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978-1-107-06312-9 - Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians

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Excerpt

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## Introduction

During the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, countless slaves from culturally diverse communities in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia journeyed to Mexico on the ships of the Manila Galleon. On arrival in Mexico, slave owners and Spanish officials grouped them together, overlooked their social and linguistic differences, and categorized them all as *chinos*.<sup>1</sup> In time, *chinos* came to be treated under the law as Indians (the term for all native people of Spain's colonies) and became indigenous vassals of the Spanish crown after 1672. The implications of this legal change were enormous: as Indians, rather than *chinos*, they could no longer be held as slaves. This book tracks *chinos*' complex journey from the slave market in Manila to the streets of Mexico City, and from bondage to liberty.

The story of *chino* slaves transpired during the seventeenth century in the expansive context of the Spanish empire.<sup>2</sup> Their experience points to the interconnectedness of Spain's colonies and the reach of the crown, which brought people together from Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe in a historically unprecedented way. The book examines *chinos*' story in this broad framework, emphasizing that the history of coerced

<sup>1</sup> Similarly, enslaved people from Africa were grouped together as "blacks" (*negros*). See Herbert S. Klein and Ben Vinson III, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Most of the events narrated in this book took place in present-day Mexico and the Philippines. In terms of the organization of the Spanish empire, the viceroyalty of New Spain governed both of these territories, along with parts of the southern United States, Central America, and the Caribbean Islands. The territory of modern Mexico is often referred to as New Spain in the records. I employ the term in quotations but otherwise use Mexico to avoid confusion with the larger administrative structure.

labor is necessarily connected to colonial expansion and forced global migration. By placing chinos in this larger narrative, the study challenges some assumptions about the uniformity of the slave experience in the Americas, especially in Mexico.

The Spanish crown dictated the legal status of people living in the colonies, but the sprawling empire also allowed for contingency and individual agency. Chinos employed myriad strategies to gain some modicum of personal freedom in their everyday lives. A great many of them, in fact, worked tenaciously to regain their natural liberty – be it by accessing capital for self-purchase, taking their masters to court and claiming illegal enslavement, or simply by running away and joining indigenous communities. As a whole, this book pays homage to the lives of chino slaves and emphasizes their individual efforts to escape from bondage prior to abolition.

The book narrates these people's stories in different contexts: the Manila slave market, the Manila Galleon trade, the labor sector of Mexico City, the Republic of Indians, the Catholic Church, and the colonial courts. Each chapter, as described next, focuses on different dimensions of their lived experience to show how chino slaves coped with structural forces beyond their control, and how they sometimes overcame these limitations to have a free life. In this way, we see the gradual changes over the course of the seventeenth century that led to the end of chino slavery. Abolition closes this history.

The story of a woman named Catarina de San Juan, told in the first chapter, provides an entry point for examining the larger transition from slavery to freedom. She arrived in the Mexican city of Puebla as a china slave, was freed, and ended her days in 1688 as a popular saint. Her story sheds light on one of the ways forced migrants survived bondage in the context of colonialism: they adopted the customs of the host country and used them to their own advantage. Catarina was thus part of a wider struggle in which enslaved people did what they could to be free. Remarkably, Catarina remains alive today in the popular imagination. In the late nineteenth century, Catarina was conflated with the China Poblana – a legendary figure who is said to have invented the colorful and sequined Mexican costume of the same name. The China Poblana inspired the research for this book.

Catarina's exemplary story sets the stage for the history of the Manila slave market. The Spanish Philippines had a diverse slave population for local labor and export, including Filipino Indians, Muslim war captives (*moros*), and foreign slaves from as far away as Portuguese India. Chapter 2 discusses the cultural and linguistic diversity of the slaves in

this colony, which prompted legal discussion in the Manila High Court (*Audiencia*) about the legitimacy of enslaving people from different parts of the world. Over the course of the seventeenth century, this questioning of chattel status encouraged the Spanish crown to articulate its justifications for slavery more forcefully. It also prompted firmer legal distinctions between nations (*naciones*), which determined which peoples (*gentes*) could be held in bondage. The outcome of these determinations was the liberation of natives of the Philippines, as well as foreign slaves who were not of African descent.

Once sold, *chinos* journeyed to Mexico on the great ships of the Manila Galleon, which linked the Spanish Philippines to the rest of the empire. Chapter 3 examines their passage to the Americas, showing that the transpacific slave trade, which functioned through individual licenses and via contraband, influenced the development of the monopoly slave-trading system (*asiento*). Slave traders working on the Atlantic responded to the competition on the Pacific by calling on the Spanish crown to prohibit the influx of slaves via the port of Acapulco. This pressure on the transpacific trade coincided with official efforts to liberate Indian slaves, which ultimately led to the end of *chino* slavery.

Upon their arrival, *chino* slaves were absorbed by the urban economy of Mexico City, where they mainly worked as domestic servants or in textile mills (*obrajes*). As shown in Chapter 4, slave owners consciously channeled *chinos* into urban occupations because of generalized assumptions about their suitability for certain kinds of labor. For their part, working in the city provided *chinos* with some possibilities for manumission. *Chinos* in domestic service were especially apt to embrace the limited opportunities available to them and to experience some social mobility. In the *obrajes*, *chinos* had few of the freedoms given to domestic servants, but they did benefit from government oversight of the industry. During official visits, *chino* slaves appealed for protection from overt exploitation by claiming that they were Indians (even if they were from Portuguese India). Remarkably, visiting inspectors listened to their complaints, and they often responded by liberating individual *chinos* under the assumption that they were indeed native vassals and could thus not be held in bondage. The overall experience of *chinos* in the viceregal capital confirms the benefits of living close to the center of colonial power.

The presence of free indigenous immigrants from the Spanish Philippines in Mexico reinforced the idea that all *chinos* were Indians. The complex governing structure of colonial Mexico involved two republics or political communities (the *república de indios* and the *república de*

*españoles*); this organization separated the indigenous majority from everyone else to facilitate the collection of tribute and the ministry of the Catholic Church. Chapter 5 argues that native immigrants from the Philippines purposely sought to confirm their membership in the Republic of Indians because corporate status provided personal advantages. They asked to be tallied in tribute rolls in Mexico to benefit from concomitant privileges, such as trading rights and legal representation through the General Indian Court. At the same time, free Filipinos were frequently confused with chino slaves – a situation that had serious consequences for Filipinos’ relations with colonial institutions and enslaved individuals. Some immigrants resented having their indigenous identity questioned and sought to maintain a sense of their Indian-ness by keeping their distance from chino slaves. The majority, however, expressed solidarity with chino slaves. Filipino artisans, for example, took on chino slaves as apprentices and taught them marketable skills. Similarly, Filipino traders incorporated chinos into their own credit networks to facilitate self-purchase.

Individual chinos who were manumitted also embraced an Indian identity, regardless of whether they were from Goa, Macau, or other places in South and Southeast Asia. In this way, chinos challenged official attempts to define them solely as former slaves. Instead, they sought to join the free republic. The possibility for this kind of social integration caused widespread concern among slave owners. To defend their property rights, masters started to brand chino slaves on the face, rather than on the chest or arm as they did with Africans, in order to dissuade them from fleeing and “passing” as free Indians. This horrifying development shows that Indian communities welcomed runaway chino slaves and, by extension, that slave owners sought visible markers of their slaves’ status.

The Catholic Church played a critical institutional role in changing social perceptions about chino slaves. At first, the church interacted with chinos as with African slaves. The Inquisition, for example, prosecuted individual chinos for religious infractions, and the episcopal court threatened to excommunicate anyone who helped chino slaves run away. In time, churchmen came to associate chino slaves with Indians and thus embraced them in their missionary project. This move also meant defending their natural liberty and pressing the crown for their liberation, as was the case with Indians. In addition, chino slaves employed religious rhetoric to articulate their desire for liberty. Chapter 6 focuses on the individual actions that blurred social boundaries and resulted in chinos ceasing to be slaves in the eyes of the Catholic Church.

The book culminates in Chapter 7 with a discussion of the abolition of indigenous slavery in the Spanish empire, and how the prohibition of enslaving Indians was stretched to include people who were not born in the Spanish domain. The crown first decreed in the 1540s that Indians who accepted Spanish sovereignty were special wards of the king and free indigenous vassals accorded protection from enslavement. Despite such legislation, the ongoing resistance of indigenous groups at the far edges of the Spanish empire allowed the enslavement of “barbarous” Indians, such as the Negritos in the Philippines, Chichimecas in the northern provinces of Mexico, and the Mapuche in Chile. Starting in the late 1660s, government officials revisited the debate over the legal status of people who were natives of Spain’s colonies. In response, the Spanish crown declared that, without exception, all Indians were indigenous vassals. Royal decrees liberated chino slaves in Mexico at this time because many of them were originally from the Spanish Philippines. Individuals born in Portuguese Goa, Malacca, and other places in South and Southeast Asia were also freed because they had long been categorized together as chinos, and because most chino slaves by this point had strong ties to indigenous communities in Mexico.

The terms employed at the time shed light on chinos’ ascribed social identity and how it related to their legal status. Spanish colonists flattened cultural differences in order to categorize people according to their place in society and their legal status within the empire. In the 1600s, the terms “chino” and “black” (*negro*) referred to individuals from the continents of Asia and Africa, who arrived in the Americas as slaves. The geographic names for the continents of Asia and Africa, which obviously encompass vast physical areas and diverse cultures, were also used as broad signifiers in the early modern period. Similarly, the word “Indian” (*indio/india*) referred to all indigenous peoples; it was a generic term for individuals who had a distinct civic status as native vassals of the Spanish monarch.<sup>3</sup>

The book employs this vocabulary as shorthand following historical usage, and in full recognition that words and categories acquire different meanings over time. In seventeenth-century Mexico, the term “Indian” was almost never used in reference to chino slaves.<sup>4</sup> People who were categorized as “chino Indians” (*indios chinos*) were indigenous people

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Jackson, *Race, Caste and Status: Indians in Colonial Spanish America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999): 5.

<sup>4</sup> I found more than 800 archival documents, dating from 1591 to 1718, that specifically referred to “chinos”; of these, only 45 used the term “indio chino.”

from the Philippines.<sup>5</sup> The term, for instance, was used in treasury records from Acapulco to refer to free Filipino sailors who served on the Manila Galleon. Chino slaves were not called *indios chinos* because the term connoted Indian identity, and Indians were supposed to be free. Masters and colonial officials therefore rarely coupled the words “Indian” and “slave.” Tellingly, in the eighteenth century, decades after the end of chino slavery, the term “chino” came to refer to individuals of mixed Indian and African ancestry (*castas*).<sup>6</sup> By that time, the word “chino” had entered the lexicon for people who were Indians. As such, scholars who group together free and enslaved chinos, using the terms “indio chino” and “chino” interchangeably, ignore critical differences and detract from our understanding of these people’s experiences in distinct historical periods.<sup>7</sup>

In this story, the scholarship on empire, European colonization in the Indian Ocean World, transoceanic trade, indigenous history, Catholic evangelization, and slavery in the Americas all play a part.<sup>8</sup> The work of scholars in these varied fields has shaped our understanding of the

<sup>5</sup> In 390 documents from the Notarial Archive of Mexico City (dating from 1600–1705), the term “indio chino” is used only nine times: six of them were for free Filipino immigrants and three were for slaves from India. Archivo General de Notarías de la Ciudad de México [henceforth ANM] José Rodríguez 3837 f.752 (1610). ANM Juan Pérez de Rivera 3359 f.315 (1614). ANM José de la Cruz 718, f.123 (1618). Records from Mexico’s National Archive follow the same pattern. Thirty-six documents dated between 1591 and 1689 employed the words “indio chino”; of these, thirty were in reference to free Filipinos, and only six documents related to enslaved individuals. Archivo General de la Nación [henceforth AGN] Inquisición Real Fisco 8 exp.9 f.262 (1599). AGN Inquisición 486 exp.3, f.201 (1621). AGN Inquisición 356 exp.20 f.26 (1626). AGN Indiferente 3878 exp.2 (1604). AGN Matrimonios 61 exp.73 f.288 (1605). AGN Matrimonios 29 exp.106 f.247 (1631). AGN Matrimonios 7 exp.56 f.203 (1634).

<sup>6</sup> Based on an analysis of casta paintings from the eighteenth century, León identified up to 53 casta categories. According to him, the word “chino” did not have an association with slaves from Asia. Nicolás León, *Las castas del México colonial o Nueva España* (México: Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía, 1924), 22–23.

<sup>7</sup> Déborah Oropeza Keresey, for example, suggests that all chinos in Mexico were called *indios chinos* and writes about free immigrants alongside slaves. Déborah Oropeza Keresey, “Los ‘indios chinos’ en la Nueva España: la inmigración de la nao de China, 1565–1700” (Ph.D., El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Históricos, 2007). Slack makes similar assumptions. Edward R. Slack Jr., “The Chinos in New Spain: A Corrective Lens for a Distorted Image,” *Journal of World History* 20, no. 1 (2009). Meanwhile, other scholars have suggested that *indios chinos* were people of “mixed Spanish and Asian” descent. Colin M. MacLachlan and Jaime E. Rodríguez O., *The Forging of the Cosmic Race: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 222.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the scholarship on African slavery in the Americas, see Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Klein and Vinson, 2007; Sherwin K. Bryant, Rachel Sarah O’Toole, and Ben Vinson III, *Africans to Spanish America: Expanding the Diaspora* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

complexity of the early modern period. These complementing historiographies have made possible the kind of reconstruction presented in these pages. The narrative has also been influenced by the scholarship on African and Indian slavery in the context of Mexico.<sup>9</sup> When the project began, no one had undertaken the task of systematically sifting through thousands of archival documents to find references about chino slaves.<sup>10</sup> The late Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán referred to these individuals in his pathbreaking works on African slavery in colonial Mexico, but it is only recently that historians have begun to publish articles on several aspects of the story of chino slaves.<sup>11</sup> To date, this book is the first to trace chinos' origins in Asia and to offer a comprehensive reconstruction of their lives in Mexico. Told in full, chinos' story changes our understanding of the history of slavery and ethnic interactions in this part of the Americas. The reader will follow these individuals from the Philippines and across the Pacific to Mexico and see what chinos did to overcome bondage.

<sup>9</sup> Recent scholarship on the African diaspora in Mexico has focused on cultural survival and African continuities, Christian syncretism, and interethnic interactions. For a review of the scholarship on Afro-Mexicans, see Ben Vinson III, "Introduction: Black Mexico and the Historical Discipline," in *Black Mexico: Race and Society from Colonial to Modern Times*, ed. Ben Vinson III and Matthew Restall (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009); Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn, *Afroméxico: el pulso de la población negra en México, una historia recordada, olvidada y vuelta a recordar* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004). The academic seminar "Studies of Populations and Cultures of African Heritage in Mexico," founded in 1997, and the program "Our Third Root" have brought scholars together and encouraged international congresses on the subject. For a review of this intellectual project, see María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez and Ethel Correa Duró, eds., *Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México* (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2005). Indigenous slavery in Mexico, by contrast, has received limited scholarly attention, with some promising recent interest on native vassalage and state protection from slavery. Silvio Arturo Zavala, *El servicio personal de los indios en la Nueva España*, 6 vols. (México: Colegio de México, 1984); Silvio Arturo Zavala, *Los esclavos indios en Nueva España* (México: Colegio Nacional, 1967); Brian Philip Owensby, *Empire of Law and Indian Justice in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> A note on methodology: I carried out most of the research for this study in Mexico and Spain for two straight years, from 2005 to 2007, and also in the summers of 2009 and 2011. My overall goal was to find documentary evidence of chinos' lives, which meant that I had to employ a broad research methodology and cast a wide net. Archival catalogues were sometimes helpful in finding documents relating to chinos. When the finding aids were incomplete or unavailable, I simply read the entire collection for the seventeenth century. I did not sample, as in looking at a decade to extrapolate for the century.

<sup>11</sup> Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México, 1519–1819: estudio etnohistórico*, 2 ed. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972); Déborah Oropeza Keresey, "La esclavitud asiática en el virreinato de la Nueva España, 1565–1673," *Historia Mexicana* 61, no. 1 (2011).

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## I

## Catarina de San Juan: China Slave and Popular Saint

Around the year 1610, a young girl was seized from her homeland in South Asia and taken to the city of Puebla, Mexico, where she became a popular saint named Catarina de San Juan.<sup>1</sup> She was unique in that churchmen crusaded to canonize her as an exemplary Christian after her death, but her life trajectory closely approximated that of other chino slaves who made the journey from Asia to Mexico in the seventeenth century. With them, Catarina witnessed the same legal and social changes that turned all chinos into Indians. Catarina's experience makes concretely visible the human toll of the transpacific slave trade, at the same time illustrating how individuals took part in the transformation of slavery.

Catarina's story is now Mexican folklore. The known outline of Catarina's life is that Portuguese slavers took her from the western coast of India on a trading voyage that went around the subcontinent, across the

<sup>1</sup> Catarina has inspired countless renderings of her story and its significance. Literary scholars have analyzed the hagiographies that record Catarina's life, with an eye toward understanding female spirituality, social control, and the role of women in the missionary enterprise of the Catholic Church. See Ronald J. Morgan, "Very Good Blood": Reconstructing the Asian Identity of Catarina de San Juan," in *Spanish American Saints and the Rhetoric of Identity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 119–42; Kathleen Ann Myers, "La China Poblana, Catarina de San Juan (ca.1607–1688): Hagiography and the Inquisition," in *Neither Saints Nor Sinners: Writing the Lives of Women in Spanish America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); María Luisa Ortega Hernández, "Woman, Virtue, and Desire: The Female Icon in New Spain" (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 2002). Historians, by contrast, have called attention to Catarina's story for what it tells us about Christianity and European expansion in the early modern period. See Ulrike Strasser, "A Case of Empire Envy? German Jesuits Meet an Asian Mystic in Spanish America," *Journal of Global History* 2 (2007); C. R. Boxer, *Mary and Misogyny, Women in Iberian Expansion Overseas, 1415–1815: Some Facts, Fancies and Personalities* (London: Duckworth, 1975).



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Bay of Bengal, through the Straits of Malacca, and up the South China Sea to Manila in the Philippines, where they finally sold her at market. This was the first leg of a forced journey that continued on a ship of the Manila Galleon, which carried Catarina across the Pacific to the port of Acapulco in 1619. The seas and ocean behind her, Catarina was then made to walk along a difficult terrain called the China Road (*vía de china*) to Mexico City and then on to Puebla, where she lived for the remainder of her life.

Catarina's survival and success were closely tied to her ability to garner support from various patrons. The first were a Portuguese merchant and his wife, who purchased Catarina to be their domestic servant. In this position, Catarina had some freedom to run errands and wander the streets of the growing city, so she witnessed the construction of the city's famous cathedral that was consecrated in 1649. Encouraged by her masters, Catarina also attended mass in her daily outings, finding a spiritual home in the Temple of the Jesuit College in Puebla. When her masters died, having granted her liberty in their wills, Catarina was left free but penniless, which forced her to work as the domestic servant of a neighborhood priest. Soon after, Catarina sought to take personal vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience as a lay religious woman (*beata*), but the said priest dissuaded her from this pursuit and instead pressed her into marriage. As a result, Catarina had to wait until she was widowed to lead the religious life she so desired. When Catarina died in 1688, she was a beloved popular saint, grieved by the residents of Puebla, where she is still remembered today.

## HAGIOGRAPHY: WRITING THE LIFE OF A POPULAR SAINT

After Catarina's death, her confessors Alonso Ramos and José del Castillo Grajeda wrote hagiographies that provide striking details about her life and allow for a reconstruction of her historical experience.<sup>2</sup> The authors employed the literary genre of hagiography used for the lives of saints because they thought she was a uniquely virtuous woman whose life story

<sup>2</sup> Alonso Ramos, *Primera parte de los prodigios de la omnipotencia y milagros de la gracia en la vida de la venerable sierva de dios Catharina de San Joan* (México: Imprenta Plantiniana de Diego Fernández de León, 1689). Alonso Ramos, *Segunda parte de los prodigios de la omnipotencia y milagros de la gracia en la vida de la venerable sierva de dios Catharina de San Joan* (México: Imprenta de Diego Fernández de León, 1690). Alonso Ramos, *Tercera parte de los prodigios de la omnipotencia y milagros de la gracia en la vida de la venerable sierva de dios Catharina de San Joan* (Mexico: Imprenta de Diego Fernández de León, 1692). José del Castillo Grajeda, *Compendio de la vida y virtudes de la venerable Catarina de San Juan* (Puebla, 1692; México: Ediciones Xochitl, 1946).

I have modernized all spelling in the text.

would edify readers.<sup>3</sup> Though the two hagiographers emphasized her mystical visions and piety, they also recorded life events and referenced historical reality. Her confessors necessarily mediated Catarina's testimony as they listened and recorded her stories, but at least Castillo claimed that he sought to convey her "ordinary language."<sup>4</sup> Examined with care, these hagiographies present a vivid rendition of life in captivity that echoes the testimonies of other chino slaves.

Ramos's definition of the term "chino" reflects a unique understanding of the transpacific slave trade and the origins of some of these people. He wrote, "in these parts, natives of India are called chinos; they all come from the Orient, by way of the Philippines, brought by the Portuguese."<sup>5</sup> This explanation strongly implies that most chinos were slaves, taken by Portuguese traders from South and Southeast Asia to the Spanish colony in the Philippine Islands, where they then boarded the Manila Galleon bound for Mexico. Ramos knew about the workings of the trade from Catarina, who spoke to him at length about her experience. She testified that Portuguese slavers worked in the Indian Ocean World, and that the mechanisms of the Portuguese trading system reached the Spanish Philippines. These details about the trafficking networks, which crisscrossed the Indian Ocean to the China Sea and Pacific Ocean, were generally unknown to other people in Mexico. With this account, Ramos sought to clarify some of the contemporary confusion regarding the origins of chinos, who were generally thought of as people born on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. The term "chino" generally referred to individuals who traveled on the *nao de China* (another name for the Manila Galleon); they were people from "the orient [who] came to stay or simply passed through."<sup>6</sup> Ramos thus described an important distinction: there were chinos who were slaves, and there were

<sup>3</sup> In medieval historiography, hagiographies have long been considered a reliable source for the experience of women who left no other documentary records; see Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "Powers of Record, Powers of Example: Hagiography and Women's History," in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Castillo 24. All translations are my own. For an analysis of the power relations between hagiographers and their subjects and the aims of the genre, see Asunción Lavrin, "La vida femenina como experiencia religiosa: biografía y hagiografía en Hispanoamérica colonial," *Colonial Latin American Review* 2, no. 1–2 (1993). Rubial García argues that hagiographers documented experiences unique to their historical context, while following a set model. Antonio Rubial García, *La santidad controvertida: hagiografía y conciencia criolla alrededor de los venerables no canonizados de Nueva España* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ramos 1689, f.11.

<sup>6</sup> Ramos 1689, f.20v.