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Muddy Decisions: Gold in the Chocó, Colombia

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ABSTRACT

As gold prices rose between 2002 and 2012, Afro-descendant gold miners confronted illegal outsider-owned gold mines on their land in Colombia's northwest Chocó department. This article examines why these Afro-descendant miners, who used hand tools and techniques, often invited the outsiders, who used heavy machinery and mercury, to work their mines. Their reasons included: familial pressure over land, profit sharing, high prices, access to gold, and dangerous working conditions. The decision to invite in the outsiders complicates the conventional narrative of a coercive relationship between outsiders and Afro-descendant communities, even as the relationship produced worse than expected outcomes for both sides.

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1. Introduction

Esteban¹ and I ducked to enter the tunnel. Its walls were peppered with sand, gravel, pebbles, and stones. A blue-gray powder caked our boots and skin. Water dripped around us and flowed down the bedrock floor to a depression in the entrance. Esteban's son Marco worked to empty the water using a 5-gallon plastic fuel jug cut in half. Esteban's extended family had dug the tunnel 20-m into the hillside over six months following a deposit of gold.

Rain-swollen rivers have deposited flecks of gold throughout the alluvial gravels of Colombia's northwest Chocó department² over millions of years. The rivers flow through the region's tropical forests from the western mountain range of the Colombian Andes into the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Thousands of rural Afro-descendant people mine gold in those gravels using simple but effective techniques similar to those Esteban's family employed. These artisanal gold miners rely on hand tools and gasoline-powered water pumps.

Six months after I entered the tunnel with Esteban, he and his family were panning for gold at the same location. The tunnel was gone, however. In its place, a misty morning sun revealed four large excavators. Two brothers named José and Geraldo owned the machines. Their excavators had opened up the tunnel by removing the hillside down to the bedrock. To gain local support, José and Geraldo let Esteban's family and neighbors, as well as people from nearby towns and villages, pan for gold for two hours every few days. The two brothers relied on heavy machinery. They owned,

between them, the excavators, seven sluices, a three-story metal classifier, two water pumps, and hundreds of meters of aluminum tubing. The two employed twelve migrant workers to operate the machines. Some of the men came from the Chocó, but most, like José and Geraldo, were outsiders from the neighboring department of Antioquia.

Esteban and all his neighbors called the miners 'the excavators' (*los retros*). The thousands of miners working on excavator operations in the Chocó described what they did as small-scale mining (*la pequeña minería*). Whatever the label,³ the excavators used the same principal as the Afro-descendant miners: Dig to the bedrock and wash for gold. But, while Esteban's family relied on water and gravity to sort gold from the earth, small-scale miners used massive machines and the toxic heavy metal mercury. Despite the difference in scale and the fact that José and Geraldo were outsiders, it was Esteban's family who had invited them to come work their family mine. This article outlines the reasons why Esteban's family made the invitation, which included pressure from their extended family, profit sharing, high gold prices, access to gold bearing gravels, and dangerous working conditions.

³ Sometimes small-scale mining is described in the Chocó as medium-scale or mechanized mining. Veiga (2013) distinguishes between small-scale and artisanal mining based on scale, technique, and legal status. He provides the categories: micro-scale (under 5 tonnes of ore a day), small-scale (5–300 tonnes), medium-scale (300–1000 tonnes), and large-scale (more than a 1000 tonnes); legal or illegal; and manual or semi-mechanized. In the Chocó, people used 'artisanal' and 'small-scale' in ways that reflected Colombia's mining legislation before 2001. Artisanal mining, following Veiga's nomenclature, would refer to Afro-descendant micro-scale, legal, manual miners relying on hand tools, while small-scale mining would refer to outsider owned, medium-scale, illegal, mechanized mining operations relying on heavy machinery (see Hinton et al., 2003).

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¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² A department is a Colombian administrative region equivalent to a state.

Esteban's family ultimately faced a paradox because the gold they received from José and Geraldo failed to meet their expectations. José and Geraldo, for their part, were unable to pay the costs of their mine.

I labored as an artisanal and small-scale gold miner in Esteban's village for eighteen months between 2010 and 2012. The village perched high above a fast flowing river in a mining region of the Chocó. About ten families lived in low concrete buildings arranged on three streets. Children attended a one-room school. Some residents tended a scattering of plants, herbs, and fruit trees. Two families raised pigs for food; another raised chickens and farmed fish. Two families ran a pair of small bars, located at opposite ends of the village, serving mine workers. José and Geraldo moved into the community with their small-scale mining operation six months after I began work. Many residents had moved away to look for work or to escape rural violence, leaving half of the homes empty. Families who had moved to the city rented these houses to the foreman, the three female cooks, and the twelve male workers, some with wives or girlfriends, employed by José and Geraldo. I stayed in the empty parish house.

I worked – unpaid – with the gold miners in the village. I began by laboring on different family mines, and when José and Geraldo arrived, I worked on their mine. I rose before dawn and moved water, hauled fuel, dug trenches, and threw stones until mid-afternoon. I only spent a brief period underground. I was an enthusiastic learner and became proficient in some techniques. Difficult tasks became mundane as I became skilled at the rapid movements needed to remove stones from a sluice. The work was monotonous and required patience. I stayed, nonetheless, a neophyte because I never mastered most tasks.

This method was inspired by the apprenticeship ethnography, enskillment, and phenomenology literature (Cooper, 1989; Crossley, 2004; Landry, 2008; Lindsay, 1996; Palsson, 1994; Wacquant, 2005). The approach had two strengths: First, becoming conversant in artisanal mining as a craft opened a window into a miner's practical knowledge and the ambiguities of mine work itself. Second, laboring alongside miners for long hours let me develop relationships and have informal conversations that would have been difficult in other settings. These strengths could be considered a weakness because my fieldwork reflected the experiences of particular families in a specific place and time. Dwelling on the accommodations they made, nonetheless, offers insights on the contingencies of circumstance. I complemented my labor-based fieldwork by visiting dozens of mine sites, and by conducting interviews with miners, activists, and leaders.

Michael Taussig (2004) describes artisanal and small-scale gold mining in his ethnography of the southern Colombian Pacific. He notes that the national Gold Museum of the Banco de la República in Bogotá is silent on contemporary Afro-descendant gold miners and their ancestors who have mined gold since the colonial period (2004, p. 13). During my own visits in 2011, I observed that the museum's public exhibit emphasized pre-Colombian Indigenous artifacts, yet made little mention of the hundreds of thousands of Colombians who mine gold today. Colombia's mining legislation does more than ignore; it criminalizes most gold miners. Legal reforms in 2001 required small-scale and artisanal gold miners to complete the same technical and environmental studies as the large-scale gold mining projects owned by multinational corporations. Various mining organizations and scholars have shown how these legal changes have criminalized the quotidian practices of thousands of artisanal and small-scale miners in favor of large-scale multinational projects (see Sarmiento et al., 2013a; Urán, 2013).

Anna Tsing (2000, 2004) describes a foreign owned Canadian mining company working in the rainforests of Indonesia. She puts a future orientation, appearances, various legal and illegal

entrepreneurs, and speculation at the core of resource extraction projects. Luning (2014) shows how similar hopes of future wealth are characteristic of many proposed large-scale mines. Opposition and support of mining projects coexists, in part, because investors see future profit while groups opposed see nightmare environmental disasters. Much of the contemporary literature on large-scale mining dwells on this tension between potential profits and community opposition to corporate projects based on environmental catastrophe (e.g. Bebbington and Bury, 2014; Kirsch, 2014; Welker, 2009).

A parallel literature addresses artisanal and small-scale gold mining in Colombia,⁴ in Latin America,⁵ and other regions,⁶ through issues of poverty alleviation, gender, mercury use, global connections, and efforts to legalize and formalize the sector. The literatures, sometimes, lumps various small-scale and artisanal mining techniques together. Rural Afro-descendant communities in the Chocó have a complex relationship with gold mining and gold miners on their territory, which cannot be understood by considering artisanal and small-scale mining as one. The relationship is also not encompassed by opposing communities to mining based on fears of environmental damage. Real and potential mining raises pragmatic tensions between the hopes and fears of particular people to particular mines.

What the literatures fails to make clear is people see in various scales of mining – artisanal, small-, and large-scale – opportunities as well as risks. Landscape, livelihood, land tenure, kinship, and labor relationships shape the practical circumstances by which people see opportunities and risks. This article addresses the dynamics of gold mining in the Colombian Pacific by focusing on a handful of mines in the northern Chocó department. For the families concerned about these mines, the significant factors where not those raised in the literature. The factors that mattered were more mundane, quotidian, and particular. This article describes five reasons artisanal miners invited small-scale miners onto their land. Despite the legally recognized collective land tenure of Afro-descendant communities in the Colombian Pacific, land is commonly understood in smaller parcels. In practice, extended family kinship groups own lots (*lotes*), including gardens, fruit stands, and gold mines. The family groups consist of interrelated households. These families might invite small-scale miners to work their lots against the wishes of other villagers. Within an extended family, individual households labor to extract gold in reciprocal work groups. While artisanal miners share profits only within these work groups, small-scale miners pay the extended family a percentage of production. Consequently, many absent family members support the decision to invite small-scale miners onto their family's lots. These are often internally displaced persons or economic migrants who hope to receive a percentage of the gold mined by the small-scale miners. While prices are high, artisanal miners seek ways to quickly extract the gold from their land. Since artisanal miners rely on physically demanding extraction techniques, they hope inviting small-scale miners to work their land will let them reach gold they cannot access with their hand tools. Artisanal miners also hope inviting in the excavators will let them shift the considerable dangers of mining onto outsiders. Yet, the mining operations that result from artisanal miners bringing in small-scale miners often fail to meet

⁴ See Cohen (2014), Idrobo et al. (2014), Rodríguez, (2013); Sarmiento et al. (2013a); Siegel (2013).

⁵ See Cleary (1990, 2000), Cremers et al. (2013), Hanai (1998), Heemskerk (2002); Kolen et al. (2013), Larreta (2002), Rochlin (2015), Siegel and Veiga (2010), Silbergeld et al. (2002), de Theije and Bal (2010), Cremers et al. (2000).

⁶ See Heemskerk (2002), Hilson and McQuilken (2014), Hilson, et al., (2014), Hilson (2003, 2006), Nyame and Grant (2014), Saldarriaga-Isaza et al. 2013, Seccatore et al. (2014), Spiegel (2014), Thornton (2014), Verbrugge (2014).

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