

Mercedes Moya

Some Common Goods : an Afro-colombian view

Introduction (by Olivier de Marcellus)

All across the Americas, Afro-descendants have always fiercely defended themselves, culturally and politically. In all the difficult to control tropical zones of Brasil, Colombia, Venezuela, Hispaniola, Cuba, etc., thousands of runaway slaves re-founded communities and commons. Some of these communities, like the "quilombos" of Brazil and the "palenques" ("palissades" as their fortified villages were called) of Colombia, successfully resisted colonial armies for decades. The Palenque de San Basilio in Colombia was actually the first territory of the Americas to obtain a (short-lived) recognition of its independence from the Spanish crown in the 18th century. Its inhabitants still speak a Bantu language. While part of the Afro-colombians (30% of the total population) remained the under-class of an extremely racist society (there were twenty different terms indicating nuances of blackness in Colombia!), all the Pacific coast rain forests and parts of the Caribbean regions of Colombia were - and are still - populated by the descendants of rebel slaves. In these areas, land is held in common by largely self-sufficient, self-organised communities extending along the rios (roads being inexistent), practically ignored by the Colombian state. The Constitution of 1993, a progressive response to the success of the guerrillas of the time, recognises the rights of the indigenous and Afro-colombian communities. Unfortunately, formal recognition now often coincides with paramilitary massacres designed to force the people off the land (already more than a million Afro-colombian internal refugees) clearing the way for multinational mining, forestry and agribusiness. A second deportation and enslavement has begun. And even the left (reformist or "revolutionary") are often reluctant to admit the right of this "world" to organise itself autonomously, by its own standards, without sacrifice to the gods of national interest or "development". Our Afro-colombian friends tell us (with a little twinkle in their eye) that white Colombians of the highlands - long since stripped of its tree cover - point to the fact that the black communities haven't rased their forests as proof of their inherent laziness...

However, cultural resistance continues and - even in the larger towns - the afro-colombian communities reach heights of sociability that we can difficultly imagine. This is the society capable - despite decades of misery and massacres - of giving the world cumbia. Practically everyone knows everyone. Funerals, for example, are huge affairs going on for days, that finally wind through the city, stopping in front of the houses of the deceased's friends so that each can sing him a last song...

On the political level, Afro-descendants of Colombia and Latin America are organised in the Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN), which has itself been a convenor of the Peoples' Global Action (PGA) network since 1998. PGA has organised several tours in the North and specific actions to support the Afro-Colombians and is now seeking to organise support and presence in some of these communities. As Mercedes' text reveals, we would have much to learn there !

(For more information on PCN and the Afro-colombians, see the PGA website: www.agp.org, especially <<http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiattiv/agp/free/colombia/index.htm#contents>> or contact Mercedes.)

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I vividly recall the pleasure of Ze Orocó, the madman of José Mauro de Vasconcelos's novel, *Rosina mi Canoa*. After having been interned in an asylum for three years because he talks and communicates with his canoe, the doctors think that they have cured him by convincing him that a tree is a tree and that therefor one can't talk with them. However, finally, when he thinks that he has lost his madness, the donkey that accompanies him in his wanderings across the country also starts to speak, telling him how glad it is to finish the voyage of their lives together. This madness of Ze touches me, because many of us, and particularly the Afro-descendants, must live such folly in order to transmute rage against the colonisation

and the slave trade which our ancestors suffered not so long ago - and the persistent, contemporary racial discrimination - into a source of inspiration.

Memory speaks to our heart and mind, obliging us to devote all our forces, so that never again should be repeated - anywhere in the world - the holocausts that deny the essence of humanity. The Afro-descendants - like other peoples whose dignity and historical destiny has been massacred - recreate, construct a path of dignity in order to share the human potentiality of Being-with-others. A project - dreamed and realised - of well-being and justice.

The word as life is a paradigm for the Afro-descendants of Colombia. A common memory and persistent discrimination since the abolition of slavery continued to provoke their passive resistance within Colombian society, and the active resistance of the runaway slave communities which had settled far from the temperate mountain zones and the God that the conquistadors and colonists had decreed was on their side.

Intimate association with common, natural surroundings was a vital aspect of the resistance of afro-colombian men and women: a symbolical and practical alliance of reciprocal solidarity. Along the river banks the afro-colombians constructed a social identity marked by interdependence with the rivers, lagoons, woods, flatlands, periodic floods, torrential rains, days of sun with rain and days of sun with sun. Today, the Pacific coast is being opened up for "economic development" - negotiated by agents of the state, industry and national or international finance, or violently imposed by traffickers and paramilitaries. But despite this dispossession, occupation and destruction of natural resources, an identity drenched in sun and water still maintains the cement of human warmth.

For Afrocolombians, life itself is the most precious of common goods. A life conceived holistically, as a social and environmental whole, was denied to our ancestors of colonial times. We have inherited from them the task of reconstituting black Being as a social entity freed from all those aspects that alienated the colonists from their humanity, rendering them de-naturalised, insensitive, perverse and irrational.

Thus, despite the ideological, religious, social and commercial indoctrination that maintained the Afro-descendants and indigenous at the bottom of the social and racial hierarchies, they preserve their colombian soul and the always uncertain hope of a better future. The paradox is that in their daily existence, Afro-colombian men, women and children build each day, persistently and with joy, the dream of that tomorrow.

Our ancestors taught their sons and daughters to look upon and to use the lakes, streams and paths of water and of the mountains as a common environment, to leave fish in the river for tomorrow and for the neighbors; to leave animals in the jungle for tomorrow and forever... ; to help themselves only to as much as necessary; to realise that if we attempt to appropriate and cut up the land, the wounds that we inflict to it will also mutilate our common, historical project.

Saints' Days also common goods. These festive encounters take place in the streets and in the houses, opened to invite others to share what has been prepared, to strengthen our forces and maintain us firmly in joy. Thus these days, intended as instruments of indoctrination, were appropriated by the people as an occasion for sharing and renewing hope. Similarly, our farewells to the dead permit us to meet with those who remain. We share the expenses of the *novena* (the nine days of mourning), we share the act of accompanying, share the time that remains to us as a good to be distributed.

I remember a trip on a small boat on the Atrato river, the attractive, solitary landscape of shorelines and canoes. One would have thought that the forest was totally uninhabited. Suddenly a powerful motor-launch speeded by, overturning a solitary canoe loaded with bananas on the other side of the river. What followed was like a hallucination. Dozens of men and women appeared in canoes from nowhere, and in an instant

had saved the cargo for the man transporting the bananas! The river has suddenly become a big neighborhood, revealing a constant potential of solidarity, the imprint of that sense of the common good that we do not wish to lose.

Economic development sells us, imposes, in images, in "development" projects, the buying and selling of individual labor as the measure of progress. To that end the paramilitaries raze the mangroves, companies exploiting gold and platinum leave us mountains of stones and pools of mud, the construction of roads brings with them the commercialisation of the land and their expropriation. Deforestation is a daily commerce.

Article 55 of the constitutional reform of 1991 - enacted into Law 70 of the republic in 1993 - formulated and advocated by the organisations of the communities, created and guarantees the existence of spaces for communitarian forms of production, distribution and exchange of services and means of existence on a human scale.

The economic principle of these is to eliminate the exploitive, hierarchical relation between capital and labor. Until today, where the struggles for power and for geographic and commercial control have not yet penetrated, "giving a hand" or "exchanging hands", communitarian forms of support to production, protect equal access to the land, and thus also substantially protect food autonomy, the socio-spatial organisation and the use and exercise of a collective time in which use value is superior to exchange value.

Private, salaried labor for multinationals, imposed by the State supposedly to guarantee employment in an alienated society, can only be seen as a new form of global servitude for the Afro-descendants and for all the forces struggling for a more just world.

On the global level, the democratic sectors are sacrificing education, health and leisure by their political impotence, by their lack of engagement and solidarity with respect to these common goods. At the same time, the system adapts the nuclear family to a social project in which everything can be bought and sold. Even the rain and sunlight are polluted in the context of global warming. Communities like ours, which haven't destroyed their forests, are considered backward, the accepted measure of progress being the devastation of natural resources. But what that we have preserved, as common goods and as a vital space of resistance, are for us the real measure with which to judge development.

The individual and collective disruption of african and indigenous communities by the colonial system and the trans-Atlantic slave trade dissolved, repressed and perverted the historical projects of great peoples. Today, the globalisation of the market economy, imposes colossal migrations, constitute new slaveries, and destroy our dreams. The organisers of today's slave trade are the so-called national elites, which sell the dignity of their peoples in exchange for the peoples' misery and their own ethical degradation.

We also know from the experience of our communities that there are elements of our culture that we must change in order to sustain the struggle. There is a co-relation between the collective and the individual which must be reinforced to consolidate the active resistance and international interaction of the peoples, to maintain knowledge of ourselves through struggle, struggle to meet one another, meetings which make us advance, advances in the de-hierarchisation of worlds and of the struggles... Struggling for the equity of those worlds. In solidarity globalising the means of struggle and – why not? – globalising too the means of love. But that we should talk about another time !

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