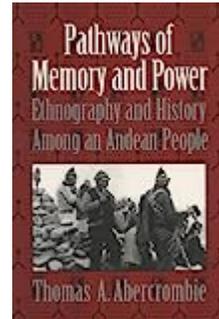




**Thomas A. Abercrombie.** *Pathways of Memory and Power: Ethnography and History Among an Andean People.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. xxviii + 603 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-299-15310-x; \$27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-15314-4.



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**Published on** H-LatAm (October, 1999)

### Pathways from Here and There to Eternity

The first reaction to this massive tome is that, like fine wine, it must be consumed slowly and deliberately, so as to savor its complexity and richness. To completely benefit from its reading, it is also helpful to take some deep breaths along the way and swish the contents around in one's mind, like you would an expensive sip of a celebrated vintage in the mouth. But because tastes disagree and levels of sophistication sometimes take years to cultivate, judgments on this book, I predict, will be mixed: from exciting and stimulating to confusing, frustrating, and even infuriating.

The aim of the book, *Pathways of Memory and Power*, by Thomas A. Abercrombie, is to discover the values that motivate people to engage in the fiesta-cargo system and the meanings inherent in their activities in a small town called Santa Barbara de K'ulta in the Bolivian highlands. In studying the mixed civil-religious authority hierarchy, he also tries to understand the transformations suffered by ritual authority systems as a result of interface between local orders and global processes. But, in pursuing these objectives, he comes, as we will see in more detail below, to realize that the chronological-event and

hero-type histories that are common to the western historical tradition are not histories that the people of K'ulta themselves would recognize. The history made by the K'ultas themselves is understood through mostly unwritten forms of social memory. These he describes in great detail.

The results of his ethnographic and archival research and methodologies are presented in three parts. In part One, he explores how the K'ulta people remember – through origin myths, genealogies, *ceque* (shrine, pilgrimage or dance paths) transits, *taquies* (song-dance sequences), pilgrimages, and other types of ritual. He finds that the ritual techniques that the aspiring authorities of K'ulta must master on their way to gaining ever-higher-status office are those by which K'ultas construe their past. Because memories are shaped by present concerns, authorities remember their past in a determined way, for specific ends. These forms of remembering are called “paths of memory”, hence the title of the book. They are forms of historical consciousness that empower those who use them. Through the use of these “paths of memory”, the people of K'ulta tried to come to grips with their

colonial and post-colonial situation and construed themselves as active social agents in and of that world.

Part Two presents a history of K'ulta (as we know it) – not a K'ulta history. In writing, the Spanish chroniclers dismissed the multiplicity of creation fables and other variable sorts of Andean, especially non-Inca, narratives, reducing all to one story line that related America to the world. In the process of selection and translation, the Spanish equated the sun god to Jesus Christ, the moon deity to the Virgin, and the thunder god Illapa to Saint James. Simultaneously, Spanish indoctrination and repression pushed traditional native religious practices into clandestinity. By the end of the seventeenth century, ritual systems to honor saints had become the principal means that social groups defined themselves.

In the last part (Three), Abercrombie provides an account of “living K'ulta ways of construing and using the past.” (p. 319) He describes the varieties of narrative, libation sequence, and sacrificial saints' rites through which processes of life and death, the human life cycle, and longer social cycles involving marriages and feuds are harnessed to deeper pasts (p. 319).

The way he combines his meticulous archival research with the account of living and learning in the Bolivian highlands makes this a unique book for methodological and content reasons. But some aspects of this book are likely to generate prolonged, even heated, discussion. He rejects the term “ethnohistory”, “because the term tacitly routinizes the antinomy between orality and writing, [the] anthropologist's interview and the historian's source . . . .” (p. 408) The word “ethnohistory”, he says, “has simply served as a label for the ghetto into

which we place the pasts of peoples without writing.” (p. 408) Related to this, he criticizes the discipline of history because it claims to be a representation of “what actually happened” or, at least, of what was actually written. (p. 409) Attention will be drawn, too, to the fact that he includes himself in the book “so that readers may judge the adequacy of my account and recognize its origins in discourses and power-laden social relations, rather than in antiseptic observation” [and, I would add, interpretation]. (p. 410). He argues, justifying, perhaps, his methodology and what he includes in the book and its organization, that written and unwritten pasts, far from challenging disciplinary boundaries, are complementary. (p. 409-10). And, he explicitly and repeatedly denies any pretension of objectivity (p. iv, 21, 409). Indeed, he admits to “interested and politically loaded goals . . . .” (p.411)

Basically, what he is saying is that there are many valid ways to record memories and make them meaningful. Europeans and their descendants privileged the western model, based on chronology, events, and actors because it is or was their own. But there are other ways, such as the K'ultas' memory paths, which until recently did not depend on the written word. To his credit, he says what many of us consciously or unconsciously know, but were disincentivated to admit. In this sense, he has done us a service by raising our collective consciousness and opening a new round of professional discourse.

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**Citation:** Susan E. Ramirez. Review of Abercrombie, Thomas A., *Pathways of Memory and Power: Ethnography and History Among an Andean People*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. October, 1999.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3468>

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