

New Methods and Old Church Records

Data: Working with JSON

An into computational methods to study the history of Africans in colonial Latin America

Project Description

Church records for colonial Latin America offer rich data for scholars to study social change over time. The goal of this project was to determine how applying computational techniques to the historical analysis of baptismal documents could allow scholars to generate new insights about free and enslaved people in Latin America. This project focused on a single volume containing more than 1,500 individuals over a thirty-year period in eighteenth-century Cuba.

Questions this project sought to answer:

1. Are there any discernible patterns in the ways free and enslaved Africans appear in the volume?
2. What ethnic groups appeared the most in this volume? And what relationships, if any, did they have?

Abraham Liddell
Vanderbilt University
April 22, 2021

This work was funded by an Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship for the Digital Humanities

This project analyzed a baptismal volume *Libro 1 de Bautismos de Pardos y Morenos, 1719 - 1752, Parroquia de San Carlos de Matanzas*. A transcription of the volume was first processed by a natural language processing (NLP) model, which extracted named entities. The information from the model was written to a JavaScript Object Notation ([JSON](#)) file for analysis. The digitized volume and its original transcription was made available through the Slaves Society Digital Archive ([SSDA](#)).

Workflow

Parsing JSON + Data cleaning:

Parsed the JSON file to extract information on free and enslaved Africans using Python libraries (JSON and Pandas). Organized the data into dataframes and prepared it for analysis.

Times Series Visualization:

Used the dataframes and Matplotlib library to construct a time series visualization of the number of enslaved baptisms over three decades.

Percent Distributions of Ethnic Groups:

Created a percent distribution of ethnic groups among free and enslaved people. Determined which groups appeared the most frequently in marriages.

Analysis

Figure 1 shows the number of enslaved people baptized in the San Barromeo parish declined significantly after 1719. Aside from a spike around 1723, the number of baptisms declined nearly every year afterward and never again reached the same number as 1719. This suggests that enslaved people were not being taken to the parish to be baptized.

Despite the low number of baptisms among the enslaved, my analysis revealed that there were 744 enslaved people recorded in the baptismal volume. This suggests baptismal records contain important information on both religious events and the relationships of the people being baptized. Figure 2 shows which ethnic groups had the most godparents. Though a relatively small sample, it reveals that the Mina, who comprised the second largest ethnic group among the enslaved by distribution (see Figure 3), had more godparent relationships than any other group. The Kongolese group had the third fewest godparent relationships despite being the largest ethnic group among enslaved people.

Figure 1

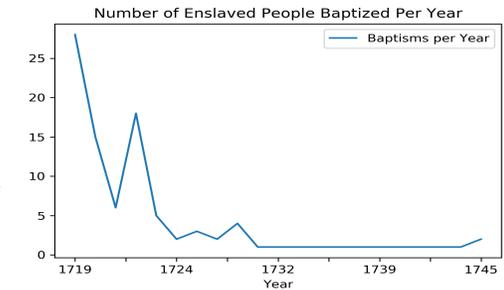


Figure 2

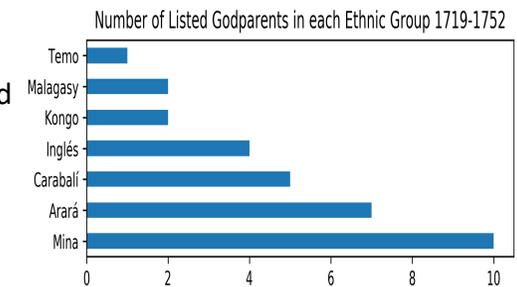


Figure 3

