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## Africans in Spanish-America: Slavery, Freedom and Identities in the Colonial Era

**Resumen:** Africanos contribuyeron al desarrollo de las sociedades hispanoamericanas en muchas formas. Aunque su estatus de esclavos determinó gran parte de sus condiciones de vida existían posibilidades de ganar una cierta autonomía en algunas partes de la vida. Así, la esclavitud se analiza como una relación social de negociaciones constantes. Mediante las acciones de los esclavos se pueden entender sus conceptos de identidad. Un enfoque especial del artículo se centra en el problema como y en cual medida las culturas africanas sobrevivieron en América.

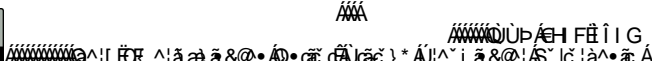
**Summary:** Africans contributed to the development of Spanish American societies in multiple ways. The specific workings of the slave trade and slavery determined great part of their living conditions but slaves used every possible way to gain some autonomy over their lives. Thus, the article explores slavery as a social relation of constant negotiation over Africans' lives. Special emphasis is given on the discussion of slaves' identities and the question of surviving African culture in America.

The Conquest of America by European powers initiated a process that not only brought into contact the New World and Europe. Although interaction between Africa and Europe had existed before mainly via trade it assumed relevance following Columbus' voyages. Thus, the Atlantic became a connecting space between the three continents and Africa and Africans played an important role in the developing Atlantic world (Bailyn 2005; Pietschmann 2002). People and ideas crossed the Atlantic and circled it, albeit most Africans did not travel voluntarily to the Americas. Rather, millions were forced into migration to the New World as slaves, their movement constituting the largest intercontinental migration that had taken place until the nineteenth century (Curtin 1991: 10).

This compulsory character of Africans' presence notwithstanding African slaves and their descendants influenced the new societies in the Americas considerably. Dur-

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ing the colonial era the number of Africans almost doubled that of Europeans coming to Spanish and Portuguese America and due to regional variances the influence of African peoples in certain areas was even more important. Africans contributed in multiple ways to American societies and cultures. That said it has to be kept in mind that Africans did not constitute a homogeneous group. The slaves originated in different societies and henceforth brought with them different cultural traits, understandings and worldviews. As slaves their social situation was ambiguous. On the one hand, the dehumanizing system of slavery, the slave's exclusion from social life and relegation to marginalized social spaces lead to social death as Orlando Patterson has described it (1982). On the other hand, social death was not complete because slaves struggled to determine as many parts of their lives as possible (Soulodre-La France 2001: 87-103). They could do more so when they successfully fled slave status and lived in runaway communities. Marronage was a widespread phenomenon in Spanish America. In addition, opportunities opened because Spaniards and Portuguese did accept Africans as souls to be saved, that is many Africans and their descendants became Christians in America if they had not already converted in Africa.<sup>1</sup> This opened at least a small window for claiming protection from the church against mistreatment (Villa-Flores 2002: 435-468). The breaches of power that slaves ably used to get command of their lives, is one of the main topics of recent research on the African diaspora in America. This theme is connected to the question of slave identity which forms another focus in the literature.

The following essay discusses slavery and the life of Africans and their descendants in Spanish America during the colonial era. The main concern will be twofold. First, the question of African agency in Spanish American colonial societies will be treated and, second, I will focus on the process of cultural change for Africans and their descendants. Both themes have been neglected for a long time and only recently represent the main tendencies in research on Africa in America. Research on the transatlantic forced migration of Africans for a long time had concentrated on numbers, the European slave traders and the legal conditions of slavery in the Americas whereas African participation in the slave trade as well as African cultural influences on the developing colonial societies in the Americas did not call the attention of most scholars. This was due to perceptions of African societies as static and powerless facing Europeans. In addition, the traumatic experiences of the Middle Passage supposedly made captives loose their cultural traits and change them in almost "empty containers" as far as culture was concerned. Nevertheless, these perceptions make no sense and have been proved false during the last years.

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1 Thornton states that many slaves from Central Africa had most likely already been baptized in Africa. This holds especially true for those originating in Kongo, where a state supported Christian church existed (Thornton 1992: 254).

### 1. African forced migration and diaspora(s)

Africans came to America with the first *conquistadores*. This was due to the slave trade, Muslim and Portuguese merchants had upheld between Africa and Europe since the Middle Ages. Especially, after the Portuguese in 1444 had started to bring African slaves to Europe directly, the numbers of those residing in Portugal and Spain rose considerably. Some of these Iberian residents joined the *conquistadores* on their journeys to America and helped to subdue the indigenous populations.<sup>2</sup> But, direct slave trade between Africa and America only became important when indigenous populations in America declined rapidly due to warfare, exploitation and disease. Furthermore, the Crown forbade indigenous enslavement and reduced the *encomenderos*' influence by restricting their special rights to tribute labour. In the following, the Spaniards saw no other way to exploit American wealth but to bring African workers in great numbers to the region. Africans could not hope for the same protection as the indigenous population due to European perceptions. Whereas Indians were considered childlike and innocent because they had never heard the Gospel and therefore could not be blamed for not being Christians, Africans' relationship to Christianity was perceived differently. They were seen as pagans who had rejected Christian faith. The legend of Ham's curse seemed to underscore this view. Spaniards felt legitimised to enslave Africans because temporary suffering in bondage would be redeemed with salvation of the slaves' souls who could only be brought to the true faith via enslavement. A more profane reason for the massive enslavement of Africans since the 15<sup>th</sup> century might be that they were available and not protected by a major power (Fredrickson 2002: 28-30).

At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Spanish Crown tried to restrict the trade in African slaves to baptized Christians having spent some time in Spain. Nevertheless, since 1517 workers were needed so badly the importation of slaves directly from Africa to the Spanish colonies was allowed. Since then, increasing numbers came to New Spain and Peru until the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when official slave trade ended. Until the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade to the Americas between 11 and 13 million Africans landed on American shores. More had been taken from Africa but had died during the Middle Passage (Curtin 1969). Even though mortality rates declined over the years, at the end of the transatlantic trade slaves still died on an average of 10% during the journey (Klein 1978). In total, it is assumed that probably a

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2 James Lockhart states the importance of Africans from the earliest time of Spanish intrusion in Peru (1968: 198). For some examples of Africans participating in the Conquest see Bowser (1974: 6s.). A short study of the "black conquista" in the province of Esmeraldas in Ecuador by Christian Büschges reveals the often problematic situation of sources generated by Spaniards on subaltern groups (Büschges 1999: 47-56).

third of the slaves taken aboard did not arrive in America, that is, more than 15 million people were destined to America.

Africa had long been underrepresented in the study of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade (Lovejoy 2000: 1-29). But it has become clear that the continent and its peoples played an important role in both. Europeans were far from dominating the first phase of the slave trade; it rather lay in the hands of Africans. Portuguese and, since the middle of the seventeenth century, English, Dutch, French, and some Danish and German slave traders could only build and keep their trading posts at the coast with the consent of African rulers. Here they gathered the captives who had been brought to the coast by African traders and shipped them to America. Although the European demand for slaves was assumed to have spurred the African slave trade for a long time, scholars have shown that the prospect of making money was not the main reason for enslavement. Instead, captives were taken for political reasons. A by-product of wars of expansion or the decline of kingdoms and subsequent civil wars were prisoners. Part of them – mostly women – stayed with the enslaving society, the men more often were sold to European traders (Curtin 1991: 12-19).

During the early transatlantic trade the principal supply areas were situated at the West African coast, i.e. between the Senegal and Niger rivers. More than four-fifths of the early slave population in Mexico and Peru originated here (Sánchez Albornoz 1974: 73). When French and Dutch traders sought to make a fortune in slave trading and hitherto demand for slaves and prices rose, Portuguese expanded their activities into the areas of the bights of Benin and Biafra and further south at the West African coast into Angola. In consequence, since the first decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the trade moved to the latter region (Bowser 1974: 38s). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century with another shift the Oyo Empire became a major supply zone of slaves due to the breakdown of the empire and subsequent civil war in the region (Law 1977). The extensive regions integrated into the system of the transatlantic slave trade should make clear, that “Africans” is a misnomer for designating the slaves’ regional or ethnic identities. There did not exist anything close to a continental consciousness of belonging. The enslaved came from multiple communities and had varied cultural backgrounds as well as social ones. Europeans ascribed regional origins according to the port where the slaves had been taken aboard. But these ascriptions did not represent ethnic identities either (Thornton 1992: chap. 7).

Even though some scholars concentrated on the African diaspora in its global dimensions at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept has not received much interest until recently. Considering the diverse regional origins of the slaves and the fact that certain regions supplied for the majority of slaves during specific phases, scholars have emphasized the need to distinguish between more than one African diaspora. Instead, special diasporas as the Igbo or Yoruba diasporas come in focus (Mann 2001: 3-21; Chambers 2000; Falola/Childs 2004; Heywood 2002). The concentration of

slaves coming from certain culture zones during specific periods of the trade notwithstanding local slave populations in Spanish America were never ethnically homogeneous. Buenos Aires for example, between 1790 and 1806, received slaves from Mozambique, a region that participated in the Atlantic slave trade only by 1800, and West Africa in almost equal proportions. In addition, half the number of West African slaves was supplied from Congo and Angola. A municipal census from 1827 recorded twice as many West Africans among the slave population than Congos and Angolans (Andrews 1980: 27). The reverse was true for Montevideo at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Andrews 2004: 215, n. 29). The Cuban slave imports seem to have been particularly mixed. 45% of the slaves imported to the island originated in West Africa, 31% in East Africa and 24% were Congos or Angolans (Curtin 1969: 247).

Whereas the supply of slaves in Africa lay in the hand of Africans and was determined by the political and social situation in West Africa (Klein 1999: 162-163), in America two main factors explain the importation of African slaves and its degree, variation over time etc. First, the integration of the local and regional economies into the international export market, and second, the availability of indigenous labour determined the demand for African slaves. Regions such as Chile, Central America and Paraguay did not participate in the export trade to Europe and in addition the Native American population was large enough to meet local demands for labour. Therefore, no significant importation of slaves did occur. Other regions, as the islands of Cuba, Santo Domingo, and Puerto Rico remained peripheral to the Spanish empire until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. But, because of the annihilation of their native populations in the early years of the conquest, even the limited labour demands were met by African slaves. Almost 50.000 came to Cuba until 1760 and about half that many to Santo Domingo in the same period. In colonies with a large indigenous labour force the importation of slaves was restricted to certain regions and economies, as the Caribbean coasts of Mexico and Colombia or the Pacific coast in Peru or parts inland of Colombia and Argentina. The centres of slave presence in Latin America were those with an extended plantation economy producing to supply international markets and an insufficient supply of indigenous labour. This was true for Brazil, which became a main sugar producing colony from the late 1500s and remained so until the end of the colonial era. It was also the case in Venezuela, which produced cacao for the Mexican and European markets since the early 1600s and it finally became true for Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo and Cuba in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the islands became major suppliers of the world market for sugar (Andrews 2004: 16-17). The largest quantity of African slaves brought to the Spanish Caribbean, i.e. Cuba, came during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the official *asiento* system was not longer enforced and 49.293 Africans were imported to the island, which meant that during this short period of 25 years as many slaves came as

had been brought during the two preceding centuries.<sup>3</sup> When the Crown integrated the slave trade into the so called free trade, the importation of Africans rose to unprecedented numbers. From 1789 to 1820 more than 100.000 Africans came to Cuba. This number still did not represent the apex of the trade to Cuba, during the period from 1763-1845 636,465 captives were brought to work on the sugar plantations of the island. At the end of the colonial era, a little less than one million Africans had been carried off to Cuba, most of them from 1790-1867 (Zeuske/Zeuske 1998: 276s.).

Although the plantation complex in America and especially the production of sugar cane represents the quintessential image of slave societies in the early Americas,<sup>4</sup> Spanish America during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries demonstrates that slaves were important in almost all parts of the economy. Due to the disastrous decline of the indigenous population and the search for labourers Africans were imported to the two main areas of Spanish colonisation, the viceroyalties of Peru and New Spain from early on. Spaniards could afford the importation of slaves to the Americas because of the precious metals, i.e. silver, they exploited in their new colonies. Hence, slaves were brought in increasing numbers and they soon outnumbered European immigrants. Peru received the most Africans until 1640. The slave population rapidly expanded in Lima, in 1586 about 4.000 lived in the city, their number rising to 6,690 in 1593, 11,130 in 1614, and 13,137 in 1619. At the end of the Portuguese slave trade to Spanish America in 1640 20,000 slaves were counted in Lima alone and 30,000 in the whole viceroyalty (Bowser 1974: 75). During the first decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century between 1,000 and 2,000 slaves were imported yearly, 80% of them being *bozales* (Africans from Africa) (Bowser 1974: 78). In the urban environment slaves worked as domestics, artisans, in construction and transportation, or as petty traders. In addition, they played an important role in transport. But slaves also worked the mines and in commercial agriculture. Without their contribution, the colonial economy and henceforth the consolidation of the Spanish empire would hardly have been successful. The same holds true for the viceroyalty of New Spain, where slaves already at the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were so numerous, that Viceroy Lu s de Velasco warned the king to stop further importation. Despite this warning, not only did Spaniards continue to import African slaves on an average of 500 each year (Bennett 2005: 21), but the Crown also supported further importation of Africans, who were to substitute Native Americans in the textile *obrajes* (Aguirre Beltr n 1987: 255s.). In 1570 20,000 slaves out of 36,500 brought to New Spain had survived. In 1646, a census counted 35,089 Africans

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3 According to the figures given in Andrews, the number of slaves imported since 1760 equalled that of the preceding two centuries, Michael Zeuske and Max Zeuske even establish that the number exceeded the importation until 1760 by 10,000 (Zeuske/Zeuske 1998: 266).

4 See Curtin (1990). On plantation products other than sugar but also other sectors of the economy and slavery see Shepherd (2002).

and 116,529 persons of African ancestry, not all but most of them being enslaved (Aguirre Beltrán 1972: 219). One of the largest concentrations of African slaves of the time could be found in the sugar plantations of Morelos. Commercial agriculture in Veracruz and to a lesser extent in Oaxaca and Michoacán also used slave labour. In addition, a part of the labour force in the northern mining areas was enslaved. But, as well as in Peru, most slaves were employed in the urban economy of Mexico City. The capital of the viceroyalty was one focus of African presence from the earliest time of the colony. Whereas slaves did never make up for more than 2% of the population in the whole viceroyalty, in the capital they outnumbered Spaniards already in 1570 and amounted to more than double the number of Spaniards in 1646 (Bennett 2005: 22; Aguirre Beltrán 1972: 219).

Until 1650 Spain had imported between 250,000 and 300,000 Africans to Peru and New Spain, and at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century about 4,000 slaves were imported to Spanish America per annum. But Peru and New Spain declined in the following centuries as destinies of the transatlantic slave trade. Other regions became more important. This holds especially true for Brazil, which already at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century absorbed 7,000 slaves per annum. Slave trade with the Caribbean islands, where sugar production rose to enormous amounts, became more important.<sup>5</sup> On the Spanish mainland northern South America received considerable numbers of slaves. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the largest concentration could be found in New Granada. With 65,000 persons, they constituted about 7.6% of the population. These slaves were distributed unevenly in the viceroyalty, most of them working on haciendas and in the mines in the Western and Southern provinces (McFarlane 1986: 131).

The forced migration of Africans to Spanish America constituted a significant factor in the development of the new “Atlantic societies” in the New World. For Spanish America the African element in its social and cultural history has long been neglected, but the mere numbers already underscore its importance. Until the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, about 716,000 Africans had been brought as slaves to Spanish America, whereas only 678,000 Spaniards had come to these shores (Eltis 2000: 9). Even though the slave population in Spanish America could not reproduce itself entirely, creoles (children of *bozales* born in America) soon constituted the majority of the slave population in Mexico and also of the free African derived population. Moreover, the mixed group of *Afromestizos* grew considerably and quite rapidly from the beginning (Bennett 2005: 16-30). The forced sexual relationships of African women with Spanish men resulted in a growing number of mulattoes. In addition, children of mixed ancestry also sprang from intermarriage and other family forms between Africans or creoles and Native Americans. Within the so called *casta* population the group

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5 A good overview of the transatlantic slave trade to Spanish and Portuguese America and the Caribbean is given by Klein (1986).

of people of African ancestry became one of the largest in many regions of Spanish America. Depending on the duration and scale of the slave trade during the colonial era, African derived inhabitants, both, enslaved and free, made up for a good part of the total populations in 1800. While Mexico and Peru had received the largest numbers of slaves during the early period, they and their descendants could never come close to the indigenous populations. In Mexico the Afro-Latin population comprised about 10% of all inhabitants at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in Peru their share was even less. In Colombia and Argentina Afro-Latins made up for 39% and 37% of the population respectively, Uruguay having a somewhat smaller share with 23%. Finally, Afro-Latins constituted the majority of the population in Venezuela with 61%, Santo Domingo with 66%, Puerto Rico 56% and Cuba 54% (Andrews 2004: 40).

African visibility became even more prominent in the colonial societies due to the Spanish policy of segregation between the *república de indios* and the *república de españoles* since the 1560s and 1570s. In order to protect the indigenous population from further decline, Spanish legislation attempted to separate them. A royal *cédula* from 1563 forbade the residence of Spaniards and *castas* in native villages. But, as several reiterations of the decree show, the separation could never be enforced completely. In addition, Native Americans, Africans, and *castas* worked together on haciendas or in the mines. Interchange between Africans and indigenous people became even more pronounced in areas where runaway slaves built their own settlements (see below). Nevertheless, the separation of the two republics meant that the *república de españoles* not only integrated Spaniards but all groups of mixed heritage as well, which in return made Spaniards and their American descendants the smallest group within this social sphere. In the Spanish, mainly urban sphere, Africans not only became visible because of their numbers and their important role in the urban economy. In Spanish eyes they posed a considerable threat because they were believed to be especially rebellious (Bennett 2005: 53). This fear was not ungrounded as will be discussed below.

## 2. Slave lives and agency

The experiences of African slaves are not easily retrieved from archival documentation due to the fact that Africans seldom had the possibility to generate accounts of their lives without the interference of Spanish officials, their masters, or the clergy. Henceforth, information about Africans and their descendants comes filtered through Spanish eyes on us. Nevertheless, these documents show that slaves did use every crack in the system of slavery that opened for widening their opportunities and supporting their search for autonomy. Thus, slaves' agency comes into focus. But, due to the system of chattel slavery, slave owners determined the living conditions of slaves to a great extent.



Even though the institution of slavery reduced Africans and their descendants to human chattel, the conditions they had to endure differed greatly depending on structural as well as contingent factors. Their status as property made slaves subject to the will of their masters in respect of their work, working conditions, and social behaviour. Gender constituted one of the main differences. Whereas the slave system was inherently brutal and dehumanising for all, women suffered from the additional threat of being violated by their masters. Furthermore, rural slaves faced different conditions than urban slaves. On plantations working and living conditions varied from place to place and depended on the economic cycle. During economic downturn the owners' incentive to wring maximum productivity out of their slaves lessened (Andrews 2004: 23). The behaviour of the owners and the overseers also influenced slaves' lives depending on their inclination to violence and their acceptance of at least some space for their slaves to have a social life. But this certainly played a minor role. Without violence the system of slavery could not be upheld and hence it was an integral part of slaves' experience. In addition to corporal punishment, plantation slaves living conditions were characterized by underfeeding, malnutrition and overwork, workdays sometimes lasting 16, 18 or even 20 hours. On plantations, slaves worked in gangs as well as in mining, where conditions were only slightly better if that. In the mining region of Chocó in Colombia, slave miners worked in gangs of 30 or more. *Cuadrillas* of 100 to 150 were not uncommon and sometimes they reached a size of 300 to 500 slaves (Andrews 2004: 23). Thus, both environments plantation and mining, made slaves work and live in rather large groups with other Africans. Gang labour was less common in the urban environment but some businesses required large numbers of labourers who often were slaves. This holds true for the brick factory in Lima, which employed 400 slaves, or a comb factory in Buenos Aires where 100 slaves had to work or the textile factories in Mexico City. But usually slaves worked in smaller groups as domestics or artisans. Artisans had to hire themselves out and were obliged to deliver their earnings with their masters. Often, they did not even live in the same house as their owners. These slaves had the advantage to move more easily in the city and therefore, they had more opportunities to lead a social life with less interference of their owners. Sometimes, slaves sent out to earn their living organised in gangs in order to control their business. This was the case with street porters in Brazilian cities who created a system to split the urban space into units where one group monopolized the carrying trade (Andrews 2004: 25). In comparison to artisans or transportation workers domestic slaves lived under more restrained conditions as they stood under full-time control of their masters.

Among other things, the larger slave groups on plantations resulted in higher marriage rates among slaves than in the urban setting. This contradicts older assumptions that marriage and family formation were particularly rare among plantation slaves. But, the relatively high numbers of African derived people living on the large land-

holdings in fact provided somewhat greater opportunity for family formation. In Venezuela for example, marriage rates among rural slaves at the end of the colonial era were twice as high as among urban slaves. On haciendas outside Lima marriage rates among adult slaves lay with 60% even higher than in Venezuela (Andrews 2004: 31-33). Sometimes, slave owners seem to have thought of slave marriages as a means to restrict flight. But usually owners defied the right to marriage guaranteed by Spanish law, especially because it implied prohibiting masters from breaking up slave couples and families. Being well aware of their rights slaves used these contradictions between the law which was further confirmed by the Catholic Church teaching the sacraments of marriage on the one hand and the claim of slave owners on their property on the other hand to their advantage whenever they could. While it is a long established knowledge among historians that Native Americans used the Spanish judicial system to make their ends meet and were prone to litigation, it is less known that slaves did the same. Usually, urban slaves had more chances to know about the law especially about changes and had easier access to Spanish officials than had rural slaves living in secluded areas. Herman Bennett showed that slaves in Mexico City by the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century used juridical and institutional channels with ease to express their grievances and seek justice. Slaves petitioned the clergy to intervene on their behalf when their masters denied marriage or wanted to sell them out of the city and thereby break up their families (Bennett 2005: chap. 5 and *passim*). At the end of the colonial era slave legal actions seem to have increased. This might have been induced by the slave code of 1784 and royal instructions of 1789. In the face of rising slave flights and rebellions, the Crown's goal in drawing these laws was to restrict the abuse and mistreatment of slaves in order to minimize the feared slaves' resistance. Slave owners fiercely rejected these actions, they considered as unwarranted state intervention in their private affairs, making the Crown setting the laws aside. This notwithstanding the Crown urged local officials to keep their provisions in mind (Andrews 2004: 33-35). Of course, this did not mean that royal officials always decided in favour of slaves' petitions. But authors like Bennett have shown that Crown officials did investigate the cases brought before them thoroughly, even though slaves were the petitioners.

Slaves used institutional channels also to escape abusive treatment by their masters. One right the Spanish law guaranteed slaves was that they were entitled to be purchased in case of mistreatment and if they found another person willing to buy them and pay their market price. Respective petitions were much easier for urban slaves who had a lot more chances to search for a potential buyer than had rural slaves. In addition, plantation owners were powerful men in the countryside whereas urban slave owners were often of modest means. Another way to flee the brutal treatment of slave owners was opened to slaves by the fact that they fell under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition. At least this is what Javier Villa-Flores suggests in his study on self-

denunciations of blasphemy by slaves in New Spain. According to the author, slaves denounced themselves before the Inquisition for renouncing God in situations of severe corporal punishment and hoped to escape further bodily harm. But, this was at least a double edged sword as Villa-Flores states, because the Inquisition could and would not let the acts of blasphemy happen without punishment (Villa-Flores 2002). Nevertheless, what studies like Bennett's, Villa-Flores' and also Soulodre-La France's show, is that slaves marginalized existence as human property was only one determining factor in their lives, albeit an important one. The Spanish Crown and the Church had conflicting views of the slaves as human beings with at least some rights and as members of the community of believers with rights and obligations. Crown officials and the clergy in certain cases acted to enforce slaves' obligations, as for example their obligation to lead an orderly life and to receive the sacraments of marriage if they had a sexual relationship. Cognizant of their competing juridical identities slaves creatively manipulated Crown officials and the Holy Office to act on their behalf. This gives us a clue of how structures and institutions of power and control could be subverted by the weak (Schwartz 2002: 430). But, by recurring to these possibilities, slaves also had to accept the conceptualisation of the social order that was lying behind the normative ideas about leading a proper life. Thereby, gender roles implicated in the Christian image of marriage over the long run transformed family and kinship ideologies rooted in the African cultures the slaves came from. In addition, as Bennett states, the litigious nature of slaves and free blacks insinuated them into the workings of Spanish absolutism (Bennett 2005: 3). On the other hand, recent studies have shown that some family and kinship ideologies fit well with the needs of slaves' lives and helped to ameliorate the effects of being enslaved (Roberts 2004: 248-259).

Christian marriages were not the only close social relationships slaves did foster in the New World. Extended and fictive kinship became important under the constraints of enslavement. Apparently, Yoruba family and kin ideologies were especially prone to survive under conditions of enslavement. This might have been the case because the patriarchal family structure and the organisation of the work force along kinship lines were compatible with the imperatives of slavery (Roberts 2004: 249; Morgan 1998). In Cuba, for example, members of the *cabildos de nación*, or Afro-Cuban mutual aid societies originally sponsored by the Catholic Church, viewed the *cabildo* membership as family (Roberts 2004: 253). Also, longstanding friendships were important, which is shown in the documentation on petitions for marriage licenses. Urban slaves often had long existing acquaintances or friends who witnessed on their behalf. In many cases, these witnesses acknowledged of having known the petitioners for an extended time period. Sometimes, their friendship even went back as far as the Middle-passage, these relationships being called shipboard bonding. Others had known each other for many years or even decades. These records suggest that Africans and their descendants lived embedded in social networks of other free and enslaved blacks (Bennett

2005: chap. 4). But they did not choose their friends from African derived people exclusively. They also socialized with Native Americans and *mestizos*. Given the conditions for plebeians in Mexico City, this seems hardly surprising. The *traza* was not segregated and there existed many multi-ethnic households. Furthermore, in the work places a heterogeneous labour force came together. Thus, several kinds of relationships cut across social lines (Cope 1994: 76).

One way of coping with the harsh conditions of enslavement was negotiation of its circumstances. Spanish law and institutions offered some protection against the inhumane brutality of the system and the slaves quickly learned to use it. In addition, slaves repeatedly showed their ability to take advantage of opportunities created by conflict among competing political forces. Another reaction to enslavement was resistance which existed as long as enslavement itself. Resistant behaviour took on various forms and ranged from individual to collective acts. It started in Africa where slaves tried to avoid transportation via the Atlantic by fleeing and during the Middle Passage conditions on board the ships sometimes even resulted in suicide. In America slaves resorted to several forms of day-to-day resistance. Poor work performance, sabotage and temporal absenteeism were means to pressure for some concessions from their masters. As Thornton states, to interpret these acts of substandard work performances as resistance is plausible but also hardly testable (Thornton 1992: 274-275). But sometimes, slaves openly refused to work in an attempt to bargain on the conditions of their work. In these instances, the slaves' time away from work often constituted a point of negotiation. Slaves on plantations pushed for the possibility to have their own plots where they could grow their produce. These vegetables and fruits could expand slaves' bad diet and also were sold on local markets in order to earn some money. Slaves also tried to negotiate on the plantation work they had to fulfil. In cases of mistreatment another issue could be the change of the estate's overseers (Andrews 2004: 26s.).

These acts of work refusal were considered as rebellion by slave owners, but slaves also took up arms in order to change their lot. Rebellions in America occurred throughout the colonial period but they were most frequent at the beginning and again tended to cluster in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In Santo Domingo the first slave rebellion already occurred in 1522. Santa Maria in Colombia was destroyed by rebellious slaves in 1530, eight years later slaves seized the opportunity to sack and pillage Havana following an attack of French corsairs and other significant slave rebellions broke out in Mexico City in 1546 and 1570. In addition to these mostly urban upheavals, slaves working at the gold mines in Cuba, Honduras, Colombia and Venezuela rebelled repeatedly in the 1530s and 1550s. After a decline of slave rebellions during the 1600s due to the consolidation of Spanish and Portuguese rule in America, slaves became more rebellious again in the last century of the colonial period. Turbulences among the free population often provided openings for slaves to rebel as well, as for example

during the *comunero* uprising in Colombia in 1781 (Andrews 2004: 37). Except for the Haitian revolution one of the largest and most threatening slave rebellions in America occurred in 1835 in Bahia, Brazil (Reis 1993).

In sum, the limiting conditions of slavery imposed upon Africans and their descendants in America did influence their lives in multiple and considerable ways, but still, slaves found opportunities to remodel African derived traditions and create institutions responsive to their needs of everyday life. In repeated negotiations with their masters slaves sought to find ways to some autonomy and to lead a social life. Ultimately, freedom was the main goal and the different roads to achieve it are analysed below.

### 3. Roads to Freedom

An individual way to achieve freedom was manumission. Spanish law allowed masters to manumit their slaves and it also guaranteed slaves the right to buy their freedom if they could afford their market price. A right, masters often tried to undermine by constant quarrels on the adequate market price of the respective slave. The reasons for masters freeing their slaves are still under debate. While masters tried to portray manumission as a gift and generous act, Andrews states that manumission rather should be understood as the ultimate outcome of constant negotiation between slaves and masters (Andrews 2004: 42). Although, manumission in Spanish and Portuguese America have been taken as a sign of the benevolence of the Latin American slave system as compared to slavery in North America (Tannenbaum 1946), rates of manumission never reached high levels. For Buenos Aires and Lima the rate ranged from 1.2 and 1.3% per year, that is, among 1,000 slaves 12 to 13 were freed (Johnson 1979: 259; Hünefeldt 1994: 211). Manumission could come in the following manners: 1. immediate freedom in exchange for payment; 2. immediate freedom without any compensation; 3. freedom upon the death of the master; 4. immediate freedom under the condition of serving the master until his or her death. Research on manumission shows, that urban slaves were more likely to obtain their freedom than rural slaves. This is mainly due to the fact, that urban slaves had far more opportunities to earn cash wages, thereby being able to buy their freedom. In the cities and towns, slaves had access to a variegated labour market. Employers hired slaves for short- or long-term jobs. Often the slaves hired themselves out and were obliged to pay their masters a fixed daily fee, keeping the rest of their earnings to supply for their living but also to be saved for compensating their masters for their freedom. Rural slaves were not completely deprived of this possibility, but their opportunities to earn cash were restricted. In addition, urban slaves usually were in closer contact with their masters than their counterparts in the countryside. Taken serious the thesis of Andrews, negotiations among slaves and masters were easier under these conditions (Andrews 2004: 42). That masters refused to let their slaves obtain freedom is shown in litigation over the

payment slaves offered for their freedom which many owners saw as too low. In these cases, negotiation was necessary.

Apart from urban slaves being more likely to obtain freedom, other groups were privileged. Manumission occurred at higher rates for native-born creoles than for Africans, and mulattoes of mixed ancestry more often gained freedom in comparison to people of unmixed African ancestry. Here, the argument of greater proximity to their masters might again have played a role. Creoles and mulattoes who were born and raised in the respective colonial society probably had advantages in conducting negotiations over their freedom. Finally, women more often than men were manumitted. In part this was rooted in family strategies. Slave families often pooled their resources to buy the freedom of one family member. The decision often fell on women, because the children inherited their mothers' status at their birth, being slaves, if their mother was so and being free if their mother was. Another reason given for women released more often is the supposedly lower value they had for their masters. But the main reason given in the literature is the proximity of slave women to their masters due to sexual relationships. This assumption is tested by Frank "Trey" Proctor in a recent study on slavery in New Spain. He is taking gender seriously in his analysis and not only considers slaves' gender but also their masters'. Correlating this, Proctor shows that not only were women slaves more likely to be manumitted, also female masters were more likely to give freedom to their slaves. He can further show that lower prices for women slaves hardly can count as a reason for larger numbers of women manumitted in the case of New Spain. Surprisingly, prices for female slaves lay higher during the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century than for male slaves. Analysing the *cartas de libertad* and the reasons given therein by the masters who manumitted their slaves, Proctor thus concludes that proximity between masters and slaves and their frequent social contact were the main reasons for manumission. This proximity did not mean sexual intercourse between male master and female slaves but rather social relations between female masters and female slaves who shared the sphere of the household. He also sees these social reasons at work behind the larger rates of creoles being manumitted, because many had been born and raised in the household of their masters, who felt some sort of responsibility for them (Proctor 2006: 309-386). Proctor's argument of greater social proximity leading to manumission in a way fits Andrews' conclusion on some sort of bargaining lying behind acts of freeing slaves. Given the creativity and aptness of slaves to use Spanish institutions to change their situation it is most likely that slaves also tried to influence their masters in cases of intensive social contacts.

Another road to freedom not based on any sort of negotiation was marronage.<sup>6</sup> Slaves fleeing to wilderness areas or to Native American communities did not intend to bargain on the conditions within the system of slavery but aimed at escaping from it completely. Nevertheless, negotiations became part of marronage in most of the cases at some point or another. As other forms of slaves' resistance, marronage existed practically from the beginning of slavery in America. Governor Nicolás Ovando of Hispaniola in 1503 already complained about runaway slaves he perceived as a threat to Spanish society. Not even two decades later, a military campaign against a community of runaway slaves, a *palenque*, followed. In New Spain the viceroy initiated a large military campaign against a *palenque* near Veracruz in 1609. When the Spanish troops were not successful Spaniards negotiated with the leaders of the *palenque* and officially recognized the community as a Spanish town in exchange for the ex-slaves acceptance of Spanish rule. This was the usual way Spaniards reacted to the existence of *palenques*. First, they fought them militarily. If the military campaign could not be won, which happened rather often, negotiations aimed at incorporating runaway communities as free cities into colonial society. Around Cartagena, one of the main slave ports in South America, a lot of *palenques* existed during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The most famous near Cartagena was San Basilio which in 1686 became a Spanish city. By then it had already existed for 60 years and almost 3,000 inhabitants were living in the settlement (Landers 2000: 35-36). Many runaway communities were established in uninhabited areas, others formed near or among Native Americans.

At the end of the colonial period, the notion of freedom gained new meaning in Spanish American societies which held implications for slaves. Enlightenment ideas of political freedom were further spurred by the American and French revolutions. In Spanish America the Haitian Revolution became even more important. Awareness of what had happened in Haiti was rapidly diffused among elites, commoners and slaves alike (Geggus 2001). During the wars of independence in Spanish America, for slaves the demand for political freedom became inextricably intertwined with the notion of personal freedom and thus, their emancipation (Blanchard 2002: 499-523). Civil wars raging the colonial societies because of internal divisions among the free population helped to open opportunities for slaves to fight not only for independence from Spain but at the same time for their own freedom. Some members of the elite motivated by liberal ideas of personal freedom did criticize slavery but they did not advocate granting freedom to the enslaved immediately. Rather, slaves had to participate in the military fight for independence and in return were promised their personal freedom. Even though, most independent countries did not declare abolition of slavery immediately,

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6 In this context, the so called "grand marronage" is treated. Slaves also absented themselves temporarily from their work places but returned voluntarily, this being another form of bargaining the conditions under which they had to live and work. On absenteeism see Thornton (1992: 275-276).

the exceptions being Chile and Mexico,<sup>7</sup> the independence wars broke the back of the institution of colonial slavery (Andrews 2004: 55). This was due to the rhetoric adopted by independence leaders who connected independence and personal freedom by condemning colonial rule as a form of national enslavement (Blanchard 2002). At the middle of the nineteenth century, most Spanish American societies abolished slavery, in the second half of the century, the remaining Spanish colonies Cuba and Puerto Rico, and finally in 1888 Brazil set its slaves free.

#### **4. Slaves' identities, African culture and creolisation**

In recent years, one of the major or perhaps the major discussion on the African diaspora in the Atlantic World is concerned with the question of culture and culture change. Whereas this topic is not totally new in scholarship on the African presence in America, it received new impetus with the cultural turn in history and the emphasis on identity as one paradigm that gained importance. Although many scholars complain about the imprecise notion of identity, it is helpful in better understanding the complexities of society and the connection between individual agency and larger structures. Identity connects the personal to the collective and thereby it can explain the day to day processes that lead to social change. People's perceptions of their identity or identities inform their behaviour, influence with whom they socialize and which groups they adhere to. Thus, the concept of identity provides a tool to access the history of the subaltern.

Studies on African culture in America and on slaves' identities are interconnected. The question of persisting African derived cultural traditions in America depended on the slaves' abilities to adhere to these traditions and thus to maintain their African identities. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some scholars were concerned with the question of African identities in the world and of surviving African culture in America. W. E. B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson in their writings from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century both emphasised the diasporic, global dimension of the history of Blacks in the Americas. But, their writing was neglected by white dominated scholarship. Also in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some anthropologists were interested in finding traces of African culture in American societies; Melville Herskovits being the most important among them (Mann 2001: 4-5). The discussion gained impetus during the 1970s when Sidney Mintz and Richard Price formulated their model of the African diaspora in America that emphasised slaves' creativity in coping with the new situation in the Americas. The authors argued that the lack of genuine African institutions in America and the fact, that the slave population consisted of "crowds" rather than culturally homogeneous groups made the invention of new creole cultures

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7 In Chile slavery was abolished in 1823, Mexico followed in 1829.



necessary (Mintz/Price 1992). This model of creolisation has been questioned recently, scholars working on Africa being most prominent in this line of critique (Law/Lovejoy 1997). Those critics emphasize the need to consider African history and the variety of African cultures in order to understand their contributions to American societies and the Atlantic World as a whole. Ira Berlin, for example, states that creolisation was not exclusively taking place in America but was already under way in Africa. Creole cultures emerged along the Atlantic littoral from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Berlin 1996). Furthermore, the thesis of the slave population not forming groups, but rather extremely heterogeneous crowds where no African culture group prevailed is seen differently in recent studies. In addition, the early and rapid creolisation according to Mintz and Price a process starting during the Middle Passage is questioned by Paul Lovejoy who instead insists on longer periods of trans-Atlantic patterns of interaction on the one hand and on the relevance to distinguish between first generation Africans and their creole descendants in America (Lovejoy 2000: 17).

The persistence of African identities is shown in a variety of studies. The conditions of the slave trade described above often led to the concentration of slaves in the New World who came from specific regions in Africa. Thus, the largest groups, as Angolans or Yoruba, for example, had better chances to socialize with slaves speaking their own or an understandable language and to share certain core cultural mores and concepts with them. The tendency to build social networks among those of the same ethnic background is stated in many studies. Colin Palmer, for example, has shown that ethnicity played a major role in the choice of marriage partners among African slaves in New Spain during the period from 1590 to 1640. Although he acknowledges that the 521 Angolans of his sample did not belong to an ethnic group, he nevertheless explains their choice of marriage partners from the same African background (89% of the persons in his sample married other Angolans) as an ethnic choice. According to Palmer, ethnicity was at work in these cases because those Africans designated as Angolans by Spaniards were taken captive in an area, where all societies spoke a Bantu language and shared common ideas about kinship and other cultural understandings. He finds similarly significant albeit not as high numbers among slaves designated as "Congo" or Bram (Palmer 1995: 223-236). Implicitly, this interpretation underscores the flexibility of ethnicity as a historic category formed in social interaction (Barth 1969). Bennett comes to a similar conclusion that ethnic identity did determine the choice of marriage partners, but he also makes clear, that the possibility to find partners of the same ethnic origin depended on the conditions made by slave trade. According to his study, for Angolans chances were bad to find spouses from Angola in the 16<sup>th</sup> century but changed during the first decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when more Angolans were brought to New Spain (Bennett 2005: 101). Changes over time might also explain somewhat different findings by Douglas Cope. In his study he did not distinguish Africans according to their ethnic background in Africa, instead he was

interested in the marriage choices among plebeians in Mexico City from 1660-1720. Especially black female slaves showed a high endogamous marriage behaviour. Of the 69 female black slaves in Cope's sample 58 married black men of whom 56 shared the enslaved status with their spouses. Black male slaves instead were more likely to marry mulattas and free women. As children inherited the status of their mothers, this behaviour most likely is explained by the search of men for free spouses thereby ensuring their children to be free. In addition, Cope believes the tendency of black men to marry mulattas had to do with the higher social status of mulattoes (Cope 1994: 81). These findings suggest that class and *calidad*<sup>8</sup> had become more important over the decades for the enslaved and free black population in Mexico. Evidence from studies on religious brotherhoods suggests that these important institutions in Spanish and Portuguese colonial societies were also organised along ethnic lines. As Kim Butler showed, in Bahia, Brazil, this was even true at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is explained by the rising importation of slaves to Brazil during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and by the high percentage Africans and their descendants constituted of the Bahian population (Butler 1998). Considered together, these findings suggest that there was no general pattern of creolisation in Latin America, instead specific time and region need to be considered in order to understand questions of identity and the formation of social networks among the African derived population in America. Slavery and the conditions under which slaves had to live were not the same over the 350 years the institution existed in America.

Nevertheless, creolisation did take place, henceforth the question for further research is how, when and under which circumstances the creation of new cultures came under way and which consequences the process had on the Atlantic World. Apparently, creolisation took most rapidly place in runaway communities and it seems to have been especially important for the contact and transformation of African and indigenous cultures. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, runaway communities formed quickly among Native Americans who were hostile to European colonists. Slaves ran away on Hispaniola to join Tainos on the island. Runaway Africans helped in the Taino rebellion against Spanish rule in 1519-32 and although the rebellion was crushed, runaway communities that had formed during that period continued to exist in the mountains of Hispaniola. In New Spain, slaves fled to the yet unconquered Zapotecs in the south in 1523. Likewise, in Venezuela, armed slaves who were to help in the conquest of Santa Marta in 1550 decided to change sides and fight with Native Americans against the Spaniards. In the Jirajara in Venezuela slaves who had fled the copper mines of Buria at the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century lived in mixed communities with Native Americas.

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8 This Spanish term refers to the *sistema de castas*, where the *calidad* of a person determined his or her position in the social hierarchy. *Calidad* was determined by "racial" designation, occupation and social contacts.

Panama was another region where runaway slaves joined indigenous people and harassed travellers between the two oceans (Thornton 1992: 286-287). These examples pose the question of African influences on Native American communities; a topic that needs to be investigated.

More research is done on the creolisation among the diverse African derived populations. In her study on *palenques* Jane Landers demonstrates that runaway communities often integrated fugitive slaves from many different backgrounds. In Matudere, a *palenque* in Colombia, a census was taken in 1693 by a Spanish priest who wanted to convince the leaders of the community to have it reduced to a Spanish town. This census shows that among the 250 inhabitants more than 100 were African-born or had African-born parents. There were twenty-eight Mina, nineteen Arará, ten Congos, nine Luango, five Angola, three Popo, three Yolofe, two Caravalié, one Bran, one Goyo and at least one Biafara. Especially for those who were members of the small groups, creolisation must have taken place rather rapidly. But, as Landers shows, ethnic identities were not absent in Matudere. The Spanish priest reported social and ethnic divisions in the community. Mina and creole inhabitants lived in different parts of the camp and the Mina controlled the existing guns while creoles used lances and bows and arrows as weapons. The captain of the community also was a Mina (Landers 2000: 38-39).

*Palenques* in the circum-Caribbean area seem to have shared certain features, including African leadership, circular or semicircular designed settlements with palisades for protection. Newly founded *palenques* depended on gathered foods or goods taken from Spaniards. Once established, agriculture and sometimes mining became important. The communities traded goods with nearby Native Americans and also with Spaniards (Landers 2000: 48). Runaway communities also participated in larger politics when they became involved in local and international wars. Thus, their isolation was never complete and their leaders had to be well-versed in European ways and equipped to negotiate their followers' best interest (Price 1979: 29-30). The mixed origin of *palenques'* inhabitants, their interactions with indigenous and Spanish society as well as reports about life in the communities show that different cultural influences came together. The priest visiting Matudere described the Minas celebrating festivities with their "costumary dances" but also reported the creoles having built a church (Landers 2000: 39). Examples from other runaway communities show that their inhabitants continued to worship Catholic saints and deities, seeking out priests and bringing them to their settlements (Andrews 2004: 28). Religion, in fact, is a field where creolisation occurred from early on, starting in Africa. Conversion to Christianity not necessarily implied abandonment of African religion and Christian deities were integrated into the African pantheon (Thornton 1992: chap. 9). Furthermore, specific syncretic religions developing and in regions with a high African presence show that some African groups influenced regional cultures in America more than others, even

though they did not constitute the majority of the slave population. Yoruba influence in Brazil and Cuba being a case in point (Reid 2004: 111-129). Thus, even though conversion to Christianity did occur religion remained a feature for identification with other African derived people. This was supported by the institutions of *cabildos de nación*, which stemmed from *cofradías de negros* or lay brotherhoods. The organisations provided for the spiritual, social and economic needs of its members. *Cabildos* usually were organised along ethnic lines and conserved the core of African belief systems and cultural practices such as dance and music. At the same time they often were attached to a Catholic saint. These organisations enabled their membership to reaffirm their identities in an oppressive and often hostile environment, facilitated social networks among African derived people and also interaction with Spanish officials and other members of colonial society (Reid 2004: 117-118). Hence, the *cabildos*, themselves a product of Spanish colonial society, were central in the formulation and recreation of their members' identities. These identities did refer to African ethnic origins but they changed over time. Interaction with the colonial system as well as contacts with members of the Spanish elite and the mixed plebeian groups influenced cultural orientations and practices of the African derived people. In addition, the ongoing slave trade brought first generation Africans to the Americas over extended time periods, thus infusing African worldviews and cultural practices which by themselves were not static, into Afro-Latin culture.

## 5. Conclusion

The milieus in which slaves worked and the conditions of the enslavement were complex and diverse: in the fields, slaves laboured alongside free blacks, peons, and wage labourers of different ethnic origins; in the city, slaves oftentimes worked as artisans, paying their owners a daily fee, while living in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. In both spaces Africans' identities and their culture were multiple and flexible over time. Although ethnic origin played an important role in social networks and organisations built by African derived people, their status as slaves as well as the variegated forms of contact with members of the wider society also influenced slaves' identities. The interaction among Africans of diverse backgrounds seems to have been a major early focus of creolisation; a process that already started in Africa. But mergers between African and European cultural traits also began in Africa but perhaps intensified in America. Another early exchange took place among African and Native Americans especially, where fugitive slaves built settlements among Native Americans. But this process, which undoubtedly resulted in cultural transformations, is perhaps the least well understood of the different creolisations.

Africans contributed immeasurably to the development of American cultures. But the process needs to be historicized. Specific conditions of the slave trade, the captives' African origin, their concentration in the slave societies in America, their work

places and the possibilities of social interaction are some factors that influenced on the concrete development of African cultures and creolisation. The process of cultural change and the question how long slaves could and did cling to their African identities, how identities were transformed over time and in which directions, constitutes one of the most thriving research fields on the African diaspora. Although these are important topics and a lot remains to be done another focus should also be taken into account in further research. What we need to understand in order to assess Africans' contribution to the Atlantic world and what is not studied enough is the question, how and when exactly African cultural practices found entrance into American – and one should add: European – cultures.

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