



The Politics of Memory

Native Historical

Interpretation in the

Colombian Andes

JOANNE RAPPAPORT

The Politics of Memory

A book in the series

LATIN AMERICA OTHERWISE:

LANGUAGES, EMPIRES, NATIONS

Series editors:

Walter D. Mignolo, Duke University

Irene Silverblatt, Duke University

Sonia Saldívar-Hull, University of

California at Los Angeles

The Politics of Memory



Native Historical

Interpretation in the

Colombian Andes

JOANNE RAPPAPORT

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Durham and London 1998

© 1990 Cambridge University Press

This edition © 1998 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on
acid-free paper ☺

Typeset in Monotype Garamond by Tseng
Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-
Publication Data appear on the last printed
page of this book.

Contents

About the Series vii

Preface to the Duke Edition ix

List of Illustrations xvii

Preface xxiii

1 Introduction: Interpreting the Past 1

PART I The Creation of a Chiefly
Ideology: Nasa Historical Thought
under Spanish Rule

2 The Rise of the Colonial *Cacique* 31

3 The Birth of the Myth: Don Juan Tama y Calambás 61

PART II From Colony to Republic:
Cacique and *Candillo*

4 The Chiefdom Transformed: The Nineteenth-Century Nasa 87

5 From Sharecropper to *Candillo*: Manuel Quintín Lame 117

PART III Contemporary Historical
Voices

6 The *Cacique* Reborn: The Twentieth- Century Nasa 141

7 Julio Niquinás, a Contemporary Nasa Historian 175

8 Conclusion: Narrative and Image in a Textual Community 197

Glossary 209

Notes 211

References 221

Index 241

About the

Series



Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations is a critical series. It aims to explore the emergence and consequences of concepts used to define “Latin America” while at the same time exploring the broad interplay of political, economic, and cultural practices that have shaped Latin American worlds. Latin America, at the crossroads of competing imperial designs and local responses, has been construed as a geocultural and geopolitical entity since the nineteenth century. This series provides a starting point to redefine Latin America as a configuration of political, linguistic, cultural, and economic intersections that demands a continuous reappraisal of the role of the Americas in history, and of the ongoing process of globalization and the relocation of people and cultures that have characterized Latin America’s experience. *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* is a forum that confronts established geocultural constructions, that rethinks area studies and disciplinary boundaries, that assesses convictions of the academy and of public policy, and that, correspondingly, demands that the practices through which we produce knowledge and understanding about and from Latin America be subject to rigorous and critical scrutiny.

In *The Politics of Memory* Joanne Rappaport challenges academic common sense regarding history—how it is written and the measure of its contained “truths.” Insisting that the epistemological separation of history and myth—granting history primarily to the West and myth to “others”—is spurious, Rappaport writes a

historiography of Nasa interpretations of their past. Since the Spanish invasion Nasa intellectuals have recorded a vision of their past that is grounded in the logics of culture and time. In transforming interpretations of Nasa colonial experiences, these intellectuals have been party to the processes making and remaking history.

As colonial subjects, Nasa used the legal means determined by Spain to defend their interests against an encroaching state. Since Spanish law framed political rights in a discourse of historical precedent, Nasa historical expressions, now encoded in legal records, became a baseline for further historical reconstructions and political struggles. *The Politics of Memory* unmask the culturally bound processes inherent in historical writing. By placing Nasa and Western intellectuals in the same analytical field, Rappaport reveals the inadequacy of traditional academic classifications and undermines the modern concept of "intellectual." By the same token, she makes us reflect on the politics of the word: the writing of history and the reconfiguration of memory are ultimately inseparable from political experience, and are intrinsic to contests for political legitimacy and ideological hegemony.

Walter D. Mignolo, Duke University

Irene Silverblatt, Duke University

Sonia Saldivar-Hull, University of California at Los Angeles

Preface to the

Duke Edition



In an insightful analysis of the repressive character of the written word when oral accounts are transformed into legal record, oral historian Alessandro Portelli makes a valuable distinction between legal and historical truth: "Historical truth is hardly ever more than a descriptive hypothesis; legal truth, on the other hand, has a performative nature. . . . Also, legal truth has a tendency to become historical truth" (1991: 269). In the Italian trial of the Red Brigades, which Portelli analyzes, the prosecution's manipulation of the defendants' oral testimony can, ultimately, be measured by years spent in prison. Here, the power of legal over historical truth symbolizes the domination exerted by the state over its citizens. The defendants, unable to control the fate of their testimony once it is translated into the legal chronicle by the court, are silenced in the written record; just as the court materially transforms their personal histories via prison sentences, it rewrites the history of their activities, irrevocably altering future public memory.

This book explores a very different metamorphosis from historical to legal truth, in which Nasa intellectuals from southern Colombia exert a counterhegemonic force over the written word, transforming a culturally specific historical vision into legal document in their struggle to maintain themselves as an autonomous people in the face of the homogenizing schemes of the state.¹ As I examine the making and remaking of Nasa historical expression since the Spanish invasion of the early sixteenth century, I take as my focus the story

of an eighteenth-century hereditary chief, Don Juan Tama, who left a paper trail of documents legitimizing his sovereignty. His tale reappears in different forms over the centuries: as chiefly title, political treatise, oral tradition, or primary school textbook entry. Using as my axis both the historical and the legendary Juan Tama, I trace the chains along which knowledge of this personage was transmitted from the early colonial era to the present, paying special attention to the political conditions under which various Nasa historians appropriated his biography. For, as his archival documentation was read and reread by Nasa political leaders in search of legal, written confirmation of their claims to territory, Juan Tama's legacy developed into an oral tradition that, in turn, furnished evidence for subsequent oral and written histories. Here is a case in which a subordinated minority is able to wrest control of historical truth from the keepers of the archives and to transform it into a legal truth that has exerted a lasting influence over the centuries.

My purpose in writing this book was twofold: to historicize Nasa historical expression and to clarify the intellectual nature of the activities of Nasa historians. At the time I wrote it, I was addressing debates among anthropologists regarding the relationship between history and myth, debates which distinguished between these two forms of narrative and identified societies as tending toward one or the other mode of remembering the past.² A radical dichotomy was created between "hot" and "cold" societies, the former exhibiting an appreciation of historical change, frequently through the technology of literacy, while the latter told timeless "myths" that communicated more about social structure than history, their members imprisoned in the oral sphere. This sort of polar opposition—which was the accepted, or even standard, fare in anthropological approaches of the time—disregarded the very real historical experience of the peoples studied by anthropologists. My own experience with Nasa narrative had taught me that oral traditions that were "myth-like," in the sense that they embellished upon and transformed historical truth, were frequently based on written documentation and layers of experience, thus constituting native interpretations of historical evidence. I subsequently decided to reconsider the mythic status of such narratives and to view them as a distinct historical vision.

I opted for historicizing Nasa mythology, using the short paper

trail left by oral and written versions of the Juan Tama story as evidence of a Nasa historiography operating within the ever-widening “middle ground” (White 1991) in which indigenous peoples and Spaniards interacted, creating a common colonial culture. The Nasa historical vision has functioned over the centuries as a foundational narrative in the process of ethnogenesis through which the Nasa redefined themselves as a modern ethnic group. I situated different examples of Nasa interpretation of the past within their historical contexts, identifying the political realities that might have influenced the form and contents of historical narrative. By so doing, I was able to show how political realities and historical narrative shape and influence each other in a mutually active relationship. My aim was to contribute to the shifting of the conceptual ground upon which the myth/history dichotomy operated, thus throwing into relief some of the problems associated with such ahistoric and essentializing approaches.

Only after *The Politics of Memory* was published did I become aware of the contributions of other scholars, working in other parts of the world, whose analyses problematized the temporal locus of historical interpretation, demonstrating the shifting and contextual nature of historical thought and the slippery quality of monolithic forms of historical truth. The persistence of Juan Tama’s legacy exemplifies Greg Denning’s assertion that history is what *actually* happened, in the sense of the Spanish word *actualmente* [at present], as opposed to telling us what *really* occurred (Denning 1988; see also Boyarin 1994); historical interpretation tells us much more about the present’s appropriation of the past than of the past itself (Portelli 1991). Hence, my attempt to situate the multiple presents of Nasa historiography within their temporal contexts, much as Vicente Rafael (1993) did with Tagalog writings in the context of Spanish missionary activities, as Shahid Amin (1995) accomplished in his study of how the memory of an Indian massacre resonated in nationalist historiography and in oral tradition, and as Richard Fox (1989) undertook in his history of the appropriation of Gandhian utopian ideology by the political actors who came after him.

Were I to rewrite this book today within the intellectual space created by these scholars, I would reject more firmly the myth/history distinction—that I criticized (in hindsight) somewhat timidly in the pages that follow—where the multiple sightings of Juan Tama by Nasa

narrators are frequently characterized as “mythic” in counterdistinction to the “historical” reconstruction that I was able to effect on the basis of archival documents. Nasa appreciations of their colonial-era leader are no more mythical than are my historical reconstructions, which are grounded in the time and place in which they were written. Moreover, as these authors have so cogently illustrated, both Nasa historiography and my own interpretations of it cannot be situated in culturally bounded compartments of “indigenous” and “European” modes of thought and action. Both Nasa histories and my reconstructions of the Nasa past are clearly creatures of a common discursive space in which various historical actors—indigenous politicians and narrators, Colombian generals and administrators, even foreign anthropologists—engage in a dialogue whose shared logic grows out of a common history (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991).

In recognition of this shared space of interpretation and action, I chose to identify Nasa historians as intellectuals, to the consternation of some readers, who felt that the term was not entirely appropriate for oral narrators who had limited or no education and were not articulated with the intellectual institutions of the dominant society. However, as active participants in a political process that spanned various sectors of colonial and postcolonial society, their location “at the nexus between domination and public discourse” (Feierman 1990: 5) enabled them to operate as intellectuals. As was true for the African peasant intellectuals of Feierman’s analysis, these Nasa thinkers were those “best able to shape discourse” (1990: 4), not only within their own society but in the broader Colombian society to which they belonged.

The extent to which Colombian indigenous intellectuals can shape the discourse of their compatriots has been demonstrated in the past decade, as native people have become interlocutors with the state and the public on the national level. The intensity of indigenous ethnic organizing, which was still incipient at the time of my research in Tierradentro, has caused the indigenous movement to be counted among the most influential alternative voices on the national stage. Under the 1991 Colombian Constitution (Colombia 1991), which recognizes Colombia as a pluriethnic nation, native peoples now enjoy autonomy in the administrative, financial, and judicial management of their territories, as well as a special electoral jurisdiction that per-

mits them to send voting representatives to Congress.³ Three indigenous legislators participated in the Constituent Assembly that wrote the Constitution; among them was Alfonso Peña, a Nasa leader of the guerrilla movement, the Quintín Lame Armed Movement.

Thanks to numerous evaluations of the role of the intellectual in Euroamerican society (Foucault 1977, Gramsci 1971, Jacoby 1987, Said 1994, among others) and to indigenous intellectuals who have burst upon the scene across Latin America, forcing us to recognize their presence and authority, it has become more fashionable today for anthropologists and historians to analyze the appearance of these shapers of intellectual discourse among the native peoples and peasants of the region (Lomnitz-Adler 1992, Mallon 1995, Nelson 1996, Warren 1992). The three Nasa intellectuals of whom I write in the following pages are the forerunners of this movement, whose ranks have swelled with regional and national indigenous politicians such as Constituent Assembly member Peña and Jesús Piñacué, former President of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca; by local leaders like the late Father Alvaro Ulcué, who set in motion a regional planning commission run by community activists; as well as by Nasa scholars, who are writing anthropological, historical, and linguistic analyses of their own ethnic group (Escuela del Pensamiento Nasa 1996, Ulcué 1996, Yule 1995). Much contemporary Nasa scholarly production concentrates on the study of Nasa cosmology, with close attention to linguistic categories and to the implementation of cosmological knowledge in shamanic practice. Were I to have written this book today, I would have dedicated considerably more space to a discussion of how Don Juan Tama, Manuel Quintín Lame, and Julio Niquinás—the three intellectual forerunners I examine—nourished the contemporary intellectual movement among the Nasa, providing those that followed with an ideology and a language that facilitated the process of decolonization of thought (Chakrabarty 1992) and provided a conceptual ground upon which late-twentieth-century intellectuals deftly balance Nasa belief systems with a keen appreciation of the nature of colonial domination.

This group of intellectuals is especially essential today: not only must the Nasa create new institutions under the 1991 Constitution, but they must also reinvent their society and their territory in the wake of a 1994 earthquake and landslide that devastated Tierradentro, compel-

ling many communities, including Don Juan Tama's village of Vitoncó, to relocate in distant regions (Rappaport and Gow 1997). Community leaders are engaged in the creation of new curricula to educate Nasa children settled far from their homeland; planners are writing development projects to assist communities in adapting their economies to new environments; and political leaders are envisioning new ways to exercise political autonomy in the face of geographic dispersion and population regroupment.⁴ The shamans—traditional intellectuals who used to operate exclusively within the Nasa tradition—have engaged in the reconstitution, upon a new landscape, of a sacred territory erased by the catastrophe. Their participation in the resettlement process, as active planners of new communities, has expanded their sphere of activity beyond the Nasa, forcing them to interact with government institutions and private foundations.

In 1995, after a decade spent in other parts of Colombia, I revisited the Nasa to conduct research on the relocation of devastated communities and on the role of indigenous intellectuals in the post-Constitution era; I was confronted with a radically different community than that which I had encountered during my fieldwork in the late 1970s. Faced with political violence, extreme poverty, the development of transportation and communication networks, the dream of educating their youth, and the 1994 disaster, numerous Nasa have left Tierradentro for surrounding rural and urban areas. The Nasa intellectuals with whom I am now working, the numerous demilitarized indigenous guerrilla fighters, the refugees (who alternate between agricultural production and wage labor), and those who remained in Tierradentro (only to periodically abandon their homes to work in nearby coffee harvests, roadbuilding, or as domestic servants in southern Colombian cities), can no longer be called "peasants" in the anthropological sense of the term; they are now what Michael Kearney (1996) calls "post-peasants," whose activities are articulated within a global economy and a national and international space of dissemination of ideas.

Most surprising was the fact that all of the intellectuals with whom I conversed, and even many of the activists working at the local level, were conversant with my research, which was available in rough translation and circulated in pirated form in communities and organizations. Reactions to my writings ranged from critiques of the finer

points of some of my historical interpretations, to an acceptance of these theories as a kind of “received truth.”⁵ Initially I feared that Nasa readers would react negatively to my analysis of the history of the construction of their identity, given that I perceive cultural continuity as the product of conscious strategy on the part of native intellectuals and not as the perpetuation of an essential Nasa culture. I discovered, however, that many found my argument engaging and convincing and, in fact, agreed that such adaptability and creativity constitute a fundamental strength that the Nasa harness in hard times.

Since 1990, a number of people have contributed to the development of my ideas. Tom Cummins, Lucho Escobar, Myriam Amparo Espinosa, Bill Hanks, and Dana Leibsohn have been inspiring interlocutors, especially in our discussions of the common ground upon which indigenous people and Europeans have interacted. My discussions with Bob Dover, Marcelo Fernández, José Antonio Figueroa, Jean Jackson, Jorge León, Alfonso Peña, Adonías Perdomo, Daniel Piñacué, Carol Smith, Esteban Ticona, and Luis Carlos Ulcué on the challenges facing indigenous intellectuals have broadened my horizons and deepened my appreciation of what it means to be indigenous in the post-peasant era. Field research in Cumbal, Nariño, subsequent to my work in Tierradentro, expanded my appreciation of the sagacity of native historians. My current research with María Lucía Sotomayor and Carlos Vladimir Zambrano on the dynamics of civil society in the post-Constitution era has irrevocably altered my perceptions of the boundedness of Colombian indigenous communities. I thank Walter Mignolo, Reynolds Price, and Mark Thurner for encouraging me to approach Duke University Press to publish a paperback edition of this book. David Gow has accompanied me as husband and colleague in my research and ramblings, both geographic and intellectual, during the past eight years; he and Dana Leibsohn provided me with insightful commentaries on previous drafts of this preface. I dedicate this edition of *The Politics of Memory* to the resettled Nasa of Juan Tama (Vitoncó), Nuevo Tóez, Pat Yu’, and San José del Guayabal: may you succeed in reconstituting *Nasa Kíwe*, following in the footsteps of Juan Tama.

Illustrations

PLATES

- 1 The village of Tálaga 6
- 2 A festival in Togoima 6
- 3 Cabildo members from the *resguardo* of Quichaya 8
- 4 A family from San José 9
- 5 Manuel Quintín Lame 135
- 6 Precolumbian snake motif 157
- 7 Chumbipe 164
- 8 La Muralla 166
- 9 Musicians from San José 169
- 10 Crosses as boundary markers 171

MAPS

- 1 The Nasa within their broader geographic context 3
- 2 Topographic map of the Colombian Central Cordillera 4
- 3 General map of the Nasa area 5
- 4 Precolumbian *cacicazgos* of Tierradentro 34
- 5 Colonial Nasa *cacicazgos* 52
- 6 Nineteenth-century Colombia: political divisions 91
- 7 Sacred geography of Tierradentro 162

FIGURES

- 1 Genealogies of the new *caciques* 58
- 2 Genealogies of minor *caciques* 67
- 3 Nasa house 170
- 4 Nasa coat of arms 173

IN MEMORY (1990)

Helen Rappaport

and

Joseph B. Casagrande

IN MEMORY (1998)

of the Nasa who

perished in the 1994

earthquake

When Rabbi Baer was five years old, a fire broke out in his father's house. Hearing his mother grieve and cry about this, he asked her: "Mother, do we have to be so unhappy because we have lost a house?"

"I am not grieving for the house," she said, "but for our family tree which burned up. It began with Rabbi Yohanon, the sandal-maker, the master in the Talmud."

"And what does that matter!" exclaimed the boy. "I shall get you a new family tree which begins with me!"

—MARTIN BUBER,

Tales of the Hasidim

Preface



This book will trace the historical vision of the Nasa (formerly the Páez) of the highlands of Cauca, Colombia over three centuries. In it, I examine the political, social and economic forces, both internal to the Nasa and those originating in the dominant society, that have impinged upon native thought, causing age-old symbols to be deployed in new ways and innovations to be cast as historical. This process of historical renovation has served as an ideological means of resisting ethnocide. My analysis is a product of the times in which I came to know the Nasa, an era in which they were under attack from landowners and army, accused of political subversion because they had organized themselves as Indians. Living with the Nasa from 1978 to 1980, sharing with them their fear of the soldiers who were occupying their territory, I listened to their thoughts on the past, and on how their history might help them to survive the present. Originally, I meant to study their notion of sacred space, but quickly came to realize that Nasa cosmology was inextricably bound up in resistance tactics, and thus could not be studied in isolation.

My first attempt at analyzing the information I collected from 1978 to 1980 in Tierradentro, Cauca, was a dissertation (Rappaport 1982) that focused heavily on the contemporary Nasa and the colonial roots of their historical vision. Since then, as I worked with nineteenth-century historical materials, I began to realize that traditional Andean scholarship was flawed in its insistence upon cultural continuity from pre-

columbian times to the present as an example of the persistence of unconscious structures in the minds of Andean peoples. I discovered that the nineteenth century, frequently neglected by anthropologists, was key to an understanding of contemporary oral tradition. On the one hand, it is in this period that the conscious reappropriation of the past is most clearly manifest in the activities of indigenous politicians. On the other hand, the nineteenth-century reinvention of tradition is not so much the persistence of mental structures, as a reapplication of older models to quite distinct social circumstances. In short, it became evident that a detailed analysis of contemporary oral tradition would have to be historical in focus. As I came to this realization, my ethnographic data became less a central focus of analysis than a means of culturally anchoring myself in the Nasa historical experience that permitted me, as it were, to view my historical materials "from the inside." This book, then, is not so much an ethnography, as an ethnographically informed intellectual history of the Nasa.

First, I would like to thank the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología (ICAN) and its director in 1978, Alvaro Soto Holguín, for granting me permission to conduct ethnographic research in Colombia, by waiving then-existing restrictions on foreign anthropological research. Dr. Soto and later directors of ICAN, Drs. Alberto Rivera, Iván Posada and Roberto Pineda Giraldo, graciously opened the resources of the Instituto to me. I would also like to thank the Fundación de Investigaciones Arqueológicas Nacionales (Banco de la República) and the Universidad del Cauca for agreeing to fund my research, at a time when North American foundations hesitated to support ethnographic investigation in Colombia. In the summer of 1984, after restrictions on the activities of foreign anthropologists had been lifted, my archival and bibliographic research was supported by a grant-in-aid from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and a faculty summer research fellowship from the University of Maryland—Baltimore County for which I am grateful.

I also wish to acknowledge the collaboration of the directors of the various archives and libraries in which I conducted historical research in Colombia and in Ecuador, including the Archivo de la Academia Colombiana de Historia, the Archivo Central del Cauca, the Archivo Fundación Colombia Nuestra, the Archivo Histórico de Tierraden-

tro, the Archivo del Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria, the Archivo Jijón y Caamaño, the Archivo Nacional de Colombia, the Archivo Nacional de Historia, the Archivo Provincia Franciscana de Santafé, the Archivo Provincial de los Padres Vicentinos de Colombia, the Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, and the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia. In all of these repositories, directors and staff went out of their way to alert me to important materials, making the historical portion of my research both productive and enjoyable. Documents from the Archivo General de Indias were consulted from a microfilm collection compiled by Joseph B. Casagrande, with the support of the National Science Foundation.

I also received extensive support from local people while in the field. I would especially like to thank the Prefectura Apostólica de Tierradentro and Monsignors Enrique Vallejo and Germán García, the Hermanas Misioneras de la Madre Laura of Calderas and Vitoncó, Miguel Palomino and Fr. Jorge Escobar for their support. Two Colombian anthropology students, Sofía Botero and Gustavo Antonio Legarda, ably served as my assistants during various phases of the research.

In Colombia, I met a circle of anthropologists, historians and political activists with whom I shared interests, both with regard to the Nasa and ethnohistory in general. Although I run the risk of forgetting some of them, I thank Segundo Bernal, Víctor Daniel Bonilla, Ana María Falcetti, María Teresa Findji, Ximena Pachón, Roberto Pineda Camacho, Clemencia Plazas, Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, Kathleen Romoli, Carlos Alberto Uribe, María Victoria Uribe and Luis Guillermo Vasco for sharing hours of conversation and analysis with me.

In North America, a number of individuals served as teachers, colleagues and sounding-boards at different stages of the development of the ideas in this book. They include Catherine Allen, Ruth Behar, Gonzalo Castillo, David William Cohen, David Earle, Donald Lathrap, Richard Price, Frank Salomon, Jack Sinnigen, Michael Taussig and R. Tom Zuidema. My special thanks also go to those who have read and commented upon my manuscript at various stages in its preparation: Stephen Hugh-Jones, Grant Jones, Catherine LeGrand, Sutti Ortiz, Deborah Poole and Linda Seligmann. I would especially like to thank Wendy Guise of Cambridge University Press for her collaboration in turning my manuscript into a book.

Gonzalo Castillo Cárdenas, editor of Quintín Lame's treatise, and author of the introduction to the 1971 edition of *Los pensamientos*, graciously granted me permission to quote extensively from the work.

Julie Perlmutter contributed the maps and illustrations in this volume.

My father, Irving Rappaport, provided constant support and motivation from the very beginning of the project.

This book is dedicated to the memory of two people who would have taken pleasure in seeing the completed book, but died too soon for me to share it with them. Without the support of my mother, Helen Rappaport, and my dissertation director, Joseph B. Casagrande, it would never have been possible.

Of all those who contributed in some way to the final product, I must single out the Nasa of Calderas, Jambaló, San José, Togoima and Vitoncó, who shared with me their homes, their time, their ideas, their hopes for the future and their knowledge of the past. I hope that, once translated into an appropriate medium and language, my analysis might become an arm in their struggle for autonomy and dignity. My immense gratitude goes to these men and women, sons and daughters of the Star.

In *Los funerales de la Mamá Grande*, Gabriel García Márquez declares that he must tell his story “before the historians have time to arrive.” But in reality, the historians arrived long ago, and the novelist is righting the wrongs of Colombian historiography by giving life and breath to long-forgotten incidents which should have been at the center of the Colombian historical consciousness, but were omitted by historians. Throughout the Americas indigenous peoples are working toward these same ends, revalidating their own historical knowledge as an arm against their subordinate position in society. For them, history is a source of knowledge of how they were first subjugated and of information about their legal rights, the beginnings of a new definition of themselves as a people, a model upon which to base new national structures (Barre 1983).¹ For them as for García Márquez, Western historiography has severed the Indians from their past by neglecting to mention them except as exotic beings or as savages. Western historiography thus justifies the European invasion. Nevertheless, from the perspective of aboriginal peoples, the writings of historians are more legendary than accurate (Wankar 1981: 297–81). European myths of the Americas have served as tools for dominating Native Americans by denying them access to a knowledge of their own past so necessary for organizing in the present. In the words of one native writer: “The whites block our road toward the future by blocking our road to the past” (Wankar 1981: 279).

This book will trace the process by which the

Introduction:

Interpreting

the Past

