

# Bloodman, Manatee Owner, and the destruction of the Turtle Book

Ulwa and Miskitu representations of knowledge and the  
moral economy

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This article argues that comparative analysis in anthropology is particularly enlightening where contexts under study are most similar. Comparisons of this kind are especially useful in that they allow us to abstract the similarities, focus on the differences, and isolate the reasons for these. To demonstrate this the article considers how the peoples of Karawala and Kakabila, two Miskitu-speaking villages in Nicaragua, represent obscure aspects of processes implicated in the generation of wealth in terms of relations with occult others. In Kakabila, where capitalist penetration is weak and gift-giving remains important, these are represented in terms of relations, both socially reproductive and selfish, with ‘spirit owners’ who mediate access to wealth. In Karawala, where villagers have experienced proletarianization and social fragmentation, these processes find expression in stories of murderous ‘foreigners’ who expropriate blood, and a myth in which an iconic representation of communal responsibility, the Turtle Book, is destroyed.

In recent years much has been made of the apparent relationship between ‘modernity’ (or ‘modernities’) and the growing significance of occult representations of the economy and economic activity.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the predictions of Weber and others that the ‘rationalizations’ responsible for this modernity would augur an abolition of magic and a disenchantment of the world, anthropologists have instead found processes associated with production, circulation, and consumption represented more than ever in terms of such occult practices as witchcraft, sorcery, vampirism, zombie labour, the sale and use of blood and body parts, and so forth (e.g. Geschiere 1992; Nugent 1996; Shaw 2001; Taussig 1977; Weiss 1998; White 1997). While reports of these activities are by no means new in the anthropological literature, it is nevertheless the case that the progressively greater opacity of the processes of ‘modernization’, particularly those relating to greater penetration of exploitative relations of production and circulation, and concomitant inequalities in degrees of access to consumables, is for many anthropologists largely responsible for these developments.<sup>2</sup> Envy by the economically disenfranchised, fear of envy by the newly enriched, and alienation from the individual’s labour, from the products of labour, from the conditions of labour, and from fellow human beings (now viewed as de-individualized ‘units’ or hostile competitors in the context of the labour market) are often equally held to account.<sup>3</sup>

As Moore and Sanders (2001: 9) have pointed out, structural-functionalist accounts of the occult economy and those of contemporary writers, who purport to offer more diachronically focused accounts, have indeed ‘much in common’, and as they rightly

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<sup>1</sup> J.L. Comaroff & J. Comaroff (1993), Geschiere (1997), and Moore & Sanders (2001) provide both useful theoretical discussions and informed case studies. Though the focus of both collections and Geschiere’s monograph is Africa, much of what these authors write about regarding ‘occult economies’ is applicable to other parts of the world (e.g. Scheper-Hughes 2000).

<sup>2</sup> See Taussig (1980) for an early and still influential discussion of this point.

<sup>3</sup> See Eves (2000), Geschiere (1997: 69-96), and Parish (2000) for these issues in relation to envy and fear of envy. Much of the interesting work on occult representations of alienation has come out of discussions of spirit possession (e.g. Ong 1988; Snodgrass 2002).

argue, the former, often accused of a blinkered focus on synchronic explanation, were most interested in gauging its aspects, at the level of community at least, in terms of a 'sustained focus on social change' (Moore & Sanders 2001: 8). Authors in both camps, in other words, focus on reactions to the significance of new and opaque translocal processes as these come to bear on their subjects.

The difference between the two approaches, insofar as they are distinguishable, is therefore to be found less in the kinds of explanation that each provides than in the object of analysis. For structural-functionalist authors, this is the methodologically isolated community, where representations of such phenomena as witchcraft might be understood, for example, as indicators of growing social strain (e.g. Marwick 1964; Turner 1957). Contemporary anthropologists, however, have moved out of small, methodologically isolated, rural communities and have focused instead on translocal relations, understood variously in sociological, cultural, and discursive terms. As they have abandoned specifically village-level studies 'to range freely from one level of analysis to another, from local-level politics to rural-urban linkages to the nationstate and the global system' (Moore & Sanders 2001: 14), it has become increasingly difficult for authors to maintain theoretical coherence, a function of having to do 'ethnography on an awkward scale' (J. Comaroff & J.L. Comaroff 1999: 282). And without this theoretical coherence the occult economy becomes a rather generalized 'metacommentary on the ill-doings of capitalism and globalization' (Moore & Sanders 2001: 14); a meta-commentary that by its very vagueness fails to get to grips with how occult economies work.

Explaining the occult economy convincingly in terms of change is not easy even at the level of the local community. As Douglas, trenchantly wrote in an assessment of the legacy of Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*, 'The general proposition that an increase in witchcraft accusations occurs as a symptom of disorder and moral collapse was superbly untestable' (1970: xx). In this article I employ what might be understood as a revisionist method by returning to the rural communities to consider this topic. Comparison of two villages only thirty miles apart, with apparently similar social morphologies and repertoires of stated beliefs and representations, but with differing engagements with the translocal economy and very different emphases on different aspects of the occult economy, provide me, I believe, with a relatively effective means of engaging with at least some of the methodological shortcomings identified by Douglas.

Comparison between widely divergent ethnographic contexts, implicit in much of the writings referenced above, is of course useful in that it allows us to expand our ethnographic imaginations. It is, however, less enlightening than it might be in terms of making sense of the day-to-day workings of occult economies. Comparison of the two very similar contexts I discuss here, however, by virtue of the fact that there are fewer potentially significant differences (and therefore less complicating 'noise'), allows us, I argue, to isolate causal relations between economy and belief more effectively and convincingly, and come closer to surmounting Douglas's pertinent 'untestability' claim.

## Karawala and Kakabila

Finding two (or more) contexts that are in general terms similar enough, yet sufficiently different specifically in those areas one wishes to investigate, is never easy, often being a matter of luck. In 2006 I was fortunate enough to conduct fieldwork in Karawala, a village on Nicaragua's remote Mosquito Coast with considerable similarities to Kakabila thirty miles to the south, another village where I had been working over the course of nearly fourteen years previously (1992-2006). These two villages demonstrated considerable similarities in terms of expressed beliefs, yet also demonstrated interesting and important divergences. The nature of these divergences can be readily understood in terms of differing relations to productive and reproductive processes, in one case considerably more influenced by extra-village engagements.

In a recently published article in this journal (Jamieson 2008) I argued that these distinctions in productive and reproductive processes created differing attitudes to the roles of sorcery, ghostly attack, and death in attributions of the causes of misfortune in the two villages, and that these entailed the presence of different specializations in the two contexts among individuals knowledgeable in matters of the supernatural. In this article I examine in comparative terms the roles of two kinds of supernatural figure (*dawanka* and *dar*) and of a category of human (Bloodman or Tala Dadira) who steals children's blood, to demonstrate (a) how social responsibility and control, born out of local ideas about production and distributions and understood in terms of culturally specific ideas about appropriate forms of reciprocity and sharing, are conceptualized in Kakabila and Karawala, and (b) how this responsibility and control are compromised to a much greater extent in the latter than in the former.

Karawala and Kakabila are two villages situated on the complex system of waterways on Nicaragua's eastern seaboard, part of what has come to be known as the Mosquito Coast. Kakabila sits on a bank overlooking the shore of Pearl Lagoon, a large, nearly landlocked estuary which flows into the Caribbean Sea, while Karawala is situated near the mouth of a small tributary of the Río Grande. Kakabila has a population of about 650, most of whom routinely consider themselves to be Miskitu, though villagers speak both Miskitu and Nicaraguan Creole English. Karawala has around 1,450 inhabitants, almost all of whom nowadays speak Miskitu, though the majority generally consider themselves to be Ulwa and a few older villagers still use the Ulwa language.

The people of Kakabila, almost uniformly, subsist mainly by swidden horticulture and fishing with gill nets. They grow cassava, plantains, and other cultigens for home consumption. Seasonal shortages of horticultural produce have traditionally been, and still are, mainly mitigated by redistributive gift-giving, though in recent years a minority of villagers have opted to sell surpluses by the pound. During the rainy season months between June and December they sell snook, coppermouth, drummer, and catfish for cash to buyers based across the lagoon. Unsaleable but edible fish caught in their gill nets and brought home are rarely sold and are usually freely given to kin,

affines, and neighbours. During brief spells in April and October, when conditions are right, villagers also catch white shrimp and sea shrimp. Shrimp are less commonly given away since they fetch good prices and they are mainly sold for cash (Jamieson 2002). Between January and May, Kakabila men periodically go to sea to hunt turtle, which they bring home so they may butcher them and redistribute the meat both through gift-giving to close kin, affines, and neighbours and through sale by the pound to other villagers.<sup>4</sup>

The villagers of Karawala are involved in a more diverse set of occupations, partly because the town is a municipal capital, and partly because for several decades logging companies have at different times used it as a headquarters. Only about 10 per cent of households are involved in subsistence horticulture and even fewer engage in gill net fishing owing to the prevalence of thefts, villagers say, both of foodstuffs from swiddens and nets from fishing grounds, both of which are farther from the village and therefore more vulnerable to visits from strangers. There are several individuals employed in the public sector at the village schools, the health clinic, the municipal hall, the police station, the court building, and the electoral council office. Some men worked until very recently as sawyers and labourers employed on a piece basis for a Costa Rican logging company based just outside the village. Others are entrepreneurs involved in transportation, hospitality (there is one pension in the village and a few villagers who rent out rooms), baking, and retail (there are two large shops). Many more, however, are occasionally employed as day labourers (as watchmen, porters, and construction workers), principally in recent years for the local authority and the logging company. There are also a few villagers regularly involved in such clandestine occupations as the sale of rum (illegal in Karawala), marijuana, crack-cocaine, and sex, as well as theft and the handling of stolen goods.<sup>5</sup> Because so few villagers are involved in either horticulture or fishing and because most working villagers sell their labour for money, foodstuffs and other goods from the commons are generally imported into the village and are nearly always sold for cash.

In summary the economies of Kakabila and Karawala are quite different. In Kakabila, subsistence strategies are focused on activities that engage villagers directly with the ‘commons’, the lands and waters to which villagers have access, while in Karawala subsistence for most is detached from this direct engagement, foodstuffs being obtained primarily by purchase from the town shops, itinerant vendors, and those few individuals who do plant, fish, or hunt.

In Kakabila both fishing and turtling crews and *pana pana* (reciprocal labour) teams devoted to the preparation of swiddens depend on the recruitment of non-kin males,

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<sup>4</sup> Christie (1996), Hostetler (1996), and Jamieson (1996; 2002) contain more detailed accounts of these activities for Kakabila and neighbouring communities, as well as discussion of changes brought about by developments within the regional economy. See also Nietschmann (1973) for in-depth analysis of similar activities amongst the people of Tasbapauni, located between Kakabila and Karawala, in the 1960s.

<sup>5</sup> These illegal or illicit activities also take place in Kakabila but to a much lesser extent.

especially affines. These subsistence-focused relations of cooperation between males, underpinned in many instances by brideservice prestations of foodstuffs by men to the mothers of their wives and brothers-in-law, effectively ensure a degree of solidarity between households and between unrelated kin groups, which in Kakabila are typically organized around potentially mutually antipathetic ‘confederacies’ of matrilocally related women, often imagined as sets of adult sisters and led by an older woman known as the *kuka* (‘grandmother’ or ‘respected older woman’) (Jamieson 2000).<sup>6</sup>

In Karawala the low degree of engagement of villagers in subsistence strategies focused on exploitation of the commons, owing (as noted above) to perceptions of theft, an apprehension of exploitation of community’s natural resources by outsiders (especially logging companies), the loss of lands held upriver by villagers to invading Spanish-speaking frontiersmen, the penetration of the cocaine economy, and the commoditization of labour within the village, evidently produced, during my time in the field there (2006), a sense of moral crisis resulting in enmities, suspicion, and violence between similarly constituted matrilocally recruited confederacies.

I have argued elsewhere (Jamieson 2008) that this sense of crisis in Karawala was, at this time, reproducing a culture in which intra-village sorcery accusations and intimations, as well as violence, were commonplace. At the same time the widespread conditions in the village that forced many of its inhabitants to suffer the alienation of their labour, the products of labour, and the conditions of labour were conspiring to compromise any sense of solidarity beyond at most the extended matrilocally constituted kin groups referred to in that article and had greatly weakened affinal relations. Because men either alienated their labour to others for cash or, in a few instances, ran businesses competing with others for the little money which circulates in the village, and did not generally work together, there was little need for cooperation between them. Non-kin solidary relations, particularly affinal relations, of the kind that are so important for subsistence activities in Kakabila are correspondingly weak, conjugal unions were exceptionally (by Kakabila standards) brittle, and relationships between households and between ‘confederacies of sisters’ in particular were often characterized by suspicion and enmity, resulting in frequent violence and accusations of sorcery between members of enemy confederacies (Jamieson 2008).

## ***Dawanka: owners of the commons and repositories of knowledge***

In the context of ordinary village life, Kakabila and Karawala people are faced on a daily basis with having to make choices that inevitably entail others subjecting

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<sup>6</sup> I have variously referred to these kin groups in earlier articles (Jamieson 2000; 2003) as either ‘matriclusters’ or ‘confederacies of sisters’ but now prefer the latter term. Note that these ‘confederacies’ also invariably contain male members (sons and unmarried brothers) as well as affiliated males (husbands and sons-in-law).

their actions to moral evaluation. They are, in other words, well aware that a perceived opposition in both villages between two diametrically codes of action, described in earlier work as ‘transactional orders’ (characterized as ‘Miskitu’ versus ‘Creole’ in Kakabila, and ‘Ulwa’ versus ‘Miskitu’ in Karawala), produces tensions that at the decision-making level have to be negotiated (Jamieson 2003; 2008; cf. Kindblad 2001). They also know, living as they do in a *habitus* where the ‘image of the limited good’ is widely shared (Jamieson 2002), that choices which apparently emphasize the abdication of reciprocity and benefit the individual are going to be especially subject to close scrutiny and moral evaluation. The resort to secrecy in one’s dealings, if only to evade social obligations, however, is likely to provoke even greater curiosity, and potentially opprobrium. Any suggestion of secrecy (even the belief that one is acting in secrecy) is likely to provoke the suggestion that one’s wealth is illegitimately generated through participation in an occult economy whose protagonists and *modus operandi* are all too well known. Indeed any form of generation of wealth that is otherwise inexplicable, by villagers and others, is likely to invite the suggestion of involvement in occult economics.<sup>7</sup> I now present three kinds of protagonist widely implicated in the occult economy and the generation of wealth: the *dawanka, dar* and Bloodman, and discuss their significance for the people of Kakabila and Karawala.<sup>8</sup>

The *dawanka* are, for the people of these villages and the Miskitu-speaking diaspora in general, both the guardians of the commons and repositories of secret knowledge about productive and reproductive processes. Particularly in Kakabila and neighbouring villages, they are sometimes referred to with the Creole English words *owner* or *master*. The two most discussed of these are Duwindu (also known to northern Miskitus as Swinta) and Merry Maid (also known as Liwa Mairin, meaning ‘Serpent Woman’). Duwindu, a short man with a large, wide-brimmed pointy hat, is the owner of the animals of the bush. He determines how many deer or wild peccaries human beings will kill, sometimes sending them out to favoured hunters from a hillside cave in which he keeps them. He has a missing thumb on one hand by which those who encounter him may know him. Should he offer one his hand to shake, it is advisable to tuck one’s thumb back, lest he steal it. Merry Maid is a beautiful woman with long yellow hair who owns the animals of the waters. She lives in the sea, the lagoon, and the rivers, and it is she who decides on the size of fishermen’s catches and the success of those

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<sup>7</sup> This is not of course peculiar to the peoples of the Mosquito Coast and has been particularly well studied in both ethnographic and theoretical terms in African contexts (J.L. Comaroff & J. Comaroff 1993; Moore & Sanders 2001). Geschiere (1997) contains a particularly detailed account of these issues among the Maka and neighbouring peoples of Cameroon.

<sup>8</sup> Barrett (1992: 205-22), Conzemius (1932: 126-30), Dennis (2004: 211-16), Helms (1971: 187-9), and Herlihy (2006) contain interesting fieldwork-based discussions of these characters. Barrett’s work is particularly interesting in that his findings are based in part on fieldwork in both Kakabila and Karawala.



looking for hunting lobster.<sup>9</sup> Some people have told me that she carries a golden comb which will bring fortune to the man or woman who finds it.

There are also other *dawanka*, notably Sisin Dawanka (Cotton Tree Owner) and Kwah Dawanka (Fig Tree Owner), both of whom reside in the specimens of the trees for which they are named, and a few men, it is said, go to these trees to seek wisdom (Reyes & Wilson 1992: 182). Hills, of which there are few in this low-lying region, also contain *dawanka* in caves, and a number of species of animals and plants are said to have their own lesser *dawanka*. The Moravian missionaries who first converted the peoples of the region to Christianity were no doubt aware of the significance of the *dawanka* and, showing enviable linguistic competence, chose the word Dawan to represent the Christian god. Without the particularizing suffix *-ka*, Dawan means *The Owner* or *The Master*, and is now the term most often used, along with Gad, to mean God.<sup>10</sup>

*Dawanka* are very dangerous. It is said that some people approach them in order to *deal* (*dil takaia*), in other words to ask for desired goods that cannot be obtained by ordinary means. Supplicants, it is said, sometimes seek success in seducing members of the opposite sex or causing harm to others, but in the great majority of cases come seeking wealth. In return the *dawanka* usually require a later return payment which the supplicant will be hard pressed to deliver. Typically this is an as yet unborn child. If, when the time comes, the supplicant fails to pay up, he or she may die.<sup>11</sup>

People of the region generally hold the view that approaching a *dawanka* in order to *deal*, at least for one's own ends, is at best dubious and at worst downright immoral. To do so is regarded as being secretive and selfish, and as such may be said to represent worst practice within local moral evaluations. Many people consequently have little sympathy for those they feel have used (or been used by) a *dawanka* to get rich. For example, following the death of Mister Abraham, a wealthy businessman in the regional capital Bluefields, it was said disapprovingly by some that he had acquired his wealth by *dealing* and that this is why he was killed.<sup>12</sup>

Some say that lobster divers injured in their work or paralysed with compression-related afflictions – all too common in this highly lucrative but extremely dangerous profession – are taken by Merry Maid, the *dawanka* of the waters. This view is reinforced by the reports of divers high on cocaine, who often take the crack pebbles (*rock*)

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<sup>9</sup> One young gill net Kakabila fisherman, his nets full with snook and coppermouth, boasted to me that he *deals* (see below) with Merry Maid, and that when the time comes he will escape the consequences of non-payment to her.

<sup>10</sup> There is no evidence at all that the Miskitu-speaking peoples used the term 'Dawan' to represent any sort of overarching deity in pre-Christian times.

<sup>11</sup> Children in Kakabila are socialized from an early age to *respect* (*rispik munaia*) the *dawanka*, with warnings, when they steal fruit from other villagers' trees, that Mango Dawanka and Plum Owner will take revenge on them.

<sup>12</sup> Mister Abraham is a pseudonym. Also said to be dealing was a wealthy American, known to Karawala people as Mister Bill, who made good money from a lodge he set up just outside the village during the 1970s, to which he invited tourists on fishing holidays.

in partial payment for catches and smoke them so that they might withstand the cold underwater. As the lobster become harder to find, owing to over-exploitation, the divers have to go deeper down to find them, taking more crack-cocaine to stand the greater cold, and putting themselves at great risk of compression-related injury. Over-exploitation of the commons and the consequent wrath of the waters' *dawanka* are thus entangled in a particularly vicious circle (Dennis 2004: 142-3).<sup>13</sup>

## ***Dar*: when opportunity knocks**

The quest for personal fortune through opaque means, as represented by *deals* with *dawanka*, implies for the people of the region a concomitant abandonment of the socially reproductive forms of distribution. Consequently they consider *dealing* to be an illicit activity. It is not, however, wealth itself that is regarded as being essentially antisocial, but the means by which it is obtained. Thus people regard the opportunistic and unsought acquisition of wealth as being entirely acceptable, and this happens surprisingly frequently as bales of cocaine, thrown overboard by traffickers fleeing the American or Nicaraguan coastguard patrols, wash up on the numerous tiny desert islands close to the Mosquito Coast shore. Thus one 10-year-old Kakabila girl, known for her moral uprightness, was able to tell me without any sense of clandestine admission, 'I wish my father would make a big cocaine find'.

The notion that unsolicited acquisition is quite acceptable, provided that it is not used antisocially, finds expression in an interesting representation. *Dar*, according to various accounts, are either pieces of vine or small birds that are, in either case, invisible. Occasionally one takes a fancy to a human being, signalling its presence with cries of 'Dar, dar, dar!' The individual to whom it takes a liking may catch the *dar*, possession of which enables that individual to become invisible when he or she holds it. However, to catch a *dar* one has first to confront one's worst fear. Thus Kuka Chavela, an old Kakabila woman, nearly caught a *dar*, but was unable to face the worms, her worst fear, which she would have had to confront first, and her opportunity was lost.

When people are asked what they would do with a *dar* if they were to acquire one and thereby be able to become invisible, they almost always say that they would go to Bluefields (or some other city), enter the bank, and steal all the money. As with opportunistic cocaine finds, this is considered entirely acceptable, the traffickers and banks both being situated outside the community's moral universe. There is, however, a cautionary tale regarding the use of *dar*, a version of which has interestingly found its way into a children's book published in the United States (Rohmer, Chow & Vidaure 1987). In this story some hunters, three brothers, find a *dar* and are able to use it in order to obtain success in hunting, thereby ensuring a plentiful supply of meat for the inhabitants of their village. Eventually the brothers encounter strangers who buy the

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<sup>13</sup> People who drown, or nearly drown, are often said to have been victims of Merry Maid. For more on Liwa Mairin and Swinta, see Dennis (2004: 211-16) and Helms (1971: 187-8).

meat from them and they now refuse to give to their fellow villagers, pushing aside the elders who try to reason with them. In the end they find that they are unable to make themselves visible again, even when they no longer hold the *dar*, and, realizing that this is a problem, they begin to panic. They beg their fellow villagers to help them, but the latter refuse and exile them from the village. *Dar*, it seems, should not be used to exploit the commons for one's own benefit *at the expense of those within one's own moral universe*, archetypally circumscribed by the village.

## Bloodman: economic predation from outside the moral universe

The *dawanka* and *dar* principally represent the activities and dangers of those associated with the moral economy operating with unseen (literally in the case of *dar*) and unknowable forces for their own ends. In this way the people of the Mosquito Coast make sense of the opaque workings of entrepreneurship and good luck, while at the same time monitoring the forms in which the wealth that comes from these is circulated within their socially constructed moral universes – although, of course, these transactions, as I note elsewhere (Jamieson 2003), are contextually situated and frequently contested at the village, extended kin group, household, and individual levels.

There are, however, opaque economic forces that impinge on the productive potential of community members evidently emanating from outside the moral universe.<sup>14</sup> While the effects of these forces are sometimes explained through recourse to *dealing*, at least when the protagonists are known or heard of, they are also sometimes explained by even darker representations, especially when little is known of them. These representations, personified by the beings known as Bloodman or Tala Dadira (literally 'blood-drinker'), seem most often to materialize when these economic forces, originating far away, impinge most urgently on ordinary lives.<sup>15</sup>

Bloodman (sometimes represented as a single eponymous individual, sometimes in the plural) is a human being, rather than a semi-human, as *dawanka* are, or a non-human, as are *dar*. He is usually described as being a Mestizo (*ispail* in Miskitu, *panya* [from the English 'Spaniard'] in Creole) with a big bushy beard, a white coat, and big white rubber boots. Some say he also carries a bag in which he keeps the tools he uses for his evil deeds. At various times Bloodman, singly or in groups, loiters outside the

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<sup>14</sup> Leonie Kindness has pointed out to me that economic forces are almost invariably opaque. While this is certainly true, it is the case that the people of Karawala and Kakabila believe that there are areas of their economy, notably those focused on subsistence, that they do understand as natural.

<sup>15</sup> Other manifestations among the Miskitu are *grisi siknis* attacks, bouts of contagious hysteria in which the afflicted are attacked by demons of various kinds (Dennis 1981; 1985; 2004: 216; Jamieson 2001). In most instances victims are adolescent women (particularly those experiencing crises concerned with their reproductive potential), but there have also been attacks suffered by workers employed as contract labourers, for example the workers constructing the Layasiksa canal a few years ago.

village waiting to ambush individuals, particularly children, whom he kills when he can. He drains the blood of his victims and, when he has enough, takes it to Managua (or some other metropolis), where he sells it to doctors for use in transplants and for other less well-understood purposes. In some instances, it is said that Bloodman has a vehicle the size of a tanker into which he pours his sinister cargo, ready to take it away.

Blood (*tala*) for the people of Kakabila, Karawala, and Tasbapauni represents the life-giving substance of humans. It exists in finite supply and, unless a medical transplant is administered, may be lost for good, being unable to regenerate. It is therefore the ultimate 'limited good'.<sup>16</sup> Murderous thefts of blood, especially the blood of children, thus provoke particular horror, representing as they do the expropriation of the village's irreplaceable productive and reproductive potential for the benefit of unknown, powerful interests, represented by the image of the Mestizo or 'Spaniard' in the white coat in the guise of Bloodman.<sup>17</sup> During my fieldwork, accounts of Bloodman were far more common and better elaborated in Karawala, where cash and market relations have penetrated the local economy deeply, than (as far as I am aware) they have ever been in Kakabila, where production for subsistence and petty commodity production for sale to outsiders still predominate. Indeed, I heard more stories of Bloodman in one period of fieldwork in Karawala than I have in eight periods in Kakabila, where this figure is regarded by many (though not all) as a joke character used to frighten children.<sup>18</sup>

Bearing in mind that Bloodman seems to represent the threat to the moral economy from powerful others, there is, beyond the general sense that commoditization is transforming the moral economy of Karawala, a rather more particular explanation for why Bloodman took such a hold over villagers' imaginations during this period. At this time (2006), Karawala villagers were greatly preoccupied with the rapacious activities of a Costa Rican-owned logging company, whose mainly Mestizo employees were cutting down hundreds of hardwood trees, sending the lumber overseas. The new village headman was trying to take legal action against the municipal mayor, who had illegally given the company a permit to work in the community's lands, and there were mutterings about how the previous headman and the mayor had taken kickbacks from the company. There were also rumours that people from as far away as the Río Prinza-

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<sup>16</sup> People from these villages are consequently reluctant to give blood donations at the Bluefields regional hospital, even to help sick relatives, or provide samples for the Ulwa phlebotomist at the Karawala clinic.

<sup>17</sup> See Lattas (1993) and Shaw (2001) for similar analyses of representations of blood and economy in the contexts of West New Britain and Sierra Leone, respectively. Rama manatee hunters thirty miles south of Kakabila, reports Loveland (1976: 76), ensure the success of future hunts by bathing in the animal's blood, a notion explicitly linked by Rama people to the foetus and human reproduction. The ritual significance of the manatee as a symbol of social order is discussed further below in this article.

<sup>18</sup> Nietschmann (1979: 105-11) has an engaging account of a Tasbapauni woman who, running into a North American film-maker on the beach, fled terrified that she had encountered Bloodman, as well as discussion of the Bloodman phenomenon in more general terms.

polka (also affected by this company's depredations), thirty miles to the north, were up in arms and were forming a vigilante group to burn down the company's headquarters situated just outside Karawala, but this never happened.

The people of Karawala were evidently during this period experiencing a moral panic in regard to the illicit expropriation of village-owned resources, and this situation may well account for the extraordinary prevalence (at least to one used to Kakabila) of reports of Bloodman murders in the surrounding area.<sup>19</sup> This sense of panic in regard to notions of productive and reproductive potential may also have been exacerbated by the fact that a number of village women were sexually involved with Mestizo workers at the company's headquarters. Supported by sisters and other allies, mutually jealous women, villagers said, were getting into fights and exchanges of sorcery accusations with one another. In one instance, the members of one group, a mother and her two daughters, even felt they had to leave their two houses and business (a small eating house), and moved to Bluefields in order to escape jealousy-fuelled feuding with rival groups of women over the attentions of the company's Costa Rican boss, Max.<sup>20</sup> Before they left, these women had suspected that sorcery (*obeah*) was being directed against them and they had, for some months, locked down their well with a padlock to prevent it being poisoned, even though this meant denying their neighbours water, a position regarded by many as the epitome of selfish hostility to others.

The unpopular (and illegal) exploitation of Karawala's productive potential represented by the depletion of the community's timber stands (like blood, considered irreplaceable) by the Costa Rican lumber company, and the expropriation of the reproductive potential of village women by the company's Mestizo employees, had generated a literally poisonous atmosphere (*puisin laka*), in which intra-village conflicts and jealousies frequently found expression in accusations of sorcery (*obeah*).<sup>21</sup> I heard no accounts of *obeah* committed by the Costa Ricans or stories of how they might be *dealing* with *dawanka*. *Obeah* and *dealing* are, it seems, illegitimate career moves employed by those who specifically inhabit the specifically local moral universe.<sup>22</sup> Reports, however, of the activities of Bloodman, who I have argued represents predatory attack by powerful others from outside the local moral order, came to me during this time on an almost daily basis.

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<sup>19</sup> None of these imagined Bloodman murders I heard about in Karawala were in fact ever substantiated as far as I am aware.

<sup>20</sup> On one occasion I witnessed one of these brawls involving seven women and one man from two other groups. Two women, one from each group, were supposedly rowing over the attentions of one of the Mestizo loggers.

<sup>21</sup> In local discourses, poison (*puisin*) may be sent to victims through the air.

<sup>22</sup> Taussig argues that the devil pact could further be seen as a moral indictment of the new mode of production, a mode understood not as natural, not as a reified sphere of the 'economic', disembodied, remote, and forever beyond the puny affairs of man [as is the case with Bloodman's activities] but as a mode accessible to the wily activist (1995: 390).

## Manatee Owner and the closure of the Turtle Book: conclusion

Many of the people of Kakabila regard Bloodman almost as a children's bogeyman, not (it is implied) to be taken seriously, but become greatly animated on the topic of *dawanka*, particularly Duwindu and Merry Maid. Conversely many Karawala villagers, at least during the period of my fieldwork, are greatly exercised by reports of the activities of Bloodman, but demonstrate little interest in the *dawanka*.<sup>23</sup> Initially this may be surprising. After all, *dealing* with *dawanka* is understood in Karawala as much as it is in Kakabila as a technique generally used illicitly to acquire knowledge specifically for one's own benefit, possibly at the expense of others. Furthermore, the greater opacity of the semi-proletarianized local economy and the comparatively greater degree of fragmentation that characterizes sociality in Karawala might lead one to predict that reports of the activities of *dawanka* would in fact be rather more numerous there than they are in Kakabila. This, however, is not the case.

I believe that there are two reasons for this, which, when examined closely through the lens of comparative study, turn out to be related to one another. The first is the subject of another article and is discussed in more detail there (Jamieson 2008). I argue there that Karawala's comparatively greater social fragmentation (alluded to above) reproduces an occult economy in which other humans, usually fellow villagers, are primarily held to account for causing the misfortune of others, specifically through various forms of sorcery known as *obeah*. In Kakabila, however, the greater degree of village-level solidarity has historically been underpinned by the work of shamans (of both the *prapit* and *sukia* types) who project the causes of misfortune onto non-human and semi-human others from outside, specifically *lasa* (ghosts) and *dawanka*. In other words, the principal protagonists within Karawala's occult economy are reportedly malign sorcerers, generally members of enemy kin groups, who poison (*puisin munaia*) and bewitch (*ambuk munaia*) other people. They are not the ordinary, though selfish, individuals one hears about in Kakabila who happen to be *dealing* for their own individualistic ends (rather than for the interests of their own kin groups), and who receive their comeuppance when they fail to fulfil their contractual obligations to the *dawanka*.<sup>24</sup>

The second reason for the lesser importance of *dawanka* in Karawala's occult economy has to be sought, I believe, in the understanding that, although they may provide access to other kinds of desired goods, *dawanka*, as sources of knowledge, are principally engaged with the protection of the commons and the distribution of its resources.

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<sup>23</sup> There were, however, a few *dawanka* reports from Karawala. For example, some villagers said that Merry Maid might be responsible for the drowning of a 9-year-old boy in a local creek and for the injuries sustained to a lobster diver from nearby Kara.

<sup>24</sup> I must stress that one does hear reports of *obeah* in Kakabila and of *dealing* in Karawala, but these are much less frequent than those of *obeah* in Karawala and those of *dealing* in Kakabila (Jamieson 2008).

Bearing this in mind, the reader should also remember that, while most Kakabila adults are actively and directly involved in the exploitation of the lands and water around their village for subsistence and therefore mindful of *dawanka*, few Karawala people nowadays rely on direct engagement with the commons for their survival.

In Kakabila the acts of hunting, butchering, and consuming manatee are rather special and exceptionally symbolically charged, and beliefs and practices associated with these activities have come to assume a particular importance in that they forcefully project an understanding of socially responsible forms of reproduction. During dark June nights, Kakabila men go out in their canoes, often in large groups, to hunt manatee with torches and harpoons in the areas close to the mouths of various creeks that empty into Pearl Lagoon. When one is found, it is killed or stunned and then pulled or directed to the village shore, where it is then butchered by men who have mastered the techniques associated with this work. A single manatee, some say, may yield as much as 800 pounds of meat, and the carcass of one may therefore provide a single meal for the whole village. They are, however, hard to find and it is rare that any given year yields more than four or five of these creatures to the village.

The manatee's lengthy intestines are distributed among the village children, who take them home to be fried as a savoury snack, while the meat is divided and given to each of the village households.<sup>25</sup> The head is cut off and given to an elderly woman who arranges for it to be placed in a drum of boiling water, where it is cooked. The meat from the head is then distributed with cassava in the form of a meal to all the village adults (*upla almuk*), these being those individuals who have offspring or their own houses. Children may not eat this meat, for if they were to do so the village hunters would be unable to find manatees in the future. The distribution of the manatee's parts thus, as I have argued elsewhere on another topic (Jamieson 2001), provides villagers with a powerful means of emphasizing the differences believed to obtain between adults and children. It also, however, emphasizes a direct link between socially reproductive transactions (the distribution of the guts, the body meat, and especially the meat from the head) and the possibility that a lack of respect for socially important distinctions (between adults and children) affecting these transactions may cause the loss of access to the products of the commons (the manatees themselves). The manatee (*palpa*), Kakabila people say, has an owner, Palpa Dawanka, who observes these distributions. Several Kakabila men own small stones shaped like manatee heads, which, it is said, embody one aspect of Palpa Dawanka's knowledge, bringing them luck in hunting manatee. Another manifestation of Palpa Dawanka, importantly for my analysis, is a large rock out on the lagoon also shaped exactly like a manatee's head, though very much larger, which turns and faces the directions where the animal may be found.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> On some occasions in recent years, when two or three hunters, rather than a larger group of hunters, are involved, the meat has been sold, rather than given, to other villagers.

<sup>26</sup> See Loveland (1976) for a fascinating account of the cosmological and ritual significance of the manatee among the Rama people to the south of the Miskitu and Ulwa. Loveland reports that the Rama

In Karawala it is said that close to the seashore near the mouth of the Río Grande there used to exist a Turtle Book.<sup>27</sup> This entity was a rock shaped exactly like a green turtle. The Turtle Book would, it is said, rotate, the head at any given moment facing those areas where turtle, one source of food and cash for the people of the lower Río Grande district, might be caught. Unfortunately, I was told, the Turtle Book had been vandalized and destroyed by irresponsible boys or young men, and this was why people were now finding it much harder to find turtle. This story is obviously concerned with local knowledge of the environment and the awareness that the green turtle on the shores of eastern Nicaragua has been over-exploited and is now in considerably shorter supply than it once was. Analysis of materials from Karawala and the village of Kakabila to the south, however, suggests that it also emphasizes a perceived erosion of forms of exchange deemed to be socially responsible. The story of the destruction of the Turtle Book is thus also importantly concerned with social knowledge.

The Kakabila Palpa Dawanka rock is, as Karawala people pointed out when this was told to them, a *book*, just as their Turtle Book was a *book* before it was destroyed.<sup>28</sup> Both are books in that they embody not only knowledge about the whereabouts of these animals but also the social knowledge which enables people to use their products in responsible fashion.<sup>29</sup> In Kakabila, where the commons still provide people with both a relatively unmediated livelihood and viable regimes of reciprocal exchange, the Manatee Book (to use the Karawala term *book*) is still available for consultation. In Karawala, progressive commoditization of labour, the abandonment of the commons, exploitation and theft by others of both natural resources and productive potential, and a growing sense of intra-village enmity have seen the closure of the Turtle Book and the destruction of this once important source of local knowledge.

Many anthropologists have considered such phenomena as sorcery and devil pacts as indicators of the fear and apprehension by many of ‘modernity’s inequalities’ and of understandings of how market relations and other aspects of change produce new, often (though not necessarily) undesirable situations. This article lends support to this view. However, close comparison between Kakabila and Karawala (see also Jamieson 2008) also strongly suggests that discourses on the occult may crucially represent the effects of such changes on what is understood to have pre-existed these changes. Palpa Dawanka (Manatee Owner) thus shows us what the destruction of the Karawala Turtle Book really means in terms of loss of social responsibility. Similarly, the relative lack of

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view the manatee as ‘symbolic of the cultural world, quiet, social order and solidarity’ and argues that ‘the manatee hunt and the butchering, distribution, and consumption of manatee meat and by-products provide a ritualized expression of community cooperation and solidarity’ (1976: 67).

<sup>27</sup> The expression ‘*turtle book*’ derives from Nicaraguan Creole English, which is widely spoken in eastern Nicaragua, particularly in the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS), where Kakabila and Karawala are located.

<sup>28</sup> Karawala people told me that nobody in the village now knew how to hunt manatee.

<sup>29</sup> The other books which figure in Kakabila (and Karawala) discourses are the Bible (and associated prayer books) and The Black Heart Book, a manual supposed to exist that provides recipes for *obeah*, so dangerous that it can kill users unable to control its knowledge.



concern in Karawala with *dealing* with *dawanka* coupled with the high degree of fear of both sorcery and Bloodman (in comparison with Kakabila where these anxieties find inverse expression) demonstrate that it is people of other groups acting systematically within and without the village (rather than idiosyncratic selfish individuals monitored by Kakabila people) who constitute the real threats to well-being and life.<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>30</sup> See Jamieson (2008) for comparison of notions surrounding sorcery in Kakabila and Karawala.

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L'Homme de sang, le Lamantin propriétaire et la destruction du Livre de la Tortue : représentations du savoir et de l'économie morale chez les Ulwa et les Miskitu

### *Résumé*

Le présent article affirme que l'analyse comparative en anthropologie est particulièrement éclairante lorsque les contextes étudiés sont très similaires. Ce genre de comparaison est particulièrement utile en cela qu'il permet de faire la part des similitudes et de se concentrer sur les différences pour en identifier les raisons. À titre de démonstration, l'auteur examine la manière dont les habitants de Karawala et Kakabila, deux villages de langue miskitu du Nicaragua, représentent les aspects obscurs des processus intervenant dans la génération de richesse en termes de relations avec les forces occultes. À Kakabila, où le capitalisme est peu présent et où les dons restent importants, ces forces sont représentées en termes de relations, aussi bien socialement productives qu'égoïstes, avec des « esprits propriétaires » médiateurs de l'accès à la richesse. À Karawala, où les villageois ont connu une prolétarianisation et une fragmentation sociale, ces processus trouvent à s'exprimer dans des histoires « d'étrangers » meurtriers qui exproprient les gens de leurs sang et par un mythe mettant en scène la destruction d'une représentation iconique de la responsabilité communautaire : le Livre de la Tortue.

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