6. Biodiversity Management: A Current Trace of the African Diaspora

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Abstract

This study investigates an aspect of the African Diaspora that, to date, has received scant attention. Environmental affairs of African Colombians have been woefully understudied and largely undocumented in major international scholarship. This is surprising since Colombia has the second largest African-descendant population in Latin America, and the African-Colombian territory in the Pacific coast is one of the most biologically diverse regions on the entire planet. The potential economic advantages of this could be enormous for African Colombians and has affected their models of development. However, African Colombians are like other African Diasporas—they are presently disproportionately poor, uneducated, and powerless in their respective societies. A principal objective of this study is to discuss the political-economic and environmental aspects inherent to high biodiversity presence in the African Colombians’ territories, identifying the advantages and obstacles standing in the way of realizing the real dimension of these natural endowments.

INTRODUCTION

The African Diaspora remains integrally connected to the natural resources of the settlements, where African-descendants were mostly forced to migrate. In the last decades, some of these settlements (e.g. tropical forests), have reached a significant global level of discussion due to the growing environmental concern about the loss of biodiversity and its impact on human survival. This concern has also revealed the crucial

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role that ethnic communities have played in conservation and sustainable use of these unique natural resources. In particular, ethnic communities have constructed their lives and cultures in direct connection with nature. African-descendants, as one of the largest ethnic communities in high biodiversity areas, have been forced to recognize and reinforce their African roots in order to establish their own role and perspective in this environmental global concern. In Colombia, this perspective has been based on the institutional strengthening of the grassroots organizations and the recognition of an ethno-development approach that is based on their identity.

Globalization, as a process of high and accelerated interconnectedness of different areas of contemporary life, has integrated diverse actors and common causes, while at the same time influencing historical processes in different corners of the world. The interrelationship between global issues, such as ethnicity, gender, development, and environmental concerns has accelerated the emergence of a growing network of interest and solidarity groups.

The African Diaspora movement is one such interest group. It represents a contemporary recognition of forced migration from Africa, particularly for the purpose of enslavement, throughout the world. In this regard, historical background is the point of reference relating to the challenges faced by the global African Diaspora community to actively participate in the process of globalization. This community is directly affected by major global issues such as poverty and environmental depletion. In particular, the social crisis has been the main concern of most African-descendants, regardless of their location. Hence, the African Diaspora impels the global solidarity of people who share not only the same skin color (to some degree), but who also have a connection to the environment, in a manner reflective of the African continuum.

Nature has been an important actor and witness of this Diaspora; it has embodied the set of material and immaterial components, which has allowed the permanence and transmission of the African roots. The biological diversity of genes, species and ecosystems was also influenced by the new migrants to the tropical areas.

Biodiversity, a rather new term, raised awareness on the key role of ethnic local communities within the global environmental system of governance. The Convention on Biological Diversity emphasizes in its preamble, and in Article 8 addressing the In situ conservation, the role of indigenous and local communities in biodiversity conservation. African-descendant communities are included under the term local communities, from which indigenous groups are differentiated. Such rhetoric, grouping the African-descendants in the local communities’ category, while the indige-