

Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology

Volume 10 | Number 2

Article 5

11-1-2002

The Virgin, the King and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670—1780

Maria Elena Diaz

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt>

Recommended Citation

Diaz, Maria Elena "The Virgin, the King and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670—1780," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*: Vol. 10 : No. 2 , Article 5. (2002)
Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol10/iss2/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology* by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

The Virgin, the King and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670–1780. By María Elena Díaz. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. Pages, xiv + 440.

María Elena Díaz, history professor at University of California, Santa Cruz, has written a wonderfully creative and detailed case study of a small community in eastern Cuba during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She demonstrates how slaves and free people of color in the mining village of El Cobre formed identity, developed firm notions of community prerogatives and, from their subordinate position, learned to negotiate for rights and status.

The study contributes to the growing historiography on colonial Latin America that demonstrates how even peripheral and subordinate communities in the Spanish Empire remained connected to the whole and, through informed and skillful engagement with the system itself, managed to struggle and often successfully defend political and socio-economic position. At the same time, Díaz demonstrates that race and slavery permanently influenced definitions of status and mobility, features of colonial society that, though often challenged, were necessarily factored into community expectations and everyday life.

Comprehensive in its treatment of economics, politics, and society, the study begins by narrating the origins of the mining community and examining processes of adaptation by African slaves in their new environment. Brought to the region by privately owned mining contractors in the late sixteenth century, the slaves gained a new status in 1670 when the Crown revoked the contracts and confiscated the mines. The now Creole (or Hispanicized) slaves became property of the King. Over the next century, reconstituted into the pueblo of El Cobre, the community of Crown slaves reshaped their notions of servitude, argued for rights and freedom, and developed an entirely new identity. Over time, the slaves of El Cobre gained rights over lands and farmed,

in some cases owned slaves themselves, independently mined copper, participated in local government, and defended their interests through litigation in the courts. At the same time, they remained slaves, subject to forced labor, though they negotiated work obligations with Crown authorities.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is how the development of the Marian shrine to Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre (Our Lady of Charity) reflected the changing status and identity of the Royal slaves. The shrine is first mentioned in a 1608 report by administrator of the mines as "a hermitage to Our Lady where a hermit lives with license from the Bishop of the Island." In that year, the hermit received "an alms of 1 real each day for the oil of the lamp," but by the mid-eighteenth century an elaborate temple occupied the site and was the most important shrine in Cuba (118). Dedicating two chapters to the topic, Díaz analyzes the local narrative traditions that gave rise to the devotion and traces its official appropriation and legitimization by the Church during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Despite a sometimes excessively imaginative "cultural reading" of the narratives, Díaz offers an interesting and persuasive argument about the relationship between the emergence of the devotion, the aspirations of the slave community, and the interests of the Church. The earliest known narrative (1687) by black royal slave Juan Moreno, as well as subsequent versions, reflected the slave community's need to establish their place within the social order, legitimized and protected by the Virgin Mary. Moreno's narrative appropriates for his community the religious traditions of the dominant society and provides the pueblo with symbolic claims to place, livelihood, and local identity. For the Church, embracing and legitimizing the narrative, initially by recording and notarizing the story, and then assigning priests to the shrine, allowed it to advance the Marian tradition in Cuba and the New World. Díaz argues that the earliest version of this story conformed to the broad outlines of the Marian narrative traditions of the time, except in the matter of race. While Indians played prominent roles in apparition stories, black slaves did not. In this case, Our Lady of Charity represented an innovation, accepted by Church authorities in Cuba.

The book as a whole is an important contribution to Latin American colonial history as well as Cuban history, but I find it particularly compelling as a contribution to understanding the historical trajectory of the devotion of Our Lady of Charity. As Díaz points out, much has been written about the devotion as symbol of Cuban nationality and the cultural syncretism represented by a white, a black and, often, an Indian or a mulatto in a canoe or boat at the Virgin's feet. But little attention has been paid to the historical origins of the devotion in a com-

munity of slaves and free persons of color. The historical evidence presented by Díaz points to the syncretism inherent in the devotion from the very beginning though in relation to El Cobre slaves' efforts to "become" a criollo and free community. This study offers an indispensable foundation from which to examine the devotion in the nineteenth century, when the devotion's intersection with the rise of Cuban nationalism sets the stage for further transformations and the inclusion of whites in the proverbial canoe.

Gerald E. Poyo
