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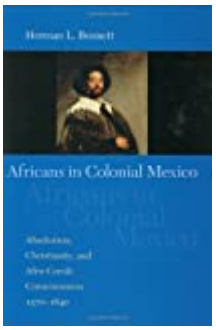

Herman L. Bennett. *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. x + 275 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21775-2; $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34236-2.

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In Search of an Afro-Creole Identity in Colonial Mexico

This book represents a valuable addition to the still relatively limited scholarly literature that focuses primarily, or at least substantially, on the presence and experiences of Africans and people of African descent in colonial Spanish America. Much of that literature has approached the lives of Africans in colonial society primarily from the point of view of their participation in, and contributions to, economic enterprises, or has examined demographic patterns. Such studies as Patrick Carroll's on blacks in Veracruz, or Cheryl Martin's on sugar estates in Morelos, where blacks and *mulatos* formed an important component of the rural work force, have shed considerable light on the non-economic aspects of the lives of both slave and free people of African origin or descent. [1] Bennett's subject, however, is not labor situations but rather those aspects of Africans' lives where, whether slave or free, they were best able to make individual decisions, as in their choice of marriage partners and sponsors or participation in religious life. They made those choices within a complex institutional framework that encompassed the sometimes competing authority of governmental officials, clergy, and individual masters. Bennett focuses on "the ways in which the Spanish monarchy and the Catholic Church shaped the slave and black experience by bestowing multiple juridical identities on persons of African descent" (p. 50).

Africans' individual and private decisions, therefore, were contingent upon their ability to reconcile personal desires and objectives with the strictures and demands of authorities that exercised both real and symbolic control over their lives. How they did so constitutes the core of this book. The fascinating cases that Bennett describes offer substantial corroboration for his contention that, as they became familiar with the institutions of colonial society, people of African descent proved highly skilled in navigating the complexities of secular law, canon law, and social and religious custom, and in using some of the contradictions inherent therein to their advantage.

Perhaps the most important of these contradictions in terms of Bennett's emphasis on the private lives of Africans was the church's insistence that its protection of the sanctity of marriage extended to slaves. In many instances this meant that the clergy could and did intervene between master and slave in favor of the latter and would not permit masters to separate married cou-

ples. The presence and influence of the varying entities that the church comprised could have quite the opposite effect, however, particularly in the case of the Inquisition. Established relatively late in the sixteenth century (1570), at precisely the time that Africans were being imported into New Spain in rapidly increasing numbers, the Inquisition had no jurisdiction over indigenous Americans, who were judged to have been too recently converted to be held to the same standards as other Christians. Yet despite the lack of a systematic effort to convert Africans brought to Spanish America as slaves, these involuntary migrants were expected to assimilate readily the doctrines and customs of what was for most of them a new religion. Unlike Indians they suffered the consequences at the hands of the Inquisition if they failed to do so, as Bennett discusses in chapter 3, "Policing Christians." Africans often appear to have been singled out as particular targets for the Inquisition, especially women, who were stereotypically associated with witchcraft and black magic. In this arena as well the relationship between the authorities that claimed the right to regulate the behavior of Africans was complex. Bennett discusses cases of slaves who voluntarily turned themselves into the Inquisition or other ecclesiastical authorities in an attempt to escape their wretched circumstances, but masters sometimes turned their slaves over to the Inquisition, which they surely viewed as another means of exercising social control over their underlings, even if they sometimes did not take the Holy Office very seriously as it pertained to their own lives. In this respect, however, slaves might have outmaneuvered their masters, risking the possibly lesser–or at least delayed–rigors of the Inquisition by deliberately blaspheming in order to escape punishment at the hands of their masters.

Notwithstanding the broader title, this book mainly concerns the African community of Mexico City, by far the largest concentration of people of African origin in the viceroyalty of New Spain. Because of the large volume of slave imports in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the numbers of both slave and free people of African origin and descent living in Mexico City were substantial enough that they could seek out marriage partners from their own ethnic groups. They could also maintain multiple relationships based on kinship, origin, friendship, place of residence, employment, ethnicity, and even means of arrival in New Spain. Although Bennett emphasizes the formation of what he calls an "Afro-Creole" consciousness, the degree to which Africans conducted their daily lives much as did other members of the working groups–forging ties with the people whom they encountered in and around households or workshops, on the street, at the market, or in church–is striking. In their emphasis on seeking marriage partners from their own place of origin, Africans were not unlike Spaniards, but as was true for Spaniards as well, other kinds of ties could supersede those of common origin and ethnicity. Among Africans as among Spaniards, mobility fostered relationships that spanned time and distance, even if, as he suggests, the challenges that slaves faced in maintaining those connections could be far greater than those which Spaniards faced. Although Bennett focuses on Africans to the near exclusion of Mexico City's other residents, we are reminded again that in this multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual, and unequal society, residential segregation was much more the ideal than the reality. The diverse members of that society interacted with those around them, with complex consequences in terms of genetic mixing, formation of families, and construction of identity and, ultimately, community.

Despite the richness of the material mined from a documentary base–especially the marriage contracts of Mexico City–that to my knowledge has been little used to study the daily lives of Africans and despite much that is commendable in the book, reading it can be frustrating in some respects. The author fails to define or explain absolutism, even while insisting on its primacy as an organizing factor in the lives of Africans. His near-exclusive focus on the experience of Africans sometimes fosters insights that can hardly be surprising to those with any degree of familiarity with colonial Spanish America or with the early modern world more generally, such as this passage on p. 138: "As individuals, some officials acted in contradistinction to the very law that sanctioned their authority. Ironically, they utilized their position to cloak their surreptitious deeds." Bennett's narrow focus on Africans at times seems to imply an exaggerated exceptionalism in terms of their perception and treatment. Works such as Sara Nalle's *God in La Mancha*, which deals with the impact of the Tridentine reforms in the province of Cuenca in Spain in much the same time period as that of Bennett's book, and others have made it clear that the Roman Catholic clergy generally were far more concerned with regulating behavior than belief, mainly because they could hope for some success in that arena.[2] In this regard, there was nothing exceptional about the colonial church or clergy in their efforts to regulate Africans. Bennett's statement that "Spaniards stipulated how Africans could experience themselves as females and males in the Indies" (p. 47) works just as well

for the rest of society.

Bennett's attraction to theoretical discourse at times does not serve him well. He states (p. 12), "I view this book as a social history of absolutism that simultaneously constitutes a culturally inflected intellectual history." In one rather short paragraph (p. 31) the word "cultural" appears four times; extracting that word which, like "absolutism" seems overused but remains undefined, does not change the meaning of the passage in any way. In other instances as well, definitions seem elusive. While acknowledging the frequency of African-Indian marriages, the children of which were most commonly called *mulatos*, he uses both the terms "mulatto" and "Afro-mestizo" to refer to the product of mixed unions without clarification. For someone who interprets the documentary record with considerable precision and skill, definitional and other inconsistencies are also surprising (for example, in the several pages in which he discusses a case involving don Juan de Suaznabar y Aguirre, *alguacil mayor* of the Inquisition, Suaznabar alternately loses and regains the honorific *don*[pp. 144-147]). Despite some inconsistencies, however, Bennett's book represents a significant contribution to the scholarship on the African experience in colonial Mexico and to our understanding of the interface between the public domain of church and state and the private one of personal lives.

Notes

[1]. Patrick J. Carroll,*Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); Cheryl English Martin, *Rural Society in Colonial Morelos*(Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985).

[2]. Sara T. Nalle,*God in La Mancha: Religious Reform and the People of Cuenca, 1500-1650*(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

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