Africans in Spanish America

People of African descent greatly altered the demographics of North America. Through participation in militias, the formation of African American communities, and the defense of colonial frontiers, pioneers of African decent helped to settle and develop Spanish America, an area which encompassed present day Florida and much of the Western United States as well as Mexico, Central and South America and parts of the Caribbean. Africans and their descendants influenced and were influenced by changes in culture, including a system of color and “racial” categorization, the social and economic order within Spanish colonial society, and the many types of resistance used during the late 15th through the 18th centuries.

Map of New Spain circa 1650.

Spanish American development with regards to people of African descent can be better understood through the application of a variety of resources including: the use of documented accounts that pertain to the arrival of various people of African descent; the role of black conquistadors; the role of women within Spanish colonial society; the way in which the caste system worked; and the tremendous impact African pioneers had on the region in terms of architecture, food systems, fraternal organizations, and the development of free societies. The time period before the arrival of the Spanish and their African counterparts to the New World helps to lay the foundation for the Spanish-African interactions that would shape New World identities and power relations.

Spanish and African Arrivals

The initial views of slavery held by the Spanish developed on the Iberian Peninsula between the 8th and 15th centuries. During these 700 years, Islamic Moors from North Africa occupied the peninsula and dominated the populations of Portugal and Spain until 1250 and 1492 respectively. These Islamic inhabitants were not solely of darker skin color as the name may imply. Depending on how the term was used and which country employed it, the term “moor” varied in
definition (Forbes 1993:25–27 and 68), and could have also been used to describe non-Christian Africans of varying skin tones.

Islamic Architecture, such as the Gran Mezquita (interior walls) in Cordoba Spain (785–786) and the Alhambra (Red Palace) in Granada, Spain (1380), attest to the presence of Islamic Moors on the Iberian Peninsula from the 8th through the 15th centuries.

It was the Moorish introduction of slavery that affected Iberian views on the institution of slavery. Initially, slavery was seen as unnatural, a consequence of war or a refusal to except a conqueror’s religion (Deagan and MacMahon 1995). Slavery was a result of circumstance and not color. Because most slaves prior to the 15th century were Europeans and North Africans, “[N]o association of color with servitude existed” (Forbes 1993:102).

Spaniards were familiar with Africans, free and enslaved, due to the settlers and slaves of many nationalities brought to the peninsula by the Moors. As Colin Palmer, Jack Forbes and others suggest, slavery existed throughout Christendom and Muslims, Slavs, Egyptians, Asians,
“Turks” [sic] and Africans were all potential slaves. Iberian Islamic laws not only recognized slavery, they allowed for Muslims to possess other Muslims as slaves if the latter were black or lorio, of an intermediate color (Forbes 1993:26).

An increase in the number of darker skinned slaves occurred on the Iberian Peninsula during the 15th century. Within this time period more Berber and black Senegalese slaves arrived especially after 1440. As the number of darker skinned slaves increased, new terminology arose that associated color with servitude. Even ancient myths associated with the African continent took on new meanings.

For many Catholics, Popes included, slavery provided the rescue or salvation Africans needed. Not only would African souls be saved, but the Spanish kingdom would benefit as well from the commerce in human bodies. As Forbes states, “[B]oth Spaniards and Portuguese had become accustomed to financing their wars and expeditions by seizing men, women, and children whenever possible” (Forbes 1993:28).

The Spanish town of Seville had the largest number of Africans in residence. The Treaty of Alcacuvas in 1479 provided traders the right to supply Spaniards with Africans. As the Africans were brought to the peninsula, there were attempts to hispanicize them while they were enslaved. For many native Africans living in Spain, there was initially the option of baptism which allowed them to be considered as members of the broader community. The role of religion and the moral commitments associated with it would have an important impact on African and Afro-Hispanic American communities.

**African/Afro-Hispanic Space**

Enslaved and free Africans were able to create public social spaces for themselves in Spain through the development of ethnic enclaves in San Bernardo, San Roque and San Idelfonso (Pike 1972:185–187). The establishment of religious confraternities or cofradías, (some of which featured singing and dancing celebrations known as cabildos (Landers 1999:8)) contributed to the social network building of people of African descent. Africans during this time period in Spain were also instrumental in administering aid in the Hospital of Our Lady of the Angels, an extension of a local cofradía, which provided medical care for its members located in the parish of San Bernardo. The hospital was built by the church for people of African descent who lived within the vicinity. One could speculate that this hospital was maintained through the use of membership fees, periodic offerings, and other cofradía obligations in the form of in-kind donations as would be customary for confraternities found throughout the Spanish territories.

Through the aid of fraternal organizations like the Cofradía Nigrorum Libertate Datorum Civitatis Barchinonitae in Barcelona, Cofradía de San Jaime Apostol de Negros in Valencia, and a variety of other confraternities, members could provide food, alms, and medicine for the needy, attend funerals, and participate in religious observances such as Corpus Christi. By creating their own social and religious institutions, Africans allowed for the creation of new communities which would enable them to maintain their cultural heritage while making a new life in a new land. As Jane Landers is careful to point out, “Spain’s African brotherhoods provided fraternal identify for their members and critical social services for their communities…” (Landers 1999).
Self-governance was also a means by which communities were strengthened and public social spaces developed. Officials of African descent were often appointed overseers of community well-being. Juan de Valladolid was a black man of noble descent who was appointed in 1475 “...judge and mayor of the blacks and l ores (browns) of the Seville areas, with authority over their communal life, whether they were free or slave” (Forbes 1993:28 and Pike 1972:173–174). Forbes comments that “[T]his policy of self-government for blacks and browns conformed to the established Castillian and Aragonese policies towards free Muslims and Jews, each community of which had its own laws and courts separate from those of the Christian community”(28).

Through these social and religious institutions as well as through the use of mayors and officials who oversaw the operation of barrios or neighborhoods, Africans sustained fraternal and community identities and reproduced their traditional social and cultural practices. As has been mentioned previously in Historic Contexts, African peoples were familiar with structured social, political, and economic livelihoods. Confraternities, brotherhoods and the application and administration of self-government were an extension of their cultural knowledge which, through the acculturation process, took on Spanish characteristics as well. These practices would later carry over into the New World.

The identities created in Spain and the strength needed to maintain them would be put to the test. Over the 16th and 17th centuries a gradual transformation of slavery from a condition of circumstance to a condition of physical differences would cause a renegotiation in the meaning of what it was to be African in Spanish society. As the Spanish traveled to the Americas and attempted to establish plantation economies, Spanish slavery was significantly altered, “stripping the slave of many of the medieval peninsular protections” they had come to rely upon including legitimate avenues of manumission out of servitude, the ability to practice their own religion, the ability to retain their own customs, and to right to keep their property (Curtin 1990:25–26; Landers 1999:6–11).

**African Explorers of Spanish America**

The first Africans from Spain were known as ladinos, or hispanicized Africans, and were soldiers, servants, settlers, and slaves. They began to arrive in the Americas as early as the 15th century, many as auxiliaries to the Spanish and Portuguese explorers. As Matthew Restall states, “[F]rom the very onset of Spanish activity in the Americas, Africans were present both as voluntary expeditionaries and as involuntary colonists” (Restall 2000:172). Many people of African descent initially saw passage to the New World as a means of bettering their social and economic positions. Landers notes, “[G]iven their numbers and roles in Spanish port cities like Seville, and their generally depressed economic conditions, it is not surprising that both free and enslaved Africans hoped to improve their lots by crossing the Atlantic on the earliest voyages of exploration and conquest” (Landers 1999:9).

Those who voluntarily set out on expeditions and became part of armed auxiliaries were more likely than those in unarmed roles to gain their freedom. The African pioneers who set out for the New World contributed greatly to the building and maintenance of colonial societies. Together with the Europeans, they formed a specialized and limited pool of human resources circulating throughout the circumCaribbean area. Between 1519 and 1600, 151.6 thousand Africans
disembarked on the Spanish American mainland and another 187.7 thousand over the next 50 years. In all, 54% of all enslaved Africans brought to the New World between 1519 and 1700 disembarked in Spanish America (Eltis et al 2001).

Africans and their descendants were an integral part of the exploration of Spanish America from the 15th through the 18th centuries. Spanish expeditions within what would become the United States largely covered Florida and the Southwest. These territories were a part of New Spain, an area which also covered Mexico and Central America. The exploration of these lands required people who would not only open up the land, but settle, develop, and secure the land as well.

African men and women were part of a number of Spanish expeditions. The Panfilo de Narvaez Expedition of 1528 from Cuba to Florida is one such example. This expedition included Esteban, perhaps the most notable African male to aid in the exploration of North America.

The Coronado Expedition of 1540 to Southwestern North America included a free African man who later served as an interpreter and would eventually become a Franciscan friar. The Juan Guerra de Resa Expedition of 1600 included African soldiers, their mulatto wives and children, and Isabel de Olvera, a mulatta woman. These are just three examples of the many expeditions which included Africans and African Americans among their members.

The Panfilo de Narvaez Expedition gives an example of how Africans potentially adjusted to life circumstances during the Spanish phase of exploration. The account of Esteban is one example of adaptation and survival in the New World.

Esteban, also known as Estevan, Esteven, Estebanico the Black Man, Stephen the Black, and the “Black Mexican,” was born in Azamar, Morocco. He was the first African in Texas and what would become the Western United States. As Juan Flores and others recount, he was one of the four survivors in the ill-fated journey of Panfilo de Narvaez in 1528 from Cuba to the Florida coast (Flores 2004). After spending many years in captivity among Indian tribes, Esteban—the gunbearer, scout, slave, and soldier—escaped and joined Cabeza de Vaca and company on a trek
across the continent. Not only was Esteban a remarkable survivor, one of the four out of 400 to survive, but it was believed that Esteban was a powerful healer and medicine man. He would later spend four years walking from Florida to Mexico City and would serve as a guide for missionaries. Esteban was familiar with many indigenous villages and was an “interpreter, emissary and diplomat with the natives” (Taylor 1998:28). It is also reported that Esteban had many relationships with indigenous women. He was eventually killed while trying to enter the Zuni town of Hawikuh. Read more about Esteban.

Esteban’s Route.

Each of these expeditions contributed to encouraging the further exploration of Western North America. These expeditions also opened up the West to people of African descent. As can be seen, these pioneers were essential to the settling, developing and maintenance of towns along the Western frontier.

Conquistadors and Militiamen

Sixteenth century conquistadors of African and Afro-Hispanic American descent, hereafter referred to as “black conquistadors,” were as much a part of the exploration of the Americas as their Spanish counterparts. Many people of African descent used military service as a means to emancipation and inclusion into Spanish society. As the numbers of expeditions increased and the people within Spanish America began to settle, the need to secure the land and the riches associated with it grew as well. Black conquistadors figured prominently in the securing of these lands.
Juan Garrido with Hernan Cortes.

As a result of their military successes, some black conquistadors were awarded land grants and special recognition, with Chile being the only country in which black conquistadors received *encomiendas*. Juan Garrido is one example of a black conquistador who accompanied Ponce de Leon on his Caribbean expeditions as well as Hernan Cortes in Mexico. Garrido, born in West Africa, participated in the conquests of Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guadalupe, Dominica and Florida. In his lifetime he was a resident of Puerto Rico, Mexico City and Cuernavaca and occupied the post of doorkeeper (*portero*) and crier (*pregonero*). Eventually, through the *probanza* or petitionary proof of merit, Juan would be given a house plot but he was never granted a position in the new city of Mexico other than those typically occupied by blacks (Restall 2000:177).

Sabastian Toral, black conquistador in the Yucatan, settled down and raised a family. But he, too, had to wait for property and recognition and petitioned the Crown (at least twice) in order not to have to pay tribute. He eventually became a doorkeeper and a guard. Juan Valiente is another example of a black conquistador who fought in Guatemala, Peru and Chile and as a result of his conquest was given an estate, Indian slaves, and an Indian town to pay him tribute. Valiente would go on to marry Juana de Valdeni who may have been an Indian woman or a free black woman. Juan Garcia took a different path. He gained his spoils and returned to Spain, but only after having been a crier, a piper, and master of weights in the New World.

Spanish American Soldier.

The example of these four black conquistadors and the brief synopsis of their conquests and occupations shed light on the social and economic positions available to black conquistadors at the time. People of African descent who were a part of the larger groups of auxiliaries were usually involved in mine labor due to the hope that mines would be found in various parts of Spanish America to finance the colonial venture. Those who belonged to the smaller expedition groups, like the above mentioned men, were stereotypically cast into the position of crier after fighting, a position which included duties such as acting as constable, auctioneer, executioner, piper, master of weights, doorkeeper/gatekeeper. Restall states that these positions were “…clearly seen by Spaniards as an obvious position for a black conquistador to assume after the fight was mostly over in a given region” (2000:191). No matter how great the contribution to a
given conquest, there was still little room for social mobility via occupations for African men, even extraordinary males, during the 15th and 16th centuries.

As the 17th century came to a close, the racial and ethnic composition of black conquistadors changed. The majority of conquistadors would now be mulattos, free and enslaved, as opposed to their earlier counterparts who were Africans. These mulattos were born in the Caribbean or the Yucatan and most were trained in pardo (mulatto) militia companies. There were also pardos libres (free mulattos) and morenos libres (free blacks) which formed militia companies. Those included within these militias requested that companies have the names pardo or moreno in them, that blacks be allowed to serve as lieutenants and receive the same pay as whites, and that members be allowed to take full advantage of fuero militar or military benefits (Sanchez 1994). Fuero militar would included the right to bear arms, select unit colors, and wear uniforms. Military benefits also allowed for a distinction to be made between militiamen and those enslaved (Sanchez 1994).

**Sistema de Las Castas**

Distinction not only existed in the military, but within the greater colonial society as well. The 16th century Spanish colonial population was made up of four basic groups; the indigenous Indians, European-born Spaniards or peninsulares, their American born descendants called criollos, and the Africans. By the late 17th century, after nearly two hundred years of Spanish law that permitted and in a sense encouraged manumission, there was a considerably sized free African population and many free African communities throughout the Spanish colonies. There was also considerable intermarriage between the four groups.

In 1783 King Charles III of Spain issued cedulas de gracias al sacar- certificates that “cleansed” people of impure blood by providing them with documentation that would allow a person’s racial status to change. For example, a pardo (mulatto) could become a quinteron (one-fifth African blood). These certificates cost money, but for those who could afford the cedulas de gracias al sacar, as their occupations changed so too could their racial status (Taylor 1998:36).

Mexican of African Descent as Cobbler.
People of African descent were located throughout the *castas system* depending on who they married or with whom they had relations. Because of the ambiguity associated with definitions of *castas* and the fluidity of the social system due to networks created in the community (through godparent alliances and confraternities for example), mobility within the system was, unofficially, a possibility. Further research on the *castas* paintings explore the contrast between what is presented in the actual paintings in terms of rigid physical or visible race, the occupations of the individuals depicted within each painting, and the actual geographical location of each *casta* (whether people are depicted as living in the city or in rural parts of the colonies) (Carrera 1998). *The Castas Paintings* were meant to illustrate that this system influenced nearly all aspect of a person’s life including occupations, emancipation procedures, godparent selection and economic and political opportunities available to people of mixed racial heritage or *castas*.

### Development and Settlement

Africans and their descendants were a pertinent part of the settling and developing of Spanish colonial societies. The infusion of African culture into the Spanish colonies and the Americas as a whole can be seen in African techniques for fishing, farming, cooking, building construction and other trades and crafts. Many of the free people of African descent in Spanish America were craftspeople, laborers, soldiers, artisans, merchants, farmers, domestics, doorkeepers, fisherman, and watermen (Deagan and MacMahon 1995:15). As Matthew Restall and Jane Landers suggest, there were Africans all over Spanish America, many of whom performed skilled and unskilled labor though it is believed that there were more skilled than unskilled workers (Restall and Landers 2000).

The examples of Spanish Florida and Southwest North America provide us with a glimpse into how people of African descent lived and created their own social and economic spaces which aided in their survival. These examples illustrate ways in which people of African descent adjusted to life challenges through the development and building of communities and confraternities, as well as through the use of intermarriage, interracial collaboration, “witchcraft,” godparent alliances, and court litigation.

### Spanish Florida (1565–1763 and 1787–1821)

With the proclamation of King Carlos II of Spain in 1693, many people of African descent began to escape to Spanish territories after the King declared “…give liberty to all…the men as well as the women…so that by their example and by my liberality others will do the same” (Deagan and MacMahon 1995: 19). This policy toward slavery increased the number of escaping slaves who found refuge in Spanish territories, a policy that angered the English colonists. Under Spanish law, slaves could legally buy their freedom, maintain family cohesiveness and sue masters for maltreatment.
Fort Mosé, Florida.

Fort Mosé, Florida, founded in 1738, is an example of what became a thriving black community in Spanish America. Francisco Menéndez, a member of the St. Augustine black and mulatto militia company and an African-born Mandingo, petitioned Governor Manuel de Montiano of Florida for a grant of land. Montiano authorized the grant and in 1738 Fort Mosé was established with approximately 100 free men, women and children of African descent (West 2004). Fort Mosé, also known as Gracia Real de Santa Teresa, is “…the site of the first legally sanctioned free black settlement in North America” (National Park Service 2004). Mosé was a place that provided “…sanctuary, freedom, and land to Africans formally enslaved in English Carolina.”

It is important to note demographically that 200 years after the initial settlement of Florida there were only 3,104 Spanish subjects. When Spain lost control of Florida to the British in 1763, of the refugees to Cuba, 420 (13.5%) were Africans or mulattos. Included within this group were 350 slaves and 80 free men, women, and children (West 2004). By the time of the second Spanish period in Florida (1784–1821), “70% of the slaves sold in West Florida (Baton Rouge) were African born” and some worked within the journal system of labor.

Religious records provide insight into the social order of Fort Mosé as well. These records include recorded births, deaths, ethnic origins, naming patterns, godparents, epidemics, warfare and marriages (Deagan and MacMahon 1995:33). Some of these records have even recorded the names of the African nations of origin for many inhabitants. The records also show that interracial marriages occurred often and the child took on the legal status of his/her mother. Those who ran away to Mosé had to convert to Catholicism as a pre-requisite for staying in the Spanish territory.

The community of Mosé also established cofradías. The tradition of these fraternal organizations, of Spanish and African origin, can be seen throughout the Americas. These organizations were approved by the Catholic Church, recognized by the larger society, provided for the members of the community through the celebration of religious festivals, the provision of medical care, and aid with funeral arrangements. The celebrations of religious festivals like Corpus Christi also took place.
Material culture also attests to African influence throughout the region. African construction skills and labor contributed significantly to new fortifications for military outpost as can be seen in the building of the Castillo de San Marcos (1672–1695) and Fort Mosé (1738) (Flores 2004). Material culture in the form of housing further demonstrates the influence of African construction and labor in Spanish Florida.

The dwellings in Fort Mosé at this time were of palm-thatched huts, some “oval in shape, and about 12 feet in diameter. They may have been similar to African houses already familiar to the Mosé residents” (Deagan and MacMahon 1995:32–33). This material culture in the form of the architecture of the time reveals a link to African cultural origins.

The impact of African architectural forms on domestic dwellings in colonial Puerto Rico has also been noted (Pabon 2001). Although according to Vasquez the Spaniards brought engineers and architects from Spain to the Caribbean to design and build fortifications, the workforce was African and the building materials of limestone, mortar and sand were materials with which they had familiarity (1986). There is also evidence of palmetto leaves being used in the construction of housing. Theresa Singleton, quoting from Weld’s *Slavery As It Is*, says “[I]n Florida in 1830, it is reported that ‘the dwellings of the slaves were palmetto huts, built by themselves of stakes and poles, thatched with the palmetto leaf’” (1000:199). Not only were palmetto leaves a key to African influence, so too was the use of tabby in various building structures. Tabby, a burnt lime and seashell aggregate, can be found throughout the Guinea Coast of West Africa and functions as a building material in fences, walls, and roadways. Tabby has been found throughout North America, including Florida’s Castillo de San Marcos and Kingsley Plantation.

Archaeological evidence for Spanish Florida provides us with information on what the inhabitants of Mosé might have eaten. According to work done by zooarchaeologists (those who identify bones) and archaeobotanists (those who identify plants and seed), we find that Mosé residents ate fish, shellfish, turtles, rabbits, deer and other animals near the village. They also consumed oranges, figs, nuts, squash, gourds, melons, beans, huckleberries, plums, persimmons, blueberries, blackberries, maypop, and grapes (Deagan and MacMahon 1995:43).

**Northern Spanish Territories: Southwest North America**

Esteban’s journey and others like it encouraged further exploration of the West by the Spanish. People of African descent began to settle in increasing numbers in the Northern frontier of New Spain and were, among other things, servants and members of naval and military expeditions. Many who came to the north were members of frontier settlements which included a number of free people of African descent. There have also been reports that Africans and Afro-Hispanics fled central Mexico to escape discrimination (Taylor 1998:35–36).

The states of Texas, New Mexico and California each supported Afro-Hispanic American communities. Texas became “the principle area of settlement and a political and cultural frontier” for fugitive slaves and free blacks (Taylor 1998:37). Through travel logs, diaries, and church records, the presence of Afro-Hispanic Americans is well documented. By 1781, Frey Agustín Morfi described the San Antonio town council as “a ragged band of men of all colors” (Taylor 1998:34).
Those who arrived in the territory took full advantage of the services available to citizens. The example of an early pioneer to the Southwest, Isabel de Olvera, illustrates how free people of African descent “fit” within the social matrix. The following deposition of Isabel de Olvera aids in telling the story of free people of African descent, particularly women, during the 1600’s. Isabel was the first woman of color to venture into northern New Spain. In the deposition she writes:

“I am going on an expedition to New Mexico and have some reason to fear that I may be annoyed by some individual since I am a mulatto, and it is proper to protect my rights in such an eventuality by an affidavit showing that I am a free woman, unmarried and legitimate daughter of Hernando, a Negro, and an Indian named Magdalena…I therefore request your grace to accept this affidavit, which shows that I am free and not bound by marriage or slavery. I request that a properly certified and signed copy be given to me in order to protect my rights, and that it carry full legal authority. I demand justice…”
[Quoted in Taylor 1998:30].

This one paragraph allows one to infer a number of things about free Africans and mulattos as early as 1600 as well as the position of free women in Spanish colonial society. Isabel’s account informs readers that she is a mulatta, or person of mixed race, and that her mother was free. As Jack Forbes notes “[Q]uite early, in both Portugal and Spain, the status of a child was determined by the status of the mother” (Forbes 1993:37). Because Isabel’s mother was free, so too was Isabel.

From this short passage we can also discern that there was legal recourse for free people of color during this time as is evident by the affidavit that Isabel sent and the order to protect her rights that would be given to her by the Justice. It is also evident that legal recourse was not limited to males. Isabel exudes a sense of entitlement to protection under the Spanish law that would legally be available to any free Spanish citizen. Isabel realized that her ambiguous status had to be legally defended.

The deposition of Isabel gives us a slight glimpse into the social order and changing patterns of Spanish colonial society during the 17th century. Through her example one is better able to understand the place of women, women of color, free people of color, and even, to a lesser extent, indigenous peoples. Isabel’s parents exhibit a degree of social adaptation or acculturation in the form of interracial marriages/relationships while Isabel demonstrates accommodation in the form of the use of the legal system.

**Women, Witchcraft, Godparentage, and the Courts: Building Community**

Isabel’s example is not the only account that sheds light on the life of people of African descent in Southwestern North America. The Spanish Archives of New Mexico reveal other aspects of the lives of mulattos and Africans in what was northern New Spain. There is evidence that there were a significant number of mulattos and Africans living in this region. Taylor and Moore, in addressing the role of African women and African women born in the Americas, examine Inquisition records in the *Archivo General de la Nacion* in Mexico which document mulattas involved in, among other things, “…witchcraft, herbal medicine and bigamy cases.” These
accounts portray women as mothers, sister, wives and daughters who were also cuaranderas or healers (Taylor and Moore 2003:35), practitioners of herbal medicine, godparents, and court litigants.

“Witchcraft,” or alternative (non-Catholic) ways of obtaining results, was used by women of African descent as a strategy to gain a measure of social control in their daily lives. Juana Sanchez and Juana de los Reyes are two examples of mulattas who used witchcraft as a control mechanism. Each woman was married to an unfaithful husband and sought ways to end their husband’s extramarital affairs. Juana Sanchez consulted an Indian woman knowledgeable in herbs who possessed a remedy. The remedy did not work for Juana Sanchez but did stop, for a brief moment, the cheating ways of the husband of Juana de los Reyes. The collaboration and acculturation across “racial” lines allowed for the sharing of cultural knowledge.

Women of African descent also used godparent alliances to stabilize families and communities. In the case of baptisms, Africans and mulattos used this occasion to form social networks. Padrinos, or godparents, were selected from all ethnic groups. Godparentage had the “…social function of establishing a system of reciprocal obligation between the ahijado, the baptized, and his or her godparent, and between the compadres, or parent and godparents” (Landers 1999:121). These links helped to create bonds between members of the community. Slaves often, when given the choice, chose godparents of a higher social status for their children thus effectively connecting various members of the community (Taylor and Moore 2003:43).

Petitioning the court was also a means by which people resisted social control mechanisms. Just like Isabel de Olvera, the example of Maria Simona de Jesus Moraza and Santiago Phelie del Fierro illustrate how petitioning the court could have working in favor of Spanish subjects of African descent. Maria Moraza was an enslaved woman who fled her owner citing that her master’s daughter and daughter-in-law had whipped her without cause. When her owners, Dona Juana de Oconitrillo and her husband, demanded her return, the alcalde or judge had to investigate the situation because of Maria's complaint. Finding the complaint valid, the judge ordered Maria and Santiago, her husband, to be allowed to seek out another residence. Their plans were stopped, however, by the death of their owner and the promise of his son to properly treat Maria and Santiago.

As this section has shown, people of African descent adjusted to given life situations through methods of acculturation, accommodation and cultural/counter cultural resistance. Some of these methods included the development of communities, building appropriate architecture, eating new foods, development of confraternities, intermarriage, “witchcraft,” godparentage alliances and court petitions. These adjustments give a textured picture of the social order during the early colonial period.

Social Class and Economics

Initially within the Spanish colonies there was a two-tier system of socio-economic divisions for people of African descent. This system consisted of bozales or unacculturated Africans who performed the back breaking labor of the mines, plantations, ranches and forests, and ladinos, free and enslaved hispanicized people of African descent who performed urban domestic work,
artisan and lower-status economic jobs (e.g., tailors and masons) (Landers 1999:16). For bozales initially unfamiliar with the system of Spanish slavery, it would not take long for them to realize that slavery under the Spanish crown and within the colonies was vastly different from what was experienced in Africa (Güiter 2000). Bozales were often “seasoned” or made familiar with the climate and food of the Americas as well as how to work with Spaniards and understand the language, behavior and customs of the society. They were also the first to occupy the front lines in battle largely because of the mistrust felt toward them by the Spanish.

African Argentine Street Vendor.

Those Africans that were brought over to the Americas would become a source of much needed labor. One contributing factor to this increase was the belief that Native Americans could not perform the work demanded by the colonists due to disease, overwork, and warfare. Another factor leading to the increase in demand for African slaves was perceived African resistance to disease (the likes of yellow fever, smallpox and malaria) on three continents.

People of African descent eventually took on different occupations throughout the Spanish colonies. Some women sold food from their houses. Other people of African descent provided various types of skilled labor and were, among other things, blacksmiths, charcoal burners, carpenters, and musicians (Deagan and MacMahon 1995:23). Many were successful. Juan Merino was an African blacksmith from Havana who would eventually open his own shop and participate in the militia, occupying the rank of second lieutenant. Isavel de los Rios was a free black woman who sold spiral rolls or “rosquetts” and other provisions from her home as a means to better her economic situation.

This system provides an example of one way in which labor relations were facilitated in colonial Spanish America. Within this system slaves could work independently and live in individual houses (much like the oval shaped, thatch roofed houses previously discussed) based upon a formerly agreed upon amount that would be paid to their owners. This system allowed slave owners to avoid paying the additional expenses of food, clothing and shelter for their slaves. Some enslaved people used the system to their benefit and built houses that became very valuable properties. Some enslaved others. People of African descent in Cuba maneuvered the system so well that there was talk of expelling them to St. Augustine and taking over their properties (Landers 1999:16).
Counter Cultural Resistance

With any form of forced cultural change there is resistance. This was very much the case with African pioneers and their descendants in the Spanish colonies. With the increasing number of African arrivals came the potential for revolt. Scholars have begun to look deeper into the forms of resistance exhibited by Africans and their descendants. Kathleen Deagan believes that resistance was almost immediate as the African uprisings in South Carolina (1526) and Cuba (1530) suggests (1995). Various forms of resistance occurred frequently throughout Spanish America from the 15th through the 19th century.

What should not be instantly assumed with regards to the eventual enslavement of people of African descent is that it was inevitable. On the contrary, there were a number of options open to colonizers once the “demise of indigenous labor” hindered colonial development. Colonizers had the options of

1. abandoning their efforts and going home;
2. relying upon their own efforts to “exploit the resources of the colony;” and

Many would ask why people remained enslaved. One limitation to resistance was the view held by some Africans that slavery was misfortune or a result of sorcery. This misfortune could be overturned only by a stronger, superior form of sorcery by the victim (Palmer 1996:87–88). Another view held by many Africans was that slavery was a result of circumstance. There were also controlling mechanisms which initially limited the scale of resistance. These controlling mechanisms included the use of the army, militia, and local patrols to suppress large gatherings; the use of the judiciary to establish and enforce laws that controlled social, economic and political areas of peoples lives; physical violence in the form of beatings and killings; psychological violence; and the forceful destruction of the family and marriages.

Church Yanga, Mexico.

As mentioned before there were, however, revolts by the enslaved which caused paranoia throughout the Spanish colonies. Just as there had been black conquistadors, there were what Restall calls black counter-conquistadors. As early as 1503 there were reports of cimarrones (maroon or runaway/fugitive societies) which caused the Spanish Crown to temporarily halt the importation of people for enslavement. Lynne Guitar, when addressing cimarrones on Hispanola,
states that “[I]t is important to understand that neither the Indians nor the Africans ran away because they refused or were unable to change their ‘cultural forms’ but because they were flexible enough to change their circumstances and customs for a lifestyle they believed to be more acceptable, even if it meant moving to less hospitable parts of the island.” This sentiment also applies to cimarrones in North America. In addition to cimarrones, there were also pirates (of European as well African descent) who threatened the stability of the colonies (Landers 1999; Restall 2000). These types of resistance produced palenques, maroon towns, and Afro-Indian communities—some of which established sovereignty through peace treaties such as the Yanquis of Mexico who founded the town of San Lorenzo de los Negros or Yanga.

For those enslaved against their will, resistance came in the many forms-running away, suicide, armed revolt, slowing down work, the emancipation of children by various methods, and infanticide are but a few examples. With the increase in the number of people of mixed racial heritage, there was also the potential to alter the balance of power in critical ways. The political engagement of Africans became an increasingly important variable as European powers fought for control of the Americas. The ability of these people to choose sides (by running away and joining militias for example) caused imperial policies to change with regards to how to administer colonial governments (Landers 1999:18). Resistance was a way in which lifestyles and circumstances could be changed by people adversely affected by the Spanish colonial system.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this section we have seen that as culture changes, the people within cultures change as well. Whether it be through the development of cofradías, godparent alliance, intermarriage, the formation of militias, the renegotiation of what it means to be African or a member of a casta, or the use the official tenets of formal institutions like courts and churches, Africans and their descendants were able to change their circumstances and lifestyles by way of acculturation and accommodation. Even though the Spanish colonial system was developed in such a way as to severely limit the degree of autonomy experienced by peoples of African descent, they were able to adapt and survive in the midst of changing ideas surrounding who was worthy to receive freedom. These African pioneers and their descendants were not only changed by Spanish colonial society, but changed this society as well through their integral involvement in the development of the New World.