

Dynamics of a Songful Resistance¹

“A single swallow does not necessarily mean that summer is on its way”

Juan Ventas²

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Despite the fact that it might appear as if the voyage along the length of the South Pacific coast of Colombia came to an end with the latest activities in Tumaco, the journey is not over yet. Through the debates, discussions and denunciations arising from the presentation, as well as the warnings about megaprojects that marginalize and bleed the territories, we have been brought face to face with the vestiges of slavery. Such has been the outcome of this campaign for life and freedom in the context of today’s marginalization. Like migratory birds, we made our way from port to port, listening to tales of a pained world, aware that the confirmation of the story lay in the lives of the protagonists: peasant men and women. These are the downtrodden victims of injustice, yet they are nonetheless alive with happiness. Together, we built a fraternal fire and shared a small artesanal boat in which we ate together as equals and gently sung ourselves into dissonance. Despite our diverse places of origin (Buenaventura, Bogota, Bahía Málaga, Ladrilleros, Cali, Sala Onda, Guapi, Timbiqui and Tumaco) and our different professions, we made the journey together in a familial and fraternal spirit. Combining visions and dreams for a single cause, we reclaimed the word, recounting the outrages and injustices of a capitalism whose discriminatory policies and practices are devastating the African population and banishing them from their own territories. Capitalism which, according to Bolívar Echeverría, “*implies the alienation of the human subject, and the erosion of its ability to reproduce itself and generate its own ways of being.*”³

This “South Pacific Voyage” was a joint initiative of the Process of Black Communities [*Proceso de Comunidades Negras*] (PCN) and CENSAT Agua Viva, Friends of Earth Colombia [*Amigos de la Tierra Colombia*]. Its goal was to broaden the resistance campaign against agro-fuels: *Filling Tanks, Emptying Territories* [*Llenando Tanques, Vacinando Territorios*] amongst local communities. This “pacific” trip through the Pacific region began in the Puerto de Buenaventura on 28th September 2007 and ended in Tumaco on the 8th October of the same year. The journey exposed the reality of permanent state of siege which Afro-descendants are facing, threatened with loss of sovereignty, freedom and territory by the onslaught of megaprojects. Of crucial importance is agribusiness, especially the monocultures of oil palm (originating from Africa) which are being developed in the region.

The multiple grievances and problems that we witnessed during the trip left us feeling impotent, with a desolate and unpleasant aftertaste. Yet, they also demonstrated the urgent

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³ Bolívar Echeverría. *Cultura y barbarie*. www.bolivare.unam.mx/ensayos/barbarie.html

need for embarking on activities that strengthen the articulation between these communities and their abilities to analyze and design local and regional strategies for defending their territory. The campaign seeks to link the entire Afro-descendant population of the South Pacific region within a common perspective of deepening the autonomous Plans and Projects for Life in such a way as to emphasize their own capacities to research and acquire knowledge. At the same time, it strives to strengthen their culture and valorize their ancestral wisdom. With this in mind, these communities are concentrating their political efforts “*in the ability of humans to make their own decisions about themselves and their ways of living together. This ability is necessarily exercised in a process of acquiring consistency in concrete daily life and in the creation of identities*”⁴. Thus, their political perspective serves to reinforce their knowledge of their rights and legal tools. By asserting their ancestry and culture they are able to cohesively constitute themselves as a threatened people and culture. Alternative proposals are based in appealing to these aspects. As the popular saying goes, “*A single swallow does not necessarily mean that summer is on its way*”.

The South Pacific is not merely a geographical space. As the inhabitants on the shores of its rivers are fond of saying, it is an entire universe. It is a universe where people still use song to express their feelings and play the marimba to get in touch with their past: “*the devil is...the marimba*” chants the song. And, after feeling and getting to know the South Pacific’s coastal and river areas, one might easily imagine that today only one devil exists in the region: megaprojects. The overbearing and indiscriminate presence of these projects is the expression of a development-based logic, characterized by a heavy dose of environmental racism and indifference to the communities and their cultures. These megaprojects obey a logic that is based in the destruction of natural wealth and the erosion of cultural autonomy. At the same time, communities that are already historically impoverished and degraded in the country’s idiosyncratic imagination, are facing displacement.

The devil made his appearance...and he was anything but a marimba

The phrase “development” conceals the shadow that megaprojects are casting throughout the region. The people there refer to it by name with great caution, just as they might refer to a ghost or an armed man. However, the various organizations and community councils which inhabit the whole region are sounding the alarm. These development proposals are the products of Colombian governmental initiatives, together with the multinational financial institutions such as the CAF (Corporacion Andina de Fomento), the Interamerican Development Bank and FONPLATA ([Fondo Financiero para el Desarrollo de la Cuenca del Plata](#)). The projects have been drawn-up and implemented without prior consultation and fail to prioritize the ethno-development projects that the regions inhabitants have managed to forge around their traditions and visions. Instead, the megaprojects are clearly a strategy aimed at dispossessing and displacing these very same populations. By undermining legislation concerning the *Consulta Previa*⁵, namely Law 70 that was passed in 1993 and Decree 1320 which was issued in 1998, these development projects are simply a mechanism to snatch away Afro-Colombians’ right to define their own ways of living which these laws entitle them to.

⁴Bolívar Echeverría. *Cultura y barbarie*. www.bolivare.unam.mx/ensayos/barbarie.html

⁵ The *Consulta Previa* is a legal mechanism for consulting the Black and Indigenous communities before going ahead with a megaproject.

The Colombian state's interest in territories rich in natural diversity does not come free of charge. Foreign companies and capitals have already mapped out the future of entire communities. "*Rooted in the historical process of capital accumulation, these companies are now developing policies aimed at seizing the peoples' genetic, intellectual and cultural wealth. And, in the name of democracy and civilization, monocultures are being promoted*"⁶. These interests do not take the communities into account, quashing and devaluing their beliefs, traditional practices and labors. The ground is being laid for a territory void of inhabitants. In other words, no peasants, indigenous people, or Blacks. In the early decades of the 20th Century, legal measures were established to usurp the land from peasants and settlers, and in this case, the Afrodescendant communities specifically. Yet, today, colonial methods still remain intact in their essential features. Now, as in the past, peasants continue suffering banishment from their land in order to offer legal and economic guarantees to the large and wealthy landowners. Only this time around, these landowners take the form of transnational companies.

The existence of a state that instigates eviction or subjugates life to new forms of commodification through the imposed presence of large multinational companies (the sole beneficiaries of the government's proposals) hinders the existence of viable and peaceful relations between a territory and its inhabitants. This phenomenon of accelerated and unscrupulous extraction of natural wealth, as well as its commodification, is characteristic of the position of southern countries in a globalized market. And, as far as the Black communities of the Colombian South Pacific are concerned, it poses a dramatic and all encompassing threat to their cultural, biological and ancestral patrimony.

Throughout the course of the Voyage, the clearest and most evident example of the threat posed by megaprojects which we encountered was the Deep Water Port in Malaga Bay [Puerto de Aguas Profundas en Bahía Málaga] in the Valle del Cauca. Not only will this construction impact on the local population's right to cultural diversity, territory and participation that the *Consulta Previa* entitles them to, but it will also endanger territories for which collective titles have already been issued. A group of young environmentalists in the community of Bahía Málaga have initiated an eco-tourism process. This is rooted in a local community perspective, as opposed to the typical logic of travel agencies or others promoting commercial tourism packages which devour landscapes and cultures. To the contrary, this eco-tourism initiative strives to cherish, reclaim and revindicate the beauty of the areas traditions and territory. By doing this it seeks to raise awareness amongst visitors to the area so that they will leave with an understanding that other ways of seeing the world and relating to nature do in fact exist. However, these very same local forms of life are seriously threatened by the building of the deep water marine port, as is their food sovereignty and territorial autonomy, which will end-up being administered by "outsiders".

The region of Gran Patía is also learning about an additional threat, the Waterway [Acuapista] megaproject. Together with the Deep Water Port, this forms part of the Archimedes Project. The government's devious approach to implement this project has consisted in breaking it down into sub-components and dividing them between the different municipalities that it will pass through. In this way, the megaproject will bring together three departments and fourteen municipalities. The Waterway would traverse the entirety of the region's complex ecosystem of marsh-lands, provoking the kind of incalculable damage which has already occurred with

⁶Almendares, Juan. *Reflections on human rights, torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and environmental justice* [Reflexiones sobre derechos humanos, tortura y tratos crueles inhumanos y degradantes y la justicia ambiental]

the Canal Naranjo. This is a canal that connects the Patía Viejo river with the Turbia ravine, a tributary of the Sanquianga river. It was built in the 1970s to allow faster transportation of wood extracted from the zone. Its construction has accelerated the sedimentation of the Patía river, making its passage almost impossible. Let us not forget that the rivers are the only means of access and communication for the inhabitants of the Pacific region. Not only would the loss of the Patía river leave an entire population isolated and marginalized (even more than they currently already are), but it would also alter an entire ecosystem and water basin which has served as sustenance and a cultural reference for decades. The inhabitants still remember a time when the river was wide and deep. Now all you hear is *Canalate!*⁷, the rallying cry for people to set about the task of removing blocks of mud and earth which are clogging the river. Projects such as the Waterway, and others which form part of the Archimedes Project, are being developed with the framework of the Initiative for the Regional Integration of South America [Iniciativa de Integración Regional para Sur América], IIRSA. This is an attempt to construct infrastructure in order to guarantee the opening up of new commercial routes, as well as facilitating international trade, a process of pillage brought about by way of Free Trade and Bilateral Investment Treaties. These infrastructure projects seek to speed up the transport of commodities produced by large companies and multinationals and result in ever greater degradation and marginalization of local and regional trade and alliances.

Patía comes under the Association of Community Councils of Greater Patía [Asociación de Consejos Comunitarios del Gran Patía], ACAPA. ACAPA was one of the first Associations to receive collective ownership rights to land that was ancestrally occupied by the region's inhabitants. Today 96,000 such titles have been granted, spanning three municipalities: Mosquera, Francisco Pizarro-Sala-Onda and Tumaco, in Nariño. Despite the fact that these collective land rights have been granted, and the black communities' longstanding residence in the region, there have nonetheless been reports of incidents in which land belonging to these collective holdings has been sold to foreigners. This has resulted in the land being exploited through practices that are not traditional to the region, such as extensive livestock grazing.

On the other hand, the municipality of Guapi situated in the Cauca Pacific region, is being drawn into the dynamic of megaprojects by way of the indiscriminate planting of African Palm in areas which are part of the collectively held lands. It is not only the old people of Guapi who are worried by these monoculture plantations: the young men and women are also concerned about the threats to their land that are associated with this megaproject that purports to produce African Palm for the next 60 years. 15 thousand hectares of the Communitarian Council of Lower Guapi's total 23 thousand hectares are endangered and the territory's integrity is in jeopardy due to Salamanca, the palm company that has won the concession.

Locals are also concerned about the construction of the Small Scale Hydroelectric Plant at Brazo Seco. They believe that this project will not serve the population's wellbeing, but rather seeks to guarantee the energy requirements of agribusiness, just as has been the case with other projects in the area. Once again this violates Decree 1320 that was issued in 1998 and

⁷ *Canalate* is a stick which the rafters use when their boats become stuck in the sand due to rising tides.

concerns the *Consulta Previa*. The Brazo Seco hydroelectric plant also threatens to have a severe ecological impact.

Tumaco is a dramatic case in point. Here the Guapireños have had ample opportunity to experience the consequences of producing African Palm. Tumaco is the municipality with the largest presence of African Palm cultivation in the South Pacific region, and it was here that the sowing began. It is reported that today around 40 thousand hectares have been planted, as compared to only 18 thousand in 1998. In less than a decade, the extension of African Palm crops in Tumaco has doubled. Meanwhile, the Afrocolombian peasants maintain a traditional culture, based on agriculture that is both varied and sustainable. This has allowed them to turn their land into a microcosmos containing diverse plant and animal varieties. However, according to accounts from people in the area, the oil palm gives rise to nothing but sterility of the soil and a uniform strain of plants which homogenizes the landscape and the territory. Furthermore, it is not even edible! In the words of a woman who attended the meeting of the Communitarian Councils: *“The oil palm is a selfish crop that does not allow for the production of anything else. Those who cultivate it will lose their ability to grow banana, cassava and fruit trees. They won’t be able to cultivate anything. Nothing at all. Absolutely nothing. This is why I call the oil palm plantations selfish.”*

Charo Mina, a leader of PCN who lives in the USA and participated in the Voyage, wrote: *“The communities exposed to the cultivation of oil palm in the vicinity of Tumaco have experienced the devastating environmental, social and cultural effects of its presence. Their lands have been expropriated (in many cases violently), their water has been contaminated, and they have lost traditional production practices such as the traditional farming system which is based upon a complex ecosystem combining edible food crops, wood sources and ecological control mechanisms. The monocultures present the Afro-descendant communities with an ethical problem, both in relation to environmental, economic and cultural issues, as well as from a historical perspective. The Colombian government’s insistence on imposing monocultures in the collective territories belonging to these communities is an affront to their morality and ethics”*.

In the mid-1970s palm cultivation was implemented in Tumaco by way of pressure and coercive and cruel methods. However, since 1999 a new strategy of getting hold of land has been adopted by those promoting palm-oil. This strategy complements their earlier strategy. In 1999, Cordeagropaz, the Tumaco Corporation for Agribusiness Development [Corporación para el Desarrollo Agroempresarial de Tumaco] was established. This is a public-private entity created to promote so-called “strategic alliances”. These alliances have overridden the legal rights of the Boards of the Communitarian Councils by organizing small cultivators of oil palm into business associations that serve to bypass these Councils. Cordeagropaz, with assistance from USAID, promotes mediation between the government, banks and palm companies and violates the basic rules stipulated in the special ethnicity law. These alliances seek to intensify the presence of agro-industrial palm plantations in the midst of collectively held territories, by way of associations which do not have legal decision-making power over the territory. These associations simply express the unequal relations between capital and the local population, where the natives put their lands and their labour at the service of this monoculture, while they themselves become indebted. Not only are their culture and food sovereignty at risk, but also their actual territory. *In order for palm cultivation to be able to expand, the people must vacate their territories.*

Thus, it must be understood that the displacement to which the black communities are being subjected to on account of the government's fervent promotion of megaprojects is an intentional strategy. It is aimed at weakening the control that these communities have begun to exert since being granted collective land titles and the establishment of Communitarian Councils to administer the territory. This is crucial, since if the Communitarian Councils were to be strengthened and given due recognition as the appropriate governing bodies within these territories, as distinct from merely being grassroots organizations, this would introduce new elements in the discussions posed by government policies and the Afrocolombian communities.

And so, the Devil arrived with his demons in tow

Numerous policies seeking to integrate the black communities with the rest of the country are based on megaprojects that in addition to assaulting the ancestral nature of the territories belonging to these communities, also intensify existing conflicts and threaten the communities. The projects are being generated according to external economic requirements, and do not include consultation with the communities about the initiatives they would aspire to be able to realize within their collective landholdings.

The invasion of illegal crops into various zones of the South Pacific has intensified the armed conflict in these regions. The different sides of the conflict fight for control over the territory and the civilian population becomes caught-up in the middle. In the midst of this violence, the government has developed so called "alternative proposals". However, these proposals have nothing more substantive to offer than further penetration into territories and displacement of their inhabitants. These supposed "alternatives" simply serve to cement hegemonic models in place, models which were initially placed on the table by the interests of large-scale capital and multinational foreign investment, and are backed up by unjust and unequal trade treaties.

The megaprojects have arisen under the pretext of the Colombian government's programme of eradicating illegal crops. The imposed establishment of oil palm monocultures for the production of edible oils and agro-diesel is turning out to be the strongest pretext. The communities' have suffered the fate of being recipients to the spread of coca in certain regions of the South Pacific, brought about by outsiders. On the one hand, the indiscriminate glyphosate fumigations negatively affects peoples' health, harming basic food-crop production and the territory's biodiversity. And, furthermore, the agricultural products and crops which the government has introduced to replace coca, have also been affected by the aerial spraying. One concrete example of this is the community of San José de Tapaje, a *corregimiento*⁸ which forms a part of the municipality of Charco.

On the other hand, it is clear that armed conflict has caught the civilian population in the middle and is suffocating the tranquility that people used to enjoy in their Pacific homeland. This is in violation of international humanitarian law. The communities that settled on the shores of the Tapaje River have had to sustain the scourge of the armed groups (both legal and illegal ones). These armed forces are often stationed very close to the houses in the community, thus preventing people from exercising their right to move freely within their own territories and benefit from its natural wealth. After six in the evening, the river is a lonesome place, a predatory serpent that inspires terror in all who stumble upon it.

⁸ This is an administrative term for a small populated area that exists within a municipality.

However, some people are more afraid of being uprooted and the resultant homesickness than of the bullets. And, so, despite everything, they continue living in Tapaje. Women, men, old people, and children all continue to bathe in the currents of the river, continue singing to its waters and have not given up sowing banana, sugarcane and hope. And, alternative projects manage to survive. One such initiative is the Association of AfroColombian Women for Peace [Asociación de Mujeres Afro Colombianas por la Paz] (AMAC). This group of women from San José de Tapaje have had to resist constant threats against its agricultural and cultural proposals.

The Tapaje River is the epicenter of multiple problems. Those mentioned above are just some of them. When coca and armed groups mix with the civilian population, the result is that the communities and the territories where they live are the most effected. Many families are forcibly displaced.

The displacement suffered by the river communities of Tapaje has undergone important changes recently. A new category of people has emerged within the displacement process. These are people who refer to themselves as “The Resisters” [“Los resistentes”]. In addition to physical dispossession, displacement also involves symbolic and psychological dispossession. The relations between the inhabitants and their land and its resources undergo profound changes. Amongst those who stay, children are left with fear in their eyes and women with empty stomachs. However, these people are not considered to be displaced peoples, and hence are not prioritized within the government’s national assistance program which purports to serve communities affected by this scourge.

“The Resisters” are loathe to abandon their land, referring to it as “their paradise”. Aggrieved, they ask themselves why the government fails to offer other alternatives that do not entail abandoning their homes. Instead, they receive threats and harassment from all the different armed groups warning them to “vacate the territory”. Bearing the brunt of the violence, they have very few tools at their disposal with which to sustain their resistance. Their main weapons are their culture and the processes of ethno-education which have enabled them to appropriate their territory as their own, by way of love for their traditions and culture. Having opted so valiantly in favour of life and communion with the land, for the most part these elements are the lifeline that The Resisters cling to so dearly. The songs, the poetry and the dance are the arms wielded by these men and women who talk to the river and rouse people to clear its channels, giving them the strength to face the bullets which have sought to remove them from their homes.

“The displaced and The Resisters alike both have lost their right to freely exercise their culture and social being, owing to their loss of autonomy to freely move, to maintain their traditional crops, to freely exercise their right to organize themselves and to participate politically. They have also lost their right to enjoy themselves and carry out recreational activities. The inhabitants of the Territorio Región of the South Pacific live in a situation of confinement, held hostage in their own territory, kidnapped for what they represent and what they are a part of.”⁹

These are the features of the policy of plunder and imposed change which is being implemented in the territories that have belonged to the Colombian black communities since

⁹ Comment made by Charo Mina in his report “ Colombia’s African Diaspora is the Target of an Extinction Strategy” . [“La diáspora africana en Colombia está en la mira de una estrategia de extinción”.]

ancestral times. There is a sense of being under siege, both from the state and from the transnational companies. Their activities threaten the region's communities and its territories; territories which are recognized as the world's third richest, both in terms of genetic wealth, as well as natural wealth in general

And, with the power of traditional sorcery, people take on the Devil

The diversity and culture of an immense lyrical universe is under threat from agro-fuel monocultures, as well as the megaprojects that go under the name of "development" for the communities. Affecting nature, the geographical landscape, the cultural worlds, the agricultural traditions and the beauty of a territory that is both friendly and seductive, these initiatives amount to an assault against life.

In many communities, such as Bahía Málaga or San José de Tapaje, people continue struggling for alternatives aimed at improving the living conditions of men and women alike, and reconciling the communities with their environment and the traditions of their elders.

Finally, the only thing that remains is to recall that upstream we encountered the men and women of a songful resistance. There they were, soaking their clothes and their stomachs in the waters of the river, drinking freshly-made "biche" and "naidy" juice¹⁰ as they engaged in their daily celebration of life. Yet, all the while, contemplating the harsh reality of hunger and the indiscriminate spraying of chemicals.

There, the bland color of the skin likens the earth, and it is at this moment when uprootedness and homesickness weigh down on our chests and we feel the burden of those who are unable to roam their territory and freely enjoy their traditions.

Despite the fact that we do not have ancestral and collective lands, that we do not know how to plunge a *canalete* deep into the water, that we do not distinguish between the flavours of "pepa e' pan"¹¹ and that we do not have a river coursing through our memories, this territory and its people nonetheless opened its heart to us. The women sang us a lullaby and seasoned our palettes with the tasty local herbs, chillangua and chillarán, while the local music reminded us of how arhythmical our feet are under the sound of a marimba. The communities entrusted us to shout to the four winds all the pain and injustice which they are living through in their own lands. And, so, this is how the people in the Pacific live, living as they do in the midst of war, and exorcising bullets and intrusions with prayer and song.

¹⁰ Translator's note: I have been unable to find any English translation for these terms.

¹¹ This is a phrase that does not translate easily into English. Pepa e'pan is the fruit of the bread tree.