

# Black Confraternity Members Performing Afro-Christian Identity in a Renaissance Festival in Mexico City in 1539

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Summary: *In February 1539, Mexico City was the stage of a lavish two-day festival meant to commemorate the Truce of Nice, signed the year before between Emperor Charles V and King Francis I of France at Aigues-Mortes. In this article, I analyze Bernal Díaz del Castillo's description of a performance by "more than fifty" blacks with "their king and queen", all "wearing great riches of gold and precious stones and pearls and silver." This article argues that the black participants of this festival most likely belonged to a Catholic confraternity, which not only would demonstrate that black confraternities were brought to the Americas very early, but also that, as in the Iberian Peninsula, they were used by members as vehicles of social mobility and agency from the start of imperial expansion. Juxtaposing this and other black performances with instances of perceived black resistance to Spanish domination, the article shows how confraternities could offer blacks a space where they could continue some of their ancestral festive practices without being perceived as a threat to colonial order.*

In February 1539 Mexico City was the stage for a lavish two-day festival meant to commemorate the Truce of Nice, signed the year before between Emperor Charles V and King Francis I of France at Aigues-Mortes. This truce ended the second of the three Italian Wars (1521–26, 1536–38, and 1542–46) sparked by Charles' election as Holy Roman Emperor (1519).<sup>1</sup> The celebrations in Mexico City most likely mirrored those held at Aigues-Mortes in the days following the signing of the truce on 18 June 1538 that, according to the conquistador-turned-chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo "was celebrated with great solemnity and fiestas."<sup>2</sup> When the news of the truce arrived in Mexico City in September 1538, the viceroy, Antonio de Mendoza, and the *audiencia* (or appellate court)—the two authorial bodies most closely linked to Emperor Charles V—ordered the festivities, whose planning took up the next four months.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Potter, *Renaissance France at War*, 30–37.

<sup>2</sup> Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera*, 754. All translations and transcriptions are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera*, 754.

Díaz del Castillo, one of Hernán Cortés's foot soldiers, who witnessed the festival and dedicated a chapter of his chronicle to it, also offers details about Mexico City's celebrations, which consisted of many theatrical performances, such as a mock naval battle that culminated in a siege of Rhodes. This mock siege of Rhodes, a common theme in Renaissance festivals, symbolized the fall of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in 1521. Cortés, who had led the siege against Tenochtitlan, was elected to perform the role of "Captain General" of the mock siege. In this performance, Cortés symbolically returned to his role before Antonio Mendoza was named New Spain's first viceroy in 1535. The festivities also consisted of a *moros y cristianos* (Moors and Christians) ceremony, a mock hunt, plays, a banquet at the end of each day, one hosted by Mendoza at the viceregal palace and the other by Cortés in his own palace, speeches, and a procession of "more than fifty" blacks "wearing great riches of gold and precious stones and pearls and silver" (Díaz del Castillo, 755). The procession of the "more than fifty" blacks took place in a life-size forest set up in Mexico City's main square. The forest had been the setting of the mock hunt, but Díaz del Castillo writes that

no fue nada para la inbençión que ovo de xinetes hechos de negros y negras con su rey y reina, y todos a cavallo, que eran más de çinquenta, y de las grandes riquezas que traían sobre sí, de oro y piedras ricas y aljófar y argentería; y luego van contra los salvajes y tienen otra quistión sobre la caça, que cosa era de ver la diversidad de rostros que llevaban las más-caras que traían, y cómo las negras daban de mamar a sus negritos y cómo hacían fiestas a la reina.<sup>4</sup>

(it was nothing compared to the performance of horseback riders made up of negroes and negresses who were there with their king and queen, and all on horses, they were more than fifty, wearing great riches of gold and precious stones and pearls and silver; and then they went against the savages and they had another hunt, and it was something to be seen the diversity of masks they were wearing, and how the negresses breast fed their little negroes and how they paid homage to the queen.)

While Díaz del Castillo marvels at the blacks' performance (the ceremonial hunt "was nothing compared to the performance of horseback riders made up of negroes and negresses"), black pageantry was not new to European

<sup>4</sup> Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera*, 754.

eyes, for sub-Saharan Africans had been staging similar performances in Spain and Portugal as far back as the fifteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, there are reasons to marvel at this procession of “more than fifty” blacks in this festival. Not only is this one of the earliest examples of Afro-Latin American festive performance, but it took place less than two years after Mendoza had suppressed the first black rebellion plot in Mexico City.

In this article, I argue that the black participants of this festival held in Mexico City in 1539 most likely belonged to a Catholic confraternity, which not only would demonstrate that black confraternities were brought to the Americas very early, but also that, as in the Iberian Peninsula, they were used by members as vehicles of social mobility and agency from the start of imperial expansion. Juxtaposing this and other black performances with instances of perceived black resistance to Spanish domination, I will show how confraternities could offer blacks a space where they could continue some of their ancestral festive practices without being perceived as a threat to colonial order. Those instances of perceived black resistance will show the ambivalence of the figure of black kings as well as other forms of black performance. The fact that confraternities sometimes, although not always, offered a safe haven for such practices will show how they were used by blacks to enact “limited self-rule” without being perceived as a threat to the social order.<sup>6</sup>

In the Iberian Peninsula, blacks began to form their own confraternities in the mid-fifteenth century—some argue earlier.<sup>7</sup> While both the Church and Crown saw baptism and conversion as ways of assimilating blacks to Iberian society, blacks began to exercise their agency by forming confraternities.<sup>8</sup> Seville was home to what is considered the oldest black confraternity, Our Lady of the Angels, known as “Los Negritos”, believed to have been founded toward the end of the fourteenth century by the city’s archbishop for infirmed blacks.<sup>9</sup> In 1455 a group of free blacks in Barcelona received royal approval for their confraternity’s charter.<sup>10</sup> In 1472 a group of free blacks in Valencia received the same royal approval.<sup>11</sup> In Lisbon, blacks were admitted to the city’s Rosary confraternity in 1460 and “soon formed

<sup>5</sup> Ortiz de Zuñiga, *Anales eclesiásticos* 374. See Moreno, “Plurietnicidad,” and Valerio, “The Queen of Sheba’s Manifold Body” and “Black Dancers and Musicians.”

<sup>6</sup> Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 74.

<sup>7</sup> See Moreno, *La antigua hermandad*, 23–56.

<sup>8</sup> See Graubart, “So color.”

<sup>9</sup> Karen Graubart contests this narrative arguing that there were too few sub-Saharans in Seville at the time to support the existence of this confraternity before the sixteenth century (in conversation).

<sup>10</sup> In Bofarull y Mascaré, *Documentos inéditos*, VIII:466.

<sup>11</sup> In Gual Gamarena, “Un cofradía,” 464–466.

an independent entity that outsiders could already recognize in the last decades of the fourteen hundreds.<sup>12</sup> We can see how confraternities became important to Afro-Iberians decades before Columbus crossed the Atlantic.

Both the pious and social elements of confraternities became very important for blacks. As Elizabeth W. Kiddy argues, blacks were attracted to confraternities because medieval views on death and other elements of medieval culture—which, like sub-Saharan culture, was community-centered—resonated with sub-Saharan cosmologies, where funeral rites were a central cultural component.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as Patricia Mulvey and Nicole von Germeten point out in their respective studies of black brotherhoods, the burial of members and destitute blacks was one of the most important services black confraternities provided to a people for whom a decent burial was paramount.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, confraternities fostered collective identity, which resonated with Africans, who came from collectivistic rather than individualistic communities.

Furthermore, confraternities provided blacks with other important benefits, such as autonomy and freedom from suspicion. Thus, while some scholars argue that confraternities were yet another means of European domination,<sup>15</sup> I contend that by giving them an African hue, blacks used them to exercise social and cultural agency. In other words, blacks availed themselves of confraternities as institutions that allowed them to continue and adapt their African practices within a Christian context. This is not to say that confraternity members were not genuinely Christian, even if as Afro-Christians they practiced a syncretism of Catholic and African beliefs and practices.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, blacks' religious syncretism, which has survived in Afro-Catholicism, Candomblé, Santería, Vudú, and other forms, shows how they exerted agency in adapting African religious beliefs to Christianity.

As mentioned above, Mexico City's 1539 festival took place less than two years after the viceroyalty's first black rebellion was suppressed. This rebellion was reported by Mendoza in his annual report to the Council of the Indies, the emperor's commission for the governance of his American colonies. In September 1537, a member of the black population told the viceroy that

<sup>12</sup> Fromont, "Dancing," 185, Fonseca, *Religião* 23–37.

<sup>13</sup> *Blacks of the Rosary* 15–63.

<sup>14</sup> Mulvey, "Black Brothers" 15, Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers* 1.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Scarano "Black Brotherhoods" and *Devoção*, esp. 9–48; Russell-Wood "Black and Mulatto Brotherhoods," "Aspectos" and *Black Man*, esp. 128–160; and Mulvey "Black Brothers" and "Slave Confraternities." For summaries of this argument, see, for example, Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers* 4, and Voigt, *Spectacular Wealth* 122–123.

<sup>16</sup> See Souza, "The Construction of a Black Catholic Identity."

los negros tenian helegido un rrey y concertado entrellos de matar a todos los españoles y aserse con la t[ie]rra.<sup>17</sup>

(the blacks [of the city] had elected a king and conspired among themselves to kill all the Spaniards with the intention of taking over the land.)

Mendoza “did not give much credit” to these words “because they came from a black person” (“Asuntos,” 9v). However, out of caution, the viceroy sent men from his household to spy among the indigenous population suspected of being part of the conspiracy. The viceroy detailed the plot and his response in his *relación* (report) to the emperor, through the Council of the Indies, for the year 1537, as stated above. According to Mendoza’s report, a plot was indeed discovered. The viceroy had “the black king and black leaders” arrested and, after “they confessed,” executed. The indigenous population was found to have had no part in the plot, but “they may have only known about it” (“Asuntos, 9v). The executions were carried out in a public fashion so as to make an example of the black rebels for all colonial subjects. The Mesoamerican *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (ca. 1561), which recounts pre-Hispanic Mexican customs, language, and history from 1385 to 1561, shows how the black leaders were executed (fig. 1). Although the image appears in a Mesoamerican codex, it can be used to examine how blacks were represented in colonial discourse because Europeans did intervene in the production of these post-conquest codices and inserted their own Western cosmology in them.

Mendoza dedicates three more paragraphs of his report to the incident. In one paragraph, he tells the emperor that the main causes of the plot were: (1) that the blacks and the indigenous population knew too much about the “wars and necessities” from which the emperor was suffering in Europe; and (2) that ships took too long to arrive with news from Spain (“Asuntos,” 10r). The delay in ships was such that “a certain friar was prophesizing that there would not be a ship from Spain in ten years” (“Asuntos,” 10r). This lack of news had the entire population worried and conjecturing, so much that Mendoza was not surprised by the friar’s prophecy. The ship that brought the news of the truce was thus a double blessing—on the one hand, it marked the first arrival of a ship in a long time, perhaps a year, and on the other hand, it brought word that the emperor’s troubles were over and that order was restored to the empire. Mendoza’s troubles were also over, for the lack of news and goods from Spain had created unrest in the viceroyalty. This gave Mendoza and the *audiencia* more than enough reasons to celebrate in a grandiose fashion. Moreover, as Díaz del Castillo tells us, Mendoza and Cortés, who had quarreled over the tribute due to

<sup>17</sup> “Asuntos de gobierno” fol. 9v.

the conquistador, “made their peace” when the viceroy ruled in Cortés’ favour (754). So, Cortés, who was still very influential with the local population, also became a host of, and participant in the celebrations.

The rebellion plot really frightened the Spaniards, for Mendoza wanted to end the slave trade altogether. In the third and last paragraph, the viceroy asks the emperor not to permit the importation of more slaves into New Spain lest “there be too many [of them] and give [the Spaniards] a great deal of trouble and put the land in danger of being lost” (“Asuntos,” 10v). This request could not be honoured because the demand for African slaves would only increase as the defence of indigenous rights gained momentum and triumphed with the New Laws of 1542. We cannot fail to see a connection between this dynamic and the exoneration of the indigenous population from the plot, as well as the inclusion of the black rebel in the codex. Finally, Mendoza tells the emperor that he warned the Spanish population to be on guard, and had a census made of the “arms and horses” available for defence (“Asuntos,” 10v). According to the viceroy, there were 620 horses, 450 of which were in battle condition. Horses were an important commodity and strategic asset, and in Díaz del Castillo’s text, we find “more than fifty” blacks “all on horseback” in a festive performance that took place less than two years after this incident, which took place in September 1537, exactly one year before the news of the truce arrived from Spain. Given the relative scarcity and high value of horses in New Spain, this fact is most significant. It is an important achievement for the black population, especially given the context.

The black festive performance Díaz del Castillo described, then, occurred less than two years after Mendoza’s report cast them as enemies of the empire. It must be pointed out that Díaz del Castillo was writing three decades after Mendoza’s report about the black rebellion plot of September 1537 and the festivities of February 1539 he witnessed. This lapse in time has consequences for the text. For example, in the first draft of Díaz Castillo’s chronicle, known as the “Guatemala” manuscript, which I cite, the number “a hundred and fifty” blacks in the procession is crossed out.<sup>18</sup> The “more than fifty” figure he provides is thus the modest number Díaz del Castillo settled for when he could not remember whether there were “more than fifty” or “more than a hundred and fifty” blacks in the procession. Díaz del Castillo was also writing to a different monarch, Philip II, Charles’ son and successor, and for a different purpose, to have his role in the conquest of Mexico recognized and rewarded by the sovereign. So, we should not be surprised by the presence of a non-hostile black king in Díaz del Castillo’s text less than two years after the rebellion plot. Moreover, as we will see in other examples, it is mostly colonial authorities that cast

<sup>18</sup> Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera*, 755n5. The other draft is known as the “Madrid Manuscript,” which Díaz del Castillo sent to Madrid, where the chronicle was printed in 1632.

blacks as unruly savages, while chronicles such as Díaz del Castillo often, although not always, cast them in a more neutral, if not positive light. Díaz del Castillo marveled at the blacks' regalia and performance, but not at their presence in the festival.

Writing at the onset of the seventeenth century, the mixed race Amerindian and Spanish Andean mestizo Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala groups blacks into two groups: "good Christians" and "very bad" ones:

ay muy cristianos negros [...]. Y de ellos salen muy malos, enubidentes y mentirosos, ladrones, salteadores y borrachos y jugadores.<sup>19</sup>

(There are very Christian blacks [...]. And among them there are those that are very bad, disobedient and liars, thieves, highwaymen and drunkards and gamblers.)

When Guaman Poma penned these words, he did not invent a new binary, but was reproducing an already established discourse. For Guaman Poma and his contemporaries, "good Christian" meant devout and obedient to Spanish authority, as can be seen in folio 703/717 of his chronicle (fig. 2). Black confraternities fell into this category as long as their activities were not seen by colonial authorities as posing a threat to colonial order, as we will see below. The rosary in figure one reminds us that the Dominican Order, the inventors of the rosary, sponsored the first black confraternities in Mexico, which were dedicated to the rosary. Texts by colonial authorities often cast blacks in a negative light, for the simple reason that blacks entered official colonial records mostly through conflictive events. This is why the Afromexicanist historian Nicole von Germeten expressed surprise that the Spanish historian Isidoro Moreno seemed to suggest that early modern Spanish records for the most part cast blacks in a positive light.<sup>20</sup> Yet, although Germeten's surprise is well founded, Moreno's appreciation of Spanish records is not rose-coloured. As Germeten herself points out, blacks and Spanish lived in relative harmony in Spain and in Mexico City until 1537. "The peaceful collusion between Spanish masters and African slaves," she writes, "ended abruptly in [1537]."<sup>21</sup> This does not mean that the urge to resist Spanish domination was not always there. Pre-1537 Iberian records show that blacks ran away, and runaway African slaves appear in colonial records as early as 1501.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Guamán Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva crónica y buen gobierno*, 926/940.

<sup>20</sup> Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 242 n. 28.

<sup>21</sup> Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 75. Germeten erroneously writes "1536."

<sup>22</sup> Herrera y Tordesillas, *Historia*, 1:142

The pre-1537 harmonious relationship between blacks and Spaniards may stem from the fact that many of the first blacks to arrive in Mexico came as *negros de acompañamiento*, that is, as personal servants to Cortés and his foot soldiers as well as the other Spanish settlers who followed.<sup>23</sup> Many of these blacks were *negros ladinos* or Hispanicized blacks who had lived in Spain before crossing the Atlantic. A good example of this is Juan Garrido, who joined Cortés's party in Cuba as a servant to one of his foot soldiers. Historian Ricardo E. Alegría has tracked Garrido's American journey that took him from Spain to Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, Florida, Cuba, and finally, Mexico, where after the fall of Tenochtitlan he was rewarded with a lot inside the city's *traza* (limits), a privilege usually reserved for Spaniards, an acre of land to farm, and was employed as porter of the City Council and overseer of the important Chapultepec Aqueduct, the city's main source of clean water. Garrido and other "black conquistadors" like him probably belonged to the Confraternity of the Holy Cross (Veracruz in Spanish), which was founded by Cortés in 1526 for conquistadors.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps as the black population of Mexico City diversified beyond just *negros de acompañamiento*, with the arrival of newly imported slaves, these personal ties disappeared. John Thornton and Joan Cameron Bristol argue precisely this point of view. "African-born slaves," writes Bristol, "may have been more likely to be involved in acts of resistance, in part because many of them had been warriors taken prisoners in Africa."<sup>25</sup> Also, as they increased in number, blacks may have seen better opportunities for a successful rebellion, something less feasible in the Iberian Peninsula where blacks lived in smaller groups and in more controlled urbanized spaces. Another factor was the influence of the indigenous population, which not only provided a model of rebellion, but also aided runaway blacks. The 1537 plot saw blacks and members of the indigenous population together as plotters, while in the 1539 festival they battled each other. Like the codex, this points to colonial intervention as a source of conflict between the two groups. At the same time, however, colonial records show that they collaborated with each other throughout the colonial period.<sup>26</sup>

What emerges from the rebellion plot and the performance are the contours of a black community. Blacks lived in the Iberian Peninsula for centuries before Columbus's first westward voyage. There, they founded confraternities and staged lavish processions in the streets.<sup>27</sup> As

<sup>23</sup> Restall, "Black Conquistadors" 173–175.

<sup>24</sup> Nesvig, *Local Religion*, 194. For a list of other black conquistadors, see Matthew Restall's essay "Black Conquistadors," 174.

<sup>25</sup> Bristol, *Christians* 98. See Thornton, *African and Africans*, 300–303.

<sup>26</sup> See Restall, *Beyond Black*.

<sup>27</sup> On Afro-Iberian confraternities, see, for example, the works of Iván Armenteros Martínez, Dedier Lahon, and Isidoro Moreno.

the literature shows, confraternities would be important institutions for Afrodescendants in colonial Latin America.<sup>28</sup> There would be at least nine black confraternities in colonial Mexico City and more than sixty in the whole territory of colonial Mexico (see table 1).<sup>29</sup> Nicole von Germeten gives seventeenth-century dates for the founding of most Afro-Mexican confraternities,<sup>30</sup> yet, as we will see below, some of these confraternities are already mentioned in sixteenth-century documents. This shows that confraternities were instrumental to Afro-Mexicans from the start of their American sojourn. This suggests that Afro-Iberians brought and instituted black confraternities in the early years of colonization, and that their descendants and those of other Africans continued to avail themselves of them to negotiate their standing in colonial society. Díaz del Castillo's text stands at the genesis of this process.

Table 1. Black Confraternities in Colonial Mexico City,  
16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> Centuries<sup>31</sup>

CONFRATERNITY	ORDER / PARISH
Exaltation of the Cross and Tears of St. Peter	Santa Veracruz
Holy Christ of the Expiration and the Holy Burial	Dominican
Our Lady of Sorrow	San Juanino
Our Lady of the Conception	Hospital of the Marquis of the Valley
Precious Blood of Christ	Santa Catalina Mártir
St. Benedict and Coronation of Christ	Franciscan / Santa María Redonda
St. Iphigenia	Mercederian
St. Joseph	Mercederian
St. Nicholas of Mount Calvary	Augustinian

Unlike other parts of the Americas, where black confraternities often identified by original African group, the ethnic makeup of Afro-Mexican

<sup>28</sup> Some examples include: Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*; Kiddy, *Blacks of the Rosary*; Mulvey “Black Brothers” and “Slave Confraternities”; Russell-Wood “Black and Mulatto Brotherhoods,” “Aspectos” and *Black Man*; Scarano “Black Brotherhoods” and *Devoção*; Webster, “Research.”

<sup>29</sup> See Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, Appendix.

<sup>30</sup> Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, Appendix.

<sup>31</sup> Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 83. Germeten's list and dates are based on “Memorial.”

confraternities has been difficult to document. In Lima, for example, Afro-Peruvian confraternities identified as “Cape Verdean”, “Congo”, and so on, from the early decades of the seventeenth century.<sup>32</sup> This politics of identity seems not to have been central to the Afro-Mexican colonial experience. Only a 1623 testament identifies a “Zape” (Cape Verdean) confraternity.<sup>33</sup> Otherwise, as Paul J. Lovejoy has argued about the American context in general, the evidence (or absence thereof) seems to suggest that Afro-Mexicans confraternities built panethnic communities made up of different African groups.<sup>34</sup> Also, as Afro-Mexicans laid claim to creole identity they seemed to have deemphasized their concrete African ethnic origin, unlike seventeenth-century Lima and eighteenth-century Brazil where concrete African ethnic origins loomed large.

Blacks also elected kings who served as justices of the peace for their communities. This was the tradition the first blacks brought to the Americas and which their descendants maintained and built upon for the next three centuries of colonization. This tradition combined African and European (or Christian) cultural practices. One festive practice that blacks brought from Africa that has some resonances with Díaz del Castillo’s text is the *sangamento* or ceremonial dance in the Kingdom of Kongo. Not only is *sangamento* an African (specifically Kongo) festive practice, but it also became associated with Christianity. As Cécile Fromont writes in *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo*:

In the Christian Kongo, sangamentos served dual purposes. On the one hand, they acted as preparatory martial exercises for soldiers and as demonstrations of might and determination in formal declarations of war. On the other hand, they accompanied joyful celebrations of investiture, complemented courtly and diplomatic pageants, and lent their pomp to pious celebrations on the feast days of the Christian calendar.<sup>35</sup>

In his *Missione in prattica: Padri cappuccini ne Regni di Congo, Angola, et adiacenti* (Mission in Practice: The Capuchin Fathers in the Kingdom of the Kongo, Angola, and Surrounding Area, ca. 1750), the Italian friar Bernardino d’Asti illustrates a Franciscan missionary blessing Kongo warriors performing a *sangamento* (fig. 3). This image may help us envision the performance by the blacks in Díaz del Castillo’s text. Like the blacks in Díaz del Castillo’s text, who ceremonially battle with members of the

<sup>32</sup> See Corilla, “Cofradías.”

<sup>33</sup> See Germeten, “Juan Roque’s Donation.”

<sup>34</sup> Lovejoy, “Transatlantic Transformation.”

<sup>35</sup> Fromont, *The Art of Conversion*, 21–22.

indigenous population, these warriors are getting ready for battle, giving the ceremonial battle between the blacks and members of the indigenous population a new dimension. And although recorded in the mid-eighteenth century, it registers African festive practices recorded throughout the early modern Atlantic, as evidence by this essay and volume. Moreover, as Fromont writes, *sangamentos* are associated with kings and were ways of asserting leadership:

During the dances, the sitting king or ranking ruler, members of the elite, and common soldiers each took the stage in order of precedence. With spectacular simulated assaults, feints, and dodges, each man showcased his dexterity with weapons and his physical agility and asserted his place in the kingdom's political hierarchy.<sup>36</sup>

These ideas resonate with Díaz del Castillo's passage about the black performers in many ways. On the one hand, the idea of asserting leadership resonates with Díaz del Castillo's passage in the sense that the black king in Mexico's festival could be asserting his leadership in the black community of the city. In her analysis of Mexico's festival, the only other one to date, Patricia Lopes Don shows how coordinating the natives' participation entailed a great deal of collaboration with Mexico City's indigenous community (or *cabildos de indios*). Blacks also lived in *cabildos (de negros)* in colonial Latin America. So, coordinating the blacks' participation in the festival most likely also entailed a great deal of collaboration with the black community. Thus, as black communities were normally headed by a black justice of the peace, who was often referred to as king, this was probably the leader of Mexico City's black community.<sup>37</sup> In the festival, then, the black king is asserting his communal leadership. Further, since the Portuguese arrived in the Kongo in 1482, this could also be a *sangamento*, for at the period the Portuguese had a monopoly on the Atlantic slave trade, another connection we will see in another example below. During this period the Portuguese were the main suppliers of African slaves to Spain's American colonies. Thus, the practice of *sangamento* could have been brought directly to Mexico by Central African slaves, or indirectly via Spain, through the Portuguese slave trade.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the Portuguese brought Christianity to

<sup>36</sup> Fromont, *The Art of Conversion*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Lopes Don, "Carnivals, Triumphs, and Rain Gods in the New World." Lopes Don's essay neglects the blacks' participation in the festival. Her argument and my own, however, show that there was a great deal of collaboration and negotiation among the three groups involved in the festival: Spaniards, native Americans, and blacks.

<sup>38</sup> In our discussion of Mexico's 1539 festival at the Symposium on Afro-Christian Festivals at Yale University in February 2015, John Thornton suggested that the fact that the blacks

the Kongo right after their arrival, which allows for a readymade connection between sangamento, Christianity, and Mexico's festival.

As institutions sanctioned by the Church and the Crown, confraternities served as safe middle grounds where blacks could both display their adherence to Iberian Christianity and continue their African festive practices. For example, in 1610, for the beatification of Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, the black confraternity of Our Lady of the Rosary, most likely Mexico City's oldest black confraternity, performed a procession that bears some similarities with Díaz del Castillo's text. This procession is described by the Jesuit chronicler Andrés Pérez de Ribas in his *Crónica e historia religiosa de la provincia de la Compañía de Jesús de México en la Nueva España* (Chronicle and Religious History of the Province of the Society of Jesus in Mexico City, ca. 1650). Like Díaz del Castillo, Pérez de Ribas casts the blacks in a neutral, if not positive light. The full account of the 1610 procession shows its many similarities with that from 1539:

En saliendo la procesión de la iglesia, la hizo reparar cuarenta y cuatro piezas que se dispararon junto a un hermoso castillo de siete varas en alto, y de cantería bien fingida que los morenos criollos de una cofradía que tienen en el convento del gloriosísimo Padre Santo Domingo, movidos de aquellos Padres (que en esta ocasión se esmeraron en hacernos favor), y también de la devoción que los mismos morenos tienen a Nuestro Santo Padre, le ofrecían esta invención. [...] Entonces el rey salvaje en media docena de octavas, dijo: cómo estando retirado allá en los bosques, oyó recostado desde su cabaña el eco de las fiestas que al santo se hacían en México. Pero no hallándose, como que era tan pobre, con más rico caudal, ofrecía aquel castillo: abrióse al punto una puerta de él, por donde salieron otros doce salvajes muy bien aderezados que hicieron una danza muy curiosa que fué alegrando la procession.<sup>39</sup>

(As the procession came out of the [Jesuit] church, they were received by a forty-four-gun salute next to a beautiful seven-yard-high castle, and by the beautiful singing of the creole blacks of a confraternity they have in the convent of the most glorious Holy Father Saint Dominic, who, urged by those fathers (whom have been very generous with us [the Jesuits] on

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are "all on horses" could suggest that they were Senegalese. However, since horses were a rare commodity in early colonial Latin America (as Mendoza's report suggests), these horses must have been lent to the blacks for the festival. This does not exclude the possibility that they were Senegalese.

<sup>39</sup> Pérez de Ribas, *Crónica e historia religiosa*, 1:250.

this occasion [the beatification]), and also by the devotion the blacks have for Our Holy Father [Ignatius], offered this invention [the castle]. [...] Then the savage king, in a half dozen octaves, said how he, being away in the forest, heard, while lying in his hut, the echoes of the fiestas in Mexico [City]. But not feeling worthy, for he was so poor, offered this castle. Then two doors opened, and twelve very elegantly costumed savages performed a most strange dance that enlivened the procession.)

This procession was followed by another where a black king mounted on a giant wooden elephant paraded through the streets (Pérez de Ribas does not identify these performers as belonging to a confraternity).<sup>40</sup> As in Díaz del Castillo's text, native Americans ("savages") and blacks performed together. The double motivation Pérez de Ribas gives for the black confraternity's participation in the 1610 procession ("urged by those [Dominican] fathers [...] and also by the devotion the blacks have for Our Holy Father [Ignatius]") can suggest a double motivation for the 1539 procession, as well. On the one hand, the blacks in Mexico City's 1539 festival could have been "urged" by Mendoza or, if they belonged to confraternity, by the confraternity's prior who was normally a priest from a religious order. At the same time, the blacks in the 1539 festival could have been moved by their own desires to demonstrate their allegiance to the emperor and his colonial representatives. Such a display of loyalty must have been more urgent for an ethnic group recently accused of sedition. Perhaps aware that accounts of such festivals were sent to the sovereign, as Díaz del Castillo himself suggests, they might have wanted the record to show that they, or some of them, to use Guaman Poma's logic, were loyal subjects.<sup>41</sup> Yet, as in the 1610 procession, they did not do it by performing a Hispanic festive practice, such as *moros y cristianos*, but rather by offering their own festive performance, or at least a performance that is a little of both.

The black confraternity in Pérez de Ribas's text further illustrates the ambivalent role of blacks in colonial society. On several occasions this confraternity (along with others) was accused of suspicious activity; for example, in 1598 a *vecino* (resident) of Mexico City accused this confraternity, and others, before the City Council of holding secret meetings and filling their coffers with stolen money:

<sup>40</sup> Pérez de Ribas, *Crónica e historia religiosa*, 1:50–51.

<sup>41</sup> Díaz del Castillo says that two other accounts of the festival were sent to the emperor (via his Council of the Indies), but I have been unable to locate these documents at the General Archive of the Indies (AGI), where they are most likely to be if they exist. If they exist, they may be at another archive or at the AGI itself, as the latter has over ten thousand unclassified documents, especially from the early period of colonization.

los esclavos varones criollos yoçales [...] tienen otro abuso que aver hecho juntas y conciliabulos so color de una cofradía en el convento de Santo Domingo San Agustin Ospital de Nuestra Señora y desamparados y para esto tienen su caxa que llaman del tesoro con tres llaves y [tienen] su tesorero majordomo escribano [y] prioste y allí juntan suma y cantidad de pesos de oro rrobando a sus amos y a los vezinos desta dicha ciudad.<sup>42</sup> (*Actas* XIII:115)

(the male creole slaves [...] commit other abuses which is to meet under the guise of a confraternity in the convent of Santo Domingo, San Agustin, Hospital of Our Lady and orphans, and for this they have a box, which they call the treasury, with three keys, and [and they have] their treasurer, majordomo, secretary, [and] prior, and in this box they gather great sums of gold pesos stolen from their masters and the residents of this city.)<sup>43</sup>

This is a good example of how blacks entered the colonial archive through a conflictive event. For colonial authority this passage registers a complaint, while for scholars it provides a great deal of information. It names some of the black confraternities in Mexico City at the time, such as that of Our Lady of the Rosary (“convent of Santo Domingo”) and Our Lady of the Conception (“Hospital” of the Marquis of the Valley), as well as offers information about their type of officers (“treasurer, majordomo, secretary, prior”).<sup>44</sup> Although the accusation is probably not entirely true, it still offers information about the collective fund they kept to pay for their celebrations and to help one another (for example, confraternities were allowed to buy the freedom of members).

Only two years after Pérez de Ribas cast the black brothers of the Rosary in a positive light, an unidentified confraternity, which we can narrow down to either that of Saint Joseph or of Saint Iphigenia, was involved in the second largest slave rebellion plot of colonial Mexico City.<sup>45</sup> This plot was recorded in an anonymous document, *Relación del alzamiento que negros y mulatos libres y cautivos de la Ciudad de México de la Nueva España pretendieron hazer contra los españoles por cuaresma del año 1612 y del castigo que se hizo de los cabeças y culpados* (Account of the Subversion the Free and Slave Negroes and Mulattos of the City of Mexico of New

<sup>42</sup> Bejarano, *Actas*, XIII:115.

<sup>43</sup> For a similar example in Lima, Peru, see Karen B. Graubart’s essay “So color de una cofradía.”

<sup>44</sup> See Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 83.

<sup>45</sup> See Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 77, and Querol y Roso, *Negros*, 123–157.

Spain Pretended for Lent of the Year 1612 and the Punishment Meted to the Leaders and the Other Conspirators), published in Madrid in 1612.<sup>46</sup> Like the other instances we have seen, the incident in 1612 also involved a black king and queen. The events surrounding the plot began when 1,500 blacks processed through streets of Mexico City with the body of a female slave whose death was “attributed to her master’s cruelty.”<sup>47</sup> They marched “shouting [...] and presenting their grievances publicly before the archbishop’s palace and Inquisition headquarters” at the convent of the Dominicans.<sup>48</sup> They threw stones at these buildings and were driven away by soldiers. The confraternity’s majordomo was beaten and imprisoned, but a new one was quickly elected. The new majordomo and his wife declared themselves king and queen. However, the king died suddenly of unknown causes. “[H]is funeral was surrounded by pomp, ceremony, and dances that the Mercederian fathers, in whose convent the confraternity had its chapel, could not control.”<sup>49</sup> With the king dead, the brothers “angled for leadership in the confraternity,” as if in a *sangamento*, and for marriage to the queen.<sup>50</sup> In other words, when a leadership void emerged, the blacks used ritualistic practices in order to assert their leadership within the group. At the same time they were planning a rebellion for Holy Week, when the Spanish population would be most vulnerable because of all the religious events that would be taking place. Their plans, however, were discovered and disclosed by Portuguese slave traders who said they could understand the slaves’ language. When the civil and ecclesiastical authorities found out about the alleged plot, they barred black confraternities from participating in the Holy Week celebrations.<sup>51</sup> Among the various things this plot reveals, two may be relevant here. For one, the plot discovered by the Portuguese underlines the Portuguese’s connection with slave trade,

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<sup>46</sup> Germeten erroneously attributes this document to Viceroy Luis de Velasco the younger (*Black Blood Brothers*, 80). The account was probably written by a member of the *audiencia*, which was in charge of the viceroyalty at the time due to the vacancy left by Viceroy Velasco’s appointment to the presidency of the Council of the Indies (Querol, *Negros y mulatos*, 160, n. 11). I believe that this document may have been meant for the Council of the Indies. Not only does it have a sort of cover letter addressed to the Council’s new president, but there is no account of the 1610 plot at the AGI. I believe this report may have been it, for the Council met in Madrid, where the account is today. The plot is also mentioned in Juan de Torquemada’s *Monarquía indiana* (1615) and Domingo Chimalpahin’s *Codex* (c. 1615). See Bristol, *Christian, Blasphemers and Witches*, 93–94 and 97–98.

<sup>47</sup> Anonymous, *Relación*, in Querol y Roso, *Negros*, 145. See Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 77.

<sup>48</sup> Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 77.

<sup>49</sup> Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 77.

<sup>50</sup> Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 77.

<sup>51</sup> Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 78.

possibly connecting these blacks to Kongo. It also shows that confraternities sometimes became independent of the religious orders that sponsored them and exercised their autonomy beyond the orders' sponsorship. In this sense, confraternity members were not afraid to offend their patrons in order to assert themselves and their legal rights, which could explain the ambivalence cast upon them by the 1598 example from the *actas de cabildo*. Yet, unlike rebel kingship, confraternities remained the most acceptable, or better put, least conflictive avenue of group self- and cultural assertion.

Between the 1537 plot and the 1539 festival, we can observe a cause-effect relation: the blacks in Díaz del Castillo's text wanted to participate in the festival and show their devotion and loyalty in order to disprove the suspicions cast upon their ethnic group by the recent plot.<sup>52</sup> This cause-effect relation is absent from the 1610 festival, but as an ethnic group constantly under scrutiny for their peculiar customs—as the 1598 example from the *actas* (minutes) of the *cabildo* (city council) shows—blacks were very desirous of opportunities that allowed them to perform their Christian devotion and loyalty to imperial and colonial authority. This argument may be further supported by the fact that black dancers were a staple of the annual Corpus Christi celebrations, the largest Christian celebration in the Spanish and Portuguese empires, as well as in colonial Mexico's spectacular viceregal entries.<sup>53</sup> More importantly, however, they may have wanted to participate in order to stake a place for themselves in the festival and in colonial society. Moreover, like the 1537 plot, the 1610 one was based on hearsay; the only evidence in both instances was someone's words. Nonetheless, in both instances the black kings and black leaders were meted capital punishment. Given these instances of colonial authorities executing blacks for crowning themselves kings, there is good reason to be surprised to find a black king in Mexico City's 1539 festival. At the same time, this supports the hypothesis that the blacks in the 1539 celebrations belonged to a confraternity, for although confraternities came to be seen as safe havens for rebels and bad Christians, as the City Council text shows, they were the only institution to which blacks had access where they could both show adherence to Iberian Christianity and continue to practice their ancestral cultural heritage without always posing a threat to the colonial social order, as Pérez de Ribas's example illustrates. This middle ground resolved the contradiction of a black king, often associated

<sup>52</sup> Lisa Voigt makes a similar argument with regard to Afro-Brazilian confraternities in chapter 4 of her forthcoming book, *Spectacular Wealth: The Festivals of Colonial South American Mining Towns*.

<sup>53</sup> The *Actas de cabildo* [Minutes of the City Council] show that in the sixteenth century, at least, black dancers were hired every year for Corpus Christi. On Mexican viceregal entries, see Curcio-Nagy's *The Great Festivals of Colonial Mexico City*, especially 58–63.

with instances of rebellion. In this fashion, blacks used confraternities not only to navigate this ambivalence, but colonial social hierarchy as a whole.

In Book 5, Chapter 10 of his chronicle, Pérez de Ribas recounts how Jesuit missionaries accompanied the army that went to “reduce” a rebel black community near Veracruz (I:282–94). On 6 January 1579, when the Catholic Church celebrates how the Three Magi paid homage to the infant Jesus, a group of black slaves near Veracruz crowned a king, Gaspar Yanga, and started a *palenque* or autonomous free black community.<sup>54</sup> The expedition Pérez de Ribas narrates took place in 1609 and was one of the many unsuccessful attempts on behalf of Spanish colonial authorities to “reduce” Yanga’s *palenque*. In 1630, Yanga and his men defeated the Spanish army once again and Spanish colonial authorities had to recognize his *palenque*’s independence, at which point it became known as San Lorenzo de los Negros. Because the Jesuits sided with the Spanish authorities, in the treaty that established San Lorenzo Yanga requested that “Franciscan friars and no others minister to them.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, by crowning himself king on “el día de los reyes” (the day of the kings), Yanga connected his black kingship and Christianity and referenced the fact that from the fourteenth century on there is a black magus among the magi.<sup>56</sup> Also, Yanga’s *palenque* was made up of newly arrived African slaves.<sup>57</sup> So, although they had been exposed to Christianity, as the treaty shows, they did not have the same personal relationship *negros de acompañamiento* and other Afro-Iberians had with the Spaniards. By comparing Pérez de Ribas’s favourable account of the 1610 black performances with his account of the Jesuit mission to reduce San Lorenzo, we can see how he reproduces Guamán Poma’s binary, good/bad black, that was the prevalent discourse in colonial society.

As in the other instances of rebellion considered above, in Yanga we have once more the figure of a black king. Given this strong connection between black figureheads and rebellion, only confraternities could give blacks the autonomy they needed to perform festive practices such as the one described in Díaz del Castillo’s text. If this is the case, it shows that blacks, like Spaniards who had confraternities in the Americas as early as 1506, continued the practice of confraternities in the Americas from the start of imperial expansion and, as in the Iberian Peninsula, used them for social mobility, held their own funds, asserted leadership in the community

<sup>54</sup> See Matthew 2:1–12 and Githiora, *Afro-Mexicans*, 28. According to Torquemada, the king of the 1612 rebellion plot was also crowned on 6 January (*Monarchia*, 1:759).

<sup>55</sup> For the agreement between Yanga and Spanish Authorities, see Rowell, *The First Liberator of the Americas*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Hildesheim, *Three Kings*, 237; Trexler, *Journey of the Magi*.

<sup>57</sup> Githiora, *Afro-Mexicans*, 28.

and cultural independence, and continued their African festive practices.<sup>58</sup> Confraternities were institutions that gave colonial black subjects the opportunity to demonstrate their allegiance to Hispano-Christian culture without entirely foregoing their ancestral cultural heritage, an option that lies outside the binary of complete assimilation into the master's culture or hostile rebellion. As we saw in this article, however, they did not always manage to escape being viewed in the light of that duality, since colonial authorities and other Spaniards often manifested their animosity towards black confraternities, as in the 1598 example from the *actas* (minutes) of Mexico City's *cabildo* (council) about blacks holding secret meetings and stealing under the aegis of confraternities. Nonetheless, black confraternities, one of the black practices that posed the least threat to colonial order, are the most likely candidates for the enigmatic procession of "more than fifty" blacks "wearing great riches of gold and precious stones and pearls and silver [...] who were there with their king and queen" (Díaz del Castillo, 755).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See Rodríguez Demorizi, *Sociedades*, 147

<sup>59</sup> Blacks also exercised agency and garnered social mobility through military service, but this may have meant complete assimilation into Hispano-Christian culture; see, for example, Ben Vinson's study, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty*.

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Fig. 1. Execution of the Black King of the Rebellion Plot of September 1537. Anonymous, Codex Telleriano-Remensis, ca. 1561. Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France, MS Mexicain 385, fol. 45r, detail.



Fig. 2. Black Christians Praying the Rosary. Guaman Poma, *El primer nueva crónica y buen gobierno*, ca. 1615. Courtesy of the Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen, Denmark, GKS 2232 4°, fol. 703/717v.



Fig. 3. Franciscan Missionary Blessing Kongo Warriors Performing a Sangamento. Bernardino d'Asti, *Missione in pratica: Padri cappuccini ne Regni di Congo, Angola, et adiacenti*, ca. 1750. Courtesy of Biblioteca Civica Centrale, Turin, Italy, MS 457, fol. 12r.