

From *The Virgin, the King and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670-1780* by María Elena Díaz, © 2000 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University, all rights reserved. No further use, reproduction or distribution by any means is permitted without the prior written permission of the publisher, www.sup.org.

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 portentiously 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?

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