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Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century

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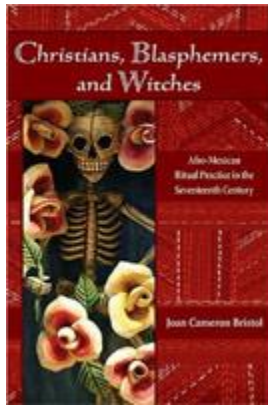
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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Joan Cameron Bristol. *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century*. Albuquerque University of New Mexico Press, 2007. 283 pp., \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8263-3799-3.

Reviewed for H-AfrArts by Andrea Lepage

Afro-Mexican Ritual, Power, and Authority in New Spain

In this inclusive study, Joan Cameron Bristol examines ritual practice in seventeenth-century New Spain through the lens of Afro-Mexican people and cultures. In *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century*, Bristol is especially interested in the relationship between ritual and authority in Mexico, and she emphasizes the ways that both sanctioned and unsanctioned ritual practices were used by Afro-Mexicans to undermine Spanish colonial authority. Bristol's category of "Afro-Mexican" encompasses men and women born in Africa as well as Spain, creole blacks (blacks born in the New World), and mulattoes (people of mixed racial heritage). In considering enslaved, free, and emancipated individuals, this study also draws attention to the varying degrees of Hispanicization exhibited by Afro-Mexicans. The lack of specificity of colonial documents forces Bristol to identify the origins of most Afro-Mexicans as simply "West" or "West Central" African. Nonetheless, in the New Spanish colonial context, the author conveys clearly the complexity of the Afro-Mexican community and the many identities carried by its community members.

The development of slavery in Mexico took place between 1580 and 1640 as people of African descent were used to supplement indigenous labor in the

Americas. Although many Europeans voiced concerns about the enslavement of indigenous people, far fewer were concerned with the enslavement of Africans. On the contrary, some argued that slavery benefited the souls of Africans because it was through this institution that they were offered baptism, and thus salvation. Yet unlike the indigenous population, Africans were not offered extensive pre- or post-baptismal education. While the Spanish Crown officially mandated that slaves learn Spanish and be indoctrinated into the Christian faith, the time necessary for such conversion meant that slave owners were unlikely to push for the full indoctrination of their slaves. Overall, this lack of religious education meant that Spaniards and Afro-Mexicans probably had very different understandings of Christianity. Afro-Mexican misunderstandings -- accidental or intentional -- opened the door to unorthodox ritual activity.

The first main theme considered by Bristol is that the Afro-Mexican experience cannot be separated from the experiences of other members of New Spain's population. Because Afro-Mexicans participated in all aspects of colonial life, any study of Afro-Mexicans must necessarily recount the stories of indigenous, Iberian, creole, and mixed populations in New Spain. Chapter 1 provides a clear example of the intersection of Afro-Mexicans and Spaniards through the examination of the case of Juana Esperanza de San Alberto. Born a member of the [Bran] ethnic group in West Africa, Esperanza was a servant to the Carmelite nuns of San José in Puebla for sixty-eight years. She professed as a Carmelite nun on her deathbed in 1678 when she was more than eighty years old. Esperanza's case seems especially surprising because as a non-Spaniard, she did not meet the *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) requirements to profess as a Carmelite. Perhaps more surprisingly, Esperanza became the subject of a *vida* in which she was exalted as a model for Spanish nuns. Esperanza was celebrated in this *vida* because she was an exceptional black woman. Other narratives had been written in honor of devout black women, but Bristol notes that in these narratives there was a tendency to whiten, or even Hispanicize, the black individuals represented. In Esperanza's case, her blackness is actually emphasized by her biographers as a way to underscore her exceptional character. Bristol contends that the language of exceptionality applied to Esperanza's story served to distinguish her from other black women who were neither worthy nor holy enough to profess as nuns. Bristol illustrates how Esperanza's exceptionality actually served the purpose of reflecting the exceptionality of the Carmelites: "Her success was theirs" (p. 60).

While Bristol fully examines the connections between Afro-Mexicans, Spaniards, and creoles, she leaves the interactions between Afro-Mexicans and indigenous people less well explored. Chapter 5 focuses on the use of magic by

unlicensed Afro-Mexican curers, but fails to establish strong connections between Afro-Mexicans and other members of the New Spanish community. Many of the rituals utilized by these curers had indigenous roots, and most of the materials used can also be linked to indigenous curative practices. Thus, Bristol's attempt to identify African roots for these rituals -- and thereby differentiate them from indigenous or European practices -- is not entirely convincing. Perhaps an examination of the exchange that led Afro-Mexicans to adopt indigenous curative practices would better support Bristol's argument that the experiences of Afro-Mexicans cannot be separated from the experiences of indigenous people and Spaniards.

The second major theme considered by Bristol concerns Spanish theories about color, honor, and religion. According to Bristol, these theories defined Afro-Mexican opportunities and societal roles. Bristol notes that "colonial social identities were expressed through the concept of *calidad* [which was] based on skin color, clothing, occupation, personal relationships, cultural practices, *limpieza de sangre*, status as slave or free, and other conditions" (p. 26). The notion of *calidad* drives much of this study and in chapter 2, Bristol presents a variety of case studies to examine the ways in which Afro-Mexicans used Spanish prejudices against blacks to their distinct advantage. For example, in 1607, another slave named Esperanza who had recently arrived in Veracruz via Angola and was classified as *bozal* (unhispanicized), denounced herself for having taken communion without having confessed beforehand. Esperanza defended herself on the grounds that she had only recently arrived and was therefore unfamiliar with Catholic ritual. Though it is unclear whether Esperanza had been baptized, her Inquisition testimony nonetheless reveals that she had not received a Christian education. It is possible that in identifying herself as *bozal*, Esperanza used this Spanish system of categorization to her advantage, hoping that she would receive a lesser punishment. Bristol argues that Afro-Mexicans quickly became aware of the structure of colonial authority and were able to manipulate the system to their advantage.

The third major theme around which Bristol's book is structured is that the meanings and forms of rituals were not fixed, and could therefore be sites from which to challenge established power. She highlights the ways in which participation in both sanctioned and non-sanctioned ritual practices allowed Afro-Mexicans to create alternate forms of authority. This aspect of Bristol's project is by far the most compelling. In chapter 3, the author shows how sanctioned religious practice, such as confraternity membership, could lead to unsanctioned behaviors. This chapter begins with a vivid description of an incident that took place in 1611 when more than fifteen hundred members of a

black confraternity dedicated to Nuestra Señora de la Merced took to the streets to protest the wrongful death of one of their female members. Though he denied it, the confraternity members held the slave's owner responsible for her death. The leaders of this rebellion were punished publicly and their owners were directed to sell these agitators outside of the colony. This uprising points to a common fear that black confraternities were a threat to the colonial order because they could serve as locations for the organization of rebellions and other anti-colonial activities. In most other contexts, Afro-Mexicans were prohibited from congregating in large groups. In the aftermath of this rebellion, many black confraternities were dissolved, and those that continued to function were allowed to do so only under the supervision of Spanish clerics or other officials. Bristol exposes the tension between the mandate to offer Afro-Mexicans spiritual salvation and the deep-seated suspicions held by secular authorities of Afro-Mexicans and their motives.

Chapter 4 presents a series of fascinating case studies which together illustrate a pattern of renunciation of God that was used by enslaved Afro-Mexicans to improve their general circumstances. Before or during beatings, some slaves threatened that they would be forced to renounce God if the beatings continued. Though slave-owners were legally responsible for the spiritual well-being of their slaves, such threats rarely succeeded in putting a stop to the violence, but did in fact lead to the renunciation of God by numerous Afro-Mexicans. The cases presented show that slave-owners understood these renunciations to be deliberate tactics employed by slaves to prevent bodily harm. But these same individuals would have known that any person who renounced God was likely to be called to defend himself or herself in front of the Inquisition. In the end, renunciations did not seem to stop abuse; on the contrary, most Afro-Mexicans who renounced God received additional public punishment. As Bristol argues, this practice represents Afro-Mexican "attempts to use the same religious practices and forms of knowledge that upheld the official system of authority to try to challenge that system" (p. 121).

In chapter 6, the author examines an Inquisition case in which a group of Afro-Mexicans were accused by neighbors of "usurping ecclesiastical jurisdiction" (p. 194). Witnesses charged the mulatto leaders of this group with founding a religious order, wearing priestly vestments, and performing masses and other religious ceremonies without having taken religious orders. Testimony makes it clear that many members of the surrounding community viewed these ceremonies with suspicion, but inquisitors deemed the activities to be orthodox and even mundane. Bristol questions whether unofficial religious orders such as this represented an effort to subvert colonial authority. In the end, it may be that

such organizations actually offered an alternate authority -- one that had clear meaning within the Spanish system, but was at the same time outside the Spanish power structure.

Without a doubt, Bristol clearly demonstrates her main assertion that Afro-Mexicans took advantage of the different forms of authority that existed in New Spain. Whether by hiding behind an Afro-Mexican ethnic stereotype, renouncing God in the hope that physical violence would be exposed, or leading unsanctioned religious services, many Afro-Mexicans understood colonial secular and religious authority and attempted to make those systems of authority work to their advantage. Both the clarity of Bristol's prose and her inclusion of dozens of gripping case studies make this an accessible study for the undergraduate classroom. Her in-depth examination of the ways that Afro-Mexicans negotiated and manipulated Spanish structures of authority makes this a stimulating read for specialists in Latin American studies.

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