

*Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640.* By HERMAN L. BENNETT. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003. Pp. xii, 275. \$39.95.)

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In 1946, the Austrian-born scholar Frank Tannenbaum published a small book that gained instant recognition for its controversial comparison of the Latin American and British American slave systems. In it, Tannenbaum argued that Latin American slaves were the beneficiaries of an ancient legal system rooted in the Christian conception that man is free and equal, especially in the sight of God. Because *Las Siete Partidas*, the Spanish legal code, was framed within this Christian doctrine, enslaved people were recognized as moral human beings and were accorded a degree of protection and certain rights. Throughout Latin America, the Catholic Church enforced legal provisions making manumission possible, insisted that masters baptize their slaves and allow them to marry, and protected families against separation. In the more “hostile” environment of British and American slave systems, opposition to manumission and denial of opportunities for baptism and marriage were the characteristic features.<sup>1</sup>

More than half a century after its publication, Tannenbaum’s thesis still has its detractors—who criticize it on the grounds that his conclusions were based on the rhetoric of the law rather than its administration—and its supporters. Herman L. Bennett eschews the idea of a complete reexamination of the historiographical tradition associated with Tannenbaum, although he adopts Tannenbaum’s starting thesis that Christianity played a determining role in the lives of African Americans in the Mexico City area. *Africans in Colonial Mexico* is a study of the process of Afro-Mexican creolization. Bennett’s introduction offers a fascinating glimpse of the distinctive demography of the Kingdom of New Spain, or colonial Mexico. From 1519, when Hernán Cortés brought the first African-descended servants and slaves into Mexico, to 1640, when the Portuguese slave trade to Mexico ended, people of African descent were a commanding presence. By the mid-seventeenth century, New Spain contained the second largest population of enslaved Africans and the largest number of free blacks in the Americas. A 1646 census reported 35,089 Africans and 116,529 persons of African descent. Although the enslaved population of New Spain declined following the end of the slave trade, the free black population grew steadily; by 1810, it represented 10 percent of the total population. Most slaves were concentrated in urban areas, a second distinguishing feature of slavery in New Spain.

As Bennett notes, to those unaccustomed to thinking of Mexico as a prominent site of African presence, these statistics may come as a revelation. Those accustomed to thinking of Barbados as the first slave society in the New World will find Bennett’s designation of New Spain, and particularly Mexico City, as the first slave society equally surprising. Given its demographic and economic profile, New Spain does not fit the conventional definition of a slave society wherein the enslaved population represents roughly 20 percent of the total and where slavery is central to the functioning of the economy. Bennett, however, aims to revise that definition, arguing that “urban slavery cannot be restricted to chattel slavery with its emphasis on labor” (p. 30). Although African labor was essential for the working of New Spain’s silver-based economy, persons of African descent were also greatly valued “for the cultural capital they conferred” (p. 30). According to Bennett, the “symbolic importance of slaves in an honorific culture” (p. 19) has been largely ignored by historians of colonial Latin America. Bennett calls for historians to move beyond the narrow view

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (1946; rpt. New York, 1963), 48-49, 63-64, 75.

of slaves as laborers in favor of ascribing “greater weight to a culturally determined need that led to the pervasive ownership of slaves,” a perspective that “underscores slavery’s centrality in Spanish America’s urban cultural arena” (p. 30).

Bennett’s central thesis is, in some respects, more complicated. At times the reader must navigate through trial narratives that are at once fascinating, tedious, and repetitive in order to fully appreciate the argument that Christian absolutism shaped New Spain’s African presence in fundamental ways, most importantly by explicitly defining and enforcing Christian morals and behavior. Through a close examination of colonial legislation, inquisition proceedings, and parish life, Bennett elaborates the contention that the African experience was centered in an imperial vortex that pitted patricians, paterfamilias, and masters on one side and the absolutist sovereign and the Catholic Church on the other. Both sides agreed on the need to regulate the enslaved population, but conflicting interests led to competition over which side would exercise final control. In the ensuing struggle, crown and church overrode the master’s authority to define chattel solely as property through the deployment of secular legislation and ecclesiastical law, which viewed the enslaved as persons. By subjecting Africans and their descendants to orthodoxy, the church insinuated Christian norms and practices among these groups, thus underscoring the importance of Christianization as a major mode of acculturation.

Bennett’s detailed look at how the Inquisition and the ecclesiastical courts that were used to police African Christians, a subject that is all but ignored by most historians of the Inquisition and church history, stands as his most original and important contribution. He relies heavily on ecclesiastical court records to explain how the Christian commonwealth monitored and disciplined the laity in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, which raised a challenge to Catholic absolutism and the ideology on which it rested. Through the first half of the sixteenth century, the disciplinary instruments of the church—the Inquisition and various ecclesiastical reforms—were aimed at instilling order in New Spain through the establishment of Catholic orthodoxy. Protestants and the Spanish population, the conquistadors and their descendants, were the first victims of the auto-da-fé; Africans, the next. By the mid-seventeenth century, the growing African population drew more and more scrutiny from church authorities.

In regulating the laity, church authorities focused a high degree of scrutiny on marriage, “the founding social institution,” and on sexual conduct. Bennett follows Tannenbaum in arguing that in New Spain the sanctity of marriage was strictly protected. The church’s view that *all* Christians enjoyed the right to conjugality gave enslaved converts an identity as Christian subjects as well as property, with the former at times taking precedence over the latter. Although Catholic orthodoxy imposed obligations on Afro-Christians, it also accorded them rights, thereby recognizing them as persons. Bennett’s close analysis of church records, for example, reveals that provisors enforced the obligations of marriage on Afro-Catholics but also vigorously defended their rights to conjugal cohabitation when they were challenged by owners claiming the rule of property.

Africans and Creoles quickly learned how to reconfigure the intellectual, social, cultural, and political landscape and to deploy their psychological resources and legal consciousness for their own benefit. Bennett’s creative use of trial narratives and auto-da-fé reports offers rare insights into the social networks and life experiences of Africans and the moral terrain Afro-Mexican Catholics inhabited in the sixteenth century. Bennett follows historians of Anglo-America such as Michael Gomez who argue for the importance of the Middle Passage in the reconstitution of community and an African ethnicity, which, like Creole culture, was largely a New World creation. His analysis of marriage witnesses demonstrates that relationships forged on the Middle Passage were sustained over decades. The records also show persistent adherence to African ethnicity, visible, for example, in the Angolan networks. Bennett’s most compelling argument is the case he makes for slave awareness of Christian orthodoxy, Catholic morality, and masculine honor, even by recent arrivals

from Africa, and the tactical use they made of that knowledge to maneuver through the judicial proceedings constructed by educated Spaniards. Although canon law and the ecclesiastical court favored men over women, a number of women claimed their rights to a conjugal existence, challenging in some cases the master's authority to delimit or define their rights and their husbands' solely as labor. In certain cases, women's conjugal rights collided with and superceded those of the father, as, for example, in the selection of a mate.

*Africans in Colonial Mexico* is a valuable contribution to the emerging interest in comparative history. But it is not without problems. Because Bennett relies heavily on anecdotes derived from the regulatory process, he does not offer any quantifiable evidence about the frequency of church marriages. In other Iberian societies, such as New Orleans, most slaves were baptized, but few were married in the church. One scholar points out that, in the period between 1777 and 1803, only thirty-nine slave marriages were recorded in the sacramental records, leading to the conclusion that planters in Spanish Louisiana felt no pressure from the clergy to impose orthodoxy on the local black Catholic population. The slave code authorized by Charles III in 1777 forbade masters to force a slave to marry and also forbade them to allow a slave to marry someone from another plantation on the grounds that their likely absence from the home plantation would compromise the master's right to the slave's labor, thus privileging the rule of property.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, these sharp differences raise serious questions and revive the old debate initiated by Tannenbaum about the cultural distinction of the Spanish clergy and law.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1999), 111, 135, 233.