

Introduction

The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre is not a standard story of slavery. It is a story about some peasants and miners in colonial Cuba who were slaves of the king of Spain and whose patroness was a Virgin who became legendary for her miracle-working powers. More specifically, this is a study about the social imagining and remaking of a particular form of slavery—slavery to a king—and the parallel reconstruction of a most unusual kind of community in the New World: a *pueblo*, or a village community, constituted almost exclusively by royal slaves and free people of color. This study examines primarily the relations that developed among the Virgin, the king, and the royal slaves as the latter imagined and negotiated social identity and forms of freedom in different spheres of life.

In 1670, the Spanish Crown confiscated the copper mines and slaves of Santiago del Prado (more commonly referred to as El Cobre) in eastern Cuba from its private contractor. Earlier in the century these copper mines had constituted the major enterprise of the region; and their exploitation had been fomented by the Crown who viewed them as a means to provide for the needs of its artillery. Years of neglect and failure to comply with the terms of a contract, however, had led to the Spanish Crown's belated intervention and confiscation. At that time, 271 slaves, most of them Creole, became the king's slaves, thus placing them in a category whose practical and ideological meaning would be worked out in subsequent years through practices in everyday life, litigation, and revolt. What would it mean to be slaves of the king? Would it mean having any kind of privileged status? Was slavery to the king to be imagined differently from slavery to anyone else? What kind of arrangements would it entail? How was the relation between distant master and slaves to be mediated?

Although scarcely noticed in the literature, the Spanish state owned and made use of *esclavos del rey* (king's slaves) in Spain as well as in its overseas territories.¹ In the New World, royal slaves were employed in the construction and operation of state projects, particularly when Indian labor was not

readily available, but the most sustained use of the king's slaves involved the massive fortification projects of the Caribbean.² While these works drew on a variety of sources for their always underfunded labor requirements throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fortresses were, to a large extent, built by royal slaves. As early as 1604, for instance, there were 163 royal slaves and 34 Spanish, French, and Dutch *forzados* (penal convicts) assigned to work in the Havana garrison of El Morro.³ In Cuba alone, one historian found that there were about 2,000 royal slaves and convicts employed in the fortification projects of Havana during the late eighteenth century.⁴

Overall, beyond largely impressionistic references to royal slaves, nothing much is known about the organization of life and work among these bondsmen, about how these slaves were viewed by others, or about how they viewed themselves.⁵ Although responses to those questions would depend on particular contextual factors and on the politics of different situations, in the case of the king's slaves of El Cobre, royal slavery came to acquire special and ambiguous ideological and practical meanings.

One of the more remarkable aspects of what royal slavery came to entail in the case of the royal slaves of El Cobre was their reconstitution into a pueblo. By 1730, El Cobre was one of only fourteen duly constituted settlements—that is, cities, towns, and villages—on the island, at least two of which, but perhaps three, were Indian corporate pueblos. By 1773, El Cobre had grown into a sizeable village of 1,320 inhabitants, of whom 64 percent were royal slaves, 2 percent personal slaves, and 34 percent free people of color, mostly manumitted descendants or relatives of royal slaves.⁶ The establishment of a pueblo of royal slaves and freed persons with a corporate land grant, a limited *cabildo* (local government), and local militia companies with their own officers strikes the historian as unusual, for, legally, as “outsiders” in the body politic, slaves were not allowed to form such a polity. Even pueblos constituted largely or exclusively by freedmen and *castas* (racially mixed people) were uncommon in the Indies. Yet, more Afro-American villages formally recognized as pueblos than heretofore suspected may have existed in the Spanish colonial world, particularly in the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean region—in places such as Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela—where free people of color outnumbered slaves, or where military considerations may have modified the usual order of things. At least two other Afro-American villages in this area during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are known: Gracia Real de Santa Teresa

de Mose in Florida, and San Lázaro de los Minas in Santo Domingo. Both, however, were pueblos of freedmen who were the direct beneficiaries of the Spanish Crown's sanctuary policies for the enemy's escaped slaves.⁷ In Puerto Rico, oral history has it that the pueblo of Loíza Aldea was once a black village, perhaps a community of slaves. In other parts of the Caribbean, particularly the English Caribbean, Afro-American peasant villages became widespread only after the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century.⁸

This kind of community is particularly significant, because, given the outsider status attached to African slaves and to a lesser extent to their descendants in the New World, a pueblo would have constituted some form of recognized corporate persona in Spanish civil society. I argue that, in the case of the king's slaves of El Cobre, life in and as a *pueblo* entailed important reformulations of the meaning of slavery that pushed its limits into the realm of freedom. Yet, constituting a pueblo would not only have implied the negotiation of some minimal political concessions, but also it may have represented one way available to people of African descent to reimagine, remap, and root their identities within the societies of the New World in a nondiasporic manner. More than Creole royal slaves, the enslaved people of El Cobre came to identify themselves alongside their fellow freedmen and -women as *cobrerros* (people of El Cobre), a term still in use today to identify the locally born people of that village. The *cobrerros* developed a sense of *patria chica* (literally, small homeland) that turned mere place of birth into local homeland. They also developed both a social memory as a community and a collective voice as a people that pushed them to speak and mobilize publicly as a whole, over and above individual status as free or slave.

In its broadest sense, *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre* is a story about colonization in the New World, but of Spanish colonization as it unfolded in the early modern period and, more specifically, of colonization as approached from "below." Likewise, the study also constitutes a general examination of creolization, particularly of creolization among people of African descent and within the wider structures of colonial society. Moreover, it is also a story about the articulation of a "Creole" identity and of the early shape that this ideology took during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in this community of royal slaves and free people of color. Ultimately, however, this local history is about the making of royal slavery and the negotiation of customary practices associated with that status. More importantly, it is a story about the active and explicit contention

of entitlements and de facto freedoms under slavery in a rural settler—and not plantation—society, however military and “frontier” the character of this settler society may have been at the time.

Imagining Social Identity

In this study I emphasize that the practical changes and the redefinitions of social identity—as royal slaves and as members of a pueblo—that emerged among the inhabitants of El Cobre during the years of Crown rule (1670–1780) took shape within the bounds of dominant colonial institutions and ideologies, and not outside their scope. Accounts of subordinate groups cannot be divorced from the wider dominant structures and strictures of society and the state of which they inevitably form a part. Indeed, the figures of the king and Virgin constitute tropes of the wider political and religious discourses or ideology from which the *cobrer*os had to speak at the time, as well as of the institutions and practices of state and church with which they also had to contend politically. Thus, in seeking to redefine their status and identity, these royal slaves were not free to reinvent themselves as they pleased (if indeed, structuralists would claim, people are ever free to invent themselves or their freedom anywhere). Instead, the king’s slaves had to reconstitute themselves along the horizon set down by Spanish law and Spanish cultural or social norms and institutions of the time—as I show here, bending, stretching, redefining, and reinterpreting them wherever possible. Close attention to these reformulations of hegemonical premises within an early modern colonial world constitutes one of the main aspects of the cultural approach of this study.⁹

Royal slavery in El Cobre became a highly ambiguous form of slavery that blended into de facto freedom in different nodes of social life. In this study I focus on how social identities were represented, acted out, or contended in a wide range of practices that include provisioning arrangements, living accommodations, litigation and its texts, economic and market activities, naming practices, religious celebrations, property holding, land claims, arms bearing, limited self-government, and the production of social memory and stories of the past. Thus, I examine here a wide array of social, cultural, political, and economic activities that provide a many-sided view of royal slavery—and freedom—in this village. The all-too-frequent exclusive focus on slavery as a form of coerced labor, or as Manuel Moreno Fraginals put it, at least after the arrival of modernity, “as a mere factor of production,”

seems to have preempted any justification for the study of other social and cultural aspects of the lives of enslaved people, inside or outside the plantation context, in Cuba and elsewhere in the Spanish New World.¹⁰ Indeed, at times, it is as if the very writing of slaves and Afro-Americans into history has unwittingly reproduced the logic of slavery in the past—by representing and bonding people of African descent in the literature exclusively to their laboring context and to questions about the productivity of slavery as a system of labor.¹¹ However, these gaps are not only found in the more ample historiography of slavery and abolition; there are still few studies about the free population of color in colonial Latin American historiography in general, and even fewer about freedmen and -women in Cuba, where in the eastern region free people of color constituted an important sector of the population. This study straddles both the study of slaves and free people of color in this community both as distinct groups and as they lived in what I would approach as a more fluid continuum between slavery and freedom.¹²

Slavery and freedom constituted a continuum across not only social groups at different stages of formal manumission or under different customary arrangements within slave societies but also, I would add, within a particular person's life, in the different activities outside the space of forced labor through which he or she could imagine and actualize being something other than a slave. If, for instance, one takes as a starting point Orlando Patterson's general definition of slavery as "social death" and "natal alienation," or Stanley Elkins trope of slavery as a "total institution," or Moreno Fraginals's contention that slavery implied complete "deculturation," then every customary practice or established entitlement that constituted an enactment of a social or even territorial tie outside the master-slave bond may be read as a *de facto* recovered fragment of "human rights" and a piecemeal achievement of freedom in a person's life, even if it coexisted with major aspects of enslavement. In this sense, it may be useful to disaggregate the practices, particularly the customary practices that constituted slavery and freedom in a particular place and time without reifying or essentializing categories. Another spin on this approach is to examine not only the making and negotiation of "custom" in social life or of the meanings of categories, but also if and how some practices came to be understood as "entitlements" or even *de facto* rights under slavery, at least in particular times and places. It constitutes a more dynamic, processual, or even political approach to aspects of life that have been subsumed under the ample code term of the "slave community," particularly in U.S. historiography.

However exceptional the ways in which royal slavery came to be imagined, negotiated, and lived in El Cobre, I suggest that both the large and, in particular, the smaller processes of the contention of meaning and identity, and notably of freedom and slavery, described throughout this book may be taken to exemplify microdramas and events that occurred to a lesser extent throughout slave societies of the Atlantic world. Rather than enslaving people in the past and in our texts to an overdetermining category of “slavery,” it may be useful to see the ways in which their lives overlapped—and to discover how they made them overlap—with those of other sectors of society, particularly other free but subordinate groups of colonial society.

And yet, the general practices of everyday life and the mobilizations of villagers examined in this study could have represented as well important ways in which freed people may have construed their identities and rights after individual manumissions. In this sense, the social history of this local village also straddles the struggles of many freedmen and -women in the colonial world.

The study unfolds in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the eastern region of Cuba, in a time and place that is less historiographically privileged than the nineteenth-century Cuban sugar plantation belt.¹³ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this eastern area blended into a wider Caribbean region (see Map 1 in Preamble). It constituted a military frontier with islands such as Jamaica and Saint Domingue in a sea still haunted by corsairs and enemy ships. Cuba’s Oriente (eastern region), however, also formed part of a shady zone where official Caribbean enemies engaged in a friendly, albeit dangerous, contraband trade. While the Oriente region lay at the periphery of other Caribbean plantation neighbors that were at the center of the global circuits of sugar, its “hinterland” character was analogous to that of other Spanish Caribbean islands, where the sparse population and small-scale economy consisting of cattle ranching, the production of some sugar, tobacco, and staple crops, alongside military considerations, all shaped the tenor of life. Yet, regardless of its frontier character, the eastern region of Cuba was also very much part of the wider Spanish colonial world. The dominant imperial culture supported by church and state, to some extent in this book emblemized by the figures of the Virgin and the king, had also penetrated these supposedly neglected edges of the New World. What most interests us here, however, is the more popular imagining of this enveloping imperial culture and the room for negotiation that some of the most marginalized sectors of the population, namely, slaves and freedmen, could find in it.

The King

I study how the royal slaves ideologically portrayed their relation to an abstract master who was also the monarch and how that image affected their social identity, their sense of entitlement, and their political practice. The popular image of a just but distant king intrinsic to the royalist political culture of the period was a symbolic figure onto which all manner of benevolent and protective policies could be projected. The figure of the king constituted an ideological "vessel" capable of holding multiple and contradictory meanings. The royal slaves of El Cobre often invoked this imagined powerful figure to legitimize their claims vis-à-vis more immediate figures of authority and to contend policies in everyday life, in the courts, and in other forms of mobilization like flight (*cimarronaje*) and revolt. The confusing, ambiguous, and conflictive character that real and imagined relations between the royal slaves and the master/state/king could often take were noted by a governor who remarked, "A lot of sagacity [is needed] in order to explain to them [the royal slaves] the difference between vassals and slaves."¹⁴

But the king also represented the power and authority of the Spanish state in its multifarious early modern legal and administrative aspects. Thus, I look at royal policy toward these slaves and, more specifically, at the direct relations between royal officials or the local state and the slaves under their charge. What kind of considerations informed and constrained the state's policy vis-à-vis these slaves? How did royal officials, in turn, envision royal slavery? How were relations between master/state and slaves managed and mediated?

One particularly interesting aspect of these royal slaves' relation to the state was their active engagement of the courts. Although regulated and repressed by the law and the state, the king's slaves, like other subordinate groups in the juridically obsessed Spanish polity, litigated, protested, and filed complaints to demand "good treatment," to claim land, to protest abuses, to denounce improprieties (particularly smuggling) on the part of royal officials and even of ecclesiastics, and eventually to claim freedom for the community. They sought redress at all the appeal levels of the judicial system in the Spanish Empire. They traveled to courts in the immediate regional capital of Santiago de Cuba, to Havana, to the High Court in the neighboring island of Santo Domingo, and across the Atlantic to the Supreme Council of the Indies in Madrid. The results of these practices could be moderately successful, ambiguous, or a failure, and they usually

entailed great expenses for the community. But like other indefatigable litigants in the Spanish polity, the royal slaves and freedmen of El Cobre persevered in their use of the courts.

The work of Richard Kagan has shown how widespread was the practice of litigation among even subordinate groups such as the peasants in early modern Spain. Woodrow Borah, William Taylor, and Steve Stern, among others, have shown the pervasive use Native Americans made of litigation to redress injustices. However, scholars are just beginning to learn of the use of the courts by black people—free or slave—made of the colonial courts. While slaves had very limited rights that could be protected by law, Christine Hunefeldt has shown that they made good use of the courts in Lima. Rebecca Scott has found them employing the courts in pursuit of emancipation once specific legislation leading to gradual abolition was enacted for late-nineteenth-century Cuba. Aline Helg has noted that later in the century and still under Spanish rule the free people of color in Cuba formed islandwide associations and litigated all the way to the Supreme Council of Madrid for racial redress.¹⁵ Their status as slaves to the state and as members of a community may have situated the king's slaves of El Cobre particularly well to use the state mechanisms to their own ends; but they seem also to have been useful, albeit to a lesser extent, by other enslaved sectors of colonial society as well as by the freemen and -women of color. Their pervasive use of the courts shows to what extent these Creole enslaved villagers understood the political culture of the colonial world within which they had to operate, regardless of their very limited rights.

Yet, I show in this study that as in the case of their dealings with the church, the practical results of this subordinate group's engagements and accommodations with colonial power were highly ambiguous. It took freedman Gregorio Cosme Osorio, for instance, sixteen years of litigation in Madrid to finally obtain a collective grant of freedom for the community. But, as I argue in the Epilogue, this was an ambiguous freedom that in many ways did not differ from what royal slavery had entailed in former times. The imagined possibilities of freedom still had to be negotiated within the real constraints of power. Thus, the actual meaning of these enslaved villagers' acquired juridical freedom had once more to be renegotiated in practice.

The king's slaves of El Cobre also formed strategic alliances with other sectors of the society beyond their local village. Although relations with church personnel, who as will be seen were central in the case, were relatively cordial, there was also tension between the two groups.

Furthermore, a state bureaucracy of officials ranging in rank from captain general to governor had to mediate the abstract relation between master/king and royal slaves. In the best of cases, this situation could provide the royal slaves with a wider array of officers to appeal to or report on, none of whom had direct property rights upon the slave. The *cobrer*os protested private citizens' actions against them to the governor, and the governor's actions against them to the captain general, to the judges in the High Court and the Council of the Indies, as well as to church officials ranging from parish priests to bishops. This exposure to and interaction with the state through the law, its administrative hierarchy, and the judicial system speaks to the level of incorporation of these slaves into the broader political structures of colonial society. These local forms of mobilization meant relations to wider and more complex forms of power as well as the development of political maneuvering practices not far removed from those of other subordinate free vassals operating within the same polity—whether in alliance or in opposition to the state. But even if these royal slaves' political mobilization experience is extraordinary as far as the experience of slavery is concerned, their political activity was nonetheless reflective of that of other subordinate free sectors of colonial society, in Oriente and elsewhere in the Indies.¹⁶

The Virgin

After the Crown's confiscation of the mines, the reputation of El Cobre underwent a significant transformation from a major export mining center to a major center of religious worship in the region. What had until then been but a marginal and modest Marian cult in El Cobre grew into a major religious and cultural tradition in Cuba. By the mid-eighteenth century Bishop Don Pedro Agustín Morell de Santa Cruz wrote, "The sanctuary of El Cobre is the richest, most frequented, and most devout in the Island, and the Lady of Charity the most miraculous image of all those venerated [in Cuba]."¹⁷ Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre would eventually become the island's patroness in the early twentieth century and continue to be an important and plurivocal symbol in the island's social imaginary to this day. How did the early transformation from local to regional shrine take place? Why the spectacular growth of the cult after the Crown's confiscation of the mines?

The Virgin of Charity (or for that matter other Virgins in the Spanish Americas) has not awakened the same academic and intellectual fervor that

Our Lady of Guadalupe has in Mexican studies. Leaving aside the earlier ecclesiastical historical accounts of Our Lady of Charity and her sanctuary in El Cobre, there has nonetheless been a modest but significant secular tradition of studies and reflections about this Marian figure in Cuba during the twentieth century. These writings all have a literary, anthropological (or folklore studies), and historical bent that focuses on the supralocal character and significance of what has become an important symbol of the Cuban nation in the twentieth century. In fact, this small corpus of writings can be said to fall within a line of early (revisionist) nationalist thinking that sought to articulate and reinvent the Cuban nation and that gave shape to important traditions with which to imagine, in Benedict Anderson's sense, that kind of wide and encompassing community.¹⁸ This intellectual production on the Virgin constituted an elaboration of the ethnic symbolism behind the popular image of the three racially marked figures, the three "Juanes" (an Indian, a black or mulatto, and a white), to whom in oral memory the Virgin was said to have appeared in the Bay of Nipe (see Figure 4).

Perhaps the key essay in this line of writing on the Virgin was José Arrom's "La Virgen del Cobre: historia, leyenda y símbolo sincrético" (The Virgin of Charity: history, legend, and syncretic symbol) written in the 1950s. The gist of this essay and of this kind of thinking is succinctly exposed in the title and in the following words that close the piece: "In the canoe [of the three fishermen] goes portentously the essence of our [Cuban] nationality."¹⁹ More recently, Olga Portuondo Zúñiga in her *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre: símbolo de cubanía* has engaged in a similar if more historical overview of the cult from the seventeenth century to the "present" (before and outside the Revolution). Although her study is the most historically informed, her thesis also follows the previous line of Arrom and even that of an unpublished work by Fernando Ortiz.²⁰ In all of these accounts the Virgin becomes a unifying symbol of Creole syncretism as well as an early and imminent manifestation of the (ontological) essence of the Cuban nation. Even Antonio Benítez Rojo's postmodern reformulation of the Virgin of Charity as a symbol of the Caribbean archipelago—rather than just the Cuban nation—is based on an interpretation similar (if more ironical and poetic) to that of the above-mentioned syncretic tradition.²¹

Overall, the exegesis in these works regarding the Indian tradition is weak and contrived; that of the African one is perhaps anachronistically associated with the more recent cult of the creolized Yoruba deity Ochún in Santería, and that of the supposed ethnically white Spanish Christian tradition is not always placed in a wider context of popular Christianity and reli-



FIGURE 4. Twentieth-century image showing the Virgin of Charity and the three "Juanes" representing the "three races" said to constitute the Cuban nation. Note the Cuban flag as background to the scene. (Courtesy of the Cuban Heritage Collection, Richter Library of the University of Miami)

tion. Nonetheless, the entwining of these ethnic readings does constitute a significant development and phenomenon in the island's cultural history: a twentieth-century rendition and reformulation of the Marian story with a revisionist, more populist, and ethnically inclusive idea of the nation, one which has become widely diffused today.

In contrast, a more orthodox, conventional, and conservative formulation

of the nation is depicted, for instance, in the mural behind the cloned effigy of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre found in the hermitage of Miami. This chapel has come to represent a diasporic space of Cubans in exile, one often charged with strong political meanings regarding the present and the past.²² In the visual text of this mural, Indians are relegated to the initial screen of colonization and blacks perhaps to the legendary figure in the mythical canoe. Allegedly, forty-four (racially invisible and mostly nineteenth-century) "major figures" in a conventional "great men approach" to Cuban historical tradition spin around the central Christian Marian/mother symbol of the nation.²³

My study approaches the Virgin's cult from a more explicitly historicist and even local perspective. Rather than use the Virgin to reify a nation that did not yet exist, even in the protonation form that is often confused with a "Creole" consciousness or identity, I approach it in a different historical context to see what it was doing then and not so much now. I find intriguing things occurring in this early colonial rendition of the story and in the process of making or remaking tradition at that point in time. Furthermore, I also approach this widespread Marian phenomenon as an early historical instance of what may be termed the localized appropriation of a "transnational" Catholic popular culture in this corner of the Spanish Empire, by an unusual kind of community.

Going back to the title of this book, of its three figures that of the Virgin may be the most easily understood as "imagined" by the reader. She may seem imagined not only because of her more intangible historical character but also because of the miraculous and portentous powers attributed to her by devotees since the seventeenth century. From the modern scholarly position of this book's narrative, miracles are, literally speaking, imagined events even if these events were viewed as fantastically real among the cultural community of devotees.²⁴ I do not deal with the ontology of miracles in this study; but I do refer to the Virgin's imagined and real character in other ways.

I examine how the church and royal slaves imagined the figure of Our Lady of Charity and how she became an important site for the construction of social memory and identity in this local community. The official foundational story for this Marian cult was produced by a royal slave elder in El Cobre who claimed as a child to have been witness and protagonist in the miraculous event of the apparition. As the Virgin's fame and power grew in the region, so did the legendary character of the village that she had selected as her abode. The growth and institutionalization of this

popular Marian cult, however, also went hand in hand with the material growth of the apparatus sustaining it and with an increasing penetration of the church. I study the ambiguous and mutually dependent relationship between the church and the royal slaves invested in the sustenance of the cult, and in the preservation of the community when under attack by the state or other sectors of colonial society. To what extent were the relations between church and community complicit or exploitative and in what sense? Did the purported protective relation of the Virgin vis-à-vis this local community play any role in the negotiation of identity vis-à-vis the state or other sectors of colonial society? Just what gave the cult a “popular” character in the first place, particularly given its ecclesiastical control?

African Ethnic Identities?

Despite present interest in all kinds of manifestations of ethnic expression in the past, this local history does not—cannot—deal with questions of the *cobrer*os’ ethnic identity. Issues of race are addressed here, but they are often subsumed under slavery. There is simply very little in the written historical record that would permit an in-depth interrogation of the topic. Chapter 1 traces the changes in naming practices for two or three generations of slaves in El Cobre, but this is as far as the study can go. That chapter shows how, against the general convention whereby Creole slaves usually shed the “African” second name or “surname” that indicated their Old World origin, as well as their *bozal* (African birth) status, some slaves in the Real de Minas gave their Creole children “African” names. At least two such names (Quiala and Cruzata) became surnames in the community and are still in use. Others, however, tended to disappear soon after the Crown’s confiscation of the mines, as Hispanic surnames became prevalent. There is little else in this study about African elements that may have been openly, secretly, or unwittingly preserved among the *cobrer*os. More importantly, there is no indication in the available documentation that any other African practices were intentionally used as identity markers during this population’s long process of creolization across generations.

The present identification of Our Lady of Charity with the Cuban Yoruba deity Ochún in the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería and in Cuban folklore in general is a phenomenon of the mid- to late nineteenth century, and in the Oriente region even later (see Figure 5). Indeed, many of the institutionalized Afro-Cuban religious cults of the present are the relatively recent result of the massive forced migration of slaves into the island, par-

ticularly its western sugar belt, during the nineteenth century. Thus, it would be anachronistic to look for underlying religious syncretisms between the Virgin of Charity and Ochún in the *cobrer*os' cultural repertoire during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But that does not mean people in those early centuries did not create their own eclectic and informal beliefs and practices alongside those of a popular Christianity, itself full of miracles and magic and spectacle.

Even though Creole *cobrer*os did not recognize themselves as "Africans" (they did make a point at times to distinguish themselves from African *bozales*) they could very well—like *cobrer*os today who identify themselves as Cubans and socialists or even as Catholics—have also cultivated a hybridized identification with certain creolized African practices. Indeed, African coded memories and practices may have been present in the *cobrer*os' music, dance, prayers, and other details of life. It is not known, for instance, how the *cobrer*os worshipped the Virgin musically during her annual festivities or what kind of music was played in El Cobre during those celebrations in church or in processions. There is an oblique suggestion, however, that creolized African music and dance may have taken place in the secular dances in people's houses during the Virgin's annual festivities. At any rate, given the lack of references in the written record, I have left the ethnicity issues relatively undisturbed in the silence of the past and focused instead on other equally compelling aspects of this story.

Sources and Methods

A local history about peasants, slaves, or peasant slaves, in which not only practices but also voices find their way onto the written page is often difficult, particularly when the period studied is remote from oral memory. The sources enabling such a venture in this case are both rich and limited. This study makes use of documentation in which the voices of those groups have been unusually well represented and inscribed, even though, as every historian knows, good representations and inscriptions of voices are always relative matters. The voices in these records, however, are for the most part public voices, a point to which I will return later. Thus, the sources for this study are also limited insofar as enormous chunks of life, identity, and memory are excluded from the written archive and are impossible to recover except through the reader's own imagination, or through reading in the interstices of the written shreds of the story. But that, generally speaking, has always been the curse of the historian.

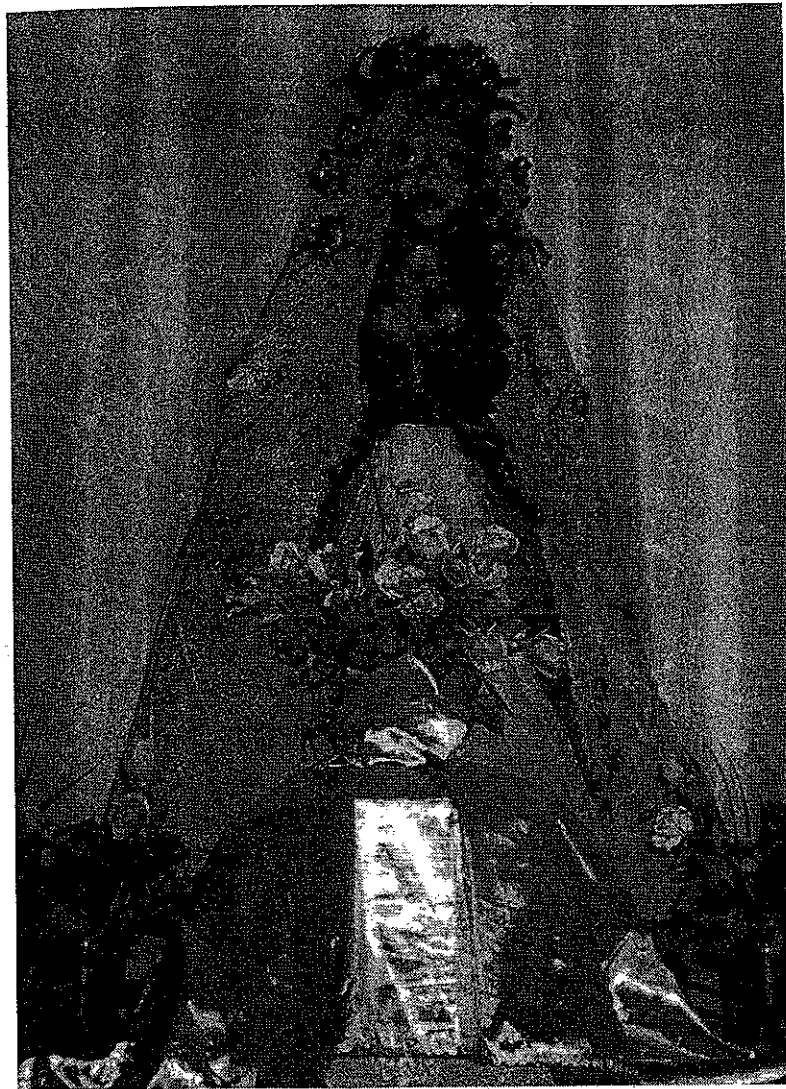


FIGURE 5. A modern artistic representation of Ochún in Casa del Caribe, Santiago de Cuba. Note the bare breasts depicting the erotic symbolism of this deity in Santería, which contrasts with the virginal and maternal symbolism of her Christian counterpart. (Author's photograph)

Some royal slaves and freedmen in this community were literate and left behind a few written documents. Thus, in this sense, the record for this case is indeed special. The problems of "authenticity" that may arise regarding the representation of these voices then would be in principle no different from those usually raised or ignored in the regular documentation the historian faces with a literate subject. Is this the "true" frame of mind of the document's "author"? Is it "representative" of others in his or her group? To what extent is this voice mediated by dominant discourses and ideology? Is

there “truth” in what is being represented? Is writing, as opposed to speaking, more expressive of the “true” voice of the subject? Whatever questions are raised by literate records of these slaves should, in any case, be a raised of elite literate subjects.

Another kind of documentation that claims to represent the voices of people in the past, in this case, those of these most subordinate groups, are the extant texts presented in the state’s judicial context. The community was quite active in the courts so that petitions, memorials, and *representaciones* (literally, some court documents were known as “representations”) representing its case and claims are available as well. Although these representations are often more illustrative of public, official discourses generally mediated by scribes or professionals, these are complex texts in which “private” voices are intertwined with official language or discourses, often in revealing ways. At the very least these texts constitute evidence of what must have passed as legitimate proposals and discourses at the time, otherwise they would not have even been raised in official contexts. Yet, they often represent as well the terms in which claims were politically and publicly framed in less official settings. Indeed, a case could be made for the intermingling of languages and voices in different sorts of contexts, that is, for the by now old-fashioned (but still insightful) “heteroglossia” posited by the Bakhtin theoretical fad of not so long ago.²⁵

Although public voices are more privileged in the record, they are no less privileged by the historian. But these public voices constitute a central and indispensable part of everyday life: they constitute the dialogue that subjects carry out with authorities and power in society and thus form an integral part of social and political life in any community. These voices constitute the public identities that people are able to construct and, as such, no less important than other “privately” imagined identities and desires. In fact, a case could be made that even more “private” (usually considered more “authentic”) voices—expressed in letters, autobiographies, or diaries—are also public voices. People speak and write in relation to purposes and audiences.²⁶ I will discuss further particular “authorial” issues in the claims I make regarding the main documents along the way.

I also make use of oral depositions such as Juan Moreno’s narrative of the miraculous finding of the Virgin’s effigy as well as those found in a judicial investigation made in 1737 where fragments of life and voices of people of the community can be directly and obliquely found as related to authorities. Although I have used these more as texts to be ideologically interpreted than to be taken at face value for their social data, I have sometimes

them carefully at both levels. Ultimately this historical study is strongly based on the story these enslaved villagers constructed vis-à-vis authorities.

Finally, I use other kinds of sources as well: baptismal records of royal slaves, early matrimonial records, and the more conventional and abundant village censuses have been used to research social historical aspects and practices rather than issues of voice and ideology. I have ransacked these texts to generate demographic facts, to draw information on occupation, slave ownership, family and household living arrangements, and naming practices, as well as to reconstruct life histories of individuals and families. Parts of this book are based on intensive, time-consuming “linkages” drawn through different sorts of documents. Weakest of all, by contrast, are the sources with any economic information—systematic quantitative information to be sure. Overall, suffering from the historians’ typical anxiety-of-insufficient-sources syndrome, I have milked every possible source to the last drop and then insisted on analyzing and including as much detail of local life as possible in my study, particularly given the usual dearth of such local material for subordinate groups. Furthermore, rather than focus on any single or partial aspect of this community, I also decided that I would try my hand at a multisided (or “total”) historical account of social, cultural, political, and to a lesser extent economic, life in this village and settler region. I also try to make use of several kinds of interdisciplinary analytical insights and approaches to the material—from social and political, anthropological/cultural, literary, and gender ones, to those related to the “construction” of identity, community, and social memory—integrating them or bringing them together from a historical perspective. Finally, this study touches on many issues and themes in the ample historiography of the Americas. Yet, this study is also lacking important comparative contexts that need yet to be researched in order to attempt more significant and ample generalizations. This work and some of the questions it poses, then, may serve as a reference point for further studies of subordinate groups in Cuban colonial society and elsewhere.

A short trip to Cuba enabled me to engage in some oral history among present-day *cobrer*os, attend festivities and rituals, do research on some matrimonial records, and collect other sparse material. Most of the research for this work, however, was carried out at the National Historical Archive in Madrid and particularly the Archive of the Indies in Seville. This community’s long and protracted litigation in Madrid from 1784–1800 led to the production of a thick dossier made up of several *legajos* (bundles of documents) kept today in the Archive of the Indies. The wide array of material

patiently compiled by the cobreros and their legal representatives who were faced with urgent "life-and-death" matters constitute the core of this study. Their enemies, however, also compiled documents, which can be found in the dossier. Finally, I also use documentation that made its way to the archives more slowly throughout the long century in question. From the National Historical Archive in Madrid I have mostly taken documentation for the nineteenth century that I use scatteredly throughout the pages of the book and particularly in the Epilogue.

In structuring the material and chapters of this book I have struggled with ways in which to best integrate topical and chronological issues, deal with synchronic and diachronic perspectives, and work through the available documentation, which was not always of equal value to run through time. The main period covered by the study is the long century under royal jurisdiction that went between 1670 and 1780. A wider span of time extending further back to the turn of the seventeenth century and forward to the turn of the nineteenth, however, frame the outer limits of the study to better situate change and continuity. Chapters are primarily organized in a topic way with some internal diachronic movement, but they are also placed in rough chronological order in the book.

Chapter 1 steps back to the early seventeenth century to trace demographic and cultural aspects in the creolization process of the mining complex's African slaves throughout most of the century. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the transformations that took place in El Cobre during the transition decade of the 1670s right after the Crown confiscated the mines and depvaluated the mining jurisdiction. More specifically, these chapters focus on the ideological and practical redefinition of identity that occurred as the former private mining slaves became the king's slaves. Chapters 4 and 5 examine the emergence of a major center of regional worship as the local cult to the Virgin of Charity took center stage in El Cobre. While Chapter 4 focuses on the production of the foundational story of the finding of the miraculous Marian effigy and its appropriation by the royal slave Chapter 5 deals with the actual development of the apparatus sustaining such an important popular tradition. Although many of these chapters move forward into the eighteenth century, their main focus is on the new loorder taking shape in the last part of the seventeenth century, after the mining settlement came under Crown rule.

The rest of the book—Chapters 6 to 11—is grounded for the most part in the eighteenth century. Despite "hashbacks" into the transitional decades of the late seventeenth century, these chapters deal for the most part with

ferent aspects of local life once the community became consolidated into a pueblo of royal slaves and free people of color. For this second part of the study, I rely mostly on the abundant documentation produced during three major episodes of conflict in the eighteenth century: the first under the administration of Governor Don Joseph Canales (1708–1709); the second under Governor Don Pedro Ignacio Ximénez (1729–1738). The third conflict, the reprivatization of the mines that sent the *cobrer*os to litigate in Madrid, is not covered in this study, except summarily in the Conclusion. Nonetheless, I also make use of the rich documentation about previous decades that the drawn-out litigation of those years generated. In any case, rather than produce a long narrative of the earlier conflicts and events, I have used the documentation produced during those episodes to reconstruct and analyze the structures of everyday life in the community, how they were understood by different parties—and how they were contested. Because the chapters are thematically organized, it is difficult to render the simultaneity of the time frame in which they are based or the events which produced the data under consideration. Nonetheless, the chapters all follow a similar internal sequence and are based on the same episodes. A chronology of events for “quick reference” is provided in Appendix 1.

There is no particular order in which the reader must get through the chapters in the second part of the book. To be sure, the way they stand organized reflects some thematic clustering among particular chapters, but no major chronological requirements dictate their ordering. Since whatever little diachrony is left in this synchronic part of the book is internal to the chapters, several reading routes are possible. Some readers, for instance, may prefer to begin with Chapter 11. Aside from its thematic examination of the royal slaves’ use of the courts and the wider regional political scene in which this mobilization unfolded, this chapter provides the most linear account of the above-mentioned conflicts. As such, it may provide a broader—and neater—picture earlier on in the reading process. In contrast, reading it last may better wrap up the different thematic threads of this “total” local history.

A general chapter-by-chapter map of the second part of this book may help the reader choose the route she or he prefers to take. Chapter 6 deals with the significance of land and landholding practices in El Cobre. Chapter 7 focuses on property-holding and inheritance practices via the study of slaveholding patterns in the village. Chapter 8 examines the informal but important local copper-mining industry that the royal slaves of El Cobre took over after the Crown’s confiscation of the mines. If agricultural

Introduction

and mining occupational practices were related to the royal slaves' autonomous self-provisioning practices—the internal “slave” economy, so to speak—Chapter 9 deals with the forced labor system to which the king's slaves were subject in the region's fortification projects. Finally, Chapters 10 and 11 are somewhat coupled as they deal with political institutions and practices at the local, regional, and imperial levels. While Chapter 10 examines the unusual institution of the *cabildo* that emerged in this community despite the slave status of its inhabitants, Chapter 11, as mentioned before, focuses on the royal slaves' extensive use of the courts at different levels as well as on the vertical political alliances that they relied on to navigate the judicial system. Overall, the only reading rule that needs be retained in this part of the book is that the Conclusion remain a conclusion and the Epilogue an epilogue.