



## CHALLENGES OF THE BLACK COMMUNITIES; THE CONSERVATION OF THE SANTIAGO CAYAPAS RIVER COMMUNITY

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AGROINDUSTRY

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### ABSTRACT

*This article addresses the case of Afro-descendants in the Rio Santiago Cayapas Commune, Ecuador. Chapter I contextualizes Esmeraldas within the Chocó Biogeographic region. Chapter II analyzes the history from African slaves to the resistance stronghold. Chapter III explores how the resource-rich Rio Santiago Cayapas Commune faces state-driven displacement, logging industry, oil palm agriculture, and mining, prioritizing resource exploitation, impacting local communities. Logging, oil palm, and mining lead to deforestation, territory loss, conflicts, and environmental degradation, straining life in the Rio Santiago Cayapas Commune.*

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## 1. Introduction

This article discusses the construction of the concept of deterritorialization based on the relationship between the province of Esmeraldas and the Biogeographic Chocó, an area of great biological diversity shared by Ecuador, Colombia and Panama. The province of Esmeraldas, dissociated from this natural territory, faces environmental risks due to economic exploitation and the demand for natural resources. Throughout the article, we first attempt to analyze the relationship between the province of Esmeraldas and the Biogeographic Chocó, then we seek to examine the processes of deterritorialization and dispossession, and finally we seek to understand the social and environmental implications, as well as the historical impacts and social and political dynamics that have led to deterritorialization and dispossession in the Comuna Río Santiago Cayapas, a territory over an area of approximately 60,000 hectares (Arroyo, 2019).000 hectares (Arroyo, 2019, p. 46) and which has a profound relationship with the history and culture of this region of Ecuador.

In the construction of this work, two chapters were established, one called Historical Conformation of the Territory, in which an analysis of the African Diaspora in Latin America is made, and how from the stranding of a slave ship on the coast of Ecuador, to the end of the African diaspora in Latin America (García, 2022). (García, 2022)The study also explores how the African descendants formed a Palenque in the northern region of what is now known as the province of Esmeraldas. In addition, it explores how Africans and their descendants acquired land and built the Río Santiago-Cayapas Commune.

Subsequently, deterritorialization and dispossession were analyzed, based on the implications of state policies, the timber industry, the oil palm agroindustry and open-pit mining and their consequences on the loss of land and natural resources, which is inferred in the deterritorialization and dispossession in the territory of the Río Santiago-Cayapas Commune.

On the other hand, the justification for the article was based on the importance of understanding the historical and contemporary processes that have led to the transformation of the Esmeraldas territory and its connection with the Biogeographic Chocó. Deterritorialization and land dispossession have significant impacts on local communities, the natural environment and biodiversity. The analysis of these processes contributes to the understanding of the socioeconomic, political and environmental dynamics that have shaped the province of Esmeraldas and its relationship with the surrounding region. Additionally for the construction of this article the methodology involved:

- Documentary research; this was based on extensive documentary research that includes historical texts, academic studies and primary sources from various authors and experts who have studied the relationship between Esmeraldas and the Biogeographic Chocó, as well as the processes of deterritorialization and dispossession.
- Critical Analysis; the information gathered was analyzed, identifying historical patterns, causes and consequences of the processes of deterritorialization and dispossession in the Río Santiago-Cayapas Commune.
- Comparison of Perspectives; different perspectives and approaches were considered to understand the factors that have contributed to the transformation of the territory and the resulting effects on the life of the communities.
- Historical Contextualization; based on a historical context, an attempt was made to understand the evolution of the province of Esmeraldas and its relationship with the conformation of Ecuador as a State, to culminate in the analysis of the rupture of the territory as a space of coexistence of the people of African descent in those lands.

The Province of Esmeraldas, a space dissociated from the partition of a natural territory of great biological diversity, the Biogeographic Chocó, as will be explained in the following lines of this chapter. What is certain is that according to the criteria of the Ibero-American Program of Science and Technology for Development, Biological Diversity Subprogram, under the coordination of Dr. Peter Mann de Toledo, it corresponds to the "Province of Chocó. A region of the (...) Pacific Coast of northern Ecuador, Colombia and Panama" Oca et al. (2020), (Morrone, 2002, p. 271), which speaks of the configuration of a territory, based on its similar biogeographic characteristics beyond the historical conformation of the nations of that region, is very well georeferenced spatially, but it could be included as an update of the new conformation of the territory, as it is known that historically,

(...) The Biogeographic Chocó is a natural neo-tropical corridor that begins its limits from north to south as follows: from the province of Darien to the east of Panama, crossing all of western

Colombia to the northwest of Ecuador and ending in the extreme north of Peru. And from west to east, it goes from the Pacific Coast to the western mountain range, which means that this corridor crosses the Pacific coast of four countries and in some it goes into valleys, slopes or even to the Caribbean coast. (Chica, 2010).

In this sense, the importance of a territory as wild as it is exponentially at risk, due to the pressures of the current economic system, which daily requires raw materials [native forests of various altitudinal levels, mainly gold-bearing minerals, water, transition territories between the sea and dry land (mangroves), wood of all types and for all uses and a great variety of wildlife] contained in the biogeographic Chocó territory, has managed to be configured around who owns the land; in Colombia "82.70 % of the population of the Chocó territory are considered Black or Afro-Colombian, which coexist with 11.90 % of indigenous population and 5.40 % of population considered white/mulatto" (Parra, 2016, p. 24).

In the Darien territory of Panama, where "the province of Chocó Biogeographical" (Morrone, 2002, p. 271) was born, its population is mainly composed of indigenous and Afro-descendants and the large influx of Colombian migration to the territory that was once part of the Republic of Colombia (Olmedo, 2006). Colonization also accounts for an important part of the composition of the population of this province, in addition to the historical variable of the struggle for possession of the territory by the continents that sought to control the territory, dominating the passage between the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean as a mechanism to control the transit of commodities from Europe, Africa, Asia to the Americas and vice versa.

Centuries of invasions and plundering passed between dependence on Spain, unable to permanently subdue the indigenous population and unable to decide and assume the project of opening the interoceanic canal for fear of opening the doors to its enemies - the other powers of mercantile capitalism - and the interests of the empires that sought simply to strengthen themselves with the appropriation of the region of Panama and the Darien, either by wresting it from Spanish rule or later, from the nascent Colombian nation. (Suarez, 2011, p. 45).

In Ecuador, the territory of the Biogeographic Chocó is confronted with the same very particular realities of the birth of the nation states of the former space of domination of the Spanish colony [the Caribbean, Central and South America] particularities that give it its wild and savage form, while urbanization was and in some cases continues to be as unsustainable as unfeasible, however; The wild and savage forms of the territory never meant that it was devoid of population settlements, since before 1830, when the Republic was founded on this side of the border (García, 2011), there were known processes of struggle and dispute for the domination of the territorial space, to the point that these struggles established new spaces of ethnic confluence, which gave rise to the cultural diversity of the Biogeographic Chocó.

The Ecuadorian case is based on a general preconception that, according to Juan García Salazar, is inaccurate, since the research work has had to rely on fragmentary statistical and genealogical documents to begin to reconstruct a culture; taking this into account, we can say that the historical data collected about black slavery on the Pacific coast from Choco to Esmeraldas, which state that the lands of Esmeraldas were inhospitable because they were inhabited by brave black rebels and zambos, is inaccurate (García, 2011, p. 51). (García, 2011, p. 51)

This highlights a process of pre-existence of population settlements, of African and indigenous descendants who lived together in a correct ecological harmony and on the other hand the belligerence of the positioning of one and the other in a common territory, as established by Dr. Rocío Rueda in her doctoral thesis entitled *De esclavizados a comuneros en la cuenca aurífera del río Santiago-Río Cayapas (Esmeraldas). Black ethnicity under construction in Ecuador, XVIII-XIX centuries;* The interaction between these jungle dwellers was of frequent tensions and rivalries, in this regard it is known that in 1548 there was a confrontation between niguas and yumbos in the so-called war of Cansacoto, due to the subjugation demonstrated by the yumbos entrusted to Francisco Ruiz. (Rueda, 2019, p. 37).

It was in this way that the population settlements were generated that later gave rise to the cities of the province of Esmeraldas, so that by 2010, according to INEC the population self-identified as mestizos 44.7%; Afro-Ecuadorians 43.9%; whites 5.9%; indigenous 2.8%; Montubio 2.4% and others 0.3% (INEC, 2010). Taking into account that the territory of the province of Esmeraldas, comes from the rupture of

the Biogeographic Chocó territory, a rupture that is typical of colonization processes and agrarian reforms, these reforms sought among other things to implement several strategic lines, which in the opinion of the Governing Board and based on the text of Fausto Jordán, on Agrarian Reform In Ecuador (Jordán, 2003, pp. 288-289) I have summarized as follows:

- Hand over land under IERAC administration to peasants and landless groups.
- To associate small farms and strengthen their productivity.
- Reduce the latifundia, emphasizing the intervention of UPAS of more than 500 hectares and up to 1000 hectares.
- Establish the policy for the conservation and use of renewable natural resources.
- Modernize public administration in the agricultural sector (create the Ministry of Agriculture) (Jordán, 2003, pp. 288-289).

Thus, the Agrarian Reform process implemented by the Junta de Gobierno (1972-1976) and deepened by the Triunvirato (1976-1979) [governments with military dictatorships preceding the reestablishment of democracy in 1979] and; specifically with regard to the creation of public policy for the conservation and use of renewable natural resources, directly generated the breaking point of the expanded territory of the Biogeographic Chocó, as historically conceived (Chica, 2010), as the deepening of this public policy from the exercise of power of the Ecuadorian State by the Military Triumvirate (Jordán, 2003), was based on a process of depredation and exploitation of the forest resource, unprecedented up to that time, while the military government had proposed to generate the development of roads in the country, in the hands of the Ministry of Public Works in the eighties but monitored by the Ecuadorian army, as part of a public policy that intertwined roads as a synonym of development and national security. O.P. constitutes, as already mentioned, the maximum entity in road matters, and the execution of National Security projects corresponds to its exclusive jurisdiction" (Aizaga, 1988, p. 72).

It is then up to this public policy to carry on its back the fruits of the expansion of the agricultural frontier over the native forest, and due to the accelerated colonization processes, the Ecuadorian government had no choice but to establish as a prescriptive norm for land regularization in the country, that; it "(...)Offered plots of 50 hectares of land in the East and needed the settlers to cut half of the forest within five years in order to demonstrate an effective use" (Wasserstrom & Southgate, 2013, p. 36), later this dynamic acquired its national character, inasmuch as road development was a cross-cutting project for all public policy in Ecuador (Aizaga, 1988).

It is in this way that it can be understood how from before the founding of the Republic of Ecuador in 1830, until approximately 1980, there existed in the country a large biocorridor that was part of what was the Biogeographic Chocó Province (Morrone, 2002, p. 271), a biocorridor that was interrupted, given the action of the central government through the implementation of an aggressive public policy of agrarian reform and colonization, which redefined the surface of the Chocó, depopulating it. 271), a biocorridor that was interrupted due to the action of the central government through the implementation of an aggressive public policy of agrarian reform and colonization, which redefined the surface of the Chocó, depopulating the territories of the indigenous and black peoples, establishing small islands of native vegetation, some of which remain to this day, the province of Esmeraldas being one of these territories.

The configuration of the African diaspora in the Americas was the main cause of the repopulation of African inhabitants and their descendants in these territories unknown to them, since they were uprooted from their original territories, stripped of their humanity and their rights, the black subjects were reduced to objects of commerce, this was due to several factors, according to Roquinaldo Ferreira and Tatiana Seijas, who developed an extensive work of compilation of historical data compiled in the book *Afro-Latin American Studies*.

Several factors explain Latin America's preponderance in the transatlantic slave trade. First, the region suffered a demographic catastrophe after European colonialism decimated millions of indigenous people, forcing Europeans to seek productive labor elsewhere. Second: Portugal was already trafficking slaves to Europe and other regions of Africa, which facilitated its landing in America with this type of trade. Third, the slave trade to Latin America reflects the region's place in the early modern global economy, based primarily on the mass production of agricultural commodities for export to Europe. The rise of the plantation system-defined as the political and economic order based on slave labor in the tropical plantations of the New World-was a product of the slave trade. (Ferreira & Seijas, 2018, pp. 42 - 43).

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Shipwrecks also brought many Africans to shore before they experienced slavery in the New World. One of the most famous occurred in what is now northwestern Ecuador in the mid-16th century, while another major shipwreck occurred near Cape Gracias a Dios in eastern Central America in the early 17th century, the latter likely due to a slave mutiny combined with an act of piracy. (Ferreira & Seijas, 2018, p. 575)

It is within the context of stranded ships or shipwrecks that occurred on the shores of the beach of what is now known as Portete, belonging to the Canton Muisne, in the Province of Esmeraldas, the stranding as told by Paul Raoul Mvengou Cruzmerino who indicates that; "In the 16th century a slave ship that left Panama for the mines of Callao in Peru, sank and a group of slaves escaped and formed some palenques in the region, as Savoia explains to us " (Mvengou, 2018, p. 227), the event itself [stranding of the ship] promoted the freedom of black slaves among men and women, this process is known in Ecuador, as the genesis of the rebellion of the slaves and the Apalencamiento of the blacks, in the territory of the new world.

At first, these black men and women who gathered on the shores of Portete beach and entered the jungle territory of the province of Esmeraldas, formed a Palenque, a territory that was later nurtured by the arrival of other blacks coming from the rebellion of their masters, the manumission of slavery, the purchase or acquisition of their freedom by their own means, etc..., then this Palenque was constituted around what Arturo Escobar calls territory of freedom; these were "free settlements (...) in which the processes of resistance and cultural, demographic and military reconstitution took place" (Escobar, 2008, p. 62), well, this Palenque was constituted around what Arturo Escobar calls territory of freedom. 62), well, this Palenque was constituted in what today is known as the territory of the Río Santiago-Cayapas Commune, historically the territory that today is communal, was always dominated by the natives of the site, same that as Rocío Rueda establishes, were "native groups such as the yumbos, malabas, cayapas, niguas, colorados or tsáchilas and campaces" (Rueda, 2019, p. 36), who saw in the arrival of the black man, the reconfiguration of the domain of the territory and its reconstruction perse, based on the negotiations and agreements established between the black Africans and the natives of the site;

After the initial warlike logic set in motion by the enslaved who arrived in Esmeraldas in 1553, the alliances and agreements they undertook, first with the Indians and then with the Europeans, resulted in the conformation of a free mestizo society, the result of new forms of socio-cultural interaction and interethnic encounter, which contributed to the conformation of a new social and ethnic identity. (Rueda, 2019, p. 35)

At the beginning, these territories included all the lands that were between the headwaters of the Santiago and Cayapas rivers and ended at its mouth to the Pacific Ocean, being this territory rich in natural resources, which contained several altitudinal floors, which generated a variety of ecosystems and added to all this, The black natives of Africa had military, mining, agricultural and rural knowledge, among many others, and the dynamics of the peace agreements between those who inhabited the territory at that time, generated the conditions for their visibility, which were later assumed as mechanisms of power and domination of the territory.

It is also known in Esmeraldas, that once the Nation State was formed and the Republic of Ecuador was born, the processes of liberation of the lands of the former Spanish colony, brought with it commitments of the new State, with the nations that contributed to its liberation, It is in this way that the territory where the blacks and the descendants of Africans were found, went from being a territory populated by the native peoples and the blacks that were found there, to being a territory under the

power and dominion of the English, due to the transcendence of the writing for the purposes of this text, I will quote a large part of it.

By then, in 1852, the English had negotiated with the State the method of payment of the foreign debt contracted with Colombia for independence in 1822 and 1824. The foreigners obtained a decree from the Government of José María Urvina, by which the State could make contracts with the agent of the Ecuadorian Bondholders Society regarding mining concessions and vacant land for people who wanted to settle in Ecuador, work in agriculture, build roads, implement machinery or any industrial innovation. Later, the official newspaper *El Seis de Marzo* published the document of the agreement celebrated in 1854 between the State and the bondholders. It established that the bonds from the deferred interest of the debt would be amortized with vacant land and specified the concession regions. Subsequently, in 1857, the Icaza-Pritchett agreement detailed the regions for the concession; in the province of Esmeraldas, the delivery of vacant land was fixed in an extension of one hundred thousand square blocks, between the Mataje and La Tola rivers and one hundred thousand square blocks on the Salima, Atacames and Súa rivers, at a value of three pesos per block. In addition, other lands were granted in the areas of Zamora, Canelos and the Cañar River, which means that the agreement was extensive to the Amazon. It was clarified that, in the event that there were not enough vacant lands in the aforementioned regions, bondholders could access the lands in Esmeraldas (Rueda, 2019, p. 209).

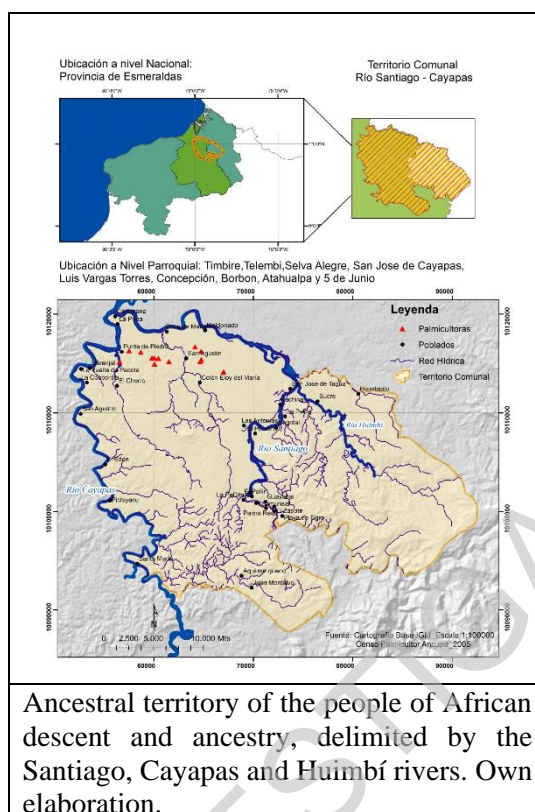
However, despite the fact that the territory of coexistence of the black and native indigenous peoples was under the administration of the Kingdom of England, those lands; those of the common territory of the blacks that became part of the Ecuadorian Nation State, were always under the dominion of the black inhabitants coming from Africa, of their descendants and of the native indigenous and rebellious blacks, manumission slaves, coming from the agreement in the territory of the Pacific Andean region, moreover, these black subjects of uncertain origin [as the rumor of the territory of the African palenque went through vast regions of the nations dominated by the Spanish colony], established diverse strategies to take possession of the territory that was once theirs, by processes of domination, dispute, usufruct or any other form used by them for their social, cultural and material reproduction.

In this way, and in order to ensure the cultural, economic, ecosystemic and even physical survival of the population of African descent in an era of post-colonial domination, now in the hands of the Creoles and the reborn feudalists of the Republic of Ecuador, the black inhabitants of this territory decided to acquire the land from the current owners of the territory, decided to acquire the land from the current owners, which at that time had passed from the hands of the Kingdom of England to Reinaldo Flores and later to Rufino Viteri, whose widow Isolina Weir inherited the territory within the following boundaries upon his death;

On the upper side the so-called Cojerías stream which is to the left of the Santiago River, on the lower side, the mouth of Borbón; on one side the lands of Guimbi, up to an estuary called La Peña, remaining in its center the Santiago River and on the other uncultivated lands with three leagues in the center (Rueda, 2019, p. 268).

The following illustration shows the territory acquired by the Apalencia Africans and their descendants, and which, based on the foundation of the nascent Ecuadorian State, was in the hands of private investors, and some commodity export companies of international English, North American, German, Italian and Colombian capital, territory controlled by the Ecuador Land Company together with all the tenants (Rueda, 2019, p. 272). 272), the transaction cost for the purchase of the territory was set at \$ 3,200.00 Sucres, the currency of Ecuador in 1885 (Rueda, 2019, p. 270).

Figure 1. Map of the Comuna Rio Santiago Cayapas



Source: Victor Arroyo Quiñónez, 2023

## 2. Deterritorialization and dispossession

The objective of this section is to analyze the processes of deterritorialization and dispossession that have been carried out in the Río Santiago Cayapas Commune, Ecuador, by various entities and industries. These processes have generated significant effects on the local communities, their relationship with the natural environment and their socioeconomic wellbeing, impacting the reality of the Biogeographic Chocó, which stands out for being a bioregion rich in natural resources and in the generation of life in the continent. The Ecuadorian state has been involved in deterritorialization through policies and projects that have led to land expropriation and forced relocation of communities. According to Ramírez (2019), development policies promoted by the central government have prioritized the exploitation of natural resources, resulting in the loss of territory for local communities. This situation has led to social conflicts and tensions between state authorities and affected populations, whose territorial rights have been violated.

An important fact of great historical value for the understanding of the process of deterritorialization is the process of constitution of the territory itself, detailed in the previous chapter on the historical conformation of the Commune, through the direct purchase of more than 60,000 thousand hectares of land, as part of the negotiation of the Afro-descendants for the recognition of land and territory, which they longed to enjoy for the full exercise of their ancestral heritage and their cultural diversity. Action that lost the main character of recognition, while the following actions of the nascent governments were raised from the recognition of the territory of national character, and removing the validity of the deeds that rest in the vaults of the Central Bank of Ecuador, where the communal territory is recognized as a private property of a group of black people. (Arroyo, 2019, p. 47).

The timber industry has been another major cause of deterritorialization and dispossession in the area. According to González et al. (2018), the expansion of the timber industry has led to deforestation and forest loss, affecting the traditional livelihoods of Afro-descendant and black communities in the

region. Unregulated timber extraction has generated an imbalance in local ecosystems and affected biodiversity, which in turn negatively impacts the quality of life and culture of the communities.

Now, in the communal territory there is a divergent reality, which could be understood only from the point of view of the opportunity cost proposed by the vertiginous advance of the timber industry, acquiring the vegetal resources that are on the ground, generating a very unsustainable forest use, generating conditions of ecological imbalance and converting forest land into farmland, generating an opportunity for the entry of a second industry, the agro-industry of oil palm production, which in the case of the Comuna Río Santiago Cayapas, is the same timber industry transformed into the agricultural industry. (Arroyo, 2019, p. 51).

The oil palm agroindustry has also contributed to deterritorialization and dispossession in the Comuna Río Santiago Cayapas. According to Vargas and Cordero (2020), the expansion of palm plantations has resulted in the displacement of local communities and the loss of agricultural lands and forest areas. This activity has generated conflicts over land use and access to natural resources, as communities have seen their livelihood options reduced and their traditional ways of life have been affected.

It is also important to establish how, as a result of oil palm cultivation, processes of colonization of communal territory have been generated that have led to the dispossession of land through economic transactions validated by the State of Ecuador, since jurisprudence establishes communal territory as a legally indivisible, non-seizable and inalienable territory (Arroyo, 2019, p. 12).

The open-pit mining process has been one of the most invasive forms of extractivism in the region. According to López (2017), large-scale mineral exploitation has generated serious environmental and social impacts, directly affecting the territory and natural resources of the Río Santiago Cayapas Commune. Environmental degradation has compromised the health of local populations and affected the availability of water and other fundamental resources for their subsistence. Taken together, these processes of deterritorialization and dispossession have significantly altered the lives of Afro-descendant and black communities in the Comuna Río Santiago Cayapas, impacting their cultural identity, local economy and the ecological balance of the region. Understanding these processes is crucial to address the socio-environmental challenges faced by these communities and to seek solutions that promote social justice and sustainability in the region.

### 3. Conclusions

This text highlights the importance of the Biogeographic Chocó, a territory rich in natural resources that has been affected by economic pressures and exploitation of raw materials, mainly due to the capitalist system. It is mentioned that the Afro-descendant population in the province of Esmeraldas coexists with other ethnic groups, being a territory characterized by cultural diversity.

The historical conformation of the territory of the Comuna Río Santiago Cayapas, which originated from the shipwreck of a slave ship off the coast of Esmeraldas. The freed Africans established a Palenque and mixed with other native groups, giving rise to the creation of a free mestizo society. The territory was the subject of interests and disputes between various powers and was acquired by private investors at the birth of the Ecuadorian state.

The territory of the Río Santiago Cayapas Commune originated from a palenque of black men and women, which was established after the shipwreck of a slave ship off the coast of Esmeraldas. In addition, the coexistence between the blacks and the original natives of the region gave rise to the formation of a new social and ethnic identity in the communal territory and the expansion of the Ecuadorian State, together with the colonization and agrarian reform policy, changed the territorial configuration of the Biogeographic Chocó and affected the ancestral territory of the Commune.

It exposes the processes of deterritorialization and dispossession carried out by various entities, such as the Ecuadorian State, the timber industry, oil palm agribusiness and open-pit mining. These activities have resulted in the loss of land and natural resources, negatively affecting local communities and their way of life. The Ecuadorian state has been involved in policies and projects that have led to land expropriation and forced relocation of local communities, generating social conflicts and tensions. The logging industry has caused deforestation and forest loss, affecting the traditional livelihoods of Afro-descendant and black communities in the region, and the expansion of the oil palm agribusiness has resulted in the displacement of local communities and the loss of agricultural land and forest areas, generating conflicts over land use and access to natural resources.



This article is a direct observation that focuses on the interaction of the Afro-descendant subject with the ancestral territory of La Comuna Río Santiago Cayapas. It addresses the historical development of this region of Esmeraldas as part of the Biogeographic Chocó, contextualizing the presence of afrodescendants in the region, to finally focus on the deterritorialization and dispossession produced in the Comuna Río Santiago Cayapas, making an analysis of the loss of ancestral lands and its causes. The processes of deterritorialization and dispossession have negatively affected the quality of life and culture of the local communities, putting their survival and socioeconomic well-being at risk. The communities of the Río Santiago Cayapas Commune have resisted and fought for the defense of their territory and their rights, confronting external actors that threaten their existence and traditional ways of life and also the conservation and protection of this ancestral territory is essential to preserve the biological, cultural and social diversity of the region and guarantee sustainability for future generations.

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UNDER INVESTIGATION

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