

LA HISTORIA QUE OLVIDAMOS: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF COLONIAL AFRO-MEXICAN CULTURE

JACK BOUDREAU

The Spanish Empire, the first global Empire, did not even know it was creating an empire when it first colonized the Americas. The Spanish themselves did not realize the significance of their actions, and to be fair, how could they? They themselves had only just unified for the first time since the Roman Empire.³⁴ The Spanish ventured into a land never before known to anyone of the “Old World” and brought with them a staple of Iberian culture, slaves. Many of these slaves came from Africa and aided the Spanish in their conquest of North and South America.³⁵ The presence of African slaves also contributed to the new *mezcla* (mix) of culture in the New World. The economy, the religion, the structure, the conquest, and the food of Colonial Mexico were just some of the ways in which Afro-Mexicans left their mark. However irrespective of their numerous and significant contributions to Mexican culture, historical scholarship often omits Afro-Mexicans from the narrative and conception of Mexican history. Only recent scholarship corrected this slight upon such an incredible and important people. Herber S. Klein was amongst the first to explore any extensive study of Afro-Mexicans in the late 1990’s, but even in the following years the historical community

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

JACK BOUDREAU

Jack is a History major with a Political Science and Spanish Minor. Jack area’s of interest in history are US history, Latin American history and Islamic history. He has truly enjoyed his time at Cal Poly and all of the opportunities it has given him. He will be graduating in June of 2017, and has just accepted a job offer in the Bay Area.

34 Stanley G. Payne, *Spain: A Unique History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 4.

35 Matthew Restall, “Black Conquistadors: Armed Africans in Early Spanish America,” *The Americas* 57, no. 2 (October 2000), 171-205.

was silent on the subject. The majority of those who have done extensive study in this area, such as Ira Berlin, Joan Cameron Bristol and Henry Louis Gates to name a few, have only done so in the past twenty years. However, the study of Afro-Mexicans is now gaining more attention in historical scholarship.

This paper focuses on analyzing Mexican history from 1570 to 1640 CE, a time when the slave population increased exponentially and laid the foundation for modern-day Mexican society and culture. It will also discuss the progression of slavery in the Spanish colony, the lives of enslaved Africans, and how, in some cases, African slaves became decently integrated parts of Spanish society. Through the discussion of their role in colonial Mexico, this essay will show how the significant contributions of Afro-Mexicans, both enslaved and otherwise, have been marginalized in scholarship and popular conception of Mexican history, and how they helped to create one of the most multicultural societies in the world.

Even before the wholesale annihilation of the natives via warfare and the Columbian exchange, a trickle of African slaves flowed into the Americas.³⁶ Steadily, the African population grew, and by the mid-sixteenth century they outnumbered the Iberian born Spaniards.³⁷ The influx of Africans into the Americas was due to the influence of one Bartolomeo de las Casas, a Dominican Friar, lawyer and historian, and incredibly influential person in the formation of Colonial Mexico.³⁸ It was he who argued that the Indians required aid from their Catholic Spanish brethren in becoming civilized.³⁹ This coupled with the laws of Burgos of 1513, which dictated that the Spaniards would help the Natives to find the righteous path, meant that Amerindians could no longer be used for labor.⁴⁰ With Natives rendered unavailable, the Spanish turned to Africans and shipped them in by the thousands during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

36 Pablo F. Gomez, "Transatlantic Meanings: African Rituals and Material Culture in the Early Modern Spanish Caribbean," in *Blacks in Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 128.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Fray Bartolome de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, ed. Miguel Ginesta (1876), in Project Gutenberg, accessed on October 6, 2016.

39 *Ibid.*

40 The King of Spain, *Las Leyes de Burgos* (1512), in Rafael Altamira, "El Texto de las leyes de Burgos de 1512," *Revista de Historia de América* 4, (Dec. 1938), 24.

The Spanish brought with them an incredibly diverse group of Africans, both enslaved and otherwise, to *Nueva Espana*. They included North Africans whom were prisoners of "slave raids", West Africans from a plethora of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and a hyper minority of Arab-Spaniards, known as *moriscos*, who were punished for charges of heresy.⁴¹ The term *morisco* has a degree of ambiguity to it, as it refers to both Arab-Spaniards and Spanish-Muslims alike.⁴² All of these different groups of people were forced into an already mixed culture of Iberians and Mesoamericans. Thus, the demographics of the slave state of Mexico were amongst the most diverse in the world at the time.

The lives of Afro-Mexicans were very different than their counterparts in other regions of the Americas. For a multitude of reasons, including religious, cultural, political and historical factors, Spanish-America allowed for much more social mobility than in other places due to a lack of legal restrictions.⁴³ Africans could create their own trade unions and social clubs, which was unlike other Western European nations and their colonial holdings at the time.⁴⁴ Another factor contributing to a relatively relaxed set of social norms was the lack of construction needed in Mexican urban centers as opposed to other colonial cities; colonial Mexico simply re-appropriated the already existing Aztec and Mayan cities, thereby making major construction unnecessary.⁴⁵ Even churches, the largest construction projects in the early colonial period, were usually built upon the foundations of former temples and government buildings of the Aztec and Mayan Empires.⁴⁶ This meant that enslaved Africans worked jobs typically reserved for paid servants in Europe, such as housekeeping or running errands. Therefore, they would often be "normalized" and quasi-accepted in the eyes of the white population. Although the lives of Africans varied from region

41 Hugo G. Nuntini, and Barry L. Isaac, *Social Stratification in Central Mexico: 1500-2000* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 21.

42 William D. Phillips Jr., *The Middle Ages Series: Slavery in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2013), 150.

43 Nuntini, *Social Stratification in Central Mexico*, 24.

44 *ibid.*

45 Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America*, 36.

46 Eliot Porter, Ellen Auerbach and Donna Pierce, *Mexican Churches* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987), 10-14.

to region, very little historiography exists that studies the complexities of this group in colonial Latin America.

There is a common misconception that *Nueva Espana* was lightyears ahead of other societies in regards race because of its flexible social strata, however this is untrue. The privilege of social mobility was enjoyed almost exclusively in urban environments. In the countryside, large land estates, both Native and Spanish run, dominated the landscape. These estates operated in a way that was much more consistent with traditional European rigidness.⁴⁷ Although there was at least some chance for Afro-Mexicans to move up the social ladder, racism and discrimination ran rampant throughout colonial Mexico.⁴⁸ Any attempt to argue that colonial Mexico was any better off than other colonial holding in the Americas is problematic. This explanation is often done in comparison to the slave society of either United States or Brazil. While both of those two cultures had their own problems, it is impossible to say which society was “better” in terms of race relations in the context of slavery. It is for this reason that Afro-Mexican history must be read with the author’s bias in mind because there can be a political agenda behind it, as there often is.

Any discussion of culture must be undertaken with extreme caution, as classifications and terms used by historians have a tendency to draw harsh, unforgiving lines that do not account for exception or flexibility. In the case of colonial Mexico, it can be difficult to determine just where diasporic African culture ends and where Spanish culture begins. It appears that both the church and secular authorities supported the institution of a quasi-caste system that was met with limited success.⁴⁹ Despite what any institutional authorities may have wished, it appears that there was a substantial intermingling of the population in social, sexual and matrimonial terms. The history of the intermarriage between Amerindians and Iberians is a well-documented one, as the majority of modern-day Mexicans can point to at least some degree of indigenous heritage in their blood lines. Unbeknownst to many, however, is the sheer degree to which African bloodlines are present in today’s Mexican population,

47 Nuntini, *Social Stratification in Central Mexico*, 19.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Patrick J. Carroll and Jeffery N. Lamb, “Los mexicanos negros, el mestizaje y fundamentos olvidados de la ‘Raza Cósmica’: una perspectiva regional,” *Historia Mexicana* 44, no. 3 (Winter 1995): 403-438.

as 12 percent of Mexico today has some degree of African heritage.⁵⁰ Because the ratio of men to women was three to one in colonial Mexico, there would have been few choices for men, of any race, to marry.⁵¹ The mixing of African, Amerindian, and Spanish influences resulted in the creation of a new, rich culture unique to Mexico.

Cooking is one aspect where African contributions can be seen explicitly in colonial Mexico; Afro-Mexicans are credited with introducing rice to Mexican cuisine. Whether rice arrived from Asia or Africa to the New World is still unclear, and requires more research for a definitive answer.⁵² What can be said with a fair degree of certainty is that the addition of distinct spices was transplanted, with the slaves themselves from Africa to the Mexico.⁵³ Indigenous crops and cooking techniques are often mentioned when discussing Mexico’s culinary history. Yet, the majority of information and popular opinion largely ignores African contributions to the Mexican diet and food culture at large. What many historians and Mexicans do not realize is that the original pioneers of many dishes that are now considered to be staples of Mexican cuisine were most likely African. As previously mentioned slaves often worked in the household, which included kitchen work.⁵⁴ After given a cursory explanation of what the master of the house wanted, slaves would fill in any gaps with regarding cooking what they already knew.⁵⁵ The variety of spices, which according to many is what gives the food its identity, were introduced by Africans based off the diets they had been accustomed to back in Africa.⁵⁶ It has only been in recent years that the massive contributions of African culture in the Mexican diet have been acknowledged. Jeffrey M. Pilcher’s monograph is one of the more recent works done on this subject, and indeed, is the only source to be found in mass circulation dealing with this particular issue.

50 “Mexico ‘discovers’ 1.4 million black Mexicans-they just had to ask,” *Fusion*, December 15, 2015, accessed December 14, 2016.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 34.

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*

Afro-Mexican influences can also be seen in the Christian religious practices of the time and still to this day has an effect on Mexican culture. In colonial Mexico, especially during the era of the inquisition, religion was paramount. This issue was of such heightened concern to the Spanish authorities that they asked, via the Council of the Indies, Portuguese slavers to “pre-baptize” slaves prior to their arrival in Spanish colonial holdings.⁵⁷ The Africans that were brought over in chains were of various different faiths and beliefs, thus when and if they did accept Christianity it would have been to varying degrees and approaches.⁵⁸ The various state and ecclesiastical approaches throughout the area also effected how Christianity was received. This new form of Christianity incorporated African dance and was so prevalent in Christian proceedings that dances were banned in streets and plazas in the state of Puebla in 1618.⁵⁹ It also seems that the various polytheistic religions that were native to Africa leaked into the new version of Christianity, as Afro-Mexicans tended to emphasize certain Saints over even God and Christ at times.⁶⁰ St. Joseph and Guadalupe, who are the patron saints of workers and the Virgin Mary respectively, were especially popular as they gave hope to the poverty-stricken and downtrodden, and even achieved cult status in areas like Mexico City.⁶¹ What is neglected in many histories of Mexico is the influence that these black Catholics had on modern-day Catholicism in the present-day, as the saints they venerated have become the most popular saints in contemporary Mexico.⁶²

The contribution of Africans has been largely misconstrued, even when discussing the initial conquest of the Americas. Scholars have portrayed the conquest of the Americas, in this case specifically Mexico, as a bloodbath done by religiously fanatical Catholics in pursuit of gold and plunder.⁶³ This idea stems both from Anglo-Protestant

racism and from historians emphasizing how badly the Amerindians were treated. While the former narrative holds a bit more truth than the latter, both betray the complexity of the situation, and both leave out just how big of a role Afro-Latinos played in the conquest of America. “Black Conquistadors” were present in Cortez’s famous expedition, which led to the fall of the Aztec Empire.⁶⁴ It is only through the close analysis of records and historical accounts that these Afro-Mexican conquistadors have been “discovered” once more. Historian Matthew Restall is one of the few scholars doing any sort of work regarding Afro-Conquistadors. If Africans are mentioned in the history of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, they are either referred to as “servants” or “slaves” and thereby the true nature of their role is diminished.⁶⁵ Interestingly enough, there is a fair amount of history exploring the role of indigenous individuals in the Spanish invasion of Mexico; even though they are often portrayed as traitors or selfish in their betrayal of their own people they are, at the very least, mentioned.⁶⁶ It is unclear why this paradox exists, but it is not the only one. It is interesting that in the narrative of colonial Mexico, the immense black population, rivaling the white Europeans and native population, has been excluded from popular conception and any scholarship until very recently. This can be seen by how enthusiastically Mexico has embraced its indigenous heritage. There are dozens of dialects stemming from the Mayan and Aztec indigenous language families recognized by the Mexican government.⁶⁷ This coupled with the prominent and popular celebration of the indigenous heritage of the country shows just how much of a disparity there is between Afro and indigenous Mexican culture in terms of popular conception.

Throughout many historical studies, African slaves have been omitted from nearly every discussion on the Spanish mining industry. The other forms of labor in which Africans engaged in depended largely on whether they were in an urban or rural setting.⁶⁸ The differences regarding slave labor in these two environments

57 Joan Cameron Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 72.

58 Sherwin K. Bryant, Rachel O’Toole and Ben Vinson, *The New Black Studies Series: Africans to Spanish America: Expanding the Diaspora* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 15.

59 Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century*, 103.

60 Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century*, 216.

61 *Ibid.*

62 *Ibid.*

63 ¹¹ Payne, *Spain: A Unique History*¹³.

64 Restall, “Black Conquistadors,” *The Americas* 57: 171-205.

65 Michael Wood, *Conquistadors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 121-257.

66 Laura E. Matthew, Michel R. Oudijk, eds., *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 119.

67 CIA, “The World Factbook: Mexico,” Accessed February 26, 2017. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mx.html>.

68 Ira Berlin, *Many thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 65.

has been documented, at least to some degree by historians. However, the story of African mine workers has been largely ignored by the history community at large. The Mexican mines were especially lucrative and significant, as they increased the wealth of the Spanish treasury which directly influenced the demand for slaves.⁶⁹ These mines also increased the traffic of the Atlantic shipping lanes, which in turn increased the motivation and continuation of the slave trade.⁷⁰ The reason for the omission of Africans from the history of the colonial Mexican mines remains unclear. Perhaps it has been left out to leave room for the emphasis placed on the Amerindian role in the Spanish mines. These mines were infamous for their mercury and sulfur deposits, both of which were incredibly deadly and it was very common for slaves to die in the mines; slaves were used so liberally in the Mexican mines, because quite frankly, they were disposable.⁷¹ It is important to acknowledge how crucial slave labor was in these mines, as this would have been a considerable source of wealth for the Spanish treasury at this time.⁷²

Unlike other areas of history, there is not a large sample of scholarship on Afro-Mexican history that can be compared and contrasted. The overwhelming majority of research has been conducted within the last ten years and is just now beginning to give this overlooked aspect of Mexican history some attention. The initial perspective on the subject argued that the Spanish, especially Andalusian Spaniards had a particular distaste for black Africans and thus looked down upon them.⁷³ This line of thinking is incredibly problematic as it follows the structure of Anglo-Protestant ethnocentrism more so than any form of reliable scholarship. Spain's colonial holdings had similar opinions of race as their Franco and Anglo counterparts and it was not until much later that we saw the development of racial attitudes that would be identified as racist today.⁷⁴ As problematic as this line of thinking may be, it is telling of just how biased the work on this subject has been, as theories such as this have existed in academia for decades.

69 Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 65.

70 *Ibid.*

71 P.J. Bakewell, *Silver Mining and Society in Colonial Mexico: Zacatecas 1546-1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 55.

72 Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 65.

73 Phillips Jr., *Slavery in Early Modern Iberia*, 150.

74 *Ibid.*

It was not until the end of the twentieth century that this subject even began receiving attention whatsoever in terms of historical research. The very first works focused on the general aspects of the society, in a very general sense. To be fair to authors such as Herber S. Klein, Patrick J. Carrol and Jeffery Lamb, conducted the first in depth research and analysis on the subject of Afro-Mexican slaves; because of this, however, their work needed be inherently broad. Despite a surge in research in the last fifteen years, exploration on the colonial period of Mexican history, and specifically 1570-1640, are just now beginning to take shape. Those who do study Afro-Mexican history, overwhelmingly discuss it from the perspective of sub-altern theory, as they seek to give voice to almost forgotten people. This theory works nicely with this subject, as both slaves and Afro-Mexicans were, by definition, outside of the hegemonic power structure. It could be argued that some historians, although they are certainly the minority, have analyzed this subject through the lens of Marxist political theory; these historians have focused on class consciousness and the stripping of identity through a proto-capitalistic system of economics. It will be interesting to see how this research will take shape and be viewed in today's political climate, as the discourse will undoubtedly become political in nature if not directly than indirectly.

The fact of the matter is, despite revisionist historians' attempts, Mexico both in the colonial period and today, would not be what it is without the contributions of Africans and their descendants. This is largely absent from popular conception and historical discourse alike. Mexico to this day struggles with acknowledging African heritage, as it was not until 2015 they placed "African" on their census.⁷⁵ It seems that the fault lies not necessarily on the shoulders of historians, but rather the culture as a whole, and the subsequent cultures studying Mexican History. What is strange is that a culture that actively admits that it is multi-cultural and multiracial takes such issue with discussing certain races over others. Indeed it is truly perplexing to consider how holistically Mexico has embraced its indigenous roots, but seems to only just now be acknowledging its African heritage. Some have argued that this is hereditary of societies linked to Spain, but this line of argument is troubling, as it tends to oversimplify Mexican society.⁷⁶ One can only hope that as time progresses

75 Aaron Barksdale, "Mexico Takes Big Step in Finally Recognizing Latinos", *The Huffington Post*, December 11, 2015, accessed on November 13, 2016.

76 Payne, *Spain: A Unique History*, 244.

attitudes towards race also progress as well. It is not that Mexico is rare amongst nations and cultures in their inherent issue with facing their racial and social history, as the same can be said about the United States. Scholarship, rather, must take the lead, and conduct further research, in acknowledging the contributions of Africans and their descendants in the context of Mexican culture.

Mexico is unique amongst nations for its history of African influence. It can be said, with a fair degree of accuracy that Mexico has more of an implicit African influence, whereas the United States has an explicit one. The difference: Mexico is just beginning to even discuss its African roots. It is not uncommon for Mexicans, when they look back through their family tree to find at least some African heritage.⁷⁷ One of the best soundbites regarding Afro-Mexicans is from Sagragio Cruz-Carretero when she says: “Afro-Mexicans are like sugar in coffee; you can’t see them, but they make the whole thing taste better.”⁷⁸ Those words truly encapsulate the entirety of Afro-Mexican culture. Their true legacy has yet to be understood by the majority of Mexicans and historians alike, but it is starting to be studied. Afro-Mexicans are starting to push for more recognition and more acknowledgment in today’s Mexican society. The purpose of this paper is not to pass judgment on Mexican culture for its race relations, as all cultures have their particular issues regarding the history of race in their own countries. Instead this paper aims to point out how valiant the struggle of these people is. The legacy of Afro-Mexicans today is that of a resilient people who have gone on to contribute to some of the world’s greatest art, food and culture. Indeed the lasting impression that the Afro-Mexican people contributed, and continue to contribute, to Mexican society is important to recognize as well as study in historiography.

⁷⁷ Henry Louis Gates, *Black in Latin America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 1-64.

⁷⁸ Gates, *Black in Latin America*, 64.

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