

12:00-1:00 p.m.  
Thursday, September 12, 2013  
UNM Latin American & Iberian Institute

# Melanie Wetzel

## Miskitu Bila Aisisna: Collecting Miskitu Language Resources

The Miskitu Indians of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua and Honduras have a unique history. Their geographic location on the outskirts of Spanish Colonial power resulted in the Miskitu being allied with British colonists. The Moravian Church was also influential in the region, converting large numbers of Miskitu to Moravian Christianity as early as the 1850's. The Moravian Church published bibles and hymnals in the Miskitu language, providing some of the earliest translations and linguistic studies of this indigenous language.

During the Nicaraguan war of the 1980's, the Miskitu in large part comprised the counter-revolutionary forces that opposed the Sandinista Revolution. In their own language, their political party is known simply as Yatama, but in U. S. news and historical accounts, they are described as "Contra-revolucionarios" or simply, Contras. In the present, there are several political parties active the Miskitu regions, including the Yatama party, the Sandinista party, and even a combined Yatama-Sandinista party, promoting continuing peace in Nicaragua.

Today, the Miskitu Indians have political autonomy within Nicaragua. From coastal ports, they work at sea as lobster divers. Other communities lie along the Rio Coco and Segovia, or the Wangki, as it is called in Miskitu language, a major waterway that provides a portion of the border between Nicaragua and Honduras. From Honduras to Nicaragua there are almost 300,000 native speakers of the Miskitu Indian language. Many stakeholders are currently involved in efforts to document, protect, and teach the Miskitu language, including the Universities of the Autonomous Regions of Nicaragua, Miskitu activists and linguists, and international scholars.

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Melanie Wetzel is originally from Kansas, and spent 13 years living in Honduras, Central America. During her time abroad, she graduated from the National Autonomous University of Honduras with a Law degree, and practiced for 6 years, as well as working as a journalist, translator and teacher. After returning to Kansas in 2009, she began graduate studies at the University of Kansas, and will be completing an M. A. in Latin-American Studies in 2014. Her interest in indigenous languages allowed her to receive Department of Education Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships (FLAS), to study Kaqchikel Maya and Miskitu as part of her graduate studies. Through funding for the LAII Greenleaf Visiting Library Scholar program, Ms. Wetzel will be reviewing and collecting materials in the Miskitu language, as well as other documentation of Miskitu history and culture, in order to preserve and teach the language.

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