

Sebastian Rodriguez Brito

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This is part of a class at the University of Washington taught by Dr. Quintard Taylor, Jr.

MARRIAGE IN COLONIAL NEW MEXICO: THE RODRIGUEZ SAGA

In the following account historian Dedra McDonald introduces both Sebastian Rodriguez Brito and provides a glimpse into the fluid social relations of multiethnic and multiracial Colonial New Mexico.

In 1689, Sebastian Rodriguez Brito, an African from Luanda in the nation of Angola and Antonia Naranjo, daughter of a New Mexico mulatto family, initiated marital proceedings in the jurisdiction of El Paso del Norte. Their plans to wed, however, soon faltered. Rodriguez's former employer, Governor Pedro Reneros de Posada, claimed that Rodriguez had already married a woman in Veracruz. In response, Rodriguez insisted, "I am free and single," and that Reneros' allegations were false. Rodriguez brought forward three witnesses to attest to his bachelorhood. Those witnesses, Juan Luis, Francisco Romero de Pedraza, Esteban de Berdiguil, and Antonio Montoya, all living at El Paso del Norte, did not help matters much. They could only repeat what they had heard from Governor Reneros while working from him. Juan Luis reported that Sebastian Rodriguez informed Reneros of his plans to marry Antonia Naranjo and that Reneros expressed pleasure at this news, "preferring this step to [Rodriguez's] whoring around." A few days later, Luis explained, Reneros told Rodriguez that he could not get married because he must continue to work as Reneros' servant when he returned from El Paso del Norte to New Spain. Francisco Romero de Pedraza's testimony also provided little support for Sebastian's claims. Romero had overheard Governor Reneros say that Sebastian was married and that he should return to Mexico City... Romero added that Reneros had summoned Antonia Naranjo's mother, Maria Romero, to inform her of Sebastian's status as a married man. The third witness, Esteban de Berdiguil, declared that two Mexico City merchants claimed that Rodriguez had already married and requested that he "be put in manacles and returned to his wife." Finally, Antonio Montoya corroborated the previous testimonies. The marriage did not take place.

Three years later, in May 1692, Sebastian Rodriguez proved his status as a single man when a Franciscan testified regarding a handwritten letter dated April 14, 1692, in which Governor Reneros de Posada admitted that Rodriguez had not previously married. Rodriguez, age 40 in 1692, had planned another marriage, this time to widow Isabel Olguin, an espanola and 44 years of age. With the matter of his marital status clear, Rodriguez could and did marry Olguin. Their wedding took place June 4, 1692.

Isabel Olguin died within four years of the marriage, which brought Sebastian to initiate yet another marriage, this time with Maria de la Cruz, mestiza and servant of Lieutenant General Luis Granillo. This marriage may not actually have taken place, for less than one year later, on May 2, 1697, Sebastian initiated a fourth marriage, with Juana de la Cruz, coyota (the offspring of parents of mixed heritages including mulatto, mestizo, Indian, and Spanish) of Las Salinas. Their marriage took place May 12, 1697...

Sebastian Rodriguez's fascinating life story provides more than entertainment. Rodriguez, a free black African from Angola whose parents were bozales, or African-born slaves, lived and worked on the far northern frontier of New Spain in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He intermarried, or at least attempted to marry, women representing the spectrum of racial categories that existed in colonial New Mexico. Moreover, he exhibited economic mobility as he moved from a position as a servant to drummer and soldier, as well as landholder. In all of these aspects, Sebastian Rodriguez's experience suggest that the history of colonial New Mexico must include the stories of black and mulattoes, free and enslaved, and that the region's geographical isolation allowed them unprecedented economic and social opportunities.

Source: Dedra S. McDonald, "Black Drummers and Mulatto Slaves: African Descendants in Colonial New Mexico," Unpublished paper presented at the Rocky Mountain Council on Latin American Studies Conference, 1995, pp. 1-4.

Rodríguez Brito, Sebastián (c.1642-c.1717)

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Native of West Africa, Sebastian Rodríguez Brito was one of a number of black freemen to join the ranks of the Spanish military during the time of the colonization of what is today the southwestern United States. While a free black man in Spanish America, he was able to navigate through this uncertain frontier social order, becoming symbolic of the malleable state of race relations in Colonial New Spain during that time.

While his birth in Luanda, Africa to Manuel Rodríguez and Maria Fernandez is confirmed through marriage testimonials, Brito's time of arrival in the Americas is not known. He does appear in 1686 as a domestic servant to New Mexico Governor Reneros de Posada. During his stay with Posada, he developed his skills as a military drummer, an occupation that would allow for his social mobility. Two years later as a freeman and resident, he

became commissioned as town crier and garrison percussionist of the northern New Spain outpost of El Paso.

By 1691, however, he had joined the forces of the new governor, Don Diego de Vargas, in an attempt to wrest the northern portions of New Mexican colonial lands from indigenous Pueblo tribes. Brito led columns of troops through drills, opened ceremonies and proclamations, and carried forces with the beat of his instrument. Brito's drumming became an omnipresent feature among the Spanish soldiers, both in El Paso and at the presidio at Santa Fe, becoming part of the victory procession after the reconquest of Pueblo lands.

As a free black man, Brito engaged in numerous affairs with women of various racial backgrounds. Among them were failed marriage attempts with a New Mexico mulatta named Antonia Naranjo in 1689 and a mestiza, Maria de la Cruz, who had

been a servant to a Spanish military officer. The former engagement was a subject of controversy as Brito's past "employer," de Posada, claimed that any marriage would be deemed illegal due to Brito already being legally bound to a woman in Veracruz. In May of 1697, Brito again attempted matrimony, this time successfully. Her name was Juana de la Cruz, a Salinas woman boasting a family racial background based on Spanish, indigenous, and African heritages. With de la Cruz, Brito would father two children, Melchor and Margarita, the former becoming a founding member of the Santa Fe village of Las Trampas.

Having settled near the garrison of Santa Fe, Brito became a landowner and continued his work as a drummer for the Spanish colonial authorities, playing in further forays with native peoples. His death occurred sometime around 1717.

Sources:

Fray Angelico Chavez, "De Vargas' Negro Drummer," in John M. Carroll, ed., *The Black Military Experience in the American West* (New York: Liveright Publishing 1971); Dedra S. McDonald, "Black Drummers and Mulatto Slaves: African Descendants in Colonial New Mexico," Unpublished paper presented at the Rocky Mountain Council on Latin American Studies Conference, 1995; John L Kessell, Rick Hendricks, Meredith D. Dodge, eds., *By Force of Arms : The Journals of Don Diego de Vargas, New Mexico, 1691-93* (Albuquerque : University of New Mexico Press, 1992); <http://www.cabq.gov/>.

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