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Political Geography 23 (2004) 957–985

Political
Geography

www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

 Fleshing out the geographies of social movements: Colombia's Pacific coast black communities and the 'aquatic space'

Ulrich Oslender*

Department of Geography, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, Scotland, UK

Abstract

The intersections between the concepts of space, place and resistance have recently received increasing attention from geographers dedicated to the study of social movements. Space and place are not merely seen as providing a physical background for mobilisations but as mutually constitutive of social movement agency. Yet, critics of theoretical frameworks drawn up by geographers have often rightly pointed to the lack of convincing empirical evidence presented in their support.

This paper addresses these critiques by offering a theoretically informed and empirically grounded account of recent mobilisations by the social movement of black communities in the Pacific coast region of Colombia. Drawing on both the objective aspects of place and the subjective feelings that are derived from living in a place, I will show how these mechanisms have impacted on the specific spatial organising forms adopted by black communities. In particular, I will propose the concept of 'aquatic space' as a set of spatialised social relationships among Afro-Colombians, and show how these concrete everyday geographies have been drawn upon by black communities in the establishment of community councils along river basins.

The paper argues that to make a strong point for more spatially sensitive analyses of social movements, geographers have to sustain their theoretical frameworks with concrete empirical data that not only illustrate spatial processes at play, but also convincingly demonstrate their very embeddedness in social practice. I thus argue for a strong consideration of ethnographies as a privileged research methodology to flesh out the geographies of social movements.

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Keywords: Social movements; Resistance; Place perspective; Colombia; Black communities; Aquatic space

* Tel.: +44-141-3304782; fax: +44-141-3304894.

E-mail address: uoslender@geog.gla.ac.uk.

Introduction: of our true profession as geographers

The sixth planet was a planet ten times as immense. There lived an old man who wrote enormous books. ‘What is this heavy book?’—the little prince asked. ‘What are you doing here?’ ‘I am a geographer’—said the old man. ‘What is this, a geographer?’ ‘A wise man who knows where the seas are, the rivers, the towns, the mountains and the deserts.’ ‘This is really interesting’—said the little prince. ‘At last a true profession!’

Saint-Exupéry (1971: 64–65)

So there we have it. Geographers are ‘wise men’ [‘and women’—the old man meant to say!] who exercise a ‘true profession’ that is characterised by the knowledge of location (the seas, rivers, towns, mountains and deserts). It is worthwhile bearing in mind these words of the old man, as I am examining the impact of geographical location on the place-based cultural and political struggles of social movements. To do this, I argue, we must know the *place* where a particular movement emerges, where the people who form that movement live, and what it means to them living in this place. Because this place and the subjectivities, identities and passions that it generates with locals make a difference to the ways in which a movement organises and articulates itself. Whereas others have argued this point convincingly before, they have often been accused of failing to provide sufficiently strong empirical evidence to sustain complex theoretical frameworks around the intersections between geography and social movements.¹

I want to argue here that a spatialised analysis of social movement practice must go beyond the usual focus on movement structures, their politics and strategies. It should examine importantly the geographies of the ‘preconditions’ of resistance, that is to say, the pre-existing people, cultures, and places. It is these preconditions or ‘soils’ out of which a social movement emerges, that set the context for movement agency, and that inform and shape the ways in which resistance is acted out. A place perspective on social movements should therefore begin *before* acts of resistance become visible and pay serious attention to the subjective ways in which people experience certain places. As a privileged research methodology to uncover local meanings of place and to show how these impact on political organisation processes, I argue that we should turn to ethnographies. In particular, I propose an ethnographic cultural geography that applies extensive participant observation and deep ethnography to be in a privileged position to flesh out the geographies of social movements.

In this paper, I will examine these theoretical and methodological claims by offering a detailed, empirically grounded account of the spatialities of the social movement of black communities on Colombia’s Pacific coast. In particular, I will show how the spatial configurations of everyday life patterns of black communities have informed the current political organisation processes in the region. As an

¹ See, for example, critiques of Byron Miller’s *Geography and social movements* (2000) in a special forum in *Political Geography* (vol. 20, 2001), and in Schock (2002) and Zhao (2001).

organising category for these, I make use of the concept of the ‘aquatic space’, with which I conceptualise the everyday social relationships amongst rural black communities as profoundly conditioned by various aquatic elements that the specific tropical rainforest environment in the Pacific provides, such as high levels of precipitation, large tidal ranges, intricate river networks, mangrove swamps and frequent inundations. I will argue that the aquatic space has been instrumental in the spatial organising structures of these populations, as they have created community councils along river basins in the Colombian Pacific region.

It is then not only characteristic of our ‘true profession’ as geographers to know where the seas and rivers are, but also *where* social movement agency emerges and what particular forms it takes on in specific places. I am sure that the little prince would be enthralled at such a prospect.

Social movements and geography

Recent decades have seen an increase in protest movements all over the world. This trend is characterised by a diversification of struggles, ranging from feminism, ecology, anti-racist, to land and ethnic struggles. In sociological terms it has been argued that a shift has occurred away from mainly class-based to identity-based conflicts (Castells, 1997; Melucci, 1989), although the former remains important, of course. More recently, globalising resistance networks have formed that connect a large number of social movements, activists, NGOs and trade unions across space and beyond state boundaries to articulate protests globally (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Smith, Chatfield, & Pagnucco, 1997). As Naomi Klein (2001: 83–84) observes on this transnationalisation of protest beyond borders, which was so spectacularly acted out in the ‘Battle of Seattle’ protests against the World Trade Organisation in November 1999: “The real news out of Seattle is that organizers around the world are beginning to see their local and national struggles—through a global lens.” The annual World Social Forum held since 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil (except in Mumbai in 2004), is one of the most exciting developments in this sense, as it provides a convergence space for all these actors to draw up alternative visions to the dominant global neoliberal project and to show that ‘another world is possible’.² To Klein (2001: 82), “a spirit of resistance is taking hold around the world—against the privatization of every aspect of life, and the transformation of every activity and value into a commodity.” She attributes the success in mobilisation to the decentralised, non-hierarchical and web-like structure of such ‘a movement of many movements’. Local problematics get increasingly entwined with global issues on all kinds of scales, and it is the all-embracing extension of this entanglement of the local and the global, which some have referred to as ‘glocalisation’ (Beck, 1998; Robertson, 1995), that can be considered as one of the outstanding characteristics of our condition of post-modernity.

There is a common understanding among social movement researchers that these ‘new’ forms of protest require new theories of social action, both to explain the

² For information on the World Social Forum, see www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/home.asp.

emergence and the development of social movements through time and space, and to reflect on their future potentials (Alvarez, Dagnino, & Escobar, 1998; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). Whereas social movement research in the past did not pay much attention to the space and place dimensions of mobilisation,³ this conceptual and methodological void has recently been addressed by geographers attempting to conceptualise the geographies and spatialities of resistance and social movements (Miller, 2000; Oslender, 2001; Pile & Keith, 1997; Routledge, 1993; Slater, 1998). These contributions must be placed within the wider interest throughout the social sciences in debates about spatiality over the last decade (Massey, 1999; Werlen, 1993). With the reassertion of space in critical social theory (Soja, 1989), an entire spatial language has emerged for comprehending contemporary social reality (Smith & Katz, 1993). Yet at the same time an unprecedented proliferation of often uncritically employed spatial metaphors has not contributed to an understanding of space and society as inextricably intertwined (Agnew, 1994: 261). Geographers still deplore, and rightly so, the frequent failure to analyse the spatial constitution of social life as a dynamic process in which space, place and society mutually constitute and impact on one another. The interest in the spatial turn in social sciences, in fact, runs the danger of being reduced to an often quite arbitrary application of spatial metaphors that do little more than illustrate certain social processes at play or, even worse, generalise specific structures as naturally given contexts, without paying attention to the particularities ‘on the ground’.

Nevertheless, there have recently been important interdisciplinary approaches that aim at redressing this imbalance. Within social anthropology, for example, there has been a fruitful engagement with geographical concerns about place, in particular in relation to the construction of identities and the emergence of protest movements (Moore, 1998; Wade, 1993).⁴ In a recent essay in *Political Geography* Arturo Escobar (2001) calls for a ‘repatriation of place into anthropology’, warning against an emerging ‘globalocentrism’ and the frequent, uncritical application of the notions of placelessness and erasure of place. In particular, he calls for the need to focus on the

³ The most influential theoretical trends emerging in the 1970s were resource mobilisation theory (see McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Taylor, 1988; Tilly, 1978) and political process models (see McAdam, 1982; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Tarrow, 1994), and in the 1980s identity-oriented perspectives (see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Melucci, 1989; Touraine, 1988). The term ‘new social movement theory’ is often used to highlight the plurality of contemporary forms of resistance, such as the feminist movement, human rights groups, indigenist associations, popular education groups, gay rights groups and ecology movements. There have been ongoing debates over the supposed ‘newness’ of these movements (see, e.g., Foweraker, 1995; Hellman, 1995). Fals Borda (1992: 303) usefully stresses that “more than two decades have passed since a new surge of social and popular movements began to arise [and] today, these movements are no longer ‘new’”. Moreover, Calhoun (1995) presents an intriguing argument that many movements of the early-19th century already showed characteristics of what many consider ‘new social movements’ today. And Castells (1983) points out that women have been at the forefront of many struggles over consumption long before we started talking about the newness of social movements. For these and other reasons, I certainly think we should discard the term ‘new social movements’, even if others still hang on to it (e.g., Miller, 2000).

⁴ See also the special issue of *Development* (2002) on ‘Women and the politics of place’ for collaborative research between anthropologists and geographers.

continued vitality of place and place-making (Escobar 2001: 141). He thereby recognises the importance of an analytical approach to the subjective nature of place. This, he argues, is a fundamental part of the articulation in identity struggles constructed around the defence of place. In such a conceptualisation, places are not seen as static, inert and fixed backdrops for these struggles, but as the vital pre-condition as well as the product of those contestations. It is such an approach to social movements that I want to capture with a place perspective.

Towards a place perspective on social movements

There are, of course, many different approaches to the concept of place within various traditions, fields and disciplines (liberal, Marxist, post-structuralist, phenomenological; in geography, anthropology, economics, ecology, etc.). This is not the space here to discuss these in great detail, but rather to draw on those aspects most relevant to the development of a place perspective on social movements.⁵ Within geography, some approaches concentrate mainly on the material and territorial qualities of place, as reflected, for example, in certain strands of economic geography that attempt to theorise place as manifesting a certain specificity within the context of general processes (Massey & Allen, 1984). Others have focused more explicitly on the meanings and inner connections of ‘sense of place’, a key concept in phenomenology and of great relevance in 1970s humanistic geography, which proposes to investigate the micro-episodes of everyday life and their embeddedness in specific contexts, or milieux (Ley & Samuels, 1978; Tuan, 1976). Place acquired further importance with the development of structuration theory, where it has been argued that place is both *constituted by* and *constitutive of* social practices (Giddens, 1979; Pred, 1984). More recently, Entrikin (1991) has emphasised the nature of the ‘betweenness of place’, trying to incorporate both the totality of the concept through an objective pole of scientific theorising and its contextuality through a subjective pole of empathetic understanding. Entrikin draws here again on earlier phenomenological approaches to place as “comprising both the objectivity of the map and the subjectivity of experience” (Ley, 1977: 509).

In order to disentangle the concept of place on a theoretical plain, I will turn to Agnew (1987), who identifies three main elements in his perspective on place: location, locale, and sense of place. Broadly speaking, *location* refers to the physical geographical area and the ways in which it is affected by economic and political processes operating at a wider scale. It stresses the impact of a macro-order in a place and the ways in which certain places are inscribed, affected and subject to the wider workings of economic and political structures that normally originate from outside the area itself. The notion of location should be understood as an antidote against lapsing into subjectivism when discussing place, rather than a rigid framework within which social interactions are fixed as pre-determined acts waiting to happen.

⁵ For a philosophical history of place see Casey (1997); anthropological approaches to place can be found, e.g., in Feld and Basso (1996) and Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003).

It thereby cautions against the disregard of both structure and scale, which is often found in phenomenological accounts of place, and importantly enframes places within a general production of geographical scale as central organising principle according to which geographical differentiation takes place (Smith, 1992).⁶ In the case of the Colombian Pacific coast, for example, a closer examination of location would include the physical setting of a tropical rainforest environment, the forms by which external capital exploits the natural resources in the region, and, more recently, strategic geopolitical discourses on biodiversity (Escobar, 1997).

Locale refers to the formal and informal settings in which everyday social interactions and relations are constituted. Yet, more than merely the physical settings of activity, locale implies that these contexts are actively and routinely drawn upon by social actors in their everyday interactions and communications (see also Pred, 1984). Giddens (1979) suggests that certain locales can be identified as the typical physical settings and interactions that compose collectivities as social systems. As I will show below, the typical locale for rural black communities on the Colombian Pacific coast can be conceptualised in terms of the ‘aquatic space’: the physical setting within a tropical rainforest environment in which everyday social interactions are structured along an ‘aquatic logic’. As it will become clearer below, this is not to essentialise certain settings and practices as unchanging and fixed in space and time, nor does it suggest a typography or specific ‘codex’ of organisational traits. Rather, it allows us to theorise, as suggested in non-representational theory (Thrift, 1996), the mobile practices of local communities and their spatialised embodied interaction with a physical environment as a more or less durable and locally *meaningful* network of actively forged connections. Most relevant for social movement theorising, then, the locale in general, and the aquatic space in particular, can be thought of as providing the specific place-based context in which social movement agency is generated and consequently mobilised.

Finally, the concept of *sense of place* refers to the ways in which human experience and imagination appropriates the physical characteristics and qualities of geographical location. It captures the subjective orientations that are derived from living in a particular place as an outcome of interconnected social and environmental processes, creating and manipulating flexible relations with physical space. Phenomenological approaches to place, for example, have tended to emphasize the ways in which individuals and communities develop deep attachments to places through experience, memory and intention (Relph, 1976). They often highlight “the dialogical nature of people’s relationship to place” (Buttimer, 1976: 284), which draws on and constructs both personal and collective memory. A critical concern in 1970’s humanistic geography argued that an ‘authentic’ sense of place derived

⁶ Geographical scale is crucial when examining social movements, be it in the form of scales of resistance as observed by Marston (2000) in the struggle of early-20th century American women against class and gender oppression, or of Miller’s (2000: 18) focus on scale variations in political opportunity structures, which may cause movements to emphasize decentralised struggle within local states or to focus on the central state. Whereas variations of geographical scale are implicit in my approach here, they are not explicitly analysed, as I want to focus above all on the local level and the importance of local histories and epistemologies for political mobilisation.

through traditional life forms and social solidarity (in villages or small towns) increasingly became disrupted by the contact with modernity that erased local specificity in favour of global homogeneity. Such an often nostalgic approach to place has been criticised more recently as over-romanticisation and countered with a more progressive or ‘global sense of place’ that sees the meanings of places less as bounded in time and space but as flexibly and creatively connected to wider global networks of social relations and understanding (Massey, 1994). Yet, the strategic essentialisation of an ‘official’ sense of place, often articulated in identity politics, is clearly an important phenomenon, and some may say, a valid one! As I will show below, the construction of what I term an ‘aquatic sense of place’ among rural black communities in the Colombian Pacific coast region is less a form of nostalgic yearning for some untainted pre-modern imagined life forms in the labyrinthine river networks of the Pacific coast region, but a strategically articulated subaltern political discourse that creatively draws on and mobilises lived experience and re-constructs collective memory in an identity politics as defence of their particular constructions of place.

It is important to point out that the three components of place should not be viewed in rigid separation. Instead, they are fluid moments that interplay with one another. A particular sense of place informs the social relations and interactions within the settings and contexts of locale, and both elements actively rework the wider political and economic structures of location, rather than being just passive objects of its workings.⁷ Central to such a concept of place is the emphasis put on feeling, subjectivities and individual and collective ways of perception, while acknowledging the more objective characteristics that frame, enable or otherwise constrain the subjectivities to some extent.

Within social movement research we find such concerns sometimes reflected (although rarely explicitly addressed as such) in the identity-oriented perspective, which emphasises the role of cultural reproduction and the ways in which individual actors collectively assume control over their historicity (Touraine, 1988). Melucci (1989) argues, for example, that social movements should be understood in conjunction with the submerged cultural networks of everyday life. These below-surface relations are rooted in place and can be captured through the notions of *locale* and *sense of place*. Routledge (1993), on the other hand, examining social movements in India, has attempted to address the place-specific context of mobilisation through the concept of ‘terrain of resistance’: the fields, forests and hide-outs, but also the buildings and edifices in urban areas—the physical sites and *location*, where resistance practices literally ‘take place’.

In the following section, I will approach the Colombian Pacific coast region through a place perspective (drawing on location, locale, and sense of place), before showing how these contexts are crucial for our understanding of the social

⁷ Pred and Watts (1992), for example, insist on how local cultures process, rework, change and influence the conditions of global capital and modernity. And Peet and Watts’s (1996: 263) argument for ‘liberation ecologies’ stresses the importance of local constructions of ecology and ‘environmental imaginaries’ as primary sites of contestation.

movement of black communities in this region. Such an approach—which is not restricted to this particular movement but on the contrary can be applied to other regions and movements in different settings and contexts—is of particular relevance here, as the Afro-Colombian movement calls itself an ‘*ethnic-territorial*’ organisation whose cultural politics are articulated around the defence of their ancestral lands. Their struggle is effectively a defence of their constructions of place.

‘Setting the scene’ for social movement agency in the Colombian Pacific coast region

(i) Location

The Colombian Pacific coast region extends from the border with Ecuador in the south to the Darien gap on the Panamanian border in the north (Fig. 1). It covers an area of over ten million hectares, with 1300 km of Pacific coastline, and extends between 80 and 160 km towards the Andean foothills. Nearly 80% of the entire area is covered in rainforest. Precipitation levels rank among the highest in the world, reaching annual averages of over 10,000 mm in some areas. The region furthermore contains one of the world’s highest levels of biodiversity (Proyecto Biopacífico, 1998).

The alluvial plains of the Pacific lowlands are characterised by an extensive network of rivers, which are subject to frequent flooding, especially during periods of high precipitation. Together with countless tributaries they form a number of vast river basins such as the Patía delta in the south-west, which extends over 3000 km². A region geographically separated from Colombia’s interior by the Western Andean mountain range, it has been described as the ‘hidden littoral’ (Yacup, 1934) or the ‘periphery of the periphery’ (Granda, 1977) due to its physical and economic marginality in relation to the rest of the country. Of interest to the Spaniards during colonial times for its rich alluvial gold prospects, the region’s economic picture has typically been of ‘boom-and-bust’ cycles imposed on a local subsistence economy since the mid-19th century. During relatively short time spans natural products are exploited intensively responding to external demands, before a decline in demand leads to a rapid decrease and collapse of these economies. Both the ‘ivory nut’ (*tagua*) and the rubber exploitation on the Pacific coast in the first half of the 20th century are typical of these boom-and-bust cycles, while local people continued to practice a subsistence economy of fishing, agriculture and gathering for their everyday needs (Whitten, 1986). Since the 1960s the region has been an important source of the country’s timber supply. More recently, the region has attracted strategic attention in national development plans with view to conserving and exploiting its biodiversity, for example, by pharmaceutical industries (Escobar, 1997; Proyecto Biopacífico, 1998).

The region’s population of some 1.3 million (DANE, 1993) consists of around 93% Afro-Colombians, in their majority descendants of enslaved Africans who were brought to the region since the 16th century mainly to work in gold mines; an

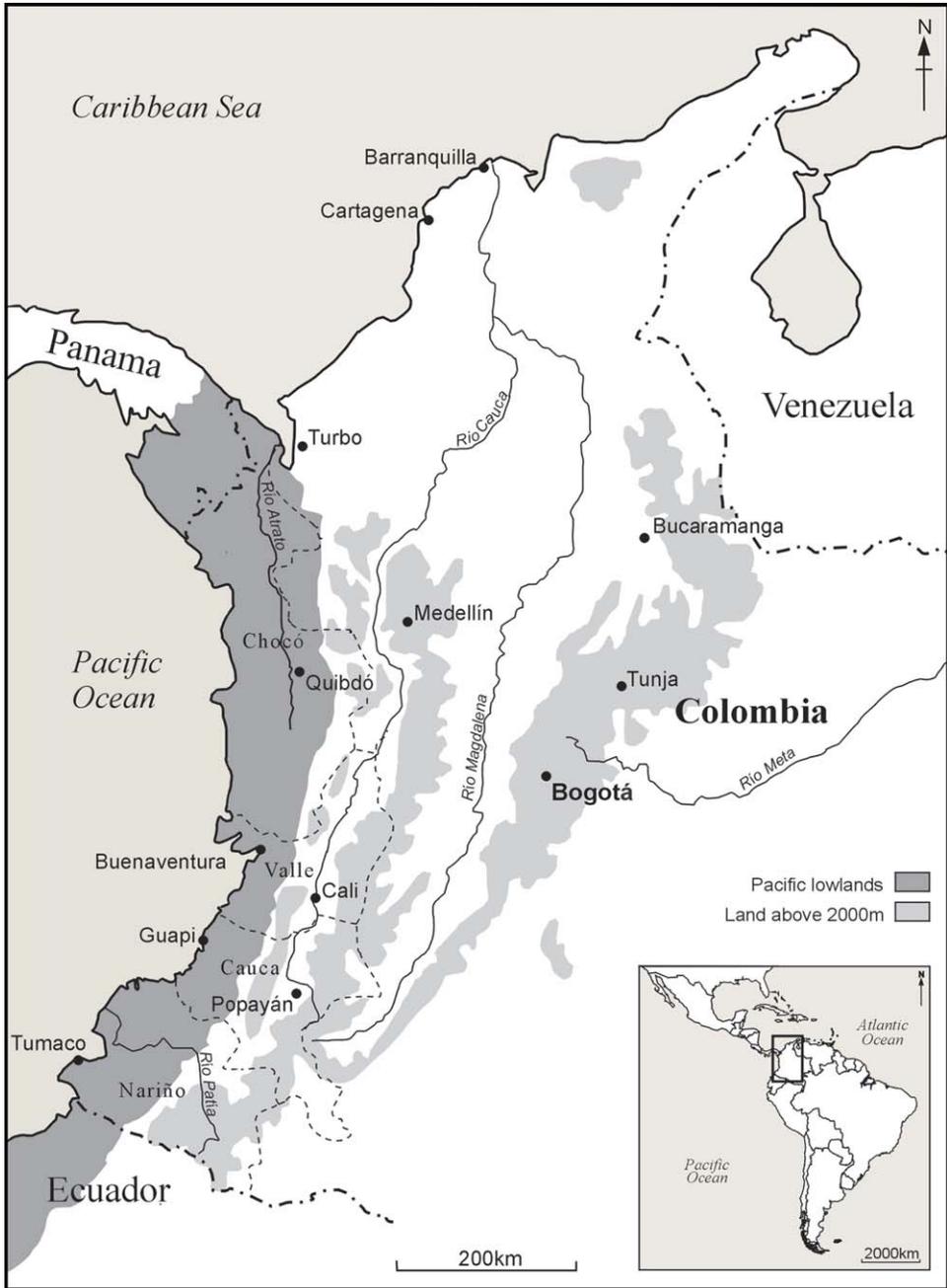


Fig. 1. Map of Colombia showing the Pacific Lowlands.

estimated 2% indigenous Indian populations of various ethnic groups; and some 5% are mestizos mostly from the interior of the country.⁸ Human settlements in the region have been oriented typically along the myriad rivers: from an Afro-American settlement phase around the colonial gold mines in the upper and middle sections of the rivers (driven by processes of colonisation and slavery in the 17th and 18th centuries); to an extensive drive of agrarian colonisation and independent mining on the part of runaway slaves (*cimarrones*) and self-liberated blacks (*libres*).⁹ Yet, it was not until the official abolition of slavery in 1851 and the decline of the gold mining economy in the Colombian Pacific region that black settlement patterns spread significantly along the river banks, characteristically in longitudinal and discontinuous extension (Aprile, 1993; Romero, 1995). As the recently demised North American cultural geographer Robert West argues in his seminal work on the Pacific Lowlands of Colombia, there are very practical reasons for these outstanding features of riverine distribution of the Pacific lowland population:

Along the lower courses of streams natural levees afford the highest land, the best soils for cultivation. Similar advantages are found on alluvial terraces along the middle and upper courses of rivers. Even for non-farmers the river banks are attractive by reason of the usual abundant supply of fish, fresh-water crustaceans and molluscs, and a variety of aquatic and amphibious mammals. Moreover, rivers are the highways in this forested land where interflaves, because of their swampy or rugged nature, are hard to traverse. (West, 1957: 87)

Thus the *location* of the Colombian Pacific coast region describes its physical geographical area (tropical rainforest environment carved up by labyrinthine river networks) and the wider historical, political and economic processes operating in and structuring the region (colonisation, slavery, boom-and-bust cycles, settlement processes, etc.). In other words, location provides the physical, historical, political and economic contexts through which social interaction is mediated in specific settings. The latter is captured below through the notion of locale.

⁸ Indigenous ethnic groups in the Pacific coast region include: embera, embera catío, embera chami, wounaan, awa, eperara-siapidara and tule. Population ratio figures presented here are generally accepted estimates, as there exists no reliable racial information in Colombia's census data. The last census in 1993 tried to quantify the Afro-Colombian population for the first time. However, due to the ambiguous nature of the census question, only 1.5% affirmed belonging to a 'black community' (Ruiz & Bodnar, 1995). Other sources have shown oscillations in estimates of Colombia's black population ranging from 4.9 million to 15 million, the equivalent of 14% or 43%, respectively, of the national population (Minority Rights Group, 1995: xiii). These considerable differences can partly be explained by the problematic definition of the term 'black community' (Grueso, Rosero, & Escoba, 1998; Restrepo, 1998) and by issues of reluctant black self-identification in a dominant context of whitening (Streicker, 1995; Wade, 1993). Most recently, Wade (2002) has consulted a number of different sources with still quite varying estimates. The most widely accepted estimate of Colombia's Afrodescendant population today is 26%.

⁹ For more details on the history and the geographies of colonisation, slavery and resistance in the Pacific coast region, see Sharp (1976), and West (1952, 1957).

(ii) Locale

On the Pacific coast, the rivers are central to all economic, domestic and social activities. Houses are constructed on stilts along river banks to avoid flooding, all transport is river-based, while fishing and collecting of shellfish are important contributors to the local diet and provide extra income. As expressed in a central government report of a field visit to the communities of the river San Francisco on the Cauca coast (see Fig. 2 for orientation):

Leaving the town of Guapi, the only communication route is by river. One has to travel along the river Guapi up to the mouth of the river Napi [Boca de Napi], and then keep on travelling upstream on that river until one reaches the mouth of the river San Francisco [Boca San Francisco]. The most commonly used means of transport are the wooden dugout canoes with outboard motor, or the smaller canoes with paddles and *recatón* (a paddle with an iron cover at its point). (INCORA, 1998, point 1.2)

The river is also the space of social interaction. It is here where people wash themselves, women wash clothes and fetch water, and children play; activities, which are accompanied by laughter, storytelling and gossiping. Moreover, the river is a collective space of social relations that are based on co-operation and solidarity. As Silveria Rodriguez from Guapi told me: “I remember, as a girl, I never went alone to wash the clothes in the river; we were always at least four. Or to wash the dishes. We always did things together.”¹⁰

Interactions between different populations along a particular river are such that communities at the headwaters depend on the productive activities of communities at the river mouth, especially on the provision of fish. Furthermore, many people living upstream own lands further downstream as well. So the interconnectedness along a river basin is not only evident in terms of exchange of foodstuffs, but also of land distribution and property relations. These spatialised social relationships along the river basins are an expression of what activists of black communities refer to as ‘the logic of the river’ and what I propose to think in terms of the ‘aquatic space’. By ‘aquatic space’, I mean the specific ways in which aquatic elements such as the constant physical and/or symbolic presence of the sea, intricate river networks, streams, waterfalls, mangrove swamps, as well as high levels of precipitation, significant tidal ranges and frequent large-scale inundations, have strongly influenced and shaped everyday life patterns in the region, and how these have evolved into specific sets of spatialised social relationships around and between the river basins of the Pacific coast. As argued above, the notion of the aquatic space does not suggest a typography for mere illustration or metaphorical purposes. On the contrary, it constitutes an analytical concept and lens through which to view, approach and understand the complexities of social life in the Colombian Pacific region and the locally meaningful interactions with the surrounding environment and the specific aquatic characteristics that it provides.

¹⁰ Interview held in Guapi, 29 April 1996.

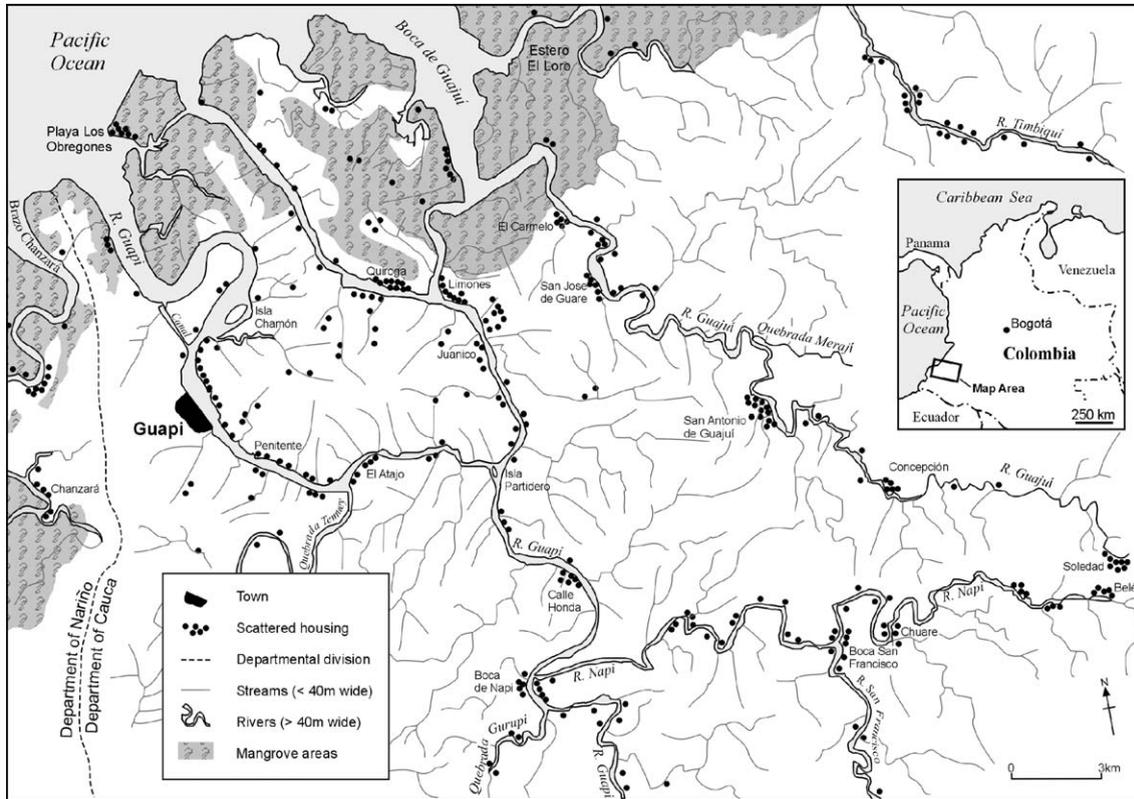


Fig. 2. Rivers Guapi, Guajú, San Francisco and Napi in the Cauca Department. Source: adapted from Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi, 'Departamentos de Cauca y Nariño—Guapi', sheet no. 340, 1994.

The tidal rhythms in particular strongly influence everyday life patterns. The town of Guapi, for example, lies 17 km from the mouth of the river Guapi at a height of 2 m above sea level. A tidal range of 4.5 m means that twice a day at high tide brackish water reaches far beyond Guapi, and that during relatively dry periods levels of saltwater intrusion can be very high. As Teófila Betancourt, a community leader from Guapi, explains:

When it stops raining for about a week, the river gets salty, because we are quite close to the sea here. Then we go upstream to Temuey, which is a fairly big stream, and the water doesn't get salty there. So we go and collect water in dugout canoes. (Interview held in Guapi, 23 April 1996)

Moreover, at low tide the waters retreat and expose the mangrove swamps, an important zone of ecological productivity (West, 1957: 70–72) and of economic activity by black populations (Arocha 1999: 73). For example, women known as *concheras* actively mobilise the aquatic space when they travel into mangrove areas to collect shells (*conchas*), which are buried in the mud. They usually set off at low tide, with the retreating waters of the river facilitating a speedy journey towards the mangrove swamps in their dugout canoes. On arrival, the low tide has helped to expose the mud flats for them to pick crabs and shells. They then wait for the next high tide to help them navigate upstream. This system of transport makes it possible for the *concheras* to travel large distances in their dugout canoes to and from the mangrove swamps without much effort.

The tidal rhythm is also taken into account in the transport of timber from felling site to sawmill. The felled tree is pulled over the forest floor to a nearby water channel, where various logs are tied together with natural fibres to form a raft, which then floats downstream to the sawmill. The tree-cutters travel on the rafts to direct, steer and protect them. This journey can take hours and even days depending on the distance to be covered and the tidal impact. As doña Celia from Guapi explains, remembering the days when she went logging with her husband (see Fig. 2 for orientation):

All the timber we cut was from the river Temuey. At low tide we transported the logs to its mouth. And when the water rose, we moved them upstream in two to three hours. We just sat on top of them. You travel like in a canoe. And with your paddle you help the water. And you know, of course, that 'lots of logs side by side, travel fast at low tide' [saying which rhymes in the original Spanish as well: *Palo bastante, coge bueno con vaciante*]. (Interview held in Guapi, 5 July 1999)

This example shows how rural black populations have mobilised the aquatic space and creatively adapted it to their specific needs.¹¹

¹¹ Creativity and adaptability to a changing and unstable physical environment have been highlighted as a characteristic of black communities in the Colombian Pacific coast region (see Arocha, 1999; Friedemann, 1989; Friedemann & Arocha 1986; Whitten, 1986).

(iii) Sense of place

Life in the Colombian Pacific thus meanders along the rivers, the fluvial thoroughfares of the tropics, to which black people are attached, not only physically by their settlement and communication patterns, but also emotionally as they create a sense of belonging and what I term an 'aquatic sense of place'. A close and intimate relationship exists between the individual and the river. The river is in fact the central point of reference in identity formation and everyday discursive practices of black communities, as West (1957: 88) already observed in the 1950s. Rather than referring to the name of a particular settlement or village, when being asked about their place of origin, Afro-Colombians name the particular river whose banks they inhabit:

If someone asks, 'Where are you from?', then people would answer, 'I am from the river Chagüí', here in Nariño, or 'I am from the river Saija', in the Cauca department. Rather than talking of their village, first is the river. (Interview with Alfredo Vanín, held in Tumaco, 19 April 1996)

The river as central point of local reference is also clearly depicted in an exercise carried out by a government project of Ecological Zonification of the Colombian Pacific Region (IGAC 1999). Part of this project examined local territorial perceptions in workshops where locals drew up mental maps of what they conceived to be their territories.¹² The results of this exercise were then translated into cartographic material by Colombia's Geographical Institute IGAC, and served as an important tool in the process of collective land titling for black communities on the Pacific coast. The map drawn here by participants in one of the workshops clearly shows the river as the central feature (Fig. 3). It also shows in accurate detail the different tributaries and the width of river channels as perceived by locals. The locations of settlements, plantations and other productive activities are identified again in reference to what can be termed 'local mental river co-ordinates'. As this map illustrates, local structures of feeling are in fact shot through by an 'aquatic sense of place'.

More than the mere physical presence, in a local epistemological sense the rivers are the places out of which individuals emerge in the Pacific and in which they submerge again, when the time has come for the final voyage; returning in body if possible, but always in spirit, to the river of origin the moment that death approaches. Such was doña Celia's imaginative journey when some years back she suffered from a high fever and felt that the time had come for her body to leave this life. In her imagination she returned to her river of origin, the river Guapi, and her life was coming full circle: "There I went to all the places of my river where I grew up. I was walking them the very moment as I was dying" (Interview held in Guapi, 23 June 1999). The attachment to a particular river of origin remains with the

¹² Mental maps have been widely used in behavioural geography referring to the representation of places as revealed in exercises of cognitive mapping (Gould & White, 1974). More recently they have become of interest within cultural and social geography that regard these representations as constructed through social discourse and practice. Mental maps have also become a key tool in the preparation of land rights claims for minority ethnic groups such as the Aborigines in Australia (Jacobs, 1988), First Nations in Canada (Sparke, 1998) or, here, black communities on Colombia's Pacific coast.

individual for life, no matter if one leaves the river temporarily to migrate to other parts of the Pacific or indeed to the large cities in the interior of the country.

This particular aquatic sense of place is also revealed in the rich oral traditions of black communities (Oslender, 2003). Countless popular stories and *décimas* (rhymed and highly structured verse) reflect the individual and collective geographical experiences of the aquatic space. Prominent features in many of these stories are real and imaginary journeys to distant places and the exploration of ‘faraway geographies’ (Vanín 1996), as exemplified in the following *décima*, which I taped with a local practitioner of oral poetry (*decimero*), don Agapito, in Guapi:¹³

El capitán pirata

*Cuando el capitán pirata
me convidó a navegar
para que fuera escuchar
lo que pasaba al mapa.
Dijo que me cuidaría
con mucha delicadeza,
pagándome al mes cien pesos
y tres comidas al día.*

... ..

*Salimos de Punto Arenó,
de Barcelona un día.
Echamos sesenta días
para hondear en Cartagena.
A mí me valió la pena
caminar el mar d'Europa
con chico comiendo en popa
mandando mis oficiales
y luciendo de buena ropa
me convidó a navegar
el capitán pirata.*

The pirate captain

When the pirate captain
invited me to sail
so I would see
what was happening in the world.
He promised to look after me
with great subtlety,
paying me hundred pesos a month
and three meals a day.

... ..

We left from Punto Arenó,
from Barcelona one day.
It took us sixty days
to unload in Cartagena.
To me it was worth while
walking the seas of Europe
with boys eating in stern
ordering my officers
and sporting fine clothes
when the pirate captain
invited me to sail.

Don Agapito describes in these verses a sea voyage which he never undertook himself, to places he never saw. Yet, it is in these imaginary journeys that the notion of the aquatic space is revealed as a fundamental (re)source in the construction of a sense of place in the Pacific region among black populations. The references in these verses to faraway geographies and to places known only through the circulation of these stories become meaningful through the grounded experiences of black people bound up with their aquatic space. In fact, the references to rivers, ports

¹³ Don Agapito Montaña was a well-known and respected *decimero*, a poet of the oral traditions of black people in the Pacific region. He died in January 1998. He took with him an enormous wealth of *décimas*, poems, stories, and local wisdom, and so remains, together with so many others, one of the great unedited poets of the Colombian Pacific coast.

(Punto Arena, Barcelona, Cartagena), the sea and the oceans, reveal an everyday aquatic vocabulary. The expression *caminar el mar*—literally to ‘walk the sea’—for example, is characteristic of the ways in which black populations refer to their travels on sea.

This ‘ethnographic excursion’ into the Pacific lowlands of Colombia—albeit only fragmentary and incomplete—has been necessary in order to provide us with a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the place that is the Colombian Pacific coast region than is usually found in representations of the social movement of black communities in Colombia. As I argue below, it is only through such a place perspective that we more fully understand the specific place-based political articulations of this movement. I am hence not trying to construct a nostalgic picture of rural black populations living harmoniously with the local natural environment at all times. The above given analysis of the logic of the river is in many ways an idealised account of social organisation on the Pacific coast, one that in many instances has been interrupted and which is more and more under threat given the current escalation of Colombia’s internal armed conflict into the Pacific coast region (Oslender, 2002b; Rosero, 2002; Wouters, 2001). Yet, it is important to stress that these traditional practices are still applied throughout the Pacific region, that they present concrete adaptive strategies to an aquatic environment, and most importantly, that these imaginaries of a historically and spatially sedimented lived space are mobilised in political articulations that aim at defending local constructions of place and at creating a differential space that enables an appropriation of the ancestral territories in the Pacific region for black communities. As I will argue in the following section, this clearly happens as people consciously draw upon the locale in the Pacific region as a spatial and territorial ordering logic in the formation of the emerging community councils along river basins in the wake of recent legislative changes.

Mobilising the aquatic space

Black communities and the Constitution of 1991

Colombia’s new Constitution of 1991 marks a watershed in the mobilisation of black communities in the country, providing them with a new political opportunity structure. Drawn up by a popularly elected Constituent Assembly, it was to democratise the state structures, ensure increased popular participation in the decision-making processes at national, regional and local level, and instil the state with a new legitimacy.¹⁴ For my purposes here, I will not discuss the extent of

¹⁴ The Constituent Assembly was a national public body, which included independent representatives from ethnic, political and religious minorities, as well as re-incorporated guerrilla fighters of the M-19, the People’s Liberation Army EPL and the indigenous guerrilla group Quintín Lamé. Conspicuously absent from the Constituent Assembly was the country’s most powerful guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia FARC. Under previous peace negotiations with the government of president Belisario Betancur they had signed a peace treaty that led to the foundation of the Communist People’s Union party UP in 1984. Yet, in the following months and years many of their leaders were killed by right-wing paramilitary groups linked to state institutions.

institutional reform brought about by the new Constitution, but rather focus on the concrete implications that it has had for the organising processes of black communities in the country. Although the process of constitutional reform was not overtly aimed at what the state might have called ‘ethnic minorities’, the debates on increasing popular participation opened a space both for black and indigenous populations into which issues about ethnicity and nationality could be thrust (Arocha, 1992, 1998; Findji, 1992).

In an unprecedented move the nation was declared to be multicultural and pluriethnic, for the first time formally recognising Colombia’s ethnic diversity. Whereas various articles dealt with Colombia’s indigenous populations and outlined their territorial and political rights, only Transitory Article AT-55 made specific reference to the Afro-Colombian population, requiring the promulgation of a law that would grant collective land rights to rural black communities on the Pacific coast.¹⁵ This set off a new dynamic and direction in the organising processes of black communities. Until then, politicisation by black groups had been limited to some small urban intellectual groups on the one hand,¹⁶ and traditional land right struggles in the northern Pacific coast department of Chocó on the other. There, in the mid-1980s the Catholic Church’s Afro-American Pastoral was decisive in helping to set up black peasant organisations who mobilised around the defence of their lands and the environment, under threat from the accelerated and uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources by external capital in the region. These first ecclesiastical grass-roots groups formed in 1987 the Peasant Association of the River Atrato ACIA, which is until today the strongest and best-organised black peasant organisation in the country. It was here that first direct links were articulated between the notions of a peasant identity and blackness, as well as creating an expression of the black peasants’ specific relations to territory. These notions found later concrete political expression in AT-55 of the Constitution of 1991:

Within two years of the current Constitution taking effect, Congress will issue a law that grants black communities who have been living on state-owned lands in the rural riverside areas of the Pacific basin, in agreement with their traditional production practices, the right to collective property over the areas that the law will demarcate. The same law will establish mechanisms for the protection of the cultural identity and the rights of these communities, and for the promotion of their economic and social development. (*Diario Oficial*, 1993)

This law was passed on 27th August 1993 and is known as Law 70. It is the result of intense negotiations that took place between government officials, academics and

¹⁵ Due to weak politicisation and internal division within the black movement no black representatives were elected for the Constituent Assembly. It was up to a sympathetic indigenous representative, who had campaigned from a platform which addressed both indigenous and black interests in the Pacific region, to push for the inclusion of AT-55 (Wade, 1995).

¹⁶ Two of these urban movements of black intellectuals have survived to this day: the Centre for the Investigation and Development of Black Culture, and the National Movement for Human Rights of Afro-Colombian Communities *Cimarrón*. See Wade (1995) for more detail on these organisations.

representatives of black populations in the Special Committee for Black Communities.¹⁷ The role of black leaders in these negotiations must be emphasised here, for although the state had committed itself to granting collective territorial rights to black communities on the Pacific coast, the extent to which this legislation was to be applied was in large part due to the tenacity of black leaders in their demands. They had developed an internal framework for the regulation of AT-55 on the first National Assembly of Black Communities held in Tumaco (Nariño) in July 1992. At the second National Assembly in May 1993 in Bogotá, delegates revised and approved the text that was to become Law 70, which had previously been negotiated between the government and black community representatives.

Throughout the Pacific region political mobilisation intensified considerably, and over 350 organisations of black communities were registered with the Office for Black Community Affairs by 1994.¹⁸ As one of the most strongly articulated directions at co-ordinating these efforts on the regional and national level, the Process of Black Communities PCN emerged as a network of more than 120 local organisations and a national organisational dynamic with its base in Buenaventura.

Ethnic-territorial mobilisation

PCN arose with the third National Assembly of Black Communities held in September 1993 in Puerto Tejada, a predominantly black town south of Cali, where the politico-organisational situation of black communities was debated. PCN's strategy was consequently articulated as an ethnic-territorial movement based on five principles (Grueso, Rosero, & Escobar, 1998):

- (1) *The reaffirmation of identity and the right to be black*—regarded as a cultural logic that permeates the lifeworld in all of its social, economic and political dimensions, countering the logic of domination and opposing a model of society that requires uniformity for its continued dominance.
- (2) *The right to territory and a space for being*—a necessary condition for the recreation and development of an Afro-Colombian cultural vision.
- (3) *Autonomy as the right to the exercise of identity*—arising out of an Afro-Colombian cultural logic in relation to dominant society and other ethnic groups.
- (4) *The construction of an autonomous perspective for the future*—based on traditional forms of production and social organisation.

¹⁷ The Comisión Especial Para Comunidades Negras was created by Decree 1332 of 11th August 1992. On these political and legislative changes, see Arocha (1992, 1998), Friedemann and Arocha (1995), Grueso, Rosero, and Escobar (1998), Wade (1995). See also the special edition of the *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* (vol.7.2, 2002).

¹⁸ The Office for Black Community Affairs was created through Law 70 (Chapter VIII, Article 67) under jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior. One of its tasks lies in establishing a register of black organisations in Colombia (as dictated in Decree 2313 of 13 October 1994, Article 2). However, many of these organisations were rather short-lived experiences or even existed only on paper, without a more serious commitment to the multiple struggles of black people in Colombia.

(5) *Declaration of solidarity*—with the struggle of black people throughout the world.

These principles address two different but interrelated themes: on the one hand, an ideological and political reflection of the movement that entails a re-articulation of the notions of territory, development and society from an Afro-Colombian perspective; and on the other the articulation of their rights, aspirations and dreams based on and developed through the perspective of daily life and traditional practices of black communities on the Pacific coast.

The movement has consequently referred to the latter as the ‘logic of the river’ from which the sense of belonging and of territoriality is derived for rural black communities in the Pacific, and through which their fundamental life aspects are spatially arranged (Oslender 2002a). The logic of the river and what I have termed the ‘aquatic space’ among black communities on Colombia’s Pacific coast thus provide the particular spatial precondition for social mobilisation in the Pacific—both in movement discourse and in practices acted out on the ground. There is, then, not only an ethnic specificity to the black movement that distinguishes itself from other movements, but also a *spatial specificity* that distinguishes it from other *black* movements (in Colombia and beyond).

Organising in the rivers

The discourses that formed during the mid-1980s in the middle Atrato area in the Chocó around the aspirations of a black peasantry for control of their lands set off an ‘hour of meeting’ in the early-1990s throughout the rivers of the Pacific coast (Villa, 1998: 443). River organisations form and mobilise, and their representatives begin to debate the new legislation, the possibilities that it opens up, and to discuss the kind of future that *they* want for the Pacific region. The shared histories of rural black populations are now being evoked in numerous meetings along the river banks, and cultural collective memories are mobilised to reflect upon the past, but also to look ahead by projecting an alternative life project. This constructs the Pacific coast as a region of shared histories, geographies and territorialities; or, in other words, as a ‘territory-region’, a cultural, geopolitical and biogeographical construction:

In this conception and in the setting that the Pacific presents today, the ethnic-territorial organisations of black communities do not only plan the appropriation but also the defence of the territory from a perspective past-present-future, which understands, assumes and develops the tradition and the history of resistance of Afro-Colombians and their aspiration to maintain, develop and realise a *different and alternative life project* together with the indigenous peoples as ancestral inhabitants of these territories and the region. (PCN 1999: 2; *my emphasis*)

This ‘different and alternative life project’ is materially embedded in the locale, drawing on the river networks as resources for mobilisation and conscientisation. The fluvial communication of the new legislation meanders, so to speak, from one

riverine settlement to the next, and the ‘fluvial messengers’ of the river organisations pass the word around of new political processes being constructed. As the Colombian anthropologist William Villa describes it evocatively:

In the rivers, the people with their singing, dancing and their games now have other reasons to meet. It is not any more only the ritual encounter with the saints or with their dead; now the *decimero* [poet of the oral traditions] arrives at the meeting to remind them of how the river organisation was born. Singing and dancing are integrated in the dimension of the political meeting, the elderly tell the history of the river settling processes, they mark on the maps the places where the first elders settled, they tell the histories of slaves and masters, of food and celebrations of the past, of Indians and blacks, of the history which in the meeting becomes the bearer of identity. But the journey on the river is not only the oral exercise, it is also the real journey, the one the settlers of the river San Juan embark upon in 1992 from the delta to Istmina. Hundreds of the Peasant Association of the River San Juan embark in their boats and stop in each village, getting off with their *chirimía*, and from the beach they put colour into the meeting with *jotas* and *contradanzas*.¹⁹ The journey is a geographical recognition of a territory, which they now understand as theirs. (Villa, 1998: 444–445)

The leaders of the river organisation ACADESAN filmed this journey on video and later edited it to be the visual testimony of “the first fluvial expedition of territorial self-discovering and defence of ethnic-cultural identity along the river San Juan” (Stemper, 1998: 170–171). The main river and its countless tributaries function in this context as the ‘aquatic street network’ essential for the communication process, and the entire river basin becomes the principal spatial figure of mobilisation on the Pacific coast.

When three years later black communities began to form into community councils that could apply for collective land titles, most communities decided to take the river basin along which they had settled as the spatial organising unit for their community council.²⁰ It is important to stress that, although the state had created the legal figure of the community council through Law 70, it was up to the individual communities to decide on what form and extension these councils were to have. Understanding the aquatic space and the logic of the river as the spatial preconditions for political organisation, the establishment of community councils along river basins reflects these specific cultural and identity-based referents of black communities. This conceptualisation is evident, for example, in the constitution and the naming of the Community Councils River Napi and River San Francisco, respectively, in the department of Cauca (see Fig. 2). In fact, the figure of the river basin’s spatial structure with its numerous tributaries resembles a fishbone. In both cases the area delimiting the

¹⁹ *Chirimía*, *jota* and *contradanza* are traditional music styles of black populations in the Chocó.

²⁰ There are some exceptions to this pattern, especially when these processes were mediated by state institutions and capitalist interests (Oslender, 2002a).

community council's territory comprises the lands around the river basin and its tributaries, including the headwaters and the mouth of the particular river.

Yet, more than merely in terms of physical location, the river basin must be understood in terms of both its socio-cultural meaning for local communities and the perceptions and sense of belonging that it generates. In the case of the community of La Soledad, for example, it becomes evident how a particular aquatic sense of place, rather than just the objective cartographic location of the community, has informed the spatial organising structure of the community council. La Soledad, a village of 575 inhabitants, lies at the headwaters of the river Guajuí in the department of Cauca, some 25 km from the river mouth in the Pacific Ocean (see Fig. 2). Yet, shallow depths and numerous rapids in the upper reaches of the river prevent navigation for the last 5 km even for small dugout canoes. The principal route of communication and transport for locals is a trail that connects La Soledad with Belén, a settlement at the headwaters of the neighbouring river Napi, which can be reached on foot along this trail in around 2–3 h. Everything and everybody moves along this trail, so that the inhabitants of La Soledad are connected physically, commercially and spiritually to the river Napi. People who need to travel from La Soledad to Guapi also do so on the river Napi. The physical location of La Soledad on the river Guajuí seems 'topographically accidental' in this context, and instead the inhabitants of La Soledad have developed a strong sense of belonging to the river Napi.

In the formation processes of the community councils, the inhabitants of La Soledad insisted in negotiations with leaders of the river Guajuí that they should be part of the community council of the river Napi, instead of the one of the river Guajuí. They finally got their way, and today, in fact, the legal representative of the community council of the river Napi lives in La Soledad. It is clear, then, that local perceptions and socio-cultural references have been more important in the spatial organising structures of these two community councils than has cartographic location. The inhabitants of La Soledad have in fact created their own 'imaginative geographies', or more specifically, their own 'imaginative river basin', to which they feel they belong. The aquatic sense of place among rural black populations has effectively been mobilised as a political tool in the constitution of these two community councils.

Defending the logic of the river

It is clear that the aspirations of the community councils go beyond the mere administrative functions of the collective territories that the State has stipulated. In fact, they continue to challenge the central government on the very definition of a collective territory, and on the question of which areas are to be included in or excluded from it. This confrontation has become maybe most apparent in the struggle over mangrove areas, which for years the central government refused to include in collective land titles, since it considered the extensive mangrove areas in the southern part of the Pacific coast as 'areas of public interest', and thus not eligible for inclusion in collective land titles under the regulations of Law 70 (see Chapter III, Article 6a). Yet, the position of many black populations is that they effectively live in mangrove areas, a complex and one of the world's most productive

ecosystems rich in fish species, molluscs and shells upon which local populations depend in their fishing and gathering activities.²¹ Strong social and commercial links exist between the coastal mangrove areas and the middle and upper sections of the rivers (Leal, 1998: 399), in line with the logic of the river, as explained above. Black communities have therefore insisted that mangrove areas be included in their collective land titles. Yet, the government's refusal meant that all of those community councils with a coastline in the southern Pacific (and therefore invariably including mangrove areas) were offered land titles excluding mangrove areas. This offer was sternly rejected by the community councils on the Cauca coast who demanded all or nothing. The spatial unit of the entire river basin as organising structure became instrumental in this confrontation. In line with the notion of the logic of the river, stressing the interconnectedness and interdependence of the various river sections, mangrove areas were argued to form an integral part of the socio-cultural system of black communities in the Pacific region. They should not be regarded separately, therefore. In one initial case a dubious 'agreement' was reached: the Community Council Acapa in the southern coastal part of the Department of Nariño received a collective land title in March 2000, including mangrove areas under a special concessionary status (Rivas, 2001). This arrangement, however, granted the government an opt-out clause by which the mangrove areas could be excluded again in the future. Such proceedings were rejected by the community councils on the Cauca coast. Finally in May 2003 and after continuing pressure the government gave in, and the Community Councils River Guajuí, Guapi Abajo, and Chanzará in the Department of Cauca received their respective collective land titles including mangrove areas. Clearly in this conflict the aquatic space as the locale and physical setting of social interactions has been mobilised by black communities to defend their spatialised cultural logic and territorial aspirations.

Conclusions

Social movements emerge and develop in particular place-specific settings and contexts. And these contexts make a difference to the ways in which these movements organise. For a better understanding of these place-specific articulations of resistance, I have proposed a place perspective on social movements drawing on Agnew's (1987) concept of place as consisting of location, locale, and sense of place. I have also argued that to flesh out these geographies of social movements, geographers should engage more seriously with ethnographies as a privileged methodology to uncover these place-specific contexts, which are often taken for granted but rarely considered as providing clues for the ways in which social

²¹ The mangrove swamps on Colombia's Pacific coast cover an area of 283,775 ha, constituting 77.5% of the entire mangrove area in Colombia (Leal, 1998: 400). The mangrove trees function as a barrier of coastline protection against the wave activity of the sea, as well as providing a catchment area for sediments and nutrients, which provides rich feeding grounds for over 380 different fish species recorded as entering or living in the mangrove swamps of the Colombian Pacific coast (Von, Cantera, & Contreras, 1990: 85).

movements work. Most emphasis is still placed on movement structures, leadership, their capacity for resource mobilisation and interactions with the state. While these are clearly important aspects, they often tell us little about the very micro-geographies of social movements and their workings on the ground.

To address these deficiencies, I have shown for the case of Colombia's black communities, how their political mobilisation in the Pacific coast region is shot through with the everyday experiences of living with what I have termed the 'aquatic space': a specific set of spatialised social relationships in an aquatic environment. By unpacking the concept of place I have shown how the aquatic space works from the subjective (sense of place) to the objective (location). Obviously, by conceptualising the everyday spatialised social relationships, water-based practices, evocations and political articulations in terms of an aquatic space, I do not intend to over-totalise the concept nor to silence the different experiences and practices that are found on the Pacific coast. In fact, all of these aquatic realities are cross cut by various axes of difference. Not everyone in the region embraces the totality of practices, relations and evocations in the full or in the same way as I analyse them here. Yet I consider the aquatic space a powerful explanatory tool in the conceptualisation of the 'place' that is the Colombian Pacific coast, and in the discourses and practices of the social movement of black communities that has emerged out of this place. In particular, I have shown how the very new political organisational form of the community council—introduced through recent legislation—has been appropriated by local communities to reflect the local aquatic logic and the everyday spatialised social relationships along river basins in the region.

These observations in the field may appear obvious to some. Yet, I argue that they are crucial to understand the particular forms of mobilisation by black communities in Colombia. Such a spatial approach to this movement provides us with an increased sensitivity to the differences that exist within the movement, to the disruption of the river logic in the construction of certain community councils, and what this means for the organising processes. Some community councils have in fact been mediated by capitalist and state interests (Oslender, 2002a), and the institutionalisation of parts of the movement may threaten its autonomy, presenting a real dilemma for the movement (Pardo, 2002). Paying serious attention to the spatial differentiation in the experience of resistance allows us to evaluate the qualitative advantages of some community councils over others. Very little evidence has so far been produced on these differences, simply because such a spatial focus has not been considered important. Yet, it can clearly provide a tool for improving the workings of community councils by comparing the different experiences that communities have had in this respect. These are still very much ongoing processes far from being resolved. And the recent escalation of Colombia's internal armed conflict into the Pacific coast region has added a new twist to the organising context for black communities, as these are increasingly subject to forced displacement induced by the various armed actors in the region.

By giving such a detailed empirical account of the social movement of black communities in Colombia, I have also tried to answer some of the critiques of recent geographical thinking on social movements that has often been regarded as failing to

show exactly how these place-specific contexts are acted out ‘on the ground’. A more serious engagement with ethnographies can help to put flesh on the geographies of social movements, and to instil them with the sounds, words, smells and feelings of places in which resistances emerge. If the vitality of place and place-making is so crucial to our understanding of culture, knowledge, nature and economy, as Escobar (2001) suggests, then a place perspective on social movements becomes in itself a necessity in the study of civil society, collective action and globalisation. In other words, a place perspective can function as an important antidote to the discourses of an uncritical globalisation craze that more often than not erases the particularities of place in favour of more ‘convenient’ generalising approaches to what is in fact one of the most contested and struggled over fields of meaning today, both materially and semantically: globalisation. These struggles over meaning find expression in globalising resistance events such as the World Social Forum: a convergence space of a whole variety of different actors, movements, NGOs, trade unions, academics, activists, etc., who share a common goal and come together to analyse the impact of globalisation on all kinds of scales and to reflect upon (and often implement) alternatives to an unjust neoliberal world order. Yet, even these alternative strategies will have to be adapted to specific place contexts. There will not be just one ‘recipe of resistance’, but many thousands. The particularities of place are therefore an important ingredient in this ‘resistance stew’ that is brewing up all over the world. A place perspective on social movements thus urges us to take the local serious, both in practice and in theory. And I suggest that it also provides a methodological tool worth considering in the ‘modernity/coloniality’ project developed by Escobar and others who stress “the need to consider seriously the epistemological force of local histories and to think theory through the political practice of subaltern groups” (Escobar, 2003: 61). While recognising the embeddedness of the local in global processes, a place perspective stresses the always open and contingent nature of this relation, and the multiple ways in which resistances are acted out in particular places. This certainly is one way to ‘celebrate difference’ without being indifferent.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Annual Meeting of the AAG in New Orleans, 5–8 March 2003, and at the SLAS conference in Manchester, 11–13 April 2003. Ethnographic fieldwork among black communities in Colombia’s Pacific coast region has been carried out continuously since 1996, mainly in and around the town of Guapi in the coastal part of the Cauca department. I would like to acknowledge support from an ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellowship (Ref. T026271170), and a Carnegie Trust Research Grant; the latter enabled me to do fieldwork in Colombia in 1998–1999. I would also like to thank the three anonymous referees for their constructive critique and comments. This article is dedicated to the struggle of Colombia’s black communities to live in peace on their ancestral lands in the Pacific coast region.

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