

# Peasant Women Between Oilpalms and Bananas Coto Sur, Costa Rica

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Dr. philos Dissertation  
**Haldis Valestrand**  
Dept. of Planning and Local Community Research  
Faculty of Social Sciences





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## PROLOGUE: ENCOUNTERING A GAP

This work brings together stories about peasant women living in the agricultural settlement Coto Sur in Costa Rica, and about the transformations this geographical area was being subjected to in the lapse of about fifteen years. It is concerned with exploring some of the relations between gender and what often is referred to as restructuration - or even development - in a region in Central America that had for about fifty years been part of a foreign owned banana zone. First transformed to a state run agricultural smallholding settlement for landless people in the 1970s and 80s, in the 1990s it was in a process of being converted to an agroindustrial oil palm growing zone.

In the mid-1980s a development programme for peasant women was implemented in the Coto Sur, and part of this programme was dedicated to research about the situation for women in the settlement. This dissertation is built on my participation in this activity, and my encounter with women who literally lived 'between bananas and palms'.

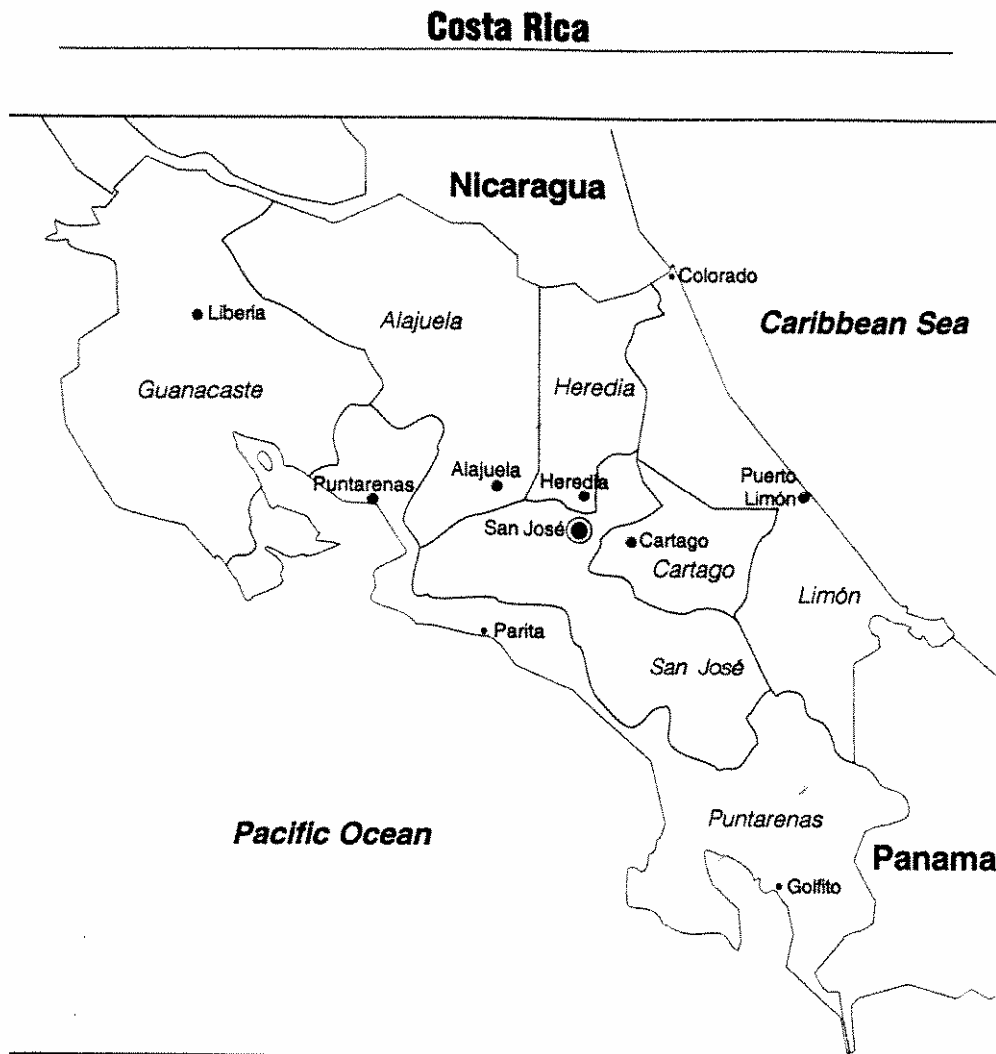
During several years I had produced substantial amounts of partly analysed, partly published, and partly not - quite - so processed materials, all drafts of chapters for a forthcoming monograph about the complexities and agencies of the women's lives in Coto Sur. There were papers, notes, pictures, documents, maps, etc., that had, for several reasons, been left to a life on the shelves in the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> Frankly speaking, I did not quite know what to do about it. To literally 'de-shelf' it would obviously take an enormous effort in re-taking the by then 10-15 years old empirical and partly analysed material. Not to talk about the task of re-contextualizing it and bringing it up to date in terms of reading and reflecting what had taken place in fields such as feminist theory, development studies and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> The most salient was that my intense elaborating on it in 1995/96 had incurred a frozen shoulder and thus stop in writing activities for quite a while.



geography, to name but a few. It was, allow me to say, not tempting, considering the effort and energy it definitely would demand. However, in the year 2001 I came across an article on the web that caught my attention as it was about the transformations of a former banana zone in Costa Rica. This changed the situation.



Map Costa Rica

## From Wasteland - to Profit Centre

The article in question, published by the Inter American Development Bank (IADB), (IADB in Spanish)<sup>2</sup>, was about the situation in the settlement of Coto Sur after the introduction of an agroindustrial oil palm scheme in the 1990s; most of which had taken place after I had physically been present in the area. One of its central points was that former banana workers now had become successful oil palm entrepreneurs as result of the introduction of the huge palm growing development scheme. My first reaction reading the article was that this is yet another story in which women are left out. There was not a single word about the women in Coto Sur. Where were all the women who had struggled to carve out their farms and contributed to building the settlement of Coto Sur? Was the success depicted equally relevant to them? According to the article it was only *ex-bananeros*, former banana workers that were given credit.

I then became concerned with the narrative style of the story; everything before was depicted as negative, everything now presented as a fantastic success. The title should speak for itself, "From Wasteland to Profit Center". The Spanish version is phrased as *De páramo a tierra prometida* (from wasteland to promised land), which interestingly gives different connotations, and was apparently meant to characterise the changes in the situation in the Coto Sur settlement - literally from rags to riches. The article and its content was spread and could be encountered in various versions later, including in the Catholic Church doctrines (Forum XXI).<sup>3</sup> It is probably essential to add here that the Inter American Development Bank (IADB/BID) was the most important lending institution involved in this more than \$50 million development project in the Coto Sur settlement.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://iadb.org/idbamerica/Archive/stories/1999/esp/c299g.htm>. Author: Paul Constance. Accessed 20.11.02

<sup>3</sup> *La Doctrina Social de la Iglesia* <http://www.forumxxi.org>. (Accessed 27.11.01) They, in turn, put most emphasis on the fact that the success of the transformation to oil palms was led by a cooperative, and one should apparently read this as 'a moral tale'.

The stories and material I had collected and constructed from Coto Sur and Costa Rica some years before were not quite coherent with these representations, to put it mildly. In the end it was the appearance of this IADB/BID article that triggered me to return to my Coto Sur involvement. And, as I have only realised afterwards; what I actually have attempted to do in this present work, is to contribute to fill some of the gap(s) both in this article and in other representations. This could be described as a gap between the article's portrayal of the Coto Sur settlement as wasteland - and what I had observed and learned of women's and men's struggles for dignity and livelihoods and which I could not use such derogatory words for. But I also read a gap between this absolutely gender-free, gender-blind story, published by one of the leading agents in the development circuit; the IADB/BID, and the same institution's commitment to gender equity. The fact that this article was published in 1999, by then long after the UN system, the 'Washington consensus' (WB, IMF, etc.) and the regional development banks like the IADB/BID, had officially implemented gender policies, revealed another gap between what the development 'machinery' said - and what they apparently did (not do) about including, or integrating women in development. Hence, this article astonished me, and irritated me, and for some time I kept quarrelling with in my mind, and in the end it was what prompted me to start the cumbersome return to my involvement with the peasant women in Coto Sur.

On the other hand, I had for long felt strongly that I was far from finished with my quite comprehensive material from Coto Sur and I occasionally checked on it, mainly in terms of 'thinking with it' when encountering interesting issues and themes in other occasions, as well drawing on it as empirical examples when writing and lecturing. (Valestrand and Gerrard 1999) I was obviously constantly activating parts of it. My own extensive involvement with the organizing of the 7<sup>th</sup> Women's Worlds conference in Tromsø in 1999, of which one of my tasks was to read through and locate more than 900 submitted abstracts, taught me one thing; that gendered knowledge production in the North and South, close to the Millennium, seemed

to be worlds apart.<sup>4</sup> This experience was a reminder of the significance of accountability, in this case entailing that I was sitting on material that also was making up part of this ‘gap’ that I felt compelled to do something about.<sup>5</sup> Hence, gaining this knowledge initiated my uneasiness about what was still on the shelves. But the thought still filled me with hesitation. However, the IADB/BID article was what got me back on track. Moreover, it is also reason to observe that Costa Rica, as the first country in Latin America, had passed the Law to Promote the Social Equality of Women in 1990,<sup>6</sup> and it was followed by the creation of a national gender plan (PIOMH) in 1996 which should indicate the state’s commitment to equal rights and which was following up of the Beijing platform.<sup>7</sup> Thus, yet another gap emerged; the Costa Rican state was a central agent in the transformation processes taking place in Coto Sur. The huge agroindustrial palm development project needed political backing and financial guarantees. Given the new laws in favour of equity, how and why were women and gender not even mentioned?

Suffice it to say, the IADB/BID article displayed and brought back the need to continue the exploration and filling in of these gaps, to write a monography and the following chapters is a contribution to this work.

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<sup>4</sup> The discrepancy became particularly obvious in putting the abstracts into slots, and it turned out that just about all submissions from the South located itself in the streams addressing work or political issues, while the stream ‘new constructions of gender’ ended up as an all ‘White/North’ affair, in spite of the organising committee’s efforts to change this. See <http://www.skk.uit.no/WW99/Report.html>

<sup>5</sup> Accountancy, or accountability, are much used terms in development studies etc., and could be roughly divided into an aspect of budgeting and an aspect of responsibility, that is account-giving. It is the latter that is used here.

<sup>6</sup> For details, see CMF (*Centro Nacional para el Desarrollo de la Mujer y la Familia*) (1994), *Ley de Promoción de igualdad social de la mujer* No. 7142. San José, CMF

<sup>7</sup> CEDAW (The UN Convention to End All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) 1979, Costa Rica approved it in 1984 as one of the first Latin American countries. The Beijing Platform for Action (PFA)(1985) reinforced the work. See UNIFEM (1998) *Bringing Equality Home. Implementing the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. New York. The *PIOMH Plan para la Igualdad de Oportunidades entre Mujeres y Hombres* CMF(1996). San José.



## Chapter 1

### INROADS: ABOUT THIS WORK, ITS TITLE AND ITS BECOMING

#### Nested Stories

*The form of the text is where it does its ideologically significant work (Hayden White)<sup>8</sup>*

This monograph consists of a collection of histories, chapters or essays, that one way or the other have been constructed in an effort to create space for peasant women ‘between (oil) palms and bananas’. The apparent strangeness of the title line and how I try to locate the term ‘peasant women’ somewhere outside, above, but ready to press itself in between - or before - or behind - or below - the title line, is indirectly inspired by Donna Haraway (1997, 1994). After much struggling, I simply could not make up my mind as how to place these words, as they more often than not, gave different meanings depending on their location. The palms & bananas are not only frames and metaphors,<sup>9</sup> but did indeed materially exist, as botany, materialities, institutions and skills, as will be depicted in the chapters to follow.

This present work can be read as a collection of intersecting stories, and how they have their histories of making. Here are stories about the life of peasant women in Central America; of survival, of dignity, of land reform, of households, of development schemes, hints to biology and natures, of connectivity and transnational feminism, about changing and challenging gender power axes, as well as identity and belonging, and much more. These overlapping stories challenge geographical scales, processes, and flows. On the pages to

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<sup>8</sup> Hayden White (Here in Pulsipher 1997:290)

<sup>9</sup> ‘between’ can also be located to what Lackoff and Johnson (1980) calls orientation metaphors. When using ‘frames’ it is both materially speaking- but also inspired by Goffman’s way of seeing “frames as the way humans organise experience according to certain principles, the so-called ‘definitions of situations’” (1974)

follow there will be movements between positions, ways of thinking, traditions and linkings, but with one underlying priority; trying to get to grips with gender in many different versions. Sometimes expressed, other times assumed. A helpful metaphor is possibly the Russian Matryoshka doll, a nested doll, here exemplified in how one story emerges within another, and vice versa, and it also to a great extent characterises the ‘nested’ research process as well.

Following some of the recommendations from Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990), this work takes as a point of departure the stories thoughts and experiences of peasant women living in the agricultural settlement Coto Sur in Costa Rica in a particular period of time. With the development - or restructuration processes, the social changes over time, the development interventions by the state and international agencies, it aims at putting a ‘gendered gaze’ and writing gender into those histories, and simultaneously make gendered subjects visible. Additionally, I reflect upon the processes of writing, re-writing, constructing and de-constructing histories and texts. The final selection of the main title of this work occurred after several contemplations and many suggestions of more or less adventurous titles, all depending on where and how I was situated, and because I wanted to try to put into words very complex and interrelated events, situations, and relationships. I both wanted to invite readers to explore together with me, different ways to read, discover, see, and certainly not see, or overlook. Not the least, I aimed to include at least some fragments of the research path that has led up to this present text.

Before proceeding I would like to state that this present work can be seen as unrelenting ‘conversations’ between four interacting and interdependent subject matters; the initial circumstances: the development programme for peasant women, the fieldwork practices, the theoretical and analytical positions drawn upon and argued with, and - the elaboration of these texts.

## Peasant Women - *Mujer Campesina*

The ‘emplacing’ of women in these stories (illustrated in the main title) has entailed first of all to literally discover them, to make visible their embodied existence in the Coto Sur settlement, and to be able to see them as active agents in their own and others’ lives. That was the starting point. My own involvement with Coto Sur began as I became a visiting member of a field team that had, for the first time in history, been deployed in the agricultural settlement to work systematically with peasant women in the *Women’s Project in Coto Sur* (WP). One of the main tasks of the mandate and portfolio of this project was to carry out basic research about the situation for women in the settlement. The bearing idea was a wish to better meet the women’s own defined needs in development practice. This present collection of texts had its inception in this concrete commitment, but has, of reasons and events that will be commented on the way, been considerably expanded over time, and this work is about both the initial project, and about the ‘roads’ followed thereafter.

If it is possible to say that there has been one central point in this work, it could be epitomised in the term, or category, *mujer campesina* (peasant women)<sup>10</sup> - who were residents in the Coto Sur settlement, and whom, as noted, had been left out of the Interamerican Development Bank’s (BID’s) success story referred to in the prologue, as well as in most of the other development stories connected to Coto Sur. Rather typically women were left out of most accounts of huge development endeavours involving many people, state authorities and crossing ideologies of what ‘development’ may entail. Among those accounts the ones produced by and in the state authority present in the settlement, the *Land Development Agency (IDA)*, under which the Women’s Project actually was organised and implemented through the institution’s *Women’s Office* the (*SMFC*), were key. Women’s (invisible) in-between position seemed to be troubling the male dominated institution IDA, and therefore tended to be reflected as either lacking, or ‘added on’. Women or gender was somehow not

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<sup>10</sup> *Mujer campesina* (sing.) will be translated to English as plural, ‘peasant women’.



part of it at all, be it in practice or in theory. The establishment of a Women's Office must be seen as the institution's aspiration to do something about this in the agricultural settlements in the country. The social category peasant woman frequently appeared in the Women's Office's (SMFC) documents and policies, as the office's 'target population' that was to be supported, but considering the practices and discourses in this unit, it became increasingly clear that this was a concept that required some further interrogations as well, some of which will be dealt with in this work.

However, at first, the peasant woman was, as stated, practically invisible in the 'public eye' in Costa Rica and thus had to be literally embodied<sup>11</sup> 'encountered', listened to, and then - constructed, before there was room for any destabilisations, to put it in academic terms. Hence, also looking into how the peasant women were being discursively constructed and how gender was 'done' (West and Zimmermann 2002) in Coto Sur has become a fundamental part of this whole endeavour. Thus contributing to that the social transformations taking place in the Coto Sur settlement, and beyond for that matter, did involve the women living there just as much as the *ex-bananeros* that so far had taken centre stage, is the aim of this present work; or as phrased by Sarah Radcliffe:

Place-specific interactions of political economy and historical nationalisms provide the contexts for women's lives and gender relations in any one location (2005: 526). After positioning peasant women centre stage one may say that there is a double perspective from which to regard the following stories;

- a) With a focus on women as active agents with respect to livelihoods, farming, families, households, gender relations, and the building of society in a particular area with a particular history - and;
- b) With a focus on restructurations taking place in a former banana zone, its gendered consequences and how its representations are being produced.

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<sup>11</sup> In feminist writing the use of 'embodied' is referring to breaking with the Cartesian 'soul/body distinction, and the male/female dichotomy, see for example Lloyd (1984); Duncan, N (1996); Shilling (1993)

I think Sherry Ortner has coined this brilliantly:

[...]to picture indissoluble formation of structurally embedded agency and intention-filled structures, to recognize ways in which the subject is part of larger social and cultural webs, and in which social and cultural “systems” are predicated upon human desires and projects (1996: 12).

### **Ex-bananeros (Ex-B) + Peasant Women (PW) = Farming Families/Family Farms (FF)**

A first move towards storytelling would be to literally ‘find’ the peasant women and study their livelihoods and wellbeing. The women’s assumed counterparts were the men in the Coto Sur settlement, their partners, sons, brothers, and community leaders whom collectively already enjoyed a high public profile as *ex-bananeros* (former banana workers) both seen as the agents behind the invasions that led to the creation of the Coto Sur settlement, as well as the agents behind the arrival of later events including the Palm programme as presented in the IADB/BID-article in the prologue. The creation of agricultural settlements and the preceding agricultural reforms of redistributing land have aimed at creating ‘family farms’, and benefitting ‘farming families’ (Deere and León 2001). Following this chain of argumentation entails that the inhabitants of these new created ‘family farms’ should be ‘farming families’. Then it should be possible to formulate by playing with these initials, and sketch the imagined ‘function’ above; (*Ex-B* + *PW* = *FF*) and one of the main tasks would therefore be to try to unveil some of the relationships between those characters and to consider some of the assumptions behind them. It would for example lead to looking into women’s daily lives on the family farms, work-burdens and relationships in the households etc. But equally important to critically investigate and question these assumed entities, the family farms (*unidad campesina*) and their assumed inhabitants (farming families) and how the internal and

external workings in time inflicted upon the women's participation in society etc., well in line with 'WID/GAD' policies and studies in the 1980s.

### **Palms and Bananas, and their Institutions, Regimes and Histories**

The second interacting approach is to turn the situation upside down, and focus on the geographical area, the Coto Sur settlement and the former Banana Zone in the Pacific South in Costa Rica and make efforts at 'gendering' the localised restructuration history. In contrast to family and household centred studies, 'gender' has not been very prominent in research about comprehensive structural change processes drawing heavily on economic perspectives, and highlighting (gender blind) material transformations. In Coto Sur such a series of events typically are epitomised by bananas in the past, by basic grains in most of the studied period, and the initiation of the planting of oil palms (and all it entailed of changes on many scales and with many actors) towards the end.

Such extensive changes give birth to great narratives that tend to construct perspectives, histories and identities that are deep-rooted - and rather hegemonic interpretations of i.e. *bananeros* as well as the palm oil protagonists as all men/male.

On the other hand, looking at structural changes 'in reality', empirically speaking, is also an approach that characteristically can be labelled historical geography, a field that only recently have been influenced by feminist perspectives (Morin and Berg 1999, Domosh and Morin 2003). As archival studies have been a typical method in that field, the 'silences', meaning women's absence, has been a main challenge.

Moving the analysis from the gendered subjects themselves and onto the historical condition in which those subjects have come to be constituted as 'different' has certainly broadened the ways in which archival material can be used. (Domosh and Morin 2003: 262).

If 'feminist historical geography' is a fitting label, and it is, then, according to Domosh and Morin;

... the very core of feminist historical geography is about the complex historical relationships between gender and space, that feminist geography incorporates change through time as an important variable for understanding the relationships between gender and place/space/environment (Domosh and Morin 2003: 258).

To return to the four main points that I will enquire in this work and which I find central:

First; it is the overall setting of the whole venture, that the initiating of this work was a WID/GAD context, a concrete development programme for women with a research component. Second; this background did lead to some particular challenges in the fieldwork situation that has inflicted much on both interpretation and further analysis. Third; this is, as claimed early on, a typical explorative work, including trying out different theoretical positions, which also has been a process of interactions over time, and which will be reflected in the work. And, fourth, of the above reasons the way the texts have been formulated and how is, therefore, part and parcel of this research process.

## **A Reconstruction of the Research Process; Starting Point, Fieldwork and Homework**

*Wayfarer, the road  
Is your footsteps, nothing else.  
Wayfarer, there is no road  
You open it as you walk it.  
The walking opens the road  
And when you turn your eyes back  
You see the path you'll never walk again.  
Wayfarer, there is no road,  
But wakes on the sea  
(Antonio Machado)<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Antonio Machado (1875-1939) is one of the greatest Spanish poets. This is but one of several translations of this very famous poem, in Spanish it starts, 'Caminante, son tus huellas el camino y nada mas; caminante no hay camino, el camino se hace al andar.' From Antonio Machado, *Selected Poems*, and *Twenty Proverbs* (1981) translated by Robert Bly and Dan Olson.

First of all, what I so far have described is the outcome of a long and winding research process. As indicated in the prologue, there has been a long time period between my first encountering with the peasant women in Coto Sur in 1986 to my final writings of these texts, a situation that also has opened up for other reflections, new approaches and contemplations concerning situatednesses, positions, methods and writing styles. My approach is influenced by what Coffey and Atkinson (1996) coined as eclectic reading and sensitizing concepts', in which the interpreting work perhaps has been the most demanding. The chapters in this dissertation are in many respects very different from my first writing efforts, yet they are also much the same, as the bulk of the empirical material gathered on two field trips (1986 and 1990) is the bottom line, but this material have, luckily - or unluckily - enjoyed the fate of being scrutinized, followed up, re-read, added to, rejected, left out, taken back, etc. This situation, which Karmala Visweswaran (1994) so wisely has called 'Homework', has led to raising new questions, seeing other aspects, new arguments. In practice this is an unending line of possibilities, but in this work I have had to be selective in what to take in, and what to leave for other occasions.

Thus, I will start with a certain outlying of the starting point, as well as the factual research procedures, readings, and the subsequent writing of the texts. I am intrigued about how these processes have continually interplayed and intertwined with each other. Hence I have made an effort of formulating this as much as possible as a 'how' account, by describing and discussing the becoming of this present work, or as sometimes one says, to peep into the kitchen. Moreover, as the 'framing and naming' (Apthorpe and Gasper 1996) of the peasant women in Coto Sur has become so central in this study, I will both make an effort to show the background for my doings, and how it has been elaborated on the road. Thus 'framing and naming' means to try to interpret, guess, reflect, deduce, construe and explain, trying out different disciplinary concepts and perspectives. I would like to present some of the empirical and analytical backgrounds for these elaborations, and try to demonstrate (some) of the roads

that I have been taking - and making - in order to move on. This is what I have tried to illustrate with the wellknown Spanish proverb and poem cited above; that the road is constructed as one walk. I was initially confronted with this old proverb/poem, over and over again, when carrying out the empirical field work that makes the basis for these present deliberations, and it has followed me ever since. Knowledge and love of poetry is close to ubiquitous in Central America, and citing poets and proverbs is a favourite way of talking, including among peasants in Coto Sur, many who knew for instance Rubén Darío and José Martí, by heart, and many also made small poems and rhymes themselves. These citations were often used as metaphors in daily speech. The concept of ‘walking’ (verb: *andar*) frequently with reference to Machado’s poem line was an everyday term in the IDA compound in Coto Sur, as well as in other circles in Central America in this particular period of time. The idea was, the way the term was used, that one would have to listen to people, and listen well in order to learn, and to construct the road (forwards), based on gained insights. This was, in many ways, a term that embraced much of the critical ‘grassroot’ (*popular*) moods in these times of rough changes in Central America and beyond.<sup>13</sup>

On this present (long and winding) road that I have been walking and constructing, meanings have changed, and so have my perspectives, as well as (un)easiness with constructing them. Because the road, or path, in this case is so central for what I have come to write, I will in the following give some selected accounts of parts of my reconstruction of the research process - *el camino de investigacion* - which is part and parcel of the final texts.

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<sup>13</sup> The main inspirator was Orlando Fals Borda, and the ideals of *Testimonio* were also much used. More about that later. The proverb and metaphor was used everywhere, even an NGO working with such issues in Central America in the 1980s was named *Andar*.

## **The Starting Point: The Women's Project in Coto Sur**

### **Captured by a Text**

The IADB/BID article that I came across in 2001 (prologue), and which triggered me to return to my shelves and the Coto Sur materials, eventually resulted in my total re-writing all of it. However, most of what is now appearing on these pages have their origins in what took place before the event of the 'Palms'. For me it all started when encountering another text, a document, - an outline of a development project. This happened in the capital of Costa Rica, San José in March 1986, and which brought me into a state of enthusiasm that I later have come to describe as 'Captured by a text' from which I will only copy an extract:

How is it possible to be totally captured and enthusiastic about a relatively ordinary document, in this case a project document, or mandate, outlining a development project for peasant women in Central America? I have asked myself that question innumerable times over the years when struggling with the material. This text contained both the motives for initiating work with peasant women in Costa Rica, legitimating it, and had a detailed account of how to carry out a particular project for peasant women in the agricultural settlement of Coto Sur in the very south of the country.<sup>14</sup> The text itself, now long after, is perhaps nothing extraordinary, it seems even clumsy at times, but it did make a lasting impression on me, and led me into the project, and later, to what may be called its embeddeness. (Valestrand, forthcoming)

It was probably not so accidentally that I got in contact with several institutions and organisations working with what was roughly referred to as 'women's issues' in Costa Rica and among them was the Women's Office (SMFC) of the Institute of Agricultural

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<sup>14</sup> The full name of the project was: *Proyecto Promoción e Integración de la Mujer Campesina de Coto Sur*, COS/83/W01 COTO SUR, Sección Mujer y Familia Campesina, IDA, Fondo para el Desarrollo de la Mujer de las Naciones Unidas, San José marzo de 1.986

Development (IDA), the author of the above mentioned mandate. In an investigation about women/gender awareness in (development) organisations and institutions in Costa Rica it was concluded that among the 213 institutions, groups, NGOs etc., encountered, only four met the criteria set up, and one of those was the Women's Office (SMFC) of the IDA.<sup>15</sup> As I then resided in the capital, San José, I made contact with the (then) director of the IDA's Women's Office, and if it had not been for the Women's Project being implemented in Coto Sur in the latter half of the 1980s, I would never have been involved with this whole endeavour. In other words, I did not go out to research 'peasant women in Coto Sur' on my own, it was the mentioned project mandate and the SMFC office that started it all, but events in Coto Sur and beyond, has triggered my continuous elaboration on the material.<sup>16</sup>

### **A Women's Office, an Enthusiastic Director, a Women's Project, and Research as Part of it**

The Land Development Agency (IDA)'s Women's Office called *Sección Mujer y Familia Campesina* (SMFC) was one of the many 'women's desks' or 'machineries' - that had been set up by state authorities to deal with increasing demands from particularly international development agencies, often to act as cooperating entities in WID/GAD projects initiated from the UN's Women's Decade from 1975 onwards (Staudt 1990; Pitilä and Vickers 1990; Jain 2005; Snyder 1995; Kardam 1991).

The IDA was a semi-autonomous state institution that had been set up in 1962 to handle rural reforms, redistribution of land, training and organisation of the peasants, and did, in the mid-1980s also administrate almost one hundred agricultural settlements in Costa Rica, of which Coto Sur was the largest one. The women's desk, the SMFC, was the latest

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<sup>15</sup> *Acción Ya*, San José. Unpublished report 1985, author Mafalda Sibille, referred in Sibille (1997) See also Nancy Sherman (1984)

<sup>16</sup> The then ongoing implementation of the WP that initiated the research activities focusing on peasant women in the settlement was later abruptly curbed towards the end of my first stay and that triggered my own wondering about why this could happen that made me follow up on the links and lack of such- and which is now documented in Valestrand, forthcoming.



administrative unit added to the IDA institution.<sup>17</sup> The SMFC was, at this moment (1986), led by an enthusiastic and active director who had been asked to set up the new office a few years before (1983) and whose ‘baby’ the Women’s Project was. The elaboration of the Coto Sur project was as a result of her concern with the situation for peasant women in the country, and she saw as her office’s first and foremost task to do something about that.

Neither the SMFC nor other public institutions in Costa Rica did, at that moment, have any systematic insights into the everyday situations for women in the rural areas in the country. They had added stone upon stone of dispersed information in order to create a viable picture as to create programmes and projects to improve the situation for the women in the IDA settlements. According to the SMFC director, rural women enjoyed few if any civil rights; many were in problematical life situations, both materially and emotionally. They were concerned about their own and children’s safety and wellbeing, as there was incessant poverty, many children, and enormous workloads. In the IDA’s Women’s Office they had become aware that women residing in the agricultural settlements hardly had access or control over resources, be it training and educational activities provided by the institution, nor did they control much income, etc. Access to one of the main resources, land, had long been a central WID issue, promoted by the FAO first and foremost, as women’s access to waged work had been pushed by the ILO, two central issues in the 1970s development programmes to incorporate women into modernising programmes as had been Ester Boserup’s (1970) solution. The establishment of agricultural settlements like Coto Sur had been based and legitimated on the grounds of providing land for the landless normally coined as ‘agricultural reforms’, and in spite of lacking documentation and available statistics at that stage in Costa Rica (Madden et al. 1992), the overall impression was that men controlled land, and other

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<sup>17</sup> The IDA will be returned to several times, suffice it to say that it was, as most such agencies, understaffed and underfinanced, with a high and controversial political profile, as most such units will be. In Valestrand (forthcoming) the history and background of the establishment of the SMFC is accounted for in much more detail. The above information is collected mainly by interviewing the director of the SMFC in May, July, September and December 1986 in San José.

resources in their assumed role as ‘head of households’; and that they were providing the ‘peasant family’ with resources that also, assumingly, would be distributed altruistically and equally to all family members. This was an assumption the IDA’s Women’s Office questioned and wanted to challenge and change. While the IDA previously had worked with peasant women half-heartedly and with what the SMFC director designated as ‘home-economic’ perspective, the SMFC was now to plan and implement programmes for women that also questioned unequal power relationships and wanted to consider women also as agents in their own right, that they both should have access to resources and to voice their rights. In many ways the SMFC programme mirrored Nancy Fraser’s insistence on not only looking at redistribution issues but also recognition in terms of justice and equality (Fraser 1997).

The SMFC director’s list was long. She had travelled to visit many of the settlements all over the country and had talked to and listened to the women and experienced that the situation for many women in the IDA settlements was very difficult. By providing facts she believed things could change; politically in the country (the government, and within the very IDA institution responsible for the running of the settlements), including practical development work in Coto Sur and the other IDA settlements in Costa Rica. Believing in the persuasive effect of facts and arguments, she had already launched basic investigations and research activities from the very inception of her office, an effort that now was to become an integrated part of the WP in Coto Sur. This Women’s Project in Coto Sur she finally had succeeded to finance through a donation from the Unifem, but that was the result her own extensive and very difficult bargaining and negotiation both within and outside the IDA institution, by which she finally had managed to get a whole field team deployed in the Coto Sur settlement, a miracle in itself in such a male-dominated institution.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> These negotiations have all been documented and described in many documents etc., see Valestrand (forthcoming) for details.

The Women's Project in Coto Sur was planned to be a pilot experience based on an 'integrated perspective'. The ambition was to make it a template that could be used in other IDA settlements and rural areas in Costa Rica. It did not stop there, the SMFC director was also actively working towards a national plan for peasant women in Costa Rica in cooperation with other national and international institutions such as the FAO and the planning ministry (Mideplan),<sup>19</sup> and the experiences from the Coto Sur Women's Project would therefore be crucial for the prolongation of both the SMFC's plans as well future national engagements involving rural women in the primarily agricultural country. There was, in other words, much at stake; "Peasant women were", the SMFC director argued, "- simply not visible and they had no voice in Costa Rica", which she had noticed they had started to get in the neighbouring Central American countries (Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador particularly) where poor rural women were beginning to organise themselves and claim their rights in the 1980s.<sup>20</sup> She saw this lack of organisation in Costa Rica and of claiming their rights as a challenge that needed to be met by contributing to the production of other versions of the situation, and which eventually could be traded for (feminist) political gains.

The director saw the SMFC's role as an important player on the national scene, but knew by experience that things had to be played by ear in order to change things in such rather intricate institutional and political settings. She could be described as a typical feminist change agent, but one who had both her feet planted in the soil, literally speaking, but also with an ardent academic perspective. She argued that all activities needed to be based upon what was usually coined as the perception that women had of their world, not what somebody else thought, or decided was best for them. In order to be able to capture these perceptions, all research activities were to be carried out within the perspective of 'participative action research (PAR)', everything that was to be accomplished working together with the women

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<sup>19</sup> The outline of the plan was published late 1986, see Monica de Jiménez et al. (1986)

<sup>20</sup> This is made a point of in Deere and León (2001) and Leitinger, ed (1997), see also Medrano and Villar (1988). A national rural women's organisation was not founded before 1996 (Asociación de Mujeres Productoras Rurales de Costa Rica)

should be within a framework that was labelled the ‘integrated perspective’ (*perspectiva integral*), a term that it turned out, was not uniformly understood, and thus provided the ground for many disagreements (Valestrand 1995, forthcoming). Like many others adhering to what can be termed the ideologies of ‘popular’ movements in Central America in the 1980s, the director consequently was adamant on the appliance of *investigación participativa*, (participatory investigation),<sup>21</sup> hence the *andar* term being activated - and pursued. This was the reason that the SMFC’s cross-disciplinary project team already working in the Coto Sur settlement employed two sociologists who were to be responsible for this part of the Women’s Project in Coto Sur.<sup>22</sup> This was meant to be gendered knowledge, to take the ‘women’s point of view’ - capturing their ‘perceptions’ as both the SMFC director and the project mandate described it.

I was at that stage not in a position to muster any money (although it was made a point of my nationality in such a US-dominated area, it was broadly known that the Scandinavian countries were among the few that were supporting women actively), but I was in a position to contribute to the production of knowledge and I was invited to do so. I was in fact asked if I would go to Coto Sur and reinforce the research they were in the process of carrying out. According to the SMFC director, the sociologists in the team seemed to have lost sight of the women and were behind schedule. I did not have to be asked twice; with a project team already in the field, working on an explicit participatory platform, I was delighted both to get the opportunity to see and learn about this to me different research practice.<sup>23</sup> But it was an

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<sup>21</sup> The main inspirator was as stated earlier the Columbian social scientist, Fals-Borda, and people working in both public and private institutions expressed interests in working in a participatory style, including the proper IDA, in which the ‘community’ was expected to be a central unit. See Fals Borda (1981a, b, 1985, 1990, 1991), deWit and Gianotten (1981); Austin (1999); Alforja (1985); Vargas(1984); It has been closely related to liberation theology, ‘Freire-ian’ and neo-marxist approaches. At this time the tradition of oral history was also becoming important in the country’s academic institutions, see Rivas (1985) and Quesada (1989)

<sup>22</sup> The research part in the project mandate is found in an annex to IDA/SMFC (1986) *Proyecto Promoción e Integración de la Mujer Campesina de Coto Sur, Cos/83/W01COTO SUR*, San José. 28 p+ anexes.

<sup>23</sup> I was at this stage on leave from my fellowship at the University of Tromsø, and had to re-negotiate my terms in order to make this work part of my duties, which was accepted, and it was thus financed by my scholarship for approximately 9 months. (The details of our agreement are to be found in letter from the SMFC office of the IDA to my university, dated June 26<sup>th</sup> 1986)

opportunity to break with the ‘normal’ academic division of labour; the structures of privilege (Bhaba 1994); which was again demonstrated in the WW’99 programming referred to in the prologue, and, as the Chilean cultural critic Nelly Richard (1996) points out, that

[...] in the global division of labour, the traffic in theory to and from metropolitan centres and peripheries remains tied to an unequal exchange, while the academic center theorizes, the periphery is expected to supply it with case studies” (in Costa 2000: 740).

Among the many aspects that the SMFC director wanted to elucidate by means of research were such well known issues as women’s access to resources; land, income, education, it was about decision-making, as well as women’s actual participation in and contribution to society, which she, as all gender aware planners knew, was insufficient, in practice non-existent. She claimed that in reality the general knowledge about the situation for rural women in the country was close to nil, and indicated substantial (and undercommunicated) regional and cultural differences in Costa Rica that needed to be both documented and taken into account in practical politics, and were important to understand and respect, including gender. She was particularly engaged in what she described as the need to democratise the (peasant) family, to increase women’s autonomy, and to improve women’s opportunities to be able to seek better life conditions. The eighties was a decade with deteriorating living conditions for the great majority of poor people in Latin America (IADB 1995; Bose and Acosta 1995; CEPAL 1986; García and Gomariz eds 1990; Gallardi and López 1986; Elson et al. 1997), the government in Costa Rica, as governments in other countries with heavy foreign debts, cut down on subsidies etc., implemented SAPs (Structural adjustment policies) to comply with demands in a neo-liberal political regime implemented by the international lending institutions. Women often had to bear the brunt of these costs.

Many of the issues that the SMFC wanted to gain better insights into were questions that had been raised internationally through the women’s movement and slowly were being

institutionalised first and foremost through the UN-system, often referred to as WID/GAD policies that tried to impact national governments, including Costa Rica. ‘Rural women’ had been targeted by international agencies like the FAO and the ILO for some years already, and at numerous international seminars and roundtables the noticeable lack of knowledge about rural women in developing countries had been on the development agenda in the 1980s. The SMFC director had been an active participant in feminist national discourses and been a participant in international roundtables from which she had brought back the WID/GAD inspired issues (access to land, training, credit, etc.) as well as experiences from other countries, and had in short time worked them into the SMFC ‘s mandate and programmes. The fact that the Unifem, the UN’s (then) women’s voluntary fund<sup>24</sup> finally had initially donated approximately US \$ 100,000 to this project was taken as a sign that they were on the right track.

### **Invited Inside**

My interpretation at that point, when being invited to participate and contribute to the research carried out in Coto Sur, and later reiterated as I have been reflecting and re-considering many of these initial issues, was that the SMFC director had a firm belief that it would be possible to both shed light on, and visualise *la mujer campesina* as a ‘development subject’ on her own, and that the researchers in Coto Sur were to contribute to give her a voice and thus increase her autonomy. This was a position that to a substantial extent coincided with my own, and it meant that this ‘assignment’; doing research about and with the peasant woman in Coto Sur would be an opportunity to literally try out WID/GAD inspired research in practice. The director of the SMFC’s belief in the potentials in providing ‘facts’ about a silenced and invisible group was one factor, but ‘filling a category’ (peasant woman)

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<sup>24</sup> At this stage this unit was still called the UN’s Vountary Fund later it was changed to Unifem. See Snyder (1995, 2003); Kardam (1991); Jain (2005). In Valestrand (forthcoming) I discuss these connections in more detail.

could also be a manner of conceptualising the initial assignment. Within a population already classified as ‘marginal’, the *Ex-banaros* (former banana workers), now *parceleros* (owners/users of parcels, smallholders) in the Coto Sur settlement were defined as marginal by the political and cultural establishment residing in the capital, San José. Women’s double marginalisation was worth closer investigation. What also triggered my analytical curiosity were all the questions about how to ‘do’ this. The exact wording of the research task was:

*Investigar la realidad de la mujer de Coto Sur y su familia en el contexto histórico, económico, social y cultural*

(To investigate the reality of women in Coto Sur in historic, economic, social and cultural context) (IDA/DOCAE/SMFC 1986: 17).

There was, I realised, quite some ‘framing’ to do, there was a lot I did not quite comprehend, but figured I would have to learn on the road.

The agreement was that I would assist the SMFC team deployed in Coto Sur, to contribute to research activities upon which the writing of their *diagnostico* (a ‘diagnosing’ written report) was to be based. In return, I could use this material for my own purposes later, if I so wished. I put as my condition that this arrangement would be accepted by the field team in Coto Sur, who by this time had been there for about five months. I did not want to be literally imposed upon them by the SMFC director. They welcomed me, thus, this was how it all started, and I found myself in a position as a visiting team member. I was not employed by the IDA and did not receive any remuneration from anyone involved in the Women’s Project and its organization. At that stage I pictured that this engagement would only be a limited contribution in time and effort, something I would do, enjoy, learn, contribute and then go home. As this present text definitely shows, it turned out that this was only the beginning of much more comprehensive involvement. But the initiation of my research project, as part and parcel of an integrated development project for peasant women has been very important all through, not only practically in terms of fieldworking, but more so, as alluded to in the prologue, by reminding me of the issue of ‘accountability’ until today. In all of my

contemplations, including expressed in this present text, this starting point and references to the Womens' Project and its mandate occur.



Map Southern part Coto Sur. (Instituto Geografico Nacional 1978)

## Field Experiences: Project Practices, Delays, and Challenges

My second subject matter is based on my fieldwork experiences, particularly the first one in Coto Sur in 1986, and the way this elapsed has had decisive influence on both the long research 'fermentation' process and the fashioning of the final texts, because I could always



return to my informants, picturing them before me, when I got stuck. I therefore have decided to devote space in this work to some more detailed descriptions of the early experiences, as a visiting member of the SMFC field team in Coto Sur.

### **In Laurel, Coto Sur and the SMFC Field Team**

I first came to Coto Sur to the IDA's administrative centre in Laurel, a former banana farm in May of 1986. I met with a struggling project team that was working hard, but had not been able to meet the dates and goals in the quite impressive work-plan they participated in elaborating four months earlier. They were six persons altogether; two social workers (*promotores*)<sup>25</sup> busy keeping up with their group-oriented work, and two sociologists who were much behind schedule. The main reason for the delays was blamed on the fact that external donation to the project, including a much needed project vehicle, had not been released from the UNDP office in San José (representing the Unifem), and there were also detectable, but diffuse signs of divergence as to the policies and the contents in the Women's Office's policies and the Women's Project (particularly held by representatives for the donors, etc.).<sup>26</sup> As it were, this situation had effects on all of the SMFC team's planned actions as they hardly managed to get out of the office in Laurel. The field-team also consisted of a specialist in cooperative organisations and an agricultural economist, the latter, unfortunately, had been called back to IDA headquarters in San José, and only could function partly for the team. A secretary, shared with another established IDA/Docae team as well as the IDA's social worker in Coto Sur (who occasionally came to meetings and participated in the different SMFC activities, when it suited) were both counted to the team. The two latter were women who had been working for long for the IDA in Laurel, whereas the SMFC team were all newcomers to the region, as well as to the institution.

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<sup>25</sup> In Costa Rica their formal title was *promotor social* and they were educated at the Universidad Nacional in Heredia and that career was most concerned with collective mobilisations and training.

<sup>26</sup> The story of the cooperation efforts and lack of such, is a main theme in Valestrand (forthcoming).

Another important observation was that the SMFC, being a totally new creation and dedicated to work with women only within the rather rigid and male-dominated IDA's administrative and executive system in a far away regional office, gave the SMFC team<sup>27</sup> quite a legitimating job to do, they had to prove themselves just about every minute of the day (How was it that so many professionals were to work with women only when we have too much to do here with too few people? - was the daily melody). It took some time before I came to realise that the SMFC team deployed in Laurel really was stuck between at least four totally different sets of expectations ranging from the external donator and the international WID/GAD community; the IDA's regional office in Coto Sur (and their superiors), the director of the SMFC in San José, and not to forget, the peasant women they had come to assist. It was in the middle of these crossing fires the team also had been set to carry out 'participative action research'.

Concerning what I had foreseen my mission to be; contributing to gendered research in the settlement, the situation turned out to be more testing than I had anticipated. The two sociologists were stressed and were under much pressure to present their second commissioned report, the overall *diagnóstico*, an overview and account about the situation for women in the Coto Sur settlement. A draft of the report was being processed just when I first arrived. It was quite comprehensive; contained tables upon tables about kilometres of roads in the settlement, percentages of school-children in each school, production of different crops, health statistics collected from the health centre, etc.<sup>28</sup> However, one had to look very well to find anything about the situation for the women living in the settlement, the draft could

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<sup>27</sup> The official name of the team was ETP *Equipo Técnico de Proyecto* (the Technical Project team) (the concept *técnico* in Latin American Spanish is more inclusive than in English; 'it is an official who has had an education in a technical/agricultural area and who deals with farmers both in the field and in the administrative domain' deVries (1992:51). Some also had some years of university education, as was the case for all in the SMFC team. In this text I will usually refer to the unit as 'the team' or the 'SMFC team'.

<sup>28</sup> It did not occur to me until much later after having plowed through a great number of similar documents that this was perhaps how '*diagnosticos*' were expected to look like? PAR methods 'has a natural affinity with clinical methods- displays a greater concern for diagnosis and treatment rather than large scale social change per se' see more detailed overview and discussions in Kemmis and McTaggart (2003).

actually be confused with any of the more general IDA presentations, with the difference that in the introduction it was made clear that this one was to be about the peasant women.



The SMFC team in the Office, Laurel

### *Lost in Translation? Negotiating Research*

I would like to bring up some of the processes of producing the empirical data that make up the basis for this present work because both the start of it and the carrying out of it were quite different from individual research journeys. I am convinced that this has a bearing on the results, including the fact that in the end of my stay I was the one who ended up taking care of most of the research materials as the SMFC team was reorganised and the research was abandoned.

Becoming a visiting member in the SMFC field team deployed in Coto Sur was both a new experience and a totally new environment to me, and all I could do was to observe and ask all the questions beginners tend to ask. Fortunately, I kept a very detailed notebook, and wrote down just about every little detail trying to find out literally where I was, what I was doing there in the first place, who my cooperators were, and what daily life in a far away

regional office and compound set to implement agricultural state policies was experienced to be. These detailed observations have been more than valuable to me later on, when I have come to realise how important these observations actually are. At the time I assumed that carrying out interviews and conversations with the protagonists, the peasant women, would become the main source of information. I have had to correct that belief several times.

I participated in all the daily activities in the SMFC office in Laurel to my best ability, often feeling 'out of place', but as it was a friendly place, it was not difficult to encounter conversation partners, and a Northeuropean woman was always interesting to share experiences with. I hung in as best I could and tried not to cause too much attention. As I also shared a dwelling with three of the women in the SMFC team, I had plenty of opportunity to discuss with them what they were supposed to do, and that they considered made up their 'target group'. This latter was not quite clear to me, as I hardly saw any peasant women. We tended to spend most of the days in the IDA compound in Laurel, the former Banana Company administration.

I soon noticed, however, that there actually was an ongoing conversation taking place within the SMFC team, often indirectly, in which much attention was given to questions as who were the 'real' peasant women, and who thus deserved the attention of the Women's Project and with whom the team were to cooperate; in practice to provide technical assistance, training, and to assist in building trust, organisation, including who were to be the informers of the very knowledge production activities we were to carry out. When much later analysing these observations I have arrived at the explanation that these deliberations functioned as some kind of internal reassurance and a manner of trying to delimit their tasks in a situation which probably often appeared rather confusing. Coto Sur was, after all, a huge settlement with more than ten thousand inhabitants; the SMFC team could not possibly attend to them all. I also registered that the team members' arguments and ways of talking were quite influenced by what could be termed the politicised 'IDA-speak', discourses encountered in

the IDA compound in Laurel and which they soon seemed to have picked up parts of. They seemed to me to be much dedicated to sort out the local population, who was seen as ‘loyal’ and who was not to IDA-policies and practices.<sup>29</sup> In the SMFC versions these deliberations surfaced as both scepticism towards the IDA’s lack of attention to the women, but simultaneously, drawing on the IDA discourses in order to delimit who were the ‘real’ peasant women. This turned out to be a very central discussion that the investigation had to be anchored within, and it pointed to the fact that the category peasant women perhaps was not as heterogeneous as assumed?

The two sociologists<sup>30</sup> in the SMFC team had started their investigations by carrying out a small survey of women farmers who (already) were in the process of converting their farms to oil-palm production.<sup>31</sup> The SMFC team, soon after their arrival to Coto Sur, elaborated a beautiful work-plan, with objectives, activities, time tables, resources needed, expected results, etc.; that in detail said exactly what they were to accomplish, and when. The research part of the assignment was included and in this plan it was listed what results that were expected, such as the different *diagnósticos*. When preparing for the work with the major ‘diagnóstico’ the full SMFC team had initiated their work by discussing what they would need to take in of information; about the region, its history, the physical infrastructure, distribution of land, production, credit, commercialisation, health, organisations, institutions, recreation, education, etc. Most of what previously had been carried out of ‘diagnosticos’ in Coto Sur was in fact outdated, based on statistics and data that were by then eight to ten years

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<sup>29</sup> DeVries (1992) has carried out a detailed study about the situation in another important IDA settlement, Rio Frio, on the Atlantic slope of Costa Rica, where he focuses much on the political disagreements within the IDA institution. In his study the perspective of ‘clientism’ was central, and he found ample examples of that. That was probably also the state of affairs in Coto Sur, but I did not pursue the matter to any extent.

<sup>30</sup> This is based on continuous conversations with them over time, particularly the female sociologist with whom I was working the closest, and who is the other part of most of the ‘we’ in the texts to follow. She was of Guanacaste origin, had studied 5-6 years at the University in Heredia (UNA) with emphasis on what she described as ‘traditional’ methodologies, design of surveys, use of sources, techniques, and rural sociology, and she underscored that they never had read any texts nor learned anything about women or gender relations during her studies.

<sup>31</sup> SMFC, *Diagnóstico, mujeres productoras*. Laurel, Coto Sur, 1986

old, and a lot had changed since the settlement's inception.<sup>32</sup> The two sociologists had then collected empirical material of all sorts, ranging from reports and data from the Health ministry to IDA statistics. They had visited public offices in the Southern region, talked to some farmers in the settlement and to people in the IDA offices, and even paid a visit to the central IDA archives in San José, etc. But the women were still missing in their reports and studies. Women seemed to have been 'lost in translation' between the Women's Project mandate and the *diagnostico*.

The situation by the time I arrived was that the two sociologists, one man and one woman, almost had ceased to cooperate; the man was sitting at his desk, signalling that he was doing 'scientific' (read important) work; whereas the woman sociologist, Odilia, who was younger and often reminded by the man that he was after all *licenciado*, she only *egresado*<sup>33</sup> increasingly worked together with the two social promoters in the team. They had much to do, so Odilia's assistance was more than welcome, she helped out with providing background materials for them, made small surveys in the Women's Groups, etc. However, she felt bad about the halting research and confided that she felt something had to be done, but did not know how. The local IDA administration, as well as the SMFC office in San José, was asking for results, and she did not quite know what to do about it. "I am in a way running away", she confided, "but working together with the women in the groups is much more rewarding and meaningful than counting percentages in the statistics".<sup>34</sup> When the male sociologist had withdrawn to his desk and started to recollect the statistics and put the material together, Odilia had started to become troubled and felt that this was not sufficient.

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<sup>32</sup> The IDA had a tradition of carrying out basic 'diagnosticos' when new settlements were to be created and as I later found out, had some templates for doing that. The work that was done in Coto Sur was in fact quite comprehensive as international agencies had been brought in to cooperate, and some of the reports date back to the mid-1970s, mostly reported in the COS/018 *Serie de Estudios*, will be referred to in more detail in later chapters.

<sup>33</sup> The difference is that a *licenciado* has passed the licenciatura exam, while an *egresado* normally was in the process of doing that. It should be well known that in Latin America formal titles are used daily, one is addressed as *licenciadora fulana*, or *ingeniero fulano*, etc.

<sup>34</sup> The gendered relationships in the project team indicated here is discussed in more detail in Valestrand, (forthcoming)

They would have to say something about the ‘perception’ of the women, which was stressed both in the SMFC mandate and by the SMFC director, and which still was totally absent in what they had produced.

*Cooperate Research Efforts, Negotiations and balancing the Situation*

After about three weeks in the SMFC office in Laurel I had hardly been out at the farms at all, and started to believe that development work in the the field was about sitting inside and discussing what to do. No wonder I started to become rather impatient, it was not exactly this I had imagined I was there to do, knowing that the SMFC team suffered as well. Something had to be done. My role had to be negotiated and I hesitantly, balancing the situation, invited the rest of the team, and particularly the two sociologists to suggest a design as to how we could proceed. Although I was impatient to get ‘out in the field’ (read, out of the office in Laurel) I felt strongly that we all had to agree on what to do, and how. In practice it meant designing a new concrete work-plan based on the main issues and themes that the SMFC project had already stated; such as the socio-economic situation for the women, their contribution at home, contribution to agricultural or other work, and in local organisations, the land issue, the question of decision-making and so on, all listed in the project mandate and work-plan. Where could we begin?

There had been carried out several studies about rural women in Costa Rica at the time (Romero et al. 1983; Romero 1986; Ramirez 1985; Quiroz et al. 1986) much concerned with women’s triple work-burdens, etc. However, studies about rural circumstances tended to be gender-blind. The following citation by a North American researcher studying the ‘political ecology of the modern peasant’ in Costa Rica (and Nicaragua) is perhaps symptomatic:

Women in San Luis (a pseudonym for a rural village in Costa Rica) knew very little about the subjects in this study: agriculture, political action, unionisation. This was

unfortunate, since as a result it was *unproductive* to interview most peasant women.

(Anderson, L. 1994: 199, my emphasis).

In his study of the Río Frío IDA settlement in Costa Rica, deVries (1992) is equally gender blind, the peasants he describes and analyses are apparently all men. In other words, we seemingly had to start almost from scratch. It turned out that the female sociologist had read much about rural women and been to many seminars and workshops dealing with such issues that in the mid-1980 had started to become quite numerous in Central America, but nothing about how to work it out.

However after some contemplations around our mission we agreed that in fact all that one needed to do was already in the SMFC project mandate, which we then started to re-read in detail and in which the objectives were “to integrate women - and their families - to the development process in the region, and their integration in base (popular) organisations in their communities”. Moreover, - “in order to get the women’s programme of the SMFC into the Development Plan of the Southern Region” - it would implicate -

knowledge about the life-conditions of women in Coto Sur, their participation in *toma de decisiones* (decision-making) in the organisations and their inclusion in the productive process (IDA/DOCAE/SMFC 1986: 16 (Antecedentes)).<sup>35</sup>

What could be read out of this was that what was expected was knowledge about the overall situation for women in the area, nothing less. In addition to this, the SMFC team had, as stated, earlier in the year, totally reworked their assignment, including a detailed work-plan for the research part.<sup>36</sup> But they had somehow got stuck.

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<sup>35</sup> The Spanish original: *Promover el desarrollo integral de la mujer campesina y su familia mediante la realización de un conjunto de actividades que la vinculen adecuadamente al proceso de desarrollo de la region a fin de obtener los beneficios que éste genere a través de la oportuna capacitación, su integración a las organizaciones de base de su comunidad y la actual participación en el diseño, ejecución y evaluación de las acciones que promuevan las distintas instituciones.*

<sup>36</sup> *Plan de Trabajo, Dimensión de Investigación* Memo, Laurel, May 1986. It was also written out on a big sheet about 2x1 meters with columns, dates and tasks and it was kept in the office and rolled out about once a week as a reminder, it appeared.



The knot that appeared impossible for the sociologist to untie was the translation of her gained insights of the situation for rural women into research that would eventually end up as a written report that also would address these women's own perceptions of their situation in Coto Sur. In our many conversations she expressed that she felt she simply did not command any analytical tools to carry out the task. It was not that she did not observe the women, listened to them and talked to them on occasional visits out in the settlement, but mostly in the Women's Groups in activity, but to get further and deeper she felt was a difficult obstacle.

All of the SMFC team members were well aware of the difficulties of approaching sensitive issues they were confronted with in the daily work in the settlement; for instance what was assumed to be men's culturally based superiority at home and society, *machismo*, and the fact that most women in Coto Sur were economically dependent on men. These were issues that had been drilled by the SMFC director beforehand, and the team's daily speech was replenished with the associated vocabulary. However, how to 'translate' this knowledge into research questions still appeared as a problem. Moreover, the land issue: women's access to farmland, was to be taken in, but that question had not brought them very far as yet, in spite of visiting the IDA headquarters in San José and their archives. They were at this stage apparently not very accurate nor updated.<sup>37</sup> In other words, there was much to build research upon in Laurel, but we obviously would have to do a lot of planning and negotiations about how to proceed with further research activities in Coto Sur. There were disagreements among the team members as well, as there were between the SMFC team and the regional IDA administration. I also registered that I seemed to be the only one who took the SMFC mandate at face value.

The many discussions we had in the SMFC team in Coto Sur, particularly Odilia and I, ended in an agreement that we simply would have to go out and listen to what the women in

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<sup>37</sup> When Deere and León (2001) about a decade later investigated the land situation it had been improved, as the legislation had been changed in the meantime, but the results seem to have remained much the same.

the settlement had to say, after all the SMFC mandate clearly spoke of *la percepción que tiene la mujer* (the women's perception). In practice we arrived at an understanding that we would have to put the issues to be addressed literally upside down; asking different questions, or perhaps better, pose them differently than what the SMFC team had done so far.<sup>38</sup> The idea of using a life-history approach was close at hand; but we interpreted that approach quite differently, I realised later on. Additionally, I brought with me what can be termed as an 'everyday', or bottom-up approach from Norwegian versions of ethnomethodological research methods and strategies.<sup>39</sup> My sociologist collaborators were trained in mainly quantitative methods but also much influenced by the *testimonios* tradition,<sup>40</sup> and the SMFC had the previous year conducted a collection of peasant women's *autobiografías* (Amador et al. 1984) thus their points of departure were expressed in *testimonio*, autobiographical, and 'participatory' concepts. In practice our different approaches were not so important when we were out working in the field together, interviewing and conversing with the women. They became an issue later, when it came to the interpretations of what had taken place and what had been said or not, and when it was to be put into writing.

The SMFC team members pointed to the need to interview different categories of women; women who were de facto heads of families and farmers, women who were de facto also farmers, and women who did not have access to land, etc. Moreover, it would be crucial to know more about young women who were in the process of getting established, and get them mobilised through the Women's Project. We should give attention to the women who

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<sup>38</sup> Bacchi (1999) has formulated this as "a what's the problem approach"

<sup>39</sup> Just to give a few key references, Berger and Luckmann (1966); Goffman (1971, 1974); Geertz (1973, 1983); Barth (1994) and Wadel (1991) plus several women studies approaches, of whom Ingrid Rudie (1984) at that stage was most important.

<sup>40</sup> *Testimonios* or autobiographies in Latin American writing, epitomised by the books presenting Rigoberta Menchú (*I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* and *Si me permiten hablar*, about the miner's wife in Bolivia, Domitila Barrios de Chungara). Particularly the first has stirred much controversy as to its 'accuracy' (David Stoll), while others, including the protagonist(s) hold that this genre is to be considered as collective experiences, that the speaker does not speak or represent a community but rather performs an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective. Beverley and Zimmerman (1990) analyse literature and politics in Central America, particularly revolutionary poetry from Nicaragua and El Salvador, but they also discuss testimonial narratives. In practical work in Coto Sur however, the two concepts *testimonio* and *autobiografía* were applied interchangeably, and added to the confusion in the beginning. See Randall (1983), Marin (1991); Yudice (1991,2001); Beverley and Zimmerman (1990); Beverley (2001, 2003).

already were in the Women's Groups, there were three or four groups functioning at that moment, as well as trying to visit and find out about women who were associated to the existing production cooperatives in Coto Sur, and other organisations etc. We focused on the women's life-trajectory, relations with, or experiences with the banana industry, on what had brought them and how they had come to the Coto Sur settlement. Moreover, daily life in their parcel and house, their chores, household economy, the children, relationships in the household, community activities, and service, and reflections over the role and positions they thought women should have in the Coto Sur settlement, etc. This was all elaborated into a list of questions.<sup>41</sup>

### **Fieldworking in the Coto Sur Settlement**

The particular background of this research, the SMFC mandate and the deployment of the SMFC project team in Coto Sur did provide a special setting and carrying out of the research in the first and most comprehensive, and I will add, explorative, part of the investigation. Both because the collection of data, at that stage, was meant to 'fill in' and be part of the 'PAR' action research, but also because of challenges in the practical field work activities. On the road we also collected loads of additional information, including fractions of the life stories, or perspectives, from a number of other women, husbands and compañeros, daughters and sons, cooperative leaders, teachers and lay ministers, shopkeepers and health workers. Altogether about eighty - ninety persons could be categorised as informants. As a rule we worked two and two together, and most of the time I worked with the woman sociologist Odilia. One or two of the promoters, Alejandra and Jeanette, participated whenever they had a chance and we could split up in two smaller teams. We started out with a handful of the

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<sup>41</sup> *Guía visitas con las parceleras*. Memo, Laurel august 1986. In many aspects this list that we elaborated was not so dissimilar from the many 'gender analyses' receipts that the international aid agencies and NGOs have published later on, many which can be found on the web today. At this stage there was not so much published material to use, we had some UN material in the Laurel office, and so on, most of it we had to construct. The team contributed with their local knowledge etc, I brought in household perspectives and gender-relations etc.

women who were already members of the two most active SMFC Women's Groups, and based on these we re-elaborated the list of questions. Ideally we had preferred to follow the plan we had outlined to interview women according to age, district, etc., but in practice the research could better be described as following a 'snowball effect', as to who we were able to reach, to talk to, who was present, etc. Needless to say there were hundreds of loose ends. The realities, when it came to where the women we sought in Coto Sur were assumed to be encountered; certainly had to be re-written. The two sociologists had as noted already made some attempts to follow the 'land' thread; to seek up women who, according to a list that had been elaborated by the IDA, were the title holders, only to find out that the list and the realities were not comparable at all. These forays gave us access and insights into networks and relationships that otherwise would have taken us considerably more time to gather.

#### *Producing Knowledge through Conversations, Interviews and Writing*

The idea was that we wanted to have the women relate their lives in an as comprehensive and open manner as possible, to be flexible and not limiting the issues dealt with and only to refer to the themes that we had agreed on beforehand if necessary. Concerning the life-history/course/testimonio approach that we had agreed would be useful when approaching the women, it could be practiced very differently. People were more or less talkative. Some kept talking during the whole session, while with others we had great help from the interview guide. Hence a combination of 'semi-structured' active interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium 1997; Kvale 2005; Gubrium and Holstein 2001,) long monologues, and ardent observations probably best would describe this fieldworking process. In practice I assume it could be labelled a quite typical ethnographic fieldwork; - ethnography as any research involving

observations of events and actions in natural contexts and which acknowledges the mutual dependence of theory and data.<sup>42</sup>

In the many visits we carried out in the women's houses, there were only a handful that one may say were accomplished in a setting in which we could sit down together and keep a continuous conversation as the daily schedules of most of these women were so filled with tasks and responsibilities that had to be met and achieved. In practice we would accompany the women wherever they happened to be; in the maize field, or doing something around the house, washing and cooking, etc. Moreover, men's recurrent tendencies to intervene (and the women's acceptance of that) in the conversations, or often taking over, posed a challenge. We felt that we had to be polite and respectful, but we definitely wanted to listen to what the women said. (Anderson and Jack 1991; Nagar 1997; Borland 1991; Cotterill 1992) A practical solution we arrived at eventually was that one of us talked to the man and the other to the woman. They were, after all, husbands, *compañeros*, sons or brothers. In this manner we also recorded a number of men's histories; and could observe how gender relations could be played out, or under-communicated (Callaway 1992; Bell 1993; Wolf 1996). In most of these cases, however, the men tended to leave after a while. Sometimes we could be interrogated in detail about what we were doing and why; and alternatively rebuked for putting nonsense ideas into women's heads (alluding to the Women's Project), and the other way around; interrogated about what the women could get out of this. Yet, it was not very difficult to get the men astray; many of them were delighted by the attention, telling off politicians, bureaucrats, including the IDA, and contrasting them with the 'real people' (*la gente*), the peasant (*el campesino*), etc. to an appreciative audience that we were believed to be in the category of. As we were women as well, the situation could also make these men turn on their 'macho' charm.

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<sup>42</sup> What is 'ethnography' and what is 'qualitative research', and by whom etc, is a discussion that has been going on for long, my own 'entrance' has been through women and feminist studies (Valestrand 1999). Among the many contributions, see for example Atkinson (1990); Silverman (2001); Denzin and Lincoln eds (2001); Ellen (1984); see also Behar (1996); Hastrup and Ramløv (1988); Hastrup (1994, 1995)

None of the women that we interviewed were trying to show-off. On the contrary, some of them would over and over again ask us if we really thought that their experiences were interesting; they “did not know anything”, but as we got to know them better, they willingly spoke, some of them seemed to be doing it for the first time in their life, and they went on. A few of them even came by the SMFC office when they were in Laurel and said that they had forgotten to tell us about a tiny detail, and that they had been thinking about it afterwards, and these visits increased in frequency, resulting in that many of the interviews were in practice enlarged substantially over time through several conversations.

Different types of ‘field settings’ turned out to provide very valuable information, data that I really did not think so much about then, but as it turned out later actually reflected many of the most relevant dilemmas and ambiguities; Observing what took place at the group meetings, what was discussed and not (‘silences’), listening to the social promoters’ reports, discussions, and not to forget the preparations for these sessions in the office in Laurel. It was interesting to observe how different some of the women’s conduct were when they were in group sessions and when at home; to the majority the groups provided a new arena with other rules than where they otherwise operated, thus reflecting over this space became increasingly important in the later analysing of the data material.

This research situation, as a visiting member of a project team, also raised some important questions about power and positionality, research cooperation, etc. Most of the research and method literature that I was familiar with, particularly feminist studies, is very much concerned about the relationship between the researcher and the researched, raising such issues as equality, balance, non-imposing attitudes, shared authorship, and using labels such as discussants and informants rather than objects and so on (Cotterill 1992; Stacey 1988; Stanley and Wise 1990; Shields and Dervin 1993). However, I found myself in a situation carrying out cooperate research, and this turned out to be even more complex as other relationships had to be taken into account as well. This was not only about forging ones roles

in field-work, it was also much about negotiations and relationships on various scales and intensities, and the bottom line was about legitimating what we were doing, both upwards and downwards so to speak. The all-over attitude was that women did not yet merit (so much) attention.

### *Reporting, Interpretations and Disagreements*

I had not given much thought to how we were going to formulate in writing any of the material we collected and produced. I figured that what the SMFC team needed desperately was empirical material that somehow would reflect and portray the situation for at least some embodied peasant women in order for them to be assigned a voice. My own use of the material was not clear to me at that point, as the 'in situ' research situation had in fact been put upside down. I had to be both aware of the research relationship between researchers and informants, in this case the women we discussed with - and us as some kind of intruders, who supposedly would do their best to make the women's situation better, but also, it turned out, balance the relationships between me, my co-workers, and all the translations, different perspectives, positions, ideologies and misunderstandings between all of us.

Before each interview and many times in the SMFC Women's Groups' sessions, the informants were, by the SMFC team members, presented with explanations and assurance that the gathered empirical material would be used to develop didactic material and that personal information would be handled respectfully and anonymously. But this carefulness did not really make any impression on the women, in fact it seemed of no importance to them. Many could not read or write, and only a handful had finished the six years compulsory education. The SMFC team was very much aware of this status difference, and discussed the ethics of it arguing that the informants would have to be protected a lot in this period. But we did not really get any further than that.

In practice the interviewing and collecting of lifehistories were carried out in many different and flexible ways. In the beginning for instance, I attempted to use a tape recorder but soon realised that this was in vain, when listening to the recordings afterwards the voices were almost impossible to distinguish; there was water running, voices of other people talking and yelling, radio with merengue music, machines running, parrots talking etc.<sup>43</sup> The strange thing was, that I did not notice any of that when we were out interviewing and discussing. We brought notebooks but they were seldom in active use during the conversations, mostly to note down central facts, such as names, places, numbers and so on. These visits could last most of the day; and often we had several conversations with the same women, some of whom we had got to know well through the SMFC Women's Project work as well. The reporting technique we processed was to sit down somewhere right after the visit, and write a short summary in our respective notebooks. It could take perhaps an hour. That was important, otherwise it was easy to begin mixing up the information. Although we usually only carried out one such visit during a day, it did happen that we dropped by another woman whom we perhaps already had talked to, and thus new information was brought on the table. When we came home to the base in Laurel in the afternoon, it was time to write more extensive field notes and diaries. (I was prepared for the length of such work, but I was not sure whether my co-workers were, in this regard we probably had very different interests and agendas, but things got on rails eventually).<sup>44</sup> We usually started these night sessions (this was also due to the unbearable heat, it was slightly cooler at night) with a summing up of the day's events and exchanged information, observations, and comments. The impressions could be quite composite, with scattered information. It was particularly difficult to try to retrace

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<sup>43</sup> When I later followed up this first study with interviews of bureaucrats etc. in San José, they all expected me to put on the tape-recorded; and were putting much effort into their self-presentation, which is reported in Valestrand (forthcoming).

<sup>44</sup> More about these aspects of fieldwork cooperation in Valestrand (1995). Suffice it to say that I had my own diary to keep as well, which of course was time-consuming, and as I was living together with the team, they found it strange that I would prefer to be 'alone' at night; and they also demanded that I read loud to them what I had been writing in Norwegian.



family and kinship ties etc. (This will be thoroughly presented and discussed in Chapter 5). The same went for details concerned with farming etc., and relationships to others. These elaborating sessions were of utmost importance to me, as I had not always been able to catch all the ‘small talk’ in the women’s Guanacastecan Spanish; while I usually had been a lot more observant as to what was taking place than my co-workers, and had noted down myriads of observational details. What we actually tried to do together was to get a first kind of order into our composite impressions, and to try to get a picture of the person in question, and how she was managing her life. These sessions can also be described as the first step of the interpretation of the data, as our observations were contextualised and added on to, and thus made (more) meaningful (Geertz 1983), and also revealed that we did not necessarily share the same interpretative horizon (Gadamer 1996).

These post-discussions did without exceptions, generate other questions, such as gaps detected in a woman’s life- history and which would normally end with a new conversation with her (in which perhaps totally contradictory information could appear); and all the time this furnished me with increased insights in daily lives and challenges for women in the settlement.



The IDA administration Laurel 1986. Note the ITCO sign.

Our next step in the SMFC team in Laurel was to produce what in the aftermath can be called intermediate texts, the initial idea was that they were to function as reports, as documentation, and for archives that would have to be useful later on, both for the formal reporting to various authorities; and for the translation into practical project work (which then appeared as rather nebulous to me). It was at this stage, however, that we came to disagree openly as to what these texts (5-10 typed pages each) were to contain; discussions that in a few instances ended up with a suggestion to write different versions. Mine tended to be long and detailed, dedicated to daily routines and relations etc., while the other team members' versions tended to be shorter and fact-oriented, often depicting the women as outstanding in one way or the other. In the aftermath I have arrived at a conclusion that our different framings both had to do with the status of the mentioned testimonial writing in Central America mentioned above, the 'participative' setting of the project work,<sup>45</sup> as well as the situatedness<sup>46</sup> the team was in; they were expected to deliver facts and results, to somehow assure that the development activities were to avail; thus they needed to depict women in a particular way, while I was of course influenced by the researchers' freedom to be curious, as well as framing the findings differently.

In addition to this cooperative effort in Coto Sur I did, towards the end of 1986, carry out interviewing and fieldworking in San José in order to elucidate the process behind the establishment of the SMFC in the IDA, the Women's Programme and Project, and trying to get to grips with how the organisational scene of feminism was in Costa Rica in this era.<sup>47</sup> Among the tangible results of this effort was the appearance of a number of documents and papers that directly and indirectly were related to the issues of women and rural development

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<sup>45</sup> This refers to the Fals-Borda and Freire tradition mentioned above, see also Austin (1999); Vargas (1984); Ruano (1991); Cohen (1981) and others

<sup>46</sup> I am using 'situatedness' frequently in this work and it refers to the longstanding debate in feminist studies, Situated knowledges is associated primarily with Donna Haraway (1989, 1991, 1997), see also Ramazanoglu with Holland(2002) and many others.

<sup>47</sup> I interviewed 18 persons, in the IDA, MAG, the cooperative movement, feminist movement, university etc, most of this material is documented and used in Valestrand (forthcoming).

and various planning activities in the Zona Sur, and which have been more than useful. These documents I did not analyse until years later.

One may say that both the issues of interpretation and representations came up early in this fieldworking process. These experiences, combined with both primary notes and written out field-notes, a well kept diary, as well as diverse written materials was the empirical material that I returned back to Norway with, not exactly knowing where the 'homework' now would lead me, but one result was that I some years later decided to return to Costa Rica and Coto Sur to follow up the first study.

### **Returning to Coto Sur**

I had, after returning home, become involved in a national research programme in Norway that was to work with research in and about women and development, and thanks to that I was able to return to the Coto Sur settlement almost four years later - to follow up on my questions about the lives of women in the settlement, but also to pursue what I so far had not even started to disentangle - the fate of the SMFC Women's Project.<sup>48</sup> This second round of empirical data collection took place during a three months stay in Costa Rica (April - July 1990) and as I had worked closely and intensively with my Coto Surian women informants' lives and fates, I felt I knew them very well when I sought many of them up again, almost four years later. Thus every new interview, or conversation, can indeed be described as a dialogue between the former information I had gathered, how I had elaborated analytically and textually upon it in the meantime, and what now was brought up on both sides; filling in with our own and others lives, this process functioned both to fill in obvious mistakes and misunderstandings, as well as moved the stories forwards, which could be described as a constant comparative method.

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<sup>48</sup> I had received a travel grant from NORAS, Gender and Development Programme, and I could hire in assistant and driver.

The practical fieldwork situation this time was quite different from the first one, furnished with a vehicle, a driver and an assistant who both were well acquainted with Coto Sur. Not only that, my assistant was Odilia, the same sociologist that I had cooperated with in the SMFC team. Now she was employed by a NGO in the capital working with training based on participative methods. There were many women that Odilia still felt that she had *compromisos*<sup>49</sup> with, and the driver had been the former driver of the SMFC and knew every corner of the settlement. I knew what I had to do, and together we really could carry out what can be described as a super efficient practical fieldwork running the settlement over, very different from the slow and explorative job we had started on four years previously.

This fieldwork was carried out through interviews, and conversations, mostly with people that had been interviewed before, opening the opportunity to consider the changes that had occurred in the women's own lives in detail. I also had the possibility of returning to many of my former acquaintances in the capital, San José, this time bringing my report from Coto Sur (Valestrand 1990), which in turn, did function as an entrance to start to discuss and continue confronting many issues. By bringing a text, we had something to discuss on basis of, in fact that did open up several new avenues for me, things I had not seen, or been aware of, and the other way around. In Coto Sur, however, my report did not make much impression (who would - or could read it?), a lesson for me, indeed.<sup>50</sup>

Our surprise at realising the magnitude of the Oil Palm activity, did, however, alter my well-prepared plans upside down, entailing that among many other things, I had to seek information about plant botany as well as organisation of big agro-industrial schemes; totally unknown fields both to me and Odilia. During these almost four years lots of other changes had of course taken place, most notably perhaps that the talk about *women/mujeres* - now was being replaced by *genero* - there was 'gender-talk' everywhere in San José, one were

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<sup>49</sup> This was the typical phrasing of the social promoters in the field, '*tenemos compromisos con las señoras*' which can be translated to something that they had pledged an engagement with them.

<sup>50</sup> See Valestrand (1995), for some reflections on this situation of 'returning' knowledge.

evidently drawing on the international development institutions' 'gender agendas' at the beginning of the 1990s. Moreover, as mentioned above, the fact that I brought back a report about Coto Sur, and my accompanying questions, did unexpectedly indeed, open up several archives that I now could get access to and copy documents that I hardly knew existed when we were struggling in Laurel some years before, but that after working on the material I had assumed would have to exist somewhere. It should also be mentioned that there had been a change in the Costa Rican government, and consequently, most of the state administration as a result of the 1990 presidential elections had moved positions substantially, and this closed some doors, but opened others.

Together, these two fieldwork periods, in Coto Sur and San José, provided the basic information or data that this present work has been constructed upon. But it should be added here that I have also had the opportunity to return to Central America several times carrying out other tasks which has helped me keep in touch. However, I have not been back to Coto Sur yet, a decision I made, not to return until I was 'done'!

## **Interplays and Conversations**

*There should be a constant interplay between the ideas we work with (play with very often) and the detail or form and content in the data themselves (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 155).*

*The need to read and analyze 'the literature' in order to generate ideas and analysis (Op.cit: 79)*

Although in this work I am not reporting 'homework' and 'fieldwork' (Visweswaran 1994) chronologically, I have already indicated that my elaborating on the empirical material and its more or less continuous encounters with theoretical and analytical (changing) positions over more than a decade is what I called the third subject matter (above). That has entailed cross-reading - and thinking - interplays and conversations over time - about issues like the women's position in the farming households in Coto Sur and if and how their pasts may

influence on their identity constructions, what it meant to live in a former banana zone, how the increased attention to women/gender issues in development agencies and institutions materialised in Coto Sur, and much, much more. On the one hand, I felt compelled to give this extensive material a form and shape that also met the initial instructions from the SMFC. On the other, as time had passed, the palms had become a reality, and many other analytical aspects could be read into this empirical material, and in turn interplayed with cross-disciplinary theoretical and analytical positions.

There have been numerous epistemological as well as ontological traps to stumble into; for example to what extent there should be direct reference to ‘reality’ in Coto Sur, expected from the accountability of the Women’s Project (usefulness), and, on the other hand, more constructivist and discursive interpretations of gender and development histories etc.<sup>51</sup> In many ways I think that Sherry Ortner’s version of practice theory comes closest to what I have tried to do. She argues that practice theory took up the challenge to overcome the so-called structure/agency opposition, that it; “‘-grounded’ cultural processes - discourses, representations, what we used to call “symbol systems” - in the social relations of “people on the ground” (2006: 3). The long time of fermentation that this process has lived through, has also opened up for several rounds of interpretation, re-interpretation and contextualisation of the material, whose reflections have already been mentioned several times. The concept of ‘bricoleur’ has been repeatedly used by social scientists to approximate a description of what such challenges may represent;

A bricoleur produces a bricolage - that is a pieced together, close-knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problem in a concrete situation (Denzin and Lincoln 2003:53).

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<sup>51</sup> It will lead too far to develop this point, I have been much inspired by for example Abu- Lughod (1991); Bourdieu and Waquant (1993); Bourdieu (1977); Giddens (1984); Fraser (1989); Haraway (1989, 1991); Rosaldo (1989); Strathern (1995)

A 'bricoleur' is in other words a jack of all trades, and elaborating on the Coto Sur material over the years definitely gave me a feeling of exactly that. Qualitative research, as most of this must be said to represent, is interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary - even counterdisciplinary says David Silverman (1997). I do not think there is any need to elaborate further on this point; I rather aim at letting it shine through in the various chapters.

Instead, I will start with the perplexity I felt when returning from my second fieldwork in 1990. What had until then occupied my mind, had been to work on the what can be termed as the peasant women's situation in Coto Sur, focusing mainly on the perspective epitomised in my playing with the imagined ('Ex-B' + 'PW' = 'FF') function; that is analysing and working with the peasant women's daily life on the farms, and certainly contextualising them, basically trying to answer the SMFC mandate as best I was capable of (Valestrand 1990). However, the emergence of the oil palms in Coto Sur came to occupy my mind in the period to follow, changes in the palm households (Valestrand 1991), but eventually, turning my attention to look more into the structural perspectives referred to as 'restructuration' and 'development' etc. And this has, in due time, led me to become more historical in my approach than I had anticipated, and new close-readings, as well as contextual readings of old and new materials were unavoidable. If I had known little about maize growing and its cultural heritage initially, I had even less knowledge about oil palms and their derivatives. And it was only after I had managed to get a certain understanding of oil palms beyond what I had observed and heard in Coto Sur, that I was able to squeeze out other meanings from my notes and impressions, and to go on with analyses of what seemed to be in the process of taking place in households and beyond.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Needless to say deconstruction and discourse theories had to be introduced to my material as well, see Neumann (2001); Søndergaard (1996, 2000); Jørgensen and Phillips (1999); Aarhus (2001); Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990); Andersen (1999); Miller (1997), different interpretations of Foucault's works (1972, 1973) Rabinow (1984)

## Exploring the Field Material

When I after the first time in Coto Sur began to elaborate on the empirical material it can be described as an exploratory voyage; I began reading them lengthwise and crosswise; thus in practice using the first re-collected life stories and other materials as sources for constructing matrices of different kinds, in which I began putting up such as size and location of the farm the women were living at, production; what and how much, additional information, who was doing what etc. to literally locate the women within what can be depicted as the agriculture field. Then I constructed life-course matrices to find out how the women had been moving geographically in space, and I elaborated on the women's changing - or more permanent household situations etc. Matrices upon matrices were constructed in an attempt to construct Coto Sur from the way the women were portraying their lives and had been moving about.<sup>53</sup>

My intention at that point was to try to simplify, to search for some patterns in what the women had narrated, but that had not immediately sprung to the surface when still in Coto Sur; thus carrying out a second degree interpretation (Fangen 2004; Ramazanoglu with Holland 2002; Rudie 1994). From thereon, I began to categorise and classify, from all possible angles and positions, ranging from relations to bananas, civil statuses, important dates in their lives, events, how much time and effort spent on various activities, etc. On basis of these initial matrices, I did construct larger and more composite ones, on big sheets with all sorts of different signs, codes, and colours, in which lots of information was pressed in, and I did, purposely, try to construct different ones as well, in order not to lose out any information. From these compressed big sheets it was possible, again, to generate new questions, and certainly encounter numbers of 'gaps'; I did literally begin to read between the lines. By alternating between the matrices, field notes, up-written life stories, and other materials, I felt

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<sup>53</sup> When finishing up this present chapter I have picked up and checked all my in-between notes, drafts and matrices (which I have kept) and could thus retrace every step I have taken, day for day in this period of time.



I began to get closer to what the material could tell me, somehow there was something new behind each turn.

In addition to this, some years later, did I work myself through about 200 documents, texts, reports, correspondence, etc. that were related to the IDA, the Coto Sur settlement, archival material from the SMFC, development plans, and many other issues.<sup>54</sup> This is what I will describe as basic groundwork, followed by really puzzle-solving, trying to make sense of the documents (Flyvbjerg 1993; Atkinson and Coffey 1997; Silverman 1997; Heritage 1997; van Maanen 1988). It was in this period that I felt like a detective at time.<sup>55</sup> This reading and analyses of the many written documents was carried out primarily in order to try to reconstruct the background and implementation history of the SMFC Women's Project in Coto Sur (1983-1990). As this was a comprehensive effort, and it did last for a couple of years, it led me to having to contextualise events in a slightly different manner, both concerning scale and extension, as well as analytical perspectives.

When I much later made up my mind to pick up again on the he material, I found to my dismay (and disbelief) that I had to go back to 'scratch' and re-elaborate the initial materials over again. After some years in the moth bag it called for other interpretations. My previous writing efforts were ok, but I realised that having read much literature etc. in the meantime I read other things into it. I drew, however, actively on the material in other occasions, like when writing a co-authored piece about the gender/women studies situation at my own institution (Valestrand and Gerrard 1999). Alvesson and Skøldberg (2000) describe such processes as 'creativity and extensive reading', and 'reflexive interpretation'. The emergence of the world wide web (www) motivated me to continue. It was possible to be better updated on what took place in Costa Rica, and to update and check material that at first sight appeared outdated.

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<sup>54</sup> In Valestrand, forthcoming there is a full account of which documents that I have made use of and have had access to, and the ones I know existed but did not get access to. The titles are referred in the bibliography in the end of this work.

<sup>55</sup> I gave a paper at a seminar titled 'Nancy Drew in action' about this in 2001.

My decision to start a total re-elaboration and writing a monograph rather than to make an ‘adding-on’ version, or publishing a collection of articles, has, as stated in the prologue, been more than demanding. However, returning to my transcriptions and comments from interviews, life stories, intermediary notes, observations etc., occasionally gave new and rewarding insights, and more than once I had to ask myself why I had not seen an incident or an obvious connection before! This was an eye-opener to me; the material was old and elaborated, and still; I had to do it all over again, realising that I had only done about half the job, and that I was in the process of becoming some kind of a ‘closet historian’, (including that part of the language had to change from present to past tense).

The empirical material, however, is part and parcel the basis of this writing. Dorthe Marie Søndergaard (1996) talks about ‘the analytical systematics’ (analytisk systematikk) and that it comes from somewhere; from the empirical material itself, from one - or several - theoretical paradigms, and from the intersections between the empirical material and the selected theories. This dynamic process, transportation between theory and empirical material, over time, and with many partial transportations back and forth on the road, until the picture eventually have found an expression to be elaborated for presentation; and is to be an invitation to a “tour of discovery”. Albeit, as she also puts it, the ‘discovery’ has by then already happened, and the journey taken place (1996: 12). To put it shortly; as a result of this re-elaboration process I became acutely aware of the complexity of my material, and even more concerned about how to forge it into (readable) texts. Such processes can also be labelled ‘readings’; one can carry out different readings of empirical material, for instance; comparative-, displacement-, opposition-, surplus readings, etc., attempting to counter own and others’ assumptions and to particularly avoid binaries (Staunæs 2004: 91-93). My own reflexive re-readings are not so concentrated around subjectivities as is Staunæs’ project, but I have made attempts at more extensive (in time and space) readings of the materials, often by contrasting them, and trying to unsettle them, to literally shake them. I had to take many

rounds, not only to decentralise and destabilise the peasant women as actors perspective; or to rethink issues of ‘community’ and ‘participation’ (read ‘empowerment’) - so fundamental in much of transnational feminism. Only by such close readings, and not to forget time,<sup>56</sup> was it possible for me not to totally dismantle those, I have to admit; but at least to question them.

Hence, the past four years or so have been, on and off confrontations and conversations with new literature, and using it in turn, to question my own versions and interpretations of transition processes in Coto Sur. It has been a slow moving, back and forth, generating and also as already mentioned, ‘chrySTALLISATION’<sup>57</sup> of numerous ideas, signs, themes, and questions, that actually already were present in the material, and writing ‘polished texts’ (Atkinson and Coffey 1997).

Moreover, the starting point, the Women’s Project in Coto Sur, was also part of more overarching structures, say the international WID/GAD policies and institutions, that had to be pursued in order to ‘emplace’ some of the events taking place in Coto Sur, most of which now is named after much of my research process; *Nebulous Territory: Gender Policies, Plans and Practices* (Valestrand, forthcoming). Working my way backwards into the background of the Women’s Project in Coto Sur, also became not only an ‘institutional ethnography (Mosse 2004), but also, I hope, a contribution to history, as Margaret Snyder (the founding director of Unifem) wrote: ‘A historical perspective is essential: Women and development was still very new in the 1980s’ (2003: 625), and she continues;

Viewed from this historic perspective and as a social revolution, the women/gender and development movement...has made an extraordinary progress in four brief decades,...It generated extensive research (op.cit: 629).

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<sup>56</sup> Doreen Massey ‘s article (2002) ‘Time to think’ - is a very thoughtful comment on the increasing demands of ‘efficiency’ in research funding-leading to lower quality of academic writing and what it might lead to no monographs.

<sup>57</sup> Janesick (2003) uses various metaphors to illustrate what she considers qualitative research to be: “Qualitative research is very much like choreography” (2003:46) “The qualitative researcher is remarkably like a choreographer at various stages in the design process, in terms of situating and recontextualising the research project within the shared experiences of the researcher and the participants in the study” (2003:48).

Thus, the WID/GAD perspectives have been inherent all through the elaborating of the material, but in this present work, they appear more as ‘control points’.

### **Peasant Women and Gender**

*To recognize gender as a social pattern requires us to see it as a product of history and also as a producer of history. (Connell 1985 :81)*

The two terms, or concepts, ‘peasant women’ and ‘gender’ will, probably, be the most frequently appearing words in this work, and their uses and interpretations will vary, and commented on and discussed as different contextualisations and situations occur on the road. Peasant Women - *Mujer Campesina* - is a social category that necessarily has had to be put into play. At the outset perhaps perceived as a homogenising category ‘poor peasant women in the Third World’ (Mohanty 1991), that is emphasising an aspect that is constructed for at all call attention to such a groups’ very existence. However, that is a perspective that has to be scrutinized and re-elaborated on different scales and levels of analysis, and which I also have attempted to do in the chapters to follow. Initially, in the role as autonomous agent of her own, which, as Leach puts it; “- means to develop a gendered reading of individual and collective action” (2004: 4), but in due course, also trying to depict not only how and if one could talk about peasant women as a collective category, and thus, how they would consider this label themselves, that is to get to grips with in what ways women in Coto Sur were struggling with constructing their identities. In the SMFC mandate and policy, in line with most other WID/GAD activities in the 1980s and 90s, what can be described as a ‘double gender agenda’ was imminent. One the one hand, the women in Coto Sur are seen as agents and individuals on their own (and not only as invisible or ‘family members’), on the other; they are seen as ‘peasant women’ - a collective force in the country, demanding their rights

etc. This, in turn, and continuation, is reflected in various strands of feminist theory and positions, touching on ‘women’ as a category, and what ‘gender’ may entail etc.

In working on the Coto Sur material over time, I have, I dare say, been trying to analyse it and to ‘gender’ it from many perspectives, of which my own background as a cultural geographer certainly will shine through. Nonetheless, I adhere to a most open and including approach but I will be more concerned about gender in relation to work, place, space, institutions etc., than more psychological aspects. Starting out in Coto Sur with a relational gender perspective (Rudie 1984) did, I think, guide much of the following analysing work, by rereading and reconstructing the empirical material, and even later on when beginning to read ‘gender’ (or lack of) into the documents and narratives concerned with this work.

On the one hand this entailed to consider ‘how were they *doing* peasant women’, and on the other, how were they perceived and represented. Henrietta Moore puts it this way;

The relationship between gender identity and gender discourses, between gender as lived and gender as constructed (1994)

I have been inspired of what Hanne Haavind (2000) so eloquently has described as the search for ‘gendered meanings’ (kjønnede betydninger) and which would apply to both gendered interactions, which is based on a perspective that gender is relational,<sup>58</sup> and increasingly also as the verb ‘gendering’ and the adverb ‘gendered’, reflecting discourses and approaches that have been elaborated in feminist studies over the past decades. There were, for example, substantial differences between the way both I and my collaborators were considering ‘peasant women’ in Coto Sur in 1986, when we literally had to ‘look for them’ out in the settlement, and how, years later, the (then) constructed category - had to be deconstructed again. This point will hopefully shine through in the various chapters. The focus on ‘peasant

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<sup>58</sup> It will lead me far astray to bring in the feminist traditions and discourses and over the years I have been drawing on: Connell (1995, 2002); Butler (1990); Moore (1988, 1994); Offen (1992); Rose (1993); Rudie (1984); Scott, Joan (1992); Smith (1987, 1990); Stanley (1990, 1993); Taksdal and Widerberg (1992); Young, I.M (1990); Assiter (1996); Dean (1997); Desbiens (1999); diLeonardo ed (1991); Fraser and Nicholson eds (1990); Hading (1991); Hartsock (1998); Longino (1987); Massey (1994); McDowell (1996); McNay (1992). See also Elson (1991); Jackson (2002)

women', has since its inception in this case, been contrasted to what has been constructed as its opposite; at least as categories - namely the *ex-bananeros*; thus a relational gender perspective has been in this, all through.

### **These Texts**

The following texts, organised in chapters and paragraphs might, on the surface appear as a rather stringent monograph, as it has been systematically built by bricks upon bricks of empirical materials in dialogues with different theoretical aspects; that this is an attempt to convey some basic facts and knowledges about women's lives and experiences in an agricultural settlement in Central America in the 1980s and early 1990s. In the introduction I referred to those as 'nested storied', and above I have tried to outline part of the processes as to how they came about.

I have attempted to organise and construct the chapters, based on both constant encounters with texts and contexts, but also to sustain them, as discussed above, with particular analytical or thematic discourses when that seems appropriate. Moreover, the texts are partly written in what may be called an essayist style and as Karmala Visweswaran holds:

"I regard the essay as a different kind of opportunity for *sustained* systematic analysis that does not attempt the totalising narrative gestures of the monograph" (1994: 11).

I am not sure whether my texts should be read out of sequence, but I do hope that they also can stand on their own, and it is not accidental how the chapters are placed into the total work, I have consciously been making numerous references across and between them, and there could be many more. For example, when, I open with a presentation of some of the life histories told by women living in Coto Sur (Chapter 2), before a presentation of the 'setting' - which here mainly is interpreted as the geographical location of the Coto Sur settlement (Chapter 3) it is a very intentional editing as I want to put the women centre place from the

start. To follow conventions, for instance in (cultural) geography, would have been to start with the Coto Sur chapter. But those two chapters are also meant to point to the two main perspectives I would like to elucidate: women's agency, and the structural constraints and possibilities. The next three chapters, (4, 5 and 6), are in the main based on the ethnographic fieldwork material from 1986. Chapter 4 is rather voluminous, it aims at answering the SMFC's mandate, trying, rather detailed, to get to grips with what it was like to be a woman and live on a smallholding farm in an agricultural settlement in the 1980s. In this chapter there is presented much detailed information about women's work burdens, division of labour and redistribution of resources in the households. Chapter 5 takes the constitution of the households/domestic units in Coto Sur as its starting point and discusses gendered relations in the settlement. The SMFC's intention of women's increased integration and participation is the main theme in chapter 6, focusing on both the institutional actors and the public spaces in a gendered perspective. Chapter 7 takes in the 'new times' in Coto Sur, and is based on the second fieldwork in 1990. The arrival of oil palms was in the process of transforming the agricultural settlement, and I have chosen (due to limited space) to focus mainly on the changes experienced in the palmgrowing households. Chapter 8 presents a number of 'in-between' discussions of some of the 'gaps' encountered on the road, and functions as a closing chapter.

Concerning what can be called the shaping of the texts, I have, in most of the chapters, chosen to present some excerpts, some in greater lengths, of individuals, mainly women, that I came to know in the Coto Sur settlement; that is the ethnographic material, observations, conversations, narratives and life-histories. I have done this in order to shed light on both the women's agency and their perspectives, as so little was in reality known about this at the outset. I have tried to avoid taking women's experiences as facts (Scott 1992), but rather been discussing with this material. But I have also done this in order to try to make these composite and complex texts easier to read, by alternating between different levels of analysis, great

details and big questions. I do try to write an alternative story about Coto Sur, and that is a story that I have aimed at getting in a fashion that reflects the dialogical ideal, and in that respect, some 'emplotments' do add to the readability and recognition, I assume.

Moreover, I have also chosen to use a substantial amount of (Central American) Spanish quotations, extracts from interviews and conversations. My reasons for that is not to make a 'truer' picture, but rather because I am not always sure whether I have got the full meaning in translation, and as English is not my mother tongue, I fear that I can have both misunderstood and taken thing for granted and in this manner I want to open the quotations for other interpretations as well. Furthermore, I have also intentionally, chosen to use many footnotes, due to the explorative approach I think footnotes increase the dialogue (Røssaak 1998), and can demonstrate disagreements that I have with myself, and others, and they are many.

Regarding what might be termed ethical perspectives I have pondered much about how to circumvent obvious recognition of people I co-operated and lived closely together with. For one, when I write these lines, some of what can be considered to be personal information has been collected as far back as almost twenty years, which probably could be said to represent much to be forgotten. On the other hand, due to use of much written materials and documents in parts of the texts, it has been important to open up for the possibility of tracking these back to their sources, also for others hopefully to continue investigations in the future, as there is so much to do, to study and to document that this text only scratches the surface of. I have, therefore, landed on the following solution; I have kept most place names but either circumvented and used other titles or statuses, and I have replaced all personal names with factious ones, except for a few central collaborators who have agreed to my using their real names. Some central agents will certainly be more recognisable than others for peoples who are familiar with these issues, however this was



cleared with them beforehand.<sup>59</sup> This also goes for the central institutions and organisations involved. As in most such work, there is also a plethora of acronyms, which I as best I could, have tried to define early on (the already introduced IADB, BID, IDA, WID, GAD etc. are perfect examples in this regard).

John Law (2000) has described five narrative forms that I have found good to think with., and one of them he has labelled ‘esoteric’, and is one that I feel resonates here; namely the construction and writing of academic stories, and which he describes as “-narrations and performances that are specific, local, and analytical” (op.cit:11); and that such stories are interpellations for specialist readers, drawing into other forms of narrations. Here I feel that I am on familiar ground; as also is the case with the another narrative that Law outlines; namely the ‘policy narrative’ - in which “-specificities are distributed into chains energized by being given some kind of pragmatic policy value” (op.cit: 11).

According to Law, such histories are meant to contribute to judgements - by distributing praise, blame, and responsibility. To me they have been about accountability and companionship, that I became aware of my sitting on unique empirical materials, to gain insights in own research process, to realise that such a job takes too much time and energy, and finally; to live in a hope that the story told can contribute a bit more than the ones it has been created to challenge; and to be comfortable with the fact that one is being caught up as stakeholder in the process whether one wants it, or not.

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<sup>59</sup> This has in fact been a difficult balancing, as to whom to protect and from whom. For a discussion of ethics in research a good reference that has been helpful is Kvale (1997/2001). See also Silverman (1997); Denzin and Lincoln (2001, 2004); Rudie (1997). In Valestrand (forthcoming.) where I have a more detailed discussion on this question related to the more focused work with the SMFC Women’s Groups.

## Chapter 2

### INTO HISTORY: WOMEN PIONEERS IN A LIFE-COURSE PERSPECTIVE

#### Introduction

The first weeks of my stay in Coto Sur were mainly spent in the IDA-compound in Laurel, the former banana farm, now into a certain decay, and the two rooms that the SMFC team had been allotted in the former UFCo administration were far from luxurious. One light bulb, two or three tables, some rickety chairs, one in-coming only telephone and an old hand typewriter was about the extent of it. However, this was a place that many people came by and during one of the first weeks of my stay in 1986, a ‘firecracker’ of a lady entered the SMFC office waving a piece of paper, and with a big smile asked if any of the *muchachas* (girls) could help her write a letter of complaint, as she had got into trouble with a neighbour and she could not write herself. She was doña Leonora, a fascinating acquaintance, and curious as I was, I began asking her about her life. During my stay in the Coto Sur settlement we had many conversations, and by slowly putting the fragments of her telling about her life together, a chronological version of her life up until then could be constructed. This helped (me) a lot when we later ventured into the settlement to carry out more extensive fieldwork. Many of the issues that had been brought up by doña Leonora became key issues that I was not familiar with at that stage. Thus, starting this story with doña Leonora is a good preamble.

**Doña Leonora: “Am I a Peasant Woman? Perhaps, But I Am a Woman for Sure”**

The above quotation was how she answered, when she one day was asked if she considered herself a peasant woman. After contemplating for a while, she figured that she was not. She had worked as a cook, she was a mother of nine, she was a housewife, had no husband - he had left some years ago, but she had a *compañero* living at her house. She thought herself to be modern, and she did farm. She loved to see her beans grow. But ‘peasant woman’, no, she was not sure about that label. She figured that peasants, *campesinos*, were old-fashioned and backwards.

She was 11 years old when she first came to la Zona Bananera together with her mother. They came from a small *finca* (smallholding) in the Alajuela province bordering Guanacaste in the northwestern part of the country to a banana plantation in Puerto Cortés (former Palmar Banana district, about 50 km north of Coto Sur). She said she never knew her father, having lived from hand to mouth with her mother. Her mother found a job as a cook for banana workers on a plantation and had added to her meagre income by making and selling *tortillas*. Doña Leonora had to work all along, most of the time by looking after children, up to 6 at the time. She had been at school two years when, “My mother did not let me anymore, you have to work, she said.”

Doña Leonora, in 1986 in her mid-forties, got married 16 years old and lived with her husband on a banana plantation in the Southern Zone for 5 years. The marriage was childless. It did not turn out very well either, so she moved in (*me junté*) with another banana worker who fathered her 9 children, 6 boys and 3 girls. Life in this period of her life was led in *cuadrantes*,<sup>60</sup> on different banana plantations in the southern zone of Costa Rica. Now, afterwards, she sums up that in spite of their having a certain comfort (running water, toilet, electric lights, etc.), she was

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<sup>60</sup> *Cuadrante* is the connotation used of the workers’ compounds on the former banana farms, called so because they normally are arranged on three sides around a square (*cuadrante*).

very well aware of the fact that it did not belong to them. Over and over again, she stresses the word 'belong to'. And besides, she shrugged her shoulders, “-he did drink quite a lot.”

One day on the plantation (they then lived in Palmar) she had heard news about land invasions in Coto Sur and that people could get their own land for free. “I made up my mind to go there, if he did not want to, I would go by myself. He did not want to, so I stacked all my belongings, it wasn't much anyway, clothes, pans and a heap (*montón*) of children, on the (banana) train and went”. In that group were also a sister, her sister's son, and some other relatives. Once arrived in Coto Sur, she and her children got themselves installed at a site where a single man already had taken land and settled. People had talked, saying that she was living with this man, but doña Leonora did not care.

“My brother-in-law was on the committee (the organisation of the squatters) and he helped me safeguard the parcel in my own name. I then sent a message to the children's father that he should come too, but because the parcel was registered in *my* name, he did not want to come. He did arrive later when he understood that I needed practical help, among other things to raise the hut (*ramada*) out of 20 zinc plates I had got hold of. The place was pure wilderness, there were no roads, we slept in a bed of *varillas* (branches), and we certainly ‘fed the insects’ (*nos dimos los mosquitos a comer*).”

She and her children had sowed (maize) three times, and cut down big trees and burnt the trunks. Three years later she was registered by the IDA as the holder of the parcel. But the father of her children was not satisfied. People kept telling him that the land wasn't his, that he was no man, and that the only thing she wanted was to exploit his working capacity. He had come when called upon, but later returned to work on the banana plantation. In the end doña Leonora had made up her mind to transfer the parcel to his name, to make him content. The IDA official in charge had then given her advice not to be stupid, that once she transferred the parcel to her

compañero's name he surely would throw her out, with the sack on her back, and the heap of kids behind. She had thought about this for a long time. But she asked her compañero to give up his work in the Banana Company and then told him that she was going to transfer the land to his name. When she proposed that, he was reluctant to accept the offer, saying that working with bananas was a more stable work, since they received payment every 14th day. "I think he was terrified", said doña Leonora.

About twelve years later she thinks that it was best it ended as it did, and that undoubtedly she would have been on the street if her compañero had done what she had begged him to do. She keeps repeating, that actually she is a different woman; "No other woman would have done what I did, invading land, establishing myself there, on the land, all by myself, working very hard. *El viejo* (the old man) gave me 150 colones every 14th day for some food, to get hold of a day-labourer every now and then, to buy a hen. But in the end he bothered me so much that I told him that we had to cut it out. It was better that we split up. And besides; seven years ago I formed a union with another guy. And guess what, he was really interested in helping me. He has helped me a lot, in spite of the fact that I don't have any children with him".

When she first arrived in Coto Sur from the banana plantations in Palmar in the early invasion period she had found land and settled in the outskirts of what was to become the settlement, in an area that used to be 'reserves' for the Banana Company. Now she lives more centrally located near one of the former plantations in the district called *La Plancha* (the Iron, referring to being totally flat). She says she traded the first parcel of 20 hectares with the one she now possesses, as the first one turned out to be too large for her to handle alone, and her children were still of little help. Besides, the children had to walk 15-20 km to reach a school. She therefore had swapped her parcel with a man called Gerardo Jimenénez, who used to have her present parcel registered in his name, as well as a 3/4 of a hectare piece of land planted with plantains somewhat away from the parcel. In addition to this, she also received 15 thousand

colones as cash payment for her parcel, as it was a lot bigger. (These were payments they had agreed upon themselves without any interference from the authorities.)

But the plantains were soon attacked by disease. A member of the banana cooperative later had bought a farm bordering hers and he had kept quarrelling with her concerning this particular piece of land, saying it was his. She then struck an agreement with Gerardo Jiménez, saying that she was to cease that land, and in return receive ten thousand colones. They had to settle things this way. It was not possible for her to do it in any other way, due to the costs with public registration etc. She says, “By yourself you cannot do much, it is the money that counts!” But now new problems had arrived, as the IDA still had not managed to give her *la escritura*.<sup>61</sup> The last time she had been at the IDA-office to get things settled they had told her that her case was in the IDA presidency and was “-*en proceso para solucionarse*” (In process to be solved....) They had told her that for more than ten years now. Months had passed since this incident and nothing had happened.

Due to her formal lack of title to the land she was farming, she was unable to obtain credit in the bank in order to buy seed. The only thing they had given her was a so-called ‘bridge’ (*Puente*) of twenty thousand colones.<sup>62</sup> Now she had turned to another bank and had travelled out of Coto Sur, and “works with them”, as she puts it. For the time being she grows 2 hectares of maize and harvests approximately 10 *quintales*<sup>63</sup> per ha, which she sells to the CNP station in Naranjo.<sup>64</sup>

Agriculture is a hard struggle. I have been quarrelling with the representative of the bank more than once for two years they have not given me ‘*un cinco*’. Besides, the price of

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<sup>61</sup> *La escritura* refers to the official registered title to the land

<sup>62</sup> The exchange rate of the colon to the US \$ was deteriorating during the 1980s, as of 1986 it was approximately 60 colones to 1 US\$.

<sup>63</sup> 1 quintal = appr. 46 kgs.

<sup>64</sup> Consejo Nacional de Producción (CNP), State marketing board, the authority dealing with prices of agricultural produce and redistribution of seeds etc.

yellow maize has fallen which means less income. In the beginning I hired a day-worker during the harvest time, but now I cannot afford it. Once they came from the bank to collect money, and I said, 'If you want to take me to prison, go ahead, but I am not going to pay you, I don't have anything, see for yourself.'

They had nothing to do but to leave. A year ago an IDA extensionist had convinced her that the future would be to grow oil palms. She had, in the beginning, been very reluctant, but had agreed to plant a few hectares with palms, so she could see if she liked it. So far the palms were not yet in production, as it takes about 3-4 years to reach that stage. Her children did not want her to convert to palms, and she says they had punished her by not wanting to help her in her work. Only her *compañero* and a son living in San José supported her. Hopefully her joining the Palm programme would speed up the titling process. She had been told that the papers had to be processed before they would be fully accepted to the big project still in its planning stage. Whenever we would talk about her farming and especially her still tiny oil palms she keeps returning to her philosophy, to what the differences are between the poor and the rich, and how it is to confront the world from below.

I have said it many times, both to those from the bank, and those from the IDA; *soy una mujer, soy vieja, soy parcelera - qué tienen ellos más que yo?* (I am a woman, I am old, I am parcelera - what do they have that I don't?) I have seen my oil-palms grow, without *un cinco*, go find the others that are growing palms, to see if they did as I did.

What I learned the most after thinking about and elaborating on doña Leonora's story, was what became an important issue, namely the importance of *contexts*, both in terms of space and time; power relationships; as well as women's active agency. Moreover, the importance of the *pasts* in interpreting the present situation, and the complexities encountered at mixing

these pasts and presents. This also pointed to other central themes in this work, namely peasant women's relations to men with regard to the set-up and relationships in their households and kinship, control over land and other resources, including their dealings with the public institutions.

## **Storytelling and Women Pioneers**

I have explained (chapter 1) how we came about to work with a lifehistory inclined approach when gathering information about the actual situation for the peasant women in Coto Sur. In qualitative studies the intention is to identify meanings, what phenomena and utterings mean, rather than how often they appear, and by studying and listening to the women's relating of their life and daily struggles, the idea (then) was to try to search and find some patterns in the social change processes that we literally were exploring (Kjeldstadli 1999). This chapter is an effort to give 'Peasant Women' a voice, and a history too, to describe and construct a historical change process, as the women narrated their versions.

But the stories also had to be analysed as stories, or narratives,<sup>65</sup> some think that one should try to consider the difference between a story and a narrative (Czarniawska 2004), while Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg (2006) suggest to use filters, genres, and perspectives when analysing life-history materials as they consider this a more fruitful way of splitting people's experiences from their narratives. This became an analytical challenge for me, for example when the women, doña Leonora and others later to be presented, narrated their arrivals to Coto Sur, but also taking into account that they later on must have interpreted and elaborated on these events. Of these reasons I have chosen to call this 'storytelling', understood as an active selection and construction based on the gathered material. This

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<sup>65</sup> 'A narrative- as a story of a sequence of events, that has significance for the narrator and her audience' Denzin in Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 55), see also Benson and Nagar (2006); Cotterill and Letherby (1993); Probyn (1993); Stanley (1993); Stivers (1993); Okely (1992):



chapter is, in other words, not a collection of lifehistories, which there actually was material to do, but instead I have used many extracts from swomen's own ways of talking to construct stories. (Thus there is reason to discuss whether it was their 'voices' that is represented). Hence, this is rather history-telling by means of storytelling, in edited form. I have found that presenting a more or less chronological version of the women's paths, in life - and space, will function as a prelude for the more focused presentations later on, although I think that this has been my most serious intervention as there were few of the women's life-histories/-stories that were narrated chronologically at all. Listening to the women (and men), I did, especially through their life-histories/interviews, become aware of a relatively hidden history; or contribution to what Elizabeth Dore has called creating 'the hidden histories of gender in Latin America' (2000), and Janet Townsend's (2002) description of 'Hidden geographies'.

In the aftermath, I recon that it occasionally was mine, at times, obsession with chronology that really drove me in the beginning, as it became more and more obvious that women's lives, work and stories, and thus contribution to the construction of the Coto Sur settlement had been rendered totally invisible in the early history of the building of the settlement. Moreover, there was no doubt that the women we listened to really could be called pioneers, women pioneers, a role that has basically been a masculine coded one:

Pioneers, settlers, homesteaders, colonists: these were all evocative names for people who set out to make farms on land where little or nothing was produced before, be it on a new irrigation scheme or in the wilderness (Townsend 1995: 7)

Townsend also points to the fact that our (Anglo American) images of women pioneers come above all from tales of white women in the USA, where hardship on the frontier of the West led to prosperity for many (ibid). The influential 'frontier thesis' of Frederick Jackson Turner gave masculine accounts of the frontier and ignored women, in addition to the totally natural determinist perspective on conquering empty land (Arnold 1996). It was men who conquered

empty land. Later feminist writers have filled in with very different accounts from women pioneers.

The images is that men ploughed, planted, harvested and cared for sheep, horses, cattle and pigs and women grew vegetables, canned them. (Townsend 1995: 20)

Townsend, discussing different types of settlements, concludes that in rich countries there are positive images of land settlements found in historical accounts and literature, whereas in poorer countries, land settlement has been and is a strategy for rural development that is popular with governments and aid agencies. There was no reason to say it was any different in Coto Sur.

### **Arrivals: “We Heard They Gave Away Land in the South”**

The majority of the women who narrated their histories, or were interviewed, had arrived to Coto Sur during the period that later was referred to as ‘the invasions’, and which mainly corresponds to the years 1973-1975 when the largest amount of people had entered the territory in Coto Sur that was still controlled by the *Compañía Bananera*, (UFCo’s subsidiary), in search for land. The youngest of our informants had come as children. Others had first arrived in this period, but left after a while, and returned again later. A few had come to the area before the invasions, squatting land in the so-called reserves of the Banana Company, and yet others had been part of a new a group of arrivals that came in 1983/84 (after the closures in Coto Valley and the final withdrawal the Banana Company from the Zone). A number of the women had come and at later stages, as well.<sup>66</sup> Hence, there were different contexts and situations, experiences and positions that their stories were narrated from and in dialogue with.

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<sup>66</sup> This is probably mainly due to the fact that in 1986 we mostly worked in the central La Plancha, Vaquita C and San Juan districts which were first settled, the latecomers had to search for land further out in the settlement that we only could reach after the Women’s Project vehicle had arrived.

However, it was the event of the considerable group of people that had arrived from approximately the end of 1972 throughout 1973-1974 and who publicly in Costa Rica were labelled *precaristas* (squatters)<sup>67</sup> and that had invaded and claimed former banana plantations that had caught the headlines and political attention in the country. This is a story that was told in many different versions, both by people who themselves had participated in the events, the media, but also by everyone else who happened to be in Coto Sur, still more than a decade later. In many ways the invasions represented the creation myth of the Coto Sur settlement, a collective story to be drawn upon and it was also a story that was part of more comprehensive discourses on peasants' and workers' struggles, authorities, law and order in Latin America in the 1970s and 80s, and including in the BID article from 1999 (prologue).

When asking the women if they could recall what it was that had made them leave whatever they had behind and go to a totally unknown place, there was one phrasing that tended to repeat itself, "We heard they were giving out land in the South"<sup>68</sup> and that was what they gave as their reason and motive for taking off. The recurrence of this phrasing puzzled me in the beginning, as it had such Biblical connotations of a Promised Land, something literally being given away to the chosen ones. When being pressed on the matter the women mentioned hope for better lives, an opportunity, access to farmland, a house of their own, as reasons for taking off to something that was then totally unknown to them. They all said they did not have any idea about what they were going to. This event of leaving something behind, as well as starting a totally new life at literally zero and in the middle of nowhere, had for

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<sup>67</sup> The word *precarismo* is Costa Rican Spanish for the phenomenon of (illegal) land invasion, stems from precarious which indicates the insecurity of the land. (Anderson, L. (1994: 197), see also Villareal (1992); Seligson (1980); Barahona (1980).

<sup>68</sup> '*Oímos qué les dieron tierras en el Sur*', was the exact Spanish phrasing. Coto Sur means Southern Coto, the larger ex-plantation areas north of Coto Sur is called Coto Valley (Valle del Coto), surrounding the Coto Colorado River leading to the Golfo Dulce. (Coto in Spanish has to do with border markers); thus it was not only in the Southern Zone (La Zona Sur) but to the South of where the women happened to be. This is a detail that I did not get when I first spent time in the settlement and actually for quite some time and writing later. It was not until I did re-read the original stories, after having elaborated on much of the rest of the empirical material that it occurred to me that most of the women already were in the 'South', and that they were going even further south! That I had, then, not been able to see the world quite from their point of view. It was in other words insufficient to say Coto only, but in older accounts from banana workers one can encounter 'los Cotos' (plural) occasionally. More details in chapter 3.

many been experienced as dramatic and which we heard many stories about. When discussing this matter with the ones who had lived through it, many memories were brought up, often phrased like a feeling of being thrown into a black hole of helplessness, but also frequently references were made to fate, destiny, and providence, also narrated in Biblical terms. Just about all of them described their journey to Coto Sur in similar terms as doña Leonora, as they told us about being accompanied only by pots, pans and children.

For the women who had been among the first arrivals to Coto Sur it was particularly the police forces (*la Guardia*) that had been sent in several times to evict the precaristas that had made a lasting impression on them. Three of the women telling their stories happened to find themselves right in what later was described as the front line, especially in the first encounters that had taken place; near Km 31,<sup>69</sup> later appropriately named *La Libertad*. One of them was doña Carmen. A woman full of energy, then 32 years old, and in 1986 still living on the land she had claimed then, or as she put it; “*tomé mi pedacito*” (I took my little piece). She had taken off from one of the banana farms in the neighbouring Coto Valley as soon as she heard about the invasions. Access was rather easy from that side as she had just entered the banana train and gone. Based on the women’s stories it is possible to say that this company train was perhaps the most important agent in the whole chronicle of the invasions in Coto Sur, as it was possible to enter at one banana farm and leave on another, as they always had done.<sup>70</sup> Carmen had occupied land and been kicked out several times by the Police Forces,<sup>71</sup> but she hid in the woods and returned, at night, over and over again. She had come

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<sup>69</sup> Refers to the Km 31 sign (from Golfito) on the Banana Company railway line (Golfito was point 0).

<sup>70</sup> This Company railway connecting the banana plantations with the exporting harbours of Golfito and Puerto Armuelles in Panamá stretching for 250 k, was kept intact after the Compañía Bananera had started to pull out and the line was in little use, but most parts of the rails were torn apart after new invaders came in from Coto Valley in 1983. Only the tracks from Tamarindo, west of Laurel, to the export harbour in Panama was still kept intact and used to export contract produced bananas, see next chapter. About the banana railway, see Yudin and Stephens (1989)

<sup>71</sup> People referred both to *la Guardia*, *la Policía*, and *la Fuerza* (the force). Costa Rica abandoned its armed forces in 1948, but has built up an efficient police force.

accompanied by her seven children. Her husband, a banana worker with *La Compañía*,<sup>72</sup> had reluctantly turned up later, but had disappeared again after some months, never to return. She had heard that he was living on some plantation in Limón, but did not care. He was no farmer, no good anyway, she said. Now she was the owner of the land, and no one could interfere with her doings.

It turned out that just about all the women who arrived early to Coto Sur had come from other banana plantations in La Zona Sur and they all said they wanted to get away from a life in the banana company compounds, to go somewhere else, as they also underlined, find somewhere of their own. At this stage banana production had started to decline in the Zona Bananera, but there were still many jobs available in the industry. None of the women we talked to felt that they had been forced to go because the men had been laid off the banana industry. This may be accidental, and there were certainly many men who had experienced this, only that when trying to tell a women's story this difference is worth noticing, whether it was the case, or the way the women saw it.

These first land seekers among our informants had come to what most of the women described as pure wilderness (*pura monte, montaña*). What had used to be banana groves on the plantations were described as a mess of fallen down plants, stalks, rotten fruits and clogged trenches and canals, muddy and insect infected. In order to establish a new frontier society the women who came on their own soon found that they needed the physical strengths and skills of men to clear the land, cut down huge trees with simple axes (*volteado*), construct living quarters, and slowly begin to farm. This homesteading period lasted for several years and many who had arrived, soon left again, pioneering became too strenuous, but new people kept arriving. Many women agreed that they had taken on what was described as typical

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<sup>72</sup> As will be dealt with in more detail later, the banana company in question is the subsidiary of *United Fruit Company* (UFCo); *La Compañía Bananera de Costa Rica* (CBCR). The women consequently said *la Compañía* or *La Bananera*.

men's roles in homesteading,<sup>73</sup> and some of them continued carrying out what they said were considered as typical men's jobs in farming ever since, and they were proud of it.

Doña Dolores, for instance, was one of the first women who had arrived on her own and she had stayed put, "I had no alternative", she said. Then in her early forties, she had walked over to where she had settled only a few kilometers from the banana farm in Coto Sur where she had lived. She came with five of her eight children. Once they had settled the *Guardia* arrived, threw them out and burned their shelter, but Dolores and the children hid in the woods and returned at night, over and over again. She had left her wedded husband behind in the cuadrante where they lived. He was about fifteen years her senior and she said that he had been playing with other women, that he was violent when drunk, and that she had made up her mind to leave him long before, but the opportunity wasn't there until she heard about the invasions. Her parcel is located in the La Plancha district and had previously been used for banana production, although not the years immediately before the invasions. What she came to she described as rotten banana and plantains plants, ditches that had not been maintained and incredible amounts of snakes and tiny and hungry bugs (*purrujas*). There had been so many snakes that other land seekers that had claimed the land first had left the parcel, scared to stay there.<sup>74</sup> She said she knew absolutely nothing about agriculture when she started out, but by trying and failing, planting one seed here another there, she slowly figured out how to farm maize on her own.

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<sup>73</sup> Mertens (1993); and Townsend (1993); both hold that gender roles tend to change in frontier/settlement schemes, and to go back to 'normal' later on. Mitchell (2000) writes about masculinities in frontier societies, see also Connell (1995) on that matter.

<sup>74</sup> There are venomous snakes in Coto Sur and people can die from snakebites if they do not get serum in time. Serum is expensive and not always available, and there are many stories being told about snakes, it is what people are most afraid of when working the land. See Bolaños, Roger (1984) *Serpientes venenos y ofidismo en Centroamérica*. San José: Editorial Universidad de CR.

## **Lots of Fear**

In addition to the rough climatic conditions there were all sorts of mosquitoes that had bothered the settling women the most. Their meticulously narrated stories about survival in the middle of all of this are filled with the tiniest details about struggling for daily existence, finding clean water, foods, roofs over their heads, materials for building, and the simplest equipment to farm and construct. They lacked everything. They continually had to keep a fire burning to try to keep the mosquitoes away, which was especially annoying for the children. Malaria (*paludismo*), and diarrhea were prevalent, and the women related their fears about that. They recalled their fear of snakes, wild animals, people who would take their land, police forces, diseases. The adult women and their daughters still remember how frightened they were alone at night out in the dark woods, sleeping under some branches only. That fear was something many of them said they never wanted to experience again. It was what had kept many of them on the parcel, although they often had wanted to leave. “But where should we go?” they asked us.

A first abode, a simple hut (*rancho*), was most urgent to put up, built of what the settlers found on the land, branches and bamboo, and for many this had remained their sleeping and living quarters for years to come. These first huts were now often used for equipment and storage and were proudly demonstrated by the women to illustrate how bad things used to be. When the Land Development Agency (IDA) took charge of the settlement, one of their first tasks turned out to be constructing roads to connect the scattered homesteading farms, normally not the institution’s job (Salazar et al. 1977). The homesteaders said that they had tried to put up their houses as close to a road as possible, or talk the IDA into constructing a road to pass by them. Some had encountered bamboo on their land that they could build a hut of, and the bamboo also represented an income resource and could be sold to others (they were used to support banana and plantain stems, which cannot

sustain themselves). Others had managed to get hold of zinc plates for roofs, and yet others had encountered old wooden construction materials left when Banana Company houses were torn down and shipped off. Some were even so lucky that they had encountered a living quarter in one of the numerous buildings that the Company also had left, easily recognisable by the remnants of light green or light blue paint. Somehow these pioneers had also managed to get hold of seeds to grow maize. The organising committee had distributed some, later on the IDA assisted, and little by little farming activities got moving and were sustained. In some of the centrally located parcels, like doña Dolores's, plantains or banana stems had been left and could be harvested, but most of them had later been attacked by the black leaf spot disease (*Sigatoka Negra*) and all the plants had to be removed completely. In the outlying areas of Coto Sur, covered by dense rainforests, the cutting and burning of tall trees had to be accomplished first. With little or no equipment it was a cumbersome struggle, and still one can see huge trunks of valuable wood only left to rot for lack of transportation and accessible sawmills.

It was a young population that settled Coto Sur. Many children were born and there was no medical help at all the first years. In the La Plancha district doña Susana had served as a lay-midwife. Ever since she was 22 years old she had practiced without any formal training, but she was well acquainted with herbs and traditional medicine. When she had come to the settlement with her bananero compañero, she just had to step in and assist at a birth after only a few days. She told us about many dramatic births she had assisted for many years in the small ranchos, and unfortunately, several deaths had also occurred. Many years later the women could go to the new public hospital constructed outside Neilly, but she was still called upon in emergencies.



## Negotiating the Land

The issue of land, and women's access to (and control over) land, was considered a key issue in the SMFC's Women's Programme. During the conversations with the women who had come early to Coto Sur, and comparing with the situation later on, it became apparent that exactly what happened in this first settling period seemed to have been quite decisive for the women's legal and practical position later on.

The arrivals who had come before the IDA were instructed to take over the responsibility of the land (after almost two years) had registered with the committee that was mentioned by some of the women and that had been set up by the leaders of the very first wave of land invasion, referred to as *el comité*; *el comité rojo*; *los rojos*; *el Sindicato* (the committee, the red ones, the red committee, the Sindicato), alluding to their origin in the well known and militant banana union UTG.<sup>75</sup> These men organised the distribution of invaded land and literally ran the frontier society for almost two years, with tasks ranging from solving personal conflicts to providing food and seeds as the area in practice was outside formal authority to a certain extent, as there was disagreement within the government as to if and how to negotiate with the *precaristas* (More in chapter 3), and the Banana Company still formally controlled most of the land. We were told that already in that period there had been so much selling and switching of land that it was impossible to keep track of, which demonstrated that the issue of land was no simple matter.

An example was Doña Imelda who had come to Coto Sur in company with her (then) four children, a niece, and the *compañero* of one of her daughters to find land in this initial period. Her story was not unusual, but very illustrative of the complexity of the situation. She had left her own *compañero* behind in one of the banana plantations in Palmar. He had refused

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<sup>75</sup> *Union de Trabajadores de Golfito* (UTG), was known as the most militant labour union in the country, some said within the whole banana world in the early 1970s, but they had been through tough times, and its leaders been harassed by the Company as well as the authorities; the conservative Costa Rican national press was not very friendly disposed towards them either. See also Donato y Rojas (1987) More in chapter 3.

to go, but she: “*Escuché que aquí estaban regalando tierra para trabajar*” (I heard that they here were giving away land to work). She had mounted the train and gone to Coto Sur:

I succeeded to settle in a parcel, but then after a while, some months I think, this man that I had left behind (dejé), arrived. However, in the meantime I had moved in with another guy, and therefore had left my own parcel (which had been allotted her from el Sindicato). When he (the first) came later, he took advantage of the situation and sold off my parcel and left with the money.<sup>76</sup> When I moved in with this other guy, he did not have time to work his parcel because he was member of the red committee and had to help organize it all. So, I began to work the land for him, which I have done all the time. When he was killed some years later, I sat there alone again, with no paper on the land. And now it turns out that he had other children as well, who have come to throw me and my children out I cannot afford a lawyer.

This story was not unique. We encountered numerous similar chains of events among women in the settlement, often stories they had heard from other women. And the fact remains that there must have been a lot of swapping, fixing, quarrels, exchanges and purchases of the land that had been invaded and claimed in the very first phase of the existence of the settlement. Interestingly, most of these pioneering women told about direct negotiations with male members of the organising committee, as for instance doña Leonora, in which the women apparently had won support for their arguments about settling in plots that were near roads etc., because they had children. They had appealed to and used strong gender ideologies to get their way, and succeeded. Most of the women expressed gratitude to the activists in the committee after all these years. These events were taking place before the IDA was installed

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<sup>76</sup> According to the women’s histories there were numerous such incidents, but it was not possible to check them all out further with the time that we had at our disposal, but it would have been an interesting angle to follow if one wanted to see how things were done in practice.

by the government to take control (September 1975), and the land laws and the IDA's guidelines for redistribution of land were enforced, but it is worth noticing that it was the committee that had provided some women with an opening, and these women did not forget that. Many were, however, also sure that it was God who had helped them;

*"Yo le pedí al Señor que me reparte una parcela a la par de la carretera y me la concedió, pero lloraba porque había un purrujero"*<sup>77</sup> (doña Celia).

Considering the dramatic event of the arrival and the farmers' first homesteading, now long after, this must also be interpreted as a chance for women, literally a 'window of opportunity', in that many women, as agents of their own, had been able to get a 'plot of their own' (Agarwal 1994) which seemed to have become more difficult later on.

These rather dramatic events that laid the basis for the establishment of the Coto Sur agricultural settlement, could for the women pioneers, be summarised as:

- thanks to the banana train (easy access),
- the workers' organising committee (possible to negotiate personally),
- personal courage to break with traditional gender ideologies;
- some women had seen an opportunity and grabbed it.

One of the central issues for both the Womens' Office (SMFC) and the Women's Project was *toma de decisiones* (decision-making), to increase women's agency and authority, and this was an aspect that also could be illustrated by the way many women, who had arrived alone, or together with their spouses in this period, said, and it could be interpreted as they had thought that they had gained more space to negotiate, pressure and influence strongly on their compañeros; on the decisions to go and seek land, this also included later arrivals who had to purchase land. It is worth noticing that among our informants; it seemed to be the women who in fact had been the strongest adherents and initiators for going off to leave the plantations.

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<sup>77</sup> I asked the Lord to give me a piece of land near the road, and he did, but I cried because it was full of mosquitos.

## **‘Routes’: Travels in Life and Crossing the Land**

The Southern Pacific Zone of Costa Rica has been characterised as a zone of immigration related to the growth of the banana industry. Supposedly twenty thousand immigrants had come between the opening of the three banana districts around Golfito between 1938 and 1950 (Sandner 1962), and the arrivals had continued in the 1950s and 60s. This restructuration process of the rural economy took a new lap with the closing of the banana plantations slowly beginning in the early 1970s and concluded in 1984, when again many people were on the move.

Listening closely to the stories of inhabitants in Coto Sur, women and men alike, it turns out that for most of them, the final move to Coto Sur could be described as a relocation, that it was but a last leg in a number of migratory movements in what can be described as their life-travels. Women in Coto Sur were no exception; they also had travelled much, surprisingly much. Doña Leonora’s story illustrates the type of journeys that many women living in Coto Sur had taken. Through the women’s own accounts these travels could little by little be reconstructed. They were seldom related in one piece, but in fragments that had to be put together and reconstructed afterwards.<sup>78</sup>

### **Doña Mayela’s Story**

The reconstruction of doña Mayela’s life travels is a case in point. She was 44 years old in 1986 when she recounted her experiences, then living on a parcel about five km west of Laurel. Doña Mayela had come to the Southern Zone together with her parents as early as in 1968 when the banana production was still in full activity. She was born and raised in Bagaces, Guanacaste. She told about her mother who became pregnant at the age of 13 and

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<sup>78</sup> McHugh (2000) gives an illustrative insight in the article ‘Inside, outside, upside down, backward, forward, round and round, a case for ethnographic studies in migration’, where he considers the importance of migration as a personal experience, not the least to get to the ambivalence in identity construction so prevalent in migrant ethnographies. The more I returned to the lifehistories in Coto Sur the more I became aware of these ambiguities.

gave birth to doña Mayela, followed by thirteen more children. She tells about a tough childhood and youth, with much hard work. She had been out working since she was eleven years old, mostly in the kitchens on some of the large haciendas in Guanacaste. She had later cooked for many people, up to forty at the time. At fourteen she had her first baby, a boy, who is now twenty-nine and a member of the banana cooperative in Coto Sur. After the baby was born, the child's father had left her, but as she puts it, “- *era mujeriego y tomaba mucho*,” (he was chasing women and drank heavily). She had returned to her parents with the baby and went out to work again to sustain her child; “Another liar came along, he was the father of my second child”, she said. He had also deserted her. She went back to her father's house in Guanacaste, where she was asked to give the child away, as it was not decent to give birth out of wedlock. Later on, when working in a private house in a small rural town, a third man came along. Doña Mayela said he was from a nice family and that she really had believed in him. But alás, she got pregnant again, and he also had disappeared. A third child. A few years later, a fourth, and she was all the time working hard to sustain the children and herself. When she had five children and been abandoned the same number of times, she decided to go with her parents who had made up their mind to go to *la Zona*, where two of their sons had already gone to work in the *Bananera*. Times were tough in Guanacaste and they did not own the dry land they had tried to make a living from, a result of increasing extensive cattle farming (Edelman 1992). They had been fourteen people altogether and two cows that made the long journey on foot, and later crossing by boat, from Guanacaste to Coto Sur.<sup>79</sup> Once they had settled in Coto Sur, squatting in the reserves of *la Compañía*, she soon found that she had to get away; they were too many in the little hut they had put up. She found herself and her children a shack on the outskirts of one of the banana farms, carving out a meager living by

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<sup>79</sup> Many women had followed that same route, crossing from the Nicoya peninsula with ships that were sent to transport banana workers to Quepos and Golfito. There were horrendous stories told about seasickness these women had never been on a boat before. This trip is also described in Emilio Quintana's more poetic book, *Bananos* (1942) 1967, and in several of the accounts of banana workers in the collection *Autobiografías Campesinas* (1977)

cooking food and selling tortillas. At this plantation, “*topé con don Eusebio*,” (I ran into Eusebio) the man she is still living with. He is also from Guanacaste, from Carillo de Sardinal, and had led a life on and off banana plantations in Limón, Palmar, Coto Valley, and finally in Coto Sur. For many years he had worked half the year on a plantation, then back to Guanacaste, then on to a new plantation. She claimed that she had negotiated with him before moving in with him, that he had to accept her children and not treat them badly. If that happened, she would leave him. On the other hand, if they did behave badly, he should punish them. He was then fifty years old and she had not yet turned thirty, and he had fathered six children with different women. Together they had another child, a boy. They had lived on one of the banana farms in Coto Sur a few years where Eusebio worked as a land labourer. They had invaded a piece of land by walking over from the compounds when hearing of the invasions. The land was registered in her compañero, don Eusebio’s name. But he said that it was her idea, he thought she had been braver than he had, he had not wanted to take the chance at all.

### **Other Travel Stories**

There are many, probably hundreds of other similar histories to be told among the population in the whole of Zona Sur, the banana belt in Costa Rica. In geographical terms the women have been zig-zagging their way, from elsewhere, more often than not from the province of Guanacaste, to a piece of land in what became the settlement of Coto Sur. One such story was told by doña Inés, forty-nine years old. She was born in Tambor, Guanacaste, on a smallholding that was farmed without paper on the land, with no future, she said, her relatives were later evicted by the *hacendado* (the landowner). At sixteen she went to the town of Puntarenas to work as a domestic in a private home. Soon she had a baby girl and the father deserted her. Knowing that her parents were not able to feed them all, she decided to go

further south, as she had heard about possibilities in the *Zona Bananera*. She had first gone alone with the child to Quepos, to the banana and palm plantations where she got a job as a cook. There she had met with don Remigio, her compañero. From Quepos they went together to la Zona Sur, to the Coto 63 plantation (Coto Valley) where they had stayed ten years. During this time she gave birth to nine children, one of who died. They had entered Coto Sur, at Km 31 during the invasions, by the banana train, and found a piece of land to settle on.

Doña Alicia had taken a slightly different route. Born in Nicoya, Guanacaste, she had traveled with her single, abandoned mother, who had gone to find work as a cook on the banana plantations in Quepos when Alicia was seven years old. When she was thirteen she had eloped with don Javier, a Nicaraguan banana worker, and went with him to plantation Coto 43. After a few years there, she followed after him, sometimes even chased him, she said, between different banana plantations, cattle herding, or whatever work he could find all over the southern zone, to San Vito, to Palmar, and Coto. He either got into trouble or got bored from the work, said Alicia; he never seemed to be able to settle down anywhere. She had given twenty births, of which ten of the children have lived. They were born in anything from banana company hospitals to out in the open air. Alicia had also arrived to Coto Sur by the banana train, then coming in from Palmar. Javier had gone first to find land, and she and the children had come after.

Doña Elba, born in Pozo de Agua, Guanacaste, has also moved around in the country. She had at forty-eight, lived in Guanacaste, Coto Sur (came first as a child with her mother in the late 1950s) back to Guanacaste where she had met don Alfonso, who is from Liberia, Guanacaste when he was home on a trip from the banana plantations. Then she had accompanied him to banana plantations in Panamá, Siquirres and Río Frío (Limón province), then Palmar for a few years, then back to the Atlantic Zone. He had participated in the invasions in Coto Sur as a union activist and Elba and the children had always come after him. After a few years as homesteader in Coto Sur, he was fed up, and went again to

plantations in Limón, and Elba followed afterwards. Finally, had they come a second time to their present parcel in Coto Sur, which don Alfonso had purchased for compensation money he had received from the Banana Company, as he had been a steady worker and he had good connections Elba said. She had always come after when things were settled, “I have been used to follow his orders,” she added. She had given birth twelve times, and she knew don Alfonso had four or five other children with other women in different parts of the country.

### **‘Roots’: Growing Up - Working from Morning ‘till Night**

A pertinent question that emerged when listening to and analysing the women’s tales was regarding what had been important for women who grew up in Central America’s rural areas in what roughly can be classified as the past generation. We were curious and fascinated, but also wanted to prepare a Women’s Programme that would be built on the women’s perceived ‘needs’ and ‘interests’ (chapter 1). However, when later cross-reading the interviews, stories, notes, etc., according to various themes, other patterns emerged. As already alluded to, just about all the women we listened to seem to have some connection to places outside the Southern Zone, particularly to the province of Guanacaste in the North Eastern corner of Costa Rica bordering Nicaragua. More than half of our main informants were born in Guanacaste (including one from Nicaragua and one from the Northwestern Alajuela province bordering Guanacaste). The remainders were either daughters of people from Guanacaste or Nicaragua, or they lived with men originating from Guanacaste. Much of the information we gathered about the women’s childhoods was therefore about growing up in rural Guanacaste in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s; that is how they were raised and socialised in accordance with the gendered rules and norms in isolated Central American countryside between 1930 and 1970.



Our informants with such ‘roots’<sup>80</sup> (including their mothers) could be grouped in two main categories: they had been born either at marginal isolated farmsteads, or in the workers’ quarters on large haciendas in Guanacaste. They all said they had been very poor, materially speaking. None of the informants had what may be called an urban background, other than that they might have been living a year or two in a small rural town with their mother who worked as a domestic in private homes. They all reported on having had a great number of sisters and brothers, many of them half-siblings. Typically their mothers had many children, as many of these women do as well. There was no access to, or acceptance for, contraception when they grew up as the Catholic Church ruled supreme in their youth. Additionally, the maximum amount of schooling for the women informants was two to three years.

Doña Hermina (46) living in the La Plancha district in Coto Sur, had two sisters and three brothers still alive. They had originally been nine, but the other siblings had died young. She was born and raised on a tiny farmstead on the outskirts of a hacienda,<sup>81</sup> far away from any village, in what she refers to as *el monte*, in the inner parts of the Nicoya peninsula, Guanacaste. She is a little bit bitter today for not getting any schooling at all, as her brothers did. It was far to the school, and when she had expressed that she very much wanted to go to school, the following reason for refusal was given to her,

*Mujeres corren peligros en el camino, las mujeres son para la comida*

(Women run into dangers when on the road (literally outside the house) - women are for cooking)

That women were ‘meant for the kitchen’ had become a truth for her, as she was obliged to cook at home ever since she was 5-6 years old. She said she had to get up at 3am every

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<sup>80</sup> Writing ‘roots’ within converted commas is done on purpose, and will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 6, concerning the question of sense of belonging to Coto Sur. See also Clifford (1997) for some contemplations on the roots/routes dichotomy I am also playing on.

<sup>81</sup> According to Edelman (1992) was this a common arrangement in Guanacaste, either illegally or with the hacendados’s blessings, in that the people would have to work on the hacienda.

morning to grind maize by hand, using the pre-columbian artefact *metate*, a stone grinder.<sup>82</sup> Nowadays, it is only seen at the museums. She remembered that it was her grandmother who made her grind by hand because the flour turned out finer, although they did have mechanical grinder in the house that would have made the work a lot easier. Her grandmother who also lived in the house, she described as being *muy dura* (very hard), a hard woman. As far as doña Hermina recalls, the rest of the waking hours were spent preparing meals. At 4:30am the women had to have breakfast ready, and by 9 am a big meal (*almuerzo*). At 3 pm it was *comida* again. Cooking for their family and at times up to 15 *peones* (land workers) at the hacienda where her mother had to cook as well. The only time she got away was when she was allowed to ride together with her father to mass in Nicoya every other Sunday. She never had worked on the fields when she grew up in the 1940s and early 50s.

Another woman who also grew up on a small farmstead is doña Susana, the one who acted as the midwife in the homesteading period. A slim woman with her hair in a ponytail, she talks a lot, is very expressive uses her hands to underline her points. She taught us most about trees, herbs, plants and animals in Coto Sur. She was brought up in an indigenous community near Puerto Cortés, north of Golfito. Her father used to grow cocoa, maize, and beans, and ever since she turned twelve she had worked with cocoa and other agricultural activities alongside with her twelve sisters and brothers. Asked how she had picked up all her knowledge about agriculture she says “*de mi papi*” (from my father). She had been taught to use *machete*, “I can handle a *Rula 28*” (the biggest machete), she proudly told us, “to sow, and to cut and farm new land.” She was also taught how to hunt and to shoot wild animals. Laughingly she says she had worked so much when she was young, “I looked like a man, yelling and working hard.” She had always worked with her father, who was an indigenous, a

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<sup>82</sup> 'Metate' is supposedly a word from *nahuatl*, the language spoken by the indigenous population in Nicaragua and Guanacaste. It consists of a square rock, shaped as a flat bowl on three legs with a round stone used for grinding. See Garcia Murillo/García Briceno (1981) for more about cooking traditions in Guanacaste

Boruca. So I am a *chola*<sup>83</sup> she said. She is one of the few women in Coto Sur who never talked about her mother at all, only saying that she, until he died a few years ago, had a very close relationship with her father.

Most of the other women seem to have one thing in common; they said that their mother was the one they related to as children, and that she was the one who taught them to work. Over and over again we were met with sayings like,

*Mi mamá era una de las señoras antiguas muy dura con nosotros, para criarnos teníamos que saber lavar y aplanchar bien, no nos dió ningún estudio, solo trabajo, yo llegué hasta 4 o grado de la escuela. Por eso yo me fuí muy jovencita de la casa y a los quince años me junté con un hombre mayor que yo.* (Doña Tatiana, 35 years)

(My mother was one of those ladies who were very hard with us, to become raised we had to know to wash and iron well, we got no school, only work but I got to fourth grade. Therefore I left the house early and at 15 I moved in with an older man than me.)

The hard work, in the kitchens or in the fields, seems to be what the women remember best from their childhood. Doña Hermina put it this way, “*Cuando yo me criaba, los peones de mi papa eramos nosotros*” (When we grew up, my father’s land workers were us), adding that from the age of ten she had been working on the land. She says that on their small farmstead in Guanacaste, both her mother and all eight children always had to be working in the fields. When women in Coto Sur would tell about their early childhood and youth, one realises that such denominations as ‘youth’ or ‘childhood’ did not really fit into their categorisations, as there hardly seem to be any differences when talking about duties and work burdens.

The real difference the women had experienced was when leaving their parental home to go to find work on their own, usually at around the age of 14-15 years of age. The women growing up in Guanacaste have all at some point in their life-course worked in the kitchens of haciendas cooking for great numbers of land workers. A few have been in the house of

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<sup>83</sup> A derogatory term used by ‘ticos’ about indigenous or ‘mixed bloods’ See Bourgois (1989) for a discussion about the ethnic and racial hierarchies in banana plantations.

wealthy landowners and had been taught bourgeois manners,<sup>84</sup> and others again have survived by cleaning for others, cooking for workers, and by petty commodity production and small sales around the banana plantations.

Concerning these women's early primary relations, two main patterns do appear in the stories. One is characterised by strong and strict traditions from a home where there was a father who was the ultimate patriarchal ruler outside, in the fields and in society, and a mother or grandmother (inside) the house, with authority and strict discipline. The other typical pattern was having grown up only with their mothers, as their father had deserted them early. "I never knew my father", was a most common saying, and memories of mothers having moved from place to place in order to seek a living, and men coming and going, new sisters and brothers being born. A careful estimate of all the persons we asked that question in the settlement (that includes many more than the ones we have collected biographies for), would be that between  $\frac{1}{4}$  and  $\frac{1}{2}$  of them would be 'without recognition' from their fathers, meaning that their biological fathers had not accepted fatherhood. A great number of people in Coto Sur present themselves as *hijos naturales* (natural children) indicating that their fathers never had recognised them legally. Often this also manifests itself in the surnames (using their mothers' name twice, i.e. Gonzales Gonzalez), but that was so normal in Coto Sur that nobody really cared.<sup>85</sup>

The younger women (born after 1960) were, as mentioned, often the daughters of the first generation of banana workers, or second generation Guanacastecos, and had either grown up as children on banana plantations, or eked out a living in the vicinity of those. The plantation children's memory of their childhood and youth was also one of moving from place

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<sup>84</sup> Especially one of the women who had worked for a European mistress had much insights in how to set formal dinner tables, put up menus and shine glass chandeliers, she giggling liked to talk to me particularly as a gringa, whom she considered would be more knowledgeable than my Costa Rican co-workers of such matters in her very simple kitchen with a dirt floor and open fire. She really was impressing, when she recalled the names of the menus, and the important visitors she had attended to.

<sup>85</sup> The law about responsible fatherhood was passed in Costa Rica 2001 and is the most advanced in Latin America, but it probably will take some time before old habits are changed in the countryside.

to place, from banana farm to banana farm, as the Company moved their workforce around. Their fathers were either thrown out, or had left altogether. Theoretically, these children had a much better chance to go to school. Only a handful of our informants have finished elementary school, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and they are all daughters of banana workers, as the Company, eventually, provided schools for their workers' children.<sup>86</sup> A number of these banana-daughters also report on having had to leave their homes during their youth as their father had found another woman, and their mother had to get along by making tortillas, cooking, etc., assisted by their daughters. This often occurring situation had also led many women from place to place, either within in the banana-zone or to in private households mostly in the Central Valley. In practice it was possible to distinguish two generations of such geographical moves among the women, but the youngest ones had usually moved shorter distances and mainly between plantations in the Southern Zone.

### **(Early) Relations with Men**

In this cohort (here in a generous interpretation), the girls, as a rule, have left whatever constituted their home at fourteen to fifteen years of age, either for good, or to return later with a child to be taken care of by their mothers. In the Catholic tradition they all were brought up in, the 15<sup>th</sup> birthday meant that they were adults. Adolescence for these women almost without exception meant experiences with men, pregnancies, and children. They all said they were totally unprepared as to what relations with men would bring, as they had been brought up strictly Catholic. Some of them have managed surprisingly well on their own with their child(ren), while others have sought assistance from their parents, usually to come home with the babies, leave them there, and go off in search of a living. It is more of a rule that they *se juntaron* (moved together, cohabited) at around 14-15 years of age. A few of the women

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<sup>86</sup> The ones who did take more schools probably have left the arean and gone to the Central Valley, an assumption that seemed to be confirmed by closer investigations among the peasants concerning their families. But they probably were very few.

even got married at that age, to men who - also as a rule - were ten to twenty years their seniors. Approximately two thirds of (all) the women we spoke with had as their first stable relationship, moved in with men who were much older, that is, in their thirties and forties at that time. When talking about this today, quite a number of these women express bitterness towards their mothers for not having warned them before striking up these relationships. Some felt that they had been pushed into those conjugal relations at the age of fifteen because their mothers could not support them any longer, and this had also happened in the remote areas in Guanacaste. Chant (1991, 1997), based on studies in the northern part of Guanacaste, maintains that this both has to do with the traditional male out-migration, as well as historical reasons, the indigenous Chorotegas of the region did not practice legal marriage. It was probably the ideological interpretation that men were expected to be breadwinners and maintain their dependants and that older men were in a better position to do so, that was the underlying reason.

Summing up, one can probably say that for the adult women living in Coto Sur in the 1980s, life has had to do with many births, hard work, and travels in search of outcomes and survival. To illustrate this (here I am referring to more than the key informants), the women have gone through from four to twenty-one pregnancies each, lost many children in childbirth, to disease or in accidents. They have zig-zagged through life and through Costa Rica. They tell about traveling around with all their belongings, which normally consisted of a great number of pots and pans, a few pieces of clothing, their children and nothing more. As they did not own anything of value but their working abilities, the only possibility they could envisage was to find a man who could support them, which normally meant a man with some resources; a farm, or a job on a banana plantation. They all told about the difficulties of keeping a man, and how he would often run away. Men's infidelity and weak character were perpetual themes in our conversations.

## Women's Lives on the Banana Plantations

The banana plantations, the regulated lives in the 'factories in the field', has traditionally been a men's world. Women struggling to make a daily living in this particular space merits attention, as they are almost totally invisible in all the accounts.<sup>87</sup> It is not easy to encounter women in written sources about the particular banana world, it appears in practice as an all male, or 'abstract' space, and 'abstract bodies' (Duncan 2002).<sup>88</sup> Women were excluded from the hard work and discipline which was male coded from the very beginning, from the clearing of the rainforests with hand axes and preparing the land, ditches and canals, to the strenuous work as labourers in tough conditions producing export bananas. Yet, women were working as cooks for the navies in exigent, rough circumstances, and, one must assume, the ideal of 'abstract bodies' was harder to maintain. Later, the women had continued living on or near the plantations, and as in all areas where thousands of men are assembled both food sales and prostitution became an income earner for destitute women. From the 1960s, when the Cavendish variety of bananas was replacing the old varieties that were susceptible to diseases, this led to a restructuration of the work organization on the plantations. The new variety was more vulnerable to damages during transportation, and had to be packed in boxes, entailing that packing units (*empacadoras*), were set up on the farms and women's 'nimble fingers' were thereby welcomed to the Company's file ranks in a packing plant (cutting of stems, washing, fertilising and packing in 18 kgs boxes), and many women in Coto Sur said that they had in periods worked in such packing plants, "If we had to" entailing that they were in a situation in which they did not receive sufficient support to sustain their children, or they were left alone. That means that the packinghouses were no longer to be considered as 'abstract

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<sup>87</sup> More recently there are many who have studied the banana plantations some will be referred to in the next chapter. Bourgois (1989) for instance writing about the UFCo's Boca del Toro in Panamá, does mention women, but mainly depicted as cooks or prostitutes. In the numerous novels written about life on these plantations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that is the same picture that is presented i.e Carlos Luis Fallas: 'Mamita Yunai' (1941), and Quintana's 'Bananos'.

<sup>88</sup> James Duncan (2002) sees the (colonial) plantation as constructed to ideally be an 'abstract space' (deCerteau 1984) with 'abstract bodies' materialised through (Foucauldian) perspectives of micro technologies of discipline and control.

spaces', but spaces where both men and women were, and thus this space was 'embodied' (Duncan, N. 1996).

However, all the women in the empirical material who had lived on plantations said that they all through had been cleaning and washing other men's clothes, selling homemade foods, taking in lodgers, or supplying other services to earn a small income. This makes the banana plantations different from other types of plantations, where women and children regularly participate in picking coffee, tealeaves, tobacco and fruit, often in a family-organised and exploiting manner.<sup>89</sup> Most of the women who came to Coto Sur have had living and working experiences from plantations in the Southern Zone, in Palmar, Puerto Cortés, Piedras Blancas, Valle del Coto and Coto Sur. Some have also lived in (the now abandoned) Quepos division further north on the Pacific Coast and in Limón province, on the banana farms there, even on the banana farms on the other side of the border, in the Chiriquí Land Co. in Panamá (Also at this point a subsidiary of UFCo/Chiquita).

In most plantation compounds, simple and rustic as they were, one had access to running water, toilet and electricity. Lawns were cut and trash bins collected, which was, and is, way above the normal living conditions in the countryside in Central America. The workers' compounds were, as mentioned already, consequently referred to as *los cuadrantes* (the squares). These were comprised of two-floor wooden houses laid out in rows on three sides of a green common, a plaza. The women who had lived on the banana plantations can tell about sharing kitchens and hygienic facilities with other households or with single workers, and about frequent irritations, conflicts and quarrels. It was not until fairly recently, due to the struggle of the unions, that the Company eventually (from the 1960s) provided family housing, school for the children and medical service after pressure from host

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<sup>89</sup> Verena Stolcke has written extensively about family work on plantations, particularly coffee plantations, in which the labour of wife and children were assumed to be part of the contract, see Stolcke (1988, 1991, 1995)



governments and organized labour.<sup>90</sup> Many of the women in Coto Sur have experienced being denied access to accommodation on the banana farms, in spite of having children with a company worker. We were told that La Compañía had a policy where the men who registered as *solteros* (singles), were the first ones to be moved to another plantation when workforce was needed, or if they got into trouble. This happened all the time. The definition of a *soltero* seemed to be a theme for discussion, particularly if a man had children with more than one woman; who had the right to live as his spouse in the cuadrante? According to all the stories told by the women, many struggles seemed to have been fought in the kitchens on the banana plantations all over Central America as to who had the right to be there.<sup>91</sup>



Quadrante in Coto Sur.

Although a woman in the position of spouse/*compañera* in a workers' compound theoretically could count on regular wages every fortnight, it was not unusual to have to feed perhaps ten persons with no land to support themselves, nor was it certain that she would have access to the man's purse. Men spending money on alcohol and other women was a

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<sup>90</sup> According to Marquardt (2002) Costa Rica was the country that the UFCO operated in that had the most advanced labour codes.

<sup>91</sup> Montero Vega (2006) in writing his memories as a union activist and functionary that had been in the Southern Zone in the 1950s has a slightly different version, but that will be returned to in chapter 8.

constantly recurring story (*era mujeriego y tomaba mucho*). Hence, as stated, most women had to make their own money for survival by cooking for others, sewing and different sales. Doña Dolores, now in her late 50s, has spent more than thirty years in banana cuadrantes before coming to Coto Sur. During most of those years she had to get up at 1:30 every morning to start baking tortillas. Her children had to be off and deliver them before the workers' breakfasts at 4 and 5 am. Her husband had been a constant drinker and womanizer and she hardly saw his money. With such a preponderance of males there were markets for foodstuffs, but many of the women said that the supply side was often too plentiful, resulting in very low prices. The women who did live on the plantations were consequently doing all the household chores; they found themselves as some kind of housewives cooking, cleaning, sewing, and rearing children. However, quite a number of them were able to see the positive sides of the banana-life, such as a stable income and access to electricity and running water after more than ten years without any of it in Coto Sur. But what also appears in just about every conversation we had concerning life in the banana cuadrantes, was the rough style on the plantations. People quarrelled and cursed, and there were even shootings, manslaughters with machetes, fights, stealing, constant conflicts and rumours. Most of the conflicts the women tell about seem to have been about alcohol and other women; and an important strategy for the women was to try to keep other women out, as they were seen as a threat. The women told about struggles to keep husbands/compañeros straight, not to run off with other women, and to have some of them take responsibility for their own children. If there was one luggage these women seemed to have got with them from the plantations it was conflicts, and which probably has marked their outlooks a lot more than one may have anticipated.

Living what can be referred to as a proper family life seemed to have been demanding for most of the women. There were some that had managed it, but they were few among our informants. Hence, there was quite a discrepancy between the 'nuclear family ideal' that occasionally seemed to be expected from the Company, as well as expressed (as an ideal) by

the workers themselves through issues they raised in the unions concerning the rights of women and children,<sup>92</sup> and the reality that the women in Coto Sur told about. That ideal always entailed a coupled relationship, with a man as provider and a woman being provided for. That was how the men saw themselves - and the women as well. That was their dream.

When talking about life on the banana plantations, after about a decade living as *parceleras*<sup>93</sup>, the women were usually very double minded. Some of them had enjoyed living on the plantations, as they said life was orderly (*ordenada*). Others did not like it at all, and talk about it as hell. Often they simply do not want to talk about it at all. More than once they simply seemed to want to create a parenthesis around that part of their lives, as if it had not existed. But the women considered it good for children to live there because they got a chance to go to school. Even the daughters could have a chance to get an education.

The fact remains that it was the man, the banana worker employed by the Company, who had the economic control in the households, and thereby the right to decide on behalf of many dependents. However, seeing it from the women's position, one should bear in mind that the establishment of the banana plantations in the Southern Zone also brought with them many secondary activities in the area, representing openings for women in the labour market and expanded their spaces of action. The establishment of the UFCo's Golfito division, and the export harbour of Golfito with the UFCo administration, gave rise to employment of women as service personnel, which also was the case for the expansion in Villa Neilly, which later became the *Pueblo Civil* in the southern region. There were more opportunities for women to make a living, although most of them were as domestics in private houses. Later, the public school system and the health system also expanded to this area, with opportunities for women, but demanded education, which excluded most of the adult women in Coto Sur.

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<sup>92</sup> An example I encountered in the documents was the 1976 accords between ITCO and the Banana union when the ex-bananeros were to take over the former plantations (later to become the banana cooperative), in which family demands were included. (UTG/Asbana 1976).

<sup>93</sup> Parceleras is a term that was used by the IDA personnel in Coto Sur about farming women, but it was not clear whether it was to include both farmers' wives and active farming women, a discussion that was an ongoing one in the SMFC team in Laurel.

## **Hoping and Coping: Women in the Settlement**

These glimpses and extracts of life-course stories illuminating the background of group of women living in the Coto Sur settlement, are based mainly on the women's own words and accounts, only occasionally framed by some more structural contextualisations where that has been regarded as necessary, and it is making the basis upon which the further elaborations will follow in the chapters to come. Meeting with the women in 1986, and many of them also in 1990, gave in the main, an impression of women who were working hard, had many worries, often tired, many suffered from bad health, especially was rheumatism a sickness many of them had to endure. They had had many dreams for a better life, for very few of them had it come true, but they were still hoping and coping. Belinda Leach argues that;

My concern.. is to consider how we might think about the apparently mundane, everyday actions of women as they go about their business of their lives, as contributing to- rather than simply responding to - the broader shifts that appear to be (and to be real, in many ways are) outside their control. That means thinking about women's meaningful acts that, through continuous and combined application, gradually alter structural conditions (2005:4).

The baseline of this chapter has been to see women in Coto Sur as agents in their own lives, and get an idea as to how they as persons had been projects in time (Rudie 1995) before proceeding to the 'contexts' that the women arrived to, and had to make themselves part of; the settlement of Coto Sur.



## Chapter 3

### **COTO SUR - LA ZONA SUR, BANANA ZONE, SETTLEMENT, DEVELOPMENT REGION**

#### **Tropics, Wasteland, Landscape, Community, or Context; Multiple Meanings of Place**

*Places pose in particular form the question of living together (Doreen Massey 2005: 151)*

In the women's histories in the last chapter, on the maps, and in names and institutions presented so far, all indicate that the 'placing' of Coto Sur is no simple and easy affair. It appears as much more than a setting for the lives of the peasant women. The special status of this place was also indicated in the SMFC mandate, pointing to the necessity of looking into women's position in the particular kind of societies that the agricultural settlements represent; they are in fact created spaces to which people had migrated, and in which the land had been redistributed, and new societies were to be constructed. Hence, much attention had been given to development plans, documents, and various institutional activities. The agricultural settlement in Coto Sur was also considered as very distinctive due to its past as a banana zone. Knowledge about peasant women in this particular settlement was close to nil (SMFC 1986a), a lack that was to be met by the SMFC team's sociologists whose task was to write the overall community investigation. Hence, the place Coto Sur needed to be taken seriously.

This chapter aims to both destabilise Coto Sur as a given setting and place, to challenge some of the assumptions linked to it, and to contribute to reconstruct it as a multisite, complex place, "that maintains the distinctiveness of a place while recognizing that

it is connected to other places..” (Katz 2001: 1229),<sup>94</sup> and this is an attempt to think through the place Coto Sur, and explore some of its multiple meanings, ignited as part of the search for a better informed understanding of the situation for the peasant women happening to live there. To explore any particular links between this place and its female inhabitants, to put it simply (and imprecisely), a natural link, so often assumed.<sup>95</sup> I am here thinking about connections between this place and women’s experiences, as well as using gendered lenses on the processes, institutions and events that seemed to be key to interpret Coto Sur in a gendered perspective.

Many theorists and observers seem to be fond of putting various (academic) traditions into their slots, perhaps in order to distance oneself from them. One typical way of doing this has been by labelling them as so-called area-studies, that is according to what part of the earth’s surface they are assumed to belong to; ‘Latin American studies’, or ‘Latin Americanists’ would be categories of use in this case. However, useful as they may be, they also could hamper communication across areas and academic domains, they are inevitably also ‘large blocks’ (Law 2004) that one will have to relate to. Noel Castree, on the other hand, wants to bring in the case studies’ approach to challenge a more deeply founded analytical stance considering contexts; of which one typical geographical one has; ‘-tended to write about a specific place, region or country for its own sake; as of interest in its own right.’ (2005: 541) by that pointing to what he labels ‘an older generation of area specialists’ (ibid). Ella Shohat also questions the tradition of area-studies, which she calls ‘ghettoized and geographically defined discursive spaces’ (2001: 1269), and which she criticises for being Eurocentric and she wants to resist those, as unified categories, to produce feminist knowledges because she argues that they tend to erase relations across areas, or as she puts it;

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<sup>94</sup> ‘Place’ is a key term in geography; often defined as three-fold; localisation; locality; and ‘sense of place’ Agnew and Duncan (1989); see also Massey (1994); Cresswell (2004); Rodman (2000) for discussions on the meanings of place.

<sup>95</sup> There is very often an assumed isomorphism of space, place and culture, challenged by among others Guptha and Ferguson (1997); Keith and Pile (1993).

'bantustans' (op.cit: 1270). Hence, a critical gaze at the existing representations of this area, in which women, or gender for that matter, were just about nonexistent, all in order to contribute to a gendered geography<sup>96</sup> of Coto Sur, and la Zona Sur was required.

### **Coto Sur**

The shifting naming, or labelling, of this geographical area and how it is being delimited, nonetheless, invites further exploration. Typical denominations such as Zona Bananera, Agricultural Settlement, Development Region (*Zona Bananera, Asentamiento, Región de Desarrollo*) are all labels, or names, that were in daily use among peasants and bureaucrats, as well as found in publications and on signs. They point to different discourses and historic epochs and have been constructed in, and were drawing on, different discourses, a field far from exhausted in this particular study. Additionally, one could also encounter names such as 'the Tropics' or 'Wasteland', at one and the same time, in practice referring to the same geographical area but within different master narratives, relating to colonialism, imperialism, agrarian reform, or neo-liberal policies, etc.

The geographical locality in question, Coto Sur (South Coto), is encountered within the perimeters of the approximately 28.000 hectares that was making up the IDA agricultural settlement and most accounts seem to take this for granted as a rather unproblematic setting or entity. When considering (the place) Coto Sur, however, I think it is important to embrace the whole *Zona Sur*, or *la Zona (Bananera)*, as our informants consequently referred to even when focusing mainly on the later established agricultural settlement of Coto Sur. There were similar places and restructuring processes to be encountered not too far away, different ones, but influenced by the same historical and physical environments, and as the women's stories

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<sup>96</sup> 'Gendered geography' or preferably - geographies (plural)- is used in many ways and it has been much debated for instance in the journal *Gender, Place and Culture*. See also McDowell (1999); Rose (1993); Laurie et al. (1999) and numerous others.



in chapter 2 indicated, most of the adult inhabitants living in the settlement in the 1980s and early 90s had been moving about in this landscape, lived on and off the banana plantations the past twenty, thirty - even forty years. There were, according to the IDA, approximately 10-11.000 people living within the confines of the Coto Sur settlement, beyond that, the Southern Zone or Region Brunca (the administrative unit) had about 45.000 inhabitants in 1986.<sup>97</sup> Most of this Southern Zone consists of similar rural environments, former banana plantations, their reserves, other agricultural settlements, palm plantations, and some existing small towns like Neilly, Golfito, and Palmar.

This is also a border region. The international frontier with Panamá is only 1.5 km away from the administrative hamlet in the Coto Sur settlement, Laurel, and when travelling by road up to the highway it follows the border for many kilometres.<sup>98</sup> The international crossing point on the Pan American Highway, with immigration and duty services, is in Paso Canóas, and the area around the checkpoint is full of commercial activities and tax-free shopping. The ‘americanized’ Panameños<sup>99</sup> on one side of the street, and the Costa Rican outlets on the other; the first offering loads of cheap imported goods such as electronics, toiletries, mock-label clothes and sports articles, while the Costa Ricans sold leather goods, food stuffs, agricultural equipment etc., supplying local and national markets on both sides of the border. This was also a landscape that carried a lot of movement of goods - and people - heading North to the Capital, and South to Panamá, a transition zone along the highway. It was geographically a very short distance between the border post and the agricultural

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<sup>97</sup> *La Tribuna Economica* No.10, 1986. For more updated numbers and information, see Mideplan (2003) *Plan Regional de Desarrollo 2003-2006, Region Brunca*. San José

<sup>98</sup> The frontier with Panamá was not finally settled until 1941, in the *Tratado Echandi Montero -Fernandez Jaén* (Flores Silva 1982). At that point in time the UFCo had already established banana farms on both sides, entailing that the border line did pass right through the plantations and a number of banana farms in Costa Rica were for several years still administered by the UFCo subsidiary *Chiriquí Land* in Panamá, among them were some of the farms in La Plancha district, formerly mentioned as González Víquez. See Yudin and Stephens (1989) and Cerdas Albertazzi (1993).

<sup>99</sup> Most of the shopkeepers were actually of Lebanese or Chinese origin, it has typically been immigrants from these areas that have run most of the small commerce in most (rural) areas in all of Central America, in fact the expression *Dónde el Chino* (At the Chinese) is often used about a small general store. The fact that the Panamenian currency the *balboa* was ‘dollarised’ added to the ‘American’ image on that side of the border.

settlement in Coto Sur, but sometimes it felt like two separate worlds. Hence, it is a region that in this period of time was encountered in an almost perpetual state of transformations, with various external agents involved, ranging from the Costa Rican state authorities to several international development agencies, all participating in attempts at developing the southern region. So far, it seems that it was only the SMFC that explicitly was focusing on the situation for women in the zone.



Part of Parcelation Map Coto Sur (IDA 1976)

### **Contested Landscapes; Rust, Smells, and Recognition**

Wrestling with the empirical material from Coto Sur and putting that into play with more recent debates on places, spaces and gender in both geography and other disciplines has opened up other ways of thinking about Coto Sur, some of which will also be drawn upon here. One such entrance is landscape, which was in fact my own embodied experience when first coming to Coto Sur and how I gradually came to alter perspective.<sup>100</sup> As an observer and external person in Coto Sur, it took me time to literally get to terms with both the physical and social landscapes encountered.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, my very first embodied - and eventually more long lasting - encounter with Coto Sur can be characterised by some sense impressions; smells of damp soils and debris, and visions of rust. Being there felt uncomfortable, unbearably hot and humid, the air filled with strong smells. From the part of the settlement where I spent the most time, and from where most of the empirical material has been collected, the former banana farms, in daily speech denominated as La Plancha, visually appeared as entirely flat, monotonous, and seemingly endless. It was huge, with an incredibly blue sky high above. My first impression immediately after arrival in May of 1986 was a certain feeling of dwelling in some past, which I think was due to encountering so much rust. There was rust everywhere, rusty old tanks, old railway tracks, remnants of machinery, etc. Moreover, smells of rotting fruit and decaying woods, marshes and soils, mould, and in the early hours, often of chemicals.

This part of Coto Sur, the former banana plantation district, materialised as worn-down banana-land with remnants of an agro-industrial landscape now gone; remaining buildings, old railway tracks, overgrown canals and ditches. In Laurel, where the IDA had its administration in the old banana administrative farm, most houses were intact and now used

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<sup>100</sup> 'Contested landscapes' is a term borrowed from Bender and Winer (2001), about landscapes; see Morin (2003); Rose (1993); Nash (1999); Mitchell (2000); Groth and Bressi eds .(1997)

<sup>101</sup> In my first field notes I wrote many pages trying to describe how I experienced the monotony of the physical landscape, and also the unbearable heat and humidity. I did, as so many have eventually, understand why the coasts were the last to be colonised in Central America.

for offices, workshops and dwellings for employees. With only a little fantasy it was perfectly possible to imagine how the UFCo functionaries had lived back in the heydays. But it was also the present; activities and labour that was visible. The existence of a producing banana cooperative in the middle of it all (which was the main source of the smell of rotten fruit) contributed to the visibility of bananas. Banana stems could be seen being cut down by sweating men and transported on the rails to the packing stations on the harvest days, and a banana train with men sitting on the on top of it was still passing right through Laurel on its way to be exported from Puerto Armuelles in Panamá. Just about everybody who was on their way in or out of Laurel had to pass through these banana plantings daily, entailing that tangible bananas were still very much present in Coto Sur; not only as myths, and history, but as daily experience. And still, bananas, were not ruling anymore.

Once outside the perimeters of the old banana farms, it was mainly open fields of maize and pastures that met the eye, the landscape appeared as a mosaic of plots with maize fields, but cattle were also grazing on the flat fields among big trunks that had been left to rot. It gave an impression, to an observer, of much land not very intensively cultivated, and few if any, people encountered on that land. There were rudimentary roads running across the settlement with big trucks occasionally passing by, otherwise it was very quiet.

### **Typical Narratives constructing the Southern Zone and Coto Sur**

*Imaginative geographies --- draw their robustness from their ability to make it difficult to see or make sense of things in ways other than that represented (Massey et al. 1999: 41)*

When I was going to Coto Sur, from San José, and told Costa Ricans about it, many apparently thought it was a different world; to go to Golfito (as the whole area still was referred to) was apparently seen as going to the ultimate margin of civilisation. This was a

popular narrative<sup>102</sup> that was being repeated, over and over again, it was a popular geography and hard-programmed ‘imagined geography’ (Gregory 1994). Officially, however, the current narrative in the capital in the late 1980s was all about ‘developing the South’, and that South was depicted as an impoverished area that needed rescue. But in the popular parlance in the Central Valley the South tended to be represented as ‘other’. If I had arrived to the Southern Zone directly from abroad, I might not have been aware of the certain disdain the area seemed exposed to. It would perhaps not make a stir at all in the capital San José that the IADB/BID article had referred to this area as ‘Wasteland’? So far it was only some adventurous gringos (US citizens) that really had taken a liking to the beaches for surfing etc., tourism had not yet been developed to the extent that other parts of the Pacific coast<sup>103</sup> were in the process of, the South was too inaccessible. It still, in the 1980s and 90s, took most of the day to reach the Southern Zone by car from the capital (360 km) because one has to climb and cross the Cordillera de Talamanca and the roads are generally in a bad state. The government was launching several efforts to create development projects to attract people and income; for example to convert the old banana-town, Golfito, to a tax-free zone for Costa Ricans,<sup>104</sup> which funny tongues already had baptised as *Churizotown* - alluding to the slang *churizo* (sausage) meaning cheaters or fixers, thus the degradation seemed to continue in another form.

A great deal of what can be recognised as hegemonic geographical discourses in Costa Rica concerning this region was probably rooted in one of the country’s national images (in addition to democracy and peace) in which coffee is a key icon; thus the orderly, rural

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<sup>102</sup> Here I am approaching the narrative constructions of place from outside, while ‘-the use of narrative to inform the anthropological understanding of place focuses on details of how local populations construct perceptions and experience place’ (Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003: 16)

<sup>103</sup> The coastline of Guanacaste has for some times been in the process of being converted to a favourite of US citizens, mainly retirees who are granted special tax exemptions, and several other tourist sites are being developed on the Pacific coast, for instance around the national park Manuel Antonio right outside the old banana town of Quepos. These sites could be reached by car from San José in a couple of hours and are also served by flights.

<sup>104</sup> A so-called tax free zone was being established in Golfito with big warehouses for electric equipment etc. In order to buy the merchandise customers had to go to Golfito and stay overnight before getting their goods released. Needless to say Costa Rica taxed such imported goods heavily.

(nuclear) family, depicted as the self-owning, 'white', small, independent, coffee growing farmer.<sup>105</sup> That was orderly and represented stability, and continuation, while Golfito, and all that was associated with that place, was the opposite. This foreignness was above all represented by bananas, and the different ethnic origins of the work force on the banana plantations. The Atlantic coast was, however, yet more foreign, because it was questioning the assumed 'whiteness' of Costa Rica, with its English spoken, black, of Jamaican origin population.<sup>106</sup>

Golfito was, still in the 1980s, seen from San José, only being constituted of 'bananas and communists'; it had been foreign controlled, and thus un-tico. Maybe one could say that in Costa Rica, viewed from the political and cultural hegemonic centre, la Zona Bananera continued to be marginal and represented troubles, with its Guanacastecan, Nicaraguan, and other ethnicities present,<sup>107</sup> certainly appeared as unorderly among many inhabitants in the Central Valley. It was not only the internal racial hierarchy in the country that was brought in when deeming the area as foreign, but also fear, directed to what was described as a left-wing breeding ground, especially in the period after the Cuban revolution. The banana workers unions were at some point considered to be the strongest workers' organisations in all of Latin America and their militarism and willingness to go to strikes and other confrontations, had been quite a challenge not only for the multinational banana company, but for more conservative national governments, the Catholic Church, and public servants as well. It seems as if they had been considered as a threat to nation building. Thus the images of a Golfito as a Red Zone in Costa Rica obviously stuck to it although it was doubtful if this name fitted the

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<sup>105</sup> This is of course a very condensed version that demands explanations, here I only refer to others, see Paige (1995); Gudmundsson (1995), see also Láscaris (1985, 1982), and many others who have noticed this national image.

<sup>106</sup> The banana industry in Costa Rica was initiated in Limón and the first, skilled, banana workers were brought in from Jamaica; see Melendez and Duncan (1981); Echeverri-Gent (1992); Casey (1979). More recently interesting challenges to the 'white myth' has appeared; see Foote (2004); Sharman (2001); Purcell (1993).

<sup>107</sup> I use ethnicity here based on Bourgois (1989), he uses a broad approach and distinguishes 'hispanics' from others (blacks and indigenous) and points to the internal diversification within the Hispanic group of labourers

zone in the late 1980s, or if it ever had.<sup>108</sup> In spite of this, these same, or slightly altered geographical images were also used and reproduced in order to portray this region and its inhabitants as ‘lacking’ and in need of assistance, what has been called ‘the minister’s model’ (van Ufford 1993). In development plans, development projects, even school-books, the same image, or representation, of this geographical area and its people as deficient, or lacking, were reproduced, including in the mandate of the proper SMFC Women’s Project.<sup>109</sup> Ordinary people living in the Southern Pacific region were more often than not pictured as poor and destitute and thus in need of assistance, which certainly could be demonstrated statistically, all indicators did support this.<sup>110</sup> On the other hand, the Southern Zone was also portrayed as promising, in terms of its resources and future possibilities. Some of these key texts will be returned to later.

It seemed to be challenging to turn the geographical images, or representations, of the Pacific South into a more positively laden *región de desarrollo* (development region), in spite of the fact that by the late 1980s the Banana Company had for long been in the process of pulling out of the area altogether (they stayed put in palm growing in parts of Coto Valley). International development organisations like the FAO, UNDP, the Inter American Development Bank, the (then) European Community, US-AID, and an array of smaller NGOs, together with Costa Rican state - and semi-state institutions; such as the Land development institute (IDA), the planning ministry (MIDEPLAN), the agricultural ministry

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<sup>108</sup> Among the critics are Seligson (1980) while Menjívar et al. (1985); Donato and Rojas (1987); and Montero Vega (2006) are seeing the struggles from very different perspectives. According to Marquardt (2001) the banana workers’ union in Golfito (UTG) did grow strong as a response to the ‘fordist’ division of labour on the plantations resulting from the ‘scientification’ of work in attempts to combat the Panama disease. Nor did it keep up its strength for a very long period either, López (1988) argues that the UTG was considerably weakened before the final banana strike in Palmar in 1984, which was used as the reason for the closing of the banana production by the UFCo (then United Brands). It seems, however, that new research now is underway to focus on this history. See also Marquardt (2002) in some of the footnotes he refers to interviews with former UTG activists. Without consulting the archives it is difficult yet to know much about this particular era, it is only Marquardt (2002) that so far has gone through the public archives, but he has not, as no one else, got access to the Chiquita’s archives (Marquardt 2001, 2002).

<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, in the mandate of the SMFC the WID/GAD perspectives were much better represented than information about the Southern Zone, but it was acknowledged a need to consider this particularly through the working out of the all encompassing *Diagnostico*. (SMFC/IDA 1986)

<sup>110</sup> OFIPLAN (1981) *La Dimensión de la pobreza. Estudio de la Pobreza rural en Costa Rica* .

MAG etc.<sup>111</sup> had for long been trying to do exactly that. Some of these institutions had been present in the area since the mid-70s and carried out much development work, but it took time to improve the images dominating on the national level. It was within such a setting that the peasant women in Coto Sur seemed to have disappeared even more, as the number of competing interests was on the rise.

### Three Territorial Narratives

Searching background information for this work did lead to encountering different kinds of descriptions and analyses of the Zona Sur, by authors in different fields; academic writing, policy documents, plans, journals, some of which already has been presented. I was after if and how women had been depicted in these texts, and in much of what can be described as the factual stuff<sup>112</sup> the structural transformations of the Southern Zone is a central theme, which in economic and development discourses often is referred to as restructuration, and whose gendering is one of the bottom lines of my present work. These territorial narratives are just about all transformation stories portraying evolutionary processes; perhaps better know in discussions about postcolonial geographies;

in which spatial narratives of inequality and interconnections try to counter -  
eurocentric models of modernity, progress and development all other histories are  
irrelevant or subordinated (Shohat and Stam 1994, in Nash 2004: 104).

These mainly socio-economic informed discourses have been dominated by hegemonic representations of places like the Southern Zone, primarily as foreign controlled and

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<sup>111</sup> *Tribuna Economica* (1986) has a long list of organisations and institutions present in La Zona Sur in the 1980s. Concerning the regionalisation, see particularly the work of the German geographer Nuhn: *Regionalisierung und entwicklungsplanung in Costa Rica*, Hamburg (1978), a comprehensive work that very much illustrates 'regional geography' in the early 1970s, full of constructed maps, indicating anything from distribution of population, administrative regions over time, spatial *ordnung*. Cross-reading many later documents demonstrates that the bulk of them are based on Nuhn's work as their sources. See also Carolyn Hall (1982, 1984); Hernández (1985); Flores Silva (1982) for different geographical overviews of the country.

<sup>112</sup> I did not carry out any systematic research in public archives, except for the archives of the SMFC, the local IDA office in Laurel, and some other institutions and organisations in San José, entailing that what I am leaning on is selective.



dominated areas within a national state, exemplified with the banana industry. The more recent introduction of oil palms in the zone, will most likely activate other discourses about globalised agro-industry, progress, and modernities, and was in the 1990s, not quite part of the story yet. La Zona Sur has often been labelled as an enclave, however, what is depicted as an enclave<sup>113</sup> in one geographical setting or scale, will often appear as the opposite seen from a different position.

Based on readings some of the texts referred to above, I have found that it was possible to recognise three main (development) dimensions in these stories, with and without plotment and which, according to Gasper (1996), possibly could be examples of development storytelling. They can be summarised as three clusters of (very simplified) place - and development constructing narratives;

1. Biological/natural rational and 'science' based : From (virgin) rainforests -> via bananas (plants)-> via basic grains (maize) -> to oil palms.
2. Social exploitation/political: From: Empty land-> to foreign controlled banana plantations -> via agrarian reform -> to consolidation of agrarian reform.
3. (State) planning: From unknown (unmapped/unclear frontier) areas -> via foreign enclave -> to increasingly being incorporated into the nation state.

It is possible to distinguish also a fourth 'master narrative' that should be well known in the North, namely categorizing La Zona Sur as the 'Tropics'; eternally opposite of the industrialised temperate (read: developed) areas, which will not be pursued further here.<sup>114</sup>

Suffice it to say that none of these evolutionary narratives encountered were gendered (except perhaps the 'tropical' which will be returned to).

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<sup>113</sup> According to Bourgois 'The plantations social formations as transnational enclaves- all relationships (whether economic or social) revolve around the company and its international markets' (1989: 22). This point will be returned to in more detail in chapter 8

<sup>114</sup> This refers to the debates on 'colonial' geographies, and constructions of the Tropics in the West; see Arnold (1996, 2000); Driver (2004); Driver and Yeoh (2000); Gregory (2001); Duncan (2000); Livingstone (2000); McEwan (2003); Felix (2004).

Such neatly chronologically organised and represented stories are not difficult to reconstruct again and again, and it is the second narrative that undoubtedly was the one I mostly recognised, due both to my familiarity with its content, and what kind of texts and documents I for the most part was relating to. Those stories were leaning on well known discourses in development literature; on state - peasant relationships, agricultural reforms, the hegemony of multinational companies, on national development, as well as the entrance of the so-called Washington consensus; the World Bank and their allies in the last leg of this story with the implementation of the oil palm project in the late 1980s and 90s.<sup>115</sup> Without going in any more detail what they all have in common is that they are evolutionary, and are depicting progress.

It will, consequently, depend very much on one's situatedness, both as research subject, as well as the discourses one draws upon, what kind of history one will write, whether one will depict the national state as the central agent, or the banana workers cum peasants, or, technological/economic rationalities. Women were not appearing in any of these stories, except occasionally, if benevolently read and assumed, as members of peasant families. Whose stories will count? Who will write the authorised history about the settlement in Coto Sur, and how will it be contextualised? It is as always a matter of hegemony and power, and current representations will therefore be constantly challenged. My intention is not to try to replace any of the existing ones but to contribute with another version in which women will be present and visible.

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<sup>115</sup> It is in such a study very simple to discover how theories and perspectives travel and appear in various public papers and books, in an almost constant referral to each other, and moreover, how the concepts and perspectives change over time; one can in reality follow these. I have to admit that I was astonished when realising how the (second) story about Coto Sur was being cross-referred.

## **The Legacy of Bananas<sup>116</sup>**

No one living in the Southern Pacific Zone in Costa Rica in the 1980s and early 1990s could escape what might be labelled the legacy of bananas, in spite of being something of the past, of reasons alluded to above. The grand scale export banana production by the Compañía Bananera was concluded after a long strike in September 1984, but some growing continued on contracts, as for instance by the banana cooperative in Coto Sur, which will be returned to shortly. Parts and remnants of the enormous infrastructural installations were still visible in the landscape mainly because of remaining houses, and railway tracks. It was the Company's infrastructure that still dominated the landscape, although sometimes one had to read it indirectly, as new rounds of 'investments' (Massey 1994) had been added over older ones. For instance, replacing railway tracks with roads, the very long and straight lines, indicated that surveyors had done the job according to strict blueprints. The tropical fruit had been dominating the whole zone, stretching across the border into Panamá (in 1986 the UFCo plantations there were still in production) for close to fifty years, with ups and downs, opening of new plantation areas, and closing - and reopening of old ones. The growing and exportation of bananas was the reason the majority of the adult inhabitants had come to the Zone in search for a living.

Bananas, the tropical fruit that became an everyday household commodity in the North, had been brought to the Southern Zone and literally conquered the land and was soon after attacked by diseases. The banana growing impoverished the land by employing enormous amounts of chemicals, when later removed, or replaced (and moved to other parts of the globe to conquer other lands) the land was left with all the residuals. Historically all of

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<sup>116</sup> I have used relatively much space about bananas, and this part is mainly meant for readers that are not familiar with the banana history in Central America, (and also my own 'homework' carried out to be at all able to capture and contextualise the women's stories). For others it might be well known and can be skipped.

this was organized and controlled by the world's first truly multinational corporation, the (then) United Fruit Company (UFCo),<sup>117</sup> today known as *Chiquita*.

The UFCo was established early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its first plantations in the Costa Rican Atlantic Coast, and the company enjoyed in fact a complete monopoly in the country until 1956. This company is infamous for the deals and contracts<sup>118</sup> they pressured onto rather weak national governments, thus the expression of 'Banana Republics', and their influence on US foreign policy.<sup>119</sup> The struggles with the national host governments were most about fighting export taxes and their contestation of the long-term contracts the company had managed to negotiate. The taxes issue is still not resolved everywhere. The stories about the conduct of this empire are numerous, ranging from participations in *Coupe d'état*, to in fact literally colonising whole 'virgin' areas, converting them from rainforests to hierarchically organized societies with production lines, housing compounds, hospitals, schools, and transport facilities like a conveyor belt from the fields, trains, harbour facilities, etc. via its own fleet of banana boats (the Great White Fleet) - bringing the fruit to the US and European customers.<sup>120</sup>

'Bananas arrived stained in blood,' says Cynthia Enloe (2000). From the beginning thousands of workers died conquering the wilderness, axing down the tropical forests from early in the century, and whom, during the 1920s, 30s, 40s and 50s, and later - being infected by the constant use of chemical spraying. The working conditions before WWII were terrible, resulting in strikes and upheavals, but also struggles and organisation of the workers. What has distinguished banana zones and other export plantations is that the work force, ranging

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<sup>117</sup> The UFCo's subsidiaries had all different names, in Golfito it was *Compañía Bananera de Costa Rica* (CBCR), while on the other side of the border it was called *Chiriquí Land Co*, etc. For some older banana history see Kepner and Soothill (1935); McCann (1976).

<sup>118</sup> One of the best known is the so-called Soto-Keith contract from 1884, granting 800.000 acres of land (8% of the whole national territory).

<sup>119</sup> "What is good for United Fruit is good for United states" (Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles)

<sup>120</sup> The literature on the fruit multinationals, first and foremost UFCo is quite voluminous ranging from Pablo Neruda's poetry to encompassing political analyses. The coup in Guatemala in 1954, initiated by the United Fruit Co is described in Schlesinger and Kinzer's *Bitter Fruit* (1982). For overviews, see for instance Ellis, (1973); Striffler and Moberg eds (2003); Bucheli (2003); Flasco/CEDAL (1988); for Columbia (Bucheli 2005), Ecuador (Striffler 2002), Belize (Moberg 1997, 2003); Grossmann (1998)-Eastern Caribbean.

from navies cutting the rainforest and contracting yellow fever and malaria, to the land workers tending and cutting the plants, all have been drawn to the sites from other places with bleak prospects of survival. In Costa Rica, UFCo had their first labourers brought from Jamaica into their plantations in Limón as mentioned above. Chinese workers were set to build the railway from San José to Limón, initially for exporting coffee. Nicaraguans were recruited as the first Hispanics, they were known to be brave and skilled axe-men, and the Guanacastecos came later on, especially after the move of the banana industry to the Pacific. Few Costa Ricans from the Central Valley went to the banana zones to work<sup>121</sup> and this probably explains some of the background for the ‘foreignness’ of the banana zone in Costa Rica discussed previously. Eventually the strong and militant banana unions grew, the impact their labour unions had on the general political situation in the country has varied. In Costa Rica much emphasis has been put on the influence of the Vanguardia Popular, the communist party. For instance, the first collective agreement that was signed in the country was between the banana workers in Golfito and the UFCo, and in many respects one must say that the organised banana workers were the first group that really had challenged the political establishment seriously, which one meets over again in historical accounts, they were obviously seen with a certain awe from the authorities, as has been already brought up.<sup>122</sup>

The stories, poetry, novels, and political analyses about the banana industry in Central America have been essential in the building of political and social conscience, way beyond the actual sites of struggles, as well as the source for numerous myths, for example the nicknames of the UFCo, like *el pulpo* (the octopus) appearing in popular songs and poetry.

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<sup>121</sup> There has, as mentioned in chapter 2, been much recent interest in analysis of the ethnic hierarchies on the banana plantations in Central America. The Nicaraguans, Hondurans, Guanacastecos, Chiricanos, Bourgeois assumes that many of those men were on the run in the first place. In the move of the Banana plantations in Costa Rica from the Atlantic to the Pacific, to Quepos further north, and Golfito, blacks were refused to go, in fact they were refused to enter the Central Valley until 1948. According to Marquardt (2002) it was the workers from the Central Valley that were lowest in the hierarchy in the South Pacific. In this way, the national ethnic hierarchy was destabilised.

<sup>122</sup> Interestingly, it has been in the banana industry that much of the so-called *Solidarismo* (worker-employee cooperation) organisations have flourished later, see Aseprola/Cedal (1989); Blanco and Navarro (1984); Donato y Rojas (1987); Wedin (1991).

There have certainly been several interpretations of the Company's own secretive information, to critical analyses of its use of political bribery etc. Its political clout has been important for the international community, in trying to entangle the more recent Latin-American history, often in too broad swipes, mixed with tropical myths and fascinations; many former UFCo employees have written their memories and their impressions and histories could be said to represent a North American variety of Saïd's 'orientalism'.<sup>123</sup> It was, I think, this intriguing mix that also fascinated me when I first got to the Southern Zone, and it keeps doing so and whenever I buy bananas in the supermarket I check the boxes and their origins. Women appear on these boxes, as the woman with the big hat, the brand logo of Chiquita.

### **'Miss Chiquita'**

In a recent account about the US banana industry, Soluri (2003) holds that 'Consumers in the US shaped landscapes and livelihoods in export banana zones both by creating a market demand (quantity) - and preference (quality)' (2003: 75). His intention is to shed light on the interconnectedness between the marketing and consumption side - and production side - of the fruit chain. This is but one, of several, ways of seeing the legacy of bananas, still alive in places like Coto Sur and the Zona Sur. The connectedness, and thus part of the place-construction of Coto Sur, is the clue here, both how the 'quality banana' was being produced and recreated not only biologically, but increasingly through branding: it was not any banana it was Chiquita Banana. However, in such an account, it is perhaps easy to underplay the struggles of the labour behind; in the banana exporting zones, as all along the production

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<sup>123</sup> An eloquent example is the already presented Steven's 'Americans in the Tropics'. A most interesting recent contribution is Steve Marquardt (2001) a historian who demonstrates how it in fact was the 'Panamenian disease that became the Company's fate, in that they were not able to change to more resistant varieties in time. He also divides the approaches to the UFCo study in three; the political critical studies, the ethnic/cultural ones, and the course he himself tries to plot out, involving 'nature' and science more actively.

chain, land labourers, packers, transporters, longshoremen and housewives. In their increased marketing of the fruit the UFCo from quite early on played upon gendered stereotypes, particularly with the construction of Miss Chiquita, a figure that has been part of the company's image for more than fifty years. She was first acted out by the Brazilian born actress Carmen Miranda who, with crazy big hats was singing '*I 'm Chiquita Banana and I've come to say..*' drawing on a popular stereotyped Latinized female image for their imported bananas. In this manner the company was trying to create an intimate relationship between their consumers, American housewives, and a multinational plantation company, but also to reshape international relations, says Cynthia Enloe (2000) pointing to how the banana plantations, the regulated lives in the 'factories in the field', always have been depicted as a men's world and the United Fruit's use of the 1940s and 50s Miss Chiquita star Carmen Miranda in order to soften their image. This shows, says Enloe, that bananas has a gendered history, but that one sometimes must draw on much wider discourses to be able to see it. Women struggling as part of banana plantation households were totally invisible in these accounts. That was not a feminine image that was considered neither 'natural' nor useful, and could possibly be better analysed by using a concept like 'feminist commodity chain' (Ramamurthy 2004).



First drawing Miss Chiquita 1944

## La Zona Bananera - Golfito Division

What today makes up the frequently mentioned La Plancha district of the Coto Sur settlement was formerly one of what was labelled ‘districts’ under the UFCo’s Golfito Division administered by the UFCo’ Chiriquí Land division in Panamá.<sup>124</sup> The name Coto Sur was used for what in practice was The Southernmost part of the Golfito Division, as the women frequently talked about (“They gave away land in the South”), and was added to Coto Colorado Valley (Valle del Coto), Palmar, and other, long since abandoned banana farm districts. The opening of the Banana Zone from the late 1930s on ignited a massive migration wave, the German geographer, Gerard Sandner (upon whose work much of the later writings seem to be based) describes the Southern Zone of Costa Rica in this manner:

Between 1938 and 1950 about 20.000 occupants entered the zone, between 1950 and 1959 came another 10. 000.<sup>125</sup> In the beginning the majority were Nicaraguans and Panamenians. Later began the Costa Rican immigration especially from Guanacaste and by this, ‘the social structure improved (Sandner 1962).<sup>126</sup>

The great influx of people mainly from the Northeastern province of Guanacaste and from the Rivas region in southern Nicaragua was noticeable, it was estimated that at least 40 % of the population in the zone originated from these areas.<sup>127</sup> In addition, there was a considerable group that came from Honduras and Panamá to work in the plantations.

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<sup>124</sup> This is also connected to the final drawing of the international border and between Costa Rica and Panamá mentioned before. The Coto Sur/Gonzales Víquez district was the site of a major conflict in 1955, see Marquardt (2002); Stephens (1989); Mora Vega (2006).

<sup>125</sup> An example is that the Cantón of Golfito in 1950 had the highest positive migration saldo of the whole country (90,9%) followed by Aguirre (Quepos) with 87% (Flores Silva 1982: 227)

<sup>126</sup> Gerhard Sandner: *La colonización agrícola de Costa Rica..* An interesting comment in Sander’s account is that he declares that with the influx of Costarricans, especially from the region of Guanacaste, the social structure improved, it could be discussed how this is meant to be read.

<sup>127</sup> These numbers are mainly found in the ‘*Serie de estudios*’ (PNUD/OIT/ITCO 1979, 1980, 1981) and are estimates of the work force, I assume, as the information from the women indicated, there were probably more links to these areas than the numbers reveal (Chapter 2). Concerning the outmigration from Guanacaste Sandner writes: ‘Especially after 1950 the migration from Guanacaste had increased. In 1963- 73 the equivalent of 73.4% of the province’s natural population growth - some 50.000 people- migrated elsewhere. By 1973, 34% of native guanacastecans resided outside of Guanacaste- and in some cantons – the percentage was between 40 and 50%’ (Sandner 1962: 260-61).



This exodus from Rivas in Nicaragua and Guanacaste has mainly been explained by relative overpopulation, a very unequal distribution of land (big haciendas) and changes in agricultural technology, from a more mixed agricultural system to extensive land use, mainly cattle, requiring a minimum of working hands. This resulted in a huge mass of rural poor, landless people of which a great number emigrated, many to the banana plantations, or in search for land or opportunities. Labour contractors hired by the UFCo had moved constantly from hacienda to hacienda to employ large numbers, many of who were undocumented Nicaraguan workers (Edelman 1992).

These migrations could be seen as taking place between two relatively speaking marginal areas in the country, and as much of it was not permanent, one probably would have to go into the UFCo's archives in order to get a more accurate estimation.<sup>128</sup> It has been estimated that around 10.000 men were engaged directly in banana production on the UFCo farms in the Southern Zone in its peak in the 1960s, after the replacement of the Gros Michel banana variety with the Cavendish, resulting in increases in production and exports.<sup>129</sup> There is no statistics telling to what extent that these banana worker migrations were male, but there is no doubt about that being the case, especially so, in the earlier part of the period. This reinforces the overall impression that it is a very male history, and seen through male lenses. Women are simply not in that picture at all.

In the Banana Zone each district of the UFCo's territorial organisation was subdivided into a number of farms (*fincas*). In Coto Sur Laurel had been the administrative farm (with many big buildings, air strip etc.) of the district, with its mentioned farms and cuadrantes of Tamarindo, Caucho, Roble, and several others (now abandoned) and which were the self-

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<sup>128</sup> These archives are most likely all gone by now. Bourgois (2003) did manage to rescue some of the hand-written mildewed materials when in Boca de Toros, in Panamá on a plantation that was still in production. Again, there is still much research to carry out, the work in public archives by Marquardt (2001, 2002) are the only ones I have seen until now, but hopefully someone in the future will be able to do something more about this intriguing history.

<sup>129</sup> See Ellis (1983); Lopez (1988); Flacso/Cedal (1988); Garnier et al. (1988); Striffler and Moberg eds (2003); Bucheli (2005) for more details on production, contracts, dates etc.

containing production farms. The spatial expression of these units is one of order and control, the roads and buildings are erected in literally straight lines, which, as stated, can still be read both in the landscape and on maps. Each banana farm had a rigid hierarchy spatially separated in work and living conditions and privileges between the land workers and the functionaries, and can be recognised in what Duncan (2002) has called the ‘abstract space’ also mentioned in chapter 2.

Those banana farms have been more or less identical all over Central America, constructed as they were by mainly imported materials (California Redwoods as they were resistant to termites), by the same UFCo engineers, the buildings often also moved about, and each such district’s farms were given names to identify them, as they physically appeared just about identical. In the Coto Sur district the farms were named after trees: Naranjo, Laurel, Tamarindo, Roble, Cenizo, Mango, Peral (Orange, Laurel, Tamarind, Oak, Ash, Mango, Pear), this naming continues into Chiriquí Land’s farms in Panamá as they had been under the same administration. In the neighbouring district of Coto Valley numbers were used to identify the farms; Coto 45, Coto 47, Coto 63, etc. Further north, in the former Piedras Blancas area, there were place names; i.e. Nueva York, Venecia, Guanacaste, etc.<sup>130</sup> These names and locations have survived today, in spite of perhaps forty years without banana plants, and when the women in Coto Sur talked about ‘47’ or ‘63’, they would normally be referring to the banana farms in the Coto Valley district.

The UFCo’s Golfito Division headquarters was, as mentioned, located to the Banana-town, Golfito, where a hospital was constructed, a school, airstrip, etc., as well as a *Zona Americana*; or, as the women in Coto Sur tended to call it; *la Zona Blanca* (white zone), the (mainly) white functionaries’ separate and gated living quarters with single bungalows, lawns and plants, swimming pool, tennis courts, and Club; secluded from the rest of town. (In the

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<sup>130</sup> The banana district between Piedras Blancas and Diquís was closed in the early 1960s, and in 1962 Piedras Blancas (Altenburg et al. 1990, based on Nuhn 1978). The naming practice, indeed invokes some thoughts about ‘power geographies’ as traces of imperialist history, (Hall, Catherine 1996, in Nash 2004)

interviews, one of the women who had lived for a while in Golfito working as a domestic, told about how the bank had a separate entrance from la Zona Blanca). It is also worth noticing that the women when talking about Golfito, were all very fascinated by aesthetics of these secluded zones, they talked much about them, using them as examples as how things could be in the future. In Golfito the transportation system was constructed to bring the fruit to the *Muelle*, the specialized export harbours and piers for the banana boats to dock, and the 250 km of railway tracks connecting all the farms from Palmar in the North and to Coto Sur in the South (and through to Puerto Armuelles in Panamá) had its zero point here, the same train the invaders used later on. There were no connections to transportation facilities to the rest of the country.

When the UFCo Golfito Division's banana production finally shut down in 1984 it was after many years of gradual downsizing, the profit in this zone had been decreasing and the Company had started closing of plantations, selling of reserves to private farmers and landowners, and replacing bananas by palm oil as in Coto Valley,<sup>131</sup> which entailed that the UFCo was still present in the region as they owned and controlled most of the Coto Valley area, including a palm oil processing plant in Coto 54.

Whenever the UFCo eventually pulled out of the areas that they had controlled they tended to take everything of value away; or destroy it, and leave it to rot - or rust (thus the 'rust' in Coto Sur). Left behind were the people and the worn-down areas, to the national governments, the host state, to hopefully do something about, or sell out. In the Southern Zone the people themselves took action first, by invading former banana plantation lands, while the Costa Rican state, reluctantly at first, did contribute in different ways, this time

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<sup>131</sup> There were compound reasons for the closings, often workers' strikes and host governments' tax policies were used as the only explanations, while in practice the situation in the companies were more complex; There was a long-lasting banana workers' strike in Golfito (from June 16<sup>th</sup> to September 20<sup>th</sup> 1984), resulting in the deaths of two workers shot by the police forces, but it led to nothing but a complete destroying of the political force of the banana union, the UTG. See the already cited works on bananas etc. for further informations and discussions.

seeking support from the many international agencies, to first set up an agricultural settlement, later to make steps to transfer it into an oil palm growing region altogether.

As repeated numerous times, there was little room for women in this in fact very public banana world, that space had to be carved out by themselves. The images of ex-bananeros were represented by a very physical, tough, hegemonic masculinity, epitomised by the machete, and, as has been repeated, associated with heavy drinking and womanizing. Following Connell (1995) the corresponding, subjugated femininity, was perhaps the superfeminine?

### **Memories - and Bodies**

One could easily be occupied with the history and legacy of bananas forever, it is so overwhelming, interesting, and fascinating. But; now although gone, in terms of the UFCo's systematic plantations since the 70s, bananas still, many years later, seem to have put some kind of imprint on everything and everybody. For one, the bodies of tired, worn down banana workers. They have had an extremely hard physical work, now taking its toll. Many we met were sick and tired and disillusioned. Moreover; the imprint on the soil in and near the former plantations; it has been sprayed with strong chemicals (Copper sulphide) for so many years and many places the soil has difficulties in recovering. Additionally, there are all the memories, which could be dwelt at and used in new and different situations. Then there is the language; so many anglicised banana related words (el foreman, el spray, etc.), were still in daily use. Many former banana houses still existed, as in the cuadrantes, while others are long gone, and as has been mentioned, they are the physical legacy, in spite of much decay, changes and additions to many of them. And finally, the IDA functionaries' perpetual references to what they called the 'plantation mentality' of the parceleros, always interpreted as a problem, or an explanation. This mentality could, then, be used as a weapon, both ways.

If one did not think much of bananas and the past before, the very repeated narratives of the ex-bananeros did continually evoke this past, but in very different ways than people themselves did, not to talk about women's versions.

In the collections *Autobiografías Campesinas* (1977/1979) there are several stories told by former banana workers sharing some of the same traits as the ones we heard in Coto Sur, and in which they recalled the fantastic stories they heard about earning 'heaps of money' in La Zona. The men's stories that we listened to in Coto Sur in 1986, could not be directly put into this migration pattern, at least not after the 1960s, their movements were mainly between different banana plantations, and occasionally other activities. But many had, the first ten years or so been coming and going between Guanacaste and la Zona, they worked till they got sick of it, or got into a quarrel, left and sought something else. This is a more recent example of how this migration is being described. Sylvia Chant (1991) refers to this same movement as it had influenced women's household adaptations in Guanacaste, while the ones living in Coto Sur in the 1980s and 90s had their primary households in the Southern Zone, and Guanacaste represented more of a memory to them. They would often tell us about their former lives, at least when directly asked.<sup>132</sup>

Many of those men, who by then were in their fifties and sixties, had not only worked hard and been exploited, many had also, through their many years in the fruit industry been exposed to experiences, people and ideas, from many parts of the world, which they, now long after, apparently went about pondering about. Three of our men informants were from Rivas in Nicaragua and related how they had crossed the border illegally at night to the other side in Guanacaste and had been quickly approached by UFCo agents who asked if they wanted 'good work for *La Compañía*'. A typical route taken was to walk to the Tempisque

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<sup>132</sup> Curiously enough it was several times my Norwegian origin that tended to start those conversations - asking what a box of bananas was sold at in Norway. Then many of those having had a long life as bananeros in the Atlantic side, remembered all the labels of the boxes, and knew all major harbours in Europe, including Oslo. The real treat for them had been eating *bacalao* (dried cod) from Norway. But there were also some that simply did not want to talk about banana farms, it was a closed chapter in their lives.

area where they managed to get across the Golfo de Nicoya to Puntarenas; and from there they were taken by company - contracted boats along the Pacific coast to Quepos and Golfito a journey several of the women also had taken (Chapter 2). This traffic seems to have been taking place between 1948 and the mid-1950s, and several of the women told about the same procedures to get to La Zona.

Another former banana worker in Coto Sur, did recall in detail the movies they were shown when working on the banana farms in the 1950s and 60s; with Hollywood stars, like Doris Day and John Wayne, shown on outdoor screens, they remembered that the same films were shown on over and over again, they knew them by heart. Working life on a plantation operated according to what one may roughly call capitalist principles, and there existed a quite distinct division of labour that had been carried to its very extreme,<sup>133</sup> and the ex-bananeros in Coto Sur had had their place, and knew exactly what their job was. On each farm between 40 and 80 men had been working in the fields, as cultivators and harvesters. Each task was specialised, and paid differently. There was cleaning of the rows of different kinds, clearing and keeping up the drainage systems (banana plants cannot stay in water for more than an hour), disease controls, and there was the terrible job of application of fertilizers and spraying, etc. The extreme working conditions, and the literally all-powerful control by the Company of every single aspect of life, were the principal reasons many men in Coto Sur gave, for going on and off the plantations, not staying at some of them too long at the time, but they had always returned, there was not much else they could do that would pay the same, and argued often that it was for the money. They reported on quarrels with *el foreman*, which often they had solved by just leaving “the damned place and the fucked idiot”. Others had kept their mouth shut and stayed. In the long run the latter had been rewarded because they could be among the ones who were offered benefits when the Company finally withdrew from

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<sup>133</sup> See Bourgois for a detailed description of working relations on a banana plantation, the Chiriquí Land (UFCO/in Boca de Toros Panamá (1989). Marquardt (2001) analyses this from a ‘scientific management regime’ intensified from the 1960s.

the Coto Valley, or other plantations in the Limón area (*liquidación*), which they, if smart, could invest in some land, which some of our informants who had arrived later had purchased land in Coto Sur or elsewhere. The ex-bananero men encountered in Coto Sur did talk much about being a free (*libre*) man, and one only could be a free man in the Company system by leaving. This argument of leaving they also drew on when explaining why they had gone to Coto Sur, and was also the reason that so many had left Coto Sur as well.

Suffice it to say that what men in Coto Sur said was a far cry from the IDA perceptions of ex-bananeros; people expecting everything put in their hand from the Company cum *Papa IDA*; instead the impression was of a group of tired men, who were spending much of their days trying to make their lives meaningful. Living and working on the banana farms that were originally organised only for single male workers, as military camps, they had very few recreational facilities, a handful of football fields, bars, and not much more. At least, life as a parcelero in Coto Sur was not lucrative, they had hoped for more, but they felt they were free.

### **Rural Reform, Land, Agricultural Settlement, State Authorities and Institutions**

The establishment of the agricultural settlement of Coto Sur has been considered as the combined result of the effects of contractions in the banana industry, initiatives of the land invaders, and ideologies of rural, or agricultural reforms concerned about redistributing land to landless. The practice of setting up what was referred to as colonies, later settlements, in Costa Rica dates back in time, and got a renewed attention with the founding of the land development agency (IDA/Itco) in 1962 (Barahona 1980; Seligson 1980; Royo 2004). What was to become the future Coto Sur settlement was invaded, and in practice run by a group of the land-seekers, a situation that stirred many political reactions in the country, but from September 1975 the IDA was instructed by the government to take charge in Coto Sur, and

from then on could be considered as part of what Hulme (1987) calls state sponsored settlement policies in Latin America. The IDA/Itco) was established on basis of the Law of *Tierras y Colonización* (1962) and suffice it to say that it is an institution that has been politically contested, continually analysed and challenged; not the least from different academic and political positions. Like similar institutions in other Latin American countries, it was created as a result of the Punta del Este conference (1961) that the Kennedy Administration and the Alliance for Progress<sup>134</sup> put up in order to curb what was conceived of as the advance of communism; and one had found it crucial to try to meet the demands from the increasing numbers of rural landless. Hence, agricultural reform programmes were recommended as the major remedy, politically and financially supported by the USA. Consequently, what happened in Coto Sur in the mid-1970s was still closely related to international politics, this time, however, administered nationally.

### **Institutions at Work**

The importance of what can be termed the big development institutions (Jütting 2004) in the construction of, and running of the agricultural settlement of Coto Sur, has been mentioned several times already, and among them, the SMFC's host institution, the IDA, undoubtedly was the most significant. Just the fact that it was within the organisational set up of the IDA that the Women's Office (SMFC) and the Women's project in Coto Sur was created and implemented, makes this institution merit special attention when focusing on the women and gender relations (which is being pursued further in Valestrand, forthcoming).

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<sup>134</sup> The Alliance for Progress was a US \$ 100 billion programme for the economic and social development of Latin America, and was a treaty between the US and 19 Latin American countries excluding Cuba. Operations ceased in 1974, in the aftermath it has been considered not to have led to many accomplishments. For an overview of the history around US relations, see Lehmann (1990); LaFeber (1983); Dunkerley (1988); Woodward, R.L (1985); Pearce (1981) and many more.



The IDA is a so-called autonomous state institution in Costa Rica,<sup>135</sup> and it had its headquarters in San José and employed in the mid-80s around 800 people, the majority deployed in the different regional and subregional offices and settlements. The institution had as mentioned, been founded in 1962 as *Instituto de Tierras y Colonización* (Institute for Land and Colonization, Itco) to get unorganised landlessness, colonisation, and titling into organised forms. In 1982 it was renamed as IDA (The institute of land development), supposedly because the spontaneous colonisation of land (rainforests mainly, as well as underutilised haciendas) had been prohibited by law; but land invasions did not cede, and the demand for land was not diminishing, and the IDA's main task was to organise possible purchases, distribute the land, according to the law, and to particular criteria. The institution also had to provide technical and other services to the settlers, from the mid-1970s it came to include organizational efforts; primarily through establishing production cooperatives in the settlements, an activity a new department in 1974 (Docae)<sup>136</sup> in the main was to be responsible for. A constant discord both within the institution and outside, was concerned about whether the IDA was to oversee redistribution of land only; or whether they also should be as involved in comprehensive development programmes (as for example in Coto Sur) involving agricultural policies, organisations and international aid agencies, as they more and more had become.

It was in this period also that the programme *Regiones de Desarrollo* (Development regions) came into being, focusing on systematic planning of the agricultural settlements, to combine all possible resources under so-called integrated rural development, and in which the frequently cited *Series de Estudios* (UNDP/OIT/ITCO) was produced in close cooperation with experts from the mentioned international development agencies.

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<sup>135</sup> According to Dunkerley (1988), the system of autonomous institutions were 'the mainstay of Costa Rican institutional life', and he adds that this system had been established by the PLN (*Liberación Nacional*) political party in president Figueres' first term (1953-58) this sector accounted for 44% of the state budget.

<sup>136</sup> *Departamento de Organización Campesina e Asesoría Empresarial*, and whose first director became the ideologue of the cooperative movement in Costa Rica. For a background and political analysis of Docae, see deVries 1992. See also IDA/Docae (1985, 1986); Royo (2004).

The IDA, as an autonomous state institution, had its own board of directors, including an executive president who also held the position as minister in government, and a general manager who was head of an, on paper, strictly hierarchical organisation. There were after the 1982 reorganisation five Regional Offices with regional directors, under which there were several Sub-regional Offices, as the one in Laurel in Coto Sur was an example of <sup>137</sup>. In the regional and sub-regional offices, such as the one in Laurel, there were in the main people from the operational departments working; technicians, agronomists, legal and land-related personnel, as well as one of Docae's field-teams, in addition to an array of different people working with an unending row of projects of all sorts. However, well organized and systematic as the IDA's organisational chart may appear on paper, in practice it appeared to be more like a maze, when trying to find out how decisions were made, and who might be responsible for them, they did not seem to follow the charted hierarchy at all; thus, gendering such a rather complex and contradictory institution, and its collaborating ones, seemed to become a challenge, indeed.

### **The Land Question in Coto Sur**

The land reform policies in Latin American countries from the 1960s on, have been criticized for serving men's interests in that the new land laws and rules for redistributing land were favouring 'heads of households', whom, it has been assumed, were men (Deere and León 2001, 2003; Agarwal 1994; Deere 1987; Madden 1992; Cipres 1992; Palmer 1985). This critique led to substantial attention to the land issue in the international WID/GAD circuit, particularly fronted by the FAO, and one of the tasks of the SMFC's Women's Programme in Coto Sur was to elucidate how women in the settlement were faring in terms of access to land. In chapter 2 the rather dramatic events of the invasions in Coto Sur were presented; land-

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<sup>137</sup> IDA: Organizational Chart 1982

seekers all over the Southern Pacific Zone, most of whom have been directly - or indirectly - dependent on La Compañía Bananera, have acted several times, both squatting individually in the reserves of the Company, and later in what has been described as massive waves, like the one in Coto Sur in the 1970s, and later in the early 1980s when banana productions was stopped in Coto Valley.<sup>138</sup> The UFCo did, at its peak, control more than 60.000 hectares in the Southern Zone, which in practice was all of the best soils, but had gradually sold out reserve land to private investors, some of them former employees. In the Coto Sur district, the so-called reserves had been sold off to a Cuban-American consortium to be used for extensive cattle production (the inhabitants in Coto Sur used to refer to them as *los cubanos*). The land in question, which was literally free from any farming activity, lay for the most part idle but was judicially speaking, private land. The invasion and taking of land in Coto Sur was later described, by the IDA, as ‘spontaneous’, but the provisional *Sindicato* leadership operating from a hut in La Plancha did its best to redistribute land as fairly as they could, until the IDA was instructed to organize the redistribution and ordering of land, and later to initiate the tedious and elaborate legal titling procedures, as well as the practical day to day running of the huge settlement.

The change of government in Costa Rica the previous year (1974), the incoming administration Odubér had taken office, and had decided to carry out negotiations with the UFCo about the final take-over/purchase of former plantation land. The rest of the area, the former reserves sold out to private ineterests and which makes up the major acreage of the settlement, was agreed upon later on. IDA/Itco, in their own accounts, tend to play down the obvious political aspects of the invasions in Coto Sur, stressing the fact that IDA/Itco came in to secure law and order (Salazar et al. 1977). The message from IDA is that the ex-banana workers did organise themselves and invaded the land, but at the same token; it is underlined that they “-never before had worked the land as independent farmers.” - and thus: needed the

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<sup>138</sup> See Altenburg (1990). Later invasions in the Osa National Park (to wash gold) did also stir much political debates in Costa Rica. For overviews of the whole regions, see Mideplan *Plan Regional Brunca* (2003)

IDA. Therefore, the ambiguous and incessant attitude to the *ex-bananeros* owes much to these histories and myths created in this early period, as well as an overall fear for communism in the country, which the ex-bananeros were assumed to represent, reflected in the ‘territorial narratives’ presented above.

However, the political demands of land to the tiller based on usufruct rights, were also a strong ideological current, not the least through the academic and political development- and peasant-discourses of the 1960s and 1970s in, and about Latin America in particular.<sup>139</sup> In much of this development literature this is referred to as ‘the land question’; the political claim of the re-distribution of tillable land to the landless, to the rural poor, to the one who tills it; and has always caused political stir, as it typically has involved redistributing land that was in private hands. This has, in Costa Rica as well as in many other countries, led to an often tacit acceptance of usufruct farming practices, as have been the case in many areas in Guanacaste and often also on the margins of the banana plantations. Duncan (2002) sees this activity, leaning on Scott’s ‘Weapons of the Weak’ (1986) argumentation; as ‘spatial tactics’; as ‘tactics of resistance’, which, I think, also could be applied in the Coto Sur case, but that would require further analysis than I have been doing.

The Coto Sur case in many ways illustrates this changing situation, the (re)distribution of land had been implemented in three manners in the settlement; according to the IDA guidelines;<sup>140</sup> purchased; and through invasions, entailing that there was no definite planned policy in the bottom of the creation of the settlement, but rather a confusing situation that the

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<sup>139</sup> The so-called ‘dependencia’ school, after André Gunder Frank (1966) was probably most dominating in the early 1970s, but also many of the other analyses of the colonial legacy and the hacienda system resulting in underutilizing of land, and of the liberal national state formations in Latin America producing export crops (coffee, tobacco, sugar), based on foreign capital (German, British, later US) in coalition with the landowning elites. See for instance Kay (2000); Williams (1986); Perez Brignoli (1985); Paige (1997); LaFeber (1985); Gudmundson (1995); Edelman (1992); Mintz (1985); Torres Rivas (1981), Barraclough (1994) Stavenhagen (1974). See also more popular versions such as Lindquist (1973) and Galeano (1971).

<sup>140</sup> IDA’s guidelines for the redistribution of land (before 1990), ‘Specify that land recipients must be peasants who have some knowledge of the agricultural trade and not ex-proletarians. They must also be landless and should not have received land from the IDA previously’ (Anderson, L. 1994:200). See also the law: *Ley de Tierras y Colonización Capítulo IV; Parcelación de Tierras*’ (1981/1982). See also discussions in Deere and León (2001, 2003), and in Madden (1992) concerning women’s rights to land under these systems.

authorities had to put in order. It was actually only the first groups that came to Coto Sur and who invaded (private) land could be put in the category *precaristas* (squatters, illegal trespassers). On the other hand; the clearing of what was considered as empty land; mainly rainforests, was in Costa Rica considered as positive, and was regarded as a central means of the colonization efforts; to make more of the national territory accessible for productive activities and civilization, with a history stretching back to the Spanish colonization from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Both these movements have long histories in Central America. The issue of land-redistribution, is, as already stated, a sensitive one; as to acquiring access to underutilised haciendas (purchase or expropriating), or the colonizing of rainforests, a long and politically accepted tradition, which at this stage (the mid-70s) was reaching its limit, both in terms of acreage and the rising consciousness as to ecological issues, a new agenda. Thus, implementing land distributing policies required (big) money from the state coffers as well as issues of private ownership to land were both highly controversial questions often had to be fought in court.<sup>141</sup> The events of the invasions taking place in the Southern Zone of Costa Rica, must definitely be seen with this as backcloth, but not exclusively, as will be brought up later on.

Both in Coto Sur, and other land invasions in the Southern Zone and on the Atlantic, it seemed regularly to have been the *precarista* (illegal trespasser) interpretation that had been activated by the authorities (and the general public), at least in the beginning. These constructed narratives of the inhabitants in Coto Sur, as well as in other agricultural settlements' coming to existence, are often depicted as opposites, as binaries, depending whether they are related and constructed from a labour-, peasant-, or oligarchic- (big landowners) perspective, but they are after all, different versions of the pioneering narratives about male heroes conquering the land (and settle their families), whether they are considered

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<sup>141</sup> Between 1963 and august of 1986, the IDA had distributed 498.000 hectares of land, which represented 17% of the cultivated acreage, 190.000 hectares had benefited 5504 families, moreover 230.0 0 hectares had been transferred to squatters, and 79.000 hectares are given in *arrendamineto* (*Tribuna Economica* 1986 No. 8 p. 14).

as worthy or unworthy. This may also explain much of the slightly negative attitudes to Golfito in the Central Valley in the 1980s, they were not only ex-bananeros, but precaristas as well.

## **El Asentamiento de Coto Sur**

When the IDA first came to Coto Sur in 1975 they had right away been thrown into sorting out enormous amounts of practical problems that had surfaced with so many people spread over such a vast area, many of them also said to be inexperienced with farming technologies in humid tropical conditions. As mentioned already, the IDA had to take on the task of constructing roads which normally was not their responsibility at all, and which demonstrated the difficult situation in Coto Sur. It was, however, land and agricultural production that had first priority, to get the farming going. A very concrete problem encountered was the quality of the land where there had been banana groves, it had decayed after about 40 years in use for intensive banana production with all that it implies of spraying of chemicals, and rivers, ditches, and canals were heavily polluted, particularly from copper sulphide.<sup>142</sup> Then, the overwhelming basic needs of dwellings, wells, and latrines, etc. Moreover, the fact that it was a very young population that had settled, with many children (the average according to a survey in 1977 was 6,7 children pr farmstead);<sup>143</sup> entailed that there was a great demand for schools, and basic medical services.

The expectations to the ideal *parcelero*, as met in the IDA compound in Laurel in 1986, was expressed as one who was on the road to becoming a successful, independent

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<sup>142</sup> The topography is according to PNUD/OIT/ITCO (1980) characterized by '*suelos planos concavos, formados por rocas aluvionales y con graves problemas de drenaje, lo que le confiere características pantanosas*' (The topography... and lack of natural drainage, and large marshes cause many problems.) Moreover, the soil is slightly acid, with a low content of phosphorus, but contains sufficient amounts of calcium, magnesium and potassium. The climate is characteristic of the humid tropics with precipitation in two well-defined periods, a dry and short one (december to april), and a rainy, from may to november. The heavy rains come in october, sometimes one has measured more than 1000 mm precipitation, normally it reaches 400 mm. The temperature fluctuates between 21 degrees and 33 degrees centigrade, max. average 31,5, minimum 22,2, annual average 26.9 degrees. (ibid)

<sup>143</sup> It was difficult on basis of this information to tell whether this was per woman, or per. farm, or household.

farmer, but that was an ideal extremely difficult to meet in practice, not only because of the demanding natural conditions, lack of expertise, knowledge, and technology, but also due to being located so far from the major consumption markets in the Central Valley. Trying to do something about the marketing problem was met by establishing of a state marketing board (CNP) receiving station in Coto Sur and a big storage building was later built in Naranjo, southwest of Laurel. A CNP sales unit for subsidised food and utilities (*expendio*) was located to Laurel. Another public service is delivery of electricity, by the mid-1980s 60% of Coto Sur had access to the electric grid, but only 3 % were able to connect to the grid. The majority of the 25 small schoolhouses that had been built did not by 1986 have access and neither did the 8 rustic health posts. Clean, potable water had been a continuous problem, later the Health Ministry waved a campaign for digging wells and latrines. Cooperating with the Ministry of Health, a Health Centre was built in Laurel in 1984.<sup>144</sup> Another immediate problem for the newcomers had been access to credit. IDA managed to get established a branch of one of the national banks in Laurel in 1979, granting credit in order for the peasants to buy seeds and fertilizers. In order to get access to credit it was necessary to be registered as landholders (collateral), and many farmers got in debt due to bad harvests or by providing collateral from others when they did not have their papers procured. That was a recurrent theme in talking with the farmers in Coto Sur.

Altogether it was estimated that there had been either allotted, invaded, or purchased between 1500 and 1800 parcels in the Coto Sur settlement. The numbers vary as many landseekers must have left after a while, only to be followed by new arrivals, thus the numbers involved must have been substantial. The individual parcels in the Coto Sur settlement vary in size from on the average 7 hectares in the flat La Plancha district, to approximately 20-25 has. in the more outlying areas whose bigger sizes is explained by annual inundations, rivers, streams, and artificial canals that rise often up to several meters,

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<sup>144</sup> Costa Rica has built up a comprehensive rural health programme since the 1970s, see Morgan, L (1993); Lara et al. (1995); and [www.edu.unupress](http://www.edu.unupress).

destroying bridges, roads and buildings and flooding agricultural land. The population within the settlement boundaries was estimated to range between 10.000 and 14.000 in the early 1980s, but few reliable data exist, as there had been quite some movement in and out of the settlement. Estimates popping up in different sources seem to say close to 10 000 dependent on farming for a living, and about 4000 from other activities and sources. The Health Centre in Laurel supplied the following numbers (November 1985): Registered inhabitants were 10.788 persons (the number was probably somewhat higher), of whom 43% were below 15 years of age, 12,2% from 15 to 20 years, and below the age of 44 the percentage was 87 %, (SMFC, Diagnóstico,1986). In other words, still, after 10 years of existence, the settlement housed a young population.

### **Rural Cooperatives**

In line with the IDA's policies, several producers' cooperatives were organised in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Coto Sur.<sup>145</sup> However, the first established, Coopevaquita R.L. located in the vicinity of Vaquita/Km 29, was an *empresa comunitaria* and was founded 16<sup>th</sup> of February 1974, that is before the IDA had arrived, by a group of the landseekers. The cooperative had in 1986 20 full members who were collectively farming around 400 hectares of land, collective property, that was used for cattle, growing maize, cocoa, etc. This cooperative could be described as a classical rural cooperative and they considered that around seventy persons were directly dependent on it. However, they had faced hard times with declining incomes and falling membership, but had tried to diversify in different directions and were now discussing plans to plant about half of their property with palms, they had just planted 32 hectares, they also kept 80 hectares as pasture with 15 heads of cattle.

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<sup>145</sup> About the cooperative movement in Costa Rica, See Bogantes Alvarez and Delgado Salazar (1986); Benecke and Eschenburg (1987); Lara (1995); Seligson (1980); Bolaños, ed. (1985).



Playing a more significant role, both economically and ideologically in the settlement of Coto Sur, was the banana-producing cooperative, Coopetrabatur RL. This cooperative collectively owned property of about 500 hectares, and in this period of time about half of the acreage was dedicated to contract banana production selling to Chiquita, but this varied with the market situation. Approximately 50 hectares were used for 110 heads of cattle and they were also beginning the process of converting plantain and banana groves to oil palms; 180 hectares. The cooperative had at that stage 71 *socios*, (*asociados*, members), all men, and all former banana workers. Additionally several hundred day-workers were employed on short-time contracts, the majority were men that worked in the fields, but also women who were in the packing stations. This cooperative was in many ways both a major actor in the la Plancha district, both through its size but also because it in practice represented the only option for both men's and women's paid work outside the farms. The members and many of the workers were provided housing in the Banana Company's former cuadrantes in Tamarindo, Caucho and Caimito, but the two categories of workers enjoyed very different privileges. In the banana cooperative the divide between the initial founding members and the majority, the temporary workers, was a constant source of conflict; both in terms of money and income, but also in terms of interpretations of needs and rights, and who were to be beneficiaries as they all worked the land. The different treatments ranged from medical attention (only for members), to access to children's parties; and conflicts about decisions on how to decide upon and divide possible surplus<sup>146</sup>, and about sharing of meat from slaughtering an ox etc. These differences had their root in the particular initiation history of this cooperative, when the IDA took over the former banana plantations from the Compañía Bananera, there were some banana farms that were in still production, and the IDA invited ex-bananeros to continue working as before under the auspices of *Asbana* (now Corbana), the National Banana

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<sup>146</sup> About three times a year a surplus was distributed among the members, according to the informants the amount was between 50.000 and 100.000 colones each. These numbers were not verified by the cooperative management.

association in 1976. Those same workers were in 1980 invited to found the banana cooperative and as beneficiaries of this redistribution process they came out in a much more beneficial position than the rest of the migrants to Coto Sur, a situation that will be returned to later.<sup>147</sup> There were also a couple of smaller cooperatives in the settlement that will not be dealt with in any detail here.

### **The IDA - and its Clients**

The IDA did as routine put up local administrations in their settlements and in Coto Sur, there was an administrative staff dealing with, and carry out different tasks such as land titling issues, agricultural extensions, engineering, eventually also considerable amounts of what was categorised as social work, and frequently specialists from other authorities or international agencies arrived, living and working in Laurel. On the average there were around 30 IDA functionaries working in the offices, in addition there were also a number of so-called local employees, who were employed under less favourable conditions, which constantly was creating conflicts in the IDA compound in Laurel.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, the institution did not only have the administrative responsibility for the settlements, but was, to varying degrees and under different political regimes, involved in educational and organisational projects for the farmers, as well procuring basic services like assisting providing grains, credit, education, roads, even health and school buildings. Such a broad agenda and under- financed as all state-institutions usually are, entailed that dissatisfaction and complaints, conflicts and internal struggles, were part of the day in the Coto Sur settlement. Institutions like the IDA were bound to be in the middle of it all. The different political base-lines that were considered as

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<sup>147</sup> The 77 founding members were all banana workers but did not know supervision, administration, logistics and quality control, but advisors from Corbana provided support for the first 7 years, negotiating contracts with *Chiquita*, and the national cooperative movement was also brought in to assist. After a crisis in the early 1990s due to falling prices, the cooperative has become a 'Fairtrade' coop, which has created different challenges. See ([www.fairtrade.org.uk](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk), accessed 24.10.06)

<sup>148</sup> These conflicts often surfaced between local and *regionalizado* (regionalised) personnel who were granted different rights and claims on the institution's resources; such as access to subsidised housing, paid monthly leaves, etc., as well as political or professional disagreements.

core in the institution, were contested, were they to be part of an ‘integrated rural development’ strategy, including both involvement, social and physical goals, or only consist of preparation and opening of land, and nothing more leaving the rest to the beneficiaries?<sup>149</sup> Thus the relationship between the huge majority of settlers, cum farmers, and their immediate authority, the IDA, was constantly at stake, an authority that had been contested by many of the inhabitants, and was always a central issue in Coto Sur. Sometimes surfacing as open conflicts, other times more subtly, it was never indifferent. But at least in Laurel, this relationship was always an issue that was referred to.



Souvenir from IDA's ten year anniversary 1985

After some time in the Laurel offices, listening to the IDA employees, it seemed as if these state employees, particularly the ones who were in daily contact with the parceleros, for

<sup>149</sup> This is what was previously referred to as the two conflicting ideological positions within the institution, see deVries (1992)

example the extensionists, were conveying some kind of double strategy:<sup>150</sup> On the one hand; they were saying that their goal was to turn the land seekers into *pequeños empresarios* (small entrepreneurs), on the other, the parceleros were still pictured as their clients, often at one and the same time. This was expressed through the language one met in the settlement, which was confusing and contradictory for one like me who had to learn (and who had peasant women in focus) and is what I have been referring to as typical ‘IDA-speak’. The labels put on people living in the settlement were many; *parceleros, agricultores, campesinos, beneficiarios, peones, labriegos*. The goal of changing the farmers’ alleged (backward) mentality, was, according to the IDA extensionists, considered as much an ideological, as a practical undertaking, and turned out to be a very arduous task, at least the way they talked about it. According to them, to turn former banana-workers, or landless peasants used to other soils and climatic conditions, into efficient farmers, to become their own boss and be able to plan ahead; clearance of the land, seed, sowing, fertilizing, clean up and harvest, to store, transport and marketing of their produce, dealing with credit institutions etc., was a never-ending task. This is one of the standard ways in which the above mentioned ‘plantation mentality’ argument was drawn upon, constructing the parceleros as needy of guidance to carry out all their tasks, and it was used by the state functionaries when things did not work as they wanted, or hoped for

What about the number of people who had not worked for long as banana workers, or accepted the banana plantation way of life? Who were, perhaps better considered as migrants, than *campesinos* or *ex-bananeros*. In the usual IDA-speak this entailed that the inhabitants in the settlement were categorised as *atrasados* (backwards), and occasionally they were also described to me as *maizeros* (maize-growers, here in a derogatory meaning) and consequently were in need in enlightenment, which the IDA or associates could provide. It was in this institutional environment the SMFC Women’s project was implemented.

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<sup>150</sup> I base this on interviews, informal conversations, and observations from the Laurel office between May and November 1986.

## **La Zona Sur in Perpetual Transitions: Plans, Palms and Neo-liberal Politics**

The IDA had, for a period of time, been inclined to carry out planning activities, beyond the pure agricultural tasks, a situation that had caused much political stir, as presented above. The event of the big oil palm programme that was being implemented from around 1988 onwards in parts of the Coto Sur settlement (and which will be further discussed in chapter 7), was by some interpreted as the continuation of state-planning, while others saw this as a sign of neo-liberal policies becoming a reality. For one, the Palms did not arrive literally on their own, they were a result of many years of planning and negotiations and which had been initiated through the cooperation between the IDA and UNDP, FAO and ILO long ago when elaborating studies and strategies for future development of the agricultural settlement. These planners had opted for and discussed the idea of turning the Southern Zone into an autonomous region, in line with the then dominating theoretical positions, based on (rural) regional development thinking from the 1960s and 70s, for instance Myrdal, Perroux, and others. They listed up criteria for regionalisation, aimed first and foremost at generating employment, and particularly recommended by those planners were huge integrated rural development projects, that were assumed to generate (economic) growth. Most of these thoughts were documented in the mentioned PNUD/OIT/ITCO 's *Serie Estudios*,<sup>151</sup> and in No.50, for example, these perspectives are elaborated into a quite comprehensive and detailed plan tying it up to national planning units (Ofiplan, later MIDEPLAN), described as 'planning at micro-level' (op.cit: 1981)

For the many institutions and their experts, national and ex-patriates alike, that have been involved with the preparations, planning and implementation of different development projects in the Coto Sur settlement, the task must have been both inspiring and overwhelming. Reading their texts, many years later, I can imagine that for the foreign experts and planners

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<sup>151</sup> This cooperative project had been initiated in 1974, had involved many international experts and resulted in the row of publications in the *Series estudios*.

this must have represented some sort of dream position, in fact a huge laboratory, in which it should be possible to start ‘development’ from almost scratch, build a new society one in which the people would be involved. Thus, as I came to realize much later was how ‘gender’ was considered and constructed, theoretically and politically, in the early 1970s, in both international agencies as well as among bureaucrats in these texts. Some of this will be discussed in chapter 8.

This extensive planning activity was taking place years before neo-liberal policies struck the government offices in the capital. The international neo-liberal regime hit hard in the first half of the 1980s, pressuring the traditionally interventionist Costa Rican welfare oriented state to slow down on, and even abandon public support, price subsidies, etc.; recreating its agricultural/rural policies into its programme of *Agricultura de Cambio* (Agriculture for change), whose main purpose was to increase earning of foreign exchange rather than support national production and sustainability, and instead import cheaper grains from the US. This policy was to be carried out by switching to un-traditional exports, such as decorative flowers, exotic fruits etc. (Jordan 1989), but was met with new organised protests in the streets of San José. In spite of launching a four-year plan called *Volvamos a la Tierra* (Returning to the Land), the PLN Monge government (1982-86) was under strong pressure from the Washington Consensus towards Structural Adjustment Policies (SAP). These neo-liberal SAP policies did in practice result in lower prices paid for basic grains, such as maize, which it now ‘paid’ to import, and which hit the peasants hard (CECADE 1986; Vermeer 1990; Reuben Soto 1988). Hence, in Coto Sur, in line with changes in (regional) economic thinking, the Oil Palms, that some years previously had been considered as a solution to unemployment and redundancy, were now portrayed differently, ranging from promoting export and earning foreign currency to poverty eradication (Costa Rican Government 110: 1986).

One may therefore conclude that the population in the Southern Pacific region were hit by a double dose and simultaneously; the effects of globalisation and neo-liberalism and the Costa Rica government's new neo-liberal policies, and, the final withdrawal of the Compañía Bananera, which did result in a recession.

The state authorities had already become involved in the Southern Zone, and had carried out several studies to document the actual situation.<sup>152</sup> There were other comprehensive development projects that were planned to be carried out in the 1980s and 1990s, in Coto Valley, in Palmar and other areas of the Southern Zone, all trying to establish sources of income for what was an underemployed population<sup>153</sup> and various projects and organisational forms have later been tried out in different parts of the South during the 1980s and 90s; including contract farming, productive cooperatives, several projects of African Palm growing and which, certainly, demands fewer hands than former banana groves.<sup>154</sup> Different projects of agro-industrial development have also been suggested together with tourism and fishing etc. The Costa Rica authorities also tried to develop what is referred to as 'social development' in La Zona Sur, particularly in getting adequate housing.<sup>155</sup> Hence, people, men and women, who had managed to acquire land in Coto Sur and had stayed put, in spite of poverty and many difficulties, were probably initially better off than many others living in the Southern region, and perhaps also received more attention in the 1970s and onwards, but now things were less favourable for such centrally planned actions, it seemed.

As a consequence, one may ask if it perhaps was not the best of 'climate' to carry out a women's project in Coto Sur at this moment?

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<sup>152</sup> See i.e. Mideplan (1985) *Estudio de la Zona Sur relacionado con el abandono de la actividad bananera*, San José, Febrero 1985, SEPSA (1984) *Proyecto de cacao y palma aceitera para Palmar Sur, Region Brunca*. San José,

<sup>153</sup> In Golfito in 1987 there was an estimated underemployment on about 70% (Altenburg et al: 1990), but it does not say whether both men and women are included in this estimate.

<sup>154</sup> 3 men per hectare compared with 0,125 in palm oil. The income level had fell considerably in Coto Valley as many continued as contract farmers for the CBCR, which was in line with the (then) United Brands' strategy of minimizing risk and lower their involvement in direct production (Altenburg et al: 1990).

<sup>155</sup> *Tribuna Economica* (1986). The national Housing programme to be carried out during the Arias administration was administered through IMAS.

## Ex-bananeros only?

This very politicised backcloth of the agricultural settlement in Coto Sur was the state of affairs that the SMFC and the Women's Project in Coto Sur was to operate within, a complex situation that few, if any, of the SMFC team were really updated upon. The particular backgrounds of so many of the land-seekers in Coto Sur with experiences connected to the banana industry, had apparently not been so straightforward for the IDA to embrace in its totality. Although the land invasions took place approximately a decade before the SMFC Women's Project was initiated, the inhabitants of the settlement were still, by the state authorities and others, consequently referred to by the term *ex-bananeros*, this label seemed to haunt them forever. In the IDA's functionaries in Laurel's versions, the inhabitants of the Coto Sur settlement *Ex-bananeros* was a way to speak of them, in plural, in which the *Ex'* had priority, but could be activated as "People were like that *because* they were *ex-bananeros*", and was thus used as an explanation for everything that did not fit with stated goals, or individual strategies of the institution's representatives on different levels. On another scale, such IDA-versions could be read as a story about becoming real citizens, of inclusion in the Nation; as banana workers in the Southern Zone had been considered to contest the legitimacy of that. As one of the former general directors of the IDA had put it; '(La Zona Sur) is;

el principal centro de radicalismo del país, generando sindicatos altamente combativos... sin lugar a dudas, es en esta Región donde se ha visto más cuestionada la legitimidad del sistema político costarricense (Salazar et al. 1977: 19).<sup>156</sup>

These representations have also been alluded to when presenting the territorial narratives in above, they seemed to have resulted in often ambiguous *campesino/parcelero/ex-bananero* identities that were being drawn upon and activated just about daily in the IDA regional office in Laurel in Coto Sur, and consequently, adopted by the SMFC team as well. When farmers in

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<sup>156</sup> [The Southern Zone] is the principal centre of radicalism in the country, generating unions that are highly combative ..without any doubt , it is in this region one has most questioned the legitimacy of the Costa Rican political system].



the settlement did not act as the IDA extensionist thought best, this was often explained that it was because they were used to what was termed the ‘paternalism’ of the *Compañía Bananera*, that they were accustomed to get everything into their hands, electric bulbs, the grass cut and water in the pipes, and that they did not have to struggle for anything. The IDA was, as mentioned above, determined not to become *Papa IDA*; this was the IDA functionaries in Laurel’s perpetual phrase. In just about every public appearance, closing ceremonies, speeches etc., these same functionaries would repeat the story about the heroic ex-bananeros who had led the successful invasions, but now (‘thanks to the IDA’), were becoming responsible and industrious farm operators, change agents, in history. Thus the IDA (through its extensionists) was constructing itself as some kind of papa after all, who led the spread herd onto the right paths. Women were never mentioned as such change agents, nor as beneficiaries, they were at the most ‘family’, at least until the SMFC Women’s Project came into being. In a little booklet produced by the IDA for the 10 years anniversary of the Coto Sur settlement, in September 1985; the story is phrased like this;

Coto Sur ha venido transformándose en forma paulatina gracias a los esfuerzos conjuntos de los ex-trabajadores bananeros y los funcionarios del Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario’ , .... - ‘En respuesta a los esfuerzos del gobierno y el IDA por consolidar un proceso de evolución de ex-trabajadores bananeros hacia productores incluidos en un sistema industrial de producción,...’(IDA, 1985:14).<sup>157</sup>

In this booklet, to be fair, the plan for the SMFC Women’s Project is mentioned shortly in the end (added on), in contrast to all the other writings, it was after all written when the SMFC was in the process of implementing the project. But there is still not a word in the main, general representation about women and their contributions to get the settlement up and going. This will be returned to in chapter 8.

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<sup>157</sup> ‘Coto Sur has developed slowly thanks to the combined efforts of the ex-banana workers and the IDA functionaries... in reply to the government’s and the IDA’s efforts to consolidate an evolutionary process of the ex-bananeros to producers in an industrial production system.’....

### **Ex-Bananeros and their Family in Coto Sur**

Both in these textual representations (plans, analyses, journals, etc.), as well as in daily speech in the settlement as of 1986, women were rendered invisible. If they did appear they normally were depicted as family, for instance as *ex-bananeros y su familia*, at the most. One may therefore say that my research project, as it eventually came to surface, could be formulated quite broadly, as ‘peasant women and ex-bananeros in Coto Sur’, as stated in chapter 1. Encompassed in such a formulation, it would entail not only allowing a construction of women beyond being farmers’ wives, but to apply a relational and constructivist perspective when it comes to gender, concerned with texts, speech and practices. When the assumed initial invaders to Coto Sur, the men, were depicted as taking or conquering the land; the women we talked with tended to phrase this key event in their lives very differently; that “they were giving away land”, and the women presented their story as if they just had gone to Coto Sur to ‘find’ it. Perhaps this illustrated what the director of the SMFC argued, based on information in the autobiographies that had been collected (Amador et al. 1984); that rural women and men were living in different ‘spheres’. Maybe, maybe not, but their language at least expressed very different experiences.

### **A Gendered Geography of La Zona Sur**

It could be enticing only to describe and use Coto Sur as a setting (locale) where all the present activities of (peasant) women and men were staged. However, when trying to gender the analysis of peasant women being encountered between Bananas and (Oil) Palms; as legacies, symbols, tangible trees, and institutions, I think that one has to embark on a more exploratory approach, at least when it comes to how this place is being moulded and elaborated upon by various agents, and consequently, interpreted and given meaning. Such an approach requires a processual perspective on place and space and gender. Involving relations

and events beyond the exact geographical locations can be crucial for outcomes, and thus how local and global economic, social, and cultural processes interfere, and how people, goods, information and images move. Cindi Katz has coined a concept which she has named 'countertopography' that is a metaphor I have tried to think with concerning Coto Sur, and which I have found helpful to some extent:

Doing a topography is to carry out a detailed examination of some part of the material world, defined at any scale from the body to the global, in order to understand its salient features and their mutual and broader relationships (Katz 2001:1228).

She argues that 'topography' is resolutely material, that the effects of capitalism, imperialism and state power were everywhere manifest. In this present work, this perspective invites to multisite conversations between what took place at the Washington consensus and the Costa Rican government concerning for example the Palm programme, and rework how women's lives and gender relations interfere.

One of the first topics that came up in my own research agenda was if and how people, women in particular, felt at home in Coto Sur after a decade or so since settling in. It is no exaggeration to say that the immediate impression of Coto Sur was bearing marks of being a very male place. Thus, in order to do 'feminist geography' it had to be de- and reconstructed.

## Chapter 4

# FAMILY FARMS, HOUSEHOLDS, LIVELIHOODS AND WOMEN'S EVERYDAY LIVES

### Peasant Women, Livelihoods, and the Family Farms

*An objective of the agrarian reforms was to change the structure of land tenancy in favour of the creation of family farms. (Deere and León 2001: 3)*

The Women's Project (WP) in Coto Sur was programmed to work with peasant women, but as stated, not expected to get involved with more technical agricultural matters. The first and foremost task in our re-organised research in the SMFC Women's Project was to document the women's associations to the family-farm (*ff*) and household in Coto Sur, their daily lives and activities, their contributions to survival and not to forget, their stakes in the outcomes of the household economy. In practice that meant to document the women's work burdens, and how they were, or were not, remunerated for their daily toiling for continued existence. It was to be about making visible the women's mundane activities, their active agency responding to social and economic change. In Coto Sur it was first and foremost the women's roles and work on the family farms and in the farm households that we were to look into, and thus meeting the SMFC's changed perspective - from what was described as home economics to focusing on women as active agents in the farms' and households' survival and wellbeing (IDA/SMFC 1985). By documenting that the women were contributing to what was defined as production, the SMFC were convinced that this would give them credibility in a rather male-dominated sector as agriculture was. This was well in line with WID/GAD thinking

prevailing in the international development agencies such as FAO, ILO and the UNDP in this period in time.

Observations and discussions with women in Coto Sur eventually led to my own questioning of what farming encompasses and who is the farmer? Were, or could, the activities that women carried out in or near the house, be labelled farming as well? Feminist researchers in the agricultural field think so, that it is imperative to de- and reconstruct farming beyond the traditionally economic and technological focus and Sarah Whatmore adds; ‘At worst, they (women) are reduced to the analytical status of a ‘factor of production’ in a ‘male’ production process- land, labour, capital and wife’ (Gasson 1980 in Whatmore 1991: 5).

The SMFC put much emphasis on being able to document the women’s contributions to the household economy, pointing to both their productive and reproductive activities. The farming households in Coto Sur could probably be analysed applying the concept of livelihood, a concept introduced by Chambers (1983) that has since then become a central development tool. I will here use it as a ‘sencitising concept’ when discussing the findings from the households in Coto Sur. According to Ellis (2000) livelihoods may be defined as

The assets (natural, physical, human, financial and social capital), the activities (strategies of use), and the access to these (mediated by institutions and social relations) that together determine the living gained by the individual or household (2000: 10)<sup>158</sup>

This is an approach that I think can be useful looking into the gathered Coto Sur material because its positive aspect is that it, according to Oberhauser et al., provides a means to link macro-level processes to micro-level outcomes and responses,

a livelihood approach provides us with a view into how people are coping with or adapting to economic restructuring and all its complexity (2004: 206).

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<sup>158</sup> There is a comprehensive literature on livelihoods today, often linked to the sustainability concept, see for instance Bebbington (1999); Farrington et al. (1999); Lipton and Lipton (1993).

On the other hand, this is a concept that I am yet not quite comfortable with from a gendered perspective, although many researchers argue for what they have denominated, ‘gendered livelihoods encompass the material realities and ideological processes that shape and are shaped by economic strategies in diverse geographical locations’ (op.cit: 205). They also claim that gendered livelihood strategies have to be studied empirically as many livelihoods analysts largely ignore the role played by gender and generation in influencing differential access and ability to command resources on the part off individual household members.

This chapter is a presentation of the peasant women’s everyday life, the situation for the smallholders’ farming practices, and issues of gendered income-generation and redistribution in the farming households in Coto Sur.

### **Family Farming and Women on the Farms**

In the Coto Sur settlement a great number of people had in the lapse of approximately a decade succeeded to establish what could be described as a reasonable farm, and could get along relatively well, many still did struggle making ends meet, and still many had left the whole endeavour. In the popular history told about the creation of the settlement returned to so often, Coto Sur is presented as a story in which small peasants, campesinos, were conquering the land and through much sacrifice had managed to eke out a living for the peasant family (*la familia campesina*). The (happy) farming family on the family farm, is thus the image and the ideal reflected both in the legal and political domain, as well as in daily speech, and these assumptions seem to be deeply embedded.

There has been a certain difference of opinion as to how one should approach rural women and family farming in literature concerned with Latin America. On the one hand, Ester Boserup in her pioneering work *Women’s Role in Economic Development* (1970)

characterised Latin America as a 'male farming system' (in contrast to Africa), but for many researchers it has been pertinent to demonstrate that in reality Latin America should be described as a 'family farming system' (excepting the large hacienda/agro-industrial units), but most of the political and academic attention has been chiefly concerned with the peasants/campesinos in Latin America, and accordingly, the always topical state/peasant relationship and, consequently, the political aspects tend to have been given priority (Kay 2000). For that reason, more detailed studies about what took place on the farms and in the local community have been less prominent, with some very good exceptions. Existing research concerned with so-called 'farming systems' have been focusing on farm, crops, output pr. acre, etc. In Latin America in general the attention in the 1970s and 80s was much directed towards rural transformation processes (Bryceson 2000). A frequent start of empirical analysis on agriculture in Latin America has, for those reasons, tended to put an emphasis on ownership to the land due to the historically extreme inequality in landholding and the tradition with huge haciendas and extensive land use, as part of overarching political projects mainly about class, democracy and nation building. Yet another approach is one in which the unit of analysis has been framed around (the geographic/economic locale) the farm, and thus the farmer, and those farmers are assumed to be men, and the farming system is made up of what the males do. 'Analytical attention has focused on the 'farmer' as business principal, labourer and decision-maker' (Errington et al. 1986 in Whatmore 1991: 4).

In contrast, researchers in Latin America focusing on women in agriculture, insist that it is the family, not the individual, or the geographic locale that is the unit that should be investigated. Accordingly, a farming system could then be described in terms of what is depicted as family outputs and intra-family relations to the factors of production, as well as the family production itself (Butler-Flora and Dos Santos 1986, Dixon-Mueller 1985; Kandioty 1990, Long ed (1984). Carmen Diana Deere (1987) says that a farming system constitutes an integrated set of activities that involves more than just crop production and

participation in fieldwork. She shows that the significance of women's participation within family farming systems varies widely across Latin America<sup>159</sup> but irrespective of their economic contribution, rural women carry the burden of reproductive tasks; housework, childcare, care of the elderly, sick and of course, child bearing. Domestic labour has everywhere in Latin America been found to be very time intensive, and rural women do bear a heavier reproductive load than urban women because they often lack the basic infrastructure and their domestic technology is rudimentary (Ibid). These were ideas and concepts recognisable in the mandate of the Women's Project in Coto Sur, and the issue for the SMFC team was really to try to produce a more thorough knowledge base for further work with women in the settlement, in which women's presence and contributions in a rural/farming society had in fact to be established (documented) and put into play. To what extent were women, living on farms, parcels in Coto Sur, actively taking part in the farm work, and how did they, and others, consider women's contributions, was one of the main questions we wanted to get a reply to when venturing out to the farms in Coto Sur. What did they actually do, what did they farm, or did they not? How was the division of labour between men and women, and what did it imply, and for whom? Thus, it was indispensable (at least for me), to get a certain insight into what farming was about in Coto Sur, who was farmer, and which actually were their projects in these difficult times. That would, as I saw it, entail focusing on the women's everyday life, which in itself is a vague and problematic phrase (Highmore 2002; Bennett and Watson 2002), and, as it turned out later, that the SMFC team and I did not have the same interpretations of either.

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<sup>159</sup> The 1982 census data available then, was that Latin American women countries list between 3 and 11% of the female labour force as employed in agriculture (CEPAL 1982 in Butler-Flora and Blas Santos 1986)



## **Women's Everyday Life and Routines in Coto Sur**

### **The Everyday and Ordinary in Coto Sur**

Rita Felski characterises the 'everyday' by means of three features: a distinctive sense of time, of repetition and routine. Second, that we experience life as a matter of habit, that is we take it for granted. Finally, she says that everyday life is governed by a particular kind of spatial ordering, 'anchored in a sense of home' (Rita Felski 1999-2000: 18). The ordinary says Rita Felski,

The essential, taken for granted continuum of mundane activities that frames our forays into more esoteric or exotic worlds. It is the ultimate, non-negotiable reality, the unavoidable basis for all other forms of human endeavour. The everyday - the measure of all things (op.cit:16).

She adds, as many others do, that the everyday tends to be associated more with women than men. These types of assumptions about a close relationship between everyday life, routines, home, and women we set out to document, scrutinise and even challenge. On the one hand, feminists have wanted to demystify the widely held belief of the home as a withdrawn heaven, and point to the fact that for many women it is their workplace. For some it even functions as prison. On the other hand, there has also been a tendency to reify the home as a gendered space and site of the 'culture of domesticity'. The truth is that it is a space that has both been understudied and taken for granted and sustained many assumptions, on other scales, with often unfair consequences for women (McDowell 1999; N. Duncan 1996; Blunt 2005; Spain 1992). Embarking on the research with the peasant women in Coto Sur in 1986 was the site where most women were encountered - at home.

In addition to the life-history/course approach we had decided on, and in line with the SMFC mandate, it was only to start to document the structure of the women's daily life and tasks at home; what the women actually did - from morning till night. This was an approach found in numerous checklists provided by international NGOs and international development

agencies in the 1980s. All contemporary international research and documentation pointed to women's double and even triple work-days world-wide, but no one in Coto Sur knew for sure what the work-burden for women in the settlement was at that stage.

As so many others who have tried to grapple with the significance of the everyday, Rita Felski (1999/2000) holds that it is an analytical term that organises the world according to certain assumptions and criteria. By keeping attention on such aspects as daily organisation and the resources the women, their households, or others, put into play, it would hopefully also be possible to say something about relationships, control and power, how gender was 'being done' (West and Zimmermann 2002), at this time and space, and within which ideological frames.

#### *A 'Typical Day'*

The day starts early. Farmwomen in Coto Sur were normally out of bed at 4:30-5am, but some reported on starting earlier than that, a few even at 3-3:30am. The women are always the first to get up, to light the fire, make tortillas and coffee, and get clothes ready for the rest of the folks. Often they also have to haul buckets of water from the well or a stream and carry into the house. The women are very, very quiet. The



Maizegrinder

most common for breakfast, in addition to tortilla and coffee, is *gallo pinto* (literally, coloured rooster, mixed rice and beans). It happened that the beans were cooked in the morning, but usually the pot with beans was boiled during the previous day, and re-heated with *manteca* (animal fat) and rice in the morning.

Getting people out of bed and ready for the day is usually a rather noisy affair.

Everyone is to *bañarse* (to have a bath) in the morning, and if they are to leave the house they are to dress in clean and ironed clothes. If the ironing has not been done the day before, the adult woman or one of the daughters or other females present, do ironing in-between other tasks. The iron has to be heated on the fireplace. The persons present are served an individual plate of *pinto* with tortilla and sweet coffee, and they eat sitting or standing. If there are many to be fed, the plates are cleaned and used again at the same meal. The woman does not eat when the others do. For an adult woman in the house it is important that this morning session goes as smoothly as possible, and sometimes she deliberately delays the smallest children in order to get the elder ones off to school and to the fields. Schoolchildren dress in uniforms, dark trousers or skirts and white or light blue blouses. The youngest ones walk to the small schoolhouse. If anyone attends the vocational school, they have to take the bus to La Cuesta, a village between Laurel and Paso Canóas. Those heading for the fields put on their work-clothes; shirt, trousers, rubber boots and a hat, take their machete and a bottle of water, and are off shortly before 6am.

By now the woman may have a few minutes to sit down and sip her own coffee and stretch her feet before the little ones, or other dependants, old or sick, are to be assisted getting ready for the day, and housework starts. Simultaneously food is being prepared and the women could *dar a comer* (give to eat) to the ones returning from the fields and from school, but some of that food is to be eaten later in the day, or the next. The most important foodstuff is the pot with *frijolitos* (beans) that has to cook for hours. Lunch (*almuerzo*), the principal meal of the day, has to be ready around 11am on the farms, and an hour later in the cuadrantes. If many are active in the fields, for instance during harvest time, lunch is served quickly. Traditionally, one should eat meat at this time of the day, but in Coto Sur it was fried eggs, *gallo pinto*, or noodles; whatever was available and affordable. Due to the rising cost of

meat, it is only served at very special occasions. Everyone is served a plate, and 'given to eat', the men first, and one eats wherever there is room. The women do not eat until later.

In the afternoon there is more cleaning, ironing, looking after the children, finding wood, and feeding pigs and hens. Some women slip out and go to the fields to work a few hours and then return to the house to oversee food preparation. This is considered possible only if there is somebody else present to look after the house and the children. A house is only unwillingly left empty, as they are all afraid of *ladrones* (thieves).

If the adult woman happens to have an errand (*un mandado*) outside (bank, doctor, etc.), she will have to leave in the early morning, entailing that everything has to be prepared the day before. Instructions, food, clothes, own and others, have to be ready. In a normal day, however, the women will continue the washing and cleaning after noon, when people who are working in the fields are off again, or the men take a nap. Women never seem to rest. Once I asked one of the women, doña Nadia what she would do if she had some time off. She looked at me, laughing; "That would have to be when there is no 'Brillo' left!" (Brillo was the brand name of the polisher they used to shine all their pots and pans).

If there is a television set the women watch the *telenovela* broadcast from Panamá right after lunchtime. The fate of the heroine of the soap operas is continuously discussed among people in Coto Sur.<sup>160</sup> But the farmwomen seldom admit that they would watch TV this time of the day. However, if they do, they will never sit down and watch, they will be organising the house, ironing and cooking all the time. The Costa Rican broadcast *telenovela* comes on at night, which is a more acceptable time to sit down and watch. After noon it is also time for the adult woman to do her personal hygiene (washing and changing clothes).

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<sup>160</sup> Most of the soaps shown are of Mexican or Venezuelan origin, and very long, they last for years. They just about all take place in upper class atmospheres, are certainly glossy and rather dramatic, and they all portray women who do not do anything.



Las Pilas

In the afternoon children return home and run errands, do homework, fetch water and wood, look after smaller children, clean beans and rice, etc. If the woman of the house is not going out to work in the fields in the afternoon, she might do things like pack maize, make *caña dulce* or *atol* (traditional beverages made of maize), clean cocoa-beans and prepare them to dry, etc. Then there is coffee to be served in the afternoon, before preparing another meal, *la cena*, around 6pm, which consists of coffee and leftovers. Once it gets dark people are expected to be near the house. Men and boys may roam the 'streets', go to the local *pulpería* (general store), play cards, or just hang around. The local church congregations have their meetings at night, and many women slip out to participate or sneak off to a neighbour's house to watch another *telenovela*.

The house settles in for the night. Women, however, keep working, preparing for the next day. Men may just hang around or doze in a hammock. By 7:30-8pm it is very quiet, and at 9 there are no sounds at all, except the grasshoppers and the *mosquitos* humming. Women are the last ones to bed.

## Daily Work Pattern

When carrying out my very first analyses of this material (1989/90) I found Redclift and Mingione's (1985) suggestion to divide women's activities into three domains, economic, organisational and cultural, helpful to dialogue with this empirical material. What they categorised as the economic and organisational can be mapped. The cultural is constituted both through the first two as well as negotiated and is a domain that had to be de-constructed, eventually, and brought up to debate as it involves gendered ideologies. Starting with the first two domains, 'economy and organisation',<sup>161</sup> one clear pattern quickly emerged; the women are working the longest hours of everyone in all the households, be it on farms or not. On the average, in this material the women's workday in Coto Sur is more or less 16 hours per day. In order to get an overview of how these women in Coto Sur had their work organised, I divided - and thus - constructed - their day into eight different tasks or components and constructed the following figure.

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<sup>161</sup> This refers to a long and extensive debate in feminist economics; the discussion on whether housework is categorised as value-creating or not, production of goods and services, etc. see for example Young, Wolkowitz and McCullagh (eds) (1981); Ann Oakley (1974) about housewives, and Himmelweit (2000), on 'discovery of unpaid work'.

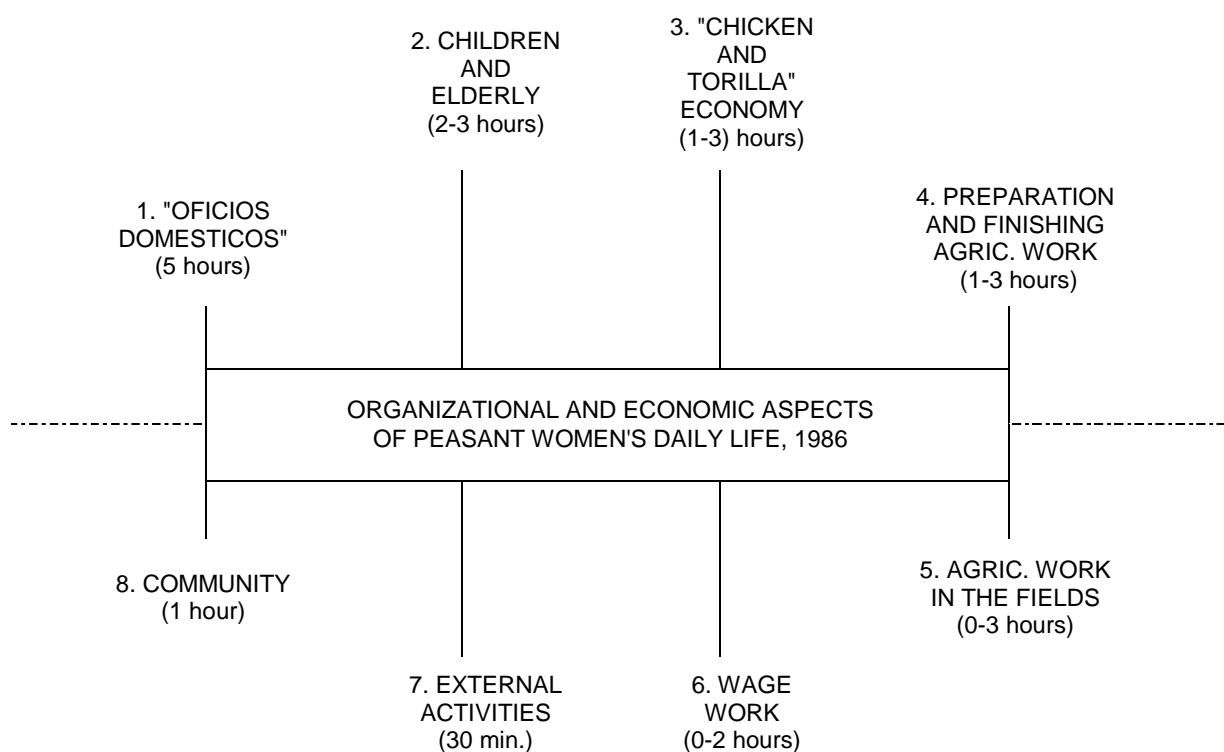


Figure 4.1.  
Peasant women's daily activities and time use, Coto Sur, 1986. (The activities above the dotted line are performed on the farm and in or around the house. Selling of produce (3) usually also took place there, but might occasionally involve leaving the house)

Those are eight very coarse features of fields, or domains, of women's daily work and organization based upon the following criteria, where (space) the activities are taking place, which tasks (function) to be conducted, and how much time is dedicated to the different activities. This division is purely analytical, as many of the activities take place simultaneously, or in phases. What characterises housework is exactly that it is impossible to split up.

### *1. Oficios Domesticos - Domestic Labour*

The most time-consuming task is what the women themselves usually refer to as *oficios domesticos*, and which could be translated to something like domestic labour. Most women reported performing this task an average of 5 hours a day, and it includes cooking, washing

clothes, cleaning, mending and sewing clothes, ironing, preparation for cooking, making tortillas, grinding maize, hauling water, etc. The coordinating activity for the responsible woman is ideally one of overseeing and supervising the whole affair, getting people out of bed, getting children to school and seeing that they have proper clothing, etc.

The incarnation of such organizing abilities the women possessed was doña Yolanda, who lived in La Plancha. On a busy morning she organised her eleven children and a grandchild, she herself ironing all the time in the middle of the house. Her children came and went, loud music played all the time. One boy was sent out on an errand in the pulperia, two others were sent to do an odd job elsewhere. She was setting fire to the oven, fetching water, feeding hens, fetching some fruit, picking up eggs, cooking lunch, continually giving orders. Her eyes were everywhere talking to us, watching and commenting on everyone passing on the road.

Of the many tasks allocated in this basket of activities, cooking and laundering are the most time-consuming and heavy physical work. The seemingly endless boiling - and cleaning of beans takes a lot of time, and so does finding fuel (firewood) to burn. Often the dried stalk of the maize, the *mazorca*, is used for fuel, which also produces smoke and keeps fleas and insects away. Very few farmhouses had access to electricity at this point in time, and kitchen technology was completely absent. The most important utensil for women is still a hand driven maize grinder. Tortillas are a must to most meals, but the younger ones often prefer to buy *Masarica*, which is the brand name for factory-milled maize. It is not supposed to taste the same and costs more, but saves time and energy.

Water is a problem for people in Coto Sur, both the quality and access to it. Many streams are polluted from chemicals. Very few have any arrangements for pumping it into the kitchen area. A lot of time and energy is dedicated to hauling and carrying water. Women do the brunt of the water fetching but it is a task that can be carried out by many, especially young boys.



## 2. *Care*

The next domain (No 2, in the figure) I denominated the 'children and elderly' or care component. The women consider this as part of *oficios domesticos*, but for analytical reasons I have split them up in the figure. Care work is mainly about the wellbeing of dependents. In Coto Sur it entails taking care of younger children, both the woman's own and sometimes one or two grandchildren. Old parents or grandparents often have to be taken care of, either directly, by their living in the house, or by cooking food and sending it to them every day.

Altogether these two clusters of tasks took on the average 6-7 hours per day, which turned out to be well in line with other studies from rural areas in Central America in this period of time. In another study from Guanacaste and Limón in Costa Rica, they found that 50% of the women used between 7 and 9 hours, while 34,4% used 7-8 hours, and 24,4% 8-9 hours on housework, and that the total work hours for women were 17 hours (Quiróz et al. 1984: 86). In a study from Nicaragua (CIERA 1984) housework for rural women was very similar in terms of time spent. The housework is not only time consuming, but arduous; it wears the women's physical health down.

## 3. *Chicken and Tortilla Economy*

The next domain (No 3), I have called 'chicken and tortilla economy' because those are the main activities and products; but can also be denominated women's 'petty commodity production' in a more academic language and consist of home production for occasional sales. The amount of time put in oscillated between 1 and 3 hours a day. This activity will be returned to later.

#### *4. and 5. Agricultural Labour - and - Related activities*

It differed a lot how much time women in this sample put into what here is termed agricultural work, and which would be some kind of work related to production of agricultural produce, ranging from working full time in the fields in harvest times, to hardly visiting the fields at all. Interestingly, there were some women living on farms who did not carry out any work characterised as agriculture while others could in harvest periods work all day in the fields. Thus, the 0-3 hours indicated in the figure is a very rough estimate, based on the women's own categorisations. What is regarded as agriculture and what is not always turned out to be a matter of discussion. It was, for instance, quite common that women would present themselves as *ama de casa* (housewife), but when looking closer into the matter, including observation, it turned out that these women would participate substantially, maybe the whole day working in the fields. However, they would not say they were 'farming women' when we brought up the matter, it was not the way they perceive themselves, it was apparently mainly as housewives.

Analytically this in-between activity (not housework - nor agriculture) has been split in two in the figure, according to function and productionline, and space; that is according to where it was performed. In the figure (No. 4 and No. 5) they are called 'preparation and finishing agricultural work', and 'agricultural work in the fields', respectively. This could have been labelled in many other ways as well. By documenting it in this manner the result is that few of the women living on the land can be said not to participate in agriculture at all, which they often would declare, and it was part of the project of making women's work visible and their contribution to agriculture on equal footing (sweat equity). The women, however, could stick to their own self-definition as housewives. The women who carried out most agricultural work might have put in the maximum amount in both 4) and 5), as the maize

fields are often to be found a walk away from the house. Work is organized so that one normally will have to stay put and work, one cannot go back and forth so easily.

The component 'preparation and finishing' (4) could consist of activities such as filling sacks with maize, cutting cocoa pods, putting the different crops to dry, etc., and they could be carried out in-between other tasks and in the vicinity of the house. Actually, we found that most of the women, at first, would label all the domains (1-4) as *oficios domesticos* (domestic labour) and (4) particularly would indiscriminately not be labelled work but *ayuda* (help) that they were helping their *compañeros*, and which was the culturally available vocabulary for women portraying themselves as secondary workers on the farms, and is a theme that also will be returned to several times. All of these clusters of tasks (1-4) are carried out in or very near the house, only broken by going to the fields with coffee and food to the people working there, or to the stream or canal to wash clothes, but seldom any further and this is indicated by the dotted line in the figure, so that what is here termed agricultural work can be taking place both 'inside' and 'outside'.

### 6, 7, 8, *Outside Activities*

The domains 6), 7) and 8) are all activities taking place, spatially speaking, outside the proper house or parcel. Not surprisingly, they occupy much less of the women's time and energy, and the elaboration of this figure confirmed the impression that most women were not much out in public in Coto Sur. When they were, it would be to carry out specific tasks, such as paid jobs. The most common jobs were cleaning others houses, working occasionally in the packing plants in the banana cooperative, or working as day labourer in the harvest on other farms (6). Then there are the explicit external activities, that are carried out away from home, such as visiting the bank, specific purchases elsewhere, or medical visits (7). As noted, not much time was spent outside the domestic sphere, here interpreted as their house and immediate

surroundings. The final domain in the figure (8) has, for lack of a better term, been denominated ‘community activities’, thus it could embrace both private engagements like visiting sisters or other relatives, or, participating in organised activities, such as church, meetings, etc, that will be more thoroughly discussed in chapter 6.

By mapping the women’s activities and work burden this way, taking into account that the results are representations as we/I interpreted and created the figure, it was possible to point to the great amount of physical work women were responsible for and carrying out every single day, and to become aware of how little rest, relaxation, or free time they had, and finally to make certain comparisons with similar patterns from elsewhere. Due to extensive poverty and backwardness, not to mention the neo-liberalisation of the economies, rural women’s burdens in Central America were overwhelming and in fact increasing, and wellbeing deteriorating, a situation that has been observed many places, often resulting in intensification of labour for women. This is because lack of cash impeded people to purchase foods and services (Pearson 1997). Using this kind of average scheme is not completely fair, as it says little about age, number of people in the household to possibly share the tasks and work burden, but this will be further elaborated upon shortly.

### **‘Making a Little Something’: The Women’s Own Efforts to Earn Some Cash and Contribute to Survival**

The ‘triple work burden’ as it was conceptualised in the SMFC, consisted of both paid and unpaid work. In Coto Sur this classification was ambiguous and often hard to decipher at all. What entailed cash outcomes and what did not was never crystal clear. The ideal of the family-farm was based on an assumption that members of the family/household worked for free in domestic and agricultural work, whereas work carried out outside, (in the figure labelled ‘wage work’ (6)) would be expected to be remunerated. As there was a shortage of paid jobs that women could (traditionally) be expected to take, or able to, in the Southern

Zone, most women who would like to, or need to find a job, could not. Younger women tended to go to the Central Valley to find jobs as domestics or in factories, men could to a greater extent find work, but it was often unstable. Many men travelled around on construction and agricultural work they could find. Women who were more physically bounded to Coto Sur had little to choose from. Only teachers, public servants and a handful of shopkeepers could afford to employ help in the houses, and the pay was considerably lower than in more urban areas. However, the women in Coto Sur showed great ingenuity in finding ways to meet their persistent cash needs and carried out all sorts of petty production to make some money. There was a constant lack of cash among the majority of the inhabitants in Coto Sur.



Feeding the Chicken

For most of the adult women who had been immigrants to Coto Sur it was through such ‘petty commodity production’ that they had survived, living on a banana farm or eking out a meagre survival wherever they happened to be. As they all had responsibilities for children, it was their survival that made them keep going, they said.

Chickens (hens) were by far most important in this micro-economy. Just about all women had hens in Coto Sur if they had somewhere to keep them. It was possible to sell eggs to people in the cuadrantes, teachers and others. An egg was priced at 6 colones (appr. 0,1 US \$). They were sold by piece. Then it was the hens, or chicken themselves. A hen could be sold at around 200-250 colones (around 4 US \$), and a debt with the local *pulpero* (the general store owner) having grown to more than 1000 colones could thus be cancelled by means of 5 hens. The *pulpero* normally would grant people 14 days credit to pay their bills, and women would wait a long time before trading their hens. Eggs also have become an increasing part of the diet, as meat had become too costly. Selling some eggs meant that a child could get a booklet or a pencil, and at times maybe a pair of nylon stockings or a lipstick for themselves at the Border (Paso Canóas). The women would, if they didn't have all their children living with them for different reasons, send them a hen or two if they could. If the church or some other organisation had a meeting or other arrangement, a farmwoman quite often would contribute by donating a hen for *arroz con pollo* (rice with chicken) the normal meal cooked for such occasions. Eggs could also be used as small gifts, and women often brought some eggs with them, "in case someone would need them" as they said. This egg-based economy was an all women's business, men were not involved. A problem the women mentioned was that hens were constantly being stolen. Many women living close to the central roads had quit keeping them because of that. For women living in the outskirts of the settlement it was difficult to find a market for their eggs and hens, as everyone had it and there was little cash around.

Women had other ways of making money as well and most common in Coto Sur was baking *tortillas* for sale. Homemade tortillas always have a market, as they tasted better than the ones made from *Masarica* that many had converted to. Children were sent out to deliver or sell them. Homemade bread was also in demand but with the prices of fuel-wood nowadays it did not pay. Doña Mayela is well known for her excellent bread that she used to make once

a week in her big oven outside her house. Now it costs her 1300 colones just to get hold of fuel-wood, and so making bread is not lucrative, she could not raise her prices accordingly knowing that people could not pay her.

Having cocoa-trees has been mentioned before, and quite a number of women with access to some land had a couple of cocoa trees in their backyard which they would pick every two weeks or so, dry the beans, and sell to a local shopkeeper or somebody coming by. Cocoa beans are sold at approximately 80 colones a pound at the local shopkeeper's store, and according to some of the women they could obtain 90 colones in Neilly, but then the bus fare had to be calculated as well. Cocoa production in this micro scale can be managed besides everything else. Doña Rosario was living on her own and does not have a farm, only a piece of land surrounding her house. She has nine trees that give her 5-6 kilos of cocoa beans per month, which gives her a relatively steady income of about 340 colones. Doña Antonia had 1 hectare of cocoa trees on the farm but was struggling with *monilia* (fungus), and now only delivered between 8-16 kilos a month to her local shopkeeper. If a woman should happen to have access to electricity and a refrigerator, she could make Popsicle or ice cubes to have in drinks. One would be surprised to experience in the middle of nowhere that upon being offered something to drink, a son is sent to the shopkeeper and comes back with ice cubes.

Fattening of pigs is yet another possibility women have for making some income. The problem is getting hold of fodder for the pigs. It could be costly if one did not have access to own maize or bananas or plantains. The pigs are normally given dried maize to eat, but one woman living near the banana cooperative and who did not have access to land of her own had been allowed to collect fallen down fruits for fodder, but she said it depended on who was working in the fields. Some of the guys were difficult and she was asked to pay, which she could not afford to do. A bunch of bananas may weigh up to a hundred pounds and she carries it home on her back, and walks to other farms to collect waste to feed the pigs. The normal arrangement for such pig raising is such that one either gets paid fifty percent of the price

obtained when the pigs were sold, or half the pig as meat. The value of a grown up pig would be 4,000-4,500 colones. Women often do have a pig or two of their own. In case of emergency it can be sold. The same is the case with cows. Many women may have one to two cows for milk and for making cheese.

Fruits and vegetables also could be realised in a market, especially the ones more in demand such as tomatoes and avocados, but the soil in Coto Sur is not very well suited for vegetables. However, fruits are seldom exchanged for cash. Often they are used as gifts and in exchange in a longer row of transactions. Examples are oranges and other citrus, like lime, which is used a lot in cooking. Some women keep an impressive garden with herbs and spices, but this requires skill. Having such knowledge one can sell produce, or give away to someone who the women consider may need it more. The balance between what can be sold for money, and what is part of an overall exchange system seems to be a delicate one.

Private service work such as cleaning or washing and ironing for others is a well-known option for women. The market depends on a location that entails living near Laurel or some of the cuadrantes. Children pick up the clothes to be washed and ironed and bring them to the women's houses and back again to the customers. Doña Leonora, who lives near a cuadrante, cleans house for one of the teachers two hours every morning in addition to being housewife with the responsibility of nine people and an active farmer. Working as a part-time domestic is an option, but it is normally the daughters who are sent out to work full time in the households of IDA officials or teachers. Some of the most skilful women crochet or sew clothes for others. The sewing is done at night, and usually demands access to electric lights.

Working in the fields as day-workers (*peon*) for others is not very common for women in Coto Sur, but sometimes women worked in the harvest season. The cases we encountered were always for pay and not barter, but there were cash transactions involved in often quite intricate patterns, which will be returned to.



### **Divisions of Labour**

The division of labour was first and foremost according to gender; adult men did not carry out any of the activities denominated as ‘domestic work’ (1 and 2). Women carried that burden almost alone but they could delegate housework to other women in the household, mainly daughters and daughters-in-law. In several cases we observed that the arduous domestic labour necessary for the daily reproduction was gladly transferred to younger women, and the older could work with agriculture, or as overseers of their own house, if they so wished. Bina Agarwal has observed this phenomenon in India, ‘Women coped best where there was more than one adult woman to do the domestic labour’ (1997: 134), a situation that could certainly be validated in Coto Sur as well. The caring/reproductive workloads could be passed on to other women, very seldom to men. Only young boys could be put to fetch water and firewood, but not to clean floors or wash clothes. That is, women could, and did work in the fields, in addition to everything else. Men worked in the fields but never in the house.

### **Expanding the Space to ‘El Monte’ and ‘El Agro’**

In the above description of the women’s daily work burden the line between what was considered ‘housework’ and what was categorised as ‘agricultural work’ was far from clear, it was apparently gendered, but as some women transgressed this line they tended to categorise their contributions as *ayuda* (help) for men. Many women were in practice farmers in Coto Sur, but this in-between space was at times difficult to literally map. Seeing it differently, it possibly would be beneficial to depict it as about trying to move between ‘culture, nature and economy’, when it comes to approaching activities on the farms; zig-zagging between in - and outside, to ‘-insists on absolutely seamless intertwining of, and perpetual exchange between, the economic, cultural, natural and all other moments of socio-ecological life’ (Castree 2001: 177). Such seamlessness would represent an expansion of the women’s spaces, into the

agricultural domain. Concerning what was termed 'nature',<sup>162</sup> in the women's perceptions this was mostly taken for granted and not made any fuss about, thus not as something outside oneself, so to speak, except that some of the farm women did talk about *el monte* as something 'out there', as wilderness and as dangerous, in contrast to the closer lying fields, or plots, which, by most of the women, were described as more 'cultured', although to some women even the fields right outside their door were categorized as *el monte*. This indicated that the perception of what was belonging to nature, and for many *el agro*, varied and it varied as to whether or not women talked about nature as something they cared about, or considered as a nuisance that they had to live with. For women who had participated in the invasions *el monte* was associated with fear, fear of darkness, snakes, thieves, animals and intruders (Chapter 2). Some of the women seemed to be very relaxed about nature(s) and said they enjoyed being there, while yet others were a lot more instrumental in their way of thinking and talking; farming was, as they saw it, one of several potential ways to survive. As it were, the women could imagine few other options for survival, and many expressed some kind of provisional acceptance of the state of the art, often without expressing it openly. What were their choices anyway, so why bother by thinking about it at all?

Concluding then, that there, as far as it was possible to detect from conversing with women in Coto Sur in different circumstances; *el agro* the way they tended to use the word, was a very wide and encompassing concept to them, ranging from the in-between space they were occupying on their farms - to the consequences of SAP policies on the prices of their maize.

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<sup>162</sup> See for example Castree and Braun (eds) (2001); Cronon (1996); and many others on the constructions and reconstructions etc. on 'nature(s)- etc. which will only be briefly dealt with here. Suffice it to say that it is a growing field in geography.

## Agriculture and Farming in Coto Sur

*Rather, land is a much more energetic configuration of earth and air, water and minerals, animals and plants, as well as people than a surface area contained by lines on a map.*  
(Ingold 1986: 147)

### Peasant Women, Agriculture, Farmers, and Farming

It seemed to me as if it was the individual farm, the farmstead, or so-called *unidad productora* (productive unit) that was understood as the central subject matter in an agricultural settlement like Coto Sur. In daily speak these units were normally labelled as *parcelas* or *fincas*. The first signifies a piece or parcel (*parcela*) referring to a small part of land regulated within the settlement, whereas a *finca* could be located just about anywhere. The different women's affiliation to a piece of land was a point in case, as peasant women were to have priority in all the SMFC's doings. On the other hand, was it the peasant women's direct relationship to the land, or was it that they were dependent on agriculture for living, or could it also be considered qualifying only to be living within the IDA's judicial perimeters in order to be eligible for support from the Women's Project? This was far from crystal clear in the SMFC team, while the very IDA tended to relate to the farm unit, without any questioning of whom was encountered there. An observation was that there did not seem to exist many images of what a 'peasant woman' was supposed to be, but the main assumption in the SMFC office and mandate, was about her relationships to agricultural production and land. The farm units in Coto Sur were on the average 13,74 hectares,<sup>163</sup> and were assumed to be family-farms; that theoretically were to fulfill two of the traditional main criteria of so-called family-farms (*ff*): that is '-the pursuit of an agricultural livelihood which combines subsistence production with commodity production'; and, '- internal social organization based on family labour, whereby the family serves as the unit of production, consumption and reproduction,

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<sup>163</sup> This was the average for the whole Coto Sur settlement. In the central area of La Plancha the average size was 7 hectares. PNUD/OIT/ITCO *Serie Estudios* No.40 p. 12

socialization, welfare and risk-spreading' (Bryceson 2000: 2).<sup>164</sup> This typical combination of subsistence and commodity production that is supposed to characterize family-farming (Whatmore 1991) was probably not too far off reality in Coto Sur in this period of time, but the issue of what constituted family labour was a more complicated matter that will be returned to later.

Whether the inhabitants in the Coto Sur settlement were to be characterised as 'peasants/campesinos' or 'agricultural producers' (as they often were presented as officially by the IDA) was an intriguing question, the two, or even three, when '*pequeño empresario* (small entrepreneur) was added, and their uses seemed to be very dependent on the actual situation, but what about the women? Would they also be addressed accordingly? 'Peasants/campesinos' was the concept with most historical and ideological clout in the IDA. Bryceson argues that

Peasantries are best understood as the historical outcome of an agrarian labour process which is constantly adjusting to surrounding conditions, be it fluctuations of climate, markets, state extensions, political regimes, as well as technological innovations, demographic trends, and environmental changes (2000: 3).

Thus, the outcome of such a perspective is that one may say that rural populations become peasants by degree; peasants are, in this interpretation; residents in rural areas and cultivate the land. In Coto Sur, these degrees were not very evident, and to what extent one was a *campesino*,<sup>165</sup> could be questioned. Seligson (1980) a North American social scientist that carried out research in several of the IDA settlements in the 1970s, simply talks about three categories of *campesino costarricense*, a) with land (proprietors, occupants); b) with access to land (usufruct); and c) without land. Bryceson, however, concludes: 'First and foremost,

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<sup>164</sup> The other two- 'class' and 'community', were not so apparent, but make up what Bryceson (2000) has called the 'ffc(c) amalgam'. (c=community).

<sup>165</sup> The Spanish term *campesino* generally adopts a broad definition, i.e. producers who have access to land (be it owned or rented), who cultivate this land with family labour or with a combination of family and hired labour, and who define production primarily in terms of household needs (Jansen 2000). In practice it means a combination of cash-crops and subsistence.

peasantries represent a *politically* constructed agrarian labour process' (2000: 4, my emphasis).

The other increasingly used concept among international academics is 'smallholder', but the most used more recent concept in the IDA - speak was *el pequeño agricultor*, or - *empresario* (small agriculturist, or businessman/entrepreneur), rural producers operating on their own on relatively small farms. Bryceson (2000) and Kay (2000) among others, question the use of the concept smallholders as they argue that it tends only to take economic rationality into account, and also Ellis (1998) consequently prefers peasants in order to encompass more critical aspects into the analysis,<sup>166</sup> but because it is so difficult to draw up the boundaries of peasantries, he suggests to use 'rural livelihoods' encompassing much more. It seems to me that Bryceson (2000) tends to stick to the (ff), family-farm, in her analyses, and this might have to do with the interpretation of the 'peasant' label. Hence, this mixing and often I think, confusing of 'family' and 'peasants' does pose a particular challenge to feminist analyses. Take for example how Gudeman (1978), in a study of a rural community in Panamá, all along refers to 'the family' as an organic unit, a perspective continued later in the study of farm/household/casa units in Colombia (Gudeman and Rivera 1990), and which is an assumption one meets over and over again in development research and debates dealing with rural Latin America.<sup>167</sup> (The family/household discussion will be brought up in chapter 5). Interestingly, the discourses on peasants/*campesinos* etc. in Latin America as well as realities met in Coto Sur, were far apart from the realities one encountered in the 'IDA speak' that seemed to be informed mainly by a version of Bryceson's view; that peasantries were best understood in the political domain.

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<sup>166</sup> This also winds up the more comprehensive debates on 'depeasantization' and neo-liberalism, etc. in development discourses. The classical theme is 'the agrarian question' (based on Kautsky's *The Agrarian Question* from 1899) and refers to the forms in which capitalist relations transform the agrarian sector and the political alliances, struggles, and compromises which emerge around different trajectories of change.

<sup>167</sup> The major 'peasant' discussions are found in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, see also Kearney (1996) and Brass (1991, 2000), as well as the discussions brought up in Scott's 'Weapons of the Weak' (1986) and his 'The Moral economy of the peasant' (1976). See also Barkin (2004); Bernstein (1979); Croll and Parkin (1992); Roseberry (1991)

In general parlance analytical concepts that cover farming, farms, and farmers, tend to be closely associated with tradition and history, and deep-seated assumptions about some mythic and close relationship between the farmer and his land. This mystique has increasingly been challenged lately by critical academics who really have questioned the hold of that link; between for example the right to land, and all that this involves, among them the are the ones that put emphasis on fluctuating relationships and favour a more complex and relational perspective also on 'land' (Ingold 2000; Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Massey 2005). In Coto Sur, so recently settled, this land/man story did not yet exist as a territorial narrative but was one that had to be constructed and rewritten, and as described previously, many accounts could be encountered about incoming people, migrants and *precaristas*, that supposedly had to be made into real farmers and consequently, would it then follow that the women had been made 'peasant women'?

There was, at this stage, no immediate localised long-term farming history and tradition to draw on as farmers in the settlement. But many inhabitants in Coto Sur were grown up on farmsteads or haciendas in Guanacaste and elsewhere, they had worked in the *agro*, as *peones*<sup>168</sup> landworkers), ranging from tilling tiny plots - to waged and regulated plantation work. Instead, the typical creation history of the Coto Sur settlement was concerned about the 'invasion->claiming->clearing->building' history of the parcels, the increased conquest and capture of nature was more prominent than the man/land assumption. One would then have to take for granted that the majority living in Coto Sur at this stage, were well accustomed with working the land, but not necessarily related to a particular piece of it, and that the new history had to be narrated and constructed on the road.

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<sup>168</sup> *Peon* is supposedly derived from (Spanish) a person who is on foot, and in contrast to people who were on horseback (sp. *Caballo*)- *caballero*, fr. *Cavalier* (*Diccionario de Lengua Española* 1984).. In Central America *peon* was mostly used about day- or landworkers,

## **Farming in Coto Sur 1986: Cultivating Basic Grains**

There were about 1400 farm units, or *parcels*, in Coto Sur and it was cultivating basic grains that was making up the bulk of production in the central parts of Coto Sur, and this did to a certain extent fit into the pattern that much of Central America is classified as 'maize and beans agriculture' (FAO 2000; Manshard 1974). Most active farms were run as a combination of cultivating land supplied with other activities. Moving about in the Coto Sur settlement it was possible to spot a variety of plants and trees close to the farm houses, and in many sites there were lustrous kitchen gardens (*solar*) with a variety of plants and herbs, which, as already described, was the women's domain. Another thing one quickly notices is the almost complete lack of machinery in spite of this being a landscape that is almost totally flat, with exceptions of the steep river - and stream banks. In other regions in Costa Rica with a similar topography one would certainly see and hear tractors and other agricultural machines, but in Coto Sur the silence is almost overwhelming, except for a roaring sound of a (banana) spraying plane now and then. If it is in the early hours of the day people can be seen in the fields or on the roads only with a hatch and machete. Mechanisation seemed to be almost non-existent, only horses or mules were used for transportation, but there were many who depended on human labour only.

Only on a few parcels in the La Plancha, Vaquita C and San Juan districts where we carried out this research had they started to plant oil palms by 1986, and these plants were still very small. These oil palms, *Palma Africana* (*Elaeis Guineensis* Jaq.) were then at the most 2-3 years old, tiny, and not yet in production. The plan at that stage was that palms should eventually substitute the omnipresent maize and cover at least about 20% of total acreage of the settlement.

Yet, maize (*Zea May*) was still the most significant product, indicated by the fact that just about every single parcel in the Coto Sur settlement had at the minimum one hectare dedicated to maize, and the majority still depended on it for a living. Maize was, according to the agricultural specialists, far from the optimal crop for the soils and climate in Coto Sur. However, maize was often depicted by people as their only chance, if everything else failed; then at least



In the Maize Field

they would be able to eat (white maize) and feed animals (yellow maize). It happened that the maize failed too, due to bad weather during the autumn storms, or attacks from insects or birds that could make maize growing a risky business. In Coto Sur maize could also be a way out when extra cash income was needed for special reasons, given that one had vacant land and labour available.

Maize is additionally very important culturally in Central America. The women are quite familiar with producing traditional foods based on maize; *tortillas*, *tamales*,<sup>169</sup> *pinolillo* and much else.<sup>170</sup> Every part of the maize plant is utilised one way or the other, the kernels made to *masa* by grinding it, as all women in Coto Sur would be familiar with. The husks are used to pack food and for thatching roofs etc. Dried *mazorca* (the stem) is used for fuel as the

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<sup>169</sup> For cultures with Latin roots, *tamales* are perhaps the most important celebratory food in existence. They are maize dough with fillings usually wrapped up in cornhusks or banana leaves and steamed.

<sup>170</sup> See Ross de Cerdas (1986) for an interesting book of receipts but also cultural history on foods in Costa Rica.



smoke kept mosquitos away. Yellow maize is the preferred fodder for chicken and pigs. The maize fields were usually referred to as *la milpa* (which in Coto Sur could refer both to the plant and to the maize field), but when delivering the product, it was referred to as *el maize*. Maize has been known for more than 7000 years, and originated in Mexico (Diamond 1998). Going further north in Central America, to the *Mayas*, legends and myths are connected to maize, and the *Chorotegas*, the indigenous population of Guanacaste, were also a maize-growing people. Maize is simple to grow and to harvest, but was also connected to backwardness; and when the IDA extensionists were trying to persuade people to replace maize for palms or cocoa and, they were reluctant, I also several time heard parceleros being referred to as *maizeros* as a derogatory term by the IDA functionaries. In spite of this and declining prices, the parceleros in Coto Sur still kept growing maize.

Beans (*frijoles*)<sup>171</sup> is the other traditional staple foods grown on the land in Coto Sur, but in contrast to maize, this crop is relatively well paid on the market. It also makes up an important ingredient in the daily menu, and I heard constant complaints on the prices as beans costs four times as much as rice in the shop. Many shunned away from growing beans because they are considered demanding and labour-intensive and difficult to handle, it took more skills and interest to grow, as they are very fragile and easily destroyed by heavy rains. In Coto Sur it was considered more of a lottery to succeed with beans in the hot, humid climate, if it kept raining continuously for more than three days in a row, the beans would be ruined. Typically, it tended to be women who grew beans as *Frijol tapado* (covered beans), a traditional slash/mulch system in which the beans are covered with a mulch of weeds, the beans grow through the mulch, and is therefore protected, but it is very labour intensive. It seemed to me as if beans were a typical women's crop, based on what the women said.

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<sup>171</sup> *Phaseolus vulgaris* or common bean, indigenous to Mesoamerica and the Andes and there are many types. See Diamond (1998) for a more historical presentation of the indigenous plants in Latin America- and the rest of the world.

Rice (*Oryza Sativa*)<sup>172</sup> might, according to the technical agricultural experts, have been the most optimal crop in parts of Coto Sur, is also a staple in the everyday diet. However, as a crop well suited for machinery it was difficult to expand, the big specialised irrigated haciendas elsewhere on the Pacific coast were more productive, so price-wise the small individual parcels had difficulties competing. Cattle is also an important activity, mainly in the outlying areas of the Coto Sur settlement. (This fieldwork did not include farms that based their incomes on cattle, except for the 1 or 2 cows often kept for milk and cheese). Animal husbandry in the form of pig rearing on a bigger scale was among the plans for diversifying the economy in the settlement, and the Chinese Mission (*Misión China*)<sup>173</sup> present in the settlement since 1976, was offering technical assistance, but only on a handful of individual parcels and the Coopevaquita cooperative had so far started up more systematically.

Plantains and bananas (*Muceas*) were grown by many farmers and sold off to traders and for own use, both as fodder and for own cooking; fried plantains was a very popular food. There have been recurring problems with plantains and bananas, attacked by diseases that have in earnest been the perhaps most lasting heritage of the banana industry. The American historian Marquardt (2001, 2002) has demonstrated the importance of the spread of plant diseases, first and foremost the *Mál de Panamá* and the *Sigatoka Negra*. The Panama Disease, which Marquardt refers to as ‘The Green Havoc’ (also called *fusarium wilt*) is a fungus disease that attacks the rhizomes<sup>174</sup> and the plant starts to wilt and rot. The only way to combat it was to plant new areas and leave the infested soils idle, thus the great amounts of ‘reserves’ (like in Coto Sur) that the company had to have control over. The other, very

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<sup>172</sup> Rice was brought to Latin America by the Spaniards, which in turn had been presented for rice from the Moors, as they brought beef and wine, and met with maize, beans, chocolate and tomato, eventually moulded into Mexico’s famous cuisine. See Diamond (1998).

<sup>173</sup> A Taiwanese development programme from 1976 in Coto Sur, with its own personnel and station outside Laurel

<sup>174</sup> The latin name is *fusarium oxysporum f. cubense*. The name Panama Disease [*Mal de Panamá*] was because it was first observed in Latin America in the UFCo’s Boca de Toro (Almirante). Bananas are sterile plants, in that they self-propagate by sending out individual lateral shots (*hijos*).

threatening, major disease is the Banana Leaf Spot Disease, (*Sigatoka*) a disease spread by an airborne fungus<sup>175</sup> that first appeared in Central American banana plantations in the 1930s. The epidemic has been combated with chemical ‘warfare’; whose legacy still is felt by thousands of banana workers’ ruined health, and soils infected for generations. The plants needed incredible amounts of fungicides; they had to be sprayed twenty to thirty times a year; no doubt that much of this is still lingering in Coto Sur and other ex banana districts.<sup>176</sup>

The other crop that was planned to become a lifesaver in the future, in addition to African Palms, is cocoa (*Theobroma Cacao*), to be cultivated on a number of specialised cocoa farms. Many had a few cocoa trees, but there were also some specialized cocoa farms, (*cacaodales*) selling their produce to travelling tradesmen. Diversification of crops or other produce had been more difficult than anticipated in the settlement and a main obstacle for expansion was the long distance to the major consumer markets in the Central Valley.

### **Experiences from Farming and Living in Coto Sur: Four Accounts**

#### *Maize-growers in Process of Change: Doña Fermina and don Emilio*

Doña Fermina is 36 years old and is living on a parcel located in the La Plancha district. Her compañero, don Emilio, is about ten years her senior and the two of them work the parcel together. They have been living together for fourteen years and participated in the early invasions in Coto Sur. At that time they had been leasing land somewhat further east. He was working as an occasional day worker travelling about and she was taking care of the land.

The parcel that this couple had settled on during the invasions had been registered in his name, as assumed head of the family. It is 7.5 hectares. Then a year ago they had succeeded to buy the adjacent farm of 7 hectares, which now was registered in her name, so now they have

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<sup>175</sup> *Mycosphaerella musicola* thought to be confined to the banana cultivations of the South Pacific

<sup>176</sup> The NGO *Foro Emaus* has provided much information on the chemical hazards of the banana industry. See also [www.bananas.agoranet.be](http://www.bananas.agoranet.be), and [www.bananalink.org.uk](http://www.bananalink.org.uk), for international information and mobilisations around working conditions etc. in the banana industry today.

two, on paper, separate farms (If they had been married this would not have been possible at this stage). It had so happened that their neighbours, two brothers, could not meet their debts in the bank, and Doña Fermina and her *compañero* had managed to buy it for 130 thousand colones. In addition they paid each of the men 35 thousand colones, summing up to 200 thousand colones.<sup>177</sup> It was financed by selling some animals she had, and by private loans in the bank. Doña Fermina said she had decided long ago that she wanted that piece of land; she only had to wait it out. She thought there were too many *parceleros* in Coto Sur that could not meet their obligations. In the end it would be people like them who would be able to acquire more land. She said she was thinking about other expansions as well, but did not want to tell us about her plans.

Doña Fermina is well into the details of the daily running of the farm. This year (1986) they had 3 hectares planted with maize, but had bad luck, as the storms had ruined the harvest and they ended up owing money to the bank. They count on having to invest 11 thousand colones per hectare in seeds, fertilizers, etc., which means that they have to sell for more than that amount to make any profit out of it at all. They sell to the CNP station in Naranjo. Fermina expresses concern, like all farmers do, that they will have to pay compound interest. On this farm, they also grow some beans, only for their own consumption. Another crop they have tried is avocado, but this year it has been, as she expressed it, “a favourite for the ants,” they have been eaten all up. Doña Fermina thinks that there are no farmers around who have been able to harvest much avocado this year, although there is a great demand for it from the trucks coming to buy. There has been talk among the farmers that it is because of the spraying plane (spraying against *Sigatoka Negra* in the Banana Cooperative), but don Emilio does not think so. Doña Fermina is not so sure. She thinks that there could be something in it, and in fact she had tried later to make inquiries about the chemicals. On their farm they have always both worked the land, until now, when she takes care of a baby and is also suffering from dwindling health (rheumatism). They said they cannot afford any rented help and that the sons are too young to be

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<sup>177</sup> This is officially not allowed of course, but according to informants was happening all the time. In 1986 the value of the Colón was constantly rising due to the so-called mini-devaluations, about 60 colones to 1 US\$

of much help in the fields yet. They do help out, clearing and cleaning up the land, finding firewood and fetching water.<sup>178</sup> Besides the daily work on the parcel, Doña Fermina also bakes empanadas and bread for sale in a nearby cuadrante. She also takes care of her 20 hens and 3 pigs. Fermina has grown up on different banana plantations in La Zona Sur (her parents were both Nicaraguans), and she had managed to finish 5th grade (out of 6). She is therefore the one in the house who deals with the bank. She gets credit, and he functions as guarantor. Her compañero has no schooling at all. They both express concern with people who cannot meet their obligations, who don't work and who cannot pay their debts.

Doña Fermina is the first one who gets up in the morning, at 4.30 am, to light the fire and get breakfast ready. Don Emilio then leaves for the fields, and the three boys are sent to school. She is very busy until 11 am, as everything has to be accomplished before the children return. Then they can look after the baby for her to do other things, like washing clothes near the well. “*Gracias a Dios*”, she says, the water in the well is of good quality. Most of their neighbours suffer from bad water supply. Doña Fermina expresses worries about the stream passing their farms and people who are swimming and bathing there, because it is so polluted with chemicals from the banana production in the cooperative. The rest of her day follows the same pattern, as do the weeks. Sunday is a workday as well in this household, as they are not active in any church congregation. Sundays the children are home from school and can be put to different tasks. Their worries now are concerned with the economy and how to get out on their feet. She is hoping for the African palms they had started to plant last year. They had, after long hesitation, decided to join the Palm programme because birds or storms often ruined the maize harvests. With all the insects, *purrujas*, that they are troubled with, she really hopes for the palms. She is a bit troubled, she says, there is so much money and debts to be incurred, in spite of the extensionists having secured them that all will be fine. This is a farm and a couple who are coping, trying to avoid

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<sup>178</sup> Typically this is what they said to us; later on we encountered people who had worked as *peones* on this farm, and that probably must be interpreted as we came from the IDA office, and the compañero was present whenever we came to that farm.

risks by changing to palms, but who are barely making it economically speaking. At the time they had incurred considerable debts, but they tried to plan ahead, and had done so by investing in new land, and thinking ahead to possible expansions.

*Workers on his Parents' Farm: Doña Jeanette*

Doña Jeanette is 27 years old, fairly recently married, and very happy to receive visitors, proudly showing us her little baby girl of only four months. She eagerly shows us where she lives with her three years younger husband and the baby. She has been married only ten months and proudly tells us all about the church wedding in Golfito. She wanted to have things properly done, and the *cura* (catholic priest) hardly comes to Coto Sur, so they had to go to Golfito. The little house is located on the outskirts of his parents' farm; they live in a bigger house nearer the road. Doña Jeanette and her husband moved into this house when a nephew who used to live there went to find work elsewhere.

Her husband works on his father's land, a farm of approximately 17 hectares, whose main production is cocoa. They are producing on 'contract' (nothing written) with a trader who comes in a truck and picks it up every two weeks. Doña Jeanette's father-in-law, her husband, and one of his brothers who also is living on the farm in a separate house, work in the *cacaudal* (cocoa grove), and in addition to that they hire day-workers, when necessary. Her husband is paid as a *peón* per day he is working, on equal terms with all others, and that is not much says Jeanette. On this farm they grow 2 hectares of maize and 1/2 hectare of plantains, and his mother keeps a few cows for milk.

Doña Jeanette and her husband lease land from an (absentee) neighbour, upon which they sow their own maize. To be able to do that they had to get credit in the bank to buy seeds. She helps her husband fill the maize cobs in sacks, cut the cocoa pods, take the beans out to dry in the sun, and pack them in sacks. For the time being she has two pigs, one was a gift from her mother,

to be used for making tamales for Christmas. If necessary, she also works in the cacaudal, and is then paid as a peón as well. The last harvest of their own maize resulted in 55 quintales per hectare, and they had sold it to the CNP at an average of 500 colones per quintal. After all debts had been paid, she and her husband were left with only 1800 colones as a profit (approximately 30 US dollars) after months of work. Due to health problems they have had to spend a lot of money on doctors and medicines, and in reality there was no profit at all.

She normally gets up at 4:30am and makes breakfast, *gallo pinto*, with eggs and a tomato, if she has. She also makes tortillas. She has to go to her mother-in-law's house down the hill to grind her own grown maize since she doesn't have a grinder herself. They cost more than 1,000 colones, but she really would like to have one. Sometimes she makes cocoa in the morning as well. The rest of the morning is spent cleaning up the kitchen and the house, taking care of the baby and washing clothes. She walks out into the fields with a *fresco* (a drink) to her husband around 9am. The baby takes a lot of her time now, together with the daily tasks. Due to lack of electric light they go to bed at 9:30pm. She really wants electricity and wonders how they can get it installed.

Doña Jeanette really would like to have some land of her own. Her husband is one of six sons, and what about their future - she wondered. Would there be possibilities for all of them?

### *Doña Imelda: Uncertain Future*

The house in which doña Imelda lives is one of the remnants from the Banana Company and has two floors. Downstairs there is a kitchen area and storage for maize and when we arrive it is so full that one hardly can move because they were piling up maize before getting transport to the CNP storehouse in Naranjo. Upstairs is an outside balcony and a couple of bedrooms.

Everything is messy and pretty bad looking. Doña Imelda stresses that her house is *muy humilde*, and that is true.

She, her compañero don Manolo, and their six children have been living on this parcel only three or four years. They had come in from the vicinity of the Coto 63 plantation, where he had worked for La Compañía for more than 10 years before they closed up banana production in 1983/84. They had managed to save some of the money he had made as a banana worker and had purchased a tiny piece of land on the outskirts of Coto Valley. He had worked on the plantation, and she mainly took care of farming. By selling that plot and also using the compensation money don Manolo had received from La Compañía they had bought this parcel in Coto Sur for 140 thousand colones from a man who could not pay his loan in the bank. Doña Imelda and don Manolo then ran into legal trouble because the IDA had not been properly notified about the transaction, and it all ended up with their having to sell their land, and all of them left to go to San Vito<sup>179</sup> to pick coffee in order to survive. They stayed there for some time, had later come back to Coto Sur because the man they sold to couldn't meet his obligations, either. So they returned, borrowed some more money in the bank, sowed maize, settled again, and were in discussions with “some characters in the IDA”, in order to solve their quandaries, doña Imelda said. She was not very enthusiastic about them.

Doña Imelda works in the maize field as she always has done. When they used to live in Quepos, she had worked as a day worker, herself, picking maize and *chapeaba* (weeded). She picked papaya, and occasionally she carried out agricultural day-work later as well. Whenever we talk about that she becomes angry, saying that she always has been paid less than a man for the same job. She is up every day at 4am to prepare the day for the others, get people to school, and at 6am she is off to the fields with the others. She returns between 9 and 10am to prepare food for lunch. The others come to eat and at 1pm she serves them coffee. If they go back to the fields, they return around 4pm. But they don't always work in the afternoon; it depends on the season and the weather. If not, she sets off to wash clothes in the canal near by. At 9pm she is in bed, as the last one.

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<sup>179</sup> San Vito is located up in the cooler mountain area and was colonized by Italian migrants in the 1950s. Milking cows and coffee bean growing are the main economic activities



Doña Imelda is able to work in the fields most of the mornings now because she has an adult daughter living with her who has four (soon to be five) children and she takes care of much of the daily routines in the house. Her *compañero* is off working somewhere, and the daughter decided to go back to her parents to have a place to stay. Nonetheless, doña Imelda is the overseer. Her oldest son is working full time in the fields with his father. Her younger children do things like wash *camisetas fáciles* (easy shirts) and heat food, slowly learning the *oficios domesticos*, the household tasks.

On this parcel they grow maize for a living and the two yearly harvests result in approximately 130 quintales each. The earnings are then equally split between the eldest son and themselves. He lives with a woman and two children in a small house at another end of the land and works the farm with his parents. They sell all of their produce to the CNP and have received approximately 560 colones per quintal lately. Last year they were really worried, as the cheque from CNP had been delayed more than a month. This year it is rumoured that it takes eight days or so. But the maize is not really yielding enough to support so many people there are falling profits if any at all, so in the future don Manolo says that he is thinking about switching to cocoa. The IDA extensionists had pressured them quite a bit and so they have just started to plant some trees. Don Manolo thinks he is going to join the planned cooperative for cocoa growers. There are already 60 producers on the new development programme, or as they call it, *el programa del Danielito* (Danielito is one of the IDA extensionists on that programme). Doña Imelda is not so sure, she is afraid of *monilia*, which she has heard ruins the harvests. In its totality this parcel is 6.5 hectares, of which 3 hectares are dedicated to maize, 2 hectares to cocoa (baby plants not yet in production) and 1/2 hectare to plantains. Their son gets the credit in the bank and keeps in contact with them. Doña Imelda thinks that best, since he has more schooling than they do. She thinks all bank people are greedy and don't understand how complicated it all is.

*An Exception? A Successful Farm*

Doña Pilar and don César have four boys and two daughters, of whom three boys, one of the daughters and a grandson are living on their farm, located rather far out in the settlement. A fourth son established his own household in another part of their farm, but he works full time on the farm. They have been living on this land since 1975 when they arrived from her family's farm up in San Vito. Don César had initially come to Coto Sur to find a farm, as he had heard they gave land away for free. But when he arrived, there was no land left in the central areas where he thought it most wise to be. Besides, he told us, he had such a fear for those people giving out the land. They were communists. So, he had looked for a place to buy instead, and was lucky. He bought the farm for 5,500 colones and got a loan at the bank. The farm was 16 hectares and the seed was in the ground already. This farm was actually paid for by just selling the first harvest. The former owner had been a chauffeur, and he did not know how to cope with agriculture, said don César, so their start was a lucky one. The first years they lived in a *ranchita* (a small hut) then built a house, and then about three years ago had built the house they live in now.

The *ranchita* is now used for storing maize, and the old house for drying clothes and storing equipment etc. The main activity the first few years was growing plantains, which was in great demand, more than they could deliver. They did very well, doña Pilar said. Then the plantains got a disease and turned black, and IDA people came and told them that all the trees had to be removed. Then they changed to maize, cocoa, and some plantains (a more resistant kind). This year they had 5 has. cocoa, 7 has. maize, 2 has. plantains. To sow the 7 has. of maize they have a loan of 57 thousand colones to make it work. (Which is considerably lower than many others who would have to count with 10 to 11 thousand colones per hectare). They rent *chapulin* (a tiny hand-driven 'tractor') to make the furrows and all their maize goes to a *fletero* (transporter) who takes care of it and gets it to the CNP in Naranjo. They have produced approximately 400 quintales of maize per harvest. They "work with" a bank in Golfito, and never have had any troubles. "We always pay before we are due," doña Pilar says; "My eldest

son is getting the credit and I am the guarantor for him”. The cocoa is sold every two weeks, approximately 120 kgs each time. They get paid 89 colones per kg now (21 thousand per month). A truck comes and picks it up regularly.

They maintain that they have nothing to do with any authority, at least not the IDA. They say they don't like them or their style. Doña Pilar does the talking, but phrases it like, “Don César thinks that so and so is a bad person”. She speaks with his voice, one may say. She has 60 excellent hens, but hardly sells any eggs, as there is no market out here. They have no debt in the bank, and never have had either. They have consistently planned ahead, putting money aside and investing it little by little. She tells us that, “Don César has a good head for investments”. This is an extremely well kept farm of high standards. Everything is clean and well organized. They don't have electric light, but have installed their own generator, which also runs the water pump. The house is beautiful, with real glass windows and tiles on the floors. It was as a dream to the members of the SMFC team, and it was later used as a proof that success was possible in Coto Sur.

Doña Pilar does not participate in any activities in the fields at all, and never has. She says that don César would not let her. She married don César when she was sixteen years old. He had left the banana plantations where he was a landworker, originally from Nicaragua. He said he could not stand the plantations anymore, had searched for a job up in San Vito, and had come to Pilar's parents' farm. Pilar had never had worked on the fields at home either. She always worked inside the house, but was used to coffee picking. Don César was thirty years old when they married and said he was fed up with *chefes* on banana plantations at that stage. He stresses being a free man. The four sons all work full time in the fields with their father. Although he suffers from high blood pressure and cannot work very much, he always is with them and supervises their work.

### ***El Agro* is a Complicated Field but who is the Farmer?**

What among women in Coto Sur was constantly referred to as *el agro* turned out to encompass more than tilling the land, it was about relationships to banks and credit institutions, the IDA and other authorities, to land and resources, as well as many other issues. There seems to be a differing in attitudes concerning banking and credit. Some women in the settlement consider themselves more apt to deal with external money matters than men. And their argument is the same, as is the banks'; men are able to waste money on drink and spend it on unnecessary things. More than once I heard stories about the parcelero who had picked up his 70 thousand colones of credit from the bank in order to buy seeds and then went to Neilly and spent them buying everybody drinks. Although the man might be considered the farmer, it was quite often that the bank preferred women as debtors; they were trusted more.<sup>180</sup>

The SMFC team tried to make an inventory of women's ownership to land in the settlement, but that turned out to be a very difficult task. It turned out that encountering women's names on such a list had many interpretations. There could be various reasons for women's formal ownership, but in most of the cases we encountered on the ground in Coto Sur, there was a clear relationship between a woman having papers on the land and her actively farming it. The land issue, in terms of ownership, was not made an issue by women who lived in relatively stable relationships. They said that they did not think it was a problem, that 'it was probably best that way,' referring to men's title to the land, or 'that he knows best,' etc. Women's access to land was an issue that did not seem to be raised until there was a situation in which the conjugal household was being threatened. Otherwise it is probably fair to say very few of the women had any imaginations as to even think that they could - or

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<sup>180</sup> Interview with the bank manager in Laurel, July 1986. This is a well-known observation from many parts of the world, to an extent that some are expressing worries that women are becoming 'money managers', see Molyneux (1998).

should - be the owners of land. The assumption that the man is the farmer and the woman the 'farmer's wife' was a current belief held also in Coto Sur.

However, there were women who were full-time farmers in that they were working in the fields and making decisions about everything from what to produce to how to sell their produce. There were also women who liked to work the land, and some who had to do it. In other words, women in Coto Sur did participate and contribute to production in many ways and to different degrees. Among our informants there were several active farming women, although they tended to say that they were housewives, or that they were working the land because their *compañero* was sick or absent. They would even say, at least in the beginning, the man was the farmer even if he did not do anything, and they repeated that they were only helping him out. Even doña Leonora (Chapter 2) who had struggled a lot, but was determined to make a living for her children and herself in Coto Sur. Doña Leonora's story about how she kept begging her (then) *compañero* to leave the banana plantation, pledging that she would cede her land to him, indicates her belief that the man is supposed to be the farmer. However, by her own living she has demonstrated that it is possible for women to be farmers, and she picked up farming techniques on the way, for instance her *frijol tapado*, she said she did not have a clue about how to do it at first. She became immodest enough to say that she is exceptional in many ways, and this is demonstrated by her triple work burden as a farmer, a housewife and working for others. The women who were *de facto* farmers in Coto Sur farm the same way as men. They grow maize, rice, papaya, and keep cattle, and it turned out that all the women who worked in the field were accustomed to use a machete; a traditionally male symbol as brought up by Marquardt (2002).

A handful of women (of the approximately 60 -70 people who by then had joined the Palm programme) have invested in oil palm production, which is rather costly. This certainly did not quite fit the commonly held picture that women are more careful than men. In itself it was of interest try to find out why they had gone into palm growing, a risky business in itself,

and it was a goal for the Women's Programme to focus on successful women farmers. Here follows a presentation of three women farmers - or farming women.

### **Women Farmers**

*Doña Dolores: "Vivir en pobreza, pero cumplir"*

One of the future oil palm growers is doña Dolores, close to sixty years old, although she says she does not really know her age. She lives on a parcel in La Plancha with two adult children and has between 6 or 7 hectares of land. She grows maize (3 has. which she has been growing since she had to quit her initial plantain production when the *Sigatoka Negra* disease had attacked. Her house and farm really do not look like much, little or no renovations have been done for many years in and around the house. It was actually more of a surprise to discover her small palm plants than about her debt of 500 thousand colones in the bank. The loan is to be paid in increments of 15 to 30 thousand colones. Looking at her house and appearance, one might not expect that she can manage it all, but she can. She demonstrates complete control of her budgetary situation and does not read and write. She is very concerned with the idea that one had to have a good working relationship with the bank, and that she had "worked with the bank" (*Trabajando con el banco*) the past 5 years, and never had had any troubles. Her baby palms were growing nicely, but it will still be two to three years before her first harvest, and then she hopefully will be able to cash in. We asked her if she thought palm farming was risky. "No, this is the future" she said looking firmly at us, "I have just become a member of the palm cooperative, in joining that we will be sure that we have a market. You see, one does have to have somewhere to send the produce to, right? If we don't have that, *porqué sembrar?* "(why sow/plant?).

When the IDA extensionists had come around to invite people to join the Palm development programme, she initially had been thinking about producing cocoa, the minor

part of the agro-industrial programme, because she liked it, had a few trees already, and knew how to work it. But then fungi (*monilia*) ruined her cocoa trees. People from the IDA convinced her that going into palms was a good idea (Her farm is located in the very centre of the planned palm area). Concerning her economic situation, she always insisted on not having any debts, “*Uno tiene que controlar, siempre!*” (Always be in control.). Normally she paid for everything with cash, never bought anything on credit, and lived very, very simply. She cannot read or write. She had no luxuries, not even a radio. She never had problems getting credit in the pulperia if she needed it. They knew they would get their money soon. Her life philosophy was, as it was repeated again and again, “*Vivir in pobreza, pero cumplir!*” (Live in poverty, but fulfil.)

#### *Doña Carmen, an Active Lady*

Another woman farmer is Carmen. She is a different type, a lot more outgoing and active in the community than was doña Dolores, who lives very quietly somewhat in the back. Dona Carmen is a fighter. She had fought in the front row during the invasions of Coto Sur and has been doing so ever since. She is always on the move, on the bus, in Laurel, in Neilly, at meetings, or in the IDA office to ask about something, or doing some *bisnis* in Neilly or Panamá. She is full of brilliant ideas. One day she is in the bank in Laurel to organise credit, the next she is in the SMFC office to ask for advice as one of her neighbours is in trouble; is there anything IDA can do to help out? One day, when she is in the SMFC office, she says she is anxiously waiting if she will get credit to sow her maize this year. She has a sizeable debt (approximately 750 000 colones) already, after starting to plant oil palms three years ago. In addition, she had co-signed a loan for a distant relative some years ago, and he did not pay. But she had paid, every colon, so she thought they had better give her credit. She now had managed to plant 11 hectares with palms, and had started to think about planting more later

on, on her almost 25 hectares farm. She had originally cleared the farm from the rainforest with her banana worker *compañero*, but he had soon abandoned her and she was left with seven children to take care of. “What should I do?” she said, “I only had to start putting the seeds in the ground, we had to get to eat.”

She managed most of her parcel herself and grew, sowed, weeded, and harvested maize and sent it off to the CNP. The past year she had the help of two sons and a daughter who had returned home after a few years working in a factory in San José. In addition to that, she occasionally hired *peónes* for the harvest and she had been able to sustain all her children through her own work. She saw few practical problems for women farmers, given that they could get help to carry out the physically demanding jobs. However, her own experience made her believe that it was not easy for women to hire day-workers. The women could easily be fooled and get lazy workers. She didn't like to be fooled; that was unfair. She did not know how to read or write, but she organized her whole farm and all her activities in small pieces of papers with signs on them that she carried in her big bag.

### *Doña Carla, a Plantain Grower*

Doña Carla is growing plantains and has also about ten cocoa trees for a living. She spends every morning out in her plantain groves, cleaning, cutting, and erecting fallen down plants. It is hard physical work. She carries out most of the work herself, lately assisted by her seventeen-year old son. A twenty-three year old daughter takes care of most of the household



In the Plantain Grove



chores whenever she is at home, as she is often going away for work and education. Her other four children are living elsewhere; a daughter nearby and the others in San José. Carla's wedded husband had deserted her less than a year ago, which came as a surprise to her after almost twenty-six years of marriage. Carla had used to work with her father on his small landholding, always *luchando* (fighting, struggling). Her husband was not a farmer anyway, she said, he was sick a lot. She kept the family afloat, and it was she who had decided to go to Coto Sur. She traded the present parcel in exchange for a farm she had inherited from her father in the eastern Guanacaste province three years ago. She had done it for the sake of her husband, as that farm was too far away from people and roads for her taste. Some distant relatives who had got land in Coto Sur wanted to return to Guanacaste and they had swapped their farms, but Carla felt she had made a bad deal, as her former land was almost 40 hectares. And now her husband had abandoned her, she had been devastated, did not know what to think,

*En la parcela me puso deshojando, yo soy feliz trabajando, y no me acuerdo que tengo hambre, en la casa suelo paso pensando...*"

(When I cut leaves - I am happy working and I do not even remember that I am hungry, in the house I used to be thinking..).

She liked to work with plantains by herself, but it was a lot of work. Sometimes she was so tired that she did not even want to eat when coming in. She thinks being a woman farmer is fine, but that her biggest problem is arguing prices with the traders who come to Coto Sur, that she has little to do but accept the price they offer. She is certain that they cheat her. She is sure that it is easier for a man to negotiate prices.

### **Does it make a Difference?**

What these women farmers said that they had been reflecting upon, and that they all mentioned, was that they encounter problems when they are to enter what is considered as

male spheres, both the more formalised ones, like the cooperatives, or the (male dominated) IDA, but even more when entering informal male spheres, as for instance the market for day workers; that they have more problems mobilizing labour power outside the farms. Two of them said that the IDA extensionists never came to their farms unless it was to persuade them to join some programme, while they observed that they frequently visited many men. Pressing the matter they admitted that they often felt marginalized in these settings, and few of them had participated in IDA organised training courses. They said they either did not have the time to go or did not feel comfortable going. Another example was the organising and hiring of transporters (*camioneros*) to take their maize to the CNP storage. The women said that they would have to go and find drivers themselves, and the meeting place would often be bars or cafes where the women did not like to go. There seemed to be many functions and spaces that sustained agricultural production that tended to exclude, rather than include, women who wanted to cross the gendered boundaries in the agricultural sectors.

## **Resources, Income Streams, Households and Redistribution in Coto Sur**

Obviously, some degree of cooperation is necessary if households are to remain intact; persistent non-cooperation is likely to lead to disintegration. What is of interest is why conflict arises between household members and the form such conflict takes (Kabeer 1994: 127).

### **Income Streams and Nested Resources**

A typical smallholder farm in Coto Sur did produce a mixed array of basic grains and other crops and it was expected that the income it provided would sustain a 'farming family'. In order to approach the question brought up by the SMFC about women's access to resources, land, income, technology etc, it was important to the extent possible, to get a certain picture of the income streams in the households, and preferably how they were redistributed. This was registered during the interviews we carried out with the women, but in addition to that, data

were also provided in the work in the SMFC Women's Groups, as budgeting and resource management were topics that often were brought up by the SMFC promoters in the sessions.

The main income originated in the majority of the farms from sales of the maize crops to the CNP or tradesmen and happens twice a year, after the summer (*la veranéa*) and winter (*la inverníz*) harvests. This was the template, and redistribution expected to take place on basis of this major income stream. However, as soon was discovered, the income streams we registered (and probably also the many more that we did not) tended to originate from several sources, and redistribution therefore was no simple affair. This was obvious as many of the women could get very upset when occasionally discussing these sensitive matters, including in the Women's Groups, and was a track that was worth pursuing, although in a low cash economy with much in and out movement, for example men leaving to find work, it was quite complicated, and the findings it has been possible to (re) construct must be taken with great care, and probably only uncovered a minor part of what was taking place.<sup>181</sup>

#### *Access to Nested Resources*

It is assumed that women's access to resources will give them a better bargaining position both in the household and in society. Hence, trying to get to grips with how these streams and resources were organised and access and control over them practiced, became a research challenge in itself, not the least untangling the often fractioned pieces of information we got and putting them together again searching for gendered patterns, links, and relationships.

Beginning with the source of the major income stream in Coto Sur, the maize growing. There was a constant requirement for money in order to prepare and sow the land, and credit was normally obtained in the banks or other institutions, demanding security in the land, or further secured by co-signing. This system of co-signing (collateral) did, in some

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<sup>181</sup> The plan had been to carry out much more systematic studies when it came to economic questions, but the economist in the SMFC team was called back to the IDA headquarters after only a few months, and the others did not have capacity or sufficient knowledge to follow this up.

cases, bring women into the household/farm economy to a larger degree than many of them seemed to be aware of. If possible, however, the maize growers in Coto Sur would prefer to do without credit as it was expensive and risky, the ones that could get access to money through other channels would try to do that. Typically men would be striking business deals with sons or brothers but occasionally also with other men, for instance former ex-bananero colleagues, in order to raise money for inputs in agriculture. Such more private - that is not involving finance institutions - arrangements when it came to creating different projects, were not untypical in Coto Sur, and were results of negotiations between men that would not necessarily involve labour, but making funds available. This was an almost exclusively male affair and much time was used to *conversar* with other men, and men tended to decide upon and control the use of the land. Few women had access to land, or to capital, less so could rely on connections and networks that many of the men had established, (often in the banana plantations), and this activity shows that looking only at access to resources, merely focusing on women's access to land, is missing the complexity of the relationships and which can be referred to as gendered access to 'nested resources'.<sup>182</sup>

A typical example of such an informal deal encountered in Coto Sur, was if one person provided capital for buying inputs to sow maize on a parcel, he would receive 50% of the profits made of the harvest without putting in own labour. This system was referred to as *a medidas* (by halves) and seemed to be a rather typical practice that usually comprised persons that supplied cash or inputs such as fertilizers or seeds, and people who controlled land and could provide land and labour, and the potential revenues were split in half. In Coto Sur we encountered numerous such arrangements most of which could be traced back to the existence of the Banana Cooperative and whose members (sons, brothers, uncles) often would be in a position to muster capital. As far as we were able to detect, this was an all male affair, no

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<sup>182</sup> According to Rocheleau and Edwards, 'the combination of gender and resource tenure concerns has stretched the tenure question beyond two dimensional maps of land ownership to address multidimensional realities'. and : '...nested and overlapping rights, which are products of social and ecological diversity as well as the complex connections between various groups of people and resources' (1997: 1351)

women were involved in these arrangements, except one between a woman farmer and landowner and her son who was a member of the Banana Cooperative. Both money-wise and quantity-wise these arrangements could be quite comprehensive, there were no papers involved, and these informal deals could hardly be traced.

This can possibly be referred to as one key ‘control point’ (Benería and Roldán 1987) to be considered when assessing redistribution issues, and one should therefore enquire both what capital was brought in, under what terms, how it was used, and how the pay back was organised, and who was in control. The overall result seemed to be that they tended to re-enforce each other to exclude women. Without own capital it meant that if one had access to resources like land, tenured, rented or sharecropped; technology, and workforce, one would be able to set up arrangements that could generate income streams from agricultural activities. Men had at the outset better access not only to land, but also better access and control over workforce, technology (including training), and credit. Peasant women in Coto Sur tended to negate that control over land was important to them. Concerning the resource land, as one of the main issues in the SMFC mandate, one therefore needs to consider both the property and control aspects of land, use of land, and access to land (Meinzen-Dick et al., 1997; Richeleau and Edmunds 1997; Deininger 1999; deJanvry 1981).

#### *Sharecropping, Access and Flexibility: Grey Zones*

For inhabitants in Coto Sur who were not enjoying direct control over resources such as land or cash, it was still possible to get access to resources and thus income streams by means of practical arrangements, particularly land to farm maize, because not all the acreage was in production and many passive or absentee title-holders gladly rented off a piece of land. Some women had, on their own, managed to get stakes in maize cultivation by means of different sharecropping arrangements, a practice that seemed to increase women’s participation and say

in the maize-economy, but not necessarily within the household economy. This practice could appear as liminal from an administrative point of view, but provided space for others than the insiders - the ones that were categorised as parceleros by the IDA and other authorities. These practices represented a flexibility that also had opened up possibilities for women who would otherwise not have direct access to land.

Women who had rented land said that they saw growing maize as a better option than cooking and selling foods to meet their expenses; it was one of the few options they could find. When discussing these arrangements with the women, it became evident that many were concerned about the debts they had incurred with the pulpero, having had to buy food on credit. The women could only meet such debts by either growing maize to earn a lump sum to repay their debts or by winning the lottery. According to Doña Betina:

*Un hectarea maíz para pagar la cuenta de la comida en el comisariato, un deficit terrible en la pul tengo*

(One ha. of maize to pay the food bill in the shop, I have a terrible deficit in the shop)

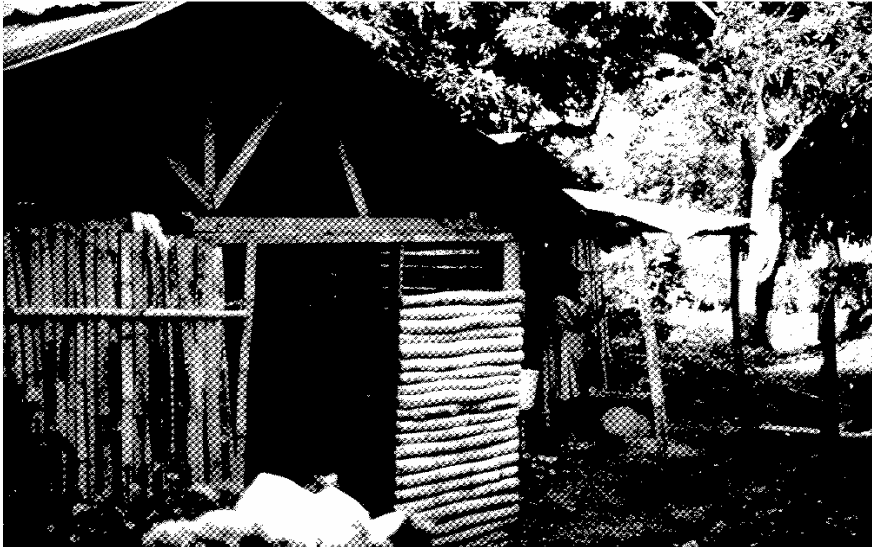
The problem was not only access to available lands, but also that the agricultural activity of maize growing often could better be characterised as a lottery. There was story after story about how much people had lost when the harvest failed on rented land, and people ended up indebted and without land to fallback on. Doña Tatiana was among the ones who had tried to get hold of her own farmland, in vain. She was responsible for many children and had often been in a precariously bad economic situation. Last year she had tried to overcome this by sowing maize as she was able to mobilise two brothers to work as peones, with herself assisting. She had rented land for two thousand colones, taken a bank loan of 30 thousand colones co-signed by one of her brothers, what she needed to pay for work, seed and fertilizer.

*y nos fue mal porque un viento lo roto la tierra y de los 30.000 C que invertí, solo saque 18.000 colones, no puedo pagarle al banco, tengo que volver a sembrar para pagarle aunque sea solo los intereses para no quedar tan mal.<sup>183</sup>*

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<sup>183</sup> 'It went bad because a storm destroyed the land and of the 30.000 colones that I invested I was left with only 18.000, I could not pay back the bank and have to sow again in order to pay, only to pay for the interest...

Now she was compelled to sow a second time to meet the debt incurred by her loss, but had found out that she could rent land cheaper from another woman landowner who said she would take only 800 colones for one hectare a growing season.



Farmhouse in Coto Sur

This very flexible sharecropping system that was practiced in Coto Sur seemed to be quite common, and it did involve women by granting them a limited access to land and by providing labour, normally through their own kin, in many ways a grey, or invisible space. One may characterise this as form of a nested cash economy in which women could get access.

#### *Women, Cash, Survival, and Piece-rate Payments*

In Coto Sur cash incomes are mainly derived from the sales of agricultural produce. To what extent subsistence farming is important for people's survival and livelihoods is not easy to say, as there in our material were so many different variations that any accurate answer is impossible to give. However, there was no doubt that for a number of women, growing of own food, (white) maize, beans, rice, plantains etc., was what had kept them and their children alive, as other income sources were irregular in periods. We also encountered a

handful of women who had histories of desertion or widowhood and who survived<sup>184</sup> on a tiny plot of land they got access to through kin or others, all of them in non-formalised systems. By growing their own foodstuffs using simple technology, receiving a little help from kin or others, as well as some occasional economic assistance from grown up children, they stayed alive. They were probably the only ones in the Coto Sur settlement who could really be denominated as subsistence farmers, but they had no security in the land. Nonetheless, they would also need cash for bus tickets, soap, sugar, salt and coffee, and occasionally some equipment. As so many others in Coto Sur they were constantly on the lookout for a way to make money, but if they were living in the back of the settlement as many did, there were few marketing possibilities.

There were also men who lived alone in similar conditions, but who could to a greater extent carry out occasional jobs, even if many of them suffered from old injuries or bad health. They could do some work in the fields, assist with some construction work, repairs, looking after land for absentee owners, and travel off to find work. Many of those men had established some sort of mutual relationships with women in that they received personal services, like foods or laundry services from women, in exchange for some maintenance work. There was a cultural acceptance that men could wander off if they so wanted, which women were not able to do without consequences.

The salient role played by piece-rate payments encountered in Coto Sur probably contributed to keeping many people going. Women did to a much lesser degree than men work as peones on other people's land, when they did, it was usually for brothers, sons, uncles or other kin harvesting cocoa beans or maize. This local piece-rate system that existed in Coto Sur favoured men structurally, but as women more often were in desperate need for cash to feed and clothe children, they reported on participating in such arrangements when being

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<sup>184</sup> These were not among the interviewed women, but we met them either through mobilisations or the SMFC heard from others, they probably were more numerous, living literally 'hidden in the woods'. It was simpler to live in this manner further out in the settlement than in the central La Plancha district, in which there was more room and more dispersed population as well as less utilised land.



called upon, particularly when sons were involved, as they provided small, but crucial cash incomes. This occurred, as doña Mayela put it; “*cuando le pegaba*”(when it ‘hit’ her), and then she would receive her 200 colones a day pay when one of her sons and her *compañero* created a project. The women needed cash desperately and would favour transactions where they would be left with cash in hand, even if the result was very meagre considering the efforts put in to obtain the money and it certainly did not ‘pay’ under more ordinary circumstances.

Some women also told us about organising barter arrangements and exchanges of the resources they did have control over. These very often were chicken, cocoa, pigs and cows, and were exchanged for soap, rice and *brillo* at the local *pulpería* or through *conocidos* (people they knew). Many women had a lot of practice carrying out such *negocios* (negotiations), but usually with much smaller stakes than men, and consequently had fewer total losses as well. When men talked about *negocios* the term had a very different meaning. They were aiming at striking big deals and long-time engagements, whereas for women these words could refer to very tiny amounts.

In this empirical material from Coto Sur no women received any pensions or public assistance as few of them had had any connections with a formalised labour market before. They had worked as domestics or in other ways fended for themselves in informal economies, in contrast to many of the men, especially the ones who had a long career in the Banana Company and could receive pensions, or had been eligible for compensation money when the banana farms closed down. Depending on whether or not they had been linked up to the public health system, women could be considered as recipients of welfare-state support, but the knowledge about this was meagre to non-existent among the women. Some had hardly been in contact with public institutions at all, except occasionally meeting medical personnel and their children’s schoolteachers. One may therefore say that at this stage the female population in the Coto Sur settlement was to a very limited extent incorporated in the Costa

Rican welfare state and its provision services for vulnerable citizens, a task the SMFC team saw as a major one for them to make the women aware of.

The SMFC Women's Project had, as one of its major goals, to document women's contributions on the farms in order to legitimate and formulate better and more appropriate assistance to women in the IDA's settlements. In the material we collected it is evident that one has to consider the whole array of activities that the women were carrying out hoping to render some cash incomes because focusing only on their 'contribution to production' would be a much too limiting approach and not fair to the women's efforts. An example is the income-streams women generated from the 'chicken and tortilla' economy (above) and was what made many people survive from day to day. These streams only represent a very small, but for the women indispensable, part of total income in the domestic units.

### **Household Livelihoods?**

Women in Coto Sur were working more - for less - to put it simply, and seeking to get access to cash through their own and others' ingenuity, often labelled as differentiations and most literature in this field still takes it that it is the household unit that seeks to solve the financial difficulties. In spite of much criticism from particularly feminist researchers, one still encounters an abundance of rather crude viewpoints coined as 'household strategies', or 'household diversification for livelihoods' (Ellis 1998, 2000; Bryceson 2000), and in which the household is considered as an intentionally acting, and mainly unitary unit. This may very well have empirical support, particularly in times of economic crisis,<sup>185</sup> but when considering gendered and other internal relationships, the household remains too coarse-meshed to capture power relationships (Pearson 1997). These so-called household strategies are seen as:

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<sup>185</sup> There has been found examples of a 'return to the household' strategy in poor neighbourhoods in big cities as a consequence of economic crisis, see for instance Mingione (1994). See also Blanc and MacKinnon (1990); Friedman (1979); Gasson and Winter (1992); Lem (1988);

livelihood diversification is defined as the process by which rural families construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support capabilities in order to survive and improve their standard of living (Ellis 1998:1).<sup>186</sup>

He argues, moreover, that diversification occurs either as a deliberate household strategy, or as an involuntary response to crisis, and that livelihood diversification is not synonymous with income diversification. It can be noted that seemingly Ellis uses both 'rural families' and 'households' without many qualifications<sup>187</sup>, but there needs to be a critical deconstruction of what in reality makes up the households in Coto Sur in order to focus on the situation of the women.

## **Redistribution and Bargaining, Conflicts and Cooperation in the Farming Household**

*Households is a matrix of complex relationships* (Bina Agarwal 1994)

The findings in Coto Sur echoed many feminist contributions that have scrutinised the assumed unitary household economy; and instead have asked: which are the significant units of production consumption and investment, in this region/people/- and thus searching for the major flows and transfer of resources between individuals and units? (Moore 1992, based on Guyer and Peters 1987).

The argument is that gender relations and gender ideologies<sup>188</sup> are crucial for understanding patterns of resource flows within the household and beyond, ongoing processes which give rise to loci of production, consumption and investment. Henrietta Moore (1992)

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<sup>186</sup> He lists a number of typical arenas, household risk strategies, household coping strategies, intra-household relations, rural growth linkages, and rural non-farming activity (Ellis 1998)

<sup>187</sup> Ellis (1998) distinguishes between farm, non-farm and off-farm income sources (,3) which, when seeing it from women's point of view in Coto Sur simply does not make sense, it rather veils and even make women's efforts invisible.

<sup>188</sup> 'Gender ideology'- serves to legitimate patterned forms of gendered relations within a cultural entity and may be contrasted among cultural entities' (Hamilton 1998: note 13)

suggests that one should consider the household mainly as a redistributive system, which arises from the particular relationships established between productive and reproductive labour in a given context. The household may be the nodal point, she says, but it is this system of redistribution that links it to kinship, local community organisation, regional and political structures, the state, and the wider international context. Feminist academics have questioned the assumptions behind the unitary household model and directed attention to power relations and inequalities within, the often referred to intra-household relationships, and raising questions of what is fair and for whom? Realising and accepting that the members of a household do not share equally, and are not equals from the start. The assumed altruism by male household heads has been criticised by feminists for years, pointing to the cultural norms that are taken for granted and not being questioned, most important among them: gendered norms about the naturalness of gendered division of labour, and the idea that all resources are pooled in a household, and thereafter redistributed to members according to needs.

These cultural, gendered norms are contested and are among important questions to pose when analysing households.<sup>189</sup> Henrietta Moore (1992, 1994) also drawing on Granovetter's (1982,1985) embeddement concept, points to deconstruction of the unitary - and - self-contained household, placing the household in society, and arguing that it has to be considered as a unit with porous and permeable boundaries. Bina Agarwal's (1994) reminder, that 'households is a matrix of complex relationships' I think is an unparalleled point around which to shed light on different social processes taking place between groups of people sharing various parts of their lives, whether they are labelled families, households, domestic units, or family farms, and render outcomes that may appear as just or unjust, and which gives rise to discussions of, and claims to gendered equity.

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<sup>189</sup> Since the late 1980s and early 1990s so-called 'Gender and Intra/-inter household analysis' (IHH) have been elaborated especially for rural or farming households for use by donor and executive agencies, in which the WHO and HOW words (who gets and does what) is the very central. See Poats, et al. (1989)

In the 1990s<sup>190</sup> Amartya Sen's work has inspired feminist economists and others conceptualising and analysing households and domestic units, in the main built on the ideas from game-theory, but applied in a much wider context. Sen's concept of 'cooperative conflict' (1990) has been influential both in household economics as well in development debates (connected to his 'capability approach'). Sen's perspectives on poor women's 'perceived interests', their understandings of personal welfare, says Sen, will not be viable in traditional analyses. He is concerned with ideology and meaning, that they are essentially illusions, that one should be concerned about 'objective' conditions that they mask (Hart 1992). This cooperative conflict, as Sen coined it, implies that members of a household face two different types of problems simultaneously, one requiring cooperation (adding to total availabilities) and the other - conflict (dividing the total availabilities among the members of the household).

Others have been concerned about who defines such 'objective needs' as both Sen and others see as crucial for redistribution within households. Henrietta Moore (1992, 1994), drawing on Nancy Fraser's 'needs analysis';<sup>191</sup> says one has to consider whether women's (and others') needs are recognised, and on what terms, that is to have a focus on how domestic consent is produced and maintained, on ideology and production of meaning; in other words that it is more fruitful to focus on how these 'perceptions' are produced and maintained, and on the conditions under which they are challenged and contested.

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<sup>190</sup> The journal *Feminist Economics* was established in 1993 and has been an important arena for these debates, Vol. 9, (2003) was especially dedicated to Sen's work. Also in the journals *World Development*, and *Development and Change* there have been many articles on these matters the past decade or so.

<sup>191</sup> Nancy Fraser (1989) says needs should be considered discursively, that there are a) struggles to establish or deny a need b) the struggles for the power to define it and satisfy it, and 3) the struggle over the satisfaction of a need.

### **Intra-household Bargaining**

The assumption that 'heads of households' distribute resources altruistically between the members has since long been abandoned by feminist researchers. Gillian Hart, drawing on Guyer (1981) says;

That from this perspective the household appears as a political arena constituted by particularly dense bundles of rules, rights and obligations, governing relations between women and men, elders and juniors' (1992: 122).

She sustains that the household must be perceived as an utterly political unit, in which members continually contest 'the rules and regulations', for instance that women would be given a subordinate position. These rules defining property rights, resource distribution etc. are culturally available, but not fixed and given. Thus, in so-called intra-household bargaining models one also must consider how meanings are produced, maintained, and contested. Others have been concentrating more on 'agency' and how some persons could be harder bargainers than others (Iversen 2003; Kabeer 1999). Folbre (1988) has used bargaining models in analysing households, models that had been elaborated in the 1950s originally.<sup>192</sup> She pointed to the fact that the relative bargaining power had been defined by exogenously given wages and prices, but she attempted to come to grips with agency/structure, and pointed to how gender seemed to be confined in the domestic sphere, while extra-domestic relations effectively were regarded as ungendered. She and others, among them Guyer and Peters (1987), Roldán and Benería (1987), have found bargaining models useful when analysing households, but insist that women tended to be considered as passive victims in such models.

Of fundamental interest are the negotiations - or lack of - based on the so-called *conjugal contract*<sup>193</sup> between the spouses, of which the situation in Coto Sur will be discussed

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<sup>192</sup> The so-called 'Nash bargaining models' of which the idea of a 'threat point' – or fallback position is crucial for the result. See especially Amartya Sen's work on elaborating on bargaining models.

<sup>193</sup> Whitehead (1981) is credited to have introduced the idea of the conjugal contract to describe 'the terms on which products and income produced by the labour of both husband and wife, are divided to meet their personal

in chapter 5, and particularly relating to another of the Women's Programme issues, women's access to land. This linking of gender and power in both domestic and extra-domestic processes are both analytically and empirically demanding, but it does, as Hart and others maintain, open up for concrete inquiry of much of what is taken for granted in unitary models which, by definition, invoke strong assumptions about intra-household power relations.

### **Pooling of Resources? Parallel and Common Funds in the Domestic Economy in Coto Sur**

The assumption that households pool all resources has also been criticised, and empirical studies have demonstrated that it is a questionable assumption, coined in Fapohonda's concept of the 'non-pooling household' (1988). The gendered norms about incomepooling may include such as maternal altruism, women who simply do not make distinctions between their own interests and those of their children etc. The systems of household budgeting and individual - and collective needs are therefore important to scrutinize concerning decision-making. Evidence from many parts of the world shows that men and women tend to control different streams of income (Elson 2000: 151)

For example, the income being redistributed to possible co-financers of the agricultural projects' (seasonal maize-growing, papayas, etc.) in Coto Sur was an economic issue that not always was clear to many of the women. Substantial efforts were used in the SMFC Women's Groups trying both to untangle each participant's situation as well as making her conscious about what was taking place in *el agro*, when the women often, in the beginning, sustained the big "we", that they were a unit. However, elaborating on the collected empirical material it turned out that there were substantial leakages in many

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and collective needs' (1981:108) Moore (1992) adds that when people discuss the terms of their marital contract or the allocation of resources they usually do so in terms of rights and needs, women may have rights to pooled resources, but their ability to exercise those rights is likely to be determined by various cultural and contextual evaluations of need (1992: 134) See i.e Roldán her studies of households in Mexico 1988, Whitehead- that this contract (not the legal one) is based on normative understandings of the marital relations, and that inequalities of power become manifest in the interpretation of the terms of the contract.

households, that is income streams that deviated before ever reaching the doorstep. More often than not the women in the beginning also tended to underestimate their own incomes, saying that they had no incomes, indicating they did not really see the household as a unit after all.

Looking at the surveys that were made in the SMFC Women's Programme (part of the demand for reporting) when women were asked about their (household) incomes, what eventually turned up and when puzzling the information together, was that they more often than not were in accordance at all. This indicates that it is not sufficient only to consider the final sums, or assumed pooled incomes when discussing for example decision-making in the households, some of which have already been indicated above. It invites to also take the SMFC's and WID/GAD issue of women's access to resources - land in particular - into account. Kabeer (1994) argues that another aspect of the division of labour relevant to the distribution of decision-making power within the household relates to the differing potential for control or autonomy embodied in different labour relationships. Both the altruistic-, and the bargaining models posit a correlation between welfare levels and economic contributions of household members, but offer different explanations for it.

### **Domestic Low-Capital Budgets**

The sessions in the SMFC Women's Groups in Coto Sur gave inestimable information about the participants' economic situation and their thinking around it, particularly because the promoters went to great lengths to try to improve the women's lacking long-time budgeting and (lack) of savings practices. They made attempts to go through each and every member's incomes and expenses, a nitty-gritty job indeed, in order to help the women to improve their situation. In addition to this, we enquired about income-streams and costs when visiting the



women's households/domestic units, and it is on basis of this, far from exhaustive information, that I have been able to construct approximate household budgets.<sup>194</sup>

We found out that in the majority of these households the most necessary purchases were bought at the local shopkeeper's on credit. Although women were the sole responsible for the running of the domestic economy, the most typical arrangement was that the men (were expected to) took care of negotiating re-payments arrangements, although many women said that in the end they often had to do it themselves. Men were expected to purchase gas for cooking, and to carry out purchases *por mayor* (larger quantities) if possible, directly from travelling tradesmen or through cooperatives.

The women living in such arrangements said they simply had to do with what they had at their disposal, and as many of them admitted, could be very little. Very few of these women had access to much cash at all, although the keeping of the household required cash just about every day.

None of the women received or had control over what often is called 'allowances', house maintenance money; to pay for the daily expenses, in fact there were several women who did not see a penny for months and had to rely on credit, loans, instalments, and what they may have at their disposal. How much quarrelling that did occur in the households in Coto Sur over access to money is hard to say, much of it was apparently taking place through several detours if we were able to interpret the women correctly. As mentioned before, this was often a delicate matter for the women, trying to keep up appearance and dignity as best they could. In some of these households there were women who hardly laid hand on any money at all (except what they kept secretly) as the man/farmer/head of household dealt with all external economic relationships, while there were also some women who were *de facto*

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<sup>194</sup> There is no room for presenting these calculations here; it was possible to arrive at a sum of between 15.- 20.000 colones as a minimum it was possible to survive on in a farm household in the autumn of 1986; including 4-5 children and 2-3 adults. Then they would rely on access to self-produced foods; maize, beans, plantains etc., and afford no extraordinary expenses. The ordinary expenses were fuel, school equipment, clothing, personal items, medicines, transportation, and items to the house. Debts were kept out of these budgets.

controlling the domestic economy (for instance the ones who had more schooling than their compañeros) but they also did, as much as they could, try to conceal this, by making the man appear as the one in economic control.



The CNP Expendio in Laurel

What these calculations did not reveal, was how they had come about, about control over - and access to - different resources, and whether or not there was agreement in their household about the ranking in importance of the items to be purchased, or how incomes were redistributed to the various items, and ultimately; which needs were met, or not. These households were to various degrees agricultural and interpretations of what was considered to be farm expenses - and investments, - and what was 'domestic' varied enormously, depending on who we talked to, and what they considered of importance. This was crucial in looking closer at what the women for example would consider their domain and responsibility, and what was others.

### **Parallel Funds and Gastos Aparte**

In typical domestic budgets constructed in Coto Sur it was difficult to encounter a common household pool, the situation could better be described as diverse parallel funds of varying sizes; and this, in turn, required a more meticulous observation of the control over resources and how bargaining would take place, and who would be involved. For example if two brothers might go for a 50/50 arrangement in a productive project; the landowner/farmer/brother would decide on the use of the land etc., usually without consulting the woman at all. Raising the question of who would be in control, when and where, for example? Nor were there apparent agreement as to what was to be channelled to a central fund, or what was to be considered a common fund, and who would get access and who would make the decisions. In Wilk's (1989) discussion about decision making and resource flows within households, he designates different names and contents on such a central fund, or the occurrence other funds (investment-, operating-, or nested-funds', etc.), and in many studies a so-called 'housekeeping allowance', that is money provided housewives is a case in point. This has been found particularly in working-class households in the North, and is less plausible in rural/farming households, although at times this housekeeping allowance or central fund could be one and the same, as long as it is a fund provided by others, for the woman to administer.

As stated, there were, in most of the domestic units in Coto Sur several income-streams, and following these - the main pattern that emerged was that they tended to remain separate and parallel, and were decided upon and spent on different things, before even entering any pool. The women's micro-economies, for example, discussed above (their cooking, sewing, selling chicken and eggs), did not enter any common fund at all, it was spent the moment the money were realized on immediate demands, food for the next day, pencils and school books etc., and which - as the women saw it - ought to have been covered by a

common fund that did not exist. Discussing the matter with the women, they were angry at men who did not pay for their children's upkeep, but to what extent they really confronted them, face to face, was hard to say. A conflicting point was therefore not only the lack of such central funds in many of the domestic economies in Coto Sur, rather what was supposed to be covered by such a common fund in the households, and how was it then put together? This varied substantially between the domestic units we studied, depending on age, number of people, level of living etc. In most cases the 'resulting fund' (which perhaps would be the most apt description) was insufficient to cover basic needs, and discussions as to who were to contribute, with what, for what, etc. seemed to be omnipresent, but as mentioned over and over again, very often disguised as something else.

There are variations, all assets are not necessarily pooled, some may be kept individually, and the redistribution might be dependent not only on internal bargaining, but also on cultural norms at large, which may involve colonial legacies, marriage and inheritance laws etc. (Folbre 1991), as well as state welfare provisions and to what extent they interfere with the households and family constructions. Diane Elson discusses gendered norms about income pooling, that they can be based in:

culture of maternal altruism - in culture where women simply do not make a distinction between their own interests and those of their children - where food to sons (rather than daughters - in Asia), and rights for men to deduct for personal spending' (2000: 149).

Kabeer (1994) holds that generally speaking women are better able to control the proceeds of their labour when production processes are segregated by separate fields, separate crops, separate sectors, or separate accounting units. In Coto Sur women's toiling with the Chicken and Tortilla economy was an all women-affair, into which men had no insights. Bargaining and negotiations between women and men, and indeed between persons of the same gender,

are often about definitions and interpretations, that gender relations are always involved with power (Moore 1992).

There were also resources that were kept separate in that they were meant for particular usages, an example is the *milpa* (maize field) *el mundial* cultivated by two young brothers who wanted to buy a TV set to watch the World football championships (El Mundial) in 1986, but there also example of sowing a *milpa* for tenth to a church congregation, or even for special medicines, or something else, but as stated, those were always kept apart (*gastos aparte*), never pooled.

### **Leakages and Control Points**

Gudeman (1978) studied smallholder households in a village in Panamá in the 1970s, and one of his main points was that these households were unitary and struggled to remain as such, and keeping resources inside the house was key to that

Outside the household one avoids *compromisos*, being dependent on others, being in debt; and a person bears little responsibility of others - in the community. The people will discuss in great detail their sicknesses, which they are not thought to be responsible, but never their hunger, for which they are (1978: 40).

His point is that people try to avoid any leakages out of the household unit, a theme that also was considered a problem by the women in Coto Sur, but for different reasons. First, women were aware of the fact that not all income-streams entered a common household fund. in addition to the *gastos aparte*, the women's own incomes, remittances, there were pay-offs to partners in the men's projects, debts with the banks, but what the women feared and considered as potential leakages, was that men would not return all the income they controlled to the running of the household.

With the typical division of labour in most farm households knowledge about what was being produced and sold was not always easy to keep track of, as there were few deals written on papers. At first it did surprise me that many women, even those who never worked the land, demonstrated detailed insights in the prices paid of the CNP for maize, as well as how big the farms' production was, when they in reality did not portray themselves as active participants and contributors to the running of the farm at all. But, with such precarious living as most of them had in the mid 1980s, any deviations of income-streams had to be avoided and was probably why women on the farms tried to keep track of every single sack of maize, they were counting and calculating with great care, not necessarily overtly, but to be able to estimate what they had to live from, but also to see to that money did not go to drinking parties or other women. On paydays in Laurel, or when the credit loans were made available in the bank, a familiar sight was a dressed up woman accompanying her spouse to ensure that money are brought where they are supposed to, and not to drinking parties in Neilly.

Many men, assumed to be full time farmers, were spending much time away out seeking other jobs and income between harvests, and whether money earned from these activities was deviated or not, the women could only make guesses about, they had little or no control on that income. This situations encountered did expose and rectify that the expectations to men, as providers, and women to be provided for, still, in an agricultural reform setting, was absolutely existent. The complex sewing together of a domestic budget, and the lack of common funds in Coto Sur demonstrated that although men tended to have considerably more control over resources and their uses than women, they did not have total, patriarchal control, there could be too many crossing interests within the same domestic unit, but seemed to be more in control concerning what they considered their money should be used for.

Roldán (1988) studied working class households in Mexico, in which men were the main income-earners, and detected a number of what she refers to as 'control points' which

she says is that the flow of incoming money was subject to certain controls exercised by men. A few such control points have already been mentioned in Coto Sur, but the chain of events must be seen in a longer time-perspective in a producing farm household than in a wage earning one. In fact, the very allocation of land to assumed 'heads of households' could indeed be considered as a 'control point', as well as their deviating of outside incomes. Women contesting these control points, could be read as contesting and re-negotiate the conjugal contract.

The situation unveiled in farming households in Coto Sur was in line with what has been found in other Central American countries in the 1980s. Constantina Safilios-Rotschild (1988, 1990) studied gender dynamics of income as they occur under the pressures of poverty and socio-economic change in a rural reform project in Honduras, and concludes that '- income pooling was not frequent in these rural households' (1988: 222), she estimated that in her material only 25% of the households surveyed was all income pooled. Safilios- Rotschild also notices that women tend to exaggerate their ability to control men's income, while men generally underestimated women's incomes. In another study from Honduras it was found that about 1/3 of income was withheld from collective household funds (Bradshaw 1995). In a study from coastal Ecuador, Lynne Phillips (1989) has shown how different rural households with access to resources provide the women unequal degrees of freedom, concerning their networking activities, and it is exactly the relationships to men, and their capacity/wish as providers, and the possibility of spreading an income over multiple household that is a critical point. The better off a farm household is, the greater is the probability for the men maintaining more than one household. Consequently it will not be in all women's interests to contribute to prosperity above a certain level, Phillips argues, and illustrates this with some interesting case studies. The fact that so many men in the Coto Sur settlement often was on the road, searching additional outcomes, did open the possibilities to striking new relationships with women, and consequently leakages in the household economy, and which

also was an underlying assumption in several bargaining situations in households in Coto Sur as well. One may therefore say that the ultimate goal for women in Coto Sur was to secure as much as possible of all income streams to some sort of common fund.

### **Remittances and Other Transactions**

Many women in Coto Sur, after almost unanimously claiming that “nobody helps me” (*nadie me ayuden*) when dissolving their meagre income-sources, did admit that they were receiving what is often labelled as remittances. These could appear in cash or kind, and their sources were their sons, who would either send a small sum of money or buy their mothers gas for the kitchen, batteries for radios or other gadgets. These were incoming resources that the women alone had access and control over, but they were also income-streams that hardly could be described as regular, as many of their senders were not in regular jobs, or only sent it when it suited them. The existence of and amounts of those remittances could be hard to discover, a woman would perhaps hint to having a son who ‘helped’ her out occasionally, and we would in our conversations try to find out how these transactions were taking place. The answers depended much on how remittances are being defined, and if she really wanted to reveal the existence of it. In Coto Sur it was, as demonstrated, mainly older sisters or brothers paying younger ones’ school expenses, or helping them with jobs and places to live when they migrated to town. This reciprocity is meaningful, how it functions, and how it is talked about.

Some of the mothers who have sons in the Banana Cooperative do distinguish between the sorts of help they receive from their sons, if they received cash or things of market value, like gas for cooking. They even can happen to say: “My son does not help his old mother”, which he certainly does, if the relationship is not in cash. Often the ‘not-helping’ idiom was but a way of talking, perhaps to keep the attention away from it.



However, other forms of remittances such as food usually went the other way, from the farms in Coto Sur, providing close relatives with maize, or fruits, which they eventually could trade for other necessities. These transactions within networks of the Coto Surian households stretched to the Valle Central, particularly in the southern less affluent parts of San José, where children tended to settle. But also to the banana plantations in the Limón province, and many had links to another large IDA settlement, Río Frío, on the Atlantic slopes. The relationships to Guanacaste seemed to weaken as so many had outmigrated. Some men did frequently go to work on farms in Guanacaste, where relatives - or other women - still were living. Hence, the domestic economies in Coto Sur could be small in size, but quite extended in scale, which, one must assume, did inflict on the women's more long-term bargaining positions, as it tended to be they who were keeping up their kinship networks, as it was the only security they in reality had.

### **A Complex Subject Matter**

In Coto Sur the internal household bargaining was a most complex subject matter to come about and often the end result, that is how resources were redistributed, seemed to depend much on the degree of male, physical presence in the household, and of course, how much real control he exercised over resources, money, income etc. Listening carefully to the women one must assume that there must have been many struggles over the years, indicating that the household's previous history frequently was decisive for the outcome, an issue that will be pursued in chapter 5.

When a couple were ostensibly bargaining about the household budget, they could in reality be negotiating about much more than that, and gender ideologies were decisive of what strategies men and women can use. The women had to consider all of this in their careful drives to try to maximise what they saw as the income potentials. In most of the households in

Coto Sur men were controlling land and there were numerous conflicts over money and resources; that was confirmed by the IDA social worker as well. The women did not necessarily phrase the situation that way; one had to learn to ‘read’ their ways of talking in this matter, and as Katz argues; ‘unitary, cooperative, non-cooperative and ‘collective’ decision-making rules may all co-exist in the same household’ (1996: 19).<sup>195</sup>

Agarwal (1997) focuses on what she sees as critical to bargaining outcomes, and asks a long row of central questions in that regard, among them are: What determines intra-household bargaining power? Are there differences in the relative factors, which determine so-called fall-back positions? How are the bargaining processes and outcomes affected by differences in individual perceptions (about needs, contributions, etc.) and pursuit of self-interest? Which are the links between intra-household bargaining and bargaining outside the household (market, state etc.)? And what determines extra-household bargaining power? (1997: 6)

Many of her points can be discussed based on the material from Coto Sur, and I have taken out some of them that were definitely recognisable. In an attempt to identify the determinants of bargaining outcomes she says that one must grapple with several complexities, and she has elaborated several such factors, and repeats that it is central to be aware of the wide range of such. In Coto Sur this should already have been demonstrated.

## **Women and Land: Some Contextualisations**

### **The Land Issue - not Part of the Negotiations?**

*Take arable land. One could argue that land-owning women would have a stronger fall-back position and therefore greater bargaining power than landless women vis-à-vis the allocation of household subsistence. But to gain a share of arable land may itself require bargaining, and a somewhat different set of factors would determine women’s bargaining power in relation to land’ (Agarwal 1994: 7).*

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<sup>195</sup> Here cited in Agarwal 1997:5

The previous glimpses into negotiations and bargaining in the domestic units in Coto Sur disclosed that women's access to land was not part of the deliberations. In spite of the SMFC's efforts to place this issue on the agenda, institutionally, by working towards changing the laws and regulations in the country, and in everyday practices in the Coto Sur settlement. It could seem as if land in Coto Sur still, in 1986, for many women was beyond the limit of what they imagined could be bargained about, that it was uncontested, in spite both seeing examples of successful women farmers, and being informed by the SMFC team and the Women's Project about the political possibilities for change, a process that was just about starting to be initiated, but this apparently had to be interpreted more as an enlightenment project at this stage. That did not mean that there were not women - and bureaucrats - who were in favour of women's access to land, and some of the latter had helped women out (for example doña Leonora).

When bringing up this issue in the SMFC Women's Groups it was, initially at least, more or less a non-issue. Social norms seemed to be having a strong effect on what women were at all able to consider as apt to bargain about in their situation, and they did not then see it possible to start in that end, if they started to bargain about the farmland, how should that be considered, it was apparently incomprehensible for most of them. Social norms did not yet see the woman as the farmer as long as there was a man in the vicinity, and I have demonstrated how women over and over again did portray themselves as helpers and assistants and not as farmers when living in conjugal households. The women that did say they were farmers were the ones who de facto were, although they also would present themselves as housewives. The idea of property, of ownership to land, and that it was attainable for them I think did pose for many of the women a substantial dilemma; their struggle to become 'good women' and to create and maintain a home, and their long-term investment in this, probably occurred to most of them to something that they were not quite prepared for.

It is this self-perception that can limit how women can negotiate, and about what, referred to at times as being ‘accountable’ to one’s gender category (West and Zimmerman 2001). Formal household models discussed above assume fully aware, and typically self-interested, individuals participating in the bargaining process, and Sen, Agarwal and others ask; what if some household members do not act in their own interest and therefore do not bargain to their best advantage? Norms also affect bargaining power by defining the extent of voice a person has within the household, and by impinging the possibility for exit. Within the household cultural construction of appropriate female behaviour affects the ability to bargain and can impinge on their negotiating rights, including property claims.

At times women’s ambiguous attitude was incomprehensible for the SMFC team and they did really do their utmost to challenge the women with scenarios and games where it would pay to claim their legal rights. There were certainly several women who eventually stood up, but often were lacking both support and vocabulary to voice their claims. The experiences many women had, of being told, together with their children, to leave a parcel, if a man decided to engage in a new relationship, had not yet furnished some of them with enough confidence to allow themselves to see that things could be different, and certainly did play back to the SMFC’s wish to have knowledge about women’s perceptions when it came to further development work.

### **Little Knowledge about their Rights**

The magnitude of the Coto Sur settlement with close to 1500 individual parcels entailed that the authorities could not possibly keep track with all that was taking place. Many women, it turned out, had been illinformed about their legal rights; they had got little education and spent little time outside their farms. There were no long traditions, or strong families in a newly established settlement as Coto Sur, entailing that women’s potential fall-back was own

kin that often could be in the same precarious situation as themselves, nor was there a labour market for women from where they could earn a living. The best option still, was most likely to try to strike up a relationship with a man who had access to land, which many had done, without really thinking about it, nor being aware of what would happen when the law stroke in. The Costa Rican land laws had until then been favouring families through granting land to 'heads of households', taking for granted all the assumptions contested above, in order to create family-farms.

The civil code in Costa Rica as in the rest of Latin America provide equal inheritance for all children irrespective of sex, and spouses have full common property, but the separation of property prevails - which means that 'a husband may purchase property with household funds (generated by all or some of the members) but register such property, such as a land title, only in his own name. In the event of separation or divorce, the wife has little recourse in terms of claiming co-ownership if her name does not appear on the title. Moreover, if the wife's name is not on the title, the husband may sell or mortgage this land without her consent (Deere and León 2001: 53).

Often a double signature has been required for the sale of durable property, but this is rarely enforced in rural areas if the name of both spouses is not registered on the land title (García 1992 in Deere and León: 55). This certainly seemed to have been the situation for many in Coto Sur over time, I assume that we only uncovered a tiny, tiny part of that. In 1990 Costa Rica recognised consensual unions and in 1995 they also got the same inheritance rights as marriage recognized,<sup>196</sup> but this was after this study was carried out. This has been very important, as consensual unions often are the norm in rural areas in Central America.

In addition to claims on the state - which by this time had been initiated - to change the laws (Madden 1992; Deere and León 2001), and open for joint titling for example. It was

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<sup>196</sup> This also requires registration in presence of witnesses and a judge- costly and time consuming and thus discouraging many rural couples to do so. Deere and León (2001:56)

rather the women's perceptions, as well as society's; ostensibly in Coto Sur counting both IDA officials and most women; a view that women do not really need to own land; they will be taken care of. The examples that we came across in Coto Sur, which were probably only the top of the iceberg, were that the women who were de facto land owners - and farmers - had all become that due to widowhood, or male desertation, or for that matter, their own seeking land - to get away from a situation they did not find satisfactory on the banana plantations (chapter 2).

There were also women who were holders of land, on paper, but were not farming their land, or leaving that to men, and it turned out that many examples pointed to particular reasons for women holding the title; what we mostly encountered was that the woman held Costa Rican citizenship, while the man was foreigner, most typical Nicaraguan, and her signing had made the paper mill simpler.

By 1986 the titling process was far from solved, there were many (approximately 900) still without legal papers, after 10 years, and that was a fact that could open up for at least joint titling, having both names on the paper, and keenly argued for by the SMFC team, and was in a position as both educators and defenders at one and the same time.

On the other hand, there were also, simultaneously, many women who wanted access to land, but could not get it, because there was no more land to distribute.

In the 1990s there has been more focus upon women's rights, in addition to needs also in Costa Rica (Facio 1995), and Bina Agarwal's groundbreaking work on women's rights to land (1994) has been particularly important. She argues that it is important to distinguish 'land rights' from the more general and loosely used term, 'access' to land, while the SMFC mandate, written in the early 1980s, was using access argumentation in line with WID/GAD contemporary vocabulary. The rights arguments are about legal and social recognition enforced by an external legitimized authority, while access includes obtaining land, such as by borrowing it for cropping seasons from a relative or neighbour, as was demonstrated by

what I did call the 'grey zones' and the flexibility still possible to exercise in Coto Sur. This entailed that in Coto Sur many women had access, but not rights. The fact that credit is usually linked to land as collateral is also a critical variable when considering the women's situation.

What we did find in more than one case, even when women were de facto landowners, was that they were planning for sons to take over. They found it fine to be owners, but considered men both to be more apt and to need land more because they were expected to maintain families, and in this way the mothers transferred male dominated gendered norms. This attitude was tough fare for the researchers and the SMFC team alike, and we did have to take some rounds among us, and with the women debating it. Whether the women changed their minds, I do not know for sure, but they eventually would say, after being supported by the SMFC team, that they did not want their daughters to suffer in such a man's world. There were a few examples of some mother/daughter teams who had sorted it out and were running farms together. Those were people who had more education and more external connections and who had been able to see beyond the immediate situation, which was still a main challenge for the majority of women in the settlement. On the other hand, women farmers/owners - whether in name- or reality were apparently sought after in the marriage market, older widows told about young, landless men courting them, often to their great amusement. But it also could end up in relationships, and who then had the upper hand, was an interesting question.

It should also be recalled that when women in Coto Sur were talking about the invasions and their reasons for coming, the phrasing of "they were giving away land" is well worth returning to, and remember and how it can be interpreted. There is no doubt that the women who de facto were landowners had a better position in the settlement and in society as such. In the end I have myself begun to start wondering if it in was only 'land', as material

reality, symbol, idea and prospects that in reality kept society together in the Coto Sur settlement in this period of time?

### **Family-Farms and Farming as a (Male) Project?**

The family-farm has been an icon in rural settlement and land-policies, i.e. in agricultural reforms, but the family as such, has been taken for granted. A more detailed examination of families and households in Coto Sur will be carried out in the next chapter. Because this family was not necessarily uniform as some of the fragments of the women's histories should indicate, one would have to enquire into the institution called the family-farm, and I think it pertinent at this point to bring up a few arguments concerning the 'building of the family farm', as the assumption was in the establishment - and running of Coto Sur - and other - agricultural settlements.

A first point would be to consider if it after all was a family-farm these men - and women - had established in Coto Sur. And, second; was this, after all, a women-friendly arrangement? Concerning the farm enterprises encountered in the empirical material from Coto Sur, they could be described as some sort of composite project, in which a number of different activities were implemented. Based on the information we gathered, a better description would possibly be that most of the inhabitants living on parcels in Coto Sur were carrying out a cluster of projects of which the land and the tilling of it was but one, and that the men, overwhelmingly, were in control of most of these projects, thus it was a cluster of male controlled projects, under which women had their own, separate Chicken and Tortilla parts.

Scrutinizing the data from Coto Sur it was expedient to ask who are the stakeholders in these projects? A picture of a man-wife team did not always appear, but there were examples of it; doña Fermina and her compañero was perhaps the closest we could get in our



sample. As it were, it was a lot more typical that men tended to set up work - and financial relationships with other men. That gives reason to ask: whose projects were they? Were they family-, or household-, or men's projects in practice? When I have alluded to the latter in the title above it is based on observations from Coto Sur that will be further elaborated upon in the following chapters. What this does, however, is to bring back the question about what the family - or household - consists of? Literally to open up the family in then family-farm (*ff*) definition. As I pondered and battled with the information gathered in Coto Sur, I slowly realised that it was extremely easy to fall into the unitary family - or household - trap when analyzing the material, because it would more neatly fall into proper analytical categories and slots. However, the conflation of household with family is a returning one, which also helps to keep women invisible, and certainly, may question many agricultural reforms and their family-farming ideals, indeed.

## Chapter 5

# WOMEN, GENDER, AND 'LA FAMILIA CAMPESINA': ATTEMPTS AT UNTANGLING THE COTO SURIAN FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD

### Complex Households in Coto Sur

*Theorising the relationship between household and families is complicated not only by competing interpretations and cultural-linguistic specificities, but the fact that both entities are open to seemingly infinite variations on the ground' --. So close is the association between 'families' and 'households' that the two are often deployed interchangeably (Chant 2003: 162)*

### Household

The analytical concept household is generally considered as a basic social and economic unit (a residential unit), while the family is a social unit based on kinship, marriage and parenthood. Often the two - household and family - are used interchangeably; that for instance Moore (1992, 1994) and others are warning against. It is a long time since feminist researchers declared that households are not 'natural units',<sup>197</sup> but still, many seem not to have got the message, and keep mixing the household and family, or take it as a separate unit, for example when coining 'the faming family'. More analytical concepts, such a *households*, *domestic units*, *residence*, *house* etc.<sup>198</sup> have been tried out in order to deal with the women's situation and their well-being and livelihoods (as already started in the previous chapter), focusing mainly on economy and redistributive issues. There are many definitions of households, and there has also been a change from more definite and restricted definitions

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<sup>197</sup> The credit of coining it usually is given to Harris (1981), but there are many who have been on the same line of argumentation through the years.

<sup>198</sup> I have to admit that I blamelessly operated with 'families' in my first writings from 1988-90 It was long after that after closer readings of the empirical materials realised that I had been too quick.

gradually towards more open and inclusive ones. A well-known and much used definition is the following:

a socially recognized domestic group whose members usually share a residence and both organize and carry on a range of production, consumption, inheritance and reproductive activities whose specific contents varies by society, stage in the life cycle, and economic status (Wilk and Netting 1984, in Wilk (ed) 1989: 231).

The household term also tends to be used too generally, as the 'typical African Household', but there are also writers who suggest that one should abandon the concept 'household' altogether, and rather look for the units and processes of consumption, production, reproduction and redistribution (Macintosh 2000).

More analytical versions of the so-called household debates, have mainly taken place in two academic domains, anthropology and economics, which in turn have furnished the rest of the social science field with concepts and interpretations to have been applied - or as in feminist studies - contested - correspondingly. The main questions have been centring around the usefulness of seeing the household as an acting unit, and on the issue of fairness, rights and needs etc., in the redistribution of resources among the persons assumed to belong - or have a stake in the unit, and thus focusing on conflicts within the unit, as presented in chapter 4. It is in this latter perspective the conjugal relationships - and 'contracts' are key.

Traditionally anthropologists have been seeing the household as a unit with morality for sharing, and economist, especially after Howard Becker's New Household Economics in the late 1970s as apt for game-theory thinking. But there are several unsolved issues left, and there have been many who lately have argued for the need of rethinking the household, and develop alternative models of the unit. Among the problematic issues: how to delimit a household - who belongs - and who does not, and on what grounds? In economics for instance, it has been common to consider it as a separate unit; 'An identifiable thing called 'the household' marked by a sharp break in social and economic relations at the household

boundary' (Macintosh 2000:). There have also been numerous attempts at classifying different types of households, such as extended households, farming households, women-headed households, blended households, etc.<sup>199</sup> One may therefore, as Razawi puts it, say that it is 'Impossible to construct a simple dualism between male-headed and female headed households, impossible to interpret it in a meaningful way' (1999: 413). In order to try to disentangle the situation in Coto Sur, I will begin by presenting three households/domestic units.

### **Mayela**

Mayela lived on a parcel in the La Plancha district together with her compañero of the past fifteen years or so, don Eusebio, who was about 15 years her senior and in whose name the parcel was registered, although the papers were not straightened out as yet. They had one child, a ten years old son. Those three persons could perhaps typically be seen as a (farming) family. Yet, there are more people who were living in the house, working on the farm, or elsewhere, and who receive, or claim resources and care, and who to various degrees contribute to the farms production, the question is whether or not they were considered as part of the farming-family?

Doña Mayela had given birth to five children fathered by different men who had all deserted her in due order when she got pregnant before meeting with Eusebio (see chapter 2). For the time being two of her adult sons reside, on and off, in the house, but they are in constant conflict with Eusebio, they quarrel a lot because he thinks they are lazy and not working sufficiently. They are both involved with women, and one young woman who is now expecting one of Mayela's sons' child had come and asked if she could stay in this house, as her mother cannot afford to take her in. Mayela's son had refused to recognise fatherhood and

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<sup>199</sup> It has especially been the 'anomalie' of women-headed households in many societies that has spurred the interest it seems. See for instance Chant (1997, 2003b); Varley (1996); Stuart (1996); Himmelweit (2000); Folbre (1991).

taken off, nobody knew where he was for the moment. Another of Mayela's sons is a member in the banana cooperative and not living on the farm, but has occasionally invested capital in different projects carried out, like growing papaya for sale one season, or maize another. He lives with a woman with two children (hers) in one of the cuadrantes and he has several children with other women. Mayela tries to keep track of these grandchildren and she also has negotiated with the children's mothers and pressured her son to accept fatherhood legally, and for him to pay the mothers for the children's upbringing, without success so far.

On the other hand, it is this same son, who, through the cooperative has access to capital and who has helped his half-brothers with school expenses and his mother with fuel for her stove, gas, and bought her presents, etc. Her oldest son, who has got a higher education thanks to this brother, had moved to the Central Valley, never comes home, never sends anything, to Mayela's great sorrow. She thinks that they are not civilized enough for his wife, who is from San José.

Right now a one-year old baby has just moved into the house, a grandchild of Eusebio's. One of his daughters from a former union got pregnant and left the child here, so she could go to San José to work as a domestic in order to clothe the child. She comes and goes and lives in this house about once a month. Mayela has taken the child in, but thinks she is too old for so small ones, besides, she does not really think it right, the girl should stay with her own mother, but Eusebio had said yes. Eusebio's other children, he says he has six, some legally recognised, others not, are not living in this house, but some of them are called upon when he is to carry out a job, or if they happen to have access to cash to invest in one of his projects on the parcel. He has been talking about letting one of his sons put up a house on the parcel because he has no place of his own to live, and has two small children who lives with their mother in a room in her mother's house. This son is working as a Guardia Rural, and is away most of the time. Mayela is sure he has another woman where he works, and therefore eagerly supports this project, when she thinks about it, she figures that perhaps it was her own

idea after all? Eusebio is more interested in having access to his son's working capacities, he figures that having him live here would procure that in times of harvests.

Mayela's old and partly senile mother had also lived in this house the past 5-6 years; she requires continual care, screams at night, and drives Eusebio crazy. But, he says, Mayela is still good looking and such a good cook, and he laughs and says, "I am getting old myself and will need her to look after me rather soon". Mayela's father (her parents split up long ago) - over eighty years old, is almost blind and lives now with a sister of hers in one of the cuadrantes. But Mayela sends him food every day. She has four other sisters and brothers living in in the Southern Zone, they all are Guanacastecans by birth, and are the ones she says she can turn to in case of emergencies, but she does not see them much, except a sister who lives in Laurel and the one over in the cuadrante.

### **Elba**

Doña Elba's household is a case in point. The ones who now resided on the parcel where she lived were; her compañero and five of their ten children, aged 17, 13, 11, 9 and 7 years and who are all going to school. This household had spent a relatively short time on this parcel, they had arrived about three years ago from a banana plantation in Limón and had bought land of compensation her compañero had got, they had bought it cheaply because the former owners had incurred too much debt and had left.

Literally next-door, in two added-on rooms, resided her 22 years old daughter Beatriz with her compañero who was 33 years, he worked as an occasional landworker in the banana cooperative and they had three children; two boys and a girl. Beatriz said three children was sufficient, pointing to her mother whose life she considered too hard (had given birth twenty times and lost ten children). They had moved in here since her parents came and she had also been living in the Atlantic coast as a child, then gone to San José one year working as a maid,

but had returned to La Zona and had worked in a banana packing plant in Palmar where she had met her present compañero. He was son of a bananaro who had never recognized him and had been raised by his grandmother because his mother had left the Southern Zone to find work and had met another man who did not want to have him in his house. Elba's daughter said that they now had been talking about going to San José where he had some half-brothers living in Cinco Esquinas in Tibás where she figured they could get a little shed when searching for their own place to live. The way she expressed their wish to go was that they wanted more opportunities. Beatriz cooked on her own, washed clothes on her own, but tried to help her ailing mother when she could, and worked for her father - for money - when there was some harvesting to do.

In a cabin, about 20 meters off the house, resided Elba's oldest daughter Linda, with her three children, all in school, whom she had with two different men. She did not have a steady compañero for the moment and tried to make a living by working in a banana packing plant. She had also traveled to work in other packing plants in Palmar, and elsewhere, and had also been working on banana plantations on the Atlantic, sometimes taking her children with her, other times leaving them with her mother. She also had her own cooking and washing arrangements, but her sister Beatriz, or doña Elba looked after the children when she had to go away to work.

Within a radius of about 20 meters there were three different pots, cooked in the same kitchen and *pilas*; and latrine and well were also shared spaces. The way doña Elba perceived it, was that she "gives food" (*dar a comer*) to six persons, and thus that her house consisted of seven including herself. However, having her daughters so near she found comforting and assuring, she could help them looking after the children, and they helped her doing different things and were, obviously also, emotional support for her. On the other end of the parcel a son had moved into an old hut with his woman, but she did not cook, nor wash near the farm house. He worked occasionally for his father, as did Beatriz's compañero, thus on this parcel

none of the residing men working the land were doing it full time, and when they worked they were paid day wages. It was evident that it in the main was kinship that was organizing the living arrangements but not the pot, and probably also occasional access to the men's working capacities.

### **Leonora**

In doña Leonora's household the picture was also composite. Of her nine children, two daughters 18 and 17 years, and a son of 10 were living with her in the house. The girls assisted her with cooking and washing and ironing at night, as they both worked as domestics in private houses in Laurel during the day. Her compañero for the past seven years, Paco, was spending about half the week or so in the house when he was not away working as a land labourer at different farms in the Southern Zone. Sometimes he went to Guanacaste for perhaps half a year or so, helping his old mother. Leonora's twenty years old son worked with her in the fields, when he did not go off to seek work, he had lived in a separate hut right next to her house the past two years or so together with a compañera.

One day when we came to see doña Leonora she was very upset because she found herself stuck with her son's two children of only 9 months and 2 ½ years, respectively, and said she could not accomplish anything. It was, according to doña Leonora, the mother (of the children) who had deserted the children, and as her son was the children's father, she felt compelled to take them in. But she was angry and asked "*Como podría comportarse así, como madre?*" (How is it possible to behave like this as a mother?). It was Leonora's heartfelt conviction that it was a mother's responsibility to look after her children; it was nature, and also had to do with the soul (*alma*), she added. After all, she argued, had she raised nine children on her own, as their father had deserted them, but for a woman to leave her own children of flesh and blood was more than she was able to comprehend. Nevertheless, now she felt worn



out and did not want to care for small children any longer, it was so much work, they were so small, needed much care and attention, and all the extra laundry they produced upset her. She would have to wash for seven people, and she who preferred to be in *el monte*.

She thought her grandchildren's mother was *fresca* (impudent) as she had left the children behind when doña Leonora was in San José at the seminar that the SMFC and the team in Laurel had sent her to, to discuss the situation for women and development in the country,<sup>200</sup> because she knew that doña Leonora was unwilling to take them in. This girl, not yet 18 years had supposedly gone to Paso Canóas to work as a domestic.

Doña Leonora had not believed that was the truth, and had personally taken the bus to town and to search her up some weeks later and had, in fact, encountered her in the house the girl had said she was. She was paid 2000 colones a month, (approximately US\$ 30), a sum that doña Leonora found horribly small, to wash, clean, polish, cook, iron all day long, 6 days a week, but that is what they pay around here, she added. Her son, she said, "Poor boy, he does not know how to handle babies. And now he had no one to cook for him. He grew his own beans and maize. The *chiquitos* (the little ones) had used to be given food by the girl. Doña Leonora was resigned. She did only blame the girl, and what the real reason was for the girl's leaving, or whether or not she had negotiated with her son we never were able to find out.

### **Complex Relationships**

These three portrayals are not untypical for *familias campesinas* encountered in Coto Sur in 1986. It is rather that all of these complex relationships do not occur at once, or are not recognized, or talked about, or registered. I am not even sure if all of Mayela's complex family/kinship/household relationships are accounted for, her story was constructed as a result

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<sup>200</sup> The SMFC office in the IDA did have extensive networks within the WID/GAD circuit and were often invited to seminars etc., to which they always tried to send some 'Ordinary peasant women', and around 10 women in the Coto Sur settlement had been to such events. For more details see Valestrand (forthcoming).

of a long process of discussions, observations and spending time together with her, and it was not the story accounted for in her self-presentation in the SMFC Women's Group where she was a member. There she introduced herself as *La señora de don Eusebio, parcelero*' (the wife of the farmer don Eusebio).

Mayela's situation opens for many entrances to the setups and relationships in the households/families in the Coto Sur settlement, and so do Betina's and Leonora's. One could, for instance, begin by asking who is in practice to be considered as family? Which relations are steering which, who lives where, who cooks for whom, and who works for whom, when? And how are decisions taken, and about what? Moreover, how were women shaping and contesting the roles as wife, mother, or *mujer campesina*, and how were they influenced or constrained by gendered ideologies?

All three women belong to the generation that in spite of only being in their 40s had lived through difficult childhoods in Guanacaste, survived by sustaining themselves and children by all sorts of home-based hard work, had negative experiences with men. Mayela and Betina were indiscriminately introducing themselves as farmers' wives when out in the settlement. Mayela, for example appeared in many ways as a loner, a survivor, who tried to make the best of her situation, and tried to ease her children's and grandchildren's complicated lives, and in that way constructing her family.

However, when cross-reading the empirical material, many complex relationships emerged that would have to be taken into account if it was the women's situation and well-being in Coto Sur that was at stake. In one house (hold) after the other in Coto Sur the domestic units or arrangements displayed similar and dissimilar patterns; the personnel living there, under the same, or very adjacent - (spatially speaking) - roofs, were rarely eating from the same pot, but cooking and giving of food was the women's way of conceptualizing for whom they were responsible. It included also personal service like washing and ironing, for men, and other dependants. This relationship was only exposed when the women told stories

about their lives and particular events, and could also be observed when staying for a while in a house. Women's services could be extended beyond the immediate residence, but also function as markers, to distinguish between receivers according to gender, age, kinship- and other relationships. The women were, in this manner, carrying out some very delicate balancing acts and in subtle ways exercising the power they had in the households, and in this way provided personell different positions and statuses. Interestingly, women's speak often would not reveal any of this, they would frequently portray themselves as treating everyone equally. Much of the key to this internal distinguishing was to be found in the history of the formations of the households. There were many indications in Coto Sur pointing to complex, even conflictive household relations, in spite of the women's constant attempts at presenting them as proper families. This gives a clue to start at home, in the house, to look closer at how women constructed their households. Among our women informants and discussants<sup>201</sup> in Coto Sur who were related to agriculture, it turned out that there were only a handful that lived in what could be categorised as nuclear families; consisting of a married/co-habiting couple with their own biological offspring. Variations were numerous, as will be returned to shortly.

In other words it has proved increasingly problematic to encounter a typical Coto Surian family in the empirical material from the settlement. The more I searched, read, and tried to decipher, constructing all sorts of kinship-trees, matrices, arrows and boxes, the more complex it got. The closest I came to what was could be described as a nuclear family, was the newly married doña Jeanette, who resided in her little house with husband and baby girl, she talked with enthusiasm about love and caring. Yet, they were heavily dependent on his relatives, as had she been on hers before. The farming family of doña Pilar, also could be categorized as a real family, the way they lived and presented themselves, putting weight on cohesion and unity, however, with some enlargements in terms of whom were considered to

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<sup>201</sup> I refer to informants and discussants it includes the ones that participated in the Women's Groups and a handful others that otherwise were not interviewed, summing to about forty, as stated earlier

belong. There were also a couple of more domestic units in this material that could aspire to such a title. Nonetheless, most people in Coto Sur, did, about ten years after the establishment of the settlement, lead their lives within what appeared as quite complex relationships, which in IDA-speak usually were reduced to *familias campesinas*, and by doing that, omitted further insights to important aspects in the life and dreams of many of the inhabitants. There were, as indicated, a multitude of complex relationships that had its site in, and reaching out from, the house and household. Those were gendered, and in turn producing gender; children that were socialized, rights and needs and skills were challenged and negotiated.

### **La Casa - The House**

How could or should one draw up the boundaries of the households/families/domestic units in Coto Sur? The most obvious starting point was the house - and how the women themselves label, describe and delimit their house and home. After all it is the site or space in which most of the women in practice spent the major part of their life, as demonstrated in chapter 4. The home/house/household was the central space and all that it entailed in the women's lives, and indicated also gendered meanings and control over spaces; for example - the inside - and outside - (*casa/calle*) dichotomy so well established in Latin American gendered images, which also needed to be examined in Coto Sur. Hence, the relationship between house, household, and family, merits exploration.

A sentence that I often heard uttered by women in Coto Sur was "*Tengo que ordenar a mi casa*". It could literally mean that she was to clean and tidy up her house; all that was contained within floors, walls and roof, perhaps even including her immediate physical space outside of kitchen garden and *las pilas*. Thus, it would be about what she considered as her *deberes* (duties) and housework, the *oficios domesticos*; that were almost totally time consuming and took place at home.

However, closer readings of the empirical material indicated that this statement also could be deciphered as a more general affirmation that she was fulfilling cultural expectations concerning a woman's gender role in a rural society and took care of the needs of others; men, children and others whom she considered she was there to serve, entailing that she was in control of 'the house', from inside. By saying that, she also affirmed that she was to be encountered where women were culturally defined to be, in the house as good women, and not in the 'street', as perhaps not so 'good' women.

*La Casa*, for the women could signify a lot more than a place of residence or dwelling, and how would a woman demarcate her space, her house, for instance what and whom belonged to the house, and possibly who would be excluded? Thus was it (only) the ones living under the common roof, a much-used designation in social science. The concept 'home' is also a tricky one; it can both allude to a safe place, as well as a 'feeling at home', which necessarily could enlarge the space way beyond the place of residence. The latter refers to scale; '- (the) scale of the household, as it is the site where the interactions among the relations of production, social reproduction' (Marston 2000: 233).

Important also was how language was used, *hogar* in Spanish translates to home, but was a term that was hardly used by the women in Coto Sur, except for instance when alluding to hearth. I think I never heard women use the word *hogar* (home), except when talking in literary terms, biblical or reciting poetry. On the other hand, this was a word increasingly used on TV in home-making shows concerned with cake baking and manicure etc. that were on every morning. Women in Coto Sur did draw on such images when we were discussing how they wanted their homes to be like in the future.



House in Coto Sur

## Houses

Physically speaking, regular houses in Coto Sur often consist of one room only, in which people sleep at night and a kitchen area, often partly inside and continuing outside the walls (see chapter 4). The house is then both inside and outside, right next to, and sometimes even the *solar* (the kitchen garden) is included in this commonsense house concept, implying that it may spatially stretch beyond the man-made constructed house. The inside/outside kitchen-area or space is the center of all houses, and this is where women are in total command and men only occasional guests. In some houses it was actually only in that kitchen area that the women were in total control, and where others had to ask for permission to enter (*con permiso*). The rest of the house, depending on size and number of rooms of course, seems to be spaces that have to be negotiated about, not to speak of policing the boundaries in most intricate ways. If there was a front room it would be where men would gather, women only appeared there to serve upon others, it was not theirs at all.

Most of the house seemed to be categorised as private for external visitors in that access was reserved for the ones that were considered to belong there. But, could also be

interpreted as quite public, if that is taken to mean access for others. One obvious reason for this apparent possibility for access was physical, the rustic constructions may have a door and roof, but one could often to see right through houses from outside, there were no glass windows, and all sounds went through. Boundaries for what was considered their house was something that the women worked on continually, through many and subtle processes of inclusions and exclusions, some of them alluded to above

As a rule, women had no 'room of their own' but they had spaces, especially the mentioned kitchen area, over which they possessed power to decide access. The notion of *la casa*, hence, could make these spatial partitions indistinguishable. It was, I think, often more a question of keeping undesired elements out, including *vagos* and animals, and women's power to control those boundaries that were at stake. Humble women, as so many of them they were, in terms of material assets, they had (learned) to make use of strategies, and one of them was boundary making and subtle policing of those.

I would suggest that the house, as a space, for women could stretch well beyond the walls, or even the fence, if there was such a thing, but the essence of it was, I think, to exercise control over this space (Spain1992; Ardener1993; Blunt 2005). That entailed that many negotiations were about control over space, and had, at least for the oldest generation of women, to be seen in a longer time perspective of their project of establishing a 'base of their own', started out in the homesteading in the new settlement later to be defended. Hence, the *casa* term, as used by women in Coto Sur, was an ambiguous term, but one that possibly best embraced the relationships that would be of interest for judging women's situation in the settlement.

### **Who's House?**

In Coto Sur one could occasionally hear statements like, “*La casa de doña Marta y la parcela/finca de don Gerónimo*” (Dona Marta’s house and don Geronimo’s farm/parcel) when talking about the same couple, and in fact perhaps even the same physical space, but as it were, most of the time it was labeled as his house and parcel. Women were seemingly perceived of as merely part of the (his) house. However, one also would hear people say, “*la parcela de doña Luisa*,” if she was the de facto farmer/owner, as the women farmers presented in Chapter 4 all were. Nonetheless, it is usually women, adult women, who are associated with the house. Many women we interviewed or conversed with in Coto Sur did as stated before initially introduce themselves as housewives (*ama de casa*) and the label would for them entail that they were carrying out the reproductive tasks, and also they would mention what could be termed indoor leadership, to administer directly or indirectly, people - and resources in the daily whereabouts. The fact that many of them were working full day in agriculture as well, did not affect their perception of being housewives. They were perceived by both others and themselves as wives and mothers primarily, and that was reiterated by their insistence on being housewives, as was the title they all used when signing up to the Women’s Groups.<sup>202</sup>

### **Food, Responsibilities and Boundary Making**

Women in Coto Sur talked about maintaining the house (*mantener la casa*) and this usually implied the economic-administrative responsibility whatever that entailed; securing raw materials, consumption goods, and money entering, fed and clothed personnel leaving the

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<sup>202</sup> Of 13 participants in this group, all the adult women signed as housewives although they all worked at least part time in agriculture.



house.<sup>203</sup> Implicit in such a saying is meant the house(hold), and what the woman considered as her responsibilities, usually expressed as *deberes* (duties). Women's responsibilities in terms of reproductive services, were evidently key to the women's own interpretations of what their houses were about. These included the *oficios domesticos*; cleaning, mending, cooking etc. But women's cooking and consequently distribution of food also meant something more; it must also be understood as 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 2002).<sup>204</sup> Some women were known for their good food, which could be decisive in some household negotiations, men said that they had been looking for a woman who made good food, and that could also make a difference in order to secure good land workers for the harvest. Each person was always given food, individually, on a plate, it was not common to sit together and eat around a shared table in Coto Sur. The sharing of food was enacted between the giver, the woman, and the receivers, in a one-one relationship. What was put into the pot (rice, beans and tortillas mainly) was re-distributed by the woman in the house, no matter how simple the meal may be. To give food to others was women's cultural privilege,<sup>205</sup> and way of demarcating who she considered were her responsibility, as discussed above.

Many women with older close relatives mainly parents, either had them living with them, full- or part-time, or they sent them food on regular basis and that system went well beyond their own dwelling. Women living on farms sent food, eggs, hens, fruits also to sisters who did not have access to land etc., but that was not talked about in front of the men. In exchange they would receive other assistance, whether emotional support or information. When asked, therefore, about who belonged to her house, a woman usually began by counting

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<sup>203</sup> This could be associated to Gudeman and Rivera's (1990) analysis of Andean peasant households in Colombia, but I read them to be a lot more essentialist than it was possible to do in Coto Sur. This will be returned to later.

<sup>204</sup> 'Doing gender' is based on ethnomethodology- and 'involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures' (2002:4)

<sup>205</sup> Elizabeth Fürst (1997) has developed some interesting perspectives on the importance of women's food-giving as part of femininity and the subjective experience of being a woman, inviting to consider giving of gifts. It was not possible to follow up in this particular empirical material, but the material indicates some of the same traits.

whom she gave- to- ea' on a daily basis, and she would say that her house (hold) consisted of for instance nine persons, which she kept close track of. The sending of food “*manda café al hijo*” (to send coffee to the son) was always included in the women’s daily calculations. Men, on the other hand, did consider their house literally from outside, a place they were to protect, which they tended to *say*, but as it were in Coto Sur, often had deserted.

Summing this, one may say that the boundary-making carried out by women living in different kinds of farming/rural household units in Coto Sur did not necessarily coincide with the walls or fences or lines on the IDA’s parcellation maps. In their particular manner, women seemed to be subtly carrying out gate-keeping in their household by means of whom they were providing meals and that did not necessarily coincide with the ones who were sleeping in the house. However, what power-base this would provide them with; to negotiate their needs and rights, is a different question. Would it for instance be possible for them at all to withdraw their service provision, what would then happen in the households?

### **Familias Campesinas: Farming Families**

*The concept of the family farm, with the emotions it evokes and the policies it has provoked, constitutes a definite proof of the relationship between family, culture and economy. Why does the family farm merit protection when so many other small enterprises of all stripes have been gobbled up or put out of business by capitalist behemots (Creed 2000:336)*

Creed sets the scene for questioning the whys of the farming-family, some of which was dealt with in the previous chapter. He points to the ideological and cultural significance of the family farm in many countries; Ireland, the US, Canada and Europe, and also stresses an interesting observation, namely that in the South (read ‘less developed world’) the emphasis on such issues as households, development, and subsistence (ecology) are given most weight, while in the North the nuclear family is a more central issue. This latter observation has been challenged by feminist scholars pointing to the complex and ambiguous situation for many women ‘farm wives’ on family farms (Whatmore 1991; Whatmore et al. 1994).

The issue of how to settle on what was meant by *familia campesina* has been a case in point all through this present work and promptly invokes wellknown debates concerned with (*peasants =family farms*), as a mode of production, and analyses based on assumptions about a unitary farming family, as a contrast to commodified relationships which has been one of the main thesis behind the ideas that had characterised most of the agrarian reform movements in the 1960s and 70 (Deere and León 2001).

In Coto Sur the situation for women in farming families/households have been examined in terms of both work burdens, responsibilities, etc., as well as access to and rights to resources be they land, or cash, or of other kinds (Chapter 4). One of the main assumptions in the Coto Sur settlement that was mirrored in the IDA's parcellation map; was taking for granted that each parcel was to house one farming-family only.

As indicated, the situation on many parcels turned out to be a lot more composite, and demonstrating this would defy the family-farm supposition and contest the political icon, which probably was not what the authorities wanted, nor saw the point of. But opening up the family/household demonstrated that people with different status, rights, and duties were to be found within the same domestic unit and would, necessarily in turn quetsion the assumptions of that unit.



Baby in Hammock in Coto Sur

Of particular significance is the consequence for different women; that is, if and how women living on the physically speaking same parcel could have dissimilar status and roles and rights. The material from Coto Sur indicated that in many houses, farms, or households more than two generations could be living, in the same house, or in a part that had been added on, or there could be more than one dwelling on a parcel, where daughters or sons with their offspring would live. Those who were living in the same house had as a rule separate pots and cooked with separate ingredients.<sup>206</sup> This phenomenon is often referred to as ‘nested’, ‘embedded’, ‘hidden’, or sub-families-households, and has been registered all over Latin America and does first of all point to lack of opportunities on the labour market for young mothers (Bradshaw 1995, Chant 2003). The general impression from Coto Sur was that on a great number of parcels more persons than the ones that were somehow counted as farming families seemed to be living, not necessarily permanently, but often for years at the time.

The farming-family in Coto Sur was therefore considerably more thorny to get to grips with than perhaps anticipated by both WID/GAD activists, politicians and researchers alike, it continued to be taken for granted. ‘Family’ was, and has remained a thorny word in this regard, on the one hand, to defend the right to a family, on the other, to open it up in order to see what is taken for granted and that may impede women’s possibilities for realisations of their potentials, thus one may say that it is in the very dilemma of much of the women’s movements world-wide.

The cultural differences between the ideologically speaking hegemonic ‘white’ population in the Central Valley, and life on the low-lying coasts in Costa Rica, have already been stressed, and these differences would also invite to thinking more thoroughly about family forms and gendered ideologies. The domestic arrangements and constellations in Coto Sur for the most part were very complex, and needed some conceptual elaborations.

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<sup>206</sup> Stolcke did find this same pattern in her studies of – that married children had their own stove, own shopping, own cooking and eating arrangements (1995:85)

## Family in Coto Sur

*The concept of family both reflects and masks the realities of household formation and sustenance* (Rapp 1979: 177 in Jelin 1991)

The persistent family phrasing inevitably did locate all women in the Coto Sur settlement as family, whilst the man was always being depicted as farmer, producer, parcelero, agricultor, etc., thus family was evidently applied as an all-including concept. The most frequent designation in more ceremonious and formal occasions was: *el campesino y su familia*; (the peasant and his family), in which the ‘-and his family’ inevitably put the other persons under his control. The peasant-family is time and again appearing in discourses about agricultural policies, for instance when it comes to who are assumed to be the (passive) beneficiaries of rural reform - or other state programmes, what often is referred to as ‘familism’ (Deere and León 2001). In different representations of ‘the family’, women remain invisible and taken for granted, and stereotypical gendered assumptions were invoked.

It was, however, not only in more official discourses one met with talk that was permeated with the family-word; our women informants and discussants also used it extensively; as did other people in Coto Sur. (This led, in turn to my own filing the ‘family’ word in notebooks and accounts, without in the beginning, perceiving that this was a term with more manifold meanings and interpretations than I initially translated it to myself.<sup>207</sup>) I have now, belatedly, become aware that when I/we asked what could be posed as a typical ‘family’ question, when interviewing the women, and they responded by telling about sisters and brothers, their consanguine relatives, and not about, as both the SMFC team members and I tended to take as given, a nuclear family core. Or, as also could be the case, that the women in Coto Sur did talk in family-speak, wanting to present themselves as a proper nuclear

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<sup>207</sup> When checking interviews and field notes in connection with this final writing, I realize that it is me who have said ‘family’ whereas the women have talked about ‘*mi marido, mis hijas*’ (My husband, my daughters, etc). Checking the material again, I see that my collaborators did the same, they constantly refer to the family word in their reports indicating that it was not the Spanish that was misinterpreted. It probably could be better explained by class, I think.

family, which could, or could not be the case, that is that they intentionally wanted to appear as a unitary and harmonious family unit. This could, perhaps, point to ideological shifts in ideas about the family in Coto Sur in the late 1980s.

The apparent contradiction between women as individuals, and women as family members, entailing different roles, expectations and identities were complex and contradictory to handle for the SMFC, and was perhaps reflected in the name of the IDA's Women's Office: *Sección Mujer y Familia Campesina* (The Section for Peasant Women and Family) a name that startled me when I first got in contact with the office. To me it signalled that the 'and family' placed peasant women as a mainly social issue, that is traditional women and family affairs, in the IDA.<sup>208</sup> It should be mentioned, however, that in daily speech both in Laurel and San José it was referred to as *La oficina de la mujer* (The women's office).

Women's position in, and their relation to *familia* in Coto Sur was at times not straightforward to grasp, as phrases and concepts were used interchangeably, and there was no explicit questioning of the existence of the family, as stated several times. For that reason, when reflecting upon these experiences long after, I think it fair to say that the family-word occasionally materialized as a kind of cloak, or veil, in Coto Sur and concealed that it probably also could be interpreted as some kind of agreement about how things should or ought to be, rather than reflecting realities, although everyone living in the settlement knew it was not quite how things operated, or even that they perceived it as family. An observation from Coto Sur; did the family-language that mainly had to do with kinship, expressed as *familiares*, with Ann Marie Fortier's version,

instead 'provide a vocabulary to also speak of cultural identity and local particularism in terms of nurturance, fixed gender roles and generational response (Fortier 2000: 64)

It was, however, evident that family both was a language giving the women in Coto Sur the possibility to speak within or from, and it was much about relations centred on blood,

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<sup>208</sup> This question I have pursued in Valestrand, forthcoming, it could also perhaps be used as legitimating the office in this period of time.

reproduction, etc. When the IDA and other authorities did use a family language, did they talk in the same family-language as the women did?

### **Ideology and Family Values**

Among the many who have worked with the concept of family, Rayna Rapp (1991) says,

Families, on the other hand, are a bit more slippery. In English, 'family' tends to mean household. But analytically the concept means something else... at least two levels of meaning (here based on Goody 1972).

One point is the normative: husbands, wives and children are considered a set of relatives who should live together (nuclear family). The other meaning includes a more extensive network of kin relations that people may activate selectively, that is relations of blood and marriage. Rapp, additionally, points to the fact that it is through families that people are recruited into households, to productive, reproductive, and consumption relations, and that the two genders enter them differently. As she puts it,

the concept of family is a socially necessary illusion which simultaneously expresses and masks recruitment to relations of production, reproduction and consumption, relations that condition different kinds of household resource bases in different class sectors (1991: 199).

The class aspect of family formations has also been a theme for debate, often coined in the contrast between marrying for 'money' or for 'love'; and is also central to the ideology of the family. The cultural distinction between love and money corresponds to the distinction between private family life in the home and work life outside the home. The two are experienced as opposites (ibid).<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> She discusses this in the North American setting of working class 'good girls' who marries the 'wild' boy- and domesticates him, see Rapp (1991)

Central in this notion of family is the conjugal relationship between a man and a woman, united through need, money, love or whatever, with women depicted as being between love and money, and procreation, motherhood are central, but redistribution of resources probably most important among the poor. There now seems to be agreement among social scientists about one thing, and that is that there is no universal understanding of the family, but that everyone has ideas about how relationships of blood, marriage, sex, and residence should relate and articulate with processes of social reproduction. Diverse economic experiences in different cultural contexts lead to divergent forms, different family relations, and varied family commitments, between different societies and over time (Creed 2000). Based on Yanagasaki Creed suggests that it really is no point in defining the terms and consider the variations of domestic arrangements, the material aspects of making a living and cultural values attached to the family. Going through the extensive literature in this field he states that 'family commitments' has to be granted a more central role than many analysts have done, but also to observe closely how ideas about family are changing over time with changing social translations and economies and bringing them into a family-values discourse (ibid). It would entail to put more emphasis on 'love' or to the ideas that families are in crisis in what is referred to the modernising process.

Sarah Whatmore, studying rural women in the UK, says that the family is elusive and holds that one has to begin to distinguish between kinship (blood and marriage), household (socio-economic unit organising livelihood) and familial ideology (the powerful representations), influenced by Goody's (1972) writings (Whatmore 1990). She contributes, in this way, to the feminist critiques levelled against the bulk of academic writing that more often than not tends to use 'family' in ways that appear as natural units, should by now be



well known and accepted,<sup>210</sup> its main contribution has been to deconstruct the family unit and open up for looking into the complexities involved.

The family is, in other words, no simple entity in social science analysis, and what is emphasised in this regard is very much dependent on from where one sees it, whether it is question of kinship, of emotions, or positions in society, or as particularly anthropologists have been studying and comparing families - and kinship on a comparative scale.

Elisabeth Jelin (1991) examining Latin American family constellations, stresses formal, affective, and kinship relations, and the processes of creation, defense, reproduction and management of resources as central points. The excerpts of the life-courses of women migrants that had come to Coto Sur (Chapter 2) disclosed that for many their positions in, and relations to family in their lives were important but complex; more than half of (all) our informants had been subjected to their mothers being deserted by their biological fathers. This had resulted in complex kinship relations and much feeling of loss, and one must assume that their picture of a family was almost certainly influenced by these experiences. Crucially also was the overall and overwhelming familial ideology characteristic in a country like Costa Rica, a liberal Catholic country with much emphasis on (nuclear) family values,<sup>211</sup> and many powerful representations of the nuclear family, conveying strong ideological messages.

This cultural hegemony, familial ideology and gendered ideologies are pointing to proper roles and behaviour for women (and men), particularly motherhood and male authority. Elisabeth Dore (1997) has claimed that the ideology of 'the holy family' in Latin America is based on upper-class ideals that can be used in many different ways, both in liberating ways (emotional support), as well as exploitation, i.e. through so-called family-

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<sup>210</sup> The one most known within the field of Women's studies, that is beyond the scope of anthropologists, at least in the beginning, was probably Harris (1981) who questioned the naturalness of households and family, this article must have been among the most cited all through the 1980s, I think!

<sup>211</sup> Chant (1997) puts it this way, 'Many have argued that the lives of Costa Rican women are heavily circumscribed by patriarchal family norms, where women gain social legitimacy primarily as wives and mothers, and are bound to the domestic domain as reproducers and consumers' (1997:128)

labour,<sup>212</sup> and such aspects would have to be taken into account when bringing in the farming family in Coto Sur, as already discussed in chapter 4.



Young Girl Cleaning Rice in Coto Sur

Concerning the status and position of children, *patria potestad* (men's sole right over children)<sup>213</sup> have been inextricably connected to the family in most of Latin America, as well as men's in fact, legal control over, and thus authority in families, and the civil codes therefore have been considered as gender discrimination by more recent critics.<sup>214</sup> This patriarchal family has been an icon in Latin American discourses up until quite recently when more critical voices can be heard. Much of what has been characteristic of family forms, as well as ideology, on the Latin American continent, has been traced back to the turbulent colonial history, racial hierarchies, sexual conquests, the Catholic church and procreation policies - thus regulation of female sexuality and their expected domesticity. Among what has

<sup>212</sup> See Stolcke (1988, 1995) for a discussion of 'family labour' on Latin American haciendas and plantations.

<sup>213</sup> For an overview, see for example FAO: 'Review of Latin-American rural women's legal status' 2000, [www.fao.org/docrep/U5615E/u5615e03.htm](http://www.fao.org/docrep/U5615E/u5615e03.htm) Accessed september 2006

<sup>214</sup> See Dore (2000); Chant with Craske (2003: 31-32); Molyneux (2000).

been suggested as 'common threads' are: the importance of the state and the Roman Catholic Church in influencing and legitimating family roles, a bias towards patrilineal inheritance, patriarchal tendency, and some regulation of female sexuality (Chant (2003: 167). In another study, from a Brazilian slum, however, Claudia Fonseca asks if one can justifiably speak of one family model in Latin America, as she found many versions (1991: 134), and the same has particularly been a topic in the Caribbean and in poorer strata in the rest of the continent (Stuart 1996; Varley 1996; Safa 1995; Jelin 1991; P. Ellis 1986; Cierchia 1997; Chant 1997; Nash and Safa 1986; Aroba 1996). In other words there are many forms for families encountered in Latin America, and Coto Sur was no exception to that pattern.

### **Conjugal Relations, Children, Rights and the Importance of Women's Kinship Networks in Coto Sur**

In spite of the immediate appearance of varieties of farming-families in Coto Sur; if one should be capable of declare anything reasonable about the women's position in them, and their decision-making possibilities and potentials as members of them, it is by means of what may be termed as the formation of, or generating process of the current domestic units. The generating processes in the Coto Sur settlement, seemed to reflect cultural patterns found among poorer strata in the Central American (- or even Latin American) region that typically could be characterised by serial conjugal partnerships, resulting in what is referred to as 'blended' or 'reconstituted' households over time (Chant 1997, 2003), of which the one organised by doña Mayela and don Eusebio was but one such example.

Conjugal relationships had been much affected by migration and male desertion. Between half and 2/3rds of all the women in the empirical material (here referring to the total number of informants) could be said typically to have lived through serial conjugal partnerships; having been deserted, some women had walked out by themselves, for example as some of them got the opportunity to do when they learned about the 'giving of land' in

Coto Sur. Women who had experienced male desertion had entered into new conjugal relationships later on. A rough estimate of the (total) empirical material gathered in Coto Sur was that around 2/3 of the households had changed in terms of the conjugal relationship over time, most of these transformations seemed to have taken place in the turbulent periods of the process of invasion, settling and homesteading in Coto Sur. Later on things apparently had stabilised more.

By examining women's life-courses one may assert that there is a long way from the middle-class or elite conceptions of what families are supposed to mean, to what was encountered in Coto Sur, with the resulting blended, or reconstituted households as in fact the most typical template and that, in turn, points to both different cultural interpretations of relationships, as well as material and structural opportunities and how they have been interacting and intertwining over time. However, there is reason to question the overall gendered outcomes of these processes, and focus on the particular problems that some women were confronted with, especially the issue of access to resources, primarily land, and the problems this may have raised.



House in Coto Sur

## Tatiana

An example of such predicaments can be illustrated by doña Tatiana's situation. She was thirty-six years old in 1986 and living together with a man who worked as a land labourer (not member) in the banana cooperative in one of the cuadrantes where they had to share accommodation with another labourer. Her compañero makes very little money (compared to the cooperative's members), and he had no access to land or other extra resources. Tatiana has seven children, the oldest is twenty-two, and the three oldest are living in consensual unions in different parts of the Southern Zone. She is now a grandmother of five.<sup>215</sup> She gave birth to six children on a row, the first when she was fourteen, living with a banana worker in *union libre* in different banana plantations in La Zona Bananera, including in Coto Sur. When the youngest, a girl, was nine months old, this man had left with another woman, and she had to manage on her own. She had been desperate and had gone to Palmar to try to find work:

*Yo pasé cinco años sola, sufrí mucho pensando en como mantener a los güilas yo no sabía hacer nada. Pero gracias a Dios no deje desampara a nadie, me fuí para Palmar y una amiga me consiguió trabajo como salonera, entraba a las seis de la tarde y salía a las dos de la mañana<sup>216</sup>*

During the day she had worked in a shop from 6 am to 4 pm in order to sustain her children, but had then returned to Coto Sur after a few years because the children's paternal grandmother had called upon her saying that her son was going to help her (*ayudar*, here meaning money support). However when returning she found that it was only wishful thinking from the grandmother:

*Pero cuando volví 'el me dijo que no me iba a ayudar que viera yo como hacía para criar a los güilas. Me vine para acá y trabajé 8 meses en el comisariato, ahí conocí a Javier Bustos García y me junté con él. Tuve tres niños pero se murieron dos y solo me quedó uno de él.<sup>217</sup>*

<sup>215</sup> Still in 25% of all Costa Rican women have their first child between the age of 15 and 18 years of age (Lara et al. 1995: 106).

<sup>216</sup> I lived alone five years, suffering much always thinking of how to maintain the children and I did not know to do anything. Pero, thanks to God.

<sup>217</sup> But when I returned he told me that he was not going to help me - and I went to one of the cuadrantes and got a job in the commissary

Her compañero, Javier, she said was a nice man because he had helped her with her own children, (that is he supported them economically). He had worked for the Compañía Bananera, and after she met with him they had returned to Palmar for him to find work, but very soon the final closures of the UFCo in the Zona Bananera occurred (1984), and they came back to Coto Sur two years ago, but were too late for acquiring land. They had tried to lease a farm for a while, from people who had left Coto Sur, but they later sold off, and Tatiana and Javier could not raise money to buy it. Her compañero had also made an effort to become a full member of the banana cooperative, but the result was negative, and he had to work as a much lower paid day labourer. His income was too small to live on for them all, and the house so crammed, that despite Tatiana's continuous cooking, knitting and selling, two of her children, 16 and 13 years old, are sent to live with her mother, who now lives with a man who is a member of the cooperative. He is, however, not as altruistic as Javier. Tatiana says,

*Como no es el abuelo no les da todo lo que ellos necesitan llegan a la casa y ellos les da a comer y les ayuda con los gastos del colegio.*<sup>218</sup>

Her children were not being supported economically by this man; although the children's grandmother did continually go in-between, trying to help her daughter out. The situation for Tatiana was one of being between several systems having to rely on her own mother, who in turn was dependent on a man, who did not take any responsibility for the children who were not his biological offspring.

In household after household in Coto Sur it turned out that kinship relations were complex, but often decisive, particularly for women and children living in a house and who could, at the outset, be bestowed very different rights or positions in a household compared to others. Children living under the same roof very often could be rendered different rights the

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<sup>218</sup> 'as he is not their grandfather he does not provide them with all that they need, they come to my/the house and I they are given food, and help with school work'

way things were perceived, and as women had the sole responsibility of these children the result was gendered in women's disfavour.

The issue of men's responsibilities for own biological offspring was still not solved in Coto Sur in the late 1980s, in spite of progressive changes in paternal laws being formulated and implemented nationally.<sup>219</sup> It was in practice women who would have to fend for maintenance of their offspring, by negotiating with their biological father, grandmothers, and other kin, but more often by trying to produce and sell something for their upkeep. Women have, as a rule, absolutely total responsibility for their children, and there were in fact few men, like Javier Bustos, who did help Tatiana out with her children. The women admitted that one could not trust a man in the long run, but still, they all were startled when they constantly were experiencing being deserted by men they thought better of, and constantly encountering men who did not trust women.

## **Reconstituted Women-headed Households**

### **Jeanette's Grandmother**

Doña Jeanette's mother had a different story. She was 45 years old in 1986 and had come to La Zona Sur from Guanacaste with her own mother when she was about fifteen to seek an outcome and her mother had quickly moved in the man who became Jeanette's father and who then was a bananero on the plantations around Golfito. They had arrived together to Coto Sur looking for land after the first invasions when Jeanette was only a small child. Jeanette's grandmother, then also living with a bananero had also arrived, and these two kin-related households, had succeeded to get hold of adjacent parcels. After a while the two men disappeared out of their lives, Jeanette's father had found another woman who moved in with him, and her mother and children were literally thrown out, when Jeanette was twelve. In the

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<sup>219</sup> A new law about fatherhood responsibility was finally passed in Costa Rica in 2001 *Ley de Paternidad Responsable*. As of 1999 1/3 of the newborns in Costa Rica were registered with 'father unknown' (Chant 2003)

meantime the grandmother's *compañero* had died. By some incident, she had secured the land in her name as her last *compañero* had been a Nicaraguan citizen and to shortcut the bureaucracy; she found herself as the titleholder of that land. Her daughter and her children, including Jeanette, had moved in with her, and Jeanette's brother, by now sixteen years old, worked the parcel. They had been fortunate that the grandmother had control over the land, which Jeanette's mother did not. It is part of this story that Jeanette's mother had always worked their land, while the grandmother never had.

This reconstituted household was a *de facto* and *de jure* women-headed household, which, as will be discussed later, were more difficult to sustain in the settlement than in many other Latin American settings, exactly due to male preferences in control with the land - as 'head of households'.

There were, however, a number of *de facto* women headed households in Coto Sur in which men played a visiting role, but when being asked about who were making the decisions in such households the women would invariably say that *el manda* (he decides). In other words, men had been coming and going in the women's lives, but women had remained solely responsible for all children. Women were often in despair and had to rely on others, in the main their own consanguine kin, to get help and assistance, many were, in fact in quite a vulnerable position, and their kinship networks was the only security they perhaps could rely on. That is own sisters and brothers, and mothers - and vv. There were in practice relatively speaking few officially women-headed households in Coto Sur but it was in reality hard to say without going into more detailed studies.<sup>220</sup>

We met with older widows or deserted women, who would claim they were alone, but it turned out few of them lived completely on their own, but often had younger relatives, grandchildren or daughters living for shorter or longer time, and it also seemed as if the women tended to establish new relationships rather soon. The *de-facto* women-headed

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<sup>220</sup> In Costa Rica 27,5 % of female household heads reside independently PEN 1998 in Chant with Craske (2003: 175)



household living in the settlement were mostly women farmers who held title to land. It was probably very difficult to survive alone as single mothers with children without access to land; as there were hardly jobs for women in the area. The adaptation that for instance doña Elba's daughter had managed to organise; living in a hut on her father's parcel, at least temporarily, was not untypical, but the lack of income opportunities and housing did hamper the viability of women-headed households in the settlement, it was easier to survive as such in more urban areas.

### **Miriam**

An example on how the state of single motherhood could be generated was Miriam Bermudez, 27 years of age. She was born in Laurel where her father had been a bananero and he had left her mother and moved in with another when Miriam was a small child. Then her mother had taken her three small children and gone to San José to find work and they had stayed there for eight or nine years. Miriam and her mother decided to return to La Zona Sur where the mother soon found a man who had land and had moved in with him. Miriam found work as a domestic in for a foreign family that she liked, but when they were to go back abroad, they wanted to bring her along but Miriam did not want to go so far away. She moved into her mother's household and sought a job in one of the packing plants in the cooperative.

She is now the single mother of two daughters, four and two years old, the father of her children has denied to recognise fatherhood. For the birth of the first one he had helped her with 1000 colones (then approximately 50 US dollars), "*hizo promesas pero cuando yo volví a quedar embarazada se olvidó de ellas*" (he made me promises, but when I again got pregnant he forgot about them). It turned out that the man was married and had a wife and five children in another part of the country. Miriam's mother had found this out out trying to have him pay support for the children. Hence, it is her mother who has taken care of the girls

as Miriam had to go out to work to pay for their upbringing, now she is thinking about moving away to a place where it is possible for a single mother to put up her own house, she feels that her mother is balancing her own situation by taking care of Miriam's children.

Miriam was kicked out of the packing plant when she got pregnant, but had managed to get contemporary work the same place as she was strong and a clever worker, but she had been met with many comments from the male workers, making open guesses and suggestions as to who was the father, and making obvious approaches, which made her furious, but that she could do little about but to endure.

The situation found in 1986 in the majority of the studied households in Coto Sur, and most likely covering the rest of the population as well, could be characterised by a complex history, leading up to today's state of affairs, probably closely linked to poverty, marginality, migration etc., In all the stories, it is, when it comes to the end of the day, the women's own kinship relations that are the only to be relied upon for women, not necessarily the conjugal or sexual relationships, presented as *familia campesina*. Kinship, referred to as *familiares*, encompasses mothers and their offspring, siblings and half siblings, that is the blood-related relations. Claudia Fonseca, based on findings from a study in a Brazilian slum, calls such patterns leading up to the present situation in Coto Sur, non-standard family patterns in Western society. She met with a situation in which 'conjugal instability comes hand in hand with tremendous consanguinal solidarity' (1991: 134), and found that a shift from conjugality to consanguinity gave the surprising result of highlighting the males in the family, what often is called 'Caribbean' adaptations<sup>221</sup> with marital instability. This was in effect women's only 'fall-back' (Sen, Agarwal) and one must assume inflict upon their bargaining position within a household.

Women living in Coto Sur have been seeing brothers and sisters moving in and out of the household arrangements they have happened to live in, and many also experienced

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<sup>221</sup> Stuart (1996), points to the fact that in reality those are rather post-modern family adaptations, now becoming typical in the North

unequal treatment from visiting men in their mothers' lives, a reason probably why so many run away at such an early age. From men's point of view the situation could be perceived differently, there were many who said that they were living in visiting unions; that they had other households they spent time in, and partly provided for, sometimes by work. Then they travelled, they said, looking for odd jobs, and often spending time in other women's houses. Thus, it was reason to look into the conjugal contracts in Coto Sur, and how they were negotiated, as most of the household arrangements in the settlement were, after all, at some stage, built around a couple residing together,

### **Conjugal Relationships, Contracts and Gender**

*The ideal couple relationship defined by hegemonic heterosexuality - and theorized as 'the family' (Connell 1995: 183)*

The romantic idea of a perfect conjugal relationship was widespread in Coto Sur, based on the ideal of true love and mutual respect. The women's life-stories, illustrated in Chapter 2 and other narratives, have demonstrated that perfect life-long relationships were hard to come about, although some of women were living in long-lasting relationships, but in these relationships the male partner more often than not also had several sexual relationships to other women, resulting in offspring, a situation that point to what was considered as men's traditional cultural rights. This was not necessarily brought up to discussion, very often the woman in interviews or conversations, did see to that the couple would appear as *juntos* (together)

Age was, however, crucial in this regard. Among the oldest couples encountered in this material the average age gap was ten to fifteen years, men the women's seniors. Many of those men were beginning to age, they were now in their fifties and sixties and were becoming increasingly dependent on women's care. Many were sick, worn down by hard

work on the plantations, having been exposed to chemicals and rough living, and could work less than before.

On the other hand, looking at the group here investigated in a life-course perspective, there were just a handful that can be said to have lived in ideal conjugal relationships the way that was depicted by the women. Among the around thirty domestic units with a residing conjugal couple that were closer examined, there were only a handful that could be described as traditional, in that the residing conjugal couple had lived together for perhaps twenty to thirty years. It looks as if all of these were couples that had survived since before coming to Coto Sur, explained by the fact that women literally had chased their men, as one of them laughingly described it. Which negotiations that had taken place, and how the women had succeeded, one could only guess, it seems that getting another child has been one way of trying to keep a man's economic maintenance. Others who had lived in more unstable unions had experienced that they had been dissolved, most common was through men's abandonment or (sudden) death,<sup>222</sup> but there were also women who left men, particularly if they had been violent or did not bring in money, and another man could provide shelter and sustenance; there were many cases of such stories heard in Coto Sur as well.

In the whole empirical material I only came across a few examples of real *pater familias*, traditional male household heads in Coto Sur, to my own surprise, but there indeed were many examples where this figure was physically absent, but somehow mentally present, in that women referred to them, particularly when it came to disciplining children, or as a figure that bestowed them with status as partnered women. Men came and went, this was perfectly possible with the maize-growing system, as they only would have to turn up to prepare the land and to carry out the harvests, if there were others present that could assist in the day-to day activities. Nonetheless, women would often go to great lengths to portray a

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<sup>222</sup> Chant (1991) describes the following, 'Indeed, although Guanacasteco women are popularly seen as strong individuals who view their spouses merely in terms of their capacity to generate economic resources, when partners fail to send remittances or to return at all, most women attach themselves fairly promptly to another man' (1991:248)

situation having a man, the farmer, there on permanent basis. The other side of this story could be described as how men, over time, had tended to move between households, which very often include stays in their mothers' households, the mother-son coalition was, in Coto Sur as often elsewhere in Latin America, a quite frequent occurrence. The widowed/deserted mother provided house and did not question the son's behaviours or put too much demands on him, and he provided workforce and eventually, external income as well.

One observation was clear though, and that was that the youngest generation in Coto Sur, the daughters in their late teens or early twenties, were a lot more resolute in their expectations to men's behaviour than their mothers and grandmothers had been socialised to, or could perceive viable solutions to, and they were probably a lot less enduring. But the young had fewer children they had to support, could enjoy birth planning eventually and were also more knowledgeable of their legal rights than their mothers as they had been in more contact with public health and education, entailing that they, most likely, will not be so totally economically dependent on men as their mothers had been. These young women also tended to have sexual and emotional relationships with men closer to their own age, than their mothers had.<sup>223</sup> However, many remaining in Coto Sur had all been compelled to live in 'hidden households' with their mothers, in lack of opportunities, they really wanted to live on their own - which their mothers in turn - had difficulties in comprehending and thought their daughters were ungrateful.

### **Consensual Serial Unions, 'Estoy Casada Pero Solita'**

In this material all adult women had children and they had all, one time or another, experienced being left alone with responsibility for one, or more children, and more than 2/3

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<sup>223</sup> 1/3 of women become mothers in Latin America in their teenage years, see Chant (2003b) and others. An interesting inspiration that I kept thinking about was some of the research that has been done in East London, on households, kinship, structural changes, migration, ethnicity, gender etc, see Young and Wilmott; (1957, 1973); Dench, Gavron and Young (2006).

of the women had given birth to children that were not legalised by the biological fathers, although the women said that they had tried hard. There were also couples that lived together but the children had not been legally recognized by the father. One should, sitting in a secure Western position - rather ask: which were the real choices if one, like Tatiana for instance, or Mayela, does find oneself alone responsible for perhaps four to six children? Children were in Coto Sur women's sole responsibility, and no doubt that responsibility forced women to seek solutions that were not necessary optimal.

The so-called conjugal contract<sup>224</sup> between the spouses living together in Coto Sur was formalised legally by marriage by around ¼ and 1/3, as an estimate. A number of our informants reported that they had been married in church once, but now living with others than the ones they were originally married to due to the Catholic Church's position. They were not formally divorced, but had split up years ago, thus when asked if they were married, they would certainly say yes. There were men who were legally married to other women, but lived with and had children with women in Coto Sur. As an old woman put it; "*Estoy casada, pero solita*" (I am married, but alone). Thus statistical reporting could be misleading if the question was only stated whether one was married or not.

Among eleven members in one the SMFC Women's Groups, there was one seventeen years old who was single, two were formally married, and the rest stated that they were living in consensual unions (*union libre*). About ¾ of the women in the (total) empirical material from Coto Sur who were presently living in conjugal relations stated that they were living in *union libre*' or *juntados*' (consensual unions), and which in turn, could have lasted from twenty to thirty years to a few months.<sup>225</sup> There were four women that we encountered who had been legally married to the same man all the time and who said they had been forced to marry by own parents when they were very young. In these unions all men told us that they

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<sup>224</sup> This is Whitehead's (1981) term, 'they specify the terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, income and services, including labour within the household' (1981: 88)

<sup>225</sup> Legally people living in consensual unions did have the same rights but not yet access to land, see Deere and León (2001); Chant (2003).

also had children *afuera* (outside) with other women, I did not encounter one adult man in Coto Sur who did not. Whether these children were legally recognised by them was another question, most of them were not, but we did hear about several men who in their old age had recognized fatherhood for their children.<sup>226</sup>

Asked why they did not marry, the women would say: “We just moved together and did not think more about it”, or, “that that was the way it was”. It could also be explained by the fact that the man they moved in with was already married, or; that they did not want to get married in case the man was brutal, it was easier to get away, or; that they had been married once, and what did that lead to? Moreover, a wedding was expensive and they did not have the means etc. There was simply no cultural pressure to contract *matrimonio* (to wed) in the population.<sup>227</sup> When women, as a rule, got pregnant, forming a couple was considered normal, but as mentioned, in many cases it did not last, because men took off, or were, for different reasons, not able to enter into conjugal contracts.<sup>228</sup>

The ever returning issue, as also discussed earlier, was men’s multiple unions, which were not legal, nor recognized, but still somehow accepted tacitly, and was taken as another sign that men had urges that women did not have. The conjugal contracts were not codified, and as stated earlier by Moore (1992, 1994), Folbre (1988), and others, these are usually discussed and negotiated in terms of rights and needs, but what Carole Pateman has called the conjugal, sexual contract, was thus often not explicit in Coto Sur.<sup>229</sup> The terms of this contract did not seem to be specified, but to consist mostly of gendered expectations, roughly said to be about exchanges of services for money and maintenance, the distributions of rights and entitlements, however, and if and how they were negotiated was discussed in chapter 4.

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<sup>226</sup> One can only guess, but besides the wisdom of old age, the fear to be left alone, not having to provide for them etc. could be part of the story.

<sup>227</sup> The indigenous Chorotegas in Guanacaste did not contract matrimony formally, Chant (1991)

<sup>228</sup> In two studies of poor rural women, in the Dominican Republic (Brown 1975) and Colombia, (Rubbo 1975) they both found the same patterns and attitudes to formal marriage.

<sup>229</sup> According to Fraser, it was based on core concepts of dominance and subordination, on the model of mastery slavery, and translated into a dyadic power relation in whom a male super ordinate commands a female subordinate (Fraser 1997).

An interesting question to pose is whether any such contract had changed in content as a consequence of becoming inhabitants in Coto Sur, and in what ways. This is hard to say so long after, but worth pondering about. Goldenberg (1994) summing up from a more comprehensive study in Central America, divides this contractual relationship into three groups: *la conjugalidad sancionada*, *la conjugalidad fallida*, and - *la conjugalidad transgresor* (sanctioned, failed and transgressive conjugality), which she combines with whether the situations are adaptive, negotiated or conflictive illustrated by male, female or shared headship (op.cit: 232). .

To what extent the women considered a house without a master as a complete house,<sup>230</sup> varied, there were, as demonstrated, a small number of women who, after having had bad experiences with men would disagree, but would consult sons if they were to appear in some kind of public setting. Age, had quite a lot to say, and it was for women, obviously possible to earn themselves respect and a position, if they managed their home and their children well, that is

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<sup>230</sup> Goldenberg 1994 (: 221) holds that women who don't have a master in the house are considered as sexually available.



## Female Role Expectations and Gendered Stereotypes in Coto Sur

*Men are dependent on a woman for all domestic services* (Verena Stolcke 1995: 98)

### Daughters and Sons and Gendered Expectations

Masculinities and femininities were forged and bargained about continually in and outside the households in Coto Sur, in spite of a rather essentialist understanding that men and women, ideally were complimentary, and sexual difference was naturally given; for example femininity and motherhood, and a masculinity interpreted as the provider. That form of masculinity, however, was being produced through individual women subordinating themselves to individual men, and children were also socialized to what they could - and should do - and not, in order to live up to those ideals. Little girls, for instance, many living with their maternal grandmothers, were from early age dressed up in lace, pink, and jewellery provided by their (absent) mothers and in reality spoiled, until they had to begin carrying out household tasks and wait on men in the house, including boys their own age around eighth-nine years of age. Daughters were from the age around ten given many responsibilities in housework, while sons were allowed to roam about, the mothers said they had to teach their daughters to become good householders and to please men.

Some of the women we interviewed had only sons and discussing these matters, they all expressed that the way they saw it, their daily life would have been easier for them with women in the house with them. Daughters were considered as beneficial to have in a farming household, several of the mothers expressed this by sayings like, "*Ojalá qué tuviera hijas*" (I wish I had daughters!). When discussing their daily tasks with the women, more than once this was how they saw the solution to alleviate heavy and time-consuming *oficios domesticos*, Especially women who worked in agriculture whenever needed, it was a great relief to have other women work in the house, preparing food, so they could be in the fields, not only because they did not like to leave houses unattended afraid of theft, it was as much about

providing cooking and cleaning services and that was best carried out by daughters according to the mothers, they were born for that.

Boys, sons, on the other hand, usually received special treatment by their mothers; they invested in them, expecting future support, to many sisters' great irritation. There were no expectations to boys at home, except that they - in the future - should return with status and money. One may perhaps think with Agarwal's (1994) women's strategies for the fall-back position? When after repeated discussions with doña Iliana, who in many respects certainly could be described as both knowledgeable and respected in her community and she described her own compañero as rather lazy and far from a farmer, it became clear the behaviour of her own daughter, had left her both surprised and actually angry. She told us one day that her daughter had left a man she had been living with and come back home for a while, and Iliana was irritated, -“ although he had both house, TV and radio”, as she put it in earnest. It was incomprehensible for her to leave a man that could be a provider, while the daughter thought otherwise; she had found him too demanding.

There were, however, few other adult women than the housewife/farmwife living in the households in Coto Sur, and thus the “wish I had daughters” was illustrative for how women experienced the situation. Many of the daughters did, as their mothers had done before them, come home if they were deserted, or had broken relationships themselves, but most of them had to go out to earn money for the upkeep of their own children. The stereotyped expectations to women, including from women, drove young women away.

There were not many younger women in the Coto Sur settlement who were single, nor many who did not have children depending on them. None of the farm women in the settlement could afford to hire domestics in (which they often jested about would be great), so they had to rely on their own which usually meant kinship, preferably daughters. In a few instances there were sisters who came to help out. Keeping up a house, a household and a

farm was exhausting for most of the women, as demonstrated they were working sixteen hours a day.

The probably most difficult position to be in for a woman in Coto Sur was to be recruited as the *compañera* of a son in a house. For one, the youth that did not leave the settlement for work or education, still joined together very young, at 15-16 years of age, and normally had their first child very soon. These girls said they would prefer to get their own house, or live with her own folks, but it was the boys that worked in agriculture with their fathers, and who therefore could be in a position to organise living arrangements as their fathers more often controlled land than mothers did. These ‘nested’ arrangements providing young couples with a place to live and usually meant that these young women cooked on their own etc., but they would be expected to carry out heavy work in the ‘extended’ farm household, especially during the busy harvest times. Many of these young unions were perhaps not going to last very long, the young people were often immature, and in contrast with the parents’ generation when most consensual unions were contracted between women ten years or more younger than the men, their children were often both teenagers when entering consensual unions.

The picture emerging was that boys would typically be allowed to roam about while girls were left with babies, but fewer than before, it seemed as having two-three children was more typical for the women in the youngest generation that had remained in Coto Sur. The girls would begin using contraceptives as they usually were captured by the public health system when they gave birth the first time.

Some of the women, like *doña Leonora*, were worried about the girls, and *doña Mayela*, and *doña Carmen* as well, expressed preoccupation about that they thought girls being spoiled at home; not having been neither taught, nor used to what a life as ‘a rural housewife’ would entail. It was particularly in a few cases where the girls had grown up in the *cuadrantes* (referring here to those whose fathers were members of the banana cooperative),

that they were spoiled, they reasoned; they had not had to work for own survival. Hard work, and to be hardworking were considered as a quality among the farmwomen in Coto Sur. There were many such stories in Coto Sur, and young girls said they were desperate to go away, and many did. In this period of time it was these women who were recruited to the informal labourmarkets in the Capital, and to the growing *maquila* industries.

### **Motherhood**

All adult women, that is from sixteen years up, in Coto Sur were mothers, and motherhood was also women's most taken for granted role and status, and motherhood is a biological, symbolic and social identity position (Woodward 1997; Smart 1996; Moore 1996; Bortolaia 1996). On the one hand, in Coto Sur, this was so taken for granted and naturalised that it was rather a woman who was not a mother, that would be questioned. On the other hand, individual women would, often as their only weapon, use motherhood as a public position to bargain (Jelin 1991; Mayoux 1998). Some women in Coto Sur drew on the motherhood position in all kinds of negotiations, it was the only weapon they had, and they used it cleverly. The prime example is in the invasion period in the settlement when women, as mothers, had been able to negotiate for land, with the *Sindicato*, which was a position that the state institutions, the IDA and others, did not accept fully, when it came to distribution of resources for example. Several feminist authors have brought up 'citizenship through motherhood' and 'the citizen-mother', involving women's claim to citizenship in maternalist terms (Lister 2003: 100) and whose most famous expression in Latin America is the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, in Buenos Aires. In Coto Sur there had so far been no collective mobilisations of women as mothers, motherhood was interpreted as individual, but if there were to be one, it probably would be the only thing possible to mobilise around at this stage, but that of course, could change. When the SMFC team organised a Mother's day celebration

in Laurel<sup>231</sup> the handful peasant women present very obviously did not quite feel comfortable in the praising of motherhood in such a setting, they had apparently a more practical approach to motherhood, than the hymns, flowers and poetry presented.

Motherhood was, among women, interpreted as an essential role; it was nothing to bargain about, as doña Leonora so eloquently illustrated in her critique of her son's compañera, "it was in the soul". A mother was to be an altruistic mother, as many were, but it seemed as if 'strategic mothers', at times was a better description. Practical 'mothering' also has created mother/children alliances, particularly strong mother-son relationships, that were recognizable in just about every household in Coto Sur. The man always returned to his mothers' house when things got bad, it was as some men said, their only safe harbour in the world. And it was perhaps as mother of a son who provided cash incomes, that the status rendered most in Coto Sur. But, also worth noticing was that motherhood meant different things at different points in time. The relationship between motherhood and femininity was not even questioned among the peasant women in Coto Sur, and women's potential for reproducing children was always a card they could play out, and did, including in order to gain material support and maintenance from biological fathers. So, perhaps it would be possible to say that women in Coto Sur did not discuss or contest practicing of motherhood. In Coto Sur women were recognised more as reproducing mothers than as producers.

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<sup>231</sup> Mother's day is a big event in Costa Rica, usually celebrated in work places, schools and institutions with mother songs and gifts.

## Gender, Gender Relations, and Perceptions

*Gender, we argue, is a situated accomplishment of societal members, the local management of conduct in relation to normative conceptions of appropriate attitudes and activities for particular sex category* (West and Zimmermann in Fenstermaker and West 2002: 65)

What perhaps kept surprising me the most, both the two periods I spent in Coto Sur and not to talk about afterwards, was somehow to get to grips with was, and still is, I must admit, an enigma; how all the strong, clever, skilful, funny, resourceful women that I got to know, at some point submitted themselves to what at a start could be described as male dominance. It could be directly, relatively to one man, or more generally, to some ideas of masculine authority and superiority, to some kind of gendered order (Connell 2002). Women would, as the performance of always phrasing whatever they accomplished as *ayuda* (help); whatever they were doing and accomplishing, it was always phrased as if they were constantly helping their male partners.<sup>232</sup> Women in Coto Sur, did, as described numerous times in this work, construct the man as the farmer, as the head of the household, and the ruler supreme. By constructing themselves in this helping role, they both underestimated their own contributions and standing, and reified and over-estimated male cultural domination. Doña Yolanda, for example, who with her eleven children did keep everything going with a rather unsteady provider and companion, kept stressing that, “*Me gusta ayudar a mi compañero*” (I like to help my compañero) holding that that she enjoyed it as well, when we perhaps would comment and praise her hard exertions. Whether she wanted to express that she really liked to do what she did, or that she would demonstrate that she was a decent housewife and living up the cultural expectations was hard to say, but this was a hard-programmed idea in her mind. Others were more uncertain, would start out with the helping idiom, but eventually would

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<sup>232</sup> Gudeman and Rivera (1990) interpret the use of term ‘*ayuda*’ among farmers in Colombia they studied as helping the land, in a more comprehensive ecological understanding. That might be so, but in Coto Sur Sur I never heard men, nor women talk about helping the land, and men were not ‘helping’ women either. My interpretation is that in Coto Sur Sur it had to be understood as a manner of positioning oneself in a sub-position, and it was gendered, no doubt.

openly describe these same men as hopeless, lazy, etc., and admit that why they actually were saying that they were helping out was in practice a way of talking.

Another possible interpretation is that by talking in this way, and thus to subordinate themselves; they could accomplish a lot more than there was culturally room for decent women to do? The interesting question was what the women in their relationships to men tried to construct themselves as. Considering both their migrant backgrounds, and often turbulent relationships with men, fathers or partners and how many men had deserted them, and failed to live up to their role as providers. There was something about men's attempts at being in control - and in command - that was at stake (Melhuus 1996), and women's subtle and indirect contestations of that.

Getting to know some of the women quite well, this appeared more and more as a contradiction, and was perhaps the very knot to be untied in the SMFC programme, although at that stage it was still not quite recognized or rather, elaborated upon. Women's own explanation of this contradictory situation was often brought up in our conversations, including sessions organised by the SMFC Women's Programme. Women held, repeatedly, that men were simply by nature *mas débiles* (weaker) than women, morally and spiritually, and simply could not help it. Men were considered to be born that way. That did not prevent women to criticise individual men for being lazy or no-goods. Elisabeth Brusco (1995) found in households in Columbia that there was little comprehension between spouses and that men were mostly concerned about female betrayal, a situation encountered repeatedly in Coto Sur as well; men tended to be very suspicious about women, although they were not always able, or willing to do anything about it, particularly as many of the ex-bananeros now were compelled to spending more time at home, near the house, than they liked, or had ever done before, they were getting older.

Another typical way of describing men, in contrast to women, was that they were (born) restless; *muy andariego*<sup>233</sup> (walking about), was a frequently heard expressions of men's apparently inherent drive to be on the go, on the road. Men would often reify this impression, but they would phrase it that they were going away from something, that it was an escape, when they could not bear a situation anymore. Former bananeros in Coto Sur were claiming that impossible foremen and quarrels on the plantation as well as too demanding women, had more than once made them hit the road and they solved it all by leaving. Went away. And it was apparently cultural acceptance for men's inherent need to be on the move, and that they were free to do so, while that was not the case for women at all.

Women would transgress these gendered boundaries in different ways and thereby contest male authority, for example by saying "*Voy a pasar*",<sup>234</sup> which ostensibly could be interpreted in various directions, depending on who you were, when, where you were going to, and if you were observed by others. If an adult woman in Coto Sur was observed talking with an unknown man alone, it seemed always to be mentioned, and it soon could be made a story about her as a doubtful woman. If a man talked to an unaccompanied woman, the same, but then it was interpreted as he was trying to seduce her, with the difference that the woman had tempted him.

In numerous conversations women would seriously argue that they thought God had intentionally constructed males and females this way, and that it was women's fate to suffer, although a growing number were in the process of changing their minds, but their vocabularies seemed to somehow be stuck in their old ways, when they would try to communicate how difficult it was to keep a conversation going with their partners, "they simply do not have a clue", they said when it comes to children's needs, emotional stress, or any such things, in fact some of the women said they hardly talked much with their partners, things went without saying, so to speak. This was never expressed if asked directly about such

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<sup>233</sup> wandering, vagrant, etc

<sup>234</sup> This could mean anything from 'I am going to spend some time there' to simply mean 'walking about'.



issues, those were topics that had to slowly emerge in conversations over time, and it was also something that the IDA's social worker had noticed, and saw the need to try do something about.

This apparent male dominance in Coto Sur could be very open and direct, and individual women's submission to men who were not so smart, perhaps indolent at times, not always best looking, at times rude, ageing, and irresponsible, as simply scripting it as subservient, was enigmatic. It was something that existed but very difficult to grapple, and yet probably decisive when trying to create a Women's Programme among the peasant women, in which their empowerment (at this stage couched as '*toma de decisiones*'). One would have to give attention to the women's noticeable submissiveness to men and male domination, one way or the other, and begin to work on that in order for the women to gain enough confidence to stand up and fend for themselves.

### **'True Love'?**

In Coto Sur there seemed often to exist a world of difference between the expectations from women - and from men - to each other causing many conflicts most often explained by jealousy and emotions. We heard several stories about women who had eloped with men, run off, and those elopements were explained with romantic ideas about true love, and good-looking men who had promised the sky, but ended in conflicts due to jealousy and men's constant fear of women's betrayal. The overall pattern seemed to have something to do with very different normative understandings of the conjugal/marital relation.

In the Women's Groups in Coto Sur the topic of ideals and realities as regards conjugal relationships was often brought up, directly or indirectly, with the clear intention of supporting the building of women's self-esteem and to assist them to become conscious that they were not alone in their difficulties; it was a quite common experience, that they get

support from others, for example, but as it were, it was a theme very difficult to deal with. Both in the Women's Groups, and when discussing with the women in their homes, such matters were constantly brought up, and the SMFC social promoters, and researchers as well, did make great efforts to have the women begin to assess their own experiences in order to be able to negotiate better and thus contribute to what the SMFC director had called the much needed democratisation of the peasant family. Building women's self-consciousness took much time, and the SMFC promoters usually legitimated this as their having *compromisos con las señoras*, and that engaged them very much.<sup>235</sup>

An example how such gender relations were experienced, was doña Luisa's explanation for why she had endured ten years before breaking out of her difficult relationship was typical:

I did everything for my compañero. He was ten years my senior, and we eloped when I was 14. I was ready with the towel when he had showered, I combed his hair, cut his toenails, dressed him, made all his clothes ready, ironed and mended every day, I cleaned and ironed and cooked day and night. He was never satisfied, and he got angry if things were not as he wished, when he wished, and if he was drunk, he hit me.

When asked why she endured, she looked at us and said, "But I loved him! But he was indeed a tyrant, in the end I walked off when he brought another woman into the house". When it came to the end of the day the majority of the women did not really leave the men they had had relationships to, and who had fathered their children much honour, although a number would say, "well, not too bad", or "he was a nothing, but sent at least money when he had", or, 'he was at least occasionally responsible'. A handful of the women who had these kinds of experiences held that they had later encountered men that were more positively talked about.

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<sup>235</sup> The promoters in the SMFC realised that they had to put a lot more energy and attention into such 'consciousness training' than both the WP and they themselves had anticipated. This in turn had led to many delays of the planned agendas, and probably was one of the reasons for the change in mandate and leadership, which on the other hand did not make the situation any better.

More than half of the informants were explicitly clearly negative about their experience with men and if their experiences with their own biological fathers, who often had walked out on them were added to it; there were not many positive adult males left in the women's judgements. It was not easy, having experienced men's desertations in two, even three generations, and still "expect the unexpected," as one of the women humorously added. Still, as mentioned, the women were not (yet) in a position to contest many of the men's behaviour, as they when pressured on the issue, could not quite get themselves to face the gendered expectations directly, and were, ambiguously accepting female subordination, at least to some extent. Nonetheless, the man-woman relationship was also supposed to be very emotional ('true love'), and jealousy that was threatening this relationship, was accepted as a reason for many actions, including murder. Thus 'True love' - a symbolic reconnection of the dichotomized symbolic world' (Connell 1995: 137), was very often drawn upon when gender relations were at stake.

### **Female Subordination, Machismo, Dualisms, and Contestation of It**

The topic of the assumed universality of female subordination was early brought up by feminist and gender researchers, as exemplified by for instance, Sherry Ortner (1974) summed up in three points:

- 1) Elements of cultural ideology and informant's statements that explicitly devalue women, according them, their roles, their tasks, their products and their social milieux less prestige than are accorded men and their male correlates;
- 2) Symbolic devices - that may be interpreted as implicitly making a statement of inferior valuation, and;
- 3) Social structural arrangements that exclude women from participation or in contact.

Many have also added that women in Latin America have traditionally been socialised to accept a submissive position, to such an extent that they incorporate it in own behaviour and thinking, but as mentioned before, this is deeply influenced by class differences, race, as well as regional variations (Jelin 1991). By now it is accepted that meanings of gender are ambiguous particularly in Latin American settings in characterised by rapid social and economic changes that certainly influence on gender relationships (Costa 2000; Foote 2004). When gender relationships were brought up in conversations in Coto Sur they were just about always rationalized as being natural by the women and men alike; or, when pressured on the matter, as things in nature it always coming in pairs; thus the image of *parejas*, of two parts that supposedly fitted, was very often referred to.<sup>236</sup> The fact that the two making up such pairs were from equal, seemed to be neglected, it was the image of the perfect heterosexual couple that counted. This is what is often referred to as binary thinking and was well developed and employed in Coto Sur often by referring to natural surroundings, “Look at the birds, or the cows, the stags”, were favourites, or through Biblical stories, in which the binaries *hembra/varón* (male/female) were repeated. It was based on observed differences, on sexual differences, and sexuality, and transformed to every possible situation in life, it seemed.<sup>237</sup> The dualism of body and spirit is a Catholic iconography, and the vocabulary of *vicios* were much drawn upon as well. Altogether legitimating sexual differences with nature was probably explanation most typical in Coto Sur. Others have pointed to that

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<sup>236</sup> Silvia Marcos (2002) has an interesting suggestion trying to explain this phenomenon in Central America by gender, bodies and cosmology.

<sup>237</sup> This belief in the complementarity and reciprocal nature of male and female roles has been central see Stevens (1973: 99)

the relational construct of gender which positions men and women oppositionally, and the singular, essentialist concept of sexuality in which sexual desire is imagined to be virtually instinctual and, therefore, uncontrollable (Nencel 1996: 61).<sup>238</sup>

There was, in other words, a marked tendency to essentialise femininity and masculinity in Coto Sur, at least in speech, when it came to lived life the impression was that there was more space for variations. Women's vocabularies when it came to such difficult questions were in the main drawn on nature and religion. Gender relations were to them inherently asymmetrical, but represented by the women as not so much to do anything about, some of the women had endured physical violence from men, and still considered it to live with. It seemed as if it was not until after a break, and if women were able to make a living on their own, that they could allow themselves to begin to scratch on the surface of these - to them -, very complicated matters. Sometimes, when trying to launch such discussions in the Women's Groups, the SMFC promoters had to take long detours, speak clearly in metaphors and narratives. A favourite situation to start from was the current running soap opera on TV; in which jealousy, love and deceit, in normally very luxurious upper class environments (Mexican and Venezuelan) were watched by many women in Coto Sur every day. This could prompt many discussions as the women thought they did not talk about themselves. I therefore would like to make Belinda Leach's observations to mine:

In the context of women's multiple subjectivities and subordinate position vis-a-vis men, we have to pay serious attention to the contradictions that women express in both words and actions. Apparently contradictory behaviour and talk is one of the (only) ways women can critique their position, even as they live it (2005:5)

Such contradictions surfaced when women simultaneously complained about men being womanizers and their worries about leakages in their meagre household budgets and about

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<sup>238</sup> She holds, building on other researchers, that 'it is feasible that sexuality and gender are far more entwined in Latin America than, for example in Western Europe' (1996 :57).

men's running off, for, in the next moment to say that they enjoyed helping their *compañero* in his doings.

### **Machismo**

When bringing up some of my observations of gendered relationships in Coto Sur to discussion, the SMFC team members would frequently use the term *machismo* (as well as *patriarchado*) to describe and explain situations that they found to be in women's disfavour. As of 1986 this was not a word or discourse that peasant women were drawing on at all, whereas it was an everyday expression in the capital San José, and as the SMFC team all had attended university, it was literally a household term in Laurel. The team members often used the term in group sessions with the women mainly as an explanation for why things were as they were. How would machismo have any analytical meaning to explain men's behaviour and women's apparent submission in Coto Sur?

In Latin America (and perhaps especially in Hispanic USA) the term *machismo* has become a street word with different meanings but all of them alluding to biological men's cultural dominant position, but with several different connotations. Lorraine Nencel simply says that 'Machismo is an all-embracing concept determining women's subordination' (1996: 57). In social sciences, *machismo* has, since the early 1970s, been a key term and anyone working in Central America would expect to be confronted with the phenomenon one way or the other. Well educated middle class women in the Capital, San José would just shrug, and make a short analysis of the current state of affairs, for thereafter contrast with Mexican men, as really *machistas*; they would not let you as a female go alone in a street, less so not trying to conquer you, compared to the more modest *ticos* (Costa Ricans). Entailing that machismo according to them occurs by degree. But whatever interpretation machismo may be given, the term seemed to help explain, or rather point to, gendered injustice, and its many expressions,

ranging from sexual conquests, to the effortless privilege to have first priority in the most unexpected situations. Among the many who have scrutinized both the term - and men's machista behaviour - there are different explanations and definitions, ranging from depicting a typical Mediterranean masculinity; to more composite ones that especially due to the high Latin immigration in the US has led to *machismo* being altered and given new meanings.

Many who have struggled conceptually and empirically with the term, hold that there have been basic differences between the understanding in the 'old world'; that is the Mediterranean emphasis on 'honour and shame',<sup>239</sup> and the Latin American versions, which have been strongly influenced by conquest and colonialism in which male Spanish conquerors also forced themselves on indigenous women, and whose offspring seemingly endlessly have been considered of less value.

Of the many versions of machismo, there is a common denominator, and that is that it represents a typically public appearance, in that men are regarded as competing with other men in a public setting, demonstrating aggressiveness, independence, sexual conquests. In Costa Rica, including in Coto Sur, Nicaraguan males were considered more machista, in this interpretation of the term, with Guanacastecos as second. According to women in the Coto Sur settlement the preponderance of men of these two origins in the Southern Zone had its positive aspects, and they would often, when referring to some of the state functionaries or international experts encountered now and then, contrast them as being *cacihombres* (almost-men, or half-men), clearly alluding to their pale, 'civilised' and dull appearances what they found as a lack of zest. That Nicaraguan version of machismo has been judged as a special aggressive version (Lancaster 1992; Sternberg 2000), but the term has been axiomatic in the discussion of the relative status, rights, responsibilities, spheres of authority, and decision making of men versus women (Brusco 1995).

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<sup>239</sup> Most cited are probably Stevens in Pescatello (1973), in which machismo is described as a male personality and concomitant behaviour pattern characterised by 'exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to male relations and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to female relationships' (Stevens 1973: 90). See also Peristiani ed (1974).

There is, however, little consensus about how to characterise Latin American gender system or indeed whether this is possible by means of machismo. McCallum comments on this, drawing on Lancaster's analysis of the Nicaraguan hegemonic machismo, as he says, 'it is (also) an organisation of social relations that generates ideas. It has its own materiality, its own power to produce effects (Lancaster 1992: 236), and she shows, that that the gender system is, 'produced both in discourse by sexuality, sexual practice and in other domains where gender relations are played out. Sex and sexuality may constitute gender but not in its entirety' (McCallum 1999: 276). McCallum, working in Brazil, questions the differences-class, peasants, bourgeois, etc. and demonstrates that the cult of the sensual female often seems to take precedence over that of the powerful male. Thus, she insists on focusing on the changes taking place, including also '- structural analyses of local social and political organisation, kinship, marriage, employment and gender hierarchy' (op.cit :288), and thus, searching for the multiplicities of gender.

### **Male Domestic Abdication**

Based on empirical material from Andean Colombian households, Elisabeth Brusco says that more everyday versions of machismo have not been given as much attention as the more spectacular public displays mentioned above and described as, 'complex, 'hypersexuality, *cuatismo* (male camaraderie), violence, risk taking, courage or stoicism, authoritarianism, independence' (1995: 78). However, she finds that these are not useful approaches when trying to deal with the situation in households and families, where male-male public appearance is not at stake.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Her observation is that she has 'marveled at the efficiency with which the application of the term machismo to Latin American kinship and family patterns has rendered women invisible' (Brusco 1995: 80) She instead lands on another version, namely Kutsche' pointing to the contradiction between what he labels male 'self-confidence' vs 'male self doubt', and she finds that the latter better explains the male behaviour patterns among peasants in Columbia.



Such patterns of everyday versions of machismo have much in common with what is found in much of rural Central America, in Coto Sur (and Guanacaste for that matter), with typical patterns of male desertation, what Brusco labels as ‘male domestic abdication’, asking what characterises the apparent alienation of men from the household, she says it is:

attenuation of their roles as husbands and fathers, (and-) - their identification with the world outside rather than with their household group (op.cit: 80).

Elisabeth Brusco points to the oppressive class structures in Latin America, and thus economic and political exclusions as explanatory factors, and connects machismo to male economic insecurity, and to the well-known idea of the ‘bread winner model’ where the man is supposed to be the sole provider. When he is not able to do that, due to economic hardship, he runs off instead. Brusco argues that in Latin America one understands that machismo contributes to a man’s lack of involvement in his roles as husband and father, and if *marianismo*<sup>241</sup> really describes women’s role as mother and has, says Brusco, a bearing on the conjugal role only insofar as husbands have to be treated as demanding children, and she adds;

if *machismo* defines the male role it is inaccurate to speak of the family as being ‘patriarchal’, men gets respect instead by installing fear. The adult male role as defined by machismo is not a familial role, as a man’s only legitimate domain is the public realm (and thus the woman may have the house and family as her sole legitimate domain). ‘Conjugal relations, then, are shaped on the surface by the dominance of the machista personality - and by the situation of female dependency on male (op.cit: 97).

Based on the situation in Andean Colombia, Brusco holds that the relative aspirations of men and women rarely coincide, and are most often in conflict. This intense conflict, insecurity, negotiations, and manipulation surrounding male household contributions has been

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<sup>241</sup> ‘Marianismo’ refers to the mother Maria- and her sufferings, see Stevens (1973)

documented by many, and was also to a certain extent confirmed in Coto Sur, entailing that when reaching beyond the face of the household units; what came up were endless conflicts. One could, with reason, pose the question if and whether the establishment of the Coto Sur settlement had stabilised, 'normalised', or improved these relationships?

As Brusco and many others have remarked, if a man becomes a 'family man' he is breaking with the norms of machismo. The inverse correlation of machismo is responsibility, cooperation, satisfaction in work, and productivity. When a man becomes a *parcelero* in Coto Sur, a settled farmer, the masculinity associated with that, is apparently the opposite of a masculinity typical of bananeros (Marquardt 2002). IDA functionaries' perpetual reiteration of the ex-bananeros image was about their 'plantation' mentality, but they should perhaps rather be talking about *machista* mentality instead? One certainly could question what machista image men in Coto Sur were trying to live up to, there was little cash to show off publicly, many suffered from weak health, and the IDA also ridiculed them. extensionists at times as old-fashioned. In many ways they were in need of some redefinitions.

### **Caught between Different Systems and Expectations**

Coto Sur in the 1980s was undergoing rapid changes, to be intensified in the years ahead, and looking closer at women's situation one may say that they were encountered somewhere in-between expectations and assumptions about a happy nuclear family, and the realities of complex household arrangements, that it was much up to themselves to make out, interpret and make the most of, as best they could, within what can be described as rather traditional and complementary gender discourses. With the life-experiences many women had, having literally survived on their own, most of them seemed to have realised that in order to make ends meet they would have to find a male provider. In spite of much attention to ideals of true love and eternal happiness, most women were rather realistic in terms of what they, as

women, could expect, and to make it meaningful. Coming to Coto Sur had for most of them represented a possibility to create a nest, from which to construct and build a family. Now the realities of their domestic units were complex, and often very demanding on the women. On the one hand, the 'mother' generation (35+) had been little exposed to modern education and ideas about equality between the sexes, on the other, their own life courses had probably taught them much about male domination and discrimination, but they had been forced to fend for themselves and their children. The challenge was how to literally translate these experiences, and at times, hegemonic representations of gender stereotypes, in this particular setting to practical changes and improvements.

To disentangle and make family life meaningful, within the complex household and kinship arrangements found in the settlement, seemed to be many of the women's own projects, but that was not something that they shared with others. That was still far ahead.

## Chapter 6

### PARTICIPATION, INTEGRATION AND BELONGING

#### The SMFC's Efforts - To 'break with the two spheres'

*Vamos a integrar a la mujer* (Oscar Arias, presidential campaign 1986)<sup>242</sup>

One of the SMFC's main concerns was that women in the agrarian settlements in Costa Rica were not enjoying the voice and participation they constitutionally were entitled to, a question raised worldwide and discussed and tried improved by WID/GAD policies, echoed by the Costa Rican president's call to 'integrate' women. Among feminists frequently phrased as women's 'empowerment'. There were then, as later, various opinions whether women should be organised separately in women's groups, or one should 'integrate' women in existing organisations, institutions and communities (later labelled 'mainstreaming') in order to achieve the goal of greater participation in democratic processes. This would, in many cases, take as its assumption that women would have to leave the 'private sphere' behind, and go out and literally enter the 'public sphere'.

The versatile SMFC Women's Project mandate had been constructed upon this assumption, that increased participation in the public sphere would lead to an improvement in women's situation. When the SMFC was constructing their new policies they had been gathering information about peasant women's livelihoods etc, and when analysing this material had they detected what was formulated as the existence of 'separate spheres' for men and women:

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<sup>242</sup> This was one of Oscar Arias' many slogans in the presidential campaign 1985/86, and it translates to 'We will integrate the women'. This was, however, seldom talked about in more concrete terms, except when his (ex) wife, later *Primera Dama* Margarita Penón was actively promoting women's issues.

On the ideological level one observes a division of the world in two spheres of action, excluding one another. One domestic and feminine, the other masculine and extra-domestic (Amador et al. 1984:125)<sup>243</sup>.

This entailed that women - men - and society - would have to learn to accept that both genders could, with the same right, be encountered anywhere, thus invoking ideas about universal citizenship and collectives, which was breaking with ingrained ideas, as discussed previously. The theme in this chapter is not to decide and verify the existence of such separate spheres, but rather to seek to examine the constructions of them, whether or not they were contested, how and by whom.

Women were not spending much time outside their homes and were not very active in organised activities in the Coto Sur settlement (chapters 4 and 5), commonly explained by referring to practical and ideological reasons, the latter habitually expressed in Latin America as, 'Man for the street, woman for the house.' Accordingly, that 'outside' had to be considered as something more than open and public spaces to be visited by women on equal terms with men. That entails enlarging the question and ask: what was in fact this society/community that women were to be 'integrated' into? Moreover, did women feel 'at home' in Coto Sur? Did they feel that they were part of what took place? Did they feel that they belonged in society, in their local community, and beyond for that matter?

The SMFC Women's Programme in Coto Sur had integration of women as a central issue in its mandate and had chosen as a main strategy to mobilise peasant women, to get them organised, and to start new women's groups in the settlement. As it were, most effort was put into mobilising sustain the handful of women's groups that had been created the past years, and which, it turned out, needed immense moral and logistical support, they were not in the best of shape. Hence, in their first period in in Coto Sur this work took most of the time and energy for the SMFC promoters and the participants were motivated and trained in

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<sup>243</sup> 'A nivel ideológico, se observa una división del mundo en dos esferas de acción, excluyentes entre sí. Una doméstica y femenina y la otra masculina y extradoméstica.' (Amador et al. 1984: 125)

organisational practices (how does a steering committee function, etc.), and consciousness raising. Due to limited resources, the SMFC did not succeed to create new women's groups, as the plan was.

However, the other part of the assignment; to enhance women's participation and integration in existing groups, associations, organisations and institutions both in the (local) community, and society at large, was it first and foremost the SMFC team's sociologists' task to work out, to prepare the ground so to speak. This was to be done by research and writing of various community assessments (*diagnósticos*) in the Coto Sur settlement. This chapter is built upon some contemplations around this activity, both in practice, and how it was ideologically constituted and framed.

Starting rather broadly by looking closer at women's whereabouts outside their assumed private sphere is an attempt to consider this matter from the women's point of view, (in the SMFC mandate phrased as their 'perceptions'). I will let doña Elena submit some of her contemplations concerning these issues.

## **Local and Other Communities in Coto Sur**

*Aquí no hay comunidad, solamente hay gente buena y gente mala* (Doña Elena 1986)

"Here is no (sense of) community, only good and bad people", said doña Elena, and probably without being aware of it, she resounded Margaret Thatcher who, during the same decade, held that there was no such thing as society, only individuals. Elena said she lamented what she described as "lack of community" (*falta de comunidad*), but it was difficult to get to grips with what she really meant by community. Was it the people she met when she sporadically ventured out of her house and parcel, was it the whole Coto Sur settlement, her church, the nation, or was it what she thought it ought to be, or something she had experienced before?

Doña Elena's statement, far from uncommon in Coto Sur, directed her attention and concern to what was taking place beyond her immediate daily paths between kitchen, well, and maize fields, and she was not alone in looking well beyond that setting. Whether in small talk, in the Women's Groups, through interviews and conversations, inhabitants in Coto Sur expressed concerns about their worlds, on different scales, but not necessarily in a hierarchically ordered manner (local, regional, national, international etc.).

Doña Elena could be a suitable example. At 43 years old she lives on a farm in a recreated domestic unit with her *compañero* and three of her children (her other three are living in Río Frio, in San Jose, and in Palmar Sur respectively). In this household also lives an old uncle of her spouse, as well as a brother of his that comes and goes, and who occasionally works in the banana cooperative. Elena says that she is not participating regularly in anything public. If she dresses up and leaves her house it could be to accompany one of the children to the health centre in Laurel, and if there, she also would visit the CNP shop if she has some cash, and perhaps stand in line and make a phone-call to her seventeen year old daughter who works as a domestic in an upper class family in Escazú (a well-off neighbourhood right outside San José). She would occasionally take the bus to Neilly if there was something special that would have to be accomplished, and then she also would visit some shops where she knows people (she had lived in one of the banana plantations in Coto, near Neilly), "only to look" as she puts it. She makes most of her own clothes so she is always after a bargain looking for cheap fabrics. She never leaves her house without wearing her best dress and shoes, and she has several. Once or twice a year she travels to mass in the Catholic Church in Golfito, and sometimes there was a wedding or a funeral she would have to attend. She has little direct contact with people living on the farms around, but she knows who they are. She says, "We don't run around to visit, it is not like that around here". If something needs to be accomplished she sends her eleven-year old son with a message. He is also the one who goes to the *pulperia* to get groceries (on credit) but it is usually her *compañero* who makes the

necessary purchases, there, or at the CNP outlet in Laurel. Occasionally Elena would leave her house to talk to one of the two teachers at the local school, and, if asked, she would also contribute with some cooking if there were to be some kind of activity at the school. She said she liked to do that, and that she considered it important to be friendly to others, but one has to be aware of anyone who may not be sincere. Said she had distrust in people she did not know.

There are no newspapers in circulation Coto Sur (except a day or two late in the IDA offices in Laurel) nor is she very good at reading either, but she listens a lot to the radio, and every morning she works with agricultural activities. She has two sisters and a half-brother living in Coto Sur, and other kin in San Vito, Palmar and Golfito, as well in Guanacaste where she was born. They are the ones she can ask for help, and who she would help if they needed it. Through them, the radio, and by listening to the men talking at home she gets her information. She has never been to the Atlantic, but she has visited a sister in San José once about ten years ago and has also travelled to funerals and other visits in the Southern Zone. She would like to see her kin more but does not have time nor money to do so, and her *compañero* does not like her running around, she says. Hence, she obeys his wishes of not staying outside on her own more than necessary, but admits that she has her ways of persuasion if she has to do something; in that case she would ally herself with a sister or one of the children.

When listening to Elena, she seems to have a perspective, or outlook, that to a very limited extent can be said to be 'local'. Her community, as she conceives of it, is geographically spread out, in many ways typical of migrants. She says that she has no time or interest to spend time with neighbours; everyone living in the vicinity are labelled *los vecinos* (neighbours). "There is too much talk", she says, and so many conflicts. Neighbouring adult women are described as *las señoras*; typically *la señora de don Luis*, or *la mujer de don Enrique*, even "the woman who used to be don Manuel's", and seldom by the women's own



names. Elena is surprisingly well informed about others' whereabouts, and says that it is important to be correct, to greet people, to be helpful when dealing with others, and to be friendly. The way she portrays her life-world is through personal relationships. It is other people she relates to, not to systems, such as the school, the bank and so forth. 'The IDA' is to her the extensionists; Carlito or Gustavo, the *carajos* she sees running around on their mopeds or who the men have been in contact with. She distinguishes, like most people in Coto Sur, along binaries: *gente buen* and *gente mala* (good and bad people), not us and them, or from here, or from there.



Small Community in Coto Sur

### Community?

*Lying at the heart of the idea of community is an ambivalence. On the one side, it expresses locality and particularness, the domain of immediate social relations, the familiar, proximity - and, on the other, it refers to the universal community in which all human beings participate (Delanty 2003: 12).*

There was often some kind of story, by-line, or slip of the tongue perhaps, that there “ought to be a community”, when the women were talking, and said that there is no community in Coto Sur,<sup>244</sup> and that in fact perhaps they were missing something, or wishing that things should be

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<sup>244</sup> I have to repeat that now long time after the first field work, I realise that both the SMFC team as well as myself did probably signal very clearly that ‘participation’ was a good thing, and the replies were coming in accordance with the manner the questions were posed.

different, that there was something unstated about belonging and wellbeing in their deliberations.

In a classic book about Costa Rican society by Biesanz, Biesanz and Biesanz, one chapter is dedicated to Community, and the authors argue that, 'Most Costa Ricans are greatly attached to home and community,' (1980: 33) and they present the typical,

village, the hamlet, and the *caserios*, which is described as 'the little clusters of houses - the widely scattered wooden or adobe houses of a hamlet surround a central plaza, which usually a grassy square for soccer.(op.cit: 45)

Moreover, one is informed that there is a school, a pulperia, a policeman, and a teacher. The presumed communities in Coto Sur are perhaps not so different from this description, only lacking some of the mentioned typical traits, part of which is obviously explained by the very recent establishment of the settlement.

So much for the rather (at least in the 1980s) hegemonic account of Costa Rican community, that in the main describes the traditional communities of the 'white' majority of the Meseta Central. As brought up in chapter 3, this is a picture that is being increasingly contested, particularly by the black population of Jamaican ancestry that has mainly been residing in the Atlantic shores (Foote 2004; Sandoval García 2004; Sharman 2001). In the territorial narratives of the 1980s La Zona Sur did not comply with the 'Costa Ricanness' of the Central Valley; it was rather its otherness that was being emphasised. There was, as yet, little reification of this distinctiveness in the Southern Zone as was beginning to happen in the Atlantic, but probably, only a question of time before contesting versions will be produced.

Hence, the issues concerned with women and community, and framing 'participation' and 'integration' in the Coto Sur settlement, were twisted to come around, they did not spring to the eye immediately, and could mean many different things. What follows here has been based on various readings of the empirical material, constructions of matrices etc., and inspirations from other experiences and literature, for example discussions about inclusion

and exclusions, contestations of the ‘public/private dichotomy’, on different interpretations of what citizenship may mean, as well as perspectives on the concept of ‘social capital’, etc. Some basic notions of place and space could be encountered in the empirical material, giving some directions what Coto Sur was understood and constructed as among different people, and it probably is no surprise to say that they not always did overlap. To be constituted as an agricultural settlement had given rise to applying some special rules and regulations, as well as placing in the administrative hierarchies in the country, with some particular links to the national state and government,<sup>245</sup> and consequently the presence of important (state) institutions. But also seemed to legitimate certain views as who the inhabitants were supposed to be, and their assumed belonging and allegiance to their homeplace; Coto Sur.

In the IDA in Laurel they talked about the communities (*comunidades*), out there, and it sounded as some kind of territorialized and bounded units. IDA personnel consequently were talking about the importance of spotting and being on good terms with (informal) leaders in those communities, often denominated as *caciques* (chiefs, bosses)<sup>246</sup> and the functionaries’ notion of participation and democracy was consequently interpreted as to be on good terms with those leaders. If they were, things would move in that community, if not, nothing would happen. In the minds of many of the IDA functionaries in Laurel, the Coto Sur settlement consisted of a mosaic of communities, some better and others worse (when it came to cooperation), it could, I think, actually be used crayons in different colours to signify the degree of good or bad - communities - on the big map in the extension office in Laurel.

Summing it up, one may say that in the IDA compound in Laurel there were represented two main, partly interrelated versions of the communities; one ‘communitarian’

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<sup>245</sup> This is not my field of study, but it concerns possible overlap and authority between the local government systems and the state by the autonomous IDA institutions, see Lara et al. (1995) for an overview of local governing bodies etc.

<sup>246</sup> It was through the routines developed in the IDA’s Docae dept that these approaches were outlined (see for example Docae: ‘Ponencia 5 (1984), and the sociologists in the SMFC were also on the outlook for *caciques* when they were out, which they argued was how villages in Costa Rica were organised. The issue of farmers’ organisations and the IDA is a long and complex matter that will not be brought up here.

and one 'territorial' that might provide an entrance to study how gender and gender relations could be taken into account. I did not have the chance to go out and study any of the communities in Coto Sur in more detail (which certainly I would have liked to do), but as it were, most of the empirical material was collected in five or six of the IDA-defined 'communities' in the La Plancha, Vaquita C, and San Juan districts and that I basically will be drawing on. Nonetheless, I have found it of interest also to turn this question around and ask; how would it at all be possible to identify and detect some linkages - or associations - between the place(s)/community (ies) in Coto Sur, the ruling IDA- interpretations of them, the women's own views and imaginations, and my own - and others? That is, initiating an exploration of society, place, and community and which place and space women occupy in it. It is paraphrasing over some of these intricate topics that lay at the bottom of this chapter, what could be described, quite indistinctly indeed, as something like the overall situation' for women in Coto Sur. And that was, after all, both the SMFC's and my mission.

### **Community and Participation - A Few Analytical Perspectives**

I have started out this chapter by pointing to the assumptions in the SMFC mandate between the taken for granted existence of community in Coto Sur, and the need for increasing women's participation, resulting in a questioning of what it exactly was that women were to be integrated into, and for example which scales, places and institutions one was referring to, indicating that there were some links that were assumed between those. Doña Elena is a case in point, she mentions both scales, institutions, as well as notions of neighbourhoods in her contemplations.

Academics often distinguish between the idea of community, for instance as 'imagined community' (Anderson 1981), and 'communitarian' political traditions, emphasising participation and democracy, while in more daily speech they tend to be put in the same

bag.<sup>247</sup> Delanty's (2003) pointing above to the 'locality and particularness' vs 'universal', is often referred to as a double sense of community, and adds to the ambiguity of the concept. In the history of these thoughts there is often reference to the idea of a 'total community', understood as a fusion of state and society, an organic whole.<sup>248</sup> In British sociology there has been a long tradition of community studies, including both urban and rural communities (Bell and Newby 1971). In contrast to these, mainly sociological perspectives are the ideas underlying 'political community'; invoking such terms as 'communitarianism' and 'citizenship'. The concept of community in political philosophy is normative, of the type 'from contract to community' and communitarians argue that citizenship is based on a social concept of the individual as member of a community. With communitarianism, community has become a highly contested term, and even within, there are several strands (liberal, radical pluralism, civic republicanism ('social capital' etc.), and government communitarianism (Delanty 2003).

It is within the strand referred to as 'radical pluralism' feminist political theorists tend to be placed (by others), as they argue for a group-differentiated understanding of community, which is never holistic. (Iris Marion Young 1990, 2000; Ruth Lister 2003; S. Benhabib 1992, 1996). They think that one should be shaping a genuinely multicultural society where all groups may be accommodated regardless of their size and importance.<sup>249</sup> The third strand, 'civic republicanism', is concerned with citizenship participation, including the ideas of 'social capital' and thus participation in public life, particularly in Putnam's version. To many

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<sup>247</sup> In sociological thinking there have been three main versions: as tradition (Tönnies); as moral community (Durkheim); and as symbolic community (Turner, and based on him; Anthony Cohen). In the latter deliberations lie an understanding of 'culture' in contrast to 'civilization' in the German tradition and he owes much to Turner, when he argues that communities are based on the symbolic construction of boundaries.

<sup>248</sup> This is a classic debate, in which reactionary politics, fascism etc. have been central. Hobsbawm (1994) does discuss these; as communal movements that are opposed to modernity and to universalistic concepts of community. The Kibbutz is the best example of a communal movement that embodies a vision of a total community that also reflects an alternative to modernity.

<sup>249</sup> An interesting observation is that one often distinguishes between a liberal communitarianism - concerned about the politics of citizenship and the public domain, and the radical pluralists who would extend citizenship also into the private realm, as the feminists often do. Community is thus understood as a communicative category rather than a closed cultural sphere (Delanty 2003).

civic republicans community means the creation and mobilisation of social capital and much development work the past decade has moved from so-called economist priorities to building 'communities' and 'good governance' etc., which, indeed, have questioned lack of both gender and class perspectives (Molyneux 2002; Das 2004; Mayer and Rankin (2002); Norris and Ingelhart 2003).

Many analysts have pointed to the movement from ideas about cohesive communities- to rather consider daily life and multiculturalism, which shows that concepts are continually given new meanings. Now community is becoming more discursively constituted, and not necessarily correspond to reality.

Community is becoming receptive to new forms of belonging based on different modes of communication (Delanty 2003: 188).

Moreover; he says that because community is imagined does not mean that it is not real, but that we need to abandon the distinction between real vs imagined community. Considering the above perspectives on community, both participation and belonging would be crucial to take in when exploring the women's situation in Coto Sur.

### **Neighbourhoods, Good and Bad People**

When doña Elena (above) did talk about *falta de comunidad* (lack of community) she alluded mainly to relationships to others, neighbours, people that were living near her but were not her own kin, and she will usually be talking about them as *los vecinos* (neighbours). On the other hand, women in Coto Sur tended to say, and we observed that as well, that most people tried to keep up good relations with neighbours; they would stop and talk for a long time whenever they happen to meet, for instance on the road, but the women did not go to visit their neighbours if they did not have a particular reason to do so. "It is not like that around here" they would argue when interrogated. Nonetheless everyone still seemed to know a lot

about each other, sometimes in very delicate detail, even though they held that they did not see or talk to their neighbours on regular basis.

The women would say that "people talk", and some talk more than others, and they are known to bring news and gossip around. Whenever someone come to a farm they are thoroughly questioned of news, and children always inquired what they have seen, and who they have talked to. Some older wanderers, usually retired older men, had the privilege of being able to walk about, often from farm to farm, they acted as some kind of messengers as to what was taking place. They would get a cup of coffee, and then stay to tell gossip, and enquire of news, often for hours, and they seemed to be welcome most places, as they did not pose any threats to women, apparently.



Men playing cards in front of a Pulperia

Most women did not leave their houses much. There could be many reasons for that; for one, women, said that they did not like to leave their farms, afraid always of thieves, and so they tended to stick to their place to guard their scarce belongings, they had to defend what they had acquired. By and large Coto Sur is a very safe place, but the vicinity to the international border with Panamá had led to the increasing arrival of what was described

officially as ‘unwanted elements’ that happened to come across, and they were often after food and money for survival. Hence, the *panameños*, were constantly described as others, and then the us were the inhabitants in Coto Sur.

When farm women occasionally dress up and leave their house the usual expression they would present is that they will say that they just "*Andar paseando*", which means, as mentioned before, just to walk about. This is particularly what one would hear they would say in and near the cuadrantes where most people do not have land to attend to, and where many women de facto are housewives, and thus, at least theoretically, have more time to fool around as the women on the farms often would say. A farmwoman seldom *anda paseando* without an explicit errand. There was, according to the women, a marked difference between farmwomen and the ones living in the cuadrantes, the farmwomen argued that everyone in the cuadrantes seemed to know everything the moment it happened, there were so many rumours etc. They wanted to distinguish themselves from the women in the cudrantes, a quite contradictory situation in fact, as so many had sisters and other kin living in the same cuadrantes under rather precarious situations (Chapters 4 and 5). It was, apparently, important to the farmwomen to construct this dividing line. On the other hand, having relations into one of the cuadrantes in La Plancha, could also give the farm women access to news that were passed around.

Typically people in Coto Sur, women and men alike, tended to categorise and be categorised into two broad categories; as *buena gente* (good people) and *anda con mal genio*, or *Vagos*. This was a moral discourse was about distinguishing between deserving and undeserving persons. There were good people and bad people, and there were apparently nothing in-between. That's it, it is how people are. You are simply that way, born that way. Everything then, including relationships in the neighbourhood will depend on people's personal qualities. Bringing these external relationships up in discussions with the women in the SMFC Women's Groups, the promotores could ask what a good person is; and a most



recurrent answer was that: “- they are people that help other people”. Foreign church people who had come with clothes and donations (U.S. evangelist missionaries) for instance were categorised as ‘good people’. People who listen to someone's complaints are also good people, they understand (*entienden*).

Bad people (*gente mala*) were consequently described to be the opposite of good people (*gente Buena*); as people who do not live up to the moral standards they are assumed to have. The standards in question are hard to get to grips with, as they seem to be rather floating, in fact, negotiable, and they were in the bottom line about distinguishing between deserving and non-deserving people. There was, however, one line, somewhere, that the women actively put to play, and that was between the already mentioned *vagos* and others. However, it also seems to be negotiable what is considered *vago*. When asked to exemplify, women would say that *vagos* steal and rob, that they don't have a house etc., but not very precise, but they could say who were *vagos*, but not really why. It seems to have to do with the extent to which one did work hard, that one did ones' best. *Vagos* do not like to work. And *vagos* should therefore not be entitled to assistance of any kind. Having fallen into the *vago* category, it seemed to be impossible to get off it again, and they were not entitled to any sympathy.

Then there is the group of people that by the women was categorised and labelled as *pobrecita/o* (poor creature, miserable), and they merited to be pitied. They were considered to undeservingly have come into some kind of situation, but could not help that they had ended up so. Examples could be women who had been cheated by someone, or that their children had not quite succeed, or that they had a husband or *compañero* who had abandoned or beat them, or whatever. They simply had not had any luck in life. *Pobrecitas* could be entitled to help and support by others, and it was worthy to show them pity, at least in talk. This line between who were deserving or undeserving, was hard to distinguish, but pressured on the

matter, the women seemed to think it was mainly a moral issue, and mostly about making lifestyle choices.

The dividing line between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women, so strongly defended elsewhere in Latin America, was also rather clear in Coto Sur, but in discussions with the women, both individually and in the Women’s Groups’ sessions, it seemed as if this could be more leniently interpreted in Coto Sur. Concerning some issues there was obviously room for women to make up for former mistakes if they only were making the right decisions now. Women are basically considered to be shrewder than men, but the woman is not put on a pedestal among the farmers.

A few of the older guard of IDA functionaries were so characterised by some of the peasant women who had been in contact with them, in that they had listened to them. People do not talk about ‘the IDA’, but about so and so, Jorge or Guillermo, whom they had got to know, or heard about, who could be good or bad. All such systems and institutions are difficult to handle and to understand how they work, thus the best thing is to *conversar* (talk things over) with so-and-so to solve matters. This goes for men and women alike, but is mainly practiced by men. They will repeatedly say that it is important to *conversar*, to take one’s time, to sit down and get to an agreement with mutual respect, thus, *respect* is a central tenet. Abstracts like a programme of the PMA,<sup>250</sup> or a public health campaign, or whatever, are always referred to as the thing of so-and-so. Be it *de el señor del Banco*, the president of the Republic, or the IDA extensionist. People are quite aware of social differences and hierarchies, which are expressed in many different ways, often by constructing themselves as *humildes* and this is often phrased in a power-laden vocabulary. Somebody to have power over others (*que tiene poder*), and whom they think are not entitled to it (an example often referred was the assembly of the banana cooperative Coopetrabatur) is an inequality taken to

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<sup>250</sup> The PMA, World Health Organization, (WHO) conducted a programme that was distributing food boxes to people who in a period of project implementation needed extra assistance, and it was well-known in Coto Sur as this had been used at several occasions, somehow one had to deserve that foodstuff, and the ones who did not receive packages did not understand why their neighbours would get it.

be negative, but others are expected to 'have power' over others, like the President of the Republic, which was the most typical example often pulled out in conversations in Coto Sur.

It seems as if the many tough experiences people have had in life have taught them some lessons, of which distrust in people they don't know, is one of the most important ones, and had to be taken into account when trying to get to grips with the women's relations to community in Coto Sur.

### **Local Communities**

*Instead of assuming the autonomy of the primeval community, we need to examine how it was formed as a community out of the interconnected space that always already existed (Guptha and Ferguson 1997: 8)*

When reading and rereading the stories told by the women in Coto Sur, they often revealed complex patterns in the women's actual use - and constructions of - what they and others would consider to be public and private, through activities and participation. In the lapse of the first field work period we observed cooperation and relationships in some of the communities, neighbourhoods, or the 'local' for that matter, for example by simply sitting in front of the general store for some hours. A few of the clusters of houses around crossroads in different parts of the settlement had grown to perhaps be called a local community physically speaking, including public places such as a rustic school house, a simple football-field, a pulperia or two, maybe a workshop of some kind, and occasionally even a small chapel, a community hall or dancing hall, and a simple health post.

However, in the Coto Sur case I find Appadurai's (1996) notions of 'scapes' constructive when reflecting about what 'the local' may entail. He states that localities are not contexts, but that contexts define the boundaries of localities, and argues that localities are not given primordially, but are socially produced through processes of boundary definition,

Neighbourhoods are inherently what they are because they are opposed to something else and ... from other already produced neighbourhoods (Appadurai 1996: 183)

He insists that neighbourhoods are not to be seen as passive, static products, with the implication that the dynamic of change comes from outside. As residents go about their daily life they encounter images, people and technologies from outside their neighbourhood.

The work of producing localities in the sense that localities are life-worlds constituted by relatively stable associations, relatively known and shared histories, and collectively traversed and legible spaces and places. (Appadurai 1996/2003: 338)

I think that Appadurai's approach to thinking about the process of localities, also echoed by Doreen Massey's 'sense of place' image (Massey 1994), in many ways meets the way I have been able to draw out how the 'localities' cum 'communities' could be comprehended in the Coto Sur settlement.

Among women in Coto Sur there were several who expressed perceptions of loss, particularly articulated through how things ought to be around them, and there was also, on some occasions, some sentiment of shared experiences of struggle, getting to Coto Sur, struggling to get hold of land, of defending their land, and of survival. However, strange enough, these shared struggles had only sporadically led to local actions based on common history and territory, except a few places that had set up a so-called development association. There were also neighbours that had fought for a road or school, etc., but few of these actions seemed to have materialised in more lasting organisational practices. There were fewer examples of what can be termed place-bound belonging as basis for collectivism in Coto Sur than what theoretically and ideologically could be expected. It should therefore be possible to say that generally speaking there was less 'social capital' (Molyneux 2002) based on the locality, or neighbourhood, than the authorities claimed, and indeed, this would entail that the women really had nowhere to participate, if this was the way community was considered.

Many men in Coto Sur had much to say about many things, including how they thought things ought to be in their community. When bringing up these issues with them, they typically would construct themselves both collectively, as self governing campesinos, indicating that they had nothing to do with the IDA, or the state, or other authorities, but simultaneously, also talk about an 'us' that collectively fight the enemy forces; be they understood as lower prices on their products, unfair regulations, greedy authorities, etc. In Coto Sur the male farmers' own categorisations of others were also much marked by binaries; it was either -or, friend or foe, black or white.

Women also spoke in binaries, but their world seemed to radiate from their own house, and basically through kinship lines; sisters, half-sisters, brothers, children, as described in chapter 5. There was little shared understanding among women that they had many common experiences and could possibly improve their situation by acting together. This became one of the real hard nuts to crack for the SMFC team in Coto Sur and the promoters had to spend much more energy than anticipated in the Women's Groups just getting the women to open up and start sharing, there was a long way to go. In spite of a wish to participate in the Women's Groups hoping for something better, the women hardly trusted each other, or anyone else, for that matter. But the women's entering this public sphere was nothing new to them, the question was rather how and on what terms it happened.

## Women's Public Places in Coto Sur (*La Calle*)

*Increasingly women entered public spaces such as streets, cafés and libraries. However, as women entered these spaces, they brought with them expectations of traditional, feminine behaviors. The parameters of women's public behaviors were strictly circumscribed in both covert and overt ways (Elizabeth Munson)<sup>251</sup>*

A public place means that there should be open access for all, such as the street, or the marketplace, spaces that are gendered and should be considered in terms of access and control, inclusions and exclusions, in Latin America typically depicted as *la calle* (the street); and in the following are some examples of what such public places in the Coto Sur settlement would mean. There was, except perhaps the only street (or rather dirt road) in Laurel, nowhere really that could deserve to be called a public meeting place, open to all, which the women associated with public squares, plazas, or parks to stroll about on Sundays. This lack of such spaces was always presented as a want, and in most of the women's narratives there were often some references to memories of such places, in front of their parish church when growing up, or occasional visits to the *Plaza Central* in San José, that made an impression on many women.<sup>252</sup>

In Coto Sur the inhabitants had to travel to Laurel or to Neilly (the regional state administration was located there) to shop for bigger items, visit public offices, connect to the national bus transportation grid, etc. Sometimes they also would have to travel all the way to the Capital for special medical treatment, to get a passport, or other important errands. In order to get around women in the settlement would have to walk, hitchhike, or catch the very poor public transportation system which was both time - and money consuming, and therefore represented hindrances for women. There were some hard-programmed ideas about proper gender behaviour; epitomized through the well-known binary house/street (*casa/calle*)

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<sup>251</sup> [http://muse.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/access.cgi?url=/journals/journal\\_of\\_social\\_history/v036/36.1munson.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/access.cgi?url=/journals/journal_of_social_history/v036/36.1munson.html), accessed october 2<sup>nd</sup> 2006.

<sup>252</sup> See Low (2000) for a discussion of La Plaza in Central America and the importance of it. The women, who had been visiting such places, did talk about the flowers, the plants and the possibility to observe others without having to engage in them.

women are for the house - men are for the street. Hence, what represented the street in Coto Sur would merit attention, and how women could, and would, transgress the line between private and public, or rather move it, as part of their integration and participation efforts. In Nicaragua for example,

the street... was more than a geographic location; it was a culturally constructed concept that stood for all practices related to sexual conquest (Montoya 2003: 69).

The creation of Women's Groups in Coto Sur (1982 and onwards) were examples of establishing of safe public sites for women only, but still in 1986, women's participation in the groups caused some stir among men, but also among women who did not participate; namely why should women leave their houses and for what? Several men called the Women's Groups nonsense, and women who initially had been mobilised and later ceased going to the meetings saying that they did not have the time, admitted, when being but pressuring on the matter by the social promoters, that it was men's dislike of their venturing outside (his control), that had made the women stop participating (Valestrand, forthcoming).

The most salient trait that springs to one's eyes in the public Coto Sur (here for simplicity interpreted as outside the farms) in this period of time, was the omnipresence of institutions; the IDA, other state institutions, the Banco Nacional office, the CNP and these institutions provided many public spaces in the Coto Sur settlement in this in-between period. The presence of the IDA and their initiations of various public activities such as courses, training events, information meetings, seminars, field demonstrations, offices, buildings, etc., probably provided the inhabitants with the most comprehensive public spheres of all.

However, many of these places and spaces were in practice only considered public to the extent that one was invited or had access in virtue of membership of some kind, for example being registered in the IDA as holder of land title. Sometimes the inhabitants even had to ask for permission to be in a public area from different gatekeepers, official or unofficial ones. For instance, one had to be a parcelero to attend a course, which in addition to

the fact that it was organised when the women were busy preparing meals at home, etc., excluded most women. In practice it was a male dominated public place, but also excluded people who would like to farm but did not have land. But women could also be interrogated by unauthorised gatekeepers who would ask them what they would be doing there, and not staying home to take care of their house.

In the vicinity of the cuadrantes of Tamarindo, Caucho and Caimito west of Laurel where the Banana Cooperative had its land and activities, one could not simply walk in and claim to have a meeting, or just sit around, as it was policed as private property.<sup>253</sup> In this case, it was not the IDA, but the Cooperative that controlled that space.

There were very few true physical public meeting places open for all people in Coto Sur. Public meeting places are, as mentioned, generally thought of as markets, plazas or parks, and are usually part of urban Latin American landscapes. These are places that often raise conflicts of access to, use of, and behaviour in, and which provide space for negotiated social action (Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga (eds.) 2003; Low 2000; Robinson 1989; Robertson 2003). The ones that do exist in Coto Sur were male coded areas, mainly drinking places and football fields.<sup>254</sup> The exceptions are the small schoolhouses and a few health posts, sites where one may say that the 'nation' was represented and supposedly provided free access for all. Normally the street - the roads for instance - would be considered public - with open access to all, but it was in this same street that women had to consider their presence, for instance when in Laurel and Neilly. They always had to be prepared to explain why they were there. Some of the women said that they had been directly inquired by men they hardly knew about what they were doing a particular place, been told that they ought to be home or that they had a bad husband who did not look after his woman. Indeed, all this entailed that

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<sup>253</sup> This became very clear when one of the Women's Groups tried to set up a working place near one of the cuadrantes; this became a long struggle about access and control, see Valestrand (forthcoming).

<sup>254</sup> I have here put most emphasis on gender, but the men told about the former banana farms as spaces in which ethnicity and class were central markers for access to different parts of the farms, cfr. *Zona Blanca* etc. referred to in chapter 3.



women had to consider, all the time when in the street, that they would be observed, and that they had to behave accordingly.

When transgressing this invisible line women were incredibly clever in making explanations, particularly phrased in needs-talk; coming up with legitimations for why they did appear in public. One of the women said that each time she planned to venture out of the farm she repeated for herself what explanation she would have to come up with when surely being interrogated where she was going. The front of the pulperías were typical areas of inquiry as groups of men would often sit there, playing cards.<sup>255</sup> Everyone passing by seems to have a reputation, and a pet name, either *negrita* (dark) or *la blanca* (white) , and even people they did not know personally. It was, as mentioned, a good observation post.

### **Gendered Places and Spaces**

Women had, as stated, in reality very few places to meet, or where it was possible to be without being questioned about what one was doing there in Coto Sur. Women in Coto Sur did indeed enjoy unequal access to particular places; there were strong assumptions about where men and women belonged and could be (McDowell 1999; Montoya 2003). As noted above women were a lot more restricted than men when leaving the domestic sphere; they were signalling availability if they were out on their own. Some areas were considered more neutral in that women and men could meet as gendered beings, usually public and staged events.

Typically such gendered incidents took place in front of the IDA offices in Laurel, in the queue in front of the bank, outside the pulpería, or on the days when credits were

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<sup>255</sup> It was an experience, again and again when out interviewing etc, being interrogated under a tree in front of one of the pulperias, usually by the men; who we were, what we were doing, and then we were pulled into the latest rumours, especially the ones concerning literally life and death; snake bites, hospitalizations, killings and motorbike accidents- and who was cheating and jealous with whom. . For the SMFC team it was of importance that people in the settlement got to know the, so they patiently answered questions (Valestrand, forthcoming)

delivered in Laurel, or in other more staged events. Those would have to be settings that were not considered as dangerously gendered, such as bars, or dances or private meetings, in which people's and particular women's reputation could be at stake. In such events the aforementioned conversations between men and women could be quite entertaining and daring. Once I overheard a long dialogue between a woman farmer and a man, he was one of the gatekeepers (former banana union leader) in Coto Sur, taking place in public, in a queue in Laurel with lots of people around them. They were apparently talking about male and female horses, but it was obvious that the performers were talking about and interpreting sexuality. In such situations peasants in Coto Sur, women particularly, had more space to play out gender roles than many urban women had. Suffice it to say, it was very entertaining.

Young people voiced that there were no places to meet; that they had very little to do around here. This was often mentioned by state-authorities as one of the reasons for all the young women leaving the countryside. There was not much to do and the youngsters had little money and few resources. Some were involved in church youth groups, but for the rest there was not much else but to hang around the football field or the Pulpería, or somewhere else. If something special were to take place young boys would always be there, roaming about, on motorbikes if possible. Some of the schools tried to launch different activities for instance 4H projects of raising hens or rabbits, but that was about it. Once out of school the youngsters were sent to work or to relatives to attend more schools. And, of course, their mothers kept worrying about them turning vagos. Going to the Zancudo beach (appr. 30 km on bad roads) to party on weekends was also a possibility but that demanded access to transportation, which was hard to find, but occasionally somebody managed to organise a truck on Sundays. There were many women of the 35+ generation who had never been to the beach at all.

### **Fiestas and Turnos and Other Special Events**

In Coto Sur there was as yet little of the tradition of *fiestas cívicas*, or *turnos* which represented staged public events and spaces that were usually out of immediate control of the authorities (often dedicated to a patron saint for example). There was, however, much talk about such events. Many had memories and experiences from their youth, and in some parts of the settlement a few simplified versions such as a dance with music and food for sale. These arrangements were organised in order to collect money for the school, contribute to equipment for a health post, a football club, etc. Such events always gathered substantial crowds, often from outside the community as well. There were a few in and around Coto Sur, but it was nothing like what can be seen in other parts of the country, for instance in Guanacaste, where there are long and unbroken traditions in this respect.

Food is very important in all social events. Not only in the more comprehensive *turnos*, but also in the often occurring closing ceremonies (*clausuras*) of all kinds, for instance a training course with the giving out of diplomas, etc., where women would cook *arroz con pollo* (Rice with chicken). In fiestas and bigger events there is a chance for people to get food that no longer was part of the diet (explained as the lack of resources) and this was the women's scene; this was where they could gain public respect, and a chance to show off within the limits of a woman's 'place'. A central question is always whether there will be 'tamales' or not, and secondly, how they are. *Rifa's* (lotteries) are important in all social gatherings, big or small.<sup>256</sup>

Dancing (*Baile*) is important in social gatherings in Costa Rica. People love music, and there is music everywhere. Occasionally dances were organised in the settlement and there normally would be an entrance fee with a difference in the price for men and women.

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<sup>256</sup> If something very special is taking place there will be a beauty pageant with coronation of a queen and her attendants (Miss Coffee, miss Cooperative etc), clearly demonstrating the gendered beauty ideals, but so far there had not yet been any such events in Coto Sur.

(For women the ticket could cost 50 colones, and for a man the double, if it is a good band, maybe four times as much). The music are boleros, merengues and paso dobles, played on guitars with huge electric amplifiers that sometimes were empowered with portable generators. People come in couples or larger groups. Elderly people go with the whole family to sit, watch, and enjoy the event. Dancing was always performed in man/woman couples. I never saw women dancing alone or with another woman in public places in Coto Sur (which could happen in San José or Limón). One sits at tables, and a bar is in one of the corners where cokes, beer and rum are sold. Men invite and men pay for drinks. Women sip cokes with straws; men drink beer or rum from the bottles. Women in Coto Sur very seldom drink alcoholic beverages in public. These dances often included much alcohol, fights and troubles.

Summing up; one may say that there were apparently many and different expectations of 'community' in Coto Sur, ranging from the IDA bureaucrats' wishful thinking about receptive and predictable distinctive local communities to the women's yearning for 'more community'. Implicit in both these versions was that they mainly seemed to encompass something that was small-scale and both these versions have to be taken into account when trying to carefully assess the situation for women in the settlement in the late 1980s, as was the commission of the SMFC.

## **Women, Progress, and Local Organization**

The SMFC Women's Project Programme was concerned about 'participation' in what was perceived as organised activities presented above, and in the project mandate the participation/integration issues were phrased as to hopefully lead to:

*Cambios que percibe el grupo de mujeres a nivel personal, organizativa y comunitario*

(changes that the group of women perceive on a: 'personal, organizational and community level) (SMFC 1986)

It did allude to peasant women both as individuals - and as collective (full) members of society, hinting to more critical questions of 'citizenship'. This was certainly in line with the assumption that (local) organisation was important in securing progress in the agricultural settlements, normally expressed as to *adelantar*<sup>257</sup>, or to *salir adelante*, living strong, rhetorically, among the IDA personnel and farmers alike. It could perhaps be interpreted as a version of the idea of the strength of social capital and the compelling argument that many aspects of community life have declined. In Coto Sur the argument one heard was that one had to establish and build new social capital, and, as discussed above, it was not only the women, but also the IDA (in this case) that was concerned about lack of such social capital in the settlement. This belief in strong ties, is shared with most such development institutions; entailing that there had to exist, or to be created, some glue that would help the local community, consisting of the rural poor, in order to *adelantar*. No doubt it was a rather romantic view of the local community that was painted, and whether it was believed that strong (local) ties - or 'the strength of weak ties' (Granovetter 1985), that would lead to progress, is a basic and interesting question that only can be raised in this instant. The challenge was to explore women's positions and perspectives when it came to such more overarching ideas about progress and participation in Coto Sur.

### **Women's Groups, Collectives and Organisations**

During the period of study in Coto Sur, we did not encounter many self-organised women's groups in the settlement. The few that existed had all been initiated by external development agents; such as US Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries, teachers and activists from various institutions and organisations, including the social worker at the IDA. The SMFC did argue that there were women in the settlement who were in the process of getting organised. The

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<sup>257</sup> The verb *adelantar* has a number of meanings, but move forward, move on, progress..

main argument for setting up such groups was phrased in terms of needs; that the women in question were best assisted by establishing ‘income-generating projects’, that is material needs.

There were, as far as I could detect, not any organised activities existing in the Coto Sur settlement in this period of time that was based on what has been depicted as peasant women’s interests (Molyneux 1985) or peasant women’s recognition (Fraser 1989); be they separate or not, until the SMFC Women’s Project was being implemented with its new focus on active women, participation and integration, etc. It is worth noticing that in the 1980s there was a marked interest for increasing different strands of activities with and for women in the country, most of them different groups that either had been assembled to carry out some kind of productive activity (sewing, marmalades, cooking, sweets, pig raising, etc) together, or aiming at making women into small entrepreneurs,<sup>258</sup> but there was no *campesina* women national movement that would fend for peasant women’s interests and that could establish local branches in for example settlements like Coto Sur. (Leitinger 1997; Deere and León 2001). The attempts of building peasant women’s own organisations and institutions were therefore also parts of the mobilising attempts of the Women’s Project in Coto Sur, but as of 1986 this was in its first year, and had not made so much impact yet. The consolidation of the existing Women’s Groups was more than demanding.

### **Grassroot Organisations in Costa Rica: High ideals - Low Activity**

It may seem a paradox that Costa Rica is a country that officially has such high esteem of democracy entailing the right to organisation, but that there still is a low level of organisation in the population. The rhetoric of organising in the 1980s was therefore very ambiguous, in that there should be organised activities in order to progress, but not any kind of

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<sup>258</sup> COF (1985, 1986) GAF, Grupos Asociativos Femeninos,

organisations, a situation also reflected in the job carried out by the SMFC Women's Project when, occasionally, more effort was put into a discussion of what type of organisation one wanted, than really building one.

In the IDA settlements there has been a long history of political struggles, and the organisations that did not agree with the authorities were not particularly supported (deVries 1992). Nonetheless, in Coto Sur all complained, IDA functionaries and inhabitants alike, about what was depicted as people's lack of initiative when it came to more enduring organisational enterprises. This adds to the commonly held idea that people are individualistic and which was perhaps the word most heard among development workers and ordinary people alike in Coto Sur; entailing that the explanation for nothing happening was "because people were very individualistic", it was even drawn upon to distinguish *ticos* from other nationalities.

Some researchers think that one reason for the low level of popular (grassroots) organisations in Costa Rica is the high level of state involvement,<sup>259</sup> which, they argue, has not left space for autonomous organisations. Macdonald's (1997) point is that the dominant role of the Costa Rican state has limited the independence of the so-called grassroots, or popular sector (*sector popular*). Others also point to the country's lack of popular organising seen elsewhere in Central America to have something to do with a Catholic Church that in contrast to other countries has isolated itself from progressive trends (base communities, liberation theology, etc.) that have been so important for grassroots organising, even popular uprising against dictatorships. In Costa Rica the Catholic Church remained as paternalistic

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<sup>259</sup> Costa Rica is a country that in many respects is extremely state dominated, or expressed as 'Government in Costa Rica is distinguished by its pervasive presence' (Lara et al 1995: 3). Government at the regional and local levels is organized into three tiers; provinces, cantons and districts. The seven provinces are divided into 81 cantons, and each canton into districts. Cantonal government principally consists of a popularly elected Municipal Council, but they do not play an active role in national life, the increasing number of state ministries and institutes – like the IDA, the MAG and the MIDEPLAN etc- have absorbed them. (op.cit 1995: 8) Coto Sur is located in the province of Puntarenas, the canton of Golfito, and the districts of Corredores and Golfito.

charitable organizations (Macdonald 1997; Backer 1974; Ferro 1986; Picado 1988; Lara et al. 1995).

On the other hand, it was exactly the building of *popular*, local civil organisations to work for progress and development, that was the inspiration of most development workers encountered in NGOs and in the field attempting to implement ‘participative development’, including the very SMFC. In spite of the heritage from Freire and other Latin American intellectuals and the *educación popular* (popular education) movement in their luggage, it was not always simple to create and maintain local popular organisations, and the SMFC promoters, educated in this field, did encounter this dilemma each and every day in their struggles to sustain the SMFC Women’s Groups in Coto Sur. Thus it was not the theories or vocabulary that was lacking, it was getting it moving, that caused many frustrations. As a comment to this, one may cite the following;

The range and breadth of participation in politics in Costa Rica today are extensive, but its depth is not. (John Booth in Macdonald 1997: 44).

According to Macdonald (1997) local development associations in Costa Rica remained stuck in what David Korten calls the ‘first generation of NGOs’ providing charity and relief to fill the gaps of state action.’ (op.cit: 61). With ‘popular organisations’ is meant organisations that are ‘- composed of members and are in some way accountable to them’ (Korten 1987: 7). Much of this tradition was inspired by Esman and Uphoff (1984) and their emphasis on the importance of local organisations in rural development, and that such organisations are ‘accountable and responsive to their members’ and that the variety of interests and needs among rural people requires a variety of organisations even in the same area’ (1984: 15). In their view, the rural poor are able to influence government policy if they build strong local organizations etc. Later their liberal-pluralist position has been much criticised for not



examining class or gender structures that represent formidable obstacles to their representation (Macdonald 1997)<sup>260</sup>.

As it were, we never had the possibility to carry out a more extensive study of women's participation in existing grass-root groups, but the impression was that women hardly participated, but that some women had made important contributions to for example health committees, parent-teacher associations and various ad-hoc committees.<sup>261</sup> There were, however, two fields, or domains, that were important when it came to people's activities and organisations in Coto Sur, and therefore should be looked closer at with gendered lenses, namely rural cooperatives and the religious field.

### **Rural Cooperatives**

The IDA had, as demonstrated in chapter 3, been actively promoting cooperatives in the new settlements and their training and organisation department (Docae) had played a key role in the founding of new cooperatives since its inception in 1974s, although political disagreements and established views on both *precaristas* and *ex-bananeros*, were, as discussed before, still prevalent. There were, as presented in chapter 3, a handful of formally organised cooperatives and one in the making (The Palm growers) in the Coto Sur settlement. The majority were so-called agricultural production cooperatives, producing collectively or for securing services for its member farmers (sales, transportation, purchases etc.). A consumer's cooperative had been founded in 1984 and was in 1986 in the process of constructing its own outlet in Laurel, and also wanted to do something about housing

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<sup>260</sup> According to Macdonald (1997) there are three main approaches to popular participation; instrumental participation, localised participation and political empowerment. See also North (1990); Williamson (2002)

<sup>261</sup> This was initially the plan to do, but changes in the administration of the SMFC and their cooperants led to closing of this part of the study. Some smaller 'community studies' (*diagnósticos*) connected to the formation of new women's groups were carried out later by the SMFC, and both these and detailed scrutiny of existing written material, as well as interviews and conversations with people in Coto Sur, make up the basis for drawing this conclusion. See also Valestrand forthcoming).

(Bruncoop RL). This latter had, not surprisingly, many female members, while the production cooperatives were dominated by men.<sup>262</sup>

Several of our informants were living in domestic units that would be associated with a cooperative, either directly, as members, or indirectly in that they had (kin) relationships that were members of, or were working for (the banana) cooperative. Only one of our women informants was registered as a member of a producer's cooperative, but some of the women who had decided to go for the Palm programme were in the process of joining the new palm cooperative. It was reason to consider if, and how, women were involved in these existing cooperatives. In the La Plancha district, from which most of the empirical material was gathered, it was no doubt the banana producing cooperative (*Coopetrabatur RL*) that was dominating, but there was also the other agricultural *cooperativa de autogestión*<sup>263</sup> (*Coopevaquita RL*) located a bit further out in this area, both introduced briefly in chapter 3. These two most important productive cooperatives were very different indeed, and did represent close to opposite political positions in this period of time, before the palm-programme was implemented. However, the history of both were closely intertwined with the history of the Coto Sur settlement, and their establishment were both a result of initiatives from the land seekers that had come to Coto Sur. While the founding of the banana cooperative had been strongly supported and assisted by the IDA and the state authorities and also had so far, succeeded pretty well, Coopevaquita, was part of a movement that was indeed critical to the political establishment and had to live through very rough times.

The existing cooperatives in Coto Sur could be said to be in some kind of in-between position when discussing women's participation and integration, as they were both representing places and spaces that were gendered, but also that they were, at the outset,

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<sup>262</sup> The existing cooperatives in Coto Sur as of 1986 were Coopetrabatur RL (the banana cooperative), Coopecotosur RL, Coopevaquita RL, and Coopetechsur RL, all 'cooperativas de autogestión. In addition Bruncoop RL, a consumer coop, and the cooperative in the making- Coopeagropal.

<sup>263</sup> In Cooperativas the *autogestión* the members lead and carry out all productive and service activities, while a *Cooperativa de gestión* can employ salaried workers. See, Capítulo XI: p. 18

democratic organisations, open to all. Cooperatives, are somehow, taken for granted as ‘good’ institutions, an assumption that one also should not necessarily accept, and discussions about gender and cooperatives have been raised from both inside and from outside analysts, for example that cooperatives are easily seen essentialist concepts (Gasper 1996),<sup>264</sup> which in turn also could make them more difficult to analyse in gender and development perspectives. In spite of being an explicit democratic organisation - one member one vote - it has been very male dominated, particularly in the so-called productive cooperatives, and both women grassroots activists and the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) have, since the 1970s, been actively trying to promote and improve women’s position within the base cooperatives as well as in the administrative and leadership of the movement, intending to change traditional attitudes by means of training and educational activities etc.<sup>265</sup> In other words, the cooperative sector did represent a possible public arena for women as it was present ‘on the ground’ in Coto Sur.

#### *Coopevaquita and Fecopa - trying to be Women friendly*

In 1986 ten adult women lived in the Coopevaquita, they were spouses of members, but only three women had become full members. This cooperative was, as stated, living through rough times, but they had put up a *porqueriza* (pig raising) 6 years ago where the three women were working. The other women only dedicated their attention to their house and their hens, in spite of the leadership having made several attempts of working out different projects for the women. The *Alianza de Mujeres Costarricense*<sup>266</sup> had been involved through their federation’s

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<sup>264</sup> Des Gasper (1996) makes a point of the dangers in policy and development discourses if essentialist concepts are left naturalised and given, and he illustrates his point with such terms as ‘ownership’, ‘socialism’, ‘class’, ‘equality’, ‘development’- and- ‘cooperatives. Concerning co-operatives he says that *performative essentialism* is a danger.

<sup>265</sup> See ICA, (1999, 2000); ICA/ACI (1991); Apromujer (1991); Felix et al. (1995); García et al. (1992); Lamming (1983)

<sup>266</sup> *Asociación Alianza de Mujeres Costarricenses* dates back to 1952 and is the oldest women’s organization in Costa Rica and is based on popular and working women’s interests and international solidarity and started out with support to women in poor neighbourhoods in San José but has later expanded to other parts of the country.

project to increase women's participation, and had suggested to create a vegetable garden project, or a *granja avícola* (poultry) project. The leader (*gerente*)<sup>267</sup> of the cooperative saw, however, the need to train and educate the women as a clue, so that they eventually would become aware that they should participate in productive projects. He did not believe in separate women's projects, and referred to the work initiated by the federation they were associated to, Fecopa that they worked in close contact with.

This federation (Fecopa) with which the cooperative worked closely, was founded on an ideology of seeing *la familia campesina* as the basic unit in the rural productive cooperatives and secure their access to land and a living.<sup>268</sup> The men in the cooperatives under this federation, did, according to the leadership, have great difficulties in understanding the importance of, and significance of women's reproductive contribution to the productive unit. Agricultural cooperatives are as a rule organised as one farm unit, one vote, and this is an issue closely related to the land question. Women were construed as *familiares*, sisters, and daughters, of the members. In some cooperatives many men had opposed women's entrance as full members because they considered that they were slower workers and hampered productivity. Male cooperative members thus felt that widows, or single women could join the cooperative only if they had sons to carry out the agricultural fieldwork. In Fecopa they had an illustration to this situation. The law on cooperative associations<sup>269</sup> demanded that there had to be a minimum of twenty members to be legally constituted as a cooperative, a number that was hard to reach for some of the smaller cooperatives when members withdrew, and then women were then invited to become members, only to meet that requirement. When the law was later modified and the minimum number was reduced to twelve, the Fecopa leadership had registered that in some cooperatives women were *desinscritas*, (de-inscribed) as the men found that they had a sufficient number of men members (Mora 1985:42).

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<sup>267</sup> Interviewed November 1986

<sup>268</sup> Interview with two leaders in Fecopa in San José, November 1986.

<sup>269</sup> Ley de asociaciones cooperativa No 5185

*Pero, nosotros, los campesinos somos machistas 100%, no sabemos nada, y pensabamos que una mujer que anda en cursos y talleres era una vaga. Tuvimos que empezar a cambiar nuestros actitudes, pensamos que hemos mejorado un poquito!*

(But we, the peasants, are 100% machistas, we do not know anything, and we believed that a woman who participates in courses and workshops was a *vaga*. We have to start to change our attitudes, and we think we have improved a bit). (Leader Fecopa 1986).

Becoming aware of this situation, the Fecopa leadership decided to initiate an internal project to increase the number of women, or what they called *incorporación real* (real incorporation), resulting in a project supported by the Unicef, first of all to diagnosticise the situation in each member cooperative, and in which they found that women in practice were excluded to participate in important decisions, that one did not consider reproductive work as important for the cooperative's development, that very few women depending on the cooperative for a living were not members, extensive resistance among the members to create possibilities for women to participate in productive activities and to get them to take leadership positions. men always having to be responsible for children. They had now begun talking about establishing kindergartens in the cooperatives as a way to increase women's interests for and involvement in base cooperatives.

#### *Not very Women-friendly - the Banana Cooperative*

The Banana Cooperative, *Coopetrabatur RL* was the one the SMFC were most in contact with due to its location in the centre of the La Plancha district, and it did, in 1986, depict many of the classical signs of a male dominated institution; women were invisible except as part-time labourers in the packing plants. But women were very visible outside these places on the harvest days, selling foods to the workers (Chapter 4).

Some of the women working in the cooperative's packing plants had wanted to become full members when the cooperative had been formally established in 1980. One young woman, Lidia, had just returned to Coto Sur after working away for some years and

had got a job in one of the packing plants through her mother's compañero who was one of the founding members of the cooperative. She had heard about cooperatives when she had worked as a domestic in another town and that they were democratic organisations that should be open to all. This was during the formalising process of the cooperative and four or five women who were working in the plant had attended the preparatory meetings because they were interested in becoming *socios*, full members;

*y nos dijeron que no permitían socios que las mujeres aquí y que las mujeres allá. Después dijeron que si queríamos asociarnos necesitaba nos pagar una cuota inicial de 50.000 colones, y de dónde íbamos nosotras a coger esa plata, nos asustamos y fuimos retirando de una a una.<sup>270</sup>*

Lidia had never succeeded to become a member as the men had put down all sorts of hindrances for her and the other women. Six years later she still was working in the packing plant, on unstable contracts, which was a problem, as she now had become a single mother of two needing a constant flow of income. The contract she had got all the time, was one entailing that she was suspended after eleven months of work for two days, and was then called on again and reinstated, starting at zero. In this way they could avoid all work regulations and rights, such as compensation money, *aguinaldo* (13<sup>th</sup> month) etc. She worked two to four harvest days that normally were taking place per week, it could vary depending on the market situation how much fruit was contracted and on these days the labourers worked from 6 a.m to 6 p.m. She worked on piece- work contract, on the number of boxes that was produced, for example if the order was of 1500 boxes the *capataz* (foreman) would employ lots of people, resulting in lower income for each one.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> - 'and they they told us that they would not allow women members- women here and women there-. Afterwards they told us that if we wanted to become members we had to pay a initiating fee of 50.000 colones, and where should we be able to get hold of that amount of money, we were shocked and retired from the issue, the one after the other'. (My translation, interview November 18<sup>th</sup> 1986.)

<sup>271</sup> In 1986 the women we interviewed and who worked the maximum they got to, did receive 3000- 3500 colones pr 14 days, approximately US \$ 30 s



Women working in the Banana Packinghouse

At that moment six women were working in this packing plant;<sup>272</sup> two in the patio where the banana stems arrive on the rails, cutting clusters of fruit off the stems, and four were inside in the packing house, washing the bananas, surveying the size and quality, and putting on *Chiquita* stickers. Some of the women were also allowed to work with cleaning the plant on the days there were not harvests. The men day-labourers who worked in the fields were working all weekdays, even Sundays when there was much to do, which Lidia found unfair, because the men were placed in the packing plant when there was little to do in the fields, while women, many who had worked as long as the men, were sent home, and received no pay. These workers were not *socios* but ordinary land workers (*peones temporales*) but still they were given priority to work and income. Both Lidia and some of the other women who had worked there before were discharged when they got pregnant, but called upon later

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<sup>272</sup> Four years later the number of women in the packing plant had increased considerably, they were between 12 and 15 one day we visited the same packinghouse in 1990

on because they were good and dependable workers. Lidia and two of the other women were strong, had experience from farming, and they were positive to do some work in the fields, like cleaning and driving the *chapulín*. When bringing up their wishes to work outside in order to get more stable incomes with the male members of the cooperative, those would just about in unison exclaimed:

*Cómo se le ocurre que la mujer va a manejar chapulin and hacer trabajos en el campo, como deshojar?*

(How would it be that women were to manage the chapulin and carry out work in the field such as cutting leaves?)

The men just laughed at the women's suggestion - that was simply not comprehensible to them. The fact was that there were women in Coto Sur who were doing all of that on their own farms was not an issue. The very male, even machista, ideology of the former banana farms, including in their unions, had apparently been transferred to the banana cooperative. Women were to be wives, men to be breadwinners.<sup>273</sup>

The right to living quarters in the cuadrantes controlled by the cooperative has been commented upon earlier; and also how women living on parcels around did their utmost to distance themselves from whom they tended to label as the housewives in the cooperative controlled cuadrantes, and whom they thought were doing nothing and only spread rumours, that was a rather constant schism. The peasant women's main target were the spouses of the 'elite', the founding members of the cooperative.

*“No hay cooperación entre las señoras de los asociados, se los tiran, como ellas no necesitan y el marido no las dejan, ellas dicen que no las alcanzo el tiempo y a veces se quedan viendo las novelas. Estas mujeres solo piden plata para comprar ropa.”*  
(Doña Gina)

(There is no cooperation between the wives of the associates.....)

The fact that the majority of the women living in the cuadrantes lived in conjugal relationships with temporary landworkers (for example doña Tatiana introduced in chapter 5),

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<sup>273</sup> This can be read directly out of the paragraphs of the ASBANA- UTG agreement (1976) mentioned in chapter 3.



and that many of them had to struggle a lot in order to survive, taking in lodgers, cooking and selling foods, washing laundry, etc., were not quite part of the peasant women's picture, they seemed to have put behind them all of that. But it was, after all, often thanks to kin relations to the farms that many of the women living in the cuadrantes on these precarious terms did survive economically (chapters 4 and 5). However, it was, according to the farm women, more the 'style of living' in the cuadrante that they did not approve of.

The importance of the banana cooperative concerning gender relations and gender could be manifold; economically it provided some of the few income earning opportunities, unstable with few rights; but it provided the main income-stream for women depending on breadwinning men, as temporary workers, and as associates, the latter were relatively speaking (and assumed) in a better material situation, and perhaps most significant, the preponderance of rather machista male attitudes and ideals was upheld. A handful of the women in one of the SMFC Women's Groups resided in one of the cuadrantes of the cooperative, while yet others, one way or the other had relationships to the cooperative, sons particularly, and finally, later on, the SMFC Women's Project also, as mentioned, got into a dispute about a piece of land that the cooperative did not want to put to one of the Women's Group's disposal. Hence, there were not many inhabitants in the La Plancha district and around that were not influenced by the existence of the banana cooperative in their midst.

The banana cooperative was probably the most significant institution in this part of the settlement, but seemed to have a quite ambiguous relationship to its 'father' - the IDA. There were often skirmishes, and as an economically relatively successful endeavour in this specific period of time, the cooperative was in a beneficial position in front of the IDA's administration, and could also draw on support from the central national cooperatives' administration and expertise if needed. In Coto Sur, one may say that it appeared as kind of state within the state in this period because they still were endowed with stable contracts from

Chiquita, a situation that changed later on.<sup>274</sup> On the one hand, the cooperatives would eventually be pressured from above, to comply with equal rights and the changing laws in the country. In the meantime, however, women organising in Coto Sur, in the Women's Groups shunned away from cooperatives because they found them anything but 'women-friendly', that was their experience. They saw the banana cooperative's practices as very elitist, for example access to different services, like medical assistance. The banana cooperative had a doctor visiting once a week after 4 pm but only for their associates (members), but the about two hundred workers had no right to medical attention and their children were also excluded from the Christmas party for the children, and so on. This attitude many living around found unfair as long as no new members were admitted into the cooperative, but the day-workers were still contributing with the same work as the members, and thus to the cooperative's earnings. This was the reason why also the SMFC team were not enthusiastic about cooperatives; they were not women-friendly, they argued, only looking after themselves.

### **Evangelical Congregations: The New Communities?**

The other important field in Coto Sur, making up part of what may be called civil society was religious in nature. Attending mass in the Catholic Church on Sundays was perhaps the public sphere that most of the adult women in Coto Sur would associate with and had experienced in their youth. There were not many Catholic Churches to the Coto Surians' disposal, only a few chapels, a situation many of the women commented upon and lamented. Many said that they had a strong belief in God, that he had helped them through the rough times, and they all tended to use a very Biblical language when explaining moral questions, very often through allegories. Religion was important. It was not understood for people not to be religious. For

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<sup>274</sup> In 1995 these 'golden contracts' with pre-decided prices ceased and the cooperative had to start looking for other outcomes, and it was with assistance from various NGOs and development organisations that it was becoming a 'Fair Trade' cooperative, and has later been known through the Max Haavelar's marketing etc. See: [http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/downloads/pdf/coopetrabasur\\_profile.pdf](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/downloads/pdf/coopetrabasur_profile.pdf). Accessed 29.6.2006

the women the church had been one of the few meeting places they could go to, and the lack of both clergy and churches in Coto Sur worried them a lot. They had to go to Golfito to go to mass. Laurel had a simple Catholic church, but the women said that they thought it did not look nice, and worst of all, it was located in the back and in a side street. A church was supposed to be in the central plaza. It was not right. There had been a few Catholic chapels erected in the settlement, there was one at the entrance of Tamarindo that was seldom in use, however there was talk about building a new church there in the future. Many of the women more than once expressed that they found it regrettable that there was little religiously based, cum moral community. Thus, church and congregational activities must definitely be seen as important conveyors of women's 'integration' into society, and more importantly, church - and religion - is prominent in shaping gender, which the discourses on Catholicism and womanhood; i.e. women's eternal suffering and Mother/Virgin Mary (marianismo), have well demonstrated (Ferro and Quiros 1988; Melhuus 1996; Chant 2003 , Stevens 1973).

Just about all the migrants who came into the Coto Sur settlement from the mid-1970s were brought up as Roman Catholics and many women who grew up in Guanacaste had strong memories of going to church and of Catholic rituals and beliefs. The Catholic Church was often the central part of their lives, both morally and spiritually, as well as providing a place to meet after Sunday mass. Roman Catholicism is still the dominant religion in Costa Rica, and is the de facto state religion, although most are considered to be eclectic believers who do not attend mass regularly (Lara et al. 1995; Picado 1988;). The Catholic Church also played a central role in shaping the social democratic ideology in Costa Rica. It has been instrumental in legitimising the social welfare state, maintaining a lid on popular organising, and propagating an ideology of 'anticommunism' (Lara et al. 1995: 97). Its hegemony, however, is now being challenged by protestants; particularly the politically conservative US based evangelicals. According to observers, the country has not yet been subject to the massive evangelism campaign by Pentecostals and fundamentalists experienced by countries

like Guatemala and Honduras, one explanation is that Costa Rica has not suffered the same kind of natural catastrophes and political crises that tend to attract such groups. (ibid).<sup>275</sup>

Some analysts of the evangelical movements look at how they connect people's feeling of an outer threatening world and aggressive marketing, especially via the media. The Pentecostals are, most of them, tied up to reactionary, fundamentalist anti-communists in the US, particularly the so-called neo-pentecostals. The most well known in Costa Rica, and also connected to the Assembly of God, was Jimmy Swaggart.<sup>276</sup>

The evangelical congregations encountered in Coto Sur are part of a wider context, with the overall religious movement sweeping through Central America, and must be seen in a geo political context and which has been the theme of several authors more recently.<sup>277</sup> The Catholic Church's inability to decentralise their autonomy system is a reason that has been given by many, but also described as:

Whereas liberation theologians identify the US as the main source for Latin America's backwardness, many evangelicals hail it as a model of progress, democracy, and redemption, a veritable chosen nation (Stoll 1990: 309).

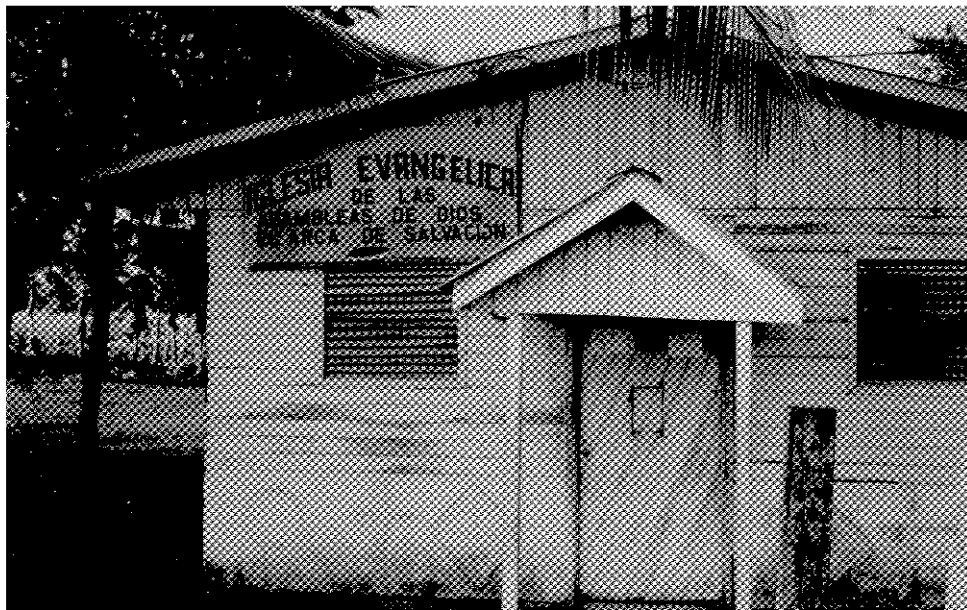
In many rural areas in the country the evangelical congregations had become an alternative.

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<sup>275</sup> Pentecostals are by far the largest and fastest growing category of evangelicals, encompassing probably 80% , the Assemblies of God are the most numerous churches in this category- their theology is based on personal relationship with God rather than precise dogma .

<sup>276</sup> See Stoll (1990: 170) on the witch- hunt at the Seminario Biblico (Lutheran) in San José.

<sup>277</sup> Stoll (1990), and the links to the US extreme right in connection with the Iran Contra Scandal and Oliver North p. 321



Asamblèa de Diòs in Laurel

### Evangelicals in Coto Sur - Creating new Meeting Places

The first protestants that had arrived to Coto Sur were US missionaries from southern Methodist churches that have assisted much both materially and practically, sending used clothes, medicines, and Bibles, as well as helping out to construct churches in the Southern region. Many of the inhabitants in Coto Sur were thus quite familiar with US missionaries (and that was the reason that I was more than once taken for one when moving about in the settlement). It is, however, the charismatic, mainly Pentecostal, congregations that really have expanded in Latin America<sup>278</sup>. In Coto Sur, as elsewhere in Central America, the adherents were referring to themselves as *evangélicos*. These congregations were spreading throughout the settlement, and even in the IDA-dominated Laurel had they got a foothold.

It was, however, very difficult to find any account or survey over the situation, nor seemed anyone to know. It was also difficult to find out exactly to whom they were affiliated, especially as the situation was when they just had started up a new church, and the *Asamblèa*

<sup>278</sup> See Berryman (1994); Dodson (1993); Huntington and Dominguez (1984); Martínez (1989); Piedra (1984), Kearney (1996); LeBot (1999); Lehmann (2002);

*de Diós* (Assembly of God) encountered both in Laurel and some other locations, was only one of the evangelical congregations in Coto Sur. Many of the members seemed not to know exactly, as they were in the process of learning and becoming familiar with the new evangelical vocabulary. The local laymen, or leaders, were often very reserved towards us (interpreted as ‘the IDA’, or ‘the state’), and the national leadership was almost impossible to reach.<sup>279</sup> Consulting the Catholic Church did not help much either; their representatives replied that,

Regrettably there seem to be many (congregations), but the situation is that we don't have a sufficient number of *curas* (priests) and people need to meet God, and because of that they turn to whoever is there (Catholic Priest in the Southern Zone, september 1986).

Catholicism is practiced with a number of different *misas* (mass) and there is a great need for priests to organize it all. This was a want expressed by numerous of devoted Catholics whenever the theme was brought up in Coto Sur. However, without having made this separate inquiry I certainly will believe that there is more to it than lack of clergy.

### **To have Order in One's Life**

Doña Dolores was very sceptical of anyone she did not know the first few times we went to see her. She was friendly and correct, but somewhat reserved, until I one day wondered whether she was active in a church or not. After that she many times told me about *la palabra* (the word), and said that she was a re-born. She is an active participant in one of the *Asamblea de Diós* congregations further out in the settlement where she attends just about every night.

She is very happy as she has found *El camino de Cristo* (The Road of Christ) and said that she

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<sup>279</sup> I should emphasise here that these congregations were not the main study, but though discussions with the peasant women their existence repeatedly came up, and only in the end did I make some efforts to find out more about the situation which was unknown to me.

got to know the words of Christ about ten years ago, and life since then had improved. In spite of the fact that she still is very poor, life was better;

*Ordenada, honesta, porque dónde hay orden está el Señor*

(Order, honesty, because where there is order is the Lord).

She talked of all the happiness when participating in *vigilias, cultos y testimonio*, about singing the whole night and praising the Lord. She thinks there is so much happiness around and uses the word *alegría* (happiness) a lot. Normally she participates in all the preparations for *ventas* (sales) in order to raise funds to make their church more beautiful for *los hermanos* (brothers and sisters). Whenever we discussed the religion matter she kept repeating that “*Soy renacida*” (I am reborn). Life definitely is better, says Dolores, because,

*No bailan, no fuman, no toman, no roban y no hablan mal. Tengo mucha fé, y la Iglésia es linda, ayuda a los pobres, también.*

(No dance, no drinking, no smoking, no stealing and no bad talk, and help to the poor as well).

All of her life now is in God's hands, but there still are many people, especially in the *cuadrantes*, that were not Christians and she would like to see that change. She was planning some missions, as those people (in the *cuadrantes*) were sinful in her eyes. Her rebirth had been of a special significance, as she had been a devoted catholic, and her mother had been a *rezadora* (knowledge to recite) as well. However, she drank herself to death on *guaro*, doña Dolores adds. Like many other converts she continually makes a point of the differences between them and the Catholics. Most women converts in Coto Sur express strong rejection for what they now consider meaningless rituals, while others that were not so absolute admit that they find the situation a bit difficult and confusing, but that they are working on it. They refer to themselves as *crístianos*, or more often as *evangélicos*, and make a point of being

*creyentes* (believers), moreover that they do pray (*orar*) and not *rezar*, which is to recite by rote.<sup>280</sup>

Doña Dolores is very definite about finding what she calls the right path in life. However, when discussing such matters with some of the other women in Coto Sur who said that they attend one of the evangelical churches, they say they are not quite sure of everything, but being in the church had resulted in less troublesome daily life.

Doña Imelda, her *compañero*, don Alvaro, and two of their nine children had recently become members of a pentecostal assembly. One day I asked her why she had converted from Catholicism. She told me that they both had grown up as Catholics, but not been very active. When they had arrived to Coto Sur three years ago, a woman had kept coming and asking them difficult questions about life and death, and tried to persuade her all the time. Doña Imelda said that she had become confused, for there had been *tantas cosas* (all sorts of things). In the end, she had agreed to go to listen to what they said, as she had felt so pressured. After attending the congregation for a while, she decided to become a member. She thought that her life had become simpler for her, and then she had convinced her *compañero* to go too. He had been very reluctant in the beginning, but gave in, and now she was sure that he was content as well. The way she saw it, everyone could not *cumplir* (comply) in all that was demanded of them, but at least they tried. Now they went to church together with people she described as *amistades* (friends, people they knew) and tried to live according to the Word. And she repeated that the Bible says no to drinking, smoking, dancing, etc. They are busy with the many meetings and *cultos* they participate in. Now she said that they tried not to fight, nor speak bad words in the house, that was very important to doña Imelda. Before it happened that she went to the *bailes* (public dances), accompanied by her children, “No, I did not dance, was just watching,” she says, giggling. They could spend 200 colones, and

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<sup>280</sup> What Brusco (1995) found in Colombia was much the same in Central America, although she makes a point that they called their worship house for *templo*, in Coto Sur the peasants did say *la iglesia*, or rather *mi iglesia* (my church) and they could mean both the building and their congregation,



sometimes more, and then had to live without sugar in the house afterwards. Now everything had become a lot simpler. They had friends and people helped one another. On top of that *buenos gringos* came to help out and sent them used clothes. The clothes were really nice looking, Imelda said, and were distributed by their pastor to who was most in need.<sup>281</sup>

Some have also joined the more established (historical) protestant churches, as doña Cándida who is living next to a Methodist Church located further into the settlement, where somebody had donated the land for the church building some years ago. She is a very active lady with many things going on, and a quite relaxed and pragmatic relation to most of it, including the church. She is happy about the fact that they have increased the membership lately, and even people from the Banana cooperative now have joined them. She spends much time working for her church, raising money, making foods (*tamales*, *gallos*, etc.) for sales, and she was doing a lot of cooking whenever their congregation organised big gatherings because she thought it was important that everyone coming should get food. Tuesdays and Wednesdays they had *cultos* with prayers, Saturday was for the young ones and of course Sundays they all gathered in church. She had been active in this church since its inception about eight years ago, when a *gringo* missionary came to establish a congregation. This year they had had fifteen *gringos* visit that had helped repair the church. Now they only lacked the tiles for the floor, but doña Cándida is sure that in short time the tiles will be there.<sup>282</sup>

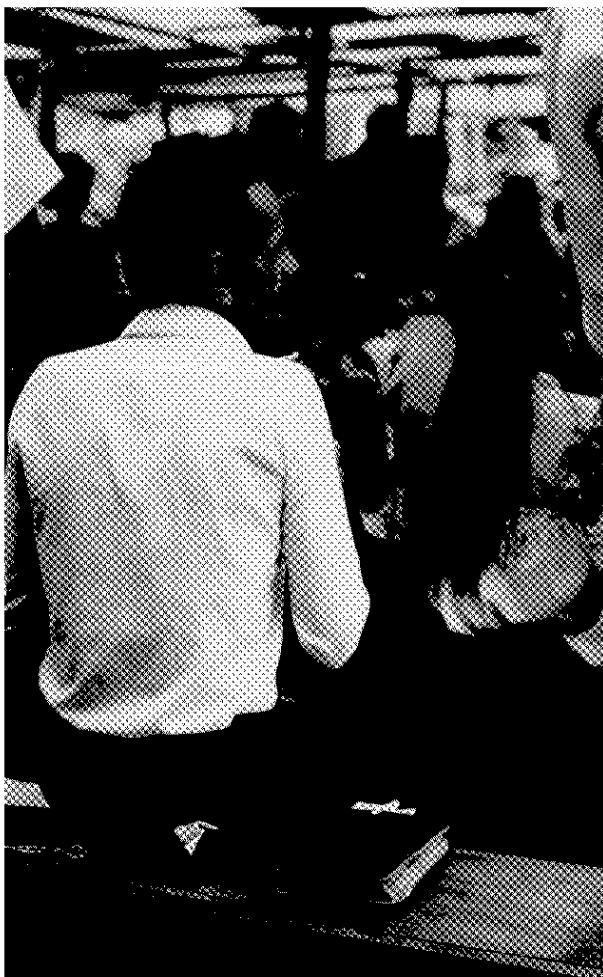
Membership in evangelical congregations, whether the few more established (historical) protestant, like Methodist or Baptist, or the more numerous and more recent Pentecostal, was far from uniform through families and households in Coto Sur. It seemed as if it was the women in a household who first start going to a congregation, often after much

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<sup>281</sup> In this period of time these used clothes were distributed through US missionaries, but shortly afterwards the market seems to be overloaded with cheap, used clothes that were sold from trucks, and in practice did undermine much of the women's handcraft skills all over Central America.

<sup>282</sup> These groups of US church volunteers can often be encountered at the airports in Central America, usually wearing T-shirts with their home-church's name, sponsors, where they would be going and a Biblical verse or two.

pressure from the local missionaries. Many told about the difficult questions they were constantly reminded of, about their own life and death, and sins that could bother them for perhaps several years, before they eventually decided to join a congregation. Also important was the fact that the church provided a place to be, and people who cared about them.



Man and his Bible at an Assembly

### **Women's new Spaces?**

One may say that the protestant churches and the evangelical congregations eventually emerged as places and spaces where women had access and felt at home. Men were increasingly joining as well, but among our informants they were following after the women, and were more sceptical at the outset, but the impression was that many of the men in Coto Sur who had turned to these congregations had done so in hope of being freed from sickness

and deceases etc. When discussing with them how they came to join a congregation it turned out that they hoped to be cured. Occasionally it was the other way around. In doña Rosario's house her *compañero* and one of her daughters had converted to an Assembly of God congregation one and a half years ago because he was sick. Doña Rosario still considers herself a Catholic. But she admits that, “*Me da vergüenza ir a misa*”, that she was a bit ashamed to go to mass. She thinks that people are looking at her, knowing that she had participated a few times in *la evangelica*. She likes the evangelical congregation, says it is nice, but still she feels the Catholic Church rituals are part of her. She is very happy that her *compañero* has joined them because now he has stopped spending a lot on *guaro* (alcohol) and did not have any other women, as used to be the case. Her main impression is that the Catholics are more dispersed, as she puts it, the evangelicals are more together (*unidos*), an expression she repeated many times.

Doña Mayela also feels that she is looked at when she goes to (Catholic) mass. She has participated every now and then with the evangelicals, when she had been invited (and pressured), but says that she certainly still considers herself a Catholic. She even could *rezar*, but regrets that the priest never shows up. Last year she had been to mass only twice, and that wasn't right. In *La Evangélica* they had *cultos* all the time, and she is always invited, but she has not joined them yet. “*El viejo no le gusta*” (The old man doesn't like it). He is a big, strong ex-banana worker, and says that he certainly does not believe that the cripples stand up and walk, that it is nonsense. Besides, were we some kind of *gringo* missionaries? If we were, we better get out of his house, immediately! Doña Mayela later admitted that she liked the *culto*, but she did not leave the house much. He did not like it. But every now and then she slipped away, she whispered.

Nobody knows for sure, but it is evident that quite a number of the campesina households in Coto Sur have one or more persons active in evangelical congregations. The attendance is definitely on the increase. Quite an amount of time is spent in these

congregations, both attending religious and social activities, and in preparing everything. Women put a lot of energy into cooking food and preparing sales, and some of them go around trying to be “good to others” as they put it.. If someone in the congregation has fallen sick, others pray for him or her and organise visits. The indifferent are the ones who consider themselves as Catholics but go to the evangelicals now and then, and say that if someone would ask for help, of course I go and help them out.

There are also people who consciously refuse to have anything at all to do with the evangelists. It seemed as if the women in Coto Sur who considered themselves Catholics live according to their religious rituals at home, and had what may be described as a practical relationship to God. They said they talked with him when in the fields, asking for practical help in their daily prayers etc. Besides, the daily expressions used in Coto Sur reflect the catholic heritage. *El Señor me ayuda, Vaya con Diós, Qué Diós le acompaña*, etc., even more archaic than what is normally heard in San José. They will go to mass whenever there is a chance. However, there is hardly any social activity around the Catholic chapels. The evangelical congregations seem to meet two needs among the female population, both a moral/orderly and thus one that ‘elevates domesticity’ as Brusco holds as most important among pentecostalists in Andean Colombia (1995). Secondly, these communities provided spaces and social relationships that otherwise were almost non-existent. In most places in and around Coto Sur the worship houses are the only regular social activity being offered to which women feel they can go without asking for permission. Moreover, there is music, song and people who seem to care about one another.

Anne Hallum (2003) argues that the growth of the Pentecostal movement in Latin America also must be seen as a part of the women’s movement in that the majority of the converts are women in the continent:

Many of the same women who are active in movements reject the category 'feminists' because they see feminism as hostile to men and to their own maternal identities, and they have provided feminist scholars with a strong theoretical challenge (2003: 181).

Drogus (1994) found the same tendencies in Brazil, and that there were greater equities between women and men in these congregations. Brusco points to how evangelism is serving women's practical interest, as well as a certain replacement of the machismo role (aggression, violence, etc.) and she says that

an individualistic orientation in the public sphere is replaced by peace seeking, humility and self-restraint, and a collective orientation and identity with the church and the home (1995: 137).

She would like to see evangelism as a women's revolt, but in Coto Sur, I would argue, it very much is also because it provides a public space that was non-existent before, one that is not excluding women. Hence, to what extent these congregations would function as integrating mechanisms in the community, or contribute to further split between people in Coto Sur was still difficult to say. Most members were poor and the worship houses they had erected were unpretentious. However, when discussing with members of these congregations they often seemed to be more concerned about their own denomination and worked to enhance that, attract bigger followings etc, than working together with others on a communal, territorial basis, to develop the community. Providing people with their practical needs (foods, soaps, and clothes) was one thing, but there also was of course the spiritual needs.

## **The Shifting Constructions of ‘Public’ and ‘Private’<sup>283</sup> (‘Casa y Calle’)**

I have chosen the dichotomy public/private to close up this chapter on aspects of women’s integration, participation and belonging in Coto Sur in the 1980s. The assumed division between what has been considered as public and private; has a long history and it is, as pointed out already, very tempting to clutch to when it comes to the SMFCs’ mission to increase the peasant women’s participation and improve their relations to their community.

When I have chosen to write ‘private’ in between converted commas, it is because the majority of the women in Coto Sur did enjoy very little ‘privacy’ in a Northern middle class interpretation of the word.<sup>284</sup> Thus the concept of ‘privacy’ has no precise and uniform content; it is therefore very difficult to define, whether in ethical, psychological or simple linguistic terms (Sciama 1993). The private/public opposition is almost universal in social studies and analyses, and is often credited to Marxist distinction between private and public economic sectors, particularly the general assumption that women exist entirely within a private sphere is based on Engels’s understanding of the difficulty of reconciling women’s domestic roles with integration of their labour into wider sectors. As Davidoff (1998) points out, a distinction between private domestic spheres and the workplace was most strongly developed in Victorian England, and was indeed a strong feature of Northern European thinking in the nineteenth century. The conclusion of this is that ‘domestic sphere’, inaccurate as it also may appear, I think, is a better concept when discussing women’s (lack) of participation in the ‘public’ corresponding one.

Returning to the question of what in Coto Sur constitutes public spheres? And if, and how are women excluded, in theory - or practice - and on basis of what - from those? Is it gender ideologies that would prevent women to participate outside (‘*calle*’), or is it individual

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<sup>283</sup> I have borrowed this title from Sheller and Urry (2003)

<sup>284</sup> ‘Privacy’ –the need for individuals, families or other social groups, to separate themselves from others at various times, or for certain well-defined activities’ (Sciama 1993: 87). There seems to exist an agreement that the notions of privacy is most widespread throughout the Protestant Anglo-Saxon and Northern European society. See also Cubitt and Greenslade (1997).

submission to men, or both? When the members of the SMFC team in Coto Sur had been interviewed for the job, they had been asked what they would do when they came across men who would not allow 'their' women to participate in (public) project activities, and in practice the SMFC team were put to the test many times the first year. Later this all calmed down, and some of the initially hostile men even did help out for instance with practical tasks in the SMFC Women's Groups (Valestrand, forthcoming). One may therefore ask if 'public sphere' was a good term to use when dealing with these issues in Coto Sur?

In a predominantly rural area, like the settlement of Coto Sur, it is relatively speaking a lot more demanding to try to distinguish when things are private/domestic and when they are considered public, and what the different meanings given them would come to entail in practice. Since long, the most common meaning of private - has been that it is out of sight, but what it entails more than that has changed over time and space, and is therefore an issue to be discussed and a term to contest. Thus, it is worth mentioning that both this dichotomy, and the idea of what is public, has been among the important discussions among feminist philosophers and political scientists in particular. Nancy Fraser (1989) has suggested confronting Habermas and 'rethinking the public sphere'; while I.M. Young (1990) asks 'what *is* a public sphere'? According to Davidoff (1998) a public space has been enduringly constituted along masculinist lines. Both she, and others, for instance Pateman (1988) and Young (1990, 2000), do connect the public sphere to the old association with the 'civic public' and 'reason' - which accordingly - was supposed to be located inside the male brain. Focusing both on *how* public, and for *whom*, is perhaps a better approach when considering the women in Coto Sur and their situation (as of 1986), as well the one to be in the future; that is which position they would be able to locate themselves in, activating the verbs *integrar* and *participa*.

## **“Somos humildes, pero decentes”: Identity, and Women as Equilibrists on a Tight Line**

The above citation *Somos humildes, pero decentes* (we are poor but respectable) was one that I did encounter, in different varieties of speech, over and over again in the empirical material from Coto Sur when the women made some remarks concerning their own situation.<sup>285</sup>

Interestingly, just about all women did speak as if they were a collective with shared experiences, it was as a rule phrased as a plural we (*somos*); in spite of the fact that these women did not talk much together sharing their experiences as women, which became so evident in the SMFC Women’s Groups when questions about shared experiences and what could be done and changed on basis of those, were brought up. Then it was full stop, conflicts and much effort had to be put in by the SMFC promoters trying to calm down the participants, and move on. In their view, and from their professional perspective, this was about building the women’s self-confidence, to help them to be able to function together.

So, how should, or could, the *Somos humildes, pero decentes* statements be interpreted? Suffice it to say that it could be understood as some sort of felt social and cultural subjugation, that many of the women had not yet acquired a vocabulary to face, but those were statements that also had to be read between the lines (and which the SMFC social promoters were really wizards in doing), and certainly interpreted within many contexts. The central word was *decente* (respectable, decent), and this wish to appear as respectable persons, respectable women, could be considered as an articulation of how the women of this generation assessed themselves and their situation, and could be an indicator as to how they were negotiating and constructing their identities<sup>286</sup> within recognised idioms of womanhood - as they perceived it - and their imaginations about how things ought to be. The in the main, external classification as *mujeres campesinas* (peasant women) did not quite fit the self-image

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<sup>285</sup> It was so almost omnipresent in the material that I used this as the title of my first account from Coto Sur before returning for my second field work, Valestrand (1990) *Somos Humildes- pero decente: Peasant Women in Coto Sur*.

<sup>286</sup> Richard Jenkins says that ‘Identity can in fact only be understood as process. As ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ (2002:4). See the rest of the book for an overview and discussion of ‘social identity’.



of many of the women, even doña Leonora, the active, farming woman that I started this work with, did not quite think that was a well fitting description. It was a label that was interpreted as more collectively based and moulded, a political version so to speak, not yet attained, but that did not mean that some of the women slowly would perhaps incorporate the word in their own vocabulary and make it to their own eventually, and say *nosotras, las mujeres campesinas* (we, the peasant women) as the men, ex-bananeros tended to do, not necessarily because they believed in it, but it was the recognized idiom within the IDA sphere. One may probably conclude that the *mujer campesina* in Coto Sur as of 1986 had to be considered as an identity of becoming, depending on many other circumstances, the IDA, the SMFC's activities trying to organise the women, to support them in having them formulate their shared interest, etc.

Women's very personal and long-time, struggle for respect, for being taken to be *decentes* did, I think, also demonstrate their realism and actual reflection upon their own situation, but in a somewhat different version than the WID/GAD vocabulary presented. That was a discourse of what the SMFC Women's Project in their activities would frame as *autovalorización* (self esteem), and that was, as stated before, making up a substantial part of the course and training portfolio that the SMFC team and other development agents were activating in their work with women's groups in the 1980s and 90s.

Women in Coto Sur, seemed, on the other hand, to be continually working on constructing their identities, their reference would be for instance to be respected as women in the settlement would entail to be good mothers, and housewives, and to occupy the central core in an (often imagined) close-knit family situation, which, as discussed particularly in chapter 5, was not quite the case in perhaps the majority of the domestic units. However, it became evident that there was very little mutual understanding when it came to 'mothering' among the women; they held that a mother had to take care of her own dependents, an attitude the development workers in the Women's Programme did struggle with. The women

participating in the Women's Groups for instance, were not willing to accept that one should have any special treatment in terms of a sisterhood interpretation, that women had any common interest on basis of being mothers, that was unthinkable and caused many conflicts in the SMC Women's Groups, especially when it came to practical tasks that had to be carried out. There simply was not much solidarity between women when the groups started out, it was something that had to be worked upon, tirelessly, which often wore out the SMFC promoters, who had high expectations to this.

This situation did emerge as a contradiction in terms, for example how women did express some of their own values, for example to *ayudar a los demás* (help thy neighbour), and their practice, which often was anything but that. I have to add though, that there were also examples of the opposite, of women acting very altruistic, but they were not in the majority in this empirical material when we started out the research activities (and I am not talking about what took place in other areas, as for example the pentecostal assemblies).

On the other hand, there was no uniform social construction of what womanhood was in Coto Sur either, it appeared as rather composite, closely associated with motherhood, but seemed also to be much dependent on the woman's position in their household, as well as the standing of the farm and household in question. Another typical trait was the women's constant needs-talk, rather than rights; the recognizable idiom was not yet one that could encompass women's rights and interests, at least not on the face on, it had to be communicated very subtly, they were indeed masters in subtlety.

Women's frequent emphasising of the *decente* aspect, I interpret as their way of trying to build bridges in their own and others' complex situations and composite identities, between differing, even contradictory values, and respect was something that they, as culturally understood women knew, they had to *deserve*, it was not endowed upon them at all. Another way of putting it would be to say that many of these women were balancing on a tight rope. Thus one may perhaps say that their talk represented a navigable way of mediating between

what they felt was expected of them, from let us say the SMFC trying to raise the women's self-consciousness as individuals and working together collectively, and the women's own wanting to be better mothers and housewives and family members, and the local interpretations of the same. It was a hard knot at times, and language could be deceiving, and led to discrepancies that could be difficult to overcome.

When women used the term *humildes*, they both wanted to say that they were 'ordinary people' even poor (*pobres*), which they also would apply in certain settings, but also signal that they were not bragging about, it was the recognised idiom not to be proud, but to be modest. One can ask whether this could be said to be the way the women used the term, as the *humilde* phrase also was frequently used by men; even some of the IDA functionaries in Laurel emphasised the importance of being *humilde*, which also could be read of the IDA slogan *A la par del campesino* (next to the campesino), but the degree of 'humildedness' could be an issue that would merit further investigations, but I will leave it at that. I do think, however, that the female and male version of what it would entail to be *humilde* in this period of time in Coto Sur in practice meant different things, although they would use the same words. For women the room for what women could do was considerably more limited than men's. However, to live up to those ideals, to be ordinary and decent, as a woman in precarious material conditions, was a hard struggle, as has been documented on the previous pages. It has revealed a construction of their identity that on the one hand was very determined and proud, only in the next moment, to express doubt and meaninglessness. They did have great difficulties in seeing that they had much in common as peasant women, but I think it would be better to phrase it as they did take no chances sharing with others. They obviously could see that others struggled as well, and could talk about that, but many were more reluctant about cooperating to improve their situation, their strategy was to keep things within what they considered as their sphere of control, and few of them had any experience

with and thus trust in 'organisations'. That was something that had to be learned, and it took much time to build that confidence.

The women would, as noted above, often talk about 'we' but who were the 'we'? It was conflict upon conflict that was referred to, directly and indirectly and whether people were good people - or bad people. Many women were also expressing much fear, worries, and uneasiness about their situation, with sicknesses, unstable relationships, variable incomes etc. They were not victims, nor did they want to be, but many of them were, undoubtedly, very, very vulnerable. There was little expressed of what might be called class consciousness, that could be discerned among the women, and surprisingly little among the men as well, except in their speak, when they would draw on *campesino* or 'agrarian reform' discourses, as already referred to.<sup>287</sup> The idea of sharing with others (*compartir*), was often mentioned, but not much practiced it seemed. Most women seemed to be on a constant alert, for possible or potential threats to their own projects; be they family-building projects, that most of the women were into, or 'bisnis' that many of the men were talking about. This posed great challenges to the SMFC Women's Project, and obviously led to the many delays of its implementation, in that this situation was not really acknowledged by donators and host-institutions alike.

### **Constructing their Homeplace - Belonging as Basis for Collectivity and Identity**

The much criticised assumptions in numerous studies about some kind of links or direct connections between a place and its inhabitants generating typical identities (Guptha and Ferguson 1997; Keith and Pile; Creed and Ching 1997) is well worth to take on board again, when analysing the situation for peasant women in the agricultural settlement of Coto Sur, a

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<sup>287</sup> This does not entail that people were not thinking in such terms, it could very well be that they did not want to share their thoughts with others, or that the ones we did get in contact with were not among the activists.

society and homeplace still very much in the making. After having toiled with the empirical material trying to tell the story of the peasant women in Coto Sur in this in-between phase, I have to admit that I had perhaps been putting too much into the analyses, as to how things were in Coto Sur, based on the life stories and the women's narrations. For, when thinking more about it, the women had enough with their daily struggles, but that did not mean that they did not imagine the place they lived the way they wanted it to be. The IDA-version was one of an assumed 'place'-cum 'peasant', in which community was to be built and constructed as a basis for shared interests and viability, to put it bluntly. Who should make up the human basis for such collectivities? Obviously it was the farming-families; and it was also the women's individual projects to sew together the family, as discussed in chapter 5 and elsewhere. For women who could have complex experience with what a family may entail, the family as ideal, was what they would go for, and in fact thereby supported a more conservative perspective than what perhaps would be in their own interest.

Typically the discourses (or lack of) on women and land rights illustrated that. One may probably also say that the particular form of place, or society, that a state run agricultural settlement represented, could provide a double-edged situation for women, they were in many regards excluded as individual women from acquiring land and becoming farmers if they so wished, a number of women barely survived in what I did call the 'grey zones', because there were pockets of available land that could be accessed in various ways. In a society that is so much based on an ideology of land reform and 'family farms, there was not much room for other versions at this stage, which I think must be part of the explanation for women's invisibility.

When the women would be talking about their home-place, it sounded as if it was rather what they *wished* it should be. First of all they talked about wanting more togetherness (*comunidad*), described as something that now was lacking, but ought to be. Moreover, women, without exception, when asked about it, were almost obsessed with what they said

was lacking, namely more attractive surroundings, that meant to them parks, and public places with trees and flowers, paths and benches. If there was something they could talk much about, it was that. Many used the (former) beauty of the administrative zone (*Zona Americana*) in Golfito as an example, how nice it had been. The beauty of many Catholic Churches was also a constant reminder (even among the re-borns who otherwise said they detested the church). It was the possibility to be in a public place, to stroll, that was what the women all thought was a symbol of being from a nice place.

“What do we have here to be proud of?” one of the women said, once we were discussing, “We are poor and backwards, no schooling, and it does not look nice either”. The women said that they really were not proud of being from the settlement when travelling elsewhere, for one; people had no idea where Coto Sur is, and second, they figure we are rustics and backwards. The lack of being taken to be civilized, that there was no plaza, nor any markets, was perhaps what the women mentioned most often. Even in Guanacaste, when they grew up, there had been plazas and beautiful houses in many places, and they also often referred to the beautiful houses - and dresses - they watched on TV in the soaps, and beauty queen contests. Thus ‘imagined’ places could in many respects be an apt description.

In this manner the women illustrated their in many ways, contradictory position; on the one hand, their intrinsic building and construction of their own base, a house, or nest, for themselves and their children. On the other hand; there was the lack of ‘civilisation’ in Coto Sur, which they also thought essential for decent living. It was probably based on such matters that they would judge themselves, whether they had been successful or not. More seldom was this expressed in terms of land which was the official (IDA) discourse, and the WID/GAD one as well, or participation for that matter. Women would rather talk about being taken seriously, and about distinguishing themselves from others; in this case it could be formulated that they wanted to be considered as real *ticas* (female Costa Ricans) with their

own dignity. To sum it up one may perhaps say that most women said that they felt at home in Coto Sur, but whether they really had 'come home' was not possible to say, as yet.

### **The Past in the Present**

As a population consisting of in-migrants, I took it that they had brought a bit of Guanacaste (where the majority had their origins) with them when constructing their homeplace, as well as experiences from the different banana plantations and elsewhere where they had spent time. A closer reading of such aspects in the narratives resulted in little to encounter, not that the women did not tell about their past experiences, but these places were apparently not places of longing, they were places they had left, and not really wanted to return to.

Concerning the banana plantations what the women had to say about them, was that there was a certain order, but too many conflicts, only a few of who had had more positive experiences were not so negative (chapter 2). The other pasts, represented by Guanacaste - here also in a metaphoric meaning - was a country they had left behind, it was not a future land that they were dreaming about or sharing any form of collective memory from. To the extent that it did so, it was as source of kinship ties for the women, as expressed through language, such as dialect expressions (*comiche* for example meaning the youngest child), and for the women particularly through food traditions. They kept up and were proud of their (regional) cooking, but which they did not reflect upon as 'Guanacastecan', and which was not brought up much before the sociologist in the SMFC team, who had been born in Guanacaste, made it a theme, as she was so interested and curious about their cooking which she had knowledge about through her own mother. By bringing in these matters, this part of the women's pasts became much more present again, and they remembered more than they initially said they did, and would, perhaps contribute to their identity construction in a positive manner. Guanacaste was past, and not much to be particularly proud about among the women, and it was not possible

to detect any territorially based ‘Guanacaste society’ in Coto Sur, which, under other migratory circumstances probably could have been the case. It is interesting how many places do get constructed on basis of a past that was being used for constructing the present, in Coto Sur it was certainly the Bananas, and the banana workers, that was making up the official past, mixed with ‘modernity’ and progress (chapter 3), and not the ‘backward’ Guanacaste. Women’s quite similar backgrounds were not made part of collective history as yet, but that one has to think is going to change. There had not yet been erected a ‘banana worker museum’ in the Southern Zone, but that might very well become the case in some future, and then, perhaps, if there are some conscious curators, one will get an exhibition dedicated to ‘the pioneering family’ as well?<sup>288</sup> When the IDA took over the administration of the Coto Sur settlement it was made a point of the fact that the campesinos did not know how to farm in humid climate as in Coto Sur, either because they were labelled as *bananeros*, or because they originated from dry climate and cattle dominated areas like Guanacaste (Chapter 3). They were defined negatively, and collectively.

The impression was that our women informants had to deal with their migrant history and status alone, it was not what they said they talked much about, if they did it would be through paraphrasing, through Biblical connotations, or by means of poetic verses. It is worth noticing that while the nation, Costa Rica has embraced the ‘folkloric’ heritage of Guanacaste, and the *Punto Guanacasteco* has officially been declared as the national dance, and as national dress (wide skirts etc.) influenced by colonial clothing is often associated with Guanacaste as well, nothing of this was the ‘Guanacasteness’ that the women in Coto Sur would draw on, they would not even dream about putting on such a dress, and preferred merengues to folkloric dances. The women were, however, very much marked by their difference from ‘white ticas’; with their usually darker complexion, many were ancestors of the Chorotegas, the indigenous group that inhabited the land before the Spanish conquistadors

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<sup>288</sup> In Guanacaste they have now got a tiny *sabanero* (cowboy) museum’, to the memory of the cattle herding cultures of the past.



arrived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which was something that they often commented upon, they were looking different. Thus, it was how they experienced their own relative 'backwardness' as *morenas* (dark complexion).

The assumingly shared experiences from the invasions, and the struggles to survive the first periods in Coto Sur were not activated much in such a setting either. With a few exemptions, women hardly seemed to have been talking collectively about what they had lived through, or given each other credit for that. In the banana plantations the women we talked to reported of little collective and shared experiences, it was rather everybody's struggle against everybody else, and insecure family relations on top of that. None of the women talked about 'togetherness' of any kind from their experiences living on plantations. That does not entail that that was the case for everybody, but it was not what our informants narrated.<sup>289</sup>

### **For Better or Worse - more Autonomy or Well-being for Women?**

One of the bearing ideas of the Women's Project in Coto Sur, as many other such projects, was to work towards greater autonomy for women, as individual persons who had been little noticed, been subjugated to individual men, and to male-dominated society for generations. In Costa Rica at this point there was little in terms of legal constraints that hampered women's autonomy, but lots of practical and ideological battles that had to be fought on many arenas and scales. The SMFC project workers, under whose auspices and cooperation much of this present material has been collected, had to try to balance between supporting women's autonomy, in a situation where few of them in practice had lived in stable family relationships, and in which a family was an aspiration. This was, for example, illustrated

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<sup>289</sup> A woman working in the IDA administration in Laurel had grown up on banana plantations in the southern Zone and she told that her mother and other women had had 'women's committees' etc. in Palmar, so it did exist, and Vega Mora (2006) does talk about active women in the banana zone in the 1950s, hence it might be that the ones we did talk to were the ones that had mainly bad experiences?

when women who had got access to land, were willing to cede the land in a man's name, which they believed would secure the 'family'. It was a fact however, that women who owned land were in a better position to negotiate than the ones who did not, but that was beyond what the women were able to imagine. The SMFC Women's Project's claimed that women could and should have their own name on the title, seemed not a case in point as yet, the women still argued that men were better equipped to be farmers, and better apt to deal with 'such matters'; in spite of some of the same women often were running more or less the whole farm. They were willing to see themselves as women in farming households, but saw women's owning of land as a threat to a potential well functioning family. No wonder that many experienced difficult dilemmas and ambiguities when being confronted with such possibilities that they felt there was no understanding for around them.

Living in an agricultural settlement that seemed to exist in some kind of constant making had not made things easier. The women had arrived with a hope of a better life, which they were not sure that they had got. Some were saying that they finally had found a 'harbour', while others admitted that they still were hoping for something else. The work in the SMFC Women's Project, including the research, did demonstrate a tension between the wish to enhance individual social capital, and at the same time build collective social capital (Molyneux 2002). Thus, when trying to mobilise the women in Coto Sur, on what grounds should they be mobilised? On interests or identity; on needs or rights? In the SMFC Women's Groups the participants whenever encountered with a problem, always seemed to seek individualised solutions, they would indiscriminately try to 'go and see someone'; whom they said would either be a relative, or occasionally some 'good people' whom they knew helped people. In such cases they often would activate their status as mothers, and that they were in need. Distrust was, as stated, widespread, entailing that it was only through some safety strategies that they thought that they would survive.

These deliberations over some of the findings in Coto Sur leads to some important questions, for example; How should one build feminist collectives and organise the women? Would provision of income sources for women, one way or the other, lead to more autonomy, as has been the most typical strategy for development projects for women? And how should women's autonomy be part of rural development policies? How would it then be possible to integrate women? And how important was really farming for the women in Coto Sur? Another way of asking would be if the land reform really had benefited women?

## Chapter 7

### ‘THE MODERNISING TROPICS’: COTO SUR IN TRANSITION - THE PALMS

#### Laurel and Coto Sur 1990: Return and DejaVu

The experience of returning to Coto Sur and Laurel in May of 1990 after having been away for some years could be described as almost coming to a foreign land. Four years does not necessarily mean so much many places, but in Laurel and Coto Sur, the change was stunning. First sight when we<sup>290</sup> entered Laurel, the former UFCo banana farm, was the big new bank palace of the National Bank (BNCR), located at the very entrance of town. It is a three story, modern concrete building. There are flowers planted, two gated and well-guarded entrances, and outside of that are high barbed wire fences. In it's modernist architecture the building looks like it is floating on the ground on pillars, and in fact looks quite displaced here in the open, flat landscape. What a symbol of money and prosperity. Was this the concretisation and realisation of an ‘imagined community’ for planners and peasants alike?

Continuing into the only street of Laurel, which used to be a dirt road running parallel with the banana train tracks, now asphalted, it was impossible not to notice that Laurel was in the process of becoming a small town. The old wooden schoolhouse (built by the UFCo long time ago) on the right-hand side cuadrante had been torn down, and a new, concrete school had been constructed on the other end of the village across from the *Zona Americana* where the IDA's administrative compound was. The site where the old school used to be was in progress of becoming a small park, a plaza, and a pathway had been laid around it, covered by pavement stones, some trees had been planted, and a few benches had been placed around. It

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<sup>290</sup> This time ‘we’ included the former driver of the Women's Project in Coto Sur and Odilia, the sociologist from the first SMFC team, both hired for the field work

was not finished yet, but compared to four years previously when this was only a worn down grass field, it was quite a change.

Further up in the village, however, most looked the same. The telephone exchange was still the only public phone in Laurel with its usual queues (automatic telephones were installed in 1992). Next to that, where the SMFC Women's Project's sewing group,<sup>291</sup> used to have its locale in a former banana farm workshop, was the long planned SMFC Women's Project *soda* (an unpretentious café). The little house had been nicely decorated, painted with figures depicting foods and women cooking and serving. It was properly named *Soda la Tentación* (The temptation), and had a central location, right across from the IDA headquarters and the (old) bank locale. I remember that I felt a certain relief, at least *something* from the SMFC Women's Project's struggles had resulted in a little that was both tangible and visible.



The street in Laurel

The Costa Rican state had increased its presence in Coto Sur. The Ministry of Agriculture (MAG) had built a new edifice on the other side of the railway track and three

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<sup>291</sup> IDAL was a group that was adopted by the SMFC team, but was soon closed down as the competition with *maquila* was too hard for them to operate with a balance. They had occasionally got contracts to make school-uniforms

agricultural experts were working there on a permanent basis and with local staff. Behind this new building was a completely new street on which a housing project with 30 small, single family houses were in process of becoming a mini-suburb to Laurel. (It turned out that it was one of the results of the 80.000 new dwellings campaign of the Oscar Arias presidency).

The old banana-train, so significant in the history of the invasions in Coto Sur (chapter 2), still passed right through Laurel on its way to and from the exporting port Puerto Armuelles in Panamá, even more frequently than it used to, an indication that there had to be more activity in the banana-sector. The bus-schedule out of Laurel had become more frequent and it turned out that a number of the functionaries in the Palm Project, the bank, etc., were not living in Laurel, but in the villages of Canóas and Neilly and were going back and forth every day, actually coming into Laurel to work. Men in office donning and women wearing high heels and small suits on weekdays were a noticeable change in sleepy, dusty Laurel, indeed.

Then there was the *Zona* where the SMFC team had lived and worked. The first thing to be noticed was that a new, big sign had come up, *IDA- Region de Desarrollo de Coto Sur. Oficina Central*. The IDA's administrative offices located behind the sign still looked the same, not many observable changes. The significant noticeable alterations were found further into the *Zona*, namely the building in which I had used to spend a lot of time, the former UFCo Coto Sur headquarters, subsequently the IDA's *Centro de Capacitación*, (training centre) which now had been turned into the headquarters for the Palm (and cocoa) development programme. The huge wooden constructions had been painted and new windows had been installed where there before only were wooden screens. Air-conditioning was installed upstairs, electric neon lights everywhere (there used to be only one small bulb in each room), professional armed watchmen stood outside, and busy young men in ironed white shirts moved in and out of the building.

In official language the new Palm project was named '*Proyecto Agroindustrial Coto Sur; IDA- BID-CDC*', but in day to day talk it was only called the *Proyecto BID*, after the *Banco Interamericano nacional de Desarrollo* (The Inter American Development Bank IADB/BID).



Statue in honour of one of the central supporters of the peasants in Coto Sur. Proyecto Agroindustrial Coto Sur IDA- BID- CDC. *En Homenaje al Distinguido Ciudadano Ing. Elías Soley Carrasco por su invaluable aporte al desarrollo agropecuario nacional y su infatigable trabajo de ayuda al campesino.* Abril de 1988.<sup>292</sup>

The *Palm Project*, or the huge agro-industrial project was very clearly in the process of being implemented. One could identify the presence, or rather, representation of the project out in the street in Laurel, for example the quite well groomed young men who did not use to be there before, nor the new grey project jeeps that were cruising around in the settlement and running up and down the street in Laurel all day. There was also more daily activity and more

<sup>292</sup> The text on the plaque unveiled at the opening ceremony of the Palm project in April 1988: 'The Agroindustrial Project-IDA- IADB- CDC, in honour of the distinguished citizen ing. Elías Soley Carrasco for his invaluable support for the national agricultural development and his never ending work to help the peasant'

people to be observed in Laurel, which used to be very sleepy and dusty except on the days when the bank was issuing the credits. Now, there were many bicycles and motorbikes and a lot of movement in the street, especially late in the afternoon. Sundays were still days for football, for the men. There is football on TV, on the radio, and on many open grass fields around in the settlement. The handful of places of worship of different denominations continue to have their sermons and there are ‘missionary rallies’ with meetings every night in Laurel, which indicated that the Evangelicals also had made Laurel their territory. Many couples, dressed in their best clothes, with small children now walk around the new pathway around in the cuadrante on Sundays.

The most evident difference for a returning visitor in Coto Sur, however, was the impressions of the landscape. It appeared completely transformed visually, but also the smell, the feelings, emotions were different. Encountering what I experienced as endless deep green *forests* (bosque) of oil palms, as the farm women used to call them back in 1986, when it was still possible to reach the top of the new planted palm trees standing on one’s feet. I think that none of us really were prepared for the total transformation of the landscape that met us in Coto Sur.

## **Palms, Development Schemes and Progress**

*Modern oil palm production lends itself to estates because of its positive response to weed and bush control, regular employment of labour force and the need to process soon after harvesting. The initial capital investment is higher than with other outgrower schemes, smallholder palm production no longer has the close relation with other farm activities that used to exist with traditional palm groves* (Baumann 2000: 19).

The palm trees<sup>293</sup> (*Elais Guineensis* Jaq.) thousands of them, had taken over the Coto Sur settlement. It was a major transformation process that now was in its second year, still with

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<sup>293</sup> Roy Ellen (1998) discussing anthropological perspectives of trees, asks whether palms really are ‘trees. It also appeared as some kind of coincidence of history that the former banana farms in Coto Sur had names after trees..



several years to go. Approximately 3900 hectares of arable land in the most plane sections of the agricultural settlement, that is mainly the former banana plantations and reserves emanating from the La Plancha district extending West- and Northwards; had been selected to become oil palm groves. (Later this acreage has been enlarged). The huge project also included a smaller cocoa growing option.

The parceleros who had been allotted land in this area had been invited to convert their farms to individually owned and run palm-growing farms, and if they accepted the offer they would become part of a system, in practice a total package, in which plants, expertise, infrastructure (reinforcement of the roads, canals, bridges, etc), training, market access, including transportation of produce, and most important of all; a credit package and organised re-payment schemes etc, was provided. The future palm-growers were compelled to join the new palm cooperative, put up as part of the scheme, and that unit would become the future owner of a palm-oil pressing unit to be constructed in the former banana farm Roble (it was delayed several years, opened 1993). The new palm cooperative (Coopeagropal RL) would therefore, in the future, become a very significant actor in this area due to its sheer size, but also because it eventually would provide its members with services, such as bookkeeping, transportation, maintenance, and many other things. It was an offer many could not refuse.

The formation of the Coto Sur settlement in the mid-1970s had been a major accomplishment, providing land and living for about 1400 smallholder households. The Palm project was also a massive scheme, but obviously meticulously planned beforehand, in contrast to the agricultural settlement that had been evolving along the road. Now very little seemed accidental, this was about technical almost military precision. We were taken by surprise all of a sudden encountering ourselves in the midst of what could be said to look like a gigantic construction site. Therefore, before proceeding to the palm farms, I will think that some basic information about these kinds of schemes will be appropriate.

## Outgrower Schemes

The Coto Sur Palm project could be described as a variety of so-called outgrower-schemes that have increased in importance as templates for development projects and planning in the South. As they often are resettlements schemes they are also referred to as ‘smallholder schemes’, and most such huge palm-growing schemes are found in Malaysia, Indonesia and New Guinea (Fold 2000, Baumann 2000, Vermeuen and Goad 2006, Ifad 1997;Hyman 1990). The main reason for promoting oil palms to generate growth is that it is the most productive oilseed in the world, but these big schemes are also costly, and the Palm Project in Coto Sur was no exception.

The budget (as of 1986) had been of around US \$ 50 millions with loans provided by the Inter American Development Bank (IDB) 33 mill US \$; CDC<sup>294</sup>15 mill. US\$; and the Costa Rica government to secure the rest (3 mill. US \$)<sup>295</sup> put together in a so-called ‘multipartite-arrangement’ (Glover and Kusterer 1990). Technically speaking, these types of arrangements in which agricultural producers (smallholders) deliver to a central processing unit are labelled ‘Nucleus Estate- Outgrower Schemes’, which is:

A core estate and factory is established and farmers in the surrounding area grow crops on part of their land which they sell to the factory for processing (Baumann 2000: 7).

In development scheme analysis and literature these can also be called ‘Nucleus-outgrower schemes’, presented as a variation of the outgrower scheme, in which a project authority also administers a plantation adjacent to the processing plants. Glover and Kusterer (1990) say that an Outgrower scheme generally connotes a government scheme, with a public enterprise purchasing crops from farmers, either on its own or as part of a joint venture with a private

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<sup>294</sup> Former Commonwealth Development Corporation, now a privately owned investment co. Specialising in financing oil-palm schemes in the South.

<sup>295</sup> According to analysts is the importance of public sector support for smallholder projects is essential, because of the long gestation period of tree crops fixed capital assets of palm oil processing plants represent a high proportion, and that they are motivated by political objectives, see Baumann (2000).

firm. Other designations on these types of relationships can be satellite farming which is a broader term, referring to any of the variations mentioned above.

Implicit in these arrangements is a contract, and the concept 'contract farming' can probably also be applied, although it is a term more frequently used for fruit and vegetable production. This entails that there exists a contractual relationship, the farmers cannot produce what they want or sell to whomever; they have in practice handed those decisions over to others. (Kay and Runsten 1999; Little and Watts 1994; Watts 1994 a, b; Collins, J 1993; Porter and Phillips-Howard 1997) In Coto Sur, in the future, it would be the producer cooperative, Coopeagropal that in practice will be doing the contracts, for the time being, it was the executive unit.

The implementation phase of the Coto Sur Palm project was directed and co-ordinated by an autonomous executive unit (*Unidad Ejecutiva*) whose office spaces and functionaries it was that we had observed in Laurel. A professional leadership had been contracted to this Executive Unit for a four- year period, and three top qualified chief engineers were employed for three years to carry it through. These experts had been recruited from abroad, and 18 agricultural engineers and experts had also arrived from outside (those were the young men in grey jeeps). There were no 'locals' in this crowd. The directors of the Executive Unit kept talking about rough changes (*cambios bruscos*) yet to come, that this area would be totally converted to a Palm Zone; and they said that they expected that the producers that would not be able to meet the production and quality requirements in the future most likely would have to leave, subsequently start working as hired hands for the ones that succeeded. They had seen that before, in other similar projects in Honduras and Colombia, we were told.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Interview Laurel, June 1990.

## **Trees, Farms and Gender**

The Coto Sur settlement was so evidently in the process of immense changes, the simplest way to characterise it is probably to say that it was ‘modernising’ without at this stage making any forays into the complicated field of what that may entail.<sup>297</sup> The situation in Coto Sur seemed to have turned upside down, but there were also, looking closer, unmistakable signs of continuation that could be recognised and called for some following up. The year 1990 was still early in the new Palm regime in Coto Sur and it was premature to really be able document the profound changes that were taking place in the Coto Sur society, and which some years later in the BID article (prologue) were more poetically described as ‘the promised land’. Moreover, the actual fieldwork period was considerably shorter this time and this, in turn, entailed that some important planned fields of study in the settlement had to be omitted, and to be literally replaced by attention to the Palms.

### **Reluctant Re-entrance to the ‘Modernising Tropics’**

Most of what was so visually apparent in the Coto Sur landscape of the 1990s had its immediate cause in the arrival of the tangible palm trees. However, they had not come by themselves, and it was an ideological battle of what was understood as progress that lay behind. There had to be some imminent connections between trees (palms), progress and gender that tickled my curiosity. Thus, how to get to grips with the physical presence of palms covering the ground, their material existence and organisational set-up, and how people lived with these new arrivals? If women in Coto Sur had been relatively invisible before, they now seemed to have totally disappeared behind the palms. A main assignment of the SMFC’s Women’s Project had been to find the peasant women, uncover their needs and to do

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<sup>297</sup> Arce and Long (2000) suggest to distinguish between modernisation as a metaphor for new and emerging materialities, meanings and cultural styles, and as a comprehensive package of technical and institutional measures and transformations underpinned by neo-evolutionary narratives. ‘Individual’ modernisations (Giddens 1990, 1991) I only discuss to a very limited extent.

something about that. At this point in time, where were the women to be found in these 'modernising tropics'?<sup>298</sup>

There were quite a few indications that the rules of the game were changing in Coto Sur, thus who would benefit; men, women, or, farming-families? According to the BID-article, published nine years later, it was the ex-bananero. How did I myself react when the old and proud ex-bananero, don Eusebio, greeted me with a grin, saying, "Welcome back, look how progress and development has reached us here!" Did I feel happy, excited and curious on their behalf? Did I not, to be truthful, prefer the romantic mythical peasants, after all? As an afterthought I have made up my mind that it was my own intuitive reluctance to the process that enabled me to only observe the superficial contours of Coto Sur that in the end convinced me to go on. I had to deal with that feeling properly.

First of all, returning as a researcher to Coto Sur could be described as a mixed experience; happiness and joy meeting with old acquaintances and collaborators, reluctance to what the new turn of the development wheel would entail for the women. Odilia, a rural sociologist, had been with the SMFC Women's Project since its inception in Coto Sur, but had decided to leave the project one year after I went home, rather dismayed, and she had not physically been back to the Southern Zone for three years. She also felt hesitant about re-entering, thus, we had to pep each other up. Neither of us felt that this was quite our Coto Sur that we were returning to. But, as the days went by and we met with old acquaintances, the pressure began to diminish and the new realities could begin to be seen and questioned.

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<sup>298</sup> I am here consciously playing on the 'tropics' trope, brought up in chapter 3 when presenting Coto Sur. What kind of representation was I going to produce this time myself?



The Bruncoop supermarket in Laurel

### Signs of Changes in Laurel

In the sleepy little place Laurel it was possible to read also smaller signs of the ongoing structural changes. The most noticeable, besides the new bank, was that the new building of the consumer cooperative *Bruncoop RL* now was finished. It was Laurel's first self-service shop, mostly stocked with dry foods, canned foods, sweets, a few pieces of clothes, sodas, some agricultural equipment, soaps, detergents, and a few other items. Three persons were working in the Coop store, a manager and two assistants. *Dónde Loís'* the old hangout on the other side of the street was still in existence. I remember the owner had been talking about leaving Laurel, as there was so little business back in 1986. "So much is happening here now", he said. I had to admit to myself that I had visibly been totally taken off guard. More curiously, perhaps, was a sign that now there was *promoción* (special offer) of cold beer at 45 colones.<sup>299</sup> That was something new, indeed, and indicated that there was more money in circulation. So did the fact that there were more dances and entertainment organised, the new

<sup>299</sup> In 1990 the exchange rate was about 100 colones to 1 US\$.

wave was more *discomobil* (transportable discoteque) and fewer live bands. People of all ages in Laurel and around still attended, but it seemed as if the younger were in a majority now. More *panameños* came over the border to the dances and activities and women in Laurel complained, saying that they danced differently. The panamenian influence meant a different rhythm, the music was said to be harder, more latino-pop, reggae, and rap, whereas on the Costa Rican side they still fancied their merengues, salsas and boleros. T-shirts and American basketball shoes had come to Laurel; seldom seen only a few years earlier.



Laurel, special offer

There was another interesting newcomer in Laurel, well worth noticing, a little *Salón de belleza y novedades* (Beauty salon) found inside the house of a woman living on the (main) street. One enters through the main door and behind a curtain and a folding screen there is a

mirror, a stool, and some scissors and combs. Before women either travelled to Neilly for a haircut or they cut each other's hair. In the little room there is also a small counter with some nice women's underwear, sewing materials, children's clothes, and a few pieces of fabric for sale. The woman who owns it is certainly a 'small entrepreneur'. She is good at haircuts and has found that adult women still get most of their clothes made by women who knew how to sew, and thus had put women's different needs together in her shop. She said that her earnings were on the rise. Next to the beauty parlour there was another novelty, namely that a man had built three cabins for rent. Nothing like this existed in Laurel before. Only the IDA had a guesthouse for their visiting staff in the Zone. Others had to stay in Neilly. There now was even talk about a possibility of getting the planes to fly directly from San José to Laurel, which would make the journey in only 45 minutes, whereas on the road it still took most of the day.<sup>300</sup>

In the afternoons (and on Sundays) people in Laurel, especially around the two cuadrantes, sit outside on the porch in their rocking chairs, as they used to, looking at people, commenting to people passing by. The houses around the two cuadrantes in Laurel were approximately 50 years old, and had been built as workers' compounds when the area was turned into plantations in the late 1930s and 1940s. The IDA took over all of the buildings as part of the makeshift with the CBCR/UFCo (then United Brands) in 1975, and is still the formal owner. Most of the houses have been completely remodelled over the years by their tenants.<sup>301</sup> They have got new colours (before they were all mint green), former open spaces under the houses have been closed in, and some have added on to the house in front, or behind, or approached the neighbour's house on the side, often to house children with off-

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<sup>300</sup> The banana plantations all used to have airstrips, for spraying planes. The two longer airfields in Coto 47 and Golfito were used for commercial flights.

<sup>301</sup> Originally the houses in the cuadrantes consisted of two-room units each with a common open kitchen area below. Now they are all one-household, but with a number of variations as to how the household is composed. The grandmother, daughter(s)- grandchildren- and some men coming and going is beginning to emerge in some of them.



spring, accommodating ‘nested households’. The inhabitants now were a mixture of local IDA functionaries, teachers, parceleros with land outside the village, retired bananeros, border patrols, and Guardia Rural personnel.<sup>302</sup>

The clusters of houses in Laurel offer a market for vendors of all kinds. There are still several elderly people living around Laurel whose only cash income is selling eggs and vegetables to the functionaries. Most of them have their own clients; usually the more established households. The new arrived BID-functionaries did not buy anything from them, and people thought they were arrogant as they went to Paso Canoas (the frontier) to do all their shopping. Later on we found out that the children of the BID project functionaries and other experts living in the area were not attending the local school, but sent by bus to a private (adventist) school in Canóas, between Laurel and the Inter American Highway,

### **Women in Transition in the Shadow of the Palms**

It also turned out that the SMFC Women’s Project in Coto Sur was in the process of being phased out in 1990, which was kept low-key, and explained as a result of changes in the newly elected central government who wanted to reorganise gender issues.<sup>303</sup> Three of the Women’s Groups that had been mobilised and assisted by the SMFC team were still struggling with creating and maintaining ‘income-generating activities’, two pig-raising projects and the mentioned Soda in Laurel. My initial research plan had been to follow up on the Women’s Project from where I had left it four years previously, a plan that quickly had to be re-elaborated and changed. I came equipped with all my questions, elaborated after having toiled with field notes, interviews and observations, but in Coto Sur, new questions popped up

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<sup>302</sup>As Costa Rica abandoned its army in 1948 security forces are increasingly important (and armed). In the early 1990s at least ten different police agencies existed under different ministries. The much feared OIJ (particularly known for chasing drug traffickers) is under the Ministry of Justice, whereas the Ministry of Government supervises the GAR, (Rural Assistance Guard) that were the civil police in Coto Sur. The immigration police guard the international border. See Lara et al. (1995).

<sup>303</sup> That was only part of the explanation, there were also internal disagreements in the IDA and between the financing bodies, some of which is discussed in more detail in Valestrand (forthcoming)

immediately. Among them were: What had happened to the women we knew and cared about and who had been important participants and partners in the SMFC's Women's Project? Had all their labour and toiling - at home - and outside - resulted in better lives for them and their dependants? Would Coto Sur as a Palm Zone be a better place to live for women? Would their dreams come true? How would the Palms - and the transformations they brought, affect peasant women, households, and gender relations, whether they were directly involved with the palms or not? Moreover, had gender, and gender planning, been part of this agro-industrial scheme? And there were many more questions as well.

In other words; what I had, sitting at home, planned as an intense follow-up study, had to be converted into what can perhaps be described as a an attempt of a contextual gender approach, presented in chapter 1; literally 'in the shadow of the Palms.'

Knowing very well that it was still early in the (palm) conversion process, but hoping at least that it would be possible to say something about the direction of the changes, Odilia and I set out to follow up the work that had been carried out in the SMFC team, particularly the same questionnaire that we had constructed and used in order to document the *toma de decisiones* (decision-making), and other issues in the households and domestic units in Coto Sur.

The bottom line from the SMFC mandate remained, and was re-elaborated into whether, and how, women would get better access to resources under the palm regime, and how that was enacted in the smallholder palm-producing households. Or, to put it differently, it was both a question about equity and wellbeing, as well as active agency under other structural frames, to repeat what Sherry Ortner says,

the articulations between the practices of social actors 'on the ground' and the 'big structures' and 'systems' that both constrain those practices and are yet ultimately susceptible to being transformed by them' (2006: 2)

The study of the domestic units in Coto Sur four years previously had demonstrated that there was a clear gendered division of labour in the households (chapter 4). Women were working longer hours and carried out just about all the reproductive work, while their participation in agricultural activities could be described as rather flexible. Some women worked full time in the fields, others not at all. It was time to go and see the women again.

### **The Farming Unit, and Palm Household**

*An oil palm grower is like a civil servant- a regular income and no work (CDC, in Baumann 2000)*

#### **On the Palm Farms**

The following up on, and revisiting the women we had interviewed and collaborated with in 1986 led us to farms that were in the middle of the transition from maize-growers to smallholder producers of palm oil fruit. After a while carrying out interviews with our women informants it became evident to us that we also would benefit from better knowledge of how the work in the palm groves was performed, none of us had a clue about oil palms, and we decided to carry out (participative) observation on three palm-growing farms that we had been well-acquainted with when they still were producing maize. This led us out to the palm groves, and we did observe and even participate in three harvesting days. In addition to our venturing to the groves we were also present on a fieldday (*Día del campo*) organised by the Palm Executive Unit, and we interviewed and observed several of the oil palm extensionists at work. After collecting basic information about the Palms, we continued interviewing the women according to plans, but now with a rudimentary insight into what smallholder palm growing was about.



Harvesting Palms, sharpening the Chuza

In the following I will give a short account of the harvest- and work process on a typical small palm farm in La Plancha district. The palm acreage on the parcels in this area varied between 6 and 10 hectares planted, often with varying ages of the palms as many had started out with some hectares only and had expanded their acreage later. The Palm Executive Unit organised the collection of palm fruit from the farms and had it transported to the processing plant in the neighbouring Coto Valley, at Finca 54,<sup>304</sup> and the different geographical sectors of the project area had been assigned one collection day per week.

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<sup>304</sup> Numar was then a subsidiary of Chiquita, later on the ownership has changed due to mergers etc. The former banana plantations in Coto Valley had been replaced gradually by oil palms organised as plantations. See Altenburg et al. (1990).

Driving about within the Palm Project perimeter this was obvious, if there were heaps of palm fruit at the entrance of the farms that it was their harvest day.

### **In the Palm Groves on Harvest Day**

The newly established palm farms in Coto Sur had all got their allotted weekly collection day which entailed that the day before (on some of the bigger farms even days before) is the day of the week when the palm-growing households have to mobilise all their available labour resources as it is the one most work-intensive day on the farm. The aim of the day is to harvest and get the palm fruit ready for collection and off-transportation the next morning. A cutting crew of two or more able-bodied men start about 6am in one end of the long rows of palm trees and the goal is to get to the other end of the grove before the end of the day, that is, about 6pm when it gets dark. In short, the ripe, mature clusters of palm fruits have to be spotted, cut down, picked up from the ground, loaded to the wagon and taken by mule and wagon to the storage platform at, or near, the entrance of the farm. In this cutting procedures 'loose' berries fall to the ground and are picked up by one or more persons following behind the cutting crew. The berries are put in sacks and brought to the platform. This was, simply speaking what the work process was all about. Here is an illustration from one of the farms we were present:

It is early morning, 7am and already steaming hot, and we are in the fields of doña Flora's<sup>305</sup> where a working team consisting of three men, her *compañero*, a son of hers, and the *compañero* of one of her daughters, are slowly moving down the row from palm to palm. The two younger men do the cutting, the heavy clusters of fruit

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<sup>305</sup> As we, Odilia and I knew the women well from earlier, we tended to talk and think of the women, and the farms as theirs, and I have noted that I used the women's names in all notes, and after some thinking around it decided to leave it with that, it was after all our perspective.

bump down on the ground and the older man loads them on the wagon and drives the mule. They all work with thick, heavy gloves, as the clusters and berries have many thorns. To cut down the clusters, each one weighing around 20 kilos, they use a *chuza* (Malayan knife) it looks like a combination of an axe and a broad semi-round knife with a sharp edge on a long handle. The palms they are cutting now were planted almost five years ago and the big clusters of fruit can still be reached from the ground with this tool. Later on they will have to use a ladder in order to get up. It is a very strenuous work with arms lifted all the time. There is a hollow sound, “bump, bump, bump”, as the clusters fall to the ground. Every now and then the *chuza* has to be sharpened, and there is a short break. The leaves that support the fruit are cut with a big machete and left on the ground. The mule is left to on its own as long as they keep loading the wagon, and it moves around eating grass, then has to draw the heavy wagon to the platform, to unload, then back again to the woods. Back and forth, back and forth, until they are finished. Up one row, down the next, up the next again. It looks like a very, very monotonous work process, indeed.

We are following behind, three women, doña Flora, Odilia and I, and three small grandchildren of doña Flora's. We are equipped with buckets and sacks. Our job is to pick up berries of the fruit that have gone astray, that is loose berries that fall off the clusters during the cutting. This job is called to *coyolear*.<sup>306</sup> The other women in this household, a daughter and the compañera of the son who is in the groves, are at the house, cooking. Discussing our experiences with them later they say it is much too boring to be in the fields, they don't like it at all, they both thought that it was more interesting to grow maize, although they admitted that they really had not worked much with that either, but sometimes they had, and at least there was some variation, and more people to talk to, they added. (Field notes, Coto Sur, June 1990)

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<sup>306</sup> *Coyol*- from aztec, *coyolli* in Central America and Mexico: ‘*Palmera de mediana altura, de cuyo tronco, provisto de espinas largas y fuertes..—and thus : fruto de este arbol* Diccionario de Lengua Española (1984)

People from the farm also have to be present the next morning when the oil-fruit bunches are to be loaded onto the trucks, a job they have to carry out themselves. At this farm the truck arrived around 7.30am and after loading the menfolks went back to sleep, very tired, and later in the day all of them leave the farm, they only come once a week to carry out the harvesting.



The Mule in the Palmgrove

### **Palm Farms in Transition**

The three farms that we observed more closely had by that time been completely planted with palms. Until the year before one of them had still 1,5 hectares grown with maize, but now also that one is completely covered with palms trees. On that farm two adult and full-bodied men were carrying out the cutting of the fruits and an old man organising the mule and internal transportation, and by working one full day, including the *coyolear*-ing, that farm was kept going. The rest of the week it is basically cleaning and maintenance of the groves that have to be carried out and that does not require full time work at all. On this particular farm it is the woman who takes care of all the administrative- and paperwork, as she can read and write

well. On the other two farms the man-farmer did not leave the farm after the harvest day, but his co-workers (sons, a brother) left right away.

What the palm-harvesters have to do in the groves is to decide upon which fruit should be cut down, and which ones left to mature further. In addition to that, they have to know how to cut the clusters of fruit correctly, how to handle them gently, and to put up the best internal transportation on the farm premises. This implies different skills and discipline than a smallholder maize farmer would need. The rest of the production chain is taken care of by the project - and later - the palm cooperative.

Observing work routines in the palm groves in Coto Sur indicated that thorough changes most likely had to be occurring in the organisation of daily tasks in the palm-growing households compared to what its personnel had dedicated their time and work force to before. And yet, the transition period was still far from completed. As demonstrated in the old *maizero* farm units, the agricultural work schedule followed more or less the semi-annual maize cycle, with the maximum amount of work carried out during the two harvest periods. Nonetheless, there had been sufficient work to carry out in- and outside the fields combined with maintenance work and other tasks throughout the year, but the low income-level had forced many to supply their activities with different “bisnis” projects, in which access to land was key (Chapter 4). But then - as now - many men did leave the farms to go and seek temporary work elsewhere, the difference seemed to be that before the men would stay away for longer periods of time (between the harvests), while on the palm farms some men continued to come and leave on a weekly basis, the others had to leave for good, or perhaps, in the future, making up a corps of a reserve army in the palm growing society?

There had been a clear division of labour between men and women on the small farmsteads in Coto Sur (chapter 4). Men were mostly full time workers in the fields (at least in the morning hours) and the women went in and out, carrying out a number of activities. However, many women could perfectly well also do a maize farmer’s job and many women



could be observed in the maize fields, or working with beans or other crops. It was more typical that the men on the farm never ever did do anything inside the house. Now, by contrast, we hardly saw any women in the palm groves at all, in fact most of the coyolearing, the picking of loose berries, was carried out by men, or children. It looked like the women had left the fields, for keeps, in Coto Sur.

Another crucial alteration in the palm-growing units was that the agricultural cycles had been switched from the twice-yearly maize harvest with unsteady outcomes, to a weekly year-around harvest cycle, within an organised system of weekly delivery of a uniform product. The effect of this change in the households was probably mainly economic; from making potential earnings twice a year, to a computerised pay-sheet once a month.

Both these detectable changes must have gendered effects. For the women and men in the palm producing units this probably, entailed re-negotiations of the implicit gender contracts, as so many of the parameters in fact were in transformation, without perhaps, everyone really were aware of it?

## **Palm Growing Households in Conversion**

### **Doña Fermina: Risk Minimizing**

Doña Fermina, one of our former informants (chapter 4), never worked in the palm groves. She had participated in the invasions in Coto Sur, in the initial homesteading and clearing of the farm, and she had kept on working with maize and beans over the years. But the palm harvesting was too heavy work for a woman, she said, and nor did she find the physical work very interesting either. To her, beans were a lot more demanding and interesting. She had not known anything about growing maize when starting to farm in Coto Sur, but had been interested and had learned by trying and failing. The palms were different; she was not quite comfortable with them and did not really like the thorns and the palm fruits at all. This farm

now only had a tiny field left with plantains. She said that don Emilio, her *compañero*, wanted to plant that with palms as well, but she wanted to keep the plantains, and they disagreed. She felt that it would be good not to only have palms, she wanted to have a small opening for something else, but then there was the problem of diseases, the *Sigatoka Negra* that could attack the plantains any time. However, she said she would have liked to have the opportunity to have homegrown maize for her hens, because it soon became expensive to buy fodder, she liked having hens around. When they used to be short of cash to buy meat, they could at least slaughter one of the hens.

The issues of only palms, or palms and something else, and risk, were current themes in Fermina's thinking and reflections around the changes they had experienced, and these were issues that came up on farm after farm. If it had been up to Fermina alone, they would probably have a more mixed production on this farm. She was so far happy with the changes and the material improvements brought them, but did not feel quite at ease being totally dependent on only palms. She said she had a lurking doubt based on the fact that there now was no way of return, the palms would be there for at least twenty-five years, they had been told. Certainly, she was content with the changes that have taken place, this unit was not doing very well as yet, their standard of living is not quite what she hoped for, but the worries, day and night, for whether or not she could buy food the next day or not, if the storms or the birds would take the harvest, were now gone. That, she said, was in the end of the day most important to her, to get food on the table and clothing, and her responsibility for that had made her agree to the palm-only option. It was about risk minimizing, but she did, again and again, voice doubts about the monoculture. She had apparently been thinking a lot about it.

A big change in the daily organisation of this household was that they now could afford to buy their supplies in quantities, in sacks, and save money. Before they had to buy in small, on a day-to-day basis, often on credit at the local *pulpero* never knowing if, or when

they were able to pay. Fermina was very much aware of that. Receiving their monthly pay-cheques from the Palm Executive unit, purchases could be organised to buy sacks of rice, beans, maize etc. She was the one controlling this, don Emilio hardly read or wrote, and he would easily spend too much, she said. Meat, which they hardly ate before, was now back on the menu, at least a few days of the month. The monthly income-stream in this household varied around 60-70.000 colones, but they had a huge debt with the bank that was deducted immediately, leaving nothing to save, and little to invest, she said. Getting this household and their enterprise to go around, was meticulously calculated, especially the use of workers to get the fruit ready for delivery on time, and it was she who did that thinking, she said, but don Emilio thought it was him, she added, giggling.

### **Doña Leonora: Fewer Worries**

Doña Leonora was one of the so far only handful of women farmers that had joined the palm programme, and she was very enthusiastic about it. “*No puedo hablar mal de la palma*” (I cannot speak badly about the palms) she said, “-look, it just goes by itself, and I can dedicate more time to my house”. This farm delivered approximately 16 tons of (palm) fruit each month on six hectares of palms that are about five years old by now. Another hectare with palms has been added and can be harvested in a year and a half, that will be good, she thinks. Only recently had she got her title to her land settled, a delay that had caused her troubles in the bank when she wanted to buy a beast to draw the carriage, not to talk about her wish to purchase another parcel adjoining hers for her children to have. But it had been so difficult to get a loan in the bank, -“*el banco no quiere pagar*” (the bank doesn’t want to pay), she said. Then she had dressed up and gone to see don Agosto, whom she knew from since long back and who is working in a bank in Neilly. But in order to buy a *finquita* (small farm) now, it is a question of mustering at least 500.000 colones for a small one of perhaps 6,5 hectares, “- *sin*

*pozo, sin pasto, sin nada*” (without well, without pasture, without anything). Well, nothing had happened, it was more an idea she had for securing her children, but it was too difficult to carry out. And now, the paper mill! Until February this year, she had such a fuss because her *escritura* (title to the land) was not cleared yet and that was the reason why the bank was so difficult. The former director of the bank in Laurel (he was characterized to not have been too bad), but the new one; *anteojado* (with glasses) had turned her down, she was furious, what did that man know? But then she had gone to talk to don Carlos and don Felipe that she knew in Laurel (old IDA acquaintances), and they had helped her get through the mess. It had definitely helped on her situation that she already had palms planted. “I have 17-18 years of fighting, - finally don Carlos organised the whole thing, but there had to be a lawyer and a lot of other stuff and the papers were delivered last year, in September 1989”. She had received her land title finally in February 1990.<sup>307</sup> “That was certainly a happy day! “ In order to convert her farm to palms she had needed to have big trucks coming in and then she had got into troubles with a neighbour over whose property the road was crossing.

It started, I think, when I was to get a truck with cement to construct the platform for the palm fruit. Then this neighbour meddled and said that it was a private road passing over private property and no big trucks should pass. I also wanted to get the bridge repaired and strengthened for the big loads that were to cross it as they were both in bad shape. So, I went to the IDA<sup>308</sup> in Laurel, and they said we will fix it, if you can get people together to tear down the old one we will come with tracks. But this neighbour protested, complaining to the IDA. So there had to be hearing since it was a question of

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<sup>307</sup> As will be recalled the land law say that one has to have lived and farmed the land for 10 years to obtain the title and legal rights. This was now in the process of being changed.

<sup>308</sup> She here means the Palm project Executive Unit, but to many of the peasants the IDA and the BID- project was appearing as the same thing, and they could mean either one or both. They often mixed up the IDA and the BID and the cooperative.

private property. Even the Rural Guard arrived, I almost ended in jail! But the engineer in the IDA, who understands these things about bridges, arrived, and so did don Manolo and many other people. Well, finally there was a *juicio* (*una demanda*), and I was a bit nervous not knowing what a *juicio* implied. They told me to find four witnesses, but my neighbour arrived alone, I think that was bad planning. Well, I think that I had more *razón*, because I am carrying out productive activity. That road has been here since I arrived 13 years ago, so why not close it before then? And of course, I do get heavy, big trucks in here every week to collect my fruit. Besides, I am part of the big project of the IDA.

Leonora had been farming actively ever since she first arrived to Coto Sur. But not any more, now she dedicated most of her time to be in and near the house. “Look, now I have time to make things nice and comfortable for my lads, they are in the field”. She had two sons who could be called upon for the harvesting. In addition she had a day-worker who got 300 pesos (colones) a day when working and he was allowed to live in an abandoned hut at their farm. He worked by making *fajinas* (rows) that is to clean between the long rows of palms. By providing him with a house she was sure to have access to his labour, and he was a relative after all, the son of a cousin. Her own *compañero* came for the cutting each week and he also took care of another farm in La Cuesta, for someone who lived in San José (absentee landowners).

The busy day in this household is every Wednesday when they organise their cutting, to have the fruit ready for pick up on Thursdays. For the time being this farm was paid approximately 3800 colones pr ton of fruit, but doña Leonora thought it was rising because she now had learned that there were four qualities of fruit and she figured they were improving. She gets the pay-sheets every month, but payment is always delayed, the office is not updated. It did happen now and then, but not very often, that she took a turn with the

palms, picking up the loose fruit (*coyolear*) putting the fruit berries in sacks, but it was not necessary, and she said she did not like it very much. The guys did well without her, it is such a heavy job, the cutting with the big *chuza*, nothing for women or older people, she said.

On this farm there are usually four harvests pr month, they might receive payment for three of them, then there is perhaps payment for another later on. This unit had received approximately 56.000 colones for around 3 tons every 8 days, and up to 14 tons each month, it adds up to. One therefore also has a chance to cover old debt, to help oneself a bit, Leonora argued. One of her problems, or better, a dilemma, was that she no longer had any maize, and has to buy it, either from others who still grow it, or in the pulpería. She had not been thinking that she would miss it, but she admitted that she did, as she missed not having beans as well. “There are fewer worries now”, she commented on questions about the changes incurred by the palms. Less to worry about, before she always kept thinking, day and night, do I have that and that, can I pay for my food and my bills? Constant worries.

She works alone in the house, the two daughters living home are working as domestics in houses in Laurel, working from 6am until 7 pm. One earns 4000 colones a month and the other 5000 colones and they get food included. “ But, you know in the *empacadora* (packing plant in the banana cooperative), which is the only other job for women around here, they don’t get any food and they are not even working every day. The thing is, you know, that my daughters like so much to *vestirse bien* (to dress nicely), they spend all their money on dances and clothes! And every week they have to have a new piece of clothing, so they better work for it themselves, but they live here at home, I have to say I don’t like their being away at night. *Les gustan vestirse, no les gustan el monte, tienen alérgica contra el monte*” (They like to dress nicely, they don’t like the fields, they have allergy against the land).

“*Me siento mejor* -I think I have a better life now, I only work in the house, but I talk a lot to other people how nice it is with palms. Before, you know, nobody wanted to sow the

plants, but now, yes. I still pay the IDA for my plants, I don't get credit, but I do not have *la culpa* (It's not my fault). IDA helped me to sow the palms." Leonora is doing the administrative work in this household, manages the money, goes to the bank, pays the peón, she has full control, because she says: "*Uno tiene que saber manejar bien*" (One has to know how to manage well). She has only one year of school. As a woman landowner with access to family labour she was in a very fortunate position.

## **Women, Men, Gender and Agricultural Work: Masculinisation of Space**

### **Daily Work on the Farms in Transformation**

As we retraced our steps, literally, visiting household after household in Coto Sur that were undergoing a transformation from small peasant adaptations to becoming palm-growers within an industrialised system, there were some changes that immediately sprang to the surface, and others that so far only can be alluded to, and be posed as questions about possible future outcomes. The most obvious, already mentioned, was the observation that no women were seen in the fields anymore, they seemed to have left the (maize) fields, now turned to palm groves, for good, entailing that the palm groves had become totally *masculinised spaces*, and harvesting the oil palm fruit had become a thoroughly masculinised work. The cutting of the clusters of fruit does, as stated repeatedly, require much physical strength, and that was the major explanation both women and men gave for the women's disappearance from the fields.

In 1986 many of the women who had not considered themselves as farmers had presented themselves as housewives but had been actively taking part in agricultural activities. That could be in the harvests, in preparing land, sowing, in cleaning and packing produce etc, and they were contributing substantially to the productive results, in spite of not explicitly communicating this outside and they tended to disguise their perpetual hard work as

the continually repeated help (*ayuda*). Other women had considerable less influence, but had gained some internal bargaining power, due both to their contributions to agricultural work, including piece ratel payment, recognition of their reproductive work, and often by being in a position to mobilise kinship relations, particularly sons, often from former unions and as mothers they had much influence in such matters. Some were also suffering from lack of both recognition and insights in the processes around them. As discussed more thoroughly in chapters 4 and 5, a well-founded assumption was that there would be a connexion between the women's contribution and participation in the productive activities and her position to bargain in the farming households.

The empirical material collected in 1986 did draw a complex picture that had to be interpreted also with reference to the formation process of the households, as so many of them had been re-established with personnel with different rights and voices to resources brought into the same domestic unit. A key point in most of these negotiations seemed to have been about securing as much as possible of the different income streams channelled back into the often minimal and thus insufficient 'central fund' (Wilk 1989) to cover the members' basic needs in terms of nutrition and clothing etc. Many women did mention lack of insight, and thus potential leakage of income streams, so decisive in the economically precarious situations many lived within. Whether women's participation in agriculture did have any crucial role to play in these negotiations or not, was hard to say during the 'maize-regime', as described in their accounts. As it were, the working and household relationships were often so complex and often resolved by piece-rate work and short-time accommodations, and it had led to many wakeful nights for the women. A pertinent question that should be raised, if not possible to answer yet, was what kinds of effects the reorganized everyday work routines of the women in the palm households could have?

In 1990, in what may be categorised as transitory palm-growing households, or domestic units, the women's occasionally *coyolear'ing*, the picking of loose fruits, was the



only task we observed that a few women were carrying out directly in the groves. This was no must, but was sidelined and subordinated to the cutting and transportation of the fruit and sacks were not registered separately as far as we were informed, although some said the children would often receive small remunerations for doing the job. The internal transportation was also an all male activity; thus when we once encountered a woman driving the mule, loaded with palm fruit, it was a noticeable event.<sup>309</sup> There could be many reasons for women leaving the fields when the palm-groves started to materialise in Coto Sur, the weight of clusters of palm fruit is mentioned, they are heavy (about 40kg) and have thorns, implying that all the steps but the first one (decision of which fruits are ripe) require physical strength normally entailing able-bodied young males. All the women we talked to said that palm harvesting was too heavy work for women, and that it was the main reason for their not working in the fields anymore. Thus it could be interpreted that it was either considered as ‘a male job’, or could the (simple) technology that was used (no machines for instance) also be an explanation for women’s removal from the agricultural work?

Women tended to look upon palm fruit berries (*coyol*) as something they could relate to, but not the big bunches. The growing palms, becoming taller and taller, and the big, heavy clusters of mature fruit, apparently did appear to many of the women as something that was not quite theirs; and in the women’s narrations about their disappearing beans and maize, there were some indirect reflections on this relationship. While an active landowner as doña Leonora said that she loved her palms, it did not entail that she was dealing with, handling the fruits herself at all. Without claiming to be accurate, my impression was that most of the women in the palm growing households had become distanced from both *el monte* and its produce, not only from the work-processes in the groves. It was not theirs’ anymore, as the maize fields for quite many of them had been an embodied experience, the weeding between

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<sup>309</sup> This incident could also inspire to further thinking around the fact that this was a mule, and not a tractor, and that tractors – and machines are even more masculine coded than animals, which I have not pursued in this case. etc. See Little (2002). See also Richardson (1995) ‘The history of Oil Palm Production in the UFCo’.

the plants, and the handling of the maize cobs, and eventually transforming them with their own hands to fodder and meals for their dependents, was history and memories. The palms seemed to have something impersonal about them. Or even something 'scientific'/'industrial' that to most women was completely out of their experiences and comprehensions.

Men who had formerly been banana workers demonstrated a more functional approach and recognition of the palms and the fruit, and the industrialised work processes involved, it was obvious from only looking at them at work. They did not make any fuss about that at all. Women's thoughts were not always articulated, but the above are my interpretations of some of the conversations that we had about their new situation as women on palm producing parcels. The more immediate changes in their daily lives, particularly in terms of improved and more regular incomes, were at this early stage of the transformation processes apparently so overwhelming that other issues may seem as trifles at the moment.

Another reason that fewer people could be observed in the fields in Coto Sur in 1990 was that there was considerably less need for labour on a more permanent basis harvesting palms. The labour requirements on each farm were concentrated only to the harvest day as described above, and as most of the farms in the project area were only around 10 hectares, some even smaller; it normally took only a day to collect the produce. If the point was to create jobs, as the initial plans for the development of the settlement had held expectations of, the result did not seem to be quite what was calculated yet. Moreover, the fact that many in this population, men and women alike, were weary, many suffered from ill health and were rather worn down from years of struggling in hostile climatic conditions, was an important part of the overall picture. The palms were definitely experienced as a relief by some as they entailed not having to work hard days and nights only to survive.

The labour intensity of a crop, and the frequency of labour input needed, has an enormous effect on how it is produced, and the fact that oil palms have to be cut every two weeks, and this rhythm is difficult for people who have gone walk-about, to maintain

according to technical specialists (CDC 1989). Palm growing is not really a technology that has been difficult to acquire, what is needed, apart from physical strength, is to be able to decide on, and eventually to improve the quality of the fruit, which is a skill that certainly is not gender specific. Collecting of the loose fruit that sometimes was done by women was not weighed separately, as mentioned, and this did not make women's potential contribution visible to any extent.<sup>310</sup>

The monoculture that now took hold on the farms gave, as the women lamented, less space for women to plant and grow other crops as many had used to do, such as maize, cocoa trees, pineapples, beans and plantains. It was only the first few years that it was possible to grow maize between the row of palms, after that the canopy of the palm leaves made it too dark on the ground, and there were also strict instructions endowed upon the *palmeros* in the Palm programme to keep the ground clean all the time, and remove excess leaves etc, in order to keep the venous snakes away as well. This specialisation that the palms brought about, and the new skills required, also functioned to deskill people, their deep seated and long time acquired knowledge about survival, and about how to work the land lost its importance in Coto Sur. On the farms in Coto Sur they had some long established ways of carrying out their tasks, and in the agricultural production for instance, the system of hiring peones (day-workers), how it was practiced and their sharecropping arrangements, were well-established practices, many of them brought to Coto Sur from practices known from Guanacaste and other places, and which had been flexible enough to include otherwise marginalised people, even single women.

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<sup>310</sup> In palm projects in Papua Guinea they had found that this part could account to 14% of the harvest, which has been a concern of the industry, the fruit wastage. In the schemes in Hoskins, Popondetta, and Biialla a separate payment card for women has led to large increases in loose fruit collection, in blocks, called Mama Lus. Koczberski et al. (2001)

## **Gendered Effects of the Palm Regime**

One could perhaps say that by this time, old, and some new ways of doing things were in the process of being merged into a 'blended system' in which gender probably was being 'done' (Fenstermaker and West 2002) in different ways. In theory at least it did not have to be that way, it did not have to end up like it seemingly was in the process of cementing and reinforcing male and female roles, expectations, and what was to be considered as 'natural' for men and women to do, and to be. If the women had wanted, and the social positions were open for them and culturally recognised; women could have participated much more actively in the palm groves than one could be observed that they did, they could perfectly well for instance been deciding which fruit should to be cut (which requires knowledge), driving the mule etc. The alterations in the internal work organisations on the palm growing farms in Coto Sur were in other words much about introducing new technology, and thus recreate relationships between bodies, minds, tools and their organisation. One may also say that different 'assemblages' or coalitions were created, between land, crops, technology, and labour (assemblages) (Latour 1986). They were put together in new ways, and rendered different outcomes. It was not only the farmland (access to, control over) but the '*land+ the palms*', that now have to be considered, as the palm trees were expected to be on the land for at least a generation, and to be continually renewed, according to the plan.

The palm farms in Coto Sur could in many ways be compared to built-up areas, their value, worth and potentials had become more and something else than the 'ground' alone, the original interpretation of the situation and the basis for the agricultural reform and thus redistribution of land to the landless. When migrants first had come to Coto Sur it was access to land that was the issue and in principle the same for all, and did to varying degrees inflict upon redistributive issues in the households/domestic units.

The emerging situation in Coto Sur, however, with land planted with palms that one could not remove overnight but would be stuck with for perhaps generations, would, in turn, have repercussions in the farming households/domestic units and the different members' relationship to each other and their accesses to resources and fall-back (Agarwal 1994, 1997). One would expect that the (land+palms) controlled by a farm(er) would provide fewer opportunities for negotiations and bargaining, for instance about what to grow, and where, when, to decide upon an extra *milpa* or not, etc. The combination of (land+trees) was not negotiable as such; and represented a change in what would be interpreted as resources; and consequently, could raise new questions about access, gender and gender relations in the households/domestic units in Coto Sur. Such a shift can be described as:

a shift of gendered tenure analysis from land to trees and challenged the prevailing constructs of gender relations. (Roucheleau and Edwards 1997: 1352).

Roucheleau and Edwards were not analysing oilpalms, but other trees, but their argument could be transferred to the palm production, as they say;

As the venue of the gendered tenure discussion moved to trees [forests, crops and animals] the constructs had to be reformulated to accommodate complementarity of gendered domains of resource access, use, control and formal ownership (one means of control) (op.cit: 1352).

What this entails, and which needs to be considered, when gendered power relationships, control, authority and negotiations in the farming households, have changed and have to be addressed as a different matter. The stakes had become higher and the rules of the game had been altered, the question one may pose is to what extent that had been recognised?

On the palm farms in transition in Coto Sur, it was the bodies, the physical strong bodies of men, that were the small farms' comparative advantages, and thus in practice excluding women, as well as the not so able-bodied men and others that could carry out the transportation part on the farms. The way the Palm project was organised on individually

owned land one should perhaps expect more variations in terms of gendered division of labour than on collectively run oil palm plantations, but that did not seem to be the case. It was rather that the organisation of the Palm programme in Coto Sur contributed to a close to total re-masculinisation of agricultural work in Coto Sur. But, again, it did not have to be that way. But the pattern and gender division of labour was in the process of being set and was en route of becoming 'natural'. This tendency, that women often are driven out, or opt to leave when technical solutions are introduced has long ago suggested that division of labour is not sufficient to explain how gender is 'done' in rural societies, obviously, this is more complex, encompassing symbols, representations, negotiations and so on. A situation that invites to look closer at masculinities, femininities and other aspects of identity constructions, and how they are being represented, which will be returned to later.

I must also be framed in a complex web of transformation of knowledge by the palm specialists, the extensionists operating in the field, in courses, field-days and demonstrations, and the organisation of, and ideology of, the Palm project a such- and how the encounters with the peasants and their former experiences from small peasant adaptations, as well as the *bananero* past, was at this moment at a very crucial stage. All of this, combined, and the production of meaning concerned with what it should entail to be a proper *palmero* in Coto Sur, including which gendered discourses about men and women, masculinities and femininities that were constructed, contested and redefined, were probably quite decisive as to what the outcome came to be (which I when writing these lines really do not know).



Children Coyolearing

One could, for instance, ask whether alternative ways of using the raw materials had been considered that would create jobs and separate income for women as well? There are examples in other parts of the worlds, for instance West Africa, where oil palms also have been used alternatively and the palm fruit was basis for small-scale production, in which women have produced foodstuffs and soaps from oil palms. This entails that it is not the palm in itself that inevitably leads to such ‘natural’ ways of seeing and doing things, it is also how the whole palm regime and ways of thinking that will produce inclusions and exclusions, through which gender, femininities and masculinities are being produced and gendered effects in income and statuses are the results.

### **Housewifeization?**

One of the main intentions behind the second field period in 1990 was to follow up and make an effort to detect and compare the situation in the daily lives for women in households in

Coto Sur.<sup>311</sup> This is concerned with what was termed as the daily household chores and schedules in 1986, and then followed up in May and June 1990, by filling in the same questions.

The very first observation from a comparison of these two sets of data is that the women's daily activities on these in-conversion-farms had become more concentrated both in space and time. On the whole, the women interviewed again in 1990 reported on having fewer different activities to attend to during the day, and what they did carry out was less spread out in space, taking place within what can be called the house perimeter, with the *pilas* (was basin) and the well included. Looking closer at how women in these households allocated their time and energy in daily activities in 1990, and using the same categories as in 1986, I have tried to make a comparison of the two sets of information.<sup>312</sup> I am, now, as then, firmly arguing that this is only meant to indicate some of movements and directions that are in process in the palm-growing households (as also discussed in chapter 4).

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<sup>311</sup> Altogether the observations in 1986 consisted of approximately 30 households, of which around 20 were studied in more detail. In 1990 we studied around 10-12 palm-growing households in more detail, although we got information from many more in more sporadic encounters off the farms, or by inquiries with neighbours and kin. (In addition to this came the household that were not part of the palm project). Some of the people we searched up had moved, some had sold out as prices had been rising.

<sup>312</sup> As mentioned already, when comparing them it has to be done with care, what we did try to do was to use chronology, like we did before, to have the women in as much detail as possible to report what they did from morning till night, week and year.



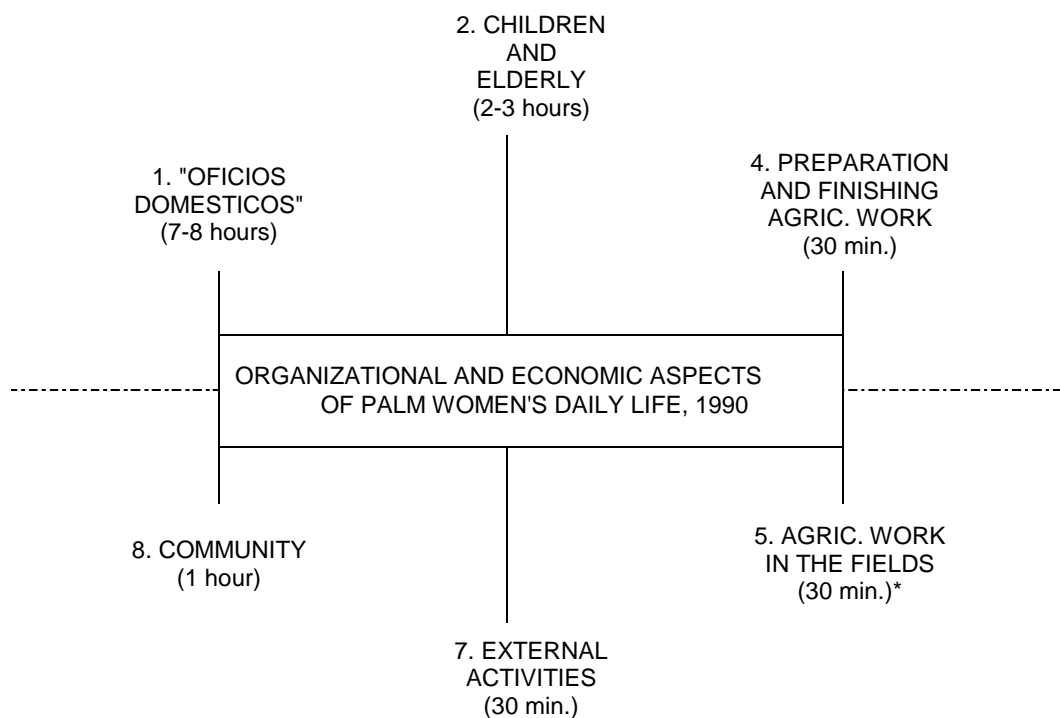


Figure 7.1 Palm women's daily activities and time use, Coto Sur 1990. From Valestrand (1991)

The measurable changes are first and foremost that the box containing the petty commodity activity (in chapter 4 called the Chicken- and Tortilla-economy) is all gone. None of the women did any of this any more, and that was also the case with the box containing 'external wage work'. Other registered activities are still carried out, but some have undergone changes, both in time-use and content, while others seem to remain unaltered by the structural changes taking place on these farms.

Starting with the boxes above the dotted line, the activities carried out in or near the house: The most obvious change is the rubric labelled *oficios domesticos* (household chores). Compared to 1986 this is the domain in which women now say they dedicate even more of their time and energy, it was increased by between two and three hours daily. The harvest days once a week on the palm farms in different stages of production demanded more intense service provisions (such as meals), but there were reported to be fewer people involved than what used to be the case for many of the women, that is they said they now tended to cook for

fewer people. This entails that the two to four hours these women earlier spent working to earn some cash for own and children's maintenance, now in the main seemed to be 'converted' to increasing the welfare of other household members.

Taking a look below the dotted line in the figure, most of the changes there have already been commented upon concerning women's disappearance from the palm groves. The 30 minutes put up in the figure is only to indicate the ones that do some *coyolear'ing* (picking loose berries), a job that usually was left to the men, or to children who normally would receive some pocket money for doing it. The women who did carry out some of this reported that they received nothing (in contrast to some of the former arrangements where they sometimes did on piece-meal rates), but there might very well be other ways of arranging this that we did not capture in our survey. The two other boxes in the figure labelled 'community' and 'external activities', had so far, not changed at all, not in content nor in time-use. Women who did attend the evangelical congregations were, except for two who had left their church (of reasons that seemed to have to do with differences of opinion), still doing that, spending much time in their congregations, there were no detectable changes here as yet.

Summing this up, one may say that the indications were that all the time and energy that had been recovered for the women, by not having to participate in activities rendering income to the survival of (and by that, to sustain at least part of the often complex household arrangements, whether in agriculture or in petty-commodity- production), rendered a twofold result: a) time was converted to heightening the quality of their housework, and b) that was a situation women said they were happy with. There is no doubt that many of these women actively were contributing to these changes, and that seeing it individually, had led to a more comfortable life for most of them. With the initial, almost precarious material situation many had lived in before, only small material improvements would make a great difference, and is no little achievement in itself. It is a goal sought after in most development projects and policies (as it usually can be measured in improved indicators of income, health, education

etc). The fact that the transformation to palm growing, for most of the farms and households involved in Coto Sur, had led to significantly higher and more stable income levels within a few years was evident. So far, the development logics can be followed in the allocation of the women's time and energy in the households. On the one hand, this did entail more comfortable lives for most of the women, but on the other, also a close to total dependence on income incurred from the men's work in the groves. That had to be legitimated.

### **From Dignity to Home-making Discourses**

A way of phrasing these changes could be that these women to a greater extent have become housewives,<sup>313</sup> or rather farmwives, or even rural housewives. Some of them had, in their own view, now got in a position that they thought would enable them to take the role of wife seriously. This was, it seemed to me, more about how they thought things ought to be, or they would like them to be. A number of women now were actively attempting to create themselves as housewives in some meaning of the term, however, well aware of the material and structural limitations they lived within, and they often would joke with this too. Part of such active casting of themselves with an identity as housewives, or what apparently was considered to be more proper women, was by distancing themselves from agricultural work in the palm groves. This may be linked to the line of analysis mentioned in chapter 6 concerned about accessible social identities for women in the Coto Sur settlement, and if those would appear as culturally recognisable to them and that who the individual 'is', can vary over time and between different arenas depending on which discursive practices and within which positions for these discursive practices the individual is offered access (Søndergaard1996).

Without going into such an analysis in detail, it is worth considering this argumentation; that locating oneself differently did become an option, and that this perhaps

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<sup>313</sup> For a definition and discussion of housewives, see Oakley (1974). I did discuss the situation in Coto Sur in the early 1990s in Valestrand (1991). See also Townsend (1993). Mies (1986) couples this also to colonisation.

was how some of these women tried to talk about it? Nonetheless, the above observations from the palm households in Coto Sur must be seen only as tendencies, there were also women in this empirical material that still did strongly identify with agricultural processes and attempted to mould a double identity. But the impression was that the majority of women turned away from agriculture. Did no one encourage them to stay put and demand their fair share, on their own premises? Probably not.

Returning to the comparisons of the tasks the women did carry out on a daily basis (in the figure) an other observation was that the contents of their daily tasks had not changed that much yet, the changes the women reported could be about cooking new foods, on buying more ingredients, on thinking about getting hold of washing machines, eventually, etc. Many still lived in their old houses, lacked potable water and electricity, housework was still cumbersome, but they seemed to have raised their aspirations as to what their houses and homes were to be about. They had experienced that they can clean more inside the house, can spend time decorating, make curtains, crochet, and attend to their children. As they did not grow maize of their own anymore, they did not have to spend time grinding it; instead they could buy maize flour and make more interesting menus, as some of them said, following the many cooking-programs on TV. All of this, they said, was done for "the best of their family".

The tasks of taking care of children and elderly had not changed much, those were chores that women expressed; had to be carried out by them, now as before. Concerning the third domain in the figure from 1986; 'preparation and finishing of agricultural production' (Chapter 4), this had, as illustrated in the figure, changed considerably. What now could be put under that label was a completely different set of services for proper palm production, such as book-keeping, writing letters, receiving instructions from the cooperative, etc. New activities related more to the administrative domain that had to be carried out by a small palm-enterprise. To read the pay-sheets they received from the Palm Executive Unit demanded skills in reading and calculating, which at this moment was generally at a low level among the

majority of the former parceleros. Some women had more years schooling than many of the men, but it was the children who were better equipped with reading and writing capacities, and who would be called upon to translate the ever increasing amount of written information pouring into the palm producing units.

The palm households had, as mentioned, become closer tied up to and become part of the agro-industrial system than when they were smallholders. This did have repercussions on the households, a process that was only at its very beginning in the early 1990s. It will be interesting to see in the future if women will take more charge, as paper-work undeniably will increase, or if the women will disappear completely out of what can be labelled agriculturally related activities. Most likely, one will see both things happening, depending on the farmwomen's educational level. This may result in a polarisation in the now rather homogeneous peasant/palm-growing population in Coto Sur.

Summing this; it could be detected that changes in agricultural activities, had led to a situation in the palm growing households in which the women could concentrate on what they said was most important to them, and which in various disguises and versions must be translated to home-making. This was expressed differently, often in care-terms, or as service-to-others-in-the-house terms. "To do more for mine", was perhaps the most concentrated of these different justifications, and it had to be interpreted as these women felt that they would be a better position to be women the way they had been socialised, and that they felt was culturally acceptable.

Hence, now one could hear that women were drawing on what can be termed as security (risk avoidance) discourses,<sup>314</sup> entailing that as they now could get more stable incomes, and opening for home-making discourses, that could not be detected so explicitly, four years earlier. When discussing the changing situation in their household (the women were usually asked by us to reflect about the situation before and now, which of course

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<sup>314</sup> See for example Lupton ed (1999) for a discussion about risks in sociocultural theory

perhaps at this stage may have invited them to paint the 'before' situation darker than it necessarily was) it was this welfare aspect that the women tended to emphasise; well-being for their own household (children, kin etc), created by them, the women. Pushing the matter, they would formulate this so that it appeared as their active creation of what they described as for instance higher level of nutrition, better clothing, etc. One may say, that they had, at this point, been turning their attention inwards, not outwards, which is interesting, thinking about the well-being and livelihoods debates discussed previously (chapter 4 particularly). The dignity discourse, epitomised as *Somos humildes, pero decentes* that had been so prominent earlier in the smallholder society (chapter 6), seemed in fact to begin to be replaced by a 'home-making' producing welfare for others discourse, and eventually, characterising femininity in ways more in line with more hegemonic discourses on motherhood and homemaking, for many only a distant dream before. But also perhaps for the first time, to be able to taste a little the unending potentials of consumption was a sweet pill that had to be enjoyed.

There and then, this tendency appeared as a dilemma to Odilia and me and we discussed it much between us, and then brought it up as an issue in the later interviews and conversations we had with women in the settlement. That gave some interesting reflections, which the women said was difficult, they did not quite think that they really wanted to give this more thought. In the empirical material from 1986 the overwhelming impression was that women submitted just about all their actions in order to meet others' immediate needs, rather than all they had been dreaming about when first coming to the settlement. As times passed there seemed to be more and more that were placed under their needs-talk. In contrast, women now could, slowly, see that the material wellbeing had already improved, not substantially, but at least some. This new economic situation raised a long row of questions. Among them; did the women involved not perceive any costs for them? How could these imposed changes inflict upon gender relationships? Did the 'conjugal contract' have to be re-negotiated? What

did the women have control over in this new situation? Could this be a veiled re-establishing and bolstering of more male authority in the households? And what about the women's fallback situation?

At first sight there seems to have taken place a rather distinctive 'housewifisation' process on the palm growing farms in Coto Sur, with a collateral masculinisation in the fields, if seen at the farm level. However, in whatever manner one can disclose the findings on these farms and households, this does not, in any way, automatically lead to a conclusion that women necessarily had ended up in a more inferior position within the households than they had before. Most likely the changes had produced a belated in-between era compared to other parts of society that perhaps would not last so very long. Only time will show, however.

### **The Conjugal Contract Renegotiated and the Breadwinner Model Returned?**

*The dominance of money wages changed the situation in the households (Connell 2002)*

One may ask if the women - and men - living in conjugal partnerships on palm producing farms in Coto Sur had reached that culturally defined goal of men as maintaining and women being maintained (by men)? On one level one may say that the breadwinner model had finally been reinstalled in Coto Sur. Comparing the 1986 and 1990 household data indicated that the conjugal relationship must have increased in importance as a result of the fact that most of these women had become more economically dependent on men. The palm farm households had, in terms of income an improving situation, livelihood or wellbeing, thus the redistribution question re-emerged.

It was the women in these households that had felt the pressure for the daily survival of their dependents, to provide meals, clothes and school materials. In 1986 women had worked hard, but at least had control of their small income-streams, those were now gone,

which was a relief to the women because it wore them out, but raised new questions of gaining access to the household's income streams. The women now did register that money actually was coming in monthly, and that it was possible to purchase foods, ingredients, but that they had to construct different strategies for gaining access to these new possibilities, and also find creative ways of redistributing it to their dependants, not the least because many of them had responsibility for their own children (with former partners), and whom their present partner not necessarily would maintain (chapter 5). This had been a heavy burden on them, now they said that perhaps it would be easier to negotiate for their own children than before, but it was not a question that was settled, the women said that they still had to play things by ear.

There was more access to cash in the palmgrowing households, but in practice little or no substantial surpluses to talk about on the average palm farms, only huge debts hanging over them. As they were strictly under surveillance by the Palm programme, the income stream became more difficult to leak out of the household. What some of the women were apprehensive about now, as before, was that money should seep out to other women that the men had relations with, or that they would set up other households. That the Palm project participants were living under an extremely regulated regime, that they fact could be described as self-owning wage workers, was not made a point of by any of the ones we interviewed, at least not directly. I think they simply could not allow themselves to even think in that direction. But this new situation, with all its strict rules and regulations also provided fewer opportunities for men striking up 'bisnis' with other men, which they had said was something that they had enjoyed. There was no space for such flexibilities anymore. There were fewer options to make unofficial projects under the palm-regime, whereas before, there had been less income but more openings and flexibilities for both women and men. It will be interesting to see, in the future, how this situation would inflict on gender relations in the households.



The (re)turn to a breadwinner model also entailed that women's contributions to production had to be seen as mainly reproduction services, by their intensified social and daily reproduction. Although one may foresee that sometimes in the future, increased investments in private consumption, house, and well dressed family members, could enhance the household's local standing and esteem. One of the visible consequences in the palmgrowing households, however, was that consumption now was in the (still early) process of becoming an activity that was within reach. There were electric gadgets in just about all the palm households. To put it on the edge; perhaps one could say that women could becoming citizens through consumption before 'participation'?

The impression at this early, transformative stage, however, when discussing with the women and comparing with the 1986 situation, was that the improved quality of their reproductive (daily) work was invisible, taken for granted, and remained inumerated, which in practice made women more economically dependent upon their men. How power relations in the households had changed - one direction or the other - is therefore hard to say, but would very much depend on whether the women and other household members would have insights and access to what the palm unit actually earned. From thereon, their ability to bargain and secure a fair redistribution would be decisive for the assessment of whether or not it would be interpreted as fair. They were, in practice, in this early stage, in a process of re-negotiating the conjugal contract (Roldán 1988), and hopefully they play their cards well.

## **Encounters, Modernisations, and Gender**

In the Palm project implementation process period in Coto Sur there were numerous encounters between old and new ways of doing things, of thinking, of new and old actors, institutions and values. It was indeed, a compressed moment in history that was difficult to interpret when one was in the middle of it. Trying to think gender into this partly chaotic and transformative situation can be nothing but preliminary and presumptuous, I will have to draw on a few practical examples to make an attempt to illustrate how such encounters were taking places. It was first and foremost the arrival of the palms, that initiated and provided new types of encounters, not necessarily directly organised by the Palm project, but many of the surrounding institutions and other agents had to relate to the palms.

In the Palm project implementation process in Coto Sur a number of new meeting points, or arenas, for such encounters to occur, had been created, for project workers and their beneficiaries, between the farmers/parceleros/ex-bananeros/entrepreneurs- and the palm experts for example. Norman Long, et al.'s (1989, 1992) suggestion that an analytical entrance to such situations could be seeing (aid) relationships as 'social interfaces,' and I think that could be applied in Coto Sur as well. Long has been particularly concerned with what he sees as external interventions in Third World agricultural societies, based on an idea of different life-world concepts and he, and others, have come up with the concept of 'interface encounters' to describe and analyse meetings between such different life-worlds, often popularly illustrated as top-down vs bottom-up views on development aims and goals, and how to attain them (Long 1989, 1992; Arce and Long eds 2000; deVries 1992).

We did not have the opportunity to carry out in-depth studies of such interfaces between women and the day-to-day implementation of the Palm programme, nor was that the main purpose, nonetheless, one could not avoid encountering such critical points, what we most observed were the palm extensionists' and experts' visits to their designated palm farms.

If the palmgrower- cum landowner was a man, women in the households never met these men extensionists, or discussed with them at all. However, these newcomers, the palm specialist, were most visible as they were seen cruising around in the Palm project's fleet of new grey jeeps, in contrast to the old and worn down vehicles of the IDA. But few of the women did in practice meet with any of those men face to face if they were not landowners. Hence, gender issues were rather cemented than negotiated one must assume.

### **The Soda in Laurel**

There was, however, one such interface encounter that is worth mentioning and that involved women, and gender issues directly. In Laurel the SMFC' Women's Group's *soda* project *La Tentación* (mentioned in the introduction to this chapter) had, after many struggles been opened in a former bananafarm-, later IDA- workshop, right across from the entrance to the Zona in Laurel. When the women in this group had prepared this income-generating project they had also carried out a feasibility investigation in order to calculate their potential incomes and viability of the enterprise.<sup>315</sup> They had, assisted by the SMFC, found that the increased presence of palm engineers, bank functionaries, specialist and other visitors, could be counted on as steady customers to their new enterprise. In the construction process the group had been actively promoting their services, including in the IDA, and among the new Palm experts. The women had also, eventually, received much practical assistance from the IDA, soem assistance from carpenters, paint, and had been allowed to borrow chairs and other equipment, and many of the local inhabitants in Laurel had supported them, arguing that they needed such a decent (no alcohol) place to go.

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<sup>315</sup> 'Costa Rica is saturated with sewing groups', said Sally Yudelman (1987), while Mayra Buvinic was concerned about such projects' misbehaviour' (1986). See also Butler- Flora (1987); Chaney (1987);



Soda la Tentaciòn in Laurel

They women in the soda project were, indeed, women entrepreneurs. However, women doing such things on their own; was not accepted by everybody in Laurel. They experienced being bothered by other IDA lower level male functionaries, who came and said they used the IDA's water, that the place was not clean enough, that they had borrowed a freezer from the IDA and that was not fair etc. In fact, the women in the soda, were reminded, over and again, that women going public in this way, was not accepted without consequences for them. It was told them, face-to-face by men who came in only to tell them.

The most surprising encounter that the women experienced, however, was the way the Palm project specialist totally ignored their existence. The Palm guys had put up a private set-up and employed a woman to cook for them inside the premises where both they and people from the bank had their meals. The women in the soda told that they even had the nerve of coming in and asking if any of them would like to come and cook for them instead! After all the problems this group had gone through, working about two years to get their project up and going they saw the Palm project experts' behaviour as a provocation. The Palm

project employees in this manner undermined the Women's Group's existence. The women were resigned, asking how people from BID and the IDA, who allegedly were 'gender aware' and supported women's development projects in the world, could treat the ones who were trying to make a living from them like that? The Palm extensionist did not see the point when confronted with the situation, they were there to oversee plants and road construction, not to eat local food, they told us. What the women did was really not their problem.

### **Día del Campo**

Another such interface encounter, or critical points in Long's vocabular, were the so-called *días del campo* (field days), demonstration days, when Palm project functionaries invited old, new, and potential *palmeros* to an all-day event to disseminate information, demonstrate skills, and secure support for the programme. The field-day template had been used in the IDA before, and I had attended a few back in 1986, but they were simpler affairs than what had now become standard. They were not really public events, in that one had to be a palmgrower in order to be invited, and the palm-wives were not part of such events. However, when I would like to give an account of such a field-day it is more to illustrate that the arrival of the palms, as a top-down project, was not totally accepted - nor rejected by the participants.



Día del Campo

To the field-day we attended the Palm executive unit had gathered about 26-27 palmeros in a palmgrove pertenecing to a palmgrower, don Joaquín. Five of the participants were adult women and two children, the rest were men, half and half the father and son generations. The five women, among them doña Leonora, doña Fermina and doña Dolores, had gathered at the back. The setting was as a classroom in the woods, the experts had brought with them didactical materials, of which a flip-over with ready-made information was the centre-piece. The experts acted as teachers, explaining the various themes by using the readymade folios as illustrations. There were 7-8 technicians present and they were all men in their late twenties and early thirties. All of them were wearing ironed blue jeans and short-sleeved shirts and leather boots. After the formal greetings with thanks to the government, the BID and the IDA, etc, the day's lecture started. The theme was how to improve the quality of the palm fruits and the biological and botanical facts of the oil palm were demonstrated; about pollen- and reproduction, female and male flowers. To try to summarise the content of the event it could be described that the experts wanted to convey that the palmeros, as serious

producers should know as much as possible in order to improve their stock, while the host, don Joaquín, and other men palmeros, kept talking about their own problems with hopeless bureaucrats and troubles with papers and regulations. It was a long day, with an extensive agenda. Here follows a few excerpts:

The women are still in the back, talking among themselves. A new technician comes up and takes over. Now they have shifted tactics. "Is there a question or anyone who would like to tell their fellow parceleros about their experiences from growing palms"? A palmero stands up on this sign, and declares: "You who are beginners- you can do it so and so"...and a long array of his own history starts, and he ends: "*-estamos ahorita aficionados de este cultivo*" (We are now very enthusiastic about this plant). The technician supplies, enthusiastically. But it does not take long before the participants have taken over the show again. This time they are concerned about the time it took with the *tramites* (the red tape). The men in the audience participate eagerly in that discussion, some are giggling now - others support him by telling about how bad the people in the bank are.

The technicians try to look as if they are in control and continue their lesson on biology and quality, but find it hard in the heat. They decide to switch to all the benefits the peasants will enjoy by changing to palms, and they now invited doña Leonora, as an oldtimer, to tell about her experiences. Doña Leonora did not have to be asked twice: "I will compare mine and don Joaquín's finca- *Doy la razon a don Joaquín*, -(I am on don Joaquín's side)", and then she went on with her own history, of struggling with the bank years ago, asking for a loan of 25.000 colones which they did not want to give her, the reason was that she did not have *escritura*. She told, in minute detail, over and again, goes on talking and talking, and saying that today she is very happy for the support she has received from the IDA, getting her *escritura*

problem through the *vaina*. Then she starts on her life history, that she had arrived back in 1973 and that the IDA always had helped her, ... finishing with: ‘-that is all that I have to say’... Kevin: "Thank you doña Leonora; well, let's go on".<sup>316</sup>

Yet another technician starts to explain about harvesting and quality of the oil palm fruits. This technician did consequently use ‘she’ about the farmer, (looking at Odilia and me) - that - “*she* can loose 70.000 colones per year, or more, by not being good enough in the harvesting”. But we were still not finished. The technicians demonstrated by pointing to examples among don Joaquín's trees how it should *not* be done. Don Joaquín's finca was rather full of such bad examples it turned out, and I suspected the technicians had picked this finca on purpose (which I got confirmed talking to some of them at a later stage). It was Kevin who carried out this practical demonstration, and the farmers were yelling and shouting and enjoying themselves with many comments. Doña Leonora was flirting openly with Kevin, inviting him to come over to cut her trees, as he apparently was much of a man, and the other farmers followed up with comments on masculinity, on being a real man with a big *chuza*. Real men could cut whatever it would be.

To finish off the session, individual counselling was provided at palms around in the groves of don Joaquín. Now the male and female flowers were identified, that there had to be insects to fly between carrying the pollen, and that every six months a female and each six months a male flower grows out, but it was only the females that could produce fruits. That initiated a lot of sexualized comments, and indirect talk, where both men and women participated and had a lot of fun, and it finally seemed as if things made sense, the palms were just like humans after all, one of the men said, it was the woman who had to carry all the weight, and the man who had to maintain, support and cut it.

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<sup>316</sup> I suspect Kevin let Leonora do all that talking because Odilia and I were present, and he knew that we were focusing on women in Coto Sur.





Día del Campo. Instructors.

The *dia del campo* was moreover useful in order to observe the way collaboration between the beneficiaries and the developers, the palmeros and the Palm experts, was acted out in public in this transitional period, and illustrated how they used and enrolled each other, and the situation, for different purposes. There had initially been little room for the growers' own stories and interpretations of their life-worlds, but they tried, and and took some space - and the extensionists also allowed them some, in order to have the growers cooperate. During this long session, my interpretation was that the parceleros present to quite an extent were able to redefine the situation on numerous occasions. The experts accepted it for a while and they used their authority again and again, trying to return to their facts and sheets, they were after all, the ones who had invited, the farmers were guests (got cokes, attention, and were brought by BID-cars).

The growers did actually not have much choice but to obey the rules and regulations, but oldtimers like Kevin knew he had to coax and cajole his audience in order to reach the project's production goals. Front-line skirmishes like this one, were part of the extended

persuasion, and it was also about positioning the palmeros into the longer (IDA) -history of 'progress', always bringing in how they were among the chosen ones, and as such, they would have to be thankful and obey etc. Except for doña Leonora, who was intentionally made part of the show, and who enjoyed it, the other women did not utter a word. The women present were all land owners and members of the Coopeagropal. None of the palmero-wives attended this session, and we were told that they never were, this was for 'producers' only. The women living in palm growing households were in practice silenced and thus excluded from such 'interface' encounters, and thus there is reason to ask whose 'life-worlds' were represented?

### **Institutions, Gender and Change: Drawing some Lines and Questioning Assumptions**

The Palm cooperative in making, *Coopeagropal RL*, will surely be putting its mark on the development process in Coto Sur in the future, as owner of the processing plant (not yet in production) and thus controlling more of the processing chain, but also due to its sheer size. It would in the future be a very important player in the development of the whole Southern Zone in Costa Rica, and by that inflict upon the way gender was being constituted, and 'done' and contested. This also invites to see the cooperatives, together with other institutions, as a contribution to discussions about the growth of civil society, 'social capital,' and gender. Through the palm cooperative the links to both national and international cooperative movements, state- and international lending and aid organisations would be more accessible for many living in Coto Sur, and probably, also exposed to different ideas about gender equity. One scenario is for instance if and how these institutions will deal with relationships between what was in process of becoming insiders and outsiders in the Coto Sur settlement; the ones who own land and grow palms, and the rest. As many women were among those excluded, would and could this cooperative do anything about their situation, or would it only defend its (male) members' immediate interests?

My point is that if there was to be any attention to gender issues in the cooperatives in Coto Sur, (except Coopevaquita that to a certain extent had faced it (chapter 6); those seemed to have to come from elsewhere, and then the international cooperative movement must be close at hand. Women in the International Cooperative (ICA) movement have the past decades raised the gender question, parallel to what has taken place in the women's movement elsewhere, including in Central America. Special women's projects have been launched internationally, in various countries, in which questions concerning women's participation, rights, needs and leadership within cooperatives and the movement have been raised (ICA 1999, 2000; Alforja 1991; García et al. 1992). The cooperative sector is a huge and at times an overwhelming sector, with a considerable support system - and bureaucracy. It is, more often than not, a long way from members of the individual cooperatives - to top politicians and bureaucrats, in Costa Rica a number of them were even ministers in the government. My guess is that new pressures will have to come from outside, from women and gender aware elements in the national and international cooperative movement (ICA). In 1995 a gender statement was passed, that eventually will seep down through the organisational hierarchies and there will be different outcomes, guaranteed.

### **Production and Reproduction, Gender and Claims**

A key issue, that was not yet brought up Coopeagropal as a productive cooperative, concerning gender and the discussion on gendered contracts, is the relationship between production and reproduction, and how that will be tackled in the future. If the observed pattern on the palm producing farms (discussed above) continues in the future, with absolutely division of labour in the groves, with women (-and female identity) directed to reproduction only, or perhaps also to non-palm activities, the situation is different from the other production cooperatives producing on contract (for instance in horticulture, tea, or

coffee schemes etc) where women, and children, as ‘family labour’, were directly contributing to production, and based on that, could claim their shares in income and decisions. The act of persuasion and argument then appears as somewhat different than when the women’s contribution in the main is removed to the home-sphere, and to reproduction as such. How to introduce gender relations, power and subjugation etc. into the ‘contract’; is both a theoretical and practical challenge, that it should be interesting to follow.

The new palm cooperative had many expectations to its role and functions in society, and to start with practical issues; one could for instance ask if and how a cooperative like Coopeagropal will take up reproduction, and reproductive services; such as kindergarten, training for women, medical and health provisions, etc, and will they through membership democracy provide paid jobs for women; and which discourses will they then draw upon? These are issues that can draw on the by now longtime debates on women’s ‘practical’ and ‘strategic’ gender interest - first raised by Maxine Molyneux in the mid-1980s, later much debated in WID/GAD circles, but can be dusted off again. It could be possible to say, I think, that asking the women about the potential of getting a house built, through the house building programme launched by the Palm project’s executive unit and the Coopeagropal; definitely would be meeting a ‘practical’ gender need. But whether the palm cooperative in the long run would contribute to women’s ‘strategic’ gender needs, is a political- and thus empirical question not possible to answer at that moment. This does point, however, to the potentials and probably necessary coalitions between different sectors in society, in this case the cooperative movement, the state, and ‘civil society’ - concerning gender equity.<sup>317</sup> In Coto Sur the cooperation between the different development entities, the Palm Executive Unit, the IDA and the cooperative movement would be the case in point, where gender issues would be raised or not, and whose legacy would render influence for long time to go.

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<sup>317</sup> Deere and León (2001) refers to this as examples of ‘iron triangle’

As long as one had to be holding a land title in order to join in the Palm project, and through that, get access not only to membership benefits, but also to credit and market, etc. the 'gatekeeper' could, at one level, be said to be the state, through the IDA, that had given priority to 'heads of households' legally, when the land was distributed long ago, and whose functionaries in addition did not believe that women land seekers were interested in farming, thus they could throw the ball away. But they could also, if they wanted to, be able to do something about it. The tricky issue is that gender relations are long-time arguments, while the new cooperative and its allies and coalition partners have other agendas, on short and long term, but it indeed points to the necessity to consider gender on many scales, not only as a household issue.

Experiences from other huge palm growing schemes in other parts of the world demonstrate that there are things that could be done to secure women's participation in productive activities within an institutional setting. In the huge palm scheme in Papua New Guinea mentioned above, the development unit had decided to pay women separately for their picking of palm berries, thus not assuming that the family would be a unitary and fair unit.<sup>318</sup> However, in Papua New Guinea, the land was not individually owned; suggesting something like that in Coto Sur would (initially at least) probably be perceived as crossing the line of 'private property' - that the farming-family (read the man) should decide on in his own backyard, and with the wellknown machismo prevalent, that was perhaps something that had to be targeted. In terms of gender relations, both in the household units and in the cooperative, this would be very interesting, as a potential crossroads for private and collective gender bargaining. There could be various ways, in other palm producing regions in the world they have been seeking alternative products and plants, an example is a more recent development

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<sup>318</sup> Known as The Mama Lus Fruit Scheme, a payment scheme at Hoskins, (Koczberski, Curry and Gibson (2001), see also Vermeulen and Goad (2006). In another setting Reynolds (2002) bring up some of the same thoughts coined as 'Wages for Wives'.

project in Malawi, in which they have introduced what they denominate as ‘women-friendly, low cost spindle’, and organised production of soaps, cooking receipts etc.<sup>319</sup>

There are two interesting points here; one is time, and what I previously alluded to as the ‘gender impasse’ in the Coto Sur case. The palm development projects in other parts of the world have (probably) been created within multipartite systems, in which the institutions’ gender desks and claims have been activated, and assumingly, different organisational set up- and probably, women activists mobilised. The other point is the background history of Coto Sur, as a rather male-dominated banana zone, in contrast to the new settlement schemes in Asia and Africa. But that does not entail that one should not ask if it would be possible to do such things within a productive cooperative set-up like the Coopeagropal? Could they change the strict agro industrial set up? This, I think, will be a key issue in the future for women in Coto Sur living in palm households.

It seems helpful to draw a few historical parallels, because it appears that men used their privileged position to create an almost all male organisation and space (exclusion of most women and of other men who did not own land or grow palms), thus the chosen ones were gaining individual liberal rights (Davidoff 1998). In this manner they were establishing an own identity, and a public space that had been enduringly constituted along masculinist lines. In the 19th century constituting the ‘family’, and thus a male breadwinner, with non-working female housewife and non-working children as well as the family-language. In practice the way it was understood in most of the cooperative movement was that it was either gender absent, or at the most, perhaps as ‘gender neutral’ if pressed on the issue. The interesting issue would then be how they did this ‘gender neutrality’ that is accepting gender, but that they were given different roles.

What has happened in the years after the implementation of the Palm project is, strictly speaking, not a theme for this work, although the BID article’s ‘Wasteland’ presentation and

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<sup>319</sup> Fao

image provoked me to return to the Coto Sur material. In that article, and others following suit, the role of the cooperative has been salient, but as agreed on these pages, gender or are women absolutely absent. Thus, it could be reason to look into how the cooperative, and its representatives do present themselves, and give credit to the ones that have taken the burdens in the creation of the ‘new’ Coto Sur when established: In the Coopeagropal’s later self-presentation on the Web, their own history is formulated the following way:

*Un grupo de visionarios parceleros, decidieron producir un cultivo no tradicional, manejado por manos costarricense, que genera empleo, infraestructura, bienestar y que fuera económicamente rentable. El 3de mayo de 1986, nace la cooperativa de Agricultores de Palma Aceitera, Coopeagropal R.L.<sup>320</sup>*

(A group of visionary parceleros decided to produce a non-traditional crop, managed by Costarrican hands, which created employment, infratsructure, welfare and was economically rentable. May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1986 the Coopeagropal was born)

It is interesting here, to notice that it is the ‘visionary parceleros’ who are presented as the initiators of the palm growing endeavour in Coto Sur, and neither in this presentation, nor the ‘Wasteland’ article, both published in the end of the 1990s, had women made any inroads. Now, this formulation - and version - of the history and background may very well have been coined by others than the members of the cooperative, but here it is used publicly, and reflects much the same as the banana cooperative, an all masculine world.

## **Peasant Women in Transition**

Everyone who has been present, or in contact with the transformation processes taking place in Coto Sur, must have had a very distinct feeling of being in some sort of in-between-ness, liminality, en-route, to something else, and it would, and could not be right to formulate conclusions that very likely could be contradicted by showing to events and results that have materialised later, when all of the previous can be diagnosed as ‘history’. However, not

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<sup>320</sup> [www.coopegropal.co.cr](http://www.coopegropal.co.cr), accessed 2002

everybody in Coto Sur wanted to, or actually were in a position that they could become palmgrowers. I have also looked into that matter, but space does not allow to convey those findings, thus only a few more general observations will be submitted here.

The ability to exercise choice', says Naila Kabeer, -incorporates three inter-related dimensions: *resources* (defined broadly) not only access, but also future claims to both material and human and social resources; *agency*: (including processes of decision-making, as well as less measurable manifestation of agency such as negotiation, deception and manipulation) and *achievements* (well-being outcomes)'

(Kabeer 1999: 436, my italics).

She does, in other words, see the issue of agency well within what could be denominated, in accordance with Sherry Ortner (2006), an 'intentionality' discourse, there was, after all, a goal to be achieved at stake. It has been assumed that better access to resources, that is in this case mainly land, would give women who held land title, a better position, both for own survival, well-being and for negotiations with others. When the Palm project was endowed upon the Coto Sur settlement some women found themselves in a position to be able to choose, or to decide, whether to join in the Palm programme or not. These were the women who already were women farmers (chapter 4) and a handful of those had, as demonstrated, joined the Palm programme early on.

However, there were, in Coto Sur, also some women who held title to land, but who had decided to sell and move out as they did not want to become *palmeros*, with all that they imagined that would entail. The women farmers, in theory, had the choices of continuing farming and living more or less as before; to convert to palms; or growing something else; or to exit, that is they were empowered to decide for themselves. That does not mean that they did not discuss their decision with others, or that they were not relying on others' work force, for instance their children, which they all reported that they did; only that these women were



not living in typical conjugal relationships in which a man had the upper hand in terms of access and control over resources.

In 1990 we also interviewed some of these women, and due to lack of space I will here only mention that some women had, rather successfully, joined the Cocoa-project<sup>321</sup> rather than the palm project, as they saw it as something they could handle better, and control. There was in 1990, noticeably, little bragging about the assumed ex-bananeros who had become *cacaoteros*, in fact, I heard no heroic histories told, or new myths created about cocoa. The *Palmero*' was perhaps in the process of being created as the new Hero, but what about the *Cacaotero*- or *Cacaotera*? Cocoa was apparently not as associated with masculinity and physical strength to the extent that the palms seemed to be in the process to become. Hence, the cocoa project was moving very quiet forward, compared to the palms, which were literally marching, parading forwards, conquering the land, to return to the military metaphors, and continuing in that vein; perhaps 'guerilla warfare' was a better picture for the cocoa? Moreover, cocoa is a tree that is, as mentioned, a lot less visible than the palms, it blends into the landscape, even when grown as *cacaudales* (cocoa groves), and can be combined with other crops. There were plantains, banana plants, and other trees between the cocoa trees, even on the farms that were in the process to become part of the cocoa project. In the documents outlining the new big agroindustrial development scheme in Coto Sur, there is noticeable difference between the manner in which the *cacaoteros* and the *palmeros* were expected to utilise the land. When the oil palms are in full production, there will be no room for anything else, the palms take up all the space, and their canopy covers the ground so that no other crops can be sowed in between. One is in practice stuck with a monoculture for generations. Cocoa invites to mixed farming, and many of the women farmers preferred that. Moreover, the cocoa-grower had opted not to establish a cooperative, but instead an

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<sup>321</sup> The cocoa project was a sub-project of the Agroindustrial. In 1990 their new association (Asproca) had 170 members of whom 20 were women and they had got built a drying station in Caucho, but fought with fungus and fluctuation prices.

association, which some of the women members said, was more democratic, pointing to their experiences with what they saw as the unequal treatment of workers and members in the banana cooperative.



Cocoa Tree in Coto Sur

### **A few Points or Findings from Coto Sur**

In this chapter I have looked at changes in the gendered division of labour at the farms converting to palms. I have approached the (lack of) gendering of the new institutions being established in the settlement, viz. the Palm project executive unit and the newly established palm growers' cooperative. Some gendered questions have been raised about potentials (at that stage) of becoming more gender aware. I have linked them to their contexts, be it development agencies - or the international cooperative movement. To a certain extent the situation in the households in 1986 has been compared with situations under conversion to palm growing in 1990. I have found that in this particular period of time, some of the inhabitants in the Coto Sur settlement either continued as before, or were in a situation to try

something else. I have later chosen to approach the analysis of this situation by considering the 'structure/agency' debate in the social sciences, primarily because, at least to me, this points to a rather complex matter, not the least when it comes to studying peasant women as our original mandate was when we started out with the SMFC team in 1986

However, this situation, has I think, eventually, functioned as some kind of fermentation process, in that I have had to bring in more overarching issues to discuss with my findings, in addition to more comparative aspects. This has included the changes the inhabitants in Coto Sur experienced in the first place, and the changes that I was able to arrive at, after having pondered with my data over and again, as presented in chapter 1.

Two important aspects have, in different ways, guided my work, and alternatively led me astray. First of all it is the SMFC mandate that I felt compelled to answer as best I could, but also to discuss with, and bring in later WID/GAD arguments, without making the latter a main point. The other is that I see no point in theoretical discussions only, they will also have to be confronted with practice and although this practice may counter what one prefers to see, as a researcher, you have to take yet another round.

The second field work period was not part of the SMFC development work in Coto Sur, as the Women's Project in this period in practice had been closed, but its ideals and mandate were still very much part of our gaze; both in the settlement, and later on, in my own elaborations as well. Some of our women informants and discussants had lived through perhaps four or five different 'ways of life' in their own lifetime. They could have been children of landless workers, migrants seeking work and livelihoods, lived on regulated banana plantations, homesteading smallholders, and finally; perhaps members of palm growing households in another strict regulated system, or, as has been the case for the majority of the women, somehow they have always been *in-between* these ways.

The changes had been rapid; from initial homesteading, to banana plantations in the beginning of 1970s, to contributing in the construction of an agricultural reform settlement

(officially from 1975), to experience and take in the abrupt changes that the ones living within the Palm perimeter were exposed to from around 1989/90. In such a perspective I think that some of the personal small stories are important in these big and overwhelming restructuration processes. Many gendered processes could be detected that intertwined with the logistics of the economics, that sometimes intertwined, and other times did not seem to have any effects.

The particular starting point of this research as part of a development project for peasant women in the smallholder era, before the palms, has informed the approach and steered many of the initial questions, but also later on has kept it on track. The SMFC in Coto Sur functioned as a way in, not only to the 'hidden' life of peasant women in the settlement, as was part of the research assignment, but also contributed, by its very existence, as a sort of modernising 'project within a more comprehensive (state) project' and pointed to how such external development 'projects' both have their own agendas. In this work, I have been moving back and forth between these positions and experiences.

### **From a 'Plot of One's own' to a 'House of One's Own'?**

Beginning with our women informants in Coto Sur, one of the main findings, to the extent that it was possible to talk about such, was that these women had come to the settlement with the intention to build themselves a base in life. It was the possibilities for land that had brought them to Coto Sur in the first place. However, as the events took place and different policies were tested out in the settlement, none of which took in women's realities or their 'perceptions' as the SMFC had coined it. What this in due time, will come to entail, was too early to say anything about, but at that time, gendered relationships were - to some extent brought back to (former) ideals of men as providers, women as being provided for. Women in Coto Sur bore the whole weight of responsibilities for children. Some entered into consensual

unions with men because they were dependent on somewhere to live with their children, some economic support, and often not so happy endings. I have also argued that this process must be seen from the point of view of the women, who were insisting on dignity *respectable* in their immediate interpretation of the situation, that was by then within reach, by becoming housewives.

Not all the inhabitants in Coto Sur had been lucky enough to become the holder of land title, or have (indirectly through family) access to land. Some had, through different social processes, been excluded. Quite a number of women experienced being abandoned by the father of their children. Some had established new households and bargained access to resources. Others had so privileged survived by working for others or linking themselves up to some kind of kinship relations, etc.. There were many invisible inhabitants in Coto Sur who did not quite fit in with the family-farm' category or ideal. As has been demonstrated, they often occupied 'in-between gendered spaces' (Roucheleau and Edmunds 1997).

What I think (and hope) I have been able to convey is that in these enormous transformation processes, there also were many inclusionary and exclusionary processes. One group of men, in general, had 'won' twice; once, when they first came and were granted land as assumed 'heads of households', and now, for the second time; as this right had secured them access to the Palm package. The resource had added value; as (land + trees) could be considered as a double redistribution process benefitting men, assuming that they would redistribute evenly. Access to resources, be that land, jobs, training, education, etc, had over time, been a 'gender gain' (Kandioly 1988; Connell 2002) favouring men. Despite this, some women also made it. A main conclusion, as I see it, also bringing in the various projects, ranging from the huge palm conversion- to the tiny women's projects etc, was that the complexity of the situation in Coto Sur was totally underestimated. This has been yet another of my main 'threads' when elaborating on this material, ranging from planners, via

bureaucrats to implementors. The women who, for different reasons had gained their property rights, and were conscious about it, had by now a very different bargaining situation.

The findings in Coto Sur was that women expressed that land meant little to the women who for the time being had access to land, directly and indirectly. To others without access, land could mean everything for their very survival. Hence, the question addressing access to land, and other resources in Coto Sur, should be reformulated to also consider how justice and fairness was understood. Bina Agarwal (1994, 1997) is known for her term 'a plot of one's own', as crucial for women in order to enjoy more equal relationships in their households, and above all, to have a better fall-back-position. After having observed some of the changes taking place in Coto Sur during this transitional decade, one may pose the rhetorical question cited above, whether women (not all) did remain content with the prospect of a decent house of their own, rather than to control a plot of their own? It is hard to say yes or no, but perceptions as expressed by many women during the 1986 field work period, actually pointed to such a position, which, by the SMFC team was categorised as 'false consciousness'. In Sen's vocabulary it would probably be described as 'things are typically organised' and 'attitudinal fog' (Sen, 2003). But it could also be epitomised as women's improved 'well-being', that they were given more freedom of choices. Quite a number of women living in the Coto Sur settlement would be a lot more interested in a 'house of their own', than a 'plot of their own', and I would not be surprised if many later have moved into more urban areas and men commute out to their harvest days. But this I do not know. Such a scenario would, however, be in line with what Rigg (2006) has observed, that livelihoods in the South are increasingly becoming divorced from farming. But also be explained partly by drawing on many of the women's complex life-stories, but also, I think, on the structural changes that were taking place. The majority of the women did not at all feel that the palms appealed to them at all.

Many important questions concerning women's access to and control over land, however, remained. Many of the issues that did come up were questions that for one, tended to have their origins in the past, to the very 'land reform' itself, as well as the civil and legal codes. The tricky issues in Coto Sur were mainly connected to inheritance of land for children and spouses, legal and illegal transactions of land, as well as women's position after abandonment, and the following complex household and kinship relations often encountered in Coto Sur.

Many of these troubles emerged from the fact that it was the farming-family that had always been assumed to be the acting unit, also legally, which means that in addition to the land laws and the IDA guidelines allotment, it was the civil codes that counted. In spite of Costa Rica being a very lawful country with numerous lawyers and legal institutions, the majority of the population in the Coto Sur settlement was not well educated in terms of the law (with few exceptions). And could not afford to pay for legal advice. The term 'family' is a case in point. Around  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the adult inhabitants who lived in conjugal relationships were probably not legally married, and as indicated earlier. A number have changed partners several times over the years, and because of this in many households there were children with different formal or informal rights or claims to the land. The civil codes in Costa Rica combined with the land arrangements were what were legally ruling, but people often took the task in their own hands and switched, bought, sold, borrowed, etc. without the interference of the IDA or other legal entities. The situation on many farms often appeared as unruly, a version that was confirmed by IDA functionaries. What the SMFC-team became aware of, particularly through the contacts through the Women's Programme, was that there were a number of women in Coto Sur who could have had a much safer position, if they themselves had been better informed, if they had had a better negotiating position, if others had advised them better, and of course if they had been able to picture themselves differently.

### **Changes in Activity and Authority Spheres for Women**

The gradual dissolution of the often hard constructed borders between 'public' and 'private'- interpreted in gendered terms as *casa y calle*, is worth bringing forth again when looking back. It should be clear from the foregoing, that the Palms did not necessarily bring more equal gendered conditions to Coto Sur, but that would probably rather draw on other discourses of equal rights laws, etc, both through different organisational and organisational setups, and by means of other channels of communication. Thus, one thing is how public places and spheres will be opened up for women; another is the scales of it, and how to interpret those.

The lack of organisation of rural women in the country also merits some attention in this regard. It would have made a lot of difference if there had existed a rural woman's interest organisation, like in the neighbouring countries. The SMFC in its first phase (1983-86) was carrying out many of the tasks that such an organization would be expected to do. However, by the pressure from their own host institution, the IDA, as well as the UNDP, the little Women's Office was pushed to defending their existence rather than formulate policies for peasant women.

Costa Rica is a centralised country, and the organised feminist movement in this period of time was in practice only found in the capital, San José. Much attention was centred on changing and improving the legal system. There was never a mass movement out in the provinces. For the SMFC and the Women's Project in Coto Sur, it was women's wellbeing and autonomy that was their motive and aim at working as they did. One question one definitely may pose, is how women came out of all of this? I have suggested that from a 'women's point of view', the whole process of invasions, IDA settlement, the different development projects including the Women's Project, and finally the conversion process to Palms- gave preference to men, both legally (as assumed heads of households) as well as culturally in that women were not considered apt as farmers, etc.



The existence of the Women's Project in Coto Sur and the work of the SMFC and the IDA during most of the 1980s, have been central to this present endeavour, and it came time to try to consider these efforts and perspectives in a somewhat more extensive setting. Pushing things to the extreme, did these concentrated 'women-efforts' have any impact at all on the overall development in Coto Sur? Not that I think it is possible to assess after such a short while (that would demand much more encompassing research) but there were several occasions and events that invited reflection upon the matter. The presence of the IDA and its subdivisions (particularly the Docae and the proper SMFC, the Women's office), have entailed active participants and contributors to the development in the settlement that have involved or had effects for women and gender relations during this decade. This was assisted by a number of other national and international institutions; the FAO, ILO and UNDP from the beginning, later the Unifem, BID and the CDC, in addition to several other institutions including the Ministries for planning (Mideplan) and agriculture (MAG), other state institutions, as well as some NGOs, various churches and others. These groups have, over the years, had varying interests for -or lack of - gender sensitive policies.

During the 1980s and 1990s, much more effort and experiences have been dedicated to this issue internationally. One does, I think, have to bear this in mind when reading the programmes and papers. That does not mean, however, that such themes were not being debated. It was only that the deconstruction - practically speaking - of all the assumptions in laws, rules, regulations, and practices concerning women and this issue, has taken about a decade to unravel. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a much broader knowledge base with which to discuss this.

## Chapter 8

# CROSSROADS: OTHER GENDERED 'CRAFTINGS AND BUNDLINGS'

### Complex Mixes of Projects, People, Policies and Perspectives

#### Crossroads

*There are cross-roads when ghostly signals flash from the traffic and inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day (Walter Benjamin 1929)<sup>322</sup>*

In the preceding chapters I have made an effort to construct what metaphorically speaking can be categorised as an antiphonal story; with a focus on women as active agents with respect to livelihoods, farming, families, households, gender relations, and the building of society in an agricultural settlement in Central America in the late 1980, and; with a focus on restructurations taking place in the former *Zona Bananera* in Costa Rica, its gendered consequences and how its representations are being produced.

The background story is one of extensive development planning and implementation; from land reform to neo-liberal policies, state involvement, and international development agencies, whose gender awareness have been questioned and discussed on basis of the emprirical material. In this final chapter my intention is not to conclude, as I do not think here are any conclusions to this ongoing story, I promised only new questions in the introduction, and thus to pay tribute to the possibilities of 'creating new stories' (Haraway 1991, 1997), and to to continue to reflect upon what has occurred, in time and space. It is in the prolongation of this reserach agenda that I will, single out a few subjects and concerns that could be described

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<sup>322</sup> Surrealism. The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia. Here in [www.generation-online.org](http://www.generation-online.org)

metaphorically as ‘crossroads’, or ‘diffractions’, leaning on Donna Haraway’s ‘prism’ metaphor, entailing that prisms, or

‘Diffraction, the production of difference patterns might be a more useful metaphor for the needed work than reflexivity’ (Haraway 1997: 33)<sup>323</sup>

She believes in researchers’ obligation to breach, disturb, interfere, make waves, refigure, and ‘implode’, to create waves that interfere, cross and disturb what she calls world producing discourses. In the following I will pick up some of the themes and issues that possibly have disappeared or not been brought up in the previous text, and I will pursue a handful of the many in-between anxieties that I feel are resting, or hiding in this material. I will, in some sense, return to John Law’s (2004) perspectives of looking for the ‘unseen’, and his views on ‘methods of assemblage,’ for example by distinguishing different narrative forms and narratives that the Coto Sur material has been brought into conversations with.

This far, I have tried to explore some of the gaps encountered at the start; the lack of considering women’s agency, and the lack of gendered perspectives in plans, stories and other materials interrogated. Following Law (2004) I have constructed a few ‘craftings and bundles’ in which I discuss some of the above issues in more detail. They are issues that have emerged when I have been searching information, reading other stories, quarreling with the empirical material, different theoretical positions, etc.

Among many, I have selected two issues springing out of elaborating on the events in Coto Sur; how to consider a restructuration process like the one in Coto Sur from a gendered perspective, and I will discuss other banana enclaves as examples. An other anxiety that has surfaced, is about how the planning and implementation procedures in Coto Sur, particularly the Palm project, evidently had succeeded to avoid any gender checks, an issue that I felt laid resting in this story.

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<sup>323</sup> Later Donna Haraway says; ‘Diffraction is a narrative, graphic, psychological, and political technology for making consequential meaning’ (op.cit: 273). See also Haraway (1991, 1994) and Kirsten Campell’s (2004) discussion of her ‘feminist reflectivities’.

## About Former Enclaves, Good Lives, Gender Identities and Social, Economic, and Cultural Changes

The transformation processes in societies described as former fruit enclaves, pit communities, or factory towns, have often been analysed by means of assumptions about the existence of uniform, collective cultures ('pit cultures') which Crang (1998) describes as 'tight-knit communities with a longing for the past'. One such first aspect that springs to my mind when considering the emerging palm-based society in Coto Sur from the 1990s on, is a suggestion to possibly consider the palm-based society as a sort of 'industrial culture' that was in the process of overtaking the so-called 'plantation culture' (favoured by the IDA functionaries) and which, perhaps, will both dominate the perceptions of the landscape and enforce hegemonic palm- experiences and thinking about the world in the future. Thus, these concepts and way of thinking would merit some critical thinking in the Coto Sur case. In order to illustrate this anxiety, I will start with some ponderings around 'enclaves' and approaches in a study of another banana enclave: Tenguel in Ecuador.

Doña Leonora or doña Mayela, however, would never talk about having led their lives in an enclave, but in *la Zona Bananera*, and they would say that "*Hubo cambios bastante*" (There have been big changes) or, that they hoped to "*salir adelante*" (move forward, progress); while more academic discourses of geographers and economists, for example, would talk about 'transitions' and 'restructurations' of production, of agricultural regimes, and organisational aspects, etc. A pertinent question to pose is thus what such terms as 'enclave' and 'restructuration', and others, do entail in terms of capturing what was taking place, and experienced.

In other words it was something wolly about the terms and concepts, their ontological validity so to speak, when using them as thinking tools and sentizing concepts. I have also used the 'gendered geographies' as an umbrella term that I think can encompass not only the

change processes, but also the active women, their daily lives, materialities, and other issues that otherwise would easily be omitted. There is, additionally, a long tradition in characterising a geographical region on basis of the main crops grown (Arce and Long 2000:159), in the Southern Zone in Costa Rica connected to the three major crops and their affiliated administrative, organisational and economic regimes bananas, maize and oil palms, respectively. It has been as rather uncomplicated to have those crops literally steer the construction of these texts, but one has to ask oneself if this has been the best fit way to capture women's perceptions, their experiences, gendered relationships and so on?

### **Contact Zones rather than Enclaves? An Initial Feminist Critique**

The concept of the enclave<sup>324</sup> has been dominating in discussions and understandings of restructuration of regions and areas like the Southern Zone in Costa Rica. By invoking the enclave term, it is, in these types of studies, the idea is apparently to say something about contrasting a 'before', the process of opening up an area to external influence; or rather, replace one external influence with another, and it is depicted as a negative term for instance as; *La ocupación del Pacífico Sur Costaricense por parte de la Compañía Bananera* (Royo 2003).<sup>325</sup>

The basic idea of an enclave the way the term has been used in economics and economic geography is that it is something bounded, that there are few if any connections to the host country in, and one could suspect that the inhabitants were assumed to be part of the package as well. It is generally held that the only links to the host country in such export enclaves was the labour force. Such export enclaves, typically found in Latin America and other developing countries, have been depicted as negative, and that negative situation is to be

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<sup>324</sup>A typical definition in geography may be: 'an enclave is a piece of land which is totally surrounded by foreign territory'

<sup>325</sup>I have been searching all sorts of texts, but it seems as if *enclave* is a term that still is taken for granted, and thus it is about time to deconstruct it.

rectified thorough to projects of nationalisation, of breaking open, and regain foreign controlled areas. In Costa Rica the term enclave, was, as stated, often used about the Southern Zone and opening this enclave through the national project to develop this part of the country has been couched in different discourses; poverty, national control and - certainly - political control. The former 'red zone' enclave in Golfito was literally to be re-conquered by the Costa Rican state, by reason, by modernity, welfare, and progress etc.

Both the banana industry, and other major export crops (sugar, gum, tea, coffee, cocoa, etc.) have been the topics of more detailed studies recently and many of those have chosen a 'follow the product' research strategy (Clifford 1997); in which life-histories, cultural aspects, nature, even race and gender, have been much more emphasised than older accounts mainly influenced by political and economic thinking. Some of these studies have also focused not only on the past, but also on the transition processes bringing in other and more complex views, perspectives and theoretical aspects, for example looking critically at the 'old' tales of imperialism and exploitation, hence bringing in more constructivist and post-colonial elements. This growing literature, including the work force, their histories, thoughts, and relationships should long ago have abandoned the enclave term, but that seems not to be the case. Reading through the life-histories and other information provided by inhabitants in Coto Sur I will argue that seen from their point of view, the term 'contact-zone'; coined by Pratt (1992) as

the space in which people previously separated historically and geographically come into contact with one another in relations of dominance and subordination  
(1992, in Nash 2004: 118),

is more fitting. Particularly the women's ambiguous narratives about how they had experienced living in the banana farm cuadrantes, how they saw the aesthetic of *la Zona Blanca* (the white functionaries' living compounds), and how it was the women who mainly kept track with their kin, trying to keep kinship relations as intact as possible, as a security

safety net. As I have come to see it, the enclave term is misleading when it comes to an understanding of women's lives in the *la ZonaBananera*, the enclave. It may be so, that these women felt subordinated, but they did, in turn, rework selectively, reinvented and reappropriated the cultural materials of the 'colonial metropole', to cite Pratt. If one is to try to re-combine economic and cultural perspectives, I think the rather one-sided use of the term enclave functions more as a smokescreen, while thinking with 'contact zone' can open up more analytical avenues.

### **A Gendered Perspective on Banana Zones**

When I was working with the situation in Coto Sur and the Southern Zone I read Steve Striffler's (1999, 2002, 2003) accounts about another former enclave; the banana zone Tenguel on the Southern coast of Ecuador. These two banana zones had many similarities, not so strange as both had integrated parts of United Fruit Co.'s fruit networks for more than fifty years. Both had also experienced the gradual pullout of the multinational, finally to have all export production closed off, thus were victims of strong external structural forces. I have noted, with interest, that Striffler's assessments of people's struggles following the pullout of UFCo's Banana Plantations in Hacienda Tenguel in Ecuador, is a process with recognizable traits to what happened in la Zona Sur in Costa Rica, However, the outcomes of the restructuration processes seemed to be different, at least when it came to the core of the former banana farm district in Coto Sur. The UFCo's Tenguel operations in Ecuador (1934-1962) was followed by workers' invasion of the company land, thereafter a state agrarian reform was implemented, to later be followed by conflicts leading to yet another restructuration process, resulting in a system of individual contract farming of bananas, considered as a disaster by most of the smallholders (Striffler 2002).

Likeness in form with the restructuration processes in the Southern Zone in Costa Rica is evident; nonetheless, the two banana zones come out differently. According to Striffler the former bananeros in Tenguel claim that things were much better before; which was not at all the case in the La Plancha district in Coto Sur. Now, there can be many plausible explanations for this, which exactly illustrates the point Striffler and others also make, that local conditions, be they material, ideological or based on the strength of people's struggle, do make a difference. Among those should particularly be mentioned the Costa Rican state's more intense involvement, as well as the (then) strength of the banana union in Golfito (Chapter 3). Striffler also questions the role of the state,

The Ecuadorian state, provided UFCo with little assistance in developing the region, recruiting workers, or controlling its labour force during the 40s and 50s. This 'absence' gave UFCo considerable freedom, allowing the company to act as the Zone's police and legal power on a day-to-day basis (2002: 93).

I have, when trying to compare the two parallel restructuration processes in more detail, noticed Striffler's use of the concept 'family' and familial ideology when analysing the situation in Ecuador. His 'family findings' differ considerably from my own in Coto Sur, which I think can be a starting point for a feminist critique. In his article 'Class Struggles and Gendered identities in the Restructuring of the Ecuadorian Banana Industry' (1999) he has an interesting discussion of the current state of affairs in the restructured contract farming society and argues that the class and gender identities that had been moulded in the plantation era now could no longer be apt. His explanation is that the (patriarchal) banana company provided what he describes as 'family friendly environments', including clubs and meeting places, and which, he argues, were central to the formation of the working class struggle and identity in Tenguel. He says that this was the UFCo's attempt to control the working class of Tenguel and was rooted in its support and manipulation of gendered institutions and practices,



such as male plantation workers and female housewives making up the family, social clubs, sport teams etc.<sup>326</sup>

The entire community fiercely protecting the very same sets of gendered relationships, rights, and identities that the company had manipulated in order to produce a docile labour force. In contrast, the current system of contract farming has made it impossible to adopt the identity of worker in a more subjective and political sense (1999: 93).

Striffler's observations reflect much writing from so-called pit-communities under pressure, in which what have been seen as complementary gender roles and relations are challenged and elaborated upon (Giesen 1995, Corbin 1981, Leach 2005). Reflecting upon what I had encountered in the stories told, and conversations with women in Coto Sur, they simply did not quite 'fit' with the picture from Tenguel at all. This must have to do with the different situations the peasants/farmers found themselves in Coto Sur and Tenguel, respectively, when interviewed. It is of importance to note that the life-histories from Coto Sur were recollected before the event of the palms (chapter 2), and women - and men - were making their reflections and observations in situations that were not optimal, that is, they did not look back from an economically more stable situation provided by incomes from palmgrowing.

I have therefore ended up with a point of view that this discrepancy not only have their origins in different family policies exercised by the UFCo, but also must have to do with thinking with gender, and being familiar with feminist studies and theorising. As far as I can judge, Striffler's main explanation is based in the concept of 'family', and I think that perhaps the taken-for-granted-ness of the family can open an avenue for different thinking.

Striffler's accounts must lead one to assume that there had to be other cultural patterns in the areas the banana workers were recruited from in Ecuador than low-lying Central America that also inflicts differences in the family-oriented gendered identities he describes. He says, about the situation in the banana era in Tenguel,

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<sup>326</sup> From the outset UFCo equated a stable labour force with a married one, young men who would bring their families and reside in the Zone permanently' (1999: 99)

at the same time women clearly benefit from the higher wages and benefits received by their male relatives, ate better, well maintained homes.. (1999: 99).

He also holds that women's claims on their husbands' wages homes and benefits were strengthened. According to Striffler;

masculinity was based on men's perception of themselves as family providers engaged in a quintessential masculine occupation'(op.cit: 103). And that ; the withdrawal of services undermined the nuclear family supported by UFCo, including both the male provider and the female housewife', moreover that it had led the women to join men in strikes, and '-women had organised in a support committee that eventually evolved into one of the first women's political organizations on the coast (op.cit: 104).

These observations are indeed akin to the 'pit-community' identities mentioned above. The situation and practices Striffler accounts for in Ecuador did, as mentioned, not quite correspond to what the women in Coto Sur had experienced on the plantations in La Zona Sur in Costa Rica where they had been living, as described in chapter 2.<sup>327</sup> These divergent perceptions might of course indicate that a multinational fruit company like the UFCo would exercise different personnel policies in different parts of the world, which would be no surprise, but it also means that Striffler's observations in Ecuador are not necessarily helpful in other banana enclaves; but rather that both cultural gendered practices and policies vary.

I am not in a position to make a comparison between the two banana enclaves at all (which certainly would have been more than exciting to do), but rather to ask how far it is possible to stretch the gender ideologies, here interpreted as family, in analyses? How much the cultural differences between lowland Central America and Ecuador mean, I do not know, but my impression, based on the material from Coto Sur is that they must be considerable

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<sup>327</sup> I have to base my impressions on the lifehistories of the women in Coto Sur, and there might very well be more family-friendly environments than what they said. I did not make any detailed studies (which should be done when people are still alive), but my impression stays the same. In Tenguel Striffler holds that the male breadwinner and female housewife was unattainable before- that the women who had used to work before, now did not have to.

when it comes to gender and gender relations. In Coto Sur/Zona Sur in Costa Rica, people's migration histories and legacies had produced household forms that were anything but nuclear and family in a strict definition of the term (chapters 4 and 5). It is also worth noticing that the women who came to Coto Sur, from the banana plantations in La Zona Sur in the early period (1973/74), explained that their main reason for leaving was to get away from the plantations and - some as well - admitted that it was an opportunity to get a way from their *compañeros* also. There has apparently been more typically abandonments and acceptance for striking up new relationships in the Southern Zone in Costa Rica than what Striffler has found in Ecuador, but it may also indicate that it was perhaps the women who were unsatisfied with the situation at the banana plantations that were among the first to leave when opportunities for land opened in Coto Sur.

Striffler says his writings are based on people's own experiences, but it seems as if he does not question the family unit, although he asserts that when the women had become housewives on the plantations, their economic dependence on men grew. This was also a story that women in Coto Sur told when they first came to the plantations in the Southern Zone as spouses. Nonetheless, the majority of the women we listened to also related that such a family idyll was hardly possible to sustain, they had to work hard all the time, making foods to sell, doing odd jobs, to try to making their own money to sustain their children, as their claim on the men's wages were not absolute at all.

These differences may, therefore, either entail that men in Tenguel were acting more responsibly and were truly altruistic, or, another possibility is that the spouses in Tenguel perhaps were interviewed together, as spouses, or families, and were looking back on what appeared as better times for them? I also miss information about if and how internal negotiations in the households in Tenguel were carried out.

Carrying out research in Coto Sur we also experienced that the family/household could be the setting for interviews and conversations, but in addition to this information, we

also had the SMFC Women's Groups, the SMFC team, and the focus on the peasant women, to complement, and interpret the impressions. I am therefore inclined to think that this must be part of the explanation for the different gendered outcomes and perceptions of the otherwise parallel stories in La Zona Sur in Costa Rica and Tenguel in Ecuador. By concentrating initially on the women in Coto Sur, and their life histories and experiences, what came on the table, would not necessarily be the same if the purpose of the study had been to consider how the ex-bananero/farming-family had experienced and reflected upon their pasts altogether.

Another observation, when comparing the accounts from the two zones, was how little experience with community, collaboration, etc. the women in Coto Sur had, while Striffler reports about much higher collective engagement in Tenguel. Women in CotoSur were, most of them, very concerned with their children and their own situation and which was the main challenge for the SMFC Women's Project to overcome. This does point to explanations launched before, pressure to survive in often hostile environments, lack of traditions of civil society in Costa Rica, as well as apparently little common and shared experiences on the plantations the women had lived<sup>328</sup>. But this does not alter the overall impressions discussed above. Striffler maintains that the basis for women's increased political activity and presence in what he refers to as the public sphere in Tenguel was rooted in and legitimised by, their roles as housewives (shaped by UFCo's policies), and that this had created a unity of interests between men and women that was based on a broadly similar sense of emotional loss and entitlements. This is in line with what many feminist writers have observed when it comes to women's organisations and mobilisation patterns in Latin America; that the major basis has been on family-welfare aspects (Jelin 1991; Bose and Acosta 1995; Hallum 2003)

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<sup>328</sup> This will of course depend on many things, first of all the time aspect. Mora Vega (2006) does mention very active, supporting women in La Zona Sur in the early 1950s. Hopefully others will be able to carry out research about the role of women in the history of the banana regime in *La Zona Bananera* in the future.

While the situation in Ecuador ended up with banana contract farming and under private contractors, the situation in Coto Sur, with a strictly organised regime involving the state, the international lending institutions, and the palm cooperative, probably have given rise to women's different interpretations of family', community etc.

By focusing on some of the terms used and applied, in 'restructuring' analyses, I have also brought up some of the almost contradictory findings between the former banana zones, Coto Sur and Tenguel, in order to illustrate how complex such situations may appear, and how careful one really have to be when gender is to be taken into account.

### **Contemplating Gendered Geographies and Restructurations**

*One the one hand, restructuring depends heavily on gendered discourse and gender ideology for its own construction because they make it appear natural and inevitable. On the other hand, restructuring entails reworkings of the boundaries between and meanings of femininity and masculinity, which are intimately related to shifting boundaries and meanings of private and public, domestic and international, and local and global (Marchand and Runyan 2000: 19)*

Another analytical perspective to I would like to bring in, is a more critical approach to so-called rural restructuring, as the processes taking place in Coto Sur also could be perceived as. The major social struggle emphasised in such perspectives have been the unequal access to the means of production, in this case; the land, and the accompanying benefits, such as credit, training, market etc., organised in a evolutionary order invoking a movement from 'bad and backwards' - towards 'future and progress'.

It is rather tempting to draw on the salience of what is termed 'economic' when it comes to discussing former banana plantations turned into other forms of productive activities, as the transnational fruit companies operating globally on basis of profits are the most powerful actors, having used control over space as one of their primary strategies. Political economy, concerned about states and workers' struggles (such as invasions, rural

reforms, etc.) are also important perspectives in those stories and geographies, and the historical perspectives can also be brought together with the idea of 'place enactment' (in John Law's (2000, 2004, terminology), but more importantly: inviting to look closer at how ideas about gender and place, could be further developed and better understood when braiding together these perspectives.

In Coto Sur and the Southern region one could state that different place-enactments over time and spaces are represented, and that different activities are inscribed in the landscape as early homesteading, rainforests, plantations, smallholdings, parcels, palmgroves, etc. What one chooses to call this, is of less importance, 'contested landscapes' has been images increasingly studied and analysed, for instance in cultural studies and associated fields. Trying to summarise some of this, it could be said to be about the analytical efforts to combine place-enactment thinking, with a restructuration focus and gender, into which, I think, one could make use of several terms from feminist studies and theories. The particular challenge, as I see it, could be described as getting to grips with the emerging encounters between what often is sorted out as social/cultural processes, and other times, as 'economic', and in order to see women, gender relations, identity constructions etc., in analysing such restructuration processes that the one taking place in Coto Sur. Generally speaking women tend to be more present in culture - than in economy- dominated academic disciplines, and a growing number of so-called critical geographers have, since the 1990s, been opting for more and better dialogues between the cultural and the economic domains, and this is reflected in the academic debates, not only in the explicit feminist ones (Castree 2004; McDowell 2000; Sayer 1997, 2000; Hart 1998).

A problem, as I have encountered it, is that so few (male) researchers in those fields really have taken in what feminist theory offers, not the other way around, and I will return to another such example later. This is perhaps a main finding during my 'homework' for this thesis. Not only geographers have been struggling with the integration of different

disciplinary approaches to encounter the complex contemporary world. Marchand and Runyan, political scientists, have taken yet another road based in international political economy, and in an edited volume called 'Gender and Global Restructuring, Sightings, sites and resistances' (2002), and stress the importance of 'feminist sightings and global restructuration'. They also pay heed to the investigations carried out concerning the relationship between gender and global restructuring, and that they

tend to focus largely on the materialist or economic dimensions of restructuring and tend to reduce gender analysis of restructuring to the differential effects it has on women and men in the workplace and the home' (op.cit: 1).

Their view is that these ideological shifts have led feminists to probe beyond the material economic and political effects of global restructuring on women and focus on how gender operates at the symbolic, ideational, and cultural level to produce and direct global restructuring in particular ways to reduce resistance to it.

Summing up, one may say that by making efforts to combine historical re-workings of long time territorial development processes in different academic disciplines, such as ethnography, geography and economy etc., one is currently trying to get better to grips with the world, but it varies, and depends on the situatedness and positionality, for example whether the intention is to demonstrate that political struggles do make a difference, and one wants to establish that 'agency' is still significant. What one so often discovers, however, is that the complexities caused for instance by 'gender' tend to be overlooked in much academic writing or simply not dealt with ('it makes things so difficult'), a modification now is rather that many do pay heed to 'women' for example in as separate chapter, but more often than not, continues to remain gender-blind in the rest of the analysis, for example by the use of undifferentiated families, by which scholars demonstrate clear and sound that they are not informed by feminist theorising, unfortunately. More recent writing from many of the 'plantation cultures', with the difference that those are usually set in a colonial setting (the

South),<sup>329</sup> are increasingly taking more cultural perspectives on board<sup>330</sup> including gender, and finally, the peasant studies tradition, also drawn on throughout this work is becoming more culturally oriented as well, only barely touched upon here.

There is no doubt that combination of detailed ethnographies and scale-jumping, as for instance works of feminist geographies often are examples of, are methods and approaches that may provide such crossroads, and creation of ‘nested stories’. Gillian Hart, among others, pleads for what she describes as ‘Critical ethnography’, which she says is,

precisely one of ‘advancing from the abstract to the concrete’ in the sense of building concrete concepts that are adequate to the historical and geographical complexity with which they are seeking to grapple (2004: 97)

Nagar et al. (2002) want to bring into conversation with feminist analyses through inclusion of spaces, scales, subjects and forms of work that have been largely neglected, and Rankin (2003) says that

anthropologists and geographers are increasingly turning to one another for tools to analyse the present global political-economic conjuncture (2003: 718).

Another critique of globalisation/restructuration studies is the exclusion of ‘nature’ in the mainly economic analyses which slowly are being re-negotiated, for example in banana history by bringing in the agro-ecological perspectives (Marquart 2001, 2002; Bucheli 2005; Whatmore 2001). I have tried to bring in several of these perspectives when ‘conversing’ with my materials; ethnographic details, women’s agency, but also by considering ‘land’, and redistribution of resources for instance, based on gendered perspectives, on equality and fairness, for a start.

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<sup>329</sup> I use ‘colonial’ very undifferentiated here, but do draw on ideas about hegemony and dependencies- although the fruit multinationals were closely and part of the colonial projects, and securing raw materials see Hobsbawm (1987/1994).

<sup>330</sup> Bourgois’ analysis of the Boca de Toro banana plantations in Panamá is an example here, although he is not analysing women, (1989), Duncan (2002) bring in ethnic conflicts on tea plantations in Sri Lanka while Verena Stolcke has studied gender and conflicts on coffee plantations in Brazil (1988, 1991, 1995) See also resource based communities in the North, Marshall (2001).



## The Emergence of the Palm Project

One of the main findings in this work is that the Palm project was a more or less total male affair that benefitted former ex-bananeros who already had been granted land. This gave reason to ask why one had selected trees as development vehicles in Coto Sur and not something that also would benefit women or people without access to land? When toiling with reconstructing the background story in Coto Sur, to try to answer that, I discovered that the decision to select oil palms as the major vehicle for further development in the settlement could be traced back to some older documents that I came across as mildewed exemplars in a state of decay on the shelves in the SMFC office in the IDA compound in Laurel<sup>331</sup>.

However, most of these documents that I later analysed, did I find in different offices, archives and shelves in the capital San José, both in 1986 and more so in 1990, and most of those I could not make sense of then, only when re-reading them long after. Doing that I realised that many, perhaps the very majority of the textual representations about ‘Coto Sur’ produced later on (public papers, articles etc.), have, as far as I can judge, been based on several inaccurate assumptions about who did what, and when initiatives were taken, etc., and which must be considered as ‘bonuses’ to my own initial readings of the documents.<sup>332</sup> Most of the planning and formulation of policies that resulted in the tangible Palm project in Coto Sur, was carried out in the Alberto Monge, PLN presidential period (1982-86) and his four year plan *Volvamos a la Tierra* (let us return to the land), but the background and all that was behind that did not appear explicitly there.<sup>333</sup>

Another approach would be to look closer at how the background and upcoming of the Palm project was being assessed by different agents in the development process in Coto Sur.

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<sup>331</sup> The documents in questions have most of them, been cited already, the majority were written in the *Series de Estudios* of the PNUD/OIT/Itco collaboration project. See the bibliography in the back for further details.

<sup>332</sup> Particularly all that has had to do with the coining of the Palm programme seems to be to have been couched in rather inaccurate assumptions, which to me, has been a surprising discovery. Hopefully later historians with access to the proper archives will be able to rectify most of this sometimes in the future.

<sup>333</sup> One would have to be updated on the political scene in Costa Rica of course, see for instance, but that is not a line of argumentation that I have pursued here.

One thing that struck me in this regard, when close-reading the different projects in Coto Sur over time, was that without exception, be it the IDA, or the Banana Company, the banana cooperative Coopetrabatur, or anyone else, the term *paternalismo* was never used to depict the Palm programme, strangely enough, because that was a term that was frequently drawn upon on just about all other occasions when categorising the situation in Coto Sur by whomever seemed to be in charge, both in talk and texts.

How did that come about? The experts working in the Palm project's Executive Unit in Laurel in 1990 certainly were considered as arrogant and not particularly understanding by the inhabitants in Coto Sur, that was true, but the whole endeavour of imposing hundreds of thousands of palm trees on the land was not. Assumably this must have something to do with the rather successful selling of the palms as the saviour of the people and the settlement (cfr. The BID texts in the prologue), in spite of the fact that the parceleros themselves had certainly not been the ones who had pushed the idea of a palm growing region forwards, many of them had been unconvinced in the beginning. (There were several of the parceleros in Coto Sur who had both experiences with working with palms, and had seen the consequences, both in the earliest UFCo plantings in Quepos, as well in their plantations in neighbouring Coto Valley, and it was known that the establishment of palm groves resulted in fewer jobs than the banana plantations did provide).<sup>334</sup> It was therefore probably not the crop, the palm trees as such, but the setting and packing of them that legitimated and convinced people.

### **The 'Gender Impasse' - some further Explorations**

*Un desarrollo rural integrado en donde el individuo, el campesino, se constituye el actor principal del proceso- que no es solo economico, sino fundamentalmente social* (Serie Estudios No.50:)

(An integrated rural development in which the individual, the peasant, is being constituted in the main agent of the process, that is not only economically, but fundamentally social)

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<sup>334</sup> This fact had resulted in many protests among banana workers elsewhere, for example in Honduras, to protest the banana companies' replacement of banana with oilpalms. See Erazo (2000)

The earliest planning for this huge agro-industrial project was apparently done as part of the COS/018 cooperation in the 1970s (UNDP, ILO and IDA), and reported in the *Series de Estudios* that I have been drawing upon many times in this work, particularly in chapters 3 and 7.

Interestingly this cooperation took place in a period in which the IDA had also established its first Women's Desk (1980/81), which one perhaps would have expected to function as a watchdog for women's interests in the planning processes in Coto Sur and other of the IDA's agricultural settlements. Later the SMFC (1983) was opened with a more comprehensive gender agenda, and Costa Rica was also early creating a gender state 'machinery' in the 1970s, 1980s and 90s, and the planning ministry, Mideplan, worked out four years plans into which all foreign co-financed programmes and projects had to be fitted.<sup>335</sup>

Nor were there any 'women's issues added on to these documents either.'<sup>336</sup> The Costa Rican government was very much involved in the preparation of the Palm project, represented by one or more of its ministries or authorities (like the IDA, the MAG, the Mideplan etc.), all of which should of course be under the same jurisdiction, recalling that Costa Rica ratified the CEDAW convention in 1984.

Most of the major development actors (FAO, ILO, UNDP etc.) today have their elaborate gender frameworks published on the web (www), in which check list, questions, strategies, goals, techniques etc., easily can be accessed. In the 1980s this was not so easily available as today, but these institutions, as well as states and ministries, had started to establish women - and gender units, producing gender training kits, etc.. Thus, the possibilities of influencing the plans, documents, and practices that were important in the Coto Sur case should therefore be in place, as these institutions had been in activity since the

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<sup>335</sup> See Moser (1993) for an overview of 'gender planning'.

<sup>336</sup> The PLN's four years plan (Volvamos a LaTierra) 1982-1986 has in its chapter 3 (*Compromiso con la democracia*) a part called '*Participación Femenina*' (7.3) and there are listed many areas where women are to be integrated (pp. 109 -110).

1970s and the Costa Rican government had a keen eye on discriminatory laws etc. In other words, the institutional setting around the Palm project in Coto Sur should in theory be well equipped to tackle the gender issue.

In spite of this relative strong presence of official gender claims, the Palm project seemed to have escaped any gendering efforts, what I formerly have alluded to as a 'gendered impasse'. What is perhaps most remarkable in this case, is that it looks as if there has not been any 'gender diagnosis' carried out at all in the preparation of a US\$ 51 million project converting the area completely, despite of the fact that at the time the project was officially approved (1985 and 1986), and later implemented (1989-93 and onwards), the involved international and national institutions had developed extensive gender lists and tools that were only a touch away.

One may ask if nobody involved had asked the Palm programme the 'gender question'? And ask if the Palm project, and its co-operating and financing and expert institutions were accountable to women? The official documents available concerned with the Palms, for example the cited government CR-110 document, do speak in a very technical language partly in contrast with the COS/018 form the late 1970s language and the proper IDA's; the Palm project is represented as a huge and important project, based on 'scientific' enquiry and knowledge. This does not entail that in the preceding planning process there might not have been efforts, that I have no knowledge about (and again; this could be a very interesting study), but there are no traces of any such gendered insights or knowledge in the final papers and documents that are accessible, thus what lies in between one can only guess.

As it appears from the papers, documents and my previous analyses, I will suggest two possible explanations for the gender-blindness or gender neglect encountered in most of what has to do with the development projects in Coto Sur. The first is what I already have said, that the 'family' understood as a producing family unit (*unidad familiar*), was used actively in the representations. Hence women were lumped together with, and assumed to be the same as

family, and assumingly to be included, they were not seen as having any agency of their own.

In the PLN four-year plan for example, the first chapter reiterates that

*Volvamos a la Tierra significa un sano desarrollo rural, del hombre campesino y de su familia..(1981: 13)*

(Returning to the land signifies a healthy rural development for the man the peasant and for his family..)

The other was that there does not seem as if there had been any active ‘gender advocates’ (Staudt 1985, 1990) within these institutional systems that broke in, at least there are no traces of possible attempts in the documents. This does not entail that there might not have been attempts to include ‘women’ or ‘gender’ in the plans, only that such efforts have then disappeared again, in the next round of reworking, a process only too well known to women- and other activists.

Another promising avenue of analysis in this case, (which there is no room to pursue further here), is to considering the gendering of these institutions (Acker 1982; Goetz ed 1997; Wilson, ed 2001; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Staudt ed 1990; Kardam 1991 to mention some). Sophie Bessis points to some possible explanations when it comes to international organisations and how they understand gender. She distinguishes between what she calls ‘the two schools of official international feminism’ (2003: 634), between the UN system that she says is based on law and justice to move equality forward (Human Rights, CEDAW etc.) - and the World Bank system that considers improvements in women’s equality as a way to measure the functioning of a healthy market economy, the latter she calls ‘the instrumental feminism of the World Bank’ (ibid).

I do not know what happened, there might as stated very well have been active ‘femocrats’ trying to do something about it, but according to information from interviews, there had not been any questions about this project at all.<sup>337</sup> It seems to me that the ones that were engaged in women’s and gender issues did not have access to, or were not present in the

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<sup>337</sup> Interview, Mideplan, San José, november 1986

institutions involved in such big agricultural schemes as this represented. One may perhaps say that they have been structurally excluded; building on assumptions that women/gender issues were understood as ‘cultural’ or ‘social’ (*Dirección de Mujer y Familia*, The Directory of Women and Family; was in this period of time located at the Ministry of Culture and Youth), and that men’s issues were interpreted as such as finance, industry and agriculture and were exonerated from such ‘external’ pressures?<sup>338</sup>

Nor should one rule out the possibility that ‘women/gender’ issues were considered as something that could be added on, as *el problema de la mujer*,<sup>339</sup> entailing that it did not even occur to the central agents in the planning process of the Palm project that they would, or should ask for what the women in Coto Sur would think about their future, or try to include gender aspects in their thinking. They seemingly took it for granted. The plans and policies produced in these institutional settings are in the main based on academic, often ethnographical, knowledge but in the end of the day, women (and other groups) tend to be treated exactly as that; special groups that at the most are added on. This perspective, however, includes also most of the more discursively attenuated writers on development processes and ethnographies of aid in the late 1990s, few of those build their knowledge on feminist theory, if women or gender are mentioned, it is, still remains a ‘special group’ (Escobar 1995, Apthorpe and Des Gasper 1996, Edelman 1997, de Vries 1992, Long 1992.).

One may therefore keep trying to find out how it was possible that the many plans and documents about this comprehensive development project have passed the many boards or committees that they must have done, as such a huge sum of money was involved and so many requirements and securities claimed, without being object of any gender analysis.

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<sup>338</sup> It was not until 1997 that the women’s office in Costa Rica did elaborate an addendum to the national plan 1996-98) for the Equality of Opportunities between men and women) that focused on the agricultural sector and the environment. See Deere and León (2001: 126-127)

<sup>339</sup> This was of saying did puzzle me much when in the field in Coto Sur, that ‘*el problema*’ in Spanish also corresponded to subject, topic, issue etc

The only observation I have been able to come up with is that this huge project has just slipped all observant eyes, has eluded watchful gender eyes during a period when the UN system had systematically begun to build up focal points and gender offices.

How the Palm Project has passed through the board rooms of the BID, the World Bank, the CDC, and the proper Costa Rican government without paying heed to any of this is still a mystery, but there apparently have occurred more than one 'impasse', including changes of governments which was one of the explanations centrally placed feminists in Costa Rica always launched, when 'women' or 'gender' tended to fall out. One may therefore conclude that the Palm project in Coto Sur must have succeeded to pass through the red-tape before 'gender mainstreaming' had been established as an institutional policy in those institutions, and the different women's desks in the institutions were possibly not involved. Hence, there must have been an 'impasse' of at least a decade when it came to 'integrating' women and ensuring that equal opportunities between men and women before launching such huge enterprises as the Palm programme.

Instead, the Palm project, as many other such gigantic development projects, seemed to have been based upon assumption upon assumption about the needs of the population in Coto Sur (variously represented as poverty combating, or supporting ex-bananeros, victims of transnational companies and international capital, etc.), and not a single word about potential needs and interests the female part of the population may have. They were never asked. And if they had been asked, one would have to enquire how their 'needs' had become political issues, who would be talking on their behalf, etc. (Fraser 1987, 1997). Listening to the women in Coto Sur, it is probably reason to think that the women's needs talk was not read and met and interpreted in a manner that it was possible to translate directly into policies. Their ways of expressing themselves were more often than not baked into long and complicated positionings, in which gender identities and gender relations were negotiated, and that often would require translations that would have to bring in many more aspects, a job that the

SMFC team in Coto Sur was struggling with, and which also, kept them at bay, as it took so much energy.

One may perhaps say that women living in Coto Sur, as well as the ones that were supposed to represent them, were not talking in the same language, and that they also, certainly, were not at the same level, or scale. One may even say that women living in the Coto Sur settlement were at that stage not capable to raise demands that could be met, by the authorities, in a ‘gender progressive’ manner, and that was also the clue to how the SMFC director (see chapter 2) had caught what her Women’s Office in the IDA would have to work with and towards, a recognition that seemed to be incomprehensible for many of the remaining actors in the development schemes in Coto Sur.

### **The Women’s Project in Coto Sur: A Separate Endeavour?**

*Que el eje central del proyecto está dado a la necesidad de integración y legitimación de la mujer en el desarrollo rural de Coto Sur (SMFC/IDA 1986, Mandate Women’s Project Coto Sur)*

‘The central axis of the project is the need to integrate and legitimate women in the rural development in Coto Sur (above)’, is the starting line in the mandate of the Women’s Project in Coto Sur. However, when it came to the event of the Palm project and the restructuring process in the settlement, integration of women seemed to have been forgotten. My conviction is, however, that among the actors involved the transition process in Coto Sur, first and foremost the IDA and their collaborators, it was believed that ‘women’, and whatever their interests may have been, were already met by the presence of the very SMFC Women’s Project, and they were the ones to be taking care of women’s stuff, hence, apparently, that there was no need to worry.

Looking closer at the various actors involved with development in Coto Sur, it could be worthwhile to consider Latour’s (1986) suggestion:



actors in development constantly are engaged in creating order and unity through political acts of composition', and, 'it involves examining the way in which heterogeneous entities; people, ideas, interests, events and objects (seeds, engineered structures, pumps, vehicles, computers, fax machines, or data bases-) are tied together by translating of one kind or another into the material and conceptual order of a successful project'.<sup>340</sup>

The involved agents or actors in the 'development processes' in Coto Sur, in such a perspective are ranging from (the absence of) the peasant women in the settlement, the field- and other agents (including the researcher), and particularly the various institutions involved over time. As explained elsewhere, there were apparently few if any exchanges of perspectives between the different development actors based in Laurel beyond exchanges of practical services in the pre-palm period, while even that seemed to have waned when the Palm project arrived (and a new SMFC team had been installed). The (new) male SMFC director did answer, on my direct question, in May of 1990 that, "*Nosotros practicamente no hemos tenido contacto con el proyecto*". (In practice we have not had any contact with the (Palm) project). His stance was reconfirmed by two of the participants in the (second) SMFC team when interviewed retrospectively.<sup>341</sup>

First of all, it is important to recall that the efforts to 'integrate and legitimate women' into the development process in Coto Sur has a history dating back to the earliest time of the IDA settlement, and a number of individual agents and institutions have been involved over the years. However, there have also been a number of more indirect contributors, who have not explicitly worked towards women's autonomy, rights and recognition, but indirectly might have played a part in doing the opposite, frequently resulting in incongruence and ambiguity in actions and behaviours. The story about how the BID personnel in the Palm Executive Unit, and others as well, did not want to support the SMFC Women's Project by

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<sup>340</sup> Latour (1986) in Mosse (2004)

<sup>341</sup> Laurel 1990, interviews with two of the former SMFC workers

using their *soda* in Laurel, do, I think, reflect that the consciousness among the male external experts concerning women's struggles and interests, was just about non-existent. How should the technical experts with such an attitude be able to 'see' that many women's needs would not be met by the Palm project and their actions, or did they at all care? The attitude of many of the IDA extensionists that the SMFC team worked together with in 1986 tended to be that women were not real farmers; but that did not entail that they refused to support them if asked, which there were ample examples of, by the women in the first SMFC team usually expressed as their having *compromisos con la mujer*.

To really be able to tell the full story about the role played by the SMFC Women's Project in Coto Sur would require an institutional analysis of the office's location the host institution IDA and many other connections which is beyond the scope of this work<sup>342</sup>. Nonetheless, I would like to bring in some remarks because I think that the way the SMFC's Women's Project came to be implemented (of internal and external reasons that is), might have had a bearing on the 'gender impasse' of the Palm project, and consequently on the situation for women in the Coto Sur settlement.

One predicament of mine, and which I have struggled with over the years, is the contrafactual question about what would have happened if things had marched more according to the SMFC original plans, outlined in the Women's Project mandate. One never would know, many things did happen on the way, but I am pretty sure that the situation for women in the settlement in Coto Sur would have been pictured, and experienced differently.

The initial attention in the SMFC of 'land rights' for women for example, the plans to establish a rotating fund, the research activity (of which this very thesis was initiated), and the more open participatory training approach, were all stripped from the SMFC programme when the new regime took over at the end of 1986, when the Palm project was soon to be initiated (1988).

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<sup>342</sup> Part of this is discussed in Valestrand (forthcoming)

Seeing this in retrospect, I think a better strategy for the SMFC would have been to work towards trying to impact the Palm project<sup>343</sup>. However, this is a position that was not rendered the initial activists and enthusiasts in the SMFC, they were sidelined by development actors focused on control; and the outcome as of 1990, could, I think be phrased by means of Molyneux's (1985) discussion of what she refers to as 'practical and strategic gender interests'. It was only very practical gender interests that were met in the last leg of the SMFC project (1987/89), for a few women who had been successful, the more strategic gender interests, embodied partly by the first SMFC director and her policies through the 'toma-decisiones' and her emphasis on legitimation, was a point at stake. Thus, the more strategic, gender equalising perspectives inherent in the original SMFC project were barred and closed off, not by single actors alone, but by the composite result of bargaining and raw power demonstrations, most of those however, without changing the words and concept at all; the wording was mainly kept intact, while the meanings were quite different, indeed.

As things developed in Coto Sur and San José, my view is that in the end of the day the SMFC was pacified or sidelined, and I think that a way to see this is that gender issues were literally and in practice 'enclaved', of various reasons, whereas it was in fact the big actors, the BID, the CDC, the Executive Unit, the Palm cooperative, the IDA and the Mideplan etc., were left with the total responsibility for gender awareness and never faced it.

This does, in turn, raise many questions; one important one of course is the well known debate about separate institutions/programmes/projects for women, or what later on has been labelled as mainstreaming, defined as

Gender mainstreaming is predicated upon the assumption that gender relations are central to development work, and must be fully reflected in development agenda setting and policy making (UNDP 1998)

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<sup>343</sup> It is interesting to note that in a rural development project carried out in Brazil, an external gender crew had been called upon and only worked with the development institution's extension workers to modify their attitudes. See Sardenberg et al. (1999)

I will not pursue this any further, but leave the questions open-ended. A different, but no less interesting question would be to wonder if the Palm project would have passed the political instances at a later stage in time? It would, but perhaps with a ‘women’s package’ attached to it?

### **Consolidation; A Tremendous Masculine Process**

*El Proyecto tiene el propósito de consolidar y expandir el proceso iniciado por los parceleros de Coto Sur para transformar sus fincas destinadas a cultivos anuales de subsistencia en unidades de mayor producción y productividad, mediante plantaciones permanentes intensivas de cultivos dirigidos a la agroindustria de exportación y al consumo interno. (WPC/CR0024-18, CR-110, p. 1, and Apéndice III)*

(The project’s goal is to consolidate and expand the process initiated by the parceleros in Coto Sur in order to transform their annual subsistence farming to units with better productivity and production, by means of permanent intensive cultivation directed to export agroindustry and internal consumption)

This excerpt is the introduction in the Costa Rican government’s proposal for the approval of the comprehensive Palm project in Coto Sur (1985) and is thus a very central document laying in the bottom of the transformations in Coto Sur. In this quotation the development process is portrayed as the ‘consolidation’ and ‘expansion’ of a process that had been initiated by the parceleros in Coto Sur, also alluded to in my discussion of what I have called ‘territorial narratives’ in chapter 3. Hence, looking closer at some of the representations (Hall 1997) in both this and other documents, if and how they are gendered, should contribute to an analysis of the events of gender and the Palm project in Coto Sur.

In these documents concerned about about the future lines of development in the settlement from their inceptions in the mid -1970s to the planning and implementation of the palm growing and cocoa scheme in late 1980s and early 1990s, there can be detected, as stated before, a main ‘modernising’ line of argumentation, (often expressed as ‘progress’) but with shifting emphasis on the mainly economic activities; for example by improving basic grains

agriculture, and efficiency, but also legitimating this with participation, moral arguments and with varying (male) development ‘objects’, ranging from ex-bananeros, to campesinos to entrepreneurs, respectively, brought up in the previous chapters.

Among my main concerns is what I will call the knowledge base (in a broad meaning) that these documents have been founded on, that is its thoroughgoing lack of a gender perspective. I hope to get better insights to determine what has taken place seeing this as a (gender) planning process, simply by asking for example ‘who is talking’, and ‘about what’, influenced by Foucault’s thinking,<sup>344</sup> and a ‘what’s the problem approach’, how problems are described, implied causations and the implications which follow (Bacchi 1999: 35), referring to Deborah Stone (1988);

(P)roblem definition is never simply a matter of defining goals and measuring our distance from them. It is rather the *strategic representation* of situations.. (orig emphasis).

Bacchi adds that there is a need to examine problem representations in terms of other structuring discourses, those affecting gender relations, those prescribing sexual roles, those categorising people by skin colour or accent or sexual orientation. To unpack problem representations, and that a ‘what’s the problem approach’ accepts nothing as given, thus how are women and men in Coto Sur represented?

In the IDA’s and other documents and stories, including the BID article(1999), the Palm programme was, as a rule, represented and depicted not as something new and extraordinary, but as ‘consolidation’, a consolidation of a long process, in which it was the ex-bananeros who had taken the initiative then, long ago, and the palms were thus only the very crowning of the efforts. This is in many ways a very plausible story; it both takes care of the dignity of the ex-bananeros, and at the same time has added maturity, know-how and technology onto it. The heroes remain the same, but modernised.

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<sup>344</sup> See for example Flyvbjerg (1993); Neumann (2001)

The most common, current story encountered in the late 1990s, upon which all the later ones seem to be based (when the palm project was up and running with the plant and the refinery), is the one in which the banana workers in the Southern Zone through struggles and pains, have made it to become entrepreneurs in their own enterprise, supported by the international and national community and their associates.

In different versions this story has been transferred in the world, including through the Catholic Church and is, as repeated over and over again, the one that triggered me to go on with elaborating on the Coto Sur material (prologue). It is portrayed as a success story, framed in neo-liberal thoughts and concepts of the present (entrepreneur, enterprise, self-owning) and is about deserving persons (they have struggled). In the variations of these stories based on the BID article; there are three interesting observations; one is the manner the past is described, second - how fabulous the situation is now, and thirdly; that it is only about men, or at the most, 'families' - there is not one reference I have encountered in which women have been given a voice.

The past, which is without exceptions described in derogatory terms; as 'Wasteland' (*Páramo*)<sup>345</sup> whereas today is described as, 'The Promised Lands', 'Macondo of Costa Rica', or 'An oasis of hope'. It is the material and security aspects that are emphasised, including through the voices of some of the veterans, a couple of former banana workers who lend their perspectives to the world.

As this master narrative unfolds, it depicts a well-known strategy that things have to be simplified in order to reach its audiences, in this case it is an international audience obviously, and the BID's need to (re) present and thus - legitimate - their actions and policies. This is simplest done by emplotment; pulling out the man, the (ex-)banana worker hero who has fought and won, over a multinational company, the wilderness, etc., and now is pictured as his own boss in his own enterprise!

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<sup>345</sup> In later versions I have encountered '*Páramo*' (accessed on the web 2002), has in fact been replaced by '*Tierra improductiva*' which give quite different connotations. One should probably ask why!

I have encountered few if any critical questions except from German researchers who question both the monoculture and the concentration only to the Coto Sur settlement (Altenburg et al. 1990) and ecological movements (Rainbow Alliance, etc)

There are many more threads to pull from this particular story; most of them have been presented on the previous pages. Here is the story of bananas; which is captivating for a 'Western' audience, and which draws on all sorts of recognisable discourses; from anti-imperialist struggles, blood and honour, fights for national sovereignty, the 'Tropical adventure', exploitation of workers, masculinity through physical strength and independence; and as was definitely the case in the Southern Zone, the strengths of the banana workers' union. The dependency' development discourses, including perspectives on 'peasants' and agricultural reforms, are also easily recognised.

In the later plans and documents, presented and discussed above, (that is the ones from the preparation the implementation of the Palm Project onwards) from the mid-1980s; the 'banana past' is represented a lot more simplified, whereas the documents from the earliest period, of course closer in time, were more ambiguous when it came to characterising the protagonists, the (ex) bananeros; they were, then, both communists and breaking the law through their invasion activities (*precaristas*), and would have to be converted to become more deserving citizens<sup>346</sup>. Preferably as responsible fathers, heads of households; the very palm cooperative did talk in the same language when saying that they sustained: *Plena desarrollo de la unidad familiar* (Coopetrabatur RL)<sup>347</sup>

However, as Enloe (1989) so eloquently puts it 'Bananas has a history, a gendered history', which, as stated and documented, is totally excluded in these discourses, and when women occasionally do emerge, they tend to be heavily essentialised, as will be returned to

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<sup>346</sup> This I think is apparent in some of the IDA documents, for instance Salazar et al. r(1977), but also the work of Seligson (198,; Part II. In the proposal for the recommendation of the palm project is a typical synopsis found on the pages 5-6, paragraphs 2.18- to 2.2.1, 'Origen del Asentamiento de Coto Sur ' (Programa Agroindustrial de Coto Sur, CR 110, Propuesta de Prestamo, 1985;

<sup>347</sup> [www.coopeagropal](http://www.coopeagropal) accessed 2002

shortly. The banana workers were undoubtedly men, and did not appear as having family or dependants.<sup>348</sup> But the use of ex-bananeros today, do activate all these old tales, even in the more recent ecologically and consumer related tales, in which the so-called 'fruit chains' are emphasised, as in the Fair Trade discourses referred to, into which is also built assumption about democratic and participatory agents and institutions. When Enloe (1989) exclaims that 'bananas has a history, a gendered history', one may pose a connected questions; what about the palms - don't they have a gendered history too? Or is that history being completely wrapped up in some rather vague notions of family-farms and 'productive units'? On the other hand, there is, as mentioned before, little exotic about growing oilpalms. The palm groves and their production regime are rather boring, and do not trigger any well-known tropes, no wonder such stories have to be constructed, even for internal use.

But the history of the creation of the *agroindustrial* can be seen as, and read as a much needed story about modernist agriculture, and successful restructuration internationally, granting credit to both male heroes, the Costa Rican state, and government and a number of other actors. They can be read as part of a grand national narrative and which not yet has been really contested.<sup>349</sup>

### **From 'unruly' Bananeros- to 'entrepreneurial' Palmeros- 'y sus Familias'**

One may say that in these continuity stories, as they must be seen as, women were (mostly) excluded as active farmers and re-instated as family/wife. And what kind of man was *el palmero*? How should he be re-instated? If he was to run his own plot, he would have to be muscular and strong, but eventually, if he was only to oversee and hire working hands, sons,

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<sup>348</sup> In more recent research and accounts a more complex world is beginning to emanate, in which the hero still is the banana worker, but in which human dilemmas and doubts are more frequently referred to. A very good example, when it comes to give credit to women living on the banana plantations is the long interview with Alvaro Montero Vega (2006).

<sup>349</sup> As also brought up several times, very recently, alternative histories about Costa Rica is now challenging older ones, particularly by the black minority in the Limon province, descendants of the first banana workers brought in from Jamaica around the turn of the century, see chapter 3



or other men; he had to be depicted as smart, to be a 'businessman' or entrepreneur, which invokes a different masculinity (Connell 1995). These new representations had definitely said good-bye to the *campesino* image, so frequent in the earlier development stories that had legitimated aid and external interventions. Whereas the construction of the *ex-bananeros* in the IDA-regime was on the one hand, one who needed to be led and guided, preferably by the IDA, there was also the other image, often held by the (ex) bananeros echoing Robert Williams who says that,

Today's hero in these circles the ones currently being honoured in Central America for taking the initiative to carve out fresh territory for the export trade, the one whose title connotes toughness and commands respect, is the *ganadero* '(cattleman) (1986: 120).

This evident contradiction in the male identities in Coto Sur, was now to be brought into a new regime, for the ones inside - to become *palmeros*. Hence, the new constructions of the *empresario* is one who decides for himself, but the dependencies in the agro-industrial system is wisely undercommunicated, thus the man now may be dreaming about becoming a 'free' man, a *ganadero*? It is really incredible what a change in personality there has been, but the consolidation process is still, depicted as a very masculine process, indeed.

One line of argumentation sustaining this is that the palm oil producers are contributing to the national economy, supplying raw materials for domestic consumption, thereby saving foreign exchanges, even with prospects of exporting at a later stage. Thus, one can read that the *unruly* (read former 'communist' and 'bad mannered') banana workers are becoming dependable citizens contributing to Costa Rican growth and welfare. The palm activities taking place in Coto Sur were in these texts also described as an *empresa de desarrollo integra los eslabones de cadena* (a development enterprise that integrates the links of the chain), or at other times, as the final crowning of the previous efforts of the state, state institutions and the *ex-bananeros*, confirming the historical construction of the modernising project initiated long ago, and I therefore think this also can be read as a redemption history,

that after ‘the lost decade’ of the 1980s, with SAP policies, etc; it was necessary to look forward again.

Or, as a history of genesis; of the creation of ‘the new man’, the new era, etc.in a much tried region. (Occasionally, perhaps of less importance than before, one also can read this master narrative as one meant to rescue the narratives of self-centred regional development that were so significant in the early COS/18 documents, as they were described in plans that were to develop autonomous regions set in ‘dependency discourses’ with participatory elements, carried all through as the ex-bananeros/parceleros/palmeros’ organizational expression, in the end materialized as the palm-cooperative.<sup>350</sup>

In the documents particularly concerning the conversion to palms, the language is, as mentioned above, very technically founded, it is almost exclusively in measurable units; acres, production goals, financial numbers, and ‘producing units’; the tiny aspects of ‘family orientation’ in the rural reform narratives, are now gone, except as the expression of *la unidad familiar* referring to the productive unit, here understood as the former parcel planted with palm trees on and its potential harvests of palm fruits. It is perhaps no surprise that in the neo-liberal era of *agricultura de cambio* there is no gender, the *palmero* is a gender-neutral agent, but he is a man, indeed.

My main observation, when trying to perceive these stories over time, in retrospective, is that they all come out as linear, progressive, and contrasting (positive) achievements to a (negative) past. Moreover, that the main actors and beneficiaries are men, that these agents (men) are taking - or are granted - different roles and identities which are changing and improving; morally and progressively, if one were to put it rather simple they could perhaps be coined as,

‘From unruly *bananeros*-> via immature (but in learning) *parceleros* -> to entrepreneurial palmgrowers’.

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<sup>350</sup> In the beginning there were launched several different forms of organizations see *Serie de Estudios*

And it is worth noticing that in some of the representations, the heroes are not only that, but they are ‘ours’, of *nuestros campesinos* (our peasants) give a very different connotation than ‘outgrower’; and in this manner, they can be distinguished from others; whoever they may be. In a development context this probably could be depicted as competition from abroad, which gives weight to the national arguments.<sup>351</sup> There are some similar observations in this same text to the Costa Rican legislative assembly that would like to take in, which does depict a (rhetorical) really mixing of the argumentation;<sup>352</sup> for example, through *nuestros agricultores palmicultores* (:12) (our palmagriculturalists); and represented as:

*al pasar de asalariados con una mentalidad conformista por la seguridad laboral’..(,1) via ‘Inadecuadas prácticas culturales’.. to ‘dueños de la tierra que cultivan, con una mentalidad empresarial’ (:3). Moreover, he is still el pequeño agricultor (:10),, sometimes ‘el agricultor conjunto con su familia’ (:5) ; (-the agriculturist with his family).<sup>353</sup>*

In this excerpt the palmero have changed from being salaried with a conformist mentality - via inadequate cultural practices, to masters of the land they cultivate with an entrepreneurial mentality.. he is still a small farmer - together with his family..

The project of restoration of the family in Coto Sur, and similar places, has been discussed at several points in this work. That the particular area (within the Palm project parameters) by now is depicted as a sort of family oasis is hard to believe, knowing some of the background histories, but in lack of more detailed and updated information, one may only question why and how the situation should be so different from the rest of Costa Rica, and elsewhere for that matter? It depends on the eyes that see, thus it has probably more to do with a family ‘impasse’ as compared with a past (improved welfare)?

<sup>351</sup> I did assess this in 2001, and I do not know when it was published, in a later edition this part has been

<sup>352</sup> I did notice that, one in one single instance, this paper is referring *productores and productoras* (,3), *Beneficiarios (as)* (,2, 4), which probably can be read to pay tribute to women and gender aware audiences? The rest of the text, however, remain ‘male’.

<sup>353</sup> Proyecto Ley: Modificación de los incisos a) y b) del Artículo 2, de la Ley No 8092, de 23 de febrero de 2001 y sus reformas (Ley de readecuación de la obligación de la Cooperativa Agroindustrial de Productores de Palma Aceitera Responsabilidad Limitada con el Gobierno de la República. Expediente No.15.655

Not only are women reessentialised, but the nuclear family is as well. It is also question how these ex-bananeros overnight have changed to altruistic family fathers? Is it perhaps so, as suggested by Nancy Fraser (1997) that by keeping the category (here family) one simply does not see?

### **Some final Considerations**

Summing up, it was, still, a surprise realising that ‘women’, and ‘gender’, both as agents, concepts and perspectives, were so totally excluded and left out of most of the available material that has been concerned with development in Coto Sur and the Southern Pacific region the past decades, in spite of taking place within an era in which WID/GAD policies were being designed and implemented in all major development agencies and governments, including both Costa Rica and the national and international agencies involved. Somehow this huge development scheme seems to have evaded any demands to ‘integrate’ or ‘graft’ or whichever term to use, neither a ‘gender component’, nor a total integration (Moser 1993), in spite of the involved agents’ expressed political objectives of equality and equity. Either the Palm programme had been exonerated from gender demands of unknown reasons, or they had simply cleverly been able to circumvent them.

Another line of explanation may indicate that the political and academic discourses that the development agents and agencies drew upon (particularly economics, agriculture etc.) still did not ‘see’ that women and men who would benefit unequally from such a huge project being imposed upon them, nor the unequal power relationships and gendered discourses within the local communities they were to enter. To consider all people, independent of sex, race, etc. as equals with equal rights to autonomy and recognition seems to have been sidelined completely. The development agents, apparently, were all drawing on assumption upon assumption about the existence of democratic, harmonious, nuclear families that would

redistribute income and status equally among its members. This was certainly what elsewhere so often had been described in Costa Rica as another 'impasse'.

This was in fact, as I started out with, taking place simultaneously with great efforts in gender planning and legislation in the country. Costa Rica was, as already stated, the very first country in Latin America that passed its equal rights law; it was first presented in 1988, and passed in 1990 (The law to promote the social equality of women)<sup>354</sup> The Gender plan PIOMH came later,<sup>355</sup> 1996 with the addendum about rural women 1997. That really puts the Coto Sur gender 'impasse' into perspective.

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<sup>354</sup> Deere and León (2001: 202-03)

<sup>355</sup> CMF (1997)

## **BEYOND PALMS AND BANANAS: INSTEAD OF AN EPILOGUE**


### **Men are improving - Women Remain Eternally Female**

I would like to finish up this work by bringing back the very first category that stirred my own curiosity, and which prompted mine - and others solidarity and wishes to contribute, namely *la mujer campesina*. When doña Leonora did not quite know who were talking about in the SMFC office, or whether she really considered herself as a 'peasant women' - she was not so sure of that, it did question the very category. Hence when scrutinising the development stories, or narratives, about Coto Sur and the Southern Zone, to focus on the categorisation of peasant women, is also, as I see it, to look and move beyond Palms and Bananas.

It should by now have been established that the representations of women in the histories, narratives and texts concerned with the development of, and the situation in the agricultural settlement of Coto Sur, Costa Rica, as agents in their own, are, with a few exceptions, totally missing. If women's presence occasionally may be traced, their identities and roles are assumed, and in contrast to men, women do not seem to change over time, they are portrayed as women, housewives, mothers all through; or they are only appearing indirectly as part of families. This implies, in turn that they are depicted as eternal women, while men, as discussed above, have assumingly been changing and improving.

This typical argumentation detected in the narratives and texts I have consulted in this case, can be illustrated by the following sketch, in which, still for the sake of simplicity, a distinction between the three main epochs, or regimes have been constructed.

Time-→



Assumed roles and identities	Early (before) invasions, plantations)	Interim (The Coto Sur settlement)	Later (The Palm region)
Men	<i>Bananero</i>	<i>Campesino/parcelero/ex-bananero</i>	<i>Palm grower/entrepreneur</i>
Women	<i>Housewife</i> (absentee)	<i>Housewife/‘mujer campesina’</i>	<i>Housewife -</i> (in family unit)

Table 8.1 Very simplified dualist/essentialist representations of men and women in the texts/narratives depicting ‘development’ in Coto Sur.

The above categorisations are quite essentialist and dualist interpretations of ‘men’ and ‘women’, but I have put it up this way because this is how they appear in the narratives and texts mentioned. The man is depicted as the active agent who is both being implicated by policies and projects around him, whereas women are not seen as active agents in their own lives. Men are historically all being allotted different masculine identities; as bananero who is (really) not responsible (depending on source),<sup>356</sup> then as a peasant/ex-bananero (who has to learn to become a responsible head of household), and finally, as a (potential) industrial palm-grower.

In contrast, women are pictured as being apparently unchanged, they remain the same all through, they do appear as fixed in time and space. They are hardly present in what can be depicted as the ‘banana stories’, later, (chronologically), as (farm) housewives/family (in the IDA/agricultural reform versions), but occasionally as *mujeres campesinas*, as constructed in the SMFC discourses, (informed by international WID/GAD discourses and policies in the 1980s), but this denomination is not transferred to the overall plans and documents.

However, these more active women disappear again, literally into the *unidad familiar*, when the narratives about Palm programme are being constructed.

There is, in these narratives as far as I have been able to read, not even the slightest alluding to women’s cultural subordination to men, nor to the way households are unqually

<sup>356</sup> This is of course not the case in the ‘labourist’ versions encountered in the banana unions etc.

put together, resulting in very different positions, or, about women as head of households in their own right.

In this way, by taking a shortcut and also simplifying ‘men’ into three categories, women are, accordingly, assumed to be for instance, banana-wife, campesino-wife or palmero-wife (or *compañera*, daughter, sister)<sup>357</sup>. It has also, in these representations of Coto Sur and what has taken place there, been crucial to portray men as active agents; (preferably aided by the IDA in some of these stories), in order to legitimate many of the moves that there perhaps would not be support for otherwise, in the country. Hence, by portraying (biological) men as active, and women not visible, they thus are interpreted as passive, (with the usual exceptions to any story of a single heroine occasionally).

There are also allusions to what can be read as and interpreted as different masculinities, which, according to Connell (1995, 2002), can be depicted as hegemonic, and thus to be typified in each of these periods in Coto Sur: the brave, strong bananero, occasionally, but not always, drawing upon his Nicaraguan or Guanacasteco stock as wild and hardworking ‘cowboys’, conquering women, but running off, just as easy, prompting a typically ‘latin’ male public image. However, this image is mainly used as a contrast to the more settled frontiersmen of the IDA settlements, but still portrayed as fighting the wilderness by clearing (*volteados*) and creating a farmstead; for his family, wife and children. Finally; the *palmero* definitely seems much less appealing; if one were to describe a typically hegemonic masculinity linked to him, it must to being a dependable, and productive provider of the palm fruits of good quality, in time; and thus indirectly to be a stable breadwinner for others who are his (invisible) dependents. These are virtues of quality and discipline, contrasting both the exotic bananero and the hard-working campesino. (It can be recalled that when women in Coto Sur considered many of the extensionists as *cacihombres* (almost men) they were alluding to them being boring. The challenge is to make this ‘new’ man

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<sup>357</sup> This appears in the programming from the first Women’s Programme in the IDA, which are dealt with in Valestrand, forthcoming.



recognisable and thus meriting attention from outside audiences, be they national or international, it takes more to create the palm-grower as an interesting figure, worth public attention and identification. Both bananas and subsistence agriculture can be depicted as worthy, the Banana-chain, for instance can depict heroic workers fighting global fruit companies, chemical hazards and Western consciousness, expressed through Max Haavelaar and ecological growing schemes etc., whereas the peasant/campesino, still does evoke ideas about small-scale communities, subsistence and ecological balance, in spite of a great amount of tales about the globalising 'post-peasant' (Kearney 1996). The palm-grower, in contrast, in an out-grower, relatively speaking 'Fordist' system, is harder to promote positively, thus it seems as if it has been imperative to uphold his past as contrast to his present, and endorse the *ex-bananero/campesino* as the main actor in this story, as the routine harvesting, transportation and industrial production of palm fruits are rather ordinary, and not much to identify with.

As a somewhat speculative closing of this work, I will suggest that a challenge in constructing the narratives about Coto Sur, seems to have been to create the entrepreneurial palm grower as a new, male, hero - to recreate 'the man in control'. Where is it that he is in control? If masculinity in the local articulation entails 'to be in control' (which I am inclined to agree to), it entails to be in control over women, in his own kingdom; his palm-grove and household. Women are, in the discourses and documents (1980s and early 90s), almost without exceptions pictured as being dependent on a man. Dependency is indirectly seen as a natural part of everlasting and eternal female identity, the way it is often appearing throughout these decades, in spite of all that has happened on the ground in Coto Sur.

And so is the way many women do conceive of themselves, that it is their destiny to subordinate themselves to men. They not only appear as *familia*, they express it too. As an ideal. During the interim period when the SMFC Women's Project was in activity in Coto Sur, the category *mujer campesina* was being created and eventually acquired by women, they

slowly began to ponder around a peasant woman identity, with her own autonomy, apart from being a self-sacrificing mother/spouse/service provider, in many respects, that was the core of the very SMFC Women's Project. When the *campesino* was to be removed from the vocabulary,<sup>358</sup> one could not have *mujer campesina* remaining? But with what label to replace her?

In the various documents produced by the SMFC and associates in the 1980s, the *mujer campesina* and *mujer rural* were used simultaneously, and the SMFC often would refer to 'rural women', in line with the ongoing discourses of talking about 'rural dwellers' instead of 'farmers' in worldwide rural social studies for instance. However, there was nothing like a concept like *mujer palmera* a palm woman, there were *palmeras*, that is women who were de facto owning land and organising palm growing and harvesting (but did not work the groves), but there might be palm-wives, which is a different connotation altogether. My suggestion based on cross-readings of these narratives is the following,

*To re-cast the Ex-bananero to Palmero- the Mujer Campesina had to (continue to) be invisible.*

Telling other stories, in which women's daily toiling and reproductive struggles would be main themes, there was no room for yet, except that one or two women could, at the most, be noticed as heroines, for example by fighting in the invasions in Coto Sur, that is being visible in typical male spheres. These new stories had to be created literally from scratch, starting with women's experiences (Dorothy Smith 1989) and their active agency. That is what the previous chapters in this work have aimed to do.

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<sup>358</sup> *Campesino* is now being appropriated by the campesino movement, and given specific political connotations, often in anti-globalist, anti capitalist and alternative discourses. See so also the debate referred to on 'peasants' rather than smallholders, see Bryceson (2000), and Kay (2000) touched upon in chapter 4.



From Tamarindo, Coto Sur

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