

Miskito

Data source: eHRAF

Secondary source

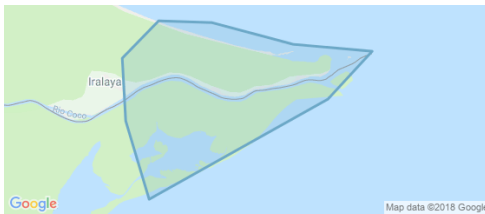
Entered by Emily Pitek, Human Relations Area Files

** Data Source entry, prepared based on data sourced from an external project.*

** Secondary Source entry, prepared from a literature review by a Ph.D. RA*

Entry tags: Religion, Christian Traditions, Syncretic Religions, (Afro-)Caribbean religions

The Miskito live along the eastern coasts of Nicaragua and Honduras, in an area traditionally known as the Miskito coast. The Miskito "developed as a result of European-African-Native American contact and admixture" (Helms, 2011), which began in 1700. This mix of cultural traditions is reflected in their religious beliefs, which include traditional beliefs (such as those of spirits) influenced by Christianity. Christianity was readily adopted by the Miskito, so not much is known of their pre-colonial beliefs. Because religion is tied up with the society at large, this entry considers the Miskito religious group to be coterminous with the Miskito society. This entry focuses specifically on the Cape Gracias a Dios area of Honduras circa 1921.



Date Range: 1896 CE - 1921 CE

Region: Cape Gracias a Dios Region

Region tags: Latin America and the Caribbean, Central America, Honduras

Region of Cape Gracias a Dios, Honduras, ca. 1921

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Murdock, G.P. & Wilson, S.F. (Jul., 1972). Settlement patterns and community organization: Cross-Cultural Codes 3. *Ethnology*, 11(3), 254-295.
- Source 2: Divale, W. 2004. Codebook of Variables for the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. *World Cultures: The Journal of Cross-Cultural and Comparative Research*.
- Source 3: Tuden, A. & Marshall, C. (Oct., 1972). Political organization: Cross-cultural codes 4. *Ethnology*, 11(4), 436-464.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: Retrieved from <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=sa15-000>
- Source 1 Description: Helms, M. W. (2011). Culture Summary: Miskito. New Haven, Conn.: Human Relations Area Files.
- Source 2 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=sa15-001>
- Source 2 Description: Conzemius, E. (1932). *Ethnographical Survey Of The Miskito And Sumu Indians Of Honduras And Nicaragua*. Bureau Of American Ethnology. Washington: U.S. Govt. print. off.

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

Notes: "Although Spain colonized western Nicaragua and Honduras during the sixteenth century, the eastern regions were not contacted until approximately 1700. At this time the population of the Miskito Coast began its long affiliation with English-speaking peoples, first buccaneers and later traders and settlers...After the mid-nineteenth century, Moravian mission stations replaced trading posts as foci for Miskito village development. The Moravian missionaries encouraged strong community organization, and mission church activities provided a new focal point for Miskito community identity and cooperation...The Miskito readily adopted Christianity; the Moravian church is by far the dominant mission group. The Catholic church and several fundamentalist Protestant churches also proselytize" (Helms, 2011).

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Estimated population, numeric: 15000

Notes: "The Miskito are estimated at about 15,000..." (Conzemius, 1932:12).

Are there recognized leaders in the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: "Among these credulous people a great influence is exercised by the shamans, of which there were formerly only two categories, the sukya and the okuli. Of the latter there should be only one at a time, but of the former there is one in almost every larger village. In recent years two other sorts of shamans, the spiritist and the obeah man, have appeared on the coast...These shamans play a great role in the life of the [Miskito], for they act as medicine men, doctors...augurs, conjurers, magicians, wizards, diviners, rain makers, spellbinders, priests, preachers, teachers, guides, advisors, counsellors, depositaries of tribal traditions, and the like. Their opinions were formerly of the greatest weight in tribal assemblies" (Conzemius, 1932:139).



Is there a hierarchy among these leaders:

Hierarchy need not be formally institutionalized if it is widely recognized and accepted.

– Yes

Notes: The Okuli is the highest shaman among the Miskito, and is more powerful than the Sukya. The hierarchy is not formally institutionalized, but is widely recognized and accepted (Conzemius, 1932:142).



"Regional" leaders who oversee one or more local leader(s) (e.g. bishops):

– No

↳ Are leaders believed to possess supernatural powers or qualities:

– Yes

Notes: The Sukya communicates with "unseen powers", and the Okuli is representative of the thunder-god (Conzemius, 1932:140-142).

↳ Powers are acquired by individual deeds carried out in past lives:

– No

Notes: Powers are given to the Sukya and the Okulki by supernatural beings (Conzemius, 1932:140-142).

↳ Powers are acquired by individual deeds carried out in the current life:

– No

Notes: Powers are given to the Sukya and the Okulki by supernatural beings (Conzemius, 1932:140-142).

↳ Powers are culturally transmitted from a supernatural being:

– Yes

Notes: Conzemius, 1932:140-142.

↳ Powers are culturally transmitted from another human (e.g. teacher):

– No

Notes: Powers are given to the Sukya and the Okulki by supernatural beings (Conzemius, 1932:140-142).

↳ Are religious leaders chosen:

– No

Notes: The Sukya is typically a hereditary position, however, the practitioner is picked for the position by the spirits. The Okuli's powers are given to him after being struck by lightning (Conzemius, 1932:140-142).

Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of scripture.

Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– No

Notes: "There are no structures in the community that are appreciably larger or more impressive than the usual residential dwellings" (Murdock and Wilson, 1972, column 6; note, identical to SCCS Variable 66).

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– No

Notes: "There are no structures in the community that are appreciably larger or more impressive than the usual residential dwellings" (Murdock and Wilson, 1972, column 6; note, identical to SCCS Variable 66).

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Yes

Notes: "At the death of a person the material body undergoes dissolution and one or more spirits are set free and roam about doing mischief, until they are directed by the sukya to the Hereafter" (Conzemius, 1932:128).



Spirit-mind is conceived of as having qualitatively different powers or properties than other body parts:

– Yes

Notes: "Upon the death of a person the soul (M.: isiñni) or 'shadow,' as the Creoles say, leaves the body and remains about the house. After the burial it is 'caught' by the sukya and taken to the grave; otherwise it will roam about and do all sorts of mischief" (Conzemius, 1932:158).

Belief in afterlife:

– Yes

Notes: "[The Miskito] believe in the immortality of the soul and its translation to a realm of happiness and bliss" (Conzemius, 1932:158).



Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group:

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information

Reincarnation in this world:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence of a belief in reincarnation.

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Yes

Notes: See questions below for specific information regarding the treatment of corpses among the Miskito.

↳ Cremation:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of cremation.

↳ Mummification:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of mummification.

↳ Interment:

– Yes

Notes: "Burial by simple inhumation is the present practice. The Miskito dress the deceased in his best clothes and place him in a canoe cut crosswise in two parts, one half of it serving as cover" (Conzemius, 1932:155).

↳ Corpse is flexed (legs are bent or body is crouched):

– No

Notes: (Conzemius, 1932:155)

↳ Corpse is extended (lying flat on front or back):

– Yes

Notes: "...the dead person is laid lengthwise on its back to a depth of 4 or 5 feet" (Conzemius, 1932:155).

↳ Corpse is upright (where body is interred in standing position):

– No

Notes: (Conzemius, 1932:155)

↳ Cannibalism:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of cannibalism.

↳ Exposure to elements (e.g. air drying):

– No

Notes: See Conzemius, 1932:156

↳ Feeding to animals:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence of feeding corpses to animals.

↳ Secondary burial:

– No

Notes: "Secondary burials appear to have been practiced formerly by the Miskito" (Conzemius, 1932:156) [but ended before the time this entry focuses on].

↳ Re-treatment of corpse:

– No

Notes: "Secondary burials appear to have been practiced formerly by the Miskito. According to Exquemelin (Engl. ed.: 254; French ed.: II, 274) the widow opened the grave of her husband about one year after burial. Owing to the great humidity the body would soon decompose. She scraped and washed the bones and dried them in the sun. Then she placed them in a cabala, a certain pouch or satchel, which she had to carry on her back during the daytime, and upon which she slept at night. She had to keep this up for a whole year, after which she hung the bag with the bones to the post of her house for another year....[but]...Exhumation has not been mentioned from the Mosquito Coast by subsequent travelers" (Conzemius, 1932:156).

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

– No

Notes: The principal ethnographer, Conzemius, 1932, provides evidence of former practice of animal and human co-sacrifices among the Miskito. However, at the time this entry focuses on, co-sacrifices were no longer being practiced. (see pages 155-156).

Are grave goods present:

– Yes

Notes: See questions below for more specific information on grave goods.

↳ Personal effects:

– Yes

Notes: "Formerly all the personal property of the deceased, as his tools, ornaments, dogs, etc., were put in the grave, in order to assure him a livelihood in the other world...Nowadays all articles put in the grave are broken so as to prevent the stealing of them, but generally only

the useless property of the deceased is buried with him, while the remainder is kept by his family" (Conzemius, 1932:155)

↳ Valuable items:

– No

Notes: Formerly, valuable items were buried with the deceased. However, during the time that this entry focuses on, only the generally useless property of the deceased is buried with the corpse (Conzemius, 1932:155).

↳ Other grave goods:

– Yes

Notes: "Nowadays all articles put in the grave are broken so as to prevent the stealing of them, but generally only the useless property of the deceased is buried with him, while the remainder is kept by his family" (Conzemius, 1932:155).

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

Notes: For a detailed description of Miskito burial customs, see Conzemius, 1932:155-156.

↳ In cemetery:

– Yes

Notes: "The burial ground is generally a short distance from the village" (Conzemius, 1932:155).

Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

Notes: "...the Miskito...believe in the existence of a number of supernatural beings, living formerly on earth like man. These are the sun (yu, lapta), thunder (alwani), moon (kati), rainbow (kumadora), stars and planets (slilma), the Pleiades (pupu-wihta)" (Conzemius, 1932:126).

↳ A supreme high god is present:

– Yes

Notes: "...a Supreme Deity, which the Miskito call Wan-Aisa, 'Our Father'... God has created the world and the inhabitants, but He does not appear to worry a great deal about the individual being, nor is He able to ward off the various dangers which continually menace mankind; consequently He is not honored with offerings, prayers, worship, or sacrifice. Furthermore, He lives so far away from earth that it is impossible to enter into relations with Him, and He can not be approached by man" (Conzemius, 1932:126).

↳ The supreme high god is fused with the monarch (king=high god):

– No

Notes: The Miskito do not have a monarchy.

↳ The monarch is seen as a manifestation or emanation of the high god:

– No

Notes: The Miskito do not have a monarchy.

↳ The supreme high god has deliberate causal efficacy in the world:

– No

Notes: "...He does not appear to worry a great deal about the individual being, nor is He able to ward off the various dangers which continually menace mankind; consequently He is not honored with offerings, prayers, worship, or sacrifice. Furthermore, He lives so far away from earth that it is impossible to enter into relations with Him, and He can not be approached by man" (Conzemius, 1932:126)

↳ The supreme high god has indirect causal efficacy in the world:

"Indirect causal efficacy" refers to not being seen as consciously, directly and actively intervening in the human world, but their overall well being or general attitude has effects on, e.g., quality of harvest, success in war, health, etc.

– No

Notes: "...He does not appear to worry a great deal about the individual being, nor is He able to ward off the various dangers which continually menace mankind; consequently He is not honored with offerings, prayers, worship, or sacrifice. Furthermore, He lives so far away from earth that it is impossible to enter into relations with Him, and He can not be approached by man" (Conzemius, 1932:126)

↳ The supreme high god communicates with the living:

– No

Notes: "...He does not appear to worry a great deal about the individual being, nor is He able to ward off the various dangers which continually menace mankind; consequently He is not honored with offerings, prayers, worship, or sacrifice. Furthermore, He lives so far away from earth that it is impossible to enter into relations with Him, and He can not be approached by man" (Conzemius, 1932:126)

↳ Previously human spirits are present:

– Yes

Notes: "The silkcotton tree...[sisin]...is said to be the abode of the spirits of the departed, and no one ventures under it during the night. It must not be cut down, as by such an act the spirits would be robbed of their favorite resting place, and they would not fail to revenge themselves" (Conzemius, 1932:129).

↳ Human spirits have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:

– I don't know

↳ Human spirits have indirect causal efficacy in the world:

"Indirect causal efficacy" refers to not being seen as consciously, directly and actively intervening in the human world, but their overall well being or general attitude has effects on, e.g., quality of harvest, success in war, health, etc.

– I don't know

↳ Human spirits have memory of life:

– I don't know

↳ Non-human supernatural beings are present:

– Yes

Notes: "...the Miskito...believe in the existence of a number of supernatural beings, living formerly on earth like man. These are the sun (yu, lapta), thunder (alwani), moon (kati), rainbow (kumadora), stars and planets (silma), the Pleiades (pupu-wihta)" (Conzemius, 1932:126).

↳ These supernatural beings can be seen:

– Yes

Notes: "The spirits may come to the neighborhood of human habitations in their anthropomorphic form and try to seduce [people] of the opposite sex, and abnormal children will be the result of this intimacy. Monstrosities among the animal and vegetable world are also held to be spirits. Just like snakes, these spirits are said to have a great passion for women at the menstrual periods" (Conzemius, 1932:129).

↳ These supernatural beings have indirect causal efficacy in the world:

"Indirect causal efficacy" refers to not being seen as consciously, directly and actively intervening in the human world, but their overall well being or general attitude has effects on, e.g., quality of harvest, success in war, health, etc.

– Yes

Notes: "Some of these supernatural beings are in charge of the elements and are responsible for the great calamities which appear occasionally. The god of the wind and of the air, called by the Miskito Prahaku or Aubiya, sends the hurricanes and the great inundations which destroy the plantations and kill the livestock" (Conzemius, 1932:126).

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit negative emotion:

– Yes

Notes: "More powerful than God or the various tribal heroes are the numerous evil spirits (wlasa, lasa), which inhabit the hills, caves, deep water pools, etc. They are extremely malevolent and they are ever ready to injure the people, causing disease or

death" (Conzemius, 1932:127).

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information.

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information.

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information.

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of messianic beliefs.

Is an eschatology present:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of an eschatology.

Practices

Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

– No

Notes: "Celibacy is considered as something abnormal and uncanny among the Indians; people leading presumably an irreproachable celibate life are supposed to practice sexual intercourse with spirits" (Conzemius, 1932:149).

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

i.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale "ceremonies" and "festivals."

– No

Notes: The most important large-scale ritual among the Miskito is the festival of the dead (sikro), but this appears to be more of a communal occasion for fun rather than a religious ceremony (see Conzemius, 1932:161).

Society and Institutions

Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

This question refers to the wider society in which the religious group is located.

– A chiefdom

Notes: "Each Miskito village is politically autonomous, although linked by relatively weak ties to the Nicaraguan state by a village headman" (Helms, 2011). Additionally, the Miskito have one level of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community, which is indicative of a petty chiefdom (Ethnographic Atlas column 33, Murdock, 1967; retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:

– No

Notes: No evidence for the presence of formal education (see Conzemius, 1932:152-153).

Bureaucracy

Do the group's adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:

– Yes

Notes: The Miskito interact with the government of Honduras (see Conzemius, 1932:102).

Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 20, Food Storage, indicates that there is "none" among the Miskito (Murdock and Morrow, 1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

– No

Notes: It can be assumed that transportation infrastructure is not present, as routes of land transport are "unimproved trails", according to Murdock and Morrow (1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004; SCCS Variable 14).

Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

– No

Notes: Tuden and Marshall (1972) column 10, Police (note, equivalent to SCCS variable 90, Police) indicates that "police functions are not specialized or institutionalized at any level of political integration, the maintenance of law and order being left exclusively to informal mechanisms of social control, to private retaliation, or to sorcery."

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 89, Judiciary, indicates that there is "none" among the Miskito (Tuden and Marshall, 1972; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– No

Notes: Because justice and social control are not institutionalized (see previous questions), it follows that punishment is not institutionally forced.

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– No

Notes: Because there is no formal social control among the Miskito, it can be assumed that there is no formal legal code. Additionally, no ethnographic evidence indicates that a formal legal code is present.

Calendar

Does the religious group in question possess a formal calendar:

– No

Notes: At the time this entry focuses on, the Miskito did not have a formal, written calendar. For detailed information on Miskito time reckoning, see Conzemius, 1932:108-109.

Is a formal calendar provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Notes: At the time this entry focuses on, the Miskito did not have a formal, written calendar. For detailed information on Miskito time reckoning, see Conzemius, 1932:108-109.

Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– Yes

Notes: The Miskito rely on a combination of gathering, agriculture, hunting, and fishing for subsistence. Animal husbandry provides a supplemental source of food. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.



Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:

– Gathering

– Hunting (including marine animals)

– Fishing

– Pastoralism

– Small-scale agriculture / horticultural gardens or orchards

Notes: "The indigenous tribes combined cultivation of manioc and other root crops, plantains, and maize with hunting and fishing. Pigs, cattle, horses, chickens, and various agricultural foods, especially rice, beans, and bananas, were introduced after European contact" (Helms, 2011).