

Peddling Sweets and Pioneering Territory: black women and work in Colombia's Caribbean Region

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Abstract

This article is the result of ethnographic research carried out with black women from San Basilio de Palenque, a black community located in the Colombian Caribbean. These women work as peddlers of different types of sweets in Colombian territories and neighboring countries. My ethnography followed the movement of Palenquera women who circulate with sweets, in order to examine the dynamics, movements, interactions and meanings of this activity in terms of race, gender and work relations. The women find social dignity in the universe of sweets, despite affirming and experiencing harmful effects on their bodies - that is, despite recognizing that peddling sweets is work that can kill, and that makes them “slaves” – and express positive valuations and emotions about the work. This dual meaning of working with sweets permeates the descriptions presented in this article. The trade offers a marginalized and ambiguous strategy that allows them to survive and promote their social mobility, especially by investing the material gains in the formal education of their children, and the sense that this marginal strategy, although it is difficult, provides them autonomy and dignity.

Key words: Black women, Palenque, work, peddling, Colombian Caribbean.

Na rota dos doces: mulheres negras, comércio e trabalho no caribe colombiano

Resumo

Este artigo resulta da pesquisa etnográfica realizada com mulheres negras oriundas de San Basilio de Palenque, uma comunidade negra localizada no caribe colombiano. São mulheres negras que trabalham vendendo diversos tipos de doces nos territórios colombianos e em países fronteiriços. O trabalho acompanha etnograficamente a circulação das palenqueras e seus doces com o intuito de refletir sobre as dinâmicas, os deslocamentos, as interações e os significados desta atividade em termos das relações de raça, gênero e trabalho. Ao encontrarem no universo dos doces um espaço de dignidade social, mesmo afirmando e vivenciando nos seus corpos os efeitos prejudiciais para a saúde – isto é, mesmo reconhecendo que os doces são um trabalho que pode matar, e que as torna “escravas” –, elas manifestam valorações e emoções positivas sobre o seu exercício laboral. Esse duplo significado do trabalho com os doces permeia as descrições desse artigo. Este ofício oferece uma estratégia marginal e ambígua que lhes permite sobreviver e promover a sua mobilidade social, sobretudo através dos ganhos materiais que destinam à educação formal de seus filhos, e da sensação de que essa mesma estratégia marginal, mesmo sendo dura, lhes permite autonomia e dignidade.

Palavras-chave: mulheres negras, palenque, trabalho, comércio, caribe colombiano.

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Introduction

Its 8:40 on a sunny Sunday morning, in the rural black community of San Basilio de Palenque, Colombia. Walking through the unpaved streets, people are seen moving about. Women, men and children go to the streets to obtain what they need for the day. They go out to buy supplies, to work, visit family. An intense flow of people, cars and goods is noticed on one of these busy Sunday outings. Sunday is a day of particular effervescence in this community. It is the day to receive tourists who come to discover *un rincón de África*¹ in Colombia, it is a day for distant relatives to visit. It is the day for parties, drinking and *champeta*². On the main square, the movement of various Palenquera women is noticed on their way to neighboring municipalities to work and return at the end of the day to their homes. They work selling different types of sweets, in various Colombian cities and in various bordering countries. They are recognized in Palenque as peddlers and pioneers.

Walking a bit more, at 9 AM I find myself at the house of a peddler who is about to begin her sales routine. She has just finished a big breakfast of fish, manioc, plantains and soup. She puts on her sandals, rubs body oil on her feet and legs and puts her apron on her waist. The motorcycles that will take us out of Palenque is already in front of her house. She gets her *ponchera*³ loaded with sweets and takes a few moments to place it on her head. To relieve the pressure of the dozens of kilos that she balances there, she first puts an old cloth wrapped in a doughnut before placing the aluminum basin on top. The basin with sweets is placed at the front of the motorcycle, and behind she carries, in one of her hands, the plastic stool that will support her sweets at different moments. The time has come to get on the motorcycle and leave Palenque.

This article will analyze experiences with this type of informal work conducted by black Palenquera women, in an effort to understand their social agency and the consequences of this experience. The attempt is to accompany the movement of women who circulate with sweets, and in this way to consider the flows, travels, interactions and meanings of this activity in terms of relations of gender, labor and race. In most cases, the sale of their products is the main source of family income and their bodies are used as a vehicle and propaganda for the sweets.

1 "A piece of África in Colombia", this is how the local residents and the mass media evoke and refer to this community.

2 *Champeta* is a musical rhythm present since the 1960s in the Colombian Caribbean. It gained notoriety in regions with a strong black presence in the cities of Cartagena and Barranquilla, and in San Basilio de Palenque. The *champeta* is inspired by various African musical genres. This diasporic musical universe was, as emphasized by Claudia Mosquera and Marion Provenzal, "influenced by African music, the interpreters of the traditional Palenquera music created the creole *champeta* imitating the way of singing of Africans with their dialects and words in Spanish and in the Palenquera language" (Mosquera, Provenzal 2000:105). Luis Martínez also analyzed the genesis and historic development of the *champeta* in the identity processes found in San Basilio. His interest is in showing that behind this musical phenomenon of the *champeta*, "are hidden elements that in one way or another articulate the way of life of the Palenqueros. With the inclusion of this musical manifestation in the cultural archives of the Palenque they have been able to keep alive vital aspects of the culture like the musical tradition, the customs and the form of social organization in both the home town, and in the urban enters to which the Palenqueros arrived in search of new horizons" (Martínez 2011: 172).

3 *Palaganas*, *porcelana* and *poncheras* are synonyms used to refer to the aluminum basins that the black Palenquera women place on their heads.

The women who I will accompany come from San Basilio de Palenque,⁴ a community located in the municipality of Mahates, in Bolívar state, Colombia, some sixty kilometers from the city of Cartagena de Indias, capital of the department⁵ of Bolívar, which is part of the Colombia's Caribbean region. San Basilio de Palenque is a community founded by enslaved people who took refuge in the *palenques* on Colombia's northern coast since the sixteenth century. This grouping of black communities was pioneer in the first peace agreements in Colombia, and became converted into the first free black territory in America due to a mutual non-aggression agreement signed between the Spanish Crown and the local residents in 1713 (Arrazola 1970). In 25 November 2005, San Basilio de Palenque was placed on Unesco's list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and is important to the presence of Afrodescendants in Colombia.

Among the numerous Palenques existing during the colonial period (Navarrete 2003), San Basilio is the only one that remains (Cunin 2003). Local residents regularly refer to the epic deeds of Benkos Biohó, the great *cimarrón* leader and founding hero of the Palenqueros, who is revered as the person who led the village to freedom. Domingo Biohó, according to colonial authorities, arrived in Cartagena de Indias as a slave in the sixteenth century, having organized palenques, he shaped forms of military resistance and established the conditions and mechanisms for political negotiation with the colonial administration (Hernandez et al, 2008).

The ethnographic research in Palenque de San Basilio was conducted from September 2015 until June 2016, and included brief stays in the cities of Cartagena, Bucaramanga, Bogotá and Barranquilla⁶. I lived in San Basilio de Palenque for nine months with Flor María and her family⁷. My initial network of women developed mainly through my stay in Flor María's house in Palenque. She had spent years working with the sales of fruits and sweets, and through her I gradually gained access to her network of contacts. I thus came to speak, interact, circulate and interview mostly her nuclear family: mother, sisters, daughters, in-laws, daughter-in-law, friends and *comadres*.

It was not immediately easy to conduct field research with black women in a black community, even as a black woman - although my skin is less pigmented than the women with whom I worked. I felt an initial lack of trust towards my presence, for being an "outsider", young and single, who would remain in the community for nine months, triggering looks and sensations of suspicion. In this respect, one Palenquero man told me: "the theme of your research is not easy, it involves making a good first contact, the Palenquera women are not easy". I tried to carefully heed this advice during the work and be attentive to this process of approximation through which I should gain their trust.

In my initial contact with Palenquero men, they were quite helpful and attentive, the opposite of the situation with the women. Even during my preparations to arrive at the location, through contacts I had made while still in Brazil and Bogotá, the men were more accessible. In addition to cordiality and expressions of interest in my research and in helping, a number of times I felt I was the target of flirting that disturbed me. To protect myself in these situations, I would say that I had left a boyfriend in Brazil who would soon be visiting me in Colombia.

4 San Basilio is the name of a saint. The older residents of the location prefer to call it San Basilio de Palenque, instead of Palenque de San Basilio. In the first form, the saint comes from the community and not the community from the saint. Nevertheless, it is realized that in recent decades black subjects and collectives have sought to give priority to the recognition of the Palenque, reviving the history of the *cimarronaje* found in this term. Among various authors, use of both names for the city is found. In this article I will respect both forms, and will alternate between only Palenque or San Basilio, and not the complete name.

5 Departments are the administrative-political regions into which Colombia is divided. The notion is equivalent to the concept of "state".

6 This article is part of the result of fieldwork conducted for a doctoral thesis in social anthropology defended in late 2018 at the Museu Nacional/UFRJ, under the supervision of professor María Elvira Díaz Benítez. The thesis, entitled "Doce, suor e lágrimas: trabalho, gênero e família em uma comunidade negra do Caribe colombiano (San Basilio de Palenque)", presents how race, gender and work are themes that are articulated in the life of black women residents of San Basilio de Palenque, showing how they produce their survival amid the context of poverty and deep social inequality.

7 This family includes her husband and four children. Most of the time the children were in the city of Cartagena, working or studying, and returned to the community on the weekends, with the exception of one of her sons who worked as a teacher in Palenque and lived with his paternal grandfather. All of the names included here are real and their use was authorized by the interlocutors.

I gradually sought to circulate less with the men who showed me important aspects of social organization in the community and were my first “guides”. For this reason, at the beginning of the field work, I decided to circulate with Flor María. Thus, the female universe opened up, with the dosage altered by time, affection and trust. Through Flor María it was possible to access her network of women, which included both the women in her family as well as the friends closest to her home. When I was presented to them, they expressed to me the receptivity and respect they offered Flor, which was crucial to conducting the study.

Over time, I gained the trust of these women, so much so that a few months later the people of the community referred to me as the “Brazilian-Palenquera”, denoting proximity. The women no longer saw me as a “mujercita” – a reference they use, usually in deprecation, to refer to non-Palenquera women – and I came to be called “hija”, “sobriña”, “niña”, [daughter, niece, little girl] especially towards the end of my fieldwork. Since my command of Spanish was weak, my initial concern and challenge was to be understood and to explain that I was there to conduct academic work about their work. This was an effort to not be confused with the various tourists who passed through daily.

My routine helped to inform my experience and affected me greatly, both subjectively and emotionally. In the morning I would conduct domestic activities in Flor’s house and then go to the street to interact with my interlocutors. I participated with them in shopping for their homes, family parties, religious ceremonies, funeral rituals, festivals in the local square, in their houses, their yards, and in the cities of Cartagena and Barranquilla. I helped to make sweets, I assisted in their production and sales. When going out for walks in the streets with them, I was responsible for handling the plastic stool they carried to support the basin of sweets. A few times while they were doing domestic chores, they asked me to take their place in the main square of Palenque selling their sweets to passing tourists.

During my stay in San Basilio de Palenque, I closely accompanied the work and sales routines of three women: Andrea Simarra and La Burgo, who sold their products during the week in Palenque; and Sol María, who sold her sweets on the weekends in Turbaco, which was 40 km from San Basilio. I also accompanied the routines of seven other Palenquera women for one month in the city of Bucaramanga, in Colombia’s Andean region, some 605 km away. The work routine began at home, or earlier, when they left for the neighboring towns to buy the ingredients for the sweets. It is the women who negotiate and buy the products needed to make the sweets.

I present readers my ponderations based on interviews about the paths taken by the interlocutors when they entered the universe of sweets, about the experience in the locations mentioned, combined with my reflections about relations of gender, race and work in this context.

By finding in the universe of sweets a social dignity, despite affirming and experiencing in their bodies the harmful health effects – that is, despite recognizing that working with sweets can kill, and makes them “slaves” – they expressed positive values and emotions about the work. While the sale of sweets can be interpreted as a form of labor that the women agency in contexts of poverty and within situations of inequality, socio-racial exclusion and limitations of education and employment, the work with sweets is also experienced by its agents as a mark of identity and a legacy that has been passed down for generations.

This reveals the ambivalences of the senses and meanings of the struggle for independent and informal work. This dual meaning of work with sweets permeates the descriptions presented in this article. This trade thus offers a marginal and ambiguous strategy that allows them to survive and promote their social mobility, above all through the material gains that they invest in the formal education of their children and of the sensation that this marginal strategy, although difficult, provides them autonomy and dignity.

There are various kinds of sweets. Within this broad universe I highlight *cocadas* (made from milk, coconut and sugar), *alegrías* (corn, coconut and *rapadura*), tamarind balls, *macaxeira* [manioc] cake, sesame sweets and papaya candy. Depending on the location where the products are presented there a certain sweet may predominate or be absent due to the demands and preferences of local consumers⁸.

Figure 1: The *Alegrías*



Photo by the author, 2016.

Figure 2: The sweets



Photo by the author , 2016.

⁸ On the Colombian coast there is a preference for the *cocadas* and *alegrías*, in the Andean region they sell sweets in the form of a paste.

Reports on beginnings

In the conversations with the Palenqueras I sought to map the beginning of their work with sweets and learned that their main economic activity was not always based on the production of the variety of sweets found today. It would not be possible here to offer precise historic data about each sweet in Palenquera cooking, but I sought to pay attention to the memory of the older people in the region. When I asked about this, I was told that sweets were always present in Palenque cooking, particularly the *alegrías* and the sweets that are made and consumed during Easter Week. The women with whom I spoke remembered that since they were young, sweets were part of family cooking, although their sale has taken place in the past six decades, because before this women were involved in other types of commercial activities, particularly the sale of fruits, fish, rice or root crops. Some of these products come from plantings in Palenque, raised by the men and sold by the women.

In the 1930s, the Palenquero men were traditionally farmers, and the women of the family (mother, wife, daughters, nieces), were responsible for selling products in the squares of the public markets of the cities near Palenque, such as: Cartagena, El Carmem, El San Juan, Mahates, Arjona, and Turbaco. In this decade, a group of nine women, some accompanied by husbands and children, particularly members of the Cañates family, migrated to Cartagena and dedicated themselves to the sale of products cultivated in the *monte*⁹, as the Palenquero historian Fredman Padilha told me in an interview (FREIRE,2018).

In terms of the work routine, the Palenquero men dedicated to farming left the home in early morning, just before sunrise. They went very early to the community agricultural area, by horse or on foot. The *monte* is a place where the work is done typically by men, who since a very young age are prepared to relate to this space as were their grandfathers, fathers, older brothers, other relatives or friends. The group would initiate seven- or eight-year-old boys to work in the fields, introducing them to the universe of adult masculinity and the public sphere. The tasks ranged from marking the harvest space, to planting and caring for crops, to the harvest and transport of products to people. In the care for livestock, the men built and repaired wire fences, cleaned the stalls, fed the animals, gave them vaccines, milked them, drove the cattle or led them to corrals and from the *monte* to the village.

The agricultural activities of men, generate economic resources from the sale of products and food resources for the family. There is a symbolic frontier, of action in the city and homes. When the products raised and harvested on the *montes* enter the city, they are the responsibility of women, who sell them or prepare them for the families to eat. The husbands contribute to the family income with their earnings from agricultural work. Some of them also work in civil construction, as masons, carpenters or their assistants. I saw various Palenquero men who live in Cartagena shining shoes at the *Plaza del Reloj* or working as bus drivers or fare collectors in the city. In Palenque, some work as local tourist guides or driving motorcycle-taxis, and some have small stands where they sell food and beer. The work of men fluctuates due to the few options and survival strategies. It should be considered that the contribution of the husband is very often irregular and at times not very significant compared to the contribution of the women, which comes from ongoing sale of sweets.

What I perceived in the gender relations seen in Palenque is that there is a reality of a formal economy on one hand, to which they have poor access to stable and well-paying work, which causes the Palenquero men and women to perpetually shift their types of work to guarantee survival. I believe that because the work of men is conducted in early morning and in the fields, it is less visible and public to the society in general. The work of the women, in contrast, is visible to the public and goes beyond the community to spread through the streets, squares and beaches of distant cities. It is their work that everyone sees or hears.

9 The word *monte* refers to planting and caring for livestock in Palenque.

The commerce undertaken by black women is an important research theme in Caribbean studies. Mintz (1961;1971) analyzed the work of Haitian merchants in the markets of that country, addressing financial independence and the circulation of women peddlers. Haitian markets drew attention from a few generations of anthropologists during the twentieth century, from Herskovits (1952), Bastien (1951) and Mintz (1959; 1961; 1971), since the 1940s and 1950s; to Woodson (1978) in the 1970s and 1980s (Silveira 2009). The systematic study of these spaces – which stands out in Mintz’ work for its pioneering and influential nature – characterized as dedicated to the exchange and circulation of objects, services and people, brought important contributions to economic anthropology and studies about commerce. Mintz’s work highlighted the central role occupied by women in these spaces; the mechanisms of negotiation used in the exchanges – such as bargaining – and client relations, the so-called “pratik”, a market constituted from non-economic relations, such as personal relations and kinship. However, the work of Silveira (2009) affirms that if we analyze the Haitian markets as spaces that are related and structurally connected to the universe around them, we see that more than being specific characteristics of the markets, the independence and autonomy of the women-merchants is another variation of the relations of interdependence that give structure to genders and spaces within a certain social universe. It can be said that the markets, more than only female spaces, although they are, are locations of opposition and complementarity between genders.

Returning to the case of the women Palenquera peddlers, their commercial activities in the city of Cartagena began in the 1930s, in the city’s old market, where a Convention Center is now located. In this space, the women sold fruits and vegetables. Since the 1970s, other groups of women circulated as peddlers among different neighborhoods. In the 1980s, they also sold and circulated on the beaches of Cartagena de Índias, especially in those with more tourists: Playa Blanca, La Bonquilla and Bocagrande, which were and continue to be a scene of sales of fruits and sweets, and of other work opportunities for Palenquera women, such as offering massages to tourists or braiding hair.

I observed that the initiation in peddling for each woman took place at different moments in life for different motivations, but it can be affirmed that the main desire was and continues to be a search for economic resources and thus to improve the quality of personal and family life. The women commonly began work when they were still young, either single, already married or even pregnant. In addition to responding to a search for income and means for survival for most of them, among younger women today peddling sweets offers an opportunity to invest in schooling, and pays for their university studies, whether at private or public schools. The younger and single women also work to help their mothers.

Dona Antônia Márquez, 91, the mother of Flor María, belongs to the group of women who sold products coming from the plantings outside of Palenque. The mother of eleven children, she began to sell products that her husband raised in the fields: “my husband had his crops and I sold what he brought me”. They sold corn, rice, taro, cassava, banana, guava, sapota and sesame. With the earnings she bought other articles that were not produced in Palenque, like salt and butter.

In the 1970s, when the trip to the neighboring cities was made by bus, it was called the *bus de las mujeres*, because of the many Palenquera women who took the route. It was the only vehicle to make the trip, leaving Palenque at 4am and running through a region that was at times unpassable due to the poor roads and the rainy season. As Nilson Salgado emphasized:

And it was not possible because in the winter you could not reach the community, because the road was bad, so the people had to use burros to bring the loads in the early morning for the women to take to Malagana, because there was a bus that came in the summer. This bus was the prime means of transport for the sale of yucca, taro, platanos, rice and the fruits from Palenque, sold by the women in neighboring villages and in Cartagena (Salgado 2011:26).

Flor María Márquez, 57, married, mother of four children and who has two grandchildren, who was mentioned at the beginning of this article, is a black woman of average height, with stocky arms and legs that makes it difficult for her to walk. Flor often had swollen feet due to circulatory problems, as well as a recent knee surgery in response to her worn kneecaps because she is overweight. Because of these characteristics, the people of Palenque call her the “la gorda” [the fat one]. She is a member of a group of women who began circulating in neighboring towns, and then in other more distant Colombian cities, and in her case, even in Venezuela. She now often sells homemade cakes in the square of Palenque, or to meet orders of her “comadres”, that are simpler and easier to make, she says. She began to work when she was 14, to help her mother. At this age, she went to work in Barranquilla, a city on the Colombian coast, some 170 km from her community: “I wasn’t married, I did it to help my mother with my other siblings, then I went to Venezuela, there I sold sweets and then sold avocados, apples, pears and *nísperos*” (Flor María, 2016). She began peddling to help her mother, then, when she was married, continued for her children. The sale of sweets was accompanied by that of fruits.

The practice of selling various types of sweets arose between the 1980s and ‘90s. The *alegrías* were mainly made in the summer, from January until April, when corn was ready for harvest, given that it is the main ingredient. The activities began with the monthly harvest and when the corn was gone they made *cocadas*, *enyucados* (*macaxeira* or cassava cakes) and papaya sweets.

A number of women reported that they began peddling through relations among family members and neighbors. The preparation and sale of sweets can involve mothers, aunts, cousins, grandmothers, and *comadres*. When a Palenquera woman goes to a certain region, others would await her return so she could tell them about the difficulties and successes of the sales process, instigating or discouraging possible sales routes, as is the case of Catalina Herazo, who I will present below. Each of the narratives of women about their beginning with sweets involves reports of networks and actions of solidarity among them and reveals a web of affections and responsibilities in which women advise women, in which women teach women and in which women take other women by the hand along sales strategies and paths.

Catalina Herazo, 56, is a friend and neighbor of Flor María, a mother of six children, and separated. She lives in Palenque with two children and a grandson; her other children live in Cartagena, a city in which she began peddling with the sale of fruits, after the birth of her first daughter. Her experience, as that of many others, revealed that it is common for women to begin peddling when they are already married or when they have their first child, that is, a family becomes an important reason to begin peddling.

Catalina also sells fruit salad on the beach of Bocagrande in Cartagena throughout the month of January, which is a good time for sales because of the many tourists and is taken advantage of by the Palenqueras. Eighteen years ago she stopped working with fruit to dedicate herself to sweets, and explained why: “it is good, because there are times when the fruits are scarce and when fruit is scarce, it is more expensive and one does not earn much” (Catalina, 2016). She would buy fruits in the market of Cartagena and then go out to sell them in different neighborhoods. At a certain moment, one of her neighbors decided to sell sweets in the city of Bucaramanga, “a number of women had already gone to Bucaramanga”, then her good friend Flor María went together and upon returning encouraged her to go on the next trips. “A time came when I became excited about the sweets”, Catalina said.

The *Palenquera* women use a series of strategies to sell their products. Wearing multicolored clothing, the form of display and colors of the sweets in the aluminum basin, play, dance, singing, smiling, jokes and certain phrases compose the universe of strategies that facilitate the sale of products, which I will mention and that I call appeals. This is because they are phrases that appeal, invite, incite and call attention to the purchasing public. They are persuasive sales strategies.

The phrases such as “¿No me quieres? [Don’t you want me] ¡Venga a comprar de la negrita que está caminando en el sol caliente! [Come buy from the black girl walking in the hot sun]” or even “¡Aleegreen-se!” [Enjoy yourself] are key statements in the interactions between peddlers and clients.

The phrase “¿No me quieres?” [Don’t you want me] is generally used for possible male clients. While “¡Venga a comprar de la negrita que está caminando en el sol caliente!” is used so a potential client will have pity on the condition of this women who walks for hours in the hot sun, carrying a very heavy load. And another, more commonly used in the streets of Palenque, Turbaco and Cartagena, as I mentioned, is “¡Aleegreen-se!” [Enjoy yourself]. Some of these phrases have a certain poetry in their expression. Sol María often uses part of a phrase that is known among those who sell in Cartagena: “Alegría con coco y aní, casera, cómpreme a mí, que vengo del barrio Getsemaní [a neighborhood in Cartagena]” [Homemade happiness with coconut and anise. Buy from me, from Getesemani].

There are also phrases with dual meanings, like; “¿Mi amor, que vas a comprar?” [My love, what will you buy?] and the complement: [My love, what will you suck?], or “le traigo el redondo, el grande y el peludo, no se burle niña, yo hablo del coco”. [I bring you the big, round and furry one, don’t make fun girl, I’m talking about coconut”]. And they also profess that, by buying a certain type of sweet, the “activity at home” (a sexual connotation) will improve. This dual meaning demonstrates the humor of the statements, and expresses and effort to create empathy with possible buyers. We can say that each one of these phrases has the effect of creating relations, which may be ephemeral and circumstantial, but which are effective in that they allow interactions with strangers and in some cases increase sales.

In the city of Cartagena de Indias I found a higher presence of black women using colorful dresses selling fruits or *cocadas*. The dresses are predominantly yellow, red and blue - the colors of the Colombian flag. These dresses and turbans are distinctive corporal marks of black women, as they are seen in public spaces, above all the streets. The other *Palenqueras* who work in neighboring towns and in distant cities, use shorts and blouses with or without sleeves, an apron on their waist and sandals.

There is a belief among the *Palenqueras* that if they count the number of sweets they produce, their sales will not be successful, so “they don’t know for sure” how many are made and sold. The “not knowing for sure” about how many *cocadas* are made tells us that the concern is for earning what is essential to return home. It is a not a concern that focuses on high profit, but on immediate profit, in the present, on what it is viable to earn at the time, because the next day more *cocadas* will be made. In addition to an economic equation, their work seeks to sustain relations. In this sense, the monthly income from sales can vary considerably. It is possible to earn from 500 thousand pesos (or less) per month to 1.500.000¹⁰, when the demand is high, depending on the location, month, clients and strategies used.

¹⁰ 1.000 pesos Colombianos (COP) is equivalent to R\$1,50 (em reais, BRL) in August 2019.

Figure 3: In front, Andrea Simarra, in the background, La Burgo. Palenque.



Photo by the author, 2015

The sales allow buying domestic goods for home, food products and clothes, as well as paying the costs of their children's college. The use of money is broad, or as the anthropologist Federico Neiburg said "people continue to experience the social world through ordinary categories" when using their money (Neiburg 2007:122). Money in the broad sense of the term will allow access "to that which the person wants or believes is positive for themselves and their family" (Sautu 2011: 65). Economic decisions are often made through monetary and social evaluations based on the common conditions of the group. For example, considering the payment of university fees, the "choice" of investing in one and not another course at a public university is determined by the budget available budget for this expense and the cost of a course.

When I was in the city of Bucaramanga, one night there was a discussion in our house about the daughter of a peddler who wanted to go to medical school. The women said that the course was too expensive to be supported by selling *cocadas* and recommended that the mother encourage her child to choose another more viable course. I remember that they suggested nursing or social service courses, which they said would have low costs. Specific reasonings are used to set family budgets that negotiate meanings of money and evaluate destinies.

From *alegrías* to the slavery of sweets: meanings of work

In an attempt to analyze the notion of work expressed in the statements of my interlocutors, I sought to expand the notion presented by Sidney Mintz, an author who raises a few aspects for considering this category: work as a means of giving meaning to life, and work as a source of pride and self-esteem for the individual (Mintz 2010). I will conduct the discussion based on the aspects mentioned above.

I also seek to consider the meaning of work, its representations, as well as these women's idealizations about the meaning of liberty and autonomy, based on the sale of sweets. The question is: how do the Palenqueras feel about their work? How is their trade experienced and perceived?

The work activity and sales of sweets are exhausting. I was able to accompany a trip to work in another city other than San Basilio when it was possible to perceive that the women only rest their physical bodies when sleeping. But the work is also intense for those who peddle in Palenque and who circulate in neighboring towns, beginning with the preparation of sweets, followed by the exhausting sales trips. To walk long distances for seven or more hours, often under intense sunlight or under rain and cold, supporting up to dozens of kilos on their heads, brings suffering to the body and requires discipline to support the daily marathon.

I heard from them that the work is a tradition of Palenque that has been passed on by family members, and that for decades women have worked in this way. It is certain that, a few decades ago changes occurred in the way of making the sweets, with the use of gas instead of wood stoves in certain places, for example. The women say that the sale of sweets has allowed them to buy appliances for their homes, such as stoves, refrigerators, televisions, clothes and shoes for the children, food and personal hygiene products; restore their homes or build new rooms. Their main source of pride was that, with this work, it was possible to "support the family and children".

Due to the experience working with sweets and based on their statements, I was able to enter a universe in which the idea persists that this is a painful and difficult trade, but that is it compensated for and becomes satisfactory to the degree that they can attain some success, from the opportunity to have an income and buy basic goods, such as vegetables and packages of macaroni, to the possibility that a member of the family, mainly their children, can go to college. The objective of this text is to reflect on a type of autonomous activity that can lead to physical exhaustion. When and how do these women act when freedom and autonomy depend on a field with limited opportunities? Liberty and autonomy were founding principles for the formation of black communities, such as that of Palenque. How does this sentiment and desire to be free and autonomous in their actions gain depth in the relations that guide their work?

Nevertheless, the complaints about the work accumulate gradually, and it is later affirmed that the domesticated and disciplined suffering experienced can also lead to moments of personal satisfaction. Based on Mintz (2010), we can reflect on what it means to work at the level of human exhaustion and to understand how they are able to perceive that a type of work may be deadly, and nevertheless return to this practice to survive and bring dignity to it. In Mintz's words:

I hope that they do not think that I intend to glorify the effect on the human spirit of the physically exhausting toil under terrible conditions. No one should have to work like these people worked – and in certain parts of the Caribbean region, must still work. Instead, I intend to comment on how the human spirit survives and transforms these abuses, by remaining human (...) People are able to extract meaning from their acts; they can have pleasure in their work, even when it is demanding and difficult work from a physical perspective. And they can do this in the modern world, if the work they do is seen by them as socially valuable (Mintz 2010: 64-65).

Below, I present some fragments of what these black women indicate about their work with sweets. “This is work that kills you”, affirmed Sol María, 50, who is separated, and the mother of three children, adding: “the sales help to buy materials and eat, nothing more. But it is done because it is tradition and nothing more. Need forces you to do the work, but it is work that kills. The hands hurt. It is hard work”. In turn, La Burgo, 54, married, and the mother of four children, said: “this is an inheritance that I am also leaving to my children. When they do not have any work anywhere, they turn to this”.

La Burgo corroborates Sol to a certain degree by mentioning that the trade comes from a tradition, a family inheritance that has been perpetuated and proliferated for generations by the women of Palenque. She also highlights that it is an activity that can be undertaken when there is no other type of paid work. Meanwhile, Sol María constantly emphasizes that this is work that can kill those who undertake it, verbalizing the consequences that are felt and experienced in the body of black Palenquera women.

Lucia Helena, 45, married, has a daughter, and is a peddler who works in the city of Bucaramanga. She commented: “it is independent work, you are the owner of your own business”. Josefa Hernández, 28, single, with no children, who previously worked with her mother and then alone to pay her college course in political science, is now a political scientist and no longer sells sweets, said something similar to Lucia Helena about being owner and conductor of her own work, including the control over the days she works: “like here it’s very hard, you are your own boss, if one day you don’t want to go, you don’t go. And I did that, on a day I didn’t want to go, I didn’t”. She also expresses a familiar concern about the sales:

Because I worry about the fact that selling sweets is too hard, to prepare the sweets and then when they are ready, to go out and sell them in the street, to walk for hours. So I am concerned about this because my mother has high blood pressure. Then I immediately began to work, I told her not to continue, she keeps insisting and said she does not like to do nothing, and I say no Mommy, no. Now, fortunately, she no longer does it. (Josefa Hernández, Palenque, 2016).

Catalina Herazo emphasized the notion of exhaustion and the approximation of the work with servitude and dependence:

With the sweets, we are slaves to the work, slaves to the sweets. You have to spend all your time grating coconut, cutting papaya...It is hard work, very hard because you get up with the same thing and go to bed with the same thing, doing the same thing. It is not like other jobs that you go out; you go out to win a daily battle. You go, and when you come home from a day of ironing it’s over and that’s it. You know that with sweets that when you arrive you have to break coconut because if not there won’t be enough time in the morning and you’ll be very late; there is one that you start at night and finish making [the next] day.(Catalina Herazo, Palenque, 2016).

Contudo, Yosaín, 36, married, with two children, indicated another place that this work has in the imaginary of the Palenqueras: “Well, thanks to this I know a good part of Colombia, that is, it is very beautiful. I am one of the Palenqueras who took photos of the places that I worked. It was all very beautiful”.

There are different concepts about what the work offers or offered in the comments of Catalina and Yosaín. The expressive statements of Catalina associates her work to slave labor, in which a woman is a hostage to the products she sells, a hostage to the arduous and intensely taxing work routine. Yosaín, sees in the universe of the sweets an opportunity to visit and admire other Colombian cities, which shows the relation that the work has to circulating and traveling in other geographic, social and economic contexts.

Catalina, upon comparing her work to that of slavery, brings to the analysis the thoughts of Angela Davis (2016 [1981]), who raised essential questions:

As a layperson, I can only propose some tentative ideas that may guide a reexamination of the history of black women during slavery. (...) The enormous space that work occupies today in the life of black women reproduces a standard established during the first years of slavery (...) Apparently, however, the starting point of any exploration of the life of black women in slavery would be an evaluation of their role as workers (Davis 2016: 24).

The role of black women as workers often confines them to situations of physical exhaustion. All of the women with whom I interacted during the study have some infirmity caused by years of work and its conditions. “Walking like crazy carrying the sun and the earth”, was the way Flor María described her work: “walking a lot to sell, walking to one street and another, walking and walking. For this reason, I am exhausted”.

The effect of this, as indicated is physical exhaustion. Flor also had difficulty walking because she is overweight. She stopped selling sweets about four years ago, and at times makes simple cakes to sell in the square of San Basilio or if someone makes an order. I regularly saw her shake her hands and I asked what she felt. She said that her hands no longer “serve” very well. She felt pain and numbness because of the repetitive movement of mixing the pot to prepare the sweets, and suffered from varicose veins. When she sat down, she always “rested” her swollen legs on a bench. When she was working in Venezuela, in São Felix, still young and eager, she walked through many neighborhoods, that were very hilly, just up and down. Finally, when her legs couldn’t take any more, she worked seated, and the cars passed and the passengers bought from her because they knew where she was selling from and would go there. When she began to feel pain, she asked her companions to buy the ingredients for the sweets; she said that she no longer went to the market to shop because she was very tired and at times this bothered her colleagues. Sometime later, she stopped traveling.

When we were on the trip to Bucaramanga, at night, when it was time to sleep, Catalina, while lying down on a thin mattress at my side, complained of back pain: “oh child, I have great pain in my back”. She spent a lot of time massaging her own back, legs and hips and before going out for a day of work took a pill to prevent muscle pain. The parts of her body that suffered most are the hands, legs, head and back. At some time of life, having worked many or just a few years, some of these effects on the body appear. The women suffer momentary numbness in the hands, have pains in their knees, feet and legs, headaches, at times in their necks, spinal column; and if they cook on a wood stove, the smoke can be blinding and cause respiratory problems.

When they are in other cities they often self-medicate before sleeping and at times before going out to the street take medications such as paracetamol, anti-inflammatories and muscle relaxants that promise to relieve pain. When I was in Bucaramanga I took these medications twice on the weekend, because these are the days of the most intense walking. The rest for the body only comes when sleeping, and at times, they can only sleep by taking medication.

Josefa explains the pains caused by work with the *ponchera*:

Yes, of the knees, the backbone, for some head[aches] are very strong. It’s that you have to work with heat, then wet your hands, you eat poorly because although you have money and buy food it’s not like you sit down to lunch and digest. No, you are running, with one hand you do one thing and the other something else and have to leave like this. It’s the same at night you eat while you are doing something else, it’s a very fast pace, there’s no rest. (Josefa Hernández, Palenque, 2016).

What is hoped for here is to reflect on a type of autonomous activity that approaches physical exhaustion. Being a “slave to the sweets”, to go beyond the metaphor, updates a history of struggle for autonomy and liberty that has as a background the political-historical process since slavery and that was reinvented by the diaspora. Although it is exhausting work, spaces of autonomy and liberty are found from the simple fact that they do not have to work for someone else and can administer their own money, deciding how to spend and invest it, which gives these women a status as owners of their own destiny. It is through their hands that comes the source of family income. It is through these black hands that entire families are supported, fed and educated.

The work for the Palenquera women who sell sweets is experienced as a synonym for struggle, autonomy, pain, resilience, strength, respect, independence and family legacy. It is, in the sphere of commerce, in the sale of foods, that these black women seek to obtain dignity. They feel valuable and as contributors to the family and community by executing the trade, even if it is physically and mentally exhausting. The work is a way to feel active. Since they were children, the work was a determinant in the organization of their lives and of their very existence and thus gives meaning to them. We see that the body gets ill: it is work that can kill, because it is heavy activity, that requires muscular strength and repetitive movements, predominantly physical strength. For this reason, the women complain of muscle pain, injuries, osteo-articular diseases, back problems. The time of the sweets occurs in the time of illness, it is not by chance that when they return home after long stays away they visit the only local health clinic, where they are medicated and are almost always told to do physical therapy.

It is work that makes them ill, but that is valued as a strategy of social autonomy for themselves and a guarantee of social mobility for their children. The Afro-American sociologist Winnifred Brown-Glaude (2011) affirmed that an international standard evolved in informal economies, and the poor black women who come to occupy these economies develop creative forms of “earning a living” that provide them a way to establish autonomy and guarantee a future for their families. Looking at the Brazilian reality, the place of black women in the labor market is demarcated in the ghetto of subalternization and the realization of manual activities (Bento 1995).

Some of the Palenqueras have worked as domestic housemaids. When they refer to this work in houses of families, there is a suggestion of aversion and repulsion. The person who worked the most time as a housemaid among the women who I met was Flor María, who spent about ten years working for a family in Cartagena, with whom she traveled to the United States when she was young and had no husband or children. Ismênia worked as a housemaid for seven years in Rioacha, the capital of the department of Guajira, in Colombia. This was an interval in her life that she had grown tired of the work selling *cocadas*.

Bernadina, when referring to domestic work said that she tried it at a certain time of her life when she was young and did not have children or a husband: “once I had a crazy idea and went to Cartagena to work in the house of a family”. To work in the house of a family is not an option that is desired, it’s better to work as a “slave to the sweets” than to work taking orders from other people. Work in the home of a family takes place when they are young and still not married, and usually are experiences of a short period within the universe of women with whom I worked. They are moments, as Bernada said, of a fantasy “a crazy idea...” Thus, they do not see working as housemaids as an acceptable work opportunity.

I heard similar thinking during the fieldwork for my dissertation with youth in *quilombola* communities in Rio Grande do Norte. When I asked one of my research collaborators, a young black *quilombola* resident about work as a house maid, she charged: “I won’t work in the house of a family, no!”. And youth from the *quilombola* community of Capoeiras said that “working in the house of a family” is precisely something they want to avoid when they set their personal projects (Freire 2012).

Looking at the map: blazing trails in the country

On a warm Saturday afternoon in San Basílio in front of Flor Maria’s house, I sat down to speak with Josefa Hernández, who told me of her experience with the universe of sweets. In addition to reporting on her family trajectory with this type of work, she indicated that the travel of Palenquera women to cities far from Palenque took place by looking at the map of Colombia, that is *mirar en el mapa* initiates the movement of blazing trails through the country. Josefa said:

So then they began to leave, some even left not knowing where they would go because they did not know the interior of the country, for example, so they began to look at the map. Look at the map! [Expressing surprise]. The first city that they began to go to was Bucaramanga. When they began to go to Bucaramanga I said, huh! It's so far, Bucaramanga is far. Because, that is, they had never gone beyond Cartagena, Barranquilla and the communities close by, then the first group went to Bucaramanga and then from there began to go to nearby cities. (Josefa Hernández, interview, Palenque, 2016).

The capitals of the departments of Colombia serve as starting point for exploring the nearby cities: if the women were in Bucaramanga, they could also explore the interior of the department of Santander, traveling to Barrancabermeja, Floridablanca or Carmen, which is two hours from Bucaramanga. They also came to work in other countries, like Venezuela, in the cities of Caracas, Barquisimeto, Ojeda, Bachaquero, San Félix, Mérida and Maracaibo (on the border between Colombia and Venezuela), and in Ecuador they worked in Quito (the capital) and in Imbabura.

Map 1. Sweet Paths



Source: digital library, adapted by the author, 2018

Their pioneering trajectories through Colombian cities are also influenced by the eating habits and health practices of the clients. When the sweets arrive in a new location they usually stir curiosity because they are a novelty, causing sales to flow. But after years of consuming sweets, doctors' warnings begin to be felt, and health concerns can limit sales. When I was walking with them I would often hear someone say: "not today, my doctor doesn't allow it", or "the doctor said that I can't eat more sweets", often regular customers. It is clear that these declarations can be used as friendly justifications to decline purchasing sweets on a day they simply do not feel like having them, while being polite to the peddlers who they have known for some time.

In these situations, they say the sale is *dañada* [damaged], and when this happens they look for other consumers; in this search for new clients, they broaden the territorial scope of the work:

When sales become damaged, you had to go far away[...] the sales were not the same there, everyone had sugar [diabetes], they didn't want to eat sweets, and so sales dropped. I left to expand the sweets to other places that did not know them, so we became nomads. Today we are here, tomorrow in Palenque, or if I don't want to come here, I go to Montería, I go to Sincelejo and so on (Bernada Hernández, interview, Bucamanga, 2016).

Bernada's words, "*we became nomads, today we are here, tomorrow in Palenque*", reflects the quality of this movement. When sales become weak, the women must explore other cities that they do not know, cities with climates, people, resources and logics different from their own, cities that are mostly urban, that are very different from the reality they live in San Basilio. They gradually entered large cities, small ones, neighborhoods, villages, they were spreading out:

Well, the first time I worked was in Cauca. The first time that I left, I left with a sister-in-law and a friend who took me to Cauca [Antioquia]. Well, I was there for a month. When we began to leave for other places one wouldn't stay for a month, we would go for 15 days, for 20 days. The product sold because the people did not know it. Well we earned money and then soon we would leave because we didn't have money to stay, so we bought clothes, shoes for the children, a bit of food, and we left, but then it also became damaged there.

So I went to Cauca, from Cauca I went to Sincelejo, from Sincelejo I went to Montería, from Montería I went to Tierra Alta which is in the department of Córdoba, I was also in Ibagué. I had to go to Venezuela, in Venezuela I lasted about four years but it wasn't stable like here, coming and going (Bernada Hernández, interview, Bucaramanga, 2016).

Figure 4: Bernada and her omnipresent *poncheira*. Centro, Bucaramanga.



Photo by the author, 2016.

The trips to other regions of the country are not taken alone, they are taken with other companions, who may be relatives, friends or companions. As Yosáin said, “we always leave in a group, in a group of women, we never, never, never go alone”. One of the first actions when they arrive in these locations is to look for a home to rent, that has space for a few woman and basic facilities. Then they try to find out where the commercial center of the city is. In this way they explore the possible locations for sales and look for future suppliers of ingredients. They do the work of learning about the territory by asking the local residents where they can rent a house, where it is possible to buy ingredients in large quantities for a good price. They recall that looking for a place to stay is difficult work that does not always yield immediate results. Looking for a place to rent on foot, often “scared” the residents of the neighborhood; strangers, mostly white, who do not understand what a group of black women is doing knocking on the door. “We go out a lot knocking on the houses of people to see if they will rent a house. Some are scared because we are seven women arriving together. Many people made fun of us, discriminated against us and joked about us”, said Flor María. If they do not find a place to stay, some women sleep in the city bus station.

Each house is rented by four to eight women, a number that can shift up or down. Usually the houses are located in peripheral neighborhoods of the city. When I accompanied one of these groups, the house where we stayed was in a poor neighborhood of Bucaramanga, but was strategically located in a region central to daily movements. To the right of the house where we lived was the house of the owner of our house, and in front of the two residences was a stairway that connected with other houses. Also on our side there was a Catholic Church parish. On the corner of the “house of the Palenqueras” we found a small shop and in front there was a main street where we usually took taxis to get around. In the last five years, some husbands have traveled with their wives.

Upon leaving Palenque, those who had some money and initial products took what they could like manioc, corn and coconut, essential ingredients for beginning production. They also take the utensils needed to make the sweets like pans, knives, spoons, basins and wooden boards. The first trips are permeated by uncertainty, sacrifice and courage, and a constant desire to return home remains on the horizon. The tranquility of life in Palenque is left behind for a busy life in the cities. Josefa recalls that on her first trip to the city of Barrancabermeja (department of Santander) she scratched the walls to mark the days left until she would return to the village. “But there is always one time that from the first moment when you arrive you are thinking of the day you will return. I remember that the first time that I went I scratched the wall counting the days until I would go back”. Her routine as a student at the time, strongly contrasted with the work routine, in her words it was, “very hard, so I obviously I missed the peacefulness of Palenque”.

The need to leave is, in principle, a question of social and material survival, because they envision that the sale of sweets outside of their region can offer a better opportunity to earn money. But to leave is also a question of social mobility, which will be felt through the children. The circulation of these women to other regions is related to their children’s entrance to university.

Twenty years ago it could be said that the boom of the Palenqueros and Palenqueras began so more could go to university. So obviously, the sweets sold here were only enough for food but not for the children’s studies. So they began to leave (Josefa Hernández, Palenque, interview, 2016).

Time is precious and valuable on a sales trip. They know precisely how many days of work and what efforts are needed to return with a better financial situation than when they left. Catalina said: “you never return as you left”, an affirmation that has various meanings. A first is related to money and the articles purchased during the stay at a location. The second, no less obvious, concerns the experience and knowledge acquired on a trip that is transformative on various levels. The third is a reference to the process of very fast adaptation in a distinct context: they are no longer the heads of their households and despite the sisterhood,

the living with other women, in precarious material and spatial conditions, inevitably generates conflicts, fights and disputes. Waking up at 5 in the morning to continue the work of the night before; washing and eating quickly to go out and sell; the weather in the new city that may be hot or cold, depending on the altitude; everything contrasts with life in San Basilio de Palenque. The exhausting daily work requires skills to deal with the dangers of the streets: assaults, harassment, prejudice. It requires subtlety in dealing with clients, and with prejudiced neighbors, to deal with the exchange of services with men who temporarily pass through their houses. The use of time in this sense is crucial. This time is variable according to the objectives and availability of each one. The minimum time in another location is usually 15 to 20 days; but the period can extend to 3-4 months, and there are rare cases of women who reside in a city permanently. Catalina, when she was ready to begin a new trip, recalled: “When I am about to travel, I have soul (*yo tengo alma*)”. “To have soul,” in this sense is to have courage, strength, energy, to be imbued with an interior strength that is energizing but that is combined with sadness.

I had to do it, I go very sadly, and with much pain. But at times I have to tighten my heart that day and I go, I go. At times I say, I know how to say it: I go because I want to get away from this stress, because I feel like I am between a rock and a hard place. Because on the days that I am about to travel I don't eat well, or sleep well (Catalina Herazo, interview, Palenque, 2016).

To be stuck between a rock and a hard place reflects the feeling on the days before a trip, the tension that even affects eating and sleeping. The tension is relieved in this case by leaving, circulating, traveling. For Catalina, the lack of money is an incentive, because the amount she saved on the last trip was gone weeks ago, her daughter is not working regularly, and the money that her other children send her is not enough.

Flor María comments: “When I would leave to peddle, I cried, I left my children and cried, I cried the whole way, because they were so young, it hurt me, and I would cry.” The emotion in this statement reveals the duality of the work: on one hand it is necessary to guarantee resources for the children, on the other, in name of the “responsibility”, of being a mother these women need to momentarily “renounce” the functions of the nomenclature in the sense of physical presence. This is how these women continue to be read as brave peddlers who spread through the interior of Colombian cities and neighboring countries, becoming, through this process, nomadic, fearless, exhausted workers.

Final considerations

In this article I examined the work of black women from San Basilio de Palenque, in Colombia's Caribbean region, following the routines demanded by their work. By circulating with these women and accompanying their work trajectory I was able to enter a universe that confers to my interlocutors simultaneous sensations of satisfaction and exhaustion. It was through these ambiguous repertoires of satisfaction and exhaustion in relation to the work that they are able to reverse historic situations of discrimination and economic disadvantage.

The Palenquera women go out to public spaces, to the streets, to sell products, while Palenquero men often stay in the community raising taro, manioc, maintain the crops and take care of cattle in the *monte* and then their butchering. Their work is silent and less visible to the eyes of outsiders, whether of tourists or residents of other locations. I emphasized that these are distinct and demarcated forms of work, which confer to the group an image of a black community sustained mainly or solely by the work of women. I began by recognizing the work done by men in the community and the importance that the male work has for maintenance of family life. Nevertheless, I opted to direct my gaze more attentively to the place of the work of the women who sell sweets in the *Palenquera* families, accompanying its consequences. I considered the *Palenquera* women as administrators

of a creative economy, agreeing with philosopher María Lugones (2008) that the division of labor is completely racialized and geographically differentiated. At the heart of the complex socio-economic and racial reality of the context studied – but also of countless places with the presence of people from the African diaspora – black women continue to be responsible for the family, as mothers, educators, under-employed urban workers and informal peddlers. Sharing the ideas of Andrea Delgado (1999), who portrayed the memory and work of sweet makers in the city of Goiás, Brazil, these women negotiate their role within the family to the degree that they transform their work into the main source of income, making their activities the center of family projects.

Among these initiatives, I emphasize that working with the *cocadas* is a reality that is extremely difficult for most of the women involved. Despite the hardships, the trade is also valued, considering the perception that working with sweets means it is not necessary to work for another person. As owners of their own business, the pace of work is conducted and determined more or less individually.

The data from the fieldwork allow affirming that although female labor is seen as a means to provide subsistence in the realm of the family responsibilities of women, the obtention of monetary income is also valued by the women because it allows attaining autonomy and economic and social power. Thus, the work is increasingly valued as a strategy for social autonomy for the women and a guarantee of social mobility for their children. According to Afro-American sociologist Winnifred Brown-Glaude (2011) an international standard has evolved in the form of informal economies, and poor black women engaged in informal economies develop creative ways to “earn a living” providing a means by which they can establish their autonomy and guarantee a future for their families.

The movement to other states of Colombia and to neighboring countries, such as Venezuela, gives these women a broader vision of the world, different from that of their husbands and other family members. They become agents of their daily actions. To paraphrase Pakistani anthropologist Saba Mahmood: agency is not simply a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but a capacity for action that is created and made possible by concrete and historically configured relations of subordination (Mahmood 2006:123). Mahmood identifies a positive discourse about being in and inhabiting the world, in search of forms of acting within an adverse environment. Although the work is hard, the women are able to decide where to go and how long to stay, and choose when they want a brief rest. This also relates to a question raised by Anne McClintock (2010): what are the opportunities for agency in contexts of extreme social inequality? The opportunities for possible agency are constructed by mapping routes, paths and trajectories already faced by other women, given a limited range of options. It is knowing that friends and family were successful in this effort that they go out each day in the universe of the street where they eat, work, sleep from exhaustion, and establish relations that allow them to stay in another city. These include relations with people in the location where they circulate and relations among themselves, relations of care, solidarity, affinities, disagreements and affection.

In the narratives about work, they find in the universe of sweets a dignity in the trade. Although they affirm and experience in their bodies that this work can kill, they attribute positive values to the exercise of the work, which reveals the incongruities of feelings and meanings involved in the struggle for interdependent and informal work. As Anne McClintock (2010) indicated, it is at the crossroads of contradictions that strategies for change are found. I emphasize that *Palenquera* women have an important economic role in the commercial circulation of agricultural production, because they are the ones who sell the produce raised by their husbands. They are the ones who go into the *calle* [street] to sell the products and who assume decisive roles in the socio-economic organization of the domestic units.

The women learn to recognize, for example, the locations that can be most profitable for sales (middle class residential neighborhoods, commercial centers) and the most propitious times. The success of sales also depends on these factors. And on the personality of each woman, on a good strong voice for announcing the products, persuasive sales strategies, dresses that call attention, and appealing calls with dual meanings.

Reflecting on the meaning of work as an affective structure that is ripe with meaning, a trade that can cause suffering, as described by Catalina, who became a *slave to the sweets*, can also be transformed in pleasure because of the opportunity it provides to use their skills and provide individual liberties. It is a trade that can transform them into protagonists in the historic maintenance of themselves and their black families. It is a trade that allows these black women to transform the nature of the pain they experience into a generator of meanings and as an opportunity for autonomy that confers positive meanings to their work. In this way, selling the sweets becomes a tool that the black Palenquera women use to resignify work, a way to bring dignity and prosperity to black families in their location. The work is a source of satisfaction for them, which allows the realization of tasks, it is a creative act. They produce to meet their needs, like eating and dressing, it is a means of survival for their families and allows attaining autonomy and self-esteem. They understand work as the very act of living, to be alive is to work.

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