

Cultural, Educational, and Historical Origins of Costa Rican and Nicaraguan Intercultural Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed how Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans construct national stereotypes as represented by their respective school curricula, and the ways these stereotypes contribute to intercultural conflict. Through an ethnographic study, I assessed the impact of history textbooks, common discourse, and everyday practices in the two countries on culture, identity, and stereotypes while analyzing how they are imbued with unexamined assumptions.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a diverse community where every person treats his or her fellow human beings with respect. As we know, many human beings live in this depicted harmony. They may not agree on every issue, but they live without discriminating. However, in most pluralistic societies, prejudice exists that hinders the opinions of the citizens in the community. These biases often transpire into the foundation of conflict between the people of the society. Such intercultural conflict is defined as the perceived or actual incompatibility of values, norms, processes, or goals between a minimum of two cultures over content, identity, relational, and procedural issues.¹ This conflict is exacerbated due to the search for identity through individualism, collectivism and nationalism. Although generally not detrimental to those involved, intercultural conflict can and has led to unequal treatment and discrimination between two or more cultures.

Nationalism is a concept that promotes strong values and patriotism, in turn, uniting a community. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson suggests that nations are “imagined political communities” because, however committed the community feels to each other, the reality is that most of the people will never meet, much less hear of each other; yet, they all imagine themselves as one people.² In this manner, “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”³

Individualistic and collectivistic characteristics represent peoples’ individual identities or group identities as a whole. Ethnic groups that follow their cultural traditions, such as Africans, Asians, Latinos/as, and Native Americans, tend to subscribe to forms of collectivistic values more than European Americans.⁴ In the case of intercultural conflict between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, each state wishes to manifest their collective identity through expression of culminated opinions and the protection of its own people. In this way, they express their national pride.

Intercultural conflicts like that which is observed in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, imbued with individualism, collectivism, strong nationalism or ethnocentrism, have been occurring for many years as seen between Israelites and Palestinians. The war between the Tutsi ethnic minority group and the Hutu ethnic majority group of Rwanda exhibits the consequences to which intercultural conflict can culminate. Violent conflict continues today because of the need to declare uniqueness and continues due to intercultural discrimination that transcends generations. Intercultural conflict has been present in Central America since the unraveling of the Guatemalan Kingdom in 1840. Since then, all five of the Central American states have been trying to define their national uniqueness. Their fight for independence creates competition between the people and their governments. Although each person is unique, the Central American people are essentially the same ethnic group; yet, they judge themselves as unequal. This paper will explain how inequality has led to conflict. The topic of intercultural relations between Costa Rica and Nicaragua is important because it explains the deeply rooted historical sources of national bias and the reasons that

¹ Stella Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), 194-230.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1993).

³ Benedict

⁴ Ting-Toomey

this bias continues affect current society in Central America. Examining the causes of intolerance in this specific situation will help us to understand the roots of intercultural conflict in other pluralistic areas of the world. Results from this study will allow for developing models of curriculum reform that can promote genuine transformation in pluralistic societies and global environments, particularly in the field of education.

METHOD

I investigated Costa Rican and Nicaraguan curricula while observing elementary classroom lessons to study the source of bias and the ways it is being presented in the educational system. Through analyzing cross-national surveys and interviews with Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans, I determined the extent to which stereotypes are a product of the carriers of that culture, and how stereotypes are represented in academic texts and everyday discourses of the citizens. The participants in this study are educators, administrators, middle level and secondary level students, and citizens with middle to low socioeconomic status.

RESULTS

Differing points of views concerning key political issues and historical events cause intercultural conflict between neighboring countries, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, which have affected the people in different ways, depending on their affiliations. Several historical events have triggered national pride and sparked prejudice between the people. Opinions concerning these issues cause the biases to be passed down through generations by means of familial and educational institutions along with the representation of the events by the public media. This paper focuses on the events that have instigated hostility between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, the initiatives that have been made to regulate the conflict, and the improvement that need to be made in order to create an understanding and accepting community.

Historical Relations

After the Central American states became independent from the Mexican Empire in 1821, Nicaragua became a political power center. At the same time, Costa Rica began to separate itself from Nicaraguan power, desiring independence. Shortly after, Costa Rica annexed Nicaragua's Nicoya Peninsula, a territory of 13,000 square kilometers. The loss of land angered Nicaraguans.⁵

In 1855, Central America was plagued with an invasion of a destructive filibuster from the United States, William Walker, who attempted to take control of Mexico and Central America.⁶ Walker's genocidal tendencies led him to believe that his elite race justified him to dictate and kill entire cultures in order to gain property for the United States. Gathering men as he conquered Nicaragua, Walker plotted to take over Costa Rica. However, Costa Rica's president during the time, Juan Rafael Mora, heard about Walker's plans and declared war on Walker and his men. The conflict culminated during the legendary battle in Santa Rosa, Costa Rica where Mora led three thousand men to force Walker and his men out of Costa Rica back to Rivas, Nicaragua which lies on the other side of the mutual border. Within a short time, Mora and his men prowled into Rivas causing severe damage to Walker's legion. The Costa Ricans egresses Nicaragua victorious against Walker's invasion while also driving him back to the United States.

Due to both countries' struggle for a unique identity and independence, there has been a constant battle for border rights, especially concerning navigational rights on the river that lies on the border between the two countries, El Rio San Juan. The Cañas Jerez treaty of 1858 confirmed that El Rio San Juan belonged to Nicaragua but gave Costa Rica the perpetual right to free commercial navigation. In the 1880s, Nicaragua discussed building an inter-oceanic canal through El Rio San Juan, but Costa Rica opposed the building and sought imperious mediation with the potential investors. In 1888, U.S. president, Grover Cleveland, decided against the canal in accordance with the Cañas Jerez treaty.⁷ As a result, the Panama Canal was built instead.

Presidential Relations

Relations between Costa Rica and Nicaragua have always been tense; however, political rapport between the countries has fluctuated over the years. The Costa Rican government's support of the Nicaraguan government varied during the 1970s and 1980s due to the commutation of presidents. It is apparent in history that the Costa Rican revolutionary president, José Figueres (1953-1958, 1970-1974), did not support Nicaragua's dictator, Anastasio Somoza. Figueres continued to support the Sandinistas, the rebel party, independently after his term while

⁵ John A. Booth, *Costa Rica Quest for Democracy: Nations of the Modern World: Latin America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 39.

⁶ David Whisnant, *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places: The Politics of Culture in Nicaragua* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 74-75.

⁷ Bertha Berrios, 2004, *San Juan River – Border dispute between Costa Rica and Nicaragua*, Masters diss., University of Minnesota – Duluth, 8-9.

the following president of Costa Rica, Rodrigo Carazo Odío, (1978-1982), claimed to be neutral. However, Carazo viewed Somoza as a national security threat and there is evidence that he sent support to the Sandinistas, supplying them with money and arms.⁸ Luis Alberto Monge Álvarez, who was president of Costa Rica between 1982 and 1986, followed U.S. encouragement to support anti-revolutionaries, referred to as the Contras. Oscar Arias, the president of Costa Rica from 1986 to 1990, promoted a Central American peace accord in 1987 to stabilize regional politics for which he later won the Nobel Peace Prize. President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica initiated meetings of reconciliation in 2007 in hopes of bettering bilateral relations, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Border Rights

Navigational rights of the river, El Rio San Juan, remain another largely debated issue in Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Illegal immigration flow and ambiguity of navigational rights have been causing political disputes between the states for over ten years now. A largely debated event occurred in 2005 when Nicaragua prohibited Costa Rican armed police from navigating in El Rio San Juan, which prompted Costa Rican government to open a case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).⁹ Costa Ricans believe that their rights to navigate on the river are protected by the Cañas Jerez treaty. However, Nicaragua continually calls attention to the fact that the treaty gives them the right to free commercial navigation but not to military or police navigation with arms.¹⁰

Immigration

Easily manageable immigration through the unpopulated areas along the river creates problems for Costa Ricans who believe the stereotypes that all Nicaraguans are poor and that with them comes violence, disease, displacement of labor and other liabilities that affect their country. Currently, 800,000 Nicaraguans live in Costa Rica, 300,000 of which are illegal.¹¹ According to the article "Undocumented Aliens and Recognized Refugees: The Right to Work in Costa Rica," fifty-six percent of Costa Ricans oppose the presence of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica.¹² Nicaraguans migrate to work in Costa Rica because the Costa Rican economy is advanced, so Nicaraguans work the jobs that Costa Ricans do not want. Many Nicaraguans work as farm laborers, harvesting coffee, bananas and sugar cane. The aforementioned article states that thirty percent of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica live in poverty. Some Costa Ricans claim that Nicaraguans capitalize on health care and education while stealing jobs and causing problems, including assaults and robberies. During one week in March 2008, more than 3,130 undocumented immigrants were caught trying to cross the border illegally.¹³ The dependence of Nicaragua on Costa Rica for economic support is also obvious in terms of monetary relations. Currently, Nicaragua owes Costa Rica 600 million dollars.¹⁴

Opinions Generated by Open-Ended Interview

The stereotypes in Costa Rican and Nicaraguan societies originated from historical, political, and social issues. The people of Costa Rica and Nicaragua strongly expressed bias opinions during the open-ended interview process. Both groups of people generated a mainly negative opinion of the other, the depth of negatively varying for each individual. Most Nicaraguans expressed feelings of unequal treatment from the Costa Ricans. To answer to the question, "How would you describe a Costa Rican in comparison to yourself?" some popular responses were, "advanced," "egocentric," "more educated," "proud," and "discriminatory toward Nicaraguans." Comparatively, when asked how they would describe Nicaraguans compared to themselves, Costa Ricans responded with words like, "aggressive," "violent," "laborers," "poor," "illiterate," and "dishonest."

Both groups said that they received their knowledge about the people of their neighboring state from their family and from reports in the news. The majority of people interviewed expressed that they learned very little, if anything at all, in their academic education about the relations between their country and their neighboring country. According to a local female Costa Rican, "Nicaraguans always appear dangerous in the news. Whenever I open the

⁸ Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition: the United States and Nicaragua* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 102.

⁹ Sonia Gutiérrez Villalobos, "Pro-conflict and pro-cooperation coverage: The San Juan River conflict." *Conflict and Communication Online* 4, no. 1 (2005): 3-13. <http://www.cco.regener-online.de/>, 5.

¹⁰ Berrios, 5-12.

¹¹ "Miles de nicaragüenses retornan de vacaciones al país," (La Nación, December 15, 2007,) <http://www.nacion.com> (accessed February 13, 2008).

¹² Janna Crab, "Neither Here Nor There: Nicaraguans in Costa Rica," (*Faces of Costa Rica*, 2003), <http://www.facesofcostarica.com/economics/nicaraguans.htm> (accessed Feb 21, 2007).

¹³ Josué Bravo, "Migración de Costa Rica rechaza más de 3 mil nicas ilegales," (La Prensa, March 24, 2008,) <http://www.laprensa.com.ni>, (accessed May 7, 2008).

¹⁴ Calos A. Villalobos, "Costa Rica no condonará deuda de \$600 millones que mantiene Nicaragua," (La Nación,) <http://www.nacion.com> (accessed February, 13 2008).

newspaper, I find something negative about a Nicaraguan.”¹⁵ A specific example is a report of robbery in the news that portrayed a dangerous image of a Nicaraguan. This particular example also exhibits the treatment of Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica. In July of 2006, the Costa Rican police witnessed a Nicaraguan immigrant breaking and entering into a building. The police watched while two Rottweiler dogs attacked and killed the Nicaraguan.¹⁶

Textbook Representations of Intercultural Relations

In search of cultural data in textbooks, the lack of content in textbooks on the intercultural conflict that is openly discussed in the home was apparent as seen in the stark numbers of pages represented in the graph below. Information including facts historical political concordance between the countries and current social and political issues affecting the people of the lands was omitted from most of the textbooks reviewed.

Table 1. Textbook Analysis: Are Nicaraguan/Costa Rican relations referred to in textbooks?

	Geography	Annexation of Nicoya	Cañez Jerez Treaty	Battle of Santa Rosa	Sandinista Revolution	ICJ	Immigration and Labor
Los Conflictos Internacionales (Nicaragua, 1982) ¹⁷	No	Yes Page 11	Yes Page 45	Yes Page 47	No*	No*	No*
Historia de Nicaragua para niños y niñas (Nicaragua, 2001) ¹⁸	No	Yes Page 55	No	No	No	No*	No
República de Nicaragua: Propiedad de Ministerio de Educación (Nicaragua, 1970) ¹⁹	Yes Page 31, 32	Yes	No	No	No	No*	No
Estudios Sociales 3 grado (Nicaragua, 2002) ²⁰	Yes	No	No	No	No	No*	No
Estudios Sociales 4 Grado (Nicaragua, 2002) ²¹	No	No	No	No	No	No*	No
Estudios Sociales 6 (Costa Rica, 1997) ²²	Yes Page 6	Yes Page 19	No	Yes Page 59	No	No*	No
Estudios Sociales 5 (Costa Rica, 1979) ²³	Yes Page 130	Yes Page 35	No	Yes Page 59	No	No*	No
Estudios Sociales 4 (Costa Rica, 1986) ²⁴	Yes Page 27, 28	Yes Page 29	No	No	No	No*	No
Estudios Sociales 5 Año (Costa Rica, 1994) ²⁵	No	No	No	No	No	No*	No

*event occurred after the published date

Important concepts like the countries relative geographical location is omitted from four out of nine of the textbooks. Six of the textbooks included information about the Annexation of Nicoya. The largest omissions in the reviewed textbooks were of information concerning the Cañas Jerez treaty, the affect of the Sandinista Revolution on the rapport between the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan people, El Rio San Juan court case in the International

¹⁵ Personal interview by Kathryn Fick, 4 January 2008, Bagaces, Costa Rica.

¹⁶ Álvaro Murillo, "Nicaragua demanda a Costa Rica por discriminar a un inmigrante," (El País, July 17, 2006,) <http://www.elpais.com>, (accessed May 7, 2008).

¹⁷ Luis P. Arguello, *Los Conflictos Internacionales de Nicaragua* (Nicaragua: Colección Cultural, 1982).

¹⁸ Carlos Navarro, *Historias de Nicaragua para niños y niñas* (Managua, Nicaragua: Fondo Editorial, 2001).

¹⁹ *Propiedad de Ministerio de Educación* (Managua, Nicaragua: Editorial y Litografía San José, 1970).

²⁰ Jaime Barquero, *Estudios Sociales Tercer Grado* (Colombia: Quebecor World Bogotá, 2002).

²¹ Jaime Barquero, *Estudios Sociales Cuarto Grado* (Colombia: Quebecor World Bogotá, 2002).

²² Elizabeth Fonseca Corrales, *Estudios Sociales 6* (Costa Rica: Litografía e Imprenta LIL, S.A., 1996).

²³ *Estudios Sociales 5* (San Jose, Costa Rica: Susaeta, S.A., 1979).

²⁴ German Vásquez Aguero, *Estudios Sociales 4 Seria: Hacia la Luz* (Costa Rica: Trejos Hermanos Sucesores, S.A., 1986).

²⁵ Teresita Marroquín Díaz, *Estudios Sociales 5 año Educación Primaria* (Costa Rica: Litografía e Imprenta LIL, S.A., 1994).

Court of Justice, and immigration issues. These social and political issues were crucial in the development of Costa Rican and Nicaraguan relations; yet, they are not found in the textbooks used in academic classrooms. Therefore, the bias opinions that the students receive from their family and from the public media are not being nullified in the school textbooks. If this pattern continues, the prejudices that are transmitted to the people of Costa Rica and Nicaragua will never diminish.

Initiatives to Restore Peace

There have been many attempts to end the conflict between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Past and present government administrations have made attempts to communicate and create peaceful solutions. In 1986, the presidents of the five Central American countries, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, met in Esquipulas, Guatemala to discuss peaceful conflict resolutions in light of the military hostility that was present in Central America for years. On February 15, 1987, Costa Rican president, Oscar Arias, submitted a Peace Plan that originated from the meeting. A few months later, the five Central American presidents signed the "Esquipulas II Accord." The accord defined a number of measures to promote a timetable for the implementation of strategies to achieve national reconciliation, such as holding free elections, democratization, and negotiations on arms controls. The resolution of armed conflict in Nicaragua during the Sandinista Revolution was one of the main concerns addressed at the meeting.²⁶

In March of 2000, bilateral negotiations began between chancellors Eduardo Montealegre and Roberto Rojas, of Nicaragua and Costa Rica respectively. They spoke of the maritime boundaries of the countries, migration problems, tourism, and El Rio San Juan.²⁷ More recently, the current administrations of the two states, led by presidents Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, have begun to seek a better relationship. Ortega met with Costa Rican Chancellor, Bruno Stagno, in June of 2007 to discuss resolutions concerning bilateral disagreements, namely El Rio San Juan. In this meeting, Ortega suggested that a form of shared development must be found. Samuel Santos, Nicaragua's Minister of Foreign Affairs, pledged that his government was willing to find solutions. Nevertheless, he maintained that the case of El Rio San Juan in International Court of Justice would remain in affect because it is an impartial legal entity and both countries are respectful of international rights. Santos believes that the parties can resolve the situation justly and acceptably for all parts.²⁸

On August 21, 2007, President Ortega and President Arias met in Managua, Nicaragua.²⁹ This was their first political reunion since the 1980s when both were presidents of their respective countries for the first time. These presidents had not enjoyed warm personal or political rapport since the 1980s.³⁰ Reopening bilateral communication on the issues of immigration and border disagreements symbolized a desire on both parts to reconstruct a peaceful rapport among their people.

In November of 2007, both presidents agreed to reform the Binational Committee (La Comisión Binacional) that was created in order to instigate conversations among national authorities in both countries about political, social, economic and cultural issues that the countries share. The committee last met on October 20, 2006. The committee was set to begin meeting in January of 2008 but did not commence until months later. Nicaragua was waiting for Costa Rica to accept an official Nicaraguan council, which caused the delay. In February, Stagno, the Chancellor of Costa Rica, appointed Leticia Herrera, the former commandant of Nicaragua, as the general ambassador (la cónsul general) of Nicaragua.³¹ According to Christian Guillermet, Costa Rica's general director of Foreign Politics, "The issues of common interest and the benefits of both countries can be analyzed fully in spoken forum in order to avoid a manipulation of the press that could result inappropriately."³² Costa Rica's president, Arias, visited Nicaragua again on March 10, 2008 to take part in the committee where they discussed tourism and the environment. The topic of El Rio San Juan was mentioned but no movements were made.³³ Arias and Ortega continued to strengthen ties on March 14 when they signed a declaration promising to act on their discussions concerning immigration, borders, and economics, among other topics. They made an announcement that the

²⁶ Paul Wehr, "Mediating Conflict in Central America," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1991): 85-98.

²⁷ Vladimir Lopez, "Hoy se instalan pláticas de Nicaragua y Costa Rica," (El Nuevo Diario, March 15, 2000), <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni>, (accessed February 13, 2008).

²⁸ "Nicaragua reitera buena voluntad a Costa Rica." (El Nuevo Diario, June 26, 2007,) <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni> (accessed February 13 2008).

²⁹ Blanca Morel, "Ortega y Arias buscan mejorar relaciones entre los países," (La Nación, August 21, 2007), <http://www.lanacion.com>, (accessed February 13, 2008).

³⁰ "Arias and Ortega reopen bilateral relations despite ongoing historical discrepancies," (Nicaragua News Service, August 30, 2007), <http://www.nicanet.org>.

³¹ "Costa Rica aceptará oficialmente a Cónsul nicaragüense," (El Nuevo Diario, February 5, 2008,) <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni>, (accessed February 13, 2008).

³² "Costa Rica espera que Nicaragua convoque a comisión binacional," (La Prensa, February 4, 2008,) <http://www.laprensa.com.ni>, (accessed February 13, 2008).

³³ "Arias visitará Nicaragua este viernes," (La Prensa, March 10, 2008,) <http://www.laprensa.com.ni>, (accessed May 7, 2008).

business of El Rio San Juan will be carried out in the International Court of Justice.³⁴

On the seventh of March in 2008, Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans made an effort to eliminate xenophobia and increase humanitarian aid by uniting their neighboring communities in a biannual artistic conjunction.³⁵ The beginnings of bilateral intercommunication between governments have commenced a movement that will cease the prejudices held by its people that lead to discrimination and unequal treatment.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite their commonalities, Costa Rica and Nicaragua continue to have unstable relations. These countries and their people have more similarities than differences; yet, each has its own strong sense of national pride. Since independence from the Mexican Empire, Costa Rica and Nicaragua have struggled to define their national uniqueness and independence. With the always changing political relations between the countries, the citizens express strong opinions toward the current events and governmental decisions concerning their neighboring state. These opinions are passed down through the generations by public media as well as familial and educational institutions. Societies procure nationalistic, individualistic and collectivist schemas by expressing their unique identities. The biases of the people, though generally not harmful, have led to discriminatory practices, which have resulted in social and political conflict between the two countries. I posit that one of the ways to stop the flow of prejudices in pluralistic societies is with educational reform. Prejudices are learned at an early age because we use it to make sense of the world. A human tendency is to divide the social world into two categories – us and them.³⁶ To avoid this process of thinking, we must teach a non-biased curriculum that encourages appreciation and acceptance of differences.

LIMITATIONS

Based on the fact that written surveys were used in the methodology of this project, only the literate population was able to participate. The illiterate four percent of the Costa Rican population and thirty three percent of the Nicaraguan population were unaccounted for in this research. Geographic and time limitations affected the number of schools that I was able to visit.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the Undergraduate Research Grants Program for their financial assistance that made my research possible. Many thanks to Jean Hindson who encouraged me to begin a research project. Also, thank you to Victor Macías González for teaching me about grant proposal writing and to Mark Malisa for advising me and giving me direction on this project. A special thanks to Bismarck Alero and Raul Gavarrette for their assistance and guidance in Nicaragua. Gracias a mis queridas familias en Costa Rica y Nicaragua por todo su apoyo.

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³⁴ "Costa Rica y Nicaragua fortalecen lazos en comisión binacional," (La Prensa, March 14, 2008,) <http://www.laprensa.com.ni>, (accessed May 7, 2008).

³⁵ Esteban Córdoba, "Ticos y nicas se hermanan en la bienal conjunciones," (La Nación, March 7, 2008,) <http://www.nacion.com>, (accessed May 7, 2008).

³⁶ Anita Woolfolk, *Educational Psychology* (Cincinnati: Allyn & Bacon, 2007), 172-174.

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