



25. Afro-Mexicans, Mestizos, and Catholicism (1672)*

Unlike Cuba and Brazil, New Spain did not import large numbers of slaves directly from Africa after 1640. Therefore, numerous brotherhoods with membership from specific regions and language groups in Africa did not exist in New Spain. By the 1700s, individuals of African descent living in New Spain had formed *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods) based around the race label *mulato* (person of African and Spanish parentage). These *cofradías* were either supported by religious orders and parish churches or founded with less official church regulation on *haciendas* (agricultural estates). *Cofradías* served primarily to honor a saint's day or a less tangible religious doctrine, such as the Holy Sacrament or the Rosary. *Cofradía* members maintained a decorated image of their advocacy in a parish or convent church or chapel, celebrating it in yearly festivities. Members also depended on these organizations to pay for their funeral masses and burials and entrusted their brothers with the responsibility of praying for their souls. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the increasingly large free mulato population in towns in the Diocese of Michoacán began moving up the social pyramid. Their mobility led to conflicts between mulato, Spanish, and Indian *cofradía* members in such towns as Valladolid, Pinzándaro, Zitácuaro, and San Juan Peribán. Spaniards and mulatos both argued for financial or governmental control using racially explicit language and rules, believing this language would help their case.

The following are excerpts from the court records of a legal battle that members of the *Cofradía* of the Holy Sacrament waged in the community of San Juan Peribán in Michoacán over the issue of the legal rights and political choices of its mixed-race members. What devices do those representing the mestizo and mulato petitioners attempt to justify their rights? What do these documents suggest about relations between different races within the confraternity and within the larger community of San Juan Peribán?

*“Varios cofrades de Nra. Sra. de la Soledad sobre que los oficios de la cofradía se sirvan por, mulatos y no por españoles.” Pinzándaro, 1712, Fondo Parroquial Sección Disciplinar, Serie Cofradías, Subserie Solicitudes, caja 1267, fojas 1–15. Casa de Morelos Archive, Morelia, Mexico. Excerpt translated by the editors and Nicole Von Germeten.

***“Various confraternity members . . . dispute whether
the offices of the confraternity may be served
by mulatos and not by Spaniards only”***

June 27, 1672

The licentiate Lucas de Uriarte Arbide, advocate of the *Real Audiencia* [Royal Court] of this kingdom, canon in the holy cathedral of this diocese of Michoacán, official *juez provisor* [chief ecclesiastical judge] and vicar general for the most illustrious and reverend *señor* [Sir] Don Francisco Sarmiento de Luna of the council of his majesty, his preacher and bishop of this diocese. In a case against Cristóbal Bernal, resident of the Valley of San Juan Peribán and current *mayordomo* [majordomo] of the confraternity of the Most Holy Sacrament, founded in the convent of Saint Francis in the name of its mulato and *mestizo* [person of Indian and Spanish parentage] brothers. Health and grace in our Lord Jesus Christ. Don Juan de Contreras, resident of said valley, declares and presents a petition before Your Illustriousness so that you will be served to do what seems most just. The petition is as follows:

Petition

Most illustrious lord, Don Juan de Contreras Figueroa, resident of the Valley of San Juan Peribán of the parish of said town, appears as head deputy elected by the brothers of the confraternity of the Most Holy Sacrament founded in the parish church of said town of San Juan Peribán in the year 1671. Since the election is contested, I am necessarily charged with verifying it, and, if necessary, stripping the voice and pledge of all the other confraternal brothers. I appear before Your Illustriousness and state that on the day of Corpus [Christi] of the current year before the *octava* [eight-day celebration] was finished, Cristóbal Bernal, resident of said Valley of Peribán, was elected [mayordomo] of the confraternity by two votes because of the affection that the Guardian Father of the convent has for him. Most votes in his favor came from mulato and mestizo brothers. One of the votes came from his own son who is not a member of the confraternity. The Spanish confraternal brothers, however, elected Don Juan de Cueva Carvajal, resident of said Valley and owner of the sugar hacienda and mill. The said confraternity was founded by Spaniards of this parish, which can be proven to Your Illustriousness so that you will be aware that Spaniards and not mulatos or mestizos founded this confraternity and you will be served to command that only Spaniards should vote for mayordomos and deputies and that neither mulatos, nor mestizos, nor any other such [individuals] can serve as mayordomos or deputies and that a new election must be held for these positions. I ask and beg that Your Illustriousness be served in accordance with which I have presented and that you command a new election be held and that no person disturb said confraternal brothers but instead that they be given their free will to select the person that appears to them the most useful to said confraternity. Signed Don Juan de Contreras Figueroa. . . .

[On June 28, 1672, in Valladolid, Lucas de Uriarte Arbide commanded that Cristóbal Bernal and the mestizo and mulatto brothers of the confraternity would have fifteen days to appear before him and present their response to the petition. *Ed.*]

Valladolid, August 1, 1672

Don Esteban de Valdez, resident of the Valley and parish of San Juan Peribán, appears with the power invested in me in this tribunal in the name of Cristóbal Bernal, resident of said Valley and current elected mayordomo of the confraternity of the Most Holy Sacrament founded in the parish church of said town and in the name [of] Juan Velásquez and Alonso de Aguilar, current deputies of said confraternity. We respectfully appear before Your Grace according to our right and that of the holy confraternity in response to a petition made by Don Juan de Contreras on June 27 of this year and in response to your command informing us of what he incorrectly presented against us. The petition says that with the affection of the Guardian Father of said convent, Cristóbal Bernal, by two votes of mulatos and mestizos, was elected mayordomo instead of Don Juan de Cueva Carvajal. The petition says that he was wrongfully elected because of this affection, and says that the brothers of the confraternity instead justly elected with their free will an honorable Spaniard, the owner of a sugar-refining hacienda who is devoted to the divine cult and who has served in the past as a deputy of said confraternity. It is known that mulatos and mestizos voted in the election and that five votes were made by leading Spanish gentlemen, and the rest were brothers of the said confraternity. Two of them had been mestizo deputies and one was a mulato. This is because since the confraternity was founded, it has had the ancient custom of voting for and electing mulatos and mestizos as deputies. For example, the mulato Pedro Ramos has been a deputy three times. . . . The captain Don Francisco Pabon, *alcalde mayor* [district governor] of the town, was mayordomo at the time; and he did not disdain having him as his deputy, because in the service of God our Lord, neither status nor color matter as long as God is served with cordial love. And most of the confraternity's membership is made up of mestizos and mulatos who help the confraternity grow, as is proven by the confraternity record books that we present. Although said confraternity was founded by Spaniards, Indians, mestizos, and mulatos have since joined and have enjoyed all the privileges of the other brothers. They vote in the elections and are elected as deputies without any contradiction or impediment. Spanish mayordomos and mestizo and mulato deputies are always elected. The Spaniards know it is an age-old custom for them to vote in elections. On one occasion, the natives elected Juan Gómez as mayordomo without any contradiction. And the natives of the town donated land to the confraternity, which was sold for 500 pesos mortgage, earning 25 pesos rent for the confraternity to spend on wax and masses. And the mulato and mestizo brothers also collect alms for the confraternity and contribute their sweat and labor to the Corpus Christi festivities when the election and the octava are held. To address the statement that this foundation was made by Spaniards and that mulatos and mestizos do not vote for Spanish majordomos and deputies: although it was founded by Spaniards,

mulato and mestizo brothers were and are admitted to their meetings and can vote for mulatos and mestizos. The confraternity's record books, dating back almost to its foundation, prove this to be true, since custom makes law. And if it were the case that this confraternity of the Holy Sacrament were actually two—one for Spaniards only and the other for mulatos and mestizos—and if the latter interfered by voting in the elections of the Spaniards, this would be disputed with good reason. But since there is only one confraternity in which Spaniards, mestizos, and mulattos are mixed, and that being members of it, they become brothers, and as such, they must enjoy the graces, advantages, and prerogatives of said confraternity, which has been the custom almost since its foundation. Without question, these rights include voting and electing for a Spanish majordomo and mestizo, mulato, and Spanish deputies, especially as said mestizos and mulatos are those who most effectively secure alms both within and outside the town. In response to what was said about having a new election for majordomos and deputies: we dispute this because the election was done canonically. There is no foundation for asking this because said members willingly and voluntarily gave their votes for Cristóbal Bernal as Spanish mayordomo and Juan Velásquez and Alonso de Aguilar as mestizo deputies in the presence of the Reverend Guardian Father of the convent of San Juan Peribán who, as is customary, presided. In response to what was said about Cristóbal Bernal's son voting: this is unfounded, because he did not vote, because he is not a member. The entire allegation that Don Juan de Contreras makes in favor of Don Juan de Cueva Carvajal, his cousin and intimate friend, whom he wants to be mayordomo, is also unfounded. And the reason for his opposition to Cristóbal Bernal was his fear that he would be asked for the accounts of the confraternity dating from when he was deputy, when Bernabe de Armas was mayordomo, being then a resident of Pinzándaro and not able to be present there. In the present election, he asked many of the confraternal brothers—including us—to vote for his cousin, telling us that if we gave them, we would be admitted [to the confraternity] and not be [treated as] mestizos. When we did not want to give him our votes, because he did not suit us for the reasons given, he said that we should not, as we do now, contest the election. And for this reason, after the election was held, he snatched the books of said confraternity from the table and took them to his house without allowing the election to be ratified. And his wish to avoid appearing in this city is only done to vex us, to force us to defend ourselves and incur costs. For all of these reasons, we plead and supplicate you be served to declare the said election of the majordomo and deputies was good and legitimate, having been won by two votes and following the custom which must be observed. And we request that you reject the petition of said Don Juan de Contreras as illegitimate, that you declare that we are not obliged to respond to it, and that you command that he be required to return the books of the confraternity to said Cristóbal Bernal, who in full council was elected as majordomo. Don Juan de Contreras should be condemned according to the law for having carried off the books from the table on election day in the presence of our Reverend Father Fray Melchior del Carpio y Monroi, *definidor* [judicial council member] for this province and present guardian of this convent who presides over the council as is customary and constitutional, decreeing that

the election be ratified as said books record is customary and as is commanded by the bishops. And as well we protest that we should not have to pay the costs that we have incurred in coming over thirty leagues in this time of heavy rains and also that we should be awarded damages because of the reduction of the sowing of sugarcane on our estates, necessary for our sustenance, that appearing here has cost us. And only the service of God Our Lord and not malice moves us to act. We also request that said Don Juan de Contreras be prohibited from attending council meetings because he is a troublesome man who disturbs the meetings that must transpire in peace and order, and that the confraternity be expanded. Anyone who foments disturbances should be removed from office. The said deputies and I pledge to offer any information that might be necessary to you. We implore that in the service of God Our Lord and in Justice and we swear in the name of God Our Lord that our petition is made by Don Esteban de Valdez in our names. And we protest costs in that which is necessary.

Signed Don Esteban de Valdez, Juan Velásquez, and Alonso de Aguilar

[On August 1, 1672, Lucas de Uriarte Arbide commanded that Don Juan de Contreras return the election book of the confraternity within three days. On August 11, 1672, another member of the confraternity appeared to support the petition by Cristóbal Bernal. On August 17, 1672, Lucas de Uriarte Arbide declared that the election was valid and confirmed the elections of Cristóbal Bernal, Juan Velásquez, and Alonso de Aguilar as majordomo and deputies. *Ed.*]

Central Themes

Popular culture, religion, race and ethnicity

Suggested Reading

- Bennett, Herman. *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.
- Bristol, Joan Cameron. *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007.
- Von Germeten, Nicole. *Black Blood Brothers: Confraternities and Social Mobility for Afro-Mexicans*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006.

Related Sources

19. The Silver Mining City of Zacatecas (1605)
23. The Treatment of African Slaves (the Seventeenth Century)
29. Maroon Slaves Negotiate with the Colonial State (1767)