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# In the waters of distinction: imaginaries of prestige in the Colombian National Navy

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# In the waters of distinction: imaginaries of prestige in the Colombian National Navy

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En las aguas de la distinción: imaginarios sobre el prestigio en la Armada Nacional de Colombia

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**ABSTRACT.** This article is framed within Military Anthropology. Its main research objective is to explore the imaginaries surrounding prestige. Based on how prestige is constructed in the institution's officiality, it explores its relationship with social class in the Colombian Navy. Through an ethnographic approach based on the construction of life stories of male and female officers who joined between 1971 and 2001 and guided by the categories of prestige, elite, and distinction, it evidences the origin of a distinction imaginary based on social class. This differentiates it from the other Military Forces. It also reveals an existing transit towards a distinction based on the institution's academic and operational results.

**KEYWORDS:** Colombia; elite; Navy; prestige; social anthropology; social class

**RESUMEN.** Este artículo se enmarca en la denominada antropología de los militares. El objetivo principal de esta investigación es explorar los imaginarios alrededor del prestigio y su relación con la clase social en la Armada Nacional de Colombia, a partir de la pregunta sobre cómo se construye el prestigio en la oficialidad de la institución. Esto se hizo mediante una aproximación etnográfica basada en la construcción de historias de vida de oficiales, mujeres y hombres, que se incorporaron entre 1971 y 2001. Guiados por las categorías de prestigio, élite y distinción, se logró evidenciar el origen de un imaginario sobre una distinción basada en la clase social, que marca una diferencia con las demás Fuerzas Militares, así como un tránsito aún en proceso hacia la distinción basada en resultados académicos y operacionales de la institución.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** antropología social; Armada nacional; clase social; Colombia; élite; prestigio

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## Introduction

*Military anthropology* is a research agenda that has gained particular strength in Latin American countries such as Argentina and Brazil, opening military institutions' doors to the public interested in understanding their internal social dynamics. For example, in Argentina, research by Badaró (2009), Frederic (2016), Masson (2017), and Soprano (2015) stand out, involving topics like the democratization of military institutions after the military dictatorship, the role of women, and gender discussions in the Armed Forces, and ethnographies in spaces such as the National Military College and various operational units of military institutions. Similarly, in Brazil, the works of Castro and Camargo (2009), Carreiras and Castro (2013), and Carreiras et al. (2017) are recognized as important efforts to understand the Latin American military from anthropology through a series of collaborative works.

In this sense, the Military Forces (FFMM) in Colombia also embody multiple research interests. Although military institutions have already been explored from academia, mainly in fields such as Military Sociology, civil-military relations, and History, works related to anthropology have been scarce. For instance, Forero's (2017) work explores National Army officers' narratives on the conflict's impact on the institutional image. Nationally, military anthropology has focused mainly on the National Army, opening the military institution's doors to research on social dynamics, military culture, the agencies of its members, and methodological challenges (González-Saiz, 2021). These precedents have opened paths towards understanding such dynamics and agencies in the other Colombian military institutions: the National Navy and the Air Force.

In Latin America, the imaginary of the existence of a social class hierarchy among the Armed Forces prevails. Illustrating the case of Peru, Hurtado (2006) explains that its Navy is conceived as a recipient of cadets from the country's elites, the Air Force as a recipient of the middle class, and the Army as an institution that incorporates the so-called *popular classes* (p. 63). This imaginary on the country's composition of military institutions is not far from the one rooted in Colombian society. Thus, this article derives from research seeking to understand and contest this imaginary, contributing to determine what individuals comprise the officers of the Colombian National Navy (ARC in Spanish). It examines some of their narratives, constructed through their experiences in the institution, by exploring the categories of *prestige*, *distinction*, and *elite*.

The fieldwork involved only the officers given the need to delimit the research. Furthermore, because the officer's figure is the one most deeply rooted in the social class imaginary. Nonetheless, the participation of non-commissioned officers and marines is considered relevant for future studies on the subject to continue exploring these categories through their narratives. Similarly, although this research involved male and female

officers, the importance of intersectional studies between class and gender is acknowledged (Cabrera-Cabrera et al., 2021). However, for the purposes and scope of this work, the categories studied were not approached from this analytical lens. Considering the limited availability of studies on the ARC, the need was identified to study the variables related to social class to produce inputs for future research delving deeper into gender.

This research was guided by the question: how is the notion of *prestige* constructed within the ARC officers? Answering this question began with an ethnographic approach based on the construction of life stories of female and male officers that joined the ARC between 1971 and 2001. These stories and narratives are presented anonymously, using codes to identify the interviewees' rank and gender to keep the study participants' identities confidential. This decision was based on the ethnographic research's ethical approaches (Restrepo, 2015), which seek to protect the personal experiences and narratives shared for academic purposes.

This article is presented as follows. First, it presents the theory that supports the research in the three categories explored. Secondly, it presents the methodology used in-depth. Thirdly, it presents the results in which three factors are identified: the British influence on the ARC, the aesthetics, naval traditions, academic training, and the challenges to confront the social imaginary of prestige within the institution. Then, it discusses these results based on the information collected and analyzed and, finally, offers the conclusions.

## Theoretical framework

The article revolved around three categories: prestige, elite, and distinction. They served as a guide to analyze the officers participating in the research's narratives, identifying common elements during the construction of their life stories and creating a common framework to show the evolution of these perceptions within the officers incorporated into the ARC's discourses at different times. The choice of the definitions presented below is justified by their proximity to the dynamics of the officers in this institution's world and the holistic vision they present, which makes defining categories applicable to the social reality identified possible.

*Prestige* is understood as "the esteem, respect, or approval that is afforded by an individual or a collectivity to performances or qualities that they consider above average" (Goode, 1978, p. 7). This definition responds to a highly recurrent idea during the interviews that helped construct the life histories: the existence of individual and collective prestige. For this author, prestige becomes a form of social control; it generates competition in the search for esteem and respect that encourages the positive

transformation of behaviors. Obtaining prestige responds to the success of these ways of acting, attributed to certain qualities (earned or not) and perceived as *above average*. In this sense, there are two explanations for the distribution of prestige in specific groups: 1) above-average performances become increasingly complicated; therefore, fewer and fewer people are promoted; and 2) among several people, one will always stand out, either because of talent or dedication (Goode, 1978). Thus, prestige is afforded to only a few, and its distribution resembles a pyramid<sup>1</sup>.

This conceptualization illustrates the existence of a hierarchy measured by the idea of prestige, which is fundamental for the purposes of this article. The concept presented by Goode (1978) is framed in what he calls the *celebration of heroes*, involving the meaning of recognition and awards in the military career. However, in the ARC's case, the aim is to illustrate a transition from attaining prestige linked to social class and status to attaining prestige measured by academic and operational recognition and results.

In this sense, the category of *elite* is introduced as part of the construction of the collective and individual agencies of those who were part of the study. According to Keller (1991), "elite refers first of all to a minority of individuals designated to serve a collectivity in a socially valued way" (p. 4). This definition underscores the idea of a minority at the service of the society in their location, which naval officers are in relation to the ARC. In this line, Mills (1957) identifies the military as subjects to be included in this category in a study on elites. The specific way in which the idea of elite is conceived in the ARC based on British influence, aesthetics and traditions, and academic training is explained in the results section.

In conceiving ARC officers as elite, Badaró's (2009) statement referring to this concept, not as a self-reference category but as a reference, should be noted. Although the officers "do not literally define themselves as an elite, when defining themselves as a group, they resort to images generally associated with this notion" (p. 206). This statement elucidates that although the narratives analyzed do not necessarily appeal to the category of elite, they do find a frame of reference in this idea when describing individual and collective experiences in the institution.

Studied extensively by Pierre Bourdieu (2006) in his book *Distinction: A social critique on the judgement of taste*, the term *distinction* is conceived in the same analytical line. Similar to Goode's (1978) approach to prestige, this work defines distinction as a form of social control that, in this case, reproduces what Bourdieu (2006) calls *clas-*

1 The pyramid figure is commonly used in the Military Forces, as it illustrates how promotions become more and more complicated and, therefore, fewer people reach the highest ranks. Moreover, this figure explains the hierarchical structure of the military career.

*sification*, that is, practices that create different types of relationships between people in order to preserve social status. Bourdieu recognizes that this has been the case for centuries:

The classifying subjects who classify the properties and practices of others, or their own, are also classifiable objects that classify themselves (in the eyes of others) by appropriating practices and properties already classified (as vulgar or distinguished, high or low, heavy or light, etc. –in other words, in the last analysis, as popular or bourgeois) according to their probable distribution between groups that are themselves classified. The most classifying and best classified of these properties are, of course, those which are overtly designated to function as *signs of distinction* or *marks of infamy*, stigmata, especially the names and titles expressing class membership whose intersection defines *social identity* at any given time –the name of the nation, a region, an ethnic group, a family name, the name of an occupation, an educational qualification, honorific titles and so on. (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 492).

This reference evidences a series of elements found within the framework of the concept of *distinction* that is recurrent in the life stories presented here. The elements that Bourdieu (2006) mentions as part of social identity are particularly noteworthy. They are transversal to all experiences, even those of narratives separated by extended periods. This definition completes the conceptual line raised by the terms: *elite* and *prestige*. It consolidates the idea of hierarchy and certain common elements related to social constructions and discourses on someone's social role; in this case, the institution and its members.

This conceptual framework guided the analysis of the life stories that were constructed for this research. Three central elements were outlined and developed to understand the social imaginary around the ARC: 1) the British influence, 2) the aesthetics and traditions, and 3) the academic formation, understanding that these elements are not static, changing their role and importance through time. The wager on a dialogue between theories and narratives enabled spaces for describing social realities and, at the same time, combating social imaginaries about this institution belonging to the Colombian FFMM.

## Methodology

Life histories as a methodology have been widely used in Anthropology and Sociology. They are a form of qualitative social research that seeks to understand experiences and the construction of meanings and social relations within specific times and spaces. Ferrarotti (2007) argues that life histories represent and construct data beyond quantitative forms of research. He argues that these are predetermined and, by themselves,

fail to capture some elements that can emerge through dialogue and trust built thanks to this qualitative methodology.

This methodology helps understand that human beings are not “a data, but a process, and that the ‘laws’ that have to do with them cannot be *timeless* and *spaceless*, valid in any context and timeless” (Ferrarotti, 2007, p. 21). This statement confirms that social facts are not susceptible and valid only from their development in a mathematical sense. Precisely because life histories serve for understanding and not only describing, they allow approaching the experiences or, as Ferrarotti (2007) calls them, “the raw material” (p. 16). This condition enables ethnographic approaches that provide holistic views and yield results beyond sociodemographic or inventory reports.

In anthropology, life histories are part of the quest to construct more complex and differentiated ethnographies, which can support the strengthening of the understanding of individual agency and contexts (Buechler & Buechler, 1999). In this sense, comparisons are intended:

[...] between different periods of an individual's life and under different circumstances, or between different life histories, as well as placing the narrative before certain generalizations developed from other means. This process should rarely involve direct inferences from the particular to the general or vice versa but should involve a step-by-step procedure to locate the cases studied vis a vis and arrive at a contextualizing understanding. (Buechler & Buechler, 1999, p. 261)

This research's methodology was proposed based on these perspectives on life histories. The life stories were constructed during 2017 around the concepts of prestige, elites, and distinction. They were conducted at the Escuela Naval de Cadetes “Almirante Padilla” (ENAP in Spanish) in Cartagena de Indias, the ARC Communications Office in Bogota, and the Escuela Superior de Guerra “General Rafael Reyes Prieto” in Bogota. This exercise was developed in individual sessions with the officers and divided between semi-structured interviews and unscripted conversations during tours of the mentioned facilities. According to González-Saiz (2021), an important challenge in ethnographies in military institutions is creating mutual trust relationships built during diverse experiences in the field. Therefore, these life histories were constructed through interviews and participant observation activities.

Nine ARC officers participated in this process. Three were female, and six were men, including three active Lieutenant Commanders (two male and one female) and six Navy Captains (two females—one retired, one active— and two retired and two active males). These stories presented are cited using the codes: CC1H, CC2H, CF1M,

CN1H, CN2M, CN3M, CN4H, CN5H, and CN6H to guarantee anonymity. They represent the rank and gender of the research participants.

The interviewees had joined the ARC between 1971 and 2001; by 2017, six were active, and three retired. The six males were line officers, and the three females were administrative officers, meaning that they joined the force as professionals. Thus, the experiences captured here allowed us to establish a dialogue between elements identified as common from diverse points of view, according to the date of incorporation and service period. This research included only naval officers, not marine infantry officers, considering that the differential experience between the two types of officers may be interesting for future research. Officers were selected because they are the figures in charge of the institution's actions and strategic projection, among other reasons.

Finally, according to the previous, the selection of life stories as a methodology for this research was based on the aim to understand the military world from the perspective of individual agencies and recognition of particular experiences to strengthen an ethnographic research agenda for the Colombian Armed Forces. It is worth noting that the results obtained are an initial approximation to this broad agenda of social research on the ARC. Life histories as a methodology do not have a totalizing or generalizing purpose about life in the institution. Rather, they contribute to identifying elements that constitute the social imaginary around the ARC.

## Results

This research identified three elements considered key to analyzing the social imaginary built around the ARC regarding prestige: the British influence, aesthetics and traditions, and academic training. The British influence refers to the British Royal Navy's role in founding the ENAP and its direction during the early years, constituting a differential element to the foreign influence of other forces. This influence involves the role of British officers and their relationship with some members of Cartagena society, the position of the British Royal Navy as the most powerful navy in the world until World War II, and the image of elegance, class, and good manners represented by the English ideal. It has determined the values related to family, personal image, behavior, and the image constructed on social class.

The second element addresses the aesthetics of the white uniform, the officers' bodily form, the romanticism built around the sea and being a sailor, and the naval traditions, as differentiating factors. This element has a genealogy both in the material and visual and the intangible and primarily myth. It has been transformed over time and has changed the ideals surrounding prestige. The third element is academic formation,



referring, in particular, to the challenges facing the ARC regarding civil society's perception of the institution and its day-to-day reality. This element is significant because even the external view of the institution has a marked perception of prestige as a simile of social class, influenced by aesthetic criteria.

## Discussion

### The elite dressed in white

In 1932, the war against Peru challenged the Navy, which had not required a major move up to that moment. However, the need to strengthen its personnel and technology force quickly led the Government to resort to Colombian help. This situation led men to volunteer to go to war, and women donated their jewelry to the cause (Serje, 2012). As a result of this event, Colombia turned its attention to the importance of acquiring technology to protect its waters, involving foreign personnel to train and instruct the participants of this nascent restructuring of the country's naval force.

In 1933, the cessation of hostilities was signed. Two destroyers, *Caldas* and *Antioquia*, arrived in Colombia; they docked in Cartagena with a crew of officers from the British Royal Navy whose task was to "establish a naval training institution in the country" (Serje, 2012, p. 11). At that time, the British had the most powerful navy globally; its arrival represented a privilege for the country. Moreover, it marked a difference with the influence of the National Army, which was mainly French and later Chilean (Torres, 1993), and years later, with the North American influence on the Air Force.

The ARC inherited not only the rank names and insignia but also a series of English colonizing project practices, including "its style and organization [...], its uniform, insignia, protocols, and customs, including tea at five o'clock in the afternoon. They formed the first promotions of officers" (Serje, 2012, p. 11). This element was the first one identified in the formation of naval officers through their life stories:

[...] there was somewhat of a selection in the departments to choose the boys who were going to represent the department in the configuration of the first promotion, and this began to repeat itself. We are sons of the British tradition, so we are British, we are the "*British*" boys; the others are sons of Chileans, that is, they are Latinos, and we are not, and the Air Force are gringos, so who has more cachet in the end? (CN1H, personal communication, July 25, 2017).

In this sense, the British influence undoubtedly prompted a highly selective search for the Naval School's first promotion. Moreover, this English-imbuéd formation had

strong propinquity with Catholic values and the naval traditions as the institution's backbone, thus, requiring a specific profile to what is now the ENAP, which was concomitant with the Cartagena society:

Since its beginnings, when the first British commissions arrived in the country, the navy has been marked by a tradition of tidiness, discipline, transparency, honesty, and respect, aspects that, at the time also highlighted the British Royal Navy, and that we inherited due to the close ties between the English and the high society, especially in Cartagena. (CC1H, personal communication, September 15, 2017).

As Pizarro (2015) explained, Cartagena exemplified a city model marked by inequality. In the twentieth century, following the North American structure models, it reinforced and perpetuated spaces of exclusivity that increasingly separated the (self) named Cartagena elites. Although this author speaks from an urbanistic perspective of exclusion, the developed idea illustrates the social projects that strongly differentiated Cartagena society in terms of social class and race. Thus, with the British influence, the Naval School became one more space of exclusivity that allowed a certain sector of Cartagena's population to continue reproducing certain social circles.

The exclusivity attributed to the Naval School as an institution enabled the creation of a Naval Force made up of the country's most select profiles and consolidated the social relations between British officers and the families of Cartagena's high society. These relationships were mainly of two types: sons entered the Naval School, and daughters married British officers. Analyzing this *classification* project from Bourdieu's (2006) perspective makes the construction of a social identity marked by distinction, which strongly determined the ARC, evident. Although these relationships' high exclusivity was gradually extinguished after the British officers' departure in 1939, when the war broke out in Europe, many *classifying* practices continued to be part of the institution. For example, the following practices can be seen in the life histories of Colombian officers:

In fact, most of the first navy men were part of the country's wealthy families, a situation that even could perceive when we entered the Naval School. Specifically, from Cartagena, traditional surnames, such as Román, Lemaitre, Araújo, Espinosa, Martínez, Benedetti, Borda, and Fadul, among others, are common among the naval officers. (CC1H, personal communication, September 15, 2017).

In my time to marry, I could not do so until two years after graduating, and I was visited by the priest and an officer. From the priest, because they came to see: if there was not even an image of Christ in that house, I was already discarded, they looked to see if one had a Christian home, of good morals, etc. [...]. The officer would also

look, then they would say: “I think not, or you meet the requirements.” Then you received a communication, I never received it, but several received it: “the commander of the Navy is not in agreement with the marriage,” what could you do? You were in love; you were infatuated. So, you’d get married, then, after five days, you would receive: “sanctioned, five days of strict arrest.” So, this sanction slowed you down with respect to your colleagues, which is serious, because seniority is important in the Military Forces. In other words, the first is the first and the second is the second; so, the commanders are ordained to those hierarchical orders [sic]. (CN4H, personal communication, September 21, 2017).

The first account explicitly illustrates how officers from certain Cartagena families were recognized among the naval officers; this continued to be so for some time after the departure of the British commission. On the other hand, the second testimony presents a practice that exemplifies Bourdieu’s (2006) appreciation of *classification*. The fixation on the naval officers’ future partners, family, and religious values demonstrates the naval institution’s intentions to control who could be part of its exclusive social dynamics, both directly and indirectly. Moreover, it evidences that the sanctions applied to officers who did not abide by the institution’s considerations could seriously damage their careers.

The British influence indisputably assembled the naval institution’s *classifying* project, which was reproduced during most of the twentieth century. This study’s participant accounts indicated that the 1991 Constitution marked the change of these practices. However, the image projected by naval training, which, in fact, continues today regarding naval traditions and aesthetics, is decisive to understanding why the British influence permeated and transcended time, despite the changes that have occurred within the institution regarding the perception of prestige.

### **Prestige as a (self) representation of the naval institution**

As Serje (2012) points out, in addition to providing training, the British commission’s arrival brought a series of practices and symbols that demarcated the foundational differences of the FFMM in Colombia. “The Navy uniform with its stripes, with its gold gallon, its white cap, all in white... that kind of thing plays a role, an interesting symbolism in the collective” (CN1H, personal communication, July 25, 2017). The aesthetics of the neat white uniform, the promulgation of good manners, and the refinement of naval officialdom evidence the establishment of criteria used to distinguish between those who were part of the institution and those who were not. In this sense, Pedraza (2011) points out that these aesthetic criteria demarcate and maintain lines of superiority. They are “symbolic advantages provided by more prestigious labels” (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 491).

The aesthetic concept was one of the most recurrent elements identified in the construction of the life stories. The emphasis on the neat white uniform inside the ENAP and outside of it highlights how naval officers are a symbol in the city of Cartagena, entailing specific unwritten rules about the places where officers could be seen in their white uniform. Pizarro (2015) explains that Cartagena's elites were participants in constructing some of Cartagena's most traditional neighborhoods, supported by North American models of neighborhoods. The author points to Manga, Bocagrande, and Castillogrande as examples of spaces that were precisely those that uniformed officers could frequent:

You cannot go to certain places in Cartagena; you can only be in certain areas of Cartagena. In our time, we could only be in Castillogrande, Bocagrande, and Manga [...]. Evidently, all of that produces an institutional construction where all that social culture that comes from outside is exacerbated. (CNH1, personal communication, July 25, 2017).

This notion fed into the definition of what a naval officer should and should not do, which was part of an institutional project marked by the search for social status advancement through "class." However, this differed directly with the social origins of those joining the ARC years after the British departure. While the quest to maintain the social class component set the institution's agenda, changes were inevitable over time. This situation resulted in the institution's desire to reproduce this social class category in those joining and, thus, mold the officers according to certain aesthetic and social categories:

I go to Cartagena and stay in the Navy's ideal world, impeccable, with integrity, where you learn to eat, to behave, to sit, to speak... another lexicon, to modulate. You begin to change; you begin to change the imaginary that you were stratum three with two little steps of stratum four, then you think you are stratum five because everything seems more in Cartagena. But it is not that true that we are stratum five; we have that imaginary. But, when people see people studying on scholarship, their parents make efforts [...]. In fact, all the training schools have sold us erroneous ideas. I tell everyone: we in the Navy are stratum three, rising two little steps. When you arrive at the school, they tell you: 'you can't ride the bus because you are in uniform and if someone gets you dirty, how are you going to clean yourself? You go to the best places in Cartagena, you don't go to the Bazurto square, you don't go to the market where it is cheaper'; then, you start to feed on that [sic]. (CF1M, personal communication, September 1, 2017).

The ARC nurtured the image of the prestige and distinction marked by social class for many years, seeking to preserve that marked English influence. However, if current

figures on the social origin composition of military officers in the country are reviewed, we can see that the middle class is preponderant in the three Armed Forces, marking a similarity between them. Rivera-Páez (2019) took a population of 1175 officers and obtained the results recorded in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Distribution of officers by social class

Social class	Army	Navy	Air Force	Total
High	0.28 %	1.25 %	0.00 %	0.43 %
Medium-high	10.56 %	19.17 %	15.81 %	13.28 %
Medium	72.64 %	67.50 %	66.05 %	70.38 %
Medium-low	14.44 %	10.00 %	13.95 %	13.45 %
Worker	1.25 %	1.25 %	2.79 %	1.53 %
Prefer not to answer	0.83 %	0.83 %	1.40 %	0.94 %

Source: Rivera-Páez (2019, p. 107).

These figures show that there is absolutely no preponderant presence of an upper class in the FFMM officers. Although there is a greater presence in percentage terms in the ARC, the difference is not great. What is evident is the broad presence of a middle class in the ranks of the officers.

The transformation in the applicants to the ENAP concerning their social origin resulted in changes that can be distinguished in two stages; first, in the officers incorporated before the 1991 Constitution's accounts. They show a strong emphasis on the relationship between prestige and social class, especially a social ascent built with the entrance to ARC officer positions and the subsequent training in the first years. The second is the incorporation after 1991, marked by a different vision of gaining prestige, specifically through academic performance. Thus, the 1991 Constitution constitutes a differentiating element; it marked a change in the country's guarantee and protection of rights, which inevitably permeated the FFMM. For instance, the impact on an officer's career because of partner choice explicitly violated the fundamental rights contemplated after 1991. Thus, a more guaranteeing Constitution has been one of the elements that transformed the training experiences regarding how the institution perceived the construction and (self) representation of prestige.

It is also recognized that, although the British influence was decisive and forever marked the institution's direction, this influence gradually diminished after World War II, when the United States Navy became the most powerful in the world. Thus, the ARC received this tradition, which marked the beginning of the mentioned change, consolidated years later with the 1991 Constitution. The latter also determined other important changes for the ARC, such as the incorporation of women line officers in 1997 (Mouthon & Martínez, 2014).

Thus, a progressive change is evident in how prestige is obtained within the institution. The training shifted from being marked by social class to having academic performance as the protagonist. Similarly, social relationships or affective bonds no longer marked the officers' careers. Instead, the operational results became a way of obtaining prestige. In the construction of the life stories, this change was evidenced by how, over time, the distinguished officers were those who had a positive academic and operational performance, in addition to a series of values primarily related to group work, academic cooperation, and military training, no longer to class.

However, despite the officers' change evidenced during their military training and career, the institution's external perception continued to be closely related to social class and aesthetics. Perceived as one of the main actors in the internal armed conflict in the country (Blair, 1999), the National Army, for example, has a different image. However, this perspective ignores that, although the Army, by its nature, had a leading role, the other two Colombian FFMM also participated actively in the conflict.

### **Challenges of marine pride and courage**

The social imaginary constructed by the institution of the naval officers permeated the officers' individual and collective identities and the external perception regarding them. Thus, despite the gradual internal transformation, this imaginary continues to be part of the ARC's image:

[...] I often remember when I was working in the Ministry. I was talking to a person who worked in the planning office, a civilian; he came and told me: "no, it's just that militaries are difficult; they have very closed mentality. No, those of the Air Force are cool, because they are all 'whatever.' And, those of the Navy hold such beautiful ceremonies, so marked by traditions." And, I thought: "no, I mean, it is incredible that they recognize you for that, because, in the end, it is the form, it is not the substance, yes?" Many of those traditions end up being the form, not the substance [sic]. (CN1H, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

This account illustrates an idea that was recurrent in the life stories. Although traditions and aesthetics are an important part of naval life, the officers recognized that,

they are not the only elements that constitute life within the institution, much less are they the only thing that makes up the naval officers' identity. However, the ARC's challenge to contribute to the change of the social imaginary is an important task, especially amid the Colombian society, marked by traditions that pursue social status and distinction. This idea can be illustrated through the ARC's extended relationship with the National Beauty Pageant:

The ARC is not "get ready for the Cartagena beauty pageant," no? The ARC is the Republic of Colombia's Navy. But, in the other forces' collective institutional imaginary and that of many people, the reference in a country where the Cartagena beauty pageant was so important, is that the Navy is involved there. So that also helps, what we were talking about before, how that vision of the institution is built from the outside. (CN1H, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Bolívar (2007) explains that, in Latin America, beauty pageants have contributed to the construction of national identities, setting cultural guidelines that are high society inventions. Precisely this relationship between the ARC and the National Beauty Pageant, also in Cartagena, clearly illustrates elements that fed a social image around the naval officers' role. The tone for the distinction between the FFMM perceived by society was particularly set by the *aide* accompanying the beauty queens donned in his classic white ARC uniform versus the Army soldier in the middle of the jungle and the armed conflict.

These examples explain how the ARC institutional project, which sought to project a specific image from the official level, managed to consolidate a solid social imaginary that, today, challenges the institution. Two reasons were found for this consolidation during this research. In the first place, in academic and thematic matters, the preparation of naval officers is unique, especially in a bi-oceanic country. Responding to its military professionalization commitment, at present, this is what the institution seeks to disseminate (García, 2002). Thus, to achieve this task, the strong social imaginary that permeates the ARC must be transformed from a prestige underpinned by social class.

Second, the British influence intended to be preserved years after the English commission's departure strengthened the officers' narratives and, at the same time, made the social role of non-commissioned officers and marine soldiers invisible. As a result, the officer's image was consolidated as a representation of the ARC. The previous can be seen as a potentially important space for ethnographic studies of the force and an internal challenge for including non-commissioned officers and soldiers in the construction of the institution's identity.

The challenges identified in this research were consolidated based on the multiple experiences and narratives constructed by the officers. These challenges faced by the institution amid a constantly changing context do not imply that it should abandon naval traditions, foreign influence, or the collective and individual identities that have been built. On the contrary, they are a part of the ARC's essence, even a part of the essence of the armed forces in Latin America (García, 2005). However, they do show the need to make the institution's role in the country visible, not as a space for social exclusion but as a force that contributes to security and defense in Colombia.

## Conclusion

This research identified three elements that constitute the social imaginary of how prestige is achieved within the ARC, aiming to contribute to the analysis of the challenges that this institution faces in the current national scenario and a wager to transform that imaginary. It responded to the search to understand *otherness* from the anthropological endeavor to make visible experiences that explain meanings and construct realities. In this sense, military anthropology analyzes institutions that have been hermetic before civil society for years in favor of opening the possibility of strengthening deteriorated social relations, especially in a country like Colombia, which was immersed in conflict for fifty years.

This type of research, and especially the life stories methodology, allows recognizing the importance of considering daily life and experiences as a central part of the construction of military institutions and the identities that make them up, introducing new forms to understand the composition of the FFMM in Colombia. This entails recognizing the role of qualitative research, and not just quantitative, within large institutions.

This research also described the transition of the ARC's concept of prestige from one based on social class to one based on operational results. This shift was marked by elements of different nature and origin, such as British influence, Cartagena society, the internal armed conflict, naval aesthetics, and the 1991 Constitution. In addition, it shed light on how the configuration of the naval institution has been consolidated over time in the face of the particular challenges in the country's current context. Although the path towards conceiving academic and operational prestige is an essential step in transforming the social imaginary built around the ARC, consolidating strategies to disseminate what the Force does is necessary to transform negative perceptions concerning social discrimination within the institution.



The categories explored: prestige, distinction, and elites, have had different connotations in the institution over time; they have offered the opportunity to work on the changes required to externalize the knowledge and work that the ARC contributes to the country. Creating a balance between the emphasis on academic and operational importance that the ARC instills in all its members and highlighting the positive characteristics that make the Force unique can make this possible. British influence, naval traditions, aesthetics, and myth will always be part of the ARC; however, its association with these elements must be complemented by the institution's current efforts to benefit Colombia. In this way, the naval institution will be able to continue navigating the waters of distinction.

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