

CHARACTERIZATION OF WOMEN MOLLUSKS GATHERERS OF THE MAYORQUÍN RIVER

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RESUMEN

Esta investigación, realizada por un grupo de estudiantes del programa de Sociología de la Universidad del Pacífico y dirigida por el magíster Carlos Palacios, expone las difíciles condiciones en las cuales se desarrolla una de las actividades tradicionales de recolección de moluscos, particularmente la piangua, en el Pacífico surcolombiano, donde el grupo familiar funciona como una unidad económica básica en la que todos los miembros cumplen funciones colaborativas, por lo general poco especializadas, que permiten satisfacer sus necesidades de supervivencia. Por ello, el desarrollo de estrategias para obtener estos productos, en parte, constituye un proyecto en el que es vinculada la red familiar y refleja la fortaleza que tienen los lazos de solidaridad en la construcción de las comunidades afrodescendientes, lo que otorga un significado sustantivo a las relaciones económicas que se generan en estas colectividades. Del mismo modo, hace un análisis de las causas del empobrecimiento y riesgos de salud que enfrentan las mujeres dedicadas a este oficio, así como de los efectos negativos del impacto de la economía capitalista en estas comunidades rurales.

Palabras claves: Pacífico, moluscos, piangua, comunidades afrodescendientes, economía tradicional y economía capitalista.

ABSTRACT

This investigation, done by a group of Sociology students from “la Universidad del Pacífico” and directed by Magister Carlos Palacios, exposes the difficult conditions in which one of the traditional activities is developed, harvesting mollusks especially “piangua” (black conch) in the South Pacific, where the family functions as a basic economic unit in which all the members fulfill collaborative functions, generally non specialized, which allows to meet their survival needs. Therefore, the development of strategies to obtain these products, in part, constitutes a Project in which the family network is connected and reflects the strength that the ties of solidarity have in the construction of the afro-descendant communities. This gives a substantive meaning to the economic relationships that are generated in these communities. In the same way, it makes an analysis of the causes of impoverishment and health risks which women dedicated to this craft face, as well as, the negative effects of the impact of a capitalist economy in these rural communities.

Key words: Pacific, mollusks, “piangua” black conch, afro-descendant communities, traditional economy, capitalist economy.

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INTRODUCTION

The processes of land occupation of the Colombian Pacific are associated with the strong impact of the intensity of the Spanish conquest had on the indigenous population, initially, and later to the development of the processes of mining in Chocó, Guapi and Buenaventura. With the decline of the native workforce that succumbed to the harshness of the work, began the introduction of enslaved people in the industry, in the early eighteenth century.

According to Robert West, by the mid-eighteenth century, all the major rivers of the coastal plain, including Mayorquín River, had enslaved black work crews. (West, 2000). The development of black communities in the Pacific region was, from the beginning, marked by the link to the activities related to artisanal mining and the processes of extraction and gathering to which the family group was integrated. Many of the peoples of the Pacific were formed from groups of families who settled in the area, in a scattered manner.

In the Pacific, the household functions as a basic economic unit in which all members perform collaborative functions, usually low-skilled, available to meet their survival needs. Therefore, the development of these strategies, in part, constitutes a project in which the family network is connected and reflects the strength that the ties of solidarity have in the construction of the afro-descendant communities, giving substantive¹ meaning to the economic relationships that are generated in these communities.

This feature causes the recognition of the members of the group to take place in the framework of the interactions, unfolded into the shared workgroup. This way of working is a feature of traditional communities in which the members, not only the household but also the community, becomes an enlarged expression of the family network in which strong ties of friendship, affection and responsibility, for example in education and rearing of minors are shared and recreated².

In this sense the idea of community also links, in part, the development of productive activities. In the majority of these rural communities economic alternatives are few and, therefore, the processes of specialization of the trades are too. This allows for a series of common knowledge to be configured to the members of these communities, through which is expressed the particular form of relationship with the environment that these social groups have built in the processes of historical occupation.

In these types of collectives, traditional forms of transmission of trades -as an expression of situated knowledge- are presented as cultural inheritance, i.e., as factors of cultural identification of the group whereby each individual defines their social status from factors such as age and knowledge obtained as part of the life experience, this is why the elders occupy an important position in society.

The growing relationship with the modern world has changed, however, or at least has begun to transform, the valuation that certain knowledge and crafts have, for example the craft of the collectors of mollusks, that, with

1. Polanyi points out that the substantive meaning "derives from man's dependence for his livelihood, nature and his fellows. It refers, in this sense, to the exchange with the natural and social environment, in so far that this exchange as a results provides the necessary means for material satisfaction. Polanyi, Karl (1976) *The Economic System Institutionalized*. See in *Classic and Contemporary Anthropology* Edita CIESAS-UAM-UIA. Anthropology and Economics, ed M. Godelier (ed.), 1976: 155-178. It can be viewed at <http://www.ciesas.edu.mx/Classics/Publications/index.html>

2. In afros communities in rural areas of the Southern Colombian Pacific all adults are involved in the education process of children, regardless of whether or not they share a bond of consanguinity. Therefore all adults, although not known by children, are uncles or aunts.

the articulation of the community of Mayorquín in the economic circuitry of Buenaventura, has seen how these skills have been dramatically devalued. What happened, as a result of the introduction in this community of new economic and cultural logics, is leading to the individualization of its members, stimulating the processes of capital and the instrumentalization of the social relationships.

The increasing integration of these communities to modernity³, leads to rapid redefinition of symbols that give meaning to the lives of these peoples and their traditions, while imposing new logics in which the emphasis is no longer placed on sustainable relationships with the environment, which is what creates the conditions for social subsistence, but rather on economy, which is associated only with the development of activities that allow for commercial exchange and the accumulative processes of capital. This has as an effect the emergence of new jobs directly linked to economic productivity, which is configured as one of the pillars of modern society, and the devaluation of others associated with traditional practices (such as the exchange of products - barter - or favors - one hand washes the other) that tend to disappear completely with the commercialization of social relations.

One such traditional crafts is the harvesting of shellfish. This activity was developed in a

complementary manner to supplement the food needs of the family, combining with others like fishing, hunting, animal husbandry, cultivation and harvesting⁴. Currently this activity is carried out mainly by women and children and has ceased to be, for many, a major source of generation of collective welfare. The harvesting of shellfish is regarded today disjointed from cultural tradition and is valued only as a source of economic resource, which in comparison with the returns on other activities, are almost laughable.

METHODOLOGY

As part of the development of the course Introduction to Social Sciences, that students in the second semester of Sociology is taught at the University of the Pacific, a field trip was scheduled, whose initial purpose was to provide a space to approach the knowledge of reality that settled communities in the Pacific region are living. An aspect considered by the lecturer as of vital importance in the process of formation, in as much as it allows to forge professionals committed to their reality, able to put their knowledge to the service for the development of their communities.

Happily this interest coincided with some need of the community council of Mayorquín river, with which a strategic alliance was established in order to open a space for bringing students

3. In this paper modernity is assumed in the model proposed by Arturo Escobar as "a peculiar form of social organization that was born of the conquest of America and subsequently crystallized in the north of Western Europe in SXVIII. In social terms, modernity is characterized by the existence of institutions such as the nation-state and the bureaucratization of everyday life based on specialized knowledge; in cultural terms, it is distinguished by guidelines such as the belief in continuous progress, rationalization of culture, and the principles of individuation and universalization; and economically, it is particularized for its links with various forms of capitalism, state socialism being understood as a form of modernity. "So for Escobar phenomena such as "displacement is an integral part of Eurocentric modernity and the manifestation that it has reserved since the Second World War (...). Both modernity and development are spatial and cultural projects that require relentless conquest of territories and peoples, as well as its ecological and cultural transformation..." ESCOBAR, Arturo. Más allá del tercer mundo (Beyond the third world). Cap II Desplazamientos, Desarrollo y Modernidad en el Pacífico Colombiano. Edita Instituto Colombiano de Antropología. Traducción Universidad del Cauca. Bogotá, Colombia 2005. Pág. 48.

4. Traditionally the low productivity of the lands of the Pacific has been seen as one of the main arguments that have attempted to explain the versatility in the development of productive activities in these communities. Fornaguera, quoted by Virginia Gutierrez de Pineda says that "men of the inner part of the Pacific Coast are primarily farmers and secondly fishermen, while the inhabitants of the river mouths and estuaries, are in first place fishermen and secondly farmers." Gutiérrez adds that this production, in any case, is only enough to meet family needs and demand of a reduced local market. GUTIERREZ de Pineda, Virginia: Familia y Cultura en Colombia: Tipologías, funciones y dinámica de la familia. Manifestaciones múltiples a través del mosaico cultural y sus estructuras sociales. Edita Coediciones de tercer mundo y Departamento de Sociología (sección investigaciones) Universidad Nacional de Colombia 1968. Página 192.

to a particular local reality and, at the same time, an invitation was made to participate in a work process that began to be performed, and which was aimed at improving the living conditions of women, who in this township, are engaged in the harvesting of shellfish.

Given that the community did not have research experience, they requested support for a census that would allow for the characterization of women engaged in the harvesting of shellfish. The lecturer, course director, designed the data collection instrument and validated it with a pilot test performed on students, who come from origin is riverine areas. The Community Council assumed, on its part, the logistics part of this process. It was defined as a strategy to make the characterization, a census of all the women in the village of Mayorquín engaged in gathering shellfish. This was done between the 24th and 30th of July 2007.

The Community Council estimated that the total population could be around 200 women so it set as a purpose of the census "to become aware of the characteristics which women engaged in gathering shellfish have in the township of Mayorquín, rural area of the District of Buenaventura." At the time of the census a total of 152 surveys were applied due to a lack of resources to cover the whole area. Of these 146 are valid for analysis, since there are 6 cases lost by the system. Although this township has 7 villages, data are recorded for only three of them, the most populous: "El Papayal" which accounts for 42.8 % of the cases, "Secadero" with 25% "La Cumba" with 17.8%. The systematization of the data was performed by the students, and the analysis and reporting by lecturer Carlos Alberto Palacios, in charge of the course. These 152 women surveyed represent 10.8% of the total population and 22.2 % of women in the territory.

RESULTS

According to the Autonomous and Harmonious Management Plan for the Black Community of the Territory of Mayorquín River (1999), this area is began to be populated around 1830 with the establishment of the first houses in a place called Mina Vieja.

As stated in the document, in this area are located, "two townships: Mayorquín and Papayal township (...) in which 7 villages are identified" (59); the villages where there highest population density exist, in descending order are: Papayal, Bocas de Mayorquín, La Comba, Calle Larga, Cacao, Sacadera and Isla Pelada. According to the collective title document, by 1999 in the ancestral territory of Mayorquín river, a population of 1401 inhabitants, of whom 684 were women and 717 men, resided.

The community council estimated that about 200 women in Mayorquín are engaged in gathering shellfish, i.e. almost 30% of women.

According to the Management and Harmonious Plan for the Territory "in the Vallecacano Pacific, black communities collected 15 different species of shellfish and crustaceans of different species between the male piangua, female piangua, sangara, mussel, oyster, chorga, miona, clam, piacuil, bBurgao and cephalopods such as squid. Of these, 12 groups are gathered in the collective territory of the Mayorquín river basin "(72).

This activity is carried out mainly by women in raiceros or mangroves. The product collected more frequently is piangua, reason for which this work is known as piangüeo or pianguar and those engaged in it are called piangüeras or concheras . This constitutes a craft that is learned by imitation and which is confined to the sphere of domestic chores, i.e. home, which is why only women, children and girls

DISTRIBUTION OF THE POPULATION OF MAYORQUÍN BY SEX AND AGE

VILLAGES	MEN				WOMEN				TOTAL
	0-14	15-40	41 o más	Subtotal	0-14	15-40	41 o más	Subtotal	
La Comba	44	40	6	90	42	39	9	90	180
Bocas de Mayorquín	95	78	19	192	82	65	3	150	342
Papayal	120	86	30	236	124	60	23	207	443
Isla Pelada	6	7	5	18	18	4	2	24	42
Secadero	18	17	9	44	24	25	9	58	102
Calle Larga	31	24	12	67	41	24	13	78	145
Cacao	27	31	12	70	31	34	12	77	147
TOTAL	341	283	93	717	362	251	71	684	1401

Consolidado tomado del censo de población del territorio ancestral del río Mayorquín. Plan de Manejo Autónomo y Armonioso para el Territorio de la Comunidad Negra del Río Mayorquín. (1999)Territorio Región del Pacífico Sur Colombiano. Convenio No. 058 CC-PCN WWF.

Foto 1. Mangrove. By: Carlos A. Palacios. Mayorquín, July 29 of 2007.



are dedicated to it in the community. There are some cases of men pianguëan but it is very rare, since it implies exposure to the jeers and snide comments that threaten or at least call into question the virility of men engaged in the trade, so many do this activity on the sly when they are forced to do it. Which means that this is a discredited trade and, in this sense, little valued by society taking into account the effect that the patriarchal culture has on organizational processes and the dynamics of social interaction between men and women in African communities, not just in the South Pacific but throughout Colombia.

According to the Management Plan, "the groups of concheras are composed of adult women and youth and girls who, among them, maintain close ties of consanguinity and affinity...and...when the production of fishermen decreases, some work with their wooden boats carrying concheras to estuaries more distant from the locality and in return they receive a percentage of production "(72). As mollusks collected are diverse, for purposes of this study this population will be referred to as "mollusk gatherers."

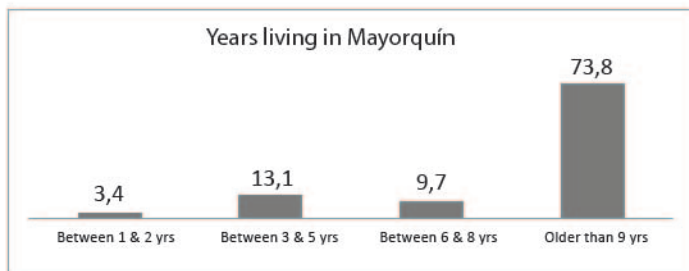
Foto 2. Women harvesters. By: Carlos A. Palacios. Mayorquín, July 29 of 2007.



IDENTIFICATION DATA

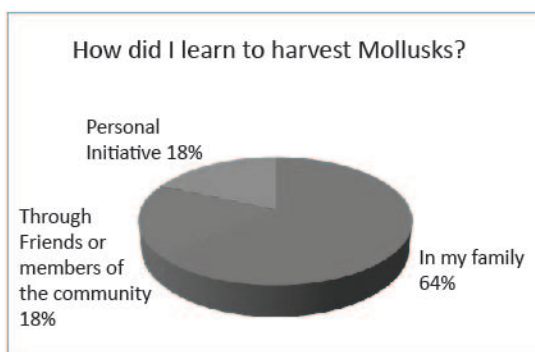
The majority of mollusk gatherers of these three communities are identified with black or African ethnicity 84.9%; another 12.3% did not identify with any ethnic group. Most collectors are native to the Vallecaucana Pacific Coast (82.7%).

The harvesting of mollusks is a practice that is, largely confined to the role of the feminine in its most classical sense and in this sense is also an activity that reveals the place it occupies in society. Therefore, men who practice it do not want it known that they do.



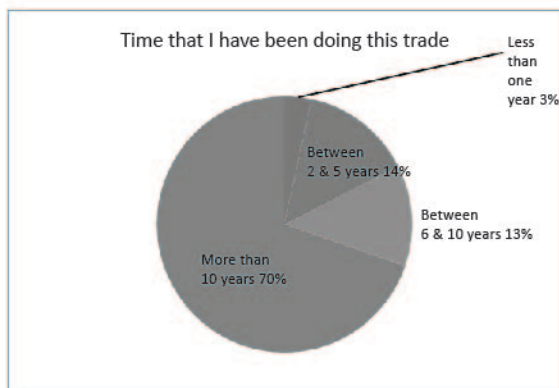
This activity is learned within the family, within the framework of a subsistence economy, which in the case of Mayorquín, faces the onslaught involving the growing dependence of urban centers in which the logic imposed are not the exchanges of products, but rather commercial transactions.

Of these, 107 women, representing 73.8% of the 146 women surveyed engaged in the harvesting of mollusks, have been living in Mayorquín for more than 9 years.



70% of participants of the census have been working in the collection trade for over 10 years, 14% between 2 and 5 years and a remaining 13% between 6 and 10 years. At least 83% of women engaged in the gathering mollusks in Mayorquín have been there for more than 6 years doing this job.

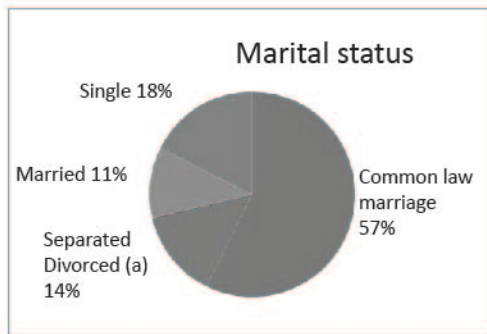
The development of this activity faces the threat that supposes, on one hand, the introduction of the new logics of the exchange characteristics of the capitalist model for which this practice is nothing more than the manifestation in part of survival strategies deployed by the household. Accepting this reflection implies recognizing that a change is being generated in the historical sense that this practice had within the community as an element of identification. On the other hand, there is the threat from deteriorating environmental conditions that facilitates this resource, which today is increasingly scarce, and in as much as this resource is a dynamic factor in the processes of social reproduction, mainly



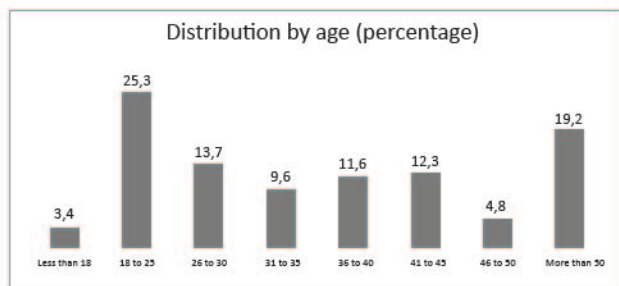
families headed by women, its scarcity or disappearance would mean limiting the opportunities for successful social integration for those who, within the community, are engaged in this trade, i.e. poor women.

However, the collection is a practice with strong roots in the cultural traditions of the town, this explains why 64% of mollusk gatherers learned this craft with family, and 18% with friends. And although this activity is not very profitable, 62.2% of these women reported feeling very well doing it.

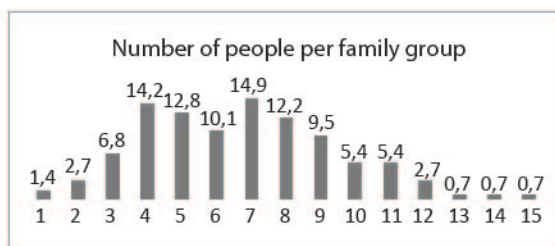
It is in this sense in which the harvesting of mollusks remains deeply rooted activity in the lives of these women, which suggests strong resistance to the probability of changing the activity, added to the fact that they are in the majority, of relatively advanced age.



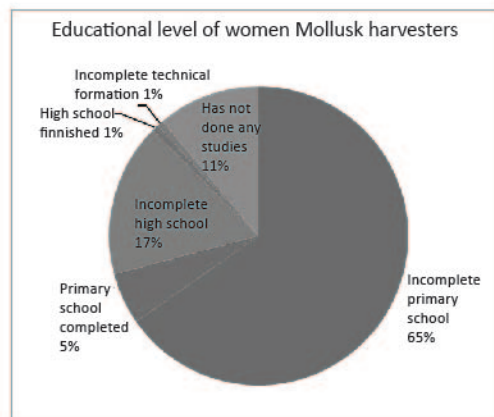
The majority of the women surveyed live in common-law marriages 57.3%, another 17.5% are single and the remaining 14% are separated. The presence or absence of a permanent partner does not seem to be a relevant factor in increasing the opportunities to improve the lives of these women and their households.



In fact, 39% of women mollusk harvesters in Mayorquín are between 18 and 35 years of age and 36.3% are older than 40 years. The smallest age group is those under 18, which reaches only 3.4%. In general they are adult women or with a tendency to elderly women. This may be relevant to consider if you think of a process of job reclassification, their willingness to change, but also for their skills and abilities to perform new trades.



23.6% of households consists of between 1 and 3 persons, 37.8% between 4 and 6 people, another 32.4% between 7 and 10 people, and the remaining 4.7% more than 10 people. 64.2% of households have between 3 and 7 people.



76% of women engaged in the harvesting of mollusks have not got any formal studies or have not completed primary school, another 17% have not completed secondary school. The level of education for these women is extremely low. Among the reasons why this phenomenon occurs may be, besides the economic aspect, at least two other circumstances:

a) The validity that the patriarchal culture has traditionally had in the Pacific privileged the education of man over the woman would, which had the effect of poor insertion of the latter into the educational system. b) The dynamics that characterize rural livelihoods causes formal education to be constituted as not important, or at least necessary in the development of daily activities; especially for those which society has traditionally relegated to women, in this sense studying is also not an element of mobility for women in rural areas.

SALUD

AFFILIATION TO SISBEN

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulated percentage
Valid	YES	89	58,6	60,5	60,5
	NO	58	38,2	39,5	100,0
	Total	147	96,7	100,0	
Losses	NA/NA	2	1,3		
	System	3	2,0		
	Total	5	3,3		
Total		152	100,0		

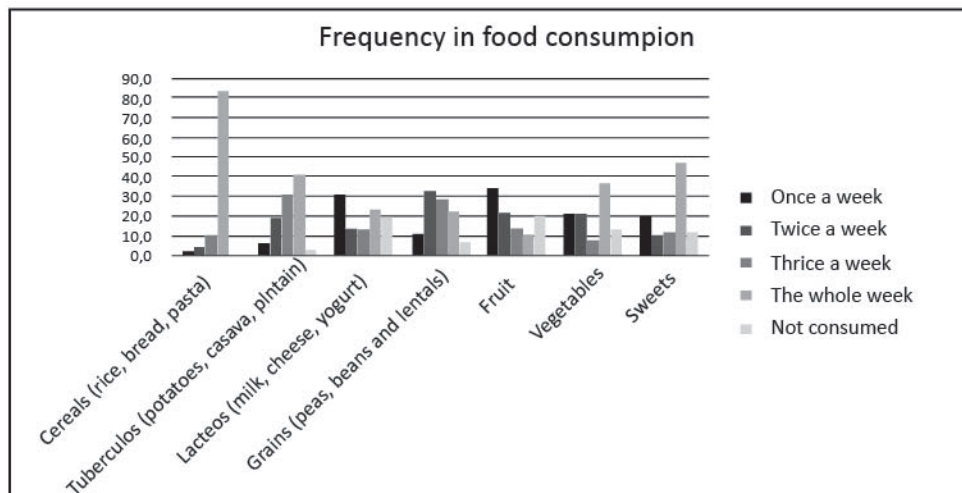
Approximately 40% of women surveyed have no affiliation to SISBEN, only 26.3 % are affiliated with a health provider entity. This is an area where endemic diseases such as malaria are prevalent, and because of the absence of utility networks and basic sanitation, this may be a risk factor for the health of these people, and not to mention the risks they are exposed to daily in the development of their activity of collection.

A protective factor is the fact that 62.4 % of participants in the study said that in case of illness they go primarily to the health center of their community.

The most common diseases among women mollusk harvesters are malaria in 54.4 % and skin infections in 16.1%, lacerations and cuts in 8.7%, and to a lesser degree dehydration in 4.7% is presented . These are all diseases arising from the work of gathering mollusks.

Although there is some level of alcohol consumption, among some collectors, it is usually very low. In fact, 39.9% of women gathering mollusks do not consume any alcoholic beverage and another 40% say that when they do, this consumption is moderate. There remains, however, a small group of women who do consume significantly more liquor and they represent 20.1 % of cases.

Although 85.1% of women gatherers report eating only the necessary to go out and participate in their activity, 8.1% reported being unable to eat even the necessary amount, which could have a serious impact on the health of these women, especially when taking into account strenuousness of the working day. In fact, while 91.8% of study participants manifest to eating two to three times a day, 8.2% reported eating only once a day at home. Hunger is a latent threat in the lives of some of these women and their families.

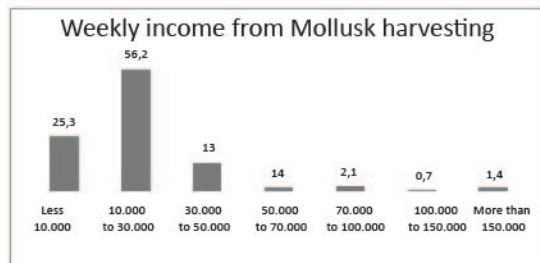
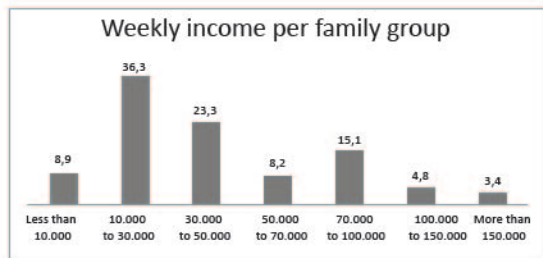


Foods that most often present in consumption are cereals such as rice and wheat flour in bread or pasta, followed by sweets and then tubers such as potatoes and cassava, in addition to plantain; while dairy products such as cheese, milk, yogurt and grains such as peas, beans and lentils are the least consumed foods. The basis of the diet in this community are essentially carbohydrate foods with low protein concentrations, which could be indicative of high levels of malnutrition, especially in children.

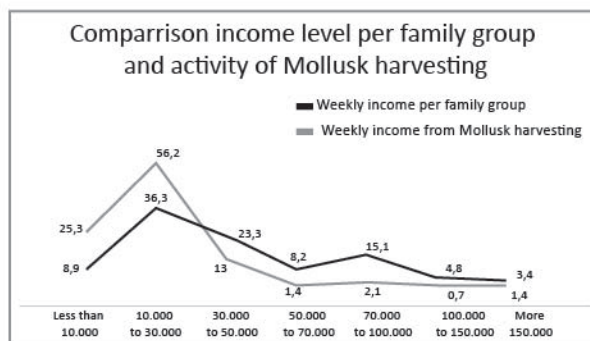
TRAINING FOR WORK AND INCOME

Only 14% of these women have received job training, the remaining 83.6% did not. In cases in which they were trained, the women say they have been trained to smoking fish, making crafts, raising chickens, preparing cucas cookies (typical of the Valle del Cauca), hairdressing and cultivation of medicinal plants, as production activities. Another issue that they expressed having received training in is nursing and bacteriology.

TRADE IN WHICH TRAINING WAS RECEIVED					
		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated percentage
Valid	Have not received	127	83,6	83,6	83,6
	Smoked Fish	3	2,0	2,0	85,5
	Crafts	1	,7	,7	86,2
	Bacteriology	1	,7	,7	86,8
	Cooking	4	2,6	2,6	89,5
	Sewing	3	2,0	2,0	91,4
	Raising chickens	3	2,0	2,0	93,4
	Nursing	2	1,3	1,3	94,7
	Make cucas	2	1,3	1,3	96,1
	None	4	2,6	2,6	98,7
	Hairdressing	1	,7	,7	99,3
	Medicinal Plants	1	,7	,7	100,0
	Total	152	100,0	100,0	



45.2% of the families of the women collectors have weekly earnings of less than \$ 30,000 pesos Another 23.3% have weekly earnings ranging between 30,000 and 50,000 pesos. In fact, 112 households, accounting for 76.7% of cases, have monthly incomes below half the legal minimum wage (between \$200,000 and \$280,000 pesos). This is an extremely sensitive issue, especially if you consider that Mayorquín is located in an area that, due to its geographical location, demands high transport costs, hindering the access of the population to services such as health; and likewise affects the nutritional possibilities within the family group. This affects mostly households with children, since most of the products consumed are imported from Buenaventura and must be paid for with cash.



In reviewing incomes, according to the activity of gathering mollusks that these women develop, it is clearly identified that 94.5% of those who do this have a weekly income of less than 50,000 pesos, i.e., they do not even reach a rounded monthly legal valid minimum salary. This is extremely serious, especially if you consider that for most of these women (81.1%) the harvesting of mollusks is their main source of income. The low profitability of the activity plunges them into a cycle of poverty from which they can not escape without institutional attention and support.

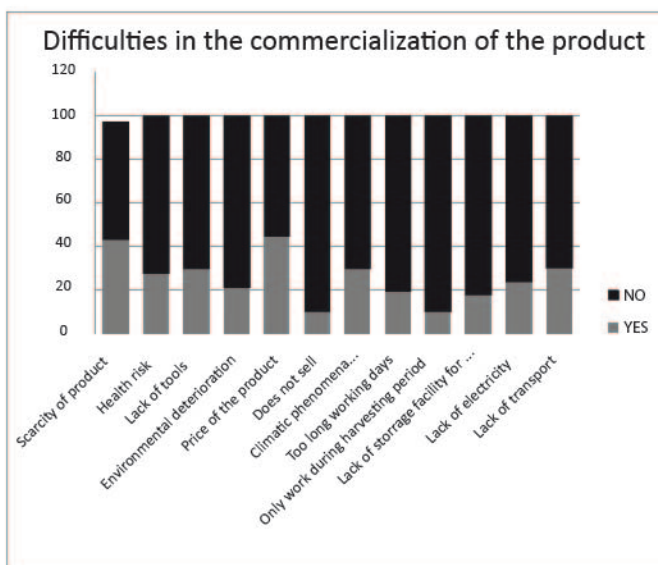
The line graph allows for a comparison of the household income with the income obtained from the harvesting of mollusks. Although in principle both revenues follow the same pattern, it is undeniable that it distances significantly when the range is smaller; i.e., the lower the income from collection, the more it will be distanced from the household income. Somehow, the deficiency of income generated by the collection activity is taken up by the activities developed by the household. However, it is necessary to clarify that the majority of cases in both income (family and collection) are concentrated in the lower income ranges, which makes the structural nature that the problem of income for these women and their families present, evident, in fact only 25% of families have incomes that are different to those derived from the harvesting of mollusks.

Additionally, close to 60% of the collectors develop this activity alone, without help from anyone else. 46.3% of study participants spend less than five hours a day on it, however, 53.7% can spend 5 to 12 hours in any work shift, morning or evening, thus leaving little or no time for development of different activities to supplement family income, when traditionally *"the exploitation of the forest formed a vital part of man's existence on the coast: providing basic materials for housing and transportation, supplementing their diet, and creating products that reinforce their income"* (139) which, even today, allows them to retain some independence from the urban centers. Currently, 71.1 % of study participants said that they participate in this activity because there is no other option for work in their community. And while acknowledging that this is a very important job for the community and family (45.1%), they consider that the harvesting of mollusks is a hard and exhausting work (63.4%). In fact, for 66.9% of the collectors from Mayorquín this is a very unprofitable task and that is why 93.3% of study participants would be interested in changing their economic activity, if they are presented with a better opportunity.

DIFFICULTIES AND MARKETING

Some of the challenges that the gatherers encounter in the development of their activities relate to the price paid for the product, which usually is very low; shortages that after long periods of operation without recovery time begins to become evident in the resource; the lack of adequate tools and the presence of climatic phenomena such as wind, rain etc. that impede excursions for collection.

For the collectors it is clear that the mollusks are a product with a high level of acceptance among the public, so the problem does not seem to revolve around its sale. In fact, most of what is collected in Mayorquín is sold in the same community, this represents 51.4% of the whole production. The remaining 47.3% is sold to buyers outside the community. Only 1.4% is consumed in the homes of those who gather mollusks. Most buyers come from the urban area of Buenaventura (56.4%), only 4.7% come from the interior, the remaining 39.1% of buyers come from nearby communities.



It is pertinent to point out that for this activity the women go to the roots of the mangroves or raiceros. Many of the collection sites are distant from the community and necessitates embarking in small canoes and rowing, even for several hours, until they reach the place where they can do the job. Usually women carrying out this activity, due to their condition of poverty, are not the owners of the canoes, so they are forced to borrow them or rent them "*porque el que no la tiene, pues no sale a cogé la piangua*" "*because he who does not have it, does not go out and get shellfish*" (group interview women gatherers of Mayorquín).

This renting is paid for with part of the crop "*as you take out the shellfish you pay per dozen, two dozen, three dozen*" (group interview women gatherers of Mayorquín). The rental cost may vary depending on the type of relationship that is shared with the owner or of the canoe or the type of canoe, or even rent a boat that is, "*sometimes one goes and paddles and charge 5 dozen piangua, not a dozen, five dozen, and when it is a motorboat it is over 20 dozen. One day I went to Piñal and gathered 8 dozen, and I worked all day, anyway 4 for him and 4 for me*" (collective interview women gatherers of Mayorquín). It is valid to clarify that shellfish are sold by the dozen, a dozen can cost between \$400 and \$800 depending on size.

Many of the collection sites are permanent transit routes which are disputed among collectors. To each site they go and come back every week or fortnight. For them, the collection depends on the rhythms imposed by the sea. So, if there is low tide, the collection is higher than when it is high tide. This movement corresponds to a daily cycle of 12 hours, so the women should leave as early as possible, calculate the time it will take to paddle to the collection site making sure it coincides with low

tide or otherwise they lose the effort made, because according to them "*it pays⁵ less when it is high tide, and it pays more from 7 am to 6 pm*" when it is low tide (collective interview women gatherers of Mayorquín).

But it can also correspond to a cycle of "15 days, every eight days there is a week of low tide and another week of high tide" (collective interview women gatherers of Mayorquín), which means that in the month two good weeks and two bad weeks interspersed. On a day of low tide, which is a good day, a woman can get to collect the equivalent of \$14,000, about seven dollars. On a day of high tide they can get, after 12 hours of work, \$4,000 or \$6,000, equivalent to 2 or 3 dollars, normally used for the days food, which basically consists of rice, which is brought from Buenaventura which increases the costs and reduces the chances of a better diet.

The month of the year in which sales are the best is in April, because of Easter. These sales are heavily concentrated in Buenaventura. However, the rest of the year, buyers usually come every 15 days (59.5% of the cases) to collect the product, only 12% comes every week, allowing these women to collect and store the product in enclosures that are made of wood on the banks of the river or stream and are known as quinchas.

However, 50.8% of the collectors must travel to market their products. This mobilization may require between half and one full days trip, at least it is true for 97.8% of them, this is, roughly, the time it takes to go to Buenaventura or neighboring communities.

The greatest difficulty that foragers identified within the marketing process is to agree on the product price with the buyer (65.9%), a second difficulty appears, though less frequently, is to

5. Expression that is used to refer to the harvesting of shellfish. Those who pay are those who fall or were able to be collected.

gather the amount of product required by the buyer (14.3%) aspect that seems to be in relation to the increasing scarcity of the product *"let us go back in time when I was about 17 years old, we would barely go in the raicero and only caught the large ones, the small ones were left, now plunder everything and if we do what do we have left? we have nothing!"* (collective interview women gatherers of Mayorquín). By linking the town to the market of Buenaventura greater pressure has been generated on the resources that are now on the verge of extinction. Thirdly, it appears as a difficulty for marketing that the collectors get paid promptly for the product (13.5%) because some buyers often take the product on consignment and are slow to pay.

Photo of the application of the Census to the collectors
Source: Carlos A. Palacios. Papayal, July 29 de 2007.



CONCLUSIONS

The women shellfish collectors face problems of discrimination for the job they do within their community, where harvesting of shellfish has become, over the past three decades, the last alternative for those who do not have access to the most profitable activities, economically speaking; and thus better social status and recognition according to the new social logic imposed under linking these communities to the economic circuits of urban centers. Moreover, they also face gender discrimination in a society in which patriarchal culture still dominates strongly. In fact, it is strongly frowned upon in the community for a man to work in this trade, and those who do it must do so clandestinely.

Slightly more than half of these women have a permanent companion, however, this is not a factor that generates significant differences in terms of the improvement of opportunities for the family, mainly because the biggest responsibility as to the household upkeep and raising of children, still falls on them.

To make matters worse , the inclusion of this community to the economic cycles of the nearest urban centers such as Buenaventura has led to a process of formalization of economic activities, that by putting the emphasis on means-ends relationship, has ended up instrumentalizing the socio-economic relationships of these communities, so that the collective sense of production processes is undermined by the problem of economic profitability. As a result of this, the emergence of more economically productive activities ended up turning the women collectors into the poor of their community. Now, in keeping with the logic of capitalism, they face the stigma of poverty and lack of opportunities, they are the poorest in

the community that is in fact one of the poorest collectives in Buenaventura, this port being one of the poorest cities in the country, according to the Surveillance System for Unemployment "*per capita income in Buenaventura for 2007 was U.S. \$440, lower than Nicaragua (U.S. \$790) and similar to Haiti (\$390), Bangladesh (U.S. \$440) and Konya (U.S. \$ 460).*"

Most of these women do not have access to sufficient economic resources to meet the needs of their household, and gathering mollusks being their main source of income, means the low profitability of this activity condemns them to live trapped between marginality and poverty. These factors are generating economic displacement towards Buenaventura, women move looking to improve their living conditions, but this also has the effect of the disappearance of the trade of mollusk harvesting as a traditional practice, among other reasons, due to the scarcity of the product.

It urges in this regard a comprehensive institutional attention, recognizing the cultural characteristics of these communities, contributes to mitigating the effects of patriarchal culture, weak state management, lack of opportunities and the growing process of integration to modernity are having these communities, where these dynamics are completely breaking the traditional processes of sociability leading to the instrumentalization of social relationships and thus, the precarious living conditions of these women and their families.

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Agradecimientos (opcional)

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