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The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/23n6f9wh>

Journal

The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced, 9(1)

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Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.5070/H39164327

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

The History of Slavery in Mexico

By Virginia Mateo

The modern-day country of Mexico has a significant Afro-descendent population. The presence and ancestry of African-descended women, men, and children can be traced back to the transatlantic and transpacific slave trades and the institution of slavery in New Spain (colonial Mexico). During the colonial period, from the 1500s to the 1800s, Spain colonized the Americas, including regions of present-day Mexico. This colonization included the conquest of Indigenous populations in Mexico and the importation of African captives to Mexico (New Spain). This article explores the movement and lives of enslaved Africans and African-descendants during the colonial period. By foregrounding the lives of the tens of thousands of captives who were imported to New Spain, I emphasize the centrality of violence in shaping their lived experiences under slavery. While this captive population endured almost unimaginable suffering and mistreatment at the hands of their enslavers, this article contends that these African and African-descended women, men, and children still managed to find and create opportunities to resist their subjugation, both in the context of the Middle Passage and during their lives under slavery in colonial Mexico.

The journey that African captives endured through the Middle Passage for enslavement highlights their traumatic experiences at the hands of European colonists. After getting captured by slave traders and merchants, Africans were forcibly marched from the interior of Africa to the Atlantic-facing ports of West and West Central Africa. After an overland journey that lasted several weeks and enduring additional time at dungeons in the West African forts, they would arrive in New Spain. Upon arriving in New Spain, captive Africans faced another forced overland movement to the cities,

towns, sugar-producing areas, and silver-mining regions throughout the Spanish colony. After reaching these destinations, enslaved people quickly realized the extent of the Spanish crown's power over colonial subjects. Aside from coerced labor, Africans dealt with various mechanisms of social control over their religion and legal rights.

The Origin of Interest for Enslaved Labor

Prior to relying on African slave labor, Spaniards in Mexico relied on the natives of the land. As historian David M. Davidson explains, over 25 million Mexican natives were forced to live a life bound to the labor of their oppressors.¹ The Spanish colonists saw financial promise in the resources—both in terms of land and people—that they encountered in New Spain. This desire for economic profit, which was shared with the Spanish crown, became an impetus to exploit the labor of Indigenous people. However, this success was short-lived. As Davidson outlines, the native population declined by just over one million by 1605 because of the smallpox epidemic and the impact of the Spanish conquest.² The overall indigenous population in New Spain dramatically decreased by approximately 90 percent, which exemplifies how the European introduction of diseases was deadly. Their immune systems could not fight off the illnesses, and they spread like wildfire throughout the population.

African Captives and Their Journeys Across the Atlantic

With a nearly depleted Indigenous workforce, Spaniards turned their attention to the continent of Africa, which became the primary location to purchase captive human beings.

¹ David M. Davidson. "Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico, 1519-1650." (*The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, no 3 (1966)). Page 236.

² Ibid. Page 237.

The vast majority of the Africans who were destined for New Spain were forcefully bound and taken in West Central Africa. At times, Spanish merchants were directly involved in the transatlantic slave trade, but generally, they relied on Portuguese, British, Dutch, and French slave traders to send captives to the Spanish colonies.³ The capture of Africans, for example, involved slaving, trading, and raiding which caught many Africans by surprise and ultimately led to the successful capture of millions in West and West Central Africa. Following capture, Africans' bodies were bound by cords to secure them until more colonists assisted with their removal.⁴ These forceful and sudden seizures of human beings was exemplified in the now well-known account of Olaudah Equiano.⁵ As Equiano outlined in his first-hand account of surviving the Middle Passage, he and his sister were taken by surprise, with their mouths covered to not alert anyone in their community. In general, many Africans were captured from regions in present-day Guinea, Senegal, and Nigeria.⁶ As Africans were taken against their will and forcibly moved to the Atlantic-facing coast of Africa, they were then coerced to embark on slave ships headed for New Spain. As an example, Captain Francisco Rodriguez (alias name) embarked 359 Africans on the slaving vessels, *Santiago* in 1551, and *Nuestra Señora de la Vida* in 1638 respectively, from West Central Africa. *Santiago* arrived in New Spain the same year with 287 captives, and *Nuestra Señora de la Vida* arrived the same year with 287 captives as well. Only 79 percent of the captives who originally embarked on the slave ships arrived in New Spain.⁷

³ Linda A Newsom, Minchin, Suzie Minchin. *From Capture to Sale*. Leiden Boston. 2007. Page 1.

⁴ "Excerpts from The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," in World History Commons.

⁵ Olaudah Equiano was a widely known formerly enslaved man, who wrote a memoir about his journey before, during, and after the Middle Passage; he was also an abolitionist.

⁶ Luz María Martínez Montiel, (1977), "Integration patterns and the assimilation process of negro slaves in Mexico". (Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 292: 446-454). Page 449.

⁷ *SlaveVoyages* Database.

Hundreds of enslaved Africans were packed so tightly on the hold of a slave ship that there was a lack of oxygen on board. Some captives tried to resist these horrid conditions by revolting against their captors, or by escaping via suicide on or overboard the slave ship. In response, a ship's crew maintained strict control, through violent punishments, like flogging,⁸ in order to prevent any kind of uprising on the slave ship. Many Africans spent up to fifteen weeks at sea before arriving at ports in New Spain. The conditions aboard a slave ship also caused severe health problems for the enslaved. For example, upon arriving in the Americas, those who were severely ill, which included many enslaved adults and children, had to be physically carried off-board because they had no strength to stand.⁹ Enslaved people endured a wide range of illnesses on the slave ship, which resulted from the lack of oxygen, food, physical violence, and exposure to bodily fluids for months on end. During the Atlantic Crossing, many enslaved people died at sea. At times, ship owners presented total losses that ranged from 9 to 26 percent in their reports.¹⁰ Moreover, countless ship reports noted the deaths of their captives, and while some reports embellished the truth because ship owners tried to avoid taxation and license fees, most reports accurately counted the number of casualties on board. While the physical challenges that enslaved people endured during their seizure and the Middle Passage were intense and extreme, these processes only marked the beginning of what awaited them in New Spain.

The Port City of Veracruz and Overland Travel

The city of Veracruz faced the Atlantic Ocean and thus, became the primary port of

⁸ Flogging: being whipped and hit with a stick repeatedly; beating used as a form of punishment.

⁹ Wheat, David, David Eltis, and Alex Borucki. *From the Galleons to the Highlands: Slave Trade Routes in the Spanish Americas* Chapter 3. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020). Page 73.

¹⁰ Linda A. Newsom, Suzie Minchin. *From Capture to Sale*. (Leiden Boston. 2007). Page 110.

entry for African captives. Over 120,000 captives were processed through the port of Veracruz between 1519 and 1650.¹¹ In his analysis of this peak in slave traffic to colonial Mexico, historian Edgar F. Love stated that “the greatest number [of imported slaves] belonged to the ports of Acapulco and Veracruz.”¹² The port of Veracruz was a vital entry point to Spanish America during the era of the slave trade. Along with Cartagena and Portobelo, it was one of the three ports in Spanish America that allowed the legal disembarkation and entry of captive Africans into New Spain.¹³ The licensing surrounding the transportation and arrival of enslaved people forced many ship owners to choose Veracruz as their chosen port of entry into New Spain and the Spanish Americas. Moreover, ship owners faced legal restrictions and financial fees if they failed to comply. They also feared being indebted to the Spanish Crown because their economic investments in slavery outweighed the cost of simply obeying the regulations placed on the importation of enslaved Africans. As both licensing and port access limited ship owners to Veracruz, it became clear that this port city would thrive during the era of transatlantic slave traffic to Spanish America.

Shortly after arriving in Veracruz, some enslaved people provided labor for the port specifically. Spanish colonialists forced slaves to work as ship carriers or dock hands.¹⁴ Their duties as ship carriers included loading and unloading heavy cargo and maintaining the ship grounds. Similarly, dock hands were responsible for securing the people and cargo aboard

¹¹ David M. Davidson. “Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico, 1519-1650.” (*The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, no 3 (1966)). Page 237.

¹² Edgar F. Love. “Negro Resistance to Spanish Rule in Colonial Mexico.” (*The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1967). Page 89.

¹³ Linda A. Newsom, Suzie Minchin. *From Capture to Sale*. (Leiden Boston. 2007). Page 136.

¹⁴ David M. Davidson. “Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico, 1519-1650.” (*The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, no 3 (1966)). Page 237.

incoming vessels. This labor ultimately facilitated the commerce of enslaved people because hundreds of Africans arrived on each slave ship. Veracruz had other economic channels besides its port. It participated in sugar production which also kept more enslaved people in Veracruz after their disembarkation.¹⁵ Enslaved people were also destined to toil in the region's sugar plantations because sugar was a vital resource for New Spain's economy.

A large part of the enslaved population was subjected to intense overland travel to other regions of the colony. The form by which captive Africans traveled could be by foot or mule. The beginning of their overland journey involved crossing through coastal wetlands near Veracruz, and later, across semi-temperate forests, and rugged mountain ranges in Central Mexico.¹⁶ The enslaved had to cross rivers of cold water, climb to high elevations, and trek through intense fogs, sleet and snow.¹⁷ The challenges of this overland trek were exacerbated by the fact that enslaved Africans had little to no clothing. For this reason, many could not withstand the extreme climatic conditions, from high humidity in the lowlands to frigid temperatures at the highest elevations and they became very ill or died during this overland movement.

It is also worth noting the physical endurance that was needed to walk, hike, and climb for days or even weeks, depending on their destination. The terrains that the enslaved had to cross were physically demanding because of the natural elements, which included summits

¹⁵ Maria Guevara Sanginés. "Proprietarios de esclavos en Guanajuato durante el siglo XVIII". (*Universidad Veracruzana*. 2014). Page 129.

¹⁶ Wheat, David, David Eltis, and Alex Borucki. *From the Galleons to the Highlands: Slave Trade Routes in the Spanish Americas*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020. Page 73.

¹⁷ Wheat, David, David Eltis, and Alex Borucki. *From the Galleons to the Highlands: Slave Trade Routes in the Spanish Americas*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020. Page 10.

over 7,000 feet in elevation.¹⁸ These climatic conditions, coupled with the critical health conditions that enslaved people had already experienced [on the Middle Passage], created a traumatic reality as they were forcibly moved through the colony. The physical strains on their feet, backs, and bodies were overlooked because their enslavers only considered them as commodities to be sold or disposed of.

The Labor of the Enslaved

The bondsmen and bonds women who survived the harsh climate and the physically punishing journey of overland travel then found themselves under various forced labor systems in the regions of colonial Mexico. The kind of labor that they provided was oftentimes determined by the commerce of a particular region. For example, silver was the most valuable product exported from New Spain. The increase in silver mining attracted indigenous laborers from central Mexico and captive Africans to toil in the silver mines of Chihuahua, Guanajuato, and Zacatecas.¹⁹ Spanish colonists also profited from slave labor in the mines of Michoacán, Tasco, and Zimpango.²⁰ I should add that mining for coal, silver, and gold was an acutely dangerous job, where the health and safety of laborers were oftentimes disregarded.

Enslaved people also worked in agricultural settings. They could serve and provide

¹⁸ Wheat, David, David Eltis, and Alex Borucki. *From the Galleons to the Highlands: Slave Trade Routes in the Spanish Americas*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020. Page 82.

¹⁹ Maria Guevara Sanginés. "Proprietarios de esclavos en Guanajuato durante el siglo XVIII". (*Universidad Veracruzana*. 2014). Page 121.

²⁰ Colin A. Palmer. *SLAVES OF THE WHITE GOD Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650*. (Harvard University Press. 1976). Page 76.

labor as field hands in *haciendas*²¹ for their enslavers.²² Sugar mills and tobacco plantations were maintained by enslaved people who lived within those haciendas.²³ This coerced labor, however, was only afforded by wealthy Spaniards who had the means to purchase enslaved people. As the production of agricultural products became vital to the sustenance of all people in New Spain, bondsmen, and bonds women were needed as cattle raisers, muleteers, and more.²⁴ The production of sugar, while it did thrive in Veracruz, also appeared in other parts of New Spain. Sugar also demanded skilled and unskilled forms of labor for its production. For example, enslaved people labored as sugar cane gatherers, sugar processors, sugar boilers, and sugar masters.²⁵ The technical processes required to grow, produce, and manufacture sugar created the demand for slave labor in the lowlands near Veracruz and in the tropical areas of the present-day states of Guerrero and Oaxaca.

Those who did not work in silver mining or agricultural production were bound to perform domestic service for Spanish elites in the colony's urban centers.²⁶ Domestic work varied from housework, and cooking, to nanny duties. Bondswomen, for instance, engaged in cleaning, cooking, childcare, and some women even served as wet nurses. Bondsmen, on the other hand, could be porters, personal servants, or carriage drivers. While urban slavery was

²¹ Hacienda: large land estate, usually somewhere rural.

²² Luz María Martínez Montiel, (1977), "Integration patterns and the assimilation process of negro slaves in Mexico". (Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 292: 446-454). Page 451.

²³ Ibid. page 451.

²⁴ David M. Davidson. "Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico, 1519-1650." (*The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, no 3 (1966)). Page 3.

²⁵ Colin A. Palmer. *SLAVES OF THE WHITE GOD Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650*. (Harvard University Press. 1976). Pages 11, 30, 34, 38.

²⁶ Maria Guevara Sanginés. "Proprietarios de esclavos en Guanajuato durante el siglo XVIII". (*Universidad Veracruzana*. 2014). Page 122.

not as physically demanding as slavery in plantation settings or silver mining, it was nevertheless demanding and difficult for the enslaved. Take, for example, Miguel de la Flor, a man born to an enslaved woman, and a Spanish father, who provided a variety of labor as an enslaved man including a shopkeeper and personal servant.²⁷ Regardless of the setting, enslaved people could face multiple forms of violence in their everyday lives. They could be subjected to physical beatings with sticks as a form of punishment.²⁸ While violence came in the form of beatings, it also came as sexual abuse. For example, a Frenchman named Juan Yubar raped an enslaved girl in 1747, in what is known as modern-day Oaxaca.²⁹ This form of violence was common for enslaved women at the hands of Europeans. The possibility for ill-treatment was heightened when enslaved people, like Miguel de la Flor, were resold to new purchasers, who sometimes branded captives on their faces or shoulders as a symbol of their ownership.³⁰ The physical expectations of labor that enslaved captives provided for their enslavers could not be challenged, nor ignored. The violent consequences of refusal worked to maintain authority and power of Europeans over the enslaved.

The Forced Reproduction of the Enslaved

While the slave population in New Spain grew through the continuous importation of African and American-born captives, the enslaved population was also sustained through

²⁷ Archivo General de la Nación. Mexico City, Mexico. Indiferente Virreinal-Inquisición Caja 4547, exp Año 1664.

²⁸ Wheat, David, David Eltis, and Alex Borucki. *From the Galleons to the Highlands: Slave Trade Routes in the Spanish Americas*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020. Page 91.

²⁹ Archivo General del Estado de Oaxaca (AGEO), Alcaldías Mayores, legajo 24, exp. 15 (Year: 1747).

³⁰ Edgar F. Love. "Negro Resistance to Spanish Rule in Colonial Mexico." (*The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1967). Page 102.

reproduction. As anthropologist Luz María Montiel noted, black captives “were urged to mate and most of the demand for slaves was met by these ‘breeding houses.’”³¹ It is not surprising that slaveholders turned to reproduction as a means to sustain the slave population because the indigenous population did not fully recover from its demographic collapse until the nineteenth century. This means that throughout the colonial period, enslaved people continued to serve as a supplemental labor force in New Spain. The value of infants, and thus the practice of encouraging reproduction, is illustrated through the example of a 26-year-old black bondswoman named Ysabel. In September 1689, Ysabel was sold with her eight-month-old son for 500 pesos in the city of Antequera.³² Ysabel would have been purchased for 300 or 350 pesos if she were sold alone. However, buyers like Captain Juan Baptista de Lizardi saw the financial promise of the infant and were willing to pay up to 150 pesos for young children. Coerced reproduction was also intertwined with sexual violence because enslaved women could be assaulted or raped at the whim of male slaveholders. These instances of sexual violence oftentimes resulted in pregnancies, but bondswomen also resisted enslavers by subjecting themselves to voluntary abortions because they could not bring themselves to bear children in slavery.³³ This was not their only form of resistance to their conditions of captivity.

Resistance and Revolt

³¹ Luz María Martínez Montiel, (1977), “Integration patterns and the assimilation process of negro slaves in Mexico”. (Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 292: 446-454). Page 448.

³² Archivo Histórico de Notarías Oaxaca, Protocolos Notoriales, Escrituras de Francisco de Quero, vol. 426, ff. 100, Venta de esclavos.

³³ David M. Davidson. “Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico, 1519-1650.” (*The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, no 3 (1966)). Page 235.

While facing such acute levels of abuse under enslavement, some captives found the strength to resist slaveholders and the institution of slavery. For example, slave resistance began as soon as captives embarked on the slave ship. Personal accounts, such as that of Olaudah Equiano, detail how African captives often refused to eat before and after they boarded the ships, and that some people succeeded in jumping off the ships.³⁴ These strategies of resistance impacted slave traders because malnutrition and slave suicide could both result in the death of the enslaved, which was ultimately a financial loss to merchants. More importantly, these tactics show that enslaved people did, in fact, try to resist their condition of captivity. Likewise, enslaved men and women fled from plantation settings in New Spain. In the 1570s, enslaved Africans revolted at the port of Veracruz and fled en masse to surrounding areas which is known as Yanga's Rebellion.³⁵ This strategy created an opportunity to escape bondage because the chaos of the revolt made it difficult for colonial officials and enslavers to catch all of the runaways. The enslaved Africans who succeeded in escaping during overland transport would be counted as losses. The transporters and slave traders would recount how many ran away, and would then report the bodies as pieces.³⁶

Many enslaved people found ways to challenge slavery through the Catholic Church. It is important to note, however, that the spread of Christianity was a fundamental part of the Spanish conquest and colonial rule in New Spain. In the eyes of the Spanish Crown,

³⁴ "Excerpts from The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," in World History Commons, <https://worldhistorycommons.org/excerpts-interesting-narrative-life-olaudah-equiano> [Accessed December 14, 2023].

³⁵ Miguel A. Valerio (2021) 'That there be no black brotherhood': the failed suppression of Afro-Mexican confraternities, 1568–1612, *Slavery & Abolition*. Page 299.

³⁶ Wheat, David, David Eltis, and Alex Borucki. *From the Galleons to the Highlands: Slave Trade Routes in the Spanish Americas*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020. Page 9.

establishing the Church in the Americas would provide spiritual nourishment and sustenance for the souls of the enslaved.³⁷ With this ideology in mind, religious officials in New Spain encouraged Africans and their descendants to forgo any spiritual practices from Africa and instead, convert to Christianity. Religious officials accomplished this change by building churches, parishes, convents, and missions throughout the colony. The most direct form of religious intervention was conducted by priests, who baptized captives as they disembarked the slave ship, delivered mass at sugar plantations and haciendas, heard confessions from the enslaved, and administered the sacraments to the slave population.³⁸ Many enslaved people embraced Christianity by participating in orthodox religious practices such as baptism, marriage through the Church, and attending mass on Sundays. Still, others used the Church to challenge or negotiate their enslavement. For example, some bondsmen and bonds women renounced God when their enslavers punished them. Later, during their defense in court, bondsmen and bonds women confessed to renouncing God because of the immense amount of pain they experienced during punishment. Further, enslaved people reported that these episodes of violence were so intense that they could not have been fully aware of their actions.³⁹ In other words, the enslaved had a legal consciousness and they capitalized on the opportunity to expose their slaveholders for the acute forms of violence that were subjected to. For enslaved people, these pleas could result in better living and working conditions, or an enslaved person could be resold to another slaveholder.

³⁷ Palmer, Colin A. *SLAVES OF THE WHITE GOD Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650*. Harvard University Press. 1976. Page 53.

³⁸ Palmer, Colin A. *SLAVES OF THE WHITE GOD Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650*. Harvard University Press. 1976. Page 54.

³⁹ Joan Cameron Bristol. *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*. (University of New Mexico Press. 2007). Page 114.

The experiences and agency of Miguel de la Flor, an enslaved mulato, illustrates some of these effective strategies of resistance used by the new enslaved population of New Spain. As previously noted, Miguel de la Flor was an enslaved man who was born to an Angolan bondswoman and a merchant from Galicia, Spain. As a captive in the urban setting of Oaxaca City, he worked as a domestic servant and shopkeeper. Yet as a child, he also learned to read and write from a mulato school teacher, and he studied Latin and grammar with a religious official in Oaxaca. This knowledge would prove to be valuable to Miguel because he later wrote letters for members of his community, and he produced comedies for the Jesuits in Puebla and the vicar general in Oaxaca. As an adult, Miguel was interrogated by the Holy Office of the Inquisition because he was accused of believing in and invoking the devil. In response to these religious transgressions, during his trial, Miguel defended his honor, emphasizing his identity as a Catholic man. Miguel stated that he knew prayer and that he was baptized by a Christian name.⁴⁰ While he admitted to producing illustrations that blended Christianity with other spiritual practices, Miguel also expressed frustration with his condition of captivity by declaring that “I can no longer suffer [in] this way. What does this man want[?] That I give him what is necessary for his illness and assist him day and night without shuteye...I do not know what I will do.” This powerful statement carries an even stronger meaning if we consider the context in which it was delivered. At the time, Miguel was enslaved to a shop owner and leper named Miguel de Fuentes. As a personal caregiver, Miguel was also responsible for administering medication and financially supporting himself and his enslaver. Moreover, by the age of 24, Miguel had already been resold numerous times

⁴⁰ Archivo General de la Nación México (AGNM). Indiferente Virreinal-Inquisición caja 4547, exp 14, Año 1664.

and separated from his mother and four siblings for a long period of time. Thus, the ruptures in these familial and social networks illustrate the fragility of personal connections under enslavement.

Recent African arrivals also contested the Church by continuing to practice their original religion and cultures from the continent of Africa. Historian Joan Cameron Bristol has noted that enslaved Africans engaged in singing, dancing, or expressing themselves through ideas they had learned from their culture of origin.⁴¹ Hence, promoting and expressing their traditions from their homelands illuminates a resistance to their slaveholders and the Spanish Crown. The continuation or recreation of African religious practices signified that although the bodies of Africans were bound to captivity, enslaved people ensured that their minds and souls could not be controlled by the authorities or enslavers. Similarly, the syncretic religious practices that developed in the Americas, which blended Christianity with African spiritual practices altered the purpose and function of the Catholic Church.⁴²

Religious brotherhoods also became a space for enslaved people to negotiate their status. Black brotherhoods were formed by enslaved Africans of the same ethnicity or among people from similar regions in Africa. While these spaces were generally built for African-descended people in Mexico to collaborate as a community for support and burial services, some brotherhoods were also designed for unity. These religious spaces were necessary because enslaved people were disposed of after death in a manner that did not humanize them. Therefore, *cofradías*, or black brotherhoods enabled enslaved Africans to practice

⁴¹ Luz María Martínez Montiel, (1977), “Integration patterns and the assimilation process of negro slaves in Mexico”. (Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 292: 446-454). Page 447.

⁴² Joan Cameron Bristol. *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*. (University of New Mexico Press. 2007).

Christianity and host burial services for the members of their confraternity. While these practices were not seen as a form of resistance, enslaved Africans and their descendants utilized confraternities in other ways. African-descended people used black brotherhoods to forge social networks with other free and enslaved people. They also used these spaces to maintain communication networks by sharing important information about job opportunities and paths to legal and extralegal freedom. Although religious officials condoned black brotherhoods, they also feared the possibility of enslaved people congregating to create rebellions and revolts.

In contrast to operating within Spanish colonial institutions such as *cofradías*, maroon communities operated outside of Spanish colonial rule. These autonomous communities were mostly formed by runaway slaves after they had fled their slaveholders. *Palenques* or maroon communities, were also created when Indigenous groups accepted the presence of African-descended people in their communities.⁴³ Regardless, these communities were known for the support they provided for their members. Male leaders of palenques oftentimes adapted to the ecological niches of a particular location and they provided food and shelter for the members of their group. Since these communities were made up of fugitive slaves who grew and gathered their own food, survival of the community was often tenuous. The most well-known palenque in New Spain was San Lorenzo de los Negros, which was led by a fugitive slave leader named Yanga.

Members of maroon communities could also partake in outright forms of resistance like riots and rebellions. With the allyship from natives, fugitive runaways terrorized regions

⁴³ Jorge E. Delgadillo Núñez. “Enslaved Women and Creoles in Guadalajara’s Slave Market, 1615–1735, Slavery & Abolition”

across New Spain.⁴⁴ For example, they attacked travelers, burned ranches, and committed more physically damaging acts.⁴⁵ By collaborating with native populations, enslaved Africans were able to create chaos and warfare against slave owners and colonial officials. More specifically, captive Africans actively conspired to incite terror against Spanish elites and they provoked a sense of anarchy for others to follow.⁴⁶ Physical attacks and the burning of properties were also possible because runaways understood the terrain and they knew the best travel routes for overland travel. This meant that maroons would purposefully target slave traders and merchants in order to disturb the social order.⁴⁷ At times, maroon revolts resulted in the capture of domestic slaves from Spanish elites. These actions not only created alternate forms of authority to enslavers and colonial officials, but slaveholders also had to deal with the financial loss of the enslaved. Furthermore, runaways were fully aware that some slave owners were even willing to pay slave catchers to recapture their bondsmen and bonds women, which added to the economic impact on an enslaver.⁴⁸ Slave revolts had a widespread and long-lasting impact too. For instance, a caravan of 500 enslaved Africans rebelled as they were transferred from their port of entry to Mexico City, resulting in the death of an assistant.⁴⁹ News of this revolt would have spread quickly to the viceregal capital, where the

⁴⁴ David M. Davidson. "Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico, 1519-1650." (*The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, no 3 (1966)). Page 244.

⁴⁵ Ibid 244.

⁴⁶ Luz María Martínez Montiel, (1977), "Integration patterns and the assimilation process of negro slaves in Mexico". (*Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 292: 446-454). Page 452.

⁴⁷ Wheat, David, David Eltis, and Alex Borucki. *From the Galleons to the Highlands: Slave Trade Routes in the Spanish Americas*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020. Page 82.

⁴⁸ Luz María Martínez Montiel, (1977), "Integration patterns and the assimilation process of negro slaves in Mexico". (*Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 292: 446-454). Page 453.

⁴⁹ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán. "The Slave Trade in Mexico." (*The Hispanic American Historical Review* 24, no. 3 (1944)): 412-31. Page 442.

authorities likely created more punitive legislation that controlled the behavior and movement of African-descended people.⁵⁰ Therefore, these forms of resistance enabled maroons to acquire goods, food, and weaponry, but most importantly, enslaved runaways found new ways to experience freedom outside of Spanish colonial rule. Every form of resistance aimed to exemplify that the enslaved would not tolerate colonialism. Their struggles in labor, life, and even death probably motivated enslaved people to continue to defy the authorities and slaveholders.

Colonial Responses to Unity

Of course, the authorities quickly responded to these forms of resistance by attempting to stop or prevent any uprising. While the colonial state condoned black brotherhoods, these religious spaces were also suppressed because city officials continued to file complaints, reporting ‘abuses’ that took place within the confraternities.⁵¹ City official Viceroy Enríquez de Almanza, for example, presented a complaint about the ‘inconveniences’ black brotherhoods presented to colonial rule.⁵² The claims of abuse reported that members of the brotherhood had stolen money, when in fact, the members collected donations for the confraternity. These accusations led to enslaved people disengaging from confraternities due to fear that they would be targeted as well. These complaints also highlight the sentiment of colonial authorities and Spanish elites, who feared the possibility of slave uprisings because

⁵⁰ Danielle Terrazas Williams. "Finer Things: African-Descended Women, Sumptuary Laws, and Governance in Early Spanish America." (*Journal of Women's History* 33, no. 3 (2021)): 11-35.

⁵¹ Miguel A. Valerio (2021) ‘That there be no black brotherhood’: the failed suppression of Afro-Mexican confraternities, 1568–1612, *Slavery & Abolition*, 42:2, 293-314, DOI: 10.1080/0144039X.2020.1755152. Page 303.

⁵² Miguel A. Valerio (2021) ‘That there be no black brotherhood’: the failed suppression of Afro-Mexican confraternities, 1568–1612, *Slavery & Abolition*, 42:2, 293-314, DOI: 10.1080/0144039X.2020.1755152. Page 301.

they were outnumbered by the lower classes. In response to the various forms of resistance, the colonial state set in place punitive laws to prevent enslaved people (and any conspirators) from rebelling.⁵³ Moreover, as runaways continued to attack wealthy Spaniards, the viceroy of New Spain organized a militia to suppress slave rebellions.⁵⁴ This militia ultimately failed to successfully stop the raids and attacks, and instead, would have to compromise with them. It is worth noting that these vigilante patrols were armed and ready to use brute force against any person who defied the authorities. In short, the local and imperial authorities responded to slave resistance with new mechanisms of social control, punitive legislation, and increasing policing in order to regulate and restrict the behavior of enslaved people in New Spain.

Conclusion

The history of slavery in New Spain (current day Mexico) highlights the journeys that most enslaved Africans embarked on. Their journeys under enslavement began with the decline of indigenous populations in New Spain, which motivated Europeans for their capture. Their capture led to their boarding on ships, traveling the middle passage, embarking on overland travels, being forced to provide labor for their enslavers, and violence. They were exposed to violent conditions and expectations that were enforced with *even more* violence. As a result, some captives resorted to resistance and revolt as a response to their experiences. Colonial authorities continuously responded to the resistance of the enslaved to suppress the motivation other captives may form as a result of them. These categories dissect the experiences of

⁵³ Luz María Martínez Montiel, (1977), "Integration patterns and the assimilation process of negro slaves in Mexico". (Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 292: 446-454). Page 452.

⁵⁴ Luz María Martínez Montiel, (1977), "Integration patterns and the assimilation process of negro slaves in Mexico". (Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 292: 446-454). Page 452.

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