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# Ulrich Oslender



Ulrich, you've worked for over 12 years now with the Afro-Colombian communities along the Pacific coast of Colombia. What have they told you about their relationship with their ecosystem before their way of life was disrupted by outsiders?

When I first travelled through the Pacific coast region in Colombia back in the mid-1990s, I was struck by the sheer exuberance of the tropical rainforest environment and, despite high rates of deforestation, the seemingly impenetrable density of the forest. The region is also crisscrossed by literally thousands of rivers, small and large, that carve up this environment and make it difficult to traverse. This has, of course, been one of the reasons why it was relatively well preserved. Even today there are only a handful of main roads leading into the Pacific coast region from Colombia's interior. The main form of transport for local communities is by river, either in the traditional dugout canoes, the *potrillos*, or in engine-driven modern speedboats. Adaptation and creative use are probably the best ways of expressing the relationship that Afro-Colombian communities have established with this rainforest ecosystem over hundreds of years.

At the heart of this relationship lies a respect for nature nurtured by magic-religious beliefs. The river, for example, is not seen as an obstacle – as it is by modern engineers and planners, who despair at the difficulties of building roads or bridges on

"fluid" lands that are prone to frequent flooding. For local populations the river is a resource. Not only does it provide essential foodstuff but supplies the basic infrastructure in the Pacific coast. In fact, many locals, especially the older folks, refer to stretches of river as "roads". They say, for example, that such and such a settlement is four roads up the river, which means you have to travel around four bends in the river to get there. It seems that in their imagination people have effectively "urbanised" the river environment by applying the road metaphor to the river bends. Adaptation to this fluid environment has also meant that most settlements are along the river banks.

This trend goes back to the days of *automanumisión* or self-liberation from slavery, which started really as soon as the first enslaved Africans were brought to the Pacific coast region to work the alluvial gold mines. Some of the enslaved managed to escape, while others bought their freedom with money they had earned while working on their "days off", a process that could take many years, of course. At the beginning these freemen, or *libres*, would often still follow the slave gangs to pan for gold. But increasingly they began to settle along the river banks. Following the official abolition of slavery in Colombia in 1851, this settlement trend really took off, and many wooden houses were built on the river banks – usually on stilts in order to avoid flooding – and small-scale agricultural plots were established. A profound knowledge of

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the environment was quite simply essential for survival.

Can you tell us a bit more about these communities' knowledge of their environment?

The whole knowledge system in the Pacific region, which developed over hundreds of years, is constructed around the major role played by the forest and the rivers. It provides valuable information about how to live in such an environment, where flooding is so frequent and where some of the world's highest rainfall is registered. One aspect that I always found fascinating is the way in which the tides are used by rural communities – for example, by the *concheras*. These are women who travel from their homes to the coastal mangrove areas to collect shellfish, or *conchas*. Normally they travel at low tide, when the receding waters enable them to navigate much faster downstream in their canoes. It is also at low tide that the mangrove is exposed and the collecting of shellfish is much easier. The *concheras* then wait for high tide to arrive to give them a helping hand, so to speak, to travel back upstream. So the women plan their working day around the tides. Which means they may start their journey in the middle of the night. This is really listening to nature and following its rhythm. Quite the opposite from “modern man” and our desire to tame nature. If you don't listen to nature, you end up paying the price. It is not uncommon, for example, for a craft to get stuck in the mud because one set off too late. That happened to me. You then sit in your canoe in the mangrove swamps waiting for the high tide to set you free again, being pestered by swarms of little flies – a nightmare!

How does the local biodiversity affect their cultural and spiritual life?

The Colombian Pacific coast region is one of the world's biodiversity hotspots. Which means it harbours an incredible diversity and density of fauna and flora. The relationship of local communities with their biodiversity is saturated with magic-religious beliefs. It is a relationship of profound spirituality. Folklore has it, for example, that the forest is inhabited by mythical figures and spirits. The *tunda* is one of them, a forest vision that appears to children as a woman they know well, only to lure them into the forest where she possesses them. This story is often told to children to deter them from venturing close to the dangers of the forest. Other spirits include the *riviél*, a poor solitary devil condemned to sail on the open sea at night in a wrecked canoe with a light in its stern. He comes as a warning to fishermen not to stray alone on sea at night, as the *riviél* rams into their

boats and sinks them in revenge for his solitary fate.

On the other hand, traditional healers, the *curanderos*, make use of the rich variety of flora. They are highly respected in their communities and prepare creams, lotions and liquids using locally gathered herbs, bark and plant extracts. Often it requires some form of spiritual invocation for the medicine to work. The healers cure all sorts of ailments with their medicine, including snake bites. One such form of healing is through the *botella curada*, a bottle filled with a variety of balsamic herbs and viche, the unrefined, locally produced sugar-cane spirit. For five months I shared a house in the small town of Guapi with a traditional healer who always invoked her saints in the preparation of these bottles. Doña Celia cured a number of ailments in this way, ranging from the general weakness of the body to menstruation problems to snake bites and malaria. The house was often full of people seeking her advice and treatment.

Were the communities effective guardians of the environment?

The idea that communities are “guardians” of local environments is, of course, a fairly recent discourse of modernity that became quite commonplace after the UN Brundtland Report of 1987 and the Rio Summit in 1992. This was really when a global consciousness was formed over the fragility of our environments and the devastating impact that humankind was having on them. So the notion that local communities in fragile ecosystems – such as in tropical rainforests – were experts in protecting this environment became a commonplace assertion, with a dose of romanticism mixed in for good measure. However, these discourses are frequently marred by racial underpinnings of the “noble savage” kind, which seek to fix these mostly non-white communities in the role of pre-modern saviours from environmental destruction. This is not to be cynical about the sustainable ways in which these communities have lived their lives, but one has to be careful not to essentialise these populations in such a role.

Black communities in the Pacific coast region of Colombia have indeed lived in very sustainable ways in *convivencia*, or together with, the environment. Yet one also has to see that Afro-Colombians are also involved in environmentally destructive activities, such as large-scale logging and mining, fishing with dynamite, and, more recently, the cultivation of coca for the illegal drug trade. Afro-Colombian activists have repeatedly pointed

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Photo: Ulrich Oslander



Doña Celia, a traditional healer, enjoys a smoke

out to me that what is required is an economic strategy for the region that combines sustainable development policies with a real empowerment of local communities; for them to decide what kind of development is desired and required. And this has to go beyond merely ambiguous acknowledgement of traditional ways of life as “guardians of the environment” to a progressive understanding of sustainable development. This is in a way what legislation in the early 1990s seemed to make possible.

The 1990s marked a significant departure from previous relations between the state and black populations in Colombia. To start with, Colombia's new constitution of 1991 declared the nation to be multicultural and pluri-ethnic. This was a significant step, as the country's black communities were for the first time officially recognised as an ethnic minority. The constitution also made provision for a law to be passed that would grant rural black populations in the Pacific coast region collective land rights. Law 70 was finally passed in 1993, and it is an obligatory reference point today if we want to understand the changing regimes of representation and black ethnic identity construction in Colombia.

Now, as a result of Law 70 collective land titles have been issued to black communities over almost five million hectares in the Pacific coast region since 1996. These lands had, of course, been used by Afro-Colombians for hundreds of years but they had officially been considered state-owned, or *baldías*. This had meant that commercial enterprises,

especially loggers and mechanised gold-mining companies, were able to exploit these lands freely via state concessions. Their extraction practices were frequently environmentally unsustainable, to say the least, and often left a path of destruction and deforestation. Law 70, then, was partly seen as a way of protecting rural black communities and their lifestyles from such predatory extraction practices. Black community councils were to administer the collectively titled lands as the territorial and environmental authority. In the 1990s, then, there seemed to be an overlapping of interests between the Colombian state and black organisations. They seemed to share a common aim in working towards more sustainable ways of developing the Pacific coast region. In all, the 1990s were a time of hope.

But it failed, didn't it?

It didn't fail at all. In fact, it is an ongoing process. There are still a number of collective land titles that are being processed and have not yet been handed over to local communities; although the bulk, it has to be said, have been granted. And black activists insist that the collective titling of lands is the way forward. What has changed, however, is the context in which such land titling is meaningful. In the past the Pacific coast region was often referred to as a peace haven or a refuge in the violent cartography of Colombia. The internal armed conflict had not reached this region to the same extent as in other parts of the country. But this changed dramatically in the mid-1990s. In fact, 1996 marked a turning point in the fate of black communities in Colombia. That year saw a coordinated offensive by the Colombian army and paramilitary forces on local populations in the municipality of Riosucio in the northern Chocó department. This attack was launched under the pretext of combating guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the FARC, who are the country's most powerful guerrilla group. I have talked to survivors who recall the “night of terror” on 20 December 1996 when heavily armed paramilitaries entered the town of Riosucio at dawn. They broke down doors, tearing people out of their beds, and, with a list in hand, started to kill. Many of those who managed to escape stayed in hiding for days, submerged in the rivers with the water up to their necks. Many others disappeared and were never found again. In the following months this military campaign was extended to the surrounding valleys. Local populations were subjected to indiscriminate air bombing. The bombing of civilian populations is not an uncommon strategy of the Colombian military, especially in more remote areas.

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People became so scared that they fled in their thousands, taking with them just the bare necessities. No one knew when this campaign would stop, and people feared that they could be the next victims. This traumatic experience is not something you forget. Ever. Today, when black movement leaders travel abroad to talk about their struggle, they often invoke the events of December 1996, a defining moment for many of them personally. This attack on the civilian population led to the first huge exodus of black peasants and fisherfolk from the Pacific region. It really marks the starting point of massive displacement in the region. Local communities have become trapped in the conflict. They are caught in the crossfire, both metaphorically – black activists talk of being “sandwiched” between guerrillas, paramilitaries and army – and quite literally, when the bullets start to fly. An impossible situation. Many have fled, becoming the displaced, *los desplazados*. Estimates talk of almost 4 million people being displaced in Colombia since 1985. And Afro-Colombians make up an increasing percentage of this population.

What happens to their view of themselves when they become *desplazados*?

This is really a very complex situation. Remember the conditions in which they were forced to leave their homes, often running away with just the clothes they had on. One activist told me how, after he had fled from his river community in the Chocó department, he wandered around in the forest for days trying to orient himself, until he finally reached another community where he was helped. But even then fear drove him on, until he arrived in the capital, Bogotá, a city he had never been to before. He was one of the first people displaced during the attacks in the Riosucio area, and at that time there was no network of Displaced Afro-Colombians in Bogotá as there is today: the Association AFRODES now provides a first port of call for the many black *desplazados* arriving in the capital. In the city the displaced experience a huge sense of alienation. The difference in the two ways of life is enormous. Even basic activities become a huge problem, such as taking a bus, for which you have to have a fare, something you didn't need on the river where you had your canoe to get around. You also have to register with the government as a displaced person, and only then do you receive some emergency aid, such as precarious housing, and some food and clothing. And perhaps most difficult of all is the stigmatisation as victims that many displaced experience. They feel discriminated against because of their condition as poor and displaced. And as Afro-Colombians they are also discriminated against because of their skin colour.

Many Colombians would, of course, deny this, saying that there is no racism in Colombia. But that is a myth. You just have to talk to displaced Afro-Colombians about their problems finding work, or even renting modest accommodation, when landlords simply will not rent to them because they are black.

How has the growing influence of transnational companies affected the type of displacement that the communities are suffering?

When the attacks in the Chocó happened in 1996, it first looked as if this was a military campaign against the FARC in the region. But it became quickly evident that there was an altogether different logic behind this glaringly obvious attempt to drive local populations off their lands. And this has to do with the legislation and the collective land titling that I was talking about earlier. Because it was precisely at the moment when the black communities in the Chocó Department were to receive their first land titles that they were attacked, threatened and driven off their lands. Now why would that be? One of the crucial changes that this legislation brought was the way in which concessions for exploiting the lands were dealt with. Previously, on the *baldíos*, it was the state through its regional development corporations that would hand out a concession to a company intent on exploiting a given area, for example, for logging or mining. But today these companies have to enter into direct talks with local communities, who are the territorial authority now. And these have often quite different ideas of how to develop their lands sustainably. Many companies have simply been rejected. This is a completely new situation, and one that those companies are not used to. Previously, they would mostly have it their way, and logging concessions were often gained by bribing corrupt officials. This is no longer possible.

So in a way, the new legislation – and this is a painfully ironic impact – while it legally empowered local communities to decide over land use, it was also a wake-up call for many business interests in the area that things had changed and had to be dealt with differently. Struggles over land in Colombia have a long history. And violence has always been part of these processes. So what we are faced with today is a new wave of violence directed at intimidating local populations, so that certain business interests can have it their way. Some local communities have been co-opted, that is, they have agreed to cooperate in return for some kind of financial incentive. This has led to huge organisational problems among black communities, as black activists are desperately trying to get the people to

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stick together as a community – a common unity – in order to implement sustainable development strategies that would benefit the population in the long term. That’s why I mentioned earlier the need for black activists to find an economic strategy with which to provide income for locals who otherwise are easily co-opted by the promises of big capital. And if co-option does not work, coercion is applied. Community leaders are targeted, and massacres are committed. All of which leads to the effective expropriation or deterritorialisation of local communities.

Has the takeover of land to cultivate global commodities, such as African Palm, intensified the expropriation?

There can be no doubt that the intensification of African Palm cultivation in the Pacific coast region has been a major force behind the expropriation of black peasants. Large conglomerates, consisting of national and transnational capital, operate throughout the region. And Colombia’s President, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, has declared on many occasions that the cultivation of African palm is a major economic export strategy for Colombia’s future. The reasons behind this are interesting. While the cultivation of African palm in Colombia goes back to the 1930s, there has been a significant increase in the area under cultivation since the 1990s. In fact, Colombia is today the fourth largest palm oil producer in the world, after Malaysia, Indonesia and Nigeria. Rather than for soap and animal foodstuff, however, palm oil is today used in the production of biofuels, specifically biodiesel. This is an emerging industry of potentially huge economic impact. It seems clear that Colombia’s President has set his sights on being part of this global development.

Is what is happening to Afro-Colombians part of a global process?

One can say that global processes are partly responsible for what is happening to Afro-Colombians. Because of the hype over biofuels, the cultivation of African palm has become of such interest to Colombia’s government and the economic elite. Development plans are devised to speak to these global trends. Without the potentially huge market in biofuels, I am convinced there would be no major intensification of African palm cultivation in Colombia. However, there is a wider global process at work. In fact, a global trend linking displacement and development can be observed throughout the world. People have always been forcibly displaced to make space for development projects, of course. Think about the construction of huge dams in India or China, for example. But

what we are witnessing today is a renewed cycle of the violent “expropriation of the commons” on a global scale. That is the passing of common goods, such as lands and service industries, into private hands for the accumulation of capital. The Marxist geographer David Harvey explains this in terms of “accumulation by dispossession”, which I think is an interesting analytical angle from which to view these global processes. It is therefore important not to view the Colombian case as isolated. Of course, the particular national context in Colombia provides the setting where forced displacement and development are played out. But it is important to bear in mind the global pressures under capitalism that play their part in shaping these processes in the first place.

What can be done to combat the “expropriation of the commons”?

In many parts of the world, local communities have resisted these processes. After all, the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in Mexico began in 1994 partly as a fight to reclaim the *ejidos*, the commons of indigenous peoples in Mexico. It seems to me that it is important to connect these different local struggles in spaces where international solidarity can be generated. I am thinking, for example, of what is happening at the World Social Forum, or rather Forums, since these now take place in different locations around the world. There, activists from all over the world meet to exchange their particular experiences and to discuss common strategies of resistance. Some argue today that these spaces have lost the energy of their initial meetings. And they may go more and more unnoticed in the mainstream media. But for those who actually participate, they are enormously useful. The fact that today so many people around the world know about the plight of Afro-Colombians is partly due to these efforts of internationalising solidarity, and of globalising resistance.

For example, African American politicians in the United States have in recent years taken an increasing interest in the plight of Afro-Colombians. Some of them have visited Colombia to witness this struggle on the ground. And on their return they have started campaigns for the US Senate to put pressure on the Colombian government to recognise the plight of the Afro-Colombian populations and to protect them. Particularly in cases such as the Colombian, where local communities feel not only abandoned but actively persecuted by the state, it is important for them to find this kind of international support. Black activists in Colombia are quite clear about the importance of mobilising the solidarity of the African diaspora in this way.

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