

## CRITICA / REVIEW

Herman L. Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640*. Indiana University Press, 2003. 312 pp.

### **Black Latin America on Fire**

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Black Latin America is on fire. After years of being relegated to the margins of history, politics, literature, and civil society, Afro-Latin Americans are demanding civil, political, and economic, social, and cultural rights. At the same time, these formally excluded populations are opening new democratic spaces in Latin America and the Caribbean. Due to intense grassroots mobilization and sophisticated political organizing, black communities in Latin America and the Caribbean are more visible than ever. As a result, new academic works are emerging that explore new terrain and provide alternative narratives for understanding and reconstructing the African experience in Latin America. *Africans in Colonial Mexico*, by Herman Bennett, is exemplary of the new scholarship.

*Africans in Colonial Mexico* is a compelling new historical narrative that examines the unexplored history of the urban African experience in Mexico City from approximately 1570 until 1640. It is mainly focused on the ways in which Christian absolutism shaped the African experience in New Spain, the colonial name for Mexico. From this point of view, Bennett provides a fresh angle to see and comprehend the

African presence in colonial Mexico. Using ecclesiastical records and inquisition sources from this period, Bennett offers a novel interpretation of the complexities of multiple African identities in New Spain.

*Africans in Colonial Mexico* argues that slavery *per se*, as a juridical category, did not fully constitute the totality of the African slave experience. Bennett moves beyond the thesis that slaves and slavery were primary commodity relations or property. He is more interested in exploring ‘competing’ and ‘conflicting’ African identities in the context of imperial expansion. According to Bennett, slave status, a legal category describing property in persons, represented just one of several identities that enslaved Africans acquired in their forced migration from Guinea to the Americas (5). Slaves, for example, also had different ethnic identities as they came from various regions of Africa, as well as gendered identities. In addition, recently arrived slaves known as *bozales* were different from *creole* blacks who were already fluent in Iberian culture. In stark contrast to slaves, there was also a relatively large urban free black labor force. These layers of difference constituted the basis of multiple identities.

African-descended populations are found in most Latin American countries, as far north as Mexico and as far south as Chile. In Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Belize, and Honduras, blacks are a tiny but significant minority. African communities in Central America and Mexico arrived roughly in the sixteenth century: thousands were shipped as slaves while a tiny portion participated in the conquest. Currently many of these black communities are struggling to preserve their cultural identity as they fight for social inclusion and civil and human rights protection. For the most part, the black

presence and contribution to culture and national identity in this region is not commonly known.

For example, the large African slave population brought to Mexico and the strong black presence in Mexico to this day have received little scholarly attention. It is estimated that in 1640 the Kingdom of New Spain had the second largest population of enslaved Africans and the greatest number of free blacks in the Americas (2). By the mid- sixteenth century, people of African descent outnumbered Spaniards in New Spain and comprised the second largest population in the Americas. The African presence in New Spain, both enslaved and free, was vibrant, dynamic, and culturally diverse. Afro-Mexicans, moreover, played an essential part in the socio-economic life of colonial Mexico. Africans fulfilled multiple roles for their owners, and they represented not only labor value, but also status to their owners. Spaniards used African labor in commercial agriculture, livestock estates, and the mining industry. Male slaves were also used as stewards and pages.

The black presence in Mexico had a significant effect on life throughout the Americas. For example, the Mexican market for slaves during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries provided critical incentives for the institutionalization of the Atlantic slave-trade. Moreover, after successful implementation of African slave labor in New Spain, its use was encouraged elsewhere. Afro-Mexicans contributed essential labor to the colonial Mexican economy just as it boomed. The wealth produced in New Spain attracted European settlement in other parts of the Americas (Carroll).

In order to better understand and assess the significance of *Africans in Colonial Mexico* it is important to note how other similar historical works have examined the

African presence in New Spain. These works include Aguirre Beltrán's, *La población negra de México*, Colin Palmer's, *Slaves of White God*, and Patrick J. Carroll's, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz, Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development*, to name but a few. These works made significant contributions in assessing the slave trade, slave labor, the nature of slave treatment, social control, manumission, and race relations in New Spain and the Americas (11). Unlike many works on the slave experience in the Americas, *Africans in Colonial Mexico* does not "privilege the laboring process" (11). Bennett argues that the laboring process was but one factor influencing the cultural formation of blacks in New Spain. Labor, he argues, simply did not have a monopoly over social relations (11).

Christianity and absolutism are seen as powerful forces influencing and shaping African identities in New Spain. *Bennett* argues that Christianity and slavery intersected to construct specific gendered identities and a heightened strategic consciousness—a result of the creolization process—allowing Africans to deploy institutional practices and discourses to their advantage (193). For example, slaves and creoles transformed Christianity into rights, meaning that as men and women they could marry, and as a couple, they were entitled to conjugal visits. This is significant because in theory, it meant that the selling of a husband or wife separately from their spouse was not permitted. In this way, by insisting on their rights as Christians, slaves circumscribed the masters' authority over them (13).

In advancing this argument and focusing on the cultural process known as "creolization," the author is staking out new ground on the slave cultural process and experience in the Americas. Creole was the term used to refer to descendants of Africans

in the Americas. Becoming a *creole*, according to Bennett, literally involved navigating the judicial maze with the intent of exploiting the possibilities offered by legal obligations and rights. Creole culture included the customs, laws, and institutions that upheld the larger social structure and came to include the ability to navigate the various institutions of absolutism. Cognizant that their competing juridical identities created an exploitable tool, Africans and their descendants seized the opportunity (3).

For example, *bozales*, who were slaves recently arrived from Africa, quickly immersed themselves in their new linguistic environment soon after arriving in New Spain, acquiring fluency in the Castilian lexicon and the morphology of power. Eventually, *bozales* learned to enlist the protection of the crown and clergy, who, as representatives of the Spanish sovereign, often stood at odds with individual patricians or slave owners (3).

By examining how Africans in New Spain formed communities, networks, and sustained particular relationships, Bennett reveals how such relations reflected the cultural and social power of the enslaved and free persons. Many of the debates assume that race and slavery formed the basis of the material oppression, and thus constituted the essential basis of slave identity. Bennett, however, argues that specific experiences like memory, marriages, the selections of witnesses (for marriages) and other forms of relationships brought individual Africans together. These relationships played a central role in defining the individual and the community (82).

Through the meticulous examination of 4,000 church records from 1584 to 1640, the author emphasizes African ethnic and cultural self-fashioning in an attempt to demonstrate the complexity of community formation. In selecting their witnesses,

Africans and their descendants in New Spain simultaneously manifested their identities and expressed agency in ways that the Church never intended (80). Mexico City's residents *bozales*, creoles, and mulatto were sustaining elaborate social networks that crisscrossed New Spain. As slaves and servants the African-born utilized elite residential, slaveholding, and migratory patterns for unintended purposes. In doing so, Africans communities in New Spain constructed communities that challenged the narrow perspective of the master-slave relation and the social design of imperial policy makers (125).

The slave experience as shaped by absolutism, Christianity, and catholic reform, constructed the strategic performances of Africans and their descendants as refracted in the language, cultural norms and the laws contributing to the cultivation of particular strategic awareness or consciousness among the African population. The African population, moreover, constituted a broad ensemble of social groups and ethnicities, which at times overlapped or intersected. For example, there were the free persons and the enslaved, *bozales* and *ladinos* (Africans culturally conversant in Castilian), as well as males and females.

According to Bennett, ethnicity, like cross-cultural ties, constituted a social expression. In the context of existing constraints, individuals made efforts to sustain specific social relationships. He argues that such relationships carried multiple meanings that enabled Africans and their descendants to define themselves, thereby acquiring a specific cultural significance (106). In availing themselves of their Christian rights, Africans and creoles did more than restrict their master's dominion over them. The selection of spouses and marriage sponsors underscores, in Bennett's view, the multiple

ways in which Africans and their descendants constituted themselves ethnically and culturally within Christianity's boundaries (193).

Whether this work charts new ground by focusing on how Christian absolutism shaped the African experience in New Spain will be vigorously debated. However, Bennett's work is also important in several other respects. First, it pieces together slave life in the urban setting of Mexico City, and by doing so, provides a unique glimpse into the experience of Africans, *Bozales*, creoles, free-persons, and slaves using culture as the main frame of reference. From this perspective, the reader is better able to understand and appreciate the texture of the Afro-Mexican experience.

Second, the focus on culture, consciousness and social networks helps to make the African experience "human" within the existing constraints of a society based on African slave labor. Moreover, by focusing on Christianity, the formation of identity, and how Afro-Mexicans contested, challenged and created new social patterns, Bennett is able to demonstrate how these multiple layers of social consciousness created particular cultural patterns.

Third, the traditional debates on the black presence in Latin America and Caribbean have until recently concentrated primarily on Afro-Brazil, and to some extent, Afro-Cuba. Therefore, more studies like this one on the black presence in countries like Mexico, as well as Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Colombia—to name but a few—are desperately needed. A better understanding of the black contribution to race and gender models, history and literature, environment and social movements, as well as their impact on democratic institutions, will significantly add to our understanding of Latin American and Caribbean societies.

In these ways, *Africans in Colonial Mexico* expands the scope of the existing literature and creates innovative possibilities for new research on the presence of African peoples in the Americas. Unfortunately, there is no discussion or reference to the contemporary situation of Afro-Mexicans. A brief analysis and overview on the demography, status and current struggle of Afro-Mexicans would have been quite helpful. This book is recommended for aficionados of the African experience in the Americas and for those wanting a nuanced interpretation of slavery in Latin America.

#### WORKS CITED

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