

## **THE CONTRIBUTION OF CATHOLIC ORTHODOXY TO CARIBBEAN SYNCRETISM: THE CASE OF LA VIRGEN DE LA CARIDAD DEL COBRE IN CUBA**

Syncretism is vital to understanding Caribbean religion. Theologians generally attribute syncretism to the ignorance of the believers; anthropologists and social scientists seem convinced that the elites are the ignorant ones and that virtually every manifestation of syncretism is the result of racial and class resistance to organized religion, usually isolating Catholicism for the severest of critiques. These competing views make syncretism into the diametrical opposite of orthodoxy. Establishment religion becomes a reflection of the status quo, while syncretism is pictured as a subversion of establishment values. These perspectives, each the opposite extreme from the other, suffer from the same defect: they fail to examine the symbiotic exchanges between formal religion and its popular manifestations.

It is my conviction that syncretism and orthodoxy are not so neatly dichotomous. Even when orthodox religion legitimises a social structure, it often does so only after delivering a moral critique against the social anomalies that conflict with the religion's teachings. As has been demonstrated repeatedly in history, religious movements of orthodoxy produce sweeping social reforms, so that it would be a mistake to categorically remove from orthodox religion the function of subversion. Syncretism, on the other hand, often sustains the status quo by allowing new religious beliefs to be assimilated into an existing social structure. The colonial experiences of European nations in Africa and Asia offer multiple examples of how ruling native elites embrace Western religious values while maintaining social power in the old order. Orthodoxy and syncretism not only refuse dichotomous categorization, they define each other, because we would not recognize orthodoxy without reference to syncretism and vice-versa.

A complete definition of syncretism is beyond the scope of this article. It is enough here to suggest that it is related to orthodoxy as a function that connects religious values to the social context. Syncretism, as an aspect of religion, serves to legitimate religiously an anomaly in the social circumstance by attributing the contradiction to the presence of more than one belief system. Thus, for example, the scandal of the enslavement of Africans in the Caribbean produced a racial prejudice that was explained by reference to the continued influence of African religion.

Moreover, since slavery in the Caribbean developed new forms over several centuries and varied from island to island, it logically follows that the syncretism explaining the social anomaly assumes different forms in each place. Syncretism's function to address social contradictions forces it to change along with conditions (Benavides, 1995; Díaz-Stevens, 1995). In the Caribbean as elsewhere in the world, different historical contexts modify the ways religions encounter each other, sometimes with hostility, at others with curiosity, and in certain circumstances with great success (Stevens-Arroyo, 1998b).

We are fortunate to have a significant body of contemporary studies that explore a semiotic interpretation for how religions syncretize symbols. But there are other arenas for syncretistic adaptation among religions. Previously, I have traced this sort of change in terms of the formal cognitive system of a hegemonic society (Stevens-Arroyo, 1998b). It may be said that the decision to explain faith in the systematic thought or mode of expression of a particular society constitutes syncretism. Thus, departing from a set of premises developed by Sir Arnold Toynbee, it may be said that early Christianity was a Hebrew faith syncretized with Hellenist religion because the Good News of Jesus was explained with concepts current in the formal cognitive system of the Greco-Roman world. Similarly, the incorporation of Aristotelian philosophy into 13<sup>th</sup> century Scholastic theology constituted syncretism, as Christianity and Islam began a centuries long struggle for hegemony of the Mediterranean world by basing the truth of their claims on Greek philosophy. Closer to our own time, we may consider American Catholicism's democratising trend against hierarchical ecclesiastical authority a form of syncretism with U.S. Protestantism. A norm in social and political life historically derived from the structures of Protestant congregational governance in North America was introduced in the Catholic Church. In a complimentary perspective, one may be tempted to examine the burgeoning Evangelicalism in Latin America today with a question of how it is influenced by Catholic beliefs (Burnett and Stoll, 1993).

Changes in the formal cognitive system of a religion do not come easily, nor are they always successful. But they all leave a historical record, usually well supplied with texts that explain and argue for acceptance or rejection of the principles professed by another religion. When we are historically removed from the setting of syncretism, there may be a greater reliability in the evidence for this sort of "textual" syncretism, than for reconstruction of the past meaning of symbols from cultural observation alone (Schwaller, 1999, pp. 253-254).

## **The Missionary Endeavor as Syncretism**

If we turn to religious practice, perhaps the best gauge of ecclesiastical policy towards other religions is the missionary endeavour. The missionary generally seeks to explain his or her beliefs by reference to practices familiar to the projected convert. St. Paul claims that the Temple to the Unknown God is really to Jesus Christ (Acts 17, pp. 16-34); St. Boniface uses the Germanic belief in the oak tree as sacred to explain why the evergreen is the symbol of Christianity; Catholic miracle

workers develop in medieval Europe, according to Valerie Flint (1991), as Christian alternatives to Celtic and Germanic demigods; Franciscan missionaries in New Spain build Catholic cathedrals on top of the remains of Aztec temples (Borges, 1987).

The missionary's tool kit provides explanations to show that traditions in the old faith exhibiting piety and morality are really anticipations of the true faith, albeit imperfect expressions. In cases where a practice of the other religion is intolerable, the missionary often paints it as a falsehood introduced by Satan. Thus, syncretism is the great weapon of missionaries both to expropriate all that is worthwhile in another religion, and also to denigrate as evil what is inassimilable. Ironically, as pointed out by Fernando Cervantes (1994) in his work on colonial Mexico analyzing the role of the devil in 17<sup>th</sup> century Catholicism, any missionary who views another religion as containing diabolical elements recognizes its continuing spiritual power.

However, although syncretism explained this way is indispensable to the missionary seeking conversions by harnessing the spiritual power of the existing religion, the exchange goes both ways. The traditional belief system is as capable as Christianity to pick and choose what it finds appealing (Benavides, 1994; Stevens-Arroyo, 1998b; Lewis, 1983, pp. 188-205). The missionary monologue about how all symbols point to Christianity becomes a dialogue when the convert synthesizes the existing religion in the language of the missionary. As an example of this dialogical mode in the Caribbean, African spirits and Kardecian Spiritualism are so embedded in each other today, that it is difficult to classify them as distinct belief systems. Rather, it seems preferable to see in the two a synthesis that has created a new faith expression (Pérez y Mena, 1995a).

I would like to focus this presentation upon Caribbean syncretism during the period that was framed by the narrative provided in 1496 by Ramón Pané and the description of Caribbean religion published by Père Jean Baptiste Lebat in 1722. The first was drafted among the Taínos of Quisqueya, even before the island became the colony of Santo Domingo (see Stevens-Arroyo, 1988): the latter wrote in the breezy, secularist style of a worldly Frenchman during the twilight of Spanish hegemony in the Caribbean when the sun was rising on an emergent Capitalism (Lewis, 1983, pp. 65-67 *et passim*).

### **The *Lex gentium* vs. racist explanations of caribbean syncretism**

Pané's narrative expresses a piety developed from a feudal social context and anticipates a conversion that follows the norms of medieval custom. A more articulated version of Pané's view of a syncretism with Taíno religion is found in the 16<sup>th</sup> century writings of Bartolomé de las Casas. Despite sporadic efforts to represent las Casas as an original thinker who anticipated modernity (Parish, 1992; Gutiérrez, 1992/1993), it is perhaps more accurate to represent him as an advocate of the feudal rights of vassal states who passionately extended European conventions to the

American experience. His promotion of a "*republica de los indios*" was patterned after the Roman *lex gentium*. Besides denouncing the destruction of the Native Americans' social cohesiveness by Spanish intrusion, las Casas advocated a missionary mode for incorporating feudal Christianity into the native structures of authority. His *Apologetica* is a study in comparative religion that identifies, for instance, which customs of the Taíno and other native peoples have biblical counterparts. He argues that such practices need not be abolished, but rather accommodated to the Christian faith. His espousal of this Indo-Iberian syncretism is intended to legitimate an extension of feudal rights to the peoples of the Americas (Borges, 1990). Las Casas envisioned a missionary technique that converted the cacique and his household, thus opening the door to all that ruler's "vassals" to be instructed in the faith and for that jurisdiction to practice only the Catholic religion.

However, the centralized monarchy that the Hapsburg dynasty installed for Spanish dominions was not about to create new feudal entities half a world away, especially when those in Europe had proven so rebellious. Without official support for native social authority, the experiment of Indian Republics was doomed. Ironically, las Casas' failure to achieve his goals may not be attributable to being too far ahead of his times, but rather of being too far behind. *Criollo* and *mestizo* majorities were more likely to inherit social power in a sprawling global empire than las Casas' idealized icon of a Hispanicized Indian living in remote homelands under a feudal system.

Nearly two centuries later, Père Jean Baptiste Lebat wrote with great detail about religion in the life of slaves and the remaining natives of the French colonies of Guadalupe and Martinique. In the scientific and rationalist tenor of an increasingly secular world, this priest of the Order of Preachers describes in detail the refining of chocolate and the processing of rum as part of his treatise on the island peoples, thus substituting economic interests for Las Casas' preoccupation with social rights. Père Lebat accepted the inevitability of syncretism, viewing it as the result of the incapacity of the slave to fully understand Catholicism. He offers racialist explanations about types of blood and the tropical heat as explanations for cultural behavior. Although he recognizes the ugliness of slavery, he rationalizes its continuance, arguing that at least it offers salvation to the Africans. In contrast to the pious sincerity of Pané at the end of the 15th century and the legalistic concern of Las Casas in the 16th century, Lebat oozes with the religious relativity of the 18th century.

## The Baroque Treatment of Syncretism

But between Pané's account of the Taínos and Lebat's narrative, there was the baroque. Studied in depth by scholars such as Fernand Braudel (1949-1973), Jean Delumeau, (1971/1977) and Antonio Maravall (1975/1986), the baroque may be treated as a mentality. It marked the transformation of the Iberian-Mediterranean polity, which had remained faithful to the papal authority of Rome, into a global empire that stretched across the Atlantic to the Americas and beyond up to the Pacific rim of China and Japan.

The Habsburg Empire that is so closely identified with the baroque was not the Enlightened Despotism that emerged later in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Spain's governance was built upon a dynastic accident that collected the crown of historically different nations under one ruler. Each of the European nations ruled by Charles V and his successors jealously guarded the prerogatives won by concessions from previous monarchs. The Habsburgs in Spain were forced to assume multiple roles, commensurate with the importance of each of the crowns that they had assumed. Thus, the Spanish Emperor justified his rule by promises to respect the local rights of each nation under his sway. Flemish tapestries now hanging in Spanish palaces depict Charles V as Cyrus of Persia, who in biblical accounts was a "good" emperor approved by God because he allowed the Jewish nation its cultural and religious freedom.

During the baroque, the protections of *lex gentium* were shifted from the feudal conception of the "natural lord" and were given over to a more abstract "sovereignty of peoples." Because sovereignty resided with the people, Francisco Suárez, SJ, (1548-1617) argued that the nation's customs and traditions took precedence over the positive law promulgated by the monarch (see Stevens-Arroyo, 1998a). In the Iberian context, Catalonia, Castile and Portugal were different nations with ancient local laws governing inheritance, jurisprudence and the like, which Suárez insisted were beyond the ordinary scope of royal decrees. The king, the Jesuit insisted, could not change customs without the consent of the governed. Language was also enshrined as an inalienable local right (Kamen, 1993). These political freedoms were symbolically celebrated in the regional patronal feasts of the various madonnas and saints throughout the empire. The local nations used these occasions to ritually articulate the national identity that had been subsumed politically by the empire. Even at the height of Spanish imperial power, the Catholic faith that legitimated the empire also protected the national identities of each region.

Thus, the polity of the Spanish Empire during the baroque period rested on two definitions of place: the local, where nationality was celebrated by a plethora of customs and traditions; and the global, where Catholicism and its defender the Spanish Crown, protected the assorted nationalities from the divisive forces of heresy and rationalism (Stevens-Arroyo, 1998a). These categories loosely correspond to the sense of place elaborated by Pierre Nora (1989) in his provocative essay, "Between Memory and History". The defence and expansion of Catholicism became a *raison d'être* for the Spanish Empire — its history; but the preservation of local Catholic customs was an equally important obligation of the empire's rulers — the people's memory. The success of Catholicism in preserving the Iberian local identities can be seen in the way the same regional identities were resurrected whenever the Spanish monarchy was eclipsed: the War of Spanish Succession in the 1700s, the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, and the present autonomous regions under the nominal rule of a restored monarchy all indicate the distinct cultures of the different nations of Spain.

## The Council of Trent and Devotionalism

The crucial ecclesiastical event which facilitated a baroque recasting of Catholicism was the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The council did not wish to accept the Protestant rejection of devotion to Mary and the saints, but it instituted a set of reforms that were designed to control excesses. Thus, for instance, the declaration that a miracle had taken place was to be regulated by Vatican congregations, rather than be left to the popular religious imagination. Local devotions had to be approved before they could share in the benefits of indulgences, and theologically correct prayers had to be composed with ecclesiastical approbation. Spontaneous local devotions of the medieval period were transformed by the Tridentine reforms into a form of material theology that has been called “devotionalism” (Stevens-Arroyo, 1998). The evidence of how popular religiosity and official dogma intersected can be seen in the Tridentine innovation of side altars for Catholic churches. The statues of the Blessed Virgin and the saints that had been placed in hermitages during the medieval period, were now brought into the church. The statues were taken out for processions by the *cofradías* dedicated to their upkeep. For their part, the *cofradías* that had functioned during the medieval period as social and economic associations that owned cemeteries, loaned money and bought property, were now to be primarily pious organizations.

The Tridentine devotionalism valued psychology and culture more than was common in medieval Christianity (Maravall, 1975-1986). The differences can be seen in the ways that baroque accounts of miracles are focused upon the interactions by heavenly persons with the recipients. Whereas medieval piety narrated the favors of healing at a shrine to pilgrims, considering the importance of the miracle to be self-evident (Christian, 1981), baroque devotionalism expected testimony of an intervention that was unmistakably supernatural. Only in this demonstration of a distinct heavenly presence could faith distance itself from the humanistic relativism of the Italian Renaissance.

## The Invention of Roman Catholicism

The missionary outlook towards the Americas is crucial to this creation of a new religion, Roman Catholicism, out of the ashes of a fractured Christianity. The presumption that non-Christian peoples without writing were savages had been the backbone of missionary activity in feudal Europe and in the earliest contact with the Americas. But this view dimmed during the baroque as Catholicism took seriously the “nation” part of the biblical injunction to “preach the Gospel to all nations.” While Protestantism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was largely confined to Europe, where it fragmented into a different state religion for particular kingdoms, 17<sup>th</sup> century Catholicism became the first universal form of Christianity (Delumeau, 1971/1977). To borrow a phrase from Edmundo O’Gorman, the baroque “invented”

Roman Catholicism, much as America was “invented” by Europe (see Dussel, 1993).

Early on, we see a focused effort to train missionaries in the language and customs of the people they were sent to evangelize. The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith was created to manage this training and missionary endeavors all over the world, including the Caribbean (Pizzorusso, 1995). Missionary diaries and accounts were carefully studied in seminaries as sources for understanding of religion in a comparative cultural context. Because they were motivated by faith, these early ethnographical accounts are shaped by what I would call “religious homology”. The missionary writers expected to find in each new religion a parallel to Catholicism. Thus, shaman are “priests,” spirits are “devils” or “angels,” and sacred trees are equivalent to the Holy Rood. In a policy that would change with the Bourbon Reforms of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, local customs were respected and even encouraged since their maintenance added the glory of another kingdom within Catholicism. The Franciscans in New Spain expected their missionary work to make up for loss of Protestants (Phelan, 1970). People of color all over the world would occupy the seats in heaven originally reserved for Europeans. These missionary formulations correspond to the syncretism that incorporates new religious values into the formal cognitive system. Although the missionaries intended to prove the superiority of Catholicism in their writings, by casting the previous beliefs in a religious homology with Christianity, they bestowed ecclesiastical and theological values on the first faith. It is not surprising that contemporary researchers can examine these missiological texts of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries to reassemble the native religion (Schwaller, 1999).

Thus baroque theology, like the baroque philosophy of René Descartes (1596-1650), straddled the line between faith and reason, religion and science. As an epoch that believed in the supremacy of Catholicism both as religion and as temporal kingdom, baroque science, art, philosophy and literature is suffused with a presumption of faith. But there is always a suspicion that diabolic influences lurk behind naked human reason. Descartes developed his concept of hyperbolic doubt, conceding the intervention of the devil – not very different from the missionary fear of a darker force within syncretism. In the final analysis, the baroque mentality was more pessimistic than the spiritual outlook of Christendom before the Reformations. In contrast to the humanism of the medieval Aquinas who saw little contradiction between natural and supernatural truth, the baroque emphasized that a belief was more religious precisely when it was contradicted by empirical evidence. Each baroque saint was a spiritual don Quijote, tilting at windmills and evoking medieval virtue in a world grown cold with materialism and heresy (Stevens-Arroyo, 1998a).

The dark side of the baroque was its all consuming need to control religious expression. The confidence that all cultures and religions would lead to Catholicism was often translated as a heavy-handed triumphalism. In these excesses, the global emphasis upon Church and State displaced the local sense of place, nationality and regional difference. The extirpations of idolatry in Peru, for instance, took place in the baroque period despite other voices of moderation and acceptance (Mills, 1997).

## The American Baroque

It is sufficient for this essay to focus on the missionary outlook of the baroque, examining this religious tendency in the context of place, local and global. The concept of many sovereign nations under one monarch was extended to the Americas, to India and to the Philippines (MacLachlan, 1988). The many nations were united by a single Catholicism. Marian devotion, which in Europe had harbored vestiges of local religion, was of particular value as a Marian devotionism that linked distant parts of the Ibero-Mediterranean polity in a set of common beliefs and practices. Frequently, the Iberian notion of "*virgen morena*," intended to contrast Spanish customs in contrast to the blonde madonnas of the Cluny reforms in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, became in the Americas of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, racial epithets meaning "non-white." In the religious atmosphere of the baroque, the frequency of the favors bestowed by the Blessed Virgin upon Indians and children became evidence that heaven favored the periphery of the Spanish Empire more than its center in Europe (Kamen, 1993).

The baroque in colonial Spanish America eventually proved more vigorous than its European version. Thus in a climate where criollos aspired to more political and economic autonomy, we find texts that claim apostolic origin for Brazilian and Mexican Catholicism. Seizing upon a reference in Origen that St. Thomas the Apostle had gone "beyond Spain" in his missionary travels, it was claimed that the apostle had visited the Americas. Another era might have greeted such a statement with incredulity, but in the baroque faith was expected to contradict evidence. Rather than slowly evaporate, the assertion of an apostolic visit snowballed. Basing herself on the premise that Aztec rituals imperfectly preserved the gospel preached by St. Thomas in the Americas, the Mexican nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz depicts human sacrifice as a prefiguration of the Eucharist (Lafaye, 1974-1976). Native symbols with crosses or triangles that were afforded religious meaning were then interpreted as evidence of the pre-Hispanic Christianity. In the baroque context, syncretism between Christianity and the native religions was part of the divine plan. The criollos asserted that they possessed an apostolic faith, validated by the frequent celestial favors from the Blessed Virgin. These religious arguments had political meaning in an Ibero-Mediterranean polity that had identified its legitimacy with expansion of Catholicism. In the baroque mentality, the peripheral colonies were elevated to equal importance with Iberia on account of these religious phenomena.

The theology that animated these tendencies in world-wide Catholicism also was present in the Caribbean. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, three Marian devotions emerged that eventually became emblematic of Caribbean identities and which can be said to be products of the baroque. In the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo Our Lady of Altigracia in Higüey assumes this role, while in Puerto Rico it is Our Lady of Monserrate at Hormigueros (Quintero Rivera, 1998) and in Cuba, Our Lady of Charity at El Cobre (Arrom, 1971; Portuondo, 1995).

It must be remembered, however, that evangelization in the islands began before the baroque. Because the native populations had been treated differently from the Mexican peoples in this earliest period, the establishment of Christianity in the Caribbean had more in common with the simultaneous effort in the Canary

Islands off the coast of Africa than it had with evangelization in Mexico and the rest of the American continents (Stevens-Arroyo, 1993). Moreover, the virtual elimination of the native society — culturally, if not biologically — meant the baroque conceptualization of nation could not be applied in the Caribbean as it was in Mesoamerica and the Andes where the native societies have survived until the present day as distinctive indigenous communities bound by custom and language. In the religious homology of the baroque, each of the Caribbean madonnas was expected to function as the patroness of the nation, more or less like Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico. Although in the hindsight of history, such attributions were usually inappropriate, it was an ecclesiastical version of what Anthony Giddens (1984) calls “structuration” (See Díaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo, 1998). Because the climate of faith during the baroque did not easily question supernatural intervention, by the dawn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century each of these devotions had prospered. The mass printing of devotional prayers on holy cards (*estampillas*) permitted the worldwide expansion of special *cofradías* devoted to the American madonnas. Efforts by Spanish bishops or by European immigrants to replace or overshadow in the colonies these 17<sup>th</sup> century American devotions was repulsed by popular religiosity. With an affirmation that the true patroness of that place was “*la virgen morena*,” the peoples of the colonies echoed the defence of Marian devotions that had first been voiced in medieval Spain against the Francophile Cluniac innovations.

## The Caribbean Anomaly of Slavery

We have suggested the premise that syncretism “serves to legitimate religiously an anomaly in the social circumstance by attributing the contradiction to the presence of more than one belief system.” The most salient religious anomaly of Caribbean society was its enslavement of Africans. If these were brothers and sisters in the faith, why were they held in bondage and treated legally as property? The dilemma was not new to Christianity, since the Apostle St. Paul had faced the same issue when a runaway slave asked to join the apostle’s missionary band. Accepting the slave into the Christian community would have amounted to the civil offence of harboring a fugitive, but denying him equality under the Gospel would have perverted the faith. Paul’s “solution” presented in the Letter to Philemon was to be imitated in Christianity for more than a millennium and a half: respect the letter of the law of slavery, but subvert its meaning by treating the slave as an equal.

Iberian law had reinforced this Christian premise as it adapted the tribal laws of the invading Germanic peoples of the fifth century. As codified by Alfonso X, the new laws established *cofradías* for the religious life of the slaves. The *cofradías* were allowed to elect their own governing council of elders, to raise money for cultural and religious events, and to organize communal celebrations such as the patronal feasts for the slaves (Cros Sandoval, 1995). The explosive growth in the slave population of the Caribbean of the 17<sup>th</sup> century outstripped the much smaller numbers of slaves in Spain, lending these *cofradías* much greater social power than the Spanish overlords might have wished. Syncretism in Caribbean Catholicism was

shaped by the *cofradías* of slaves, because the dynamic energy of the Afro-Caribbean religious imagination was given social viability by the structures of Iberian Catholicism.

This is not an apology for slavery, nor a repetition of the shop-worn argument that somehow Iberian slavery was “benign.” But if we want to understand the context for religious interactions, we must recognize that slavery was viewed differently in those centuries than it has been since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The utopian idea of the Enlightenment that all persons are equal had not become a premise for political organization. Instead, we find the baroque hierarchical conception of the world in which communities of interest and specialized functions are interlocked in a common society. In the Caribbean, the notions of local place were quickly transformed into racial categories of color, so that there were madonnas and saints who protected each of the races in the Caribbean just as madonnas and saints were patrons of Iberian nationalities. Eventually, these distinctions of color became equivalent of the *criollo* nationalism as it tried to distinguish itself from Iberian dominance. Thus, vestiges of syncretism with African religion were transculturated into symbols of a national identity (Ramírez Calzadilla, 1990).

With the opportunities presented during the era of baroque Catholicism, the Africans identified on the basis of their own beliefs which of the saints and practices of the Catholic Church best expressed their anomalous existence as brothers to whites in faith but simultaneously their property in the socio-economic system. The autonomy allowed to the African nations reflected the relatively low intensity of the slave economy in the Spanish colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. When the market for sugar and new methods of production appeared at the half-way point of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the religious autonomy of the African slaves took on a meaning very different from baroque optimism. The syncretism that demonstrated a commonality of belief was now inverted to offer reasons for the inferiority of the black, much in the style of Père Lebat.

This historical change away from the baroque syncretism and towards Enlightenment rationalism is dramatically captured in the Cuban film, “The Last Supper”. A rich *hacendado* (plantation owner) invites slaves into his mansion in a pious ritual on Holy Thursday to wipe their feet as Christ did to his disciples. The religious symbolism is interpreted by the black slaves as a step toward the freedom of manumission. The *hacendado* immediately rejects this religious logic as social folly. As suggested by this film, it clearly assuaged the conscience of the dominant class to see African slaves practice the same religion but a too literal understanding of brotherhood was a danger to the socio-economic order. In this film, the *hacendado* no longer considers the differences in religious expression introduced by Africans as the vindication of God’s glory in all nations, but as residual effects of contact with a “pagan” religion, fitting only for “savages.”

Many studies of Caribbean syncretism begin with a suggestion that the social circumstances of slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> century characterize all racial relations. Accordingly, the dichotomous view of orthodoxy and syncretism is made to correspond to the social divisions between whites and blacks. However, two socially antagonistic groups with differing religious practices may not be the best test of syncretism. In a reductionist sense, one might easily argue that the differences are not those of religion but of class (see Benavides, 1994). I would rather evaluate

syncretism for its ability to knit together disparate class and racial groups (Vidal, 1994) than for its capacity to express a clash of interests.

A more telling religious perspective for syncretism is to consider its operation outside the confines of rigid class structures. I maintain that during the baroque, Christianity “knit together disparate class and racial groups” particularly by developing Marian devotionism (Stevens-Arroyo, 1998a). Can this premise be applied in the Caribbean? In other words, instead of merely two different coded meanings for the same set of religious rites and symbols corresponding to two antagonistic classes as proof of syncretism, can we find an example of syncretism in one transculturated meaning (Lewis, 1983; Pérez y Mena, 1995b)? Neither would be completely controlled by one class. In my opinion, such a case would constitute a synthesized religious belief that represents the merging of two beliefs into a new one (See Díaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo, 1998). We may perhaps invoke Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) and ask if we have not only a case of monological syncretism, wherein Christianity or African religions talk past each other in order to absorb only bits and pieces from each other, but also a dialogical syncretism in which the exchanges go in several directions (See Palencia Roth, 1992)?

It seems to me that the answers to such questions are never definitive, but rather a matter of tendency and inclination. Nor should we expect historical constants so that once transculturation is achieved it can never become an occasion of class resistance or even end with fragmentation into rival religions (Díaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo, 1998). As suggested in the beginning of this paper, we must examine the social circumstances for the anomaly that syncretism addresses.

## The Cuban Madonna

The devotion towards the Cuban madonna, Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, provides the best test for an analysis of the dialogical facet of syncretism. The excellent history of the shrine and its devotion provided by Olga Portuondo Zúniga (1995) serves as a guide and resource to outline the historical issues for posing the question of transculturation. She verifies the account about the origins of the devotion, given by Juan Moreno before the church authorities on April 1, 1687 when he was 85 years old. The original statue was discovered in 1613 by two Taínos, Rodrigo and Diego Hoyos who took the boy Juan Moreno, then a black slave of 10 years old in a canoe into the waters of the Bay of Nipe on the north coast to seek salt to be used in preserving meat that the Indians supplied to the new copper mine on the southern side of the island. A statue was seen floating on a box, or base, and was taken by the men to Barajagua, a small settlement (p. 37) between the Cauto River and the Hacienda Tacámara. No more than 80 Christianized Taínos and some free Africans lived there under a Spanish foreman, Miguel Galán (pp. 87, 93). The image was placed on a platform in one of the Taíno *bohios*, or huts.

Francisco Sánchez de Moya, the administrator of the mining town of Santiago del Prado (today El Cobre), sent a Franciscan friar named Francisco Bonilla to inspect the image. Authenticating the icon as truly of the Blessed Mother, the Span-

ish friar recommended the town church as a more fitting location for the statue. The next few years saw a tug of war between the ecclesiastical authorities to place the image in the church of Santiago del Prado and the desire of the Indians and free Blacks to keep it in Barajagua.

The motives for placing the statue in either of the two places can be related to the interpenetration of religious and political prestige. In the context of the baroque, the marvellous discovery of the image confirmed the importance of the place where it was found. The Taínos who had found the image gained in social importance from their discovery and turning the tiny settlement into a religious shrine was to their benefit, both spiritually and economically. Francisco Sánchez de Moya had an interest in obtaining greater prestige for the town where the copper mine was located. After the King of Spain had ordered in 1603 the settlers on the northern coast of Española to relocate to areas where they were less vulnerable to attack from pirates and freebooters, there had been a major influx of these relocated settlers to Santiago del Prado. An indication of divine favor at the local level was a powerful argument for more resources to be provided from the imperial authority.

Sánchez de Moya seemed motivated by genuine piety, in as much as he had financed the establishment of an hermitage in 1609 dedicated to Our Lady of the Guide (*Guia*), not to be confused with Our Lady of Charity. A former Galician soldier, Mathías de Olivera, was charged with instructing the slave mine workers in the faith. De Olivera was an enigmatic figure, who had apparently “gone native”, as he was reported to go about naked and to eat only Taíno food. However, trapped by the doctrinal teaching that the slaves who were brothers and sisters in the faith should be also considered property. Sánchez de Moya financed patrols of Hispanicized Taínos to capture and return any runaway slaves to the hard labor of the mines. The names of the Hoyo brothers appear on this list of hired guards meant to track down these runaways called *cimarrones* (p. 91). The financial importance of the mine was growing because the Spanish needed copper for their cannons to ward off the marauding pirates.

The need for slave mine workers also had escalated. But it should be noted that at a time of war, captured enemies could be forced into slavery. Although professional soldiers and persons of substance were likely to be ransomed after capture in battle, the common sailor could be enslaved. The freebooters and pirates of the time regularly employed on their ships persons of mixed race, such as mestizos and mulatos. This is one explanation for Portuondo’s report of different races among the mine workers (p. 100). In other words, although Africans were the majority at the mine, they were not the only slaves there.

By 1620 the enigmatic de Olivera had disappeared from the registry of the hermitage located in front of the mine entrance. In the church of the town, an image of St. James (Santiago), the patron of Spanish soldiers, occupied a central place, while the side altars had statues of Our Lady of the Rosary and of St. Barbara, patroness of the Spanish artillery. Historical records in 1620 also indicate that the image of Our Lady of Charity (most likely the same one found by the Taíno brothers) had been placed in a hospital for the mine workers. Thus, the image had been moved from the settlement of the Taínos to a place frequented by mine workers.

With the replacement of Sánchez Moya in 1620 by Juan de Eguiluz, who was an incompetent administrator, the mine workers reached a point of potential rebel-

lion in 1622. Poor administration virtually shut down mine production after 1628. Not only was the official Spanish military authority diminished in El Cobre, the transfer of the Cuban episcopacy to Havana also left the religious leadership impoverished. Then in 1637, a devastating hurricane toppled the town's church building, destroyed the hospital and demolished the hermitage near the mine.

## **Devotion to Our Lady as Surrogate for Government**

The absence of clerical and government control for more than twenty years had allowed for the devotion to Our Lady of Charity to acquire a larger space in the religious world of those living in Santiago del Prado. A new pastor came in 1648, reporting that the mine workers preferred to pray at the site of the hermitage rather than in the church. In addition to rebuilding the parish church, he also sought financial assistance to erect a new hermitage. The popular religiosity of the local residents would not be satisfied unless a new hermitage would be erected. With donations from the Spanish crown, the new resting place for the statue of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre was built. We cannot be sure if the image placed there was the same statue that had been found on the sea in 1613, but if it was only a replica, it was characterized by racial features emphasizing darkness of skin.

The place where the image is venerated and the racial identity of those who encounter it figures prominently in the development of the cult. There was a fusion of local place with mixed racial background. The miracles related by Juan Moreno in 1687, now 85 years old, retired from the local patrols and married to a Taína woman, were not about the discovery of the image. Rather he found it marvellous that the clothing on the image remained wet even after transfer from the sea to Barajagua. Miraculous for Moreno was the appearance of three marvellous lights on the hills over the mine entrance. The onlookers, said Juan Moreno, had interpreted the lights to indicate that the statue should be placed where the new hermitage was built in 1648. Lights, and high places are elements of epiphany found in all religions (Vidal, 1994). If the original argument about the resting place for the image was a tug of war among the Indians, who wanted it in Barajagua, the Blacks who wanted it in the hospital, and the Spaniards who wanted it in the church, the choice of the hill top as revealed by three lights or a Marian apparition gave birth to a unifying syncretism of the three races and their respective class interests. By 1687, the image had become the unifying memory for all of the different races living together as the inhabitants of El Cobre.

When Juan Moreno gave his testimony in 1687, the devotion had been established for nearly 40 years at the new hermitage. His testimony was sought as part of the effort to secure ecclesiastical approbation of the devotion. This was when Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre emerged as a form of Tridentine devotionism, beginning the process of divulgation of the cult by indulgenced prayers, holy cards or pictures of the image, new *cofradías* in honor of Our Lady of Charity at El Cobre and a place in the liturgical calendar. What the church authorities confirmed at the time was not a miraculous discovery of the image, but a celestial sign as to where

the image should be placed. But the legend was to change, becoming more miraculous and more baroque with the passage of time.

## Miraculous apparitions of our lady

The priests Onofre de Fonseca (1701) and Julián Joseph Bravo (1766) wrote commentaries that further elaborated the miracle of the lights, while adding new details to foster the devotion. In Fonseca's version, a young girl who just happens to be named Apolonia like Fonseca's sister, hears the voice of Mary stating that she wishes the image to be placed on the hill. In the mentality of the baroque period, this change in the account of Juan Moreno is not a falsehood. Fonseca uses a common device in this type of church document that makes explicit what is the church's understanding of the event. Some 15 years after testimony by Juan Moreno, Fonseca reinterprets the original version by attributing the decision to a celestial instruction. The choice of a young girl as spokesperson for Our Lady is also part of this trope of Marian revelation (see Christian, 1981; Stevens-Arroyo, 1998a).

Notice that this miraculous apparition with a divine message is not situated at the discovery of the image in 1613, but with the decision about where to build the hermitage, an event that occurred in 1648. Since the consensus of the community dictated the choice, the solution cut across class and racial lines. The lights on the hill revealing the resting place constitute a syncretic symbol, valid in all religions represented among the people of mixed Taíno, African and European backgrounds. At this later date, the syncretism becomes iconographic because the miscegenation in the population is transferred to the features of the statue. Fonseca adds the vision of Mary and the message of the young girl to wrap the events in the formal cognitive system of Spanish Catholicism (Vidal, 1994).

Although he wrote a generation after the sophisticated Père Lebat, Father Bravo repeats the fulsome style of the baroque. In his account, Juan Moreno is now named "Juan Diego", the same as the humble Indian in the accounts of the Mexican Guadalupe. This account is filled with biblical allusions, some of which are appropriate. No doubt these references were intended to elevate the importance of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre. As in the baroque account of the Guadalupe apparition (Stevens-Arroyo, 1998a), the miracles are now described as occurring at the time of the first sight of the image. The marvel of the image with "wet clothing" in the mornings at Barajagua as related by Juan Moreno in 1687 now becomes a miracle of dry clothing while adrift on the sea. Rather than only the result of an unexpected discovery by three men looking for salt, in the narration of Bravo, the icon of the Virgin appearing after a storm at sea causes the three men to invoke celestial protection, similar to the apostles on the lake of Galilee crying out to Jesus (Mk. 4: 35-41; Mt. 14: 24-33; Lk. 8: 22-25).

There is more symbolism in these different Marian accounts awaiting detailed textual analysis, but these comments have been offered to show that the finding of the image of Our Lady of Charity at sea in 1613 was transformed into a symbol of

unified race, class and locality during the baroque period. This process fulfils a function for syncretism, which reconciles an anomaly in the social circumstance. In this case, the symbol reconciles the races at El Cobre who were otherwise divided by the exploitative work in the mines. Our Lady of Charity provided a unifying celestial event that recognized that community as a distinctive locality within the Spanish Empire with its own collective memory.

### **Racial and national identity symbolized in religious syncretism**

The issue of syncretism concerns a racial unity around the notion of place. The earliest history of the devotion to Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre suggests that there was an accommodation by all three races. The devotion bound the residents together despite the stratified nature of labor in the mine. Eventually the racial unity of El Cobre became emblematic of Cuba. The tradition related by Father Bravo in 1766 towards the end of the baroque period, substitutes for the two Taínos and the one African boy, three men named Juan. By the twentieth century, the iconography in Cuba made each of the men a representative of the three main races in Cuba: white, black and red. As in the case with the features of the madonna, the unifying symbolism of the lights on the hill found in the texts are transferred to the statue. The iconography of the event represents the harmony among the races in Cuba. It would seem that the popularity of the devotion is linked to its capacity to symbolize racial harmony and a resultant national identity as Cubans.

### **The Half-Moon and the Rainbow in Marian Syncretism**

In addition to this textual form of syncretism that adapts the formal cognitive system of Spanish Catholicism to the religious imagination of 17<sup>th</sup> century Cuba, we may also explore a symbolic form of syncretism. As pointed out by the well-known Cuban *homme de lettres*, Fernando Ortiz, we may consider examine the icon itself as syncretism. The statue of Our Lady of Charity in the church at Illescas in Spain shows Mary standing on a half-moon. Based on the biblical passage that describes the woman of the Apocalypse with this imagery, Catholic iconography has identified the glorified Mary as raised above the half-moon (Rev. 12: 1). The representation shows the crescent with the tips pointed upwards, sometimes with a star affixed. The half-moon was associated in Greco-Roman mythology with Artemis/Diana, the huntress, an inaccessible woman. The Marian symbolism borrows on this image to represent the Virgin Mother of God. Since the image in Europe was likely the model for the statue found by the three foragers in the Bay of Nipe in 1613, we should expect that the Cuban image would be an exact replica of

the Spanish statue. It is not. The Cuban image of the half-moon is pointed downwards.

Fernando Ortiz made much of this difference, and speculated in an unpublished manuscript cited frequently by Portuondo that the different direction for the points of the moon indicate syncretism with the Taíno religion, although he did not specify how. In 1988, unaware of Ortiz' manuscript, I published my own theory of the points of the half-moon in the Cuban statues (Stevens-Arroyo, 1988; 1995). I since have learned (Stratton, 1994) that the inversion of the direction of the points of the moon was part of a movement during the baroque to make the representation more realistic, since the moon in its stages never has the points raised upwards. Nonetheless, we may ask why this otherwise abortive attempt in iconography had such a pervasive effect on the Cuban devotion.

The Taínos had a crescent image in their religious symbolism. In a diary entry for 1496, Columbus noticed certain adornments worn by the Taínos through the lower part of their noses, describing them as "a half-moon of guany [*guanín*] and another half-moon of twisted hair and certain small pieces of brass tied together" (cited in Vega, 46 n° 76). However, these crescent shapes of copper and gold (not brass) have the tips pointing downwards rather than upwards as in the half-moon of the Spanish statue. The sacred image in Taíno mythology was not the half-moon, but the rainbow (Stevens-Arroyo, 1988, pp. 191-194; 216-219). The Taínos saw the shape as a rainbow, associated with their own feminine spirit, Guabonito, manifested by the union of sun and rain. This Taína spirit, also represented an inaccessible sexuality that was associated with healing rites and purgation. Although the highly respected scholar, José Arrom (1971) identifies the Taíno feminine water spirit, Atabeira, a maternal numinous spirit with the Christian Mary, I think the rainbow symbolism argues for the mythical Guabonito as the Taíno analog for the Christian Mother of God in the case of Our Lady of Charity at El Cobre.

I would suggest that the inversion of the tips of the moon in Cuba from the more usual image in Europe of the half-moon is part of the effort to make the Cuban image particular to its place. The preference for the rainbow-crescent among the Taínos may help explain why the other racial and religious groups in Cuba found this so special.

## Gold and Copper as Our Lady's Coinage

Today, the Taíno population of Cuba has minimal visibility in Cuban society. The African presence, on the other hand, is overwhelming. Not surprisingly, Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre has been syncretized in many of the African religions practiced in Cuba (Kuss, 1992 ; Arrom, 1971). For example, Yoruban beliefs in Ochún/Oshun, sister of the African orisha Changó/Shango, have been identified with Our Lady of Charity (Arrom, 1971, p. 214). One possible explanation for this syncretism is the confluence of the symbol of gold and copper. It was not uncommon for mine workers to be paid with coins of copper that were honored for purchases within the mining community, rather than in scarce Spanish currency.

Hence, copper coins were literally “as good as gold.” Could the association of Our Lady with copper be the reason for syncretism within the Yoruban belief system with Ochún/Oshun, who has power to grant gold to her votaries ? Whatever the historical reason, the identification of place and race as parts of a distinctly Cuban identity insured the success of this image as patroness for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuban struggle for nationhood against Spain.

## Conclusion

As already suggested, the 19<sup>th</sup> century introduced social distinctions between Spaniard and Cuban that emphasized racial differences in Cuba. The Cuban national identity, whose foundations had been built during the baroque era when nations were allowed religious and cultural autonomy within the Spanish Empire, could not be suppressed suddenly. The baroque sense of nationhood which had bound Cuba to the empire in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, became in the 19<sup>th</sup> a foundation for the cause of separation from the mother country. The Cuban *criollo* patriots like José Martí (1853-1895) came to embrace racial diversity and racial mixture in Cuba as constituent elements of a national identity incompatible with Spanish allegiance. Not surprisingly, the coldness of 19<sup>th</sup> century’s official Catholicism towards religious syncretism also led to a coldness towards Cuban nationalism based on racial mixing. It is only since the Second Vatican Council (1961-1965) that Catholic orthodoxy has returned to a systematic theological embrace of the syncretistic popular religiosity of Latin America.

Ironically, although the January 1998 visit of Pope John Paul II to Cuba promoted certain aspects of Catholic syncretism, he refused to treat *santeros* as ministers of distinct religions. This misstep may have convinced leaders of Afro-Cuban religions to dissociate their beliefs from Catholicism. Concerned that they had not been officially recognized by the pope, these believers turned to the government to affirm that their religions merit even-handed treatment as equals with the Catholic Church. Along with Evangelicals, the Afro-Cuban believers have now demanded equal opportunity to use public facilities for religious meetings. While these are administrative and political issues, they have religious impact on syncretism in contemporary Cuba.

One observer, Gustavo Benavides (2002), sees these political reactions as the fertile field for new religions in Cuba. Now empowered to become separate and equal religions in juridical considerations with Catholicism, the Afro-Cuban devotees have begun a “re-Africanization” of their religions. They are dispelling the ambiguities of symbols that identified Catholic and African spirits with the same icons. It is not clear if this process will undo the syncretism that made Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre a national symbol. But it does suggest that syncretism and the transculturation of symbols is an on-going process that reacts as a mechanism to explain contradictions in the society. In this scenario, if the Cuban Catholic Church is refusing dialog, insisting on a monological discussion, the African belief may reassert a separate patrimony.

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## Glossary

Cimarrones = runaway black slaves

Cofradías = confraternities

Guanín = religious talisman made of gold and copper worn as a sign of authority among the Taínos of the Pre-Columbian Caribbean

Mestizo = person of mixed Native American and European (white) ancestry

Mulato = person of mixed African (black) and European (white) ancestry.

Taíno, Carib = the two principal groups of Native American peoples inhabiting the Caribbean at the time of European arrival

*Santeros* = ministers of the Yoruba religion in Cuba

*Hacendado* = plantation owner

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*Abstract*

*The polity of the Spanish Empire during the baroque period rested on two definitions of place: the local, where nationality was celebrated by a plethora of customs and traditions; and the global, where Catholicism and its defender the Spanish Crown, protected the assorted nationalities from the divisive forces of heresy and rationalism. The devotion towards the Cuban madonna, Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, develops during the baroque period of Spanish history. I maintain that during the baroque, Christianity “knit together disparate class and racial groups” particularly by developing a Marian devotionism. In other words, instead of merely two different coded meanings for the same set of religious rites and symbols corresponding to two antagonistic classes as proof of syncretism, can we find an example of syncretism in one transculturated meaning. There was a fusion of local place with mixed racial background. Since this madonna is a national patron for all Cubans of all racial origins, syncretism has led practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions to incorporate Our Lady of Charity under the identity as the Yoruba Ochun. In the process of making the Cuban Catholic Virgin African, this syncretism also makes the African religion Cuban. We may perhaps invoke Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) and ask if we have not only a case of monological syncretism, wherein Christianity or African religions talk past each other in order to absorb only bits and pieces from each other, but also a dialogical syncretism in which the exchanges go in several directions.*

*Résumé*

*La politique de l'empire espagnol pendant la période baroque reposait sur deux définitions de l'espace: l'espace local, celui où la nation était célébrée à travers une série de coutumes et de traditions; et l'espace global, celui où le catholicisme et son défenseur, la Couronne d'Espagne, protégeait les diverses nations présentes contre les forces de division incarnées par l'hérésie et le rationalisme. La dévotion à la madone cubaine, Notre Dame de la Charité d'El Cobre, se développe pendant la période baroque espagnole. L'auteur affirme qu'à cette époque, la chrétienté s'efforce de “lier entre eux des groupes appartenant à des classes sociales et à des races différentes”, grâce, notamment, à la dévotion mariale. Le syncrétisme consiste dans le fait que, plutôt que de faire correspondre, pour un même ensemble de rites et de symboles religieux, un système de sens propre à chacun des deux groupes antagonistes, on se trouve en présence d'un système de sens transculturel. Une fusion a été opérée entre le local et des origines raciales mélangées. Cette Vierge étant une sainte patronne nationale commune à tous les Cubains, quelle que soit leur race et leur origine, ce syncrétisme aurait incité les pratiquants des religions afro-cubaines à adopter Notre Dame de la Charité en lui attribuant une identité d'Ochun Yoruba. Ce processus syncrétique d'africanisation d'une Vierge catholique cubaine aurait eu pour effet symétrique de ‘cubaniser’ une religion africaine. Se référant à Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) l'auteur pose la question: s'agit-il seulement d'un cas de syncrétisme monologique, où chaque religion, chrétienne ou africaine, n'absorbe que quelques bribes de l'autre, ou ne s'agirait-il pas plutôt d'un syncrétisme dialogique où l'échange serait multilatéral ?*

*Resumen*

*La política del imperio español durante el período barroco se basaba en dos definiciones del espacio: el espacio local donde se celebraba la nación por medio de una serie de costumbres y tradiciones; y el espacio global, donde el catolicismo y su defensor, la Corona de España, protegían a las distintas naciones presentes contra las fuerzas de división representadas por la herejía y el racionalismo. La devoción a la madona cubana, Nuestra Señora de la Caridad d'el Cobre, se desarrolla durante el período barroco español. El autor sostiene que en esa época, la cristiandad se esfuerza por « crear lazos entre grupos pertenecientes a clases sociales y razas diferentes », sobre todo a través del culto a la Virgen María. Más que hacer corresponder*

*a un mismo conjunto de ritos y símbolos religiosos, un sistema de significados propio a cada uno de los grupos antagónicos, con el sincretismo estamos en presencia de un sistema de significados transcultural. Una síntesis se operó entre lo local y orígenes raciales mestizados. Siendo esta Virgen una santa patrona nacional común a todos los cubanos, independientemente de su raza y origen, este sincretismo habría favorecido la adopción de Nuestra Señora de la Caridad por los practicantes de las religiones afro-cubanas, atribuyéndole una identidad de Ochun Yoruba. Este proceso sincrético de africanización de una Virgen católica cubana, habría tenido un efecto simétrico: « cubanizar » una religión africana. Refiriéndose a Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) el autor plantea esta pregunta: se trata simplemente de un caso de sincretismo monológico, en el que cada religión, cristiana o africana, sólo absorbe algunos rasgos de la otra, o se trataría más bien de un sincretismo dialógico en el que el intercambio sería multilateral?*