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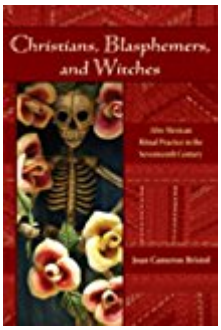

Joan Cameron Bristol. *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007. xiv + 283 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8263-3799-3.

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Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo (Virginia Tech)

Joan Cameron Bristol's *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches* is a fascinating exploration of ritual in the lives of colonial-era Afro-Mexicans. She finds that seventeenth-century Mexican society allowed for myriad forms of authority, and Afro-Mexicans, understanding this, used ritual practices—both those of which the Spanish approved and those of which they did not—to make claims for power. In this way, the concocting of love potions, the employment of magical cures, and the use of amulets represent much more than signs of African culture in the New World. Likewise, recitations of the Lord's Prayer by Afro-Mexicans were more than evidence of creolization; rather, these ritualistic practices were political actions by which Afro-Mexicans strove for reprieve, however fleeting, from the hardships of their lives.

The story of Juan Cortés, with which Bristol opens her fourth chapter, illustrates her argument well. Cortés appeared before the Inquisition in 1600 for renouncing God prior to a beating. Many of Cortés's white contemporaries thought blacks were prone to this particular blasphemy because of their "lack of civilization and poor understanding of colonial society" (p. 116), but Bristol argues, "Afro-Mexicans were in fact quite aware of the implications of their words," and "This particular action allowed slaves and servants to insert themselves into the hierarchical relationship between owners and the Inquisition" (pp. 116-117). By blaspheming, Cortés received an audience with the Inquisition, where he was able to argue he had been forced to sin due to the extreme violence of the thrashing. In other words, the enslaved person, because he had renounced God, was given the opportunity to formally complain about his treatment. Because he understood Spanish society, Cortés was able to anticipate his punishment and use it as a political weapon.

*Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*will remind readers of Herman Bennett's *Africans in Colonial Mexico* (2003), as both books analyze the ability of black Mexicans to manipulate the white worlds in which they lived. Both Bristol and Bennett find that identities in colonial Mexico were

dynamic and blacks demonstrated a remarkable understanding of Spanish society. It is Bristol's focus on ritual that sets ***Christian's Blasphemers, and Witches*** apart.

One could only wish that some aspects of the book were developed more fully. For example, it is never clear what Bristol means by the eponymous "Afro-Mexican." Apart from claiming, "The category ... encompasses a great variety of individuals and experiences" (p. 1), she is never clear about who, exactly, comprises it. It is also curious that, for a subject that seems to invite study through an Atlantic world lens, ***Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*** is focused squarely on the New World. Bristol states that Africans were "expected to understand Christian practice and Spanish culture upon arrival" (p. 3) and that "Members of diverse African ethnic groups ... became 'black' upon arrival in the Americas" (p. 12). As the historiography continues to move toward an interpretation of New World slavery that puts increasing emphasis on the transformative nature of the process of moving through the Atlantic world, one would think these claims would be developed in some detail.

This is not to say the book is without its merits. In fact, ***Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*** is an exemplary model of cultural history and a fascinating look at black life in colonial Mexico. Bristol used an impressive number of archives in researching the book: the Archive of the Notaries Public, the National Archive of Mexico, the Historical Archive of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, and the Center of Historical Studies of Mexico, to name a few. Bristol unpacks the seemingly mundane and even silly elements of the sources she found to reveal the deep meaning behind them. Love potions, in Bristol's hands, become subjects of incredible importance to understanding Afro-Mexican society, and she pulls every possible thread of meaning out of her sources. One walks away from ***Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*** confident the author interrogated every source to the fullest extent possible.

The reader should not downplay the difficulty of accessing colonial power structures by analyzing the types of sources Bristol uses. This was an ambitious undertaking, and she accomplished it with style. The organization of the book, with chapters centered on clearly defined themes, supports her discussion well, and the stories extricated from the sources bring the book to life at points. This is most evident in chapter 6, in which Bristol uses the story of a furtive home-based church in Mexico City to facilitate a discussion that effectively summarizes the book's arguments and most clearly demonstrates her thesis.

Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches is a well-researched, well-argued, and well-written book and would make an excellent addition to both graduate and undergraduate syllabi. It stands to inform readers on Afro-Mexican interactions with the Inquisition, and at points, it is extremely entertaining. With more clearly defined terms and categories, the work would have been even more persuasive.

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