

von Germeten, Nicole. *Black Blood Brothers. Confraternities and Social Mobility for Afro-Mexicans*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006. xiv, 287 pp., 13 tables, 4 graphs. ISBN 0-8130-2942-2 US \$55

This book analyzes the foundation and development of confraternities of people of African descent in Mexico from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Its mining of archival sources (over thirty individual archives are listed in the bibliography) sheds striking new light on confraternities that have hitherto been little studied. The author makes a convincing argument for the influence of confraternities on religious, social, economic and cultural dimensions of Afromexican life over two centuries.

The broad historical story, so to speak, of Afromexican confraternities runs something like this: in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Africans and their descendents adapted the Spanish model of confraternities in order to endure slavery. Their emphasis was on charity and caring for the sick. After the abolition of slavery in the eighteenth century confraternities began to offer opportunities for social advancement in a racially-mixed environment.

The two opening chapters bring the reader into the world of Afromexican confraternities by highlighting their distinctive religious and gender functions. In the first case, the author describes what she calls "Afromexican baroque piety" that celebrated humility and a spiritual, emotional, and sensory form of ritual. It also emphasized social and racial hierarchies. In the second case, the author argues for the central place of women in Afromexican confraternal life. Their roles shift, following the broad historical pattern, from charity and alms collecting in the early period to taking advantage of the benefits and respectability gained through confraternity membership in the later period.

These opening chapters provide the broader context for the detailed case studies of three urban areas: Mexico City, Valladolid and Parral. The case studies are based on a vast consultation of archival sources. In each case they bring to life the activities and functions of dozens of confraternities.

Two issues serve to complicate the story of Afromexican confraternities: race and colonization. Racial distinctions in New Spain are not as simple as the black-white divide that often characterizes the U.S. The author lists at least a dozen racial distinctions that are encountered in the archival sources, which she argues make generalizations about how confraternities created racial identities difficult. Likewise, the author is reluctant to make the subjects of her study agents of their own imperial control. Rather, she gives them agency to create their own identities that were certainly shaped in part, but not determined by colonial masters.

This book will be welcomed by scholars who have their eyes on comparative research in confraternity studies. For example, those who study European confraternities who have come to see confraternities as static institutions will be amazed at the elasticity of their basic form. Likewise, the vibrant displays of religious ritual described in this book remind Europeanists that the Post-tridentine

religious freeze encountered in Catholic countries in Europe was radically different across the Atlantic.

This work is also bound to have some influence beyond those who study confraternities. Published in the series “The History of African-American Religions,” it will reach a wide audience of scholars interested in the varieties of religious expression in the early modern period.

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