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**PERSPECTIVES IN
INDIAN DEVELOPMENT**

**New Series
54**

**Beyond the Romance of Resistance in
Post-Development Alternatives: Nature and
culture in Afro-Colombian movements**

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**Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2015**

NMML Occasional Paper



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NMML Occasional Paper



Beyond the Romance of Resistance in Post-Development Alternatives: Nature and culture in Afro-Colombian movements*

Kiran Asher

In May 2010 hundreds of movements-activists and a few dozen scholars-academics gathered in Lima for a conference entitled *Encuentro de Saberes y Movimientos: Entre Las Crisis y Otros Mundos Posibles* (An Encounter of Knowledges and Movements: Between Crises and Other Possible Worlds).¹ As the title suggests the aim of the meeting and the subsequent dialogue was to discuss the various crises—economic, political, social, and environmental—within which we find ourselves, and to envision possible alternative ways of being in this world. The conference and workshop that followed opened and closed with several *misticas* (rituals or ceremonies) to celebrate and honour the richness of nature, and to highlight how humans are deeply connected to, depend on and are sustained by the earth’s bounty.

This event highlights one of the ways that concerns over nature and culture are converging in social movements around the world. In Latin America, indigenous peoples from the Maya in Mexico to the Mapuche in Chile, and Afro-descendant groups have been drawing on environmental discourses to demand “traditional” rights and assert claims over their ancestral lands.

* A revised version of this paper was presented at a public lecture under the series ‘Science, Society and Nature’ at the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi, 6 February 2015.

¹ The meeting was hosted and organized by the *Programa para Democracia and Transformacion Social* which is part of a collaborative team engaged in researching social movements and changing cultural politics in Latin America.



But notwithstanding Evo Morales's three-time election to the Bolivian presidency (2006, 2011, 2014), and the rise of the indigeneity-flecked Left in Latin America, struggles for ethnic and territorial autonomy, and alternative development have had mixed successes. For example, the passing of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas in Colombia in October 2011 was another loss for the remarkable struggles of Afro-Colombian groups (often considered synonymous with the *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* [PCN, the Process of the Black Communities]) for "identity, territory, and autonomy". Indeed, since the late 1990s, black communities have been caught in the crossfire of the accelerated armed conflict in the region and are specific targets of violence, death, and displacement. Even as several tenets of Law 70/1993, the law recognizing the ethnic and territorial rights of black communities, were implemented, Afro-Colombians began facing homelessness, an exacerbation in existing inequalities, and renewed forms of social exclusion. Since the early decades of the 21st century, extensive legal and illegal land appropriations for mining, oil and gas operations, and cash crop plantations have swept across Latin America and other parts of the world and unleashed waves of unrest.

Despite the mixed successes, these struggles and their precursors (the so-called "new social movements") have inspired post-structural or "post Marxist" critiques of capitalist development. Among the most well known of these are "post development" approaches that call for the rejection of mainstream development as Eurocentric, patriarchal, capitalist, neoliberal, and linked to the nation-state (Escobar 1992; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Sachs 1992; Shiva 1988). They contend that the traditional knowledges and practices of ethnic and local groups hold the promise of more equitable and sustainable development. Post-development critiques continue to shape development debates across disciplines and continents, and their notion about local "alternatives to modernization" have wide appeal among many academic and activist allies of social movements.



I concur with the post-developmental call for a radical critique of capitalist development and the quest for more just and sustainable alternatives to it. However, I find their approaches are inadequate to their tasks. Specifically, I contend that the cultural politics that forms the basis of their analysis romanticizes resistance and does not offer a sufficiently critical perspective of the complex and contradictory dynamics of development. Elsewhere (Asher, under preparation) I review and assessed in detail the analytical claims and putative politics of post-development (PD) and the subsequent trio of “posts”—post-capitalism, post-state, post-liberalism (Escobar 2010). In this paper I draw on my long-term research on black movements in the Pacific lowlands of Colombia (Asher 2009) to highlight their complexities and contradictions including how they are constituted by and against state policies and capitalist development.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the third world development project, post-development arguments against it, and the shortcomings of post-development approaches. Next, is an overview of Afro-Colombian struggles for ethnic and territorial rights—often considered the poster child of post-development resistance alternatives. The focus is on three periods of black organizing over the past two decades: first, from the constitutional reform process in the late 1980s to the legal recognition of black ethnic and territorial rights in Law 70 of 1993; second, in the 1990s when the PCN’s attempts to assert black “Identity, Territory, and Autonomy” coincided with large-scale economic development and conservation initiatives in the Pacific lowlands; third, from the turn of the century to the present, a period that coincides with the massive displacement of black communities from the Pacific. The paper concludes by noting what scholars and activists concerned with supporting struggles for justice and equity can learn from black ethnic and territorial struggles, namely the need to eschew romantic understandings of culture–nature connections among traditional groups and to think beyond post-development alternatives.



Third World Development and its Critics

The post-World War II period is regularly and mistakenly taken as the beginning of development in the third world. “Modernization”, the first formal “theory” of third world development emerged in the 1950s largely from US social sciences. It is characterized by an ahistorical and technical view of development as economic growth, and pays little or no analytical attention to how development is linked to colonial expansion, enlightenment ideals of progress through reason, and capitalism. Colin Leys (1996) explains that this early development theory ignores Marx and critical political economy because of its pragmatic orientation, its ideological stakes in the Cold War, and the centrality of the Bretton Woods institutions in fostering national economic growth. Modernization theory was guided by development economics which considered capitalist expansion within national borders as the path to economic growth. The benefits of this growth were supposed to “trickle-down”, and lead to development and democracy. The failure of this model was blamed on such “internal” roadblocks as weak or corrupt states, societies dominated rural populations, and hindered by traditional values.

Early critics of development from the dependency and world-systems schools saw the struggle for development as part of anti-imperialism and nationalism. Making explicit that economic development was capitalist in nature, they argued that capitalist expansion depended on complex and unequal connections—between colonies, nations, regions, and world markets. Such Marxist-oriented political economic analysis focused on structural explanations of underdevelopment, and their understandings of social protests and resistance were couched in the language of revolutions and socialism.

Since the 1970s, gender professionals and feminists of various persuasions (Boserup 1970; Mies 1982) also offered many critical perspectives on development and especially on women’s important, but often-unacknowledged, contribution to economic



production. Many of these critiques shaped human development approaches such as anti-poverty, basic-human needs, rights-based, participatory, and sustainable. However, their radical insights and political questions disappeared when incorporated into official development policy.

By the last third of the 20th century, and well before the unforeseen end of the Cold War, the failure of both liberal and socialist variants of development was evident in the debt crises, social unrest, political instability, and ecological disasters besetting the world. By the turn of the century, the development project had turned into the economic globalization project (McMichael 1996). Rights-based approaches to human development and welfare that had emerged in the 1970s and 1980s were replaced by ones that emphasized the role of free-markets and private enterprise. This is evident in millennium development goals and strategies to empower-through-microcredit, which are premised on the view that capitalist development was a solution, rather than a generator of inequalities.

In the 1990s, the “cultural turn” in the social sciences expanded discussions about post-World War II development. Following, post-structural and post-colonial critiques raised the *discursive* question of “development”. Anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers contested the technical, apolitical, and ahistorical nature of modernization, and opened up fruitful conversations about the meanings, production, and effects of development interventions (Crush 1995; Escobar 1992; Ferguson 1994; Mitchell 1991). They also reframed the debates regarding models of development and revolution, and the subjects of resistance (Escobar 1995; Gupta 1998). These last were particularly indebted to the Latin American literature on “new social movements” (NSMs)—a term coined to describe the loosely-organized coalitions of factory workers, peasants, women, urban squatters, and ethnic groups who arose in protests against the state and neoliberalism in the 1980s and beyond (Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Redclift 1987). Marked by a diversity of interests, identities, and organizing strategies, NSMs were understood to



be anti-statist in that they neither sought inclusion in existing political structures nor participated in Leftist revolutionary struggles to overthrow the state. Rather, these heterogeneous NSMs were seen to draw on idioms of traditional or popular culture to resist the homogenizing forces of modernization and economic globalization.

In conjunction with this scholarship, many activists and professionals from the third world denounced development as a subset of hegemonic Eurocentric modernity which imposed Western rationality and marginalized non-Western systems of knowledge (Banuri 1990; Escobar 1992; Esteva 1987; Sheth 1987; Shiva 1988; Rahnama and Bawtree 1997; Sachs 1992). These writers argue that the traditional lifestyles and livelihood practices of marginalized local communities suggest the possibility of sustainable alternatives *to* development and herald a “post-development” era.

Arturo Escobar (1995), the author most often associated with post-development positions traces the discursive productions and representations of the third world and its peoples as “underdeveloped” objects and subjects in need of intervention. He maps the operations and effects of “third world development”, and argues that what undergirds them is the Eurocentric, Western rationality inherited from colonial moves. The core of his critique is that colonial practices and the national economic development measures that followed after the end of formal colonialism erased or marginalized other cultural and economic logics. His solution is to recover subaltern “difference” and reject development in favour of alternatives that emerge from outside its hegemonic reach. The cultural-political-territorial practices of black communities in the Colombian Pacific lowlands are cited as a key referent of such alternatives. A focus on recovering traditional knowledges has become a key post-development credo.

Post-development, and especially Escobar’s work which is always invoked in conjunction with it, has broadened development debates across disciplines. The limits of



post-development have also been extensively scrutinized (Asher 2009, 2012; Gidwani 2002; Hart 2001; Lazreg 2002; Wainwright 2008; Watts 1995). For example, Watts finds Escobar's work insufficiently dialectical and calls for more ethnographically grounded case studies. Wainwright (2008: 9) contends that what we need is not post-developmentalism but a critique of development and its power through a postcolonial Marxist lens.

The cultural politics of post-development approaches also informed my research on Afro-Colombian movements in the Pacific lowlands and the struggle for ethnic and territorial rights promised under Law 70 of 1993. However, as discussed in what follows, I found that rather than autonomous expressions of resistance against development and the state (as Afro-Colombian activists claimed or wished), black struggles, including understandings of local realities and culture, were at least partially shaped by through the very discourses of political and economic modernity they opposed. Furthermore, like all communities, black communities are marked by differences of region, local histories, class, political ideology, gender and occupation, among other factors. Accounting for these differences and building a unified vision of culturally appropriate development is among the many issues and challenges of social movements organization. Continued work with black movements also reveals that that claims about "ethnicity", the "environment", and alternative development were unfolding vis-à-vis, and articulating with broader political economic changes.

Black Organizing from 1980s–1993: Becoming Afro-Colombian

After Brazil, Colombia has the largest black population in Latin America. But it was only in the last two decades of the 20th century that both countries conferred specific rights to their black populations, or indeed recognized blacks as a distinct group within the nation. Why this is so is linked to a number of factors—histories of nationalism, the perception of blacks and blackness within prevailing ideologies of "race" and culture, and the



structures and dynamics of political economy—and how these function in each context. In Colombia, the dynamics of color, culture, and class played out differently for indigenous groups and blacks. While indigenous communities were historically viewed as culturally distinct and their special rights recognized—or at least legally articulated, blacks were “invisible” in official registers. Both peoples have been marginalized in socioeconomic and political terms, and have organized to redress their situations since colonial times.

Before the 1980s, most black organizations or movements in modern Colombia were local or regional in orientation. These organizations reflected the differences among black communities—of class, occupation, political ideology, regional location, and local histories. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s urban blacks formed study and research groups such as the *Movimiento Nacional Cimarrón* (National Cimarron Movement) which focused on problems of racial discrimination and economic marginalization. In rural areas, *Cimarrón*’s discourse of international black solidarity and universal human rights had little resonance. Black peasants were more likely to be engaged in struggles for land, or organized around specific work and social activities. Under the aegis of early state-sponsored development programmes, black peasants and rural women also formed user groups to help with subsistence production, and cooperatives to market regional products (Rojas 1996). In the late 1980s, when commercial logging concessions threatened their livelihoods, peasant groups along with the regional organization of Embera Indians, organized to fight them. Such struggles laid the groundwork for taking black demands to the national stage during the 1980s and the constitutional reform process, which led to Colombia adopting a new constitution in 1991.

During the constitutional reform process, black leaders and activists sought to organize disparate black communities with heterogeneous interests into national-level coalitions. In the department of the Chocó, the state with a majority black population, popular organizations mobilized shanty-dwellers in



the capital, Quibdó, and in several coastal communities. Peasant associations in rural, riverine communities expanded their reach. In the southwestern Pacific departments of Valle del Cauca, Cauca and Nariño, a group of students and intellectuals (many with prior links to *Cimarrón*) focused on bringing together peasants, artisanal fisherfolks, loggers, and miners from rural areas. Several activists from the Atlantic coast and Bogotá joined this core group from the southwest Pacific, and collectively called themselves the PCN. It was during this time that the term “Afro-Colombian” came into circulation to stress the African descent of black communities and their connections to the Colombian nation-state. Despite disagreements over nomenclature and definitions, during my fieldwork in the 1990s, the terms “black communities” and “Afro-Colombians” were most often heard and used interchangeably, as is done in this paper.

These groups and movements provided the nucleus around which Afro-Colombians organized in unprecedented numbers. Even black politicians linked to the two main political parties (Liberal and Conservative) joined them to participate in workshops and seminars to discuss Afro-Colombian needs and interests. At the local, municipal, and regional levels, various NGOs and the Catholic Church, which had long enjoyed an important presence in the region, played key roles in organizing communities. Black women were a visible and crucial part of these mobilizations.

But this black coalition was divided regarding the parameters and proposal for black rights in the new constitution. On the one hand, there were those who wanted to formulate black demands in terms of anti-discrimination and equal opportunity (both in economic and political). On the other hand, there were those who wanted to formulate black rights in terms of the needs and realities of rural black communities living in the Pacific region—an area where 90 per cent of the population was black. The latter proposal was spearheaded by the PCN. While mobilizing in the Pacific littoral, PCN members became inspired by the everyday realities and quotidian practices of natural resource use among rural



communities. Rather than thinking of black rights largely in terms of racial equality or economic development, the PCN began to envision an Afro-Colombian ethno-cultural movement based on the right to be different from the rest of Colombian society and to validate black identity. Peasant struggles against logging concessions, and the focus on the Pacific as a resource frontier and a locus of environmental conservation also influenced the PCN to think about protecting the future of black communities by staking a claim over the Pacific as a bi-ethnic territory.

Like the black struggle, Colombia's constitutional reform endeavour in the 1980s was neither its first, nor was it smooth. But in response to internally induced changes and forces of regional and global geopolitics (promoting economic reforms and democratization yet again), the process went ahead, and a new Constitution was ratified on 4 July 1991. Its principle focus is the creation of a "modern", state, ready to play a significant role in national, regional, and global affairs. This is reflected in the Constitution's liberal-democratic language and its emphasis on rights, whether political, economic, social, or environmental. A key mechanism specified to assure access to these rights is political participation along the legislative, executive, and judicial axes of state power.

In contrast to the expansion of democratic legislative spaces, the 1991 Constitution's economic reforms were in keeping with earlier state policies and the prevalent neoliberal agenda. The new policies centred on restructuring the national economy to make it more competitive in regional and international markets. That is, "structural adjustment" reforms were appearing in Colombia as elsewhere and ushering in what Colombians call the *apertura económica* (economic opening). With as-yet-undeveloped natural resource assets (including oil and gas deposits), regions such as the Amazon and the Pacific (with the additional advantage of having proximity to the economically powerful countries of the Asia-Pacific Rim), had important potential for economic growth. At the same time, these areas emerged into the spotlight of a new era of environmental politics.



Ethnic and cultural issues, and the rights of minority groups were not a crucial part of the constitutional reform agenda initially. But the presence of indigenous representatives in the Constituent Assembly, national debates in favour of multiculturalism, and such international agreements as the International Labor Organization's Accord 169, which demanded the recognition of ethnic and cultural rights of peoples within nations led to the inclusion of Article 7 in the new Constitution. Colombia was not the only Latin American country to adopt official multiculturalism. Pro-indigenous policies were adopted in Colombia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Honduras, Brazil, Paraguay, Mexico, Argentina, Guatemala, and Venezuela. Afro-Latin Americans did not fair as well, except in Colombia and Brazil. From Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua) to the central Andes (Ecuador, Bolivia) to Brazil, indigenous movements that had intensified in the 1980s allied themselves with transnational advocacy networks to challenge dominant conceptions of citizenship and to demand territorial autonomy, self-determination, respect for customary laws, and other rights based on reconstructed notions of identity (Warren and Jackson 2002).

This juxtaposition of environmental, economic, and ethnic issues played an important role in the articulation of black rights in Colombia's 1991 constitution. Prior to the constitutional reform process black demands were rarely couched in terms of the recognition of their cultural difference. But in the early 1990s, Afro-Colombians (like other aboriginals in Latin America and beyond), made alliances with environmentalists, who saw rural, grassroots communities as "stewards of nature" and advocated their participation in sustainable development and environmental conservation efforts.

But the appeal to indigeneity, multiculturalism, and environmentalism worked differently for indigenous and black groups. Under the 1991 Constitution indigenous groups were promised expanded control over their communal lands, and administrative autonomy in judicial decisions, finances, and



development policy. Blacks went into the constitutional reform process in an ethnic double-bind: discriminated against or exoticized because of their “racial difference”, but not considered sufficiently distinct from Colombia’s *mestizo* (mixed race) population as Indians to merit special legal status. This ambivalence was reflected in Transitory Article 55 (AT 55), which restricts black rights to collective land titles for riverine black communities in the Pacific.

Between 1991 and 1993, black activists and leaders worked to turn AT 55 into a law of substance. But beyond agreeing that the mandates of AT 55 needed to be expanded to recognize and include the rights of diverse black communities, not just those along the Pacific rivers, the black coalition remained divided. These divisions paralleled earlier ones. On one side were those who saw a law for black communities primarily as a means for obtaining extended political participation and equality within established institutions, and on the other were PCN activists who wanted to redefine the terms of democracy and development from an “ethnocultural” perspective with the Pacific region as the territorial fulcrum. Grueso *et al.* (1998: 200) note that the PCN wanted to emphasize the importance of “... maintaining social control of territory and natural resources as a precondition for survival, re-creation, and strengthening of culture”. But government officials, black politicians affiliated with Colombia’s two main political parties, and several members of the special commission charged with drafting a law for black communities were ambivalent or actively hostile to the PCN’s proposition. Despite these difficulties, Law 70 was passed in 1993 after two years of negotiations and official foot-dragging.

The new law managed to expand the focus of AT 55 considerably, but black communities were not, as the PCN proposed, granted autonomous control over the Pacific region. Law 70’s eight chapters and 68 articles focus on three main issues: ethnic and cultural rights, collective land ownership, and socioeconomic development. Law 70 does expand the terms of AT 55 to recognize the rights of all Afro-Colombians, but in



restricted terms. These rights are modeled on the perceived realities of black communities of the Pacific and emphasize collective property titles for groups living in rural areas and engaged in subsistence production.

Still the passing of Law 70 was a significant victory for Afro-Colombians. However, it did not unite Afro-Colombians under a single organizational umbrella. The unstable black coalition split apart further. Black politicians and Chocoan groups focused their efforts (to varying degrees) on gaining entry into traditional state politics and political institutions. The PCN continued to emphasize the importance of “identity, territory, autonomy” for black communities. That is, post-Law 70 black social movements were fraught with tensions and deeply intertwined with the political economic dynamics of development in the Pacific region.

Afro-Colombians Organizing in the 1990s: “Identity, Territory, and Autonomy”

Black organizations proliferated across the country in the 1990s. They included cultural groups; new collectives organized around logging, mining, and other productive activities; myriad community councils; and women’s groups. While some of these groups had origins in earlier organizations, a considerable number emerged during the black mobilization process that led to AT 55 and Law 70. These organizations had small memberships, limited mandates, and few independent funds. Many were linked rather loosely to one or more of the three broad factions outlined above (black politicians, Chocoan groups, or the PCN coalition).

A significant number of Afro-Colombians already lived in Colombia’s Andean cities. Since the 1970s there was a steady stream of migrants from the coast to urban centers. After Law 70 was passed, there was a resurgence of youth and squatter groups in these areas. *Cimarrón* also continued to be active in urban universities and peri-urban areas. However, in the 1990s the principal locus of black organizing was the Pacific lowlands. This was not only because 90 per cent of the region’s inhabitants are



Afro-Colombian, but also because many of Law 70's terms coincided or clashed with other state plans for the region.

The four coastal departments that span the Colombian Pacific Littoral—Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, and Nariño—comprise a large part of the Chocó biogeographic region. The Chocó region extends 1,300 kilometres from the southern tip of Panama to the northern tip of Ecuador and is rich in natural resources (timber, precious metals, fisheries, etc.). A global biodiversity “hot spot”, the region is home to a variety of ecosystems (coral reefs, mangroves, rock and sandy beaches, coastal forests, high-and lowland tropical moist forests) and myriad plant and animal species, many endemic. Despite this resource richness, the Pacific was considered poor and marginal in economic development terms.

In a country with a complex geography where regions are often physically and politically disconnected from each other, the Chocó was long relegated to the periphery of post-World War II national development. With the arrival of neoliberal globalization in the late 1980s, however, state officials and development experts held that it was strategically and economically imperative to modernize hitherto “isolated” regional economies (such as in the Pacific and Amazon areas), and to integrate their “backward” inhabitants with the rest of the country. Even as the parameters of black rights were being debated, state planners were engaged in talks with multilateral donors such as the World Bank to fund a large-scale economic modernization initiative. Called *Plan Pacífico* (Pacific Plan), its explicit aim was to develop the region's natural resources and stimulate economic growth.

The biodiverse Chocó was also fast becoming a key target of national and international environmental conservation efforts. In 1992, the Colombian government launched a five-year biodiversity conservation programme called *Proyecto Bio Pacífico* (Bio Pacific Project). With a mandate to devise mechanisms for the protection and sustainable use of regional biodiversity, Proyecto Bio Pacífico became linked to the economic



aims of Plan Pacífico. As awareness of these programmes spread, indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups drew on new global discourses of “rights-based development” and “community-based conservation” and began to pressure the state to make good on its promises to recognize their rights. In response to such pressure, the collective titling of ethnic lands, local participation, and the preservation of traditional knowledge of natural resource management became subsidiary goals of economic development and environmental conservation programs.

But the state, NGOs, and Afro-Colombian activists had very different understandings of the region’s political economy and what local participation and inclusion implied. For a large number of state and development entities, the path to a better future for all Colombians, including black communities lay in political and economic modernization. And recognizing Afro-Colombian ethnic rights meant incorporating them as resource stewards into its development and conservation practices: this was the purpose, as much as the product, of land titling. For the PCN and to some extent Chocoan groups, ethnic recognition implied more than property rights and participation in Plan Pacífico and Proyecto Bio Pacífico. Rather, these activists wished to shape the region’s economic, ecological, and territorial dynamics according to their conceptions of the links between culture, ethnicity, and territory. The PCN especially, mistrusted the state and its intentions, and took an anti-institutional stance vis-à-vis Afro-Colombian struggles. In January 1994, in an interview with Arturo Escobar, PCN leaders noted:

The state wants to close the door and leave the window half open so that not many people can pass through, nor much air..... For the state, Law 70 is a way of giving legal rights to the blacks, of institutionalizing their problems and concerns. This political opening is “a cushion of air” for the economic opening. So if the problems are institutionalized they can be managed (OCN 1996: 247).

Within this context, PCN activists noted:



The black communities of Colombia need *espacios propios*—rights over our territory—but also spaces where we can consolidate our positions. We have differences within, we have a different position than *Cimarrón*, ... or the politicians. Our purpose is to form and to strengthen the process of organization so that the very same communities generate processes of resistance or alternative visions to confront what is being imposed on them by the state. We aspire to construct a new society, where we all fit with all our differences, where no one is excluded or marginalized or segregated, where there is mutual respect for differences. We are not against the concrete demands of water, electricity, health care, transport. But we had to take a position—respond to a series of concrete petitions or work to open up spaces from which we can formulate our politics. We chose the latter (OCN 1996: 252).

Obtaining *espacios propios*—conceptualized variously as autonomous physical territory, political space, and ethnic homeland—was central to the PCN’s understanding of ethnic rights. Drawing on the terms of Law 70, the PCN aimed to organize a black social movement according to the politico-organizational principles of “identity, territory, and autonomy” they outlined in 1993 at one of the first national conference of black communities held near Cali. The PCN’s key goals were:

- to organize a broad, grassroots-based black social movement based on diverse Afro-Colombian identities and interests,
- to envision a political strategy that would enable organized black communities to make autonomous decisions regarding their livelihoods,
- to develop culturally-appropriate, ecologically-sustainable models of economic development,
- to establish autonomous territorial control over the Pacific.

PCN leaders knew that they would need to struggle across



different fronts, and that Law 70 was not a sufficiently definitive victory for their rights. But like the terms of Law 70, the PCN's goals were lacking in specifics and were ambitious in scope.

In the short term, the PCN did not succeed in putting forth a concrete culturally appropriate alternative to mainstream economic models. However, attention to black cultural practices and concerns did become part of Plan Pacífico and Proyecto Bio Pacífico, thanks to the mobilizing efforts of the PCN and other groups. Youth, community, and numerous women's groups in all four states were among the local organizations that gained new momentum in the 1990s. Working in conjunction with the PCN but also with the state and NGOs these groups developed ideas of black identity and cultural politics in interesting and creative ways. Across the Pacific, riverine communities also began organizing and the first collective land titles were handed out in the Atrato region in 1997. But even as these achievements gained increasing visibility overseas and inspired other Afro-descendant struggles, the dynamics in Colombia were changing.

The 1991 Constitution marked the dawn of a new hope of democratic politics for Colombians, and especially for Afro-Colombians. The end of the decade seemed to signal the twilight of this hope as the country plunged into yet another political and economic crisis. Corruption was one of many elements responsible. Another was the rapid spread of drug traffickers, guerilla, and paramilitary forces as the latent low-intensity conflict emerged fully into the foreground. After a brief and abortive attempt at peace talks with insurgents, the official response became one of stepping up the military offensive (against guerrillas and drug traffickers) and economic *apertura*—a policy maintained to this day.

Black and indigenous communities in the Pacific became increasingly caught in this crossfire, or became specific targets of violence, death, and displacement. By 2005, an estimated two million Afro-Colombians have been involuntarily displaced from their homes.² With the acceleration of armed violence and the



targeted killing of leaders and activists, local communities could not exert control over their lands even when they had managed to obtain collective titles. As black communities literally and figurative “lost ground” in the region, the tenor of black movements began changing.

Black Organizing in the New Millennium: From Afro-Colombians to *Afro-desplazados* and *Afro-descendants*

At the turn of the 21st century, the prevailing political and economic strategies in Colombia were framed by efforts to counter narcotics and terrorism. Key among them was the United States-funded Plan Colombia, which started as an anti-drug campaign but soon expanded into an armed offensive against guerillas. However, both the anti-narcotic and anti-insurgency tactics were ineffective against their targets. Rather they fueled conflicts between drug traffickers, guerillas, paramilitary forces, and the Colombian army in order to gain military and economic control over the region. Military operations stepped up sharply under President Álvaro Uribe’s terms and did little to achieve the goals of “peace and security” (or what he called “*seguridad democrática*” or “democratic security”). Under Uribe the environmental and ethnic gains of the previous decade in the

² Figures on the total numbers of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) differ, with the Colombian government’s figures lower than those of major human rights groups. The Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement (Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y Desplazamiento, CODHES), one of the most respected and authoritative non-governmental sources on IDPs in Colombia, estimates that between 1995 and 2005 three million people were forced to flee their homes because of violence related to armed struggles or disputes over territory and resources (CODHES and Pastoral Social 2006: 1). According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, despite the supposed demobilization of paramilitary groups in 2005, internal displacement figures remain on the rise: from 45,000 in 2005 to 67,000 in 2006 and an estimated 72,000 in 2007 (CICR 2007). IDPs tend to belong disproportionately to minority groups, with Afro-Colombians accounting for around 33% of the 412,500 persons displaced during 2002 (Human Rights Watch 2005). During the first semester of 2006, 12% of the total number of those displaced were from minority groups (CODHES 2006: 3).



Pacific also eroded. Forests and natural ecosystems, as well cultivated food crops, became the “collateral damage” of the non-selective chemical-herbicides used to eradicate drugs. Areas cleared of natural vegetation and coca are quickly replaced with more coca, or taken over for agro-industrial projects. High-profit, export-oriented enterprises dominate the latter, among them plantations of African oil palms, which destroy ecosystems and subsistence crops. Black and indigenous communities are at the centre of this vortex, facing death and forced displacement.

In the context of these changes both the loci and foci of black movements expanded on multiple fronts. In the Pacific, the PCN and Chocoan groups continued to engage in the strategic struggle for long-term ethnic and territorial rights. But from the end of the 1990s, there was a new urgency—the immediate needs of rural peoples whose lives and livelihoods are destroyed by aerial fumigants, and other aspects of the wars on terror and drugs. Many of the rural peoples end up in regional towns in the Pacific as “afro-desplazados” (displaced Afro-Colombians) where they lack housing and basic services. To address these urgent tasks, local black organizations such as community councils and women’s groups began working in conjunction with various state and international humanitarian assistance and relief services agencies. Black activists also made alliances with NGOs involved in recording human rights violations, and accompanying communities to prevent displacement, or enable their return.

With increasing U.S. involvement and funding for the problematic Plan Colombia, and the entrenchment of free-trade neoliberalism, black movements also rallied international support for their struggles, making connections with solidarity groups, Washington think-tanks and development NGOs. Also proliferating were links with U.S. politicians, especially the Congressional Black Caucus. Representatives of these entities visit Colombia regularly, and work in various ways to keep Afro-Colombian issues on the U.S. policy agenda. Instrumental in fostering these links were activists who regularly travelled abroad, black politicians such as Piedad Córdoba; and displaced Afro-



Colombian leaders living in exile in the United States. Activists constantly received death threats and many had to leave the region. In 1999, many of these black leaders established AFRODES, the Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians, an organization dedicated to addressing the needs of displaced Afro-Colombians. Many of these leaders faced continuing threats and were forced to leave Colombia, but continued AFRODES activities from abroad, especially the United States. The struggle for black rights began to be couched as much in terms of “human rights” as in ethno cultural terms. The call for the latter also began being reformulated to stress the right of black communities to return to their homes and collective lands to live a life of dignity and peace. This change in the discourses and foci of black movements was reflected in the change in the PCN’s slogan from “Identity, Territory, and Autonomy” to “Identity, Territory, Dignity, and *Life*.”

As the number of black communities displaced by violence took on alarming proportions, the black sectors described in the first part of this chapter (Cimarrón, the PCN, Chocoan groups, and black politicians) formed coalitions across their differences. They also joined forces with, or renewed alliances with other sectors (including traditional political parties) and social groups in Colombia. During a 2004 visit to Colombia, PCN activists including Carlos Rosero confirmed what I was observing—that the PCN’s position with respect to formal or institutional politics had begun to change. Black movements were engaging more actively in electoral politics as they felt it more imperative than ever to draw and keep political attention on the struggles, rights, and needs of their peoples. When I met with Carlos Rosero again in August 2007, he said that Afro-descendant groups were pursuing these goals through alliances with other progressive political forces including the Polo Democrático, a new, independent left-wing political party.

Black struggles in Colombia also internationalized in various ways. Afro-Colombian leaders were key participants in the United Nations World Conference against Racism held in Durban in 2001



where they connected with other black groups in Latin America and beyond. It was during the Durban process that the terms “Afro-Latino” and “Afro-descendant” gained currency in the Afro-Colombian movements. It was also at this time there was resurgence in activism against racial discrimination, for socioeconomic and political equality, and reparations for indignities suffered in the distant past as in more recent times (Mosquera Rosero-Labbé and Barcelos 2007).

Black struggles in Colombia continue at multiple fronts, but black organizations and movements remain split and splintered over how to engage the state and economic reforms. While PCN and other grassroots movements are more open to electoral strategies and public policies than before, they remain skeptical about the possibility of bringing about progressive social change through mainstream political channels and legislative means. This skepticism is especially justified in the light of the mixed success achievements for black communities through Law 70. Law 70 has indeed led to many gains for black groups. The most tangible success appears in collective land titling statistics, although these vary. Based on data from the Colombian Institute of Rural Development (INCODER), an UNDP report estimates that between 1996 and May 2010, 162 collective titles over 5,215,977 hectares were processed in the Pacific (PNUD 2012). In addition to collective land titles and reserved seats for black delegates in the Chamber of Representatives, special entities such as the Afro-Colombian Subdivision in the Office of Ethnic Affairs specifically address black concerns. National research institutes, such as the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History are funding research on Afro-Colombian themes. Wade (2004) cites evidence to show that Law 70 also spurred legislation to include Afro-Colombian history and culture in the national curriculum, and to award special grants for black students to attend university. There are several cases of black communities in the Andes and the Caribbean drawing on Law 70 to articulate their concerns and demands.



Black representatives are part of several government ministries (Rural Development, Environment, Education, etc.) and regional development corporations. However, such gains are not without contradictions, as is evident from the issue of land appropriations by private groups often with the help of extralegal means. And as activists note, Afro-Colombians who are elected to official posts or appointed to government posts usually do not represent the poor black base of either rural or urban areas. In August 2007 in conversation with this author, Rosero suggested that President Uribe had appointed these (young, middle-class) Afro-Colombians to high offices to substantiate his claim that there is no discrimination in Colombia. He saw Uribe's actions as an attempt to appease the U.S. Congressional Black Caucus as well as Afro-Colombians. A driving interest for Uribe may well have been the support of both for the U.S.–Colombia Free Trade Agreement (which was passed in October 2011).

However, as in the previous decade, despite the seemingly progressive public policies, the realities facing *Afro-descendientes* in Colombia face a grim reality. According to data from the University of Los Andes's Observatory of Racial Discrimination, 76 per cent of Afro-descendant people live in extreme poverty, 42 per cent are unemployed, and only 2 per cent reach University. Infant mortality among Afro-descendants is three times higher than among other children in the country: the average life span of a black child is three years (ACNUR 2007). These figures parallel those of the National Planning Department. Activists, journalists, and human rights observers note that displaced Afro-Colombians are regularly denied services, despite the substantial institutions created expressly to guarantee the rights of displaced citizens. Afro-Colombian leaders are constantly under threat and many have been violently murdered.

Between 2008–2014, I made five visits to Colombia and 4 to the Pacific coast were made. In my conversations with Afro-Colombian activists, leaders, and community members they told that rather than autonomous territories and culturally appropriate plans they are forced to engage in development projects with



NGOs. State and market forces are entrenched in the region to foster resource extraction and modernize the economy. Extractive industries such as mining and illicitly coca cultivation result in land grabs displacing communities from their lands or destroy local livelihoods. Armed actors and violent conflicts are now chronic as the economy is dominated by licit and illicit commodity trade. Ethnic and territorial struggles are increasingly mired in bureaucratic political processes. According to Carlos Rosero black struggles face a great dilemma—they need help from outsiders but it is also the outside forces that drive destruction. They can only work through the gaps. In sum, the new strategies and configurations of black social movements are heterogeneous, contradictory, and as intertwined with state-led changes as those which emerged at the beginning of the Law 70 process.

Conclusion

In this paper then I have outlined how one social movement draws on environmental imaginaries to posit a path for an alternative, more sustainable. The study began by studying Afro-Colombian movements by asking pragmatic, even political, questions about cultural and political subjectivities and rights. The author's initial responses were in terms of being “for” black communities, and “against” the state, colonialism, and development. Though struggling to come to terms with the ferocious onslaught of capitalist and state violence, and to understand the differences and contradictions among black movements, I framed the latter as upholding the possibility of a peaceful and sustainable future. As with many other scholars and activists, I social movements saw as rejecting Eurocentric modernity and promising non-western utopias. But extended, participatory fieldwork with social movements and observing the actual changes unfolding in the region highlight that the outcomes of resistance are contingent on a variety of factors including the heterogeneity of interests and strategies among black groups and their contradictory and complex relations with the forces they resist.



The economic and ecological crises of the 21st century, and rising indices of inequality across the world attest to the urgent necessity of examining existing models of development and social change. Post-development ideas make crucial contributions to the search for more equitable, just and democratic alternatives. However, despite the disclaimers against universal truth, post-development approaches tend to ignore the nuances of difference—within Europe, in Western Enlightenment thought, and especially among local communities and social movements.

Their representation of indigenous and local movements risks romanticizing resistance and traditional lifestyles. Scholars and activists aiming to be in solidarity with movements of social and environmental justice can learn much from Latin America struggles. But rather than considering of indigenous and ethnic communities as poster children of opposition to the latest round of capitalist globalization, they would be better served by paying attention to specific conjunctures of space, time, and power relations within which their struggles unfold.



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