

Mangrove Economy: etho-politics and social change *

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ABSTRACT

An advance of the research project «Bio-entrepreneurship: productive configuration of agroecosystems» is presented. The interpretative framework is based on political concepts, economy and social change, also on relations between capitalism, modernity and the nation-state. At the same time, there are observed alternative cultural practices from Afro-descendant women in their territories, their banishments and their ancestral legacy in the colombian pacific coast. It was found that meanings emerge through the stories told by them, which talk about an economy that runs on a space-time in/from the re-existence of human groups. The human groups that inhabit the ancestral territory and the ones that were banished from the mangrove and that recreate it and make it come alive in different contexts (including the urban popular).

KEYWORDS

Afro-descendants, Pacific, modernity, human-nature relation, cultural practices.

JEL CLASSIFICATION

A19, B49, B59, H89, I19

Economía del manglar: etho política y cambio social

RESUMEN

Se presenta un avance del proyecto de investigación «Bioemprendimiento: configuración productiva de los agroecosistemas». El marco interpretativo se basa en conceptos de política, economía y cambio social, también en las relaciones entre el capitalismo, la modernidad y el estado-nación. Al mismo tiempo, se observan prácticas culturales alternativas de mujeres afrodescendientes en sus territorios, sus destierros y su legado ancestral en la costa pacífica colombiana. Se descubrió que los significados surgen a través de las historias contadas por ellos, que hablan sobre una economía que se ejecuta en un espacio-tiempo en / desde la reexistencia de grupos humanos. Los grupos humanos que habitan el territorio ancestral y los que fueron desterrados del manglar y que lo recrean y lo hacen cobrar vida en diferentes contextos (incluido el urbano popular).

PALABRAS CLAVE

Afrodescendientes, Pacífico, modernidad, relación hombre-naturaleza, prácticas culturales.

Códigos JEL

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Economia de manguezais: etho-política e mudança social

RESUMO

Um avanço do projeto de pesquisa «Bio-emprededorismo: configuração produtiva dos agroecossistemas» é apresentado. A estrutura interpretativa é baseada em conceitos políticos, economia e mudança social, também nas relações entre capitalismo, modernidade e estado-nação. Ao mesmo tempo, práticas culturais alternativas de mulheres afrodescendentes são observadas em seus territórios, seu exílio e seu legado ancestral na costa do Pacífico colombiano. Descobriu-se que os significados surgem através das histórias contadas por eles, que falam de uma economia que corre num espaço-tempo na / da re-existência de grupos humanos. Os grupos humanos que habitam o território ancestral e aqueles que foram exilados do manguezal e que o recriam e o tornam vivo em diferentes contextos (incluindo o popular urbano).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Afrodescendentes, Pacífico, modernidade, relação homem-natureza, práticas culturais.

CLASSIFICAÇÕES JEL

A19, B49, B59, H89, I19

Introduction

I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order; when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe.

-But in imagining an erroneous order you still found something...

-What you say is very fine, Adso, and I thank you. The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterward you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless. [...] The only truths that are useful are instruments to be thrown away

The Name of the Rose. Umberto Eco.

The landscape expresses how humans interact with nature establishing with it an inorganic exchange. In Colombia, human groups of Afro-descendants have built places and different ways to inhabit and dwell in the world. The lush, fertile, mystical and magical landscapes of the Pacific littoral are a sample of cultural richness, biodiversity and linguistic multiplicity. The mangroves are an expression of a cultural and natural net of complex, airy and fragile relations between humans and nature, where the logic of what is alive prevails. The affirmation of life (understood as both *bios* and as *zoe*).

In the Pacific the moon is feminine and women have the role of preserving and spreading the ancient knowledge and cultural legacy of the African heritage that survives and re-creates in the collective memory. Men, who come to women in compliance of exogamy networks and the extension of kinship, articulate themselves in the feminine domestic space. They work in different activities and circulate through the rivers, estuaries and the mangrove. This mobility allows them to work on different fronts and activities. Women stabilize the sphere of productive domestic units and residences, while men do it with the kinship spheres and the

relationships networks (Motta, 2002; Meilassoux, 1997 and Godelier, 1967).

Aristotle referred to the *oikonomia* (*oikos* for home and *nomos* for management) as the science of the material provisioning of *oikos* (home) and in its most transcendent dimension, “the art of living and living well” (Pérez, 2004; Martínez -Alier and Roca, 2000). The conventional or neoclassical economy, mainly chrematistics emphasizes on prices and has a metaphysical conception of economic reality, considering Planet Earth as a closed system (Martínez-Alier and Roca, 2000, p. 13). The mangrove economy, related to the *oikonomia*, is a productive practice *multiopcional and complementary*. This practice is traditional to the Afro descent women in which each family distribute the day and the year in different productive activities, which are done and complemented in accordance with the natural cycles and with the desires and needs of the community members. Thus they ensure a diverse, continuous and sustained provision of food for their consumption and economic resources for the acquisition of basic needs articles that are not produced in the region (De La Torre, 1995).

The mangrove economy represents the survival of the vital ecosystem in/from other cultural practices different than the logics of capital that does not succumb to consumption and the unlimited exploitation of nature and culture. The mangrove economy is based on the affirmation of life, “the art of living and living well”. The human groups inhabiting the estuaries and/or the Pacific Colombian mangroves live in a natural and cultural Eden where the biodiversity is an inexhaustible source of life.

The Afro descendant culture gives meaning and shape to the social and economic institutions. It gives base to a worldview from which productive, cultural and technical

practices are created and recreated in four dimensions (De La Torre, 1995): a set of beliefs in supernatural forces with which relations are established in multiple ways, b) individual and social ethical code, according to their beliefs, c) ritual practices that symbolically express the beliefs and the ethical code, d) the institutionally that ensures the continuity of beliefs, the ethical code and the ritual.

The logic of capital supported by the metaphor of progress and development, subordinates and rages violently and abruptly against these other narratives, metaphors or ways of inhabit and dwell in the world of life (Sánchez, 1999). The forced displacements and banishments of the mangrove peoples compel the Afro descendants (as well as indigenous and peasants) to live in the suburban settlements of the city, replacing the mangrove oikonomia for livelihood activities and the faces of the joy and abundance for the faces of marginalization and exclusion.

Literature review and theory development

The Colombian Pacific is invented in terms of modernity, from the metaphor of development, which is fostered in the “Plan de desarrollo integral de la Costa Pacífica”¹ Plaidecop and in the speeches of “biodiversity”, “ethnicity”, “Chocó biogeographic”, “pluriethnicity” and “multiculturalism” (Restrepo, 1996). The transnational finance capital directs its voracity and brutality to this region and imposes new imaginaries and logics with the complicity of the nation-state.

The compositions of the relation man-nature of Afro-descendants, in the space time of oblivion and the banishment of the extermination policy by chrematistic reasons, affirm the mangrove survival. As the capital reproduces and expands with the complicity of the nation-states, destroying relations of friendship, solidarity, reciprocity and imposing the logic of capital appreciation, competition, individuality, banishment and forced displacement. Then, the human beings banished from the mangrove invent and recreate alternative forms, different from the logic of the capital that goes beyond their management and control.

In the cities, the banished people from the mangrove configure shapes to recreate it as a cultural practice that remains despite the brutality of the capitalist world. At the same time, it incorporates forms of re-existence with what was previously cultivated, danced, imagined and lived. In the cities survives the expression *chinook* “*potlatch*” (whose meaning would be “feeding”, giving, receiving and “place where one is satisfied”). The *potlatch* is a form of “total benefits of agonistic type”. What is at stake in these benefits is the “*mana*” or power of authority and respect: the “spirit”

(Maori “*hau*”: wind of reciprocity) circulating in the benefits, intensifying the mutual gestures and the exchanged objects. Strength-intentionality-sense that “comes from the jungle” and is in the thing itself, in the relations that it provokes and its originality of gift (Mauss, 1968).

In the Afro-descendants are found economic and reciprocity relations as the *minga*, *mano cambiada*, *puesto*, *sociedad*, *jornal*, *destajo* and *compromiso* (Restrepo, 1996). The *minga* is a practice widely referenced in the Colombian Pacific (Arango, 1984, p. 161; Betancourt and Gómez, 1995, p. 117-119; Camacho, 1996, p. 9; Corcetti *et al*, 1990, p. 89; De Granda, 1976, p. 25; Gómez, 1983, p. 17, 63-68; Leesberg and Valencia, 1987, p. 113; Mejia, 1990, p. 159; Otero, 1994, p. 65-96; Tamayo, 1996, p. 69; West, 1957) which consists on the formation of a working group to perform a specific task in the service of someone -individual or collective- which in exchange, provides food, drink and a party where those who worked in it participate (Restrepo, 1996).

The cultural practice of *mano cambiada*² is a relation of reciprocity and solidarity among us, where monetary exchange is not a medium for the acquisition, possession and accumulation of material objects. This relation is mediated on the survival of the human groups in the mangrove as other form of organization in social spaces. These spaces not only configure their subjectivity, but imaginary symbolic worlds, that recognize the links and their expressions in the construction of scenarios. Human groups transform and get transformed in the construction of subjective conditions, in the ethical-political and in a political-ethical relation with the significance of the individual and the collective. This gives strength to the deployment of ways of being and acting that enhance the autonomy to be placed outside the route of the economist-civilizational Western project (Betancourt and Gómez, 1995; Gómez, 1983; Leesberg and Valencia, 1987; Losonczy, 1991; Martínez, 1996; Moreno, 1994; Otero, 1994; Price, 1955; Prieto, 1996; Restrepo, 1992; Tamayo, 1996; Valencia, 1990; Yepes, 1988; Velasquez, 1957).

El *Puesto*³ is a term that expresses ownership rights in the participation of the final product. This relationship is: the owner of the tools or necessary conditions to perform a particular practice gets a share of the final output (Friedemann, 1974). It is known beforehand how much belongs to the owner of any of the instruments “borrowed”. This is evident with particular intensity in the case of the *naidí* or wood logs cutters.

The *Junta*, or *sociedad*⁴ is a strategy of consolidating workforce and resources to enable practices that would be difficult to perform in individual terms. It is a form of organization by working groups which is characterized because the parties contribute in equal conditions with what is ne-

cessary for production: the property rights, the tools, the food and financial costs, the profits and/or final losses are distributed equally among the *partners*.

The *Jornal*⁵, practiced since the colonial period (Castro and Serna, 1984; Jury, 1990; Motta, 1976; Safe, 1995; Sharp, 1970) is characterized by the payment in cash for a hired working day and it is set for a single day of work or several in order to strengthen or consolidate the “working groups” required to carry out a specific activity (such as harvesting, preparing land for cultivation or extracting timber). Restrepo (1996) emphatically points out that this does not imply, however, that will always be the same the peons and the work owners, because, someone can act as a *peon* to another which, at the same time, has been a *peon* of the latter; “In the Colombian Pacific cannot be simply read hastily from the equivalence: presence of money in the relations labor=proletarians” (Restrepo, 1996, p. 176).

The *destajo*⁶ is a notion of barter that refers to the payment of the work of one person or determined group per unit of output. In agriculture, for example, money in exchange is received for collecting work, cutting or harvesting.

The *Compromiso*⁷ is a relation of “lending” or “financing” that is received to perform a particular practice, after which the amount of money borrowed must be returned and part of the production must be sold at a significantly lower price than the paid locally for the same product (Friedemann and Arocha, 1986; Restrepo, 1992; Atencio and Cordova, 1972; Barreto, 1971; Dávila, 1979; Valencia, 1990). Who lends (*the patron*) is not directly involved in the economic activities which allow the product obtaining. He only establishes, by the “loan” or “advance” conditions of infrastructural and financial order so that the specific activity is carried out.

These economic practices show another reality that vindicate relations of reciprocity, solidarity, respect for difference and self-care, care for the others and for the mangrove in the different ways of being, seeing and feeling in the world. To take care of the mangrove is to take care of oneself and the others, since the reward is in the care of the mangrove so it is not destroyed as an expression of life. If the mangrove dies the human groups and their descendants who inhabit it disappear because it is their source of life in the appropriation of resources (*piaguas, piacuiles*, crayfish and crabs) for auto-consumption and the surplus for the local market.

The meaning of life is not based on accumulation, but in the livelihood, on the survival of the human group in the vital relation man-nature. The territory is not born from the land towards the democracy with the state, but in the singularity, in the possibility to participate in politics, in the solving of local and community problems and issues.

To think in the expropriation of labor that accumulates in the natural resources that become merchandise, is a *need of fighting* in the re-existence, in these places, in the construction of a policy of protection and conservation of biodiversity. For example, the ratio of conservation of piangueras is due to the need of transformation in the natural code of the custom. Also in the cultural inheritance of identity from the being with others in the world and in the naturalization rationalized of the need for survival, in the cultural ethos (Kusch, 1976), in the worldview of letting be in the world.

Cultural practices of Afro-descendants are associated with the management of natural and supernatural energies as an important factor on the control of productive activities. Within the rules set by the beliefs, it is considered that a woman in her menstrual period creates favorable conditions, recognizing to her the workdays in which she is absent to avoid risks with the others and with the other:

We are used here, that when the woman is with her period, she cannot go to the woods, because it is a custom and a very bad one, because snakes chase much the smell of blood and if one as a woman goes to work, one gets a headache, gets the clumsiness, dizziness in the head, sees blurry, and the blood can be lifted (stopped) that day, and the next day is when it comes ... The woman who is bitten by a snake during her menstruation, does not get cure even with all the remedies that are done, because the snake makes a plot to trick her (term used to refer to cases of disease in which it is presupposed the existence of a supernatural force, which may well be due to the deliberated application of secrets or spells) and the poison instead of running down, runs up and the woman presents mental disorders. Thus there is faith that the woman runs risks in her menstrual days⁸ (Martínez, 2011, cited in De la Torre, 1995).

The local forms of socio-economic organization are not limited to human groups; they go beyond the limits and capitalist logics in the prevailing accumulation rational framework for consumption. Thus, they get transformed in possibility, in emancipating irrationality that de-territorialize what is individual, in the ability to get out of the *homo economicus*, also in the units of meaning and in the auto-eco-organized communities (Escobar, 2008) around the sociability that aspires to conquer a place in another space-time.

The mangrove establishes socio-cultural relations of reciprocity towards a nation of the excluded. This affirmation seems paradoxical because the concept of nation is born from the confrontations and the territorial occupation of

the winners of the moment. It could be said, that the colonization from the late XIX century, has been an escape valve that reduces the conflicts created by an unequal distribution of land. Additionally with this formula there has always been excused the implementing of a truly agrarian reform (Molano, 2007). The land as a factor of production has maintained a political significance. It has reproduced the capital in all its creative forms with the connivance of the state, containing the crowds under an irregular internal armed conflict. A conflict that every day is extended at the expense of permanent exile of human groups located in geostrategic territories of mega transnational projects, in order to expropriate the resources in the agro-ecosystems and the work of the people who inhabit these territories.

The immediate risk is the preservation and conservation of the mangrove economy, the mangroves which are still in these territories and which are every time less. The picture is a kind of learned hopelessness, since these ethnic groups identified as Afro-Colombians in the legal entity are placed, banished from their territories and thrown in marginalized conditions into the urban areas of the capital cities. Those who are still permanently there are banished by the violence exerted by the weapons which generate fear to continue in there. Moreover, the intense activity of the extractive economy through the view of the development locomotive of the nation-state, gets installed without previous consultation and this finally expels or deprives them from their territories. Life in those places is no longer possible, and the ones who still remain in resistance, live with the uncertainty of what might happen to them in this crossed game of interest.

The nation-state is overwhelmed by transnational corporations so that they are granted powers to exert a system of domination and exploitation of resources in environmental licenses. This vision of imposed development which re-treads in the figure of Prometheus in the locomotives and in the messiahs of the direct foreign investment, justify the destructive expropriation actions against agro-ecosystems. This is done under the argument of overcoming inequality, social injustice and poverty, on the false promise of progress for all and in the way of legal legitimacy.

These interests end up producing an adverse outcome because there is an imposed development outside the territory and when it is thought, it is unknown. The relations built by the original peoples who inhabit it, with what is human, with what is - non-human, the material - the immaterial, are denied and erased as well as their practices that are considered as a living lag from another historical time that appears as strange, uncivilized, barbaric and savage.

The social Afro-Colombian movement, lives challenges in this crossed game of interest exerted on the territories, which sometimes seems, or at least it is what they make us believe, that nothing can be done, so that the territories end up being uninhabited. However I have hope that these practices that have survived as a legacy by the ancestors, will allow us to find creative alternatives to keep resisting within the territories where life in the mangrove still can be possible.

Conclusion

Social movements can be described as autopoietic entities. This means, as auto-produced and autonomous entities whose internal basic organization despite important changes, is preserved in its interaction with their environments through the structural articulation.

The conceptualization of the auto-organized social movements is counter-intuitive since they are often seen responding to structural forces, defending strategies based on their interests. While achieving particular functions in society configured by the contentious politics and deeply embedded in the networks that take them in different directions, among others. These descriptions are also suitable for the movements.

There is a growing sense that many of today's movements can be analyzed by approaches based on theories derived from studying the dynamics of the natural processes, especially the auto-organization. The auto-organization is not an automatic process that happens by itself, despite the context; on the contrary, it often involves issues that are both dependent and independent of the environment-context, auto-organized and external-organized. 

Conflict of interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Notes

1. Integrated Development Plan of the Pacific Coast.
2. Hand Changed.
3. The Place.
4. Board or Society.
5. Wage.
6. Piecework.
7. Commitment.
8. Translated from the Spanish.

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