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Purchasing the Status: Religious Confraternities in Late-Colonial Venezuela

Andreina Soto
History

In the year 1756, the ordinance of the confraternity San Juan Bautista, established in the city of Caracas, arrived at the Council of Indies for their final approval.¹ This document was written by administrator (*mayordomo*) Juan Isidro Gutiérrez de Medina who, stating his condition of free-black (*moreno libre*), represented the interests of his brothers (*cofrades*) to create this organization. Juan Isidro issued the document as a way to guarantee “the spiritual and economic government of the confraternity,” which is shown in his emphasis to address religious as well as administrative matters. The document also indicates the relevance of determining the socioracial and economic conditions of the principal members (*cofrades principales* or *supernumerarios*). The ordinances established that these brothers would only be like Juan Isidro, black men (*morenos*), “of good life and shape, timorous and devotees, no women, no handicapped, nor those sick in bed.”² More importantly, these men had to prove their commitment to the confraternity by providing an almsgiving of four *pesos* and one pound of wax.³ The monetary contribution granted these men decision-making power, the right to vote for administrative positions, and visible participation in the religious practices of the brotherhood. The payment also guaranteed the proper passing of their souls to the

¹ Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Santo Domingo, 733.

² *Ibid.*, f. 1v.

³ In Spanish-America, one *peso* of silver was equal to eight *reales*. Based on an inventory from a commercial establishment (*bodega*) owned by Alberto Reverón in the city of La Victoria (1803), we can estimate four *pesos* was the value for household items such as two pairs of metal chandeliers or forty pounds of almonds. Other items on the list included two crystal bottles for one *peso* and one *real*, copper items worth in six *pesos*, one pound and a half of cinnamon for six *pesos*, and thirteen and a half *almudes* (boxes of 10-11 cm³) of cocoa, with a total value of twenty *pesos* and two *reales*. José Rafael Lovera, *Historia de la Alimentación en Venezuela* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1998).

afterlife, since the confraternity provided the coffin and the necessary ornaments for the funerary rituals.⁴

In the same way as the confraternity of San Juan Bautista, different brotherhoods of the Province of Caracas also requested their legitimation by the Council of Indies. The structure of these ordinances was a repeated pattern in which the *calidad* (condition or quality) and the payment of almsgiving seem to have had an important role in determining the hierarchies and the level of participation in the confraternities. Taking into consideration this pattern, a question emerges: does the organization of confraternities reveal new dynamics and categories within the socioracial structure of the Province of Venezuela? Even though the ordinances show a theoretical functioning of these organizations, the relationship between socioeconomic aspects and spiritual practices seems to suggest brotherhoods were not just spaces for religious devotion. Instead, the ordinances of the confraternities suggest that brotherhoods in the Province of Caracas served as social spaces that allowed for identity formation and bonds of solidarity based on economic and socioracial terms. Furthermore, since they were organizations opened to different levels of the colonial society, it is possible to assume they served as avenues for social mobility during a period when the purchase of whiteness seemed restricted by the local power of the creole elite.⁵

The following paper will analyze the ordinances of different confraternities founded in the Province of Venezuela during the eighteenth century to understand the relation between religious organizations and socioeconomic mobility. In my research, I will explore the construction of socioracial categories and power relations in Venezuela's colonial society, and the relevance of almsgiving to creating forms of alliance and exclusion in the conformation of confraternities. More than a charitable action, the payment of alms was a financial transaction that provided revenues, which the brotherhoods utilized to fund their activities. This payment also created internal hierarchies within the confraternity and channels of social mobility for the brothers. Finally, I will explore how the almsgiving also created a different status in the afterlife. Confraternities in the Province of Venezuela controlled both the material and the spiritual elements necessary for funerary rituals, and the amounts each person paid created multiple ways in which the brothers proceeded with the postmortem practices of the deceased members.

The ordinances analyzed in this paper offer a look into “the conventions that confraternities observed, from mundane matters such as protocols for particular

⁴ AGI, Santo Domingo, 733, f. 4.

⁵ Twinam has an interesting discussion about the extent and effectiveness of *Gracias al Sacar* for mulattos and *pardos* in the Province of Venezuela. Ann Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness. Pardos, Mulattos, and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies* (California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 29-32.

circumstances, to such formal concerns as memberships in obligations and internal governing policies.”⁶ These documents provide a theoretical perspective of the way these individuals created their corporate identity, which is why it is important to keep in mind their values and limitations. First, these ordinances were written by professional scribes, who were familiar with the rules pertaining to confraternities, “including those of clerics and aristocrats.”⁷ Hence, we must be aware that these documents represented a communal identity and contained the voices of multiple actors—*mayordomos*, principal brothers, attorneys, and scribes—were all involved in their production. Even though it is impossible to discern the degree of agency of each individual, these documents reflect a common thread of legal thinking and the main interests of the colonial confraternities. Additionally, since the main goal of these documents was to gain the approval of the Bishop and the Council of Indies, they were carefully crafted to please their readers. These constitutions might not necessarily hold the everyday life of the *cofrades*, but they do show the ways in which they defined themselves in socioracial and economic terms, and how they created a group identity with legal, religious, and financial faculties. Hence, by analyzing the social and economic dynamics created through the confraternities, this study provides a different dimension for understanding the social fabric forming in the Province of Venezuela from the perspective of local organizations and monetary exchange.

Socioracial Categories in Late-Colonial Venezuela

In her study about the *Gracias al Sacar*—a Spanish royal decree that freed individuals from the *casta* system with their legal recognition as “white” persons—historian Ann Twinam examines the relationship between race and racism as interrelated dimensions in the colonial identities. According to Twinam:

[Spanish America] was universalist and racist in its assignation of blackness as an inferior category justifying discrimination. It was constructionist in that it recognized variable statutes between white and black and brown and Spanish and African and Native and permitted movement among categories.⁸

⁶ Maureen Flynn, *Sacred Charity. Confraternities and Social Welfare in Spain, 1400-1700* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 8.

⁷ Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, 9.

⁸ Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*, 43.

Twinam's analysis examines the different elements that defined the social relations of Spanish-American groups, and highlights its changeable character and fluidity in the making of the Spanish Indies. Her study also exposes how this "malleability" was confronted with barriers of the colonial system in which different forms of differentiation based on the *calidad* or quality—based on the skin color, the purity of blood, and economic wealth—determined closed and hierarchical groups. The term *calidad* was used as a diagnostic strategy that was based on physiognomic constructs, such as the purity of blood and lineage, in order to distinguish between white and non-white individuals, and to grant social and civil prerogatives.⁹ Hence, when discussing socioracial categories in the colonial context, it is important to keep in mind the importance of the term *calidad* as the main *emic* category of social identification, which comprises physical, moral, and economic values.¹⁰ Historian Magaly Carrera, who examines portraiture and *casta* paintings in New Spain, also suggests the importance of the term *calidad* in understanding the social values behind these colonial paintings. For Carrera, *casta* paintings and portraiture were representations of the bodies and the social attributes of *emic* categories such as white (*blanco*), indigenous (*indio*), mixed-race (*mestizo*), and black (*negro/moreno*). These categories were based on ethnic and racial components, but they were also based on the construction of social, behavioral, and material markers.

In a context where imperial anxieties in Spain increased due to miscegenation in the Spanish Indies, the applications of socioracial boundaries, the composition of mechanism of evaluation and surveillance, and the legitimation of blood purity highlights the need for the colonial system to control the "hybrid bodies." While Carrera studies this phenomenon through colonial art in New Spain, there are other authors who have analyzed the functioning of these mechanisms through written records. For instance, Joanne Rappaport explores the legal disputes in New Granada and examines the significance and ambiguity of the

⁹ Carrera, *Imagining Identity*, 9; 13.

¹⁰ *Emic* and *etic* are terms developed in anthropological research to distinguish between the entities and processes of social life that are real and important to the individuals (*emic*) and processes the researchers are capable of explaining a person's thoughts and practices (*etic*). Like Ann Twinam and Magaly Carrera, I will use the term socioracial instead of race and ethnicity as our *etic* category, since it allows us to consider broader elements in the composition of identities in Spanish America, including physical attributes as well as moral, social, and economic conditions. Marvin Harris, "History and Significance of the Emic/Etic Distinction," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976): 329-350; Ann Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*; Magaly Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

category *mestizo*.¹¹ Rappaport argues that the adoption of certain *calidades* is part of a “speech act” that intertwines institutional impositions and individual/group perceptions.¹² Similarly to Twinam and Carrera, Rappaport explains that the analysis of the socioracial categories that define *calidad* is central to understanding how people negotiated and disputed their identities in the Spanish Indies. Rappaport maintains that the varied and changeable categories people used during their court testimonies shows the fluidity and malleability of the socioracial terms they applied to their identities during the colonial period. Therefore, Rappaport unveils how the varied use of categories such as *mestizo*, *mulato*, and *blanco* shows the agency of individuals in the construction of their own identities.

The Province of Venezuela was not exempt from the complex and ambiguous relations that existed throughout the social structure of Spanish-America. In this regard, Twinam offers a rich analysis of the historiography of Venezuela and maintains that the region is a very particular case, which makes scholars differ in their analysis of the social structure in colonial Venezuela.¹³ According to Twinam, the different interpretations of authors such as Frédérique Langué, Michael McKinley, Alí Enrique López Bohorque, Laureano Valenilla Lanz, and Arlene Díaz focus on particular aspects which produced diverse conclusions about the lack of tensions within Venezuela’s social structure, specifically whether they existed in the first place and, if so, for how long.¹⁴ According to Twinam, in Caracas, as in any other territory of Spanish-America, there were different socioracial groups who defied discriminatory legislations, who sought upward mobility by whitening, and who achieved economic success. At the same time, there was an urban elite organized in municipal councils to secure their own economic and social status; these two groups were often at odds with each other. The particularity of Caracas lies in the extreme nature of these two dimensions:

¹¹ Joanne Rappaport, *The Disappearing Mestizo. Configuring Difference in the Colonial New Kingdom of Granada* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

¹² *Ibid.* 66.

¹³ Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*, 205.

¹⁴ Frédérique Langué, *Aristócratas, honor y subversión en la Venezuela del siglo XVIII* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 2000); P. Michael McKinley, *Pre-Revolutionary Caracas: Politics, Economy, and Society 1777-1811* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alí Enrique López Bohorque, *Los ministros de la Audiencia de Caracas, 1786-1810* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1984); Laureano Valenilla Lanz, *Cesarismo democrático: Estudio sobre las bases sociológicas de la Constitución efectiva de Venezuela* (Caracas: Tipografía Garrido, 1961); Arlene Díaz, *Citizens, Patriarchs, and the Law in Venezuela, 1786-1994* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004). Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*, 205.

there was a substantial *pardo* presence; there had been significant mobility; and there existed intense repression. Such combination created an atmosphere where not only white but every caste category—*pardos*, *mulattos*, *tercerones*, *quarterones*, *quinterones*, *mestizos*, *zambos*, slaves, and Natives—engaged in exquisite calibrations of those genealogical linkages that created their distinctive designations.¹⁵

Twinam examines the tensions between the mixed-race population (*pardos*) and the white elites and exposes the limitations the Caracas council presented to the *pardos* in their quest to obtain *Gracias al Sacar* by the end of the eighteenth century. Her research also suggests that organizations such as guilds and militias were avenues that permitted social alliances for these subordinated groups, and channels to obtain local status and social cohesion. Based on this idea, it is also possible to consider religious confraternities as organizations that permitted socioeconomic transactions while using the legal frame of a religious institution. Historian Graciela Soriano, who studies the social structure of late-colonial Venezuela, explains that the social structure was based on the *casta* system, the purity of blood, and the lineage.¹⁶ She explains the importance of determining the “degree” of whiteness in order to establish social differences and social status. Even though socioracial terms such as white, *pardo*, *indio*, and black were part of the everyday language spoken in the province, Soriano states that the *casta* system is not sufficient enough to understand the colonial relations in the Province of Venezuela. For Soriano, the *casta* system intertwined with other structures and criteria in which the clergy, the nobility, and the state also created social, legal, and political distinctions among the population. Thus, there were emerging official figures that “consolidated the corporative organization of municipalities, urban guilds, communities, provinces, [and] universities, through the acquisition of subjective rights that translated in privileges, prerogatives, and immunities.”¹⁷ This dynamic character and the existence of emerging channels of mobility were built upon socioracial alliances and economic access. According to Soriano, this is evidenced by the increasing rate of *pardo* population, and how the local society established their own criteria and assessments based on color, dignity, and wealth.¹⁸

The fluidity of the socioracial terms and the negotiation of socioracial identities is evidenced in the ordinances of the confraternities in the Province of

¹⁵ Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*, 206.

¹⁶ Graciela Soriano, *Venezuela 1810-1830: Aspectos desatendidos de dos décadas* (Caracas: Cuadernos Lagoven, 1988), 39.

¹⁷ Soriano, *Venezuela 1810-1830*, 42.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 46.

Venezuela. These ordinances show how the socioracial categories, based on *calidad*, helped to construct a legal image for the confraternities, using a religious organization in order to obtain socioeconomic advantages. The ordinances also show how socioracial identification is a matter of visual, verbal, and written constructions that convey surveillance and self-representation. Take, for example, a request made by the confraternity of the *Inmaculada, Pura y Limpia Concepción*, located in La Victoria in 1766.¹⁹ The brotherhood, in the name of the neighbors and residents of the town, issued a petition to the Council of Indies and the Spanish King—who had the last say in the matter—asking for authorization to perform sacramental acts and mystic comedies. The brothers emphasized that these activities would increase their revenues, improve the adornment of the church, and deepen the devotion to the Virgin.²⁰ The official roster of members lists *Don* Joseph de Castro, captain of company of whites and the militiamen *Don* Atonio de Leon Siso, *Don* Thomas Joseph de Alarcon, *Don* Joseph Antonio Rodriguez y Pena, Diego Joseph Diaz, and Gines Franco Morales. The petition states the *calidad* (white) of some members and addresses the military titles they held. But, even though these socioracial and official terms would have increased the socioracial status of the brotherhood, there are also signers with names lacking any specific category or titles (e.g. “Don”). At first glance, it seems the confraternity included a variety of *calidades*, thus permitting socioracial integration between whites and the *castas*. Moreover, the petitioners declare the poverty of the confraternity and the inability of its members to augment the rents with the almsgivings they received. On the surface, it seems the low rents obey the flexibility of the brotherhoods that, in theory, admitted persons of different socioracial categories. However, this also reflects certain ambiguities, as socioracial terms like “white” did not correspond with the ideal of economic status or social boundaries—the brotherhood defines itself as poor and lists white male and persons of unknown *calidad*. The file suggests that the *calidad* of its principal members could provide socioracial status, but the lack of economic sustaining weakened their identity as a religious institution.

The financial aspect even turned into a matter of concern for the Spanish King who, before making any final decision, wanted more information about the composition of the brotherhood. The King ordered the Council of Indies and the Bishop of Caracas to provide socioracial and economic information that identified the *calidad* of the brotherhood. He asked “what kind of people forms [the brotherhood], and which are the excises of devotion employed, which rents or

¹⁹ AGI, Caracas, 206.

²⁰ AGI, Caracas, 206.

effects owned.”²¹ The file does not contain further answers to these questions, but a prosecutor of the Council of Indies denied the petition, citing the inappropriate character of the acts the brothers wanted to perform. The verdict also emphasized the necessity of gathering more information about the confraternities of the Province and urged the Governor and Captain General to send copies of the ordinances to the Council of Indies. Like the King, this prosecutor demanded information about the *calidad* of the members, which devotional practices they performed, the nature of their rents, and the fee for admission.²² His concerns reflect the necessity of surveillance.

This document shows the different levels necessary to understand the use of socioracial categories negotiated in the confraternities in the Province of Venezuela, first, as a method of surveillance in the midst of an ambiguous society, in which ethnic, social, cultural, and economic factors determined the identity of individuals and groups; and secondly as a way to show how common people used socioracial categories and economic transactions to form associations. As Rappaport mentions, “socioracial identification was counterbalanced by social interaction and [points] to the multiple, overlapping, and ever-changing circles.”²³ Hence, the sole reliance on racial categories and the prevalence of *castas* as a fixed and closed system lost sight of other mechanisms in which “diversity was managed and negotiated in the colonial period.”²⁴ Taking into consideration Graciela Soriano’s argument, it is feasible to assume that confraternities in the Province of Venezuela were organizations that took part in the variable dynamics of the period. Furthermore, the analysis of confraternities in the Province of Venezuela permits us to understand the interrelation between socioracial categories, based on *calidad*, and economic transactions, with the practice of almsgiving.

Corporate Identity: Confraternities, Almsgiving, and the Purchase of Status

Confraternities were religious institutions that served to channel popular devotion in medieval Spain and were subsequently imported to the Americas. The Catholic Church defined confraternities as the voluntary association of laic devotees under the name of a religious avocation, to venerate a patron saint and inspire greater consecration. The main functions of the brotherhoods usually centered on charitable practices, and the funerary rites of its members and supporters.²⁵

²¹ *Ibid.* f. 2v.

²² *Ibid.* f. 1v.

²³ Rappaport, *Disappearing Mestizo*, 72.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 209.

²⁵ Baltazar Enrique Porras, Ana Hilda Duque, Niria Suárez, and Raquel Morales, *El patrimonio eclesiástico venezolano: pasado y futuro*, v. 3 (Caracas: Universidad Católica Andrés Bello,

According to Baltazar Enrique Porras et al., the evangelization process of the indigenous population in Venezuela relied on the formation of brotherhoods, whose members “enjoyed partial and plenary indulgences, which guaranteed an afterlife next to the Lord.”²⁶ These authors maintain there is a difference between the indigenous and the urban confraternities in Venezuela. The indigenous brotherhoods were imposed upon indigenous societies aiming to exterminate native religion by indoctrination and “responding to the political organization imposed by the Spanish Crown.”²⁷ The urban confraternities, usually formed by European settlers and their descendants, were a “necessity” for their members, recreating their Iberian customs and religion, which, at the same time strengthened power relations.

Nonetheless, brotherhoods through time did not limit their permeation into other groups and did not restrict themselves to religious practices. The most fundamental change in colonial cities was the inclusion of different socioracial groups beyond the limits of the white elites. This shows a certain degree of flexibility and reflects the local identities and social divisions that formed in Spanish-America.²⁸ Historian Ermila Troconis exposes this in-depth in her analysis of three black brotherhoods that operated in Caracas between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁹ Troconis explains that confraternities were a form of organization that permeated different sectors of society. Through their legal basis as religious organizations, the confraternities allowed individuals to create mechanisms of economic improvement. These brotherhoods helped their members gain a “certain degree of representativeness of their power as social groups, claiming them as prerogatives based on acquired rights, and in the certainty that they were responsible for the economic bonanza that characterized [them].”³⁰ Troconis suggests that the creation of confraternities reflects the “closed cores of ethnic groups, in which multiple degrees of social hierarchy are noticed.”³¹ But Troconis also argues that ethnic identity intertwines with economic factors, which exposes the permeability of these “closed cored groups” and permitted the

2007). José-Luis Salcedo Bastardo, *Historia fundamental de Venezuela* (Caracas: Ediciones de la Biblioteca, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1996)

²⁶ Porras et al, *patrimonio eclesiástico*, 62.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 63.

²⁸ Nicole von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers, Confraternities and Social Mobility for Afro-Mexicans* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2006), 2.

²⁹ Ermila Troconis, “Tres cofradías de negros en la Iglesia de San Mauricio de Caracas,” *Montalbán 4* (1976): 339-376. All quotations from this article have been translated from the Spanish by the author.

³⁰ Troconis, “Tres cofradías de negros,” 340.

³¹ *Ibid.* 339.

admission of *pardos* and *indios*, for example, based on almsgiving fees. Hence, the almsgiving seems to be a determining factor for these organizations, in which the economic transactions had the same value as the religious ideology.

The ordinances do not allow us to go beyond their legal frames, but they show the transformations these Spanish institutions underwent in the Americas by the turn of the eighteenth century. At the same time, they show how the financial element (the almsgiving) perpetuated differentiated relations within the confraternities. As Twinam sustains, “law, custom, religion, necessity, time, and region influenced mobility, creating potential interstices,”³² and provided different avenues for upward mobility, e.g. *Gracias al Sacar*, marriages, guilds, and militias. Religious confraternities were one of the institutional avenues individuals used to create a corporate identity with legal faculties based on economic and socioracial exclusionary practices. In them, almsgiving was a key mechanism of cohesion, segregation, and status even among subordinated groups.

Even though confraternities did not have the political power of administrative institutions, such as city councils, the documents from the period suggest their critical importance in the definition of socioracial identities, religious affiliation, and economic mobility.³³ The following chart (Table 1) shows the data from five different confraternities founded between the years 1737 and 1756 in the cities of Caracas, La Guaira, and La Victoria and connects the socioracial and economic determinants these groups utilized to define their corporate identity. In order to provide an overview of the *emic* terminology, the table shows the *calidad* of each brotherhood, through which they reasserted their socioracial status. The next two columns show the relation between economic transactions, social hierarchies and religious practices. The distribution of the alms each confraternity requested depended on the activities they organized each year. The name of the patron saint usually determined the annual festivities of the brotherhood, along with other religious practices that organized with the community and the church. Since the alms sustained these organizations, the ordinances show a great concern for establishing administrative duties and specifying the purpose of the rents each corporation received since its foundation and throughout the year.

³² Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*, 122.

³³ Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*, 204.

Table 1. Confraternities in the Province of Venezuela (Almsgiving and Activities)

Confraternity	Socioracial category	Almsgiving	Purpose of the alms
Nuestra Señora de Guía San Mauricio Church. Caracas, March 31 1737	negros/ morenos	5 Pesos and one pound of Wax	Admission fee as principal member. Any other person who gave the same fee could enjoy the same rights in the decision making. The amount secured funerary rituals and ornaments.
		4 Reales	Membership for other brothers. This amount determined a lower quality of funerary ritual.
		10 Pesos	Annual investment for the festivity of <i>Nuestra Señora de Guía</i> . The total covered the deacons and the procession.
		10 pesos.	Annual investment for the sermon given during the festivity of the Virgin. The total also covered the ornaments, the musicians, and the scents (myrrh?).
		2 Pesos	Almsgiving every Saturday to cover the mass.
		1 Peso	Annual commemoration of the deceased brothers.
		n.s.	Alms requested every Saturday of the brothers and the devotees to continue the devotion of the Holy Rosary with a mass and a procession. The alms covered the candles.
		1 Coin (n.s.)	For the sick brothers.
Nuestra Señora de la Concepción Nuestra Señora de La Victoria Church. La Victoria, April 7 1739.	White Spanish and "first founders"	4 Pesos of silver (valued in 8 reales each)	Membership fee as principal member. The amount secured the funerary rituals
		8 Reales.	Membership for any person who wanted to join the confraternity, women and men of any <i>calidad</i> . The fee guaranteed the funerary rituals.
		10 Pesos.	Annual contribution, requested to the principal members for the maintenance of the confraternity.
		n.s.	For the annual commemoration of the deceased brothers.
		Half Real of Silver	Monthly contribution for the maintenance of the Confraternity. The total amount was split between the festivities for the Virgin and the death brothers' memorial.
		n.s.	Every December 8th, for the festivity of the virgin <i>Nuestra Señora de la Pura y Limpia Concepcion</i> and for the improvement of the confraternity.
Santísimo Sacramento San Pablo Church. Caracas, April 3 1748.	"Don" white creole (?)	10 Pesos, 8 Reales, and one pound of Wax	Membership as principal brother. The amount secured the funerary rituals, the burial place and the ornaments.
		4 Pesos and one pound of Wax	Other Members. This amount was included later in the ordinances, by request of the bishop.

		2 <i>Pesos</i>	Alms requested to pay the priest during every celebration for Nuestra Señora del Carmen, Corpus Christi, and others. The rest of the expenses were covered by the rents of the brotherhoods.
		n.s.	Weekly donations to celebrate of the Holy Sacrament, requested among the brothers and the neighbors of the parish of San Pablo. The brotherhood provided 12 lights (candles) with candlesticks and lanterns for Thursday and Friday during Easter. Annual alms for funeral masses.
Jesús de Nazareno San Pedro Church. La Guaira, April 18 1750.	"Don" white creole (?)	4 <i>Reales</i>	Fee for Admission. Even though the regulations did not establish differentiated fees, the oldest members would have a higher status and would have to be white.
		1 <i>Peso</i>	Each Tuesday, to brothers and neighbors, for the celebration of a sung mass in the name of the confraternity and the devotees.
		3 <i>Reales</i>	Every October, for the expenses of festivities of <i>San Antonio de Padua</i> . This amount also covered the celebration of Jesus de Nazareno on the Wednesday of every Easter (procession with a sermon). For the expenses of the deceased brothers' memorial.
		8 <i>Pesos</i>	Annual contribution requested to the brothers for the <i>Octava de Difuntos</i> (death brothers' memorial).
San Juan Bautista San Mauricio Church. Caracas, November 8 1756.	Morenos libres	4 <i>Pesos</i> and one pound of Wax	Admission fee as principal brother. This amount secured funerary rituals and ornaments.
		8 <i>Reales</i> of silver.	Admission for other members.
		2 <i>Pesos</i>	Alms given for sung masses in honor of a deceased brother.
		1 <i>Real</i> of silver.	Requested to each brother, which would secure the remission of their souls and the proper masses.
		n.s.	Monthly alms requested of all members and devotees (women and men) until gathering 100 <i>pesos</i> that were destined to pay for the maintenance and services of the confraternity. Celebration of the Corpus Christi at the Church of San Mauricio, paying the priest 2 <i>pesos</i> , and covering the expenses for the musicians and ministers. Celebration of the Holy Sacrament, using 1/3 of the total rents and alms to cover the procession and the monuments for the Holy Week. Annual festivity of San Juan Bautista. Annual alms for <i>Octava de Difuntos</i> (death brothers' memorial).

The ordinances show how socioracial perception is a constant element in the way these confraternities shaped their legal images. The documents indicate the name

and *calidad* of the administrator reflected the same criteria for the admittance of the principal members. However, these categories and the institution itself also relied on finances, in the form of regular almsgiving. Anyone who wanted to belong to these institutions had to pay a fee for their admittance, and these amounts were usually the highest among the almsgiving rates. In exchange, this fee granted the payer a position of status that, as we will discuss later, secured their funeral. The ordinances also determined other recurrent payments from the principal members and the devotees to develop their practices, which included the festivities for the patron saint, weekly masses, Corpus Christi, Easter, and the annual memorial for the death brothers (*Octava de Difuntos*).

Although the regulations appointed the officers to be in charge of maintaining the religious spirit of the confraternities, their duties were fundamentally linked to administrative activities that secured the preservation of the corporate identity. Their role and their continuous payment of alms secured a prominent position within the quotidian and ritual activities of the organization. The brotherhood of Nuestra Señora de La Concepción, for instance, states that all the principal members should be exemplary individuals of the community who showed constant devotion to the church and served as a referent for the “naturals” (indigenous) of the town. However, while the first part of the document supported inclusive practices based on devotion and moral example, other rules show that the almsgiving defined hierarchies and duties. The principal members, in charge of the administration of the brotherhood, were selected only among “white Spanish” who paid eight *reales* as a “contribution.”³⁴

The confraternities of Nuestra Señora de Guía and San Juan Bautista, both organizations of *morenos*, relied on similar financial principles and established different rates based on the position a person could afford. The brothers of Nuestra Señora de Guía had to “donate” five *pesos* and one pound of wax, which guaranteed them the right to opt for administrative duties. These officers were mainly in charge of managing the annual rents and organizing the religious celebrations of the confraternity. The most important position was the administrator (*mayordomo*), the person in charge of managing the alms, revenues, and material possessions. The procurator (*procurador*) was responsible for collecting the contributions of the devotees and the pending payments of those who owed money to the brotherhood.³⁵ Meanwhile, four deputies (*diputados*) were in charge of organizing and summoning the members for the rituals and meetings. These titles were selected annually and only the principal members—those who paid the highest membership—could opt for these positions.

³⁴ AGI, Santo Domingo, 728B, f. 6.

³⁵ AGI, Santo Domingo, 733, f. 2-2v.

Likewise, the confraternity of San Juan Bautista seems to have relied heavily on donations and, based on the almsgiving rates, determined three levels in their internal hierarchy. The brotherhood also augmented the number of positions available: two procurators instead of one, and six deputies instead of four.³⁶ San Juan Bautista also created the role of constable, who assisted the administrator. This confraternity requested a fee of four *pesos* and one pound of wax for admission as a principal member (*cofrade numerario*). Other affiliates (*cofrades supernumerarios*) could pay eight *reales* of silver. These type of brothers enjoyed certain privileges in the funerary practices, but the administrative offices remained exclusive for the principal members. On a third level were the rest of the devotees associated with the church, who would support the religious activities with monthly or annual contributions for the maintenance of the confraternity and to celebrate annual festivities. The confraternity did not offer them any benefits despite their donations.

The ordinances usually ordered that any person who wanted to join their corporation could present their request. However, the rates for the “contributions” show that economic revenue was an important limitation to obtain membership. The brotherhood of Jesús de Nazareno, which functioned in the city of La Guaira since 1742, suggests these alms were probably difficult to afford for the majority of the devotees.³⁷ The document does not give precise reasons, but in 1750 the brothers decided to change its name for the avocation of Jesús de Nazareno. In spite of this change, most of the administrative and devotional elements of the former corporation remained the same. The “new” organization would be working under the jurisdiction of the church of San Pedro, developing activities to “keep and augment the cult to Jesús de Nazareno and the devotion of the glorious San Antonio.”³⁸ As with any other brotherhood, their ordinances stated the acceptance of “all kinds of persons of both sexes who desired it, of all ages and conditions.”³⁹ Nevertheless, the admittance as a *cofrade* was restricted by the socioracial and financial conditions. Those who wanted to enter as a “secondary” member had to contribute the amount of four *pesos*. Moreover, even if the admission was open, “white persons and no others” could assume a principal membership.⁴⁰ The same procedures are shown in the ordinances of the confraternity Nuestra Señora de la Guía, a brotherhood of black men. This corporation maintained that “to make [this confraternity] more perfect, it will be formed by persons of all states and *calidades*,

³⁶ AGI, Santo Domingo, 705, 3v.

³⁷ AGI, Santo Domingo, 731.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.* f. 1.v.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* f. 2.

without excluding anybody no matter how humble he is.”⁴¹ Regardless of this principle, though, the brothers established two rates of almsgiving for admission which, at the same time, provided differentiated positions and access to the brotherhood.

Even though there were regular requests for alms, these payments became unsustainable when colliding with the principle of confraternities as charitable institutions. The confraternity Santísimo Sacramento, which was in operation by 1748, sets a great example. The ordinance of this confraternity contains a request signed by the Priest Dr. Don Juan Chirinos who requested the confraternity to admit women and men for a lesser amount. Chirinos exposed the necessity of this movement, as several persons from the community expressed their desire to join the brotherhood but could not afford the alms of ten *pesos* and one pound of wax.⁴² The brothers authorized the request and stated that those persons who contributed less money could be admitted. Nonetheless, the requirement of monetary contribution persisted, as an almsgiving of four *pesos* secured the admission and funerary honors of these new members.

When discussing the terms of admittance in New Spain’s brotherhoods, Nicole von Germeten argues that the payment of fees and socioracial criteria played an important role in determining the internal structure of the colonial confraternities.⁴³ The limitations based on *calidad* and revenue for the acquisition of a title prevented “anyone with another racial designation or place of birth from assuming leadership of their group.”⁴⁴ The cases of Jesús of Nazareno, Santísimo Sacramento, and Nuestra Señora de la Guía are examples of a pattern that repeated in different socioracial groups that were seeking ways to create their corporate identity through the conformation of religious brotherhoods. Ermila Troconis also suggests this in her work about black confraternities, which were similar to the white elites in their jealousy of other institutions and in their desire to preserve their “purity.”⁴⁵ Regardless of their *calidad*, the status of the confraternities strongly depended on the almsgivings. This payment, at the same time, allowed these corporations to create legal strategies for the conformation of alliances, internal hierarchies, and socioeconomic status. These stipulations show that religious confraternities permitted alternative channels of upward mobility based on economic transactions. Furthermore, these negotiated identities also influenced the passing of the soul to the afterlife.

⁴¹ AGI, Santo Domingo, 705, f. 3v.

⁴² AGI, Santo Domingo, 731, f. 7-7v.

⁴³ von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 192.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 192.

⁴⁵ Troconis, “Tres cofradías de negros,” 339.

Purchasing the “Good Death”

In theory, confraternities sought to channel different charitable practices in order to provide relief to socioracial groups under limited economic conditions.⁴⁶ However, the corpus of ordinances gathered in this paper do not indicate a great concern for the development of altruistic activities outside the jurisdiction of their members. Only the file pertaining to the regulation of the brotherhood Nuestra Señora de Guía shows, in a later document from 1735, a request the *mayordomo* made to the bishop to ask the brothers for “one coin of alms for the sick brothers.”⁴⁷ The document also stated that those members who wanted to redeem their souls before death could do so by paying the brotherhood the amount of twenty *reales*, regardless of whether they were sick or healthy. On the other hand, confraternities fostered devotional practices based on the avocation they associated with their corporate identity—San Juan Bautista, Nuestra Señora de La Concepción, Nuestra Señora de Guía, Jesús de Nazareno, Nuestra Señora de Altagracia, etc. The ordinances specify the constant planning of annual masses and processions in the name of the patron saint, but despite these examples, it seems benevolent activities are not as relevant as the salvation of the brothers’ souls afterlife. The ordinances show more concern with death, judgement, and resurrection, and the responsibilities of the confraternities regarding material and spiritual elements to perform postmortem practices.⁴⁸

The following chart (Table 2) shows how each brotherhood distributed the alms destined for funerary practices. The first column contains the different amounts for each activity, which consisted of the burial of deceased members or the annual celebration of all the departed brothers that belonged to the confraternity (*Octava de Difuntos*). Usually, the *mayordomo* kept records of their names in a book, in which he also stated the amount each person gave as a contribution from the time of their admission. As mentioned earlier, the amount paid granted a particular position in the brotherhood and, at the same time, the alms also determined the quality of the burial. The table shows how the confraternities made differentiations between the quantity of masses or prayers and the extent of the responsibilities of the corporation based on the almsgiving the payer provided. Other brotherhoods also stipulated the extra “donations” the person could give prior to his death in order to augment certain privileges in their

⁴⁶ von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*; Troconis, “Tres cofradías de negros;” Brian Larkin, “Confraternity and Community. The Decline of the Communal Quest for Salvation in Eighteenth-century Mexico City,” in *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico*, edited by Martin Austin Nesvig, 189-214 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2006).

⁴⁷ AGI, Santo Domingo, 705, f. 13.

⁴⁸ Larkin, “Confraternity and Community,” 192.

rituals. The brotherhoods also committed to providing the material elements, such as the coffin, the candles, black cloths, and the black banner, all of them necessary to the funerary practice.

Table 2. The “Good Death:” Almsgiving and Funerary Practices

Confraternity	Almsgiving	Funerary Ritual	Funerary Ornaments
Nuestra Señora de Guía	5 <i>Pesos</i> and one pound of Wax	Admission fee as principal member. The confraternity committed to covering all the expenses and a sung mass with response the day of the burial.	Coffin, 4 candles, six candlesticks, black cloths. If the brother died away from the city, the confraternity would still present an empty coffin during the mass.
	4 <i>Reales</i>	Membership for other brothers. The confraternity committed to attend the funeral masses and cover the lights.	6 candles the brothers would carry during the procession and the burial.
	1 <i>Peso</i>	Annual memorial of deceased brothers. The ritual consisted in 16 sung masses, the preaching of the Gospel Book until the communion, and a procession led by the brothers.	Oblations (wine and bread), musicians, deacons, six candles with candlesticks, and two cirials.
Nuestra Señora de la Concepción	4 <i>Pesos</i> of silver (valued in 8 <i>pesos</i> each)	Admission fee, covering a sung mass. While the mass was taking place, a black cloth was put on the floor or over the casket and six candles were placed at the altar of the Virgin. The brothers accompanied the coffin in a procession from the deceased’s house to the church, and then to the burial ground.	Six candles, two cirials. Black banner with the image of the virgin, black cloths, and six candlesticks to accompany the deceased brother. The candles must weight half pound.
		If the brother died out of town, the confraternity committed to ordering a sung mass in his name, paying the “accustomed alms” for the services of the priest.	The confraternity committed to covering all the expenses for the mass, and contributed six candles to the altar of the Virgin.
	8 <i>Reales</i> .	Admission fee for any person who wanted to join the confraternity. The fee guaranteed the funerary ritual of the person.	n.s.

	n.s.	Contributions given among the brothers to cover the funerals of poor people, who could not afford their funeral.	The confraternity gave a casket for the deceased, and the funerary ornaments: a black banner with the image of the virgin, black cloths, and six candlesticks to accompany the deceased brother.
	n.s.	Annual alms for the celebration of the <i>Octava de Difunto</i> every November, with a sung mass at the church. All the brothers had to assist in the ceremony. The mass had to take place in front of the altar of the Virgen of the Conception, if not, in front of the altar of the <i>animas</i> .	
	8 <i>Reales</i> or half <i>Real</i> of silver.	For the anniversary of deceased brothers.	n.s.
	8 <i>Reales</i>	For the funeral of a death brother.	
n.s.	Weekly Almsgiving the confraternity requested to the neighbors and residents for the maintenance of the brotherhood.		
Santísimo Sacramento	10 <i>Pesos</i> , 8 <i>Reales</i> , and one pound of Wax	Membership fee. The amount secured the funerary rituals, with masses and honors in the name of the death brother.	The confraternity provided the black cloths, a black banner, a coffin, and candlesticks. The membership fee secured a place in the burial plot of the confraternity, located at the San Pablo church.
	4 <i>Pesos</i> and one pound of Wax	Other Members who could not afford the higher fee (later regulation by request of the bishop).	
	4 <i>Reales</i>	Four sung masses when the brother died.	
	2 <i>Reales</i>	One sung mass when the brother died.	

	n.s.	Almsgiving collected among brothers and devotees to celebrate the annual memorial of the deceased brothers, every November. From the total, the confraternity payed 2 <i>pesos</i> to the sacristan. If they wanted to include a sermon, they would pay 4 <i>pesos</i> instead. They also paid for the musicians.	Oblations (wine and bread).
Jesús de Nazareno	4 <i>Reales</i>	Fee for Admission that secured the funerary rituals. The brother would accompany the body of the deceased brother with a procession from his house to the church.	The brotherhood provided the place for burial at the church of San Pedro and 12 candles for the procession of the body.
	3 <i>Reales</i>	Annual contribution distributed between festivities of the saints and the annual memorial of the deceased brothers.	n.s.
	8 <i>Pesos</i>	Annual contribution requested for the <i>Octava de Difuntos</i> . The ritual consisted in a sung mass and procession in the name of the deceased brothers.	
San Juan Bautista	4 <i>Pesos</i> (8 <i>Reales</i> of Silver each) one pound of Wax	Admission fee for the principal members. This amount secured funerary honors, with a mass and three days of prayers by the members of the confraternity, with response, and a third part of the rosary.	The confraternity provided a black banner, black cloths, candlesticks, lights, and all necessities for the burials.
	8 <i>Reales</i> of silver.	Admission fee for the other members. This amount secured funerary honors, with a mass and three days of prayers by the members of the confraternity, with response, and a third part of the rosary.	
	2 <i>Pesos</i>	If the person wanted more sung masses during their funeral.	
	1 <i>Real</i> of silver.	Requested of each brother, which would secure the remission of their souls and sung masses during their funeral.	
	n.s.	Annual alms for the annual memorial of the deceased brothers.	n.s.

The confraternities' emphasis on the procurement of a proper passing shows that the significance of death in the colonial period was not exclusive to higher administrative institutions. Conversely, "the control of dying, the rules according to which one dies, the rules over the possession of the dead and the possession of the corpse, the exchanges tying the ancestors to the living" made up the fabric of everyday life.⁴⁹ According to Nicole von Germeten, the intervention of confraternities in funeral practices secured "the good death" of their members who "depended on their brotherhood to pay for their funeral mass and burial, and they specially trusted other members to pray for their soul."⁵⁰ This dynamic also reasserts the importance of alms as a crucial element that guaranteed differentiated status within the confraternities as well as in the performance of postmortem rituals.

In the confraternity Santísimo Sacramento, for example, a *cofrade* could pay for his funeral four *reales* for four masses, or two *pesos* for one sung mass. The confraternity provided the wax for the candles, the coffin, and the minister to accompany the deceased's body from the church to the cemetery.⁵¹ Those who did not pay the same amount could enjoy a proper funeral, but their passing was not as prominent as the funeral of a principal member. In these cases, the confraternity committed to assisting them "with the mass and six lights that they would bring to all the burials."⁵² This confraternity in particular had the right to bury its members at the church of San Pablo and the administrator kept records of their places at the cemetery. The vicar of the church demarcated the places within the plot, and assigned the location of each principal member. The document does not specify if this is a privilege that applies to all the persons associated with the brotherhood, but it seems that the membership fee was a determinant in securing the burial place. On the other hand, the confraternity of San Juan Bautista only provided the ornaments for the ritual: black cloths, candlesticks, and the coffin for any deceased member. This confraternity did not provide a burial place and the disposition of the ritual varied depending on the amount of the contribution. The *cofrades de número*, who paid the highest amount of alms, were honored by his brothers with a Mass for the Death at the church of San Mauricio. If the deceased gave two extra *pesos*, the confraternity would also exhibit the coffin at the church surrounded with candles. For the members who paid a lesser amount or held an inferior title, the

⁴⁹ Lawrence Taylor, "Introduction: The Uses of Death in Europe," *Anthropological Quarterly* 62, 4 (1989): 149-154; 150.

⁵⁰ von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*; Martina Will de Chaparro and Miruna Achim, *Death and Dying in Colonial Spanish America* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 8.

⁵¹ AGI, Santo Domingo, 731, f. 4-4v.

⁵² *Ibid.*

brothers only had to pray in the church for three consecutive days and do three parts of the rosary.⁵³

As suggested by these documents, confraternities were communities that performed a fundamental role during the transition between life and death.⁵⁴ The recurrence of postmortem practices unveils how funeral ceremonies became part of a quotidian space that reaffirmed the bonds of solidarity created through the confraternities, bonds that extended to the afterlife. This shows how the cultural beliefs about death were not unidirectional and solely under the control of higher institutions. On the contrary, local communities had an active role in the redefinition of the ideas and practices imposed by the Church and the State, taking new forms through the local imagery and the financial access. As Taylor expresses,

death takes part in the more general dialectic between local and “official” religion. Whether and to what extent local communities or lower classes are successful in maintaining their own interpretation of Church generated symbols probably depends on their general degree of cultural autonomy.⁵⁵

Thus in the Province of Venezuela death and dying was not a private matter, but a collective practice that was grounded in social bounds that permeated the whole spectrum of the colonial structure, controlled by local institutions such as religious confraternities. Moreover, these practices show how the socioeconomic differentiations that determined the alliances made through the confraternities affected the afterlife of brothers and devotees. Along with the socioracial categories, the honors for the dying depended greatly on financial access to corporate identities. Thus, the purchasing of status in a confraternity determined hierarchic relations in life and in death.

Conclusion

The analysis of the constitutions of different confraternities that formed in the social and economic fabric of the Province of Caracas provides greater insight about the form these organizations took by the eighteenth century. The legal construction manifest in these documents provides a narrative in which the *cofrades* of different brotherhoods defined themselves in socioracial terms determined forms of alliance and exclusion in their corporate identity. These bonds and their limitations also exposed the relevance of the almsgiving that, more than a

⁵³ AGI, Santo Domingo, 733, f. 4.

⁵⁴ Larkin, “Community and Confraternity,” 192.

⁵⁵ Taylor, “The Uses of Death, 150.

charitable action, was a financial transaction that provided economic revenues to the institution and mechanisms of social mobility for its members. In a context highly restricted by the anxieties and fears of the white elites, these “alternative” mechanisms seemed to provide a more suitable avenue to gain socioracial privileges that sustained in economic transactions (almsgiving). In addition, the analysis of the funerary practices the confraternities performed shows the importance of postmortem rituals for the ratification of socioracial and economic differences. The material and spiritual control of the “good death” reflects the power local confraternities acquired in the social fabric of late-colonial Venezuela.

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