

La Virgen de Regla: a Material Approach to Lived Religious Transformation in Latin America

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Abstract

Statues of the Virgin Mary have been embarking on various types of movement and migration for centuries. They are the fixed points around which religious activities are carried out in communities in Spain and Latin America and play significant roles in the personal and social lives of their devotees. Until recently, however, scholarship has largely overlooked the potential richness of what religious material cultures can tell us about religious transformation in Latin America. This paper therefore offers a theoretical and methodological advance by way of a ground-up, ‘material’ approach to understanding religious change through the religious statues themselves. It utilises the statue of the Virgen de la Regla in Chipiona, Spain as a node on a map from which to trace the lines of movement from Spain into Cuba where a replica of the same Virgin, another nodal point, is worshipped as both Virgin Mary and Santeria Orisha Yamaya.

Keywords

Virgin de Regla – Cuba – material – religion – statue – devotion

1 Introduction

Working within the fields of lived and material religion, I have been conducting research among Catholic Marian statues and their communities in Andalusia, Spain, since 2005. Although I have centred most of my research around the particular statue of the *Virgen de Alcalá de los Gazules* and her mountain shrine in La Sierra de Cadiz, time spent at Marian shrines in surrounding towns and

villages has repeatedly revealed the rich array and diversity found in the characteristics, features, and traditions among Virgin Mary statues in Andalusia. The ritual creativity that takes place around the different statues is also locally informed, and each has specific functions that correlate with the different geographical locations where they reside, playing the roles of patron, protectress, facilitator of beneficial agricultural cycles, and healer.

In 2009 I began conducting preliminary fieldwork at the coastal shrine of *Virgen de Regla* in Chipiona within which sits one of Spain's black Madonnas. I have heard her called the *Virgen Marinera* (sailor virgin), as well as *Virgen de Marinos* (virgin of those who do sea-related work), and she is annually processed along the shoreline in demonstration of this relationship to the sea. She is also referred to lovingly as *la morenita* (the dark one), and she holds a white baby Jesus in her arms. Also in 2009, I travelled to Habana, Cuba, where I encountered, as expected, more statues of the Virgin Mary; only in this context, there is a vital difference. In Cuba, Catholicism co-exists alongside the African-derived Regla de Lucumí, 'religion of the Orishas' (spirits/gods) or *Santería*, (the latter of which I will use in this paper). Here, different statues of Mary are *also* different African Goddesses.

To explore this first-hand, I took a boat across the bay from Habana to the town of Regla where I went in search for *another* Virgen de Regla. This 'Virgin' is a replica of La Virgen de Regla in Chipiona, Spain. She is a Virgin Mary in her own right within the Cuban Catholic context, and significantly, she is also the Orisha Yemayá, an African Goddess, and she governs the sea, maternity, fishermen, and the tempest. Similar to Marian statues in Spain, the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá (referred to in this paper thus) provides healing and protection, and is the point around which community cohesion rituals, processions, and feast days take place. She also 'listens' to the muted voices of the people, and much like her statue kin, *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* in Santiago de Cuba, she is the point around which political action is mobilised. After a pause, I have come back to this research with renewed vigour and inspiration. The fact that a replica of La Virgen de Regla from Chipiona was carved in Spain and taken to Cuba where she was installed in a town with her namesake 'Regla', but who also became the African Goddess Yemayá, tells a certain story about religious and wider cultural transformation that can be more clearly understood if we recognize (and take seriously) the material religious figures at its centre.

Providing this background information is necessary for the introduction of both the premise and proposal of this article. Extracting one aspect of a larger developing project that examines the largely overlooked roles of religious statues in different Latin American countries, the paper utilises preliminary, ongoing research in Spain and Cuba to test a developing, novel, material approach

to religious transformation in Latin America. It proposes that statues such as the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá, a) reveal theoretical and methodological potentialities that can help us re-think the significance of the roles of religious material cultures that, b) expand the category of *syncretic* to better account for the richness, complexity and relationality of the lived realities of religious devotions taking place; and c) are figures through which the intersecting points at which Catholic colonial and West African ontologies meet. Last, throughout the article I test the approach that religious statues can be used as ‘nodes on a map’ from which to methodologically chart the lines of colonisation and other religious movements that continue to take place primarily between Spain, Cuba, and parts of Africa, an approach that can be used as either central to investigations, or as a complement to other methods and approaches.

2 A Material Approach to Religious Transformation

2.1 *Material Religion*

Material religion, a sub-field in the study of religions, emerged fully in the early 2000s, around the time I began conducting fieldwork at Marian shrines in Andalusia, Spain. Since then, I have discerned that material religion comprises three main interrelated categories: objects (or things), the senses, and performance. The category of objects covers a range of things such as natural sites, architecture (temples, shrines), geographical locations, clothes, food, ritual objects, statues and devotionals, natural objects (shells, wood, bone, acorns, gold) and much more. The category of the senses highlights the role of the senses in relation to things, spaces, places, beliefs, and rituals. And the category of performance includes (every day and more highly ritualised) rituals, pilgrimages, processions, and even political manifestations with religious associations. One of the main drivers within the field of material religion is the fact that the ‘thing’, ‘object’, or aspects of any of the three categories outlined above is taken as the central point from which to understand religious phenomena such as transformation among other things, and both Catholicism and Santería offer no shortage of material, or things and practices, from which observe, participate with, touch, and *think through*. This is one of the reasons why using a statue-centred approach to religious transformation in Latin America in Cuba and more broadly can be quite effective.

As stated above, this paper has extracted one of the primary aspects of a larger project that is currently in development that seeks to examine the roles of religious statues in different Latin American countries. It builds on my previous research in Spain, where I found that Andalusian Marian devotion

is particularly passionate and vibrant. Here, Virgin Mary statues are treated not as 'mere objects', but subjects of a special, powerful kind. This led me to develop the theoretical outcome that Andalusian statues of the Virgin Mary are better understood if situated within debates about the 'new animism', and the ontological turn to (religious) things. Here, the personhood of putative objects such as statues of Mary is evidenced through the significance of their individual roles as divinely influential 'border workers' that occupy the space between this world and the next. Their statue-personhood is also readily discerned through the gifts they receive, and the rituals that take place with and around them (such as caretaking, personal supplications).¹

The purpose of this paper, then, is to build on this previous and preliminary research in Andalusia to create a framework that uses religious material cultures, their journeys, ensuing rituals, and even their biographies, from which to explore religious transformation in Cuba, past and present. This approach is justified through the use of clear physical points (religious statues) that can be marked out and delineated – points from which lines can be drawn on a map and changes can be charted, visualised, and perhaps more clearly understood. Addressing the depth of the historical details of La Virgen de Regla in Chipiona, Spain, La Virgen de Regla in Habana, the history of Yoruban religion in Africa, and Catholicism in Spain, is, however, beyond the remit of this paper. As such, this account is far from comprehensive, nor does it pretend to be. The paper is an exploration that tests how following the sometimes intersecting, multi-directional lines of religious movement between different religious 'worlds' *might* work, and how they reflect what Kathryn Rountree refers to as the 'current post-colonial impulse and rise of valuing indigenous, black, subaltern, etc. religions',² i.e. (Santería, lay Catholic practices), that have been framed to typically represent 'others' in relation to colonially driven hegemonic discourses.

The process of selecting certain lines of movement for a smaller piece of work such as this one will, however, necessarily reveal certain biases, especially regarding positionality, power and gender relations, and hegemonic discourses, reflexive knowledge of which can also be transformed into constructive methodological tools. Recognizing biases, after all, offers opportunities for dialogue and learning. My own bias can be found in my treatment of Andalusian Catholicism, not only as a colonial, suppressive power, but as a comparative opportunity from which to understand the influence that Andalusian Catholicism would have had on shaping material devotion to the different identities of the Virgin de Regla in Cuba.

1 Whitehead, *Religious Statues and Personhood*.

2 Casual conversation with Kathryn Rountree, 15/09/21.

2.2 *Historical Footing*

I will begin this section by illuminating selected lines of historical trajectory that foreground how figures of the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá (in both Spain and Cuba) have shaped religious transformation, particularly in Cuba. I say ‘particularly in Cuba’ because it is here that the most obvious changes to Marian devotion can be seen, and continuity of devotion to the Virgen de Regla in Chipiona can be assumed. Contemporarily, both the Virgen de Regla in Chipiona, and Virgen de Regla/Yemayá in Habana sit at the heart of their communities and enjoy being the centre of vibrant, cultic celebrations, processions, and feast days, particularly their ‘Saint Day’, which is the 7th of September. And although the Cuban statue is a replica of the Spanish one, they are not the same. They exist in different cultural contexts and carry diverse religious identities. The two statues do, however, share a legacy, and that legacy begins in Africa.

The narrative and legend that surround the Virgen de Regla go as follows: Saint Augustine of Hippo (known as *el Africano*) had a revelation in which he was visited by an angel. The angel told him to carve a statue with the same complexion as the Africans (explaining why she is ‘black’). When Thagaste (in present day Algeria, now called Souk Ahras) was sacked in the 5th century CE, it is said that a deacon named Cipriano saved the statue of the Virgin and took her through a storm across the Strait of Gibraltar. This successful passing across the stormy sea is considered the first miracle the Virgen de Regla ever performed.³ That she sailed is the reasoning behind her being known as the *Virgen Marinera*, or patron saint of sailors. The Virgin was taken to Chipiona in Cadiz, where a shrine was built in her honour. In later centuries, like many Virgin Mary statues in Andalusia (including the Virgin of Alcalá de los Gazules), she was hidden for safe keeping during centuries of Arab rule in Andalusia. This meant that from 711 to 1330 CE, the Virgen de Regla had gone underground until her rescue and subsequent restoration to a castle monastery donated to her by the Ponce de Leon family at the end of the fourteenth century.⁴ Part of that monastery can be seen in the present-day shrine in Chipiona.

When including Spain as part of the remit for understanding religious transformation in Latin America, it is worth bearing in mind that the regions, kingdoms, and later provinces of Spain underwent numerous radical religious transformations, disruptions, reforms, cultural ideologies and political and secular movements throughout the span of its history. During my research at the shrine of the Virgin of Alcalá de los Gazules, for example, I became aware of what I consider a living notion offered to me by Imna, a local historian. Imna

3 EcuRed, *Virgen de Regla*.

4 EcuRed, *Virgen de Regla*.

made the observation that Marian statues and their display can be considered Christian continuations of local ancient Goddesses such as Isis or Cybele (to name two of many).⁵ Also worth bearing in mind is that the Iberian Peninsula was once home to a host of indigenous gods and spirits of place (such as the Goddess, *Mari*, whose various movements had a direct effect on weather patterns) before and during the notable periods of domination from Phoenician, Roman, Visigoth, and later Moorish occupation⁶ (among others). I have observed these changes reflected in Spain's diverse architecture which varies from region to region. For example, a temple to Isis is partially standing next to temples of Juno, Minerva and Jupiter in Baelo Claudia, an ancient Roman town on the Costa de la Luz near the village of Bolonia in Andalusia today. Was this ancient 'syncretism' similar to that which took place later in Cuba when similar features were identified by enslaved West Africans between La Virgen de Regla in Cuba and the African Goddess Yemayá, both of whom are connected to the sea and the fates of mariners? I will return to this further along with an accompanying critique of syncretism that utilises Bettina Schmidt's⁷ suggested replacement of syncretism with the term of *religious bricolage*.

Also significant is how Spain underwent 800 years of Moorish occupation from 711 CE to 1492 CE,⁸ the after-effects of which overlapped with the beginnings of what the Spanish may have considered its most successful conquest in the so-called new world of Latin America (as well as the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain), despite the horrors and confusion experienced by existing inhabitants. Arguably, in addition to the Counter-Reformation, centuries of Catholic and Muslim conflict may have sharpened the resolve of Queen Isabella of Castile to see Latin America united under the mantle of a 'universal' Catholicism.

In the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the spread of Catholicism with colonisation was done as much through its visual and material cultures as much as through the spread of doctrine. Statues of the Virgin Mary, sometimes originals and sometimes replicas, often accompanied Spanish colonisers and missionaries on long sea voyages across the Atlantic to Latin America. Relating this to the Virgen de Regla from Chipiona, her shrine, positioned at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River (which ran north and inland to Seville), was often the last site that Spanish mariners laid their eyes on before moving out into open ocean before carrying on down the African coast, or across the Atlantic. Sailors would supplicate the Virgen de Regla from

5 Whitehead, *Religious Statues and Personhood*, p. 65.

6 Hillgarth, *Spanish Historiography*, p. 27.

7 Bettina Schmidt, *Critique of Syncretism*.

8 Hillgarth, *Spanish Historiography*, pp. 33–35.

aboard their ships for protection and safe passage.⁹ Another Virgen de Regla shrine and statue was established “in 1643 in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, one of several cities in the Canary Islands where slave ships stopped for provisions on the way to the Caribbean.”¹⁰

It is important to note, then, that the narrative of the Virgen de Regla's creation in Africa, and how she sailed across the Strait of Gibraltar seeking refuge with her devotees in Spain was continued, not only in story form, but physically, with how a replica of the Virgen de Regla went to Habana, Cuba. Hers is also a seafaring story that begins in Africa (although she is replicated) and involves a voyage, only this time by the hand of the wealthy Spanish Don Pedro de Aranda y Evellaneda who had taken a replica of the Virgen de Regla with him on his first trip from Spain. He later donated this statue to a humble sanctuary that already housed an oil painting of the Virgen de Regla in 1696.¹¹ Speculatively, this shrine may have been set up as a site from which to pay homage for safe sea passages given, or from one Marian point to another, if we conceptually chart this phenomenon on a map.

Also early on in the colonisation process was the brutal transportation of enslaved people from West Africa. The Middle Passage of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade carves out and maps the violence of the routes of the slave ships that ran between Africa and the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to Schmidt, “In the beginning of the 16th century (1518), the Spanish king allowed slave traders the direct transport of human goods from West Africa to the Spanish colonies.”¹² It was during these voyages that people from a variety of different sites, traditions, and languages, and from their own long lineages and traditions were brought together. Schmidt writes:

Some believed in Allah, others in ancestor spirits and deities; some were patrilineal, others matrilineal; some spoke a Yoruba dialect, others Hausa, Ewe, Fon, or various other languages including the Bantu languages. Hence, from the time of their capture, people had to find a common language, a new social network, and a new common cultural structure in order to survive.¹³

Enslaved people were allowed to go to church and to ‘organise small festivals in honour of a Catholic saint’ but were not allowed to meet in numbers greater

9 EcuRed, *Virgen de Regla*.

10 Viarnés, *All Roads Lead to Yemayá*.

11 EcuRed, *Virgen de Regla*.

12 Schmidt, *Critique against Syncretism*, p. 237.

13 Schmidt, *Critique against Syncretism*, p. 237.

than three. They were, however, permitted by the Church to “create their own social space through the Catholic festivals.”¹⁴ These social spaces would have provided the common ground for people to come together, and Catholic statues and images of saints would have more than likely been the present central figures through which something entirely new would have been created.

The seventeenth century saw an increase in the numbers of enslaved people in the American colonies due to the amount of labour needed for sugar cane and coffee plantations. Following the establishment of the Virgen de Regla among Cubans, this time also coincided with a new chapel to the Virgen de Regla in Habana being built, and in 1714 Nuestra Señora de Regla was proclaimed patron of the Bahía de la Habana. These events coincided with even larger numbers of captives arriving from the Yoruba Kingdoms (of Benin and Nigeria) and into the nineteenth century. Many of these people spoke the same language and had similar customs which would have enabled them to unite in ways not experienced by earlier arrivals who spoke different languages. Shortly after, according to Schmidt,

the transatlantic slave trade was prohibited. Hence the Yoruba formed the last and largest group of slaves arriving in the Caribbean. Because of the [probable] civil war [in the area of the Yoruba Kingdoms] scholars assume that a large number of religious and political leaders were sold as slaves; hence with them a wide range of specialized knowledge of ritual was brought from Africa to America.¹⁵

The Yoruba tradition as it was practiced in West Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and that which continues to be practiced today) would have significantly informed the ongoing development of Cuban Santería, or *la religión de los oricha*.

3 Cosmologies, Correlations, Syncretism

3.1 *Cosmologies and Correlations*

In terms of structure, Santería has no central organisation, no central leader, it does not proselytize or recruit new members, and it is non-dogmatic. Referred to as *La Regla de Ocha*, or the Rule of the Orishas, it was developed like other Afro-Caribbean religions in tandem with the influences of Spanish Catholicism by the *Lucumi* (Yoruban descendants in Cuba) as a response to long decades

¹⁴ Schmidt, *Critique against Syncretism*, p.237.

¹⁵ Schmidt, *Critique against Syncretism*, p.237.

of crisis. From an anthropological perspective, religious practices within most contexts contain beliefs, rituals, and practicing that entail the successful coping with uncertainty. Functionally, they offer ways through which people try to remedy, justify, or deal with that over which they have no control, especially in moments of crisis. Slavery can certainly be considered within the remit of 'crisis', and Santería emerged as a response thus.

Structurally and cosmologically, Santería practitioners believe, according to Schmidt, in

the existence of God as creator of mankind, the former African deities and spirits are in the centre of the rituals with the ancestor spirits below them. The African spirits or deities are connected with nature (thunder, sea, rivers, spec. tress etc.) as well as with human activities and human characteristics: Yemayá is the Orisha of maternity, Oshun the Orisha of love, Ogun the Orisha of war and violence and so on.¹⁶

Although not assuming 'sameness', exploring the similarities and differences between Catholic and Santería cosmologies and material practices can be fruitful to understanding how certain material aspects of this 'new' religion came to be. Catholicism includes a hierarchical worship of God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints. Within this structure the saints are understood and treated as mediators, or 'border workers' between this world and the next. Mary can be found with a special status that warrants 'hyperdulia', as opposed to 'dulia', which is veneration reserved for the saints. These Catholic saints have resonances with different Orisha, or vice-verse depending on one's religious orientation, and are powerful in their own right. For example, Oshun is associated with the Virgen del Caridad del Cobre, Ogun with Saint Peter, Shango with Santa Barbara, Olofu is associated with Christ, Oya is associated with the Virgen de la Candelaria, and of course the Virgen de Regla is associated with Yemayá. Peter B. Clarke tells us, Santería,

like many African and African-derived religions, does not divide the world into distinct realms. The spiritual and natural orders exist within the world that we experience. Thus, Santería has as its main concern the ritual control of the spiritual and natural forces that impinge on everyday life, on relationships and on all that a person does.¹⁷

¹⁶ Schmidt, *Critique against Syncretism*, p. 237.

¹⁷ Clarke, *New religions in Global Perspective*, p. 225.

This reflects how every person is born with a special connection to one particular Orisha, and this Orisha is worshipped within a special cult that is presided over by a Santero/a, or priest. Initiations are some of the more significant ritual practices in Santería, a process that lasts a year and a week. During times of initiation, similar to how a child belongs to a family, the initiate belongs to the ritual family of the priest. This means that they belong to the same ritual lineage that can be traced back, most likely, to African origin.

Assuming an amount of continuity, contemporary Marian devotional practices in Andalusia are suggestive of what popular rural beliefs and practices might have been like in Cuba in the 16th century. This is due to how early on Cuba's colonisation process, the vernacular Marian-centred Catholic devotional rituals, beliefs, and practices that were carried out in Spain were re-established and transposed onto the new Catholic Cuban colony. Schmidt, supporting this claim, states that "Christianity in the Caribbean was based mainly on the 16th century popular Spanish Catholicism, which was already mixed with popular beliefs of the rural Spanish."¹⁸ As such, these practices may be seen as potential influences on the early transformation of Marian devotion to Santería in Cuba. For example, while bearing in mind the recognized notion that the Virgin Mary is a continuation of earlier ancient Goddesses, devotees to the Virgen de Regla in Chipiona treat 'their Virgin' as a powerful person capable of protecting, healing, or granting miracles. Technically, however, she is *theotokos*, mother of God, and an intercessor between humans and Jesus (the latter of which has access to God's divine hand). Accounts, however, revealed that this divine hierarchy is often surpassed in popular devotion. Devotees turn directly to the Virgen de Regla, supplicating and treating her as if *she* has the power of divine intervention, much like we can see happening today in Cuba.

Another example of similitude can be found in Marian lineages. When my daughter was born she was ritually introduced to the Virgen de Alcala de los Gazules – the Virgin who sits at the heart of our Spanish family's ancestral village home. This introduction by the family matriarch (which is a rural, local tradition) means that my daughter is now of the lineage of the Virgen de Alcala specifically (not the universal Mary), where there is now a reciprocal obligation of commitment in exchange for life-long protection.

3.2 *Syncretism, Bricolage, and a Plurality of Ontologies*

Santería is primarily understood to be a 'syncretic' religion within the dominant scholarly and even popular discourses on the subject. Cubans were forbidden from practicing their African religions, so it is assumed that African Gods and

18 Schmidt, *Critique against Syncretism*, p. 237.

Goddesses would have been subversively worshipped through their superimposition onto the Catholic saint with the closest resonances and resemblances. However, whereas this may make sense superficially, the dynamics of what took place deserve an approach that considers religious statues as co-creative participants in the generation of religious phenomena who are capable of inspiring what Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell refer to as '[...] a plurality of ontologies'¹⁹ in relation to 'things' more generally. These dynamics also invite a material critique of syncretism that builds on Schmidt's notion of religious *bricolage*.²⁰

Similarities between the Virgen de Regla and Yemayá are both natural and crafted. Since both have connections to the sea and can be approached for similar issues, syncretism is an easy conclusion to draw. However, as Schmidt²¹ suggests in relation to *Dambala* (who 'correlates' with St Patrick), that which appears to be taking place in relation to the statue is more complex than that which the binary conceptualised in the term syncretism represents. Schmidt writes:

During the creation process, under the oppression of slavery, the slaves did not just hide their African beliefs underneath Christian cover. They created something new, in a dynamic and creative process which allows even today the inclusion or rejection of elements. Such a system which I call, religious bricolage, is always open and ongoing. The results are dynamic mixtures of diverse elements with creative actors as members who make their own decisions and form their own systems.²²

Religious bricolage, as per Schmidt, helps address the fallacy found in discourses surrounding syncretism that suggests that there are 'pure forms' of religion. In the case of Santería, it is suggested that there is a 'true' or pure form of Catholicism that was co-opted or transposed onto by another mythical pure form of Yoruba tradition, and thus the syncretic religion of Santería was born that combined the two. This is, however, far from accurate. As Schmidt suggests, culture is a dynamic process with 'more than one voice'.²³

Born in response to the dualism found in the experience-analysis divide of traditional anthropological discourse, the *Thinking Through Things*²⁴ project

19 Henare/Holbraad/Wastell, *Thinking Through Things*, p. 7.

20 Schmidt, *Critique against Syncretism*, p. 241.

21 Schmidt, *Critique against Syncretism*, p. 239.

22 Schmidt, *Critique against Syncretism*, p. 239.

23 Schmidt, *Critique against Syncretism*, p. 241.

24 Henare/Holbraad/Wastell, *Thinking Through Things*.

offers methodologies that are specifically dedicated to letting ‘things’, in our case religious statues (who are, in fact, subjects), speak. In addition to statues, observing both the displays and practices that take place at the Cuban shrine speaks like a visual language – a language that a researcher must learn how to read before going into the field. For example, in Santería, the Orishas are the centre of the rituals. Materially, flowers, money, cowrie shells, and the lighting of candles are common elements and activities, as well as the Virgen’s annual procession. The main offerings that I observed at the church of the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá in 2009, however, were seashells, flowers, black ‘spirit dolls’, and candles. Distinctions concerning where the weight of devotion is being placed (whether on Yemayá or Mary) can be materially discerned through the things that devotees wear and carry. Of course, it should also be noted that some devotees of the Virgen de Regla may direct devotion to Yemayá on one occasion, and perhaps to Mary on another, depending on the particular concern at the time. For example, many devotees dress in various shades of blue, while some dress in white. Colourful beaded necklaces and bracelets identify those who are priests and priestesses.²⁵ Schmidt’s notion of religious bricolage provides a framework from which to begin assembling the many voices, power structures, traditions, geographical and natural conditions, and ‘things’ that make up this religious ‘other’. It also involves making room for the other two categories of material religion in addition to religious ‘objects’: ritual performance and the senses. Schmidt says in relation to how traditions such as Santería developed:

[...] the main attraction is the address of all senses, in particular the combination of music, movement and ornament, and sometimes even smell. Together they create a religious artifact, which is central for the believers confronted by surroundings they regard as hostile, cold and senseless.²⁶

If we follow a method of things, similar to that which I have argued for elsewhere,²⁷ we can arm ourselves with knowledge about the diverse roles of colour, things from nature (shells, earth), candles and flowers, as well as with etiquette and knowledge about Yoruban, Catholic and Santería cosmologies. This creates space for religious statues and ensuing performances to ‘speak’ and can be an appropriate method to follow as we chart the lines of religious change from site to site. As we have seen so far, the Virgen de Regla has ‘more than one voice’. She is multi-ethnic and multi-vocal. In fact, the statue herself can be conceived of as a fixed point through which different ontologies

25 Viarnés, *All Roads Lead to Yemayá*.

26 Schmidt, *Critique against Syncretism*, p. 239.

27 Whitehead, A method of ‘things’, p. 245.

(Spanish Catholic, Yoruban, Santería, something *new*) intersect and meet. This makes the statue-person of the Virgen de Regla capable of dictating “[...] a plurality of ontologies”²⁸ as suggested by Henare et al.

A theory of (religious) ‘things’, combined with Schmidt’s notion of religious bricolage, then, allows for a complexity of assemblages, and relational phenomena to emerge that speaks more clearly to the lived processes and realities of these religious ontologies than attempts at making them fit neatly into controllable categories such as ‘syncretism’. If we let the things speak, as suggested above, we would apprehend the assembled voices of Spanish Catholicism, Cuban Catholicism, the Goddess Yemayá, and the voices of devotees who say they *just are what they are*.

Maha Marouan suggests that today, Santería is the more practiced religion than Catholicism; but that Santería “preserves Cubans’ link to Catholicism”. She notes that this an “historical irony considering that the Catholic Church has historically exercised a policy of calculated tolerance with the expectation that African-derived religions would eventually disappear”.²⁹ Santería has far from disappeared. The Virgen de Regla/Yemayá in Cuba is better known and has, for example, more internet presence and diversity of followers than the Virgen de Regla in Chipiona, Spain. Marouan suggests from an account given by Juan Dionisio, “a santero and Head of the House-temple of Regla” that “There are very few people in Cuba who go to the Catholic Church to see the Virgin Mary. They go to see Yemayá, the Yoruba goddess of the sea [...]”.³⁰

The content of this account, while telling about the growth in popularity of Yemayá, is difficult to measure without my being present at the shrine/temple in Regla and speaking to a vast array of shrine visitors today. During my own visit to Regla, Cuba in 2009, I encountered priests and priestesses of Yemayá, Catholic devotees who were there to see the Virgin Mary specifically, and a woman who said she was not concerned about whether the Virgen de Regla was an African Goddess or the Virgin Mary; this last person was a devotee to the figure of a Virgin/Goddess – a deity figure who *is who she is*. This last reflects a third, ‘new’ transformation that transcends the notion of syncretism and supports Schmidt’s notion of religious bricolage. It indicates that neither Yemayá nor the Virgin dominates the heart of this devotee; but the figure, as a whole.

A significant point about the Virgen de Regla is that she is always dressed in blue. This colour, as all Orishas are identified with a particular colour, identifies her within the Yoruban religion as Yemayá. The sacred blue colour of her dress,

28 Henare/Holbraad/Wastell, *Thinking Through Things*, p. 7.

29 Marouan, *Santeria in Cuba*, p. 59.

30 Marouan, *Santeria in Cuba*, p. 59.

the colour of the sea which she commands, is also identified with the Cuban capital. Blue is so significant to the people of Habana that it is the colour worn by the territory's baseball team, as well as the capital's television channel as well as their baseball team. From this we can see that devotion to the Virgen de Regla is developing in relation to a host of cultural, political and other factors and is continually emerging as something both established and new.

As such the physical characteristics of the statue such as the colour she wears or the colour of her 'skin', can inspire theoretical innovations as well as give insight into the changes that have taken place over their historical trajectories. From this, questions can also be raised as to whether or not the dark colour of the Virgin's (wooden) skin makes her resonate with Yemayá in Cuba? I must remind the reader that the Virgin originated in Africa, around whom the Andalusian Spaniards wrapped the Song of Solomon: *Negra soy, pero hermosa hija de Jerusalén* (I am black, and a beautiful daughter of Jerusalem). Although more than likely not the intention of Don Pedro de Aranda y Evellaneda (the man who donated his own personal statue of the Virgen de Regla to the sanctuary), the mixing of blackness and whiteness that the statue depicts (the Virgen de Regla and the white infant Jesus) visually speaks to and with Cuba's national identity – a nation of many colours. According to Carrie Viarnés,

The Virgin's refusal to accept imposed whiteness mirrors resistance to colonial society from below, while also confirming her status as a miraculous image. From this perspective, the Virgin is a model *of* and *for* (in Clifford Geertz's terms) the colonial experience of both peninsular Catholics and Cuba's cultural "Others." In the end, devotion to the black Virgin probably helped to creolize the church.³¹

Telling again are the words of one devotee to whom I spoke in relation to the fact that the figure has multiple identities: "ah, but we're all united through the Virgen de Regla". Moving away from notions such as syncretism and using a theory such as Schmidt's 'bricolage' re-frames this phenomenon in a way that honours the new without deference to the old, or without trying to fit dynamic and volatile contemporary religious experiences and interpretations into established moulds.

3.3 *Meshworks and Maps*

Santería, along with worship of Yemayá and replication of the Virgen de Regla, is growing, and religious transformation is taking place continually as the lines

³¹ Viarnés, *All Roads Lead to Yemayá*.

of movement are becoming entangled as they grow in a multitude of directions. If we think once again about nodes on a map and networks, we can see how the popularity of Santería in recent years has created a ‘there and back again’ scenario whereby Santería is now practiced in Madrid. I have also encountered Santería groups, as well as shops selling materials for ritual practice, in both Camden Town and Brixton in London, the latter of which is home to a prominent Afro-Caribbean community. It is also practiced in Miami and New York, along with other major and smaller cities in Europe and North America, and by a variety of multi-ethnic practitioners. It appears as though Santería, as well as veneration of the Virgen de Regla, is not showing signs of slowing down. But how can we look at this movement effectively?

The idea of using religious statues as nodal points on a map from which to follow lines of movement offers the possibility of using the framework of networks, or of using Tim Ingold’s³² notion of a ‘meshwork’. In Actor Network Theory (made famous by Bruno Latour) statues of the Virgen might be understood as nonpassive objects who are also social relations. Ingold, however, argues using a metaphorical dialogue between ANT and SPIDER that since objects (statues for our purposes) are made up of ‘bits and pieces’ that are ‘assembled so as to make things happen’, ‘Every “relation” in the network, then, is a connection between one thing and another. As such the relation has no material presence’.³³ From this Ingold suggests that the network is superficially concerned with materiality and objects as social relations but overlooks the complexity of the ‘materials of the materiality’ where the connections that join up the network (where humans are distinguished from non-humans) cannot be established.³⁴

Figures of the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá in Spain and Cuba readily expand the theory of the meshwork because these statues are special kinds of objects, that are really subjects, capable of generating myriad forms of events and phenomena. Ingold says, “Every such line describes a flow of material substance in a space that is topologically fluid.”³⁵ In fact, we can conceive of the Cuban and Spanish statues as Arachne-like SPIDER figures who sit at the centre of a web, from out which runs a variety of lines that make up volatile networks of relations. In the case of the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá and her communities, these networks, or meshworks, extend into the worlds of humans, other-than-humans and more-than-humans, and into the divine worlds of the spirits

32 Ingold, *Being Alive*.

33 Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 91.

34 Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 91.

35 Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 64.

and gods as well. Ingold offers a further critique of ANT in relation to 'hybridity'. Unlike ANT's network, Ingold suggests that the world does not consist of 'stand-alone' entities who are assembled and put in motion by some notion of agency that humans attribute. For Ingold, "*the web is not an entity*. That is to say, it is not a closed-in, self-contained object that is set over against other objects with which it may then be juxtaposed or conjoined". But Ingold's SPIDER overplays the point made by ANT because the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá really is an 'entity'.³⁶ She is, however, a 'more than material' entity capable of relationally bridging the metaphorical frameworks of the network and the meshwork (depending on who is looking on and who is doing the relating). Not only does her personhood and presence act and flow within the fluid, relational lines of SPIDER's web as part of a meshwork of interactions.; she is *also*, and significantly, a powerful actor in the network – a node of connection that operates on and within the borders of several worlds. But she is not a hybrid. As stated before, hybridity, like syncretism, carries the implication of 'pure forms'; and, as Ingold's SPIDER objects, "entirely misses the point".³⁷ Religious statues such as the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá are complex nodal points from which the lines of religious change, transformation can not only be traced, charted, and connected; they are also the central points around and through which life happens, concerns are laid bare, and community cohesion rituals take place.

3.4 *In Recent Years*

Contemporarily, and despite volatile political changes in Cuba (US trade embargos, economic crisis, the 'collapse of the Soviet bloc' and travel restrictions),³⁸ devotion to La Virgen de Regla and her African counterpart Yemayá has been growing from strength to strength. The current church dates from the early 19th century and is always busy with devotees from both religions stooping in silent prayer before the images of the saints that fill the alcoves. This has not, however, been a clear and easy stretch of road. Similar to what took place after the Fourth of May protests in China where the Chinese intelligentsia reduced religious practices to the pejorative category of superstition,³⁹ nearly five decades of the Cuban Republic (1902–1959) also saw Afro-Cuban religious practices criminalized and oppressed. Practices were once again driven underground. During this time, however, Catholicism remained in favour. This is demonstrated through the 1957 crowning of the Virgen de Regla statue by

36 Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 91.

37 Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 91.

38 Maraou, *Santería in Cuba*, p. 56.

39 Ko-wu, *The Origin and Evolution of the Concept of Mixin*.

the Cuban Cardinal in Habana cathedral. But this was also short lived. In 1959, according to Marouan, the

subsequent Socialist state (1959–) discouraged any religious expression until the 1990s. In the same year Cuba was declared secular, a World Congress of Yoruba religion, the first of its kind in Cuba, took place in the presence of the Communist Party and government officials. This was the beginning of public forums on African religions in Cuba centered on debates about hierarchy, orthodoxy and autonomy. The shift to the secular phase allowed Santería practitioners to take their gods out of hiding and the religion began to thrive openly both inside and outside Cuba.⁴⁰

However, according to Marouan, bringing the gods and Santería practices out into the open have worked against Afro-Cuban practitioners. During the early years of the Revolution, Santería priests and priestesses were not able to join the Communist Party or to find work, and “with tourism at the heart of the economic recovery plan, new patterns of social mobility and commerce arose, and some of the structural inequalities of the early years of the revolution were exacerbated.”⁴¹ This, according to Marouan, meant that the costs of ceremonies and initiations were inflated, and “Afro-Cubans found themselves at a disadvantage and unable to compete in a tourist economy in which whiteness was privileged, and their religious practices were marketed and engaged as a commodity.”⁴² Once Cuba was declared a secular, instead of atheist, state in 1991 Fidel Castro lifted prohibitions against religious believers. Since then Santería has been experiencing a revitalization.⁴³ In the case of the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá, her popular September 7 annual procession is a material expression of this revitalization.

3 Further Questions for Research

In the larger, more comprehensive study that is currently under development, this framing will be adjusted to include tracing the complex and ‘topologically fluid’ lines that run not only from Spain to Cuba, but also from Nigeria and Benin to Cuba. Questions that have arisen so far that will be followed up when

⁴⁰ Marouan, *Santería in Cuba*, p. 58.

⁴¹ Marouan, *Santería in Cuba*, p. 59.

⁴² Marouan, *Santería in Cuba*, p. 59.

⁴³ Marouan, *Santería in Cuba*, p. 57 et seq.

Covid-19 restrictions are lifted concern the wider and ongoing effects of the hegemonic discourses found in and facilitated by colonisation and globalisation, reasons for personal and collective supplication, or the roles that the Virgen de Regla plays in the mobilisation of political protests. These types of questions are indicative of wider social issues such as gender, racial and economic inequality, or whether or not needs are being met by authority figures, government, or those in power. As Rountree points out, “[t]he Virgin’s story is more than a story about religion [...] it is a story of wider cultural transformation in the context of a multiplicity of efforts to shrug off the heavy yoke of colonialism.”⁴⁴

Looking at the two statues in Spain and Cuba comparatively demonstrate how aspects of social, political, and personal problems either differ or are shared cross-culturally, or at each node on the current map. Another question is, then, how do the statues embody social justice, regionalism, or nationalism? Further, since the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá is associated with landscape features and elements such as the sea, does she play a role in environmental concerns such as rising sea levels? How does she influence the wellbeing and safety of her devotees, especially if they embark on sea journeys? The types of gifts that the statues are offered can inform us about the nature of value within Santería and Catholicism in the different contexts of Spain and Cuba, too.

Significantly, what do statues such as the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá tell us about the development of new religious movements in Cuba, and also in European and North American countries? And finally, since the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá statues are the material figures through which these issues are assembled, what can we learn from the often-overlooked roles of material religion in different cultures? Limited by the onset of Covid-19 and ensuing restrictions since 2020, further qualitative, ethnographic research is needed in both Spain and Cuba to address these questions in appropriate detail. However, based on preliminary desk and fieldwork investigations at both sites, and although this project is in initial stages, the Virgen de Regla/Yemayá statues have already revealed fruitful understandings that have invited the creative development of approaches to a host of questions pertinent for exploring religious transformation and the roles of material cultures in Latin America more broadly.

4 Conclusion

As part of a developing premise aimed at forming part of a larger project, this paper has offered a novel, material approach through which to understand

44 Casual conversation with Kathryn Rountree, 15/09/21.

religious transformation in Latin America. Building on several years of research at Marian shrines in Andalusia, Spain, the paper has highlighted the potential theoretical richness of what can be excavated from engaging with the largely overlooked medium of religious artefacts. La Regla/Yemayá in Spain, and primarily Cuba, have been used as the points from which to propose that religious statues can a) form the basis from which a dynamic methodological and theoretical model can be developed that places ‘things’ such as statues, their physical characteristics, offerings, and ritual practices and objects at the centre of an approach to religious transformation; and b) aid in re-thinking how we understand and engage with religious materialities such as statues who have volatile multi-ethnic and religious identities. The ritual creativity and expressions generated in relation to these lived religious realities also provide visual and participatory evidences that speak to the complexity found in these contexts. Re-imagining religious statues as sites for understanding religious transformation at local levels in Habana and Andalusia, as well as mapping statues using a material approach, creates a model that can initiate wider conversations about Latin American religions that respond to the history (and present) of religious transformation and the wider and ongoing effects of colonisation through the Virgin and Yemayá’s changing faces.

Biography

Amy R. Whitehead is a Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at Massey University in Aotearoa New Zealand. An Anthropologist of Religion/Religious Studies scholar, she is the author of *Religious Statues and Personhood: Testing the Role of Materiality* (2013), as well as several journal articles and chapters for edited volumes. Amy’s primary areas of research concern the material and performance cultures of religions, the ‘turn to things’ in the Study of Religions, the development of new approaches to animism and ‘the fetish’, ritual studies, and Earth Traditions (Paganisms, Goddess movements). She has also co-edited edited volumes, including *Indigenous Religions: Critical Concepts for Religious Studies* (2018), and is the managing series editor for Bloomsbury Studies in Material Religion.

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