



The above picture is the Casa de los Azulejos (House of Tiles), one of the remaining colonial structures in the historical district of Mexico City.  
Photo: Tamara Spike

## **NGCSU E-Text for History 1112**

### **Essay Module**

### **Colonial Latin America**

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## **Unit Goals**

**After reading this essay you should be able to:**

- 1) Describe the nature and development of the governmental institutions in Colonial Latin America.**
- 2) Understand the complexity of race, class and color in colonial Latin America.**
- 3) Understand the development of the colonial economic system in the Spanish colonies.**
- 4) Explain and discuss religion in colonial Latin America, including the concept of syncretism.**
- 5) Discuss the nature and characteristics of slavery in Latin America, including resistance to slavery.**
- 6) Describe the reforms of the nineteenth century in Latin America**

## **Colonial Latin America: Overview**

For more than three centuries, from 1492 until the end of the rebellions for independence in 1826, European powers ruled Colonial Latin America. Spain and Portugal dominated the majority of Latin America. Even though disease and other causes left millions of dead natives, native peoples still outnumbered their European counterparts after the conquest. To maintain dominance, Europeans had to create durable systems to maximize their ability to dominate and control peoples of lesser status. Thus they introduced their own systems of economic exchange, governance, and religious observance and established institutions to justify and consolidate their social and economic supremacy.

The colonial state in Latin America developed in three stages. During the first period from contact until about 1570, the colonial systems, administrations, and governmental institutions were developed. Slavery was introduced, and the indigenous Latin American empires were undermined and subsumed by the colonial structure. The second period, lasting from the late 1500s throughout the 1600s, was characterized by a mature colonial system: governmental structures were in place, the mercantilist economy had developed, and the complex social structure that characterized Latin America was established. Finally, the 1700s were a century of reform and change for the colonies.

One of the first and foremost problems faced by the Spanish Crown was the distance between Europe and the Americas, which made ruling the empire from Spain extremely difficult. From Spain to Havana was about 65 days each way; from Lisbon to Brazil was almost 100 days. A fleet sent to the Indies usually returned 14 or 15 months later, as travel was generally avoided during the dangerous hurricane season. All of the systems of governance established by the Crown were profoundly influenced by this physical distance; emerging cultural differences between mother country and colonies also played a large role in the development of the colonial systems.

## Society

The population of Latin America, originally made up of three distinct groups (Indians, Spanish, and Africans), is characterized by the idea of **mestizaje**, or the mixing of peoples. Colonial society was structured by a hierarchical system, called the **society of castas**, a reflection of social status as race, color, class, and power. Whites (*Peninsulares* and *Criollos*) were at the top of the system, blacks and Indians at the bottom, and people of mixed race in between.

At the top of the hierarchy was the most elite group: Spaniards born and raised in Spain, called **Peninsulares**. They dominated not only society, but also many of the governmental positions during the first period of the colonial era. Over time, a larger **Criollo** class came into being: an elite class of Caucasians born and raised in the New World. The largest of the groups emerged as marriage and informal unions occurred often amongst different ethnic and racial groups. This group, the **mestizos**, was made up of individuals born from Indian and Spanish parents. Children resulting from the sexual exploitation of African slaves further complicated the system. The society of castas was complex, with a dozens of categories for every imaginable parentage or racial background.

In theory, these categories of race were immutable, and a person was born into one group and was so labeled for the rest of his or her life. In actuality, there was a certain amount of flexibility to the system, especially for people in the middle or bottom of the hierarchical system. Some individuals “passed” for a higher status based on the color of their skin, their family name, or because they had acquired money or power.

## Government and Economy

The colonial government faced many challenges. The government needed to serve as a unifier to an extremely diverse and sometimes contentious population. The political system was designed to hold colonial society together while the king extracted the wealth of the colonies. It also had to surmount problems of time and distance: the king was far away and the local elites had a lot of authority. The colonial state tended to be reactive, unifying the peoples under one crown and one church and then mediating conflict among its disparate peoples and institutions as needed.

## Casta Paintings

During the colonial era, Spanish artists depicted the society of castas in paintings.

These paintings are meant to depict the reality of colonial life; however, they probably reveal more about Spanish prejudice than colonial realities. The society of castas reflects Spanish concerns about *limpieza de sangre*, or purity of blood.

Casta paintings offer a window into Spanish ideas about race, class and color. Examine the two images to the right (and others available via Google image) with an eye to how the Spanish thought of and depicted race, class, and color.



Source:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Coiot e.jpg>

Source:

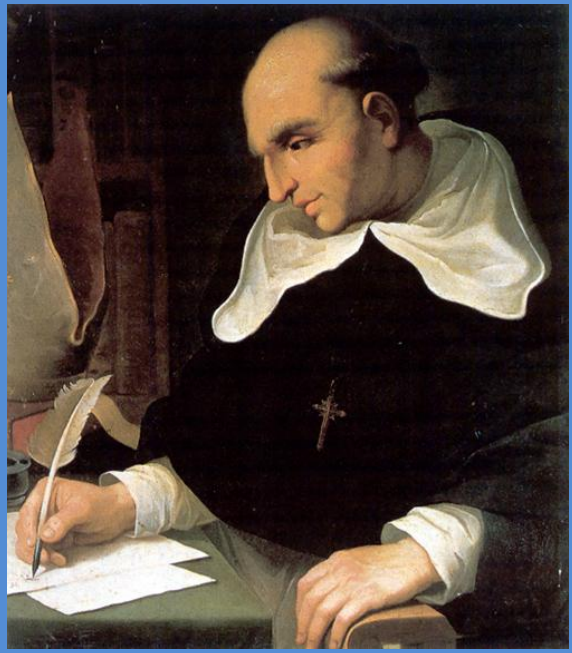
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cabrera\\_Pintura\\_de\\_Castas.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cabrera_Pintura_de_Castas.jpg)

The size of the New World made creating smaller, more manageable administrative units imperative. In 1524, King Charles created the **Council of the Indies** to help formulate colonial policy. The Council of the Indies oversaw every kind of government activity in the colonies: legislative, financial, commercial, military, and ecclesiastical matters all fell under its purview. The most powerful officials in the sixteenth century were the **viceroy**s (literally “vice-kings”) who represented the king of Spain. In the days after the conquest, there were two viceroyalties—New Spain in Mexico City and Peru in Lima. New Spain's jurisdiction was huge, including all of Mexico and the southwestern United States, the Caribbean, Central America, and the Philippines. The viceroy of Peru governed Spanish South America (or everything but Brazil). But it took a lot more than two viceroys to rule the Americas. Provincial governors worked under the viceroys, reported to them, and wielded executive, judicial, and military authority in outlying areas.

Major Spanish cities became seats of Audiencias, or courts of appeal. The first was at Santo Domingo in 1511. Soon there were many in places like Mexico City, Lima, and Guadalajara. There were also town councils, known as **cabildos** in important towns. They first were composed of conquistadors, but later merchants and prominent townspeople composed them, further testifying to the diversification of commerce in the Indies. In the beginning, only **Peninsulares** could serve in these offices. Later, **Criollos** became more involved in colonial government. This societal division became more and more contentious over time, and eventually became one of the causal factors in the Latin American wars of independence of the early nineteenth century.

The first generation of Europeans quickly captured existing native wealth and used to fund agricultural and mining operations that integrated the Americas into a world-wide commercial network supporting European conquest and settlement. The major source of wealth in the Americas soon proved to be silver ore. Two major mining fields dominated the New World: Guanajuato in Mexico, and Potosí in Bolivia. Mines were individually owned, but the Crown was entitled to one fifth of all production, making them a major source of wealth for the elite and the Crown alike. Mining operations made up some seventy percent of export from the American colonies throughout much of the colonial period. The labor of the mining industry was supplied for the most part by the indigenous populations of Mexico and Peru.

To compel the labor of the Indians in mining, agriculture, and other operations, Spaniards turned to an institution first utilized in Spain during the Reconquista: **encomienda**. The encomienda was a right granted to the early conquistadors, a grant of the labor of a group of Indians to an individual Spaniard. It permitted the **encomendero** (holder of the encomienda) to compel groups of natives to work for him. From an Indian point of view, many groups had already been subject to a system of labor tribute under the Aztec or the Inca. The Spanish Crown initially had mixed feelings about the institution. On the one hand, it saw the institution as a threat, and feared that elites in the Americas would become too powerful. On the other, encomienda could be used as a tool of religious conquest; technically, all encomenderos were compelled to provide those who labored for them with access to a priest and education in the Christian religion. Few encomenderos went to the trouble and expense.



The encomienda system proved to be deadly. Thousands died from disease, malnutrition, and overwork, inspiring Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas to campaign and write against the practice. Ultimately, las Casas convinced King Charles to abolish the encomienda. The New Laws of 1542 stipulated that encomenderos could demand tribute only in the form of goods, not labor. The New Laws also prevented encomenderos from passing it down to their heirs; this new policy thus precluded the creation of a new nobility in the Americas.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bartolomedelascasas.jpg>

For more information on the influence of mining in the Spanish Empire, see primary documents at <http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/PhilipII.html>.

For an excerpt from Bartolomé de las Casas's *A Brief Description of the Destruction of the Indies*, see

<http://web.archive.org/web/19980116133031/http://pluto.clinch.edu/history/wciv2/civ2ref/casas.htm>.

The colonial economy also faced the challenges of distance; the Crown sought to extract the wealth of the colonies for the mother country under the system of **mercantilism**. Thus, Spanish colonies would only purchase imports from other loyal citizens of the monarch. All colonial trade was to flow through the mother country. And the citizens of other countries were not to benefit from colonial trade and production. The sum goal was to enrich Spain and turn her into a world power. There were, of course, limitations. Sometimes the mother country recognized how difficult it was to export everything the colony needed. Slaves were the primary example. Spain granted the *asiento*, or right to import slaves, to other countries because Spanish slavers could not import them fast enough.

## Sugar and Slavery

Slavery became a transformative force in Latin America because of the tremendous need for labor in the mines and, more importantly, in what became one of the most important products of colonial Latin America: sugar. While many Americans think that the majority of African slaves were brought to the United States, in actuality, the vast majority of slaves were forcibly migrated to Brazil and the Caribbean, the chief producers of sugar.

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The rate of mortality for slaves on the sugar plantations was staggering; it was quite literally cheaper for slave-owners to buy a slave and work him (or her) to death than to invest in the slave's well being, providing adequate shelter and food, as owners calculated that the work of each slave returned the investment in 3-4 years. Slaves brought to the New World had to undergo a period of "seasoning", a brutal introduction to work discipline. Thereafter, the rigors of the work and the poor nutrition considerably shortened the slave's life span. It is estimated that the average life span for slaves on a sugar plantation was no more than 8 years.

Consequently, the culture of slavery was very different for Latin American slaveholders and for slaves alike. Unlike the in United States, the majority of slaves in Latin America had been born in Africa. Slaveholders classified slaves in three broad groups. The largest numbers were **bosal**, those born in Africa and new to the system of slavery. They did not speak the language of the land (be it Spanish, Portuguese, English or Dutch), and were unaccustomed to the brutal work of the sugar plantation. Many of the bosales faced the additional and equally daunting challenge of mentally reconciling themselves in one way or another to the condition of being enslaved. The second of the groups were known as **ladino**. These were slaves that had at one time been bosales, but had been enslaved long enough to have become acculturated. They spoke the language, knew the work, and at least appeared to work within the system. For these reasons, slave owners considered them to be more valuable than bosales. Most valued of all in the eyes of the slaveholders, and the least numerous, were the **Creoles**, persons who had been born into slavery. Because of the harsh conditions and the economics of Latin American slavery, far fewer children were born into the system of slavery in Latin America than in the United States. In Brazil in the late 1700s, African born slaves constituted two-thirds of the slave population, while those born in Brazil only one-third.

Within the slave community, this population division of bosal, ladino, Creole had great cultural impact. As recent emigrants from Africa, bosales were a connection and a constant touchstone for identity. Bosales were brought from the Gold Coast, from below the Sahara, from the Congo, and from Angola. Others, less frequently, came from the east coast of Africa-Mozambique. They were speakers of the mother tongues of Africa, carried regional news, and were recent practitioners or African religion unadulterated by Christianity. Each new influx of new slaves to the community reaffirmed an identity separate from that of slave, a powerful means of passive resistance to the system of slavery. Bosales were incorporated into the slave community through fictive kinship—that is, extended families of individuals not related by blood but by ties of ethnicity, language, and affection.

Although African languages and culture did not survive intact in the Americas, African peoples did contribute much to shaping their new environment. They resurrected old traditions and created new ones. The reconstituted families and religion

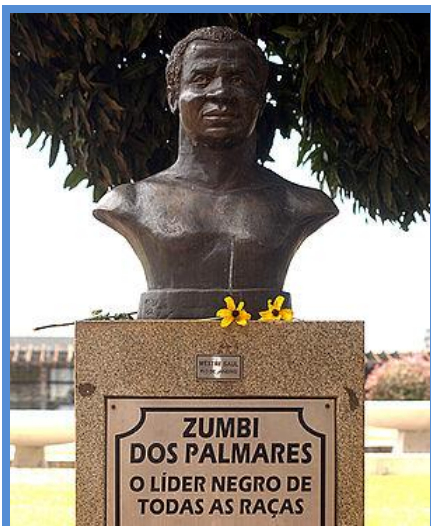
In Latin America, manumission or freeing of slaves was possible. Through a process known as **coartación**, any slave could purchase his own freedom. He notified his master and a contract was drawn up and a market price established. Once the first payment had been made, the slave seeking freedom became known as a **coartado** and even if his master sold him, the new master had to honor this agreement. Even though legally any slave had the right of coartación, it was, of course, virtually impossible for many to earn the money to pay for their freedom. Those in urban areas with a skill were much more likely to be able to earn the money

to buy their freedom than were slaves in rural areas working on a plantation. Moreover, manumission posed no threat to the institution of slavery as masters were paid the market value of their slave and there were always more slaves available to buy.

One of the most common means of resisting slavery was flight. **Palenques** were communities of runaway slaves found throughout the Americas. These communities also existed in Brazil, where they were known as **quilombos**. Slaves in Veracruz ran away from sugar and tobacco plantations and established palenques high in the Sierra Oriental of Mexico and maintained themselves as highwaymen, cattle thieves, and petty traders. They also fomented rebellion among slaves still in captivity in 1725, 1735, 1741, and 1749 in Mexico. Palenques were always formed in areas difficult to control, in either mountainous regions, or frontier regions. The Spanish sent out numerous slave-catching missions but these almost always failed, and colonial authorities had to accept some of these communities as legal townships. In this manner, some of the descendents of these runaway slaves became recognized by local authorities as free villagers, even though by law they remained slaves as they had been born of slaves.

Numerous palenques existed in Cuba. A palenque in the mountains near Bayamo served as a constant aggravation for colonial officials. The governor of the district wrote in 1777 that this village was heavily armed, and resisted the government troops sent out against it, and termed them ““thieves, vagabonds, foreigners, American-born runaway slaves, and all of those pursued by Justice.””

One of the most famous runaway communities was **Quilombo dos Palmares** of Brazil. This community, established sometime around 1605, grew to more than a dozen villages with over 10,000 inhabitants. The government of Brazil waged a largely unsuccessful war with Palmares and its legendary leaders Ganga Zumba and Zumbi for more than fifty years before finally suppressing the community in 1694.



Zumbi of Palmares remains a national hero of Brazil today as evidenced by this bust displayed in a park of the capital city of Brazil, Brasilia.

Translated, the plaque reads, “Zumbi of Palmares, Black leader of all races.”

Source:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Zumbidospalmares.jpg>

## Religion

As Spaniards conquered Native American peoples, they used religion much as their ancestors had in Iberia during the Reconquista. They used Catholicism to justify conquest. While the Spanish engaged in the secular conquest in Latin America, they also engaged in the Spiritual Conquest, whereby they converted the natives to Catholicism whether they liked it or not. Religion served the ends of colonialism. It even condoned the enslavement of Africans. And it is unlikely that without the so-called Spiritual Conquest, the Iberian conquerors could have lasted as long as they did. For the Spanish, the moral justification for their occupation of the New World was the conversion of subjects. As the Reformation took shape in Europe, the Spiritual Conquest became ever more important to the Crown as they sought to convert Indians not just to Christianity, but to Roman Catholicism. Conversion also served the Crown by serving as another system of control; the political authority of the Crown and the Spanish presence in the New World could only go so far. Creating a Catholic population in the New World introduced not only the Spanish faith, but also elements of Spanish culture.

Early on, the Crown sent missionaries, mostly Dominicans and Franciscans, to convert the native population. Two priests accompanied Cortés and baptized the nobles of Tlaxcala even before the defeat of Tenochtitlán. Large numbers of mendicant priests first arrived in 1524. Natives submitted to baptism and the missionaries' optimism grew. They hoped to create a native priesthood, and evangelization efforts grew. They built hundreds of churches and monasteries on the sites of pre-Hispanic temples. However, the early missionaries underestimated the complexity of the indigenous religions; while the friars saw the rite of baptism and church attendance as evidence of conversion, they did not understand that for many Indians, Christianity became only *part* of a polytheistic religion rather than supplanting it completely, as the friars had assumed.



**The National Cathedral of Mexico, located in Mexico City, was built almost on top of the ruins of the Aztec Templo Mayor, a powerful symbol of the power of the Catholic Church.**

**Photo by Tamara Spike**

Such was the case in the Yucatan in 1563. The Franciscan friar **Diego de Landa** grew alarmed at reports that thousands of Mayans whom he considered converts had continued with native religious practices, including human sacrifice. The clergy took hundreds of Mayans suspected of practicing the old religion into custody and interrogated them under torture. Furthermore, de Landa ordered the destruction of all pre-Hispanic Mayan books. Only four manuscripts are known to have survived.



**The Church of San Francisco, the site of the headquarters of the first 12 Franciscans to come to Mexico in 1524. The original church was built on the site of Moctezuma's zoo. The church seen above is the third built on the site, and was constructed in the 1700s.**

**Photo: Tamara Spike**

In the eyes of the Church, the conversion of natives had to be a total one. They could not choose which elements of Christianity to adopt and which elements of the old religion to retain. It appears most people hedged their bets and did a little bit of both the old and new religions. Over the second phase of colonial Latin America (about 1570-1700), millions of Indians and African slaves converted to Christianity. Yet over this period, the Catholicism practiced by many Indians and African slaves throughout Latin America was characterized by **syncretism**, the blending of two or more systems of belief into a new system of belief. For example, practice of Haitian vodou combines the **lwa** (aspects or messengers of the Creator god) of the Yoruba of Nigeria with elements of Catholicism. Thus, the lwa Xango represents a historical figure of the Oyo people of West Africa, a god of thunder and storms, and the Catholic Santa Barbara.

One of the most important religious symbols of Catholic Latin America both in the late colonial era and in modern day Latin America is **Our Lady of Guadalupe**. To the faithful, the

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Virgin of Guadalupe represents an apparition of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus. According to tradition, the Virgin appeared multiple times to a young Nahuatl man, Juan Diego, in December 1531, only ten years after the conquest of the Aztec. The Virgin asked Juan Diego to carry a message to the Bishop of New Spain, Juan de Zumárraga, asking him to build a cathedral dedicated to her on the site of her appearance. The Virgin appeared to Juan Diego as an indigenous woman, and spoke Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, to him. After the bishop discounted Juan Diego's story of the apparition, the Virgin gave him roses to gather in his cloak and take to Zumárraga as proof of her presence. When Juan Diego appeared before the bishop, he spilled the roses from his cloak, revealing an image of the Virgin that had miraculously appeared.



The cloak of Juan Diego hangs in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Tepeyac, Mexico City.

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Virgen\\_de\\_guadalupe1.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Virgen_de_guadalupe1.jpg)

## The Bourbon Reforms

By the late 1700s, Spain held an empire in decline. A weak monarch with no direct heirs occupied the throne, political ties to its American colonies were weakening even as the colonies were becoming less and less profitable, and Spain itself was no longer the global power that it had been after conquest. Much of this changed in 1700, when Charles II, the last of the Hapsburgs, died and left his throne to Philip of Anjou, a French relative from the Bourbon ruling family. This new dynasty sought to reclaim much of Spain's former glory and power through a series of changes to the political and economic structures of the colonies. These changes were collectively known as the Bourbon Reforms, and occurred in the last half of the eighteenth century.

The overarching goals of the Bourbon Reforms were twofold: to regain tighter political control of the colonies and to improve their economic performance. To realize these goals, the reforms concentrated on several areas: military, administration, the economy, and the role of the Church in the colonies. Many of the reforms sought to take power from the growing Criollo population and return it to the hands of the Peninsulares, who were more closely tied to the mother country.

The first of the reforms took power away from the Viceroyalties and the Viceroy by creating two new Viceroyalties, New Granada and Buenos Aires, and by appointing Peninsulares to government offices. Moreover, the King sent representatives to conduct exacting reviews of the colonies, their governing officials, and their economy. They also wrested control of the militias from the Criollo population by establishing regular armies and tripling military forces in the era from 1760-1800; naturally, most of the officers were Peninsulares.

Economic reforms included extensive tax reform to increase revenue, the expansion of the state tobacco monopoly, and the introduction of a system of freer trade; after 1778, trade between Spain and the colonies was expanded to include 13 ports in Spain and 22 in the Americas. The Bourbon Reforms also sought to gain absolute obedience from the religious orders. The Crown viewed the religious orders as a hotbed for Criollo activism. Ultimately, this resulted in the expulsion of the Jesuit religious order from the Spanish colonies in 1767.

The overall result of the Bourbon Reforms was mixed. The reforms did stimulate the colonial economy and increase revenue for the Crown and yielded tighter bureaucratic control over the colonies through increasing peninsular presence among state personnel. However, the reforms alienated Criollo elites, who found their social status threatened and themselves thrust from power. The reforms also deeply upset groups who felt that their traditional ways of life were threatened. In particular, indigenous groups were very uncomfortable with the Crown's efforts to bring them into the modern economy.