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LECTIO PRAECURSORIA:

CHOCÓ CHALLENGES: COMMUNITIES NEGOTIATING MATTERS OF CONCERN AND CARE ON COLOMBIA'S MARGIN

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It is my pleasure to present for examination my work of the last four years entitled, 'Chocó Challenges: Communities Negotiating Matters of Concern and Care on Colombia's Margin'. This dissertation is an effort to build a narrative that encourages a new politics for stirring, staying and living with troubles, committed to de-colonialism, eco-socialism, and materialism. In this Lectio, in order to present my argument, I will answer three questions: First, for those unfamiliar with Colombia, where is Chocó and what is it like? Second, why study the region of Chocó? And third, what can we learn from studying Chocó? Before I provide answers, I want to begin with two personal anecdotes that are tied up with the course of my dissertation and to the ongoing process of becoming an anthropologist.

Over four years ago, months before I started my research in Finland, I made the decision to leave my previous job in Colombia as an environmental coordinator. I had many reasons then. The most pressing was that the situation of security in the field was steadily deteriorating and my boss stubbornly wanted me to head there without providing any assurance of my safety. In my mind, the contradiction of working in the environmental management department for an oil company had also become untenable.

As I saw it, the contradictions were manifold, manifesting themselves, for example, in the contrast between the wealth generated by the oil extraction and the poverty-ridden conditions of the neighbouring communities, in the embezzlement of royalties by local politicians and the general lack of public services, and in the land-grabbing practices of the oil company which enabled, what appeared to be, the conservation of local forests and wetlands, a mirage which dissipated once those areas were identified as oil-bearing. Perhaps, what was most striking is that these sets of contradictions are conflated with one another and have become the norm: the default condition of that area's reality.

Back then, I saw policy and governance systems as the remedies for such inequalities and unfairness. I was not yet an anthropologist, my background being in microbiology, economics, and environmental science, policy and management. My second anecdote alludes to a moment when I was confronted with science as an object of anthropological study during a conference in Bloomington, Indiana in mid-2014—shortly after I had begun my own research. Attendants to that conference worked with the ideas of Elinor Ostrom, the 2010 winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics,

and were concerned with the management of common pool resources, watersheds, fisheries or forests, which are characterised by being extremely difficult for someone to exclude other people from using. It was common sense to me that, with defined rules, a natural resource could be properly managed. This implied that for those rules to work, a particular type of subject was required, a particular kind of person who would follow rules in a governance system. During the conference, what seemed to be common to all the presentations that I attended was that those rules for managing resources were very context-specific and relied heavily on what in anthropology we call culture or, to be more specific, nature-culture relations. From my conference notes, paper after paper that I attended seemed to point towards the peculiar conclusion that a 'better' kind of subject, a 'better' kind of people, was needed for those governance systems to work. In retrospect, what was happening was that the presentations were based on a dualist nature/culture model that produced a particular type of subject, which was then used as benchmark to qualify governance systems in particular case studies. In that sense, anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1992: 10) reminds us: 'it matters what ideas one uses to think other ideas (with).'

I bring up these personal anecdotes for two reasons: first, to show that the current corporate practices to manage environmental and social impacts are simply not sufficient to address contradictions of wealth and social inequality, violence, and environmental degradation, which are not just unforeseen consequences of development, but are intrinsic to its current form; and second, to argue that it is not uncommon to find that mainstream academic discussions follow what decolonial scholar Santiago Castro-Gómez (2007), calls the 'hubris of the point zero'. This refers to

the conceit of Western knowledge production in its claim of having a privileged access to reality, with the consequence, as I explained, of producing research that suggests that people need to be better and need to conform to being something other than what they are.

The natural beauty of Chocó and the rich histories of its local inhabitants have been my source of inspiration. I employed what Heikkinen et al. (2016) call a 'context-sensitive' approach to ethnography in order to be attentive to relations of power and agency. In our ethnographies, we must rigorously use our methodologies in order to produce thick descriptions of our experience, but we cannot be neutral in response to the environmental and social crises in which we live. My dissertation reflects a complex process of being rigorous but not neutral in finding commonalities between protests for a hydroelectric dam, the political ecology of Utría National Park in Chocó, global environmental change, and drift-cocaine.

With these initial remarks, let me start answering the first question, where is Chocó and what is it like?

Chocó is one of 32 administrative regions in Colombia. Located on the country's Pacific coast, Chocó borders Panama in the northwest, the Caribbean in the north and the Andes in the east. It is slightly bigger than Denmark. Chocó is inhabited by Afro-descendant and indigenous communities, that are not only neighbours but extended kin, friends, and partners in resistance against historical oppression. To speak of these relations it is necessary to recall the violent past that forged them.

The Embera communities, with which I worked, are the survivors of the first encounters with Europeans on the mainland of the American continent in the 16th

century. They fiercely battled and resisted the Spanish conquistadors for over a century. The communities of African ancestry are the descendants of the peoples brought as slave labour from the gulf of Benin to work in the gold mines of the region. Since colonial times, the region of Chocó has been classified by Colombian elites as inhospitable, backward, and inhabited by 'savages'. In recent decades, it has been considered among the poorest regions of the country. Development has been the remedy for these conditions, a solution which has come accompanied by the repeated rebranding of the region. For example, in the nineteen seventies Chocó was branded as a door to the nations of the far East; in the eighties, it was branded as a place of 'enormous forests' that could be cut down and exported; in the early nineties it was 'discovered' as a biodiversity hotspot of global importance; in the late nineties and early noughties it was rebranded as an area for 'ecotourism' until the security situation changed for the worse, then public opinion associated the region with armed conflict and more recently with drug-trafficking.

Today's news, not only from Chocó, reminds us constantly that the possibility for destruction of our worlds is very real: narratives of war, social crises, and environmental degradation have become pervasive. Yet these narratives tend to overshadow the concrete capacity that we also have today of turning the world into the opposite of crises and devastation. This possibility of change and transformation need not be confused with 'civilisation', 'progress', or 'development' and their taxonomies of pre-industrial, industrial, and now post-industrial societies; pre-capitalist, capitalist and also post-capitalist ones; and least-developed, developing, and developed countries. These taxonomies follow a single logic: it is as if a country or a society were a cake that could be placed in an oven until it becomes industrial, capitalist, or developed. Yet what makes the study of these concepts complex is that while, on the one hand, becoming industrial, capitalist, or developed partially delivers on the promise of improving material conditions, on the other, it also heightens the relation between the social and environmental crises which are inseparable from the current mode of social life, be it capitalism, industrialisation, modernity, patriarchy, or neoliberalism (Escobar 2015). The issue with development, progress, and civilisation is that, both when they fail and when they succeed, they set the terms of how people should live, as Colombian Anthropologist Arturo Escobar (1995: 194) tells us: 'In this narrative, [people] appear as the half-human, half-cultured benchmark against which the Euro-American world measures its achievements.'

We know today, five centuries since the Spanish first arrived in present day Chocó, that the model of development, of so-called 'progress' and 'civilisation', has failed. We can be sure that if we are to produce something else, we need to change that model, we need to change the story; the story *must* change. While both the setting of the beautiful coastal rainforest and the complex histories of the local inhabitants of Chocó are fixed, we can, however, redefine the actors and the plot, so that the conflicts and their resolutions have different outcomes. In other words, recalling Marilyn Strathern, 'it matters what ideas one uses to think other ideas (with).'

So, to answer the second question, why study the region of Chocó?

In my view, what makes Chocó very special is that none of the tools of domination have been successful in their infamous endeavours: neither the Spanish conquistadors' expeditions, nor the colonial mining settlements, nor the

Colombian state's capitalist development, nor drug trafficking, can, nor could, force their will on the local peoples and natures of Chocó. Hence, a different narrative is required, one that is context-sensitive to the histories of conflict, exploitation, and violence. The story *must* change.

An alternative narrative for a politics of stirring, staying, and living with troubles, needs to be rigorous and must not be neutral. Let me explain:

I arrived in one of the villages in Chocó called El Valle with great expectations. I had, one could say, the knowledge that an urban Colombian has of Colombia's Pacific region, produced to a great extent by the media and by word of mouth of those who have visited and lived there. I knew that I could expect a humid tropical rainforest, and towns and villages inhabited by Afro-descendant and Embera communities. The village of El Valle, where I spent a large part of my fieldwork, is dominated by a tidal pool: when the tides rise, the sea pushes back the river creating a beautiful sight. When the tide goes down, the pool empties and reveals a sandy area in parts covered by mangroves and dotted with crabs that draw patterns on the sand as they filter it for food. The area is also used by local fishermen to park their boats, and to unload their catch. Birds are a common sight. On one of its shores, one can observe the ruins of what once was a fishermen's harbour, which the waves have washed away. The area is also used as a playground by children. On one side of the pool there is a football field where young adults play barefoot in the wet sand. A creek runs along the side of the football field, flooding it at times. The creek brings down sewage water from a nearby neighbourhood. Awash in raw sewage water, they play.

This tidal pool in many ways reflects the complexities of life in the region: complex ecologies and complex relations. Scarcity, marginality, and poverty are very real. Yet the story of poverty in Chocó cannot continue to be told in the same way whereby the local peoples are portrayed as savages who must be civilised and the local natures are presented as inhospitable and adverse for humans. That is precisely the story we are continuously told, where a capitalist magic wand can transform the local bays into hubs for international commerce, convert the hills into mines, and distil the rainforests for medical patents. In other words, Chocó is good for extraction and capital, bad for anything else.

Allow me to explain one way the story can change. A very interesting occurrence takes place during the night at this same tidal pool. Brave local conservationists patrol the beaches every night looking for sea turtles that come to lay their eggs in the sand. This initiative was seeded over a decade ago by an environmental NGO that trained a few people in collecting the eggs, in taking measurements of the turtles and the nests, in creating artificial nests in safe locations away from people and predators, and in ensuring that the baby turtles reach the waves so that the females return in twenty years' time to continue this cycle of life. Today the initiative is run entirely by a community group called Caguama—in reference to the species' local name. By doing this hard work, the conservationists from Caguama derive a small income by taking tourists to release baby turtles into the sea. Their motivation is not the income, which hardly covers their expenses, but their sense of responsibility. The lives of the turtles and of their land-dwelling caretakers are entangled. This is just one of many ways in which the local peoples develop relationships of care, which help in changing the plot and redefining the actors of the story.

This leads me to the third question, what can we learn from studying Chocó?

As you may note, the title of this dissertation 'Chocó Challenges' is meant to have a double meaning. Yes, the communities of Chocó face many challenges, but the people of these communities also challenge in their own right the preconceptions which are applied to them. In other words, they confront the issues that concern them in a process of engaging with and rejecting development and its capitalist governance. To shed light on how this process takes place, I make a simple move: I take the matters of concern and care of local communities as a starting point, which reveals that a different narrative already exists, as is the case with the turtle conservation project. In this dissertation, I build four context-sensitive narratives for a politics of stirring, staying, and living with troubles. Briefly, these narratives explain:

First, the relationship between the Afro-descendant and Embera communities and the Park Administration within Utría National Park in Chocó (Acosta García et al. 2017). My co-authors and I took as a starting point the complex historical relations among the three stakeholder groups, which have divergent views concerning what to do with the park's resources. Then, we developed a methodology that, by comparing the purposes of each stakeholder, shifts the focus from searching for solutions to the management of the park towards finding commonalities for flourishing together. We argue that fostering relations of care and service with other communities and the environment can help in reducing environmental conflict. This methodology provides an alternative to mainstream approaches to conservation, such as 'ecosystem services'.

Second, both local communities of Utría have engaged in social protest twice, first to gain

and later to maintain access to hydroelectricity (Acosta García and Farrell forthcoming). In our analysis, we find that while the Afro-descendant community protested for economic, political, and legal justice, the Embera protested out of indignation over losing control over the territory where the infrastructure was built, and in solidarity with their Afro-descendant kin. Hence, what could be understood to be a single focused protest in favour of a specific development project is better understood as the articulation of a complex polyphonic voice reflecting a highly involved post-colonial politics. Thus, we offer a complementary argument to current debates on local and indigenous communities that protest against infrastructure projects.

Third, I found that people in coastal communities used the term 'White Fish' to refer to drift-cocaine packs and their associated relations. Hence, I explore how the White Fish imbricates drift cocaine and fishing livelihoods in Chocó (Acosta García n.d.). In this area, there are no coca plantations; however, packs of drift-cocaine arrive as consequence of the actions of the Colombian military against drug-traffickers on the high seas. This issue is underreported in media and virtually unexplored in academia. As cocaine is an illegal substance in Colombia, my capacity for involvement was limited. Thus, I developed an approach that allowed me to get close to the deeply felt effects of the transnational drug-trade, showing how local communities engage with and reject the ongoing transformation.

Fourth, I employed photography to investigate the political ecology of living in and around Utría National Park (Acosta García forthcoming). I use the emic concept of 'rhythms' to explore networks and temporalities in subtle elements of pictures displaying local livelihoods, places of dwelling, environmental

change, and conservation practices. I make explicit the networks that, with their rhythms and temporalities, weave and mark the pace of everyday life in the villages. These, in turn, give space to reflect on practices of living with a damaged planet and a post-colonial order.

The actors in these narratives are the Afro-descendant and Embera communities. The setting is the natural beauty of the region of Chocó and the historical ties that bind both communities together, manifested in their sense of solidarity and partnership in the fight against oppression. The plot is their struggles with their troubles, matters of concern and care. The outcome is the possibility to have them as writers and heroes in their own narratives, with their own complexities and contradictions. The story of material hardship in Chocó can, after all, be told in a different way.

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