

Creating Racial Identities: The Free-Colored Militia in Colonial Mexico.

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The question of identity has been one of considerable importance to the study of race in Latin America. Particularly for the multitude of racially mixed offspring produced by miscegenation, it has been debated, what exactly was the degree of consciousness that race could produce? What degree of strength, if any, should be attributed to the caste boundaries created in the colonial period, and how did the reins of “caste” contribute to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century heritage of the region?<sup>1</sup> With the new and emerging research on the African Diaspora in Latin America, the question has often been asked: did the free *mulato*, *moreno*, or *pardo* ever feel a specific identity, especially during colonial times, and especially when racial discourse was apparently created by, and served the interests of those who held the supreme positions of power?

I feel that some of these questions can be addressed through an analysis of the militia. Few colonial institutions offered blacks (and I use the term “blacks” loosely to incorporate the free-colored castes, including *pardos*, *morenos*, and *mulatos*) the same amount of political, social, and legal strength as did participation in the military establishment. Military legal immunities, known collectively as *fueros*, offered a measure of autonomy from the traditional state channels of criminal litigation. While there has been some debate regarding the actual worth of the privilege, it is undeniable that under the *fuero*, military cases were reviewed by a designated legal appointee, the *auditor de guerra*, who often reviewed case files from a stance that took into consideration the free-colored’s value as soldiers.<sup>2</sup> This distinctly military perspective mitigated the effects of racial prejudices and biases that frequently prevailed in ordinary civilian courts. Furthermore, free-colored militiamen enjoyed other special benefits, called *preeminencias*, which liberated them from numerous civil obligations that were often imposed by municipal and provincial authorities.

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<sup>1</sup>For a sample of the literature and debates on race and class in Latin America see: Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997); John K. Chance and William B. Taylor, “Estate and Class in a Colonial City, Oaxaca in 1792,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19, (1977): 454-87; Idem, “The Ecology of Race and Class in Late Colonial Oaxaca,” in *Studies in Spanish American Population History*, ed. David J. Robinson (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1981), 93-117; Dennis Nodin Valdes, “Decline of the Sociedad de Castas in Mexico City” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Michigan, 1978); Magnus Mörner, “Economic Factors and Stratification in Colonial Spanish America with Special Regard to Elites,” *Hispanic American Historical Review (HAHR)* 63, no. 2 (1983): 335-369; Lyle N. McAlister, “Social Structure and Social Change in New Spain,” *HAHR* 43, no. 3 (1963): 349-370; Woodrow Borah and Sherburne F. Cook, “Sobre las posibilidades de hacer el estudio histórico del mestizaje sobre una base demografica,” *Revista de historia de América* 53/54 (1962): 181-190; Patricia Seed, “The Social Dimensions of Race: Mexico City 1753,” *HAHR* 62, no. 4 (1982): 569-606; Rodney D. Anderson, “Race and Social Stratification: A Comparison of Working-Class Spaniards, Indians and Castas in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1821,” *HAHR* 68, no. 2 (1988): 209-41; R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination. Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720* (Madison, Wisconsin: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1994); Richard Boyer, *Cast and Identity in Colonial Mexico: A Proposal and an Example* (Storrs, Connecticut; Providence, Rhode Island; and Amherst, Massachusetts: Latin American Studies Consortium of New England, 1997); Robert McCaa, Stuart B. Schwartz, and Arturo Grubessich, “Race and Class in Colonial Latin America: A Critique,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 25 (1979): 421-33; with a reply to this article by Chance and Taylor, “Estate and Class: A Reply,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 25, (1979): 434-42; and Herman L. Bennett, “Lovers, Family, and Friends: The Formation of Afro-Mexico, 1580-1810” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1993).

<sup>2</sup>Christon I. Archer, *The Army in Bourbon Mexico, 1760-1810* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1977); Lyle N. McAlister, *The “Fuero Militar” in New Spain, 1764-1800* (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1957).

Additionally, select tax exemptions, such as relief from mandatory tribute and service fees (*servicios reales*) served to distance the free-colored soldier from ordinary civilian blacks.<sup>3</sup>

The militiamen's transcendent legal status was coupled, at least for officers, with a fair degree of social elevation. By servicing the state in a military capacity and by willingly sacrificing life and limb for the king, these individuals strengthened their bonds of fealty. Militiamen and soldiers, dressed in uniform, commanded a position of respect. Admittedly, sometimes that respect was shown through outright scorn, as soldiers were frequently chafed when on duty--their uniforms being the first items on their person to be desecrated. Regardless, the impact of their militia duty was not lost. By protecting some of the most revered symbolic buildings in the colony, such as churches, hospitals, and the viceregal palace, military duty became virtually coterminous with the affairs and smooth workings of the colonial state.

In the view of some scholars, military status placed the soldiers in a separate social space that eroded the inhibiting effects of the caste system. Many free-colored militiamen sent their sons to the university, entered prestigious liberal professions, changed their baptismal registers to specifically mention that they were white, took fair-skinned brides, and used the honorific "Don" before their names to emphasize "hidalgo" status.<sup>4</sup> In Mexico, there were certain militia families, such as the Santanders of Puebla, who reputedly possessed fortunes in excess of 70,000 *pesos* during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, more than enough to be considered among the city's elite members.<sup>5</sup> In Jalapa, some free-colored officers played a role in local political assemblies in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>6</sup> The possibilities for wealth, class, and even racial mobility have caused the militia to be perceived as a stepping stone towards achieving social whiteness, or at least to serve as a vehicle for lesser-grade "passing."<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, some soldiers used the militia in this capacity, as the evidence maintains. But for others, I argue that quite a different process was occurring. Within the military, and specifically the militia framework, I believe that the unique military privileges, along with the numerous struggles for added rights, actually worked to solidify racial ties by imbuing concrete meaning onto racial abstractions. In other words, while the *pardos*, *morenos*, and *mulatos* who participated in the militia may have been legally and socially

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<sup>3</sup>Free-colored in 18<sup>th</sup> century Mexico were subject to 12-16 *reales* of tribute fees per year as full tributaries. See: Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Californias, vol. 58, exp. 1, fs. 6-8, 70; AGN, Civil, vol. 130 pt 2, 1757, Mexico City, fs. 5-11.

<sup>4</sup>George Reid Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800-1900* (Madison, Wisconsin: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 113-137; Peter M. Voelz, *Slave and Soldier: The Military Impact of Blacks in the Colonial Americas* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993); Allan J. Kuethe, "The Status of the Free-Pardo in the Disciplined Militia of New Granada," *Journal of Negro History* 56, no. 2 (1971): 105-117; Leslie B. Rout Jr., *The African Experience in Spanish America, 1502 to the Present Day* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), 150-151; and Herbert S. Klein, "The Colored Militia of Cuba: 1568-1868," *Caribbean Studies* 6, no. 2 (1966): 17-27.

<sup>5</sup>Archivo Judicial de Puebla, INAH Puebla, exp. 3108, fs. 1-277.

<sup>6</sup>Patrick J. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup>Kuethe, "Status of the Free-Pardo," 105-117.

distinct from their civilian brethren, these very distinctions provided for a deeper racial understanding.<sup>8</sup>

Before engaging in a fuller analysis of how free-colored participation in the militia offered opportunities for the formation of a race-based identity, a few words are needed about the evolution of the free-colored militia in Mexico itself. I maintain that an important explanatory factor behind the development of a militia inspired racial identity lies in the periodization of events. It is not coincidental that the 18<sup>th</sup> century surfaced as a significant time for the expression of free-colored militia issues which incorporated a language of self-recognized, racial difference among the colony's *pardos*, *mulatos*, and *morenos*.

Free-colored militia duty in Mexico first came about during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, specifically after the publication of the royal decree of 1540, which stipulated that Spanish colonists residing in the Indies were to provide for their own defense.<sup>9</sup> By the 1550s, free-coloreds were found serving as auxiliaries to regular army units in the coastal port of Veracruz, and in 1562, a unit of *pardo* and *moreno* auxiliary militiamen operated out of Mexico City.<sup>10</sup> The earliest years of the militia's history are admittedly sketchy in the existing archival record, but what surfaces is that from the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the opening decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, free-coloreds were incorporated rather cautiously into the colonial defense scheme. On one score, this caution was produced by many of the difficulties that the colony had experienced with its resident black population. The first century after the conquest saw a considerable number of hostile acts performed by enslaved blacks and free-coloreds. There were menacing highway raids reported in New Galicia and Guanajuato. Multiple runaway slave communities were founded in Veracruz and Oaxaca, of which the best known was the settlement of Yanga, which successfully resisted the colonial government for some thirty years. In Mexico City itself, there were several botched rebellions planned, including a 1611 effort to crown a black king and queen to replace the sitting viceroy. Atop these episodes was the fact that slavery, between 1521-1639, was at its peak in Mexico, importing over 110,000 individuals, representing nearly half of all slaves imported to the Indies during those years.<sup>11</sup> Some colonial administrators confessed that they felt the colony was being inundated with blacks, and that they needed to implement more thorough measures of social control. A few royal officials, like Viceroy Gelves in the early 1620s, acted upon their intuitions

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<sup>8</sup>An initial examination of these themes can be found in Ben Vinson III, "Free-Colored Voices: Issues of Representation and Racial Identity in the Colonial Mexican Militia," Journal of Negro History 80, no. 4 (1995): 170-182.

<sup>9</sup>Paul E. Hoffman, The Spanish Crown and the Defense of the Caribbean, 1535-1585: Precedent, Patrimonialism, and Royal Parsimony (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 41. For additional information on the early free-colored militia in Mexico, as well as information on the 18<sup>th</sup> century see: Vinson III, "Las compañías milicianas de pardos y morenos en la Nueva España, un aporte para su estudio," in Población y estructura urbana en México, siglos XVIII y XIX, comp. Carmen Blázquez Domínguez, Carlos Contreras Cruz, and Sonia Pérez Toledo (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 1996), 239-249.

<sup>10</sup>AGN, Indiferentes de Guerra (I.G.), vol. 197-B, Narcisso Sagarra, Ildifonso Silva, and Juan Pastor to Marques de Branciforte, June 25, 1795, Mexico City; Jackie Booker, "Needed but Unwanted: Black Militiamen in Veracruz, Mexico, 1760-1810," The Historian 55, (Winter 1993): 260.

<sup>11</sup>Colin A. Palmer, Slaves of the White God: Blacks in Mexico 1570-1650 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), 28, 119-44.

by enacting a string of severely restrictive legislation. In short, demographic factors and substantiated fears about black upheaval, combined with a general unfamiliarity in arming large numbers of the free-colored population, produced a definitive trial period for the free-colored militia in which various arrangements of free-colored troops were experimented with. As the militiamen consistently proved their loyalties, sometimes against runaway slaves and hostile Indians, at other times against foreign pirates, free-colored militia service became more widely accepted and the institution developed on more autonomous grounds.

By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, three different types of free-colored militia service had clearly emerged. The least common type comprised militia units founded in former maroon communities. In this capacity, the militia essentially served as part of a larger social engineering project. Oftentimes, as had occurred with Yanga's settlement and other runaway communities along the Veracruz coast, colonial towns were founded directly atop the sites of former slave resistance. Whites, *mestizos*, and even Indians were encouraged to migrate to these settlements. But in the initial years after a maroon community had been defeated, the colonial government's institutional apparatus was usually weak, and white and *mestizo* immigration to the area did not always occur in great numbers. To better integrate these communities into the greater colonial scheme of provincial design, the militia was seen as an attractive tool. Administrators realized that by offering high ranking commissions to former maroon leaders, they could provide crown sanction to these individuals' leadership status, thereby serving to better tie their fortunes to the colonial government. The hope was that these ex-maroon leaders would be given the incentive to encourage their followers to emulate their example of crown loyalty. While in practice there were a range of responses to the crown's designs, ultimately, royal bureaucrats hoped that the militia would help transform these settlements into centers that actively fought against further seditious slave activity and that protected their relatively isolated areas from all forms of hostile enemy incursions.

Much more numerous than the militia units founded in former maroon settlements were those which I call companies of the "independent type." These were upgrades from the free-colored auxiliary forces which characterized much of the early and experimental forms of free-colored service in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. What most distinguished companies of the independent type from their predecessors was that the level of white supervision over their command structure and responsibilities was considerably reduced. Also, their military role was more pronounced, being less a support force than a separate field group. Additionally, matriculation into these companies was predicated almost wholly on race. Only free *pardos*, *morenos*, *mulatos*, and *moriscos*, could join. Sometimes these companies were even further delineated according to phenotype, as occurred in Veracruz, where the dark-skinned *negros* and *morenos* served apart from the lighter *mulatos* and *pardos*. Significantly, even officers were drawn almost exclusively from the free-colored racial categories, giving added racial independence from white and *mestizo* units. Free-colored companies of the independent type were most commonly found in the colony's major cities, like Puebla, Campeche, Mérida, Veracruz, Valladolid, and Guadalajara. With fairly large and diverse populations, these centers were logical areas to possess militia forces that were stratified along racial lines.

The third major type of militia unit that bore free-colored participants were those of the "integrated type." Not specifically based on racial premises or quotas, the racial composition of these forces was subject to wide variation, depending upon constantly shifting, regional demographic realities. In the rural towns of the Pacific and Gulf coasts, free-colored participation

in these types of companies ran extremely high. For instance, in 17<sup>th</sup> century Papantla, located along the northern portion of the Gulf coast of Mexico, free-coloreds came to comprise almost the totality of the town's sixty soldiers, including officers. The situation persisted through the opening decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, where by 1749, nearly all of the 300 soldiers were *pardos* and *morenos*.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere along the coasts, the percentage of free-coloreds serving in integrated units frequently numbered between 70-90%, with all but the highest officers being drawn from the *pardo* and *moreno* groups.<sup>13</sup>

The period between the 1670s and 1762 was arguably among the most instrumental for the solidification, elaboration, and articulation of expressly free-colored demands within the militia framework. Some of this had to do with an increase in the meaning of militia service for its participants. Prior to these years, militia duty was primarily a casual affair. Companies congregated only a handful of times per year, and those that met most frequently did so at quarterly intervals, uniting once every four months for training purposes.<sup>14</sup> Apart from making emergency musters to repel pirate raids and Indian attacks, the other major responsibility for free-colored soldiers in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century entailed gathering at their headquarters towns during Easter and Christmas to perform ceremonial marches. Additionally, the troops maintained security details during these holiday seasons to tame the drunken revelry that normally occurred. Prior to 1670, the free-colored militia in most locations also had very little social impact in terms of its privileges. Many of the benefits and rights that I discussed earlier were simply non-existent. For instance, the characteristic tribute and tax exemptions, veritable hallmarks of free-colored service, were not in effect except for in the extreme southern Gulf port of Campeche. Most military *fuero* privileges were equally absent for the rank and file. Even ascension into the commissioned grades was jealously guarded in several cities and towns. Whereas after 1670, Mexico's blacks would acquire posts of truly illustrious stature, prior to that time there were few free-colored officers holding a position above the captaincy.

The 1670s through the 1720s witnessed dramatic change for the free-colored forces. To begin with, after a daring and successful pirate raid was made on Veracruz in 1683, the colonial government provided for the expansion of the number of operable companies. In the diocese of Puebla, which was one of the zones most threatened by the attack, free-colored soldiers appeared in the fighting forces of nearly 50 towns and cities. The expansion process continued elsewhere as other raids were made. In New Galicia, there were 23 operating free-colored companies in place, possessing nearly 1,400 men, by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly during these years, free-coloreds even came to play open roles in militia units that were supposedly reserved exclusively for whites. When emergency situations arose, the more well-to-do *españoles* resorted to hiring replacements to fill their posts. Free-coloreds and *mestizos* drawn from the lower classes

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<sup>12</sup>AGN, I.G. 488-A, Ildefonso Arias de Saavedra to Dn. Pedro Mendinueta, January 15, 1788.

<sup>13</sup>AGN, I.G., vol. 231-B, Luis Bermudo Sorzano, 1763; AGN, I.G., vol. 490-A, Aug. 9, 1766, Gorostiza to Villaba; AGN, I.G., vol. 490-A, Gorostiza to Marques de Croix, Oct. 17, 1766; AGN, I.G., vol. 490-A, Gorostiza to Villaba, Oct., 1766; and AGN, I.G., vol. 484-A, Tomas Gil de Onzue to Martin Mayorga, June 18, 1781.

<sup>14</sup>Hoffman, The Spanish Crown, 40.

<sup>15</sup>AGN, I.G. 252-B, Don Nicolas Lopez Padilla, October 13, 1772, Guadalajara; AGN, I.G. 46-A, Pedro Montesinos de Lara, Puebla, October 14, 1758.

were among the soldiers of choice for stand-in duty. As the numerical presence of free-colored soldiers increased throughout the colony, and especially along the key strategic coastal sites, crown administrators felt prodded to concede benefits to the militiamen in order to retain a loyal and reliable defense force. Between 1710-1720, negotiations along these lines resulted in the conferral of the colonelcy to the free-colored militia, a rank that brought a measure of significantly increased autonomy to Mexico's free-colored forces. Based out of Mexico City and Puebla, by the 1720s, the free-colored colonel had achieved the equivalent status of military inspector. He alone was commissioned to organize, supervise, train, and inspect all of the free-colored companies of the independent type throughout the viceroyalty. Among the many documents he carried with him in retinue was a special letter stating that he was to receive "all the assistance, favor and support that he will need [for the task]," without molestation from local governments.<sup>16</sup> The level of autonomy that the free-colored militia possessed after the 1720s lasted briefly until 1762, when, with the advent of the Bourbon military reforms, veteran cadres of white officers were stationed inside each free-colored battalion for training and monitoring purposes.

Apart from the physical expansion of the companies and their greater autonomy over internal affairs, the period from 1670 through the 1720s was also a time when the range of militia duties began to multiply considerably, encompassing a host of non-military related tasks. This transformed militia duty from being a merely casual affair, to being one with concrete, almost daily responsibilities in many locations. For example, free-colored in all types of units were called upon to fulfill an array of municipal obligations, such as patrolling city streets between the hours of dusk and dawn. Militiamen also ran errands for provincial governors, escorted silver trains across treacherous terrain, collected taxes, and even provided mail service for the colony's most isolated regions.

As the soldiers responsibilities increased, so did their visibility. Particularly in rural coastal areas, the political involvement of soldiers grew markedly. In the Gulf coast community of Acayucan, years of political participation produced a situation whereby in the 1750s, the town's free-colored militiamen had grown wholly divided in their loyalties. Some favored the provincial governor's policies of town management, while others staunchly supported the local priest's dictates and designs. Being militiamen, factions of free-colored support sometimes led to the overt use of arms, as occurred in the late 1750s and early 1760s, when the free-colored militia contingent who supported the priest conspired to remove a number of political prisoners from jail. In actuality, there were many towns like Acayucan in colonial Mexico. This is to say that there were several communities which were heavily populated by free-colored and where the militia's involvement in politics was pronounced. Indeed, in the colony's central coastal lowlands, some accounts for the 18<sup>th</sup> century reveal that the free-colored population outnumbered whites by a ratio of 10:1.<sup>17</sup> In such settings, colonial officials were almost pressed to rely upon some measure of local free-colored expertise for affairs to run smoothly, especially in cases where those who assumed office were unfamiliar with their provinces.

Since many *pardo* and *moreno* militia officers were well-known and prominent figures in their communities, by courting militia favor, administrators and clergymen built alliances that

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<sup>16</sup>AGN, Civil, vol. 158, pt 7, exp. 16, 1742, Puebla, fol. 8v.

<sup>17</sup>Cook and Borah, Essays in Population History: Mexico and the Caribbean (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), 2:190-197.

touched the deep, grassroots areas of their jurisdictions, often bringing into sway soldiers who lived in the most remote fringes of their respective provinces. Almost like Indian *caciques*, the free-colored corps performed a mediating function between what administrators perceived to be a broad and cohesive *pardo* community, and what the free-colored understood to be the colonial state. It is important to note that in most official contexts, blacks, while normally discussed in implicitly collective terms, were not normally assigned the same degree of internal cohesion as attributed to Indians living communally in *pueblos de indios*. Vagrancy, loitering, and rootlessness, were the traditional images and adjectives seen repeatedly in state documents pertaining to *mulatos*, *pardos*, and *morenos*. However, when blacks were discussed in relation to the militia, there was a different tone. While discussions of free-colored aimlessness could still abound, these might be counterbalanced with discussions of a militia-inspired, structural integrity among the their race. Consequently, a supposedly vagrant population could simultaneously be discussed as territorially rooted, thanks to its militia ties. Ultimately, therefore, I believe that the militia's presence, and the strides made in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century towards providing the militia with more responsibilities and meaning, actually served to increase the plausibility of an existing, formal *pardo* community in the eyes of the state.

On the flip side, free-colored participation in the corps could increase black self-perceptions of racial solidarity, especially when layered with opportunities for obtaining collective political or economic gains. As the militia institution underwent changes in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the prospects for racial bonding along these lines gathered strength. Take the case of Tamiagua, another coastal community along the Gulf coast. Here, free-colored residents readily referred to themselves as the *vecindad de pardos libres militares* during the first three decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Quite literally, this meant the "community of free *pardo* militiamen." Taking its cue from the town's free-colored residents, colonial bureaucrats in Mexico City adopted the nomenclature to refer to Tamiagua's blacks as well. Interestingly, while a significant number of the town's free-colored population was enrolled in the militia's rosters, not everyone belonged to a military family. Yet the term encompassed civilians and militiamen alike. A quick historical glance reveals that the decision of Tamiagua's free-colored to present themselves as the *vecindad de pardos libres militares* emanated from their long-standing efforts to secure fishing rights in the town's outlying rivers. Since the 1640s, free-colored had been embroiled in legal struggles with successive *alcaldes mayores*, community whites, and Indians to acquire sufficient river access that reflected their dominant percentage of the town's population. Over the years, the sustained conflicts had brought the town's *pardos* together and actually gave meaning to race, since free-colored began to define themselves oppositionally in relation to the other racial groups vying for river control. This led to the production of some rather interesting, *pardo*-written histories about their evolution in the town, with accounts stretching back into the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But until the 1730s, free-colored arguments were largely ineffective in bringing about the policy changes that they desired. Even after legal victories had been achieved between 1644-1661, local officials continued to monopolize the town's economic resources by disproportionately allowing river access to Tamiagua's whites and Indians. It became evident that it would take a harder-edged approach for free-colored to secure greater control.<sup>18</sup>

Understanding the situation, free-colored began using the influence of the militia towards enhancing their image before the state, particularly during the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries,

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<sup>18</sup>AGN, Tierras, vol. 1458, exp. 7, 1-97v.



when the institution itself began to mature. Tamiagua's *pardos* completely understood that they were more likely to receive supportive attention from crown bureaucrats if they fashioned themselves as a tightly knit *vecindad* of *pardo* soldiers, rather than as ordinary civilian blacks. At the same time, at the local level, free-colored actively used the militia as an organized strong-arm to thwart threats by local authorities. In 1710, free-colored militiamen organized a rebellion, freed prisoners, confronted and wounded the *teniente de justicia*, and avoided punishment for their actions by paying a bribe of 1000 *pesos*. The combination of altering their image at the viceregal level, and exercising raw militia power at the local level, produced a greater cohesiveness amongst Tamiagua's *pardos* that was racially bound. As a testament to the success of their machinations, the free-colored were issued full river rights in 1732. In some documents, they were conferred these rights not just as *pardos*, but explicitly as the *vecindad de pardos militares*, re-emphasizing the role that the combination of race and military status played in their winning arguments. In my estimation, the major lesson to be learned from Tamiagua is that while race, in this case *pardoness*, often assumed meaning outside of the military context (keep in mind that in Tamiagua *pardoness* was intimately linked to the struggle over fishing rights), the insertion of military service and militia ties provided a distinct political edge and enhanced the commitment for many to associate with race.<sup>19</sup>

Let us now return to the happenings from 1670-1762, to further examine their effect on the free-colored militia. The period not only witnessed an expansion of free-colored militia companies, duties, and political involvement, but also an increase in militia privileges, providing the institution with more social impact. Contrary to popular belief, benefits were not simply doled out to the soldiers. Rather, they were secured through legal petitions initially launched by the soldiers themselves, in conjunction with the advice of their hired legal aides. The negotiation process provided the militiamen with considerable legal savvy. More importantly, the appeals assumed racial overtones that bespoke of their outlook on racial affiliations.

Tribute exemption was among the most important privileges to be secured by the soldiers. Apart from Campeche, the first exclusions were acquired in 1679 by captains Agustín Torres and Manuel Fernández Morgado for the militia companies in the port of Veracruz. In their arguments to the Real Audiencia, the two officers stressed that free-colored military services were rendered voluntarily and without pay. Furthermore, the men in their units furnished their own weapons and uniforms, making the militia financially independent of the royal treasury. All of these costs weighed heavily on the soldiers who were said to be poor. Moreover, being located in the port of Veracruz had advantageously placed the militiamen in frequent contact with sailors who kept them abreast of happenings throughout the Atlantic World. Thanks to this source of news, the captains added that they were well-aware that free-colored militiamen in Santo Domingo, Havana, Campeche and Guatemala, had already been granted tribute relief. Following their statements, a full investigation was called into the matter. On July 10, 1679, after three years of inquiry, the soldiers' tribute exemption request was granted.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>AGN, Californias, vol. 58, exp. 1, fs. 1-5; AGN, General de Parte, vol. 33, exps. 77-78, fs. 68-87; AGN, Tributos, vol. 40, exp. 11, fs. 182-192v; Recopilacion de Leyes, Libro VII, Titulo V, fol. 287v; and AGN, Reales Cédulas Originales, vol. 11, exp. 113, fs. 316-317. This last document intimates that the tribute exemption process may have been underway as early as 1669 in Veracruz, sparked by the appeals of militia captains Diego Perez and Francisco de Torres. However, the preponderance of evidence from other sources confirms the 1676 petition was the definitive push that secured the privilege.

The successful bid for tribute exemption in Veracruz sparked an immediate tide of requests for similar exclusions throughout the Gulf coast region. First were the petitions of soldiers in Acayucan, representing the province of Guazacualco.<sup>21</sup> These were followed by Guachinango (1679), Papantla (1688), Tabasco (1691), and eventually the town of Jalapa (1697), among others. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, exemptions had been granted to select locations along the Pacific coast.<sup>22</sup> What characterizes all of the petitions is that every successful request took the form of individual contracts between the crown and the free-colored inhabitants of a specific town or region.<sup>23</sup> Royal officials preferred handling matters in piecemeal fashion, reviewing situations case by case, and granting exclusions on the merits of each request. Often, the initial appeal for exemption would originate from a *cabecera* (head town), and then be applicable to several locations within a province. In the majority of cases, the exclusions were said to last indefinitely, although there are some instances where contracts lasted for just a few years.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, there were regional differences as to who was included in the exemption. But in almost every case, over time, the militiamen's wives and children were eventually relieved.

The most successful appeals followed the lines of argument laid out by captains Torres and Fernández Morgado. The crown was approached with great humility, the cumbersome burden of bearing tribute was highlighted, and a list of militia deeds, such as struggles against Indians and pirates were featured. Generally speaking, the crown followed a policy of issuing dispensations to areas that could be categorized as frontier zones—meaning the most susceptible to attack. This included both coasts and the northern borderlands. Interior locations, like Mexico City and Puebla, were granted relief on the score that they could prove that they were important towards port defense in a reinforcement capacity.

Tribute exemption had a galvanizing effect on militia participation and free-colored behavior. In many of the rural areas where the dispensation was placed into effect, free-colored joined the corps as never before. Given the fact that prior to the 1760s, there were no limits on troop enrollment, entire communities were said to be on roster, from youths who were well under age, to the elderly and decrepit. Even men who lived well over 30 leagues distance from the nearest headquarters town claimed militia status, although they clearly lived too far to render effective service.<sup>25</sup> In truth, the general increase in militia participation was the first step in a series of processes by which blacks began to reinterpret the military exemption as applying to all free-colored, including those of non-militia status. There were also individuals who joined the militia briefly, perhaps for a week, and then quickly abandoned ranks, later claiming to tax collectors that

<sup>21</sup>AGN, I.G., vol. 492-A, exp. 3, Testimonio de las diligencias practicadas en el superior gobierno por representacion que hicieron a su ex.a los pardos y demas milicianos de la provincia de Goazacoalcos sobre la reeleccion de pasar al puerto de Veracruz cada que haiga novedad de hostilidades, por los fundamentos que expresan, 1767; and AGN, I.G., Tributos, vol. 40, exp. 11, fs. 167-233.

<sup>22</sup>AGN, Tributos, vol. 34, exp. 7, fs. 163-173.

<sup>23</sup>The term “contract” is used in the petition of the militiamen of Tamiagua: AGN, Californias, vol. 58, exp. 1, fs. 23-62.

<sup>24</sup>AGN, Tributos, vol. 40, exp. 1, 1677. This document mainly discusses Indian exemption in Tabasco.

<sup>25</sup>AGN, I.G. 502-A, Thomas Roncali to Mayorga, Feb. 13, 1783, Acayucan.

they had once served and were entitled to relief. The frequency of such turnover in units along the Gulf and Pacific coasts reached a critical point in the 1770s. Local officials complained that although some towns had companies of only 50 men, up to 300 would be excluded from tribute on the grounds that they had once been soldiers.<sup>26</sup> Blacks further expanded militia benefits by redefining the scope of military privilege. Initial tribute exemptions were intended exclusively for the militiaman, his wife and children. After the 1760s, Bourbon reformers eliminated the privilege for children.<sup>27</sup> But in practice, entire kinship networks—including parents, siblings, nephews, and grandchildren—would successfully claim exclusion, citing that at least one of their family members was enrolled.<sup>28</sup>

Important to the process of expanding tribute privileges beyond the circle of soldiers were the actions of local officials. These included the *alcaldes mayores* and their subordinates who often accommodated the claims of free-colored civilians towards exemption status. Such allegations seem to contradict everything we currently know about the character of these officials, their profit driven behavior, and the nature of their offices. Presumably, they would have wanted to incorporate as many people as possible under tribute coverage to expand their regions' income and increase their opportunities for graft. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that our present understanding of the tribute practices of the *alcaldes mayores* comes mainly from research on Indian communities, where the majority of the work on colonial tribute policy has been done. Tribute collection among free-coloreds abided by a different set of rules, especially from those that functioned among Indians residing in *pueblos de indios*. Militia service played a crucial role in modifying the free-colored tribute arrangement. For instance, provincial administrators were sometimes nervous that if tribute exemption laws were interpreted too narrowly, free-coloreds would not provide military duties, especially sentinel and watchtower details, thereby leaving important regions defenseless and exposed to attack. Fears of sparking civil unrest and rebellion in their jurisdictions was another concern. In Acayucan during the 1780s, there was a real anxiety that since so many men were in the militia, any tinkering with the tax structure could trigger an uprising that would be difficult to subdue.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, members of the *justicia* and various *alcaldes mayores* did not want to compromise the important supplementary functions that the militiamen performed, such as armed escort services, prison guard duty, and night patrols.

Laxity in collecting tribute from free-coloreds stemmed greatest from worries over securing rural labor. The decline of slavery in colonial Mexico placed an added emphasis on seeking new workers for sugar and cotton plantations, haciendas, *ranchos*, etc. Some of these estates belonged to the *alcaldes mayores* themselves, who boasted diverse portfolios in their attempts to maximize profits during their short tenure. The partial recovery of the indigenous population in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, alongside emigrations from the *pueblos de indios* offered solutions to growing labor needs, but not adequately for all regions, as documents from

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<sup>26</sup>AGN, I.G., vol. 307-B, Juan de Riva to Martin Mayorga, Dec. 10, 1780, Mexico City.

<sup>27</sup>AGN, I.G., vol. 307-B, Posada to Mayorga, April 21, 1781, Mexico City.

<sup>28</sup>AGN, I.G., vol. 422-A, Francisco Cañaverl y Ponce to Martin Mayorga, April 4, 1781, Acapulco.

<sup>29</sup>AGN, I.G., vol. 492-A, Maritn de Solis, June, 2, 1679, Mexico City; AGN, I.G., vol. 502-A, Pedro Moscoso, Feb. 7, 1782, Acayucan.

Igualapa, Tabasco, and Xicayan, as well as studies of Morelos and Veracruz have made clear.<sup>30</sup> Considering these realities, many *alcaldes mayores* understood that the best means of attracting and retaining the free-colored labor source in their provinces was by being flexible with privileges. If free-coloreds were being charged tribute with zeal in one jurisdiction but not the next, experience taught that there would be mass migration to escape the region imposing the burden. Eventually, a mosaic-like system of regional privileges evolved in colonial Mexico. In areas where free-coloreds figured prominently into the rural population, and where they comprised an esteemed labor source, local officials were often more lenient in the application of colonial tribute laws that prejudiced blacks. A few examples include Chicontepec, Guachinango, Xicayan, Panuco, Tampico, Papantla, and Tehuantepec.<sup>31</sup> Again, tribute leniency mainly involved extending exemption to free-colored civilians by winking at their false claims of being soldiers.

What effect did this have upon the development of racial identity? For civilians, over time, leniency in the application of tribute laws caused tribute exemption to be viewed by blacks as a genuine legal right, institutionalized by custom if not by written law.<sup>32</sup> When reforms threatened to change tribute policies, civilians protested vociferously. Particularly in the period after 1762, both the advent of Bourbon military reforms in Mexico and a renewed interest in fiscal austerity brought tribute privileges under wholesale attack. Take the examples of Tepic and Sentispac

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<sup>30</sup>Cheryl English Martin, Rural Society in Colonial Morelos (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1985), 149-153; AGN, Padrones, vol. 18, fs. 209-305v; AGN, Californias, vol. 58, expediente formado a msta. de Don Felipe Izusquiza, gefe de las companias de caballeria de Xicayan sobre que no matriculen en los tributarios los que son soldados, 1780; AGN, Tributos, vol. 34, exps. 4-6, fs. 106-117v; AGN, Tributos, vol. 40, exp. 9, fs. 81-159v. In Veracruz, Patrick Carroll has traced a shift in labor patterns from slaves to free workers. He notes a strong transition from slave to free workers between 1630-1720, intensifying after 1720. However, a glance at Adriana Naveda Chavez's work on the 18 sugar haciendas registered in the area of Cordoba in 1788 reveal that although free-coloreds represented approximately 28% of the free-labor force, they comprised only 9% of total workers. Here, the majority of laborers continued to be slaves. In the smaller ranchos near Cordoba, of which 145 were registered in 1788, the percentage of free-coloreds was smaller, representing just over 7% of the labor force. None of the *ranchos* workers were slaves. The patterns found in Naveda Chávez's study are repeated further north in the Huasteca. Antonio Escobar notes that in 1743, almost half the hacienda residents were either *pardo* or *mulato*, the majority being slaves. In all, there were 878 hacienda residents, of which 132 were pardos and 392 mulatos. Of the mulatos, 277 were slaves. Interestingly, although slaves may have comprised the core workforce on haciendas in the Huasteca and near Cordoba, evidence suggests that the *alcaldes mayores* did not radically alter their disposition towards extending privileges to free-coloreds in these areas, for fear of losing those free-coloreds that did play important labor roles on these estates. References include: Carroll, Blacks in Colonial Veracruz, 61-78; Adriana Naveda Chavez-Ita, Esclavos negros en las haciendas azucareras de Cordoba Veracruz, 1690-1830 (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 1987), 54-55; Antonio Escobar Ohmestede, "La poblacion en el siglo XVIII y principios del siglo XIX, Conformacion de una sociedad multiétnica en las Huastecas?," in Población y estructura urbana en México, siglos XVIII y XIX, comp. Carmen Blázquez Domínguez, Carlos Contreras Cruz, and Sonia Pérez Toledo (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 1996), 277-291.

<sup>31</sup>For Guachinango see: AGN, Tributos vol. 40, exp. 11, fs. 167-233. Here, the *teniente general* suspended tribute payment in the late 1780s. The document also makes references to customary tribute exemptions in the jurisdictions of Papantla and Chicontepec. For Panuco and Tampico see: AGN, Tributos, vol. 40, exp. 15, fs. 270-74. For Xicayan see: AGN, Tributos, vol. 34, exp. 7, fs. 118-178v. For Tehuantepec see: AGN, Tributos, vol. 34, exp. 3, fs. 60-93. For discussion on Tabasco see: AGN, Tributos vol. 40, exp. 9, fs. 121-127.

<sup>32</sup>My thinking here is shaped by E.P. Thompson, Customs in Common, Studies in Traditional Popular Culture, (New York: The New Press, 1993).

during the late 1770s. Here, civilians had been accustomed to receiving tribute relief for nearly two decades. Free-colored militia units had been founded in these areas in 1753, with tribute clemency for civilians following shortly thereafter. When the crown tried to impose the tax with vigor in the early 1780s, civilians responded uproariously with the argument that they were duly exempt on account of the sheer fact that they were *pardos* and *morenos* who inhabited the coast. In this interesting example, civilians were claiming relief *because they were free-colored*s, whereas the crown held them accountable for tribute on these same grounds. In their writings, the civilians essentially saw no difference between themselves and the free-colored militiamen, who they described as “just the same.”<sup>33</sup> From their perspective, formal militia duty became a secondary criteria for tribute exemption. They lived in the same communities as the militiamen, were of the same caste, and contributed indirectly to the safety of the region. In their estimation, as elsewhere in the coastal areas of Mexico, these had become sufficient terms for free-colored civilians to advocate exclusion.

A somewhat different dynamic transpired among the militiamen. During the Bourbon reform period after 1762, militiamen experienced almost as many challenges to their tax privileges as did their civilian counterparts. This was because many of the military reforms were aimed at curtailing the number of free-colored soldiers who could staff the colony’s militia forces. Since tribute exemption was a privilege that was enjoyed equally by all soldiers, regardless of class and military grade, when tampered with, the response generated quick, unified action from the ranks. In the Pacific coast community of Guajolotitlan, militia protests further joined in concert with civilian tax agitation. In fact, during the late 1780s, active duty militiamen under the command of Policarpio de los Santos successfully encouraged civilians, along with groups of forcibly retired militiamen, to formally resist tax collection. Ordinarily, militia-based protests against tribute collection did not assume the form of overt, race-based defenses for tax exclusion, such as those seen among civilian free-colored in Tepic and Sentispac. Militiamen had acquired exemption as a valid benefit in return for their military services to the crown. Therefore, there was no need for them to insert race into their arguments to preserve the privilege. But Guajolotitlan shows that militiamen were not averse towards expanding the scope of their reprisals by acting jointly, and even supervising the protests of free-colored civilians.

When engaged in this role, militia duty assumed a different function. Indeed, when the militiamen’s rights were challenged alongside those of free-colored civilians, sometimes the militiamen perceived of themselves as protectors of the broader free-colored population. In Acayucan for instance, when a free-colored soldier from the company of Lt. Juan Domingo Ramos was abusively whipped by provincial authorities, the officer expressed: “Never before in Acayucan has a *pardo* been whipped.”<sup>34</sup> Although the soldier was a militiaman, the infringement upon his rights threatened to violate the status of all free-colored in the community. To curb future abuses, Lt. Domingo Ramos retaliated by planning a small confrontation with the local authorities. In short, what I am saying is that the militiamen’s defense of military privileges in general, and tribute immunities in particular, opened numerous possibilities for collaborative activities with civilians. The underlying goals of these activities involved the collective protection of self-perceived, free-colored rights at large.

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<sup>33</sup>AGN, I.G., vol. 307-B, Juan de Riva to Martin Mayorga, Dec. 10, 1780, Mexico City.

<sup>34</sup>AGN, Civil, legajo 24, exp. 156, 1762, Acayucan, fol. 32.

In closing, let me briefly summarize the major points of my presentation. The free-colored militia began tenuously in Mexico as an institution with few responsibilities and little social impact. As the militia matured in the latter portion of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, its participants gained a significant degree of autonomy over their internal affairs and began to press for added privileges. The accruing of military-related benefits and the increase in the number of prominent ranks open to blacks worked towards substantiating their place within the colonial defense scheme. As a result, the militiamen acquired political capital and leverage, which they then used to enhance their position in Mexican society. In many areas, particularly along the rural coasts, militia earned privileges held important implications for civilian free-coloreds, as they found themselves acquiring many of the rights that were supposed to be reserved solely for soldiers. Through garnering privileges, militiamen and civilians altered their legally assigned status as *pardos* and *morenos*. Rather than “passing,” or engaging in social whitening, a reverse process occurred. Through earning rights such as tribute exclusion, free-coloreds felt a confidence to express themselves in racial terms, since being free-colored no longer carried the traditional legal baggage associated with their race. Their confidence was seen in their official dealings with viceregal administrators, provincial governors, and local mayors. With the advent of the Bourbon military reforms between 1762-1793, a host of challenges to the military establishment and privilege structure were issued. During this period, racial defenses for tribute relief escalated among civilians, and protests for maintaining privileges intensified among militiamen, some of which led to unified militia/civilian actions in support of their self-perceived, free-colored rights.