

Criole Stew

W

alking down from the Ministry of Education in Managua, then left towards the Plaza Espana, I paused to buy a "quesillo" — one of those drippy Nicaraguan meals in a plastic bag consisting of a cheese crepe wrapped in a tortilla with shredded cabbage and cream — and was about to walk on when I was suddenly transfixed.

I was standing in front of a school. Through a fence and the open door of a classroom, I could see a teacher talking to his class about the Literacy Crusade of 1980, in which a hundred-thousand high school and university students flush with the memory of the Sandinista Triumph trudged through rural Nicaragua teaching campesinos to read and write. These were the foot-soldiers in the Frente Sandinista's "New Education" program, in which the history of Augusto Cesar Sandino's anti-imperialist struggle would be revived and revolutionary doctrine instilled.

Someone made a noise. There would be a quiz, the man said calmly, so people should listen. Several giggling adolescents peeked through a back window. Nicaragua had done what many other countries take for granted, the teacher resumed, and had ended up winning an award from UNESCO. He wrote the letters of the UN organization on the chalkboard.

I felt amazed. Here was a teacher, obviously Sandinista, talking about one of the so-called "logros" or accomplishments of the Revolution that may or may not have been put on hold with Violeta Chamorro in power. Was he risking his job? The new government is all gung-ho to "depoliticize" education. Several hundred teachers have already been fired or transferred for political reasons, says the Sandinista teachers' union, ANDEN.

What struck me was not just amazement that he would risk his job sympathizing with the Revolution, but a sense of epiphany too, as if I had been watching someone try to dampen the plunge of a dialectical pendulum. The Chamorro government has been accused of trying to eliminate "everything that smells of Sandinismo," including art, literature, language, norms of social behaviour, interpretations of history and, most particularly, discussions about the Revolution in schools. Sheer paranoia? Judging from their rhetoric, the new mandarins of Nicaraguan culture and education would wipe out Sandinismo if they could. Pablo Anto-

nio Cuadra, co-director of Mrs. Chamorro's newspaper, *La Prensa*, refers to the Literacy Crusade as "a global swindle." Gladys Ramirez de Espinosa, Minister of Culture, says the Crusade was "distorted and manipulated," but that a "new balance of power" exists in Nicaragua now that the Sandinistas have been "abolished and pulverized by history."

The first engagements of the Chamorro government on the field of cultural counter-revolution amounted to frivolous tinkering with the trappings of etiquette. Mrs. Chamorro's inaugural party was held at a former gathering place for the filthy rich that had been converted by the Sandinistas into a leftist convention centre. Government figures rechristened it "The Country Club." The office of the presidency let it be known that employees would be asked to address their bosses not as "companero" or "companera," but as either "senor" or "senora," or by academic rankings such as "ingeniero" or "licenciado."

Cardenal Miguel Obando y Bravo quickly emerged as a proponent of moral and cultural restoration. In his Sunday homilies broadcast live on state television, he has emerged as a spokesman for law and order too. "The ecclesiastic ideology of reconciliation developed particularly by Cardenal Obando coincides perfectly with the discourse of the bourgeoisie and serves the same interests," wrote angry liberation theologians. In one of his most transparent sermons shortly after the Sandinista strike in July, Obando explored the biblical parable of tares sown maliciously in a field of wheat. "We have slept, while the enemy and all those who serve him have been moving ceaselessly," said Obando. "The authorities have to be vigilant. They cannot sleep or cross their arms, permitting evil ones to sow tares in the field of wheat." Obando cited "the mysterious provisional permission by God for evil and for its definitive extirpation," not by man, but by God himself. Across from *La Prensa's* customary résumé of the sermon, a cartoon showed Daniel Ortega, shovel in hand and malignant sneer on his face, burying a writhing body. "I love to plant," the caption read.

Not everyone has the patience to wait for the tares and wheat of the Nicaraguan

field to allow C June, M Lacayo tomb of When Cultural around Nicarag and bla UNO I move th martyrs tary sch took its placed (the nat the US ment.

Nam ginning burned prose by Giacon Sergio I and retr disappe from op past, op sion," fo Sergio I nicipal three m colour c The gov sired to r the Rev of one r tracing Columb umph, v "Now yo marked, grade vi what su painted eliminat image b Canales bright p tirely. L colour a landscap such as t Associat German Minh: "Y Yanqui s



Are the hundreds
of thousands of
young people
due to vote in
1996 – the flower
of the Sandinista
Revolution's
second decade –
opening their
arms to capitalist
fashion and
consumerism?



field to distinguish themselves, nor to allow God to do the extirpating. Last June, Managua mayor Arnoldo Aleman Lacayo extinguished the flame on the tomb of FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca. When Sandinistas set up their "Popular Cultural Council," hoisting billboards around Managua with the words "Viva Nicaragua!" splashed over Sandinista red and black, he ordered them ripped down. UNO legislators proposed a law to remove the names of Sandinista "heroes and martyrs" from public places. The elementary school textbook *Los Carlitos*, which took its name from Fonseca, is being replaced by another called *Blue and White* (the national colours), with financing from the US Agency for International Development.

Names and symbols were just the beginning. The municipal librarian in Leon burned some 50 volumes of poetry and prose by Sandinistas like Omar Cabezas, Giaconda Belli, Ernesto Cardenal and Sergio Ramirez. "There are obscurantists and retrograde forces that believe that the disappearance of the Frente Sandinista from government opens the doors to the past, opens the doors to cultural repression," former vice-president and novelist Sergio Ramirez told me. In October, municipal workers in Managua obliterated three murals with dark grey paint, "the colour of fascism," Ramirez pointed out. The government has a "schizophrenic desire to make all artistic manifestations of the Revolution disappear," he said. Part of one mural, a work by Chilean artists tracing the history of America from pre-Columbian times to the Sandinista Triumph, was spared when the paint ran out. "Now you can see," Ramirez ruefully remarked, "as a demonstration of the retrograde violence they want to impose on us, what survives of that which creative hands painted and which the enemies of liberty eliminated." Another mural, a polychrome image by Nicaraguan artist Alejandro Canales of indigenous women cavorting in bright print dresses, was painted over entirely. Large works of graffiti that added colour and exuberance to Managua's bleak landscape have been painted over too, such as the warning from the Nicaraguan Association of Plastic Arts across from the German embassy on the Avenida Ho Chi Minh: "We're waiting for you right here, Yanqui son-of-a-bitch!"

Sandinistas, it seems, should have nothing to fear in the realm of music. Last July, government officials launched a media campaign to convince people to avoid the eleventh anniversary celebration of the Triumph. There would be violence, they warned on the TV program *Democracy on the March*. Close to a hundred thousand showed up. Soaked in a cold, driving rain, they sang the words of Carlos Mejia's song "La Consigna" while Carlos, brother Luis Enrique and Norma Elena Gadea raised their fists on stage: "This is the struggle unleashed, the popular and prolonged struggle against the oppressor."

The new government cannot deny the appeal revolutionary music holds, and sometimes even lauds Sandinista musicians. What it can do is introduce changes in the educational process, within which Sandinista music has always situated itself. "The New Music" has served as a vehicle not simply for entertainment, but for teaching, uniting and raising cultural and historical consciousness. During the Literacy Crusade, "brigadistas" sang songs about Sandino's struggle to campesinos, many of whom had their own to share. This was what Dona Gladys Ramirez de Espinosa had in mind when she referred to "distortion and manipulation." This is what turned the Crusade into a "global swindle" for Pablo Antonio Cuadra. Ramirez de Espinosa now calls for the promotion of "the true Augusto Cesar Sandino." Education chiefs say they will discontinue literacy work in the countryside, cut back on adult education and develop curricula "free of distortions caused by ideologies subject to historic obsolescence."

"The government of the UNO wants to bring about a regression of values within society," wrote Darwin Juarez during one of the most heated ideological clashes with Chamorristas, which had to do with Columbus's so-called "discovery of America," celebrated in Spain and much of Latin America as "El Dia de Raza," or "Race Day." The premise behind "Race Day" is that in 1492 Spanish and indigenous cultures "encountered" each other and that things proceeded from there in a

The "criole" spirit, Sandinistas say, is the spirit of the white Nicaraguan, the "chele." It's the "my empire right or wrong" spirit of deference towards Spanish culture that deep down symbolizes deference towards the US.

beautiful and often harmonious fashion. The Sandinistas boycotted "Race Day," arguing that the Conquest was an act of genocide, not an "encounter." The Chamorro government revived it, announcing it would also celebrate the 500th anniversary of Columbus's landfall.

At the heart of this debate lie issues of more contemporary thrust than whether Christopher Columbus was indeed a "genial Genoan," as one Chamorrist says. Essayist Norman Miranda condemned the "cunning and hypocritically humanist idea, inoculated in many minds, that the good, poor little Indian was annihilated by the greedy Spaniard," ascribing such analysis to the "petrified, orthodox left," the "adversaries of the benefits of benign western colonialization" and to "the straightjacket of official culture." Education officials voiced a similar line, instructing teachers to explore "the positive values that came about from colonization," to "exalt the heroic prowess" of the Spanish, "the flaws and successes of our fathers the conquistadors" and the "admirable and holy labour of the missionaries" who bestowed upon indigenous peoples "the gospel of Christ, the fundamental rock of culture and human relations of the new man."

This wasn't the "New Man" admirers of Che Guevara had had in mind at all. "Why not occupy themselves with the prowess of contemporary adventurers, like Reagan?" retorted Darwin Juarez. Sandinistas condemned the spirit underlying "Race Day" as "criolla." The "criole" spirit, Sandinistas say, is the spirit of the white Nicaraguan, the "chele." It's the "my empire right or wrong" spirit of deference towards Spanish (as opposed to indigenous) culture, say Sandinistas, that deep down symbolizes deference towards the US.

Hispanofilia does seem to be a redux for Chamorristas, who are less interested in posthumous Habsburg favours than in exchanging the cold shackles of Marxism for the warm embrace of US-sponsored entrepreneurialism. In occult defense of

landowners seeking to recover farms confiscated by the Sandinistas, Norman Miranda argued that Nicaragua's native Nahuas had been ignorant of private property, and thus fell prey to "the ferocious disgression of the caciques." The education ministry's "Race Day" statement condemned "the premeditated forgetfulness of Sandinismo," and its "sectarian interpretations of Marxist sociology." While lauding the 1992 celebrations, culture minister Ramirez de Espinosa rejoiced that Nicaragua finds itself "in the heart of America, incorporated once more into the American ideology, in permanent struggle for the common ideals of America, with our territory as a field of friendship between north and south."

The *Weltraumschung* of Nicaragua's new cultural and educational mandarins gazes back farther than the Somocista days of economic integration with the US. "They're trying to impose a regime that in ideological terms I situate in the epoch of the 30 years of Conservative government (late 19th century)," says Sandinista legislator Doris Tijerino. This was a time not only when Nicaragua's links to Spain were exalted, but when priests like Pablo Antonio Vega – the Bishop of Juigalpa, Chontales province, who helped organize the November uprising of contras and UNO mayors – wielded political power. Chamorristas have called for the forging of a new alliance between church and state since the electoral campaign, when Mrs. Chamorro was herself forged into a surrogate "Madonna" for "humble" Nicaraguan Catholics. Such an alliance is now most evident in the education system. Education Minister Sofonias Cisneros is an ex-official of the Association of the Family of Christian Colleges. He and Vice-Minister Humberto Belli are members of the "City of God" group and Belli belongs to something called the "Sword of the Spirit." Education guidelines state that "to confuse a lay education with an atheist one would be a serious mistake." It would be equally erroneous "to suppose that a scientific education must imply the negation of God or of Christian values or morality." The guidelines warn against "an alienating and materialist vision of man" which ignores "the transcendental and Christian vision."

Sowing Christian and "criole" perspectives in the schools goes hand-in-hand with the rooting out of references to Sandinismo. Banishing *Los Carlitos* came first. In the new textbook, almost everyone is pink and dressed like a gringo. Visual references to Atlantic coast blacks or indigenous people are virtually absent, and the patronizing and unusual word "pastorcito" is used instead of "campesino" – which may be seen as a tainted term by Chamorrist educators. To buttress curricular reforms, the posts of principal and superintendent of education have been declared "positions of confidence," over protests that experience and accomplishments should be the sole prerequisites.

Sandinistas are resisting. Some teachers still use *Los Carlitos* and keep Frente slogans posted on walls and chalkboards.

When the dismissal and transfer of teachers and the appointment of UNO principals – one of them a priest – began to accelerate, Sandinistas chained the front gates of their schools while police, ministry officials, journalists and the occasional infuriated priest milled outside. With the end of the school year in sight, Sofonias Cisneros ruled that graduating classes would be asked to dedicate their commencement ceremonies to parents, not political figures. Many defied "Don Sofo." In Matagalpa, students at the Eliseo Picado National Institute split in two: 120 from the day session dedicated their commencement to parents, while 180 from the evening session held theirs three days later, in honour of Daniel Ortega. This was the first time in the school's history that two commencements were held, one sanctioned and the other not.

If Sandinistas aren't being paranoid when they scream cultural counter-revolution, then they may be comforted by these events and by the victory last summer of Sandinista candidates in high school and university elections. However, other signs suggest that the cultural tide, or the swing of the dialectical pendulum – not just a handful of reactionary education officials – is against them. Nicaragua is experiencing a brutal recession, but kids seem to have the cash (certainly the desire) to buy BMX bikes, ghetto blasters, chic jewelry and stone-washed blue jeans. Ralph Macchio-style hats are all the rage among young men, as are knapsacks covered in fake US military insignia. Many high school graduates want to go into law and business administration. Universities find it hard filling enrollment quotas in the social sciences, arts and education.

Are the hundreds of thousands of young people between ten and 15 years of age due to vote in 1996 – the flower of the Sandinista Revolution's second decade – opening their arms to capitalist fashion and consumerism? Are they succumbing to the avalanche of advertising, including pitches for rum and beer, now burying over a goodly half of Nicaraguan TV and radio time? If so, then the big fight to be fought by teachers like the grey-haired man who enthralled me with his exposition on the Literacy Crusade, as I ate my drippy quesillo out on the street in downtown Managua, will not be to defend their jobs from revanchist bureaucrats stalking the bloody warpath of cultural counter-revolution. Their fight will be to inspire students whose minds have wandered, who want to go out and get a bite to eat when class is through – not a traditional Nicaraguan quesillo, but a hamburger at the new Burger King. ♦

David Kattenburg is a Canadian M.D. who is currently teaching medicine in Managua.