

Annie Gibson
Professor Queeley
Final Paper
Fall 2007

Virgin of Charity:
Nation, Exile, and the Embodiment of the Waters

During the 1994 Cuban refugee crisis, countless images were published of Cuban citizens desperately tearing down boards from their houses in order to make flimsy rafts to set sail to the United States. Perhaps the only thing “secure” about this precarious way of traveling from Cuba was that the figure of the Virgin of Charity, Cuba’s patron saint, was almost always strongly fastened to the helm of the raft, leading the way for a safe crossing. In this paper I will explore how the patron saint of Cuba, the Virgin of Charity, has been used in the imagining of a migrant identity that links Cubans abroad to the Cubans still living on the island. The legend of the *Virgin de La Caridad* who, according to legend, walked across waters to save her followers, has now crossed waters again to become part of the mythology of being a Cuban in foreign lands. The Virgin is revered as both the guiding force that has led Cubans safely across the oceans to their place of exile as well as Cuba's patron saint, whose church has remained, even through the revolution, the most revered pilgrimage site on the island. I will argue that it is her mythic character, so intertwined with the shape-changing element of water where she was found that allows her to play a role in uniting a divided Cuba across waters. I will begin the analysis by looking at the mythography of the Virgin, paying close attention to her incorporation into syncretic religious practices and to cultural explanations of why she is considered the patron saint of Cuba. I will then explore how the Virgin has become the central figure in the identity development of Cuban exile communities in Miami and Puerto Rico where the Virgin of Charity is a symbol of miraculous intervention that is

tied in complex ways to the dangerous journey over the waters as well as to syncretism, to race, and, of course, to the embodiment of the Cuban nation itself.

Firth has suggested that the anthropological study of symbols should link symbols to specific social structures and events. He sees symbols as occurring in situations of disjunction, the “gap between the over superficial statement of action and its underlying meaning” (Firth 26). Miraculous Virgins, in general, often represent a disjunction between social structure and meaning. Donald Kurtz has argued, for example, that the Virgin of Guadalupe has symbolically articulated social relations, attempting to resolve fundamental contradictions in the changing society of central Mexico (Kurtz 195). In the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe, these are an inevitable result of the intersections of Indian society and culture and Spanish society and culture, between ecclesiastic authority and civil authority, and between paganism and Christianity. In the case of the Virgin of Charity of Cuba, fundamental contradictions rest between ideologies of justice and injustice, revolution and nation, and Christianity and paganism that simultaneously exist in imagining intercessory divine power.

The Virgin of Charity is an extremely powerful figure because of her liminality, both as a Virgin and also as being a “water born” Virgin. Victor Turner famously emphasized the concept of “liminality” in the 1960s and it continued to be the main theme of his work until he died in 1983. Liminality, as Victor Turner developed the concept, refers to an intersection between social and symbolic forms that may emerge and provide meaning to the social relations that develop at the “limen” or threshold. In his work “Liminality and Communitas” (1969), Turner begins by defining liminal individuals or entities as “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony (Turner 95).

A liminal figure has shed a previous identity, but has not yet emerged as a new entity. Liminal beings rest at an ambiguous threshold and represent dual states of existence. Images of the Virgin Mary are necessarily liminal because they are motherly figures that are supposedly “pure,” having never had a sexual experience yet becoming miraculously impregnated. Their very nature rests at the junction of opposing forces. They are holy and earthly at the same time.

The Virgin as a symbol has emerged as a protectorate of those resting in the limen state. The Virgin of Charity is particularly interesting as a liminal figure, not only because of her Virgin qualities, but because of her mythological and also historical relationship to water. Water itself is a very ambiguously liminal element. It is constantly shape changing and often becomes the marker of various thresholds for society. Water is seen as having cleansing properties, and is often incorporated into rituals dealing with religious rites of passage. In baptisms of religions across the globe, people symbolically enter water and exit into their new states of being. Water is central to these ritual processes because it is cleansing and also because humans are left helpless to contend with the powers of the water. We become innocent children again needing protection in its depths. People have no status in the realms of the water. We are essentially “fish out of the water” while we are in it. The whole purpose of going through a rite of passage is to emerge as a more grounded person. But while in the water, people are at a helpless, liminal state. There is no sense of being “grounded.” Water’s very nature makes it fluid. In this fluid state, the myths of the Virgin of Charity arise. Herself the ultimate liminal figure, the Virgin helps those who must contend with the challenges of the “water” (and there are many in and surrounding the island of Cuba) in reimagining the Cuban nation. For this, the Virgin has gained the nickname “la Virgen de Buenviaje” as she helps Cubans cross the Florida

Straits.

The legends concerning the Virgin of Charity in Cuba are numerous, as she continues to appear and reinvent herself in a context that is historically significant and meaningful. She has come to share the same mobility and globality as her worshipers, floating across the Florida Strait, the protectress of phantom rafts. This transnational invention is an image that pays reference to her earliest legends of discovery. The oldest version of the legend of the Virgin of Charity is from the 17th century. In this version, two Indian brothers, Juan and Rodrigo, and a black slave named Juan Moreno were sent by their master to look for salt on the northern coast of Barajagua in the Oriente province of Cuba. They were stranded due to a heavy storm and had to delay their return for days. When the storm finally calmed, and they began to return home, they discovered a statue of the Virgin of Charity floating in the water. Miraculously, all of her clothing was dry even though she was pulled out of the high seas.¹

The three friends rescued the image of the Virgin Mary from the waters and discovered that she was attached to a piece of wood, upon which was written, “*Yo soy la Virgen de la Caridad*” (García 58). As scholars such as I.A Wright, María Díaz and Olga Zúñiga have noted, there are certain elements of the story that ask us to question its veracity. For example, in 1782 Don Bernardo Ramírez, the Chaplain of the sanctuary of the *Virgen de la Caridad* wrote the article “*Historia de la Aparición Milagrosa de Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre*” in which he analysed a 1703 manuscript written by the first chaplain of the church, Don Onofre de Fonseca² (Zúñiga 30-31). Don

¹ María Díaz (2000) notes that the miraculous stories surrounding the virgin had radical implications for the social order at the time. The virgin appearing to the Indians and the slave in the natural environment, outside of the colonial structure, and appearing dry when she logically should have been wet is a reversal of normal social norms.

² Don Onofre de Fonseca himself was a Jamaican immigrant to Cuba. We see that the Virgin has already begun to cross national boundaries from her founding story.

Onofre's manuscript was based on the slave Juan Moreno's testimony, but unfortunately, the original copy of Juan Moreno's testimony has been lost and the interpretation of the testimony is all that we have left.

According to Ramirez's interpretation of the manuscript, Juan Moreno recorded his testimony about the discovery of the Virgin in 1688. Moreno was said to be 70-71 years old during the time of his testimony. According to Moreno, he was between 9 and 10 years old when he discovered the Virgin. If his calculations were correct, that would mean that the Virgin was discovered between 1627 and 1628. However, there is proof that a temple had already been constructed for the Virgin of Charity in El Cobre by 1605 making the discovery of the Virgin twenty years after her cult had begun. In fact, Juan Moreno would not even have been born by that time.

Also, Juan Moreno's story must be viewed in relationship to the context in which he came to retell the story. To begin with, Moreno was very old at the time of his testimony. He was also the only survivor of the three finders of the Virgin. He was giving his testimony because the story of the apparition was to be heard and notarized by the church authorities (Arrom 202). The story, therefore, had to be "approved" by the church in order to be notarized. Church authorities were very powerful people during this time period, especially if you consider the relationship of the church authorities to a slave like Juan Moreno. Not only could Moreno's account have altered because of the social hierarchies involved in the telling and the listening, but the church scribe could have glossed over or altered aspects of Juan's account (Díaz 89). Juan's story was, thus, based in the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church and was also recorded as a notarizing ritual, a way in which the institution structures the historical narrative.

There are other elements of the story that also bring pause. For example,

according to the testimony, one of the three friends in the boat was able to read the sign saying “*Yo soy la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre.*” That means that at least one, and most likely all three of the finders spoke Spanish and at least one of the three knew how to read Spanish (Arrom 207). The probability that there would be an Indian or a slave that could read at this time is quite slim. And, the fact that two Indians and a slave boy were allowed to travel alone at more than a day’s distance from the white Master also seems very improbable (García 59).

There is considerable reason to believe that this mythical story is, in fact, a symbolic myth whose importance has continued to grow over the centuries, as believers added details and variations to make the narrative fit more soundly into the contemporary settings where the Virgin finds herself. There are, in fact, several accepted and contradictory versions of Juan Moreno’s story that seem to all co-exist in literature written about the Virgin of Charity. For example, variations say that the Virgin appeared to three sailors and others say to three fisherman when they were caught in a storm out on high sea instead of the three finders waiting out the storm in a protected bay and then returning home, as in the original story. In the variation with the finders as sailors and as fisherman the three are actually close to death at sea when the Virgin appears to them, calming the waters. It is only by the divine intervention of the Virgin of Charity that they are not killed.³

In some ways, the Virgin of Charity follows the Marian master code which includes the Virgin appearing to the lowest and most disempowered people all over the

³ In the original myth it is also interesting how the names of the three finders of the Virgin have altered throughout history. Juan Moreno becomes “Juan esclavo,” the two Indian brothers, Juan Hoyos and Rodrigo Hoyos become “Juan Indio” and “Juan Criollo.” Symbolically, these three figures become the synthesis of Cuban transculturation with African, indigenous, and “mixed” roots. They are given names that represent their creolization and also the creolization of the Cuban nation (García 60).

world (women, children, shepherds, and Indians). But in other ways, the story of the Virgin of Charity challenges New World Marian myths because rarely are blacks the figures depicted as primary witnesses and the “authority” when it comes to the formation of the Virgin legend. In most New World myths, it is the Indian figure that plays the leading role in the foundational story. The fact that Juan Moreno becomes the central figure in the myth is significant. The Virgin becomes the protector for the enslaved even from her early history. In her later transnational journey, she will again travel in order to help her followers in the Cuban exile community escape what is often referred to by exiles as the “imprisonment” of the Cuban nation under the Castro regime.

If the legends surrounding the Virgin are syncretistic, the Virgin herself is even more syncretistic, absorbing iconographic images from different Marian representations, and from indigenous and African symbolism. In order to understand why the Virgin of Charity has such a strong relationship with the water and why water is such an important symbol, it is necessary to understand the basic hypotheses about her origins. The Virgin’s contemplative posture atop a half moon surrounded by angels shows elements of the iconography of Immaculate Conception. The boat with the three Juan’s is similar to representations of the Virgin de Misericordia and the sunrays that form a halo around the Virgin seem to be reminiscent of the Virgin de Guadalupe (García 107). In 1922, historian I.A Wright showed that it is a matter of historical fact that Our Lady of Charity is actually *Nuestra Señora de la Caridad de Illescas*, Spain (709).

Nuestra Señora de la Caridad de Illescas was a miraculous saint known and revered throughout Spain in the early 16th century. There still remains doubt about how and when the Virgin of Charity of Illescas actually arrived in Cuba. Wright says that, most likely, the image was brought by Alonso de Hojeda, a Spanish sailor, who left the

saint as an offering to the Indians along the southern coast of Cuba for his gratitude in helping him escape the mangrove swamps where he became stuck during his expedition in 1511 (Wright 112). Wright also offers another possible explanation, however, by which Captain Sanchez de Moya brought the Virgin to Cuba in 1597. Moya was sent to El Cobre by the Spanish crown to administer the copper mines in order to prepare the Spanish for a battle against the English (Wright 710).

Wright believes that the first version is more probable because in early writings by Bartolomé de las Casas and other early missionaries there is reference to an image of the Virgin Mary discovered among the Indians, which would support the hypothesis that maybe this figure was left in the water by an Indian tribe making an offering to Atabex (Arrom 189). And if the Virgin had been brought by Captain Sanchez de Moya in 1597, the Virgin revered by the Indians in the writings of Las Casas, would not have been the same Virgin worshiped in El Cobre because Las Casas's writings were prior to 1597. Exactly how the Virgin of Charity arrived may never be proven, but, it is clear that by 1608 *El Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* was revered at a hermitage on the hill of El Cobre⁴ (Díaz 119).

Bartolomé de las Casas talks about a Virgin being “baptized” by the Indians in the water of the river by being sent to float down the river so that the priest would not take the image away from the Indians (De Las Casas 533). We can only hypothesize as to whether this is actually the Virgin of Charity and as to the thought process of the Indians during this supposed “baptism.” Whether or not this is a description of the Virgin of

⁴ The mining administration sustained the hermit in payment for his evangelization efforts among a still mostly African slave force in the settlement. It is said that his name was Matías de Olivera, a soldier from Santo Domingo, possibly a deserter, who had been found living in a hill above the mines. In the evangelization process, was this soldier teaching Juan Moreno about the miracles and vows of the Virgin? Is his role central in understanding the foundational stories of the Virgin? In Moreno's account he recalls the hermit scolding the Virgin for her miraculous disappearances after she had reappeared with her clothes wet (Díaz 121).

Charity is less important than the syncretistic way in which the Indians approach the worship of this anonymous Virgin figure. In the description of Las Casas, during this symbolic episode, it is as if the Virgin inhabits the characteristics of the Indian *Madre de las Aguas*, Atabex. They send her back to the water. Perhaps this is the first relevant syncretism: Atabex and the Virgin.

The Indians, not understanding the language or the customs of the evangelizers received a Virgin statue, a material object, and understood that this object must be sacred and so they treated her as if she was one of their own goddesses, sending her down the river into her natural habitat. In his description, Las Casas discusses how easily the Indians began to understand and repeat the Ave María, but it remains questionable as to whether they were singing to the mother of the Christian God, or whether they were singing to the mother of the Taíno God, Atabex. According to the Taíno religion, the mother of God comes from the water and Atabex is probably a derivative of *itabo*, meaning lake or lagoon. In fact, the Taíno term today for a clear lagoon is “*itabo*”. Atabex was also related to the devotion of the tides and to maternity⁵ (Arrom 193).

The Indian *Madre de las Aguas* syncretism is further supported by the writings of Fernando Ortiz who argues that the symbols and iconography surrounding the Virgin of Charity are actually of Arawak descent. The Virgin of Charity sits on top of a half moon facing downwards. The moon in the Arawak tradition is the symbol of the creator and is also the ruler of the waters. This makes sense when we consider that the statue was pulled from the ocean (Zúniga 60). There are also indications that the very first statue of the Virgin of Charity had many similarities to Arawak statues. There is a painting of the

⁵ This becomes interesting to think about in other versions of the syncretistic practices where the Virgin becomes syncretized with the African orixá Oshun who governs over rivers and streams and who is the daughter of Yemanya, the maternal goddess of the sea, also linked to maternity and the tides.

image of the Virgin from the 17th century and the details of the face seem to have indigenous features. Both the face and the baby lying in the arms of the Virgin seem to be carved out of wood, just as Arawak statues are portrayed (Zúniga 77).

It is interesting to note that Taíno gods often disappear and reappear to their followers since this is a primary trait of the miracles surrounding the Virgin of Charity. (Her hermitage was constructed on a top of a hill looking down upon the copper mines of El Cobre because the Virgin supposedly disappeared from her small church parish in the town and reappeared on top of the hill of El Cobre, letting it be known that it was there that she intended to stay.)

Her disappearances were also marked with a strong relationship to water. It was almost as if the Virgin could not go too long without reconnecting herself to water; water functions as her portal for movement and proof of her miracles. She would disappear and then reappear with her clothes wet. (This contrasts from her founding myth where she was in the water and her clothes were dry.) The Virgin symbolically reverses the natural order of the world. Water is wet, yet the Virgin stays dry. Land is dry, yet the Virgin becomes wet.⁶

El Cobre, the town where the Virgin chose to become protector (and according to legend it was her choice rather than the decision of the people) lies in the mountains of Sierra del Cobre in the Oriente province of Cuba. Although oral history has placed the foundation of El Cobre in pre-Colombian times, Spanish written sources trace the foundations of the mining village to the 16th century, still making it one of the oldest settlements on the island (Díaz 1). El Cobre is named after “copper,” the material for

⁶ Her story is also representative of Gideon’s fleece, a Bible story in which God strengthens the faith of Gideon by making a piece of fleece wet when the ground was dry. (6:39-40) The story is fitting because the miraculous apparitions of the Virgin of Charity also strengthen her following.

which the mining town was created; the town has been interlinked with its copper mines since its foundations. El Cobre has historically seen diverse people working together on the mines, making it a prime location for a Virgin who is representative of racial and cultural syncretism and integration. Workers from Africa, Spain, the West Indies, China, England, and the United States have all converged at El Cobre at different points in history. The traces of their presence remain in the town's social memory and in the Virgin's transcultural appearance (Díaz 6). It is in her relationship with the workers of El Cobre that the Virgin of Charity began to take on other syncretistic natures and her water symbolism becomes even more complex.

Although much speculation has been written about the indigenous influences in the iconography of the Virgin, perhaps the strongest influence in the development of the Virgin's miraculous legends as they are remembered today are linked to the slaves that first worked the mines under the direction of the King of Spain. María Elena Díaz describes how the relationship between the royal slaves and the Virgin developed in a way that became a negotiating force for issues of identity formation in different spheres of the slaves' lives. The royal slaves have been part of the social memory of El Cobre since the 16th century. In 1800, after litigating for their freedom from Madrid, the royal slaves were granted freedom. El Cobre became the first fully recognized Afro-Cuban pueblo in Cuba. It remained predominately Afro Cuban until the 19th century when British mining interests brought big business and more wealthy settlers into the area (Díaz 49). These ex-slaves had a huge impact in shaping the cult of the Virgin.

In order for a saint to have both a successful and meaningful shrine, there must be constant proof of her miraculous powers. The Virgin of Charity provided this for her followers and has continued to be miraculous. Díaz shows how the stories of the Virgin's

miraculous apparitions during the colonial years were linked to the Virgin's commitment to social justice and the performance of miracles to empower the royal slaves⁷ (Díaz 109). Juan Moreno's account recalls the placement of various images and paraphernalia left as an offering in payment of a miracle performed.⁸ In the process of instating a New World identity, slaves came to identify themselves as *cobrerros* by uniting behind the image of the Virgin, and the Virgin's miraculous lessons came to be outcries that pushed the people to unite and motivate collectively (Díaz 139).

The Virgin Mary is paradoxically the creator of her Creator, the mother of God. Her exaltations of and through humanity were essential to her devotion from the earliest centuries of Christianity. But is the Christian concept of Mary an answer to why slaves would worship her so fervently in El Cobre? I think that this answer is not sufficient. Syncretism is also the explanation as to why the Virgin played such a powerful role in the development of a sense of belonging for slaves in the New World. Traditional representations of the Virgin Mary show her as a loving mother to humankind and preoccupied with the daily problems of the masses but what was going on in official church records are not always telling of the way in which symbols are imagined by the people, especially non-European people of African descent.

*En el sincrético símbolo de lo que somos, el blanco puso su
castellana Caridad de Illescas, el indio agregó su antillana Atabex, y el
negro añadió a su africana Oshun. Lo último es un secreto a voces.
Escasos han de ser los que en Cuba todavía no sepan que en muchas
viviendas de los arrabales, y también en algunas mansiones de los mejores*

⁷ It is interesting to note that Juan Moreno was the captain of the royal slaves in 1677.

⁸ The tradition of ex-votos to the Virgin of Charity has continued today and has also become part of the tradition among the exile community in their worship of the Virgin of Charity.

barrios, se rinde culto a una Santa Bárbara identificada con Changó, a un San Lázaro identificado con Babayú Ayé, a una Virgen de Regla que es igualmente Yemanyá, y a una Virgen de la Caridad que es también Oshun.

(Arrom 212)

A counter-narrative to the more Catholic version of the appearance of the Lady of Charity is told through the lens of Santería. According to the legends of Santería, Oshun, goddess of the rivers and the lakes in Africa, became saddened when white slave traders took many of her children off to a far away place called Cuba. She asked her mother, Yemanya, the goddess of the sea if Yemanya would help her to go to Cuba so that she could continue to watch over her children. Yemanya agreed, and Oshun asked her mother Yemanya if there was anything that she should know before she left for Cuba. Yemanya told her that the climate and the vegetation are very much like Africa, but one thing that Oshun should know is that not everyone there in Cuba is black. Oshun then asked her mother to grant her two wishes: to make her hair straighter and her skin lighter so that all Cubans could see a piece of themselves in her and then to help her cross the ocean. In granting these wishes, Oshun was transformed into the Lady of Charity and crossed the ocean from Africa with the help of her mother Yemanya to protect the slaves from the oppressions of slavery in the New World (Tweed 49).

Oshun is thought of as being a beautiful, light-skinned mulata, who playfully charms and attracts like her favorite food, honey. “Among the orixas she is one of the most venerated, perhaps the most easily and naturally adapted to Cuba, not only because of the syncretism of the patroness of Cuba...but because she is thought to represent many Cuban women in her sensual grace and Creole mischievousness” (Barnet 95). The Santería narrative where Caridad is actually Oshun also helps us make sense of why the

Virgin of Charity has come to not only help water crossers, but also how she came to reside over the copper mines in El Cobre. In Africa Oshun used to be associated with copper because copper was the most precious metal of ancient times, and thus Oshun's favorite offering. When copper ceased being the most precious metal, Oshun developed a liking for gold. This explains why, at one time, the Virgin of Charity had wanted her hermitage to be built close to the copper mines, close to her preferred offering⁹ (Mitchell 140).

Lydia Cabrera addresses the disconnect between Cuba's Iberian-based "official" culture and institutions and its African-derived popular traditions in her book, *El Monte*, documenting the dynamic relationship, of Yoruba, Fon, Kongo and Ejagham religions in Cuba. In *El Monte*, Cabrera creates a compilation of Afro Cuban lore and practice and provides an ethnobotany dictionary for healing and ceremonial offerings for the orixás. She talks about the rituals of Santería and the significance of different animals, symbols, and words within Afro-Cuban religious cosmology and daily life. Her work is an ethnographic study with interviews from various *babalawos* and other important members of different Afro Cuban religious groups.

The description of rituals and ceremonies performed in African-derived religions shows us that the Virgin of Charity is, in fact, synonymous with Oshun. Lydia Cabrera, as well as the interviewees that she includes in the volume, share stories about Oshun in which the orixá of the rivers and lakes is talked about interchangeably with "Caridad," "the Virgin," and "Mama Caché." She even talks about *babalawos* who manifest themselves as the Virgin of Charity during ritual ceremonies performed for Oshun (Cabrera 30). In Santería, the Virgin of Charity, just like Oshun, is said to be a beautiful

⁹ According to the legend the Virgin of Charity would disappear from the church and reappear, wet, above the copper mines.

dancer (Cabrera 34). There is a description of the feast day of the Virgin that sounds as if she were Oshun. In Cabrera's description, the feast is spoken of as if the Christian portion of the ceremony does not even exist: The santera "*con un mantón amarillo de seda enredado a la cintura era la Caridad del Cobre, Oshún panchággara, en persona*" (Cabrera 57). Oshun led the feast dressed as the Virgin, an incarnation of the orixás persona.

Healings performed by the Virgin of Charity (Oshun) often incorporate water as a cleansing and renewing element. In Santería there is a healing recipe known as "*baños de la Caridad*" where the initiate will bathe themselves in mint water as a way of getting rid of the evil eye (Zúñiga 258). Offerings left for the Virgin of Charity are often left at the edge of bodies of water where she is most likely to appear. In fact, "*caballos*¹⁰" of Oshun and her mother Yemanya always get wet, either dousing themselves in water or entering into the water during the ceremony (Cabrera 41).

With so much imagery of water, cleansing and rebirth, it also makes sense that the Virgin of Charity became associated with another type of water; She is in charge of the breaking of the water during childbirth. The Virgin of Charity is known as the "*dueña de las barrigas*" (the ruler of the belly). She and the Virgin of Regla (Yemanya) are the two caregivers and protectorates of safe childbirth.

To understand how syncretism with Oshun comes to affect the "official" doctrine associated with the Virgin of Charity, we need only to look at the physical attributes given to the Virgin in her temple. Here I am not talking about the skin tone of the Virgin of Charity (although she is noticeably darker than that of European saints). I am interested in the robes in which she is dressed. The official color of garments worn by the

¹⁰ An initiate in santería is said to be "mounted" by the orixá during the ceremony. The orixá is able to come down to earth through the body of the practitioner. The person who is mounted by the orixá is referred to as the "horse".

Virgin of Charity by the Catholic Church is blue, a tradition dating back to the Middle Ages, a time when the deep blue of lapis lazuli was a signifier of the most precious metal. However, in her temple in El Cobre, the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* is not represented in her blue robes, but in royal robes of white and gold (García 60). How can you explain such a violation of Catholic tradition in the Virgin's primary temple? The answer is that white and gold are the colors of Oshun. Symbolically, this saint wears the colors that allow her to cross boundaries of recognition.

The Virgin of Charity's crossing of boundaries and her insidious incorporation into various cultural and religious practices in Cuba has meant that the Virgin as a symbol has aided in the construction of a sense of national identity for Cubans today. Arrom has argued that the link between the Virgin of Charity and the Cuban nation is a relatively "modern" phenomenon, beginning in the 19th century when ideas of Cuban nationhood began to form, even though devotion to the Virgin of Charity as a cultural symbol dates back to the 17th century in the Orient as we have seen.

During the Cuban revolutionary war the Virgin was used as a figure of revolutionary fervor against Spain (Zúñiga 226). The song used to unite the rebels in the barracks during the war was

Virgen de la Caridad
Patrona de los cubanos,
Con el machete en la mano
Pedimos la libertad (Zúñiga 229).

Later, during the Cuban revolution, the *Ejército Rebelde*, led by Fidel Castro, wore Virgin de la Caridad pendants on their camouflaged uniforms. There was even said to be an improvised portable altar set up for the Virgin of Charity in the Sierra Maestra mountains

(Zúñiga 271). The Virgin became militarized as a defender of her people. She represented the nation's fight against oppression.

Afro Cubans have also used the Virgin of Charity in their cause against racial oppression in the imagining of their place within the Cuban nation. The sense of hope that the Virgin of Charity embodies for the Cuban nation is illustrated in the writing of Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillen:

Virgen de la Caridad
Que desde un peñón de cobre
Esperanza das al pobre
Y al rico seguridad.
En tu criolla bondad,
¡Oh madre!, siempre creí,
por eso pido de ti
que si esa bondad me alcanza
des al rico la esperanza,
la seguridad a mí (Guillen 263).

The Virgin of Charity represents both hope and security. Because of this, on January 24, 1998, the Virgin of Charity made an unusual pilgrimage from her normal place of resting in the Basilica of El Cobre to the nearby city of Santiago de Cuba where Pope John Paul II officially crowned the Virgin of Charity as the patron saint of Cuba. This was an important moment in the relationship between the people, church, and state in Cuba and an ingenious political maneuver on the part of Castro (Díaz 47). By uniting his government policies with the visit of the Pope, Fidel showed that the revolution was sanctified by the Virgin. It is important to remember that just like Catholics, santeros and

even “non-denominational” Cubans, make pilgrimages to the shrine of the Virgin of Charity, making her integration into the Pope’s visit a way to unite all Cubans regardless of whether or not they were practicing Catholics. The Pope’s visit may be seen as the culminating moment in which the symbol of the Virgin of Charity comes to represent a sense of Cuban nationalism. And, as the Pope also denounced the U.S embargo on his visit, the Virgin also becomes the fighting figure, along with Che Guevara, to unite Cubans behind the ideals of revolution.

But the Virgin of Charity is both as fluid and transnational as the waters upon which she was found. This is evident in her representations within the Cuban communities abroad. Here we come to the heart of the Virgin’s modern transnational water travels. How is it that the Virgin of Charity, a symbol of Cuban nationalism, also comes to represent a sense of diasporic nationalism? Diasporic nationalism refers to a displaced group’s attachment to the traditions and geography of the homeland (Tweed 86). And there are few groups where diasporic nationalism is so fervently charged as with Cubans living abroad, yet the Virgin of Charity is able to unite Cubans across borders and political divisions. The *Hermandad de la Caridad*, an organization of Cuban exiles from Miami, is quoted as saying, “Only the Virgin of Charity is able to maintain the Cuban people united; she is the undisputed link that ties us forever to our land” (Hermandad de la Caridad 1983).

Diasporic images of nationhood are multiple and contested and with this, new associations are brought to the devotion of the Virgin of Charity. Ironically, for Cuban exiles, diasporic nationalism is in fervent protest to the political ideals that the Virgin of Charity supposedly conforms to on her Cuban soil. In Miami she is the protector of people who are hoping to escape Castro. But the Virgin of Charity was known throughout

the Caribbean even before she became associated with a political sense of Cuban nationalism because it was not only with the Cuban revolution that the Virgin became transnational. It is important that the Virgin was known prior to her association with Cuban politics because she was quickly able to become a symbol for Cubans to feel at home outside of Cuban soil because she “existed” outside of the Cuban political realm as a cultural symbol even if she was co-opted into a political symbol in the 19th century. As the protectress saint of copper miners in the town of El Cobre and because of immigration to the mines, she was able to begin her crossings and her life as a cultural symbol against oppression far beyond her special imagining as a Cuban national protector. Jamaican immigrants, for example, have been involved with the cult of the Virgin of Charity since the 1600s. Onofre de Fonseca, the priest in charge of the shrine of the Virgin of Charity at the end of the 1600s, was of Jamaican descent (Zúñiga 124).

The Virgin of Charity has also made an interesting appearance in Haiti. Because the Virgin of Charity is known as Oshun in the Cuban religious pantheon, she is identified with loa Evzulie in Haitian Vodou, also known as LaSiren (Olmos 43). Lasiren makes up part of the lwa rite in Haitian vodou and has many similar characteristics to Oshun. Haitian Vodou can be traced back to the kingdom of Dahomey in what is now Nigeria, Benin, and Togo (Olmos 110). The *rada* spirits like LaSiren are characterized as being sweet-tempered spirits, just as Oshun. LaSiren is a mermaid and she is linked in worship and song to the whale, Lavalenn, and the two are considered to be manifestations of the same deity¹¹ (Olmos 111).

The copper mines and later the profitable sugar cane plantations enticed a

¹¹ The Siren and the Whale are two marine deities so closely linked that they are almost always worshipped together and celebrated in the same songs. Some say the Whale is the mother of the Siren, others that it is her husband; and there are still others who say that these two names are used for one and the same deity (Houlberg 33).

constant back and forth movement between Haiti and Cuba, and the Virgin of Charity crossed the waters with the immigrants who came to work on Cuba's shores. Lasiren is said to be a seductress and those seductions that she possesses are those of a very vain and coquettish young woman. These characteristics of Lasiren are the same characteristics prescribed to possessions by Oshun. Because of these similarities, in chromolithographs from Haiti that depict LaSiren, she is often represented as the Cuban Lady of Charity. The Lady of Charity, thus, comes to be a manifestation of Lasiren as well.

Water spirits have been known to cross national borders and imaginations since early history. Water deities have roots in both Europe and in Africa. In Europe, tales of mermaids date back to ancient times. Homer relates how Ulysses, hearing the melodic voices of three sirens, had to be tied to the mast of his ship so that he would not jump overboard. Africans brought to the New World their own strong traditions of water-related spirits. Looking at Cuba as an island country we can understand why the Virgin of Charity's connection to the waters allowed her to take on such a central role in the development of Cuban identity and also allowed her to migrate across national borders. As an island country, Cuban identity is profoundly connected to the water. As a country that has inspired thousands of rafters to take to the Florida Straits, water is intensely part of Cuban national history.

In contemporary Cuban migration, the cult of the Virgin tends to represent the transnational wanderings of the Virgin's Cuban people as they escape the Castro regime post 1959. Puerto Rico, for example, is the home to a large Cuban exile community and, because of this, the Virgin of Charity is worshipped there as both a Catholic saint and as a representation of Oshun. Although she does not hold the same centrality to the nation that

exists in Cuba, she is still an important figure in the Puerto Rican Santería tradition and can be seen on altars throughout the island. Mutual aid and charity associations for Cubans in Puerto Rico are in charge of organizing annual feasts for the Virgin of Charity in San Juan. One such group, *Unión de Cubanos en el Exilio*, holds an annual celebration on her first feast day on September 8th. In 1984, the first large feast day, there were over one thousand people in attendance, most of them first generation Cuban exiles and their children. Masses in honor of the Virgin of Charity have been performed in Puerto Rico since 1960 (Cobas 95).

The Virgin of Charity is so important to exiled Cuban communities because she has come to represent a link to the Cuban homeland. In fact, even though she is used as an example of the revolution in Cuba, her figure is used just as frequently, if not more frequently, in anti-Fidel manifestations outside of Cuba. Cobas notes that the patriotic motif of the San Juan feast day in 1983 overrode the religious component of the event. Father Enrique Méndez, the priest in charge of the mass that day, emphasized the contradictions between the Catholic teaching and the communist system (Cobas 96).

In contrast to a more conservative understanding of nation, Cuban diasporic communities have adopted the Virgin of Charity as a representation of their views on nation; Fidel is the enemy and threat to their well-being. The Virgin has crossed waters to protect the people. The Virgin represents the ties of the Cubans to the island, even in their diasporic space as exiles. As the Virgin has traveled across water, she has been able to create bridges, being in two places at once, and upholding two different ideas of “nation.” The primary message of the Virgin appearing in the exile community is that the values of Cubans are actually better preserved outside of Cuba. Perhaps nothing has best illustrated this fact as the Elian Gonzalez case when Miami Cubans see the Virgin of Charity

symbolically appear to save Elián from repressive Cuba.

During the Elián González case, the Virgin of Charity "appeared" in Miami, first as an oily mark on a Total Bank window, then as an apparition to Elián's cousin and primary caregiver, Marisleysis González, in a mirror in the boy's room. These images gave authenticity and power to the argument that Elián should remain in the United States. The image of the Virgin of Charity showed that he had been led to safety with the blessings of the Lady of Charity. There were stories of the boy being saved by dolphins, the helpers of the Lady of Charity; All of the water spirits divinely protected Elián.

The day after the boy was forcefully removed by federal agents from the Little Havana home of his relatives, nearly every news account lingered on images of a broken statue of the Virgin of Charity that was smashed during the raid. The return of Elián to the island had literally "destroyed" the Lady of Charity. The following day, on Easter Sunday, an emotional mass was held in honor of Elián at the shrine *La Ermita de la Caridad*, the chapel built in honor of the Virgin of Charity at Coconut Grove (Tweed 15). In her own temple, the Lady of Charity could not be broken. Within that sacred space, the "legitimate" Cuba was still strong. The shrine to the Virgin of Charity combines spatial and visual narratives to create a sense of history that legitimates the exile community and its sense of itself as the "legitimate" Cuba. The Virgin of Charity was, after all, the first Cuban "rafter," since she was rescued from the waters back in the seventeenth century. In her temple, Cuban exiles could regroup and become strong again.

The Virgin of Charity has taken on a very specific role as the protectorate of *balseros*, Cuban rafters who risk their lives to come to the United States in escape of Castro at the Miami shrine which was dedicated on December 2nd 1973. By the 1990s, her Miami shrine had become the sixth largest pilgrimage site in the United States. At the

shrine, symbols of Cuban nationalism are everywhere. A Cuban flag is painted on the stones to the left of the shrine exterior, there is a bust of José Martí located on the back wall, and a mural narrating Cuba's political, military, and religious history is prominently located inside the shrine (Tweed 3-4). The shrine represents a place where Cuban nationalism is related to the early symbols of independence and freedom rather than the current Castro definition of nation.

The Virgin of Charity's journey to Miami is representative of her appeal as a savior of Cuban freedom. Thomas Tweed tells us that the Lady of Charity traveled from Havana airport to a baseball stadium in Miami on her feast day to begin her life as a Cuban exile in 1961. In August of 1961, the exile community in Miami contacted the Italian ambassador to Cuba requesting that he grant "asylum" to the Virgin of Charity located in Guanabo Beach. The Italian ambassador granted asylum and the Virgin of Charity statue was smuggled out of Cuba with the help of Panamanian diplomat, Elvira Jované de Zayas and an unwitting exile, Luís Gutiérrez Areces, who was granted asylum so that he could unknowingly carry the statue in his knapsack into the stadium in Miami where the Virgin's feast day would occur on September 8, 1961 (Tweed 15).

This symbolic story of the escape of the Virgin of Charity from the island comes to have powerful meaning for the exile community. Her feast day each year continues to have ritual significance related to the perilous journey that Cubans make over the ocean to reach the "safety" of the United States. Consider the following scene of the feast day described by Sarah Mahler:

American Airlines Arena, downtown Miami, 7 p.m., September 8, 2001. One after another they come, eleven couples, each carrying carafes of water from their home diocese in Cuba, vowing to Caridad (Our Lady

of Charity) before emptying the vials into a crystal bowl on the altar of the makeshift sanctuary. Eleven exile couples, eleven waters blessed by diocesan priests on the island before being commingled and sprinkled by Miami priests upon the exiles in attendance, tens of thousands strong. Cheers of “Cuba libre!” and strains of “Virgin Mambisa” punctuate the hours-long performance of the patron saint festival, now in its fortieth year. A thousand miles away in El Cobre, Cuba, hundreds of pilgrims file past rum-sweetened revelers into the teeming, sultry sanctuary where another gold-draped Virgin awaits them in the dark before dawn. Some come to petition her and others to thank her for providing help. Times are hard and could she spirit them a visa or watch over a loved one about to embark for Miami on a raft? They come despite the difficulty of finding transportation and food and under the watchful eyes of the authorities (Fernández 52).

On the ritual feast day, the Virgin functions as the ambulatory protector of Cubans. Whether in Cuba, Miami, or at sea, she is the witness of Cuba’s ever-present transnational plight. What is not mentioned in the above description of the feast day held in Miami is how she arrives each year to her feast. In 1994 and 1995, the Virgin arrived via helicopter on the “Brothers to the Rescue” helicopter. “Brothers to the Rescue” is an organization of pilots who rescue Cuban refugees off the Miami coast. All other years since the 1970s, however, she has arrived to her feast site via boat, tying her mythical story of being pulled from the waters at the Bay of Nipe to the plight of Cuban exiles who must cross the waters to escape political persecution and, at times, must also be pulled from the waters (Tweed 129). The Virgin of Charity is the symbol of their safe passage

across the waters. Catholics, santeros, and non-denominational Cubans alike often go to the water's edge behind the shrine in Miami and throw offerings into the water to the Virgin (or perhaps to Oshun). Through the power of the waters, their prayers will reach her—whoever is meant by “her”.

Persistence of identity implies the manipulation of shared symbols. In this sense, the mass in honor of the Lady of Charity dramatizes the abyss between Cubans in exile and those who support the revolution. The physical symbol of the Virgin of Charity has great significance because she can transport the exiles symbolically to the homeland both in its remembered past and its imagined future. The fact that the shrine is built looking out over the ocean is also important. It reminds devotees that it is this liquid space that separates them from the homeland, a liquid space that the Virgin has crossed successfully back and forth on multiple occasions, a liquid space that is also the mediator between themselves and the Virgin. The cornerstone in the Miami shrine represents this relationship between the water and the transnational dilemma of Cuban migrants. The cornerstone lies beneath the altar of the shrine for the Virgin of Charity and each of the side fragments were affixed in place using soil from the six Cuban provinces and water taken from a raft on which 15 refugees died at sea (Tweed 102). The ritual space of the shrine emphatically reconstructs the Virgin of Charity's connection to the water as the protectress of those who must cross.

This association makes her a powerful symbol for all migrants who must make perilous “crossings,” whether they are across the ocean or across the Rio Grande. In the name of migrant solidarity, the Miami shrine opens its space not only to Cubans, but to all other Latinos as well. Even though the shrine is a place of Cuban national identity, during the month of October, the clergy invites migrants from each of the twenty-eight

Latino migrant groups of Miami to visit on their particular “day.” The Lady of Charity has, thus, become transnational on many levels. She is a representative of all Latin American migrants in search of a better life. For some, Miami may have been their first encounter with the Virgin of Charity. For others, such as migrants of Haiti, devotion to the Virgin (the black mermaid) actually began in their home countries. For all, the Virgin of Charity represents a sense of fluid identity movement and formation. She cleanses the spirit, giving all those in search of a more just life a symbol behind which to unite.

The Virgin of Charity subsumes the themes of mobility, modernity, and citizenship as they play themselves out in the context of the exiled Cuban community. She has become a migrant herself. Though she exists in a statue form, she is also “alive,” embodied in all waters everywhere. Not only does she embody the rivers and the sweet waters of Oshun, but her mother Yemanya has also opened up the oceans of the earth to the Virgin of Charity, Our Lady of Safe Travels. She is a watery, roving signifier, in whatever space her statue should be venerated: No icon could be more profoundly Cuban—or universal.

Works Cited

- Arrom, José Juan. Certidumbre de América: Estudios de Letras, Folklore, y Cultura. Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1971.
- Barnet, Miguel. "La Regla de Ocha: The Religious System of Santería." In Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997: 79-100.
- Cabrera, Lydia. El Monte. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1992.
- Casanova, Manuel Martínez. "Sincretismo y transculturación: La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre". In Islas. 88(103) May-August 1987: 57-62.
- Cobas, José and Jorge Duany. Cubans in Puerto Rico: Ethnic Economy and Cultural Identity. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1997.
- De las Casas, Bartolomé. Historia de las Indias, Caracas, Venezuela: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1986.
- Díaz, María Elena. "Rethinking Tradition and Identity: The Virgin of Charity of El Cobre" in Cuba: The Elusive Nation. Edited by Damián J. Fernandez and Madeline Cámara Betancourt. Gainesville, FL: University of Gainesville Press, 2000. 43-59.
- García, José de la Fuente. "La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre: Estudio de la imagen y el mito de su aparición." In Revista de los Ciencias Sociales. January 1999: 99-122.
- Firth, R. Symbols: Public and Private. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1973.
- Houlberg, Marilyn. "Sirens and Snakes: Water Spirits in the Arts of Haitian Vodou" in Special Issue: Arts of Vodou of African Arts, 29:2 (1996): 30-35+101.
- Kurtz, Donald V.. "The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Politics of Becoming Human" Journal of Anthropological Research, 38:2 (1982): 194-210.
- Mahler, Sarah and Katrin Hansing. "Myths and Mysticism: How Bringing a Transnational Religious Lens to the Examination of Cuba and Cuban Diaspora Exposes and Ruptures the Fallacy of Isolation" in Cuba Transnational. Ed. Damián Fernández. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2005.
- Miller, Ivor. "Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance" in The Drama Review 44.2 (2000): 30-55.
- Mitchell, Mozella. "Africa's Oshun in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Trinidad and the Multifarious Image of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre: Symbols of Continuity and Change in Caribbean Religions" in Crucial Issues in Caribbean Religions. New York: Peter Lang Press, 2006. 140-151.

Olmos, Margarite Fernández. Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo. New York: New York University Press, 2003.

Tweed, Thomas. Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami. New York: Oxford Press, 1997.

Walker, Sheila. “Everyday and Esoteric Reality in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé” in *History of Religions* 30:2 (1990): 103-128.

Wright, I.A. “Our Lady of Charity” in The Hispanic American Historical Review 5:4. (1922): 709-717.

Zúñiga, Olga Portuondo. La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre: Símbolo de Cubanía. Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1991.