement of powdered milk; the Law of Relations between Mothers, Fathers, and Children, which granted both parents equal rights and responsibilities in the upbringing of their children, ended male privilege concerning

the custody of children in divorce cases, and recognized the rights of illegitimate children; the Provision Law, which recognized the family as the basic social unit and forced fathers to pay financial compensation to the mothers of their children; and the Agrarian Reform and Cooperative Law, which gave women and men the same ownership rights and outlawed the paying of lower wages for equal work to women (Molyneux, 1985:154).

Redressing the inequities that women had long suffered as well as positioning the state as the ultimate defender of women's interests was important to the FSLN, but not at any cost. As the Contra war escalated and the revolution became more uncertain, gender issues were no longer prioritized in national politics. Not wanting to upset the men fighting to keep them in power, the Sandinista leadership began promoting the status quo in terms of household relations. Women were asked to take on more supportive roles, even as they moved out of the house and into the fields to make up for the labor shortages created by the swelling ranks of men in the Sandinista army. Political spaces that had opened during the insurrection of the late 1970's were gradually closed. In 1984, 36% of executive posts in the Sandinista government were filled by women. By 1989, that number had dropped to 3% (Fernandez-Poncela, 1997:41). When the 1987 constitution was passed, a special provision was enacted to guarantee women equal rights before the law but only after much debate and lobbying by feminist groups. Abortion, although somewhat tolerated, was never legalized by the FSLN and the penal code that allowed men to beat their wives without facing prosecution as long as they did not cause bodily harm requiring at least ten days of medical treatment in a hospital was only abolished in

1996, during the last year of Dona Violeta's administration.

Rosario Montoya argues that the FSLN's turn to gender conservatism was to be expected. Although laws were enacted to protect women from injustices and political spaces enabling female participation in public affairs were, albeit temporarily, opened, the revolution had, from the beginning, been a male project of social transformation. Montoya makes this point in her study of gender relations in a Sandinista rural cooperative:

As we have seen, in El Tule the revolution's male-dominant character figured at many levels: in the gendering of the primary subject of the revolution as the New Man; in the segregation of men and women into separate production organizations of which male-owned cooperatives were regarded as the principal family resource; and in the confirmation of the patriarchal household structures through a conservative turn in the leadership's stance towards household politics. The Sandinistas, then, naturalized critical features of pre-existing gender hierarchies and carried them into an attempt to organize class-based organizations. The result was the opening of spaces for the reproduction of pre-existing masculinities within the new structures of the state (2003:14).

Integral to the Sandinista project of social transformation was the creation of a new male subjectivity: *el Hombre Nuevo* (the New Man). Feeling most men lacked the political consciousness and sense of responsibility to build healthy communities, the FSLN leadership attempted to create subjects more in tune with the revolutionary requirements of social justice and household equality. Nicaraguan men in the FSLN were thus encouraged to espouse the role of the Benevolent Patriarch, who would be the pillars of their families, the key providers of their households and the foundation of the Sandinista state. Montoya argues, however, that the concept of the New Man promoted by revolutionary ideologues easily fit into existing patriarchal structures. Both Lancaster and Montoya have documented opposition within the Nicaraguan male population to the changes the FSLN attempted to bring about to household

relations through legal amendments and, perhaps more importantly, through encouraging women to participate in the reconstruction of the nation in public spaces. But by producing a model male subjectivity that was compatible to existing notions of gender propriety, the FSLN also created ideological spaces for resistance to greater female participation outside of the home, which would undermine the patriarch's role as family provider and leader. Don Elvin, one of Montoya's informants, takes such a stance in opposing women's involvement in economic and political doings outside of the home: "It is good for women to help, but those women didn't have the need, they just go because they are vagabonds (vagrants), they don't like to be in their house" (2003: 11). Lois Wessel also argues that ideals about female propriety were used by men to create barriers to women's participation in public affairs: "Participation in women's activities or in anything outside the house was difficult because the women were accused of being vagabonds, whores, or bad mothers. And of course those women who did participate in community activities still had to deal with all the domestic chores (1991:541)."

Back to the "Good Old Days"

Although the FSLN did not put an end to gender inequality, the Sandinistas did make possible the politicization of gender issues in Nicaragua, a trend that continued well beyond Ortega's first mandate. The election of Dona Violeta to the presidency brought a new gender agenda to the fore. Kate Sweeny describes these changes in gender politics:

With Chamorro's victory, the fairly superficial Sandinista rhetoric of women's rights vanished. In its place was a return to the Virgin Mary-martyr model of womanhood. Women were thus encouraged to return to their homes and concentrate on being good mothers and wives, much like their widowed

president claimed to have been: "I am not a feminist nor do I wish to be one. I am a woman who is dedicated to my home, as Pedro taught me" (as quoted in Kampwirth, 2006:6).

Dona Violeta advertised her conciliatory maternal powers as a means of bringing peace to a troubled nation. By ending the war and the forced military draft, she had eased the suffering of Nicaraguan mothers. The weeping mother was now replaced with the self-sacrificing woman, who did everything possible to keep her family happy during difficult times.

But Dona Violeta's idealized symbolism of gender propriety and her message of feminine abnegation were not simply moral suggestions to be adopted at will. Indeed, they went hand-in-hand with the policies her government put forth as part of a wider package of neoliberal reforms. Gone were the state-sponsored daycare centers, the support services for battered-women, the distribution of contraceptives at hospitals, and the sexual-counseling and information campaigns in schools. Therapeutic abortion was criminalized (Kampwirth, 2004:51; Wessel, 1991:541). The curriculum of elementary schools was revamped to include a new course, Morals and Civics, where children were taught the importance of legal marriage, proper gender roles, and the wrongs of abortion. In the early 1990's, public sector workers were offered 2,000\$ US to give up their jobs and start their own small businesses under the Ministry of Finance's Occupational Conversion Plan. Masquerading as an economic policy, the plan served as a financial incentive for the restoration of a male-dominated workplace. According to Florence Babb, the plan created few solutions to existing monetary difficulties:

Many women invested in freezers in order to sell soft drinks and ice cream out of their homes, businesses that were destined to fail in an economy already

saturated with small, informal enterprises.

The results of this ill-conceived plan to cut back the state sector and favor the private sector has been still-rising unemployment and underemployment (2001:33).

In 1997, the Aleman government created the Ministry of the Family, whose mandate was to promote the well-being of families. The new ministry, however, only recognized formally married heterosexual couples with children as valid family units, despite operating in a country where over one third of all households are headed by single women and where legal or religious marriage is rare (Chant, 2003). Comments made by Max Padilla, minister of the family under Aleman, highlight the Ministry's religious orientation and political agenda:

Perhaps the Berlin Wall has come down but the ideology, the atheist and antifamily vision of Marxism, continues to be very much alive at the end of this century. Today the class struggle has been transformed into a struggle to eliminate sexual classes or for the triumph of the 'neuter sex.'

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has an agenda of perversity and attack against all of our values... The Nicaraguan people need food, housing, medicine, basic education, work and the UNFPA comes to 'provide a remedy' with contraception, condoms, 'sex education,' pornography... Don't be naïve, these are diabolical programs to limit population growth in underdeveloped countries. (Padilla as reproduced in Kampwirth, 2006: 84).

But a burgeoning women's movement has countered what Kampwirth qualifies as the "antifeminist" forces. Following the ousting of the FSLN and the dismantling of much of the party/state apparatus, many Nicaraguan feminists broke away from the Sandinista core to form independent associations. Tired of deferring to the male party hierarchy and of pushing aside their main concerns, they welcomed the opportunity to create non-governmental organizations whose focus would be the promotion of the rights and interests of women. At the same time, the emergence of a democratic state in conjunction with neoliberal economic reforms created a climate in

which the development of civil society became both permissible, due to the accrued level of political tolerance in the country, and necessary, because of the drastic reductions in public services. Comprised of several autonomous factions, the women's movement has gained in prominence by tackling issues such as working conditions in the free-trade zones, women's reproductive health, lesbian and gay rights and conjugal violence as well as through the provision of support networks and services no longer granted by the state to Nicaraguan women. By 2005, groups like the Maria Elena Cuadra women's movement and the *Red de Mujeres Nicaraguense Contra la Violencia* (Nicaraguan Women's Network against Violence) were running advertising campaigns on national television.

But despite these efforts, much work remains for those who wish to redress gender-based inequalities in Nicaragua. Data compiled by the United States government for the year 2000, shows that women are most prominent in the public and informal sectors of the economy, where wages are low and job security is tenuous. In the private sector, men can be paid up to two times more than a woman for the same work (US Government, 2001:2). Twenty-five percent of the nation's households were both headed by women and qualified for extreme poverty. Dismal economic opportunities have led many women to rely on the sex-trade to meet their financial necessities:

Prostitution is common, and there were credible reports that some women were trafficked and forced into prostitution. In Managua most prostitutes work on the streets, clandestinely in nightclubs and bars, or offer sexual service in massage parlors. In towns along the Pan-American Highway, women and girls sell sexual services to truck drivers and other travelers, often foreigners driving north from Costa Rica. In port cities such as Corinto, the primary clientele are sailors...However, in most areas, prostitutes do not have access to medical screening or treatment (US government, 2001:2).

Numerous studies have also shown that many Nicaraguan women continue to be victims of physical violence. Mary Ellsberg conducted 488 interviews with women in the city of Leon. Fifty-two percent of respondents stated they had been physically abused by their spouses. Of these women, 70% declared having been the targets of attacks where kicks, punches, beatings, threats, and diverse objects were used to inflict pain (Ellsberg, 1999:32). In a separate study conducted by two universities and an independent women's group, 50% of women reported having been hit by a man (Dinur, 2001:2). Sexual violence was also identified as a major problem. Once again, women were overrepresented, comprising 94% of sexual assault victims. Other estimates suggest that one in four girls and one in five boys under the age of twelve are prey to sexual aggression. Estimates also showed the suicide attempt rate to be highest for girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years old (Herrera et. al., 2006).

It is within the context of a depressed economy, of continued migration, of political corruption, of sexual and physical violence, of continued male dominance of the home, and of efforts to overturn all of these inequities that we will now take a greater look at the lives and living habits of a few people. It is important not to forget these broader societal patterns that unfold simultaneously and intersect with the lives of individuals as we move to the ethnographic analysis of gender relations within the realm of the household.

5. Men of the House: The Gender Dynamics of Household Relations

“*Buenas!*,” I said as I neared the door of Reyna’s house. “*Buenas,*” Reyna replied, “*Pase adelante* (Come in).” “*Estoy adelante* (I am in),” I answered. Reyna is a large woman in her mid-thirties and is married to Rodolfo, Martin Dominguez’ eldest son, with whom she had three children. The couple was living at Jose Antonio Alvarado’s ranch, where Rodolfo watched over the politician’s cattle. “*Voy agarrar agua* (I’m going to get some water), I told her.” “*Ay agarre,* she said, nodding her head in the direction of the orange water container that rested on the *molejon*, a thick wooden plank used in most rural homes to wash dishes or to prepare food. As I walked inside, I noticed Reyna was not alone. Her twin sisters, Selena and Luisa had come from El Descanso with their children to spend the afternoon. “*Como estan?*,” I said. “*Bien, y vos Samuel,*” they answered as they removed grains of corn from cobs with the dull edge of large knives. After drinking a third cup of water and taking off my sweat-filled shirt, I went back outside to catch what was left of the light breeze that was blowing through the hills. The month of March was coming to an end and *verano*, Nicaragua’s summer or, perhaps more appropriately its dry season, was in full swing. No rain had fallen for over three months and the last significant precipitation dated back to November. The sun-baked earth was now covered with a thin coat of *polvo*, a kind of dusty film that rose up with every burst of the wind. The reflection of the mid-afternoon sun gave the landscape a dreary quality. Movements were at a minimum in the 100 degree heat. The trees were now bare and without leaves for the most part and the *quebradas* (streams) that had flowed with water only a few months ago were now completely dry. The cattle were thin and getting thinner

as the fields where they grazed became ever more barren and the water holes where they drank desiccated with each passing day.

A few minutes later, Reyna called me back inside: "*Samuel, venga comer* (Come and eat)." As I walked in she handed me a large plate of fried plantain, fried eggs, *cuajada* (cheese), and beans, which I made quick work of. "*Ya va ser el casamiento* (The wedding's coming up), Luisa said referring to Mildre's upcoming marriage. Mildre was one of Don Martin's granddaughters and her nuptials with Roman, a man from the community of Nandarola, were planned for the third week of April. "*Hombre, ya va ser,*" I answered as Marcos, one of Mildre's younger brothers walked in the door. Marcos, who is affectionately called Pollo by most, had been carrying some stones with his father's oxen and had decided to stop by Reyna's to wait out the afternoon heat before making the trip back up the hill to La Uva. Tall and skinny, Pollo was developing a reputation as a formidable worker as well as an avid partygoer despite his young age. While he made himself comfortable in the hammock hung across the *sala* (living room), Reyna began teasing the teenage boy. "Pollo, I heard that following the wedding they were going to have a *vigilia* (religious celebration)," she said. "*Como que vigilia,*" he answered as he nearly fell out of the hammock. "No, no, no, no, what we're going to have is a *fiesta*." Luisa and Selena now put down their bowls of corn and looked up with interest. Having obtained the reaction she wanted, Reyna pressed on. "But Pollo, I heard they were going to outlaw *guaro* at the party." This suggestion did not amuse Pollo either: "*Vez que locura* (see what craziness), a party without *guaro* is useless." This time, the three women laughed in unison. "But what Pollo says is true," I interjected. "A party without any

guaro is boring.” Luisa, however, did not agree, stating that it was precisely because of *guaro* that there were so many problems at the *fiestas*. “*Y ademas* (and what’s more),” Selena added referring to her husband, “*Mauricio es solo guaro ahora* (All Mauricio does now is drink liquor).” This sounded somewhat strange. Mauricio, Calixto’s oldest brother, had often been praised for his moderation *en los vicios* (in the vices). He rarely drank, did not chase women, and never lost his temper. He had even been given the nickname of “*El Viejo*” (The Old One) since he was thought to act more like an old man than a young male in his twenties.

“*Mauricio, no creo* (I can’t believe it),” I responded. “*Como no Samuel,*” Luisa replied. “He drinks every Saturday now. Even weekdays he drinks” “It’s because he’s with one of those *mujeres vagas* (bad women),” Selena added. “A so-called *bichuda* (big pussy). He gives her beer and he gives her money.” “Didn’t you see him when you passed by,” Luisa continued. “*Como no,*” I answered, “when the bus passed he was standing outside of his house.” “You see,” the girls replied. “That means he’s getting ready to go out and drink.” “This guy, nobody stops him,” Selena continued. “I told him we should go to La Uva to visit Dona Miriam (Mauricio’s mother). Do you think he wanted to go?” Reyna, being the oldest sister and being quite fond of Mauricio, told Selena that she did not have it all that bad. “You’re not so mad about him drinking,” she said. “What really bothers you is that he’s chasing other women. And you should open the door for him when he comes home at night (Apparently Mauricio had gotten drunk with Calixto in Escalante a couple of weeks ago. When he had stumbled home, all the doors and windows to his house were locked. Stuck outside, Mauricio passed out in front of his house and rolled into the

ditch where the pigs bathed. When Calixto showed up the next morning, he found his brother covered in mud. Dona Miriam was not pleased when she heard the news and had threatened to castigate her grandson Ernal, who she felt should have opened the door for his father). Reyna kept going: "But that Rodolfo (her own husband), boy he pisses me off. I can scream and shout and do whatever and do you think he listens to me. Sometimes he even goes and leaves me screaming here. He just doesn't care. I mean, the guy has grandchildren. *Fue vago, ya que se calme* (He was a vagrant, now it's time for him to calm down). I know that every woman is *odiosa* (hateful), but there are some guys that really go overboard."

"Well," Luisa added, "at least he's not like his son." Reyna and Selena both nodded in approval. Rodolfo's son, Rodolfito, lived with Carolina and their newborn baby in El Descanso, in between Luisa and Selena's houses. It was widely assumed by all that Carolina was the one in charge of that household. "*Ella lo manda* (She controls him)," I was often told. "He even carries water to the house for her to bathe in," Reyna said. "And if you say anything to him, he gets pissed off. When the boys were cutting sugarcane in Costa Rica this summer, they met this Miskito guy from *La Costa* (The Caribbean Coast). They said that this guy rarely ever spoke to anyone. He just stayed by himself thinking about things. Then one day, Ricardo (Rodolfo's brother) and Calixto started talking with him. The guy pointed Rodolfito out and asked them: "Who is this guy?" And Ricardo told him that he was his nephew. "That boy is sick," the man told Ricardo. "You guys need to find him a cure." And what he was referring to was Carolina." "But did he say what the cure was?" I asked Reyna. "No," she answered. "But there is a cure for that. Luisa gave it to one of our uncles

once and he left his woman right after. What you need to do is find a *ahogadora* (choker) hornets' nest where there is an odd number of hornets. You catch the hornets with a plastic bag or something like that and you let them die. Then you grind them with a stone and put the powder in that person's drink, it can be milk or coffee or whatever. They say that if you do it with *guaro*, the reaction will be too strong and he might kill the woman but with the other drinks he just wakes up and leaves her."

It was now past four o'clock and the sun was beginning to cool down. "Are you going to La Uva?" Pollo asked me. "Yes, that's where I'm going," I answered. "Then meet me down by the well," he said, "I'm going to go and bathe." As Pollo walked down the steep hill towards the well, Luisa looked at me and said: "*Es que ese Pollo anda caliente* (It's that Pollo is warm, I.e. sexually excited). The only reason he is going to bathe is that Licha is washing at the well." Licha was a woman in her mid-twenties with a three-year-old daughter, who was living with Reyna at the time. She was rumored to have been having an affair with Armando, one of the workers on the ranch. Reyna recounted that the other day, she had run into Sandra, Armando's ex-wife. "Sandra told me that if she encountered Licha on one of these roads, that she would beat the crap out of her." "*Esta bueno*," Luisa intervened. "*Porque anda de puta?*, (Why is she whoring around?)." "But do you think that woman could take Licha that easily," I asked. "*Eh*," Reyna answered, "*esa mujer es brava* (that woman is mad, tough). I told her she should just scare her, but not beat her because I wouldn't like that. It's that Licha always has to have a man. I told her that I wasn't getting involved, that she would have to see for herself. I think she's scared. She even asked Armando if it was true but he told her it wasn't."

The sun was beginning to set. Now completely caught up on the happenings of the area, I thanked Reyna for the meal and left. Luisa and Selena said they would soon catch up. They were also headed to La Uva. Pollo was waiting for me down at the well, seemingly having had little success with Licha, who was accompanied by her daughter and two other girls as she washed a large pile of clothes. When we walked up *la bajadona* (the big descent), Pollo turned around and said to me: “*Que hablan esas mujeres* (Man, those women talk a lot).” We reached la Uva at around 5:30 pm. About half an hour later, Selena and Luisa arrived. Mauricio was with them.

The Household in Theory

Although the afternoon chat with Reyna and her two sisters did not provide us with the full panoply of potential household situations, it nonetheless helped us identify certain issues of importance to household members, such as the disposition of resources, the power to make important decisions and to influence the behavior of other co-residents, the repartition of labor, and the sexual habits of constituents. In examining these different facets of household life, one of my primary goals is to display the webs of relationships that exist between adult men and the other people they share a home with. By doing this, I hope to help redress a considerable imbalance in the anthropological analyses of men, which, as was mentioned earlier, have often been focused on public displays or on interactions between males in homosocial contexts. By looking at men within the context of the household, I also wish to counter a growing tendency within the social sciences whereby adult males have been excluded from the unfolding of family affairs. An example of such theorizing can be found in *Death Without Weeping*, where Nancy Scheper-Hughes

proposes a working definition of shantytown households in a Brazilian city that casts men as familial satellites whose role is limited to the (often inadequate) provision of material goods:

Shantytown households and families are “made up” through a creative form of bricolage in which we can think of a mother and her children as the stable core and husbands and fathers as detachable and circulating units. Consequently, the definition of a “husband” on the Alto do Cruzeiro is a functional one. A husband is the man who provides food for his woman and her children, regardless of whether he is living with them. ...The definition of father on the Alto do Cruzeiro is the man who arrives at least once a week bearing the prestigious purple-labeled can of Nestle or, when relations are strained, who has the can of milk sent to the household through a friend or intermediary (1992:323).

Similar to Scheper-Hughes, much of the theoretical literature produced on households has focused almost strictly on the economic dimensions of relations within units of residence and how they impact the power dynamics of the home. Indeed, it is often posited that household arrangements reflect current socio-political priorities. For example, in capitalist societies it is argued that women stay home to perform reproductive labor (the work required to reproduce the labor force) not because it is inherently natural for them to do so but rather because it is beneficial to the capitalist class by assuring the (free) maintenance of workers. Since they are not the direct providers of the material necessities requisite for household survival, women hold an inferior positioning within the home in terms of decision-making power (Harris 1981, Beneria 1982, Nash & Safa 1976, Sen 1990). Furthermore, researchers have documented that when women do engage in paid work, it is often to provide a complementary income to the earnings of the so-called male breadwinners. Women are expected to continue meeting most of the domestic labor needs of the home and become burdened with the double-day (work at home and on the job).

Women are thus forced to take on more work without seeing a significant improvement in their household positioning (Beneria & Roldan 1987, Fernandez-Kelly 1983, Safa 1995, Sen 1990). Finally, even when socio-economic conditions permit women to act as the principal financial providers for their families, analysts feel that gendered power imbalances within the household do not completely disappear, since the economic gains made by women are countered by legal and political regimes that favor male control of the home (Chant 2003, Safa 1995). Although it is difficult to deny the validity of the principal conclusions found in these studies, it is worth mentioning that many of these authors, with the notable exception of Fernandez-Kelly, failed to examine alternate manners in which women could exert power within their homes because they focused their investigations almost exclusively on the economic relations within households. Only Sally Cole, working in a Portuguese fishing community, seems to have encountered a situation where historical circumstances, cultural practices and economic realities have given women an opportunity to acquire leadership positions within the home while at the same time developing occupational identities disassociated from the domestic sphere (1991).

A second issue of contention within the literature on households has been how to conceptualize living formations without prioritizing particular kinds of arrangements. Olivia Harris tackles this issue in her article "Households as Natural Units." Writing in the early 1980's, Harris examines the different discourses on the household present in the sociological literature of the time. Her main argument is that the conception of the household most often promoted by academics of the period naturalized the living arrangements of the Euro-American middle-class nuclear

family and the sexual division of labor that came with it. Harris encouraged us to separate the notion of “household” from that of “family” to overcome these ethnocentric conceptions that reduced our possibilities to account for alternate patterns of residence. By equating the concept of family to the middle-class North American household, scholars were contributing in creating several theoretical misconceptions. Included in the faulty assumptions were: that all households were led by men; that households were self-enclosed units where relationships of altruism and the pooling of resources predominated; and that the division of labor between household members maximized the well-being of all. But instead of helping us to understand household dynamics, Harris believes that analyses of the sort only contributed in continuing to confine women to the domestic sphere by justifying the sexual division of labor as an operational necessity (1981:55).

Harris’ argument is particularly relevant with the case at hand. In La Uva, the household was understood by residents as *la casa*, which could be defined as a “unit of co-residence (Chant, 2003).” The Uveno households were characterized by the economic relations that existed between members, regardless of whether they had family ties. The family, on the other hand, represented the totality of an individual’s blood relations. Several expressions were used to refer to the family, including *la familia*, *mi gente* (my people), and *mi sangre* (my blood). There existed no formal obligations for individuals to entertain economic relations with members of their family from outside of their households.

In the case of disputes, however, there was no clear pattern to determine personal allegiances. Often, individuals would side with close family members such

as parents or siblings over other household members such as spouses or in-laws. Reasons given to explain such behavior included “*Uno siente su sangre* (One feels for its blood)” and “*A mi me duele mi sangre* (My blood pains me).² In one instance, Damari, a young woman in her mid-twenties from La Uva but who now lives with her husband Rodrigo in Nandaime, sided with her parents when they feuded with her spouse. To show her displeasure with Rodrigo’s behavior, Damari left her home in Nandaime and returned with her two daughters to live with her mother. Only after much pleading and apologizing from Rodrigo did she agree to return. In a more dramatic case, Wilma sided with her brothers when they got into a gunfight with her husband and his father, not allowing the latter to take out their weapons as her siblings fired several shots in their direction. But examples to the contrary also exist. Mariana, Damari’s sister, sided with the father of her two children when he quarreled with her mother, going to stay with her aunt instead of with her parents when she visited from Managua. What is important to remember is that rural Nicaraguans conceive the household and the family as two separate entities, each of which produce different relations and obligations.

Life in La Uva

As I mentioned before, I conducted most of my ethnographic fieldwork at the Dominguez family hamlet in La Uva, staying sometimes with Calixto but mostly with Don Martin and his wife Amanda. I also spent time in El Descanso, Escalante, La Zorra, Rio Chiquito, El Valle Meunier and Nandaime, where I resided with different relatives and friends. La Uva is characterized by two physical elements that strongly influence the everyday lives of its residents. The first of these is the scarcity of water,

² In both instances, the word blood is used by the speaker to refer to blood relations or family members

especially during *verano* (summer). Don Martin and his sons tried for years to dig a well but never struck the subterranean water lines despite digging over thirty yards into the ground. To fetch water, the people of La Uva must go to the nearest water hole and carry a twenty gallon bucket of water up a steep and rocky trail. The exercise is both tiring and time-consuming. It is also a common cause for conflict among household members.

The second feature of La Uva's geography that impacts the lives of its inhabitants is the unevenness of its topography. Since it is composed almost entirely of steep hills and deep ravines, most of the agricultural work in the area is done on sloped terrain. The men of the area are recognized for their skill at plowing, being able to till the earth with oxen at high inclinations. Where the slopes are too steep, digging sticks are used to plant crops. The broken terrain of La Uva also makes it difficult of access, especially during the rainy season when the trails are covered in mud. No roads go into the community. The closest bus service is in Escalante, which is a one hour horse ride or a two-hour walk away. During *verano*, a bus from Nandaime goes into El Descanso, which only shortens the trajectory by a half-an-hour. Large goods have to be carried into the hamlet by oxcart. Outsiders that come to La Uva sometimes find the living conditions difficult. William, a market vendor in his mid-twenties who had been sent to harvest his *patron's* bean crop, once said to me following a day of work: "*Demasiado he aguantado, no vuelvo a venir nunca* (I endured way too much, I'm never coming back here)." Similarly Marcial, a young man from the not-to-distant rural community of La Zorra, once told his brother-in-law that La Uva was *triste* (sad or boring) and that he would have a difficult time getting

used to living there. The Uvenos did not take kindly to such commentary and would often retort that “*esa gente se la dan* (these people are full of it).” Another common criticism that life in La Uva brought out, this time by both local inhabitants and outsiders, was the difficulty of accessing important services. There was no electrical power, *la luz* (electricity) only reaching as far as Escalante; children had to travel over one hour by foot to attend grade school and leave the community altogether to receive secondary education; and, perhaps most importantly, the closest hospitals were several hours away.

Living in La Uva, though, was not all bad. Because of its relative remoteness, land was still cheap in the area. This allowed most families to have access to significant acreage to cultivate crops, graze animals, and harvest lumber. Furthermore, because of the still significant stretches of forest left in the region, collecting firewood was not a problem for households, which was not the case for many urban and even rural homes that had to purchase cooking fuel. Also, unlike urban zones and more populated rural *barrios* like Escalante or El Valle, petty theft was not a problem in La Uva. Inhabitants could leave their clothes on the line at night without having to worry if they would find them there the next morning. Houses could be left unattended without great risk and chickens and hens were not prey to human hands even though cattle theft did occur from time to time, as groups of bandits operated in the surroundings. Another advantage to life there was the absence of mosquitoes in the higher peaks of the region, principally because of the aridity of the land and the unevenness of the topography, making La Uva a malaria-free zone. Although substantial timber extraction has taken place over the years, wooded areas

are still sufficient to host a variety of wild fruits and animals that complement the diets of local inhabitants. *Garrobo* (iguana), *armado* (armadillo), and even at times *venado* (deer) are still hunted, while *camarones* (shrimp) and *cangrejos* (crabs) are gathered in streams and *mamones*, *granadillas*, *papaturros* and *pitahayas* (all small fruits) are picked from trees and vines. Finally, the beauty and serenity of the landscape, especially during the final months of *invierno* (wet season) when several trees such as the *roble*, *madrono* and *cortez* are in full bloom, can be breathtaking. Calixto once told me while we sat on top of one of the larger hills overlooking the landscape: "*Aqui es lindo. Trabajando y sabiendo vivir, aqui es muy alegre. Yo no me voy de aqui* (It is beautiful here. Working and knowing how to live, it is very happy here. I'm not leaving this place)."

Building La Uva

The Dominguez family did not always live in La Uva. Originally from Niquinohomo, Don Martin grew up in Los Gomez, a rural *barrio* in the department of Carazo. It is there he met Dona Amanda, his eventual wife and the mother of six of his children:

When I first took Amanda with me, I had this thing like I wanted to leave her. One day we went to the town of San Marcos, Carazo, shortly after she had eloped with me. When we get there, this guy comes up to me and says: "that's your sister, right." "Yes," I told him, "go ahead and make me your brother-in-law." "Okay then," the guy said. And he takes us out to a saloon that was called *Salon Rosado*. They'd give you a slice of tomato, a piece of meat, and a slice of plantain (with every drink). With 5 pesos, you'd get ten shots. You would go out of there like this (Martin wobbles from side to side) and you would eat your fill. Now all they show you is the street. Anyway, I was starting to feel drunk. "Sister," I told her, "We better get going before our mother gets upset." To buy a piece of cloth, first you have to try it. A *Chino* (Chinaman) once told me in Jinotepe: "I'll give you two pieces of cloth for one. Pay up, pay up." So I had to try out Amanda like cloth. Miriam was born back there. Then we came to El Jicaro (a community

neighboring La Uva). It was *muy triste* (very sad, unhappy, boring). Over there (Los Gomez) it was *alegre* (happy, great). In Los Gomez I used to go out and all that. When I came to these parts, do you know what my entire capital was Samuel? I had 100 pesos. And I went to work and made a *rozado* (cleared a piece of land). When I come back, the sister-in-law had kicked us out next to the tree. A set of planks was worth 100 pesos back then. So I went to look for the lumbermen because before you could do what you wanted with timber as long as it was for your own use and not to sell. So I built the house, the square was made of twenty-four planks. Ten planks on each side and I made her a little kitchen. After that she (Amanda) sold a piece of land they had left her and received a cow. Then the cow gave birth and with that we bought *La Calosa* (part of the Dominguez land holdings where limestone can be found). Then I bought another cow for 250 pesos. She was called *Novia* (girlfriend), I remember and I sold her for 500. I was moving up. She bought her little piglet for ten pesos, that's what a piglet was worth, ten cordovas. And the sow gave birth and we sold the piglets and fattened her up. For how much did I sell that sow for? How much was it? What I want to tell you is that I arrived at Transito Barrios' grandfather's and asked him to sell me a *ternerita* (female calf). How much I ask him? "I'm selling this little fat one," he said. "How much," I asked again. He sold it to me for the price I had sold the sow. For 100 pesos. I didn't even ask him to bring the price down. Back then there weren't a lot of houses here. Out in la Savana (where Reyna currently lives), there were only Amanda's brother and ourselves. After came a cousin, he was called Paulo Ramirez. Then I brought my brothers Lino and Juan and they went and lived closer to here. Now this whole area is populated. So we went on working and I bought this mountain and I told her this is yours for the inheritance you had sold. She went to sign, she's the owner. Now I gave some to these people (his children) because it's my obligation so that tomorrow they don't come and tell me: "See you didn't give me anything." I multiplied it. From the little bit they gave Amanda, I multiplied it. But if I would have drunk it away "*Veni yo soy tu prisionero* (Come I am your prisoner, the lyrics of a famous ranchera song often sang by drunk men)," we would have accomplished nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Throughout the years, Don Martin and Dona Amanda along with their six children, Miriam, Concha, Rodolfo, Tula, Evaristo, and Ricardo, were able to increase their land holdings considerably. Today, the Dominguez family controls approximately 200 manzanas (+/- 300 acres) of land in La Uva, although segments of the property are owned by Ramon, Miriam's husband and Sebastian, the husband of one of Tula's daughters.



Figure 2 La Uva landscape

Although this land mass is substantial, it is used to meet, in part or in full, the subsistence needs of eleven households. Among these are the four households that remain in La Uva: Dona Amanda's, where she lives with Don Martin, her brother Leonardo, Martin's brother Lino and his son Armengol; Miriam's, where she lives with her husband Ramon, their teenage daughter Yassenia, Miriam's son Ismael and his wife Marcelina; Lorena's, who lives with her husband Evaristo and their six sons; and Calixto's, who lives with his wife Maria and their daughter. Two of Don Martin's daughters, Tula and Concha, had once lived in La Uva but left over fifteen years ago for La Bernardino, a rural *barrio* on the banks of the Ochomogo River situated some five kilometers from Nandaime. Tula and her husband, Pedro Araujo, have since moved with their children to Rio Chiquito, another community just outside of Nandaime. They have also been able to buy up around fifteen manzanas of land in La Zorra. Five other households moved away from La Uva in recent years. Rodolfo

currently lives with Reyna in La Sabana where they are the overseers of Alvarado's ranch. Ricardo, Rodolfito, Mauricio, and Ernesto all moved their families to El Descanso in 2003, after six members of the family pooled their resources and bought twenty manzanas of land there. The households of El Descanso, though, continue to look to La Uva for their livelihoods, as the terrain they live on is insufficient to provide for all of their subsistence needs.

The household composition of the Dominguez family network is similar in terms of diversity to the household formations documented by other scholars in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Latin America (Babb 2001, Cole 1991, Goldstein 2002, Lancaster 1992, Fernandez-Kelly 1981, Scheper-Hughes 1992). In *After Revolution: Mapping Gender and Cultural Politics in Neoliberal Nicaragua* (2001), Florence Babb presents us with the following living arrangements, which she found in a single city block in Managua: a woman living with her mother, brother, and two children; a woman residing with her husband and their young child; a woman living with her husband and their two children; a household made up of four sisters, their mother, two of the sister's husbands, and ten of their children; a retired man living with five other adult kin and four of their children; and an older man staying with his son, daughter, three grandchildren, and a family friend (2001:81-84). My research adds to these findings.

Another feature of the Dominguez households was their fluidity in terms of membership.³ Household composition could shift throughout the year, with members coming and going due to work obligations, the need to attend school, or an inability to get along. During *verano*, most households in La Uva and El Descanso were

without adult men. Similarly, one would be hard-pressed to find school-age children in La Uva during weekdays from February to November. But besides these movements of a more cyclical nature, households often comprised semi-permanent visitors. In exchange for shelter and food, the *huespedes* (boarders), as they were often called, were expected to work for the household. Mariano, a young man from *abajo*, stayed with Calixto from May to July, helping him clear land and plant crops. In exchange, Mariano was fed and had his clothes washed by Calixto's wife. Lichia, who stayed at Miriam's and then at Reyna's for several months, helped out by washing clothes and preparing food. These temporary unions would last as long as they remained convenient for both parties or until disagreements between the *huesped* and other household members made the continued arrangement untenable.

Survival Strategies and the Division of Household Labor

In *After Revolution*, Florence Babb documents how the members of Managua households resort to different economic strategies to ensure their survival in the context of neoliberal economic reforms. Again using a single city block as a sample, Babb found side-by-side a retired carpenter working out of his house, a retired security guard living on a pension, a woman operating a *pulperia* (corner store), a family running a restaurant, a young couple who both worked for the state bureaucracy, a primary school teacher with an unemployed husband, and a woman who operated a market stall and whose income was supplemented by cash remittances from a brother in the United States. Working in a mixed-class neighborhood, Babb points out that most households further enhanced their incomes through informal commerce carried out from their homes. As such, she argues that the diversity in

financial undertakings encountered within and across households “may signal the popular democracy of neighborhoods in the city, but it is also an indication of the rapidly changing fortunes of many residents in a period of uncertainty (2001:81).”

Although the occupational diversity was much lesser in the rural context I worked in, there existed a similar flexibility in the economic practices of many of the households I encountered. The strategy most commonly employed by the households of La Uva was to use agriculture as a basis for procuring the necessities for subsistence, which could then be supplemented by income gained from animal husbandry, hunting, the harvesting of timber, sub-contracting lumber-hauling jobs, renting plots of land, working for wages, sewing, baking, selling cheese, or engaging in small-scale commerce. Don Martin would confirm this strategy in his nightly prayers, which he sometimes shared with me: “*Le pido a Dios que me de resistencia para poder ganarme el bocado de cada dia. Le ruego tambien que me de cosecha para mi alimentacion* (I pray God to give me resistance so I can work for my daily bread. I also implore him to grant me harvests for my nourishment).” According to Don Martin, it was improper to ask God for commercial profit in a harvest. Demands should be limited to asking for the ability to put enough food on one’s table.

For the four households of La Uva, the burden for providing the household with sufficient food was distributed unevenly. Don Martin fashioned himself as the chief provider for his home and, despite his seventy-five years of age, continued to be an efficient agricultural laborer and strategist. Dona Amanda, who did an overwhelming share of domestic tasks, occasionally still took in work as a seamstress for extra income. Lino and Leonardo, much to the dismay of Don Martin, only made

occasional material contributions.

In Miriam's household, responsibility for the provision of essential items was distributed differently. Miriam operated as an ambulant merchant, traveling on horseback to households that lay even further than her own from urban centers, where she would sell items such as rice, cooking oil, sugar, soap, bleach, flour, coffee, powdered juice, cookies, sardines, onions, and garlic. During her weekly rounds, she would also purchase goods produced by her customers such as eggs, beans, corn, sorghum, rice, hens and pigs, to take back and sell at the market in Nandaime. Through her work, she was able to furnish her home with many of the purchased goods necessary for household survival such as rice, cooking oil, soap, sugar, coffee, and salt. Ramon and Ismael would in turn provide the household with corn, beans, sorghum, yuca (cassava, a tuber), guineos (similar to plantain), and sometimes rice which they produced in their *huertas* (fields), while Marcelina and Yassenia took care of cooking, cleaning, hauling water, and washing clothes.

Lorena's household was also different in its repartition of labor. Lorena was burdened with all of the domestic chores since her eldest daughter Mildre had recently married. Evaristo worked as a *montado* (cowboy, horseman) at Alvarado's ranch where he received the paltry sum of thirty cordovas (less than US \$2) for his daily labors. But the bulk of household necessities were provided for by his three oldest sons, Eddy, Oscar, and Marcos, who planted crops and worked as day laborers. The boys were often praised by other family members for their maturity, discipline, and skill at work. Not as much could be said of Evaristo, who was a frequent target of criticism. "*Evaristo se la pasa tuani*," Ernesto once told me. "*Camina fresco*,

trabajando de montado y recogiendo su paguito mientras que los chavalos se matan trabajando (Evaristo has it easy. He walks around smoothly, working as a horseman and gathering up his pay while the boys are killing themselves at work).” Even Don Martin disapproved of his son’s doings, stating in his usual metaphorical manner that “*para poder mandar el barco lo tiene que manejar primero* (to be able give orders on the ship you have to be able to sail it first, meaning that to be the head of the household Evaristo had to be able to provide for its sustenance).”

Finally, in Calixto’s home, a more classical patriarchal arrangement existed. Calixto provided for the material necessities of the household while his wife Maria took care of their young daughter and performed domestic chores. As Calixto once explained to me in one of our interviews, “In this house my responsibility is to *buscar la mantencion* (search for the maintenance): cooking oil, rice, beans. I have to provide them.” Although the arrangement favored by Calixto and Maria was not common in La Uva, it seems to correspond to the mode of labor repartition preferred by couples with young children, since the surveillance of toddlers in itself requires the constant attention of an adult. Mauricio, Ricardo, Rodolfito (despite many claims to the contrary) and to a lesser extent Ernesto’s households were all similarly structured, as the men worked in the fields and took care of the cattle while the women stayed home to cook, clean and look after the children.

The availability of different kinds of labor and the particular labor needs of the home were more important in determining how work was distributed among household members than a strict adherence to the sexual division of labor. Let us examine some of the activities of other rural households to illustrate this point. In

Concha Dominguez and Pedro Puerta's household in La Bernardino, responsibilities were divided as follows: Pedro worked as a security guard in Managua; Concha bought pigs and hens from neighbors which she then sold at the market in Nandaime; Tano, their oldest son, watched over a ranch close to Nandaime; Juan, their second son, planted beans and sorghum and worked with the family's oxen; Alfredo, their youngest son, worked as a day laborer in the sugar cane fields; and finally *las nueras* (the daughter-in-laws, Sylvia, Chilo, and Marina) took care of household chores.

Tula and Pedro Araujo's household in Rio Chiquito was similarly structured. Tula bought and sold swine like her two sisters did. However, she also oversaw the bulk of the household's agricultural activities, working with *mozos* (day laborers) and sometimes even doing the work herself. Her husband, Pedro, was employed by a local plantation as a security guard. Three of their children had now moved away but Alia, Antonio, and Mariana, with her husband Wilmar and their two children still remained. Mariana did a lot of the domestic work and took care of her two infants, while Wilmar was employed as a maintenance worker. Antonio and Alia still went to school.

Obviously, the sexual division of labor was an important feature in every rural household. Without exception, women carried out the bulk of domestic chores, while men and sometimes women worked for wages, planted crops, or operated small businesses. Most chores also took on a gendered character. Women were expected to prepare food, iron and wash clothes, wash dishes, look after babies and young children (at least most of the time), feed hens, chickens, and pigs, sweep and tidy the house, carry water from the well and stoke the fire. Only when younger girls or

daughter-in-laws were able to fill these labor needs could older women concentrate their activities elsewhere.

Men would almost never volunteer to do household chores that were thought to be reserved for women. I was told by many men that they would only cook if they lived by themselves or if their wives were sick and jokes were often made when a grown man was seen doing housework. When I first went to Nicaragua during the late 1990's, I had initially tried to help out around the house by washing dishes, hanging clothes to dry, and carrying water. Not yet knowing how to perform agricultural work, I figured my contributions in completing household chores would be appreciated. Although some people encouraged me to *hacer oficios* (carry out chores), many others thought it to be a curious sight to have a grown man doing women's work. Even many of the women, some of whom later told me it was embarrassing for them to have a man wash dishes, would discourage me from helping out, saying instead: "*Ay dejelo, yo lo voy hacer* (Leave it, I'll take care of it)." On one occasion, while I was washing dishes at Concha's, Pedro Puerta, came home from work and started mocking me: "*Ay, la mujercita. Le vamos a buscar un delantarcito* (Hey the little woman, We'll find her a little apron.)" Such logic was also used by boys to get out of doing chores associated with members of the other gender. When Tula asked her eldest son Gerardo to wash dishes, he protested by telling his mother "*Acaso soy cochon* (As if I'm a faggot)." Calixto here explains what he considers is the acceptable range of male involvement in the execution of domestic chores.

Samuel: What do you think of a man who only performs household chores?

Calixto: You mean women's work?

S: Yes, women's work, what do you think of that?

C: Well, in my opinion that is wrong but I don't know. I'd imagine a man would look

ugly while he cooked. At the very least, I would not eat food cooked by a man that I would see him cooking. No

S: Does that mean that if I fry you up a couple of eggs you're going to leave them on the kitchen table?

C: Well, it depends on the person. If I see that he's clean maybe. Like I told you, when we're out working, we're the ones that cook. Well actually, I never cook but other men that were with us did. We were four so they would cook. I can't cook beans and it isn't my fault if someone gets sick eating my food. So they wouldn't make me cook and they would cook. I had no choice but to eat. It was a house in the middle of the bush and we were only the four of us. We would cook out there in the bush. There are guys that like to cook and do it very well. At least Justo Silva, that guy really cooks well.

S: But that's not all that he does?

C: No, he does housework but he also works. Ooouu, this guy is really good at working in the fields.

S: But let's take a man that only does housework. Would you be able to consider him as really being a man?

C: No, I wouldn't consider him a *huevon* (one with balls). A guy that only likes to work in the house is a faggot, a homo. There are men that like to do housework and work in the fields. Those are men. But a guy that likes to work only in the house is like a faggot.

Oddly enough, of all the households I regularly visited, only Pedro Puerta and Concha's sons were known to consistently wash dishes, cook, sweep, and even wash clothes. In one instance, Oscar, one of Evaristo's sons, had complained to me about how his aunt had treated him while he had stayed with her. What had displeased Oscar was not the fact that Concha had asked him to participate in household affairs, which is expected out of most medium and long-term visitors, but that she had made him do "*trabajos de mujeres*" (women's work) such as sweeping and washing dishes. "*Mi tia Concha piensa que nosotros tambien los mantenemos en la casa como cochoncitos* (My aunt Concha thinks that we hang around the house like little faggots as well)," Oscar had told me, stressing that he and his brothers were too occupied with manly labors outside of the home to engage in household chores.

Tono, however, Evaristo's seventeen year old son *con otra mujer* (with

another woman), who lived with his mother, Dona Juliana, his sister Rosi and her daughter in El Valle Meunier, claimed to perform all sorts of household chores. Living in a rural *barrio* that was constituted more like an urban neighborhood than a hamlet, Tono and his family worked almost exclusively as wage laborers. With no access to land and few opportunities to plant their own crops or build up a cattle herd, the labor requirements placed on young men in such settings were significantly different from those found in La Uva households. Whether or not Tono actually performed all of these chores on a consistent basis is probably debatable. Nevertheless, he showed no inhibition in claiming he washed dishes, cooked food, carried water, ironed and washed clothes, swept the *patio* (area surrounding the home), fed chicks and hens, made his bed, and looked after his niece on top of looking for and splitting firewood, looking after his horse, maintaining the lawn, and fixing diverse household items.

The young men I knew in Nandaime were similarly more adept at performing and more willing to do household chores. Not having had to look after cattle or weed rice fields, the young men of Nandaime were burdened with lighter labor requirements than their counterparts in *el monte*. But because many women held down jobs or worked in the informal sector and that older sisters might still be in school, boys from the towns were expected to learn how to wash and iron their own clothes, cook basic foods, and keep the house tidy. Even Rodrigo, who proclaimed himself to be an *hombre machista*, enjoyed cooking. One time while he prepared *ubre frito* (fried udder) and was wearing a cooking apron, his five year-old daughter Mirna asked him with an air of amusement: “*Papa, Es Ud. mujer?* (Dad, are you a

woman?).” To which Rodrigo replied: “*Hija, vos no me conoce todavia* (Daughter, you don’t really know me yet).”

Now that we know what most men in rural areas did not do, let us take a look at what adult males were expected to accomplish in terms of household tasks. Clearly, women or older girls were saddled with the bulk of housework in all of the households we examined. But men were nonetheless expected to contribute by performing certain chores that did not directly pertain to agricultural labor. The chores men were supposed to do included gathering firewood, splitting firewood, feeding and bathing horses, searching for horses in fields and saddling them up if they were needed by someone, clearing weeds from the *patio*, milking cows, fixing broken household items such as chairs, tables, or beds, making reparations to the house, and, in most cases, hauling some water.

The great majority of women would rarely, if ever, fail to get their chores done. That lunch would not be ready for the worker returning from the field or that a man would have to go to town with a dirty pair of pants was unthinkable. Men, on the other hand, seemed to have more difficulty in complying with their end of the bargain when it came to household chores. Whether because of overwork in the fields, a clash of opinions with other household members, time wasted during a drinking binge, or pure and simple laziness, many men failed to carry out some or all of the chores assigned to them. Expectedly, these deficiencies would often result in quarrelling. Mothers, sisters, and



Figure 3 Men carry firewood home

wives would often nag their male counterparts to get their work done. In one instance, Mildre scolded two of her younger brothers, Marcos and Oscar, telling them that they had no right to go down to the well to bathe and not carry home a bucket of water before adding that she wasn't their *mula* (mule). Further examples abounded. Maria was often on Calixto's case on the subject of firewood; Dona Amanda would chastise Leonardo for not hauling enough water; Marlene criticized Ernesto for not clearing the vegetation around their house; and Tula would criticize her two sons for not doing much of anything. In a more contentious dispute, Tula feuded with Pedro Araujo and her sons because they refused to milk the four cows they had. Pedro explained to me that it was counterproductive to keep milking the cows since they were all *bien pansona* (well into their pregnancies) and that the constant extraction of liquids would weaken the cow and make the newborn calves feebler and more vulnerable to disease. "*Esa vieja*," he told me, "*quiere sacarle hasta las ultimas gotitas a esas pobres vacas* (That old lady

wants to get up to the last drop out from these poor cows).” But Tula interpreted her husband’s refusal to milk the cows as an example of his laziness. “*Que hombre mas aragan,*” she would often say. As she stubbornly continued to milk the cows by herself, Tula refused to give Pedro any of the *cuajada* (cheese) or *crema* (cream) she made with the milk. Pedro would reciprocate by refusing any dairy product whenever it was offered to him by one of his daughters. Although the dispute came to an end with the birth of the calves, it nonetheless gives us an idea of how the failure of men to perform the tasks assigned to them through the gender division of labor can create tensions within a household. By comparison, if Pedro would have refused to feed the hens for example, nothing much would have probably come out of it.

Quien Manda? Power and Gender in Nicaraguan Households

Another common issue of contention within Nicaraguan households was that of *quien manda* (who is in charge, who has control). If we follow the logic of patriarchal relations as discussed in the previous chapter or use the existing literature on households as a precedent to understand how power is distributed within units of residence, the question of *quien manda* would be a non-issue, since, in both instances, adult males are considered to be well in charge of the affairs of the home. In *Gender in Latin America*, Sylvia Chant examines how economic developments in the region have affected the balance of power within households. Chant argues that even while certain economic trends, such as increased male unemployment and female employment in the context of economic restructuring, have undercut patriarchal influences within the home, as women have made concrete gains in terms of mobility, autonomy, and authority; male power has been consistently reinforced by state actors

that continue to treat adult men as the “heads of households” and create legal and bureaucratic systems that confirm their authority (2003:186).

Amartya Sen bases his model of cooperative conflict in “Gender and Cooperative Conflicts” on a similar premise of societal male dominance. In wanting to understand how decision-making power was distributed within households, Sen develops an analytical scheme of household interactions based primarily on the economic relations between members. The basis of this behavioral prototype is that two opposite processes dictate household relations: cooperation, where co-residents pool their resources to satisfy common material necessities, and conflict, which occurs when resources are unevenly redistributed by members among themselves. According to Sen, the redistribution of resources follows existing household power structures, which are determined by three factors: a member’s perceived contributions, a member’s perceived needs, and the extent to which members would stand to lose by the dissolution of the household. Sen argues that three interrelated realities existent in most societies serve to reduce women’s bargaining power within the home: social structures that make it easier for men than women to find gainful employment outside of the home; the greater difficulties faced by women in supporting themselves and their children; and the pre-eminence of maternal altruism (1990:137). According to Sen, material imbalances are the principal cause of male power within the home.

Martha Roldan and Lourdes Beneria also take on this issue in *The Crossroads of Class & Gender: Industrial Homeworkers, Subcontracting, and Household Dynamics in Mexico City*. Rejecting the notion that households are governed by

cooperative dynamics where members share common interests and desires, Roldan & Beneria conceive units of co-residence as a “locus or special sphere made up of a number of individuals who share a common place to live and a budget” (1987:111). To truly understand how household relations between members function and are established, Roldan & Beneria argue that it is necessary to examine the contributions and interests of each member. Conducting their research among women homemakers in urban Mexico who supplemented their incomes through piecework, these scholars found that most of the men in their study occupied superior class positions to those of their wives. Whereas the men of these households were identified as proletariat, when working for steady wages, petty bourgeoisie, if traders or shopkeepers, or as sub-proletariat, when employed as day laborers, occasional workers, or black market vendors; the women, on the other hand, were among the ranks of the unemployed, performing only unpaid housework, or classified as sub-proletariat, when piecework was added to household chores. Like Sen, Roldan & Beneria conclude that “husbands’ different and better-paid class position outside of the household is translated into a commanding position within the family/household context” (1987:120).

Most of the men I associated with during my fieldwork would undoubtedly agree with the idea that men had an upper-hand in household relations even though they probably would not trace the roots of such dynamics back to divergent economic opportunities. Referring to the Bible for an explication was much more common. “*Dios y Hombre* (God and Man),” Don Martin would often exclaim, “*No Dios y Mujer* (Not God and Woman).” Others would refer to the the book of Genesis,

claiming that after all, since women originated from the body of a man, they should be subservient to men (Genesis 2:22, "*Y de la costilla que Jehova Dios tomo del hombre, formo una mujer, y la trajo al hombre.*" (And from the rib that Jehova God took from the man, he made a woman, and brought her to the man)). But for most of the men I encountered, no justification was needed for their right to *mandar*. It was just the way things had to be. Households needed senior male authority to be well-governed. Rodrigo would often say "*En mi casa, pantalones solo mio* (In my house, only my pants)," or "*Solo yo puedo mandar aqui, nadie mas* (Only I can direct here, nobody else)." Calixto made a similar claim during our interview, despite having some trouble coming up with a valid justification for why it was he that had dominion over his wife and not the other way around:

Samuel: Here in your house *quien manda?*

Calixto: It's me. Only me. When I'm here it's me. When I'm not here it's the woman. The most important things I decide. But lets say, the hens, she decides over them. The eggs, she decides over them. Right now I would like her to kill a hen so we could eat it but I don't decide over them. She doesn't want to kill one.

S: If she wants to go out to some other place, she has to ask you for permission?

C: Obviously. If she leaves the house without asking for permission, *le cae la tajona* (the horse whip falls on her) (joking). Seriously, leaving jokes aside, I decide over my horses, my cows.

S: If you decide right now that you're going to La Zorra and you're taking your horse?

C: Well then I guess I'm taking it.

S: Maria can't say anything to you?

C: No

S: She's never said anything to you about this?

C: Of course she has. She gets mad but I still take it.

S: She can't decide things for you? She can't tell you Calixto, you're not going?

C: No, she can't. I, though, could decide for her. In some things, maybe if I had problems in a *fiesta* and she tells me "Calixto don't go there, you know you've had problems. Watch that nothing is going to happen to you, don't go." I might start to think "Man, I'm not going to go." In that case she could intervene *pero por huevos de ella* (but for her balls, I.e. for her desire to impose her will on me): "Calixto don't go there," because she wants to control me: no. I can't. Clearly a bit of advice I can listen to but that she is going to decide for me and maybe I want to go somewhere and she

is going to tell me: "Calixto, don't go." It's that I'm not her son for her to direct me. Her daughter she can direct. If her daughter wants to go somewhere, she can say: "You're not going" and she can't go. She has to listen to her mother because she's her daughter. But she can't tell me what to do. Only my mother can do that.

S: She is not your mother but you can control her without being her father?

C: Yes. Who knows why that is. Sometimes I get confused thinking because I know her father is her father, right. One example, she would be looking after her mother's house right now since her mother and her father aren't there. So why doesn't she go and watch over it? The girls are over there by themselves. Instead of being over there doing her mother a favor she's here. Who decides, her mother or me? In my opinion it's me because if not she would be with her mother.

S: Where does your right to direct her come from?

C: From the day they gave her over to me (the day they were married).

S: Since you're her husband you have the right to decide for her?

C: That's right.

Not only men, though, supported the idea of male authority within the household. Many women, especially older ones with adult sons, were in favor of the continuation of patriarchal relations in the home. Miriam once told me that the only thing she had hoped from her sons when it came time for them to choose their spouses was that they "*buscaran mujeres que se dejaran mandar de ellos* (would look for women that let themselves be directed by them)." Concha had hoped for much of the same when her three sons formalized their relations with their girlfriends by bringing them home and *encargandose de ella* (taking charge of them). She had mixed emotions, however, about the spouses they had chosen:

That girl Alfredo is with is really calm and polite. She's also very devoted. Chilo, well, she's a bit wild and she's a bit of a liar but despite all that she's all right to live with. When Juan makes any money, the first thing he does is come up to me and say "Here you go Mother" (Gives her his pay). And she never gets mad about it. But Tano's woman Marina, she's something else. She takes off and leaves Tano by himself. She does what she wants, not what she has to do. *Lo que pasa es que las muchachas de ahora no les gusta tener mando de hombre* (What happens is that today's girls don't like being directed by a man).

But women do not only support their sons in their claims for decision-making power

but may also encourage their daughters or grand-daughters to adhere to the authority of their spouses. “*Hacele caso a tu marido, hija* (Listen to your husband, daughter)” or “*Ay dejalo, si el es hombre* (let him be, he’s a man)” were words often heard in Nicaraguan households. During one of my first visits to La Uva, back in 2001, I stayed with my wife Kenia at Dona Amanda’s house. As we sat in her kitchen one afternoon, Kenia began singing the lyrics to a merengue song “*Chiki, chiki, meneadito. Chiki, chiki, suavecito*. (Chiki, chiki moving it. Chiki, chiki, smoothly).” The sexual undertones of the song apparently did not please Dona Amanda, who turned around and said to me with a menacing tone: “*Samuel, si es verdad que Ud. manda a la Kenia, digale que no vuelva a cantar esa cancion*” (Samuel, if it’s true that you order Kenia, make sure she doesn’t sing that song again). Although Kenia was her grand-daughter, Dona Amanda had reminded me of my authority and obligations as husband by asking me to take care of the matter instead of directly ordering her to stop. Caught somewhat off guard by the censure, I promised Dona Amanda such nonsense would stop immediately.

Despite most men’s claims of sovereignty over their homes and the support many women entrusted in these claims, the opinions and actions of certain individuals of both sexes went a long way toward casting doubt over the assumed male domination of household affairs. Such challenges usually came in two distinct manners: male, and sometimes even female, criticisms of other men’s failures to maintain proper control of their homes and acts of defiance or independence by women. Not surprisingly, Rodolfito was the one most often chastised for his shortcomings in the governance of his household. Comments along the lines of “*La*

mujer lo manda (the woman controls him)” or “*esta hecho paste* (he’s in rough shape)” were often heard when the subject of discussion turned to how Carolina mistreated Rodolfito. “*A mi me cae mal esa mujer* (That woman rubs me the wrong way),” Dona Amanda once told me, referring to her grandson’s companion. “*Es que ella lo trata como si fuera su hijo y el bavooso se deja* (It’s that she treats him as if he was her son and the dummy lets her do it).”

Rodolfito’s predicament, however, was not only a matter of concern for his family members. It seemed all of Escalante was aware of what transpired between the couple and the Dominguez men were often reminded of their kinsman’s ineptitude during their forays into *el barrio*. During one April night, I accompanied Rodolfo, Calixto, Miriam, and Don Martin to a wake in Nandaime. To get there, Morales, a cattle trader from Escalante, had come to pick us up in his jeep at the edge of Alvarado’s property in La Sabana. While we rode down the dusty road to El Descanso, Morales began to tell us that the battery in his vehicle was not charging properly and that he could only use his small headlights, making the trip to Nandaime on the Panamerican highway somewhat of a dubious proposition. “But I’ve got a new battery at Rodolfito’s, let’s go and get it,” Don Martin interjected. When we got to Rodolfito’s a few minutes later, Don Martin and Rodolfo jumped out of the car to go and get the battery while Morales lifted the hood of his jeep and began to take the defective part out of the motor. Less than two minutes later, the two men came down empty-handed from the little hill that separated the house from the road. “He’s not there,” Rodolfo said. “And Mauricio (who lived next door) doesn’t have the key.” “*Se fue a dormir adonde los suegros* (He went to stay at his in-laws),” Don Martin

remarked somewhat bitterly. The conversation continued as we got back into the jeep. Morales looked into his rearview mirror where he could see Rodolfo and Don Martin and exclaimed "*Esa mujer lo tiene como munequito* (That woman keeps him like a puppet). They even said she beat him up a few days ago." Rodolfo and Don Martin remained silent, not even attempting to refute Morales. "You know," Don Martin said after a while, "he should have just built an extra room at his in-laws." "It would have probably been better," Morales answered as he guided his old Chevy up and down the dark and winding road to Escalante. "You know, Don Martin continued, I tell him he should sell me that house, *porque la casa que no tiene calor humano no dilata* (because the home that lacks human warmth doesn't last) *y lo que se va a comer el moro, mejor que se lo coma el Cristiano* (and what the Moor is about to eat should be fed to the Christian instead)."

One of the complaints most often levied against Rodolfito was that he neglected his own home by paying frequent visits to his in-laws. Many women were criticized for wanting to spend more time at their mother's houses than in their own homes. The results of a woman's absence in a household were quite evident as dirty clothes piled up, water became scarce, and only raw food was often found. Although tolerable for a couple of days, the continuous absence of an adult female presence was clearly detrimental to the regular functioning of the home. For a man not only to accept his wife's continuous absences but to join her in visiting her relatives with such frequency as to compromise the effective functioning of his own home was unheard of. And there lay Don Martin's principal disapproval of his grandson's behavior.

But this was hardly the only accusation brandied upon the couple by the other members of the Dominguez family. Evaristo, who is usually calm and soft-spoken, got quite upset one afternoon as the news that Carolina was forcing Rodolfito to sell his mare reached La Uva. "*Como voy a dejar que una mujer decida de vender un animal mio si yo soy el que me camino jodeiendo en esos montes* (How will I let a woman decide to sell one of my animals if I'm the one that suffers looking after them in the bush)," Evaristo exclaimed, emphasizing the link between his part of the labor bargain and the executive power over household resources such activities conferred him. By deferring to Carolina, many believed that Rodolfito was not only losing face within the community but also putting in serious jeopardy the survival of his household. Because he had to attend to his wife's whims and conduct more household chores than most men, Rodolfito was neglecting his agricultural work. For the *postrera* (the second and often most productive of the two planting seasons) crop of 2005, Rodolfito planted less than half of a manzana of corn, half of a manzana of beans and cleared another half manzana for beans which he never planted. Carolina gave birth to their son Alejandro at the end of October of that year, going to Jinotepe to deliver her baby. Rodolfito accompanied her there. Upon returning to Escalante, the couple then stayed at Carolina's parents' house for another week. When they finally returned home, Rodolfito missed another week of work, staying home to help with the housework. Although Rodolfito's actions were commendable, in the meantime, his patch of corn was lost to weeds and the beans he planted did not sprout, leaving the couple with no grains whatsoever for the *verano*. To make up for his losses in agriculture, Rodolfito sold a cow and left in early December to cut

sugarcane in Costa Rica. During his absence (he returned in April), Carolina lived at her parents, leaving her own home without *calor humano*. Although this may seem quite benign to most, it is impossible for a rural household to operate in such a manner. No animals such as hens and pigs, essential in meeting the nutritional needs and providing extra sources of income in most rural homes, can be raised by an absentee household. No improvements to the land can be made such as clearing land for pasture, fixing fences, or planting a garden. No livestock, the greatest source of wealth for most households, can be kept. The economic conditions most households lived with made the maintenance of the home challenging enough already. To keep afloat while failing to meet daily labor requirements on a consistent basis made things doubly difficult.

An interesting development in this case is that despite being widely disparaged for failing to act as a proper man within his home, Rodolfito faced little direct criticism from others. During my entire stint in the area, I never saw anyone directly challenge Rodolfito about what took place inside his home. Rather, as is usual with the household affairs of others, most people adopted a policy of non-involvement. "*En esas cosas uno no se puede meter* (You can't get yourself involved in these things)," Rodrigo once told me. Others, like Calixto, attempted to counsel their young relative: "I talked to him once and I told him that I thought he had started out very well when they had lived in La Uva at my grand-father's house. But since he moved out of there *la estaba cagando* (he was shitting it, i.e. messing up). But when I finished talking to him, he got mad at me. That's why I don't say anything anymore. It's his problem if he wants to live like that." Rodolfito, then, did not lose his status as

a man within the community. He continued to socialize with other men, be recognized by others as a man, and even fulfill the functions of the patriarchal man within his household, although many would argue inadequately, as chief provider and protector of the home.

To say Rodolfito did not feel in any manner the consequences of his failures within the home in his dealings with other community members would be inaccurate. However, his case does show us that men can fail to live up to certain social ideals and still retain their local gender categorization. This flies in the face of what many scholars of masculinity have argued, as they insist men can be emasculated by not living up to certain local cultural standards (Peristiany, 1966, Brandes 1981, Gilmore 1990, Lancaster 1992). Lancaster even went as far as to suggest that in Nicaragua, men had to maintain the upper hand in their dealings with women if they hoped to avoid being stigmatized and completely stripped of their manliness (1992:244).

What renders Lancaster's theorem more dubious is that even though Rodolfito's case was the most extreme, it was far from being the only instance in which women gained the upper hand, exerted influence, or defied male authority in household exchanges. Although the men in these instances may have been criticized for failing to act like men, their manly integrity was never placed into question and their gender identity remained clear to all. Don Martin would often state that "*la mujer tiene tres brincos* (women have three jumping points, i.e. breaking points), if she gets up on your hips, you can still get her down; if she climbs up onto your back, you'll have a hard time getting her down; but if she's able to get onto your shoulders, you'll never get her off. Of all my sons (including grandsons), only Ernesto and

Evaristo are like me, the rest have the women sitting on their shoulders.”

Examples of women sitting on men’s shoulders abounded. In Tula’s household, both she and her daughters openly proclaimed that Pedro Araujo was not in charge of household affairs and that they acted in complete independence of him. Maria said that she had the right to decide whether Calixto would use a particular horse since it belonged to their daughter, even bragging that in the past she had forced him to take his mare to *fiestas*. I have also seen Concha bark out orders to Pedro Puerta in public several times. Instead of getting upset, Pedro usually did as his wife had asked him. On one occasion when Mauricio was out drinking, Selena nailed the door and windows of their house shut, forcing him to sleep outside (again). The next morning when Mauricio got up, Selena then refused to cook for him. Unfazed, Mauricio killed a hen and prepared a hearty stew, which he shared with his kids and his brother. Marlene once made Ernesto go back on a cattle deal she disliked. Ernesto saddled up his horse and traveled for three hours to recuperate the cow he had given *a media* (shared ownership). Mariana once intervened when her husband lost his cellular phone in a bet, refusing to hand it over to the victor, who lambasted Wilmar for not upholding his end of the bargain. Although she did eventually concede, Mariana was able to extract 50 cordovas from the new owner of the phone since, as she successfully argued, the battery charger had not been part of the initial wager.

The point of this section has been to map out the relations of power between couples in Nicaraguan households. Although men do exert considerable clout in terms of decision-making, their influence and authority is by no means absolute. Unlike the unblemished and mostly unquestioned chain of command that runs from parents to

children in rural households, husband/wife relations are more contested. Obviously, important nuances between households exist as factors such as the personalities of actors, their access to productive resources, their contributions to the household enterprise, and their faith, or lack thereof, in local behavioral norms can all come to impact the relationship that develops between two individuals.

The Household in Action

Despite certain similarities in how labor and power are subdivided, all households have unique internal dynamics and their own ways of doing things. To better comprehend the daily unfolding of such relations, I will provide a more in-depth description of the everyday occurrences within one household. Although this method does not enable us to account for the patterns of interaction existent in all households, we can nonetheless devise through this concrete example how different members of a home relate to each other, how they often spend most of their waking hours, and how they connect with individuals from other homes. The day examined here took place at the beginning of *verano*, during the middle of harvest season in the Nicaraguan hills.

A Day at Dona Amanda's

December, 13 2005

I wake up to a familiar sound: the melody of *Los Cuentos de Pancho Madrigal*. "*Pancraccio, veni vez jodido*," the radio screams out. It is 5:15am. I close my eyes again. The daylight has not yet penetrated into the cracks between the wooden planks that form the upper part of the bedroom. After a few minutes I look over to the *tijera* (bed made out of a wooden frame that opens and closes like a pair of scissors) next to mine. It is empty. Cavolion (Leonardo) is up already. The *cuento* (story) is now ending, it's 5:30. Don Martin is getting out of bed. The voices from the radio become fainter as he carries it into the kitchen where Dona Amanda has been working for over an hour. I get up, slip on my *chinelas* (slippers) and head down to the kitchen where the sound of Dona Amanda's hands pounding corn mass into tortillas can be heard. Cavolion is working the *maquina* (grinding machine). I walk

over to the *tinaja* (clay container used to keep drinking water), where I grab a cup of water. “Y Don Martin,” I ask. “Ya se fue,” Dona Amanda answers without looking up. I sit down in one of the plastic chairs near the wooden table Dona Amanda made a couple months ago. Cavolino (Lino), makes his way into the room with his radio. For a minute, we get a double dose of Radio Corporacion’s slogan: “*Radio Corporacion, la emisora que habla el language de su pueblo* (Radio Corporacion, the station that speaks the language of its people). I get up and shut off Don Martin’s radio as the Ave Maria is being sung. It is six o’clock.

I start talking with Cavolino. “*Hombre*,” he tells me, “*dicen que tus frijoles estan bueno* (they tell me your beans are good).” “*Hombre, estan regular*,” I answer. “*Ya los tengo arrancado* (I’ve picked them already). *Y los de Ud. Como estan?* (How are yours?)” “No, no,” Cavolino retorts, “*vez, los mios no sirven, no sirven* (mine are useless). *La mucho agua lo jodio* (they got too much water).” Dona Amanda walks up to the table with two cups of steaming coffee. “*Aqui esta su café*,” she says and walks back to the fire where she is now cooking her tortillas. As we sip our beverages, Armengol walks in and stands by the door. Armengol, Cavolino’s oldest son, is well into his fifties. His curly gray hair and unkept gray beard are still full of straw from the wheat cane in the *rancho* (shack used to store grains) where he slept. “*Vez, vez que bonito* (see, see how nice),” Lino shouts out. “*Se levanta para estar parado ahi esperando que le den el bocado* (He gets up just to stand there waiting for someone to feed him).” “*Callate vos, Viejo jodido* (Shut up old fool),” Mengol answers back. “*Respeto a tu padre Mengol y busca como ir a traer un viaje de agua* (respect your father and go and get a load of water),” Dona Amanda shouts back. “*Ese jodido no es mi padre* (This guy isn’t my father),” Mengol argues before turning over and saying to me: “*Oye Luis, no tene un tabacco por ay?* (Luis, don’t you have a cigarette).” For some reason, Mengol took to calling me Luis. Diagnosed by most in the surroundings as *loco* (crazy), Mengol was a free spirit to say the least. He would roam from house to house, carrying with him only a few rusted machetes. Sometimes, Mengol would wander as far as Managua or Costa Rica where he had relatives that could feed him. Most of the time, though, Mengol would hang around La Uva, occasionally working and almost always getting on Don Martin’s nerves. Although many thought him to be dangerous and he had in fact attacked two different men with machetes, Mengol was quite docile if not disturbed. As I was telling Mengol I had no cigarettes, Ricardo, Dona Amanda’s youngest son walked in and pinched Mengol in the back, making him curse up and everyone else laugh. “*Buenos Dias Mama*,” Ricardo said with his hands placed against his chest as if he was about to recite a prayer and pointed towards his mother. “*Santito, hijo*,” Dona Amanda answered as she handed him a cup of coffee. After finishing my coffee, I got up and went outside where I sat on one of the logs that were laid flat onto the house and served as seating for whoever felt like taking in the breeze. Miriam’s house, which is at most twenty yards away from Dona Amanda’s, was bustling with activity: Ismael had just gotten back from the hills and was now saddling up his mother’s horse; Ramon was sharpening his machete as he waited for his two *mozos* (day laborers) to finish their meals; Miriam was coming up from *la quebrada* (the water hole) with a twenty liter bucket of water on her head and a large tin full of clothes tucked under her right arm; and Yassenia and Marcelina were already pouring water on the kitchen floor to smoothen it out and prevent the

dust from rising.

While I sat outside, Evaristo's three oldest sons came up the hill from where they lived and entered their grandparents' kitchen, repeating Ricardo's earlier routine. After chatting with their uncles for a couple of minutes, they came back outside and sat beside me, each of them with a cup of coffee in hand. "*Adonde va a trabajar ahora?* (Where are you going to work today)," Oscar asked me as he sipped from his plastic cup. "*Hombre, hoy me voy a quedar aqui en la casa* (man, today I'm going to stay here in the house)," I answered. "*Y eso?* (What's up with that)," Pollo inquired. "*Es que tengo que escribir unas cosas* (I've got to write some stuff)," I told them. "*Va a escribir* (You're going to write)?" Calixto said with a smile as he walked up the wooden step that led onto Dona Amanda's patio. "*Que lindo* (How nice)," he exclaimed using an effeminate voice and getting a laugh out of the boys in the process. Patting me on the back, Calixto assured me he was only joking. In the meantime, Cavolion had walked out of the kitchen with his machete in hand. Crouching down, the sixty year-old man tucked the shaft into his lap and nudged the blade against a piece of wood on the ground so as to arch the steel of the tool. Cavolion then proceeded to scrape the edge of the machete with a file, causing *colochos* (little steel curls), to fly off. "*Va adonde Alvarado, tio?* (Uncle, you're going to Alvarado's)," Calixto inquired. "*Asi es,*" said Cavolion, "*vamos a picar potrero* (Yes, we're going to clear some pasture land)." "*Ah,*" Calixto sighed, "*Que tio mas gallo... gallina* (Ah, what uncle most rooster...hen)."⁴ This time, the boys erupted in laughter and before Cavolion could turn around they had scampered off with Calixto, leaving me alone to face the irate old man. Not saying a word, Cavolion simply went back into the kitchen where he filled a plastic container with water before finally going off to work.

"*Ya esta la comida,*" Dona Amanda yelled out. It was seven o'clock. I went back inside to have my breakfast. Cavolino and Armengol were already eating their tortillas with fried red beans. While I was eating, Don Martin walked into the kitchen. Although it was still cool outside, he already had sweat on his brow. "*Que vida* (What a life)," he said with disdain. "*Vengo de trabajar. Fui a buscar la mula, fui a darle vuelta al trigo y este jodido esta aqui tranquilo, bien sentado y comiendo* (I'm coming from work. I went and looked for my mule, then I went and checked the sorghum and this guy is here nicely seated and eating calmly)." "*Anda buscar que hacer* (Go and look for something to do)," Don Martin told Mengol. "*No este jodiendo* (Stop messing around)," was the answer he received. Cavolino was now finished eating. He got up, collected a few items in one of his nylon sacks, and walked out the door. "*Voy a ir a ver a la Marlene,*" he said. As Lino was slowly going down the first hill that follows the hamlet, Don Martin turned around and commented that his older brother's only real occupation was going from house to house to spread rumors. Now well into his eighties, Lino preferred to live with his brother in La Uva than move back to Managua where most of his fourteen children

⁴ The word *gallo* (rooster) is used as a complement in Nicaragua. It is often used to accentuate the ability of a specific person in performing a particular task. But when coupled with *gallina*, as in *gallo gallina*, the significance shifts to designate a homosexual.

resided. In his youth, Lino had been a handsome man. He had been the disc jockey at local fiestas and, I was told by many, a formidable dancer. "*Mi tío tuvo cuatro familias* (My uncle had four families, i.e. children with four different women)," Ricardo once told me. "*Pero ahora en su vejez, vive solito* (But now in his old-age, he lives alone)." His relationship with his brother, although usually amicable, was sometimes tense. But despite his old age, Lino still loved to joke and tell stories. Something, which he did almost daily in his treks *par abajo* (below, i.e. to the west or remainder of La Uva). "*Cavolino es como la Radio Ya* (Cavolino is like Radio Ya, an all-news radio station)," the Uvenos would say as he brought information about all the happenings of the area back to the hamlet.

It is now almost 8:00 am. Don Martin is saddling up his mule. Miriam has gone out on one of her weekly rounds to neighboring households, her horse loaded with all sorts of non-perishable goods, grains, and other items of utility. Most of the men have gone to work. Calixto is picking beans. Ramon is beating beans with two younger boys from *abajo* who have come to work for him. Ismael is bringing home a load of rice from El Descanso. Evaristo has gone to Alvarado's farm where he will milk about thirty cows and then take them out to pasture. Ricardo is also picking beans with the help of his three nephews, Pollo, Oscar, and Eddy. Only Mengol remains. Dona Amanda now sits down at the table with a plate of beans which she scoops up with her tortilla. After making quick work of her breakfast, she washes the dishes even more rapidly. She then gathers some dirty clothes into a bin and heads off to the *quebrada*. "*Ay cierre la puerta si se va* (close the door if you leave)," she told me before stepping outside. Mengol, who is now sitting outside, asks me for a cigarette once again. "*No ando* (I don't have any)," I tell him. After mumbling to himself for a few minutes, he gets up and leaves, wandering off into the bush.

Having been left alone, I sit down at the kitchen table and start writing. A hen passes by my feet with her band of chicks, looking for worms and grains. A few minutes later, Don Martin's piglet, which Dona Amanda abhors, sneaks in and starts chewing some plantains that were left on a wooden plank. When I hear the pig eating, I get up and chase it away. But as it runs for the door, the animal knocks over a pale of *agua de chancho* (pig feed, scraps), covering Dona Amanda's immaculate dirt floor with a thick and malodorous liquid. I close the door so that no other animals come in and disturb me but before long, the kitchen's roof tiles begin to enclose the day's steadily increasing heat. I decide to go back outside. The women in the other houses are all working, completing their daily routines, while the two toddlers, Enrique and Neli, play together amid the resting cows. Because cattle theft is fairly rare in the area, the Uvenos let their cows roam freely during certain periods of the year. Due to the heat of late mornings and early afternoons, most of the cows come back to the hamlet to drink water and lie in the shade during that period of the day, returning to their pastures only in the early evening, where they will spend the night. Feeling bored, I put down my pen and went to Miriam's to borrow Ramon's axe. After talking briefly with Yassenia and having a drink of water, I start to chop some of the logs Cavolino brought home the other day. The wood is dry and it splits easily, which is often not the case. After about a half-an-hour of splitting firewood, I see Don Martin arrive on his mule. He carries one sack of corn on his hips while two others hang on each side of the saddle. I go up and grab the first sack from him. "*Y la*

Amanda,” he inquires. “*Esta en la quebrada* (She’s at the water hole),” I answer. After unloading his mule, Don Martin goes into the house where he grabs a drink of water. I help him empty the sacks of corn onto the roof of the *ramada* (a temporary structure made out of wooden poles and topped with wheat cane where corn is left to dry during the *verano*; the *ramada* also provides shade and is often used for dances or other special occasions). As he got back on his mule, the seventy-five year-old man looked back at me and said: “*Ay Samuel, yo ya estoy viejo. Ellos me deberian de andar asi* (he puts his hands together and moves them from side to side to indicate the action of rocking a baby) *pero que va, ni siquiera me ayudan* (I’m old now. They should carry me like this, but they don’t even lend me a hand).” And with those words Don Martin was off to his corn patch.

At around 10:00am, Dona Amanda emerged from the *quebrada*. Upon her arrival, she started to prepare lunch. Filling a bowl with uncooked beans, she sat down for the first time today to clean the grain before cooking it. “*Que es ese tufo?* (What’s that smell),” she wonders. “*Es el agua de chanco, la chancha de Martin la rego en todita la cocina* (It’s the pig feed, Martin’s pig spilt it all over the kitchen),” I tell her. “*Chancha condenada* (Damned Pig),” Dona Amanda exclaims. “*Ay gente en la quebrada?* (Are there people at the waterhole),” I ask her. “*Si,*” she says, “*ayi estan todas esas mujeres. Ellas no bajan para trabajar pero para estar hablando del projimo. Por eso a mi no me gusta dilatar ayi* (All those women are there. They don’t go down to work but to talk (gossip) about the next person. That’s why I don’t like spending much time there).” As Dona Amanda finished preparing the midday meal, I went back to my writing. After about half-an-hour, I decided to go down to the water hole to bathe and carry up some water, judging the women had probably finished their laundry by then. I grabbed a plastic container used to haul water and the nylon bag Dona Amanda had made to carry the soap, the *paste* (equivalent of a face cloth made out of nylon), and a small bowl. When I was about two-thirds down the rocky slope and could now start to make out the water-hole, I was stopped by a series of screams: “*Oyyy, Parese. Esperese unos minutos* (Hey, stop, Wait a few minutes). Maria and Yassenia were still there. Since the women liked to bathe as they did their laundry, males were not welcomed to the *quebrada* when clothes were being washed. I went back up the hill a few meters and sat on a large boulder, waiting for the signal to go back down. Lastenia, the semi-domesticated monkey that had bitten about a half-dozen people, was in the tree next to where I was sitting. When she saw me, she began showing her teeth and making high-pitched sounds, warning me to back off. She was upset with me because I had hit her with a bean stalk when she had tried to sneak into Dona Amanda’s kitchen the other day. “*Esperate mona jodida* (Wait up you damn monkey),” I muttered as I picked up a rock. Lastenia scampered off quickly, jumping from tree to tree. “*Yaaa, Puede bajar* (You can come down now),” the girls shouted. I walked down the rest of the way. Maria and Yassenia were filling their buckets with water, which they would carry on their heads some one hundred and fifty yards up the rocky hill. “*Ud. no avisa cuando baja a la quebrada, casi las mira* (You don’t let people know when you come down, you almost saw us),” Yassenia said as she raised the twenty-liter pale over her head. “*Ni quiera Dios que las hubiera visto* (God forbid I would have seen you),” I answered, causing the girls to laugh as they walked away.

I got back up the hill with my water container around 11:30am. Don Martin had just unloaded another three bags of corn and Ricardo had come back from the fields with the three boys. Lunch was now ready. Dona Amanda put down three plates of fried rice accompanied with freshly cooked beans and covered by a large tortilla on the table. Ricardo, Don Martin, and I sat down and ate our lunches without talking much. Ricardo said he was thinking of going to Costa Rica during the dry season. He heard that they were paying well in the sugar cane. "*Vez, te voy a decir una cosa* (Look, I'm going to tell you one thing)," his father said as he chewed on his tortilla. "*Si vas a trabajar esta bueno que vayas. Pero si te vas a poner a beber todos los realitos que ganas, mejor quedate aqui* (If you're going over there to work then it's good that you go. But if you're going to drink away all the money you make, you're just as well to stay here)." Ricardo promised his father that he would not drink profusely in Costa Rica. When he finished his meal, Don Martin grabbed his radio and lied down in the hammock he had put up under the ramada for an afternoon rest. Dona Amanda, meanwhile, retreated to her sewing machine, where she was making a long-sleeved shirt that had been commissioned by a boy from *abajo*.

Things are quiet in the mid day heat, only the noise of the sewing machine breaking the afternoon silence. The house's low tin roof traps the heat making anyone who even sits inside sweat profusely. Evaristo's boys come over after having eaten their lunch. We decide to play cards. "*Calixto tiene el naipe* (Calixto's got the cards)," Pollo declared. The four of us ventured over to Calixto's. He was swaying from side to side in his hammock. "*Aja amigo*," Calixto said as we walked into his house, "*como le ha ido?* (how have things been)." "*Pues bien amigo*," I answer back, "*siempre trabajando fuerte con mi lapiz y cuaderno* (working hard with my pen and paper)." Calixto chuckled. "*Sientese pues* (have a seat then)," he said as he pulls out a chair. Maria was on her hands and knees, rubbing in wet ashes onto her dirt floor to make a smoother, more cement-like surface. Neli, her four year-old daughter, was at Miriam's. We started playing *casino*, a game that requires the players to pick up cards by matching them with other ones of a similar numeric value. I team up with Oscar while Pollo plays with Calixto. Eddy is working the radio as he sits in the hammock, going from station to station searching for songs that he likes.

The boys started talking about their horses. "*Viera como baila el caballo de Tito* (Eddy) (You should see how Tito's horse dances)," Pollo said. "*Cuando fuimos a la Zorra, se quedaron un poco asustado* (When we went to la Zorra, a bunch of guys were impressed)." "*Hombre*," Calixto says as he sits up straightly in his chair, "*es cierto que ese caballo del mono* (monkey, another one of Eddy's nicknames) *es bueno al piquete pero al trabajo no le queda al mio* (It's true that el mono's horse is good at doing tricks but in terms of work he's not as good as mine)." "*Como que mi caballo* (What do you mean my horse)," Maria interjects. "*El caballo es de la nina, no te acordas que se lo diste* (The horse is the baby's, don't you remember you gave it to her)." "*Hombre, esa jodida es loca, acaso ando diciendo que no es de ella* (Man, this woman's crazy, as if I'm saying its not hers)," Calixto retorted. Maria, not amused by the whole affair, stormed off to Miriam's. "*Ay quedense con su naipe* (stay with your cards)," she said as she walked out the door. After about an hour and three lost games, which of course were all blamed on Pollo, Calixto got up and said he was tired of playing. "*Voy a ir a buscar la llegua* (I'm going to go and look for the

mare)," he said as he walked away with a lasso draped around his left shoulder.

Having lost our host, we decided to head over to the boys' house to finish our game. When we got there the place was empty. Lorena, their mother, was at the *quebrada* with Enrique, their youngest brother. The boys pulled the table back from against the wall and placed it in the middle of the *sala*. Pollo turned the radio on and cranked it to its loudest. "*Radio Catarina, la radio de la meseta* (the radio of the plateau)." Radio Catarina's slogan roared out of Pollo's cassette player. "*Y ahora el Pajaro Campano*," the disc jockey announced as a famous cumbia began to play. When Oscar finally dealt the cards, Lorena walked in with a large basket of wet laundry. Pollo quickly got up and grabbed the heavy basket from his mother. Lorena went straight to the radio and turned the volume down. "*Parece cantina aqui* (It's like a bar in here)," she said. "*Muchachos, ya fueron a ver los animales* (boys, have you gone to see the animals)?" Lorena inquired. The boys remained silent. Brrrrrr! Only Enrique could be heard, cutting down trees with his chainsaw. "*Pollo*," the toddler said, "*Mira mi motosierra* (Look at my chainsaw)," as he lifted a triangular piece of wood for all to see. We kept on playing. Moments later Evaristo arrived on his mule. "*Hombre que bonito estan Uds. aqui. Los buyes estan aguantando sed en esas lomas y Uds. andan jugando todavia* (How pretty you guys are sitting. The oxen are dying of thirst in those hills and you guys are still playing around)," Evaristo said in a low but threatening voice. The boys did not require a second warning. The card game was over. "*Es que ese Pollo es fresco, le dije que fuera en la manana* (That Pollo is fresh, I told him to go in the morning)," Eddy protested, trying to shift the blame onto his younger brother. "*Macho, macho*," Enrique screamed out as he lifted up his arms for his father to pick him up. Evaristo took his youngest son in his arms and sat him on his mule. Enrique would kick the mule with his heels, as if he was spurring it, while Evaristo guided the animal from its reins. After walking around the house a couple of times, Evaristo took his son down from the mule. "*A ver*," he said "*Ud. me va a amarar este macho!* (You're going to tie up this mule). Enrique grabbed the rope and made the semblance of a knot on one of the *ramada*'s posts. "*Ya esta*," he said as he walked proudly into the house. Evaristo looked at me and smiled. It was now three o'clock.

After chatting with Evaristo while he downed his lunch, I went back to see what was going on at Dona Amanda's. Don Martin was about to make his fourth trip of the day. Since nothing much was happening around the house and I was starting to feel guilty for not having done much of anything today, I told Don Martin I would accompany him on his next load. "*Vamos pues* (lets go then)," he said, welcoming my help. I went inside for a quick change of clothes and we were off to the hills. "*Quieres montarte* (Do you want to ride)," Don Martin asked me. "*No*," I told him, "*montese Ud* (you ride). The sun was starting to cool down as the afternoon shadows grew. When we finally got to the top of the first hill, the wind began to dry my sweat. The view, as always, was idyllic. Lush green hills bordered by steep ravines followed one another as far as the eye could see. "*Aya queda el mar* (Over there is the ocean)," Don Martin said as he pointed westward. "*De noche se miran las luces de Nandaime y de Jinotepe* (At night you can see the lights of Nandaime and Jinotepe)," he continued as we walked along the trail. When we had finally climbed the hill that led to his corn field, Don Martin stopped his mule. Leaning his body on one side of his saddle

without ever letting go of the reins, he hunched over towards me and pointed out in the distance to a hill-side devoid of trees and filled with weeds. "*Ayi venden* (they're selling there)," Don Martin said to me as his eyes lit up. "*La vieja Lario*, the old widow, owns that land. I remember, when I bought over there where the *chaguite* (plantain trees) is, her defunct husband bought that hill. It goes all the way down and meets with El Carisal (a forest owned by Dona Amanda). In total, I think there are twenty-five manzanas." Don Martin got off his mule. "If you want," he said, "I can go and show you sometime. Lario sold it to Dona Tomasa, *que Dios la libre* (may God save her). But Dona Tomasa never finished paying and her sons cut down all the *pochote* trees (a tree whose bark is covered with thorns and which is used to make planks). They fought over the land and apparently a lawyer said that because of the destruction they brought to the land, Dona Tomasa's sons should pay Larios and give her the land back. But Larios didn't want to go to court. She was scared they would go after her son so she's *dejando las cosas a Dios* (leaving things up to God)." We walked down to the corn patch and filled the four nylon bags with dried corn. Two bags were tied onto the mule's back, while a third was placed on Don Martin's lap. I carried the forth one on my back, making the return trip a less pleasant affair.

When we got back to the hamlet, night was beginning to settle in. We unloaded the mule and put the rest of the corn up on the *ramada*, with Cavolion's help this time. Despite having been away for several hours, Cavolion was still in a bad mood. He sat by himself in a corner of the kitchen where he started playing with a cat. Cavolino was back from *abajo* and was getting ready to listen to a baseball game on the radio between los Indios del Boer, his favorite team, and Leon. Dona Amanda was now serving supper. This time it was *gallo pinto* (a mixture of beans and rice fried together) with *cuajada* (locally made cheese) and boiled yuca (cassava). Even Armengol was back, still looking for a cigarette. "*Luis*," he said to me, "*no tenes un tabacco?*" "*Nadie fue al pueblo Armengol* (No one's been to town)," Dona Amanda answered wryly. "*Trabaja si quiere fumar* (Work if you want to smoke)," Don Martin told him contemptuously. Mengol sat down and began reminiscing about some work he had once done in Managua: "*Me gane tres azules limpiando un solar en Ciudad Sandino* (I made three blue ones (one-hundred cordova bills) clearing a lot in Ciudad Sandino)." "*Ese es loco* (This guy's crazy)," Cavolino shouted from across the room, never removing his ear from the speaker of the radio. "*No le hagan caso* (Don't listen to him)."

After finishing his supper, Don Martin turned his radio on. *El Correo de la Noche* was starting. Although many households in rural areas now have access to cellular phones, the use of the radio as a means of communication continues to be important in the countryside. The *Correo de la Noche* (Nightly Mail) is the program that perhaps best performs this function, serving as a medium for people to send out messages to their relatives in remote communities via the airwaves of Radio Corporacion from the hospitals of Managua, the urban centers of the Pacific coasts and even Costa Rica. "*Un aviso para Juan Flores de Achuapa, por favor encontrar a Maria del Socorro Reyes el sabado a las doce a la parada de los buses. El nino esta mejor.* (A notice for Juan Flores of Achuapa. Please meet Maria del Socorro Reyes at the bus stop Saturday at noon. The boy is better)," were the words uttered by a female voice. Following the *servicios sociales* (social services) as the Corporacion liked to

call it, a selection of ranchera songs was played. Miriam and Evaristo walked in and sat at the table. The room was now being lit by two *candiles* (a kerosene fuelled lighting device). They started to talk with Don Martin about some people they knew from Camarona, a community situated some fifteen kilometers to the north. After about a half an hour, Miriam and Evaristo left. It was almost eight o'clock. Yawning, Don Martin got up from his chair and grabbed a cup of water. Dona Amanda shut the radio off and took a *candil* to her room. Mengol went off to the shack where he slept. Cavolino was still listening to his baseball game, but was now lying in his *tijera*. As I walked by he told me the score was five to three for Leon in the sixth inning. The Boer were losing. Cavolino had already gone to bed, seemingly still upset with this morning's events. Perhaps tomorrow would be a better. Lying in bed, I could hear Don Martin praying, as he did every night. Down on his knees in the dark kitchen, Don Martin was imploring the Lord to grant him the strength to keep on working. "*Senor, te ruego que me des fortaleza para seguir trabajando, para seguir ganandome el pan de cada dia. Senor, te agradezco por todo lo que tengo y te pido que protejes mi familia* (Lord, I beg you to grant me the strength to keep on working, to keep on earning my daily bread. Lord I thank you for all that I have and I ask you to protect my family). And with that, the day of December 13, 2005 came to an end.

Conflict and Crisis I: Household Violence

Having outlined how labor is subdivided between members and how relations of power are imagined, lived, and contested within units of co-residence, I will now end this chapter by examining how households react to more stressful situations such as internal disputes and predicaments, including household violence. As the statistics presented in Chapter 4 suggest, conjugal violence in Nicaragua is a serious problem. Roger Lancaster addressed this issue in *Life is Hard* in a chapter entitled "Beating one's Wife," where he explains that despite hearing several references to incidences of domestic violence against Nicaraguan women during his fieldwork, he initially encountered little direct evidence to support these claims. Lancaster, however, later witnessed two separate incidents, one in which a delicate situation was alleviated by a woman not challenging her husband and another where a husband and wife exchanged blows, that concretized some of his initial suspicions about conjugal violence:

The threat of violence, as with Onix and her husband; the reality of violence, as with Esperanza and Pedro: both are part of a larger picture of gender relations in which men literally have the upper hand. In both cases, violence comes up when women encroach on what men see as their domain. Until the revolution, it was one of the working assumptions of Nicaraguan culture that men could control and discipline their wives and companeras with impunity. Community opinion, especially male opinion, would not reproach a man for occasionally beating his wife, unless the level of violence was seen as excessive (1992:39).

Lancaster continues on to argue that FSLN reforms have created a climate where physical violence within the home is less tolerated than before, and that although many men have lagged behind in their willingness to change their ways, they can no longer act with impunity in castigating their wives. Lancaster believes that the discrepancy in male cooperation is the result of the existence of two sets of values that “coexist, compete, and more than occasionally blur: the ideals of machismo, which is the cult of aggressive masculinity, defined as a mode of sexual and physical conquest; and the ideals of the revolutionary New Man, who is envisioned as hardworking, devoted, and family oriented.” (1992:40).

Although my own findings somewhat resemble Lancaster’s in their content, I still feel that certain difficult questions about conjugal violence have yet to be addressed. More specifically, I think it is important to examine how violence is used within the confines of the household and who are those that most often utilize it. Like Lancaster, I overheard or was directly told several stories about past violence. Many women recounted tales of past disputes without inhibition. “*Ese Pedro mucho me pegaba* (That Pedro used to hit me a lot),” Tula once told me. Reyna spent an entire afternoon reminding me of the things Rodolfo had done to her in her youth, even recounting the time that she had to hide in the bush to escape from her raging

husband. Marlene, Concha, Maria, and Dona Amanda all told tales of past disputes in my presence without any noticeable discomfort. Women often used public forums to vent their frustrations, receive sympathy, and denounce the actions of their husbands and companions. Men, as might be expected, were much more reticent to go into details when discussing such matters. Most of the time when presented with a direct accusation, which was fairly rare, they would claim not to remember, to have been drunk, or that the woman in question had brought it upon herself by being *odiosa* (hasty, cruel). Only in private conversations did I hear a few men discuss in any depth previous quarrels with their wives. Most of the time, information about the troubles of a particular couple were publicized by women or by men not directly involved in the affair.

This is not to say, however, that men never made reference to conjugal violence. Quite to the contrary, the men I interacted with consistently alluded to the existence or possibility of violence between couples. This was done, though, in a manner much different to that of women, who usually provided audiences with precise details of past events in the hope of condemning male excesses. Men, on the other hand, made vague references to the possible benefits of the use of violence in marital relations. Ismael once exclaimed amid a group of men at Miriam's house that "you should beat your woman one week after taking her to your house. That way, she'll be scared of you and she'll listen." On another occasion, Ernesto confessed that at times, "*a uno le da gana de agarrar las mujeres y darles* (one feels like grabbing women and giving it to them)." Jokes about the necessity of the use of force were also made. During our interview, Calixto said he would bring out the horsewhip if Maria

did not listen to him. On a similar note, Don Martin often said he would get me a *chuso* (long stick with a metal tip used to direct oxen) so I could better direct my wife. In another instance, when Nelson, a five year old boy, made an older girl cry when playing with her, Pedro and Rodrigo said laughingly: "*Ya le da sopa de muneca* (He already gives her wrist soup; an expression used to signify hitting a woman)."

By making conjugal violence a laughing matter, men were diminishing the importance of a serious problem in many households. But when directly confronted with the issue, few men condoned the use of physical force in their dealings with women. Rather, many men were quick to denounce such behavior as unmanly. Rodrigo repeatedly told me he had never hit a woman in his life. He even claimed to have roughed up one of his brothers when he caught him beating his wife. Tono also disapproved of such actions. "*Es feo* (it's ugly)," he said, "*talvez peleando, pero pegarle asi, no. Eso es vicherada del hombre* (maybe fighting, but to hit her like that, it isn't right. That's pussyness on the part of a man)."

Like the different opinions among the men of the Dominguez family network on the issue of conjugal violence, disputes occurred with varying frequency and intensity among the households I surveyed. Although it is difficult to account for all occurrences of violence within households, the most important and dramatic disputes between couples were quickly publicized. The incidence of violent fights between husbands and wives seemed to have been fairly low, although, once again, such tabulations can never be entirely accurate. During the eleven months I spent in Nicaragua doing fieldwork, I witnessed one quarrel directly and heard of five others through word of mouth. In my prior trips to Nicaragua, I was present for three other

disputes. Two factors seemed to be often related to such quarrels: alcohol consumption and sexual infidelity or supposed sexual infidelity.

Back in 2001, Concha and Pedro's only daughter Melinda was going out with Julian, a young man from Nandaime. Julian had begun paying visits to Melinda while Pedro had been away in Costa Rica the previous year, working in the banana plantations of El Limon. When Pedro came back, he found Julian well installed in his home, something that is not taken lightly in Nicaraguan households. Julian would visit Melinda continuously, sometimes even staying overnight. He had promised Concha that he would marry her daughter and to do so he was planning a trip to Costa Rica where he would save the necessary funds to pay for the wedding. Pedro, however, remained skeptical. He doubted Julian had the mettle to survive away from home for a long time and put aside enough money to make his promise of matrimony come true. One September evening of that year, several people gathered at Concha's to drink guaro during a wake that was being held for a deceased baby a few houses down the road. After having a few drinks, most of the visitors went back to the wake. However, Kenia and I stayed behind. Tired, we lay down in one of the bedrooms to rest awhile. Shortly after eleven o'clock, a heated discussion erupted between a now-inebriated Pedro and a still defiant Concha. "You really think going to Costa Rica is that easy?" Pedro shouted. "I don't like this guy's intentions at all," he continued. Pedro felt that Julian was only promising to marry his daughter so that he could receive the trust of his future in-laws and be granted more leeway in his courting of Melinda. He thought that the young man from Nandaime was in no way interested in getting involved in a formalized union. Concha, who had accepted Julian into her

house and seemed to like the young man, took offence to her husband's reproaches. She felt Julian would be a good husband for her daughter and she refused to believe that he might be lying to her. The animated exchange between the couple was replaced by a tense silence after ten minutes of arguing. No one in the house said a word. From our room we could distinguish Pedro's heavy breathing. Suddenly, a sound of chairs being turned over broke out in the night. "Aayyyyy!" Concha screamed out as she raced out the door, "*este hombre me esta pegando* (this man is hitting me)." Everyone in the house got up and immediately stepped out onto the *patio*. As I made it out of the side door, I saw Pedro hurl a glass onto Concha, striking her in the left shoulder. Concha, ran for another ten yards after being hit, where she then stopped and began panting loudly. A deep purple bruise soon burst out from the top of her arm. The two girls went over to where Concha was lying, while I tried to calm Pedro down. Tano, the couple's oldest son approached his father and addressed him in a defiant manner: "*Y que lo que le pasa a Ud?* (What is going on with you?)." Pedro looked up and shoved him aside. He walked into the house and sat down. "*Quiero que los echemos un trago* (I want us to have a drink)," he told me. I poured Pedro a drink. After looking blindly at his glass for a few seconds, he guzzled down the liquor in one shot. "*Ya me voy* (I'm leaving)," he said. Drunk and frustrated Pedro left for work five hours early. Two days later, he returned from his forty-eight hour shift as a security guard in a Managua university. The couple was once again on "talking terms" (*se hablan*).

A second example worth recounting is a dispute that took place between Evaristo and Lorena in November of 2005. I did not witness this particular quarrel but

was informed of its occurrence by two different people, who subsequently produced two distinct versions of the event. The row occurred in the following context. For over a year, Evaristo had been visiting a woman in El Descanso named Yamilet but who was commonly referred to as Yamilon because of her imposing stature. Evaristo often tried to disguise his rendezvous with his lover by claiming he was visiting different friends that lived in the surrounding area. His romance with Yamilet, however, was La Uva's worst kept secret. One September day, as I stayed at Ernesto's while weeding a rice field, Evaristo showed up to El Descanso late in the afternoon on one of his horses. Ernesto, Mauricio, Evaristo, and I all gathered at Ricardo's where we talked and smoked cigarettes as we listened to the radio. At around six o'clock, as night was beginning to set, the group broke up, each man going home for supper. When Ernesto and I got up to leave, Evaristo said to us almost in a whisper: "Man, I'm going to go and see Marlon about this horse." "Dale pues," we answered as we walked away. Evaristo got up onto his horse and rode away. When we were at about thirty yards from Ricardo's, Ernesto turned around and said to me: "*Vez que locura la de Evaristo, como que si a uno le importara que vaya a ver esa mujer* (What craziness that of Evaristo's, as if one cared that he went and saw that woman)." Evaristo would thus often travel to El Descanso where he spent most of the night before returning to La Uva in the wee hours of the morning.

Lorena made few public complaints about her husband's behavior. I never heard her make any comments about Evaristo's philandering, which hardly means that none were ever made. But one day, as she went with Maria to the Centro de Salud in Escalante for an annual malaria shot, Lorena ran into Yamilet upon arriving

to the local clinic. Apparently, Yamilet did all she could to embarrass Lorena, telling others who were present that Evaristo *los mantenía bien a ella y su hijo* (was providing a good maintenance for her and her son, was giving them money).

Although Lorena did not react to her rival's goading, she certainly did not appreciate being ridiculed in public. In the days that ensued, she argued several times with Evaristo, claiming he was neglecting his children to support a woman who only cared for his money and a child that was not his. Although Evaristo kept his cool during several arguments, the confrontation between the two eventually escalated. Calixto was the first to tell me how the dispute unfolded:

I was sitting at home one day with Maria and Neli. It must have been around five o'clock. Suddenly, we began to hear Evaristo and Lorena fighting with each other. After a little bit, I heard a scream, so I rushed over. When I entered there, Evaristo had her up against the wall and was squeezing her pretty hard. Mildre and Niero were both crying. "Control yourselves," I shouted out. "Aren't you ashamed, your kids are grown up now." Then he let her go. Man Evaristo really shouldn't be doing that. His sons are men now. If they walk in and see him like that, *lo pueden irrespetar* (they might lack respect towards him, i.e. get physically involved in the fight) and it's going to be his fault only.

According to Calixto, Evaristo had finally lost his composure in the face of his wife's continued verbal assaults and had made use of his superior strength to take control of the situation. Reyna, however, provided a different version of the events. Although she was not present during the tiff, she claims Lorena gave her a full account of the happenings. "*No sabe*," she said to me with a big smile on her face, "*es la Lorena que le pego al Evaristo. Ella me dijo que lo estaba orcando cuando llego Calixto a desapartarlos. Dice que Evaristo ya no aguantaba* (Don't you know, its Lorena that roughed up Evaristo. She told me that when Calixto came in to split them up, she was choking Evaristo and he couldn't take anymore)." "The same thing happened to your

buddy Rodolfo the other day,” she said. “I found a letter in his bag by a woman from Escalante. When he saw I had the letter, he tried to wrestle it away from me, but I put him down and he got pissed off and left.” Reyna took great pleasure in giving me the details of her and Lorena’s supposed triumphs. That Lorena or Reyna could have handled their husbands in a physical struggle is doubtful but possible. They are both very strong women and weigh as much, if not more, than their husbands. Although women often do not come out on top in such battles and the suffering and pain caused by conjugal quarrels is real, as much for the children that witness them as for those directly involved, stories such as these ones suggest that characterizing women as hapless victims of abuse may not be productive in understanding and ultimately terminating the use of physical force in the resolution of household disputes.

Lancaster claims that Sandinista legal amendments and educational programs changed public opinion on conjugal violence in Nicaragua. Certainly, few men and even fewer women still accept the legitimacy of male violence against adult women within the home. The reason most often given to contest such abuses, though, may be surprising to many. Diana, a woman who sold candy, cigarettes, and other trinkets at the park near Rodrigo and Damari’s in Nandaime, best summarized this train of thought with her comments:

There are no reasons for a man to mistreat a woman. If he sees that the woman is of no use to him, then it is better for them to end their relationship on good terms and not bad ones. A man doesn’t have to be that way because he is the son of a woman and the reason he sought his woman is to live in harmony and love. Because only our parents are the ones that can punish us.

As Diana’s remarks demonstrate, only the right of parents to use physical force in the castigation of children is fully recognized within Nicaraguan households. It is widely

accepted, that a mother or father can discipline their offspring. This is not to say that public opinion licenses parents to beat their children savagely. There are proper ways of hitting. "*Hay que saber pegar* (You have to know how to hit)," parents often said when discussing how they disciplined their children. *Fajas* (belts) and *barejones* (little branches from a bush) were the tools of choice for castigating. Parents who used their hands, other objects, or excessive force while hitting their children were criticized. "*Esa Tula es bruta* (That Tula is a brute)," Rodrigo once told me. "*Ella agarra a sus hijos como enemigos* (She hits her children as if they were her enemies)." But parents who failed to discipline their children when sufficient motive existed were also disparaged. "*Ese Rodrigo no le pega a ese chavalito viejo, por eso que es un gran mal educado* (That Rodrigo doesn't hit that boy of his, that's why he has bad manners)," Tula often exclaimed.

The frequency of the use of force by parents in disciplining their children was much greater than the eruption of violence in marital disputes, perhaps reflecting its greater level of societal approbation. Obviously, not every household was the same. Parents meted out punishments at much different rates, which ranged from almost daily in certain homes to almost never in others. More often than not, it was adult women that castigated their children, especially daughters. On one occasion Ernesto caught his oldest daughter playing near an open well. Although he was visibly upset, he did not hit her. Instead, he called Marlene over: "*Vos, veni pegale a la Mireilla* (Come and smack Mireilla)," who quickly obliged her husband by placing her belt on her daughter's back. This is not to say that men never hit their children, which was far from true. Nevertheless, women seemed more comfortable and often more willing to

dole out punishment than their male counterparts.

Crisis and Conflict II: Dealing with Health Problems

Most Nicaraguan households are faced with many challenges at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Economic stagnation, constant migration, disputes between members, and the squandering of resources are but a few of the many factors that put constant stress on the overall viability of the home. Nothing, however, seemed as debilitating to households in rural Nicaragua as having to deal with illness or injury. The strain caused by the incapacitation of a member had a sort of snow-ball effect that disrupted the balance of everyday operations. The productive labor of the sick person was lost. Caring for the stricken meant other members of the household had to relinquish their regular activities. Operations, medicine, vaccines, radiographies, medical tests of all sorts, the purchase of blood, transportation to and from hospitals, food, and phone calls to family members all put significant dents into already frail household budgets. To meet these expenses, rural households often had to part with livestock, tools, prized possessions, or other animals, meaning both their capital and productive capacities were often reduced as they coped with crisis.

Once again, an ethnographic example will help us better comprehend the repercussions of such events. In early September 2005, Marlene gave birth to her third child, a plump and healthy-looking boy named Cristobal. In late September, *el tiempo de abajo*, a weather pattern moving in from the Pacific ocean, set in. Feared for its excessive rainfall by most farmers, *el tiempo de abajo* lived up to its reputation. Starting September 21st, it rained intermittently for forty-two days. The effects on agriculture were devastating. Grains of corn and beans sowed with a

plough were washed away by currents that formed at the slightest inclination in the land while those planted with a digging stick were drowned by excess water. Soon, it was impossible to plough any field due to the thickness of the mud. Even rice crops, which generally relish abundant rainfall, began to show the ill signs of the weather by sprouting black instead of the customary green. Taking a bus to Nandaime became a perilous journey as the vehicles would get stuck in large pools of mud that covered the entire road. Even going from one house to another became a challenge due to the treacherous conditions of the trails.

In late October, Cristobal began to cough frequently. At the time, I was clearing a field with Ernesto where we wanted to plant beans. After planting this last field and weeding his other patches, Ernesto was hoping to go back to Costa Rica where he had a job working for a construction firm in San Jose lined up. Marlene brought Cristobal over to Dona Esperanza's, the local healer, who gave her a few herbal remedies for the sick child. But Cristobal's condition did not improve. His cough got more hollow and his body temperature began to rise. Not knowing what to do, the couple took their infant to the hospital in Rivas. But only Ernesto returned that night. He was in a somber mood. The baby had pneumonia. Maybe he was going to die. Over the next week and a half, Ernesto made daily trips to Rivas, bringing Marlene and Cristobal clean clothes, food, and money. Marlene stayed by her infant's side, sleeping very little the entire time she was in the hospital.

Luckily, the couple could count on the support of several family members. Miriam went over on three different occasions to relieve Marlene. Yassenia was sent by her mother to watch over her two nieces and keep her brother's home together

while the adversity lasted. After about five days, the doctors declared that Cristobal was winning his fight with pneumonia and that the worst was probably over. He would, nevertheless, have to remain under hospital care for another week out of precautionary measures. Ernesto was relieved but he was also running out of cash. Having rapidly spent the money he had saved up to travel south to Costa Rica, he was now forced to borrow from his uncle Cavolion, who acted as a local moneylender. Somewhat compassionate towards his nephew's plight, Cavolion agreed to omit the customary interest payments on the principal. Ernesto was also able to borrow money from Ricardo and received small but gladly welcomed donations from Damari and Mildre.

At the start of the second week of November, Cristobal and Marlene left the hospital and returned home. The rain had stopped and the cool winds of early *verano* were setting in. The end of the heavy rains in Nicaragua is the equivalent of the arrival of spring here in Canada. The roads dry up, the mud is replaced by dirt after a few days and the sun once again shines in the sky. The December holidays and the *postrera* harvest are just around the corner. Work loads become lighter for the farmers following the frantic planting season and a general optimism sets in. Despite being greatly relieved their son was in good health, the economic outlook for Marlene and Ernesto was quite grim. Weeds had covered Ernesto's bean crop. Although it could still probably be saved, the yield would be considerably lower than if the field had been properly cared for. Another patch of beans that he had planted a bit later had not yet been invaded by foliage. Instead, it had been devastated by *plaga* (plague, small insects that eat the leaves of the bean plant). Furthermore, by delaying his

voyage to Costa Rica, Ernesto had lost the job his cousin had lined up for him. He would now have to sign up to cut sugar cane to pay his debts and make up for his poor harvests.

A few days after Marlene and Cristobal had returned home, Maria suddenly fell ill, complaining of a continuous strain that ran through her arms. Although the pain was light at first and the young woman worked through it for a couple of days, by the third night she could no longer tolerate her throbbing limbs. Hearing her cries resonate throughout the hamlet, the residents of the four houses quickly gathered outside of Calixto's small domain. Concha, who was visiting her parents at the time, went inside and began massaging Maria's arms, while everyone else sat under the *ramada* with Calixto as a show of support. Only Miriam would go in to check on the patient before coming out and addressing the crowd, who would stop talking momentarily to listen to the prognostic. "*Dice que le duelen sus brazos, que hace unas grandes fuerzas* (She says that her arms hurt, that she makes a strength (strains)), Miriam said before slipping back into the wooden house. "*Que raro ese dolor* (How strange this pain)," Lorena remarked, "*quien sabe que sera?* (who knows what it is)." Cavolino leaned forward and began to whisper to those sitting next to him on the wooden plank upheld by four poles that served as a bench: "*Tal vez, tal vez es brujeria* (Maybe it's witchcraft)." "*No este con esas locuras* (Don't start with that craziness)," Don Martin said wryly as he looked over to his brother. Suddenly, and somewhat unexpectedly, Calixto started crying. I could see a mix of surprise and compassion on the faces of his family members as the usually joyous and fun-loving young man wept in the night, his head cocked between his knees and covered by his

two hands. Ismael got up and patted him on the back. After a moment, Calixto looked up and wiped the tears from his brow. Nobody said a word. Calixto then got up and went back inside. A few minutes later, he emerged once again, having regained his composure. "*No se ahueve papito* (Don't give in son)," Cavolino said. Calixto nodded, acknowledging his uncle's advice. Maria had now stopped moaning. Miriam came out once again. "*Parece que se le esta bajando un poco* (It looks like the pain's gone down a bit)," she said. The crowd sat around for another hour. When it was again suggested that Maria was feeling better, those present slowly dispersed. It was past 10:00 o'clock.

The following morning, Calixto went over to Dona Amanda's kitchen to update his grandmother on his wife's condition and, at the same time, enjoy a cup of freshly brewed coffee. "*Se siente mejor mama* (She's feeling better mama)," Calixto said. "*Gracias a Dios* (Thanks to God)," the old lady shot back. Calixto began explaining to us what had made him cry last night: "It's that I began to think of the situation. Of not being able to do anything to help her. My crops are bad this year and I have no money. It reminded me of the time Neli was born." Calixto had once told me that his daughter's birth had not been an easy one. At the time, Calixto was living with his wife in Escalante, where he oversaw a small farm. Because Maria was having trouble during labor, he had brought her to the hospital in Rivas. After Neli was born, the doctors told him that she had deficiencies in her blood. The infant was placed in extensive care. Having to stay overnight at the hospital, Calixto ran out of money. He was beginning to despair when an unknown woman helped him out, giving him money to buy food for his wife and pay the bus fare home. Upon returning

to Escalante, Calixto was able to find his employer and receive an advance on his pay. He had then gone back to Rivas with enough money to pay for his daughter's treatment and to care for his wife while she recuperated. "*Esas son cosas de Dios* (Those are the things of God)," Calixto had told me. "*El fue que puso esa mujer en mi camino* (He's the one that put that woman in my path)."

A few minutes before seven, Ernesto arrived on his mule. "*Buenos Dias mama,*" he said as he walked into the kitchen and took a seat. "*Como esta el nino?* (How's the baby?)," Dona Amanda asked. "*Hombre, esta mejor. Gracias a Dios* (He's better, thanks to God)," the young man retorted. Don Martin, who had been listening to Calixto's comments about his state of mind, brought the conversation back to its original subject. "*Uno no llora tanto por el dolor que por la desgracia* (One cries not so much for one's pain but for one's disgrace)," he calmly said. "Well," Calixto answered, "if I had money I wouldn't worry at all." Ernesto looked at his brother and shook his head. Getting up from his chair, he said, somewhat annoyed: "You would still worry. What if the person dies. Money won't help you." Calixto remained stoic in the face of his brother's retort. "Well then," he shot back, "I would give her a good funeral and that's it." Luckily, things never got to that point. The following day, Miriam took Maria to see a doctor in Nandaime. Her mysterious illness was revealed. She was pregnant with the couple's second child.

Although Maria's pains were benign in the end, they brought out in her husband a fear shared by many in Nicaragua. Since the neoliberal reforms of the 1990's, and one could probably argue that before them as well, the state sponsored health care system lies in tatters. While medicines in hospital pharmacies have grown

sparser and the number of hospital beds stagnate, the cost of operations, consultations, and transportation have all sky-rocketed. Dealing with a serious health crisis can be overwhelming for households that lack both cash flow and capital to stymie the loss of one or more productive members or incur the costs of treatment. Unfortunately, illnesses, injuries and even deaths, seem to be ever-present in Nicaragua. In less than a year, I met over ten people who had troubles with their kidneys, two of which have since passed away. Sub par safety standards in transportation and the workplace also caused accidents. Body parts severed by machetes, limbs crushed by industrial machines and automobile accidents were frequently reported both locally and on the daily news. When the now extinct *ingenio* (sugarcane processing plant) operated in the outskirts of Nandaime, people used to say it had a *pacto con el Diablo* (pact with the Devil), that required it to hand over one or two lives to the Devil every year in exchange for the riches it produced. How else could the recurrent tragedies be explained? Dealing with health problems is a priority for many households in Nicaragua. Regrettably, the issue has yet to receive sufficient attention from politicians and academics alike.

Men of the House

The purpose of this chapter has been to illustrate some of the relational webs that are woven among the members of Nicaraguan households both on an everyday basis and during more difficult situations. My goal here is not to decode some secret formula or hidden behavioral pattern that will illuminate the actions of all men in every circumstance. Such a task is impossible and counter-productive to understanding human relations. Rather, I simply wish to illustrate through the

ethnographic examples I provided that men in rural Nicaraguan households are active, if at times inconsistent, participants in the affairs of the home; that they exert rights and hold down responsibilities within households which are influenced without always being pre-determined by local gender norms; that power is, although usually unequally, shared within the majority of households; that men are perhaps often, but not always, the cause of disruptions within households; that they are concerned as much as anyone else by the external developments that impact their households; and that, for the most part, Nicaraguan men despite all their flaws have the well-being of their households at heart. In sum, I wanted to show that men are full-fledged contributors and not temporary and disinterested residents in household enterprises as they have often been presented in the literature. In the following chapters, my challenge will be to demonstrate how the activities men pursue beyond the physical realm of the home are intrinsically linked to household operations. Our first stop in this journey will be made in the fields of La Uva, where the adult males of the Dominguez family spend much of their time and energy.

6. The Work of Men: Gender and Identity in Agricultural Labor

As we saw in the previous chapter, the completion of household chores was known as *trabajo de mujer* (woman's work) in La Uva. The performance of agricultural labor was similarly understood in gendered terms by the inhabitants of the hamlet, this time however as *trabajo de hombre* (man's work). Despite this obvious link between work and gender identity, the analysts of masculinity in anthropology have paid little attention to the potential role of labor in forming male subjectivities. In *Metaphors of Masculinity*, Stanley Brandes takes exception to this rule by examining the social interactions that take place between men and women during the olive harvest in Andalusia, where interactional barriers between the sexes are relaxed. But instead of finding a transformative or defiant potential in the event, Brandes, through the use of a symbolic analysis, discovers that sexual hierarchies are spatially reproduced through the division of labor during the harvest, as men, who wield large sticks to knock the olives from the trees, work above women, who kneel down to pick up the fallen fruits. Brandes thus concludes that "In the collection of olives, agricultural technology mirrors sexual technique" (1980:147).

Although we may or may not agree with the use of a symbolic framework in interpreting gender relations between the sexes, at the very least, Brandes must be commended for examining an important source of meaning in the creation of gender identities. Much less can be said for the likes of Michael Herzfeld, who studies the impact of sheep theft on the formation of manhood in Crete but considers sheep herding devoid of significant cultural meaning; Miguel Vale de Almeida, who abandons the world of work in his ethnography because of his inability to labor

alongside his collaborators in a marble quarry, reducing his investigation of Portuguese masculinity to the world of male sociability outside of the workplace and the home; and, even Matthew Gutmann, who despite his ground-breaking work on men's participation in household affairs and on the impact of women on male identity, does not explore the possible influence of certain types of labor on Mexican male subjectivities. Indeed, to find an anthropological analysis that links work with masculinity or male identity, we must move to Philippe Bourgois's historical materialist analysis of the shifting fortunes of the Puerto Rican population of New York City. Concerned with the everyday effects of the restructuring of the American metropolis from a manufacturing-based to a service-centered economy on the lives of Newyorican youths, Bourgois argues that young males of Puerto Rican descent could express their cultural and gender identities more freely on the shop floor of factories than in the office jobs currently available to them. The author explains:

Factories are inevitably rife with confrontational hierarchies; nevertheless, on the shop floor, surrounded by older union workers, high school dropouts who are well versed in the latest and toughest street culture styles function effectively. In the factory, being tough and violently macho has high cultural value; a certain degree of opposition to the foreman and the "bossman" is expected and is considered appropriately masculine.

Workers in a mailroom or behind a photocopy machine cannot publicly maintain their cultural autonomy. Most concretely, they have no union; more subtly, there are few fellow workers surrounding them to insulate them and to provide them with a culturally based sense of class solidarity. Instead they are besieged by supervisors and bosses from the alien, hostile, and obviously dominant culture. ...Gender barriers are an even more culturally charged realm. They are repeatedly reprimanded for harassing female workers. Once again, a gender dynamic exacerbates the confusion and sense of insult experienced by young, male inner-city employees because most supervisors in the lowest reaches of the service sector are women. Street culture does not allow males to be subordinate across gender lines (1995:320).

Bourgois shows us how a particular work environment can be more conducive

than another occupational scenario to the fulfillment of the cultural and gender preferences of certain individuals within a population. Although I am similarly interested in the relationship between work and gender identity, and hence cultural identity, and despite also using a materialist framework in my analysis, I will address the topic somewhat differently than Bourgois. Instead of deciphering how a form of employment can be compatible with a specific cultural skill set, I will examine how gendered meaning is created for the men of the Dominguez family through their almost daily participation in agricultural work.

For most, although not all, of the men I interacted with, *trabajar* (to work) was an important part of their lives and even though many of them had done at one time or another several different kinds of work, they held their common identity as agricultural laborers through the mantle of the *machetero* (machete worker).

Agricultural labor in Nicaragua requires workers to become skilled in the use of several tools and sources of animal power, including *maquanas* (digging sticks), *espeques* (planting sticks), axes, knives, hoes, ox-pulled ploughs and carts, *bombas* (back-packs attached to a spray-gun used to douse plants with insecticides, pesticides or fertilizers), *ganchos* (Y-shaped sticks used to make piles of vegetation), *cabras* or *bordones* (the former a L-shaped stick used to push vegetation aside while working with a machete, the latter a straight stick used by the worker to maintain his balance while clearing land on slopped terrain), and *limas* or *molejones* (the first is a file used by workers to sharpen their machetes while in the field, the second a large wet-stone used to get rid of dull edges on blades). But it was the machete that was by far the tool of preference. Men would rarely, if ever, leave their homes without one when

they ventured into *el monte* (the bush). Although principally conceived for clearing land, machetes served several different purposes. They could be used as a weapon both in instances of self-defense or to hunt down animals. They could be used as a support, the tool being placed, with its sharp edge facing out, onto the free shoulder of a man carrying a heavy log to distribute the weight of the object more evenly. They could be used as a digging instrument since small holes could be quickly made by poking the ground with the point of the tool and then scraping back the loosened soil. They could be used while fixing fences to loosen up *grapas* (U-shaped metal nails used to hold up barbed wire) or even to pound one into a post, the dull edge playing the role of hammer. They could be used as a knife while out in the bush, to peel the skin off fruits such as mangos or oranges. And, finally, they could be used to cut pieces of wood to desired lengths or shapes.

There even existed a classificatory system of machetes according to their shapes, sizes, and functions. The *guaipon* was a large machete with a heavy curve in its sharp edge. It usually measured twenty-eight inches and was used principally to clear a *restrojo* (a field composed principally of weeds, bushes, and small trees). It could also be used to cut sugarcane. The *coli* was shaped similarly to the *guaipon*. The main difference between the two rested in its length and weight. The *coli* usually measured between twenty-four and twenty-six inches and its weight was more centered. Because of these characteristics, it was preferred by men who were working in *tacotales* (fields which have not been cleared for five to ten years and are composed entirely of large and medium-sized trees). A third type of machete used to clear land was the *rula*. The *rula* was similar in length to the *guaipon* and *coli*,

ranging from twenty-six to twenty-eight inches long. Where it differed was in its shape, being thinner and straighter than the other two models. The *rula* could be used in several situations but was especially effective in *restrojos* filled with weeds due to its light weight. For weeding purposes, *cutachas* and *cotos* were turned to. *Cutachas*, machetes that had been sharpened down considerably, were light and long. They were especially useful in weeding corn, sorghum, and yuca fields as well as *chaguities* (rows of plantain trees) since these crops were widely spaced and grew tall. *Cutachas* were also used as weapons. Being light, sharp, and long, they most closely resembled swords and were carried by many men in *bainas* (leather holders that could be held by a belt or tied to a saddle). *Cotos* were machetes that had been broken during work or had been split voluntarily by their owners. They were short and thick, resembling a butcher's knife more than anything else. *Cotos* were used primarily to weed beans and rice, crops planted closely together that stayed low to the ground. A last category of machetes was the *cole-zorro* (fox's tail). The *cole-zorro* was not a tool. It was used exclusively as a weapon. Shorter and even thinner than the *cutacha*, the *cole-zorro* was a small machete with a sharp point and at times two sharpened edges that resembled a dagger. Because of its small size, it could be easily concealed. Although somewhat rare, this type of machete was employed principally by men going to public events where weapons were prohibited or where openly carrying arms was disapproved of.

But more than the ways in which it was used or the obvious preoccupation that existed in naming the variations between tools; it was the nature of the work done with the machete that produced a common sense of identity as men for agricultural

workers. Machete work was *duro* (hard) and it was thought to create strong men, *hombres que se han golpeado* (men that have beaten themselves up) through work. The men of La Uva, hardened by years of blood and sweat in the bush, took pride in being able to *aguantar* (take it). Work, however, was not primarily about identity. First and foremost, it was about survival, about making ends meet for the household and because of this, rural households in Nicaragua were organized to facilitate the fulfillment of agricultural labor or, as it was locally called, *trabajo de hombre*. It is thus from the starting point of the household that we will begin our journey into the fields.

The Household at Work: Labor and Production in the Fields

In the previous chapter, we looked at how labor was divided in households and how different economic strategies were pursued to guarantee the continued viability of the unit of residence. In this section, I wish to examine how different household members get involved in agricultural production and how the needs and locations of households can often dictate the work that is accomplished. Not all households relied equally on the harvesting of crops for their well-being. Several factors, including the availability and proximity of land, the proficiency and commitment of laborers, the possession of the required tools and animals, access to sufficient sources of capital, the existence of alternate labor possibilities, and the work preferences of household members, went a long way in determining whether or not a household made the production of grains its principal undertaking. In La Uva, the members of all four households were fully committed to agricultural production. They possessed more than enough land, had the needed skills and

knowledge, owned all the necessary tools, liked working in the fields, and had little choice in the type of work they could perform if they wished to live at home at least for part of the year. In El Descanso, the situation was becoming more ambiguous. Although the members of these households still engaged extensively in crop production and seemed to favor agricultural labor over other types of work, they were relying more and more on waged labor, especially cutting sugarcane in Costa Rica, to make ends meet. The households were situated on a property that totaled 19 manzanas and was divided in two parts by the Escalante River. The first segment of the property was composed of plains subdivided into three enclosures that contained several mango, orange, *mandarina*, and grapefruit trees as well as some pepper bushes. These plains were ideal for grazing cattle or planting corn, sorghum, yucca, and especially rice. The second and larger half of the property, however, was not as conducive to agriculture. The terrain was unequal and several steep ravines bordered small patches of cultivable land. Of the nineteen manzanas, only 8 or 9 could be used for crop cultivation while another 3 to 4 manzanas were adequate for grazing cattle. What further hindered the households was that the land was not exclusively theirs. Ismael owned 1 1/2 manzanas, conferring him the right to at least a 3/4 manzana plot on the plains to plant rice. Pedro Araujo was the proprietor of another six manzanas of the land, which he used to plant rice and corn. The residents of "Colonia los Dominguez" as the piece of land was amicably called by its neighbors, had to split a grand total of five arable manzanas four ways. That left them with enough terrain to each plant small patches of corn and rice, two important crops but not nearly as crucial to local diet as red beans, which were eaten at nearly every meal. To meet



Figure 4 El Descanso

their bean consumption requirements, the workers of the Descanso households had to travel to La Uva, a short but disruptive trek that set them back in their work schedules at times of the year when every waking moment became precious. As a result, Ernesto, Ricardo, Mauricio, and Rodolfito planted less acreage than their brethren in La Uva and provided their fields with less of the care necessary for a successful harvest. They were slower in identifying the presence of insects that reduced the yields of their crops. They would weed their plants later, reducing the amount of nutrients they received from the soil and the sun. They also put in fewer hours of work than their Uveno counterparts. Because of the accrued traveling time, they would get to their *huertas* later in the morning and would rarely work late into the afternoon. Both Ramon and Don Martin, the two most experienced workers of La Uva, were of the opinion that living in El Descanso was disrupting the labor discipline and harvest possibilities of their kinsmen. “*Ayi tienen las cantinas cerca pero las huertas lejos* (There the cantinas are close but the fields are far)” or “*El*

nombre lo dice, aya es de Descanso no de trabajo (The name says it all, this place is for rest (descanso = rest in English), not for work), Don Martin would mutter when we discussed the labor prospects of the four men living in El Descanso. Ramon made a more pragmatic analysis of the situation: “*Cuando Ernesto vivia solo ayi todavia se la jugaba. Pero ahora que estan todos ayi estan bastante fregados* (When Ernesto lived there by himself he was still able to play it (keep afloat). But now that they all live there they are really screwed).” Another disadvantage that living in El Descanso presented was the greater difficulty in making use of the labor of other household members for agricultural purposes. While women and younger children were rarely required to work alongside men, they would usually help out during planting and harvesting periods, when labor was at a premium. For those living in El Descanso, bringing an extra hand required another horse or mule, which not all of the households possessed. It also meant leaving the home unattended for the entire day. Extra laborers, then, usually had to be hired or acquired through the system of *dias cambiados* (exchange of work days), where two workers of similar skill would in turn help each other out. However, since the men from El Descanso would not travel daily to La Uva where the bulk of their crops were planted, they had less flexibility in coordinating their work schedules with other laborers.

Let us examine the impact of the differences in household location in terms of acreage planted and harvested. To make this comparison, we will use the *postrera* planting season of 2005. The *postrera*, which ranges from late August to December, is generally more productive and less of a risk than the *primera* (May to August), especially for bean cultivation, which can be ruined by the heavy rains of July and

August. Obviously, quantities of land planted and grain harvested were determined by many factors. The level of commitment to work projects, the availability of funds, the size of the work party, the skill of the worker, the efficiency of the manager, as well as other unforeseeable circumstances such as disease within the family or a serious injury to a key worker, all came to impact the quality and quantity of production.

Location, then, was by no means the only indicator of labor proficiency. However, upon closer review certain trends do arise. The eight households being compared all had similar material resources. They all owned between three and six heads of cattle and between one and three horses, with the exception of Evaristo's household where they had eight horses and mules but also eight mouths to feed. Again, the men of each household worked alone except for Evaristo's, where the three oldest boys toiled together. Ismael and Ramon would sometimes join forces on agricultural projects. In the last chapter, I spoke at length how Ernesto and Rodolfo's households had to deal with illness during the middle of *postrera*, explaining their reduced harvests but not their lessened acreages of planted crops. In terms of labor productivity, the men from El Descanso, if anything, were more highly regarded than their counterparts in La Uva. Ricardo was the uncontested king of machete work, an ambidextrous man with a powerful stroke that cleared with ease over two *tareas* of land daily in any terrain (a *manzana* is divided into sixteen *tareas*, each measuring approximately 625 square yards and measured with a *bordon*, a two yard pole). Rodolfo, at one time, had been hailed by Don Martin as Ricardo's heir apparent but had lost his mantle to Ismael in the last couple of years. Ernesto and Mauricio were both effective machete workers. In La Uva, Ismael was now the most

productive worker. Ramon had at one time been considered *bueno al machete* (good with the machete) but was now well into his fifties. Evaristo's boys were also very good land-clearers but lacked the experience to compete with their older relatives. Don Martin was seventy-five years old and Calixto had sustained a serious injury to his right hand a few years back that had considerably slowed him down and even forced him to learn to swing with his off-hand (the left). The unofficial hierarchy of machete work, though, was not immutable and, as we will later see, was continuously challenged.

The point I wish to make here is that the workers from El Descanso were easily as good, if not better workers, than those that still remained in La Uva. The one advantage the Uvenos admittedly enjoyed was the support they received from their women. "*No hay como la Amanda* (There aren't any others like Amanda)," Don Martin would sometimes say. Despite nearing seventy years of age, Dona Amanda still picked, planted and carried beans and recovered firewood. Calixto had a similar opinion of Maria. "*Mi mujer es huevona* (My woman has balls)," he once told me. Maria, in the early stages of her second pregnancy, still helped her husband sweep vegetation, plant and pick beans, and spread fertilizer. She also went to the fields to bring Calixto the midday meal, enabling him to avoid the long and tiring trek home for lunch during critical work periods. Yassenia and Marcelina put away an entire field of corn when Ismael and Ramon were in Costa Rica while Miriam supported the men by helping them with purchases of fertilizer, pesticide, and insecticide and the hiring of extra labor. Lorena, burdened with cooking and washing clothes for eight and living in a labor-rich household, did not participate in any agricultural chores.

Her reputation as a worker, however, had been made during her younger years while she and Evaristo still resided with Dona Amanda. “*Era una llegua para acarriar agua* (She carried water like a mare),” Reyna once told me. The women of El Descanso, with the exception of Marlene who had also been described as *huevo* (with balls) by several people, did not receive many accolades for their work ethics. “*Mi hijo camina como un Cristo* (My son walks around like a Christ, very skinny), Don Martin said of Ricardo “*mientras que esa mujer esta gorda* (while that woman looks like a tire).” It was generally agreed that Mauricio, Ricardo, and Rodolfito received sub par care from their wives which, in turn, impacted their performances in the fields. While the women of La Uva helped their men in the fields and carried water up steep trails, those of El Descanso were said to sit in the shade of a mango tree by the road and greet every passerby with a comment, a scene I witnessed several times.

Having compared the advantages and disadvantages faced by each household, let us now examine their production. These amounts are obviously approximations since planted surfaces were rarely measured and grains recovered rarely weighed. Let us start with El Descanso. Ernesto planted a small patch of corn, probably approximating 1/3 manzana which was lost in weeds. He planted three patches of beans. In a half-manzana he sowed *a media* (half and half with another worker). He and his partner recovered two *quintales* (one quintal = one hundred pounds), which they split evenly. In a ¼ manzana patch, he harvested five *medios* (a medio = fifteen pounds). Finally, in a field of 1/3 manzana, he harvested one and half *quintales*. Ernesto planted less than a full manzana of beans for a total harvest of just

over three *quintales*. Although his family would have enough beans to last through *verano*, Ernesto had no extra grain (i.e. beans, rice, corn, sorghum) to sell to meet other household expenses. To put things in monetary figures, Ernesto's entire harvest was worth less than one hundred \$US, one hundred pounds of beans being worth five-hundred cordovas at the time. Rodolfito planted $\frac{1}{2}$ manzana of beans, cleared another patch of land measuring a half-manzana he failed to plant and sowed $\frac{1}{4}$ manzana of corn. His total bean harvest was under one *quintal*. Mauricio, following an unlucky *primera* where he lost several thousand cordovas on two manzanas of beans that went bad, only had enough grain to plant $\frac{3}{4}$ manzana of beans. He also harvested less than one *quintal* of beans. Mauricio, however, also sowed a $\frac{1}{2}$ manzana of rice, which despite excessive rain, still gave him ten *quintales*. Ricardo planted rice and beans as well as corn. From $\frac{1}{4}$ manzana of rice he recovered eight-hundred pounds; from $1\frac{1}{2}$ manzanas of beans he recovered three hundred and fifty pounds; and from $\frac{1}{2}$ manzana of corn he gathered only a few cobs before stray animals ate the rest. Obviously, the poor meteorological conditions affected crop output more than any other factor. However, the households of El Descanso were less prepared to react when slight breaks in the weather did permit crops to be planted. As a result, the bean crops of these four households were either planted in late October or early November instead of the preferred late September-early October window.

The Uvenos, conversely, were generally able to plant more beans and more corn than their counterparts to the north. They were also quicker to organize labor parties whenever the rain halted. As a result, they harvested greater quantities of grain. Don Martin planted one manzana of red beans, $\frac{1}{4}$ manzana of white beans, $\frac{3}{4}$

manzana of corn, $\frac{1}{2}$ manzana of sorghum, and a $\frac{1}{4}$ manzana of yucca. He harvested five quintales of red beans, three quintales of white beans, had a ramada full of corn (corn yields are difficult to estimate since the cobs are thrown with husks and all onto the roof of the ramada, the grains are only removed from the cobs in April), a field of yuca that would be ready for the following July and twelve quintales of white sorghum, a more than respectable return when taking climatic conditions into consideration. Calixto planted two manzanas of beans, $\frac{1}{4}$ manzana of rice, $\frac{1}{2}$ manzana of corn, and $\frac{3}{4}$ manzana of sorghum. He collected eight-hundred pounds of beans, fifteen hundred pounds of rice, hardly any corn, and about seven hundred pounds of white sorghum. Evaristo's sons planted $1\frac{1}{2}$ manzanas of beans, which yielded six *sacos grandes* (large nylon bags containing approximately one-hundred pounds of grain), and $2\frac{1}{2}$ manzanas of corn, which returned two large *ramadas* full. Ramon and Ismael teamed up to plant two manzanas of corn which turned out a bountiful harvest. Ramon sowed $1\frac{1}{2}$ manzanas of beans, $\frac{3}{4}$ manzana of sorghum, and $\frac{1}{3}$ manzana of yucca. Ismael planted his own half-manzana of rice, one manzana of beans, and $\frac{3}{4}$ manzana of sorghum. His respective yields were one thousand pounds of rice, three hundred pounds of beans, and one thousand two hundred pounds of sorghum. Although the yields of most of these crops were not large, perhaps with the exception of Calixto's rice harvest and the corn harvests of the other three households, the grain recovered by the households of La Uva provided a solid financial and nutritional basis for the months to come.

The year 2005 was the first time most of the Dominguez men left their crops for the sugarcane harvest. Prior to that, Calixto, Ricardo, and Ernesto had all ventured

individually to Costa Rica working on melon plantations, construction projects or for local farmers. But in mid-December of that year, Ricardo, Ramon, Rodolfito, and Ernesto left during the middle of the harvest to go and cut sugarcane for a wage. Ismael and Calixto later joined them but only after they had finished harvesting their crops. Mauricio went to work for a month at the Costa Rican border and then got a job working on a sand truck in Escalante. The excessive rain of September and October had forced most of these men to search for alternate sources of income, not possessing the necessary grain reserves to use the *verano* months to rest, repair fences, work on their houses, clear land for the following year, or work with oxen, a more lucrative but less regular source of income. The households of El Descanso, though, were becoming more dependent on wage labor to meet their survival needs. Again in 2006, all four men went to Costa Rica during the *verano*, leaving their crops to be harvested by others. Although Ismael, Eddy, and Ramon did join them following the end of the harvest period, for them it was more a question of making extra income than absolute necessity. Ramon needed money to finish paying off a piece of land he had purchased; Ismael and Marcelina were expecting their first child; and Eddy wanted to get married.

My intent here is not to argue that living in La Uva is superior to life in El Descanso. Both locales contain advantages and disadvantages. Beneficial aspects of life in El Descanso include greater proximity to schools, transportation, stores, and hospitals. Electrical wires are but a kilometer away and the hope of some day having *luz* (electricity) seems more realistic there than in La Uva. Rather, I simply wanted to illustrate how a particular mode of economic maintenance has come under attack for

four households following a ten kilometer move from the hills of La Uva to the plains of El Descanso. Factors such as reduced household commitment to agricultural production, physical distance from the means of production, and, although this is difficult to gauge, lessened motivation on the part of workers, all contributed to slowly transform the sources of monetary income of these four homes.

Perhaps, taking part in cycles of migrant labor will prove beneficial for these four men and their families. They probably can make more money cutting sugarcane than planting beans, though they probably incur greater costs while doing so, having to maintain their homes back in Nicaragua as well as provide for their own upkeep in Costa Rica. That being said, it is important to remember that even though the sugarcane harvest provides steady work for a period of three to four months, the wages earned by workers can change on an almost daily basis. Sugarcane cutters are paid by the weight of the sugarcane they fell. Because the weight of the sugarcane shifts from field to field and working conditions are impacted by the weather, there are large variations in terms of what a worker can expect to be paid for a day's work. Ricardo told me that on a good day he could earn up to 12,000 colones (+/- US\$ 25). Slower workers, however, usually brought in between 4,000 and 6,000 colones daily (+/- US\$ 8-13). Furthermore, because they are away from their wives and children, men spent most of their free time at local cantinas. Ramon, who hardly drinks while in Nicaragua, told me upon his return to La Uva that "*Aya en Costa Rica, es la pura perdicion* (over there in Costa Rica, there is a lot of debauchery)" and that at least every Saturday he would spend most of the night at the cantina, where a beer costs 500 colones (a bit more than US\$ 1). Of all the Uveno men who went to Costa Rica,

only Ismael, who hardly drinks, is an excellent worker, and, at the time, did not have any children, brought back over US\$ 500, which he used to rebuild his mother's house. Most of the other men, who had to send money home while they were working, came back with less than US\$ 200, the bulk of which was used to buy clothing for their children, pay off debts with local merchants, purchase new saddles or other apparel for their horses, or simply to celebrate Semana Santa in style. Whether or not participating in the sugarcane harvest becomes beneficial in the long-term remains to be seen. What is certain is that these men now have to spend at least four months away from home every year, which can, in and of itself, bring a fair share of unintended developments. But for now let us examine in greater depth the work that all Dominguez men still used as their economic basis at the time of my fieldwork.

Agricultural Production in La Uva: An Overview

To say that certain households are becoming increasingly dependent on wage labor and more specifically wages earned in another country is not to state that the Dominguez family had never before worked for pay. To the contrary, the households of La Uva and El Descanso have always been more practical than dogmatic in their economic outlook. Good opportunities to earn money, in whatever form they may come, have usually been exploited. Even Don Martin and Lino recount stories in which they left home to seek work, going as far as Chontales (a department of Nicaragua on the other side of Lake Nicaragua) and Costa Rica. Before the revolution, Don Martin oversaw the cattle hacienda of a wealthy man from Granada named Chamorro.

But despite this history of waged labor, there has been a distinct preference for the agricultural production of staple foods as the economic basis of the household. Martin Dominguez was clearly the leader in passing down this ideology. “*Lo comprado no rinde* (What is purchased does not last),” he would often repeat. This mantra was hammered into every Uvenos’ head so often that it seemed to become self-evident that beans picked from the field would somehow outlast a similar quantity purchased at a market stall. During one conversation I had with Don Martin, I found myself exalting the virtues of having planted my own beans by telling him that “*ademas, lo que uno cosecha rinde mas* (What’s more, what one harvests lasts longer).” Don Martin’s eye lit up instantly as if faced with a student who had finally understood a difficult problem after several hours of explanations. “*Correcto* (Correct),” he rolled out as he swung his right arm to the ground to emphasize the point he was making. “*Ahora si hablaste bien* (Now you’ve spoken well).” Scientifically, it would be impossible to prove that an amount of beans harvested in one’s *huerta* would be consumed more slowly than an equal quantity bought at the store. However, restricting our analysis to such an experiment would not allow us to focus on the real issues at hand. Purchasing beans holds several disadvantages. To buy the same amount of grain that is acquired at once through harvesting a field would require large amounts of capital most households simply do not have or are unwilling to use all at once. Continually buying beans, on the other hand, means either having to search for potential vendors in the countryside, which at certain periods of the year can be rather difficult, or having to go to local stores to purchase small quantities which is inconvenient and often results in extra transportation and

expenses in interest because lines of credits are easily extended to customers by local merchants. Buying grain also leaves the household vulnerable to the machinations of the market. In times of acute crisis, this involves purchasing beans at around fifteen cordovas a pound, a price difficult to bear for many. On another level, because of the existence of few opportunities for consistent wage labor in rural areas like La Uva since the revolution and perhaps even before it, in order to buy beans, men would have to be away from their homes during extended periods of time in order to earn steady wages.

Relying on agricultural production as the economic backbone of the household did have obvious advantages. However, the price fluctuations that always seemed to disadvantage small producers and the amount of work, luck, and capital necessary to have a successful harvest made looking for alternate means of survival ever more enticing and understandable. On one mid-November morning, as I was beating rice with Calixto, Rodolfito, and Gerardo, one of Tula's sons, in El Descanso; David, one of Cavolino's many children who had minimal contact with his father, crossed a barbed-wire fence that separated the Dominguez property from the one he oversaw and walked up to where we were working. "*Entonces primo* (What's up cousin)," he shouted out to Calixto. "*Esta Buena la cosecha* (The harvest is good)?" Calixto stopped pounding stalks of rice onto the *machina* (a sort of bench made of small sticks and covered on three of the four sides by nylon sacks), and looked over to his cousin: "*Hombre, parece que va a dar su poquito* (Man, it looks like it'll give a little). As David and Calixto launched into a conversation centering on the price of rice and how excess rain had impacted the yields of rice crops, Gerardo and I stepped



Figure 5 Don Martin with La Rojita

up to the *machina* while Rodolfito kept sweeping away the debris from the small mound of rice that was slowly accumulating at our feet. After a few minutes David started laughing and then stated, as if to himself but referring to me: "*Hombre, es que a ese hombre le gusta el campo* (Man, it's that this man likes the country (work in the country))." "*A si,*" Calixto immediately answered, "*Ese hombre no le teme al trabajo* (This man isn't afraid of work)." David just stood there as we continued to bang away, caught up in his own thoughts. "*Yo no se* (I don't know)," he said after a brief pause "*pero es que yo le huyo a ese tipo de trabajo* (but it's that I flee from this kind of work)." Such remarks did not sit well with the likes of Ramon, Ricardo, and Don Martin, who once told me "*el que le gusta el trabajo, busca los montes y el que no le gusta busca la ciudad, los pueblos. Van adonde no hay trabajo para despues andar diciendo "no hay"* (the one who likes to work stays in the bush and the one who doesn't like work looks for the city, for the towns. They go to where there isn't any work to later on say "I can't find a job")."

Nonetheless, David's comments were not out of the ordinary. Many men in the Nicaraguan countryside have tried to move away from the tenuous grind of working in the bush. Some like David and Don Martin's firstborn son Rodolfo, have turned towards cattle trading as a way of ensuring their livelihoods. Others, like Pedro Araujo and Pedro Puerta, have taken jobs as security guards in Managua and Granada and yet others have attempted to learn a trade, trying their hands as mechanics, welders, or carpenters.

The desire of several men to avoid agricultural labor is comprehensible. Bringing a bean or rice crop to fruition is time-consuming, exhausting, and pays very little. Although bumper crops of years past were always remembered, harvests of twenty quintales of beans per manzana were rather rare. In 2005, the best yield among the Dominguez men for one manzana of beans was eight quintales. At the time of harvest, a quintal of beans was worth approximately 500 cordovas, meaning if that farmer had sold his entire crop, he would only have pocketed 4000 cordovas, slightly more than US\$ 200. Although such yields may seem extremely low in terms of monetary profit, the Uveno households were nonetheless able to ensure meeting the basic nutritional requirements of members by harvesting beans. Obviously, a serious producer would have more than one crop going at the same time and would often have several fields of the same crop planted. Furthermore, the year 2005 must be considered somewhat of an anomaly in terms of yields. Most households are usually able to sell some of their harvest to purchase cooking oil, sugar, salt, soap, and coffee. During a good year, when one manzana of beans can easily yield twelve to fifteen quintales, producers could sell grain to purchase cattle, horses, saddles, clothing,

furniture, or even land. But to better understand the labor costs of producing grain, let us go back and review the different stages of the agricultural process.

The first step in planting grain and usually the most arduous one is that of clearing the land. Uvenos worked with two kinds of terrains: *restrojos* and *tacotales*. The *restrojo* was a field that had been recently planted. It could have been worked on as recently as the previous season, although the same crop was rarely planted consecutively on a single patch of land. The vegetation it contained tended to consist of small trees (under ten feet tall), weeds, bushes, and vines of all sorts. *Restrojos* were quicker to clear because the vegetation was generally softer but were thought to be less productive since the soil had less time to *descansar* (rest). *Tacotales* were made up of patches of forest. They were much more difficult to work with since the vegetation was older and required more energy to be brought to the ground. At times, axes were used to fell larger trees. As the Uvenos said *uno avanza menos y se golpea mas* (you go forward less and hurt yourself more). However, the richer nutrients contained in the soil of *tacotales* were often worth the extra trouble. In such fields, fertilizer was not necessary and weeding was often much easier since the tall trees did not allow smaller weeds to spread and re-seed. *Tacotales* had to be chopped down during *verano* so the lumber would have time to dry before it was burned.

The time required to clear a patch of land depended on the thickness of the vegetation, the prowess of the man wielding the machete, and the temperature. During the hottest days, clearing had to be halted around 11:00 am at the latest to avoid the ills of the sun such as *asolearse* (sun stroke) or *guacaliarse* (which can include dehydration, dizziness, and headaches, fever, vomiting, and sometimes even

fainting). A single man could very easily spend two weeks clearing a manzana (+/- 10,000 square yards). After the field was cleared, the vegetation had to be piled up into large mounds and burned. If the weather did not permit the *basura* (garbage, cleared vegetation) to dry, it would have to be carried off the field manually, another long and tedious task. This chore only applied to *restrojos*.

Once the vegetation had been removed from the field, most farmers waited for *el chinaste* (small nascent weeds) to sprout, which does not take very long during the rainy season. Once this would occur, they would spread their fields with herbicides so the crops would *nacer en lo limpio* (sprout in the clean, a tactic to delay the growth of weeds). Spraying fields or crops was no light task either. Water often had to be carried over several hundred meters *a tuto* (on your shoulders).

Only then, could a field be planted. Two planting techniques were most often used. Again their utilization depended on the planter's personal preferences, his financial resources, access to animal power, the weather, and the physical characteristics of the field. *Tacotales* almost always had to be planted with digging sticks because the stumps that remained after the field was put to the torch did not allow a plough to pass through. This process was slower and resulted in a lower crop density than planting via the plough, which was generally preferred. Digging sticks, though, could be used on inclinations where oxen could not work and in soils too rocky or too muddy for a plough.

After finally planting his crop, a farmer would have up to three weeks' respite during which he would usually plant another field. An apt grain producer, however, would constantly return to his fields to make sure the crops had properly sprouted and

did not have to be re-planted; to be certain no raccoon, squirrel, rabbit, opossum, or other wild animal was helping itself to too much of the produce; to rest assured his neighbor's cows and pigs were not growing fat on his labor; to ascertain if any insects were eating the leaves off of the bean plants; and finally, although quite rare in La Uva, to warrant that nobody else was eating the plantain and the yuca he was growing. A successful harvest required constant vigilance. The hazards were numerous and easy to come by. But certain things remained only in the hands of *El Señor*. Too much rain made the crops yellow. Too little water made them brown. A just balance was rarely stricken but always ardently desired.

After three to four weeks, crops had to be weeded for the first time. Bean and corn fields were cleaned only once. Rice had to be freed from surrounding weeds up to four times. On top of this, fertilizer usually had to be spread and insecticide almost always had to be sprayed, especially for bean and rice fields. The different crops also had distinct cultivation periods. Beans usually could be picked after two months. Corn and sorghum after three. Rice had to be cut down only after four months of cultivation, making it impossible to plant it twice in a year, unless extensive irrigation systems unavailable to households of lesser financial means were used. Yucca took about six months to be ready but could be left in the ground for up to two years. Plantain trees were longer-term investments. They only started to bear fruit after a year to eighteen months but, if cared for properly, could remain productive for over five years.

Once the time finally came, crops had to be picked or cut, stored or beaten, and then put into bags or small metal silos. Putting grains away safely during the



Figure 6 Corn field in La Uva

primera harvest was much more challenging. Bean stalks had to be piled up in large mounds and covered with plastic tarps when rain threatened, then spread thinly to dry as soon as the sun showed signs of coming out. Corn stalks had to be broken in half so that rain would drip down the husk, enabling the grain to survive an extra month of rainfall while in the field. Sorghum was very rarely planted during this period, the risk of losing the harvest too great for the potential reward. During *postrera*, the pace of the harvest was much less frantic. Corn could be left in the fields for months and beans, once picked, and rice, once cut, could dry out without any risks. Only sorghum crops had to be cut and beaten quickly to avoid being decimated by birds. After finally bagging his grain, the cultivator then had to bring them home from the fields, either via ox cart, horse back, or his own back, dry them by laying them out on tarps during sunny days so any remaining moisture would vanish, clean them if they were destined for the market, and store them. The monetary value of crops never reflected the amount of labor and care put into the growth of the grain. Nonetheless, harvesting

rice, beans, corn, sorghum, plantain, and yucca saved the household from important expenses and allowed the little money that did come in to be allocated to meeting other necessities and, at times, the rare luxury. Having recounted the different stages of grain production, I will now begin my investigation of the dynamics of agricultural labor by providing us with ethnographic examples of work in the fields.

Men at Work: Snapshots from *la Huerta*

Like most of the Dominguez men, I spent a significant portion of most of my days in La Uva and El Descanso working in the fields. Through a long process, that dates back almost ten years now, I have learned to do most of the chores necessary for the completion of a successful harvest. Although I never reached the productivity levels consistently achieved by some men, I became adept enough with the machete, the digging stick, and the hoe to at least keep up on most occasions. During the *invierno* of 2005, I planted my own bean, rice, corn, and yucca crops, working on different projects in La Uva, El Descanso, La Zorra, and Rio Chiquito. Although on some days I worked alone, most of the time I worked with others, either exchanging days with Calixto or Ernesto, or forming large work parties in the hope of rapidly completing particular stages in the production process.

It is one of these occasions I wish to recount. In August 2005, I began clearing a *tacotal*, a practice generally not advisable for that period of the year. However, because of the relatively small size of the vegetation and the two month differential between clearing and planting dates, Calixto suggested I should go ahead with my project. Don Martin also encouraged me to clear the patch of forest, although he later changed his mind. After spending about three weeks cutting down the vegetation, I

had been able to clear with the help of others about 25 tareas or the rough equivalent of 1½ manzanas. The vegetation, however, was drying more slowly than expected as rain fell throughout most of August and parts of September. When I tried burning the field in late September I could not even get the dried and shriveled leaves on the ground to catch ablaze. I was out of luck and out of ideas. It looked like I would have to wait until next year to plant my field. But Ramon suggested I could roll the cut trees down the hill as far as possible to make large mounds of vegetation that would enable me to sow at least a substantial part of the field. He even agreed to help me in exchange for a couple-hundred cordovas (US\$ 12) he used to purchase fertilizer. After four days of tiring work, we had made substantial progress, sweeping about 2/3 of the overall surface. Ramon had even been able to burn a few of the large mounds of vegetation. But I was now faced with another obstacle. While the wood was drying, the weeds had sprouted up again. They were too high to simply spray with herbicide so I was forced to mow them down with a machete. I then exchanged several work days with Calixto and after another week's work the field was finally ready to be planted. At that point, however, the rain set in once again and as we all waited for a break in the weather, the continuous downpours accelerated the growth of the *chinaste* (small weeds). After about ten days of hoping for sunshine, I was forced to go back and spray the field with herbicide. Finally, on October 13th, I got my chance to plant my field. It was by no means a sunny day but the dampness in the soil had subsided just enough to allow the digging sticks to penetrate the soil without bringing out large clumps of mud on their way back to the surface. Because time was of major importance, I offered seventy cordovas (+/- US\$

4) for the whole day's work in the hope of securing a large work party. Although many of the men jumped on the opportunity to earn some extra cash, not everyone was happy about my supposedly generous offer. I was even told by a secondary source that Cavolino, who felt I was driving up the costs of labor, had vented his displeasure *par abajo* saying in one particular home that: "*Hasta los muertos del pantion van ir a peguiar* (Even the dead from the graveyard are going to go and work)."

When all was said and done, Ismael, Mauricio, Ernesto, Calixto, Ramon, Ricardo, Eddy, Oscar, and Pollo had agreed to join me for the day. Gerardo, who was in La Uva at the time, also volunteered to help. Although work parties counting eleven laborers were rare, they were by no means unheard of. I had once joined nine other men to clear a field for Ernesto and had been among ten other workers that picked beans for Don Martin.

The Bean Planters

October 13, 2005

I got up especially early, for me anyway. I wanted everything to be ready. The *espeques* (planting sticks), the *sembradores* (plastic jugs cut in half and tied to the waist of the worker used to carry the grain that was being planted), the *jicarones* (same as sembradores but made out of the fruit of a tree), the two sacks of beans we were about to plant, the three gallons of water I would bring so we would not run out of liquids, forcing a premature end to the work day. By 6:00 am, everything was ready. I decided to go to Calixto's to see what he was up to. As I passed by Miriam's, Ismael and Ramon were eating their breakfast. "*A que hora los vamos* (At what time are we going)?" Ramon inquired. I told him I wanted to leave in about half-an-hour. "*Bueno, Ud. Manda* (You're the boss)," he said as he ripped off a piece of tortilla and dipped it into a bowl of beans. I kept walking down the small hill that separates Miriam's house from the other two in the hamlet. Evaristo's boys were down at the water hole filling up their bottles. "*No han comido todavia* (They haven't eaten yet)," Lorena told me. I found Calixto lying in his hammock, also waiting for his breakfast. "*Sientese hombre* (Sit down man)," he told me as I walked in. "*Los vamos echar un bocado* (We'll have a bite to eat)." "*Dale pues* (Give it then)," I said. Calixto, as usual, was fiddling with the radio, searching for songs he liked but usually only

finding a suitable melody when it was about to end, which meant that the screeching sound of shifting stations was heard more often than any music. "*Ayi esta Samuelon* (Here is Samuelon(big Sam)), Neli screamed out, making her parents laugh. "*Vez que Samuelon* (Look at Samuelon), she continued, "*va ir a sembrar frijoles* (he's going to plant beans)." "*Callate chavala loca* (Quiet you crazy girl)," Maria sneered, still laughing. Then, prolonging her daughter's initial farce, she turned around and handed me my second breakfast in twenty minutes: "*Aqui esta la comida Samuelon* (Here's your food Samuelon)."

When I made my way back up the hill the boys were finally eating. "*Ahorita terminamos* (We're finishing up right now)," Eddy said. I kept walking. The sky was darkening. We were going to waste another chance to get something done I thought to myself. Ramon was of the same opinion. When I got to Dona Amanda's, he was standing outside impatiently, leaning on his *espeque*. "*Esa gente no se apura* (These people don't hurry)," he said contemptuously while running his right hand across his thin mustache. "*Ya me voy. Deme unos frijoles* (I'm going, give me some beans)," he said. I poured about a third of the contents of one of the large sacks into Ramon's handmade nylon bag, which he immediately swung over his shoulder. Cutting through the coral, Ramon vanished into the forest. I went back into Dona Amanda's where I was happy to see that Ernesto and Mauricio were already there. "*La siete y dies* (7:10)," the radio spurted out. It was getting late and we were still messing around. The sky was quickly turning gray. "*No anda un cigarro* (You don't have a smoke)?," I asked Mauricio. He nodded and handed me a cigarette, which I then lit off the fire before stepping outside once again. As I puffed away, the rest of the work party showed up. Only Ricardo was missing. "*No creo que venga ese maje*, (I doubt this guy is going to show)," Calixto said. "*Vamonos* (Let's go)." And so it was. At seven twenty a.m., we headed down to the fields.

Because of the lamentable conditions of the trails that cross the twin peaks, we decided to take the long way to the *rozado* (cleared field). We walked down a rocky and winding path lined with large ceiba trees on one side and by shorter vegetation that had been cut down by *macheteros* not that long ago on the other, before taking a left at the *quebrada* and heading up another trail to the field. "*Aqui vivia my tia Tula* (My aunt Tula used to live here)," Oscar said as we passed a lot covered by small brush and surrounded by lime trees. "*Aqui vivio l'Erlinda* (Erlinda lived here)," he commented further along the trail where Ramon was now growing plantain trees. Finally, as we neared the end of the slope, he looked at me for a third time pointing to another piece of vacant land where a house once stood, as if making reference to a livelier epoch in La Uva's history that he himself was never a part of: "*Aqui vivia mi tia Anita. Tenia una cantina* (Here lived my aunt Anita, she had a cantina)." The *quebrada* was flowing heavily and we had water up to our knees as we trekked across the stream. The younger boys seemed excited at the thought of working with their older relatives. Surely they wanted to impress, to be recognized as competent workers by their cousins and uncles. When we finally got to the confluence of two *quebradas*, where a steep hill shot up on one side leading up to the *rozado* and the sprawling and almost un-touched mountain of El Carisal began to take shape on the other, Mauricio and Calixto walked off into the bush, coming out a few seconds later with large sticks they were beginning to carve at the end. "*Yo solo uso espeques de monte* (I only use

planting sticks from the bush),” Calixto said with a smile.

When we arrived to the top of the *rozado*, Ramon had already planted three *surcos* (rows) of beans. “*Bueno*,” he said jokingly, “*Creo que ya termine, ahora le toca a Uds.* (I think I’m done, now it’s your turn). The final preparations were quickly made, *espeques* were given a last scrape with the file, *sembradores* were attached by the men to their waists and filled with beans, and sips of water were taken here and there. Then it began. We formed a long, vertical row at the top left hand corner of the hill, each man resting a couple of feet below the next. Ramon was the *puntero* (worker that takes the inside lane on the job. He has to set the pace for the rest of the work party). He was followed by Mauricio, Ismael, and Calixto. Evaristo’s sons formed a middle group and Ernesto, Gerardo and I were at the bottom. “*No hay que tapar los ojos* (Don’t cover the holes with dirt),” Ramon counseled the rest of us, “*si no se va ahogar el grano* (if you do so the grain won’t breathe (because of the muddy soil)).” The pace was frantic. In a single motion the men were opening up a hole with their planting sticks in their left hands and grabbing two or three grains and dropping them into that same hole with their right. This action was repeated at every foot.

After only a few rows, it became evident who the most efficient workers were. Gerardo had little experience using a planting stick and it quickly showed. He was awkward in his timing and often dropped beans besides the holes. Where his cousins were swift and graceful, he was clumsy and cumbersome, slowly laboring across the field. I was not much better, having a tough time adjusting my footing to the slope all the while moving across rapidly. After about fifteen minutes, though, I started being more precise with my drops and even led the pack for a couple of rows before inevitably being overtaken by Ismael, Ramon, Eddy, and Calixto. Ernesto, although sowing beans was nothing new to him, also seemed to have trouble keeping pace with the faster planters. He talked continuously, making jokes and harassing Pollo, who lined up right in front of him. “*Apurate cabeza de mono* (Hurry up monkey head),” he repeatedly shouted. After about a half-an-hour, when the order of the workers was well-established and those at the back of the line finally became resigned to being passed like race cars being lapped every three to four rows by their quicker counterparts, the pace of work lessened slightly and the ambience became lighter. Some of the guys even began talking as they kept performing their machine-like movements. “*Hombre*,” Eddy said, “*Dicen que Wilbero llevo a buscar trabajo adonde mi tio Rodolfo* (They say Wilbero, a man from Escalante, went to look for work at my uncle Rodolfo’s).” “*Hombre, asi dicen* (That’s what they say),” Ismael responded, never lifting his eyes from the ground he was poking into at twelve inch intervals. “*Dicen que Ernesto le dijo que habia trabajo de montado pero que mi tio le dijo que solo le podia dar pegue al machete* (They say Ernesto told him that they were looking for a cowboy but my uncle only offered him machete work).” Ernesto, overhearing the conversation, intervened quickly, shouting out: “*Ese hijue puta es loco* (That son of a bitch is crazy). *No es mi problema que no quiera trabajar al machete* (It’s not my problem that he doesn’t want to work with a machete).” “*Pero aunque sea* (But even then),” Mauricio advised his younger brother “*No le hubiera dicho que habia trabajo de montado* (You shouldn’t have told him they were looking for a *montado* (cowboy)).” “*Pues si quiere andar de montado* (Well, if he really wants to be mounted),” Ernesto responded wryly “*decile que se venga a montar en mi*

turqa (tell him to come and mount my cock)." Ernesto's response produced an explosion of laughter that lasted well over a minute. Amazingly, none of the men stopped working as they folded up in laughter, still planting more and more beans. At about eight-thirty, we stopped briefly for the first time to drink water and fill up our plastic waist-baskets with beans. We had managed to plant the top quarter of the hill.

If I had been preoccupied earlier in the morning that the caprices of the weather would prevent us from planting, by nine o'clock my worries had changed altogether. The clouds had vanished, being gradually replaced by a blistering sun that emerged from the hills to the east. Since we were moving downhill as we sowed the grain, we were progressing into the warmer and less ventilated segment of the field. If we did not finish planting by the end of the morning, the afternoon would no doubt be a tough one. Shortly after nine, Ricardo showed up with a planting stick resting on his shoulder. I was surprised by his foul humor. Looking me directly in the eye, he asked abruptly "*Sera que pego, por que aqui hay muchos sapos* (Should I hit (start working), because there are a lot of *sapos* here (the literal translation of *sapo* is toad but the word is also used to designate a worker whose allegiance is to the *patron* instead of with his fellow workers))." Ricardo's words were somewhat shocking. He was directly calling out some of the other men in order to excuse his tardy arrival. No one said a word but I knew Ramon, Calixto, and Ernesto were not pleased with Ricardo's allegations. "*Pega pues* (Start then)," I responded nonchalantly, trying to act as if the latecomer's presence was of little importance to me. Seemingly relieved, Ricardo looked back at me with a smile. "*Yo sabia que vos no era asi* (I knew you weren't like that)," he said as he filled his *sembrador* with beans. Although Ricardo had angered the other men with his comments, they still deferred to him when the planting started up again, making way for him to start as *puntero*. Despite being testy and brash at times, Ricardo was widely respected as a worker. Predictably, the pace of work picked up once again. Ricardo was pushing the other men to augment the cadence of work since none of them wanted to be left behind, especially following their brethren's offensive remarks. Gerardo and I were now struggling to keep up. My back was beginning to hurt from being slightly hunched over and facing the ground. A large blister was starting to form on the index finger of my left hand, where the friction caused by continuously striking the *espeque* into the soil was eating away at my skin. After about a half hour, the five fastest workers had distanced the rest of us. Ricardo was closely followed by Ismael and Eddy, with Ramon and Calixto a half-row behind. Whenever, a faster worker would meet up with a slower one, which could happen several times during a trip across the field, the width of which was close to one hundred yards, the two laborers would cross into each other's rows with the more rapid planter taking the top row while his more sluggish counterpart stepping down a line as if part of a well-rehearsed choreography.

At about ten thirty, a silhouette was seen coming up the adjacent hill. "*Quien sera ese?* (Who might that be?)," Oscar asked. "*Hombre,*" Pollo answered, "*creo que es mi tio* (I think it's my uncle)." Indeed, it was Cavolion who was lumbering up the slope in strides that seemed too large for a man of his stature. Well into his sixties and according to some looking older than his age, "*es de tanto beber guaro que Leonardo se mira tan viejo* (it's from drinking so much guaro that Leonardo looks that old)," Dona Amanda would often say, Cavolion still traveled swiftly through the hills

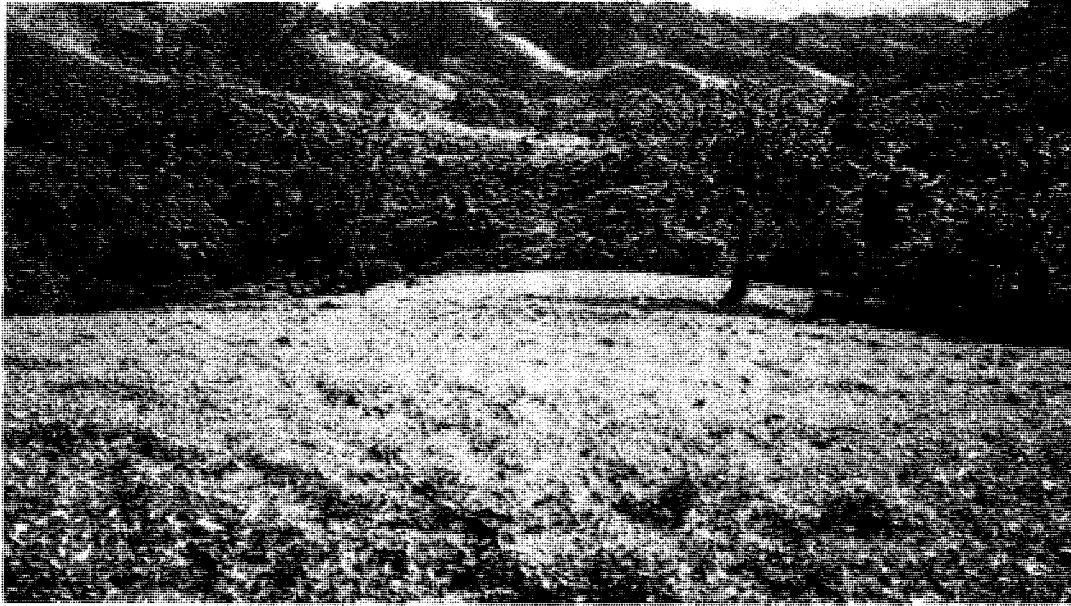


Figure 7 Bean field in La Uva

of La Uva. Never having married or fathered any children, he had lived on and off with his sister since the death of their mother some ten years ago. Once considered a standout machete worker, Cavolion was now more renown for his impetuous mood swings. "*Mi tío si es bravo* (My uncle has a temper)," Yassenia had said to her grandmother one afternoon. "*Que va ser bravo, ese hombre lo que es es malcriado* (What temper, this guy is rude)," Dona Amanda had answered. "*Lo que quiere es trabajo* (What he needs is work)." Five minutes after we last saw him dip down into the thick forest that led to the quebrada and to the foot of the hill we working on, Cavolion emerged, out of breath and covered in sweat. By the look on his face, we could tell Cavolion was not just taking a late morning stroll. All the men stopped working momentarily to greet their uncle, who seemed to be looking them over as if searching for something. "*Hombre,*" he shouted out, "*quien agarro mi espeque* (Who took my espeque)." Realizing the banality of Cavolion's displeasure, most of the men around me were getting ready to laugh when Ricardo disdainfully answered "*por esa mierda vino hasta aqui* (you came all the way here for this piece of shit)." "*Aqui esta* (Here it is)," he shouted while extending the planting stick towards Cavolion, "*lleveselo* (take it)." Cavolion, visibly embarrassed to have been scolded by his nephew, concealed his anger by feigning to have wanted to come and help us plant. "*Es que les queria venir ayudar a sembrar y no ayaba mi espeque* (It's that I wanted to come and help you guys plant and I couldn't find my espeque)." Then, spontaneously, he turned in my direction and grabbed the planting stick I was using out of my hands. "*Preste* (let me)," he said. Understanding that this was the old man's only chance to save face in front of the others, I let him have my *espeque* and *sembrador*. After all, my hands were beginning to hurt. The workers started up again with Cavolion trying to keep up to his nephew. After thinking things over for a couple of seconds, I asked Gerardo to come and help me pile up some of the larger logs that were still covering the bottom of the hill. Gerardo was probably as relieved as I was to stop planting, showing no opposition to my request. It was almost eleven o'clock

and the sun was reaching full force. Close to half of the field remained to be planted.

The rest of the day went rather smoothly. The distance between the planters increased steadily as the day went on. By one o'clock, Ricardo was a full row in front of everyone else and his old uncle was bringing up the rear. Gerardo and I began rolling logs down the hill with the help of large sticks we used as shafts. By one o'clock the sun was so strong that the heat produced a fuzzy glare in the horizons. The men never stopped working, even when they ran out of water with over two *tareas* to go. When I asked them if they wanted to stop while I went to fetch more liquids Ramon interjected, saying they would be finished by the time I got back. The sun was now glowing off the dark and sweat-filled skin of the workers. No one bothered to talk anymore, concentrating their energies on finishing the work at hand. At two o'clock, it was finally over. The *rozado* was now planted and the men had finished earning the seventy cordovas Cavolino had found exorbitant.

Conflict and Cooperation: The Dynamics of Labor in the Fields

Obviously, different dynamics existed when large work parties were formed than when only a couple of men worked together. As was shown in the past example, large groups often create more competitive work environments where workers take advantage of the presence of others to test their work abilities, prove their masculinity and rearrange local labor hierarchies. When six, seven, eight, or more men worked together, an ethos of 'each for his own' seemed to prevail, especially if tensions already exist between certain members of the group or if any outsiders claiming their own proficiency were part of the crew. In one instance, when nine of us were clearing land for Calixto's bean field, Tino Alvarez, a man from Escalante famed for his machete skills, but who had been clearly less productive than Ricardo and two of his nephews on that day, complained over a few beers that he had not been given a fair shot to display his skills. "*Yo quisiera* (I would like)," he repeatedly reminded us, "*que me echaran con Ricardo en un corte parejo* (to go up against Ricardo on an even field)." Later on that evening, when I saw Ricardo at Leticia's cantina, he told me he had run into Tino and that his rival had challenged him to a machete duel (at

work) and had even tried to take a swing at him. Ricardo laughed the whole thing off, stating that Tino was “*un jodido loco* (a crazy fucker).”

Smaller work parties rarely produced these kinds of conflicts, unless perhaps insults had been exchanged between workers and prior disputes were carried over onto the fields. Usually, more cooperative relations took precedence in smaller work parties. Parcels of lands to be cleared individually were rarely measured and when one worker finished before the others, he would often help his companions complete their *corte* (cut, piece of land assigned to each worker). In such instances, a worker could gain more respect by lending a helping hand to his fellow laborers than by showing off his individual skills.

This is not to say disputes never arose among smaller work parties. Smaller parties could also produce quarrels, especially when some of the workers were from outside of the community or did not keep pace with the others. Tono, Evaristo's son from El Valle, and Gerardo were often harassed by their older cousins when they went to the fields. Unaccustomed to the rigors of work in the hills, they would often tire faster than their more hardened brethren. Calixto and Ernesto often goaded the younger boys, making them lose their cool. On a few occasions, I saw a boy that had been harassed during a good part of the work rudely refuse help offered by another laborer. In one instance, Calixto had been bothering Tono all morning. “*Appurese garanon* (Hurry up stallion),” he would shout at his cousin as we cleared a hillside full of large bushes, weeds, and small trees. “*Dele garanon, dele duro* (Give it to them stallion, give it to them hard),” he continued to say. Tono, a tall and skinny boy of seventeen with fine facial features and straight black hair, had started the morning

off with a lot of energy, leaving Calixto, Ismael, and myself behind. However, around ten o'clock, when the sun began heating up, Tono, who was not wearing a hat, a cardinal sin for any *machetero*, began to tire and eventually lagged behind. He began drinking water more frequently and would pause after every three or four strokes, unable to keep pace with the others. If Calixto's comments had been slightly annoying earlier on and had probably fuelled Tono to double his efforts, they were now making him lose his temper altogether. Tono had been nicknamed *garanon* by his cousins for the supposed large size of his sexual organ. But instead of relishing the moniker, Tono, being a quiet boy by nature, was embarrassed by it. "*Callate!* (Shut up)," Tono screamed, "*Es demasiado lo que jode* (You bother me way too much)." Calixto stopped working and looked at his cousin "*Y que le pasa a mi primo* (What's going on with my cousin)?" "*No soy tu primo* (I'm not your cousin)," Tono howled back. Having reached the top of the hill, Ismael walked back down fifteen yards to where the beleaguered youth was struggling. "*A ver garanon, te voy a sacar* (Let's see, stallion, I'll help you finish up)," Ismael said without malice. "*Nooooo*," Tono screamed at the top of his lungs, "*no quiero ninguna ayuda* (I don't want any help)." "*Ay quedate pues, ya me voy* (Stay then, I'm leaving)," Ismael responded, insulted by his cousin's rebuttal. Although Tono got quite upset with his cousins on that particular day, his anger was as much due to the scorching sun as to his brethren's harassment. A couple of hours later, his rage had subsided and Tono spoke to his cousins as he always did. Since the dispute had happened *entre los mismos* (among the same, i.e. same family) it was quickly forgotten and forgiven.

But more than a place of antagonism or simple production, the field as

a cultural site provides a forum for male interaction like no other. Often, it is while working that men exchange information about prices, the availability of cattle, what certain women were doing in their free time, how things used to be around here, which political candidate would be the best president, when specific social events were scheduled, how some men had become their enemies or how to rid a rice crop from large weeds. During work, jokes were made, friendships were concretized, the foundations for business deals were laid, and the latest rumors were passed along. The field was the homosocial setting par excellence of rural Nicaragua. While in the cantina few, but almost always some, women were present, men were almost exclusively in the presence of other adult men or older boys during their trips to *la huerta*. Although the work at hand was strenuous, long conversations often developed while two farmers planted grain, swept up dried vegetation, or ripped corn cobs out of their stalks. It was when I was working with someone else, usually Calixto or Ernesto, but at times also Ramon, Don Martin, Pedro Araujo, Rodolfito or Gerardo, that the most in-depth conversations took place. Stories that would not be recounted in any other context, such as those of adventures with other women, of domestic disputes, of the difficulties of life, of past humiliations, of love lost, and even of the passing away of family members could be heard from time to time in the *rozados* and *huertas* of the hills of La Uva. Through work, I got to meet many men and fortify my friendship with several others. Whether or not this is the case for everyone is difficult to assert. What remains certain, however, is that working in the fields provides men with an arena in which to compete, cooperate, develop their personal networks, or simply exchange a few stories.

Bodily Harm

Being a *machetero*, though, can, at times, be quite difficult. It is a sometimes tedious and always strenuous way to earn a living and the dangers inherent to the job can result in serious injury and even death. Besides the possibility of sunstroke which I have already mentioned, men were faced with several safety hazards while on the job. Enraged oxen, falling trees, poisonous snakes, headhunting hornets, and burning forests all provided potential sources of danger. However, the greatest threat to the *machetero*'s health often rested in his own machete. By bouncing off a rock, slipping from a wet hand, or being dropped on a treacherous slope, the sharp machete became a dangerous weapon directed against the worker that wielded it. The bodies of the men of rural Nicaragua bore the signs of this perilous lifestyle. Ricardo and Ernesto had been bitten by snakes. Pedro Puerta had lost a finger trying to tie down a bull. His son Tano broke his leg while falling off of a horse. Rodrigo's father had recently fallen off his horse died while herding cattle. Pedro Araujo had damaged his knee with his machete when he had stumbled down a hill. His eldest son had also lost his life when he slipped and cut his throat with a machete. Rodolfito, Mauricio, and Pollo had all made deep cuts into their shins after over-swinging and missing their intended targets. Don Martin had countless scars on his arms and knees. And finally Calixto, whose story we will now turn to, severely damaged the tendons in his right hand while trying to fix a hole where horses often stumbled on the road to Escalante. The following is Calixto's testimony of how he hurt himself and how he dealt with the aftereffects of the lesion.

It happened during Hurricane Mitch. I was with Ricardo and Rodolfo and *mi papa* (Don Martin). We were fixing the road and there was a stupid little hole that

every time I would pass, the mare would stumble into it. Every time I'd come from Escalante at night, the mare would go into it. So I started cutting branches and leaves and stuffing them into the hole and then I started covering it with dirt. The last poke I made with the machete was a strong one but the tip of the machete got stuck in the root of a tree and my hand slipped onto the blade. So then there was blood everywhere and I told Rodolfo, "Rodolfo, I've cut my hands." And then my hand flapped down "pah" and I grabbed it with my other hand and brought it back up. They strapped me in three places to stop the blood. But the blood would not stop flowing and the rain never stopped either and I started to see all fuzzy. So we went back home and it never stopped raining. Rodolfo wanted to get me out of there but I wouldn't let him. He told me: "You might die or you might get tetanus. We'll leave once the rain stops." But since the rain never stopped, he went to Escalante and got me some pills for the pain.

The next day, I left in the rain. Miriam took me out. We got to Nandaime. Tula and Concha were there. Then I went to the hospital and they told me they were going to cut my hand off. "We're going to cut your hand off, they said, because it's starting to get gangrene." I refused to let them do it, so they sent me to Granada. When the ambulance came, it had no gas in it and they told me I had to put gas in it. So Miriam paid for their gas and they took me to Granada. In Granada, they didn't want to look after me because they wanted to cut my hand off there also. I still didn't let them do it so the doctor said to me "What do you prefer, your hand or your life?" And I told them "I'd rather die before you cut my hand off." Then they told me "Get yourself ready, you're going to the operating room." I remember that they took me in around four in the afternoon and they put me to sleep but I wanted to see if they were going to cut it off. They lifted it up and then they let it fall on this board and then it opened up and started to bleed again. And after that I don't remember. I woke up around two in the morning. I thought it was like six o'clock in the evening. I asked Miriam: "Where am I." "You're in the observation room," she said. "Did they cut my hand?" I asked her. "I don't know," she told me. My hand was all covered up. Because it was all covered up, I couldn't feel it and I didn't know if they had cut it off. And then I tried to touch my hand. But because I had an I.V. in my other arm it took me a while to reach it. "Here are my fingers," I told her. Then the next day the doctors showed up and I asked them if they had cut my hand off. "No," they said, "You still have it but we're going to see how it is." And so they looked. "It's alright," they told me. So they covered it up again and I had it like that for a whole week. After a week, my cut was infected and because of the infection the stitches snapped. That's why I stayed more than three weeks in the hospital.

After, since my hand was all stiff and I couldn't move it, I was thinking a lot. Miriam had some money back then and she was almost ruined by the whole thing. She sold her corn, her sorghum, and her beans. She sold everything. Back then 7,000 cordovas were worth something (+/- 10 cordovas = \$US 1). Miriam spent all of that. After, I kept going to the hospital twice a week. I was going to therapy. Because if I didn't go, this finger would have stayed completely stiff. They told me they would operate me again, so they put this metal pin in this finger (second finger of right hand). They opened up my finger and they put the pin in. You see how my finger is all ugly. So I had this finger completely straight for three weeks. After three weeks,

they took the pin out. Then I kept going and kept going and all the things I had, I sold them. I had a large sow and I sold it. I kept going until I got tired of it and I ran out of money. Then I never went back to the hospital. And they told me I had to go so my finger wouldn't stay like it is. Maybe if I would have kept going, my hand would have been back to normal but now that's the way it is, all stiff. I can't move this finger. These three fingers also remained stiff (middle finger and bottom two). I can only move this one (thumb). I can't close my hand or make a fist.

At first, I couldn't work at all. Then I started with this hand, with my left. Now I can work with both hands if I close my fingers on the machete. I swing with my left, I get tired, and then I swing with my right. This year I have started to be able to grip the machete with more strength. If I had kept going to therapy, my hand would have healed. Maybe not healed all the way but it still would have healed a lot. Now I've stayed like this. This hand was of no use for me at all for a very long time. For more than six months I couldn't grab anything with it. When I was in the hospital, they had to spoon-feed me. My right hand was useless and my left hand was all swollen from all the intravenous they pumped into it. I couldn't move it either. Miriam would feed me to my mouth. When she wasn't there, I wouldn't eat.

Calixto's story shows us once more how injuries or diseases can impact entire households. When he cut his hand, Calixto was still living with his mother, who had to sell a large portion of her grain and use up all of her liquid assets to help cure and feed her son while he was in the hospital. Machete work is a dangerous and poorly-paid occupation. Injuries are common and can range from minor to life-threatening. Besides affecting the health of the worker, they also impact the labor and economic resources of the entire household, increasing the work burden of others while diminishing their equity. Since men worked only for themselves and their family, they could not look to any financial compensation in the case of an injury. Even those who toiled for other farmers would not be remunerated in the event of a damaged limb. As one man once jokingly told Ramon in Escalante "*Las heridas aqui en Nicaragua son baratas, en Costa Rica es que valen* (Cuts here in Nicaragua are cheap, it's in Costa Rica that they are worth something)." What the man was referring to was that in Costa Rica, sugarcane workers were compensated when they cut

themselves while on the job whereas in Nicaragua no compensation was forthcoming. Work-related injuries in Costa Rica were seen as a financial bonanza by some. Walter, a friend of Ernesto's from Escalante, had been given 200,000 *colones* (+/- 500 US\$) by his employer when he had cut off one of his toes while clearing pasture land. Rodolfito was given US\$ 80 when he cut his left shin during the sugarcane harvest. Whether they said it jokingly or not, men talked of strategically cutting themselves before returning home from Costa Rica so as to collect some extra income before their journey. What is certain is that no such ideas ever crossed their minds while working in Nicaragua, where the costs of an injury fall entirely onto the shoulders of the worker and his family.

Learning to Be a Man: Work and Gender in the Hills

As we saw earlier with domestic labor, agricultural chores are generally categorized through a gender-based moniker: *trabajo de hombre* (work of men or manly work). In La Uva, it is through the performance of certain types of labor that the status of manhood is achieved. By toiling in the fields, a man or younger boy would be recognized within his community as a *hombre*. Despite their young age, Evaristo's sons were often said to *trabajan como hombre* (work like men), thus conferring them with a gender status usually reserved for older males. When Don Martin recounted his days as a youth, he usually stressed that he *queria emparejarle a los hombres* (wanted to equal the men, equal their production and, in doing so, be considered a man). Pedro Puerta also emphasized the importance of work in ascending to manhood and how his father was the one who showed him how to be a man through work: *fue trabajando que aprendi a ser hombre* (it is through work that I

learned how to be a man). Conversely, when a young man or older boy lacked the desire to labor consistently or displayed insufficient commitment toward work projects, comments such as *a ese le falta para ser hombre* (he lacks what it takes to be a man) or *es muy poco hombre* (he's very little man, I.e. he lacks manliness), were made to highlight his lack of manhood.

But despite being generally understood as the labor of men, the different agricultural tasks performed by workers in the bush were also gender-coded. Chores that were considered less demanding or *suave* (soft, easy) tended to be associated with the female gender while more strenuous tasks, which were characterized as *duro* (hard) were equated to manhood. Such references were frequently made by Uveno men when describing their own work or the chores undertaken by others. One day, as I walked through the hills with Don Martin after we had planted a field of corn, we passed by a large work party from Escalante. In only a few hours, the men had cleared a large patch of land. The vegetation they were clearing, however, was principally made up of *flor amarilla* (yellow flower), a weed that grows about knee-high and is easy to cut down. As we strolled by the *rozado*, I mentioned how the men had made quick work of the vegetation but Don Martin remained unimpressed. "*Es que ese monte es suave* (It's that those weeds are soft)," he told me, "*hasta las mujeres lo rosan* (even women can clear it)." Similarly, I once discussed with Ramon the virtues of planting different types of sorghum. One kind that was now rarely sowed was called *trigo pelota* (ball sorghum) because of the round shape of the tip of the plant. Although it was thought to be *rendidor* (of high yield), most farmers shied away from the *trigo pelota* because of the difficulties involved in beating the grain.

More specifically, the *ajuate* (the little bits of the plant that come out when beaten and cause severe itchiness) was thought to be near unbearable. "*Es que te voy a decir una cosa* (Let me tell you something)," Ramon had said on that occasion, "*ese trigo es de hombre* (that sorghum is for men)." Other chores that were most often associated with the male gender were ploughing and clearing *tacotales*. Tasks most likely to be considered female were sweeping vegetation and planting grain.

More generally, though, agricultural labor in its totality was correlated with the male gender despite the fact that some women were active planters and laborers. Most men I spoke with seemed to think there was something wrong with a woman working side by side with men. However, they were also quick to praise any woman that could work *como un hombre* (like a man). One day in October, Ricardo went to plant beans with Moncho, another man from El Descanso, and his wife Tacha. By now, Ricardo's prowess in the fields is well documented. Nonetheless, he later told me that Tacha had kept pace with him all morning, something most men were unable to do. "*Viera que mujer mas buena* (You should see how good this woman is)," Ricardo said, "*solo le pude enganchar un surco en todo el dia* (I was only able to plant one more row than her all day)." Women that were recognized as able to perform male labor competently were complimented as being *huevo* (with eggs, I.e. with balls), being metaphorically grafted with the sexual organs of men.

Most women, though, seemed quite content with the way labor was divided. The truth is, they did not envy men for the work they performed and often proved quite timid when given the opportunity to engage in *trabajos de hombre*. As a party of men once left La Uva to *hechar rondas* (clear the land next to fences) in mid-

January, at the height of the *pica-pica* (a weed that provokes extreme itchiness when touched or even just when its particles are carried by the wind) season, Yassenia exclaimed “*Ay, ni quiera Dios ser hombre ahorita* (God forbid being a man right now).” Damari made similar remarks on another occasion when she came to help me sweep some dried vegetation in the mid-afternoon sun, stating “*Ay, no se como hacen Uds. los hombres para estar debajo de este sol* (I don’t know how you men are able to work with this sun).”

The ambiguous nature of the relationship between work and gender was perhaps best explained in a conversation I had with Calixto and Evaristo.

Samuel: Are there any women that work in the fields?

Calixto: Yah, there are a lot. There are women that really like working in the bush.

Samuel: What do you think of that?

Calixto: Sometimes it’s good but other times it’s not because there are some men that are brutes. They make the women work like men and in my opinion that’s bad.

Women can help out their men but not in excess. For example, they can bring them food while they’re working, they can carry the beans to where they are going to be beaten, or do other easy jobs like picking beans. But there are men who make their women clear land. There’s a man here, he’s called Juan Elmon, that makes his step-daughters and his daughters clear land next to him, each with their *corte* (cut, parcel of land to clear). For me, that’s not good. it’s like if you try to make a cow into an ox.

Samuel: Don’t you think a cow could do the work of an ox?

Calixto: I’d say it can’t. It’s that a cow is a cow.

Evaristo: That’s like if you try to make a mare pull a *careton* (two-wheeled carriage). It’s forbidden to do that. There’s a law against it. It’s the same thing. You can’t strap up a cow to a plough or a cart. I imagine that if there’s a law for that and that you strap up a cow, you could go to jail. And for women it’s the same. For me a woman can’t work very hard in a man’s job. Imagine right now a woman in the midday sun swinging a machete in a *tacotal*. We men find it very hard so think about a woman doing it. Men can take more. They have greater resistance.

Samuel: So you guys think that men’s work is harder?

Calixto: In my opinion, yes, it’s harder to work in the bush. Women are here in the shade doing their things, cooking, sweeping, carrying water, while we aren’t. Can you imagine yourself right now with this sun clearing land, sweeping vegetation, or working with a plough? Those types of work are very hard. A woman is not going to go out and grab a plough. *Uno que es hombre la piensa* (Even we men dread it). You know how it is to be in one of those steep slopes with a plough and it’s two in the afternoon and you have this nasty headache? And a woman that’s weaker? She can’t

do it. Yes, there are certain jobs that women can do but not work like that. For example, planting grain, a woman can do that because it's an easy job. Weed beans, they can also do that. But to clear, no, to beat beans, no. Beating grain is also a tough job.

Samuel: But there are women that do it.

Evaristo: There are women that do it. That woman (Tacha) is a very good worker. For that man (Moncho, her husband) it's like he has another man with him.

Samuel: It must be nice to have a woman like that.

Calixto: Here there's a woman, Marlon's woman. That woman works like *un hombre completo* (a full man). That woman clears, that woman plants. When she lived with Marlon she used to do everything, everything. Marlon left for Costa Rica and he left his beans. She picked them, she beat them. He also left a patch of rice and she beat the rice. That woman does everything that a man does. That woman is *huevo*. She comes from that same *raza* (race, i.e. family) as Juan Elmon. Since Juan made his step-daughters work, that's where she learned how to work.

Despite numerous examples to the contrary, both men and women persisted in believing that only men were physiologically conceived for work in the bush. Women who consistently worked side-by-side with men were rare. I never saw a woman clear land and I have never heard of a woman working a plough. The few women who did engage in such activities on a regular basis were both lauded and pitied. *Pobrecita esa mujer, tiene que trabajar como un hombre para vivir* (Poor woman, she has to work like a man to survive). On one occasion when I was with Tula at the Nandaime market, we met a woman from Las Canas, a community a few miles south of La Uva. After the woman had gone about her business, Tula, who has done her fair share of work in her lifetime, told me: "*Para mi, la vida de esa mujer ha sido mas dura que la mia. Es que ella ha tenido que trabajar en la huerta como hombre* (For me, that woman's life has been harder than mine because she's had to work in the fields, like a man). The idea that men perform agricultural labor in the countryside because it is more exhausting, more strenuous, and probably much too hard for most women to take, seems well implemented. Through it, one of the most important structural

aspects of life in the hills is reflected: the sexual division of labor.

In Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis, Eric Wolf

examines the relationship between power and ideas. In his introduction, he argues that:

Just as all social arrangements, including those of communication, involve relations of power, so also is that true of ideas. Contrary to the old German revolutionary song that proclaimed that thoughts are “free,” (“die Gedanken sind frei”), ideas and idea-systems are often monopolized by power groups and rendered self-enclosed and self-referential. While ideas are subject to contextual variation, moreover, this variation itself encounters structural limits, since contexts involve social relationships and thus acquire their structure through plays of power (1999:7).

Is the idea that men do harder work part of an ideologically-licensed structure that enables certain unequal relationships to take place or is men’s work really harder than women’s work? The truth is that the Dominguez men were forced to engage in difficult forms of labor on a daily basis to ensure the survival of their households. Their wives also worked extremely hard both in the shade and in the sun. Washing and ironing clothes in the hills are jobs that require strength, patience, and endurance, which most men would have found difficult and demanding if they were required to do them regularly. The sexual division of labor in itself is not necessarily a structure that creates imbalances in power between men and women. However, when it is absorbed by a wider system of relations that feature commodity value, the sale of labor-power, and a cash economy, it can create power imbalances between the genders. In the capitalist system of exchange they live in, the Dominguez men produce wealth by harvesting grain, selling cattle, trading horses, and selling their labor while the women are left only with the gratitude of other household members for their continuous toil. Many analysts of household relations (Safa 1995,

Beneria 1982, Harris 1981) have explained this by pointing out how the unpaid work of women in the end benefited the capitalist class by providing free maintenance of the labor force. Although they may indirectly benefit from a "petty tyranny" (Luxton 1980), the men positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy were not to be held directly accountable for the ills produced by larger systems of power. Bell Hooks sums up this position in "Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression:"

Concurrently, they know that many males in their social groups are exploited and oppressed. Knowing that men in their groups do not have social, political, and economic power, they would not deem it liberatory to share their social status. While they are aware that sexism enables men in their respective groups to have privileges denied them, they are more likely to see exaggerated expressions of male chauvinism among their peers as stemming from her male's sense of himself as powerless and ineffectual in relation to ruling male groups, rather than an expression of an overall privileged social status (1997:23).

It is widely recognized in the literature that poor men are not the main beneficiaries of imbalanced gender relations within their own households. However, what should not be overlooked is that the financial inequity between the genders created by a sexual division of labor where only the work of men produces monetary value, helps underwrite male privilege in their dealings in "the street", a realm where theories of machismo and exaggerated masculinity have flourished.

7. Machos or Vagos? Taking a Deeper Look at Men Behaving Badly

“*Apuremos Bin Bin* (Let’s hurry Bin Bin),” I told Elvin, the fourth of Evaristo’s six sons. “*Los va agarrar el agua* (The rain’s going to get us).” Elvin looked up to the sky where dark clouds were quickly moving in and simply shrugged his head. “*Apurese pues* (Hurry up then),” he answered back. Elvin, who was twelve years old at the time, and I were on our way to El Descanso. He was to go to school the next day. I was to begin cutting rice with Calixto and Ricardo. The weather had been clement all week and this mid-November Sunday had been no different. After more than a month of continuous rain, *el tiempo de abajo* (the weather from down below) had finally passed. The sun had come out and the winds had picked up. “*Ese tiempo es de puro verano* (This weather is pure summer),” Don Martin had told me just yesterday. But the *invierno* seemed to have one last storm in it and as Elvin and I struggled to get out of the Sabana water hole and back onto the road, the storm loomed closer. “*Parece que los vamos a mojar* (It looks like we are going to get wet),” Elvin finally said, stating the obvious. This time, at least, he was right.

The day had started out as most Sundays did in People rarely worked on Sunday. When men did go out to the fields, it was out of absolute necessity, often stating “*No me gusta trabajar los Domingos, pero que voy hacer* (I don’t like working Sundays, but what can I do.” Grain planted on Sundays was thought to be *salado* (salty, i.e. cursed). Ramon’s bean crop, which was planted on a Sunday and did not sprout, provided everyone with a reminder of the perils of not resting on the day of the Sabbath. Even the women seemed to work less. Meals were eaten later and often only two of them would be prepared during the course of the day. People sat

around their homes and talked with their neighbors or other visitors. The more religious members of the hamlet would go to church. Others went to baseball games, cantinas, or *galleras* (cockfights). On this particular Sunday, it seemed everyone had somewhere to go. Calixto had left early for Escalante. Evaristo went to look at a horse. Ismael went to a cockfight. Don Martin was at church. Cavolion was at Elena's. Cavolino was somewhere. Ramon was hunting. Even Evaristo's older sons had left, riding off to Escalante in the morning to visit with their girlfriends. Only Lorena, Marcelina, Dona Amanda and a few of the younger children were left in the hamlet. Being the only man there, I should have taken advantage of the situation to get some writing done. But around one o'clock I began to feel bored. Since Calixto and I had decided to begin cutting his patch of rice the next morning, I figured I could at least trek down to El Descanso during the afternoon. When I told Dona Amanda I was going to go, she suggested I take Elvin along. At least I would not have to walk alone.

We left around two-thirty. Following a week of sunshine and strong winds, the roads had dried up, remaining muddy only in low spots or where cattle continuously passed. Elvin and I reached the Sabana water hole in less than an hour. But instead of taking the trail that brings us through Alvarado's property, the boy insisted we take what he called a shortcut. "*No quiero subir las lomas* (I don't want to go up those hills)," he said, "*si los vamos por la quebrada vamos a llegar mas rapido* (If we go by the creek we'll get there faster)." "*Vamonos pues* (Let's go then)," I answered, trusting Elvin, who spent little time in the bush, to guide us through the winding creek. The Sabana dries up completely during the *verano* but because of the

heavy rains of October, it was still knee-high when we crossed the barbed wire fence that separated it from the main trail. By going through La Sabana, we would avoid the steep hills that border the entrance of Alvarado's ranch. Taking this route, however, was only a shortcut if we would climb back onto the plateau where El Salto, the property following Alvarado's, began. Elvin, though, either missed the cut-off or did not really know where it was. As a result, we were stuck in the quebrada for over two hours, continuously hopping from one side of the rocky stream to the other to avoid getting our shoes wet. "*Queda largo la salida* (Is the exit far)?" I asked Elvin after about half-an-hour. "*No hombre*," he said, which he followed by the customary "*ayi no mas queda* (its right there)," without ever saying exactly where that was. After about an hour, it became obvious we had missed the cut-off to El Salto. "*Ya la cagaste Bin Bin* (Now you've shat it)," I said to the boy. "*A la gran vida, hombre, si ya vamos a llegar* (Take it easy, man, we're almost there), he replied. When we finally made it out of the endlessly-swerving quebrada and back onto the main road to El Descanso, the torrential rains of the tropics had met us head on. Within a minute, we were completely soaked. Soon, our backpacks began taking on water and started to drip. Elvin's uniform for tomorrow's classes was drenched. Even my notebooks were getting wet. We started running up the road, looking for cover but finding none. After about fifteen minutes the intensity of the downpour lessened and we eased our pace, having nothing more to lose since we were already soaked to the bone. At five-thirty p.m., a full three hours after leaving La Uva, we finally got to our destination.

El Descanso was hardly bustling when we got there. Ricardo and Rodolfito's houses were completely empty. Mauricio and Ernesto were also out. Only Selena and

Marlene were home with their children. “*Mire*,” Selena exclaimed as I walked into her house, “*aquí no hay nadie, todo esos hombres están en Escalante* (There isn’t anybody here, all these men are in Escalante).” Selena was not in the best of moods and after chatting with her briefly I left and went over to Marlene’s. When I walked away, I heard her say to her daughter “*Ahora va a ver tu papa* (You’re father’s going to see later),” as she grabbed a hammer and started nailing the windows shut.

Marlene’s spirits were not much better than her neighbor’s. “*Y Ernesto*,” I asked her as I sat down in her kitchen, already knowing the answer to my question. “*En Escalante*,” she responded nonchalantly, insinuating that Ernesto’s whereabouts were of little importance to her. Marlene was cooking rice while listening to a religious program on the radio. After waiting for about an hour and a half for the meat she had sent Ernesto to buy, she finally decided to eat without it. Turning towards her daughter, she said, as if to herself, “*nunca volvió tu papa* (your father never came back).” “*Que fresca*,” she continued, now looking directly at me, “*me dijo que solamente iba a comprar una libra de carne y se quedó bebiendo guaro. Si solamente ayer venimos del hospital* (he told me he was only going to go and buy a pound of meat and he stayed to drink guaro. We only got back from the hospital yesterday).” Marlene was visibly upset. After serving supper, she grabbed her new-born baby and sat down to feed him. “*Miren chavalas* (Look girls),” she said, “*solo Samuel no anda de vago* (Only Samuel is not up to no good).” Not wanting to disappoint Marlene, I kept eating my supper in silence, knowing full well that I would soon be joining Mauricio and Ernesto in Escalante.

“*Hasta esos chavalos de Evaristo andan bebiendo* (Even Evaristo’s sons are

out drinking),” Marlene said after we had finished eating and we sat in her sala sipping on some coffee. “*Chavalas, deberian de desensillar esa pobre llegua* (Girls you should take the saddle off of that poor mare),” the woman continued. But before the girls could remove the saddle from the mare’s back, that had been left there all day by Eddy and Oscar, I proposed to go out of my way and take it back to them. Marlene, looking at me suspiciously, said: “*Lo que Usted quiere es andar de vago tambien* (What you want is to go out as well). After assuring her that my intentions were other and that I would soon return, I went into the bedroom, changed my clothes, and rode off into the night.

The rain had now stopped but the roads, which had been fixed only a week ago by communal work parties, were once again in a state of disrepair. Mud puddles the size of small houses had formed all along the path, reaching up to the mare’s knees. After traveling for ten minutes on the dark road, I was approaching the *puente roto* (holed bridge) that crossed the Escalante River when I saw in the distance a group of mounted men, who had stopped near the entrance of Yamilon’s house. Clenching my horsewhip more firmly, I steadied my mare and approached the group of loud men slowly. Immersed in a conversation with a woman, the men did not notice me until I was about twenty yards away. By then, I had already recognized their voices. It was Eddy, Oscar and Ismael who were talking to Yamilon. When the boys finally saw me, they yelled out enthusiastically and greeted me with the drinker’s salute: “*Oy Samuel, veni echarte un trago* (Hey Samuel, come and have a shot).” Having accepted their invitation, the boys passed me a plastic pepsi bottle full of guaro. I grabbed the bottle and took a large swig, which made the boys laugh.

After downing some more liquor, the boys returned to their earlier conversation. Eddy and Oscar were talking up their old man's lover, while Ismael stood by somewhat disinterested. They asked the woman, who was probably in her early thirties, if she was free to go and drink with them. Yamilon, a tall woman with blond hair and a pretty face, seemed amused by the whole thing. Although she politely refused the invitations thrown her way, she kept encouraging the boys to keep up their little game of seduction. After about fifteen minutes, Yamilon went back inside, saying she had a few things to do before going to bed. No longer having any reason for being where we were, Eddy suggested that, since I had brought the mare back, we go and see what was happening in Escalante.

It was about eight o'clock when we reached Escalante and save for a few television sets that glowed in the night, the village was asleep. We made straight for the cantinas, turning onto the trail that led to *el gancho*, a fork in the road from which three of Escalante's four streets started. At the bottom of the hill was Leticia's cantina, which as always was quiet. In front of Leticia's was La Cosita, another drinking hole operated out of the *cantinera's* house. Although few people regularly went to La Cosita, there always seemed to be a few men there courting the *cantinera's* teenage daughter. Finally, on the other side of the gancho and further up the hill, was El Tubo, Escalante's most famous cantina which was run by the infamous Crespo women. El Tubo was a family affair, where three generations of Crespo women had worked at one time or another. The *cantineras* of this establishment were known throughout the region for their filthy mouths, their readiness to argue, and the pranks they played on drunken men. Their list of misdeeds

performed on inebriated men was a long one. Some men would wake up with lipstick all over their faces, while others would be left without any eyebrows. On one occasion, it is said that the Crespo women tied the testicles of a particularly troublesome drunk that had passed out to a chair. When the man finally woke up and tried to walk away in the full confusion of an early morning hangover, the string surrounding his reproductive glands tightened, causing him to scream in pain as he fell to the ground. But despite the *cantineras*' penchant for cruel jokes, the Tubo, which drew its name from the metal tube reminiscent of those found in strip-clubs located at the center of the cantina, was clearly Escalante's favored drinking hole, bringing in large crowds of men both Saturdays and Sundays.

When we finally got to the top of the hill and were about to dismount, Calixto walked out of El Tubo with two beers in his hands. "*Oy amigo*," he shouted out as he passed me a beer, "*quiero platicar con Ud.* (I want to talk to you)." Calixto followed me to the tree where I was tying the mare. "*Lo que pasa*," he said "*es que ando muy picado. Estoy tomando desde la dos de la tarde y debo 200 cordovas* (I'm really drunk, I've been drinking since two in the afternoon and I owe 200 cordovas)." Calixto, as he at times tended to do, had imbibed on credit. "*Ay te los voy a conseguir* (I'll get them for you)," I told him, "but only tomorrow." Calixto nodded and stumbled back to Morales' house, where he had been drinking with the cattle trader. The boys had already walked into the cantina and I decided to join them. As always, El Tubo was a loud and volatile place. The *roconola* (jukebox), where customers pumped in two cordovas to select the song of their liking, was screaming out *Tristes Recuerdos* (Sad Memories), an Antonio Aguilar classic:

El tiempo pasa
Y no te puedo olvidar
Te traigo en mi pensamiento constante mi amor
Y aunque trato de olvidarte
Cada día te extraño mas
Las noches sin ti
Agrandan mi soledad
A veces he estado a punto de irte a buscar
Dime que cosa me hiciste
Que no te puedo olvidar

(Time Passes
And still I can't forget you
I have you constantly on my mind my love
And even though I try to forget you
Every day I miss you more
The nights without you
Make my loneliness grow
At times I've almost gone out to look for you
Tell me what you have done to me
Because I can't forget you)

The cantina was filled with several groups of men sitting on small metal chairs. Carmen Crespo and her husband Jorge Luis, who had a large 38 caliber pistol strapped to his belt, worked the bar, while their two *empleadas* (employees), *la Vichuda* (Veronica) and *la Cabrita* (Maria), entertained the clients. The dust from the dirt floor would rapidly rise up from all the movement inside El Tubo and had to be constantly sprinkled with water to be kept down. The green walls of the cantina were covered with posters of sexy women on horseback or at the beach put out by local beer companies. "*Hasta la Victoria* (Until Victory)," read the calendar produced by the Victoria brewing company.

As Marlene had predicted, Ernesto and Mauricio were both enjoying the sights and sounds of El Tubo. They immediately called me over when I walked into the joint. "*Veni echarte un trago* (Come and have a shot)," Ernesto muttered as he

passed me a pepsi bottle filled with sugarcane liquor. After downing the shot of guaro and sending the boys to put on some music, I bought a round of beers and settled into a chair. Ernesto and Elmer, one of his friends from Javalina, a nearby village, encouraged me to dance. “*Anda saca a la Vichuda* (Go and ask the Vichuda to dance),” Ernesto suggested. “*Ponganle una movida al amigo* (Put on a song that moves for our friend),” Elmer ordered the boys, who were still sifting through the list of available songs. “*A ver*,” Eddy shouted out, “*Aqui va la perra* (Here goes the dog(bitch)).” *La Perra* was a famous *cumbia* and soon its melody spread throughout El Tubo. Ernesto jumped off of his chair, clapping his hands and singing “*Ya viene la perra con la lengua afuera. Cuidado con la perra, ponganle una cadena* (Here comes the bitch with her tongue hanging out. Watch out for the bitch, put a chain on her).” “*Pongase las pilas chele, vaya sacar a la muchacha* (Get your batteries going whitey, go and ask the girl to dance,” Elmer screamed over the music. The whole bar seemed to be looking my way, waiting for me to get up and walk over to where la Vichuda was sitting, who was talking to the cantinera as if oblivious to what was going on. As I hesitated to comply with the desires of my companions, the patrons of the establishment seemed to be getting impatient, unimpressed with my lack of decisive action and several shouts of: “*Ideay chele, que te pasa* (What’s going on whitey)?” could be heard over the music. After much coaxing, I glided over to where the girl was sitting and extended my hand forward, asking her to dance. Veronica acted as if she was surprised I was asking her onto the dusty floor. Looking at me with her large brown eyes, she shook her head hesitantly, signaling she had no intention of shaking her body to the tune of *La Perra*. “*Anda* (go),” Carmen then told

her, “*no desprecies al hombre* (don’t refuse the man).” After waiting for another couple of seconds, as if she was not yet convinced I was worth the effort, la Vichuda got off her chair and walked back with me to the middle of the cantina.

When we finally started dancing, the song had almost reached its half-way mark. Mauricio, Ernesto, and even some of the other men in the cantina I did not know were letting out sharp, high-pitched screams. The screams would only get louder whenever I lowered my hips and rubbed up on my dance partner. “*Pegala contra el tubo* (Stick her to the tube),” Elmer screamed out. His suggestion was a popular one, as several other men began cheering for me to grind La Vichuda onto the tube in the middle of the floor. Veronica, however, would not be an easy prey. She would draw me close to *el tubo* (During cumbias, men generally follow the women around the dance floor, making controlled hip movements, timed to the rhythm of the song), moving backwards onto the bar before veering away before I could get close enough to grab her. When the song was finally nearing to its end, I moved slowly back with Veronica near the pole for one last time, but instead of following her lead, I turned in the opposite direction, meeting her right at the tube, which I grabbed with my two arms, not allowing her to move away. Elmer and Ernesto erupted in laughter, nearly falling off their chairs as they slapped their laps with their hands, and screams of “*Eso chele* (that’s it whitey),” were heard throughout the locale. When the song was over, I walked back triumphantly to my table where I was handed another beer. “*Hombre, ese Samuel es bandido* (Man that Samuel’s cunning),” Ernesto said laughing, “*echemolos otro trago* (let’s have another shot).” And so we did.

This rowdy scene was perpetuated for another couple of hours, only

interrupted by the forced dismissal by Carmen and Jorge Luis of customers who had stopped purchasing liquor. By about eleven o'clock, only our group remained in the cantina and, since the cantineros were now eager to close up, the girls were no longer accepting offers to dance. Calixto had come back from Morales' and Evaristo had also joined us. Mauricio, who earlier had made inebriated declarations of love to la Cabrita, was now asleep on a table. Ernesto had talked at length with Zeneida, the cantinera's daughter. The outcome of the conversation did not seem to please Ernesto, who started drinking even more rapidly after Zeneida stormed away. Around ten-thirty, Ernesto got up and stumbled over to where I was sitting. "*Ya me voy cavo* (I'm leaving cavo)," he mumbled repeatedly. "*Esperalos, ya los vamos a ir* (Wait for us, we're about to leave)," I countered as I grabbed his arm. But Ernesto broke away and walked out of the door. Somewhat worried, I told Calixto he should check on his brother. "*Ay dejalo* (Let him be)," he told me, "*ese jodido es loco picado* (that prick is crazy when he's drunk)." Nonetheless, I still felt I should make sure my companion was alright. But when I walked out of El Tubo, Ernesto and his mule were already gone.

After waking up Mauricio and buying another two liters of guaro to go and finish off the night, we left El Tubo. I was now accompanied by Evaristo and his two sons, who had significantly reduced their alcohol consumption once their old man had shown up, Ismael, Mauricio, and Calixto. Once again, we rode off into the night. The boys were whipping their horses, making them gallop for a few yards before suddenly pulling the reins back, which caused the animals to stop abruptly. They would then loosen the reins and hit their horses lightly so that the beasts would break into a two-

step, almost stationary, march, reminiscent of soldiers in a military parade. Whenever a maneuver was successfully completed by one of the riders, the others would greet him with high-pitched screams, acknowledging their companion's skill in the saddle. We moved out of El Barrio in such a manner until we reached the fork in the road that led us to El Descanso.

But as the men were clowning around on their horses, now making them step sideways before switching sides, Oscar somehow noticed a body on the dark road. "*Pareense* (Stop)," he yelled out, "*aqui esta alguien caido* (someone's passed out here)." Evaristo got off his mare and turned the dormant man over onto his back. "*Si es Ernesto*," the middle-aged man said. "*Y la mula no esta por ay* (Where's the mule)?" Calixto inquired. "*La vamos a ir a buscar* (We'll go and look for it)," Eddy volunteered. As the boys rode off in search of the missing mule, Evaristo and Calixto attempted to bring Ernesto back to his senses. "*Ernesto*," Calixto told his brother, "*levantate hombre, no te da verguenza caer a media calle* (get up man, aren't you ashamed of passing out in the middle of the road)." "*Apurate hombre que ya los vamos. Vas a quedar botado* (Hurry up man because we're leaving. You're going to stay behind)," he continued. After a couple of minutes, Ernesto finally came to his senses. Calixto got back onto his horse and Evaristo and Ismael passed Ernesto up to his brother, who sat him on the front half of the saddle and held him with his free arm.

A few minutes later, Eddy and Oscar came back with the mule. "*Ayi no mas estaba* (She was right there)," Eddy said, "*por adonde la Leida* (close to Leida's)." We were now once again ready to take off. But before we got moving Calixto

suggested we have one more shot for the road. The plastic bottle was thus passed around from rider to rider and even Ernesto, who was still waking up, insisted in having another gulp of guaro. But as we rode away, Calixto and Ernesto began arguing. Calixto, who was not pleased to have found his brother lying in the middle of the road, proceeded to scold his older sibling: "*Yo quisiera Ernesto, que vos te hiciera hombre* (I wish Ernesto you would make a man out of yourself)." Ernesto did not take these words kindly. "*Yo se* (I know)," he responded in his drunkenness, "*que vos nunca me ha querido* (that you have never loved me)." Ernesto tried to free himself from his brother's grip, hitting Calixto's arm with his two hands. "*Soltame* (Let me go)," he screamed, "*que me voy a ir solo* (I'm going to go back on my own)." But instead of letting his brother go, Calixto squeezed him even harder. "*Soltame!*" Ernesto shouted again, his arms now wailing at his brother who refused to loosen his grab. After a few seconds, Calixto finally let him go. Ernesto's momentum, however, caused him to fall off the horse and land face first onto the road. Not showing any signs of his previous drunken state, the young man jumped back up and took off his mud stained white shirt in a single motion. "*Apíate pues jodido, te vas a dar cuenta si soy hombre* (Get down then you fucker, you're going to find out if I'm a man)," Ernesto yelled out to his brother. Calixto did not wait for a second invitation, swiftly dismounting his ride. "*Que, me quieres pegar* (What, you want to hit me)?" he asked his brother. "*Pegame pues* (Hit me then)," Calixto continued, clenching the shaft of his horsewhip with his right hand. As the two men readied to strike each other, they were restrained. Evaristo and Ismael quickly grabbed Ernesto, while I stepped in to hold Calixto back. Ernesto, though, kept struggling to break free, which got Calixto's

blood boiling once again. “*A ver, pues,*” he shouted “*pegame vos hombre, toma esta tajona y pegame* (you hit me man, take the horsewhip and hit me).” Ernesto was now crying, his drunken fury having gotten the best of him. Ismael grabbed him by the shoulders and led him away. He refused to get back onto the horse with Calixto, who was now pleading his innocence: “*Hombre, lo unico que le dije fue que me pegara* (Man, all I did was to tell him to hit me).” After a few minutes of coaxing, Ernesto agreed to get onto Ismael’s mare. Finally, we were off again.

When we reached El Descanso, Ismael went directly to Marlene’s to drop off Ernesto. The rest of us went to Mauricio’s. Many men, including Calixto and Ernesto, when they get home with a few friends and a bottle of booze after a night out, wake up their wives and try to get them to prepare food, often with mixed results. At times, the women grudgingly comply with their husband’s request, getting up to kill and skin a hen. On other occasions, though, they scold or simply ignore their inebriated spouses before going back to sleep. Mauricio had no such complexes about preparing food, quickly getting to work once we got to his home. He lit a fire, made *gallo pinto*, a mixture of rice and beans fried together, and diced a few tomatoes and onions which he sprinkled with lime juice and salt. The rest of us, meanwhile, set up a few chairs on Mauricio’s muddy *patio*. Eddy was manning the radio, searching for a station with ranchera music. Mauricio brought out a cup with water, which was placed on a wooden chair in the middle of our circle, next to the bottle of guaro and the tomato salad. It was time to drink again, each one of us taking a shot of the increasingly-harsh liquor, before taking a few spoon-fulls of Mauricio’s concoction to rid our throats of the sweet and burning taste. Cigarettes were passed around and we sat there

smoking in the cool mid-November night. No one really felt like drinking anymore but we sat there drunk and tired for another hour, occasionally passing around the bottle, before Evaristo, Ismael and Calixto decided to head out. We would still have some guaro for the hangover.

Understanding Vagancia

Although the past vignette would no doubt seem like a perfect example of macho behavior to some analysts, the men involved in this particular night of debauchery understood their actions in terms of *vagancia* and being *vago*. It is often difficult to convey the exact meaning of local expressions or word categories through the use of literal translations. Such is the case with the concept of *vagancia* and its derivatives *vago*, *vaga*, and *vagar*. According to WordReference.com, an on-line multi-lingual dictionary, the noun *vagancia* can be translated into the English words idleness, sluggishness, or laziness. As for the adjective *vago(a)*, it is defined as lazy. In southwestern Nicaragua, though, the term *aragan*, a word I have yet to encounter in a Spanish dictionary, is most often used to designate a lazy person or animal, such as *ese buey es aragan* (this ox is lazy). The translation of the verb *vagar*, which is defined as to wander, to roam and also given the secondary meanings of to drift, mooch, and rove comes closest to evoking local meanings contained within the concept of *vagancia*. But much more than just a word, *la vagancia* comes to stand for a whole category of behavior. *Andar de vago* (to go about being vago) can be used to describe numerous different scenarios, which can include but are in no way limited to the following: riding around on someone else's horse, attending a cockfight, chasing women, visiting a friend without having any motive to do so, getting drunk, picking a

fight, playing cards, loitering, not working when expected to, stealing one of your neighbor's hens or playing a prank on somebody. *Vagancia* is a local category that can be used to describe most behavior that is not work related, not religious, and not essential to household or family relations and maintenance. When men leave their homes, they usually describe their outings either along the lines of *voy a hacer un mandado* (I'm going to run an errand, an outing with a clear purpose or goal) or *ando de vago* (I'm out being vago, an outing with no intended goal but self-entertainment).

The meaning of being *vago* also has gender and generational variations. When a little girl is told by her mother that she is being *vaga*, what is usually implied is that she does not listen to her parent's directives. When an uncle scolds his young nephew for being *vago*, he is probably referring to some misdeed or prank performed by the child. But when the term is used to refer to a person of working age, it takes on a whole other meaning. Rosario Montoya, in her work on local gender norms in rural Nicaragua, discusses the meaning of the label *mujer vaga* (vaga woman). According to Montoya, *vaga* is "a term of moral evaluation that connotes avoidance of work and, in some contexts, sexual availability (2003:2)." The usage of the term I most often came across, however, was centered more on a woman's sexual history than on her work habits. When a woman was referred to as *vaga*, the general understanding was that she could either be easily convinced to have sex or that she was willing to have sex with a man in exchange for material benefits, that did not necessarily have to come in the form of money. On the flip side, it was also often said that *a las vagas no es cualquier hombre que les gusta* (the vaga does not like any man, she does not simply get involved with anybody). In more practical terms, men saw *vagas* as

women whom they could entertain sexual relations with without having to legitimate their romantic exchanges into a formal household arrangement. This is not to say that women considered *vaga*, an accusation often made without substantial evidence, were never engaged in formal relationships. That was far from the case. But it must also be pointed out that most men saw a *mujer vaga* as a less than ideal household partner. “*Es que una vaga no sirve* (It’s that a vaga is useless),” Tono once told me when I asked him if he would consider forming a household with a woman considered *vaga*. Obviously, the behavior of *vaga* women could be interpreted differently. Their refusal to comply with local sexual norms could be understood as an open rebuttal of patriarchy. The bottom line remains, however, that few women have used the title of *vaga* to produce a gender identity in defiance to local norms. Rather, it seems that most women avidly guarded their sexual reputations in the hope of not being *manchanda* (stained) by allegations of being *vaga*.

Being *vago* was understood much differently when it applied to a man. Because males were expected to want to engage in as many erotic acts as possible, a topic we will develop in greater depth a bit further on, being *vago* did not have the same sexual connotations for a man as it did for a woman. Rather, *vago* could be used as a temporary qualifier of a man’s actions and state of being or as a more permanent indicator of his character and life habits. When used as a permanent marker of character as in *ese hombre es un vago* (that man is a vago), the term generally contained a pejorative undertone. *Un vago* was a person who lived his life through treachery and avoided work by stealing, conning, fighting, and robbing in order to maintain his vices. Loosely translated, the term *vago* could signify delinquent.

Vagancia was the vago's life, his sole existential purpose. Not surprisingly, youths were most often labeled as *vagos* by people from older generations. But as with the *mujer vaga*, the appellation of *vago* was a subjective one.

Being *un vago* was also different from *andar de vago*, which represented a more temporary state of action. *Andar de vago* was the equivalent of being up to no good. Men were expected to be *vago*, at least some of the time. Too much *vagancia*, though, was thought to be dangerous. Don Martin would often tell me that "*la vagancia lo pierde a uno* (you can lose yourself in *vagancia*). But if done moderately, there was really nothing much to being *vago*. Drinking guaro with some friends, going to a *gallera* (cockfight), going to a *montadera* (bull riding), going to a fiesta, eating the watermelon in someone else's field, not closing a door where cows were being kept, courting your neighbor's daughter, scaring your old uncle, or teasing your young niece were all parts of being *vago*. In *vagancia*, men, and women, could forget their daily concerns, laugh a little, or simply have some fun. As Calixto often said "*Es bonito divertirse a veces* (It's good to have fun sometimes)." La *vagancia* was the way in which many of the men I worked with found amusement and relaxation.

Vagancia versus Machismo

Machismo, as conceived by Roger Lancaster and re-appropriated by several scholars of Nicaragua, is a theory of social relations, whereby interactions between individuals are delimited by differential degrees of power determined by age and gender. Although machismo is believed to have a deep impact on the relationships that unfold within the home, most of the evidence that is used to support its existence, as well as that of other theories of performative masculinity, is gathered in the context

of male *vagancia* outside of the home. Lancaster explains that machismo, although it engulfs women and children within its grasps, is before anything else a system of value production through which men structure interactions among themselves:

Machismo (no less than Anglo-American concepts of masculinity and appropriate sexuality) is not exclusively or even primarily a means of structuring power relations between men and women. It is a means of structuring power between and among *men*. Like drinking, gambling, risk taking, asserting one's opinion, and fighting, the conquest of women is a feat performed with two audiences in mind: first, other men, to whom one must constantly prove one's masculinity and virility; and second, oneself, to whom one must also show all the signs of masculinity. Machismo, then, is a matter of constantly asserting one's masculinity by way of practices that show the self to be "active," not "passive" (as defined in a given milieu). (1992:237)

Lancaster, though, is hardly alone in portraying men as insecure and ultra-competitive beings who have to assert their dominance in order to avoid being dominated by others. As we saw earlier on, the likes of Gilmore, Herzfeld, and Brandes also rest their analyses of masculinity on a similar premise. Miguel Vale de Almeida, although more nuanced in his reasoning, comprehends male interactions in a similar manner, claiming that:

Enemies or not, men are always potential rivals in the competition for the symbolic capital of masculinity, at the same time that they support the ideal fraternal equality of the members of the same sex (a notion that is often juxtaposed with class equality) (1996:89)

Ultimately, men find themselves engaged in a game they cannot win. They are fighting themselves, never sure whether they are worthy of their privileged gender. As Lancaster puts it: "That the fate of so many Nicaraguan men is alcoholism, broken health, loneliness, and early death is a direct consequence of this atomizing and isolating socialization (1992:43)." Violence and alcoholism are serious social problems in Nicaragua and the sexual double-standard is alive and well. But should

we condemn Nicaraguan men as unrepentant machos simply because they can, at times, be *vago*? Men sometimes engage in irresponsible, unproductive, and even hurtful activities. Although we should not excuse them for doing, I will argue that it is counter-productive to reduce their entire personas to the performance of *vagancia*.

The Three Pillars of Machismo

The three topics I will now look at in the context of male *vagancia* have often provided much of the data for theories of machismo and performative masculinity. Rough living, abundant drinking, and sexual predation have been the hallmarks of both academic theories and the popular imagination about men who live in cultures that are thought to value public demonstrations of manhood. But before moving on, I want to make two points clear. In rural Nicaragua, men could be men without engaging in any of these forms of behavior. Men who devoted their lives to religion were no less men for it. Men who did not engage in “informal polygamy” did not lose their gender. And men who shied away from violence could still be respected by others. That being said, it is also worth noting that most men did enjoy drinking, would have liked to have several sexual partners, and would probably not back down if challenged to a fight. Once again, though, we must proceed with caution. *Vagancia*, although thought of by many as a package deal, was manifested differently in each individual. Ismael liked to go to cockfights and had a girlfriend on the side but did not drink. Mauricio drank frequently, never fought, and never had a publicized adventure with another woman. Rodrigo bragged about the many women he had slept with and the many fights he had gotten into but disliked cantinas and fiestas and only drank moderately. Rodolfo had stopped drinking for almost a decade and shied away from

violent confrontations yet was rumored to be having affairs with two women in Escalante.

1) Drinking

Alcohol consumption among adult males is widespread in rural Nicaragua. Obviously not everyone drinks and not all who drink do it that often. Nonetheless, many of the men I interacted with could probably be considered *bueno al guaro* (heavy drinkers). This last statement, however, is somewhat misleading. Although binge drinking is frequent (drinking without stopping for two or more days) and I have met some men who were on two-week drunks, most of the time, heavy bouts of drinking were interspersed by long periods of sobriety. In more secluded areas like La Uva, where alcohol is not readily available, men could go well over a month without drinking, especially when labor requirements were at their peak. They could also, however, easily drink once a week or even more, especially during the months of December, July, when the patron saint holydays of Nandaime take place, and April, during Semana Santa. Most of the women I came across did not drink regularly. Some refused to imbibe alcohol while many others only had a few *hibols* (mixed drinks) or beers during religious holydays or special occasions like a wedding or baptism. There was less tolerance for women who frequently consumed alcohol and the few women who were serious drinkers, especially those who drank guaro, were usually considered *vaga*. Although most men would probably disapprove of their wives drinking regularly, they had no qualms about drinking with other women. Indeed, men often attempted to entice women to drink with them. “*Veni echate un trago amorcito* (Come and have a drink my little love),” were words often heard

during drinking sessions at cantinas, dances, or other parties. Most women, though, were reticent to drink in public with men as few invitations were ever accepted.

Above all else, drinking was a social activity in Nicaragua. Although alcohol is consumed abundantly in cantinas, at bars, and at fiestas, many men, especially older ones, preferred drinking *en la casa* (in the house), which could mean either in their own home or at another family member's or close friend's domicile. The advantages of drinking in familiar confines were quite obvious. The likelihood of a serious confrontation, which was quite frequent during fiestas and at cantinas, was greatly reduced when drinking at home. No one had to worry about being insulted, pushed, punched, kicked, or stabbed. The ambiance was thus more relaxed and jovial. Furthermore, many men only enjoyed drinking with certain friends. "*No es con cualquier hombre que me gusta tomar* (It is not with any man that I like to drink)," Evaristo once told me. When drinking at home, men could choose who they lifted their glasses with. This is not to say that men, and especially younger boys who did not have the required clout to hold a drinking session in their own homes, did not enjoy consuming during public events. Guaro and beer flowed freely during fiestas and at cantinas. Nonetheless, drinking in public was usually, although not always, done with greater caution since, as Calixto often said, "*Es clavo picarse en una fiesta porque a veces uno le cae mal a la gente por puro gusto* (It's not smart to get drunk at a fiesta because sometimes people dislike you for no reason)."

Male drinking sessions *en la casa* were often spontaneous affairs. Although they were usually reserved for weekends, they could take place at any time. The visit of a friend, of a *compadre*, of a brother, of a neighbor or simply *tener gana de beber*

(feeling like having a drink) could spurt any afternoon into a lengthy *bebedera* (drinking feast). In the countryside, men would invariably drink guaro during these gatherings. Beer was too expensive to be consumed in large quantities and was not readily available where there was no electric current. Guaro was cheaper and did not need to be refrigerated. During my fieldwork, a liter of guaro cost between sixteen and twenty-four cordovas, depending on where it was purchased, making it by far the most affordable alcoholic beverage.

Despite current notions of machos as willing and unrepentant drinkers, men often had to be coaxed into drinking, initially refusing invitations to have shots before eventually feeling *caliente* (hot, with a desire to drink). A concrete example will best demonstrate this. In May 2006, Ricardo Mayorga, a Nicaraguan boxer, fought and lost against the world famous pugilist Oscar de la Hoya. The fight was televised nationally and watched by almost everyone in Nicaragua. For the occasion, Pedro Araujo and I purchased a liter of guaro. That afternoon, Evaristo, Pedro's brother in law, stopped by after having dropped off a few cows Rodolfo had sold to a hacendado from the area. Evaristo had no doubt planned to watch the bout with us, yet he was reticent to drink. Pedro, however, kept pestering his brother-in-law: "*Echate un trago hombre* (Have a shot man);" "*Veni hombre, echate solo uno* (Come here man, just have one);" "*Que te pasa, no quiere tomar con nosotros* (What's wrong, you don't want to drink with us)?" After several invitations, Evaristo finally agreed to have a shot of guaro. But he still remained adamant about not wanting to drink, always finding an excuse to refuse Pedro's invitations: "*Es que me quiero ir ahora* (It's that I want to go home tonight); "*No me quiero picar, tengo que trabajar manana* (I don't

want to get drunk, I have to work tomorrow)”; “*Es que me esta esperando Rodolfo* (Rodolfo’s waiting for me).”

But when the fight between de la Hoya and Mayorga began to heat up, Evaristo let his guard down, no longer side-stepping his brother-in-law’s invitations. After the fourth round of the bout, Evaristo himself was serving the drinks. When our first liter expired, he volunteered to go back to Nandaime to pick up another one and when Pedro fell asleep after the second liter, Evaristo went over to Concha’s, where he drank for another full day before finally going home. Men are often reticent to have even a couple of beers because they know it can easily lead to prolonged drinking. Calixto best explained it: “*Cuando ya estoy picado, a mi me vale verga todo. Puedo hasta enjajaranarme para seguir bebiendo* (When I’m drunk, I don’t give a dick about anything. I can even borrow money to keep drinking). And Calixto was by no means alone. For many men, once inebriated, household concerns went out the window. Tight budgets, monotonous menus, and prior work commitments were no longer important, at least until the next day. What mattered at the moment was to keep drinking, to have enough booze to pass the night. Because of the scarce financial resources most men possessed, because they had little room for error in their daily undertakings, getting drunk, especially when not expected to do so, represented crossing an important threshold for many. It became a sort of point of no return. Prolonging the drinking session meant delaying the quasi-inevitable argument that followed a man’s return to his home. To some, this may seem like an epidemic of alcoholism and they may be right. It is undeniable that several men in Nicaragua have drinking problems. It is also true that many men had *mal guaro* (bad liquor),

temporarily losing control of their actions, having memory lapses, pronouncing words they would later regret, and *desconosiendo a la gente* (not recognizing people).

Drinking often caused violence or, at the very least facilitated it. Excessive alcohol consumption is a serious social problem that needs to be addressed. But what are its causes? Are they social, economic, cultural, hereditary, historical, moral, genetic?

Clearly, more research on the subject is needed, both medical and socio-cultural. But is the presence of alcoholism within a population sufficient to reduce part-time *vagos* into full-time *machos*?

2) Violence

Like drinking, violence can be found in abundant quantities within Nicaraguan society. Reality news shows like Accion 10 and 22/22 report all the gruesome events of the day, sending reporters to wherever conflicts erupt to film fights, arrests, the aftermath of fatal accidents, and any other grim occurrence judged newsworthy. Based on the daily reports of journalists and on the personal accounts of many citizens, Managua comes across as a cesspool of thuggery, deceit, and theft. *Pandilleros* (gang members) roam their respective *barrios* looking for easy preys, while *huelepegas* (glue sniffers) invade the markets to beg for spare change, and *ladrones* (thieves) assault innocents at every street corner. People from rural areas are terrified of the capital city and only go there out of strict necessity, exiting as quickly and discretely as possible. Are these fears somewhat exaggerated? Probably. Managua nonetheless remains a dangerous place, both for visitors and full-time residents.

Ironically, people from the towns and cities were similarly afraid of *el monte*

(the bush), which is imagined as a bastion of machete-wielding *Indios* (Indians). City dwellers are terrorized at the idea of finding themselves alone and unarmed in some desolate and hostile place. Young men from the towns are especially reluctant to venture into *el monte*, fearing they will be eventually chased out by a horde of *macheteros*. In May 2006, I invited two of my friends from Nandaime to a *fiesta* being held at Tula's in Rio Chiquito, barely two kilometers outside of town. Although they showed up to the dance, the two men from Nandaime refused to mingle with the rest of the crowd, watching the action from outside. When I told them they should ask some of the girls to dance, they replied that it was a bad idea and that they did not want to get shot. Conversely, my friends from the countryside quickly identified the two men from Nandaime as *vagos* simply because they had piercings, tattoos and wore baggy clothes. Some even commented that the two outsiders were surely drug addicts or thieves.

Although these stereotypes, fuelled by a mutual fright of the unknown, tend to inflate the fears of most Nicaraguans, violence does abound in both rural and urban Nicaragua. While gang violence, armed assaults, and petty theft now plague the cities, blood feuds, drunken brawls, and cattle pilfering still afflict the countryside. Violence is real and can erupt at any time. That being said, it is important not to exaggerate the incidence of violent conflict. Contrary to what many people may believe, most Nicaraguans abhorred violence. Comments such as "*Ni quiera Dios* (May God forbid)," or "*Que barbaridad* (what barbarity)," were often pronounced when violent events were being related on the evening news or when some neighbor recounted the details of a fatal confrontation. During one conversation I had with several men from

La Uva, Evaristo explained his views on violence to the rest of us: “*A mi no me gusta el pleito, no me gusta para nada. Pero si tocan a alguien de mi familia me tengo que meter* (I don’t like fighting, I don’t like it at all. But if they touch (attack) someone from my family then I have to get involved).” Evaristo’s approach to dealing with violent conflict was hardly singular. Men, and women, usually placed an emphasis on self-defense or, more precisely, on *no dejarse* (to not let yourself (get hurt)). When children were sent off to school, parents would tell them not to let others hit them. However, if another child tried to bully or intimidate them, they were encouraged to respond.

A second dictum often preached and practiced by men was the one of *evitar problemas* (avoiding problems). This could mean not getting involved in new quarrels or avoiding the escalation of past disputes. Examples of this included leaving a cantina or fiesta where *enemigos* (enemies) had been spotted, escorting away friends or family members who had lost their composure, providing shelter for outmanned groups in a brawl, and arranging meetings with the family leaders of a rival clan to reduce tension and avoid retaliation.

Yet despite these moderating practices, violent incidents and, at times, even fatalities do occur. During the course of my fieldwork I witnessed several minor scuffles and two instances in which knives were used to settle disputes. The events I have witnessed, however, pale in comparison with the stories of past gun battles and machete duels, some of which date back to the 1960’s and 1970’s, an epoch during which Escalante was commonly known as *El Rastro* (the slaughterhouse). The Dominguez family did not escape these turbulent times, as several members were

implicated in violent incidents. During one *baile* (dance) that took place in the early 1970's, three members of the family were murdered, including Don Martin's father. Cavolino, who was also present, took a bullet in the shoulder and a machete hit to the head. A few years later, one of Cavolino's sons who now lives in Managua, killed another man from the area in a machete duel. In another instance, one of Don Martin's nieces was raped and killed on her way to Escalante by a man she had refused to take as a lover. Several years after that, the deceased woman's son-in-law hunted down and machetied a man who was believed to be his mother-in-law's killer.

Although Escalante may no longer be referred to as "the slaughterhouse" and incidences of murder and armed assault have probably diminished in the area, eruptions of violence still occur with some frequency. Over the last few years, several of the men I have come to know have been involved in, sometimes lethal, altercations. Two of my *compadres* (I had served as godfather during the baptism of their children) were murdered, one in Costa Rica and the other in the Nicaraguan border town of Sapoa. One of Cavolino's nephews was assaulted while unarmed and lost the use of his hands as a result of a machete attack. Pedro Puerta stabbed a man during a brawl. Calixto beat a man with a horsewhip and then was stabbed in the back during another skirmish. One of Dona Amanda's nephews murdered his brother-in-law. Rodrigo was assaulted and hit with a machete in the back. He also stabbed another man in the shoulder. The list of violent deeds goes on and on.

So why, one might ask, does so much violence occur if most men say they are inclined to *evitar problemas* (avoid problems)? To answer this question, several factors must be considered. Some analysts have argued that the wars of the 1970's

and 1980's have de-sensitized the Nicaraguan population to violence. Although this hypothesis may hold some truth, it does not explain the abundance of violence that occurred before the beginning of the Sandinista uprising. Furthermore, it also fails to account for increases in violence in areas that were not directly affected by combat, such as Managua and most of the south-western parts of the country. I believe that if one is to search for an explanation within Nicaragua's historical record, then it is the nation's entire sanguinary history that should be examined as a potential cause for continued bloodshed and aggression. From the butchery of the conquest to the brutalities of colonialism, imperialism, dictatorship, revolution and counter-revolution, Nicaragua, since its inception as an administrative unit of the Spanish empire, has always been a violent place and violent histories can take a long time to overcome. Economic factors, such as increased inequality, widespread poverty, and the lack of significant work opportunities, are also part of the equation.

But in more concrete and immediate terms, it is possible to identify two factors that facilitate violence: the propensity to consume high levels of alcohol and the widespread availability of weapons, most notably firearms and machetes. Disputes are not really caused by alcohol or weapons. It is not because you have a gun in your hand that you will go out and shoot somebody. It is not because you are drunk that you will walk over to the next table and whack another man with a machete. What weapons and alcohol do, however, is increase the likeliness that something serious will happen. When inebriated and in the possession of a gun, it becomes much easier to shoot another man because he shoved you earlier in the evening or because he insulted your brother a few days ago or because he once fought

with your father when you were just a boy. Alcohol and weapons create fatalities out of banal quarrels.

As I mentioned in the previous section, guaro, the raw sugarcane alcohol, is the beverage of choice in rural Nicaragua. It is cheap and is sold in even the most remote communities. Even though most men would rather drink beer, it is financially impossible for them to do so on a regular basis. Furthermore, men often consume guaro in staggering amounts. Although most drunks can be erratic, highly susceptible, and rowdy, I can personally attest that guaro creates a more pronounced reaction, say, than the heavy consumption of wine or beer. Feelings of hate and aggression easily erupt; insults can be quickly pronounced; memory blanks frequently occur; and actions that one would hesitate to proceed with can be carried out without thinking; rapidly turning an evening of fun into a delicate situation. This is where weapons come in. Men often claim they carry weapons for protection or to be used only for self-defense. Some men even refuse to carry weapons or, in the case of Rodrigo, firearms. "*Es que no puedo caminar pistola* (It's that I can't carry a gun)," Rodrigo once told me. "*Con mi caracter, me comprometo rapido con una pistola* (with my personality, I would compromise myself quickly with a gun)."

But not all share Rodrigo's views of guns as dangerous objects that can transform a small dispute into a critical situation. Young men, in particular, were enamored with guns, some even going as far as selling a cow or an ox to purchase a firearm. But once in the possession of a gun, a man is less likely to back down from a dispute, thinking the odds of winning any confrontation are in his favor. He becomes less likely to want to *evitar problemas* (avoid problems). When problems do occur,

the first reaction of many families is to purchase a handgun. "*Asi no los van ayar con las manos vacillas* (That way we won't be caught empty-handed)," I was often told. But the fine line between self-defense and escalation can be easily crossed. Let us examine the events that took place during a Sunday evening in April 2006 in Escalante to better grasp these implications.

Calixto and I arrived at El Tubo around seven o'clock. The cantina was full of men and because Morales, the cattle trader, was celebrating his daughter's *quinze anos* (fifteenth birthday) just next door, the whole area was flooded with people. When Calixto and I walked into the bar, we ordered a beer and sat down with Ismael and a group of his friends. At the next table, Tinon, a tall man from the area, was drinking with a friend of his. Tinon was obviously drunk. Upon spotting me, he immediately called out "*Oy Chele comprame una media* (Hey whitey, buy me a quart of booze)." "*Esperate* (Wait)," I told him, acting as if I had hardly heard him. But Tinon was persistent, shouting repeatedly: "*Oy hombre, regalame una cerveza pues* (Hey man, give me a beer then)." Calixto turned over to me and told me to ignore him, something that was becoming increasingly difficult to do. After downing our beers, we decided to leave the cantina and instead check out the scene at the fiesta next door. As Morales introduced us to a few of his guests, loud noises came out of El Tubo. The music at Morales' was stopped and several screams were heard coming from the cantina. Immediately, El Tubo emptied out, with several people running for cover. As tension filled the night, people began hypothesizing about what had happened. "*Se agarraron los Ramirez con Tinon* (The Ramirez got into a fight with Tinon)," one man said. "*Jodieron a uno* (They messed one of them up)," he

continued. Sure enough, Tinon came stumbling out of El Tubo with a large machete in his hands and blood streaming from his forehead before collapsing about ten yards away from where we were sitting. "*Lo mataron* (They killed him)," a woman screamed, causing more women to start screaming. Calixto had a concerned look on his face. "*Quiero ir a buscar a Ismael* (I want to go look for Ismael)," he said. After scurrying around, we finally found Ismael with his friends across the road at Leticia's. Since they had been in the cantina when the brawl erupted, they keyed us in on what happened. Apparently, Tinon and Jorge Ramirez (Miguel Ramirez's son) had rubbed shoulders. Jorge Ramirez had pushed the other man back, causing him to stumble. Tinon had then gotten up, pulled a machete out of his pants, and took a swing at Jorge. At that point, Miguel Ramirez stepped in, blocking the machete with a chair, causing Tinon to fall once again. This time however, he was not given time to get up and was hit in the head several times with beer bottles, which caused his forehead to bleed. But Miguel Ramirez was also hurt. When he blocked the machete hit with the metal chair, his middle finger was cut off. After a few minutes, things calmed down. El Tubo was closed for the night but Morales' fiesta continued. A few hours later, Miguel Ramirez was back at the fiesta drinking a beer, with a handkerchief covering the remnants of his finger. "*Lo jodieron* (They messed you up)?" I asked him. "*Si hombre*," he answered. "*Pero ahora ando preparado* (But now I'm prepared)," he said as he lightly tapped a bulge in his shirt just above his waist, where the contours of a large gun could be devised.

I am unaware if there existed any prior enmity between Tinon and the Ramirez. What is evident, though, was that sooner or later, Tinon's belligerence,

which can be deliberately attributed to his inebriated state, was going to get him in trouble. When he put a machete inside his pants before leaving home, Tinon probably did not do it with the clear intention of attacking someone later on that night. Nonetheless, the fact that he had a machete with him inside the cantina, which is prohibited, probably added to his brashness that evening. If Tinon had not been carrying a weapon the fight may not have been avoided. The end result of the confrontation, though, most likely would have been a fistfight. However, if Miguel Ramirez had had his gun with him, the end result of the altercation may have been much more severe. If incidents are allowed to escalate in the heat of the moment, when it is difficult for men to think about the long-term effects of their actions, the results may be tragic. But if time is allowed to pass following a confrontation, there is a good chance cooler heads will prevail. Unfortunately, the consumption of guaro and the presence of guns often make the escalation of violence all too easy.

3) Sexual Infidelity

Discussions about male and female sexuality were hot topics in many Nicaraguan households, as allegations about what was proper sexual behavior for both sexes were often made. Although numerous ideas about male and female sexuality are clearly in circulation and could be collected by a social scientist to create a "Nicaraguan sexual ideology," no actual consensus or complete hegemony of belief exists regarding what is right and what is wrong for men and women to do in their bedrooms or in others. Louis Althusser makes an important point in his dissertation on the concept of ideology, stating that "...all ideology represents in its necessarily imaginary distortion is not the existing relations of production (and the

other relations that derive from them), but above all the (imaginary) relations of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that drive from them (1971:1965).” Therefore, it is not the existing relationships that are recreated in ideological apparatuses, but the ones individuals imagine constituting their lives. These imaginings, though, as Althusser points out, have concrete material repercussions, as ideology is, at the same time, real and materially grounded in everyday practice.

In the case at hand, ideology both fails and succeeds as a coercive force. Althusser was mainly concerned with the relations between the proletariat and capital. But to claim that ideology only works in the realm of economics would be preposterous. Ideas about sexuality and gender have long been invested with power and have been used to maintain existing economic relations or create new ones. In the case of rural Nicaragua, certain ideas that favor male philandering and female fidelity were well incrustated. However, no matter how powerful, these ideas of sexual propriety were not accepted by all. Some opposed them on theoretical grounds while others simply ignored them in their actions.

In general terms, Nicaraguan sexual ideology defends and encourages the continuation of what is commonly known in North America as the “double-standard.” Women are expected to be faithful to their husbands while men are granted sexual freedom. Women who have multiple sexual partners are marginalized while men who do the same are put on a pedestal. Several local speech expressions reflect these norms: “*El hombre no pierde nada* (Men have nothing to lose);” “*Despues del hecho, el hombre solo se bana y queda lo mismo mientras que la mujer no* (After the act, a

man only has to bathe to stay the same, while a woman is changed);” and, “*La que come, caga* (She who eats, defecates, i.e. the woman that has sex will give birth to a child).” The alleged physiological advantages of males during sexual intercourse are often referred to in these dictums: men can go freely while women can become pregnant; men penetrate while women are penetrated. Many men, whether out of convenience or genuine belief, and quite a few women supported these notions.

Rodrigo gives us his (somewhat extreme) opinion on the matter:

La mujer tiene que aguantarse. Porque? Para no darse a malvaler antes la sociedad, antes sus hijos, antes su familia propiamente. Porque una mujer que anda con un hombre y otro y otro, ya eso no sirve. Ya mejor dicho se pone guera. Ya nadie en realidad, Ud. sabe muy bien que cuando un queso se pudre, nadie lo quiere comer. Asi mismo pasa con la mujer amigo. Ya cuando la mujer tiene uno y tiene otro, ya hasta tufo echan si possible... La mujer que anda con uno y otro pierde su prestigio.

(The woman has to be able not to let herself go. Why? So not to devalue herself in society, with her children, and with her own family. Because a woman that is with one man and then another and another, loses her value. In other words, she goes bad. No one (wants her). You know very well that when a piece of cheese goes bad, nobody wants to eat it. The same thing happens with a woman. When a woman has one man, then another, and another she even starts to reek... The woman that goes with one and then another loses her prestige).

I also discussed this topic with Tono, who provides us with a broader, if less descriptive, outline of popular beliefs regarding sex, which of course he claims as his own.

Samuel: What do you think of a man who has several women at the same time?

Tono: It isn't bad.

S: If you could, would you be with more than one woman?

T: Yes man.

S: And a woman who has many men at the same time?

T: That's different. It's bad.

S: Would you ever “run away” (back down) from a woman ?

T: No

S: And if you have a woman and she cheats on you, what would you do?

T: I'd leave her. A man can have another woman but not a woman.

S: So if you catch her in the act, who would you be mad with?

T: With her. Women *tienen mas culpa* (are more guilty). It's up to them to see if they let themselves get seduced and fall. The man makes you mad but more the woman. Men talk to women but if she doesn't want to, nothing happens. *Si se deja enamorar es porque quiere* (If she lets herself get seduced, it's because she wants to).

According to Tono, the onus is on women to resist the sexual advances of men. Furthermore, he feels that men should be allowed to have several sexual partners but not vice-versa. Several men shared Tono's opinions, but most of the time, they had difficulty finding good reasons to justify their beliefs. Here are some of the responses I collected: Antonio (Tula's youngest son) told me it was different for a man than for a woman to have multiple sexual partners since a woman who was with many men was a *zorra* (whore) and could get AIDS; his older brother Gerardo also said it was different, telling me a woman could become pregnant while a man would not; Ernesto was of the same opinion, citing the "bathing" dictum mentioned earlier as evidence; Pedro Puerta said it was written in the Bible somewhere that men could have up to seven women; and finally Mauricio said men could be with more than one woman while women had to keep to a single man but could not tell me why it was the case, saying "*quien sabe* (who knows)," when I pressed for an explanation.

Although some older women agreed with male positions on the issue, usually claiming they were not interested in their husband's doings, most of the younger women I talked to had a different opinion on the matter. They felt that sexual infidelity was what it was, whether committed by a man or a woman. If their husbands would not tolerate them having an affair with another man, then why should they excuse their escapades? According to Marlene, the bottom line was that men *solo quieren hacer las cosas ellos* (only wanted to do be able to do things) and that is

why *todos los hombres son bandidos* (all men are swindlers). As for Maria, she swore she would leave Calixto if he ever cheated her. Finally, Lissett, one of Tula's daughters, said there was no difference between male and female sexual infidelity since it caused both men and women to suffer equally.

But despite this nascent opposition to the sexual double-standard, many men continued, at the very least, to desire multiple sexual partners. Few of them, however, had the necessary financial resources to maintain several households. So, except for the occasional fling or "easy opportunity" that came their way, Nicaraguan men were largely monogamous. Among the men I worked with, Evaristo was the only one to maintain steady relationships with two women. My feeling is that he was only able to do this because his sons took care of an overwhelming portion of their household's necessities. By comparison, Ricardo was unable to keep a similar arrangement going after he met a woman in Costa Rica during a sugarcane expedition. After brief attempts to "juggle" his two relationships, Ricardo finally had to renounce his romance with the Costa Rican woman when Luisa pressured him to make a decision. That most men are unable to simultaneously maintain steady relationships with more than one woman, however, does not mean they are never unfaithful to their companions. Men would often say that they would never "run away" from a woman, which meant that if a woman ever made any advances to them, they felt compelled to accept them. Even Don Francisco, Rodrigo's father, who has now passed away but was well into his seventies at the time of my fieldwork, once told me: "*Yo nunca me le voy a correr a una mujer aunque solo los pelos del vicho le pueda escupir* (I'll never run from a woman even if the only thing I can do is spit on her pussy hairs)."

However, what most men failed to acknowledge, was that if they all had multiple sexual partners, then the odds were pretty good that at least some women were also involved with more than one man. Female sexual infidelity also took place in Nicaragua and although some men dealt with it violently or by leaving their spouses, many others did very little to alleviate the situation. Indeed, men would often say that it was *malo hablar* (bad to talk) when matters such as sexual infidelity were brought up. Essentially, what this meant was that making extravagant claims or simply speaking with bravado about how one would deal with an adulterous spouse was a dangerous game since many men had later come to regret their words of earlier bravery. Although it is quite possible that certain men never found out about their wives' adventures, other cases were too well publicized for the men in question never to have gotten wind of the affairs. One such instance is recorded in my conversation with Dona Ana, who once surprised her daughter-in-law, who is commonly known as Ana Negra (Black Ana), with another man:

When I went to Nandaime, I usually stayed at Damari and Rodrigo's, who lived in a small house adjacent to the town park. Dona Ana, a woman in her mid-fifties from a nearby community, would often go over to Damari's to help her wash and iron clothes. If she worked late into the afternoon, she would usually stay the night, leaving the following morning. On this particular January evening, I began asking Dona Ana about her sons, who I had gotten to know a few years earlier. As we sat in the kitchen waiting for the supper Damari was preparing, Dona Ana updated me on all her children. Some were still around, others had gone to Costa Rica and now only came back for short visits once or twice a year. Antonio, her oldest son, still lived next door with his wife Ana and their six children. Dona Ana was not impressed with her twin teenage granddaughters, whom she simply referred to as *las gemelas* (the twins). "Those girls," she said, "only live to live. They can't even cook a pot of rice." "But that's their mother's fault," Damari intervened, referring to Ana Negra. Dona Ana shook her head slowly, acknowledging the validity of the young woman's words before launching into a diatribe of her daughter-in-law. "I thought," she said sourly, "that when she joined the evangelical faith, she would get rid of that ugly habit of hers, but I was wrong." "*A la gallina que coma huevos, ni que le corten el pico* (the hen that eats eggs won't stop even if they cut off her beak)," Damari once

again interjected. The ugly habit Dona Ana was referring to was her daughter-in-law's propensity for *andar con hombres* (being with men). According to Dona Ana, as soon as Antonio would get drunk and hit the cantinas, which inevitably happened at least once a week, some of his so-called friends would run over to his house in the cover of the night to sleep with Ana Negra. "One night, I couldn't fall asleep," Dona Ana recounted. "It was a Saturday and Antonio was drinking. Suddenly, I heard laughter come out of his home: 'ha, ha, ha, ha.'" "What's this," I thought to myself. A few minutes later, I heard it again. After going back inside, I heard Patricio (her eight-year old grandson) crying and hitting the ground with a machete. "What is going on here," I asked the boy, but he didn't answer me. "*Quiero defender a mi padre* (I want to defend my father)," the child had screamed." Dona Ana began fearing for the worst, thinking her son had been cut in a brawl. "But what is going on here," she asked the *jemelas*, who had now also come outside. The girls explained to their grand-mother that they had surprised their mother with another man inside their home, but instead of chasing the man out or pretending nothing was going on, Ana Negra had accompanied her lover into the woods upon being discovered by her children. "At that point," Dona Ana continued, "I told the kids to go and get their father." A few minutes later, Ana Negra came out of the woods. Dona Ana, extremely upset with her daughter-in-law's behavior, scolded the woman, telling her she should *respetar a su marido y a sus hijos* (respect her husband and her children). "And then I told her I was going to let Antonio know about everything, but instead of acting repentantly, she told me to shut up. At that point, I couldn't take anymore and went back to bed."

The next morning, Antonio went over to visit his mother who counseled her son on how he should behave. "I told him it was time he stopped drinking guaro and started to look after his children and his shack. I told him those so-called friends of his weren't his friends. Someone who gives you a shot of liquor isn't your friend. A friend is someone who invites you to a bit of food, who gives a pair of slippers if you have nothing in your feet, someone who gives you a pair of pants. And he just sat there without saying anything. Of the seven sons I have, not one has ever talked back or been rude to me. Even that drunkard Antonio. One day he was drinking with a bunch of men and they were blasting this radio. I felt that radio was next to my ear. I couldn't take it anymore. Finally, I got up and went and told him: "Son, shut that thing off and let these men regain their homes because it isn't a cantina here. I'm tired, I work all day and I need to rest." And you know what he said?: "Mother, here is my belt, hit me." And I answered back: "Son, I will punish you but not right now because it is not the time or place to do such things."

Meanwhile, Ana Negra had been bracing for the worst, expecting her mother-in-law would fulfill her threats and tell Antonio about what she had been up to. "When I ran into her later on in the day," Dona Ana explained, "she was with the *jemelas*. When they saw me they came up to where I was and Ana Negra shouted out: "*Ayi esta la 22-22 rapido y veloz* (Here is 22-22 quick and speedy, referring to the famous news program)." After that, even the *jemelas* began calling me 22-22, saying to people I was as quick as the news to report things. This only stopped when I finally told those silly girls that if they kept it up I would leave them with a swollen face. A few days later, I met Antonio's oldest daughter who now lives with her husband

down the road. She told me that she had wanted to tell her father about what was going on but couldn't find the courage either. I told those girls that if anyone was going to tell him it would have to be them. I'm worried that *por ella se puede desgraciar mi hijo* (that for her my son will disgrace himself). He would probably not do anything to her but if he found another man there with her he might end up in jail or, worse, in the graveyard. I even went over to talk to the father of the boy that was with her. "I know that a man is a man," I told him, "and if he finds her easy on a road, that is one thing. But please tell your son not to go to Antonio's house. I don't want any problems because of that woman."

Obviously, Dona Ana did not like her daughter-in-law and had even exchanged blows with her on one occasion. However, she was hardly the only person who accused Ana Negra of adultery. With six children and an alcoholic husband, it was rumored that Ana Negra was willing to exchange sex for money, sometimes even sending her children to collect fees before they were due. Although few instances of female infidelity were as widely publicized as the one involving Ana Negra and Antonio, many men continued to live with their spouses even while knowing they had been unfaithful at one time or another. Obviously, women faced a much greater level of social ostracism and public criticism if their adulterous escapades became public knowledge and it would probably be accurate to hypothesize that more men were unfaithful to their wives than the other way around. What is important to remember, though, is that the game of "informal polygamy" involved many players, both male and female. How such acts were dealt with, be they committed by a man or a woman, largely depended on the individuals that made up the affected couple. In some cases, there were violent reprisals by both men and women (a man I knew from Escalante was stabbed in the arm by his wife when she found out he had a mistress), while in others the couple continued to co-exist, at least publicly, as if nothing had happened; while yet in others the spouses stayed together but fought constantly and openly. That

many men had at one time or another had sexual liaisons with women other than their wives is undeniable. Nonetheless, to assume they could act with impunity in such matters would be erroneous.

The Morning After

I woke up around six-thirty a.m. The sun was already bright and the mud that had formed the previous evening was slowly beginning to dry up. Mauricio was already out and about, gathering firewood, getting the fire started and making some coffee. “*Como amanecio* (How did you wake)?” he asked me as I got out of bed. “*Bien*,” I answered, feeling the beginnings of a headache. “*Y la goma* (And your hangover)?” Mauricio inquired. “*Ahi esta la goma* (It’s there),” I answered. “*Pues la vamos a sacar* (Then we’ll get rid of it),” the man said. Grabbing the pepsi bottle that contained the liquor, Mauricio poured two shots into porcelain mugs that were usually used for coffee. As we were about to down our first shot of the day, Selena walked into the sala. “*Y eh!*” she exclaimed, “*Uds piensan empezar de vuelta* (You guys think you’re going to start again).” “*No este de loca* (don’t go crazy),” Mauricio told his wife, “*solo los estamos sacando la goma* (We’re only getting rid of our hangovers).” “*Asi empiezan* (That’s how you start),” the young woman retorted, “*y terminan picado* (and you end up drunk).”

After sipping our coffees, having a cigarette and downing another shot, we decided to go and see how Ernesto was coping after last night’s tumultuous events. Ernesto was in rough shape, lying on a tijera Marlene had put up for him. “*Y como esta mi amigo* (how’s my friend)?” I asked Ernesto as we walked into his house. “*Hecho verga, cavo* (Made a dick (In rough shape), guy),” he answered in a raspy

voice. "*Hechate un trago* (You should have a shot)," Mauricio suggested. Ernesto nodded, accepting his brother's offer. "*Anda traerme un vaso* (Go and get me a cup)," the man ordered his daughter. When the girl came back with a plastic cup, her father poured himself a hefty dose of *la medicina* (the medicine, guaro) and drank it in one swig. Ernesto immediately jumped out of his bed and ran for the door, where he started to vomit. When Ernesto came back into the house, he was covered in sweat. "*Ando hecho turqua* (I'm made a dick, i.e. I'm in rough shape)," he repeated as he lay back down on the bed. Marlene, who was now covering her husband's vomit with ashes, could no longer hold her tongue: "*Eso queria ese hombre* (That's what this man wanted). I send him out to buy a pound of meat but that was too difficult for him to do. He had to stay in town and get drunk with those whores. That's where he spends his money instead of feeding his children. We just came back from the hospital and this idiot's already spending what he doesn't have. And on top of that you lost your *vaqueta* (leather cloth used to cover a saddle). I want to see you buying a new one. *Que desgracia de hombre* (What a disgrace of a man)." "*Ya esta mujer* (Enough woman)," Ernesto whimpered meekly, finding nothing else to say. Mauricio and I simply sat there, not saying a word either. After an uncomfortable silence filled the room for another minute or so, Marlene, still fuming, stormed off to the well. We had another shot of guaro. This time, Ernesto was able to hold his liquor. But our mood had changed. It was time to stop. Mauricio went back home shortly thereafter, while Ernesto fell asleep on his *tijera*. I wandered over to the river for a quick wash before coming back to nap in Ernesto's hammock for the rest of the morning.

After every night of *vagancia*, the morning after was a difficult time.

Headaches had to be treated, women had to be placated, and the damages of the previous night had to be accounted for. Upon returning to their households, men were confronted by their spouses, mothers, sisters, or fathers. Explanations were required and reproaches were made. Who ordered you to go out and get drunk? Are you a rich man that you spend all that money buying booze? Why do you give your money to those whores when we have so many needs here in the home? When are you going to take your responsibilities seriously? When are you going to make a man out of yourself? Once *vagancia* was over, it was time to make amends, to work twice as hard, to walk the line. Although *vagancia* usually took place outside of the home, its consequences were always felt within it. Excessive *vagancia* could lead to debt, the making of enemies, or the loss of a marriage. The repercussions of drinking, philandering, and fighting could be extremely grave. The social problems caused by alcoholism, violence both in and out of the home, and sexual infidelity were real and in great need of attention. It is nonetheless important to keep in mind that *vagancia* was something men did, not something they were. Although gender-based abuses were often most manifested in the realm of *vagancia* or, perhaps more appropriately, in who could and who could not engage in *vagancia*, we cannot reduce the entire lives or personas of men to a few occasional acts, to nights of carelessness that took place once or twice a month on average. We should also remember that *vagancia* occupied varying degrees of importance in the lives of men. Although some men dedicated their lives to being *vago*, for most it was simply something they did in their spare time and, as documented in the previous chapters, most of the time, they were preoccupied with things of much greater importance.

8. Conclusion

The Morning After Continued

But things did not end as quietly as we first thought on that mid-November Monday morning. At around 11am, Evaristo and Calixto showed up again, this time with Melo, a short thirty-something man from Escalante who earned his living as a *coyote* (he smuggled people into Nicaragua) at the Costa Rican border. Instead of heading home, Evaristo and Calixto had kept drinking and had met up with Melo early in the morning. They rode up on their horses at full speed before abruptly stopping a few yards before Ernesto's house. Melo, who was barely holding on, fell off from the back of Evaristo's horse and ripped his shirt when it got caught on the rider's left spur. His face full of dust, Melo picked himself off of the ground, cursing Evaristo: "*Hijuelaranputa!* (Son of the great whore)," he shouted, "*me botaste jodido* (you made me fall, you prick)." But instead of taking offense, the men started laughing. After dismounting, Calixto called me over, offering me a shot. I took a swig out of the bottle before passing it on to Ernesto, who did likewise but once again was unable to hold his liquor. We sat down on some logs outside of Ernesto's, talking and smoking cigarettes. Ernesto and Calixto did not seem to remember the previous night's events. They talked calmly and amicably to each other as if nothing had ever happened. The bottle was almost empty. "*Mandamos a comprar mas* (Should we send someone to buy more booze)?" Calixto inquired. "*Ya no quiero guaro* (I don't want anymore guaro)," Ernesto replied. Melo, who did not worry about such things, kept drinking. Soon, he was the drunkest of the lot. Evaristo and Calixto began teasing the man, purposely enlarging the rip in his shirt. "*Y que le paso a tu camisa* (And what

happened to your shirt)?" Calixto would repeatedly ask the little man, who would scream back incessantly: "*Me vale turqua* (I don't give a dick)!!!"

After about half-an-hour, having no more liquor, our companions began to tire and lose interest in our gathering. Melo, no longer able to walk, simply collapsed in the shade of a mango tree. Evaristo went inside and lay down on the tijera that Ernesto had previously occupied. Calixto and I decided to go and take a look at the rice we were supposed to cut. It was not quite ready, not having fully dried. We would have to wait another week. "*Ya me voy* (I'm leaving)," Calixto muttered, climbing back onto his horse and riding off into the hills.

When I got back to Ernesto's, Melo was still lying in the shade. After napping for a couple of hours, Ernesto and I strapped the oxen onto the cart and went to Escalante to pick up a bed my friend had purchased from the local carpenter. Upon reaching Escalante, Ernesto remembered Melo was still lying on the ground next to his house. "*La cagamos* (We shat it)," he said, "*los hubieramos traído a Melo en la carreta* (we should have brought Melo in the cart)." When we got back to El Descanso, some two hours later, Melo was now lying in the sun. He had thrown up, rolled into his vomit, and subsequently covered himself with a mixture of bile and dust. "*Pobrecito ese maje* (Poor guy)," Ernesto exclaimed when he saw the man covered in puke, "*quitemolo del sol* (let's get him out of the sun)." We each picked up one of Melo's extremities and carried him back onto Ernesto's veranda where at least he would be in the shade.

When night finally came and we were about to go to bed, Melo regained consciousness. "*Ayyyyy!*" he screamed, "*me estoy quemando* (I'm burning)." "*Esa es*

la goma (That's the hangover)," Ernesto said, "*ese hombre tiene la sangre alcoholizada* (that man's blood is alcoholised)." After passing Melo a cup of water, Ernesto asked him if he wanted to eat something. "*Lo que quiero es banarme* (what I want is to bathe)," Melo answered. Ernesto told the drunken man that bathing was not a good idea, that his hot blood could be paralyzed by the cold water. He should instead go back to sleep on a mattress that had been set up for him in the sala. But Melo was adamant. He wanted to bathe. So we went to the well and pulled up a bucket of water, which the man from Escalante quickly splashed onto his pungent body. Melo, however, did not seem to feel better and started trembling when he went back to bed. "*Pobrecito*," Ernesto said to me, "*si todos somos humanos, le voy a buscar unas covijas* (poor guy, after all we're all human. Let me get him some blankets)." But despite Ernesto's care, Melo's cries persisted throughout the night as his *goma* would not subside.

Machos and Macheteros

In producing this ethnography, my foremost goal was to show that Nicaraguan men lived their manhood in terms of the social and economic relations in which they are enmeshed and did not, as numerous ethnographies suggest, only perform their masculinity in symbolic worlds. Although men in Nicaragua are sometimes forced to act in ways to save face or to please a certain audience, could this not be said about all human beings? Cultural conventions the world over require individuals to behave in particular ways and not others depending on the situation at hand. Nicaraguan men, women, and children are no different. They have their own codes of conduct that are usually, but not always, followed. They have their own ways of understanding

behavior and interpreting situations. Although social pressure may require Nicaraguan men to act in certain ways and not others, they are never forced to do anything. Some get drunk and chase women because they want to and, at times, because they can. Men who do not drink profusely or take on lovers are still men and, depending on whose opinion is solicited, could be considered even manlier than those regularly involved in *vagancia*. My research supports the argument that *la necesidad* (economic necessity) is the factor that most influences the behavior of both men and women in Nicaragua. Because of the always-difficult and sometimes-dire material conditions the great majority of Nicaraguans are faced with, they are forced to make decisions and take actions that will ensure the survival of their households. Many men still die because they continue to cut sugarcane even when their lungs, kidneys, or other organs are beginning to give out due to the strenuous nature of their work. To this day, men continue to lose limbs working in the bush. They are no longer coerced to do these types of work as they were in the days of debt peonage but the alternatives are even less enticing. These are the real issues men struggle with in their lives, not whether they drank more rum, fought more men, slept with more women, or displayed more bravado than any other men.

A second objective in this thesis was to present the complexity and the different contexts in which rural Nicaraguan men live their everyday lives. Obviously, many activities important to men in south-western Nicaragua were not discussed or were only slightly addressed. The relationships men had with their children, the importance of religion in their lives, how they dealt with death, how business deals were brokered, how men related to their mothers, and even how they

joked with each other are all aspects of men's lives that need to be looked at in further detail for us to paint a more complete picture of life in the hills. What I was able to do in this thesis was present some ethnographic evidence on three segments of men's lives, two of which, household relations and work, have received little attention in the literature but are of preeminent importance in the lives of Nicaraguan men. The performance of *vagancia*, on the other hand, has often been overemphasized by scholars of Nicaragua and masculinity. *Vagancia*, as I have argued, has often been used by scholars to provide evidence for theories of machismo and performative masculinity and has yet to be looked at from the perspective of those who perform it, as a means for men to relax and temporarily relieve themselves from the everyday pressures they are faced with.

Another intention of this study was to display the diversity in behavior and ideas that exists at the local level in rural Nicaragua. In the theoretical context that has reigned in examinations of gender in Nicaragua, where many have supported the idea of machismo as a dominant system of relations based on symbolic value that establishes the possibilities for interaction between and among the genders, it is important to remember that not all men act alike or want to live in the same manner as their neighbors or brothers. The pressures men are faced with in their daily lives stem more from existing material conditions and the demands and desires of the specific individuals they live and work with than from a desire to adhere to certain cultural codes of gendered comportment.

Having said this, it is also crucial in any analysis of gender relations to account for the imbalances in power and opportunity between the sexes. One of my

principal arguments was that such inequalities could be better understood by examining everyday events in men's lives rather than searching for a common cultural ethos such as masculinity. In Nicaragua, as the work of other scholars, most notably Elizabeth Dore, have shown us, the roots of gender inequality run deep. Since colonial times, the state has played a key role in attempting to mold relations between men and women both in and out of the home.

But despite these efforts there is no monolithic domination of women by men in rural Nicaraguan households. Although men may generally hold more decision-making power than their spouses, especially in matters judged crucial to household maintenance, women also exert substantial influence within the home. Men work for their households and consider it their responsibility to meet the material necessities of their wives and children. However, it is also true that where women were totally dependent on men for their livelihood, they tended to exert less authority. In situations of crisis, as in the case when Damari returned to live with Rodrigo after two months of separation because she did not want her two daughters to be a financial burden on her parents or when Luisa took Ricardo back after he had impregnated her teenage niece, women without steady incomes or economic opportunities seemed to have fewer options in making independent decisions about their own lives. Changing such an ideational and economic regime is not easy and will not be accomplished overnight. It is a process, however, that has slowly begun, as younger women now stay in school longer, hold down better jobs, contest old ideas of male privilege and think of themselves as workers more frequently.

But in order to address inequalities, we must start by understanding where

they stem from. In rural Nicaragua, men develop gender identities that are intrinsically linked with the type of labor they perform and not the petty privileges they are believed to enjoy. In La Uva, men saw themselves as *agricultores* (farmers) or *macheteros* (machete workers) and not as *vagos*. It is difficult to “fight against machismo” (Daily Heyck, 2002) if none of the men who supposedly benefit from this system of gender relations consider themselves as *machos*. More than any symbolic transactions of power between the genders, it is the economic underpinnings of gender inequality that make possible its continued existence. When a sexual division of labor is crosscut by a capitalist monetary system of exchange, men end up producing wealth while women reproduce the work force. It is as the producers of wealth that men enjoyed a greater access to cash, more clout in making decisions, and more freedom in action. In households like Tula’s, Miriam’s, Dona Julia’s, and Concha’s, where women made greater contributions than any single man to the upkeep of the home, more equal relations existed between the sexes. But even in those homes, the sexual division of labor was reproduced as young boys were taught *trabajos de hombres* and young girls shown how to properly execute *trabajos de mujeres*. If power relations within the home are to be more equal in the future, then it is important to begin realizing that men draw their privileged positions from the material realities in their lives and not from the ideological discourses that surround them.

Melo’s Morning After

When I woke up at five-thirty a.m., I went over to check on Melo. No longer agonizing on his mattress, Melo had tied up one of Ricardo’s cows and was drinking

milk straight from the teat. "*Ya me siento mejor* (I feel much better)," the man said between gulps. Reassured, I went back to Ernesto's where Marlene was making some coffee. As for Melo, he went over to Mauricio's where Selena gave him a plate of *gallo pinto*. When he came back to Ernesto's, we were sharpening our machetes, getting ready for another day of work. "*Ahora si me siento de tiro* (Now I really feel good)," Melo exclaimed, "*voy a seguir tomando* (I'm going to keep drinking)." Ernesto, not believing what he had just heard, looked up and told the man: "*Hombre Melo, me gustaria ser como vos. Es que vos no tenes nada para preocuparte. No tenes una huerta, no tenes un chancho, nada. Porque no puedo ser asi* (Melo, man, I'd really like to be like you. It's that you don't have any preoccupations. You don't have a field, you don't have a pig, nothing. Why can't I be like that)? Taking a cigarette out of Ernesto's pack and lighting it, Melo answered with a smile: "*Es que vos tene esas dos chiquitas* (It's that you have those two little ones)." And with that, he was gone.

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Glossary

The glossary comprises Spanish words and expressions that appear frequently in the text.

- a media*: in partnership, in association
abajo: below, expression used to designate households and communities that are situated to the west of La Uva
andar de vago: being up to no good
(el) barrio: neighbourhood or small community, commonly used to refer to village of Escalante
cantina: tavern, establishment where alcohol is sold, sometimes situated in owner's house and frequented mostly by men
cantinera (o): bartender, person in charge of cantina, usually a woman
(la) casa: house, home
chaguite: field where plantain trees are planted
cuajada: homemade cheese
dias cambiados: practice whereby agricultural workers exchange workdays
duro: hard, tough
espeque: long wooden stick with metal point or carved wooden point used to make holes in ground when planting grain
evitar problemas: to avoid problems, practice commonly preached by men when they go to public events
fiesta: party, public celebration
gallera: cockfight, also refers to ring where cockfight is held
gallo pinto: local dish made up of combination of refried beans and rice
goma: hangover
guaro: locally produced sugarcane liquor
hombre: man, manly, also used by women to refer to husband
huerta: field where a crop is planted
invierno: winter, rainy season
jefe de familia: family boss, head of household
(la) luz: light, electricity
machetero: machete worker, designation applied to most agricultural laborers
macho: male mule
mandar: to send, to direct, to command
manzana: unit of measurement used to measure land, 1 manzana is +/- equivalent to 10,000 square yards
(una) media: equivalent to 400ml, smallest quantity guaro is purchased in
(un) medio: 15 pounds, standard quantity used to buy and sell grain
montado: cowboy, worker charged with overseeing cattle
(el) monte: the bush
mozo: day labourer
mujer vaga: woman thought to be readily available for sex
mula: female mule

odiosa (o): hateful, cruel
patio: are surrounding a house, usually made up of packed earth
primera: first planting season, from May to August
postrera: second planting season, from September to December
quebrada: creek or stream located where two hills meet
quintal: 100 pounds, unit of measurement used for grain and other foods
ramada: temporary wooden structure covered with wheat stalks used to store corn during dry season
restrojo: field covered by small vegetation
roconola: jukebox
rozado: field being cleared of vegetation in order to be planted
sala: hybrid living/dining room in rural houses, where most socializing takes place
sembrador: plastic container used to store grain while planting
suave: soft, easy
tacotal: field covered by large vegetation including mature trees
tarea: unit by which manzana is subdivide (16 tareas = 1 manzana)
tijera: scissors, wooden bed frame covered with nylon, legs of bed fold open and closed like a pair of scissors
(el) tiempo de abajo: meteorological front emanating from the Pacific Ocean and characterized by continuous rainfall
trabajos de hombre: man's work, used to refer to agricultural labor
trabajos de mujer: woman's work, used to refer to household chores
trago: a shot of liquor
(El) Tubo: most popular cantina in Escalante
vagancia: term used to categorize activities that are deemed unproductive, can also be used to refer to vice
(un) vago: delinquent
verano: summer, dry season