

Marta Herrera Ángel.

El conquistador conquistado. Awás, Cuayquer y Sindaguas en el Pacífico colombiano, siglos XVI-XVIII.

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This deeply researched, intensely thoughtful, and finely illustrated book fills a major void. Whereas the colonial Chocó has received much scholarly attention over the years, little is known of the southwestern corner of Colombia the Spanish called the Province of Las Barbacoas. Even this name is a bit confusing, since for its polyglot indigenous inhabitants, portions of Esmeraldas (Ecuador), some parts of the Patía River drainage, sections of western Pasto, and several major rivers just south of Buenaventura all formed part of a tightly knit but wildly diverse zone of indigenous activity. Home of the famously reclusive Awá-Cuayquer and the ferocious (and presumed extinct) Sindaguas, the colonial Provincia de Las Barbacoas has remained mysterious, both historically and geographically.

After years of painstaking archival, ethnographic, linguistic, and cartographic work, Marta Herrera Ángel tells the story of this large and extremely bio-diverse region in colonial times from the perspective of its native inhabitants. As the title suggests, the author stresses indigenous resistance and wily resilience in the face of Spanish-descended gold seekers, their minor colonies of enslaved African mineworkers, and would-be conquistadors. Yet since indigenous voices, much less complete narratives, are scant, to write such a history requires a most careful, “against-the-grain” reading of colonial documents composed by Spanish-speaking colonizers, some of them seemingly bent on annihilating local groups such as the Sindaguas.

What is the nature of the documentary record? As the author explains, there survive in Ecuadorian, Colombian, and Spanish archives a few fragmentary but rich conquest narratives from the early seventeenth century, two of them with invaluable maps, followed by census-like *numeraciones* from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. There are earlier written sources, but most are thin on details. Only when combined with linguistic and ethnographic insights and all available colonial maps and charts can one begin to fathom the social complexity of this region and start to trace its history. Herrera argues convincingly that the “conqueror was conquered” in the sense that native groups managed to evade colonial rule more effectively than historians have been willing to admit. The written sources claim a degree of control over native inhabitants that is not in accordance with a larger geographical understanding of the region. Put another way, historians, myself included, have been too willing to take

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Spanish sources at their word, perhaps also skipping to later developments and projecting them backward in time.

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Noting the rich prehistory of the area, best known for the equally enigmatic La Tolita-Tumaco culture that flourished ca. 350 BCE-350 CE, Herrera Ángel moves quickly to the early Spanish reconnaissance, which produced the confounding but beautiful map on the book's cover. The Spanish arrived early from Panamá but were very slow to penetrate the wet and wooded Province of Las Barbacoas. Local inhabitants met Pizarro and company with poisoned arrows, keeping Europeans offshore at Gorgona and the Isla del Gallo. Greater Barbacoas was only barely penetrated by Spanish interlopers for a century after Pizarro, occasionally visited by shipwreck victims and neo-conquistadors probing the margins, with major conflicts beginning only in 1610.

But gold, the region's main attraction, could not be ignored, especially as highland tributary populations dwindled and gold diggings on the upper Cauca and Patía drainages played out. An early frontier gold camp of great interest was Madrigal de Chapanchica, which Herrera describes beautifully. The second- and third-generation elites of Pasto and Popayán were restless for conquests and treasure in the Pacific lowlands even if they avoided the hyperbolic language of old-fashioned El Dorado seekers. Theirs was the language of "punishment" or *castigo*, but it is clear they mean conquest. Chapter two treats the sequence of bloody conquest wars that went along with the establishment of slave-based gold camps beginning in the early seventeenth century, most importantly Santa María del Puerto de las Barbacoas (today Barbacoas, Nariño). Here we learn of the enigmatic Sindaguas, indomitable warriors reminiscent of the Pijaos of the Central Cordillera. Herrera effectively demonstrates that the Sindaguas were an established and feared ethnic group with dwellings in both the foothills and alluvial plains.

Chapter three probes deeper into Sindagua culture, a major attempt to rescue ethnography from refractory colonial documents, especially those produced in the 1630s conquest wars. Having spent considerable time with these documents, I can attest to the great value of this contribution. Herrera takes extraordinary care to map each group and trace its movements and transformations over time. Herrera turns to Sindagua practices of warfare, finding patterns in captive-taking and addressing Spanish and other captive allegations of clothing theft, trophy-head taking, cannibalism, and drinking parties. The most innovative feature of this chapter is Herrera's use of twentieth-century Awá ethnographies to attempt interpretation of seventeenth-century conquest accounts. Awá dissimulation and naming taboos help explain some of the confounding claims made by seventeenth-century interlopers and captives, a virtual Babel of names.

Chapter four traces the dispersal and reconstitution of survivor and descendant groups, including the “conquered” Sindaguas. An enduring question is what relationship these folks bore to the Agua or Awá-Coayquer. Herrera combs all available censuses, inspection records, and visitor descriptions for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to trace dispersal and reconstitution of Awá-speaking groups following the wars of the 1630s. Despite variations, most of the detailed records relate to *encomiendas* centered on or near the regional capital of Santa María del Puerto (Barbacoas). Herrera finds that the new indigenous settlements (or re-settlements) reflected distinct ethnic groups, and further that the censuses provide information on hierarchy and household organization. As with all such documents, it is difficult to parse the views of the census taker from native views, but Herrera is extremely careful and clear in explaining her method. A main focus is on what can be learned from names and their colonial variations. The chapter ends in demography: counting up the various communities and their populations to suggest that the Sindaguas and other related groups were remarkably resilient, to the extent that one can speak of a continuous history rather than one of ethnocide or cultural annihilation.

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Are the Awa-Coayquer of today direct descendants of the Sindaguas of 1635? Herrera does not argue this, but rather suggests that surviving populations are likely recombinant groups made up of Sindaguas and many other culturally related peoples found throughout the colonial record. In the end, Herrera argues that all the evidence together refutes the following claims made by past historians: “(1) that the Sindaguas were exterminated after their submission in 1635, (2) that after this date the indigenous inhabitants had, in demographic terms, a secondary presence, having been substituted by the enslaved Afro-descendant population; and (3) that from the defeat of the Sindaguas onward gold mining was almost exclusively carried out by the enslaved” (pp. 296-97, my translation). Herrera’s painstaking arguments are all convincing, but at the simplest level she has proved that there is a viable indigenous history of this long-forgotten but economically vital region of Colombia that demands recognition. The slave-based gold mining economy did not wipe out native Barbacoan peoples. They live on. Thanks to Herrera, we can now map and trace their physical movements and also mark key cultural shifts over time. This is a model of interdisciplinary history at its very best.

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