

# **DIMENSIONS OF NATIONALISM IN A VENEZUELAN POSSESSION CULT: THE CRYSTALLIZATION OF AN ORAL TRADITION**

*Francisco Ferrandiz*

*Para Luisa Escribano, con todo el cariño que me cabe.*

## **Introduction**

Throughout history, subaltern<sup>1</sup> voices have been systematically prevented, muted, misrepresented, denied, distorted, manipulated, erased, stigmatized and coopted both in the moment of utterance and in the *a posteriori* hegemonic reconstructions of realities and truths. However, these marginal knowledges have surprisingly endured, and will probably abide, despite the sophisticated mechanisms of control that put every imaginable pressure on them. In 1979, M. Foucault thus subtly captured their nature, and also the force field in which they operate:

I believe that by subjugated knowledges one should understand something else, something which in a sense is altogether different, namely, a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate for their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. I also believe that it is through the re-emergence of these low ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges ... and which involve what I would call a popular knowledge though it is far from being a general commonsense knowledge, but is on the contrary a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it -- that it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, *that criticism performs its work*. (1979:82; emphasis added)

Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind the fatal embrace in which both subaltern and dominant discourses and practices survive the passage of time. As E.W. Said points out:

*Francisco Ferrandiz, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720*

"no matter how one tried to extricate subaltern from elite histories, they are different but overlapping and curiously interdependent territories" (1988:viii). So, if we can perceive subaltern discourses and practices beneath and in spite of hegemonic accounts, screens or intoxications, both in historical and contemporary records, when we are able to find them as a primary source we should be ready to recognize the stream of domination that they contain. It is with these considerations in mind that the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" evoked by M. Foucault (1979:81) has to be closely monitored by a new kind of critical social commentary closely linked to an attentive mode of listening, of paying attention; by a different reflective mood, perhaps, patiently "unlearned" by the "post-colonial intellectual" (Spivak 1985:120).<sup>2</sup>

This paper, an uneasy and arbitrary closure of research in progress, is a preliminary attempt to explore some aspects of the political, spatial, temporal and expressive "re-emergence" of one such "low ranking knowledge," in this case a Venezuelan popular form of historical consciousness. The paper engages the recent crystallization of this particular oral tradition in a fundamentally urban subaltern religious agency, the possession cult of Maria Lionza. The cult of Maria Lionza has not only provided a different and empowering expressive forum to add to the more traditional ones,<sup>3</sup> but has itself managed to configure new fields and modalities of articulation. Before weaving the discourse on Maria Lionza and the nation, two brief discussions are needed to help focus the issue. First, I will refer to the cult, with special emphasis on the material conditions that facilitated its expansion, and on its nature as a subaltern healing cult. Second, I will briefly outline the enmeshed history of elitist and subaltern nationalist ideologies in Venezuela.

## THE CULT OF MARIA LIONZA

"Oil, manna or malediction?" With this title, M. Izard starts his discussion of the impact of the exploitation of Venezuelan oil fields, which started around 1917, both on the economy and on the society of the country (1986:205). R. Torrealba has identified two broad rural-urban migratory cycles that correspond to two relevant economic points of inflection after the discovery of the oil reservoirs (1983:134). In the first phase, from 1913 to 1940, the oil economy "defines a new orientation for the economic structure that fosters massive movements of population." After 1940, "it is the secondary industrialization and State investments that, notwithstanding the continuing importance of the oil industry, characterizes the period ... The population concentrates in those regions where private and public capital focus the process of economic growth" (Torrealba 1983:134).

The traumatic and pervasive processes of "destructuring and uprooting" brought about by the sharp transition from an agrarian to a petroleum-dominated society have historically triggered, according to N. Garcia Gavidia, two main sets of responses (1987:24-32). The political response described by this author can be briefly summarized as a sequence of militancy that, starting with the clandestine organization of two leftist parties in 1931 (PCV and ARDI), and going through the formation of the Labor Unions a few years later (1935), ended up in the constitution of guerrilla movements in the 1960's in response to the economic crisis and corruption and stimulated by the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. These guerrilla

movements were finally forced to turn in their weapons and participate in institutions functioning within the democratic framework.

The religious response, following Garcia Gavidia, mainly resulted in the "actualization and redefinition of the cult of Maria Lionza." In it,

the mystical contribution of the Africans, together with the cosmogonic vision of the Indigenous religions, form a structure of consensus that has allowed it to adapt to the changes that have occurred in the Venezuelan society without being absorbed by the institutional Church . (1987:28)

For this author, the fluid situation of this cult in Venezuelan society is "ambivalent," for it is both a response to the socio-economic structures of the country, and to the "political dissatisfaction and cultural disarray." Thus, it fulfills a double function: integration within social classes and articulation of a response to the rest of the society (ibid:32).

Given the structural conditions that can be inferred from the socio-economic development described above, it is not surprising to discover that the cult of Maria Lionza finds today its most hospitable (though not its only) environment in the "belts of misery" and poor neighborhoods that surround many Venezuelan cities (Pollak-Eltz 1968:16; 1987:63). In this respect, Pollak-Eltz notes the similarities between Maria Lionza and the Brazilian possession cult of Umbanda (1987:63). We will also make use of this interesting comparison in this paper. As to the extent of urban marginality in Venezuela, Agustin Blanco has reported that there are in the country around fifty urban nuclei of more than 50,000 inhabitants with an important section of the population living in the "hills" (shantytowns) in subhuman conditions (1980:181). In these expanding tough environments poverty, hunger, cultural disarray, unsanitary conditions, violence, drugs, crime, overcrowding and unemployment epitomize the profound impact that the self-serving and elitist management of the wealth created by the exploitation of the natural resources of the nation has caused in the conditions of life of many Venezuelans (1980:164).

The cult of Maria Lionza is, like many of the possession cults that can be found in South America and the Caribbean, a vehicle for religious activity that provides agency to its members by offering solutions to the pervasive and complex realms of misfortune and affliction. It is, in the broadest sense of the expression, a healing cult. Like Umbanda, Candomble, Pentecostalism and Kardecism in Brazil, and also like Santeria, popular Catholicism and other competing and mutually influencing subaltern religious agencies in Venezuela, it occupies a space left vacant by official Catholicism and "erudite Protestantism": that of the mystical cure (Giobellina and Gonzalez 1989:29).

If something can characterize the possession cult of Maria Lionza it is its eclecticism, permeability and lack of centralized structure. This astonishing adaptability of Maria Lionza to new and old circumstances has resulted in the absorption of multiple influences in general, and also in a particularly strong osmosis with the folk healing universe of curanderism (Pollak-Eltz 1987:71). But Maria Lionza is more than a healing alternative. It is also a very peculiar microcosm of Venezuelan history, society and culture.

## NATIONALISM IN VENEZUELA

When thinking about nationalism in Venezuela, it would be difficult to avoid the charismatic figure of the *Liberator*, Simón Bolívar. In fact, nationalism is in some ways isomorphic with Bolivarianism in Venezuela, although they are not completely equivalent. But all nationalistic signifiers seem to bear a certain kinship relation, no matter how distant, with the figure of Bolívar. Thus, whenever possible, I will pursue the discussion with a particular focus on his disputed memory.

Now it is time to ask: what are the circumstances under which nationalist ideologies<sup>4</sup> developed in Venezuela? In his book *El Culto a Bolívar: Esbozo para un Estudio de las ideas en Venezuela*, German Carrera Damas states:

The cult of the historical figure of Bolívar is far from being just a literary creation, born in the passionate patriotism and super-charged sensibilities of one or two writers. Such a cult has been, strictly speaking, a historical need.... Its function has been to conceal a failure, to retard a disillusion, and that has been achieved up to the present. (1969:42)

He thus emphasizes the historicity and contingency of the ideological exegesis developed by the elite around the figure of the Liberator. This author also makes a distinction between the original *cult of the people*, a popular cult, and the *cult for the people*, a kind of false consciousness that traditional historiography, in institutional and intellectual harmony with the project of the State, constructed (1969:239). This fact is relevant for our purposes because it is possible to establish a double historical link between the two versions: they both have a genealogical relation (one is derived from the other), and an overlapping though unequal continuity (one is able to feed on the other at any point in time). The historical necessity of this *cult for the people* is, according to Carrera Damas, rooted in the failure to fulfill the high expectations raised by the achievement of independence in 1821. Simón Bolívar came to represent the ultimate paradigm of perfection and virtue, the "Father of the Nation, the Justice of Censorship, the Guide and the Shelter" (Carrera Damas 1969:231). From Bolívar's ideologically shaped figure the State extracted a triple legitimacy, for the cult was:

converted into the source of national unity, demanding the principle of order; the source of government as the fountain of political inspiration; and the source of national achievement, as a religion of the moral and civic perfection of the population. (Carrera Damas 1969:231)

The fact that both cults have historically shared many of the main symbols, notwithstanding the polysemic exegesis that can be expected in a situation like this, seems to have worked thus far to the benefit of the State. It has been more or less able to manipulate public discontent to its advantage by appealing dramatically to the charisma and legacy of the common and incorruptible hero. All these strategies of the elite cult were established on the basis of promoting a sense of guilt in the population by blaming it for all social, political or economic ills through the very words of the Liberator (1969:59).<sup>5</sup> As Carrera Damas

suggests, the official cult of Bolívar has been a powerful political force that has acted as a "curb for any attempt at social struggle"(1969:233).

In the meantime, what happened to the *cult of the people*? Was it not definitively overrun by the incessant cascade of propaganda, institutions and liturgies<sup>6</sup> that was created over a period of more than one hundred and fifty years to sustain its hegemonic offspring? For Carrera Damas, this historical process has resulted in the "relegation of the former to the field of folklore, as the most popular form of expression" (1969:232). In an important contribution to the understanding of the cultural depth of this *cult of the people*, Yolanda Salas de Lecuna has subtly explored the various and imaginative ways in which this subaltern collective memory of history has survived to the present with a certain autonomy and idiosyncrasy. In it, she recognizes both a rather free and critical recreation of official historiography and heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory variants of the "little, unwritten and unofficial history" (1987:23). What most characterizes this oral tradition are its "forms of enunciation, transmission and learning," where the erudite and the subaltern, the written and the oral, sinuously overlap. Some of her informants showed a lucid consciousness of the more suitable grounds for each of the two knowledges:

Others were shy about speaking up about what they had learned in family settings. We had even the case of people who refused to speak about oral tradition, because when written it was transformed into "just lies," ... and the experience had shown them that the truth contained in oral history is elusive, unintelligible, and difficult to prove when faced with the strength of official history. (1987:25)

This little history has persistently been a "channel of expression of social, ethnic and cultural tensions and a search for solutions to and releases from basic needs" (1987:39). She thus downplays the pervasiveness of the messages emitted from hegemonic positions.<sup>7</sup>

## **DIMENSIONS OF NATIONALISM IN THE CULT OF MARIA LIONZA**

In this section, I will examine the relatively recent crystallization of this ubiquitous "disqualified knowledge" in the national possession cult of Maria Lionza. For convenience, I will structure the discussion around what I will call "dimensions of nationalism." The first dimension refers to the history of the cult, the second and third to complementary but nonetheless distinguishable features of its pantheon,<sup>8</sup> and the last to a very particular attribute of its spatial configuration: the existence of a geographical center universally accepted as such.

### **I: The History of the Cult and the Myth of Maria Lionza**

The oldest references to the cult as such are oral testimonies from the beginning of the twentieth century, in which villagers from the State of Yaracuy and neighboring regions report the existence of a peasant and Afroamerican devotion to Maria Lionza in the mountain of

Sorte (see Barreto 1990:12). By then, the cult was circumscribed in that small region and was mainly based on the worship of ancestors, which included both indigenous chiefs (*caciques*) and heroes of the Independence of the country (1990:10). This rural cult is believed to be a reintegration or synthesis of indigenous religious beliefs and practices that syncretically survived the pressure of Spanish Catholic evangelization. The two main ethnic groups that populated the area were the Caquetio and Jirajara Indians. Information obtained from a variety of sources (archaeological, ethnohistorical) have shed some light on the religious universe of these people. The utilization of dugouts, caves and lagoons as sacred spaces, the ritual use of tobacco to induce trance and perform divination, the cult of spirit donors of health and sickness and the presence of powerful aquatic goddesses,<sup>9</sup> are all features that reveal a strong continuity with the contemporary rituals of Maria Lionza (Barreto 1990:14-16).

Some authors have situated the expansion of the cult to the cities of the central valleys of Venezuela in the epoch of the dictator Juan Vicente Gomez, 1909-1936 (see Pollak-Eltz 1972:33). As it is represented in the contemporary press, this was a time in which spiritist (mainly Kardecist), cabalist and esoteric sects found their way into Venezuela, mainly through the leisure time of the dominant class (Pollak-Eltz 1972:33; Barreto 1990:22). Pollak-Eltz suggests that these elite spiritist rituals are the basis of the spirit-possession configuration of Maria Lionza. In the era of Gomez, when positivism was the dominant ideology, one prestigious intellectual formulated a project of religious engineering that, according to Barreto, was to converge somehow with the cult of Maria Lionza in the 1950's. Laureano Vallenilla Lanz suggested the peremptory need for the creation of a new national cult of the heroes, a "patriotic religion" that "would keep alive the nationalistic sentiment of the population while serving as one of the pillars of the State to exercise its power" (Barreto 1990:22). However, the underlying racial project envisioned by Vallenilla Lanz, one of the many advocates of the necessary linkage of a future of progress with the "whitening" of the Venezuelan population through miscegenation (Wright 1990: 168), never found its way into the repertoire of the cult of Maria Lionza.

Dissenting from Pollak-Eltz, Barreto believes that the true expansion of the cult took place during the 1940's thanks to two parallel sets of factors. On the one hand, during that decade there was a strong immigration of natives of Yaracuy and Carabobo (the regions where the original cult was in practice) to the cities of Venezuela's central valleys. In 1946-51, they already accounted for approximately 15 percent of the total immigrant population of Caracas. In such significant numbers, they managed to avoid the dissolution of their religious beliefs and practices in their new urban environment (Barreto 1990:10). On the other hand, in the new intellectual milieu formed after the dictatorship of Gomez, a nationalistic reaction led a group of artists and intellectuals to search for the authentic ethnic and cultural origins of Venezuela, mainly through anthropological and folkloric studies dealing with Indian, Afroamerican and peasant populations (Barreto:22).<sup>10</sup> One of them, Gilberto Antolinez, a native of Yaracuy, drew on the old versions of the myth of Maria Lionza in a conscious effort to discover, redefine and promote the autochthonous mythical configurations. The messages that were encoded in his writings evoke, according to Barreto, the unequivocal heroization of Indianness and the attempt to establish Maria Lionza as a national symbol of the integration of the races (Barreto 1987:58ff). By extensively publishing in the newspapers and scientific journals on the mythical origins of Maria Lionza and the different features of her cult, this group of intellectuals collaborated to a great extent in its popularization and expansion as a

nationwide phenomenon (Barreto 1990:22). With the allegiance of "print-capitalism," they brought the myth and cult of Maria Lionza to the heart of an indigenist-rooted imagined community (see Anderson 1991).

From 1948 to 1958, a new dictatorship paralyzed this vital intellectual life. During the government of Perez Jimenez, a national cult was created around the icon of the Virgin of Coromoto, who was enthroned in 1952 as "Patroness of Venezuela" (Barreto 1990:23). A complex and compulsory ceremony (*Semana de la Patria*) was established in which the Virgin visited all the regions of the country, and was carried and escorted by a squadron of military planes, doubtless a rather explicit claim to divine legitimacy for the armed forces. In this period, in which religious intolerance led many *curanderos* and mediums to high security prisons (1990:24), the religious conflict and streams of reelaborations occurring on the popular levels of Catholicism resulted in an identification of Maria Lionza and the Virgen de Coromoto (Martin 1983:149). This identification is still strong today, and Pollak-Eltz refers to ceremonies where the response of the faithful to the descent of Maria Lionza in a medium is the singing or recitation of Marian Hymns or Prayers (1972:30).

Around these years, there were also some intellectual attempts to hispanize the local myth of Maria Lionza, to imagine it as white. Barreto identifies a new version of the myth starting in the 1960's with three variants: Maria Lionza is the daughter of a Spanish man and an Indian woman; she is the daughter of a Spanish couple; she is the daughter of an Afroamerican man and a Spanish woman (1990:11). Historians have attempted to prove the second version, the "whitest," with a colonial document referring to a certain Maria Alonzo that lived in Yaracuy in the 18th century (see Martin 1983:149; Barreto 1990:11). This variant is broadly rejected among the faithful of the cult (Pollak-Eltz 1972:26), although there is a good deal of ambiguity here for, as Barreto suggests, the bifurcated iconographies of Maria Lionza as sensual naked Indigenous woman and as Spanish royal female seem to coexist without much contradiction (1990:13).

From these data we can infer that the historical development of the cult and its myth has been characterized by the interplay and mutual determination of elitist, however sensitive, and subaltern maturations throughout the years. The kind of data available make it difficult at this point to track with precision the scope of the autonomous evolution of the subaltern side of the equation. Nonetheless, and due to the increasing importance of the cult as we look to the future, the degree of free reelaboration of influences and the emotional and expressive intensity of this submerged voice will become clearer when we get to the analysis of the cult as it exists today. The muted, "tactical" voice that found a *sui generis* echo in a group of sympathetic intellectuals in the 1940's, to be later coopted in the Catholic reelaboration of militaristic hegemonic discourses, finally exploded with great vitality some years later in the suburban neighborhoods of many Venezuelan cities.

There have been more recent "flirtations" with the cult of Maria Lionza in the intellectual and political arenas, although the coordination of the political and religious responses or protests that Garcia Gavidia has described (see above) seems to have been limited thus far. One of these instances involved a political-millennarian proposal that was articulated from within the cult (Martin 1983:171-175). The self-proclaimed "Priestess of Maria Lionza," Beatriz Veit-Tane, has actively sought the creation of a centralized structure by means of organizing associations, publishing catechisms, promoting meetings, and even founding a

political party that participated in general elections (Pollak-Eltz 1972:7;9;49). She did not manage to obtain votes, her dream of becoming a deputy for the cult vanished and the party was quickly dissolved. According to various authors, this radical refusal to accept any centralized authority is in itself an idiosyncratic form of protest and a celebration of autonomy (Martin 1983:175; Garcia Gavidia 1987:81).<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Garcia Gavidia has reported the existence of certain peasant groups in Chivacoa (Yaracuy) that "maintain a front for the recovery of the lands where the unifying element, besides the struggle itself, is the devotion to Maria Lionza" (1987:81-82). But, aside from these two particular instances, one rather individualistic and the other thoroughly rural, it seems that the cult of Maria Lionza has largely chosen to articulate its political response in its own language and its own spaces, as we shall see in the following sections.

## II: The Pantheon of Maria Lionza

The pantheon of Maria Lionza is the place where different streams of "subjugated knowledge" have found their most visible and spectacular expression. In the pantheon, there is a dynamic of absorption, reelaboration and projection of both signifiers and signifieds. The "primitive pantheon," which used to include a limited number of spirits of ancestors, mainly aboriginal caciques and heroes of the Independence, started expanding in the 1950's with the gradual absorption of many spirits of deceased characters permeating the national political arena (Barreto 1990:10). After forty years of frenetic activity, the pantheon today includes an important and changing number of spirits organized along the lines of semi- or fully-independent "courts" that converge at the apex in the figure of Maria Lionza. The proliferation of spirits and the diversity of opinions among the faithful of the cult make it difficult or even irrelevant to come out with a definite structure. However, it is not wrong to assume that some spirits can ambiguously belong to one or another court depending on circumstance, while others tend to be more stable. And, at the fringes, many other spirits come and go fluidly as the social, historical and cultural circumstances of the country evolve. The pervasiveness of the media of mass communication exerts a notable influence over this periphery of the pantheon. Thus, we can find a medium incorporating the spirit of "Mr Guillette" (the famous razor blade) or of a well-known TV character (Garcia Gavidia 1987:60). Marginal characters, such as prostitutes, delinquents or other antisocial figures also dwell in the interstices of the pantheon, and sometimes find their way to more central positions.<sup>12</sup>

Under Maria Lionza is believed to lie a triad of spirits called "The Three Powers" (Las Tres Potencias), which includes Maria Lionza (whose iconography is here that of a white queen), the Indio Guaicaipuro and the Negro Felipe, a thinly disguised microcosm of Venezuelan's fundamental ethnic composition. As with the Holy Spirit structure they seem to evoke, they are both independent spirits and a single unity comprising the three at the same time. In general, different authors refer to the following courts:<sup>13</sup> the Maria Lionza court (including herself and other queens, the Don Juans and the animal spirits, spirits of vegetables and other genies of nature); celestial court (Catholic Saints); Indian court (historical caciques such as Chacao, Sorocaima, Tamanaco, again Guaicaipuro, and others); African court (the "Siete Potencias Africanas" venerated in Cuban Santeria, Negro Miguel, Negro Primero); medical court (distinguished doctors such as Jose Gregorio Hernandez, J.M. Vargas and L.

Razetti); court of Simón Bolívar (including also many other heroes of the Independence), and the Viking court.

The idiosyncrasy of Maria Lionza's pantheon can be better described when matched against the Umbandist pantheon. Giobellina and Gonzalez describe two kinds of spirits in Umbanda: "santidades" and "entidades" (1989:167). The "santidades" are individual spirits and largely respond to figures derived from the pantheon of Candomble. They cannot be incorporated easily. By contrast, the "entidades" are classes of spirits, that include in each "an indeterminate number of members equivalent in their general features" (1989:168). So, what they found in the ceremonies they witnessed were "not so much individual spirits but rather expressions of a kind of spirit" (1989:169). Giobellina, in another publication, claims that the entidades that manage to develop an individual identity lose their "operationalness" in possession, which is largely dependent on the "indiscrimination of the identical" that is to be neatly opposed to the other stereotypes in a system of mutual references (1988:233). Furthermore, "there does not exist in Umbanda a unit of narrations which show the 'Orixas' in action" (1989:194).

All these features strikingly contrast with the very personalistic configuration of many of the spirits of the pantheon of Maria Lionza. Guaicaipuro, Bolívar, Razetti, Negro Felipe, Maria Lionza are all concrete historical, heroic or mythical figures highly hybridized in the interplay of hegemonic and subaltern exegesis (mainly historiography and oral tradition) throughout the years. In fact, to be more precise, all of them seem to stay somewhere between cultural stereotypes carrying a level of ethnic and categorial generality, and distinct personalities. In Umbanda, the proliferation of spirits is constrained by the saturation of the limited repertoire of performative actions or stereotypes of possession, which are the fundamental bearers of the identity of the spirit (Giobellina and Gonzalez 1989: 174ff). In Maria Lionza, most of the spirits have their own full name and idiosyncratic biography or narrative, and are capable of developing stereotypes of action with relative ease, for they, as we will see in some detail later, both 'speak' and act their genealogy. It is important to stress that, in the current state of development of the cult, any figure or, as we discussed above, even personalized object, can carve itself a legitimate place in the pantheon, provided there is a certain informal consensus and a continuous presence in the cult.

Giobellina and Gonzalez have also explored the relations between the spirits and the followers of the cult. They weave a game of oppositions between Candomble and Umbanda. In Candomble, each person develops through the ceremony of initiation a correspondence with an Orixá which will be forever exclusive to him and will define his or her identity as person (1989:33). In Umbanda, conversely, the protecting saints usually belong to the santidades or African sector of the pantheon, and are not determined with precision. The 'filho' incorporates a group of spirits, different from the main protecting one, that constitute his or her 'crown' (1989:179). In the cult of Maria Lionza we seem to be, in this aspect, closer to the Umbandist model. Garcia Gavidia observes that in Maria Lionza there is not a consecration of a particular divinity, but rather of a court, although she ends up recognizing that even this fact is not all that normative (1987:39). Various spirits can be received sequentially in a single session by the same medium,<sup>14</sup> and these can switch between courts with absolute ease (Pollak Eltz 1972:118; 1987:242; Martín 1983:185). The fact that a medium is able to live through his or her body what is culturally encoded in a number of different and highly

personalized spirits<sup>15</sup> allows him or her to experience a kind of collective and interethnic identity that accounts for a marginal, peripheral sense of nationhood or *venezolaneity*. When the medium incorporates personalities of science and politics, spirits of the rivers and the forests, national heroes and anti-heroes, these symbolically charged fragments of Venezuela, once again in the bodies, the speech and the consciousness of the faithful, powerfully evoke articulated images, "montages" of dissimilars or subversive "bricolages" as it were (see Taussig 1984:89; Comaroff 1985:198), which foster a strong sense of definite belonging.

### III: The Spirit of Simón Bolívar

The subaltern flow of nationalism we briefly discussed in the third section of the paper has found its way through the spirits inhabiting some of the different courts of Maria Lionza. The Indian court gives dynamic articulation to the tenacious history of indigenous resistance through the figures of powerful historical caciques like Guaicaipuro, Chacao, Tamanaco and others. In the African court we find, besides the "Seven African Powers" imported from Cuban Santería, the presence of spirits like Negro Miguel, leader of a slave revolt in the sixteenth century, and Pedro Camejo or Negro Primero,<sup>16</sup> the mythical bodyguard of General Páez during the Independence war (Masur 1969:221). The Liberator's court, or court of Simón Bolívar, hosts such eminent heroes of the Independence as Bolívar, Piar, Páez, Urdaneta, Sucre, Bermúdez, Miranda and others, and also Negro Primero (see above), Negra Matea (Bolívar's nurse) and Negra Francisca (Salas de Lecuna 1987:97-8). In this section of the paper, we will mainly focus on the spirit of Simón Bolívar in an attempt to further explore some of the novel features of this oral tradition now metamorphosized into empowered bodies bearing the secret and poetic brand of the sacred spaces.

The Simón Bolívar of Maria Lionza is a spirit of "high light," only incorporated by developed mediums. His presence is usually mediated and prepared by the previous descent in the medium (*materia*) of Negro Primero, a spirit with whom he is closely associated (Salas de Lecuna 1987:99). His triple persona is perhaps the extreme illustration of the degree of idiosyncrasy that can be achieved by the spirits in the cult of Maria Lionza through the subaltern selective filtering down of biographical features to their stereotypes of possession. In the first place, he can take control of the body of the medium as the sick Bolívar (1987:101). This performance refers to the last sequence of Bolívar's life, when he agonizingly died of tuberculosis in exile, poor and abandoned by all (Masur 1948:484). The most relevant attribute of this sick Bolívar is his frenzied cough. A second modality of the Liberator portrays him as a strong, solemn, essential warrior who mimics the military salute by sharply clicking his heels. The audience responds with the singing of the national anthem and with gestures and attitudes of deference to their General (Salas de Lecuna 1987:101; Pollak-Eltz 1972:41). Bolívar also, although apparently less frequently, evokes the suffering he shared with his troops while crossing the Andes in 1819 before conquering New Grenada (Masur 1948:265ff). In this case, Bolívar shivers from cold and asks for his cape and some brandy (Salas de Lecuna 1987:102).

For both lack of space and, in some cases, enough data, we will not explore here other relevant and revealing stereotypes of possession, like those characteristic of the Indian and African courts. Perhaps it is enough to state that their unequal but generally sophisticated

codification provides a particularly flexible bodily space of symbolic representation where subaltern understandings of history and ethnic agency can achieve subtle expression. They are important repositories of deeply rooted schemes of "cultural authentication," an elastic arena for a changing rationalization of ethnicities (see B. Williams 1990:114-15). As we will see below, this feature is further complemented and enriched by the personalistic talk of the spirits.

Also, the presence of Bolívar and the other spirits of the Liberators' court brings into the ceremonies all the official nationalistic paraphernalia. Flags, swords, uniforms, hymns, statues, badges of honor and military greetings produce a peculiar celebration of nationhood that, through the appropriation of official liturgies, creates a hybrid space where, once more, subaltern and hegemonic nationalisms converge and dissent in a single gesture.<sup>17</sup>

Salas de Lecuna has emphasized a fundamental dimension of these historical spirits: their "verbal rationalization" or speech (1987:95).<sup>18</sup> This talk of the spirits provides the faithful of the cult with a documentary legitimacy that the most explicit written source cannot achieve: the voice of the true protagonists of the historical events. In the mouths of the mediums, oral tradition and popular knowledge are at the same time reproduced, amplified and transformed in nature.

The ease and frequency with which Negro Primero (a minor hero in official historiography) is incorporated by the mediums has turned him into a privileged witness of those memorable times, and also into the main confidante of Bolívar. The fact that this Afroamerican voice is such an important vehicle of historical narratives in the cult of Maria Lionza completely reverses the discursive monopoly of official versions, where non-elite voices have long been all but absent (see Wright 1990:85ff). In both the loquacious narratives of Negro Primero and the biographical memories of the spirit of Bolívar, as described by Salas de Lecuna, the triple Simón Bolívar emerges as a physically insignificant mestizo figure who combines the "official" straight stereotypical behavior of a general with a most humanized atheist personality prone to heterosexual promiscuity and hard drinking, respectful of other peoples' beliefs and worried about the uncertain future of his poor country (1987:53-55). In the framework of this oral tradition, he can either be the mystical incarnation of the Indian cacique Guaicaipuro, the continuer of his epic of resistance, or the illegitimate mestizo son of a white father and an Afroamerican woman,<sup>19</sup> the ultimate liberator of the slaves (1987:41-49).<sup>20</sup>

In the words of Salas de Lecuna, this Bolívar of the margins inscribes an "unpublished chapter in Venezuelan historiography, very far from the scientific and methodological criteria required by the historians, but so close to popular historical consciousness" (1987:53). But the new legitimacy of this subjugated knowledge provides a more solid ground for a face-to-face encounter. Empowered in the body of a medium, Bolívar or his aides can go as far as to explicitly challenge the authority of the official institutions of historiography or education. Salas de Lecuna was told by an informant that, in one occasion, Negro Felipe rectified a historical paper written by his daughter for her school homework. "I authorize you to tell them that it was Negro Felipe who corrected the paper. There are wrong dates in the History of Venezuela," was his powerful final statement (1987:57).

Bolívar is occasionally described by the faithful of the cult as "antipolitical"<sup>21</sup> (Salas de Lecuna 1987:51). In his harangues, he indulges in comments clearly addressed to the contemporary situation of the country. One of Salas de Lecuna's informants refers to sentences such as "Why do you give me so many religious offerings, when my country is dying of hunger?", or "I will not rest in my tomb as long as the political parties exist" (1987:51). However, in other incidents the spirit of Bolívar has been more directly involved in issues regarding direct political action. Salas de Lecuna quotes still another informant who remembers Bolívar describing the chaotic situation of the country and vehemently asking for "struggle" by invoking a revolutionary "spirit of freedom" (1987:57). Pollak-Eltz refers to certain 'bancos' or leaders of the cult who invoke Bolívar's spirit for advice about the right party for which to cast their electoral ballots (1972:41). In more general terms, Pollak-Eltz stresses that there is a certain level of politicization in the cult:

In certain cult centers leftist ideas are expounded that demand sharing the wealth, improvement of the economic situation for the population and a radical social change. (1972:89)

However, and as we discussed above, the impact of this potential for political protest has been so far extremely limited.

In this section, we have reviewed some of the main features and possibilities of the cult of Maria Lionza as a new and expanded forum for further subaltern reelaborations of hegemonic and non-hegemonic streams of nationalist ideology. Now we turn to a final dimension of nationalism within the framework of the cult: the articulation of an alternative space of celebration.

#### **IV: The Sacred Mountain of Sorte**

The mountain of Sorte is situated in the Chivacoa district, in the Venezuelan Estate of Yaracuy. When exploring the history of the cult, we alluded to some oral sources that stated the original link of Sorte and the cult of Maria Lionza at the turn of the century (see Barreto 1990:12). However, there are older data that help establish the area as a traditional locus of still less documented religious ceremonies. Barreto has discussed recent archaeological explorations that have shed new light on certain aspects of the indigenous religiosity of the area (1987:50). Pollak-Eltz mentions a colonial record that refers to certain ceremonies that were performed in the caves of the sierra of Sorte during the 18th century (1972:31). It seems that, with the passage of time, its uninterrupted sacredness has been steadily enhanced through the parallel overlapping and continuity of diverse religious sediments.

In today's Venezuela, the mountain of Sorte is the main pilgrimage site for the faithful of Maria Lionza's cult. It is the sacred place where Maria Lionza, the Queen, inhabits her vast subterranean palace. The rich poetics of the "Palace of the Enchantment" give vivid testimony to the interplay of multiple imaginations. In a prodigious architecture created by the geniuses (Don Juans) of the wind, the fire and the waters, Maria Lionza sits on a throne of serpents surrounded by her perpetual companions: the Crowned Lion and the Great Buck. Living transparencies belonging to different times and spaces, the members of the syncretic cortege of

Maria Lionza, walk about the labyrinths, the halls, the courtyards dotted with waterfalls and flowers (Martin 1983:214-15; Pollak-Eltz 1972:27; Jimenez 1971: 77; Garmendia 1980:39ff).

The pilgrimage to Sorte is independently organized by the multiple centers of the cult that (as we discussed before) dot many urban areas in the country, according to their own spiritual needs. There are also certain dates when huge crowds gather for specific celebrations. We will analyze later the implications of some of these dates for the nationalistic dimension of the cult. The sacredness of the mountain is not focused on a single sanctuary but distributed over a varied landscape of shrines and "portals" (*portales*). The main shrine, where the palace of Maria Lionza is believed to reside, is a cave situated on top of the mountain, but the faithful do select and prepare their portals all over the mountain (Pollak-Eltz 1987:265). When the pilgrims arrive there, they perform certain rites in the river Yaracuy before looking for a suitable place for the main ceremonies. The rituals usually take place on Saturday nights and consist mainly in evolving rituals of purification called "dispossession" (*despojos*) and, of more recently, "vigils" (*velaciones*). In the course of the ceremonies, spirits are incorporated by the mediums all over the Sierra of Sorte, and fire or broken glass walking and other analogous performances are not uncommon.

In his *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, Victor Turner explored transculturally the recurrent patterns of religious pilgrimages (1974:166-230). His discussion can help us shed light both on the inner dynamics of the cult and on its relation to official territorialities. He described a configuration of pilgrimage centers in which there was a "tendency to arrange [the] pilgrim shrines in a hierarchy with catchment areas of greater and lesser inclusiveness" (1974:179). Later he refers to the "networks formed by intersecting pilgrimage routes--which are themselves studded with subsidiary shrines" (1974:197). This reticula of hierarchical nodal points closely resembles the character of the grid of natural sacred spaces visited by the faithful of Maria Lionza and her courts of spirits in their pilgrimages. The catchment area, mainly drawing in those swarming neighborhoods surrounding many Venezuelan cities, is mediated by caravans organized by largely autonomous centers of the cult, which are also the everyday places of religious performance. Thus, in practice, the cult replicates itself in a multiplicity of complementary spaces. But the religious geography of the cult of Maria Lionza, usually scattered in a multiplicity of urban *centros* and minor shrines of pilgrimage, only finds a definite common ground in the slopes, caves and waters of the sacred mountain of Sorte. Pollak-Eltz claims that, due to the ritual autonomy of the 'centros,' the vicinity of the portals in Sorte is the main channel of communication of practices and ideas within the cult (1972:108). This alternating system of encounters and disencounters deeply conditions the oscillatory nature of the cult as an "imagined community" (see Anderson 1991). For the cult is at the same time the limited brotherhood of each center and the larger community of the faithful pilgrims.

Turner also stressed that:

the peripherality of pilgrimage centers distinguishes them from the centrality of state and provincial capitals and other politico-economic units. It further distinguishes them from centers of ecclesiastical structure such as the sees or diocesan centers of archbishops and bishops. (1974:197)

Werbner has drawn on Turner's work to further elaborate the "dialectical process in which pilgrimage centers generate fields which, in turn, may regenerate other systems of relations" (1985:263).<sup>22</sup> He discusses three broad tendencies in the "argument of images" permeating the Zimbabwean religious field (1985:274-280). "Territorialism" refers to the homology of the spatial maps of the developing churches and the "religious order recognized by the state." "Regionalism" refers to a situation of complete spatial dissonance, and "communitarianism" stands for de-spatialized religious movements (1985). The cult of Maria Lionza seems to fall into the second category. Werbner further claims that, through this "locational imagery of dissent," there develop "alternative forms of consciousness" (1985:273).

If there is a radical proposal for alternative spatiality in Maria Lionza,<sup>23</sup> when we look to the schedule of the main pilgrimages we find a remarkable concordance with both religious and profane official celebrations. It is precisely the combination of these two factors that enhances the alterity of the cult. We mentioned above that there were certain dates in the festive calendar when Sorte acted as a particularly powerful magnet. At Easter, up to 40,000 people can gather throughout the sierra (Pollak-Eltz 1987:266). But what is important for our purposes is that the main nationalistic festivities are also celebrated in Sorte. As one of Salas de Lecuna's informants puts it:

You know that the national dates are big within spiritism and that almost always it is mandatory to be on the mountain; for example, the 17th of December [day of the death of Simón Bolívar] is a big day there ... On the mountain, many rites are performed where the Indian courts and the Seven African Powers descend. They all worship Simón Bolívar. (1987:107)

Other dates that summon crowds to Sorte are: 24th of June (commemoration of the Battle of Carabobo, which led to the independence of the country); 24th of July (birthday of Bolívar); and 12th of October (Day of the Races, date of the "discovery" of America and main festivity of the Queen Maria Lionza) (see Garcia Gavidia 1987:87; Salas de Lecuna 1987:103-8). The nationalistic dances of the spirits of the cult we explored earlier in the paper can occur in every sacred domain of Maria Lionza. But they finally converge and find their outermost expression in this "official" scheduling of an alternative space: the powerful mountain of Sorte, the site of the palace of Maria Lionza. As a final vignette of the performative sophistication and emotional intensity brought about by the presence of the spirits in Sorte, we transcribe another testimony collected by Salas de Lecuna:

That was great, all the people from neighboring portals came to this one to listen to Bolívar. He reported in his message all the battles and all the exact dates. He also explained how everything really happened. After he had told everything, he spent one more hour there and said: "let's wait for the people from the other portals, they will be welcomed." Then people started to come down from every place. In half an hour, all the caravans [of pilgrims] had arrived. That was beautiful. That was the only time I've seen him. We sung the national anthem. It was beautiful that day, four years ago, the 12th of October! How incredible it was that he told us about dates, battles, his best

allies, and that infinity of things that he was telling us, and everybody was trembling. And even the most powerful medium [*materia*] was trembling. Just realize that when he arrived, the medium was barefoot and in the greeting, that sounded like a pair of boots, click!, like a fine heel, like this: tac! [he beats two wooden pieces]. (1987:103)<sup>24</sup>

The growing popularity of the cult and the pilgrimages to Sorte is, in this case, at total variance with Turner's statement that:

a pilgrimage's best chance of survival is when it imparts to religious orthodoxy a renewed vitality, rather than when it asserts against an established system a set of heterodox opinions and unprecedented styles of religious and symbolic action. (1974:227)

Sorte's expanding theater of history is an articulated scenario in which the Venezuelan periphery, now under (to what extent?) different circumstances and with different characters enmeshed in the play, both prolongs and reshapes in its own language a tradition of resistance that started five long centuries ago.

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All translations are my own.

### Notes:

1 Throughout the text, I will use as synonymous the terms subaltern, non-hegemonic, marginal and peripheral. Subaltern only acquires its true meaning when opposed to hegemonic. Drawing on Gramsci's work, Williams has discussed the field of struggle defined by the terms "hegemony" and "emergence" (1977:108-127). Hegemony is always a historical process rather than a structure or a system, and "it has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all his own" (1977:112). Williams considers the process of emergence as the creation of "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships" from two different sources: class, and a hegemonically neglected consciousness of "alternative perceptions of others, in immediate relationships; new perceptions and practices in the material world" (1977:123-5). As a social field, subaltern refers to the "mass of people ruled by coercive or sometimes mainly ideological domination from above" (see Said 1988:vi).

2 A number of authors have developed sophisticated methods to overcome the silences and euphemisms of their sources, and have also committed themselves to pay due attention to new kinds of data previously considered irrelevant or even irreverent. Some interesting examples can be found in E.P. Thompson 1971; V.L. Rafael 1987; A. Ong 1987; D. Chakrabarty 1988; D. Arnold 1988; J.C. Scott 1990; L. Abu-Lughod 1990; N. Scheper-Hughes and M. Lock 1991.

3 Yolanda Salas de Lecuna has thoroughly explored the various manifestations of this oral tradition in legends, folk songs and ballads, and epic poems, as well as in popular Catholicism and the cult of Maria Lionza.

4 In this paper, I will follow R.G. Fox's definition of "nationalist ideologies" as the "production of conceptions of peoplehood" (1990:3). As opposed to the largely elitist models proposed by Hobsbawm (1983) and Anderson (1991), Fox's broad definition seems to allow the inclusion of subaltern ways of thinking and experiencing nationhood under its umbrella (1990:8).

5 "Quoting" the Liberator to empower partisan claims seems to have traditionally been a very popular and gratifying practice in official historiography. In this particular case, blaming the population draws mainly on two ambiguous Bolívar texts (see Carrera Damas 1969:59-60). Carrera Damas also states that the obsessive exegesis of the overqualified oral or written testimonies of Bolívar who, he reminds us, was fundamentally a man of action, has somehow transformed him into the author of his own history (1969:67-73). As I will discuss later in this paper, this exegetical habit is not all that alien to subaltern oral history.

6 For a description of the intricate liturgy developed under the auspices of what he calls an official "theory of the heroic devotion," see Carrera Damas 1969:242ff. He also refers to the specific state institutions that have historically been responsible for the regulation and manipulation of this devotion as an "efficient means of action on the popular consciousness": Sociedad Bolivariana de Venezuela; Academia Nacional de la Historia; Catedra Bolivariana (1969:244-248).

7 De Certeau provides us with an interesting schema to frame the relative positions in which these two nationalistic traditions, notwithstanding their mutual dependence, are able to operate, in terms of "strategy" (that implies the presence of a "subject of will and power," a proper place for confrontation, and thus an exteriority of targets) and "tactics," that "timeless art of the weak" (characterized by the absence of a proper place, of a global project and of a totalization of the opponent). See De Certeau 1980:5-6.

8 Throughout the text, the term "pantheon" refers to the overall organization of the spirits. The pantheon is composed of metaphorical "courts" in which the spirits are grouped along ethnic, historical, national or professional lines.

9 Maria Lionza is one such indigenous goddess in the beautiful myths that describe her origin and that have survived to our day. For elaborate discussions of the (a) hermeneutics and (b) the indigenous basis and authorial reelaboration of these myths, see, respectively, Martin 1983:110-156, and Barreto 1987.

10 This intellectual predicament of authentication, in which "Indigenists" and "Indianists" differentially used the indigenous rural peasantry to imagine contradictory Venezuelan "essences" is, as described by Barreto 1987, strikingly similar to the one discussed by Verdery 1990 for the Romanian Nation.

- 11 Giobellina and Gonzalez have described a similar pattern for the Umbanda of Brazil (1989:284). According to these authors, the Umbandist Federations "were successful in obtaining both legitimation of the cult and certain favors from the State," but "failed to achieve two of their main aims: they were unable to unify, blend and 'purify' the rituals of the different cult centers ..., and they could not achieve a unique hierarchical organism."
- 12 Gustavo Martin (personal communication) has kindly told me of the existence of these elusive, marginal, antisocial spirits so difficult to find in the literature on the cult.
- 13 My main sources for the characterization of the courts have been Pollak-Eltz 1972 and 1987; Martin 1983; Garcia Gavidia 1987; and Salas de Lecuna 1987.
- 14 Gustavo Martin witnessed a nightlong ceremony in which one medium incorporated, in a rather interminable sequence, "almost all the spirits of the pantheon" (personal communication).
- 15 These spirits, as we have already partially noted, are the product of subaltern reelaborations of both the historical and contemporary interplay of hegemonic and non-hegemonic versions of society, culture, history, ethnicity, morality and politics.
- 16 Negro Primero is a spirit who, in the view of some, belongs instead or simultaneously to the Liberator's court. He is often identified by the faithful of the cult with Negro Felipe, hero of the Cuban Independence (see Salas de Lecuna 1987:96, note 22).
- 17 This phenomenon shares, again, similarities with the kind of symbolic reconstructions of core orthodox Protestant symbols through which South African Zionist churches create innovative spaces for the codification of subversive "bricolages." In this process, the appropriated symbols are at the same time perpetuated and transformed. See Comaroff 1985:197-99.
- 18 There is an interesting game of oppositions here with the largely silent spirits described by Aihwa Ong in her analysis of Malay factory women (1987, 1988). Ong has pointedly stressed the "cryptic" character of this particular Malay spirit possession (1988:3). Indeed, the limited (but intense!) speech of the spirits and the subsequent amnesia of the factory women account for an indirect message formulated in a hostile environment. Due to the opaque nature of the performance, this subtle covert message can only be fully understood after a thorough historical analysis. In our case, where the context is ceremonial and largely controlled by the members of the cult, the spirits are right on the opposite pole of expressiveness. Thus, instead of turning to history to understand the spirits, we have the twin but inverse methodological option of turning to the spirits in an effort to understand history.
- 19 In some versions, the mother of Bolívar was a slave who was murdered after giving birth (see Salas de Lecuna 1987:41).
- 20 This subaltern Bolívar is at great variance with the racial image so caressed by official historiography. In his work on Bolívar, Masur discusses the rather polemical issue of his imputed African ancestry (1969:20ff). According to this author, it appears that the ancestry of the Liberator largely consisted in a "long, unbroken line of respected, wealthy men and women of the colonial aristocracy" that was only obscured in the eyes of the Spanish by the unclear origin of his great-great grandmother. He draws on peculiarities of his physiognomy and character to claim the existence of a "slight strain of Negro blood" in Bolívar (1969:20ff). German Carrera Damas, more worried about the ideological work surrounding the

historiographical construction of his memory than with the specifics of his ancestry, declares himself astonished with the "prodigious efforts to authorize the racial purity of the person who is at the same time Father and archetype of a mestizo people" (1969:211). Carrera Damas states that the reaction against the "popular imputation" of a "note [drop] of Black blood" resulted in the "configuration of a Bolívar of the White race and, even more, Spanish in essence and noble in origin" (1969:211). In this respect, it seems that the popular version, although perhaps more distant from the "reality" of his origins, grasps much more accurately the universe of races the symbol-Bolívar "really" stands for.

21 This term here is to be taken in the narrow sense of opposed to the political parties.

22 My appraisal of Werbner's argument has benefited from the insights of Comaroff (1985:170-171).

23 In fact, the grip of the State in Sorte seems to be largely irrelevant for the religious dynamic of the cult. The mountain of Sorte was declared the "Natural Monument Hill of Maria Lionza" on 18 March 1960 (Gondelles 1977:102). Pollak-Eltz reported the destruction of the portals and the imprisonment of cult leaders by the state in 1967 (1968:19). But besides this incident, the intervention of the authorities seems nowadays not to go much beyond a loose jurisdiction that prohibits the building of residences in the park and fosters the presence of some National Guard and Rangers who control the entrance in search for "drug addicts and delinquents" and provide the pilgrims with bags for their garbage (see Pollak-Eltz 1972:106).

24 Daisy Barreto (personal communication) was apprised by an informant-friend of the 1991 celebration of the Day of the Races in Sorte. The phantom of an immense crowd hangs over the uncertain cipher of a hundred thousand pilgrims given to her. Extremely critical opinions about the government were heard and the faithful in the ceremonies repeatedly shouted: "strength!", "strength!"

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