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Review of *Cachita's Streets: The Virgin of Charity, Race, and Revolution in Cuba* by Jalane D. Schmidt

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BOOK REVIEWS

Jalane D. Schmidt, *Cachita's Streets: The Virgin of Charity, Race, and Revolution in Cuba*, Duke University Press, 2015. Pbk. 376pp. ISBN: 978-0822359371

Reviewed by Gary Prevost¹

Cachita's Streets: The Virgin of Charity, Race, and Religion in Cuba by Jalene Schmidt makes an important contribution to our understanding of both race and religion in Cuba over a 400-year span of time. The study is based on extensive archival work and contemporary field research by the author who is a professor religious studies at the University of Virginia. The focal point of her study is the patron saint of Cuba, the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre, also called Cachita. The emphasis of her book is how diverse groups of Cubans – indigenous Tainos, African slaves, Spanish colonial officials, Cuban independence soldiers, Catholic authorities and laypeople, practitioners of African-based religions, and Communist Party officials – have constructed and disputed the meanings of the Virgin. By analysing these groups over time the author is particularly successful in giving us a framework for understanding the dynamics of both religion and race in modern Cuba. These topics are well covered in other scholarly works, including John Kirk's *Between God and Party: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Cuba* (University of Florida Press) and Esteban Morales's *Essays on Race in Cuba* (Monthly Review Press), but Schmidt's focus on the struggles over the Virgin of Charity provide a window into the intersectionality of religion and race not previously studied.

As noted in the title, *Cachita's Streets*, the author gives particular attention to the occasions from 1936 to 2012 when the original brown-skinned effigy was removed from her national shrine in El Cobre, a predominately black and mixed-race village in eastern Cuba, and paraded through the streets. Among other aspects Schmidt compares these public occasions to other public events occurring in a similar time frame to tell the history of modern Cuba both before and after the Revolution.

A recurring theme in Schmidt's book is the complicated relationship in Cuba between race and religion and the tension that exists down to the present time

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between Roman Catholicism and the African-based spirituality known to many as santería. The author documents that Cachita was not always a national icon. Beginning in the early seventeenth century she was a regional figure in Oriente, Cuba's eastern province, venerated by a small population of indigenous people, enslaved Africans and their descendants in the small copper-mining town of El Cobre. This connection to the downtrodden links her to slave revolts in the region occurring in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries well before the abolition of slavery at the end of the nineteenth century.

Schmidt argues that the recent studies of African-based spirituality that have sought to link black Cuban devotion to the Virgin to veneration of the figure of Ochun are likely not accurate. Rather adherence to the Virgin for centuries in the eastern region existed as a popular form of Roman Catholicism that appealed to the Virgin for intercession against their enslavement. The author argues that the African-based spirituality developed more in the western end of the island, where there was a constant infusion of African slaves, compared to the region of El Cobre where worship of the Virgin was predominant. A good recent book on santería by Aisha Beliso-De Jesus is *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion* (Columbia University Press).

From the purported discovery of the Virgin's effigy at sea by three boys, two indigenous and a black slave, in 1612 the authorities who were the formal keepers of the story sought to shape the narrative to fit their own interests and that of Catholic orthodoxy. However, these efforts were not always successful and Schmidt documents how the 19th-century movements for independence and abolition of slavery rooted in eastern Cuba linked with the story of El Cobre. In November 1868 Carlos Manuel de Cespedes and his freed slaves made a pilgrimage to El Cobre for the Virgin's intercession as they began the independence fight. She also recounts how in their encampments rank and file independence fighters, predominantly black, sang hymns of praise to the Virgin. There are also accounts of her effigy being taken to the battlefield in all three wars of independence between 1868 and 1898. This linking of the Virgin with abolition and independence sharply contrasted with the Catholic hierarchy who favoured the continuation of the Spanish empire.

The Republican era (1902–58) saw significant developments in both Cuban history and the veneration of El Cobre that brought together issues of race, religion, and Cuban national identity. An early question in the Republic was whether or not it was legitimate to organise politically around race, a topic well documented in Aline Helg's *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886–1912* (University of North Carolina Press). The revolutionary army, disproportionately black, was dismissed by the US occupiers and replaced by a white-dominated Rural Guard. In response to this injustice and other racist

policies imposed by the Republican government, black activists formed the Independent Party of Color (PIC) whose leaders made a pilgrimage to El Cobre to ask for the Virgin's blessing of their demands for racial justice. The PIC did not gain wide support in the population and in 1912 the PIC was destroyed by a government massacre of some 3,000 black Cubans in Oriente. Schmidt argues that this official violence against black Cubans who dared to mobilise politically along racial lines still haunts Cuban discussions of race.

The author gives particular attention to the efforts during the Republican period to embrace the Virgin as the embodiment of Cuban national culture. However, the national culture embraced by the Cuban hierarchy sought to distance itself from the African elements of Cuban culture to focus on the primacy of the Hispanic, citing intellectuals who argued "only the resilient Hispanic ethnics achieve unity". As the white Catholic authorities moved to crown the Virgin as patron saint in 1936 her story and image had to be altered to downplay her indigenous and African roots. The effigy itself was recast to white rather than brown to reflect her regal status. The 1936 ceremonies in Santiago reflected a racially biased Cuba of that era. There were many black worshippers in the streets but the officials who planned and carries out the ceremonies were exclusively white. The author also points out that in that era blacks were excluded from the priesthood. Street events in 1952 on the 50th anniversary of the Republic were similar in their whiteness and demonstrated the Church's subservience to the status quo dominated by Fulgencio Batista.

The triumph of the revolutionaries in 1959 ushered in a new era for the Roman Catholic Church and for the Virgin. For more than 30 years Cuban society under the leadership of Fidel Castro and the Communist Party moved in a decidedly secular direction. Religious worship was never banned, as it had been in the Soviet Union, but the role of the Catholic Church was sharply curtailed. All religious schools were closed, foreign priests were expelled from the country, public religious processions were banned and religious believers were not allowed to join the Communist Party. In this context the centrality of the story of the Virgin was significantly marginalised.

In the late 1980s the Communist Party leaders, led by Fidel, and influenced by the role of progressive religious forces in the Central American revolutionary movements, began to shift their attitude toward religion on the island. In the early 1990s Fidel spoke publicly about the positive influence of his Jesuit education and the prohibition on party membership for religious believers was lifted. However, it was the visits of Pope John Paul in 1998 and Pope Benedict in 2012 that changed the dynamics of religion on the island and brought renewed attention to the Virgin. In preparation for the 1998 papal visit Christmas was restored as a public holiday and during the visit the government helped to

organise massive gatherings to greet John Paul and to amplify his message against the US blockade of the island.

Pope John Paul did not visit El Cobre but the prominence of the Virgin during the visit was palpable. However, it was the visit of Pope Benedict in 2012 that created a much greater focus on Cachita when he travelled to the shrine at El Cobre and in the process re-established her role as the patron saint of the country with the support of the island's revolutionary leaders. It should be noted that these papal visits did not focus on the multi-ethnic character of the Virgin, underscoring the Catholic Church's continued ambivalence on this question.