

## PREFACE

In the summer of 1997 I participated as a graduate-student researcher on a binational research team which was documenting the medicinal plants of the Mixteca of Oaxaca. I never, however, made it to the Mixteca. Instead I stumbled onto a project that would lead me in the opposite geographic direction, in search of giant yams in southern Mexico.

The team was funded in part by the National Institutes of Health, the Instituto de Química at UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), and the Museum of Man in San Diego. As the sole historian on the team, my role in documenting medicinal plants was not entirely clear to the American researchers and their Mexican counterparts. This confusion proved fortuitous, since I was assigned to spend a month in Mexico City's National Herbarium while the team's chemists and biologists pondered why I had been hired. Housed in the basement of the Siglo XXI hospital, Mexico's high-tech public health institution and symbol of medical progress, the National Herbarium became for nearly a month a calming alternate world hidden away beneath Mexico City's chaotic traffic. It is there that I learned to press and catalogue medicinal plants, marvel at their uses, and tolerate the oppressive mothball stench which stays in your clothing and skin but acts as an undisputed bug repellent. And there was where I first heard of barbasco.

As part of my herbarium training, I was expected to participate in a two-week seminar for medical doctors hailing from various backgrounds and regions of Mexico. The goal of the program was to educate physicians trained in Western institutions about alterna-

tive approaches to health and medications. Specifically, participants were to consider the role of plants in a state-sanctioned project to offer alternative healing methods to Mexican people. The objective was to revive and legitimate this knowledge and slowly begin a medical revolution of sorts by training those who prescribe medications to accept alternative forms of conceiving illness and healing. During one of these presentations, the director of the former Mexican Institute for the Study of Medicinal Plants offhandedly mentioned that few people knew that the oral contraceptives were derived from a wild Mexican yam. I was intrigued. Could this be true? If so, why was this not common knowledge? Why did some historical narratives persist while others languished forgotten? This book is a result of those initial questions.