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## Patricia Vargas, Los Embera y los Cuna: impacto y reacción ante la ocupación española, siglos XVI y XVII

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*Los Embera y los Cuna: impacto y reacción ante la ocupación española, siglos XVI y XVII.* Por Patricia Vargas. (Bogotá: CEREC/Instituto Colombiano de Antropología-Colcultura, 1993. 199 pp. Ilustraciones, mapas, cuadros, notas, bibliografía. Precio no disponible.)

Thirty years ago, a new generation of Colombian historians successfully challenged the national and regional *Academias de Historia* and the traditional canons of Colombian historiography. Today their students are graduating with newly minted master's degrees in history, replacing the old guard, staffing universities, and winning fellowships to study abroad for their doctorates. Some of the better monographs now being published in Colombia are the product of these *maestría* programs.

Such is the case with this history of the Spanish impact on the Indians of the Colombian Chocó in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Patricia Vargas first took a master's in Anthropology at Los Andes and then a master's in Andean History at El Valle under Germán Colmenares. The story she presents is an old one, beginning 500 years ago, and continuing today as the conflict between individual Indian societies and the modern nation-state. Vargas traces the fault lines of power, language, the learning of Christian

practice, and the loss of Indian tradition by combining present-day oral history traditions of the Embera, Cuna, and Waunana Indians with the colonial archival record of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She marries two different ways of knowing—the cyclical, or mythological, and the linear, or historical. In the process she attempts to correct some of the bias integral to a historical record whose documentary base was established by the conquerors.

Vargas finds that while the Spanish appeared in Urabá as early as 1502, most of the Chocó was still independent of the Spanish Empire nearly 200 years later. Nevertheless, the region underwent drastic changes even though the Spanish presence was minimal. In the sixteenth century, the upper, middle, and lower reaches of the Atrato River were occupied by the Embera, Cuna, and Tule, respectively, but the brief Spanish invasion and the struggle between various native groups for control of territory and resources led to war between the Embera and the Cuna. In supplementing the scanty historical documentation, Vargas uses native myths to argue that in the wake of those conflicts, the Embera moved further north and down the Atrato while the Cuna gravitated toward the Isthmus of Panama; these migrations displaced the Cueva, Catío, and Monguenera peoples. Although the latter three groups had more centralized societies, tradable products, and commercial relations, these apparent strengths brought them into contact with the Spanish, which weakened their social structure and made them vulnerable to attacks from the Embera and Cuna.

Even tangential Spanish activity often had a destructive ripple effect in many Indian worlds. For example, Spanish gold mining and its incessant labor demands at Santa Fe de Antioquia, just east of the Chocó, played a significant role in weakening the Catío. This facilitated the final victory of the Embera, who moved north and occupied Catío territory when they themselves felt threatened by Spanish colonization from Popayán in the south. Later the rebellion, or massacre, depending on whether one takes the perspective of Indian myth or Spanish documentation, by the Embera in 1684 led them to move west and further north, concentrating along the Pacific Coast, the Bojayá River, and the lower Atrato. The Embera wanted to exist free and independent on the fringes of the Spanish Empire, but the encroachment of Spanish gold-seekers, administrators, and priests over the Western Cordillera made this impossible.

Where Spanish documentary sources are silent, Vargas effectively uses Indian myths to structure the probable interaction among the various Indian groups of the Colombian Chocó during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While Vargas' conclusions are intriguing, the myths do lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. One Indian myth (pp. 27-31), for example, has many clear references to Indian cannibalism. While not directly

relevant to Vargas' chosen topic, it seems to verify Spanish reports which have been presumed discredited in recent years.

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