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Gente de color quebrado: Africans and Afromestizos in Colonial Mexico

PETER STERN

Blacks have been so thoroughly absorbed into the Mexican population over the course of four centuries of *mestizaje* that their highly visible and economically crucial role in colonial society has been historiographically overlooked. Yet a visitor to New Spain in the seventeenth century wrote that "Mexico City contains about one hundred thousand inhabitants, but the greatest part of them are blacks and Mulattoes by reason of the vast number of slaves that have been carried hither."¹ The labor of imported black slaves and their subsequent generations of Afromestizo² offspring was vital to the economy of the colony. The Spaniards had not come to the New World to farm, herd cattle, grow sugar cane, or dig silver themselves, but rather to live like *hidalgos* (noblemen), and to profit from the tribute and labor of others. The great epidemics of smallpox, measles, and typhus of 1520, 1548, 1576, and 1595 virtually destroyed the native population. Population figures generally accepted for New Spain show that the population fell from twenty-five million to less than one million natives in the course of a century.³ The disastrous and precipitate decline in native Indian populations, first in the Caribbean, and later in Mexico, made an alternative supply of labor necessary for the Spanish colonies to survive and prosper.

¹ Giovanni Francesco Careri, *A Voyage Round the World*, 3rd ed. (vol. 4 of *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, comp. Awnsham and John Churchill [London: printed by assignment from Messrs. Churchill, 1744]), 508.

² Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán used the terms "Afromestizo" and "Indomestizo" to describe the offspring of Europeans, Indians, and Africans. See chart in Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México*. 2nd ed. (México, D.F.: Fondo de cultura económica, 1972).

³ Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah, *Essays in Population History: Mexico and the Caribbean*, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971-1979), 1: viii.

Faced by this demographic catastrophe, and the restrictions placed by royal legislation on the use of Indian labor, the colonists turned to alternative sources for workers. In 1542 the New Laws effectively abolished Indian slavery, except in narrowly prescribed circumstances.⁴ Once the importation of blacks began, the slave trade became critical to the maintenance of the colony's economy. One scholar's estimate is that between 1521 and 1639 over 110,000 black slaves were transported to Mexico.⁵ At the turn of the seventeenth century a French traveler wrote:

I think, as well as I can judge, that there are in the said city of Mechique [Mexico] twelve thousand to fifteen thousand Spanish inhabitants, and six times as many Indians, who are Christians dwelling there, besides a great number of negro slaves.⁶

In Mexico, blacks were employed as personal servants of Spaniards, as overseers and laborers on sugar and cacao plantations, and as textile workers in *obrajes* (workshops).⁷ Wealthy or distinguished households in New Spain included blacks as coachmen, footmen, and personal attendants. Blacks were favored as workers on the sugar plantations, which were located in wet tropical lowlands or on the coasts. They could, it was believed, stand conditions much better than the Indians of the central highlands, and were more resistant to the diseases, especially malaria, which made the coasts unhealthy. In sugar mills and haciendas Africans and *Afromestizos* occupied specialized roles such as *maestro de azucar* (overseer in charge of sugar refining), blacksmith, carpenter, sugar refiner, and boiler. Indians were prohibited from working in the sugar mills (the work was

⁴ Colin A. Palmer, *Slaves of the White God: Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ Samuel Champlain, *Narrative of a Voyage to the West Indies and Mexico in the Years 1599-1602*, trans. Alice Wilmore, ed. Norton Shaw (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1859), 25.

⁷ For a detailed examination of the social and economic role of black slaves on a large hacienda, see Lolita Gutiérrez Brockington, *The Leverage of Labor: Managing the Cortés Haciendas in Tehuantepec, 1588-1688* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), especially 126-42.

believed to be too injurious to their health), so blacks, by default, filled skilled positions in this key industry.⁸ Both blacks and mulattoes also adopted trades and became artisans in the urban areas of the colony, in spite of the legal prohibitions which were supposed to keep them out of many professions.

Mestizaje among Spaniards, Indians, and Africans was a prominent feature in colonial society, a situation which led to the emergence of a bewildering number of racial categories, including *mulato blanco*, *morisco*, *castizo*, *mulato lobo*, *mestizo prieto*, *mulato pardo*, and *coyote*.⁹ Such fine distinctions were not always made by colonial census takers, who often counted blacks and *Afromestizos* in a single category, *negro*. The growth of the *casta* (caste) population of the colony was rapid; in 1570 one estimate of the black population of the colony was over eighteen thousand.¹⁰ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán added perhaps two thousand *cimarrones* (escaped black slaves), putting the total *casta* population over twenty thousand. Since his demographic data for 1570 records only 6,600 Spaniards in New Spain, *pardos*, defined as Africans and *Afromestizos*, outnumbered *españoles* by nearly four to one.¹¹ By 1646 the figures became even more dramatic: Spaniards accounted for only .8 percent of the total population, while Africans and *Afromestizos* together formed nearly 9 percent (Indians were almost 75 percent of the colony's population, mestizos almost 16 percent).¹²

After that date the "pure" African component of the population declined dramatically, while Euro-, Indo-, and *Afromestizo* populations

⁸ Palmer, *Slaves*, 69.

⁹ Aguirre Beltrán defines *mulato blanco* as half-European and half-African; *morisco* as three-quarters European and one-quarter African; *castizo* as three-quarters European and one-quarter Indian; *mulato lobo* as three-quarters Indian and one-quarter African; *mestizo prieto* as half-African, one-quarter Indian, and one-quarter European; and *mulato pardo* as half-African and half-Indian. *Coyote* was common in certain frontier areas as a term for a person of Indian-African descent; it was generally used as a term of opprobrium. *La población negra*, 341.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 210, 219, 222, 230. The population of *europesos* (essentially Spaniards), according to the "head counts" which Aguirre Beltrán uses, was still less than 1 percent in 1646, and seems to have dropped still further as a percentage of the total population by 1742; in the census of 1777 "Spaniards" had jumped to 14 percent of the population.

¹² *Ibid.*

continued to grow steadily in both absolute numbers and percentages, and the Indian community recovered from its near-catastrophic decline. *Mestizaje* continued among Europeans, Africans, and Indians; today, except in isolated areas around Veracruz and Acapulco, there remains little discernible trace of the once large African population of the Spanish colony. On the coasts the descendants of coastal agricultural laborers have the physical characteristics of African ancestry.¹³

Relations between the significant population of blacks, Indians, and whites were not noted for mutual tolerance. Racial attitudes were anything but liberal; legal prohibitions severely restricted free *castas* in New Spain. Blacks were excluded from most guilds (including those of the silk workers, gold and silver leaf manufacturers, cloth shearers, and glove makers). They could be leather workers, but that was considered a dirty and unprestigious trade. Blacks, mulattoes, and *castas de color quebrado* (a general term for *Afromestizo*) could not obtain a license to become shopkeepers.¹⁴ Women of African descent were forbidden to wear silk garments, pearls, or gold.¹⁵

Intolerance bred resentment, and resentment fed upon Spanish fears of a *casta* uprising. Slave uprisings were supposedly planned for 1535, 1608, and 1611. In each case, word of the plot leaked out, and the alleged ringleaders were arrested and punished. Over the course of a century, a body of legislation came into existence to make revolt on the part of Africans, *Afromestizos*, or any *léparos* (vagabonds) impossible. The *Santa Hermandad* (an armed municipal patrol) was created in 1553 to patrol the city streets and keep public order.¹⁶ After the abortive uprising of 1608, Africans were prohibited from gathering in public groups larger than four persons.¹⁷ *Cofradías* (religious

¹³ See Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Cuijla: esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* (México, D.F.: Fondo de cultura económica, 1958).

¹⁴ Manuel Carrera Stampa, *Los gremios mexicanos: la organización gremial en Nueva España, 1521-1861* (México, D.F.: Edición y distribución ibero-americana de publicaciones, 1954), 238-39; also, *Ordenanzas de gremios de la Nueva España*, ed. Juan Francisco del Barrio Lorenzot (México, D.F.: Secretaría de gobernación, 1921), 39, 59, 79, 99, 120, 124, 139.

¹⁵ Palmer, *Slaves*, 138.

¹⁶ Palmer, *Slaves*, 135.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122; Acta de cabildo de la ciudad de México, 15 February 1557, no. 2265, reproduced in *Guía de las actas de cabildo de la ciudad de México: siglo xvi*, ed. Edmundo O'Gorman (México, D.F.: Fondo de cultura económica, 1970), 326-27.

brotherhoods) organized by Africans or Afromestizos were banned as possible covens of rebellion.¹⁸ No free black or mulatto was supposed to live alone. No Spaniard could have more than three slaves in his retinue on the streets of the capital. One colonial bureaucrat recommended that no mestizo or black be allowed to own or ride horses, to bear or even possess weapons.¹⁹ The prohibition against *castas* bearing arms was first made in 1547, and repeated in 1574, 1583, 1589, and 1595. Blacks were forbidden to go out into the streets or carry arms at night on pain of receiving one hundred lashes and confiscation of the weapons.²⁰

Most of these restrictions were, of course, impossible to enforce at all times and in all places. That these laws existed is testimony to repeated attempts by the crown to erect strict social, political, and economic boundaries between the numerous castes of the colony. But it is also probable that evasion of unpopular laws was as widely practiced by *castas* as it was by Spaniards when it suited them. In fact, blacks and mulattoes became indispensable as agents of control over Indians in both the center of New Spain and on the colonial frontier. Spaniards were too few and too thinly spread to maintain political and economic discipline over Indian villages; therefore, blacks and Afro- and Indomestizos were used to reinforce Spanish control.

Relations between the indigenous population and the imported Africans and their offspring were complex and not easily categorized. In general, where *castas* and Indians coexisted on a more or less equal social and economic level and in a similar relationship vis-à-vis the Spaniards, they were either neutral towards each other, or they joined together in mutual opposition against European control. Where blacks were placed over the Indians, relationships were usually antagonistic.

¹⁸ Acta de cabildo de la ciudad de México, 20 May 1585, no. 4642, reproduced in *ibid.*, 632.

¹⁹ Palmer, *Slaves*, 131; *Recopilación de leyes de los reynos de las Indias mandadas imprimir y publicar por la Magestad Católica del Rey Don Carlos II Nuestro Señor. Va Dividida en Quatro Tomos con el Indice General, y al principio de Cada Tomo el Indice especial de los titulos, que contiene el Tomo Segundo* (Madrid: Julián de Paredes, 1681; facsimile ed., Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1973), tomo II, libro VII, título V, ley XV; *Disposiciones complementarias a las leyes de Indias*, comp. José de Ayala, 3 vols. (Madrid: Imprenta Sáez hermanos, 1930), 2:246-47.

²⁰ Acta de cabildo de la ciudad de México, 14 June 1527, no. 165, reproduced in *Guía*, 34.

When the Spaniards used blacks to control the natives, the *castas* often yielded to temptation and abused their powers.

There are many examples of this problem in colonial records. As early as 1547 the *cabildo* (town council) of Mexico City noted the presence of black slaves, *moriscos* and mulattoes in Indian neighborhoods and prohibited their cohabitation, on the grounds that the *castas* had an unwholesome effect on the natives. These restrictions were repeated in 1563, and again in 1578, 1607, 1620, and 1654, but apparently to little avail.²¹ While the cathedral in the capital was being constructed, an *oidor* (judge) forbade the employment of blacks as overseers on the grounds that they treated the Indian workers badly.²² In 1663 a cacique of Tehuacán complained of the cruelties of a mulatto overseer towards his Indian workers, even accusing the mulatto of murder.²³ In Pánuco, the Indian officials protested that their *ministro de doctrina* (parish priest) had given his *vara*, or rod of authority, to a mulatto to act as *fiscal* (in this context, caretaker) of their church; the mulatto forced them to labor day and night in the mission's maize fields, causing many to flee.²⁴ The leading historian of the black experience in New Spain writes:

In 1552 it was reported that the Indians in the mines of Nueva Vizcaya suffered mistreatment at the hands of the blacks, and in 1590 a similar charge was leveled at the slaves who worked in the mines of Santa María Tlalpoxagua. Realizing the powers of intimidation which the Afro-Mexicans exercised over the Indians, Spaniards sometimes used them as supervisors for

²¹ Palmer, *Slaves*, 61; also many royal *cédulas* in *Recopilación*, 6:3:221.

²² Gonzalo Gómez de Cervantes, *La vida económica y social de Nueva España, al finalizar el siglo xvi* (México, D.F.: Porrúa, 1944), 20.

²³ "Para que la justicia de Teguacán haga la averiguación que aqui se refiere don Antonio Rodríguez de Mendoza, cacique..." México, 9 September 1633, Archivo General de la Nación, ramo de Indias (hereinafter cited as AGN, I), tomo 12, fols. 17v-18, reproduced in Silvio Zavala and María Castelo, *Fuentes para la historia del trabajo en Nueva España*, 8 vols. (México, D.F.: Fondo de cultura económica, 1939-1946), 7:30-31.

²⁴ "Para que la justicia del pueblo de Guextla no consienta que un mulato fiscal de la iglesia de él haga agravios a los naturales..." México, 27 June 1635, AGN, I, tomo 12, fols. 140v-141 reproduced in *ibid.*, 7:91-92.

Indian laborers. The traveler Gómez de Cervantes observed in 1599 that 'they put with the Indians a negro or servant who goes with them and hurries them in order to make them work, making them work more than they are able because of their weak nature and little strength, and in addition to this they beat them so that they are mistreated.'²⁵

In addition to complaints about cruel *mayordomos* (overseers), there were also numerous accusations that gangs of Afro-Mexicans attacked Indian villages, pilfered their food, and wreaked havoc upon the helpless Indians.²⁶ These raids were often the work of racially-mixed gangs of *léparos*. The Indians of San Juan Cuescomatepec complained that a dozen Spaniards, mestizos, and mulattoes had stolen their land, molested their women, and forced the Indians to work for them.²⁷ In 1573, the *Audiencia* of Mexico reported that "mestizos, Negroes, mulattoes, and other vagabonds took the lands and houses of the Indians and mistreated them."²⁸ In 1608, Viceroy Velasco noted that blacks, mulattoes, and mestizos entered Indian pueblos, where they "possess more liberty and committed greater excesses without punishment."²⁹

This state of affairs resulted in further royal prohibitions against non-Indians residing or even staying in Indian communities for more than a day. The *Recopilación de Leyes de Indias* tried to regulate both the *léparo* problem, and the recurrent danger of non-Indian "contamination" of the natives, which the crown and the secular clergy wished to preserve as separate. A typical regulation was promulgated by Philip II in 1563, and again on five subsequent occasions: it declared that "no Spaniard, mestizo, black or mulatto was to live in Indian villages, because of reports that some Spaniards who lived, dealt with, and traveled among the Indians were wicked men (*hombres inquietos de*

²⁵ Palmer, *Slaves*, 61.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ "Para que la justicia del pueblo de San Juan Cuezcomatepaec vea el mandamiento y cédula real aquí citada y en su cumplimiento hará las diligencias que aquí piden al gobernador, alcaldes y demás naturales del dicho pueblo..." Mexico, 1 September 1633, AGN, I, tomo 12, fols. 15-16, reproduced in Zavala y Castelo, *Fuentes*, 7:28-29.

²⁸ Palmer, *Slaves*, 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

mal vivir), thieves, gamblers, vicious and lost men, who caused Indians to flee from their oppression." It also stated that besides maltreating Indians, blacks, mestizos, and mulattoes exploited their services, and taught them bad habits, laziness, error, and vices, "which could spoil and pervert the aims of the Spanish: the salvation and good order of the Indian republics."³⁰

Without a doubt the majority of Africans and Afromestizos in New Spain endured hardships and societal prejudice stoically, living their lives as fully as they could under the difficult circumstances created by colonial legislation and popular attitudes. A minority, however, chose to rebel. In urban areas they joined with mestizos and vagabond Spaniards to form gangs of *léparos*. In rural areas they became *cimarrones*, runaways who often founded their own rebel communities. The most famous of these mainland *palenques* (communities of escaped black slaves) was located in the Orizaba-Veracruz region. In 1609, when its blacks began to raid and burn Spanish settlements and liberate their black slaves, the authorities sent an expedition of some 450 men against the rebels. After a bloody battle, the Spanish seized the abandoned *palenque* of sixty homes. Eventually the authorities gave amnesty to the *cimarrones* and granted their community a royal charter, on the condition that they cease their raids of "liberation."³¹ The financially strapped and militarily weak colonial government used a carrot and stick approach repeatedly throughout the colonial period, against Chichimecs, *cimarrones*, vagabonds, Apaches, Comanches, Pueblos, and *norteños* (as many Texas tribes were generically termed) as the occasion warranted. The government alternated between military campaigns to intimidate or punish Indian nations, and attempting (with some degree of success) to bribe them into peace with rations, cattle, clothing, other European goods, offers of missionaries, protection, etc.

³⁰ Real cédula, Philip II, Madrid, 2 May 1563 and 25 November 1578, etc., reproduced in *Recopilación*, 6:3:21.

³¹ The *palenque* campaign is treated at length in Palmer, *Slaves*, 129-30; also Francisco Javier Alegre, S.J., *Historia de la provincia de la Compañía de Jesús de Nueva España*, ed. Ernest Burrus, S.J. and Felix Zubillaga, S.J. 4 vols. (Rome: Institutum historicum, 1959-1960), 2:176-78; also Andrés Pérez de Rivas, S.J., *Corónica y historia religiosa de la provincia de la Compañía de Jesús de México en Nueva España*, 2 vols. (México, D.F.: Imprenta del Sagrado Corazón de Jesus, 1896), 1:284, 292.

The Africans and Afromestizos who chose or were forced to rebel against the colonial social and political order, typify the violent and aggressive ethos which the Mexican historian Aguirre Beltrán defines as the mainstay of *cimarrón* liberty.³² This ethos sometimes led them into urban or rural guerrilla warfare, at times indistinguishable from banditry. Many *cimarrones* sought only the freedom to try and reestablish their old lives in remote areas, away from European control. Others used their newly-won liberty to avenge themselves on their captors and oppressors. While such persons do fit marginally into Eric Hobsbawm's definition of "social bandits" (peasants whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society and are considered by their people to be heroes, champions, avengers, fighters for justice, or liberation leaders), two factors complicate such a simplistic definition. The first is race or ethnicity; the second is the specific conditions of war and peace on the northern frontier. Hobsbawm, dealing almost entirely within the European context, addresses neither of these factors.³³

Alexander von Humboldt wrote of the Americas, "The greater or lesser degree of whiteness of skin decides the rank which that man occupies in the society."³⁴ The African and his Afromestizo descendants were involuntary settlers; their labor was needed, but they occupied no fixed or established social niche within Spanish society. *Mestizaje* and independence solved the *casta* problem in genetic and legal terms in Mexico. But during the colonial period, blacks who rebelled had declared war on Spanish society. Their only dependable allies were those who also had cause to despise the colonial regime—typically Indians who were not living in European polity, nor in a native village as subjects of a Spanish *encomendero* (a Spaniard who held an *encomienda*, a grant of Indian labor and tribute), nor as wards of a secular or regular priest. Detribalized Indians who had fled their native societies were natural allies of rebellious *castas*. The complicated social and racial structure of New Spain, which engendered

³² Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Cujila*, 12.

³³ See Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*. Rev. ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 17-18.

³⁴ Alexander von Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*. The John Black translation (abridged), ed. Mary Knopf Dunn (New York: Maples, 1972), 87.

a complex caste system, and the centuries-long struggle between Europeans and Indians in the Gran Chichimeca, aided and abetted the rebellion not only of blacks, but of all *léparos* or outcasts—blacks, mestizos, mulattoes, Spaniards, Frenchmen, métis, Englishmen, or Anglo-Americans.

As early as 1523, just two years after the successful conquest of Tenochtitlan, blacks, brought to the mainland from the Caribbean by the conquistadors, had fled and allied themselves with Indian tribes. Antonio de Herrera wrote that at the same time Cortés was occupied quelling a rebellion among the Zapotec and Mixtec Indians, "...in this time there had fled to the Zapotec many Negro slaves, and they wandered in rebellion throughout the land...."³⁵ After the outbreak of the Chichimec war in 1540, disturbing reports began to circulate concerning attacks by blacks on *estancias* (ranches) and haciendas in the Zacatecas and Guadalajara regions. When a band of fifteen to twenty blacks was reported attacking travelers around Guanajuato in 1560, the viceroy authorized the *justicia* (justice) to raise a company of Spaniards from the mines and up to 150 Indians from nearby villages to stamp out the highwaymen.³⁶ In one attack on a supply train to the mines (which consisted of eighty carts escorted by one hundred men), the rebels killed almost all the Spaniards, and looted the caravan. A report on the incident declared that the highways were so dangerous that they could not be traveled without a large escort. It went on to state:

This danger is made even greater because the mulattoes, mestizos, and vagabonds ("*gente perdida*"), as well as hitherto peaceful Indians, are joining with the Chichimeca raiders.³⁷

³⁵ Antonio Herrera y Tordesillas, *Historia general de los hechos de los castellanos en las islas y tierra-firme del mar océano*, 17 vols. (Madrid: Tipografía de archivos, 1934-1957), decade 3, 7:59.

³⁶ Philip Wayne Powell, *Soldiers, Indians, and Silver: The Northward Advance of New Spain, 1550-1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), 62.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

The Spanish reacted harshly to this threat; penalties for escaping slaves and anyone who aided them were cruel: lashes, iron fetters, castration, amputation, and hanging.³⁸

The first *castas* into the far reaches of North America accompanied the initial *entradas* (expeditions): the famous Estevanico of the Narváez expedition, and an indeterminate number of black slaves with Coronado and de Soto. In both expeditions *castas* stayed behind after the conquistadors returned to New Spain. When Coronado left New Mexico in 1542, some black slaves and Tlaxcalan Indians remained. Three blacks and an unknown European ran away from the Hernando de Soto expedition: "Although the Spaniards made an effort to recapture them, they could not do so, for in general it pleased the Indians of this great kingdom...to have the people of the Spaniards remain with them. Such evil behavior on the part of the Negroes caused amazement because they were considered to be good Christians and friends of their master."³⁹ Later, the men of the Tristan de Luna party in 1560 learned that some of the men left behind by the de Soto expedition had lived eleven or twelve years among the Indians.⁴⁰

In New Spain's northern frontier, however, substantial *casta* populations did not develop until the Spanish mining and ranching frontier moved north and west from the central plateau. Oakah L. Jones suggests that the black man was usually the "invisible man" of the Mexican frontier, that his numbers were low, and that his employment was usually that of domestic.⁴¹ On the contrary, blacks were an important part of the cattle and silver industries of the north. Their numbers are sometimes difficult to establish with any accuracy, but reports usually mention their presence in many descriptions of colonial frontier communities.

³⁸ Philip II, El Pardo, 11 February 1571 and 4 August 1574, reproduced in *Recopilación*, 7:5:21; Palmer, *Slaves*, 124-25; also Charles II, Madrid, 15 April 1540, reproduced in *Disposiciones*, 1:244.

³⁹ Garcilaso de la Vega, *The Florida of the Inca: A History of the Adelantado, Hernando de Soto...*, trans. and ed. John Grier Varner and Jeanette Johnson Varner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), 333-34.

⁴⁰ John R. Swanton, *The Indians of the Southeastern United States*. Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin no. 137 (Washington, DC: Govt. Printing Office, 1946), 60.

⁴¹ Oakah L. Jones, *Los paisanos: Spanish Settlers on the Northern Frontier of New Spain* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 4.

Typical is the notation of Brigadier Pedro de Rivera y Villalón in 1726, that El Paso del Norte, through which he passed on an inspection tour, was composed of "Españoles, Mestizos, y Mulatos." The same was said of another town in Chihuahua, as well as of Saltillo.⁴² Censuses of villages in Sonora often simply list persons of indeterminate race: "...those who in this province are called *de razón*."⁴³ For the eighteenth century, population figures are more available and accurate. A 1793 census of Sonora and Sinaloa lists the *casta* population at slightly more than 19 percent; a detailed breakdown of the population of Sonora for 1790 yields virtually the same figure for mulattoes—19.5 percent.⁴⁴ An analysis of the New Mexican urban population for the 1790s shows a very low *pardo* presence (less than 3 percent), and blacks as almost nonexistent. The report, however, alluded to the notion that many free mulattoes may have been included with the mestizos of the province.⁴⁵ Censuses of Saltillo for the period between 1788 and 1813 show mestizos and mulattoes comprising between 13 and 19 percent of the population.⁴⁶ The terms used by census takers, *de color quebrado* and *otras castas* (other castes), make exact calculations impossible. An examination of available population data bears out the conclusions of Sherburne Cook and Woodrow Borah, that the relative numbers of the *castas* were high on the central coasts, substantial in the north, and moderate to low on the plateau. In Durango, *pardos* constituted almost half the population in the eighteenth century.⁴⁷

⁴² Pedro de Rivera y Villalón, *Diario y derrotero de lo caminado visto, y observado en el discurso de la visita general de precidios, situados en las provincias ynternas de Nueva España*, ed. Guillermo Porras Muñoz (México, D.F.: Porrúa, 1945), 60, 67.

⁴³ Padre Bartolomé Saenz, series of reports on the Sonoran missions, 1766 (?), 17-33.

⁴⁴ Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 228; "Estado general de la población de las provincias de Sonora y Sinaloa, año de 1790," *Archivo Franciscano*, no. 2203, 35/768.1.

⁴⁵ "Padrones de las misiones que tiene la custodia de la Nueva México formador el año de 1750." Fray Andrés Varo, New Mexico, legajo 3, no. 26, *Archivo Franciscano*, no. 1772, 28/552.1, 1-99v; Alicia Tjarks, "Demographic, Ethnic and Occupational Structure of New Mexico, 1790," *The Americas* 35 (1979):54.

⁴⁶ Material furnished author by Dr. José Cuello, Wayne State University.

⁴⁷ Cook and Borah, *Essays in Population History*, 2:211-12.

Casta population was highest in areas where the economy was based on mining and ranching. Only a small fraction of the Zacatecas and Parral mining labor force was composed of Indian slaves taken in "just wars." Peter Bakewell estimates that 20 percent of the Zacatecas labor force was composed of black slaves; Mota y Escobar observed free *hombres de color* in both mines and on cattle ranches.⁴⁸ In the mines, they worked more as skilled craftsmen or supervisors than as unskilled labor, overseeing the patio process which refined the silver ore. Robert C. West argues that slaves were too expensive to have made up more than a fraction of the Parral labor force, but it is probable that free mulattoes worked in the Parral district; if not in the mines themselves, then as workers in peripheral areas—ore refining, and supplying food, draft animals, and wood for the mines.⁴⁹ Even on the frontier, tensions between *castas* and Indians came to official notice; the governor of Nueva Vizcaya wrote to Philip II in 1582:

...your Majesty orders me not to allow negroes in the said province to hold any communications with the said Indians, because of the many difficulties that result from it and the injury to the natives from the ill treatment they receive from them. In regard to this your Majesty should know that the negroes in the said province are separate and apart from the settlements of the natives, for the Spaniards employ them in the workings of the mines, where they have placed their mills and houses...in the future great care will be taken to prevent the negroes from ill treating the natives, and heavy penalties will be imposed for it.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ P. J. Bakewell, *Silver Mining and Society in Colonial Mexico: Zacatecas, 1546-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 124; Alonso de la Mota y Escobar, *Descripción geográfica de los reinos de Nueva Galicia, Nueva Vizcaya y Nuevo León*, 2nd ed. (México, D.F.: Robredo, 1940), 145.

⁴⁹ Robert C. West, *The Mining Community in Northern New Spain: The Parral Mining District* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 53.

⁵⁰ Diego de Ibarra to...the King...Don Felipe...May (October), 1582. Nueva Vizcaya, AGI, 66-6-18, reproduced in Charles W. Hackett, ed., *Historical Documents Relating to New Mexico, Nueva Vizcaya and Approaches Thereto, to 1773*, 3 vols. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1923-1926), 1:109-12.

and other mixed bloods, or even Indians of other nations whom the Jesuits had installed in positions of trust and confidence within the mission. The coyote Juan Frías, for instance, was Father Diego González's fiscal at Húiruis. Already resentful at the coyote's elevated status, the Yaquis accused this abusive, greedy lot of oppressing Yaquis in numerous ways, including extortion, land usurpation, and conspiracy to turn their padres against them.⁵⁸

This same Juan Frías accused one Yaqui of stealing the storehouse keys of a padre. When another Yaqui refused to whip the accused, the *coyote* punished both. When it was discovered that the son of another *coyote* had actually lost the keys, Juan Frías refused to apologize or compensate the Indians.⁵⁹ One friar reported from New Mexico that at Acoma a *coyote* lieutenant compelled the Indians to supply him every week with a sheep, lard, beans, and tortillas. The *coyote* never ventured from his house without a large (and presumably armed) escort.⁶⁰ Prejudice was so strong that another friar actually went so far in a legal dispute as to depose in court that an *alcalde mayor* in New Mexico was indeed a mulatto, but that he was a truthful man and a good Christian.⁶¹

The majority of blacks and mulattoes in New Spain's northern frontier were obviously law-abiding members of society, despite the widespread pernicious attitudes held by most Spaniards. But a significant minority of *castas* was just the opposite. In 1643, a governor of New Mexico, Pacheco de Heredia, fought bitterly with both his *cabildo* and Franciscan friars. The regulars charged that he was backed by "mestizos and *sambahigos*, sons of Indian men and negroes and mulattoes." This was at a time when the non-Indian

⁵⁸ Evelyn Hu-DeHart, *Missionaries, Miners, and Indians: Spanish Contact with the Yaqui Nation of Northwestern New Spain, 1533-1820* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1981), 62-63.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁰ The form of government used at the missions of San Diego de los Jémez and San Agustín de la Isleta by Father Fray Joaquín del Jesús Ruíz, their former minister. Undated (1773?), Hackett, *Historical Documents*, 3:504.

⁶¹ Letter of Fray Juan Bernal to the tribunal, 1 April 1669, from the convent of Santo Domingo, *ibid.*, 3:271-73.

population of New Mexico numbered less than two hundred persons.⁶² In the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, one rebel faction was composed of mixed bloods. Later, Antonio de Otermín, governor of New Mexico, wrote of Indian rebels who fled their pueblos, accompanied by "many mestizos, mulattoes, and people who speak Spanish...who are skillful on horseback and who can manage firearms as well as any Spaniard. These persons incited them [the Indians] to disobedience and boldness in excess of their natural iniquity."⁶³ Since any rebellion against the crown was seen as an illegal, unnatural, even un-Christian act, the Spanish tended to view resistance in absolute moral terms.

In Sonora, the famous *relación* of Padre Daniel Januske, Jesuit *visitador* (civil or ecclesiastical official making a tour of inspection) of 1726, complained that the greater part of the population of Sonora consisted of *coyotes*, mulattoes, and other "scum of the earth" (*hezes de la tierra*), who wandered like vagabonds in the province, with no other occupation than stealing, gambling, seducing women, sowing discord, and producing other evils.⁶⁴ Thirty years later another inspector, Rodríguez-Gallardo, reported that the same *gente mala* were living the same *mal vivir*. There lived among the Indians vicious men of bad habits, thieves, gamblers, dissolute and lost men, he wrote, who spoiled and perverted the salvation and peace of the Indians.⁶⁵ Finally, in 1772, Padre Reyes wrote to Viceroy Bucareli that two reasons existed for the deplorable state of the province of Sonora. The first was the continual incursions of the enemy Indians (mostly Apaches). The second was the vagabonding nature of the population, including Spanish traders, mulattoes, and blacks, who wandered about in search of

⁶² Jack D. Forbes, *Apache, Navajo, and Spaniard* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 137-38.

⁶³ Auto for the conclusion of the opinions of the Junta, Antonio de Otermín, place opposite La Isleta, 1 January 1682, reproduced in *Revolt of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Otermín's Attempted Reconquest, 1680-1682*, anotd. Charles W. Hackett, trans. Charmion Shelby, 2 vols. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1942), 2:354-55.

⁶⁴ Padre Daniel Januske, San Francisco de Borja, no date (probably 1723), Archivo Histórico de Hacienda, Temporalidades, 278.

⁶⁵ J. Rafael Rodríguez-Gallardo, Informe sobre Sinaloa y Sonora. Edited by Germán Viveros. AGN, Archivo Histórico de Hacienda. Colección documental, 1. México, 1975:27.

precious metals, quick to abandon a place once the silver was played out.⁶⁶

One constant complaint in colonial documents was the apparent lack of control the Spanish authorities had over both the population and the military situation. In this regard the northern frontier of New Spain differed from the Louisiana-Florida frontier. In Florida, Englishmen and Spaniards employed Indians much as the Huron and Iroquois were used as allies and mercenaries in the northeastern United States. In addition, in Florida runaway black slaves were settled near Saint Augustine as a defensive buffer against raiding Englishmen from Georgia.⁶⁷ In the southwest escaped black slaves from Louisiana formed part of a floating population of vagabonds between Spanish Texas and Louisiana.

Alliances between *castas* and Indians were a source of continual concern to the Spanish authorities. In 1787, the *comandante-general* of the *Provincias Internas* wrote to the viceroy that no one could doubt that a great part of the robberies and murders in the province of Sonora had been executed by gangs of raiders formed of Tarahumara Indians, fugitives from the missions, mulattoes, mestizos, and other malefactors of diverse castes, sometimes in union with enemy Apaches, and sometimes acting by themselves.⁶⁸ Individual accounts serve to highlight the concerns of the government. Julián de Lugo y Cabrera, a *mulato libre* of Saltillo, was accused of accompanying Apaches on raids. A witness against him told of his playing a guitar and dancing while Apaches violated and killed captured women. He was later freed for lack of evidence.⁶⁹ In another case, two mulattoes were caught spying for the Apaches in Durango in 1773. They had been taken

⁶⁶ Padre Reyes to Viceroy Bucareli, México, 20 April 1772, Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo de Misiones, tomo 14, exp. 3, fol. 16.

⁶⁷ Jane Landers, "Spanish Sanctuary: Fugitives in Florida, 1687-1790," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 62 (1984):296-313.

⁶⁸ Ugarte y Loyola to the viceroy, Arispe, 10 December 1787, Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo de Provincias Internas (hereinafter cited as AGN, PI), tomo 254, fol. 29.

⁶⁹ "Diligencias que se practican de oficio de justicia sobre la averiguación de si Julián Lugo y Cabrera tenía alguna mezcla o acompañaba a los Yndios apaches." Juan Manuel del Campillo, alcalde mayor, Saltillo, 8 June 1790. Archivo General de Historia, Estado de Coahuila (hereinafter cited as AGH, C), carpeta 6, exp. 24.

captive by the Indians, but admitted that under the influence of a steady diet of peyote, they had "persevered voluntarily in their apostasy."⁷⁰

In 1627 Gaspar Francisco, a mulatto slave, "fled from the service of his master in the company of others who committed various excesses." Captured and sent to the mines in Nuevo León, he fled again, and stole a horse. Recaptured, he ran away once more, having "little fear of God and less esteem for royal justice." He fled with a companion to Coahuila, "the land of the Chichimecs, and in offense of God our Lord and in hurt to his conscience being *ladino* (hispanicized) and Christian," he danced with the Indians of the province, was tattooed, and drank "bones of death" (ground-up bones of war victims, a common practice among some Chichimec tribes). He was also allegedly named a war captain, and lived in concubinage with an Indian woman. He was tried and sentenced to hang; in addition to his alleged crimes against society, the Spanish were afraid of what he might teach the Indians (*daría entender algunas cosas a los dichos yndios*).⁷¹

A young mulatto shepherd named Marcelino was taken captive and raised by Indians in the Laguna del Parral; he was later accused by the Spaniards of taking part in raids against them. They accused him of being a horse thief, and complicit in the murders of more than a dozen people. He was apprehended when he offered to show the Spaniards where a large herd of horses, stolen by the Apaches, was located. During the interrogation of this Apachito, or little Apache, he swore that he had never committed crimes against the Spaniards.⁷²

There is also documentary evidence that *palenque* communities of mulattoes, apostate mission Indians, and mestizos were established in the far north. One young child captive in Nueva Vizcaya described a community of three hundred persons, comprised of "rebels, mulattoes, *lobos*, *coyotes*, Tarahumaras, and other wild Indians." The

⁷⁰ Fayni to Bucareli, Durango, 19 June 1773, AGN, PI, tomo 43, fol. 11.

⁷¹ "Contra Gaspar Francisco, Mulato, por haverse huido del servicio de su Amo en compañía de otros que cometieron varios excesos." Cerralvo, 1 May 1627, Archivo Municipal de Monterrey, Causas Criminales, vol. 1, exp. 6; material furnished author by Dr. José Cuello.

⁷² "Testigo que las Diligencias contra Marzelino cautivo entre los Yndios..." Rodríguez to Ugarte, Ugarte to Croix, Presidio de San Juan Bautista, Monclova, etc. May-June, 1770, AGH, C, carpeta 4, exp. 56.

palenque inhabitants raised crops, but also conducted raids against Spanish *estancias* to gain recruits, cattle, horses, and booty.⁷³

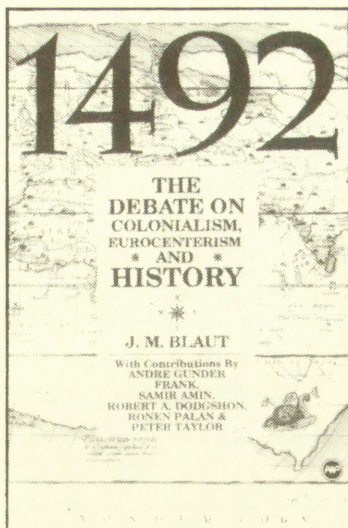
Africans and Afromestizos occupied a unique position in New Spain and its northern frontier. Unlike the Europeans and the Indians, they had no specific legal niche in the colonial order. Their labor was indispensable, but almost everywhere they were denigrated and despised by Spaniards. The Europeans presumed that the *casta* inherited from his African ancestry a variety of evil habits and impulses; he was considered base and infamous because of his race.⁷⁴ Most *pardos* accepted the limitations of their role in colonial society, and lived constructive and law-abiding lives within the political and legal boundaries set by the Spaniards. In this manner they established a place for themselves in the colonial structure, one which had not been planned, nor perhaps even desired, but which nonetheless came into being in spite of prejudice and intolerance. Significantly, the social and economic boundaries which had been designed to confine *castas* tended to be rather elastic. The repeated promulgation of royal laws intended to control mestizos and mulattoes is testimony to their failure as instruments of social control. The critical role of *castas* in the colonial economy ensured that economic restrictions were observed as seldom as were social curbs on the intermingling of castes. But beyond covert resistance was a significant element of open revolt on the part of some *gente de color*, those who became *léparos* and *cimarrones*. Their voices are missing in the colonial records, which give only the European view, but the archives document a substantial effort to evade, confound, and resist the absolute control which the Spaniards wished to wield over those who were not *gente de razón* (term used to refer to Spaniards or people of reason).

According to Turnerian doctrine, the frontier is supposed to represent unlimited freedom. We now know that this idea was at best only a half-truth; racial and social prejudices and metropolitan economic and political institutions were perpetuated on the Spanish as well as on the Anglo-American frontier. Consequently, some *castas* refused to accept these limitations. They joined with Indians in mission villages who chafed under the rule of friars, with wild nomadic bands,

⁷³ Fayni to Bucareli, Durango, 17 July 1773, enclosing declaration of captive, Real de Mapimí, 8 July 1773, AGN, PI, tomo 43, fols. 192-96.

⁷⁴ Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 271-72.

and with other outcasts of the frontier—mestizos, presidio deserters, and renegade Spaniards. The relative freedom of the frontier, the sparse non-native population, the perpetual state of war, the proximity of aboriginal society and of foreign borders, all combined to encourage a state of liberty, even anarchy in some areas, in which the boundaries of Spanish law and custom were stretched to the breaking point. Such a state of freedom was ephemeral, however, as on all frontiers. Eventually, *mestizaje* and acculturation became the fate of the frontier *castas*. But throughout the colonial period, they perpetrated acts of social insurrection, which at times threatened the peace and stability of New Spain and its frontier areas.



**1492:
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COLONIALISM
EUROCENTRISM
* AND *
HISTORY**

J.M. Blaut

* * *

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