Describing nations as “imagined communities,” Benedict Anderson (2006) writes that nations are “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” (p. 5). This summer, I spent a month researching these images of communion or narratives of national identity in Nicaragua, a country that has recently past of dictatorship, revolution, and civil war. Each of these have raised the country’s problem of national identity, but poverty, corruption, ethnic conflict, and an autonomy process that split Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast into the Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur (RAAS) and the Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte (RAAN) have also made for a challenging path to national integration. These unique conditions make Nicaragua an interesting site for studying narratives of national identity.

This summer, I conducted ethnographic research in three cities: Managua, Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas), and Bluefields. Managua is the country’s capital and the most populous city in the Pacific Coast (and all of Nicaragua). Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas) and Bluefields are two of the most populous cities on the Atlantic Coast and the capitals of the RAAN and RAAS respectively. In each of these cities I investigated narratives of nationalism using four different approaches.

First, I looked at how children’s national identities are informed by didactic materials and lesson plans provided to public schools by Nicaragua’s Ministry of Education (MINED). Consequently, I spent a considerable amount of time working with instructors and librarians to obtain access to elementary- and middle school-level materials. I was able to reproduce and annotate textbooks used to teach history, civics, and literature to public school students throughout Nicaragua.

Second, I documented on-the-ground narratives of nationalism by looking at how Nicaraguans talk about their national identity. To accomplish this, I interviewed Managüenses, Porteños, and Bluefileños on subjects such as Nicaragua’s history, its racial/ethnic makeup, customs, and traditions as well as education, national integration, progress, and autonomy. These rich interviews were instrumental in helping contextualize my background research as well as the three other approaches of my summer research.

Third, I tracked local and national government-sponsored and organization-sponsored narratives of national identity. This approach involved obtaining and annotating materials published by the Nicaraguan Government of Reconciliation and National Unity as well as publications by Fundación para la Autonomía y el Desarrollo de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua (FADCANIC) and Centro para la Autonomía y el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CADPI), two non-partisan and non-profit organizations founded to improve the quality of life of the peoples of the Atlantic Coast. The materials obtained allowed me to learn about and analyze the language of local and national government-sponsored narratives of national identity and to compare these to the critical reflections offered by non-governmental organizations and Nicaraguans in their own narratives.

Finally, I explored how artists, through their productions, propose alternative narratives of national identity. This part of my research was informed through access to a live performance by Carlos Mejía Godoy y Los de Palacagüina and their recordings as well as recordings of other Nicaraguan artists such as Dimensión Costeña, Otto de la Rocha, and Fabio Gadea Mantilla.

This fall, I will be using my summer research to conduct an independent study on Nicaraguan national identity with Professor Greg Beckett.

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References