Indigenous Perspectives: The Struggle For Land, Culture And Education In Rivas, Nicaragua

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INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES: THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND, CULTURE AND EDUCATION IN RIVAS, NICARAGUA

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PIM 69

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in Social Justice in Intercultural Relations at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

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ABSTRACT

The domination of Western educational systems and the capitalist market over indigenous social economic structures has been detrimental to communities all over the world. The search for foreign investment and development opportunities, along with local government’s educational structuring has spread these systems to communities in Central America. This research explores first-hand accounts surrounding these influences through the perspectives of two Nahua indigenous communities in Rivas, Nicaragua. First, a history of indigenous struggles in Nicaragua along with U.S. economic influence on land rights, tourism and educational systems are explored. Then, the indigenous communities’ perspectives are presented to understand the effects of foreign development, education in the community, and their struggle for communal land rights. Five individual interviews representing both communities were conducted in addition to a group discussion with one community. Interviews revealed that Western educational structures and U.S. dominated tourism have altered the indigenous communities’ culture, suppressed native language, threatened land rights and shaped education. A qualitative analysis of the indigenous perspectives showed the alternative that they are fighting for directly opposes what the U.S. capitalist model represents. Overall, participants expressed the need for a new educational and ideological model; one that supports their rights as indigenous people, preserves their native culture, respects their ancestors’ traditions and embraces their connectedness to the environment in which they live. Community members also expressed their openness to work with people who are in solidarity with the indigenous struggle for land and culture preservation.
Introduction

I first heard about the struggles of the indigenous community of Las Salinas de Nahualapa when I was in Managua attending the weekly Thursday morning talk at Casa Ben Linder. That was 2008 when several community members came to tell the story of their community land along the Pacific Ocean being threatened by a company headed by investors from the United States. Their story of resisting the violent and corrupt acts by the head of the company and his employees opened my eyes to yet another injustice facing an already marginalized people. Two months after hearing about the situation in Las Salinas, I traveled with a group of other foreigners to the community. We acted as accompaniment on a day when an eviction notice was to be presented to the community. They invited us to be present and thought that it was less likely there would be violence against them if there were some foreigners on their side of the fence. I saw intense anger from the community members toward the lawyers and representatives of the company that was trying to claim the beach-front land which the indigenous community owns and occupies. I was impressed with the unity and determination of the Las Salinas community in confronting this threat to their land. Thinking about what I experienced that day on the beach, I began to reflect on why this company owned by a U.S. American would go to such extreme measures to try and take away a section of land that doesn’t belong to them.

In the months that followed after visiting the Las Salinas community during their land struggle, I accompanied members as they presented their case to the office of indigenous affairs in Nicaragua’s National Assembly. Later, I was part of a group of people who set up an informational blog about the community’s land struggle aimed at
educating prospective land buyers from the United States and surfers who plan to visit the beach.

As I spend more time in Central America I continue to learn about large numbers of communities being affected by the global economic system. Throughout my time in Nicaragua I became increasingly interested in the indigenous communities and how development and tourism have affected them. For my practicum phase I came back to Nicaragua with the opportunity to learn more about how U.S. education policy and foreign development is affecting the indigenous communities in the southern department of Rivas. I did not want to study these issues by reading about land disputes in newspapers or books, instead I wanted to visit the communities and learn from the people who are directly affected. Through the contacts that I had made when I first learned about the situation in Las Salinas, I was invited to visit and meet other community members involved in the struggle. I was also introduced to members of the community of Veracruz del Zapotal, another Nahua indigenous community nearby.

Also connected to my research was the work experience I had during part of my practicum phase. I worked with the Institute for Central American Development Studies (ICADS) coordinating U.S. college students’ internship experiences in Nicaragua. With this, I had the chance to see the impact of these experiences on the students and help them connect what they saw in Nicaragua to the larger political and economic structures that emanate from the United States. I also saw the potential for their solidarity efforts to have an impact on community success against these exploitive structures.

The focus of my research was the relationship between the United States’ education system and the ideologies and actions of U.S. developers and investors in
Nicaragua. After getting involved with the Las Salinas indigenous community I wanted to learn more about their views on the effects of development in their community. I also had an interest in exploring the ways capitalist ideology is exposed to their community and the community of Veracruz. I grounded my research in the understanding that the U.S. educational system is designed to fuel the most powerful capitalist state in the world.

My interview questions were focused on the theme of outside influence in the communities, this being just one of the many struggles that the indigenous communities are facing today. My primary research question was: “Do indigenous communities in Rivas, Nicaragua view their struggles with foreign development as directly related to influences from the United States?” And if so, do they see it connected to the U.S. education system or to an influence from tourism, or both? My sub-questions were:

1. Are actions by U.S. citizens in Nicaragua related to their educational experience in the United States?
2. What kinds of education systems does the indigenous community participate in?
3. Are young people losing their traditional values of the indigenous community?
   - How do public schools play a role in this?

I also asked community members about their specific struggle for land rights in the case of the company that is attempting to steal part of their land. This paper is a course-linked capstone (CLC) connected to Janaki Natarajan’s Education for Social Justice class. There were several themes and questions from this class that are relevant to my research: What links are there among larger social formations, schools, cultures, educational systems, and the political economy? What alternative educational efforts can be mechanisms for social justice? The Education for Social Justice framework also informs the language I use in this paper.
**Language Usage**

The indigenous movements in Nicaragua use the word “pueblo” when referring to their indigenous community on the local and national level. They describe pueblo as “a collectivity of people, consciously united by a community of origin, history, traditions, culture and religion that is affirmed as a subject of the cultural, political, and economic rights, starting with the right for self-determination” (Girardi, 1994, p. 69).

A Las Salinas community member explained:

> The term *pueblo* has more weight than the term community, because *pueblo* indicates territory, and indicates that there is an origin of the peoples. In the case of the us, it is the Nahualt origin and culture, it’s not a community, you are talking about a peoples. (Member 2)

In this paper I use the phrases indigenous community or indigenous peoples when writing about “el pueblo indigena” or when I translate pueblo from Spanish.

Western educational models are the policies and structures that have originated from Europe and the United States. In this research most of these Western influences in the communities originate from the United States, where its systems have roots in European models. There are two levels of influence that these systems have on the indigenous communities; the influence that comes from studying outside of their own community and those that have adopted the U.S. educational model and ideology through local schools that have been shaped by foreign systems.

Development can be a simple yet complex term that stretches from the individual to the societal level. First, it is often used to refer to a countries’ economic status; “developed”, “developing” or “underdeveloped”. On the global level this separation is usually referred to as the countries of the “global north” and of the “global south”. While other factors in society are just as important, economics has become the
dominant factor in which countries’ progress is evaluated. For most, when referring to a country’s level of development, they are evaluating the economic situation of that country, yet not taking into account other areas of society. I use the term “underdeveloped” to refer to a country’s historical relationship with imperialist powers (most often colonization by Europeans). A country termed “underdeveloped” is not inferior or lacking in resources and ability compared to other countries, but instead has been underdeveloped as a direct result of its relationship with imperialist countries who have exploited its natural resources and people. Through this research I have come to understand development as intrinsically connected to capitalism. I have often seen the push for development and progress as the rationale behind tourism projects and movements toward modernization in Nicaragua. This has created a mindset that defends development above all other costs such as the loss of cultures, threats to communal land and destruction of the natural environment. These other areas of concern often become “externalities” in the drive toward a more advanced and modern society. Yet, in my mind these “externalities” should have just as much weight as the economic factors do in development proposals.

Capitalism is a difficult concept to explain concisely. Basically, it is the dominant world economic system that defines the modern class conflict between labor and capital. These class divisions between people are based on production relations; those who labor (producing food, clothes and shelter), those who own the means of production (land, tools, technology, factories, etc.), and those who benefit from this production. This wealthy ruling class benefits from the system by appropriating labor and goods that are produced by workers, and then selling them to create a surplus, thus maintaining control over the majority. The wealth created by the people “at the top” always occurs at the expense of those “at the bottom” (workers and global poor).
Literature Review

The struggles that the indigenous communities of Rivas, Nicaragua face today need to be placed in context with the long history of colonialism and imperialism that has occurred on their lands. This literature review covers important moments in Nicaragua’s history and explores the early indigenous struggles in Nicaragua as a background in order to better understand the current situation. I also review the United States’ involvement in Nicaragua, its capitalist ideology and the U.S. educational system and how these all have an impact on the indigenous communities in Nicaragua. Next, I highlight the case of La Flor de Mayo, a company headed by U.S. investors that has been attempting to expand its tourism project onto indigenous communal lands. The last part of this section covers past and current indigenous resistance movements and alternatives.

One difference from the indigenous people of Nicaragua compared to other Latin American countries is that most of the communities do not use the traditional clothing that their ancestors wore, but have now adopted the use of Western clothing. Also in the Pacific, Central and Northern parts of Nicaragua the indigenous communities are very much mixed with the rest of the population in the language they speak and the schools they attend. Since the focus of my research was the indigenous communities of these regions in Nicaragua, I don’t include history about the indigenous communities of the Caribbean Coast. Although they shared much of the same history during the Spanish conquest their more recent history and current situation in the Caribbean autonomous region is different from the indigenous communities of the Pacific side of Nicaragua.
In Nicaragua indigenous peoples represent a considerable portion of the population, and they are located in all parts of the country. The last census, done in 2005, showed that 15% of the total population self-identified with a certain indigenous group or ethnic community; with a total of 189,511 people in the Central and Pacific regions affirming that they belong to an indigenous community. However, according to a base study about the living conditions of the indigenous populations of the Pacific, Central, and North of Nicaragua, published in 2007, there are 333,000 indigenous people belonging to the twenty-two different indigenous groups of those regions. This includes 20,000 Nahua people living in the department of Rivas (Tellez, 2009). In the 2005 census the classification was done in a way the indigenous people and existing communities didn’t agree with, this contributed to reducing their numbers compared to overall population of the country. It is helpful to remember that even as recently as 1995, “the government of Nicaragua affirmed in their report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, that there were no indigenous communities in the Central and Pacific regions, only in the Caribbean Coast” (Tellez, 2009, p. 40). “In the Central and Pacific regions of Nicaragua processes of removal and dilution of indigenous identity have been implemented since the nineteenth century with an impact on the loss of individual and communal identity, the deterioration of culture, and the loss of language and links to social cohesion” (Tellez, 2009, p. 40). Many factors have been pushing against the existence of indigenous communities even before the struggles they are facing today. Other parts of Nicaraguan history have affected indigenous communities in other ways.

A very important and defining period in Nicaragua’s history was the Sandinista Revolution. This affected everyone in Nicaragua including the indigenous populations of the Pacific as well as the Caribbean coast. The overthrow of the Somoza family
dictatorship after 43 years of oppressive rule provided a major turning point in all aspects of Nicaraguan life. After its triumph, the Sandinista government enacted a range of social programs as part of the revolutionary process during the 1980s. One major focus was education and literacy. In March of 1980, just 8 months after the triumph, the government launched a massive literacy campaign stretching from the cities to remote rural parts of the country. Sixty thousand young teenagers volunteered and went into the countryside to teach, while another 40,000 were assigned to the cities. Over 400,000 fellow Nicaraguans were taught to read and write. It is estimated that the illiteracy rate among the adult population of Nicaragua, at the time of the triumph of the Revolution (1979), was as least 51%, this number was reduced to just 12.9% by the end of the five-month long literacy campaign (Cardenal, 2005).

Another important aspect of the campaign was the learning experience for the literacy teachers who went out to teach people in the countryside. These young teachers ended up learning as much as those who they taught to read and write.

Living together with the rural population had a deep impact on young people and allowed them to gain new insights into the socio-economic and cultural realities of their country. This political consciousness affected the development of an entire generation. (Hanemann, 2005)

Although the literacy campaign’s goal was to teach people how to read and write, it was also clear that it was designed to achieve more than just reading and writing skills. Its goal was also to build awareness and conscience. Not only did adults in the Nicaraguan countryside learn to read and write for the first time in their lives, they were also given the opportunity to understand their position in the larger political and economic structures in which they found themselves.
This focus on conscience raising or “conscientization” (conscientização in Portuguese) was influenced by the work of Paulo Freire who explained in an interview that conscientization implies a deepened reading of reality, and it is the way to understand better the problem of interests, the question of power” (Freire, 1995, p. 177).

The whole experience of the revolution was also a significant way in which the Nicaraguan population became educated. As Che Guevara announced in his 1960 speech *The Revolutionary Doctor*: “there is nothing that can educate a person...like living through a revolution” (Guevara, 1960). The literacy brigade played an important role in increasing the conscientization of all Nicaraguans, and this can be seen in many of the indigenous community struggles today.

**History of Indigenous Struggles in Nicaragua**

There are a range of books and articles that focus on how the Spanish conquest affected Latin America and the Nicaraguan indigenous populations. Nicaragua is part of the vast civilizations in Latin America that the Spanish came upon over 500 years ago. In *Open Veins of Latin America* (1997), Eduardo Galeano presents this history by writing the stories that were left out of the history textbooks in most schools. He describes that from the very beginning of the European encounter with the Americas, wealth has flowed in just one direction:

Latin America is the region of open veins. Everything, from the discovery until our time, has always been transmuted into European—or later United States—capital, and as such has accumulated in distant centers of power. Everything: the soil, its fruits and its mineral-rich depths, the people and their capacity to work and to consume, natural resources and human resources. Production methods and class structure have been successively determined from outside for each area by meshing it into the universal gearbox of capitalism. (p.2)

The complexities of the global capitalist system continue to affect indigenous people in Nicaragua today.
An in-depth look at how the indigenous populations were affected and how their communities are organized today is presented in *Persistencia Indigena en Nicaragua* (Indigenous Persistence in Nicaragua) (1992), edited by Germán Romero Vargas. This book covers topics about indigenous communities’ organization and how the Spanish invasion changed their history forever:

The implementation of the Spanish domination in the Pacific region of Nicaragua had, as an immediate consequence, an enormous diminution of the indigenous population and, in the long run, a modification of the ethnic composition of the country. (p. 16)

Throughout Latin America the indigenous populations have suffered greatly since the invasion of the Spanish. Gustavo Fischman and Isabel Hernandez (1995) write that the natives were exploited as free labor until they were reduced to small numbers. They were held in contempt due to the beliefs of the conquerors that their view of the cosmos and their culture were peculiar and considered poor next to the belief in private property as part of the imposed economic regime. In this perverse dialectic, they started being exploited as they were discriminated, and then debased as a consequence of economic oppression. (p. 83)

One of the many influences that the Spanish had on the indigenous inhabitants of Nicaragua was the introduction of private property. Romero reports that early on the indigenous communal lands were actually protected under Spanish laws:

We have seen before that within the indigenous populations there only existed communal ownership of the land. This form of property was conserved during the whole colonial period and was protected by the Spanish laws. Every indigenous community had, on one hand, the *ejidales* lands (land that belonged to the whole community as a forest reserve that could be used for artisan and fuel needs, but where cultivation wasn’t allowed) and on the other hand, the communal lands which were allocated to families who planted on them for subsistence farming. (1992, p. 18)

While the Spanish received free land assigned by the Spanish Crown, and others established themselves on the “*tierras realengas*” or the land that belonged to the King.
Over time they demanded property titles, and finally the Spanish would buy land from the King. The form of individual ownership of property developed wherever Spanish authority existed: from Nueva Segovia to Chontales, from Chinandega to Rivas. (Romero, 1992, p. 20)

This means that while law protected indigenous communal lands, the Spanish were free to take other parts of the land thanks to the King. But as time passed, it became much more complicated as the mestizo (mixed race) populations increased and landless mestizos sought ways to acquire property. In some cases they leased indigenous communal land, while other groups simply squatted on fallow land which caused the spread of agriculture and cattle production to other parts of the country. There also was the formation of a latifundia system where large tracks of land were given to select families and Spanish elite (Romero, 1992, p. 20). This system encroached on indigenous lands and quickly these communities found themselves with less and less land.

In the late nineteen century, elites in Nicaragua responded to the rising international demand for export crops, such as coffee, by pushing for land reforms in the countryside:

The reforms legally transformed communally held indigenous properties into “unoccupied” territory that could be purchased by wealthy agricultural elites who wished to produce lucrative export commodities. (Paris, 2004, p. 114)

As a result, indigenous farmers were displaced from their land while new laws prohibited the growing of plantain, one of their staple foods, and pushed many into forced labor on the giant coffee plantations that had often replaced their indigenous farms (Paris, 2004). In 1881, several thousand indigenous people were killed during the War of the Comuneros (a Spanish term used for community members that have shared
rights over their land), a rebellion by the indigenous communities that tried to stop the takeover of their ancestral lands by wealthy coffee growers (Walker, 2003, p.15).

The Spanish introduction of private property opened the struggle for indigenous communal land which still continues to this day. Today in Nicaragua all of the [indigenous] communities of the North, Central and Pacific, have real titles for their land, issued since the colonial times. The majority of these indigenous lands were bought from the Spanish crown. The communities’ property faces diverse problems. On the one hand, the leasing of land to private owners, a model used since the late nineteenth century, has been changing the property rights of the indigenous communities. Some [communities] have managed to reestablish the payment of rent, but in other cases, properties are assumed to be “private” and they even pay taxes in the municipalities without the acknowledgment of the value of the lease that belongs to the communities. (Tellez, 2009, p.43)

Unlike the Spanish invaders in Nicaragua, the British who arrived in the United States did not recognize any Native American property rights. Instead, expansionist policies and the hunger for new land, with the blessings of the King of England, gave the newcomers full right, in their mind, to claim and develop land from the Virginia colonies to the Pacific coast. In the early 1600s the King of England wrote the Virginia Charter, which gave the settlers the right to this land:

And they shall and may begin their said first Plantation and Habitation, at any Place upon the said Coast of Virginia or America, where they shall think fit and convenient, between the said four and thirty and one and forty Degrees of the said Latitude; And that they shall have all the Lands, Woods, Soil, Grounds, Havens, Ports, Rivers, Mines, Minerals, Marshes, Waters, Fishing, Commodities, and Hereditaments, whatsoever, from the said first Seat of their Plantation and Habitation by the Space of fifty Miles of English Statute Measure, all along the said Coast of Virginia and America, towards the West and Southwest... (Virginia Charter, 1606)

This charter includes so many geographic locations and formations that it attempts to encompass every resource that could be taken from the land. The right to this new land
that the early settlers from England were given seems to have been carried over by subsequent generations. But today, instead of being given the right to new land by the King, people pay for land under the capitalist system and alter that land in the name of development. As the lands of North America have been taken away from the Native Americans over the centuries, there has been a continuous movement south into Latin America where new lands are now seen as available for extracting natural resources and ready to be “developed”.

**U.S. Involvement**

There is a long history of United States government intervention, occupation and violence in Nicaragua, dating back to the mid 1800’s till today. The United States’ political interference and economic influence have clearly affected all Nicaraguans, but especially the indigenous populations. While foreign policy, economic domination, and war have been the story in Nicaragua, the indigenous communities have found themselves most often among the marginalized population during these interventions, thus the most affected.

Trans-isthmus route opportunities, land, natural resources, and geographical location were behind all of the United States’ early interventions and occupations of Nicaragua. Support of a Nicaraguan government that acted in the interest of the United States and its business partners was often the objective of such interventions. The United States’ attraction to land and using whatever means necessary to secure economic hegemony wasn’t unique to Nicaragua. Even before Nicaragua was an independent country, the United States was claiming territory in other places. In Ronald Takaki’s book *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (2008) he discusses the early expansion into Mexico:
During the 1820’s, Americans crossed the Mexican border settling in a territory known as Tejas. Many of them were slaveholders from the South in search of new lands for cotton cultivation. In 1826 president John Quincy Adams tried to purchase Texas for a million dollars, but Mexico refused the offer. (p. 156)

Even so, U.S. Americans most of them slaveholders, continued to cross the border into Texas despite Mexican government laws that prohibited further immigration and outlawed the institution of slavery. By 1835 there were twenty thousand U.S. Americans in Texas, greatly outnumbering the four thousand Mexicans. “Stephen Austin urged his countrymen to ‘Americanize’ Texas and bring the territory under the U.S. flag. He stated that his ‘sole and only desire’ since he first saw Texas was to ‘redeem it from the wilderness—to settle it with an intelligent honorable and enterprising people’” (Takaki, 2008, p.157). Soon there was war and after bloody killings on both sides, Sam Houston declared Texas an independent state, the Lone Star Republic. He was elected president and in his inaugural address claimed that the new Republic reflected “glory on the Anglo-Saxon race”, and he insisted that their struggle was against Mexican “tyranny” and for American “democracy” (Takaki, 2008, p.158). Next the U.S. set its sights on California, also Mexican territory, and later started venturing to lands further south.

In 1855 a group of armed United States filibusters headed by William Walker sailed from California to Nicaragua at the request of the liberal party which was involved in a long battle with the conservatives for control of the country. Once Walker arrived, he and his army helped the liberals take the city of Granada, the conservatives surrendered and Walker with his liberal allies set up a government under a puppet president, while real power remained with Walker. He began to implement a series of ideas that included the encouragement of foreign investment and the increased exploitation of Nicaraguan resources (Walker, 2003, p. 14). He later declared himself
president and made English the official language and legalized slavery. He didn’t last long though, as other Central American countries, and the British—opposed to increased U.S. presence in the region because of their own interests—joined the growing internal opposition to Walker, and he was eventually defeated in a war that took place in the town of Rivas in 1857. A truce was arranged by a U.S. Navy Commander, whose ship had been sent to Nicaragua’s Pacific coast to protect U.S. economic interests, and Walker and his remaining followers were escorted by a force of U.S. Marines to the ship and sent back to the United States (Merrill, 1993). Walker was later captured by the British in 1860, during another filibuster attempt in Central America, who turned him over to Honduras, who quickly tried him and executed him before a firing squad (Walker, 2003, p. 15).

The United States again left its mark on Nicaraguan history in the early 1900s. In 1909 U.S. Marines helped overthrow the government of Jose Santos Zelaya, who was opposed to U.S. interference in the affairs of the region and had refused to grant the United States canal-building rights that would have given U.S. sovereignty over certain Nicaraguan territory (Walker, 2004, p.18). After several years under a pro-U.S. regime and with a deteriorating economic and political situation a group of dissident Conservatives and Liberals joined Benjamín Zeledon, who had served under Zelaya, in an uprising to rid Nicaragua of “the traitors to the Fatherland” (Walker, 2004, p.19). The U.S. did not want to let Nicaragua slip back into the hands of leaders who didn’t cooperate with U.S. interests and lose influence in a country that they had invested in, so they sent in more Marines to quash the rebellion, and Zeledon’s troops were defeated and he was captured by government troops. Though the U.S. was in a position to save Zeledon’s life they turned their back and the U.S. supported Nicaraguan government claimed that Zeledon had died in battle, but then dragged his body through the streets of
a town (Walker, 2003, p.20). A young boy who witnessed this brutality was Augusto Cesar Sandino.

Years later, Sandino would organize a small army and fight against several U.S. Marine occupations, ultimately being successful when the United States withdrew in 1933. During the United States’ occupation they helped create a National Guard which they left under the command of an English-speaking Nicaraguan politician, Anastasio Somoza Garcia. Following the departure of the Marines, Somoza worked to consolidate his control over the guard, and in 1934 had Sandino assassinated, even though Sandino had just signed a peace agreement with Somoza and the government. Several years later in 1936, with firm control over the National Guard, Somoza Garcia overthrew the elected president and staged an “election” which he won. This was the start of the long and brutal dictatorship where Somoza and then, after his assassination by a young poet, his two sons subsequently ruled Nicaragua for the next 43 years. During their rule the Somoza family had the support and blessing of each U.S. administration until the Sandinista Revolution (who took their name from Sandino) triumphed in 1979.

When Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, he quickly turned efforts to destabilize the new revolutionary government, which the Republican Party called “the Marxist-Sandinista takeover of Nicaragua”. In early 1981, U.S. economic assistance to Nicaragua was terminated, the administration began to allow anti-Sandinista (Contra) paramilitary training camps to operate openly in several states, and Reagan authorized “the CIA to spend $19.8 million to create an exile paramilitary force in Honduras to harass Nicaragua” (Walker, 2004, p. 46). In response to these developments the Sandinistas quickly had to shift focus from social programs to defense and military funding. Some of their reactions directly affected indigenous communities in Nicaragua. “In response to the contra activity in the region, the Nicaraguan government
ordered the involuntary evacuation of some 8,500 to 10,000 Miskito Indians from isolated communities along the Rio Coco” (Walker, 2004, p.48).

In the years to come the U.S. government blocked approval of Nicaraguan loan requests before the World Bank; conducted military “exercises” off both Nicaraguan coasts; and imposed a complete embargo of U.S.-Nicaraguan trade, while directly funding the contra’s deliberate attacks on social service infrastructure that resulted in the kidnapping, torturing and killing of anyone involved with health, education, and cooperatives in Nicaragua (Walker, 2004, p. 49-50). In the end, after a decade of violence and over 30,000 thousand Nicaraguans dead, the U.S.-backed candidate Violeta Barrios de Chamorro beat President Daniel Ortega in the 1990 election. Nicaraguan voters were promised an end to the violence by the U.S. government if Chamorro won. U.S. government influence didn’t stop then and continued with a focus on influencing presidential elections in the years to come.

This long history of U.S. influence in Nicaragua is a backdrop to the current struggles of the indigenous communities who face numerous threats and challenges to their wellbeing, many of them involving their communal lands.

*La Flor de Mayo Case*

Within the indigenous community of Las Salinas de Nahualapa lies a stretch of the Pacific Coast beach popularly known as Popoyo Beach (*Playa Popoyo*). The Las Salinas indigenous community has been involved in a battle over a section of beach-front property which happens to include some of best surfing spots in the country. Foreign investors have been interested in this land for some time, but since the beach and surrounding land are part of the indigenous communal land and indigenous and national law prohibits indigenous land from being sold, they are unable to buy it.
However, in 2004 a company called La Flor de Mayo S.A. (The Mayflower) purchased an 81 acre section of land north of Popoyo Beach. According to Las Salinas community members, the family that Flor de Mayo purchased the land from that wasn’t from the community and didn’t live in the community, but had been able to get a lease from another family who had illegally obtained a title for a 14 acre piece of land. The family then went to a judge in Rivas and obtained a land title for 81 acres, and was allowed to get a supplementary title, which was notarized and turned into a land deed showing that they were the owners of 81 acres of land. Community members say that this family paid off officials along the way and that all of this happened behind the backs of the indigenous community and the community’s board of directors. This deed should never have existed and the lawyer who gave the signature affirming their ownership of the 81 acres, should have investigated the supplementary title and found out that it had been rigged and wasn’t valid (personal communication). Since Flor de Mayo’s purchase, its chief investor Philip Christopher claims that an extra 74 acre piece of land, which includes a 20 acre stretch of beach-front property, actually belongs to them. The indigenous community says this section of land has never been sold, rented or leased since the community received a legal title in 1877.

When Flor de Mayo’s claim was met with opposition from the community they attempted bribing, pressuring, and buying off key community leaders to get them to hand over this section of land. When that didn’t work they took the Las Salinas community to court claiming that the community was occupying their land and had torn down their fences. Before the court hearing Flor de Mayo workers even tried to threaten children into signing documents admitting to these crimes. The indigenous community won the first court case, reaffirming the validity of its original land title. That is when Flor de Mayo and its representatives turned to violence by terrorizing the
Las Salinas community over the next four years. This includes tearing down fences, kidnapping a community leader, attacking and shooting rubber bullets at community members who were on their own land, and buying off judges, police and government employees; all in an attempt to claim this section of land to build a surfing resort. Later more cases were filed by Flor de Mayo against community members, these cases had claimed that the community members shot at company employees or trespassed on to private property, the very things that Flor de Mayo has done to the community.

Over the past several years the indigenous community has been able to get the National Institute of Territorial Studies (INETER) in Nicaragua to do an official survey of their land. In 2009 INETER released an official demarcation showing that indeed all of the land in dispute, including Flor de Mayo’s titled property, are within the borders of the indigenous communal land. More recently Flor de Mayo workers have again ripped up and stole fence posts while the owners have tried to convince a newly elected community board of directors that they should make a deal with the company. Las Salinas community members have filed complaints with the local police about the continued violation of their rights, but have not heard or seen a response from the police (Popoyo, 2011).

While the community struggles to hold onto their communal lands there are other influences that also have an impact on the wellbeing of the community and their struggle to maintain their culture.

**U.S. Education and Capitalist Development**

There are a number of ways in which the mainstream public (and private) education system in the United States reproduces pro-capitalist ideologies and hands
students over to the capitalist system. Author and activist Peter McLaren has written extensively on the topic of critical pedagogy and systems of education. McLaren supports the contention that the U.S. education system is dominated by a “neoliberal education policy” which “operates from the premise that education is primarily a sub-sector of the economy” (McLaren, 2010, p.498). He writes that neoliberalism advocates a number of pro-capitalist positions including to:

- allow the needs of the economy to dictate the principle aims of school education;
- suppress the teaching of oppositional and critical thought that would challenge the rule of capital;
- support a curriculum and pedagogy that produces compliant, pro-capitalist workers;
- and make sure that schooling and education ensure the ideological and economic reproduction that benefits the ruling class. (McLaren, 2010, p. 498)

In Education as Enforcement (2003) David Gabbard writes about how the market drives the enforcement of the current U.S. education system, “As Karl Polanyi defines them, market societies such as our own [the U.S.] differ from traditional societies in one primary regard: traditional societies embed their economic activities within their social relations” (p.62). He goes onto explain that in traditional societies the concern for the general welfare of other individuals in the collective group places significant limits on the extent of which economic concerns could become a force in their lives and drive their thoughts and behaviors. This is very different from market societies; where social relations are embedded within the economy. The result is that the U.S. education system has become an integral part of the market which now requires educational credentials as a precondition to employment. The consequence of this was that school became viewed less in terms of being an institution that the state forced people to attend, and more as an “opportunity” or “right” that the state granted to individuals enabling them to meet the demands of the market (Gabbard, 2003, p.62).
What happens when the U.S. educational system exports its product (students) to other parts of the world? Anne Koplinka-Loehr in her Capstone paper “Knowing What’s White: Eurocentrism In The Middle School Curriculum- Teachers' Perceptions” (2010) writes that “currently, there are many elements of the public (and private) educational system in the United States that reproduce class structures and perpetuate the inequalities of capitalism in this country and around the world” (p. 4).

In Latin America this has been especially true where, over the years, U.S. educated individuals have brought with them the education and ideology of the United States’ system and have made a huge impact on the local communities. Those who were trained in the United States, from national economic advisors to business investors with development plans, have made a significant impact on almost all countries around the world.

How is this related to indigenous communities in Nicaragua? How do ideologies and policies that are taught in a classroom in the U.S. affect a small indigenous community in rural Nicaragua? In Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples (2003) Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes about the way in which the West interacted with indigenous people around the world: “Imperialism and colonialism are the specific formations through which the West came to ‘see’, to ‘name’, and to ‘know’ indigenous communities” (p. 60). Because the West “learned” about indigenous communities through the plundering and colonizing of Latin America over the past five-hundred years, the relationships that were built over time are based on systems of oppression and exploitation. Today, the exploitation that indigenous communities in Nicaragua face is connected to this long history and fueled by U.S. educated developers and investors. Epifanio San Juan Jr. in his book Racism and
Because of unequal relations of power between the West (including Japan) and “the Rest,” globalization remains basically the export of Western commodities, priorities, and values. At best an uneven process, globalization allows for a new articulation between the “global” (Western capitalist domination) and the “local,” now subject to relativization. (2002, p.149)

These West and “the Rest” relationships drive the globalization development frenzy in which the indigenous communities of Nicaragua today find themselves stuck in the middle. As Eduardo Galeano wrote, “development develops inequality”, and communities in Nicaragua have experienced this first hand.

The indigenous leaders who gathered in Managua for the 3rd Continental Meeting of the “500 Years of Indigenous Resistance Campaign” echoed these words based on their experience, “The different models of colonization have maintained a constant in the abuse worsened by the implementation of racist systems, which are reinforced by the neoliberal economic model” (Girardi, 1994, p. 86).

The education that the indigenous populations received also had a major impact on their struggle to conserve their traditions and cultures. Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes extensively about how by the nineteenth century, colonialism meant that there was “imposition of Western authority over all aspects of indigenous cultures.” She writes: “Numerous accounts across nations now attest to the critical role played by schools in assimilating colonized peoples, and in the systematic, frequently brutal, forms of denial of indigenous languages, knowledges and cultures” (2003, p. 64). Nicaragua’s public schools, where indigenous youth attend class have been affected by the U.S. and European educational systems which have dominated so many aspects of life in Nicaragua over the past five-hundred years.
European Americans in the United States forced Native Americans into their school systems and culture, Don Trent Jacobs writes,

Up until the past two decades, Indian children were taken away from their parents and forced into Western culture’s school system. Their hair was cut off and their mouths were washed out with soap if they spoke their native language. They were beat if they misbehaved. They were forced to wear uniforms. Under threat of punishment, they were not allowed to participate in their spiritual ceremonies and were forced to learn Christian orthodoxy. (Jacobs, 2003, p.155)

A larger structure that affects the education system throughout the colonized world is the idea of “modernization”, which is taught in schools as something achievable, which will lead to success in life. Modernization’s focus is on the individual and competition, pitting individuals against one another in a competitive race toward gaining capital and therefore successfully contributing in society. It is preached that this modernization will lead people out of their “underdeveloped” position within the capitalist structure. The drive toward more complete modernization is what capitalist development pushes for and is implemented into the ideologies of the colonized.

The policies of implementing Western educational and cultural structures in North America and Latin America were influenced from the European’s model that was used in other parts of the colonized world. In How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (1981) Walter Rodney writes about the influence of the European colonizer’s education on the local populations in Africa.

The colonial system also stimulated values and practices which amounted to new informal education. The main purpose of the colonial school system was to train Africans to help man the local administration at the lowest ranks and to staff the private capitalist firms owned by Europeans. (p. 60)

There are also high levels of aculturación or acculturation among indigenous communities as evidenced in the increasing loss of their traditions and languages.
Fischman and Hernandez write that the role of the school is also related to this acculturation, “Because it is considered a broadcaster of the dominant ideology and the hegemonic values of the national society. These are functions generally contrary to the cosmologic indigenous view” (1995, p. 84). This indigenous view is at the core of the indigenous resistance and plays an important role in the alternatives for which they struggle.

**Resistance and Indigenous Alternatives**

There are several organizations that are working against the increased presence of the dominant ideology and fighting for national laws that recognize indigenous communities and their social, cultural and territorial rights. One such organization in Nicaragua is Monexico (The National Indigenous Council for the Nahua and Chorotega People). According to their informational bulletin, Monexico works “to defend and promote the free determination and the integrity of indigenous rights and to strengthen the communal organizational fabric” (Monexico, 2009). They also state that one of their main objectives is to “struggle against the capitalist, imperialist and neocolonial politics” (Monexico, 2009). Monexico is part of a “process of strengthening the indigenous conscience and reaffirming cultural identity” (Monexico, 2009). This is the basis of a larger movement of indigenous peoples all across Latin American.

The movement for reclaiming indigenous identity and building alternatives to the economic and social structures that negatively affect the indigenous communities has been active for years in Latin America. Each year there is a Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples that meets in different countries throughout Latin America. In 1992 the summit took place in Managua, Nicaragua. At the end of the meeting the delegates prepared a final declaration that included an announcement of the Constitution of the
Indigenous, Black and Popular movement. The central objectives of the constitution included the following:

To fight for the establishment of a new alternative economic model, facing the charge of neoliberalism, using five fundamental axes: work, nature, women, identity, and sovereignty, all of them directed toward achieving the formulation of a social economic system in which the protagonist actors will be us. (as cited in Girardi, 1994 p. 137)

Their declaration also included these fundamental points in building an alternative project:

Here we are 500 years later reencountering with each other from our roots, men and women without differences for skin color, languages, cultures, territorial boundaries and borders; recuperating what is ours and constructing an alternative project from the one that threatens and assaults us; a project which excludes misery and suffering; in which our cultures, languages, and beliefs flourish without fear or prohibitions; in which we retake our autonomy and forms of self-government that made us great in the past; in which we enhance our capabilities for art and beauty; in which we destroy the chains of oppression over women and where children and young generations have a future; in which mother nature reconciles with her humanized children on her lap; in which war stays in the memory of bad times; where we can look face to face at one another without feeling the shame of hate or contempt; united, then, in love, solidarity and hope. (as cited in Girardi, 1994, p. 132)

Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o has written extensively about language and its importance for culture and identity of communities. In Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (1986), he writes about the power of the colonizers language in dominating the colonized: “The domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized” (p.16). He also writes about the importance of language in communal self-determination:

It is an ever-continuing struggle to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space. The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to
a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. (p.4)

Language is how communities pass down tradition and culture over time through struggles and celebration, if language is also taken from a people then it is a deeper attack on their culture. “Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history” (Thiong’o, 1986, p.15).

**Methodology**

This research was conducted in a qualitative manner, focused on creating a knowledge base and foundation of indigenous perspectives in Nicaragua from which future studies can draw upon. I was not as interested in finding out how a percentage of community members viewed issues facing them as I was in exploring in depth with a few members about their experiences. The best way to do this was through individual interviews with members of the indigenous communities. In addition, I facilitated a group discussion with eight members of the Las Salinas community to get an idea of other members’ ideas and experiences related to the research topic. I wanted this to be an opportunity for the community members to reflect on the larger structures that are influencing their lives and discuss with each other how their community is reacting. My attempt was to make this a process of collecting valuable insight from people who are too often overlooked or ignored in society. I wanted to be able to think through the connection to globalization and its connection to the U.S. education system with community members who are experiencing this link in their everyday lives. The interviews and group discussion allowed me to explore how effects of the dominant ideology and education system in the United States are felt as far away as small indigenous communities in rural Nicaragua.
The five community members that I chose to interview individually are all involved in leadership positions in their community or work for organizations that defend the rights of the community. I was able to interview these community members thanks to connections that I had previously made with community leaders when I first learned of the land struggle in Las Salinas. In addition to the Veracruz community members that I interviewed there were other members invited to participate, but were not able to attend the days I visited Veracruz.

While this research focused on the effects of U.S. citizen’s actions and behavior on indigenous communities in Nicaragua, I was aware of my own situation as a North American living in Nicaragua. When analyzing how the U.S. educational system affects the ideology of U.S. citizens, myself of product of U.S. education, I attempted to reflect on my own experiences in Nicaragua within the context in which I have conducted this research. My experience as someone from the United States living in Nicaragua has been different than those U.S. citizens who are in Nicaragua as investors. While the focus of this project was to critique the influence and actions that U.S. citizens have on indigenous communities in Nicaragua, I am also aware of and question my own influence on these communities. Even though my presence in the communities had a very different objective, my presence nonetheless had an impact on the community in some way.

Throughout this project I was aware of what Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls “research through imperial eyes”:

Research “through imperial eyes” describes an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings. (2003, p. 56)
I made efforts to counter this “Western” approach with the nature of my research, which was focused on the perspectives of the indigenous communities and not how I viewed the communities, or how I thought they should deal with their problems. Although, while I interpreted their words and analyzed what I thought was the meaning of their views, my own bias and experience nonetheless shaped my approach and how I presented their stories.

Using the research question mentioned in the introduction (do indigenous communities view their struggles with foreign development as directly related to influences from the United States) I created a set of questions to focus the interview around this topic (for a full list of questions, see Appendix A). Overall, I conducted five individual interviews with members of the indigenous communities of Las Salinas de Nahualapa and Veracruz del Zapotal both located in the department of Rivas. I used the same set of interview questions for each interview but allowed space for the interviewees to talk about whatever was important to them. The same set of questions was used as a jumping-off point during the group discussion in order to create dialogue between community members. I also asked follow up questions related to what was brought up during the discussion.

In addition to the individual interviews and group discussion, I also conducted follow up interviews with two members of the Las Salinas community. These interviews allowed me to explore their ideas and experiences in more depth, and get a better understanding of their ideology and views on current struggles.

To protect the community member’s identity I only identify each community member with a number. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, and most took place at the community member’s home. I digitally recorded the interviews, then listened to
the recordings, and translated each interview into English. My results are based on the interviews and group discussion.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study included the number of individual interviews completed. With more interviews I could have collected a wider range of ideological and experiential responses from the community members. As with any research, time and resource constraints played a factor in the possibilities of broadening the study.

**Findings**

Three members of the Las Salinas de Nahualapa indigenous community and two from the Veracruz del Zapotal indigenous community made up the five individual interviews that were conducted. One of the five works for The National Indigenous Council of the Nahua and Chorotega People (Monexico), another is the legal representative for the community of Las Salinas, one is the vice president of the Council of Elders, and the two others are senior members of their community and active Monexico representatives. One of the community members interviewed has been the target of attacks by the company Flor de Mayo and has been directly involved in the legal and informational battles that have been ongoing for the past seven years.

The group discussion was a valuable way to hear dialogue among community members that was related to my research questions, as well as other topics that came up during discussion. There were a range of members that spanned several generations in the group discussion. The participants were four women and four men ranging from 24 to 85 years old. The group was comprised of members of the Council of Elders,
including the president and the community’s attorney, and a young community member who got involved because of the recent land struggle.

The results are organized into sections that are related to the research question and sub-questions: Do indigenous communities in Rivas, Nicaragua view their struggles with foreign development as directly related to influences from the United States? If so, do they see it connected to the U.S. education system or to an influence from tourism, or both? Are actions by U.S. citizens in Nicaragua related to their educational experience in the United States? What kinds of education systems does the indigenous community participate in? How are young people losing their traditional values of the indigenous community? And, how do public schools play a role in this?

Effects of Foreign Development

This tourism leaves us with things that we don’t have any use for.

- Las Salinas Community Member 3

It is clear from the literature review that the indigenous communities of Nicaragua have gone through a long and oppressive history. A small number of their ancestors survived the brutal colonization and more recently they have focused their struggles against foreign investment and other issues facing their communities. The members of the Las Salinas community had the most experience with foreigners, in part because of their location, along the Pacific Ocean, which is a rapidly growing tourist attraction mainly because of its high quality surfing beaches. The actual number of people native to the community is decreasing in part because of the “invasion of foreigners”. A community member explained that, “we call foreigners the people that
not only come from North America and other countries including Central America, but also other departments [or states] within Nicaragua” (Member 2).

With a large number of foreigners in their community I asked them how they see the effects of foreign development there. One prominent community member shared that, “the development which is called tourism, gives knowledge and develops some places, but it also destroys. We say as indigenous people: why in order to develop a country do we have to destroy a community, an ecosystem, a people? It’s not necessary!” (Member 1).

A member of the Veracruz indigenous community, where there is much less tourism influence, reflected on the way outside organizations and their development plans are influencing their community’s youth:

They come with the eagerness to supposedly help but in the end they want to wreak the indigenous community. It’s a big problem that we have here. First there has been the acculturation here, where they have put our young people in a different mindset. Now our young people are copiers of other cultures. In the dance, the dress, the way they behave. We are talking almost specifically about the U.S. culture; there aren’t really any Europeans here. (Member 5)

The Veracruz community members expressed that the influence from outside organizations, rather than tourism, has a real effect on the youth of the community, while also explaining that TV and music play a large role in this influence too.

The Las Salinas community members see some potential benefits that tourism and development could bring to the community, but their experiences with tourism projects in the past have not been positive. A community member explained that they have cooperated with foreigners who have invested in the community, but in the end they are not seeing a lot of development that directly benefits their community:
We have conserved our little piece of land since 1887, we have shared with brothers and sisters of the community and with foreigners, who help “develop” the community. But really they invest in order to make their capital. What they develop is their tourist complexes, but the part where the campesino and indio are, is becoming more and more forgotten. (Member 1)

He further explained that for the indigenous communities, they feel that tourism actually uses them as an “attraction”. They are not only seeing negative effects of tourism in their community, they also feel like they are being used as complements that benefit the tourist complexes even more:

Practically for the indigenous communities, tourism is not development. For the indigenous community, the feeling is that they use us as a complement, not for the development of the community, but for the development of their tourist complex to benefit their investment, the indigenous person and their customs are complements to the development. When a tourist comes and they see an indigenous person serving them, they see the way they are dressed and how they talk, that attracts them. We need for people to see us as a race that maybe needs to evolve, but will evolve on our own, we need to be left alone and they shouldn’t implement foreign customs on us. (Member 1)

Another community member explained that you can’t see any of the supposed development that the tourism claims to be bringing in. He explained:

If you come through the center of Las Salinas you’ll see normal houses. The road is not in good shape, houses aren’t painted, or repaired, there isn’t development. There isn’t any work that serves our needs. Because a job that works is one that allows you to feed and support your family, to buy medicine when someone gets sick. On the other hand you see the big tourist complexes with castle-like buildings worth millions. To me this isn’t development, I think that development has to be integral, especially when there is a poor community. This means that investors come not to develop communities, but to just develop themselves as people. (Member 3)

Claims by governments around the world that tourism will bring development and progress to communities has to be examined, and questions need to be asked: Who benefits from this development? Who gets to define progress for the community? The previous statement captures the overall feeling and experience that I heard the Las
Salinas community express toward the development that comes into the community.

Most of them don’t see it translate into good jobs for them or their families.

To me it seems that the education in the U.S., because it is such a big country, they have a different way of thinking, and different ideological currents, and some come with one kind of formation, others with different. Someone who comes with millions comes with the business mindset and doesn’t come to give anyone anything, but instead comes to make more money. Those who have a finer formation, those who come to contribute, which there are few U.S. Americans who do, are very limited in what they give. (Member 3)

Several Las Salinas community members talked about the ideological currents that people in the United States have and bring with them to Nicaragua. There were several levels of influence that community members mentioned that people from the United States bring. One is the ideology, as member 3 talked about, those people who come on purely business to make money for themselves. The second influence is physical; activities, buildings, dress etc. This affects the indigenous community in what they see, particularly how the youth of the community are influenced by new sports like surfing. Another community member talked about how these influences are slowly changing the culture of the community:

In Las Salinas what we are seeing now, is that since the arrival of surfing in the community, which wasn’t part of the community’s culture before, they are losing the cultural customs, like artisan fishing. So there has been a full implementation of a sport that wasn’t born in the community, so this has a certain level of educational influence as well. Another form of influence is in the dress; the way tourists dress -Hawaiian style-, eating habits with junk food, I think this is educational too, which has to do with the change of culture as well. (Member 2)

The third influence comes through the schools in the community; schools that are government run and have been influenced by Western models of education. As foreign development and tourism are affecting the culture of the community, education has also
been influencing the youth of the community even before the beach resorts started popping up.

*Education in the Community*

*There’s not really any formal communal education in the community, only individuals with their family.*

– Las Salinas Community Member 3

Many community members of Las Salinas see the public schools as another avenue for the dominant ideology to be broadcast into their community. One community member expressed the importance of language to the indigenous community’s culture. She explained that the community’s native language of Nahuatl isn’t taught in the schools and this contributes to the loss of indigenous identity: “We don’t necessarily want the Nahuatl language in the sense that it be spoken as the official language, but we do want to maintain it and rescue it as part of a cultural rehabilitation of the language” (Member 2).

Loss of language is one way the community is losing its identity to outside forces creeping into community. The local schools in the community are run by the government which has been influenced by Western education models and thus is another way in which outside models affect the traditional indigenous values. During the dictatorship in Nicaragua the education and laws all had the influence of the Western vision and culture,

The laws during the Somoza era were laws that had to do with a colonialist vision. These are laws from the outside, and that’s why we say that it isn’t just by chance that these laws are made without the indigenous community, nor for the indigenous people. So up to now they haven’t taken us into account. (Member 2)
Another community member explained how his experience in elementary school was influenced by the dictatorship:

When I was 8, the highest grade in my community was 3rd grade. I was in 3rd grade for about 5 years; and I was the best student in 3rd grade. My mom used to say, “Go, you might learn a little bit more.” This was because Somoza didn’t allow people to study. My teachers were 6th graders! (Member 3)

Members of Veracruz del Zapotal also expressed concern about the outside influence inside their community and how it can affect their youth’s knowledge of community history, but they explained that several teachers in the local schools give assignments to students to investigate the indigenous community and their history.

With Monexico we work on conscientization (consciousness raising), some teachers send students to research the history of the indigenous community. We take time to teach the little that we have learned and we maintain pretty good contact with the youth in the community. (Member 4)

Community members also mentioned that sometimes university students come to research the indigenous community and its history. In spite of the outside influence in the schools of Veracruz these community members feel like they are doing a fairly good job of at least maintaining the knowledge of the indigenous community history and are recuperating the values of their young students.

It is worth mentioning the difference in the way the two indigenous communities select their governing bodies. The Las Salinas community has elections for its board of directors, and there is a national law that recognizes the board of directors as the authority of the communities. Although one community member explained that:

The board of directors is not an authority but they are people that are at the service of the community. However the degree of authority that they are
casting, or that the mayors and outside people are giving them, has permitted all this to happen. (Member 2)

Veracruz is a community where they have never allowed secret balloting for the board of directors, but instead have used popular assemblies to elect their board; this has allowed for much more transparency in the community because nothing is hidden. Las Salinas has had problems of intervention by local mayors and political parties in their internal elections, which has influenced other areas of their community by “introducing structures and methods that are outside of the social, political and cultural context of the pueblos” (Member 2). This could play a role in the community’s ability to recuperate indigenous values among their population.

The U.S. Educational Influence

They adapt quickly to the capitalist system, they get comfortable with the capitalist system. And what does this mean? That now they don’t have any interest in collectivism, now their values of solidarity don’t exist.

–Las Salinas community member 2

In addition to the effects of foreign development, I asked community members if they thought there was a connection between the education system in the United States and the actions of the U.S. investors in their communities. The influences of the dominant educational system and the capitalist economic system are interconnected. A Las Salinas community member told of how she has observed the outside influence in her own community and Nicaragua and how those who leave the community to study are changed by the systems they encounter:

The educational system and formation play a very important role in the acculturation when there is an external formation that has totally different
visions that collide with another reality. These tools of capitalism, including the formal level in the way of educational reforms, have to do with a vision from outside without taking into account the vision of education that has been more of a collectivist vision. (Member 2)

She talked about how the young people start to absorb a foreign education even while in the community.

There is a vision that they already start to absorb even though they don’t live in the U.S. It is a formation or education that is foreign, they start to absorb the Western education and culture, and distance themselves from the people’s own culture. (Member 2)

This outside influence on the community is different from the hotels on the beach, or churches built in town, instead it is transmitted through cultural and educational ideology. The “formation” of the students that she refers to, are the steps they will take in life and how their values will be formed based on their educational experience. She further explained that when those who have studied or been trained outside of the community come back this also creates confrontation:

The vision of an outside lawyer, or an indigenous lawyer that studied outside of the community and was never part of the struggle, who then comes back and tries to implement western judicial laws made by the state, which aren’t the natural laws of the social behavior of the community, creates a huge clash and confrontation. (Member 2)

The community members talked a lot about those from other cultures coming in and having an influence on the community. A question that arises for me now is: when is contact with other cultures beneficial and when is it invasive or manipulative? As a student studying intercultural relations, the balance of when the arrival of other cultures can be beneficial and when it becomes harmful to the native culture is complicated. One area where outside influence and been especially troubling for the indigenous community of Las Salinas has been the outside interest in land.
Struggle for Land

Those who don’t defend their rights, loose them.

-Las Salinas Community Member 1

The most pressing issue facing the Las Salinas community right now is the threat to its communal land. Conflicts, intervention, damage and violence from the Flor de Mayo Company has threatened to create divisions among community leaders and divide the community against itself. Although there have been divisions in the community and the influence of money has played a factor, there still remains a solid core within the community who are standing up to the intervention and continue to fight the legal battles to hold on to communal land. The community member that works for a national indigenous rights network explained that what has occurred in Las Salinas is representative of what is happening to indigenous land all over the country. Authorities are focused on the re-measurement of indigenous lands in order for the state to take advantage of tourist possibilities and natural resources.

In Las Salinas, there is a collective title, and the land measurements are established, however there are still violations of the territory rights on the community. These violations are happening in all of the indigenous communities, not only Las Salinas. What is happening is the re-measurement of the lands in the Pacific, Central and North, not demarcation. With what objective? To redo the measurement, but not recognize the ancestral titles, and leave certain areas of the land in the hands of the state, and this political interest has to do with where the natural resources are. Re-measurements have taken place and have changed depending on touristic or natural resource possibilities of the land. (Member 2)

The community member gave an example of one popular tourist destination called the Somoto Canyon. Although the majority of this large canyon and river in located on indigenous land, the government has claimed the majority of it, and uses it for tourism.
One member of the Las Salinas community also talked about a relatively recent tactic that Western influenced Nicaraguan governments and authorities have used to undermine indigenous identity. The language that governments have used over the years to refer to indigenous people has affected their struggle for land. Governments and authorities have in the past referred to indigenous people as *campesinos*, grouping them in with the rural farmers who use the term. By imposing the terminology *campesino* on the indigenous people they were able to individualize the collective rights of the indigenous communities. This played a large role in the process of re-forming the people to the capitalist system; by telling the communities that every individual *campesino* had the right to own their own land. This has resulted in a movement away from the idea of collectively owned indigenous lands.

Part of the movement for recognition and rights of the indigenous communities on the Pacific side of Nicaragua has focused on adding articles to the constitution of the republic so that these communities would be included specifically as legitimate indigenous *pueblos*. A Las Salinas member explained:

There isn’t an article in the constitution that talked specifically about the indigenous territories on the Pacific, Central and North. However article 5, paragraph 3 of the constitution was part of what the indigenous peoples of the Pacific, Central and North, headed by the peoples of the south precisely, pushed for there to be an article in the constitution, that said “indigenous *pueblos de Nicaragua*”. There were already sections of the constitution that talked about the indigenous communities of the Caribbean coast, but not in the all-encompassing Nicaragua, nor did it recognize them as *pueblos*, which carries a lot more weight than the term community, because *pueblo* indicates territory, and means that there is an origin of the peoples. (Member 2)

Las Salinas community members talked a lot about the activities of the Flor de Mayo company, and how they are affecting their land and community as a whole. One area that particularly has bothered them is the way national authorities and institutions let foreign land owners and investors get away with things that local people can’t:
Mr. Christopher comes to the community, and out there near the estuary he pulled out some trees to put in a road. There are several different kinds of trees there and he evened out the ground and made his road. But he didn’t have permission from the mayor’s office, or the community, or the board of directors, or the elders council, he didn’t have consent from anyone. But if I come along and take out a tree that is on my property, then right away Marena [the Nicaraguan Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources] would be here asking me about this tree, and who gave me the authorization to cut it down. Why can’t they do the same with foreigners, why can’t they restrict them too?! This damages the community, and I don’t think this is the way it is in the United States. (Member 1)

They also mentioned that they feel like many people from the U.S. come there to loosen up and liberate themselves, and do things that aren’t allowed in the United States which includes taking advantage of a lack of authority in many areas.

A Las Salinas community member talked about the important role that Monexico plays in opening doors to get youth in the community organized and integrated into the struggles.

I have been in this fight for 10 years, I’m 33 years old. I’ve learned what it really is to struggle for the good of the collective. I learned how it was to achieve something and feel satisfied, not for me, but for the whole pueblo. In these 10 years, the first thing that we achieved was the demarcation of our territory. One feels satisfied that you did something for your people. This is what Monexico brings, your reward can’t be quantified, it isn’t money. My reward is to feel good, to feel good that you did something good for your people. So that tomorrow your grandchildren and great grandchildren can say your grandpa did this for the people. (Member 1)

There is an ideology in the community that is based on the collective and doing things for the good of the collective. These are the ideals that are at the center of the struggle to preserve communal land, culture, education and tradition.

Discussion
Overall, through their perspectives, members from both communities expressed a desire for a different educational and social system from the one they currently have; one that supports their rights as indigenous people, preserves their native culture, respects their ancestors’ traditions and embraces their connectedness to the environment in which they live. Through their experiences of outside influence in almost all areas of their life, indigenous community members expressed their commitment to collective struggle against forces that are threatening their land and culture. Community members expressed their openness to work with people who are in solidarity with the indigenous struggles for land and culture preservation. A Las Salinas community member mentioned, “We feel more solidarity with the people that come from the outside and are in solidarity and identify with our struggle, than many from our community that migrate [away] for whatever reason (economic, studies etc.).” (Member 2) This shows that the story that the indigenous perspectives paint for us is not only about the Nicaraguan indigenous populations and other Nicaraguans who are being influenced by the U.S. educational system, but also about those people on the other side of the capitalist divide. Many are from the United States, have had meaningful experiences in Nicaragua and because of this are in solidarity with the Nicaraguan people and their struggles.

If the objectives of the U. S. and all Western educational systems are to create obedient, competitive, individually driven students who can enter the capitalist economic system and continue turning the gears to keep the structures moving, then in the views of the indigenous populations and all other people fighting for justice around the world is that a major change needs to occur. The fight against this dominant power is difficult and can only be successful if students within these systems truly commit to pushing for alternatives that advance structures of collective ideology and cooperative
economics. Many of the students who are in a position to have a powerful influence in changing the system are in the United States, the center of this dominant ideology.

I explored U.S. college students’ learning experiences in Nicaragua in one of my Reflective Practice Question (RPQ) papers. The focus was on how this had an impact on their understanding of Social Justice and the potential that these experiences could inspire students to get involved in social change movements in the United States. I asked them questions related to this at the end of their eight-week internship, after they had worked with different Nicaraguan organizations, and lived with Nicaraguan families. One student talked about how valuable it was and how it broadened her view to be shown a different way of life and share someone else’s perspective on the world. My hope was that by being exposed to these different perspectives, the students would begin to build awareness and consciousness that will lead them to take action. I challenged them to make an introspective step forward, where they confront their own educational experience, better understand how they fit into the larger picture, and look for ways to make change that can be felt in the communities of Nicaragua.

When U.S. students have an experience living, working or studying in a country like Nicaragua, and if their experience is a genuine one where they connect with the local people and live among them, then there is great potential for these students to be inspired by the things they see, and use that inspiration to push for political and social change in the United States. Such actions will strengthen the friendships that they have gained and add a relationship of solidarity with the people they have connected with in Nicaragua. As the stories of the Nahua indigenous communities in Nicaragua show us: social and economic policies directed by Western capitalist powers have damaging effects in all corners of the globe. Thus, the struggle for social justice in indigenous
communities around the world should be at the heart of all solidarity movements working to achieve a more sustainable and just world society.

BIBILOGRAPHY


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**Appendix A: Interview Questions**

**Capstone Research Interview Questions- Indigenous Community Members**

1) *Por favor explica su papel como miembro de la comunidad indígena.*

   (Please explain your role as a member of the indigenous community.)
2) Como ha visto Usted la influencia del desarrollo extranjero en su comunidad?

(How do you see the influence of foreign development in your community?)

3) Por favor explica que paso con la situacion del proyecto de Flor de Mayo en su comunidad.

(Please explain what happened with the situation of the Flor de Mayo project in your community.)

(Note: Only asked to Las Salinas community members)

4) En que tipos de sistemas educativos participan la comunidad indigena? - Usted piensa que es anti-capitalista?

(What kinds of education systems does the indigenous community participate in? Do you think it is anti-capitalist?)

5) Existe alguna diferencia entre la education de los jovenes de la comunidad indigena y las otras comunidades en Nicaragua?

(Is there a difference in the education of the young people of the indigenous community compared to other communities in Nicaragua?)

6) Como piensa Usted que influye el sistema educativo de los EE.UU. en las acciones de sus ciudadanos cuando estan afuera de su pais?

(Do you think the educational system in the United States influences the actions of its citizens when they are outside of their country?)

7) Piensa Usted que los jovenes estan perdiendo los valores tradicionales de la comunidad indigena? (En las escuelas publicas)

- En los intereses de quien se basa la education publica?

(Do you think the young people are losing the traditional values of the indigenous community? (In the public schools.)

- (Whose interests does public education serve?)

Appendix B: Map of Nicaragua