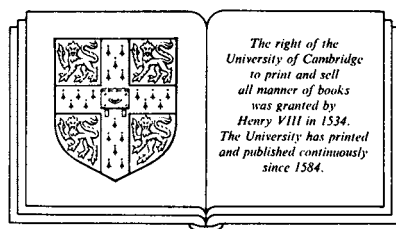


NATIVE SOCIETY AND DISEASE IN COLONIAL ECUADOR

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Introduction

Over the last twenty years historians have uncovered and illuminated a new history of Amerindian peoples under European rule. Spanish defeat and subjugation of native populations, so an older historiography once held, were the history of these peoples in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. More recently, however, scholars have concentrated instead on the Indians' resilience and adaptability – their capacity, in the face of terrible odds, to maintain themselves and their societies.

The new historiography has begun to reveal the faces and voices of peoples long misunderstood.¹ Still, little attention has been paid to another, very important element in the history of Amerindian populations – their biological adaptability and resilience. The social history of these peoples, in other words, will remain incomplete without further development of their pathogenic and immunological history. Disease, of course, existed in the Americas long before the sixteenth century. But, just as native societies resisted and eventually adapted to European conquest, so too did they adapt to Old World pathogens. Just as the responses of Indian communities to the economic and political demands of Spaniards varied over time, so did the immunological responses of indigenous populations change over generations. What began in the sixteenth century as contact and invasion soon would involve both Indians and Europeans in a new history of biological and social adaptation.² And this story, as it

1 For the Andean area, see Stern, *Peru's Indian Peoples*; and "The Age of Andean Insurrection, 1742–1782," pp. 34–93; Spalding, *Huachibiri*; and *De indio a campesino*; Larson, *Colonialism and Agrarian Transformation*; and "Caciques, Class Structure, and the Colonial State in Bolivia"; Sánchez-Albornoz, *Indios y tributos*; and "Migración rural"; Cole, *The Potosí Mita*; Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches*; and Salomon, *Native Lords*. For Mexico and Central America, see Farriss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule*; MacLeod and Wasserstrom, eds., *Spaniards and Indians in Southeastern Mesoamerica*; Newson, "Indian Population Patterns," 41–69; *Indian Survival*; and *The Cost of Conquest*; Hill and Monaghan, *Continuities in Highland Maya Social Organization*; Lovell, *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala*; and Zamora, *Los mayas de las tierras altas en el siglo XVI*.

2 To date, the most thorough and innovative analyses of biohistorical issues can be found in the works of historian Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange and Ecological Imperialism*.

developed in the northern sector of the viceroyalty of Peru – in Ecuador – is the subject of this book.

Because this study traces fundamental biological and social changes over many generations, it is important to assess the nature of Ecuador's native societies before the arrival of Europeans. The first chapter examines the physical and social settings and concludes with an analysis of the demographic history of the region before 1534. The second chapter introduces the pathological setting and relates it to native concepts about health, illness, and healing as they existed before the Spanish invasion. In so doing, it addresses the debate over the nature of pre-Columbian medical systems.

The history of biological and social adaptation begins in the third chapter, where the congruent paths of sixteenth-century military conquest and epidemics of Old World diseases are analyzed. Chapter three also examines European attempts to deal with illnesses, both their own and those of the Indian population, through the establishment of hospitals and the creation of rules and regulations designed to protect public health. It concludes with an analysis of the documentary evidence on the catastrophic decline of Ecuador's native population during this period.

In the fourth chapter, the resilience and adaptability of native society become especially clear. For although disease continued to exact a heavy toll during the seventeenth century, by 1690 the number of natives living in the north-central highlands of Ecuador had more than doubled. And although native concepts of disease underwent fundamental changes following the Spanish conquest, evidence suggests that the practice of native medical traditions continued largely unchanged. Demographic patterns, in addition, reveal the ways in which both individuals and communities responded to the onerous economic and political demands of Europeans by devising new social institutions and customs and by learning to use the mechanisms of colonial government to their own advantage.

Population recovery, however, was to be short-lived in the *audiencia* (a jurisdictional and administrative unit of the Spanish empire; also, court of appeals) of Quito, and the fifth chapter examines the disasters of the 1690s and their demographic and economic effects on highland society. Chapter six then traces the disease history of the region during the eighteenth century, when these conditions reinforced each other and ensured that, at least in the sierra, Ecuador entered the era of independence with a declining Indian population and a shrinking economy. Significantly, it was during the same period that Quito's natives began to demonstrate immunological resistance to the very diseases that had devastated them for so long. At the same time, native opposition to colonial rule, often taking the form of violent protests, increased throughout the region. The old

strategy of resistance through cooperation was replaced by direct confrontation, with native healers and shamans often leading the assault.

The story of the relation between the biological and social history of the Indian peoples of highland Ecuador raises many issues of concern to historians of colonial Spanish America. Among these, the most central involve the consequences of the biological collision of two cultures so distinctly different from each other. But this study is more than a history of disease incidence, medical responses, and population trends. The history of the biological adaptation it recounts also reveals much about a people's social and political experiences under colonial rule. It is difficult to separate the biological from the social and political in the effort to understand the colonial history of Ecuador's Indian peoples. Indeed, this book insists that it is impossible.



Map 2. Highland basins of Ecuador.