

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 8
Issue 5 December 2005

Article 13

12-1-2005

Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640

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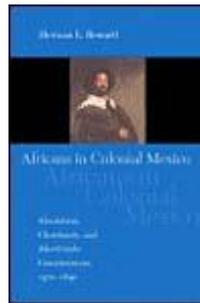
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Recommended Citation

Bennett, Herman L. and Fisher, Andrew B. (2005) "Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 5 , Article 13.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol8/iss5/13>

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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

Published by H-LatAm, <http://www.h-net.org/~latam/> (July 2005); and H-Slavery, <http://www.h-net.org/~slavery/> (September 2005).

Herman L. Bennett. *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640*. Blacks in the Diaspora Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. x + 275 pp. Maps, table, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-2533-4236-8; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 0-2532-1775-X.

Reviewed for H-LatAm by Andrew B. Fisher, Department of History, Carleton College.

Creating Subjects and Forging Community: Afro-Mexicans and Colonial Institutional Power

Scholarship on Mexico's place within the African Diaspora has experienced a veritable renaissance of late. Herman Bennett's book, *Africans in Colonial Mexico*, contributes to this effort by examining sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mexico City, the capital of a colony that for much of this period held the second largest African slave population and the largest free black population in the Americas.

Bennett scrutinizes the lives and process of community formation of the enslaved and free through a close-reading of marriage petitions and bigamy trials adjudicated by the Mexican Inquisition. He posits that an African creole consciousness evolved hand-in-hand with a "legal consciousness" by which individuals learned to position themselves within colonial institutions and practices. In particular, he argues that Spanish absolutism, by which chattel were transformed into both vassals of the Crown and members of the Catholic community, enabled Africans and their descendants to curtail the control and authority of the *paterfamilias*, the slave owner, while asserting their own social networks and communities.

The opening chapters set the stage for the central findings of the book. Chapter 1 summarizes current knowledge of the foundations of African slavery in rural and urban settings throughout Mexico. Echoing the work of Ira Berlin, Bennett argues that New Spain, and Mexico City more specifically, constituted a "slave society," where "the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations," although curiously this paradigm is argued to have evolved in absence of a well-developed plantation system (p.

32). Much as Berlin does for colonial America, Bennett traces three distinct phases of the African Diaspora and community formation in Mexico through the mid-seventeenth century.[1] Relying on examples like the famed "black conquistador" Juan Garrido, Bennett identifies a charter *ladino* generation able to take advantage of a relatively fluid nascent society.[2] Several decades after the conquest, Mexico's demography shifted radically as increasing numbers of non-Hispanic *bozales* entered the colony, exacerbating elite concerns over social control and orthodoxy. Finally, the end of Spain's access to Portuguese slaving by 1640 decreased slave imports while the freed and creole population expanded rapidly.

Chapter 2 discusses the importance of Iberian canon law for regulating the behavior of non-Christians in both the Old and New World. Bennett points out that scholarship on Spanish-American slavery has neglected ecclesiastical laws in favor of secular codes. In so doing he revises Tannenbaum's thesis, suggesting that the Church's intervention in the master-slave relationship had more to do with the desire to regulate slaves than to ameliorate the conditions of slavery.[3] Efforts to augment the sovereigns' absolutist aspirations by the thirteenth century signaled the reversal of a tradition of recognizing the corporate rights of Jews and Moors as *extra ecclesiam* or non-Christians, and the insistence that such individuals abide by Catholic norms. The decision of Charles I in 1518 to allow the importation of *bozales* to the New World led to the transfer of such treatment to Africans as a means of maintaining social control. As the numbers of *bozales* in the New World grew, Charles looked specifically to Christian marriage as the "grand remedy" for alleviating concerns over disorder and contested royal authority in Spain's far-flung empire. This insistence would ultimately translate into the Crown and Church's willingness to undermine the authority of the slave owner in order to regulate and reinforce the spiritual and conjugal lives of the enslaved.

Chapter 3 develops this argument further by tracing the increasing ecclesiastical vigilance over the perceived threat of Africans and mulattoes to the social fabric of New Spain as well as the menace of Protestant foreigners residing in the viceroyalty. Unconvinced by the clergy's ability to regulate the *república de españoles* from either source of religious contagion and disorder, Philip II mandated the introduction of the Inquisition to New Spain in 1569. Here Bennett points out that nearly 50 percent of extant Inquisition records concern defendants of African descent, clearly indicating the authorities' desire to monitor more intensely a growing segment of the colonial population.

The last three chapters develop the central arguments of the book through a painstakingly detailed examination of case studies drawn from ecclesiastical records. Chapter 4 analyzes marriage petitions filed by individuals of African descent between 1584 and 1650, paying particular attention to the approximately 4,400 witnesses the conjugal parties selected to testify on their behalf (p. 81). As others have demonstrated, parish and ecclesiastical records surrounding major religious rites in the lifecycle can provide invaluable glimpses into the social networks of the participants. Bennett contributes to this effort by construing what witness selection might mean in terms of the ethnic consciousness of the betrothed and the evolution of community formation among the colony's black and mulatto population. This is done by gauging the relative similarity of a number of factors

describing the parties involved; including recorded racial and ethnic ascriptions, place of residence, enslaved or free status, and length of mutual acquaintance. While labor relations have been found to be a critical source of patronage and basis of elite control over the city's plebeian population, Bennett notes that all African-based groups were reluctant to select Spaniards as marriage sponsors, a role one might expect patrons to play.[4] Preferences become more complicated, however, across the many ethnic and generational divides that came to characterize the Afro-Mexican population. Not surprisingly, for instance, the ability of West Africans to forge ties with one another declined dramatically by the seventeenth century as the slave trade shifted to West Central Africa and with the subsequent growth of so-called Angolans and Congos in the viceroyalty. Overall, Bennett makes a convincing case for the extent to which the Afro-Mexican community was able to sustain meaningful and long-term social connections that transcended the individual elite households in which they were so often held in bondage.

Ecclesiastical records over marriage disputes serve as the documentary base of chapter 5. Slaves came to understand fairly quickly that Iberian law afforded them a possibility of contesting the constraints slavery exerted on their lives. Given the primacy of a Christian identity over all other markers of status in this society, churchmen were willing to allow -- or, according to Bennett, even somewhat encourage (p. 128) -- slaves to challenge owners' claims of property and paternal authority by stressing the sanctity of marriage (particularly as it related to expectations of cohabitation) and the free will of the betrothed. Appealing to medieval canon law, which was not originally intended to regulate such individuals, enslaved Afro-Mexicans utilized rhetoric of Christian duty and morality as married individuals to limit slave owners' theoretically absolute right to manage or transfer their human property. Such challenges to the authority and honor of the *paterfamilias* extended beyond Spanish masters. The appeal of the free mulatto Gertrudis de San Nicols to Church authorities to overrule her father's unwillingness to allow her to marry an enslaved black creole underscores not only the agency of slaves and free women of color, but also the desire of Afro-Mexican men to assert authority as the *paterfamilias* of their own families and extended kin networks.

The final chapter offers a detailed reconstruction of the lives of four black and mulatto defendants punished for bigamy by Mexico City's second *auto-de-fe* in 1575. Emphasizing again the correlation of creolization with an awareness of and ability to navigate Iberian legal institutions and norms, Bennett demonstrates how the accused articulated the dominant Christian discourse while refusing to buckle entirely to the power and authority of their inquisitors. The agency of historical subalterns can be extended only so far, however. As Bennett reiterates, the absolutist state's interest in the enslaved was driven by a desire to regulate the bodies and lives of a new group of Christians. Interactions with Church institutions, whether that be a priest supervising a marriage or an inquisitor punishing the transgressions against that sacrament, were still instances where "the beliefs, customs, and bodies of Africans were steadily redefined in Christian terms," highlighting "the disruptive potential of Christianity" (p. 180).

In sum, Bennett's study of the limits of the absolutist project and the manner in which Africans interacted with and absorbed Christian discourse represents an important

contribution to our understanding of the African experience in Mexico. While the author's argument is discernible throughout, his decision to present a large number of case studies in great detail at times makes it difficult to distinguish the forest for the trees. Indeed, the numerous claims of "patterns" backed by anecdotal case studies rather than a more quantifiable presentation of the evidence can be frustrating. The numerous marriage petitions and supporting witnesses that support the claims of chapter 4, for instance, seem suitable for such an alternative analysis, which might clarify the various trends the author purports to discern in the data. Nevertheless, specialists will recognize that Bennett has accomplished a remarkable feat in reconstituting the lives of New Spain's early African population despite the many intrinsic limitations of his source material, and in offering a new vantage point from which to study this important component of the African Diaspora.

Notes

[1]. Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

[2]. Matthew Restall, "Black Conquistadors: Armed Africans in Early Spanish America," *The Americas* 57, No. 2 (2000): pp. 171-205.

[3]. Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1946).

[4]. R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 166-1720* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

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