

Theses Completed

Nicole von Germeten, "Corporate Salvation in a Colonial Society: Confraternities and Social Mobility for Africans and Their Descendants in New Spain" PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2003. 397 pp.

This dissertation explores the changes in social, family, economic and religious life experienced by Africans and their descendants living in New Spain from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth century.

At first most Africans and their children suffered under the harsh conditions of slavery, which prevented them from achieving social and economic success in the Hispanic world. Often baptized as "without known fathers" or as orphans in the seventeenth century, Mexican-born individuals with African parents (labeled "negros," "morenos," "pardos" or "mulatos" in colonial documentation) created fictive families for themselves by joining confraternities, or lay religious brotherhoods. The confraternities provided social connections, charity and status for their members within towns throughout New Spain. Confraternities led by men and women of African descent flourished in the 1600s in Veracruz, Mexico City, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosi, Taxco, San Miguel Allende, and Queretaro. Often penitent (practicing public processional flagellation in honor of the Passion of Christ) and dedicated to popular Spanish and African advocations, Afro-Mexican confraternities enjoyed success and prestige in the Baroque religious milieu of seventeenth-century New Spain. Male confraternity leaders, even if they were enslaved or given colonial racial labels, achieved limited prosperity from the mid-seventeenth century in towns such as Morelia and Mexico City.

Gradually, individuals with African ancestry were less likely to be enslaved and were generally labeled "mulato," indicating strong social, cultural, and familial connections to the Hispanic world. Children labeled "mulato" in eighteenth-century baptismal records were twice as likely to have both parents present at their baptism than their ancestors in the seventeenth century, and their parents' unions were officially recognized as "legitimate" by the colonial authorities. Eighteenth-century "mulatos" were likely to be born free (without an enslaved mother) and often inherited their fathers' trades, helping them to attain social respectability and economic stability in their professional and personal lives.

Confraternities played a strong role in this long term upward mobility, by providing an acceptable way for their members to take part in public rituals and celebrations of local life in New Spain. However, racial hierarchies varied by town and region.

This dissertation uses case studies from Mexico City, Parral and Morelia to show the varying success experienced by individuals living in a racially divided colonial society. Despite legal distinctions and divisions, by the end of the colonial era, individuals descended from African slaves in New Spain achieved a limited degree of status in Hispanic society. Confraternities were a crucial institution facilitating this process.