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The 'Event' of Nationalism

Published without images as 'The "Event" of Nationalism', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 2.7 (2015), 1113-1127.

In this essay I shall be focussing on the role played by a series of events and how they were interpreted to have a foundational meaning for the creation of Mexican identity, nationhood and statehood. I shall be comparing the creation of Mexican statehood with the portrayal of Cuban nationhood, via the use of the supernatural signification and resonance associated with saints and/or apparitions of the divine. The three test cases are, for Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and for Cuba, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre and the Virgen de Regla. In each case the events on which a sense of nationhood were pinned operate in a dual sense in that their meaning was constructed retroactively. Comparing them allows us to draw some conclusions about the various factors which were at work in the creation of a national icon.

In order to understand the way in which the complex process of the creation of a national icon functioned the work of the French philosopher, Alain Badiou, is helpful. In *L'Être et l'événement* (1988) Badiou refers to the elusive meaning of the term event in his famous description of the French Revolution: 'The Revolution of 1789 is certainly "French", yet France is not what engendered and named its eventness. It is much rather the case that it is the revolution which has since retroactively given meaning – by being inscribed, via decision, therein – to that historical situation that we call France'.¹ Badiou is particularly interested in the ways in which events achieve meaning and, more specifically, do so via a process of nomination. As he suggests:

What do we understand here by 'nomination'? Another form of the question would be: what resources connected to the situation can we count on to pin this paradoxical multiple that is the event to the signifier; thereby granting ourselves the inexpressible possibility of its belonging to the situation? No presented term of the situation can furnish what we require, because the effect of homonymy would immediately efface everything unrepresentable contained in the event; moreover, one would be introducing an ambiguity into the situation in which all interventional capacity would be abolished. Nor can the site itself name the event, even if it serves to circumscribe and qualify it. For the site is a term of the situation, and its being-on-the-edge-of-the-void, although open to the possibility of an event, in no way necessitates the latter. (*Being and Event*, p. 203)

A number of the events we shall be referring to – such as the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe to Juan Diego in 1531, and the appearance of the Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre to the three Juanes in Cuba in 1616 – contained what Badiou refers to here as something 'unrepresentable'. But what does Badiou mean by the 'unrepresentable'? On the one hand, Badiou argues that the 'unrepresentable' is the 'unpresented element of the presented element of the site, "contained" in the void at the edge of which the site stands' (*Being and Event*, p. 23). On the other hand, he argues, it 'indexes the event to the arbitrariness of the signifier; an arbitrariness, however, that is limited by one law alone – that the name of the event

¹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 203.

must emerge from the void' (*Being and Event*, pp. 23-24). The unrepresentable element within the event leads to the creation of a doubleness within the event, such that it is split into two. As Badiou continues:

The interventional capacity is bound to this double function, and it is on such a basis that the belonging of the event must emerge from the void. The intervention touches the void, and is thereby subtracted from the law of count-as-one which rules the situation, precisely because its inaugural axiom is not tied to the one, but to the two. As one, the element of the site which indexes the event does not exist, being unrepresented. What induces its existence is the decision by which it occurs as two, as itself absent and as supernumerary name. (*Being and Event*, p. 205).

According to Badiou's typology the splitness of the event is characterised by a division between the event as a product of what might be called meaningless 'sheer force' on the one hand and the indexical capacity of the event which lends its meaning (often retrospectively or in terms of *après-coup*), which is here characterised as a 'supernumerary name'. This shuttling between the two functions of the event is crucial, as Badiou argues, to the functioning of representation itself:

I have shown that the state of a situation – its metastructure – serves to form-a-one out of any part in the space of presentation. Representation is thus secured. Given a multiple of presented multiples, its name, correlate of its one, is an affair of the state. But since the intervention extracts the supernumerary signifier from the void bordered on by site, the state law is interrupted. The choice operated by the intervention is a non-choice for the state, and thus for the situation, because no existent rule can specify the unrepresented term which is chosen as name of the pure eventual 'there is'. Of course, the term of the site which names the event is, if one likes, a representative of the site. It is such all the more so given that its name is 'belonging to the site'. However, from the perspective of the situation – or of its state – this representation can never be recognised. Why? Because no law of the situation thus authorizes the determination of an anonymous term for each part, a purely indeterminate term; still less the extension of this illegal procedure, by means of which each included multiple would produce – by what miracle of a choice without rules? a representative lacking any other quality than that of belonging to this multiple, to the void itself, such that its borders are signalled by the absolute singularity of the site. (*Being and Event*, pp. 205-06)

In what follows I want to draw on a number of ideas taken from this passage; firstly its sense of the process whereby representation is 'secured' to use Badiou's term; secondly, its notion of the brute force of the event as a 'pure eventual "there is"', and, thirdly, Badiou's rather intriguing allusion to the notion of a 'miracle of a choice without rules'. Though this last comment operates rather like an *ex tempore* comment in Badiou's text, I want to explore the underlying notion that a miracle might

be defined as an event which is characterised by a split, doubled representativity based on a 'choice without rules'. Indeed, Badiou defines the miracle in an essay on Blaise Pascale, contained within *Being and Event* as follows:

[T]he miracle – like Mallarmé's chance – is the emblem of the pure event as resource of truth. Its function – to be in excess of proof – pinpoints and factualises the ground from which there originates both the possibility of believing in truth, and God not being reducible to this pure object of knowledge with which the deist satisfies himself. The miracle is a symbol of an interruption of the law in which the interventional capacity is announced. (*Being and Event*, p. 216).

In this analysis I intend to refer to the miracles which structured the lives of a number of individuals who experienced the supernatural in a form which – following the typology enunciated above – contained an unrepresented component which would come – in the fullness of time – to have a religious and political meaning. As we shall see, that splitness between two moments of being – joined by the diagonal of time, to use Badiou's metaphor – was also voiced in the splitness of colours attached to the skin colour of the Mother of Christ and, in some specific cases, the skin colour of Christ the Child.

Virgen de Guadalupe

The Virgin Mary has been closely associated with the growth of nationalism in Mexico as much as in other Latin American countries. The story of the invocation of the Virgen de Guadalupe in the War of Independence in Mexico in 1810 is, indeed, a central part of the folklore surrounding the growth of Mexican identity in the nineteenth century. As David Brading, in his authoritative study, *Mexican Phoenix*, points out:

On 15 September 1810, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, the parish priest of Dolores, called out the masses of central Mexico in rebellion against Spanish dominion. For their banner he gave his followers an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe and later inscribed on their flags the slogans: 'Long live religion! Long live our most holy Mother of Guadalupe! Long live Ferdinand VII! Long live America and death to bad government!'. But the Indians and mestizos who joined his movement soon simplified those war-cries into 'Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe and death to the *gachupines*', the latter term the popular name for European Spaniards. When Hidalgo approached the provincial capital of Guanajuato, he informed the intendant that the purpose of the insurrection was to recover the rights of the 'Mexican nation' and to expel the Europeans, adding that 'The present movement is great and will be still more great when it attempts to recover the holy rights conceded by God to the Mexicans and usurped by a few cruel conquerors.' Whereas, in 1746, Our Lady of Guadalupe had been acclaimed as patron of the kingdom of New Spain, she was now saluted as the mother and symbol of an

insurgent Mexican nation.²

I want to use this primal scene of Mexican history as a spring-board to ask a number of questions: (i) how unique was this use of a religious symbol in terms of its nation-building intentionality? (ii) what role did the race, ethnicity and (skin) colour of this religious icon play in the construction of national identity? and (iii) what role was played by the pre-history of the Virgin Mary's representation before her 'arrival' in the New World? My essay will employ a blended methodology, combining an initial doctrinal analysis followed by a case-study approach, with specific comparisons drawn with the representation of the Virgin Mary in Cuba.

The answer to the first question may be dispensed quickly since it is clear that since the Virgin Mary also plays a central role in the nation-building project in other Latin American countries such as Cuba, though the formulation of the icon in each case is different. While Miguel Hidalgo's 'grito de Dolores' is a recognisably synthetic moment which (conveniently) draws together the various strands of Mexico's nationalism, Cuba has two such patrons saints – the Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre (the canonic patron saint) and Virgen de Regla (the patron saint of Havana, and particularly its harbour) – making it more difficult to pinpoint a single event in which nationalism was (even if retroactively) formed. Compared with the Cuban test-cases the growth of Virgen de Guadalupe as an icon of Mexican national identity seems almost scripted, becoming, in Oleszkiewicz-Peralba words, for Mexicans 'the utmost national and religious identity symbol'.³ We can get a clearer sense of the uniqueness of Mexico's co-option of religious iconicity in its nation-building project by focussing of the role played by race via an analysis of skin colour.

In order to get a clearer sense of the stages of the growth of nationalism it is important to use Badiou's distinction between the originary event in which there is an element of the 'unpresentable' and the 'supernumerary name' in which the latent meaning of the originary event is revealed. The story of the originary event in Mexico takes us back to a hill outside Mexico City near Tepeyac. An Aztec Indian Juan Diego experienced the apparition of the Virgin Mary in that place on five separate occasions in December 1531. Rather curiously the account of Juan Diego's reaction to the apparition has some of the reluctance we find in the narrative in the Old Testament of Moses's initial reluctance to carry out God's mission. Moses told God he should choose someone for his mission who was a better speaker than he was (Moses had a lisp),⁴ and Diego told the Virgin Mary that there were better people who could carry out her tasks for her.⁵

² David Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 228.

³ Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin American and Europe: Tradition and Transformation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), p. 50.

⁴ As Moses says: 'I am slow of speech and tongue' (Exodus 4: 10) and then in Exodus 4:11: 'But he said, "Oh, my Lord, send, I pray, some other person"'. Though he is at first reluctant Moses does eventually obey God's command.

⁵ What follows is based in the main on *The Story of Guadalupe: Luis Laso de la*

But the Virgin Mary, like God in the Old Testament account, was persistent. She first appeared to Juan Diego at dawn on Saturday 9 December 1531, asking him to entreat the Bishop, Fray Juan Zumárraga, to authorise the erection of a chapel in her honour. Juan Diego did as requested but the Bishop asked for some time to think it over, and Juan Diego returned to tell the Virgin Mary that he had failed because he was a 'man of no importance' and suggested she should recruit a candidate with a greater likelihood of success. She insisted, however, that she wanted him to carry out the task for her. Juan Diego met Bishop Zumárraga the following day, Sunday 10 December, and the latter said that he needed a sign to prove the authenticity of the vision. Diego returned to see the Virgin to report the Bishop's words and the Virgin said she would provide a sign the following day.



Fig. 1. Juan Diego, *hoja religiosa*, etching by José Guadalupe Posada

On 11 December Juan Diego's uncle fell ill and Diego went to look after him; given the seriousness of his uncle's state Juan went to Tlatelolco to find a priest to give his uncle the last rites. He was met by the Virgin once more on Tepayac hill and she asked him what he had been doing and when he replied that he had been looking after his uncle, she said: 'No estoy yo aquí que soy tu madre?' She told him that his uncle was now well and that he should go to pick some flowers growing on the top of the hill. Despite being out of season Juan found some flowers, took them to Bishop Zumárraga and, when he opened up his cloak the flowers fell to the floor, revealing an image of the Virgin on the inner lining of his cloak. The bishop proclaimed that it was a miracle. Juan Diego subsequently discovered that his uncle was well, and the Virgin told him that she wished to be known as Guadalupe. The chapel for Our Lady of Guadalupe was built soon afterwards and the rest, as they say, is history.

Vega's Huei tlamahuiçoltica of 1649, edited and translated by Lisa Sousa, C.M. Stafford Poole, C.M., and James Lockhart (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

The most noticeable aspect of the traditional iconic representation of the Virgen de Guadalupe is that she is dark-skinned. Her skin colour is recognisably Amerindian, as if to suggest that her ethnicity is the same as Juan Diego's. From very early on, the Virgen de Guadalupe was recognised as identical to Tonantzin, the Aztec goddess Mother Earth – which was enhanced as a result of the publication of her 'dialogue' with Juan Diego in Nahuatl, the *Huei tlamahuiçoltica* of 1649 (see above n5). One of the advantages of her Amerindian appearance, of course, was that it subsequently became straightforward to promote her as a representative of Mexican (national) identity.



Fig. 2. Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico

The distinctive representation of the rays of light which are emerging from her body can be traced back to the image of the Virgin Mary which were present on the banner of Mexico's conquistador, Hernán Cortés. Cortés's banner had the recognizable rays which clearly had been subsequently incorporated into the Mexican version of the Virgin of Guadalupe.



Fig. 3. Cortés's banner depicting the Virgin Mary

Though this solves the problem of the provenance of one of the characteristics of the representation of Mexico's Virgin Mary, it does not

solve the question of the Virgen de Guadalupe's ethnicity. For while Cortes's Virgin Mary, 'la conquistadora' as she came to be known, is white and ethnically Spanish, Juan Diego's version of the Virgin Mary is a 'dark' Madonna. Since her name is Guadalupe, however, this can also be solved because the Virgen de Guadalupe in Spain – on which Juan Diego's image would appear to be based – is also 'dark'.



Fig. 4. Our Lady of Guadalupe, Spain

On the face of it, this would appear to solve the problem since the representation of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico would by the same token be the result of a syncretistic fusion of the two virgins, with the Cortés's 'la conquistadora' providing the iconicity of the rays of light and the Virgin venerated in the Spanish town of Guadalupe providing the name as well as her skin colour (more or less), along with the Aztec Goddess of Tonantzin, in order to create a specifically new autochthonous image of the Virgin Mary.

As we can see, the Virgen de Guadalupe as a religious icon drew on a number of cultural strands including Caucasian, Amerindian and African versions of the divine in order to form a new autochthonous reality. At the time that Our Lady of Guadalupe 'appeared' in New Spain (December 1531) the New World had already experienced the invasion of the kingdoms of Amerindian cultures by Caucasian conquistadors (the first landing is normally given as occurring in the Bahamas on 12 October 1492) as well as in the form of the forced arrival of African slaves (22 January 1510 is normally given as the date of the systematic transportation of African slaves to the New World since this is the date on which King Ferdinand of Spain authorized a shipment of 50 slaves to be sent to Santo Domingo). A crucial element in this new cultural mix was the veneration of black Madonnas which was prevalent in Spain at that time – i.e. in the 1530s. I want to turn now to a brief analysis of the role played by the Black Madonna in the creation of a new religious structure of feeling in the New World.

A Black Madonna or Black Virgin is a statue or painting of Mary in which she is depicted with dark skin, especially those created in Europe in the

medieval period or earlier, generally in Catholic countries. While for some commentators her black features were due to age, soot or incense smoke, for others her blackness was based on a doctrinal description of the Church in the *Song of Songs*:

Nigra sum, sed formosa, filiae Jerusalem,
sicut tabernacula Cedar, sicut pelles Salomonis.
Nolite me considerare quod fosca sim,
quia decoloravit me sol.⁶

The three most famous examples of the black Madonna in Spain are the Moreneta (the Black Virgin of Montserrat in Catalonia), the Black Virgin of the Canary Island and the one which was transplanted to Mexico, the Black Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura; their blackness was seen as an intrinsic part of their holiness in Spain and they were often favoured over white Madonnas as a result of their superior healing and restorative powers. From a cultural point of view, their blackness was justified as a result of the confluence of three factors. Firstly, the black Madonnas were often characterised by *inventio*, that is, 'the miraculous finding of the image, sometimes after it had been lost or hidden away from infidels for centuries'.⁷ Secondly, they were argued to have been created by St Luke the Evangelist and therefore seen as true-to-life portraits.⁸ And thirdly, they were argued to have been created in the Byzantine style; thus, the 'dark colour of a statue could have suggested not only aged wood but also precious types such as ebony or cedar thought to grow only in the Eastern Mediterranean'.⁹ These three factors – antiquity, the legend of the true portrait and Eastern provenance – were mutually reinforcing features which justified the blackness of the Madonna, and drew upon the theological point – mentioned above – that the Virgin had characterised herself in these terms (when speaking as an embodiment of the Church in the *Song of Songs*) as 'Nigra sum, sed formosa'. This latter point was enhanced as a result of the legend that St Augustine (354–430 AD), the Bishop of Hippo, had commissioned a statue of the Virgin Mary which was inspired by the description in the *Song of Songs* and was black (more of this legend later on).¹⁰ In Spain, Portugal, France, Italy and Poland during the medieval period the most highly regarded of all Marian images were black.¹¹ As Mary Lee Nolan and Sidney Nolan point out, in the Early

⁶ 'I am very dark, but comely, / O daughters of Jerusalem, / like the tents of Kedar, / like the curtains of Solomon. / Do not gaze at me because I am swarthy, / because the sun has scorched me'; *Song of Songs*, 1:4-7; see discussion in Monique Sherer, 'From Majesty to Mystery: Change in the Meanings of the Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries', *The American Historical Review*, 107.2 (2002), 1412-1440 (p. 1422).

⁷ See Carlos Serra y Pickman, *La Virgen de Regla* (Seville: Imprenta Raimundo Blanco, 1935), p. 9.

⁸ Monique Sherer, p. 1422.

⁹ Monique Sherer, p. 1430.

¹⁰ Monique Sherer, p. 1422.

¹¹ For a discussion of the cult of the Black Madonna in Poland, see Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin American and Europe: Tradition and Transformation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), pp.

Modern period (and continuing up until the modern period), a 'cult image characterized by darkness of skins tone is well over twice as likely as a light image to be venerated at a shrine with substantial visitation from an extensive area, and even more likely than usual to be found as a primary cult image at an extremely important shrine'.¹²

It makes sense, therefore, that the cultural authenticity and magical powers associated with the Black Madonna were soon transferred over to the New World when the Spanish and Portuguese took their customs as well as their religion to the Americas. The most famous example of the Black Madonna in the New World is, of course, Our Lady of Guadalupe as mentioned above, although, as we have seen, the cult of the Black Madonna was used to support the creation of a new version for New Spain, the Amerindian Virgin Mary.

So, what are the differences between the Mexican narrative of nationhood created through a miracle and the equivalent narratives for Cuban nationhood? As we shall see, there are similarities:

- (i) In each case an event occurs whose *raison d'être* is based on the agency of the supernatural
- (ii) In each case the nature of the nationalist narrative is not revealed until later
- (iii) In each case the later narrative uses the previous narrative as 'proof' of the authenticity of the nationalist cause, although the nationalist cause was not (indeed could not have been) present in the originary event
- (iv) In each case the icon fights *against* the human agents who brought the icon to the New World in the first place, i.e. the Spaniards
- (v) In each case the space of splitness between originary event and the supernumerary name is occupied by the ontology of nationalism

The comparative case I wish to refer to now is Cuban nationalism. The Cuban test-case is more complex because there are two candidates who can be argued to have fulfilled the originary mandate of nationalism, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre and María de Regla, as we shall see.

The Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre and the Virgen de Regla

Again, in order to compare the originary event with the subsequent narrativisation it is important to assemble the facts of the original apparition. The apparition has some visionary qualities – as in the Virgen de Guadalupe – but is distinctive in that it involves the appearance of a

11-47.

¹² Mary Lee Nolan and Sidney Nolan, *Christian Pilgrimage in Modern Western Europe* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1989); quoted in Monique Sherer, p. 1414, n6. For further discussion of the cult of the Black Madonna in Europe see Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (1985) and Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess* (1993).

statue of the Virgin. The history of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, began in around 1612.¹³ Two Indian brothers, Rodrigo and Juan de Hoyos, and an African slave, Juan Moreno, set out to the Bay of Nipe for salt. They needed the salt for the preservation of the meat at the Barajagua slaughter house, which supplied the workers and inhabitants of Santiago del Prado, which is now known as El Cobre. Suddenly a storm arose and the waves rocked the boat mercilessly. Juan, the slave, was wearing a medal with the image of the Virgin Mary and the three men prayed for her protection. Suddenly the storm disappeared and they were saved; they saw an object in the water, rowed towards it, and came across a statue of the Virgin Mary holding Jesus in her left hand and a gold cross in her right hand. They saw it bore an inscription 'Yo Soy la Virgen de la Caridad' (I am the Virgin of Charity); much to their surprise, the statue appeared to be completely dry while afloat in the water. They picked the statue out of the water and rowed quickly back to the shore. They showed the statue to a government official, Don Francisco Sánchez de Moya, who then ordered a small chapel to be built in honor of the Virgin Mary; later on a church was erected in commemoration of the event.

As we can see, there is no mention of nationalism at this point and – though there are some indications of sensitivity to political issues on the part of the statue in the early part of the nineteenth century – for example, a royal edict passed on 19 May 1801 by Charles IV of Spain decreed that Cuban slaves were to be freed from the copper mines of El Cobre and was read in front of the state – it was only during the latter part of the nineteenth century that the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, as she came to be known, became associated with nationalism and achieved her 'supernumerary name' to use Badiou's term. She was venerated by the 'mambises' of eastern Cuba during their struggle against the Spanish in the nineteenth-century wars of Independence and some years after the independence of Cuba in 1898 (in 1915, in fact) the Mambises wrote to Pope Benedict XV asking him to proclaim the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre 'Landlady of Cuba'. Pope Pius XI authorised the canonical coronation and, on 20 December 1936, Monseigneur Valentín Zubizarreta of Santiago de Cuba crowned the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre patroness of Cuba. The Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is venerated as a result of her yellow colour and her subsequent association with Ochún, a figure of the santería pantheon; in other words she is also associated with one of the African Goddesses, which suggests that her syncretism differs from the Mexican prototype as illustrated by the Virgen de Guadalupe. The fact that she was a white Virgin suggests that – though a symbol of Cuban independence – she stood for a 'criollo' type of independence rather than for specifically Afro-Cuban values, despite the fact that the 'mambises' of eastern Cuba venerated her.

¹³ Based mainly on Testimony of Captain Juan, Investigation of the Virgin's Apparition, Santiago del Prado, Apr. 1, 1687, fols 12-18v, AGI-SD 363, Archivo General de las Indias; see also María Elena Díaz, 'Writing Royal Slaves into Colonial Studies', in *Rethinking the past, Retrieving the Future*, ed. V. Salles-Reese (Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana, 2005), Chapter XIII.



Fig. 5. Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre

It is in this sense that we can speak of a 'double' splitting within Cuba in terms of the creation of an image of independence for although the canonic icon of the Cuban nation is to this day the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre it is important to add that another icon began to take on increasing significance in the twentieth century and this was the Virgen de Regla.

María de Regla's origins go back to Africa; legend has it that the original wooden statue of a Black Madonna was commissioned by St Augustine in the 4th century and was placed in his chapel, in Hippo, present-day Annaba in Algeria. Thirteen years after the death of St. Augustine, when Hippo was under threat of attack by the Vandals, the monks fled to Spain and – according to a legend – took the statue with them to Chipiona. A copy of the icon was taken and transported from Spain to Cuba in 1696 by one Sergeant Major Don Pedro de Aranda y Avellaneda and donated to a church which was then established on the Bay of Havana. The Virgen de Regla proved to be very popular with local residents of African extraction and – over time – an enduring syncretic link was formed with the African Orisha Yemayá, associated with the blue of the seas. The Virgen de Regla's associations with Cuban nationalism were not immediate and took a rather circuitous route. When Havana was captured by the British in 1762, for example, the statue was taken to the church of the small town of El Calvario, and then to a sugar mill in nearby Managua, to prevent it falling in the hands of heretics. The significance of the Virgen de Regla emerged once more in the mid-twentieth-century when she was taken off in 1958, with the priest's knowledge and consent, by young revolutionaries who were fighting at that time against Batista's dictatorship. This was an early indication of the importance that Afro-Cuban values and 'santería' in particular would take on during the early days of the Cuban Revolution.¹⁴

¹⁴ For further discussion of the espousal of 'santería' by the revolutionary regime in the 1960s and 1970s, see my article, 'How Popular is Cuban Popular Culture?', in *Latin American Popular Culture: Politics, Media, Affect*, eds Geoffrey Kantaris & Rory O'Bryen (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2013), pp. 93-112.



Fig. 6 María de Regla

It is possible to argue, therefore, that – unlike Mexican nationalism – Cuban nationalism clearly took a different path even if – in doctrinal terms – it followed the same principles. The Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre came to be a symbol of the ‘criollo’ Independence movement of the last half of the nineteenth century and for that reason – in terms of its colour coding – it expressed the values of a ‘criollo’ revolution. The Virgen de Regla, however, expresses the nascent Afro-Cuban values which would come to fruition in the Cuban Revolution and, thus, she is a black Madonna, and expresses the values of ‘santería’ which were supported by the Cuban Revolution. But most striking for our purposes is that she typically appears as a Black Virgin carrying a white Christ child.

Based on the analysis of the three case-studies, one from Mexico and two from Cuba, it may be possible to venture that one of the most important ingredients in the creation of a nationalist symbol via a religious icon in Mexico and Cuba which the secondary literature has not focussed on sufficiently to date is that of colour. For whether it concerns the use of a particular colour in the depiction of the Virgin’s skin or the use of colours as part of a cultural encoding of transculturation, or the use of different coloured skin for the Mother of God compared to that of her child, each of these icons are involved in an active re-codification of cultural systems of signification which are complex and differ when incarnated in different national landscapes.

It is well known, for example, that colours for the Aztecs and the Mayans had a supernatural significance – something which went beyond aesthetic beauty. Miguel León-Portilla, for example, has pointed out that – according to the Aztec imaginary recorded in their codices – the world has ‘five great cosmic sections’, namely, east, north, west, south and centre, and furthermore that each of these cosmic sections ‘has its own colour, gods, cosmic bird and tree’.¹⁵ The operative word here is colour, for colour had a supernatural significance for the Amerindian peoples.

¹⁵ León-Portilla is referring to the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer; see ‘Aztec Codices: Literature and Philosophy’, in *Aztecs* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2002), pp. 64-71 (p. 65); the codex concerned is reproduced at p. 66.

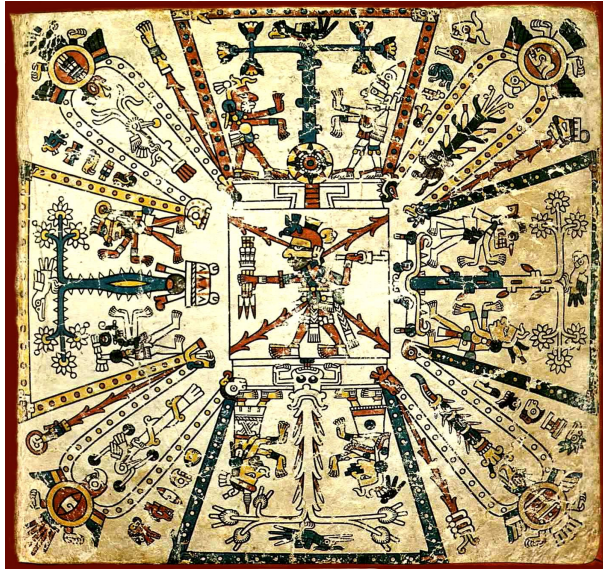


Figure 7. The Codex Fejérváry-Mayer

Colour was often associated with direction and site in the Mexican codices. The anthropologist, C.L. Riley, discovered, however, that colour associations could vary. Thus black, white, red, yellow, blue or grey could stand for the north; blue, red, black, white, green or yellow could stand for the south; east could be signalled by white, yellow, blue, grey or green; and west as white or black, yellow, red or green. As Riley has suggested:

One of the most striking things about the color-direction symbolism throughout this entire Meso-American-Southwestern area is the remarkable lack of uniformity in associations from one culture to another. Even within the same group, two informants may give different color-direction associations.¹⁶

There are three points to be retained from the Riley's research on the Mexican codices and they are (i) Mexican pre-Columbian colour association, though intrinsic to Amerindian cosmology, was not characterised by static values, (ii) the colour brown was not a component of the pictorial universe of the codices, and (iii) the East was associated with white, yellow, blue, grey or green. With hindsight we might underline that it is not by chance that the Virgen de Guadalupe was associated with three of the five colours associated with the east (white, yellow and blue).

A similar point could be made about the African world. The African cultures – especially in Cuba – ascribed supernatural significance to colour in a way which was alien to the ethical book-based monotheism of the Abrahamic religions.¹⁷ Robert L. Winzeler, for example, has pointed out

¹⁶ Quoted in John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p. 110.

¹⁷ See E.E. Kellett, *A Short History of Religions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 37-98 (Judaism); pp. 166-99 (early Christianity); pp. 331-69 (Mohammedanism).

that colours had an intrinsic symbolic significance in Africa:

The primary association of the colour red is blood. While blood is linked to the male activities of hunting and warfare, it is also linked to the female ones of menstruation and childbirth. The same is true of white: female milk on the one hand and male seminal fluid on the other. More generally, blood is associated with life and power, and white with purity, goodness and the sun and moon. Both red and white stand in opposition to black, which is associated with night, fainting, death, and sorcery, although in some contexts (dark soil, river mud, rain clouds), black is linked with fertility. The Ndembu explain the three colours as parts of a river that comes from God. Other things in the environment are valued in part and used in rituals because they have these colours.¹⁸

The important point to underline here is that, for one African community, colours come directly from God and, for that reason, are 'valued'. The African Gods when transplanted to Cuba took on new associations combined with new colours: Changó (the God of war and lightning), for example, was associated with red and black, Ochún (the Goddess of love and fertility) with yellow, Yemayá (the Goddess of the Sea) with blue. In what follows I shall be arguing that the splitness between the two moments of being of the event – as understood by Badiou – that is, the void followed by the supernumerary signifier, occurs in the New World under the auspices of colour. For it is colour which specifically inflects the specificity of the supernatural event in Latin America, as we shall see. Colour becomes one of the essential ingredients of the event.

It is clear that the significance associated with colour had an important impact on the process whereby the discourse of nationalism was signalled and even created. In the case of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre the colour yellow – originally associated with the copper which was mined in the region around Santiago de Cuba – was subsequently associated with the African Goddess Ochún, and thereby leading to a syncretic transculturation which was subtended by and justified by the colour yellow. In the case of Mexico's Virgen de Guadalupe the established precedence of black Madonnas in Spain – of which the Virgin of Guadalupe was one – led to a creative manipulation of the Virgin's skin colour, allowing her to appear to Juan Diego as if she were if not an Aztec Mother of God then at least an Amerindian Virgin Mary. Indeed this motility of the hue of the Virgin Mary's skin led, at times, to some embodiments of the Holy Family which – to the eyes of a rationalist imbued with the spirit of the Enlightenment – appeared irrational if not downright odd. An example of this is the Virgen de Regla who is often depicted as a black Madonna with a white child. This anomaly first of all indicates that the religious icon in the New World was never understood as either an empiric representation of the Virgin Mary with her son, Jesus Christ – since it would therefore have been obliged to depict a Palestinian mother with a Palestinian child – but is rather a symbolically encoded projection of the

¹⁸ Robert L. Winzeler, *Anthropology and Religion: What we Know, Think and Question* (Plymouth: Altamira Press, 2008), p. 103.

racial, social and political strata within a contemporaneous context. While the Virgen de Regla resonates with the Christian notion of sacrificial motherhood it also chimes with African symbolism (both in terms of colour coding as well as a palimpsestic invocation of Yemayá, and by extension the sea and its connections with the foundational transatlantic journey through slavery), and evokes the subaltern position of the Afro-Cuban wetnurse within the Spanish Big House.

Conclusion

In this essay I have investigated the culture of identity-formation and nation-formation as it coalesced around the notion of the Black Madonna in Mexico and Cuba, with particular reference to the use made of the notions of race, ethnicity and colour. The Black Madonna, I suggest in this essay, acts as a barometer of the ways in which race, nation and identity functioned in these countries from the Early Modern to the Modern. All three versions of the Virgin Mary – the Virgen de Guadalupe, the Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre and the Virgen de Regla – grew in the New World, as it were, according to the same recipe. Their originary event sprang from an apparition (either of a vision or a statue), whose significance grew with time until it achieved its 'supernumerary name' – to use Badiou's term – whereby it became an icon of nationalism. During that journey from event to name the Holy Virgin in each case attracted new arenas of signification to her; in Mexico she became identified with Tonantzin, the Aztec Goddess of Mother Earth, in Cuba she took on new forms as the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre through her fusion with Ochún and as the Virgen de Regla through her melding with Yemayá. The syncretism therefore created is as much a blending of theological discourses as it is of ideological codifications and colour codings. As mentioned above, it is surely not by chance that the Virgen de Guadalupe was associated with three of the five colours associated with the east (white, yellow and blue) used in the colour symbolism of the codices. The Virgin Mary's ability to change into new beings – or, perhaps, to manifest different sides of her being – is in remarkable contrast to the more taxonomic manifestations of Christ (whether as crucified Christ or as Christ the child) whose representation has mutated less over the centuries.

It is important to underline that the space between the originary event and the supernumerary name was inhabited not only by time (or better the passage of time since it often took about 300 years or so for the originary event to achieve a richer social significance) but by a nationalist ideology and by colour. This latter aspect is often not referred to in the secondary literature about the creation of nationalist narratives in Latin America and yet there are grounds to suggest it was very important for Amerindian and African cultures and thus it is not surprising that it played an important role in the transculturation process. It was in the space between the eventual 'there is', in Badiou's terms, and the supernumerary name that the ontology of not only nationalism but also colour was produced. Perhaps most extraordinary of all, the ontology of nationalism produced the ouroboros of the icon since it devoured the original source of its ideas, Spain.