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2-1-1984

### María Lionza

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#### Recommended Citation

Blank, Rodolfo, "María Lionza" (1984). *Artículos educación teológica*. 8.  
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## MYTH, RITUAL AND SYMBOL IN THE CULT OF MARIA LIONZA

Dr. Rudy Blank



As visitors to Caracas makes their way through the parkways and municipal gardens which adorn the eastern part of the city near the Military Club and the Central University, they will find their path lined with the statues of famous figures in the history of the Venezuelan republic. The strangest and most intriguing of these statues will be found sitting on a small traffic island high above the outcoming and incoming lanes of the Autopista del Este. It is the imposing statue of a nude muscular woman with the exaggerated breasts of an ancient fertility goddess. The stone goddess is mounted astride a giant tapir while great stone serpents lie coiled at their feet. The visitor may be astute enough to observe a bunch of freshly cut flowers or a burning candle placed before this female deity – an indication that the statue is more than the embodiment of some civic virtue; she is the object of devotion. The statue, a creation of the Venezuelan sculptor, Alejandro Colina, is in fact an artistic representation of Maria Lionza, the supreme figure in a rapidly expanding cult which bears the name of the naked goddess mounted upon the tapir.

The cult of Maria Lionza can be defined as a rapidly growing syncretistic movement which combines elements from at least four widely disparate sources, namely: Roman Catholicism, Native American shamanism, West African religions and spiritism, a la Alan Kardec (Castellon, 1980:71). In a comparatively short period of time the Cult of Maria Lionza has spread from a

small area of central Venezuela into every state and territory of the Venezuelan Republic; it has crossed over to the Columbia and down into Peru as well as reaching out to the island of Trinidad, Tobago, Curacao and Aruba.

Although certain elements in the Maria Lionza Cult can be traced back into the dim reaches of Venezuela's colonial past, the cult in its present form is a new phenomenon which had its beginnings somewhere in the period between the two World Wars. It is said that a favorite mistress of dictator Juan Vicente Gómez (d. 1935) was a priestess of the cult and that it was through her influence and the patronage of Gómez that the cult was introduced into the inner circles of the nation's political, military and business establishment (Pollak-Eltz 1981:73). However, it is not until 1943 that the Caracas newspapers first mention the existence of the cult. The great surge in the growth of the cult seems to have taken place during the dictatorship of Marcos Perez Jimenez in the 1950's. It was Perez Jimenez who dedicated the state of Maria Lionza in Caracas; in fact, many claim that the dictator himself was a believer.

It is no accident that the cult began its rapid growth in the 1950's. This is the same period that witnessed the rapid urbanization of Venezuela and the great socio-economic changes that the end of World War II brought to the country – not the least of these being immigration of hundreds of thousands of World War II European refugees. Today the Maria Lionza Cult has local centers in every city and town in the nation in addition to its famous pilgrimage shrine upon the mountain of Sorte some 270 kilometers to the southwest of Caracas. The shrine is now a Venezuelan National Park which is said to receive over a million visitors a year (Castellon 1980:84). This is a considerable amount when one notes that the total population of Venezuela is only about fifteen million. It is claimed that from thirty to eighty thousand faithful congregate upon the 1500-meter-high mountain to celebrate the major festivals of the cult.

The great majority of the devotees of Maria Lionza are drawn from the lower classes, but one also finds a good number of middle class Spanish, Italian and Portuguese immigrants among the faithful. The Italian mechanic who repairs my vehicle is a cult leader of the sect. Out of his own funds he has built a cult center on the outskirts of the city. Finally, among the followers of the cult one encounters a sizable number of radio and T.V. personalities, military officers, teachers, political leaders and even Supreme Court judges.

When speaking of the cult of Maria Lionza one should not assume the existence of a centrally controlled, structured organization akin to a church body or a business organization. The cult has no central authority, no national headquarters, no board of directors and no universally accepted creed or ritual. The different practitioners and leaders of cult centers hold to widely disparate and even conflicting beliefs. Many of those cult leaders are avid readers of all kinds of occult and esoteric literature. Not infrequently a cult leader will introduce into his local center a doctrine or a ritual taken out of a book on Yoga, Zen or Tantrism. Some members of the sect believe in reincarnation and the transmigration of souls while others do not. A good number of the faithful believe in the secrets of the great pyramid and the triangle of the Bermudas and not a few are flying saucer freaks (Pollak-Eltz 1977:247-258).

Because of its highly syncretistic nature the cult is in a constant process of evolution – absorbing new practices and new beliefs into its system as it comes into contact with new ideas,

philosophies and religious movements. Although its adherents like to stress its antiquity, the Cult of Maria Lionza is really a new cult that is in a constant state of renewal, readaptation and reformulation. Like the ancient Gnostic systems and the West African religions from which the cult has borrowed many elements, the sect tends not to exclude conflicting doctrines and practices but rather to modify them and to incorporate them into itself. Consequently, the cult has changed considerably from what it was only ten years ago. Undoubtedly one of the reasons why other new cults have found it difficult to find a foothold in Venezuela is that the Cult of Maria Lionza instead of competing with them – absorbs them.

Despite the variegated and even contradictory beliefs held by the followers of the cult, there are certain elements which are shared by almost all the devotees. As is the case in many West African religions (Eliade 1958: 46-50) and pre-Columbian South American religions (Krieger 1961: 231-258) the followers of the Maria Lionza Cult believe that the good Creator God (who is identified with God the Father of the Christian creed) is for all purposes a “Dios Otiusus” – that is a god who has withdrawn from earthly and human affairs and who has turned the governing of the world over to other lesser gods and spirits. According to the cult, the foremost of these spirits is Maria Lionza who is known to the faithful as the “Queen”, “the Mother” or the “Goddess”. Maria Lionza is believed to reign over various “courts” or pantheons of lesser spirits. Since it is impossible to speak directly to the Creator God or to establish contact with Him, the members of the cult seek the aid of Maria Lionza and the other spirits of her court, for these are the mediators between man and the supernatural.

It will be the thesis of this investigator that a careful analysis of the Cult of Maria Lionza will provide the student of Venezuelan society and especially the expatriate missionary with a unique window into the Venezuelan cultural experience, thus enabling the missionary to better understand Venezuela and its people and providing him with a valuable tool in the development of strategies for communicating the Gospel in the Venezuelan context. In order to facilitate this process, we will study the Cult of Maria Lionza in three parts: Myth, Ritual and Symbol. In each section, but especially in the last one, we will attempt to emphasize those elements in the cult which have a particular relevance for the trans-cultural communicator of the Gospel.

## **MARIA LIONZA, THE MYTH**

There is no agreement among historians, anthropologists and students of Venezuelan folklore as to how the Maria Lionza Cult began or who Maria Lionza originally was. According to one version there was once a rich avaricious Spanish woman who owned land around the mountains of Sorte some two hundred and fifty years ago. After her death, her spirit began appearing to people who visited the mountain – granting them such favors as prosperity, health, success in amorous adventures and protection from evil spirits. The name of this Spanish woman was supposed to have been Maria Alonza. With the passage of time this name was corrupted into Maria Lionza and thus the cult had its genesis (Pollak-Eltz 1973:11-25).

Garmendia claims to have found ancient documents in Yaracuy state that verify that a woman named Maria Alonza really did exist (Garmendia 1980:5-50) in the Colonial Period. She is supposed to have received a land grant from the Spanish governor which she worked with her servants and slaves. She is reported never to have married although she had any number of

lovers. She was also believed to dabble in the occult. A person with such a lifestyle was bound to have raised many eyebrows in the traditional Roman Catholic colonial society. Hence it was to be expected that she came to be regarded as an *anima* after her death.

In Venezuela *animas* are the spirits of dead people who appear to the living – granting them healing, prosperity and success in their amatory pursuits. Usually a shrine is built over the place where the *anima* is supposed to have appeared or where it is supposed to be buried. The shrine is always full of votive candles, prayer affixed to the walls and plaques and testimonials of those who have received assistance from the *anima*. There are many such *anima* shrines in Venezuela, one of the most famous being that of the *Anima* of Taguaripe near Santa Monica de Ipire in the state of Guárico. The *Anima* of Taguaripe is the spirit of a pious Christian woman named Francisca Duarte who died in childbirth on a lonely Venezuelan llano in the year 1902. Few truck drivers or bus drivers pass the shrine without stopping to place a lighted candle in the shrine. It is possible that the Cult of Maria Lionza developed around such an *anima* shrine. Should this be true it would be a case of a myth giving birth to a developing ritual (Castellon 1980:153-154).

Another version of the Maria Lionza myth is that of Beatriz Veir-Tané, the self-proclaimed high priestess of the Maria Lionza cult (her authority as a high priestess is recognized only by a small number of the faithful). Veir-Tané claims that Maria Lionza was not a Spanish woman at all but an Indian princess who was a priestess of her tribe. When Venezuelan was invaded by the Spanish conquistadores, she fled to the mountain of Sorte and from there called upon the Indians to rally together and defend their lands. The Indians, however, thought her to be a witch and burned her alive. After her death, she was given extraordinary powers by the Supreme Being and thus became goddess.

She was given authority over the flora and fauna of the mountain and is thus revered as the protectress of the wild animals and plants of the forest. She also became the champion of the Indians in their fight against the Spanish. Later she came to the aid of the Negro slaves in their struggle for emancipation. Maria Lionza, according to this version, is the helper of the oppressed and exploited classes of modern Venezuela, a sort of patron saint of the nation's poor. Interestingly enough, one notes that the majority of the cult leaders belong to the leftist political parties (Pollak-Eltz 1972:15-60).

Veir-Tané claims that after the death of Maria Lionza her spirit began to appear to the Indians who visited the mountain of Sorte. A good number of them reported the visions that they experienced to the Roman Catholic authorities. The Spanish friars, upon learning of these visions, told the Indians that the supernatural being that they had encountered was the Virgin Mary and not the spirit of an Indian princess. It was thus, according to Veir-Tané, that the cult of the Virgin of Coromoto was begun. The Virgin of Coromoto is the patron saint of Venezuela; her shrine is also located in the state of Yaracuy not too far away from the shrine of Maria Lionza. Most anthropologists and historians discount the version of Veir-Tané as being a product of romantic nationalism and not historical research. It is, for example, a known fact that priestesses did not exist among the pre-Columbian Venezuelan Indian tribes. The shaman and priests are invariably men. Even without a historical base this version of the Maria Lionza myth is

nevertheless important since it reveals the presence of a nativistic tendency among those who are drawn to it.

The leading authority on the Maria Lionza cult, the Austrian anthropologist Angelina Pollak-Eltz, postulates that the spirit that is today known as Maria Lionza was originally one of a great number of aquatic deities venerated by different Indian tribes in pre-Columbian Venezuela. These deities were believed to be the guardian spirits of the springs, streams and lagoons within the forest. According to the many Indian myths which are told about these feminine spirits - the water deities have sensual and libidinous nature. Such a water spirit can turn itself into a siren or Anaconda water snake and lure a man into the jungle in order to seduce him. Afterwards the man's spirit is bound to that of the water spirit.

After the Spanish conquest, the friars forbade the worship of these and other nature spirits. To avoid detection those who still venerated the old spirits celebrated their rites in caves, secluded areas in the jungle, mountaintops and riverbanks. Originally, Maria Lionza was only one of the spirits who venerated. As time went by the different cults associated with these nature spirits gradually coalesced around one central figure who became known as Maria Lionza. Somewhere in this evolution the cult made contact with folk Catholicism and Marian piety – and in the process Maria Lionza picked up the Marian name and many of the attributes of the Virgin. Such an evolution would account for the dual personality of the Maria Lionza who is venerated by the faithful today – for according to her followers the “Queen” is both saint and sensuous fertility goddess. On the one hand, many of the followers of the cult venerate the goddess as a helper, healer and friend of the poor and oppressed. During many of the rites Marian hymns are sung to the “Queen”. On the other hand, the “Great Mother” is also venerated as a promiscuous fertility symbol whose help is sought in augmenting sexual potency, making love potions, producing or preventing childbirth and in giving success to both men and women in their amorous adventures. It therefore comes as no great surprise to discover that a good many priestesses and mediums in the cult are or have been prostitutes (Pollak-Eltz 1972:10-72). Garmendia reports finding contraceptives among the other things offered to Maria Lionza upon the altars on the mountain of Sorte.

One can see here how Maria Lionza reflects the opposition between the two-contrasting conception of woman which are particularly evident in macho societies – i.e. woman as a symbol of chastity, holiness, purity, passivity, and over-idealized mother (the Virgin Mary) and the polar opposite – woman as the symbol of sexuality, eroticism, carnality, prostitution (Astarte, Venus) and aggression (Kali). Some investigators feel that by identifying with Maria Lionza many Venezuelan women have been able to break out of the passive martyr role in which traditional Roman Catholic piety has imprisoned them. They are thus enabled to accept themselves, their sexuality and their aggressive instincts without betraying their religious sensibilities (Solar 1976:18).

After the discovery of petroleum in Venezuela, there began an unending migration of rural folk into the oil camps and the urban centers of the republic. This migration helped to bring indigenous religious elements from the rural areas into contact with Afro-American beliefs and practices in the urban areas. During the Colonial period the Roman Catholic religious authorities,

in an effort to stimulate the veneration of the saints between the slave and free Negro population in the urban areas, established a number of fraternities or religious brotherhood, each dedicated to a different saint. Since these “cofradías” or fraternities were organized according to the tribal origin of their members, they served to preserve many West African traditions and religious beliefs. These beliefs were in turn assimilated to the veneration of the Roman Catholic saints. In many instances West African deities continued to be worshipped under the name and disguise of the Roman Catholic saint with whom they were identified. In time the name of the Yoruba or Achanti deity was forgotten, but his attributes, his emblems, his ritual color and the taboos relating to his veneration became affixed to that of the saint. Many Venezuelan superstitions and folk beliefs are of West African origin. Many of these beliefs and practices have subsequently entered into the cult of Maria Lionza (Pollak-Eltz 1977:241-246). Thus the roots of the Maria Lionza cult branch out in many directions.

Perhaps it will never be convincingly established which if any of the versions of the Maria Lionza myth is historically more accurate. However, as Levi Strauss has repeatedly stressed, each version of a particular myth is important in its own right because of what it tells us about those who hold to each version and about the tensions that exist in the society in which the myth lives.

### **MARIA LIONZA, THE RITUAL**

Upon establishing itself in the urban centers of the nation in the 1920's and the 1930's, the cult of Maria Lionza came into contact with the spiritist followers of Alan Kardec and Joaquín Trincado. This brought another stream of esoteric beliefs into the syncretistic system that is today the cult of Maria Lionza. It is not surprising that spiritists should be attracted to the cult since the most distinctive element in the cult is spirit possession by a medium that takes place during a self-induced trance. During the trance the spirit of Maria Lionza or one of the members of her court (pantheon) enters into the medium in the presence of the assembled believers – making supernatural powers available to the faithful.

The local meetings in the Maria Lionza cult centers are conducted by cult leaders (usually males) called “bancos”. These meetings are held in homes, caves or in secluded areas in the forest. A cult center near my home meets in the back room of a “perfumeria”. Perfumerias are stores, which sell not only perfume and beauty products but also incense, votive candles, esoteric literature; herbs love potions and many of the “home remedies” used by practitioners of the cult. Perfumerias are perfect fronts for the cult and they can provide a nice income for the cult leaders.

The banco usually begins the meeting with a number of Roman Catholic hymns and prayers in which the Virgin or some special saint is invoked. The banco then makes the sign of the Cross with a lighted cigar. After this everyone present lights a candle while the banco purifies the faithful by burning incense, sprinkling them with water and by blowing cigar smoke over them. The use of tobacco smoke in purification rites is a common practice among the shaman of many South American Indian tribes. By noting how fast and on which side the cigar burns most rapidly the banco determines if the séance will be successful or not. If no obstacles are present and the signs indicate a successful séance, the banco will open a bottle of rum or cane whiskey, pouring some on the altar, some over the heads of the faithful and some on the ground. As in West Africa

and in Ancient Greece and elsewhere, most Venezuelans (even those not involved in cult activities) will pour a mouthful of beer or rum upon the ground before drinking anything themselves. This, they say, is for the dead (Pollak-Eltz 1977: 247-258; Browne 1981: 24).

After these introductory rites, the medium will come forward. After the medium is purified with cigar smoke and anointed with rum, the *banco* will put his hand on the medium's head. The medium will then fall to the ground and to into a trance. Sometimes this happens with a minimum of commotion, but at other times the body of the medium will move with violent jerks and convulsions as the spirits descend and enter into the medium. The medium can be possessed by only one spirit at a time; however, many different spirits may enter into the medium, one after another in rapid succession, during the same *séance*. Each medium has his or her own familiar or tutelary spirit which manifests itself in almost every *séance* and to which the medium is especially dedicated. Perhaps one might mention in passing that the spasmodic movements exhibited by the cult mediums as the spirit enters into them bear a striking resemblance to the movements made by many members of Venezuelan Pentecostal groups as they receive the "Spirit".

The spirits which possess the mediums and speak through them during the *séance* are ranked in various pantheons or courts. Some are more powerful and influential than others, and each spirit manifests its own personality while present in the body of the medium. The three most powerful spirits are those of Maria Lionza, el Indio Guaicaipuro and el Negro Felipe. They are known as "Las Tres Potencias" (trans. = the Three Principalities or the Three Powers). El Indio Guaicaipuro is the most important and powerful spirit in the Court of the Indians and the next most important spirit after Maria Lionza herself. Guicaipuro was an Indian chief who was killed while fighting against the Spanish conquistadores. In a cave, near the provincial capital of Los Teques, there is a special shrine where the spirit of the Indian Guaicaipuro is venerated. Guaicaipuro is considered a very violent spirit. At times the *banco* and his helpers must restrain the medium from doing physical harm to others while possessed by the spirit of the great chief. Some mediums put on Indian headdress and dance around the room while under the control of Guaicaipuro. The Indian Guaicaipuro is also very vulgar and coarse in his language and behavior. He entertains the faithful during the *séance* by telling crude jokes and by making obscene gestures. He delights in obscenely fondling the women who are present during the *séance* and he is constantly demanding rum and cigars. He downs one shot of rum after another and furiously puffs away at the big cigars which he chain smokes with abandon.

The faithful believe that it is not the medium at all who is acting in this way – rather the spirit who possesses the medium. At no time is the medium held responsible in any way for what he or she does while in a trace.

The other members of the Court of the Indians (Yoraqui, Mara, Sococaima, Tamanaco, Yaguari, etc.) are the spirits of other chiefs who were prominent in the history of Venezuela – especially in the struggle against the Spanish. They, like Guaicaipuro, manifest themselves as spirits who are very macho, violent and vulgar. This is in sharp contrast to the spirit of Maria Lionza who speaks in a soft voice and who never drinks and smokes.

The third member of the cult's "Holy Trinity" is "El Negro Felipe". He is the most important figure in the Pantheon of the Negros which is made up of the spirits of negros who were prominent in the history of Venezuela. El Negro Felipe was a heroic figure in the Cuban struggle for independence from Spain. It is not known how or when the cult of the Negro Felipe was transported from Cuba to Venezuela. El Negro Felipe is a happy-go-lucky mischievous spirit who is also given to vulgar jokes and gestures. His picture or his image is never lacking upon the altars of the cult. Another prominent member of the Court of the Negros is "El Negro Miguel" who was the leader of a slave uprising in Venezuela in 1552-1553. Miguel founded a small settlement of runaway slaves in the mountains of San Pedro in central Venezuela over which he ruled with his beautiful and benevolent wife, Guimar, who some devotees identify with Maria Lionza.

There are many other courts or pantheons of spirits which play a part in the Cult of Maria Lionza. There is a Patriotic Courts made up of the spirits of national heroes and independence fighters. The spirit of Simon Bolivar is the supreme figure in this court. One, however, is surprised to find the spirits of many non-Venezuelan personalities ranked among the members of this pantheon. They also manifest themselves during the séances. Among their number one finds the spirits of such well known figures as Jack Kennedy, Stalin, Hitler, John XXIII and others.

There is a Pantheon of Doctors headed up by the spirit of José Gregorio Hernandez, a famous Venezuelan physician, surgeon and humanitarian who was killed in a freak traffic accident in 1918. In Venezuela there exists a cult of José Gregorio Hernandez which is independent of the cult of Maria Lionza. Pilgrimages are made to the tomb of the good doctor in the old cemetery of Caracas where flowers are offered up and candles burned by people who wish to petition Dr. Hernandez to heal them of their ailments. Many miraculous healing have been attributed to the spirit of the "Doctor of the Poor" and there is a strong movement afoot which is seeking the Vatican's canonization of José Gregorio Hernandez.

Images, statues and medals of the good doctor are to be found in many Venezuelan homes (perhaps even in the majority of them) and upon the dashboards of innumerable cars, buses and taxicabs. The influence of José Gregorio Hernandez has spread beyond the borders of his homeland. A few years ago I saw the statues of the uncannonized saint on sale in downtown Bogotá.

In different cult centers the spirits of many other pantheons are also invoked, among them: the Persian Court, the Greek Court, the Celestial Court (which includes Maria Lionza and the Roman Catholic saints), the Hindu Court, the African Court and the Court of the Encantados (nature spirits).

After a spirit takes possession of a medium and identifies itself to those present in the séance, the banco calls the faithful to come forward one by one for his or her consultation with the spirit. Each person is purified with tobacco smoke, holy water and an anointing of rum before speaking to the medium. Then each person verbalizes his or her problem to the medium. Some come for physical healing; others want protection from evil spirits, witchcraft, accidents, illness or the evil eye. Many are looking for employment, a spouse or a winning number in the state lottery. Distraught wives request supernatural help in keeping their husbands from running off with

another woman. Star struck students ask for a love potion which will bind the girl of their desires to them. Sterile women want help in conceiving a child and all sorts of people want advice on how to solve personal problems. While the banco takes notes and writes out a prescription for each consultation the medium tells each person what to do. Of course, the faithful believe that it is not the medium but the spirit which is diagnosing the prescribing treatment for each and every problem. One should take note here of the need for Christian churches to provide counseling services that take seriously all of the above felt needs of the Venezuelan masses.

The prescription given during the séance will vary greatly in accordance with each person's problem. The sick are often told to go to a pharmacy and buy a certain patent medicine or to take a special folk remedy. In other instances the patient is ordered to a Roman Catholic Church in order to make confession and to commune. Sometimes the prescription will include the making and wearing of an amulet or charm or undergoing a rite of purification. Sometimes a patient will be asked to offer up a sacrifice to a certain spirit. The sacrifice usually consists of flowers, cigars, rum and food. A person with an evil spirit will be put in the center of a circle formed by candles and gunpowder. However the circle is not completely closed; a small opening is left on one side. The candles and the gunpowder are lit and the evil spirit is believed to leave through the opening in the circle. Some mediums will cut their own wrists and asks the patient to suck the medium's blood. One anthropologist reports visiting a séance where the medium put her mouth over the festering sores of a patient so as to suck the sickness out. (Pollak-Eltz 1972: 10-72)

One of the most popular rites is called velación. This consists of putting the patient in a tomb-shaped hole in the ground and covering him up with a sheet. Candles are placed all around the patient and lit; the banco then anoints the patient with seven different liquors: aguardiente, cocuy, anís, whiskey, champagne, wine and rum. Flowers and cologne are sprinkled over the patient and prayers are chanted. After this cigar smoke is blown over the patient. Upon arising from the ground the patient is washed from head to toe with a mixture of tobacco and soap. He then takes off his old clothes and puts on new, leaving the old clothes discarded upon a river bank. This rite is used not only for the sick and the demon possessed but also to "destapar" (unclog) a medium who for some reason or other is no longer able to go into a trance or to receive a spirit.

During some séances the medium in the manner of a South American Indian shaman will go through the motions of operating upon a sick person, removing from his body a cancer, an evil spirit or some other malady. Some mediums specialize in the preparation of magical packets prepared out of bits of iron, dust from a cemetery, a caiman's tooth, human blood and other elements. These packets are then placed within the house of an enemy or rival in order to bring sickness, death or misfortune upon him. The spirits are believed to be morally ambivalent, neither wholly good nor wholly bad. This, in effect, means that they can be manipulated to do either good or evil as the case may be. Should evil be done, the blame is believed to rest entirely on the person who solicits the help of the spirits. In no case is blame to be cast upon the medium, the banco or the spirit. This moral ambivalence of the spirits is most decidedly one of the West African elements that have worked their way into the cult (Pollak-Eltz 1972:21-45).

In most of the cult centers there are no charges for consultations; the faithful do however, give freewill offerings to the banco and the mediums. These are usually substantial enough to

support the cult leaders. There are cases of swindlers having infiltrated the cult and setting up centers in which exorbitant fees are charged for consultations, cancer cures and other get rich quick schemes.

At one time the proportion of confidence men that had wormed their way into the cult was so great that the government ordered a crackdown on the sect. Thus it was that in 1966 many of the cult centers were briefly closed, some shrines destroyed and a good number of cult leaders imprisoned. This brief persecution, rather than retard the growth of the cult, actually helped it – by purifying it of criminal elements.

For the most part, the majority of the cult leaders sincerely believe themselves to be servants of God and benefactors of humanity. Most consider themselves to be good Catholics and not a few attend mass every Sunday. These bancos and mediums hold themselves to be persons called and spiritually endowed by God to carry on their work; since it is God himself who has ordained that human affairs be governed not by the Deity himself but through Maria Lionza and her courts of spirits to whom power and authority have been given.

Garmendia holds to a more negative assessment of cult activity than most other investigators (1980:60-81). He reports on cult ceremonies in which mothers offer their virgin daughters (13-15 years old) to the bancos who deflower them at the climax of nocturnal rites and dances which are celebrated by torchlight and the beat of drums. Many cult leaders have denied the accuracy of Garmendia's charges and have gone so far as to invite the press to ceremonies in which Garmendia's book is publicly burned (Gonzales 1980:16).

While the bancos or cult leaders are more often men, there are more women among the mediums. The bancos are older – generally in their thirties, forties or fifties while the medium is younger – not infrequently a girl in her teens. Each cult center has a number of mediums under the direction of the banco. Most mediums enter into their role after an intense emotional experience or after a vision or a dream which they interpret as a calling. In some instances the mediumistic calling is hereditary. The mediums are generally persons from the lower classes, susceptible to psychic experiences, hypnotism and domination by others. They are persons not unlike that girl with the spirit of divination of whom we read in Acts 16:16-18.

Most mediums are introduced into their office after a brief initiatory period under the direction of the banco although there are at least two schools in Caracas which specialize in the preparation of mediums. During the training period various techniques are used to help them medium go into trace, these include: fasting, smoking cigars in rapid succession, the taking of seven glasses of warm water in order to produce nausea and vomiting, being cooped up in an airless, incense and smoke filled room and even the use of alcohol and drugs. Women mediums will generally receive female spirits while in trace and male mediums, male spirits – although there are exceptions. It has been noted that not infrequently female spirits have been received by male mediums who are either homosexuals or transvestites.

During the cult meetings the mediums will remain in trance and continue receiving spirits until all the people present their problems to the spirits. The meetings often last all night long. When it is time to end the meeting those present will cross their legs and their arms and the

spirits will depart. The banco then brings the medium out of trance by pouring rum and whiskey over the medium's head and then rubbing his or her body with it. The trances have been interpreted by various authorities as conditioned reflexes produced by auto-hypnosis, the use of drugs and an excess of nervous tension (Pollak-Eltz 1981: 74). Eliade regards any use of narcotics or alcohol in order to produce a shamanistic trance as a decadence in fault of true ecstatic methods (1964: 419).

We have already mentioned that there is no one cult leader who is recognized to have authority over the movement. Certain individuals have tried to codify the beliefs and practices of the cult and to set up a national organization of centers and cult leaders as has happened among the practitioners of Umbanda in Brazil. Several nationwide conferences of leaders have been held to try to standardize the rites celebrated in the different centers and to denounce as charlatans and frauds those who have set up centers without having first been initiated by a recognized banco or medium. To date such attempts at standardization have proved unsuccessful.

The different members of the cult are, however, agreed upon the need of maintaining a good public image. The public burning of Garmendia's book is a case in point. In order to defend the faith, certain pseudo-intellectuals within the movement have penned books and tracts justifying the cult as a legitimate expression of man's religiosity which encompasses not only those elements of spiritual experience which have been legitimized by the great religions but also those elements which have unjustly been relegated by Christianity to the realm of superstition and the occult. These apologies have much in common with similar works produced by Rosicrucians and Umbandistas.

Despite the differences between the various exponents of the cult, there still exists a body of commonly held doctrines and practices. What seems to hold the variegated expressions of the cult of Maria Lionza together are the pilgrimages which the faithful undertake to the Mount of Sorte in order to visit the central shrine of the sect. The mountain with its cover of dense lush tropical vegetation is located near the town of Chivacoa. To this site the pilgrims flock throughout the year but especially during Holy Week and the Day of Saint John the Baptist. Pilgrims traveling in groups leave their cars and buses at the foot of the holy hill and proceed upward on foot – loaded down with offerings for the spirits. In order to ascend the sacred mountain the faithful must ford the shallow waters of the Yaracuy River. This mineral laden stream is believed to have curative powers and the pilgrims invariably bathe themselves in its fast-flowing waters as if it were a Venezuelan Ganges.

Many visitors to Sorte have claimed to have been cured of paralysis, cancer and other illnesses after taking their lustrations in the river. As the pilgrim ascends the mountain he encounters dozens of shrines and altars that have been erected for the veneration of the many spirits in the pantheon of Maria Lionza. Each altar is covered with offerings which the devotees have left for their favorite spirits. Many altars are surrounded by a group of believers conducting a service or performing a rite of purification. The silence of the mountain is interrupted every now and then by minor explosions – caused by gunpowder being tossed into a fire to signal that a rite has been concluded. (Browne 1981:25)

It is believed that high up in the tall moss covered trees which cover the sacred mountain dwell the nature spirits, that is, the spirits of the streams, ponds, flowers and the wild animals of the forest. Offerings are often left out under the trees for these nature spirits since there are no altars dedicated to them. The offerings for these nature spirits are survivals of native Indian religious practices which existed before the coming of Europeans to the Americas. These nature spirits do not figure into the courts and pantheons over which Maria Lionza presides as queen. This is an indication that the origin of these spirits is different from that of the other spirits which are venerated in the cult. These indigenous Amerindian spirits are commonly called the “Don Juanes” or “San Juanes”. There is Don Juan del Viento (wind), Don Juan of the Forest, Don Juan del Rio, Don Juan de la Suerte (good luck), etc. These Don Juan spirits are however rapidly losing popularity and are being replaced by more aggressive spirits from elsewhere (Pollak-Eltz 1981:72-76). The ranking of spirits into courts or pantheons appears to be a West African adaptation of recent vintage. There is no record of spirits being organized into the courts in the Maria Lionza cult prior to the 1960’s.

Further up the mountain of Sorte the pilgrims will encounter altars or portals dedicated to the Seven African Powers where bloody sacrifices of chickens and goats have been offered to the Yoruba deities which have come into the Cult of Maria Lionza via the immigration of Cuban cult leaders of the “Santeria cult” following the establishment of Fidel Castro’s Marxist state in their homeland. Before Castro’s revolution the Santeria Cult was confined mainly to the lower-class blacks on the Isle of Cuba, but since then it has spread to Puerto Rico, Venezuela, the United States and the Dominican Republic.

The real base of operations of the Santeria Cult today is Miami where the cult has become a vivid expression of Cuban nationalism among the Cuban refugees in the USA. In all of these countries in the Caribbean Basin Santeria is growing rapidly – not only among Cuban refugees but also among Anglo-Saxons and Afro-Americans. In the United States many people in show business and the media have been drawn into the Santeria Cult. In Venezuela the spirits venerated in the Santeria Cult have been integrated into the Cult of Maria Lionza. The influence of Santeria upon the Cult of Maria Lionza is increasing year by year. Before the 1960’s, there is no record of bloody sacrifices being carried out in the Cult of Maria Lionza. The only sacrifices mentioned in the older investigations are those of candles, flowers, fruit, tobacco and rum (Pollak-Eltz 1981:72-76).

Near the top of the Mount of Sorte the pilgrim comes upon the temples of the “Tres Potencias” – the white woman, Maria Lionza – the red Indian, Guaicaipuro – and the black slave leader, El Negro Felipe. These three major deities are representatives of the three races that have blended racially and culturally to form the Venezuelan people. It is without a doubt that one of the elements that make the cult of Maria Lionza so popular is its total absence of racial and social prejudice and its acceptance of Spanish, Negro, and Amerindian cultural and religious elements into its body of beliefs and practices.

Highest up upon the Holy Mountain the pilgrim will find the Coronation Palace which is a grotto sacred to Maria Lionza herself. It is believed that beneath the early palace of the Queen – deep down in the earth lays the subterranean palace of the great queen. Here she rules served by the spirits of those who during their lifetime made a pact with Maria Lionza and as a result

received wealth, good fortune and success in love. Now they must repay their debt to the Queen by serving forever as her retainers.

The grotto itself is impressive. Its interior is illuminated by hundreds of flickering candles and its dark recesses perfumed by braziers full of burning incense. All around one sees the offerings that the faithful have brought from afar – fruit, tobacco, jars filled with brightly hued powders and great quantities of flowers, both natural and artificial. On one of the altars there is even a pair of bright red panties. By the light of the myriad candles the pilgrim can read the many commemorative plaques, secreted by grateful worshippers – thanking the goddess for a favor gained, a problem solved, a sickness healed.

Most of the pilgrims that come to the Mount of Sorte spend from two to seven days – venerating the spirits, buying food in kiosks that have sprung up at the foot of the mountain and sleeping in hammocks slung under the great trees whose roots are supposed to penetrate to the underground recesses of the Queen’s hidden residence. Some pilgrims, however, stay for several months in repayment of a vow made to one of the spirits.

After paying his respects to the queen and seeking her good will, the pilgrim, barefoot and singing the hymns of the cult, will descend the sacred mount and make his way back to the teeming barrios of Caracas, Valencia and Maracay to face the struggles and tensions of a nation that is striving to reconcile its rural-agricultural past with its urban petroleum oriented present while looking apprehensively into an uncertain and threatening future. Without a doubt the Cult of Maria Lionza is helping the inhabitants of this land to feel more secure amid the conflicting currents of modern Venezuelan society – no matter how fleeting or false that security may be. In some way this strange and contradictory cult has struck a responsive chord in the psyche of the masses and for this reason it merits our study and analysis. To that analysis we will turn in the last section of this investigation.

## **MARIA LIONZA, THE SYMBOL**

Sixty years ago Venezuela was an underdeveloped agricultural society with over 80% of its population living in rural areas and maintaining a great wealth of preindustrial folkways and traditions. The rapid development of the petroleum industry in the twenties and thirties and of the steel industry after 1960 has brought to this traditional society rapid social change on a scale unequaled in Spanish speaking Latin America. In the fifty-year period, 1934-1984, the city of Caracas has grown 26 times over (Uslar Pietri 1983:5-19) and Ciudad Guayana has grown from a malaria infested fishing village of one thousand inhabitants to a pulsating planned industrial center of close to half a million. Today with over 80% of its inhabitants living in cities, Venezuela is one of the most urbanized nations in its hemisphere. The uprooting of millions of rural people into Venezuela’s urban areas has radically transformed the values and life style of the nation.

Many observers feel that the easy riches of a petroleum economy have brought Venezuela industrialization, modern cities, a sizable middle class, a preference for imported luxuries and the highest standard of living in South America – but in the process the nation has

been estranged from the traditions and values of its rural past. Back in the 1960's Ari Kiev researched the psychological disorders of Mexican-Americans living in San Antonio Texas and came to the conclusion that many of the disorders (both major and minor) arose out of the trauma produced by the attempt to affect a cultural transfer from traditional Mexican community orientated folk culture to the individualistic competitive Anglo culture of the U.S. (1969:18)

Many case studies were presented to show how guilt was produced by the feeling that the anglicized Mexican had betrayed his past, his family and his people by adapting a "gringo" life style. By undergoing treatment at the hands of the curandero and his traditional cures the afflicted individual was helped to reintegrate himself into his ancestral culture. The anxieties and psychological conflicts catalogued by Kiev bear a striking resemblance to those suffered by those seeking physical and spiritual healing within the cult of Maria Lionza. These and other correspondences would lead us to suspect that some of the same dynamic is at work both in Mexican-American curanderismo and in the curanderismo in the Maria Lionza cult. Pollak-Eltz, in one of her more recent investigations of Venezuelan curanderismo, would also bear this out. (1981:54-78)

Thus on one level the Cult of Maria Lionza functions to help the individual bridge the contradiction between his modern, competitive, dehumanized urban existence and his traditional, communal, agrarian roots. As in different manifestations of folk psychiatry around the world the banco and the medium help the alienated urban Venezuelan to make contact with his past and to experience a kind of reintegration with the land, the forest and the world of animals and spirits.

Anthropologists and other social scientists who have investigated the cult are at a loss to explain the healings that they themselves have witnessed in the cult ceremonies. They point out that in Venezuela modern medicine has been accepted for many sicknesses since these are thought to be caused by microbes, viruses and intestinal parasites. However, other illnesses are thought to be produced by evil spirits and black magic. The illnesses so produced are those which cannot easily be classified as clearly being one thing or another. Mary Douglas (1966:94-113) has stressed that it is just such in-between areas which the human mind cannot catalogue that are considered to be impure and in the realm of evil spirits and magic. This would in part explain the need for the many elaborate rites of purification which we have found in the Maria Lionza Cult. Such magical practices are frequent in societies in cultural transition where they function as defense mechanisms that help the masses transfer their frustration at not being able to reach their goals to someone or something that wishes them ill. (Pollak-Eltz 1981:62)

The curanderismo in the Maria Lionza cult is effective for several important reasons that should be noted by the communicator of the Christian Gospel. Among the most noteworthy are the following:

- a. Many have been cured or have claimed healing.
- b. Culture conflicts are externalized as illnesses.
- c. The banco or the medium fulfills a role that is expected of him.
- d. The banco or medium seeks to reintegrate the person into the group.
- e. Magic and religion form a whole. Physical and spiritual illnesses are not compartmentalized.

- f. Traditional M.D.s have lost the confidence of many of their patients because they treat only the illness without taking into consideration the patient as a person and without considering his social environment (Pollak-Eltz 1981:77)

On another level Maria Lionza is a symbol for good fortune or good luck. Not only does Maria Lionza symbolize luck, not only does she bring good fortune, she is a personification of luck; she is Lady Luck in person. In order to appreciate this identification one has to examine the role of luck and games of chance in Venezuelan society. Since colonial times Venezuela has been a country characterized by economic dependence. The campesino living in his rural setting with hardly any material goods of his own was completely dependent upon the largesse of his landlord or patrón. In this kind of a setting he soon learned that getting ahead in the world was not a matter of hard work or practicing the so called “protestant work ethic”; it was rather a matter of knowing the right people, making the right connections, having influence with those whose who had influence and having a powerful godfather to intercede for one. To be a success one had to be an opportunist who knew how to take advantage of the opportunities. The winner had to gamble on choosing and backing the right godfather; he had to play his cards right in order to ingratiate himself with those in power.

For many, Venezuelan life is a gamble and the man who wants to get ahead is the man who bets on a winner. This is still true today. There is no civil service to speak of in modern Venezuela; the spoils system and the patronage system still operate in full force. In order to make oneself eligible for patronage one must take a gamble and pick the man who is most liable to win the election; then back him and ingratiate oneself with him in order to reap the benefits afterwards.

After the decline of Venezuela’s feudal agricultural economy, mining and petroleum exploration became the name of the game. Venezuela is rich in gold, diamonds, precious stones, bauxite, iron, dolomite, kaolin and above all petroleum – thus Venezuela is also a country of prospectors where getting ahead depends not so much on hard work as on striking it rich. Modern Venezuela is full of people who were once nobodies but who were lucky and have struck it rich; they took a chance and invested in the right enterprise – they backed the man who came out on top. Life is a gamble and what is needed to succeed is being lucky and being willing to gamble. Of course, there are losers; but that is part of the game. But life itself is viewed as opportunistic, for life is a gamble. Venezuela itself was one of the poorest, most underdeveloped, yellow fever infested nations in the Western Hemisphere. But Venezuela was lucky; the easy riches of a petroleum economy have helped her strike it rich (Carías 1982:125-154)

Thus opportunism and the attitude that life is a gamble are characteristics that are firmly embedded in the Venezuelan national character. With this kind of a background one can understand the great emphasis on good luck and bad luck which abounds in the society as a whole. One of the most forlorn characters in popular Venezuelan culture is the person considered to be “pavoso” (jinxed – the bringer of bad luck). He is the butt of innumerable jokes and comedy situations. One of the cures most sought in the séances of the Maria Lionza cult is that of “quitándose la pava” – getting rid of the jinx. It should be noted that the jinxed person is a polluting person (Douglas 1966:109-112).

It is not surprising therefore that modern Venezuela is saturated with all kinds of number lotteries, animal lotteries, cockfights, shell games, card games, raffles, bingo, horse races and betting on such sports as prize fighting, baseball and soccer. The very vocabulary of Venezuela is riddled with phrases, exclamations and neologisms that have originated in games of chance – especially the races.

According to Mary Douglas that preoccupation with luck and gambling is characteristic of the highly individualistic social structures that she has classified as ego-focused big man societies. That is societies that manifest strong grid and a strong ego. In describing this kind of a social structure Douglas quotes a passage from Grönbech's account of the "Culture of the Teutons". That quote bears repetition here: "Whichever way we turn we find the power of luck. It determines all progress. Where it fails life sickens. It seems to be the strongest power, the vital principle indeed of the world". With slight modification the Teutonic concept of luck described in Grönbech would equally describe a good part of Venezuelan society (Douglas 1970:158).

The Venezuelan cultural anthropologist, Rafael Carías, (1982:125-154) claims that there is no such a thing in Venezuela as a bettor who rationally and unemotional places a "colt bet". The bettor does not seek to bring luck to his side; rather he must make himself acceptable to luck. He must enter into the spirit of chance and make himself attractive to luck. He must recognize the power of luck. Luck is personified and the relationship between luck and the gambler is referred to as one of deep friendship (even love). The bettor exclaims "Luck, I am with you for you and we understand one another."

Carías has devoted an entire section of his book on the Venezuelan national character to the theme "La Cultura de Juego". The word "juego" here is to be interpreted not only as game or gambling as its dictionary definition would lead us to believe but as a mindset that sees all of life as a game to be played – for by playing life as a game the Venezuelan attempts to mitigate the blows of destiny and to confront reality. After all, it is all in the game. (1982:125-154)

Many books and essays have been written on the Latin American character that use the bullfight as a symbol of understanding the Latin's view of life. As apt as this bullfight symbolism might be for Spain or Mexico, the bullfight analogy does not seem to apply that well to Venezuela. This investigator would like suggest that a more fitting paradigm would be that of the horserace. He would further suggest that to the extent that there is a "Cultura de Juego" in Venezuela – Maria Lionza is the unofficial Patron Saint of the Game Culture.

In the proceeding discussion we have use the symbol of Maria Lionza to help in identifying Venezuelan society as an ego-focused Big Man society according to the categories popularized by Mary Douglas. When we read Douglas' description of ego-focused Big Man societies we find a list of characteristics compiled on the basis of research done in New Guinea and in Teutonic societies. It is striking to note how well many of these characteristics fit as a description of modern Venezuela. In particular one should note the following points:

- a. The world is seen as a morally neutral technical system that is lying there for the opportunist (big men) to exploit. The universe can be manipulated.
- b. There is no disapproval of men who use magic to further their own cause.
- c. Ambition, cunning and strength are admired virtues.

- d. Religion is viewed as a technology for overcoming risk.
- e. There is an obsession with making money and gaining power, peerage and prestige.
- f. The power of luck is given great importance. (1970:173-188)

The points noted above help to explain the popularity of the Maria Lionza cult when we compare them with some of the key elements in the Cult of Maria Lionza and other similar cults such as Santeria, Candomblé, Umbanda and Macumba. Among these elements, we would underline the following:

- a. The idea that the Supreme Being is far removed from human affairs and that it is difficult or impossible to establish contact with him.
- b. The belief that supernatural powers are directly mediated to men through secondary deities or spirits.
- c. The belief that these spirits are morally ambivalent and can be manipulated.
- d. The cult is this-worldly in orientation. The faithful are primarily concerned about obtaining prosperity, physical healing, success in amatory adventures, vengeance and protection.

The Christian communicator should at the same time note the social, anthropological and theological reasons that are used to explain the appeal of the Maria Lionza cult. They are at the same time an explanation as to why some Christian communities in Latin America are growing and why others are stagnant. To wit, the reasons for the rapid growth and popularity of the Maria Lionza cult are the following;

- a. Widespread ignorance of orthodox Christian teaching.
- b. The offer of physical healing in a society where quality medical care is not an option for the masses.
- c. Active participation of all the believers in the rites of the cult.
- d. The possibility that even uneducated people from the lowest rungs of society can become cult leaders and thereby achieve a status that is denied them in the Roman Catholic church and other traditional institutions.
- e. The lack of racial prejudice.
- f. Participation in the activities of the cult center give a sense of belonging and identity to the uprooted rural masses who find themselves lost, friendless and dehumanized upon moving to the metropolis.
- g. The opportunity to achieve vengeance via sorcery as a way of protecting oneself in a society where police protection and legal redress are largely unavailable to the poor.
- h. Rites that incorporate traditional music, dance, myths and other cultural elements which have been prohibited, suppressed or ignored by the traditional churches in favor of cultural expressions that are foreign to the masses.
- i. The lack of a national cult organization and resulting independence of local cult centers and cult personnel. Among the poor – complex organizational structure with their involved lines of authority are often threatening. For many Latin Americans, even denominations that come out of a congregational rather than an Episcopal heritage are considered to be very complicated churches in the sense of being highly bureaucratized institutions. “Mejor la cabeza de ratón que rabo de león” – it is better to be the head of a mouse than the tail of a lion – goes the popular proverb.
- j. The lure of the occult.

- k. The possibility of communication directly with supernatural forces and receiving supernatural help for them.

The cult of Maria Lionza is a movement which is expanding and growing in popularity despite the fact that it has no formal organization, no central authority, no authoritative scripture, no formal creed, no foreign subsidy, no mass medium programs and no paid missionaries. Finally, a study of the cult of Maria Lionza would suggest that Christian communicators in Venezuela need to give a special emphasis and creative interpretation to certain central affirmations of the Christian Gospel. Among these we note the following:

- a. The Incarnation which affirms that the good Creator God is not a “Deus Otiosus” who is unreachable. He is Emmanuel who has drawn near and revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ.
- b. The holiness, morality and goodness of a God who cannot be bought off or manipulated by man no matter what techniques he employs.
- c. The Ascension of Jesus Christ who is now enthroned above every principality and power and to whom all authority has been given, an authority which is shared not with spirits but with all who believe in Him – each one with his own spiritual gifts, Ephesians 4.
- d. The Church as a Community of God’s People rather than an impenetrable bureaucracy, a Church in which mutual aid and counsel are offered to all – a Church without prejudice – a Church where each Christian is encouraged to exercise his or her spiritual gifts – a church where lay ministries are encouraged – a Church not dominated by a clerical elite – a church which does not suppress indigenous cultural forms or neutralize them by foreign impositions.
- e. The Eucharist as the true participation in the powers above.
- f. The Cross which calls men not to avoid commitment and suffering by means of magical rites but to follow Him who bore our cross and redeemed us from the powers of darkness.
- g. Baptism as a call to daily repentance and daily rising up to new life.
- h. The coming of God’s Kingdom in its fullness and the restoration of the last paradise, the memory of which still haunts the subconscious longings of the cultist. For if we look closely behind all the esoteric rites and strange rituals of the cult followers we will be able to see that what the cultist seeks in his trances and ecstasies is the vision of Paradise Lost. However weird, unbiblical and even satanic the cults may be – they are in the last analysis products of man’s nostalgia for paradise. (Eliade 1964:508-511)

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**Note:** In 1984, I wrote the following paper on the Cult of María Lionza in Venezuela. Although the paper needs updating, the data it contains can still help visitors and volunteers to better understand Venezuelan culture and religion. In making this study available I want to thank Clint Souigny for scanning this material and making it available in digital format.