

Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico, 1519-1650

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NEGRO resistance to enslavement was an integral feature of the history of African slavery in the Americas. Studies in the past few decades in the United States and Latin America have successfully refuted if not entirely erased the once accepted notions of Negro docility and acquiescence in slavery.¹ These works have provided a most convincing panorama of slave mutinies, insurrections, clandestine conspiracies, and individual escapes. Repeated evidence of more subtle forms of resistance—for example, suicide and voluntary abortion and infanticide—reveals further the determined refusal of many slaves to accept their position, and their reluctance to bear children in slavery.² Such resistance occurred in varying degrees wherever Europeans established Negro slavery in the New World, primarily in the southern United States, the Antilles, the Pacific and Caribbean coasts of Central and South America, and northeastern Brazil. Although most studies have been restricted to these regions, there is a considerable body of evidence to indicate that Negro slave resistance was also present in colonial Mexico.

Recently, and primarily through the efforts of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, we have gained substantial information concerning the number and role of Africans in Mexico.³ It is now fairly certain that in

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¹ See especially Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1963); Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York, 1941), 86-109; Clovis Moura, *Rebeliões da senzala* (São Paulo, 1959); Federico Brito Figueroa, *Las insurrecciones de los esclavos negros en la sociedad colonial venezolano* (Caracas, 1961); Carlos Federico Guillot, *Negros rebeldes y negros cimarrones* (Buenos Aires, 1961). Daniel P. Mannix, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1962) contains information on slave mutinies during the Middle Passage.

² Herskovits, *Myth*, 102-103.

³ See in particular Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán's *La población negra de México, 1519-1810* (México, 1946). Other works treating Mexican Negroes in this period are Oriol Pi-Sunyer, "The Historical Background to the Negro in Mexico,"

the period 1519-1650 the area received at least 120,000 slaves, or two-thirds of all the Africans imported into the Spanish possessions in America.⁴ The early development of Negro slavery in colonial Mexico was a direct response to the serious labor shortage resulting from the startling decline of the Indian population.⁵ Demographic studies suggest that the indigenous population of central Mexico alone, which may have been as high as 25,000,000 in 1519, had decreased to around 1,075,000 by 1605.⁶ The spread of European diseases, wars, relocations, and the ecological changes wrought by Spanish settlement and control all contributed to the decline. The advance of Spanish mining and, particularly, ranching and agriculture (which spread quickly in the sixteenth century to provision Mexico when decreasing indigenous food production threatened starvation) produced a demand for labor which the declining Indian population could not fulfill.⁷

Although the crown soon made concessions to the colonists' demands for workers by sanctioning forced wage labor (the *repartimiento*), and by failing or refusing to thwart the spread of debt peonage, it hoped to fill the need with African slaves.⁸ Royal decrees throughout the late sixteenth century prohibited the use of Indians in certain industries considered detrimental to their health, especially

Journal of Negro History, XLII (October 1957), 237-246; Alfonso Toro, "Influencia de la raza negra en la formación del pueblo mexicano," *Ethnos*, I (November 1920-March 1921), 215-219.

⁴ Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 199-222.

⁵ A succinct account of the labor shortage and its consequences is in Woodrow Borah, *New Spain's Century of Depression* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951).

⁶ Woodrow Borah and Sherburne F. Cook, *The Aboriginal Population of Central Mexico on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963), 4, 88. Other works examining the decline are Sherburne F. Cook and Lesley Byrd Simpson, *The Population of Central Mexico in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1948); Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah, *The Indian Population of Central Mexico, 1531-1610* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960); George Kubler, "Population Movements in Mexico, 1520-1600," *HAHR*, XXII (November 1942), 606-643. Charles Gibson provides a useful synthesis of figures for the valley of Mexico in *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule* (Stanford, 1964), 5-6, 136-147, 448-451, 460-462.

⁷ Aspects of the rise of economic activity are covered in Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Exploitation of Land in Central Mexico in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1952); François Chevalier, *Land and Society in Colonial Mexico* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963); Fernando B. Sandoval, *La industria del azúcar en Nueva España* (México, 1951); William H. Dusenberry, *The Mexican Mesta* (Urbana, 1963), 24-43; Richard J. Morissey, "The Northward Advance of Cattle Ranching in New Spain, 1550-1600," *Agricultural History*, XXV (1951), 115-121.

⁸ For indigenous labor systems see Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Studies in the Administration of the Indians of New Spain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1934-1940); Gibson, *Aztecs*, 220-256; Chevalier, *Land and Society*, 277-288; Eric R. Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago, 1959), 202-232.

sugar processing and cloth production, and ordered their replacement by Negro slaves. African labor was also encouraged for the mines.⁹

The response to these conditions was a constant demand for Negroes, a flourishing slave trade, and a rising Negro population throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. As a result, by 1570 Mexico contained over 20,000 Negroes, and by 1650 there were more than 35,000 Negroes and over 100,000 *Afromestizos* (mulattoes and *zambos*).¹⁰ Slaves were found throughout the colony, serving in the mines, plantations and ranches, as well as in the urban areas as peddlers, muleteers, craftsmen, day laborers, and domestics.

Concentrations of Negro population appeared in four distinct areas.¹¹ In the eastern region, from the coastal lowlands between Veracruz and Pánuco to the slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental, there were some 8,000-10,000 Africans. The port of Veracruz alone contained about 5,000 Negroes and *Afromestizos* in 1646, most of whom served as carriers and dock hands, while in the rural areas over 3,000 slaves worked on the sugar plantations and cattle ranches that spread inland to the mountains. In the region north and west of Mexico City were at least 15,000 slaves in silver mines and on cattle, sheep, and mule ranches. In the broad belt extending southwestward from Puebla to the Pacific coast were another 3,000-5,000 slaves on sugar plantations and ranches, in mines, and on the docks of Acapulco. Finally, the largest Negro concentration of all was in Mexico City and the valley of Mexico, where 20,000-50,000 Africans, slave and free, were employed in urban occupations.

⁹ See for example the empress' instructions to Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza, April 25, 1535, *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y colonización de las posesiones españolas en América y Oceanía, sacados en su mayor parte del Real Archivo de Indias* (42 vols., Madrid, 1864-1884), XXIII, 532 (cited hereinafter as *DII*); decree of Philip III, November 24, 1601, *ibid.*, XIX, 164; Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (cited hereinafter as AGN), Ordenanzas, Vol. 2, fols. 129-132v, 313-316v; Tierras, Vol. 2769, exp. 10.

¹⁰ Gonzalo de Salazar and others to Charles V, November 10, 1525, Francisco del Paso y Troncoso (ed.), *Epistolario de la Nueva España (Biblioteca histórica mexicana de obras inéditas, segunda serie, 16 vols., México, 1939-1942)*, I, 87; Audiencia of Mexico to Charles V, August 5, 1533, *ibid.*, III, 112; *Actas de Cabildo de la Ciudad de México* (47 vols., México, 1889-1911), VI, 227-228, 491, VII, 36, 122, 330-331, XII, 45; Conde de Coruña to Philip II, *Cartas de Indias* (Madrid, 1877), 340. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, "The Slave Trade in Mexico," *HAHR*, XXIV (August 1944), 412-431; Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 3-50, 210-221. Internal slave sales are preserved in AGN, Historia, Vol. 407 (1554-1646) and Vol. 408 (1647-1749), and in Archivo de Notarías, Mexico City (cited hereinafter as AN), Protocolos, Vols. 1-3, Escribanos Martín de Castro and Diego de Ayala.

¹¹ The following figures are based on the estimates in Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 210-221, my re-examination of the sources cited there, and further archival research.

Spanish officials sought to incorporate this large, culturally distinct labor force into the neo-medieval structure of the American colonies. Legislation spanning the 1530s to 1550s, intended for the most part for general application to the Indies, stipulated the privileges and limitations pertaining to the slaves' place within society. Royal intentions derived in general from the profound hispano-Catholic faith in the organic structure of a divinely imposed social unity, in which each person or group found its privileges and limitations defined according to its role in the hierarchy of inequality.¹² More specifically, as Frank Tannenbaum has noted, this policy was rooted in the Iberian heritage which had long allowed slaves a legal and moral personality.¹³

Yet the current of realism which accompanied and at times contradicted much of Spain's early idealism in America emerged forcefully in the regulation of slavery. The royal concern for slaves as Spanish subjects and Catholic souls was tempered by the need to create a stable and dependable labor force, maintained by consent in a situation where physical control was difficult. Much of the legislation concerning slavery assumed a conciliatory tone, in which certain privileges granted to slaves were intended to reduce or eliminate causes of slave discontent.

Thus royal decrees and Church proclamations provided legal release from bondage by allowing slaves to purchase their freedom and by encouraging voluntary manumission. Such declarations served equally to give substance to the Spanish belief in the essentially transitory nature of slavery and in the humanity of the slave. Some of them, such as the royal *cédula* of 1536 to Mexico, also suggested that slaves would work with more spirit and be less inclined to revolt.¹⁴ In seeking to make slave life more palatable by guaranteeing family solidarity and marital privileges, the king observed that a protected marital life was not only a Christian obligation, but also an essential means of insuring slave tranquility and stability.¹⁵ Both Church

¹² See the discussion of colonial social structure in Lyle N. McAlister, "Social Structure and Social Change in New Spain," *HAHR*, XLIII (August 1963), 349-370.

¹³ Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave & Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York, 1963), 45-53 and *passim*. See also Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (New York, 1963), 52-80.

¹⁴ Vaseo de Puga, *Provisiones, cédulas, instrucciones de su majestad, ordenanças de difuntos y Audiencia para la buena expedición de los negocios y administración de Justicia y Governación de esta Nueva España . . .* (México, 1878), 32-33; *Recopilación de Leyes de los Reynos de las Indias* (3 vols., Madrid, 1943), Libro VII, título v, leyes 6-8.

¹⁵ Royal decree to the Audiencia of New Spain, January 17, 1570, Richard Konezke (ed.), *Colección de documentos para la historia de la formación social de*

and crown were adamant in restricting the disciplinary authority of masters and in encouraging good treatment, for, as Juan de Solórzano commented, such conditions would protect the slaves as well as preserve an important labor base.¹⁶ Finally there was the desire to hispanize Africans in order to bring them into a community of spiritual and cultural brotherhood with their masters.¹⁷ Slaves would receive the benefits of hispanic culture and religion, and their masters might rest assured that such fraternal bonds would temper resentment. In these respects the dictates of self-interest and religion went hand in hand.

The conciliatory measures appear to have had only a limited effect. Slaves did not achieve much success in purchasing their freedom or in being manumitted, if the few recorded instances of these are true indications.¹⁸ Such extralegal channels to freedom as intermarriage and miscegenation were relatively more successful. Master-slave marriages provided one source of slave freedom, especially in the seventeenth century when the church pressed many masters to legalize their illicit unions with slave women.¹⁹ Although the crown generally disapproved of Negro-white unions, they flourished and contributed to the rise of the free mulatto population.²⁰ Many children were freed who might otherwise have been slaves.

Slaves also tried to gain freedom by marrying into the free Indian population. Bartolomé de Zarate complained to the emperor in 1537 that Negroes were marrying Indians and declaring themselves freed.²¹ Although the *Siete Partidas*, Spain's ancient legal code, had granted

Hispanoamérica, 1493-1810 (3 vols., Madrid, 1953), I, 450; see also *ibid.*, I, 99, 210, 318; Mariano Galván Rivera, *Concilio III provincial mexicano, celebrado en México el año de 1585* (México, 1859), 347.

¹⁶ Royal ordinance, ca. 1545, Konetzke, *Colección*, I, 237. Juan de Solórzano y Pereyra, *Política indiana* (Madrid, 1948), Libro II, capítulo vii, número 13.

¹⁷ Konetzke, *Colección*, I, 237-238; Galván Rivera, *Concilio*, 193-194, 197; Francisco Antonio Lorenzana, *Concilios provinciales primero y segundo, celebrados en la muy noble y muy leal ciudad de México . . . en los años de 1555 y 1565* (México, 1769), 72-73, 138.

¹⁸ Examples of manumission are in AN, Protocolos, Escribano Diego de Ayala, Vol. 2, fols. 109-109v, and Escribano Martín de Castro, fols. 198v-200, 493-495v, 606-610v. Examples of slaves purchasing their freedom are found in AN, Protocolos, Vol. 3, fols. 352v-353; AGN, Historia, Vol. 408, fol. 51.

¹⁹ Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 248-254.

²⁰ *Consulta* of the Council of the Indies, October 21, 1556, Konetzke, *Colección*, I, 347. On the developing mulatto population see Viceroy Marqués de Villamanrique to Luis de Velasco, February 14, 1590, *Advertimientos generales que los virreyes dejaron a sus sucesores para el gobierno de Nueva España, 1590-1604* (México, 1956), 33-34; Martín Enríquez to Philip II, *Cartas de Indias*, 299-300; Marqués de Mancera to Duque de Veraguas, October 22, 1673, *Instrucciones que los virreyes de Nueva España dejaron a sus sucesores* (México, 1867), 259.

²¹ Royal decree, 1538, Konetzke, *Colección*, I, 185.

liberty to some slaves who married free persons,²² Charles V nullified this provision, thus emphasizing that if the authorities would condone a trickle of free Negroes, they would not tolerate a substantial loss of their slave labor.²³ Despite the royal desires slaves continued to marry Indians in order that their children might be free. "Indian women are very weak and succumb to Negroes," wrote Viceroy Martín Enríquez in 1574. "Thus Indian women would rather marry Negroes than Indians; and neither more nor less, Negroes prefer to marry Indian women rather than Negresses, so that their children will be born free."²⁴ Spanish law and custom respected these marriages, which, with common law unions, produced the free zambo population of Mexico.²⁵

Legislation which sought to cure some of the worst abuses in slave life provided only minimal protection. Whereas both crown and Church hoped to protect the familial stability of slave life, many masters seemed bent on its disruption.²⁶ Juan de la Peña informed Philip II in 1569 that masters were separating slave families by selling male slaves, "from which results great harm to their wives and children, because they remain in this land with no aid."²⁷ The Archivo General de la Nación has many examples of masters forcing slaves to marry against their will, separating slave families, and violating wives and daughters.²⁸ Both crown and Church did on occasion protect slave families, but in general Aguirre Beltrán seems accurate in stating that slave family life was highly unstable and vulnerable to the masters' whims.²⁹

The regulation of slave treatment and discipline did not fare much better. Under Spanish law mistreated slaves had access to courts for redress of grievances, and at least a few took advantage of this protection.³⁰ There are also some notable instances when local officials, priests, and even sympathetic neighbors intervened on behalf of mis-

²² *Las Siete Partidas* (New York, 1931), Partida IV, título xxii, ley 5.

²³ Konetzke *Colección*, I, 185; *Actas de Cabildo*, IV, 245.

²⁴ Martín Enríquez to Philip II, January 9, 1574, *Cartas de Indias*, 299.

²⁵ See Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 260-268, on Negro-Indian unions.

²⁶ The general problems of slave family life are treated in *ibid.*, 247 ff.

²⁷ Quoted by the king in his decree to the Audiencia of New Spain, January 17, 1570, Konetzke, *Colección*, I, 450.

²⁸ AGN, Historia, Vol. 117, fols. 15-59; Inquisición, Vol. 29, fols. 63-65; Vol. 31, fol. 1; Vol. 259, fol. 60; Vol. 292, fols. 2-4.

²⁹ AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 77, exp. 45; Vol. 101, exp. 7; Vol. 339, fols. 583-586; Vol. 808, exp. 2; General de Parte, Vol. 2, fol. 209v. See the detailed case of Church intervention in "Un matrimonio de esclavos," *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación*, VI (México, 1935), 541-556. Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 258.

³⁰ AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 75, exp. 38; Vol. 353, fols. 22-32.

treated slaves.³¹ At other times royal inspectors would investigate cases of brutality and correct the grievances, as in the *visita* of the cloth mills of Coyoacán in the 1660s.³² Yet the rarity of such intervention suggests that the legal buffers between masters and slaves remained essentially on paper.

Furthermore, neither crown nor Church intervened in situations which modern opinion would consider brutal. In the many cases of Negroes tried by the Inquisition for blasphemy it usually came out that slaves cursed upon being beaten by their masters.³³ The slaves were tried for their crimes, while the violence which provoked them was ignored. Indeed both crown and Church sanctioned severe penalties for slaves who disobeyed the law. The Inquisition viewed whipping as an acceptable punishment and gave "some lashes very piously and without cruelty" (rarely exceeding two hundred) to Negroes found guilty in court.

That many Negroes were tried and punished in courts and not by their masters seems to have made little difference regarding slave treatment. Repeated evidence reveals that cruelty and mistreatment were as much a part of slavery in colonial Mexico as they were in most slave regimes in the New World. As the king frankly stated on more than one occasion, slaves in Mexico and the Spanish Indies in general were subject to "scandalous abuses," and mistreated "to such an extreme that some die without confession." "The poor slaves are molested and badly cared for."³⁴

The hispanization of Mexico's African population sought to ease the transition into slavery. While conversion was certainly one facet of the broader evangelical mission of Spanish expansion, in regard to slave control the policy served three possible functions: it would influence the development of a society where shared religious and cultural values produced a slave regime based on consent; it would provide certain outlets for slave tensions and discontent through

³¹ AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 292, fols. 2-4, 12-18, 172-173; Vol. 309, fols. 583-586; Silvio Zavala and María Castelo (eds.), *Fuentes para la historia del trabajo en Nueva España* (8 vols., México, 1939-1945), III, 38.

³² AGN, Historia, Vol. 117, fols. 15-59. For a brief discussion of this inspection see Gibson, *Aztecs*, 533-534. Other cases of intervention are in AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 253, fols. 287-290; Vol. 322, fol. 178; Vol. 431, fols. 265-279.

³³ See for example AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 145, exp. 7; Vol. 256, exp. 15; Vol. 271, exps. 14, 18; Vol. 273, exp. 6; Vol. 274, exp. 3; Vol. 276, exp. 1; Vol. 282, exp. 10; Vol. 291, exp. 1; Vol. 298, exps. 1, 9, 12; Vol. 306, exp. 4.

³⁴ Royal decrees in Konetzke, *Colección*, II, 754 ff., III, 113. A discussion of the discrepancy between royal law and slave treatment in Spanish America in general is in Marvin Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (New York, 1964), 65-78.

religious ritual and social activities; and it sought to offer slaves spiritual equality in the City of God in return for deference and obedience to their masters in this world.³⁵ Iberian Catholicism was ideally suited to these ends with its many saint's days and fiestas, auxiliary social organizations, and ingrained sense of hierarchy.

Hispanization of Africans was relatively successful, judging from the countless references to creole Negroes in the archives. True religious conversion was somewhat more difficult, although missionaries apparently made notable gains.³⁶ Evidence of Negro brotherhoods (*cofradías*) in the urban and mining districts suggests that some slaves benefited from the social outlets and religious balm of Christianity.³⁷ The Church also established hospitals to serve the Negro population, although the charitable intentions and social functions of these institutions probably outweighed their medical efficacy.³⁸

That many slaves did adopt the forms and receive the benefits of hispanic culture and religion, did not make them contented with their servile life. Christian slaves were just as likely to resist or revolt as any others. In fact, in 1523, the first slaves to revolt in the colony erected crosses to celebrate their freedom "and to let it be known that they were Christians."³⁹

Unfortunately conciliatory legislation and hispanization failed to eliminate the general causes of slave resistance in Mexico. Unstable familial and marital life, mistreatment, overwork, and the scarcity of effective channels to freedom undoubtedly contributed heavily to slave discontent.⁴⁰ Although these conditions certainly varied from one region, master, and economic activity to another, the worst treatment

³⁵ As Cuevas notes, the Church tacitly tolerated if it did not openly encourage Negro slavery, and it held a dim view of Negroes and mulattoes. (Mariano Cuevas, *Historia de la Iglesia en México* [5 vols., El Paso and México, 1921-1928], II, 43.) Of the few notable exceptions in which clergy spoke out openly against Negro slavery, see particularly Archbishop Montúfar to the king, June 30, 1560, Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario*, IX, 53-55.

³⁶ Note the reports of the clergy in Luis García Pimental (ed.), *Descripción del Arzobispado de México hecha en 1570 y otros documentos* (México, 1897), 172, 255, and *passim*; AGN, Historia, Vol. 31, fols. 17v-18.

³⁷ García Pimental, *Descripción*, 45-46; Martín Enríquez to Philip II, April 28, 1572, *Cartas de Indias*, 283; AGN, Ordenanzas, Vol. 1, fols. 146, 149v-150; Vol. 3, fol. 77; Vol. 4, fol. 60; Josefina Muriel de la Torre, *Hospitales de la Nueva España* (2 vols., México, 1956-1960), I, 145, 253-255.

³⁸ Muriel de la Torre, *Hospitales*, I, 210-211, 253-255.

³⁹ Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, *Historia general de los hechos de los castellanos en las islas y tierra firme del mar océano* (17 vols., Madrid, 1934-1957), Década III, libro v, capítulo 8.

⁴⁰ See similar viewpoints in Octaviano Corro, *Los cimarrones en Veracruz y la fundación de Amapa* (México, 1951), 8; Norman F. Martin, *Los vagabundos en la Nueva España, siglo XVI* (México, 1957), 120-121.

and the most brutal revolts occurred in the mines and sugar plantations of the colony. Here the deplorable circumstances intensified that common factor behind all slave resistance, the wholly human desire for freedom. "The love of liberty is natural," wrote Padre Alonso de Sandoval in 1627, "and in exchange for receiving it, [slaves] would join and give their lives for it."⁴¹ The frequent slave revolts throughout the first century and a half of Mexico's colonial history substantiate Padre Alonso's judgment.

Although individual Negroes fled in the early years, the first alleged effort by slaves to organize a large-scale uprising occurred in 1537.⁴² On December 10, 1537, Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza informed the emperor of a plot intended to free the slave population of the young colony. "On the twenty-fourth of the month of November past," wrote Mendoza, "I was warned that the Negroes had chosen a king, and had agreed amongst themselves to kill all the Spaniards and rise up to take the land, and that the Indians were also with them."⁴³ Mendoza sent an agent to corroborate the rumor and soon received the reply that a plot existed which included the capital city and the outlying mines. He swiftly arrested the "king" and his principal lieutenants, and, after eliciting confessions, had the leading conspirators drawn and quartered. There is a good possibility that the alleged plot, although it never materialized, was not a figment of the viceroy's imagination, since an independent sixteenth-century source also records the plot and subsequent events.⁴⁴

Whether reality or fantasy, however, the conspiracy struck fear into the Spanish population and created a serious concern for Negro slave activity. In the months following the plot, Mendoza, the cabildo of Mexico City, and the commander of the fort guarding the city, all expressed their fears of future slave retaliation and called for defensive measures to protect the city.⁴⁵

Continued tension in Mexico City and the occurrence of at least two more revolts in the 1540s prompted Spanish officials to issue a number of decrees restricting Mexico's Negro population.⁴⁶ Men-

⁴¹ Alonso de Sandoval, *De instaurada Aethiopia salute* (Bogotá, 1956), Libro I, capítulo xxviii.

⁴² AN, Protocolos, Vol. 3, fols. 87-87v, 460-460v; Herrera, *Historia general*, Década III, libro v, capítulo 8.

⁴³ Antonio de Mendoza to the crown, December 10, 1537, *DII*, II, 198-199.

⁴⁴ Diego Muñoz Camargo, *Historia de Tlaxcala* (México, 1892), 264.

⁴⁵ Mendoza to the crown, December 10, 1537, *DII*, II, 199-201; Lope de Samaniego to the crown, December 10, 1537, *Colección de documentos inéditos para la historia de Hispano-América* (14 vols., Madrid, to 1932), I, 85-87; *Actas de Cabildo*, IV, 98-99.

⁴⁶ Diego López Cogolludo, *Historia de Yucatán* (2 vols., México, 1957), Libro

doza's ordinances of 1548 prohibited the sale of arms to Negroes and forbade public gatherings of three or more Negroes when not with their masters.⁴⁷ The viceroy also declared a night curfew on Negroes in the capital city. Mendoza's warnings to Luis de Velasco apparently alarmed the new viceroy, for he repeated Mendoza's restrictions in 1551 and wrote in 1553: "This land is so full of Negroes and mestizos who exceed the Spaniards in great quantity, and all desire to purchase their liberty with the lives of their masters."⁴⁸ In the same year Velasco also established a civil militia (the *Santa Hermandad*) in the colony, in part to cope with slave uprisings.⁴⁹

With restrictive measures barely under way, Mexico experienced its first widespread wave of slave insurrections in the period 1560-1580 as a result of the increased use of Negroes in mines and estates.⁵⁰ By the 1560s fugitive slaves from the mines of the north were terrorizing the regions from Guadalajara to Zacatecas, allying with the Indians and raiding ranches. In one case maroons from the mines of Guajuato joined with unpacified Chichimec Indians in a brutal war with the settlers. The viceroy was informed that they were attacking travelers, burning ranches, and committing similar "misdeeds."⁵¹ To the east, slaves from the Pachuca mines took refuge in an inaccessible cave from which they sallied forth periodically to harass the countryside. Negroes from the Atotonilco and Tonavista mines joined them with arms, and created an impregnable *palenque*.⁵² Local reports revealed that the uprisings were spreading eastward, and that much of the area in the quadrangle between Mexico City, Zacatecas, Pánuco, and Veracruz faced similar revolts.⁵³

The futile stream of instructions from the viceroy to local officials indicates that the bureaucracy and slave owners, outnumbered by slaves in the mining regions, were helpless in the face of such anarchy.

V, capítulo xi; Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Mexico* (5 vols., San Francisco, 1883-1886), II, 537.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Luis González Obregón, *Rebeliones indígenas y precursores de la independencia mexicana en los siglos XVI, XVII y XVIII*, 2nd ed. (México, 1951), 334-335.

⁴⁸ Mendoza's instructions to Luis de Velasco, 1550, *DII*, IV, 494. Cited in González Obregón, *Rebeliones indígenas*, 335. Luis de Velasco to the crown, May 4, 1553, *Cartas de Indias*, 263-264.

⁴⁹ Cuevas, *Iglesia*, II, 42.

⁵⁰ Lists of some of the revolts in this period are in Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 210; Martín, *Los vagabundos*, 120-124.

⁵¹ AGN, Mercedes, Vol. 5, fols. 65-70, 158, 232-233, 359; Philip Wayne Powell, *Soldiers, Indians & Silver: The Northward Advance of New Spain, 1550-1600* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1952), 62.

⁵² AGN, Mercedes, Vol. 5, fols. 69-70.

⁵³ AGN, Mercedes, Vol. 5, fols. 201, 232-233, 459-460, 564.

Spanish control of Mexico had never been weaker, and, as the secret report of a Mexico City councilman in 1569 stated, almost everyone was in revolt against the conquerors.⁵⁴ Viceroy Martín Enríquez noted in 1572 and 1574 that the cooperation between Negroes and Indians made repression all the more difficult and requested aid from Spain.⁵⁵

A series of royal decrees from 1571 to 1574, forming a fugitive slave code, consolidated previous restrictive legislation and articulated a complex system of slave control and surveillance.⁵⁶ Slaves absent from their masters for more than four days were to receive fifty lashes; those absent for more than eight days were to receive one hundred lashes "with iron fetters tied to their feet with rope, which they shall wear for two months and shall not take off under pain of two hundred lashes." The death sentence was to be applied to all those missing for six months, although this penalty was reduced at times to castration.⁵⁷ In other circumstances the leaders of revolts were condemned to summary hanging, while the other maroons were to be returned to slavery. Local governments aided by rural police units were to provide a vigilance system in the countryside, and overseers were to make nightly checks on plantations and ranches. The decrees established rewards for the capture of runaways and encouraged fellow slaves and returned fugitives to join or aid the posses. The crown hoped to prevent any assistance for fugitives by placing heavy fines on those caught aiding slaves.⁵⁸

The insurrections continued into the 1570s as Martín Enríquez attempted to implement the royal ordinances. Yet neither the code of 1571-1574 nor the issuance of restrictive legislation in the 1570s and 1580s was of any avail.⁵⁹ A viceregal order of 1579 revealed that the contagion of revolt nearly covered the entire settled area of the colony outside of Mexico City, in particular the provinces of Veracruz and Pánuco, the area between Oaxaca and Gualtucu on the Pacific coast, and almost the whole of the *Gran Chichimeca*.⁶⁰ Only emergency

⁵⁴ "Parecer de Luis de Castilla, regidor," 1569, Francisco del Paso y Troncoso (ed.), *Papeles de Nueva España* (9 vols., Madrid, 1905-1948), III suplemento, 73-74.

⁵⁵ Martín Enríquez to Philip II, April 28, 1572, *Cartas de Indias*, 283; same to same, January 9, 1574, *ibid.*, 299-300.

⁵⁶ *Recopilación*, Libro VII, título v, leyes 21-22.

⁵⁷ AGN, Ordenanzas, Vol. 1, fols. 34-34v.

⁵⁸ *Recopilación*, Libro VII, título v, ley 22.

⁵⁹ AGN, Ordenanzas, Vol. 1, fols. 78-80v, 86v, 102-103.

⁶⁰ AGN, Ordenanzas, Vol. 1, fols. 34-34v; Vol. 2, fols. 232-232v; Silvo Zavala (ed.), *Ordenanzas del trabajo, siglos XVI y XVII* (México, 1947), 126-127. For other revolts in this period see AGN, General de Parte, Vols. 4-6.

repressive measures and the continued importation of Africans maintained Mexico's slave labor supply.

During the last decades of the sixteenth century the focus of slave revolts shifted to the eastern sugar regions of the viceroyalty. Isolated uprisings had occurred there since the 1560s, but by the turn of the century the slopes and lowlands between Mt. Orizaba and Veracruz teemed with small maroon settlements and roaming bands of slaves who raided the many plantations and towns in the area.⁶¹

The geography of the region so favored maroon guerrilla activities that local authorities proved incapable of thwarting their raids or pursuing them to the palenques. Andrés Pérez de Ribas noted: "And although some justices of these districts had sallied out a few times, accompanied by other Spaniards, to castigate and apprehend the fugitive rabble, they failed to achieve their goal because the site chosen by the Negroes for their dwelling was extremely rugged and difficult [to approach]."⁶² The viceroy appointed two Spanish captains, Pedro de Bahena and Antón de Parada, to pacify the area in 1606, but they were equally powerless to prevent the raids which destroyed property and freed increasing numbers of slaves. In that year the viceroy wrote to Bahena with dismay: "I understand that the number of Negro maroons who are gathered in revolt within the jurisdiction of Vieja and Nueva Veracruz, Río Blanco, and Punta de Antón Lizardo is very large and their liberty and daring much greater, and that they have begun to enter the town of Tlalixcoyán to rob and sack the homes and seize Negro domestics, taking them from the homes of their masters and threatening the Spaniards, setting fire to their houses."⁶³ Maroon activity was so successful that, as Pérez de Ribas observed, the camino real between Mexico City and Veracruz was unsafe for travelers and commerce. In one attack of 1609 "the Negro maroons robbed and destroyed some wagons which carry from Veracruz to Mexico City the clothing that comes from Spain, routing the carriers and breaking to pieces the Spaniard who led them."⁶⁴ In 1609 such activities prompted Viceroy Luis de Velasco to commission Captain Pedro Gonzalo de Herrera to lead a pacifying force to the distraught area. The story of this expedition is perhaps the only surviving de-

⁶¹ See Andrés Pérez de Ribas' account in AGN, Historia, Vol. 31, fols. 31-48, and in his *Corónica y historia religiosa de la provincia de la Compañía de Jesús de México en Nueva España* (2 vols., México, 1896), I, 282-284; Corro, *Los cimarrones*, *passim*.

⁶² Pérez de Ribas, *Corónica*, I, 283.

⁶³ Viceroy Montesclaros to Pedro de Bahena, August 23, 1606, quoted in Corro, *Los cimarrones*, 17.

⁶⁴ Pérez de Ribas, *Corónica*, I, 283-284.

tailed account of an armed encounter between Spanish troops and ex-slaves in the colony. It takes the form of a long letter written in 1609 by the Jesuit Juan Laurencio who accompanied Herrera's expedition.⁶⁵ An examination of this encounter should reveal the general nature of maroon activity and life in colonial Mexico and the difficulties experienced by the ruling authorities in suppressing fugitives.

Herrera, a "man of valor, wealth, experience, and prudence," traveled to the coast where he assembled an army in January 1609. While stationed at Veracruz he added 150 Indian archers and another 100 or so irregulars to his original nucleus of 100 Spanish troops in the king's pay. On January 26 the full expeditionary force left the city in search of the maroons. The Negroes knew of Herrera's departure but continued their raiding in the hinterland. In one attack they captured a Spaniard and brought him to their main settlement at the Cofre de Perote in the mountains near Mt. Orizaba.⁶⁶

The ruler of the Negro settlement was an aging first generation African referred to as Ñaga, Ñanga, or Yanga. Padre Juan wrote: "This Yanga was a Negro of the Bron [sic] nation, of whom it is said that if they had not captured him, he would have been king in his own land. . . . He had been the first maroon to flee his master and for thirty years had gone free in the mountains, and he has united others who held him as chief, who are called Yanguicos."⁶⁷ In Yanga's settlement were some sixty huts housing about eighty adult males, twenty-four Negro and Indian women, and an undetermined number of children. Although the settlement had existed in that location for only nine months, "they had already planted many seedlings and other trees, cotton, sweet potatoes, chile, tobacco, squash, corn, beans, sugar cane, and other vegetables."⁶⁸ The settlement was by necessity

⁶⁵ Although the original letter, addressed to one Padre Rodrigo de Cabredo, is apparently no longer extant, a copy was printed in full by Pérez de Ribas in 1654 in his *Corónica*, I, 284-292. A slightly paraphrased version is preserved in the eighteenth-century MS copy of Pérez de Ribas' narrative in AGN, Historia, Vol. 31, fols. 48-56. Pérez de Ribas' original account, including the letter, was printed by the eighteenth-century Jesuit historian Francisco Javier Alegre in his *Historia de la Provincia de la Compañía de Jesús en la Nueva España* (4 vols., Roma, 1956-1960), II, 175-183. See the notes in Alegre for more recent works utilizing the letter.

⁶⁶ Pérez de Ribas, *Corónica*, I, 284-285.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 285. "Bron" probably refers to Brong or Abron, a subgroup of Akan culture living to the northwest of Ashanti in present-day Ghana: G. P. Murdock, *Africa, Its Peoples and Their Culture History* (New York, 1959), 254. Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 126, 244, notes that many Africans of this subgroup were imported into Mexico.

⁶⁸ Pérez de Ribas, *Corónica*, I, 290.

a war camp with its internal structure oriented to the needs of self-defense and retaliation. Padre Juan noted a distinct division of labor within the palenque, with half the population tending the crops and cattle and the remaining men comprising a constant military guard and forming the guerrilla troops which periodically raided the countryside. The command of the army was in the hands of a Negro from Angola, while Yanga reserved to himself the civil administration. Most of the Negroes had received some religious instruction before escaping, and, like many other maroons in the Americas, they retained at least a limited form of Catholicism. The town had a small chapel with an altar, candles, and images.⁶⁹

The captive Spaniard was brought before Yanga who supposedly assured him: "Do not fear, Spaniard, for you have seen my face, and so you cannot die." Yanga then ordered the captive to write a letter to Herrera, "full of notable arrogance," in which Yanga dared the Spaniards to defeat him. The Spaniard delivered the letter to Herrera who had made camp unaware of the palenque's location and thus learned the whereabouts of the Negroes.

On February 24, 1609, Herrera and two companies left on a reconnaissance mission, and they had their first encounter with the maroons.⁷⁰ Yanga, soon regretting his burst of pride, had sent a flying squadron to raid a neighboring sugar mill to acquire reinforcements. Halfway through the raid the Negroes fled upon seeing Herrera's troops and returned to the settlement where they sounded a general alarm. Herrera did not pursue but remained in the area and established a permanent camp protected by a palisade. From the new site he could see the palenque, some two leagues away, securely nestled in an imposing and rugged mountain range. Herrera sent out two scouting parties to check possible approaches to the palenque, and on the next day the Spaniards held Mass and marched to attack. They soon came across a waterhole used by the maroons. "We arrived at a fountain placed between two rocks," said Padre Juan, "from whose water the Negroes take sustenance, for although it is far from their town, they have nothing else to drink. Next to the fountain was a large field of tobacco, squash, and corn, which [we] desolated and destroyed to deprive our enemy of provisions."⁷¹ Then Herrera, apparently experienced in guerrilla tactics, sent his nephew up the trail with a dog to check for sites conducive to ambush. The dog soon

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 285, 288-290.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 285-286.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, I, 286-287.

began to bark and revealed a troop of Negroes hidden in the bush. The Spanish army advanced, and the first battle began.

There was a brief exchange before the Negroes fled up the mountain to their settlement with the soldiers in pursuit. Although the army had harquebuses and the Negroes mainly bows and arrows and a few firearms, the Spaniards advanced only with great difficulty. The maroons had thrown up numerous barricades which blocked the narrow passages up the precipitous slope. Many in the army fell wounded in the attempt to scale the obstacles, Padre Juan receiving an arrow in the leg.

Upon reaching the top Herrera found the palenque deserted. Earlier Yanga had sent his people to another location, and he and the remaining inhabitants fled just before the army arrived, leaving most of their possessions behind. Padre Juan described what was left in the village: "The spoils that were found in the town and huts of these Negroes were considerable. A variety of clothing that they had gathered, cutlasses, swords, axes, some harquebuses and coins, salt, butter, corn, and other similar things without which, although the enemy was not left totally helpless, he was very much weakened." While the army remained in the settlement Herrera received a second note from Yanga. Again he defied the Spaniards and refused to make peace. Herrera raised the white flag calling for a truce and negotiations, but he received no further reply from the maroons.⁷²

The Spanish commander then decided to pursue the slaves and left a few men to guard the village. He soon caught up with the main body of the maroons who, upon seeing the Spaniards, climbed a rocky and thickly wooded mountain from which they poured a hail of arrows. After a brief exchange in which both sides suffered severe casualties, Herrera again called for negotiations. Yanga refused and led his people further into the interior. Herrera could find no trace of him and returned to the palenque where he waited.

Padre Juan's narrative ends here, but Pérez de Ribas reported that Yanga and Herrera soon came to terms, although he did not explain the circumstances.⁷³ Judging from the terms of the negotiation, however, the two leaders arrived at a mutual accommodation, which was not a surrender for the slaves. The terms of the truce, as preserved in the archives, included eleven conditions stipulated by Yanga upon which he and his people would cease their raiding.⁷⁴ The

⁷² *Ibid.*, I, 287-290.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, I, 290-293.

⁷⁴ The terms of the truce, entitled *Las condiciones que piden los negros Simarrones de esta Comarca*, are contained in a MS copy of a letter from the

African demanded that all of his people who had fled before September of the past year (1608) be freed and promised that those who had escaped slavery after that date would be returned to their masters. He further stipulated that the palenque be given the status of a free town and that it have its own cabildo and a *justicia mayor* who was to be a Spanish layman. No other Spaniards were to live in the town, although they could visit on market days. Yanga asked that he be named governor of the town and that his descendants succeed him in office. He also required that only Franciscan friars minister to his people and that the crown finance the ornamentation of the church. In return Yanga promised that for a fee the town would aid the viceroy in capturing fugitive slaves. The Negroes, he said, would aid the crown in case of an external attack on Mexico.

As Pérez de Ribas noted, the viceroy accepted these terms.⁷⁵ Besides being unable to conquer Yanga, the authorities needed the aid of his guerrillas to capture other fugitive slaves in the area. Thus, shortly after the negotiations, the new town of San Lorenzo de los Negros was established as a free Negro settlement not far from the old palenque. How long it existed is unknown, but the Italian traveler Gemelli Careri, who traversed the region in 1698, testified to its prosperity and industry.⁷⁶

Yanga's maroon movement is a notable incident in the history of Negroes in Mexico—the only known example of a fully successful attempt by slaves to secure their freedom *en masse* by revolt and negotiation and to have it sanctioned and guaranteed in law. This experience demonstrates that, under capable leadership, slaves could maintain an active guerrilla campaign, negotiate a truce, and win recognition of their freedom. In view of the tenacity displayed by other maroons as well, it is likely that similar incidents occurred which have not been recorded.

The violence of slave insurrections in the eastern slopes and northern mining regions kept Mexico City in a prolonged state of anxiety.

Commissary of Veracruz to the Inquisition in Mexico City, in AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 283, fols. 186-187. The letter is dated March 8, 1608, received in Mexico City on March 24, 1608. The discrepancy in the year (Pérez de Ribas states that the negotiations took place in 1609) is probably due to a mistake by either the scribe, the letter writer, Pérez de Ribas, or Padre Juan Laurencio. The document refers directly to Yanga and undoubtedly includes the terms to which Pérez de Ribas refers.

⁷⁵ Pérez de Ribas, *Corónica*, I, 293.

⁷⁶ John Francis Gemelli Careri, *A Voyage Round the World*, in Awnsham Churchill (ed.), *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (6 vols., London, 1745), IV, 520-521.

By the first decade of the seventeenth century the Negro population of the capital had grown enormously, and there was a general fear that the urban slaves would unite to take the city.⁷⁷ The tensions in the metropolis exploded in 1609 and 1612 when rumors circulated that the Negroes had chosen leaders and planned massive uprisings.⁷⁸ In both cases elaborate defensive preparations followed brief periods of panic and confusion. Negroes were apprehended and punished, and the plots, if indeed they existed at all, never materialized. Yet whether or not these conspiracies actually existed, the terror which they caused was a reflection of the tensions inherent in multiracial Mexico where insecurity plagued the Spanish and creole population well into the seventeenth century.⁷⁹

A violent Negro-Indian uprising in Durango in 1616 and a rash of retaliatory raids in the following years by the maroons of Veracruz province prompted further restrictive decrees but little effective action by the authorities.⁸⁰ Countless minor revolts and escapes occurred in the sheep ranching regions of the north in the 1620s and 1630s. As Viceroy Rodrigo Pacheco Ossorio observed in 1626, it was so easy to flee the ranches that it was almost a daily happening. In fact he noted that some ranchers were near bankruptcy, not merely because of the loss of their slaves, but also because of the exorbitant fees charged by local officials for capturing fugitives.⁸¹ Constables and corregidores held a monopoly of slave-capturing in the ranching regions and made lucrative profits by reselling runaways, not always to their original owners. The frequent complaints of ranchers and viceroys indicate that slaves continued to flee, local officials continued to capture them

⁷⁷ For travelers' estimates of the Negro population of Mexico City in the early seventeenth century see Samuel Champlain, *Narrative of a Voyage to the West Indies and Mexico in the Years 1599-1602* (London, 1859), 25; Pedro Ordóñez de Ceballos, *Viaje del mundo*, in M. Serrano y Sanz (ed.), *Nueva Biblioteca de Autores Españoles* (Madrid, 1905), II, 332; Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa, *Compendio y descripción de las Indias Occidentales* (Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Vol. 108, Washington, D.C., 1948), 146.

⁷⁸ Reports of these incidents are in Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana* (3 vols., México, 1943), Tomo I, libro v, capítulo 70; Agustín de Vetancurt, *Teatro mexicano* (4 vols., Madrid, 1960-1961), II, 217. AGN, Ordenanzas, Vol. 1, fols. 146-150, contains the hurried restrictive legislation.

⁷⁹ See Irving A. Leonard, *Baroque Times in Old Mexico* (Ann Arbor, 1959), 37-52.

⁸⁰ Herbert Ingram Priestley, *The Coming of the White Man* (New York, 1929), 45-47. AGN, Historia, Vol. 31, fols. 31v-32. AGN, Ordenanzas, Vol. 3, fol. 77; Vol. 2, fol. 13v; Vol. 4, fols. 26v-27v, 40v-41v, 60, 82, and *passim*.

⁸¹ AGN, Ordenanzas, Vol. 4, fols. 78v-79v; Zavala, *Ordenanzas*, 130-132.

and charge high fees, and ranchers continued to suffer throughout the first half of the seventeenth century.⁸²

It is apparent that officials and slaveowners found it extremely difficult to prevent or contain slave resistance. Few in numbers, they were forced to rely on the scarce royal troops in Mexico aided by untrained and undisciplined bands of mestizos and Indians. These haphazard military operations faced serious strategic and tactical problems, especially in campaigns against distant hideaways in the frontier regions. Mexico's rugged terrain compounded the difficulties, for fugitives could establish settlements in the mountains and isolated barrancas which afforded excellent defensive sites. Moreover, Indian cooperation seems to have been instrumental to the success of various revolts and made the job of repression all the more difficult. With such a weak system of control, the flight and insurrection of slaves continued into the eighteenth century, and it was only the abolition of slavery in the early nineteenth century that put an end to slave resistance in Mexico.

In conclusion, some implications of slave control and resistance in colonial Mexico are evident. In the first place, it appears that flight and revolt constituted the most effective avenue to liberty for the slave population, despite the existence of an elaborate (if often ineffective) machinery of control and conciliation. Thus a major consequence of resistance was the development of the free Negro and Afro-mestizo population of the colony. Second, slave resistance, real or imagined, had a notably disturbing effect on the society of the conquerors. In this respect the anxiety of colonial society differed more in degree than in kind from that of the fear-ridden slavocracies of the Caribbean and southern United States. The same restrictive and precautionary measures, the same false alarms, and similar bands of roaming vigilantes characterized Mexico as well. Moreover, preventive legislation and Spanish fears extended to the free Negro population, and the status of freedmen in the colony suffered regardless of their role in slave resistance.⁸³ Finally, the study of Negro slave activity reveals an area of social life barely perceived by many students of colonial Mexico—the relations within the nonwhite and mixed peoples in the multiracial societies that developed throughout tropical America. Of particular importance here are Indian-Negro relations,

⁸² AGN, Ordenanzas, Vol. 2, fols. 13v, 41-43; Vol. 4, fols. 104, 110, 117, 121-124v, 138, 140-153v; Zavala, *Ordenanzas* 125, 129.

⁸³ On the status of Negro freedmen see William H. Dusenberry, "Discriminatory Aspects of Legislation in Colonial Mexico," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXIII (July 1948), 284-302.

where miscegenation, marital and common-law unions, cooperation in resistance and also mutual antagonisms provide a rewarding field of study of social history. Slave resistance in Mexico is more than just another chapter in the Negroes' long struggle for freedom and justice. In the context of Mexican social history it illustrates the interplay of diverse races and cultures which make that history one of the most complex and fascinating in the New World.