

# Politics and the cult of the dead in Venezuela

**Luis Alonso Hernández**

**Journalist. PhD in Social Anthropology.**

**Southern Anthropologies Network.**

“On the mountain of Sorte por Yacuy, in Venezuela, lives a Goddess...a noble queen of great beauty and great goodness, loved by nature, illuminated by charity.” This excerpt is from the song "María Lionza ," written and performed by Rubén Blades, a Panamanian composer, singer, and activist well known in Central America, the Caribbean, and the Spanish-speaking world in the United States. The success of the song "María Lionza," popularized in 1978, made this entity known outside Venezuelan borders. Blades wanted to express his devotion to the Queen of Sorte after a visit to the mountain. The visibility of María Lionza in mass culture somehow expresses the relevance of the queen and her mediums in Venezuelan everyday life, where the presence of the dead and other superhuman beings penetrate the relationships sustained in political spheres.

Within this context, Venezuela is a country where connections with the dead are routinely established. In rural and urban areas, people customarily leave glasses of water or coffee for deceased relatives; place a photograph on home altars next to Catholic saints or deities from Santería and Spiritism. Communications are also established with the deceased by hearing noises inside homes or while sleeping. In this way, a relationship is structured that goes beyond memory and shapes daily life. In most cases, people ask for protection and favors in exchange for maintaining their presence in the world of the living. As the deceased complies, they acquire a legacy and power.

These ties are not only established with family members. Relationships with the dead considered powerful are also common: national heroes, prominent doctors, and some politicians (Carrera Damas, 1973; Pollak- Eltz , 1987; Ferrándiz, 2004; Salas, 2005; Franco, 2009-2011). Unlike ordinary deceased persons, these beings perform services and miracles after their death. In this context, the cult of María Lionza gains importance , adoring the entity that bears this name

and a large number of minor spiritual entities that make up her infinite pantheon, very present within the different forms of adhesion that Venezuelans establish with figures considered sacred.

However, despite the preponderance of the non-human and the bond that people establish with super-powerful beings in everyday life, hegemonic representations of the nation made invisible religious expressions typical of the popular sectors, indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant population, in a country that since its republican formation was imagined as Catholic and mestizo <sup>1</sup>. Any link established outside of socially legitimized religions was considered superstition, charlatanism or diabolical manifestations, representations that are maintained today in some sectors, which is why a certain stigma can still be observed towards Santería or Marialioncero spiritism itself, despite the public exposure they have registered in the last two decades.

In this sense, the differential ontologies that contrasted with the images of a civilized nation were regulated by the state itself, the media, and Venezuelan academia. The nation was to behave as a homogeneous ethnic unit, where all differentiation was perceived as negative and, therefore, rendered invisible. Assimilation brought Indigenous and Black Venezuelans closer to an ideal of political-economic relationship with the state, whose model was the mestizo population, which gradually abandoned native religious practices and adopted those imposed by the elites.

These processes were repeated in most Latin American nations. Segato (2007) highlighted that the nation-states in the region were formed under the mestizo ideal, an ideological arm that obscured the possibility of memory and supported the repression that forced the dispossessed multitude to fear and silence memories that linked their lives to a deep history anchored in the Latin American landscape. Thus, in the cauldron of mestizaje, all traces of the kinship of the members of the non-white multitude with the peoples, American or African, of their ancestors, including their religious practices, were lost. The melting pot was the figure that guaranteed this opacity of memory.

Venezuela was precisely built on the idea of racial mixing. Mansutti refers to three blocs in the Venezuelan case: "Indians, Blacks, and Europeans, each contributing the uniqueness of their cultures, their language, their aesthetics, their music, and their productive and culinary cultures. At the same time, the result would be substantially different from its contributors: a new race" (2016, 17). Conversely, Kelly (2010) argues that the idea of mestizaje corresponds to a process, a

---

progression toward a final state: the mestizo person, class, or nation. It is assumed, then, that mestizaje produces a distinctive type of people that eliminates the relationship between indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants, who ended up being consumed by the mixture, which in turn resulted in a new and shared identity.

In this context, and despite the persecution of its practitioners, the veneration of María Lionza has managed to endure over time (Ferrándiz, 2004). At the same time, it represents an important cultural precedent that offers a range of possibilities for sacralizing charismatic figures, heroes of Venezuelan independence, renowned doctors, students, healers, women in labor, African slaves, indigenous people, young bandits, prostitutes, military personnel, presidents, and even Don Juans. Once these figures reach popular altars, they often pass to the Maria Lionza pantheon and vice versa.

The dead, then, play a leading role within common sociality by offering help, protection, and resolving people's daily problems <sup>2</sup>. In the particular case of the Marialioncera religion, depending on the political and social dynamics of Venezuela, spirits enter or leave the so-called courts or groups (Ferrándiz, 2004). These are formed according to the ethnic origin, occupation, or particular characteristics of the deceased. For example, the Black Court is made up of slaves from Africa and their descendants, among them Negro Primero, a member of the Army that liberated Venezuela from Spain, and the slaves Matea and Hipólita, who breastfed Simón Bolívar, the father of the country.

It is not a minor fact that Negro Primero, for example, accompanies María Lionza and the chief Guaicaipuro in what are called the three powers, a triad that in the national imagination represents a kind of holy trinity, which combines the Spanish, the indigenous and the African <sup>3</sup>, reaffirming in some way the discourse on mestizaje typical of the official narrative.

Lionza's religion is also interpreted through narratives of national mestizaje, which describe this expression as a result of syncretism. Despite this, María Lionza far exceeds this

---

<sup>2</sup>sociality is used to refer to the relationship between humans and non-humans.

<sup>3</sup>The three powers of the María Lionza cult rescue aspects of national identity. Accompanying Queen María Lionza at the top of the pantheon is Negro Primero, who stood with Simón Bolívar in the battles for the independence of the countries that made up Gran Colombia. He earned the nickname "Negro Primero" for always carrying his lance at the forefront of the battlefield. He died on June 24, 1821, during the Battle of Carabobo, which sealed the absolute independence of Venezuelan territory from Spain. Also part of the triad is Chief Guaicaipuro, who, according to official historiography, inflicted major defeats on the Spanish during the conquest. He is a symbol of indigenous resistance, and during the Bolivarian Revolution, his figure was revived as a national symbol and symbol of the gallantry of the indigenous peoples.

category, considering that practitioners constantly add elements to their reality that ultimately transform their connections with beings considered superhuman .

In this sense, it is of vital importance to delve into the historical records of the religion of María Lionza and the narratives of her mediums, which relate, for example, Simón Bolívar, an important figure within the Maria Lionza divinities , with Commander Hugo Chávez Frías, whom they consider the reincarnation of the Liberator since he appeared in the public sphere, after the military uprising of February 4, 1992 against the then president Carlos Andrés Pérez (Salas, 1987; Pollak- Eltz , 2000; Taussig , 2015).

Simón Bolívar is venerated throughout the country outside of these spiritualist practices, especially in homes where a more popular Catholicism is practiced (Carrera Damas, 1973; Pino Iturrieta, 2003). He is often worshipped for strength, determination, and power to undertake important economic and/or political projects. In this context, Bolívar is one of the most powerful figures of the dead in the country, whose mythical biography gains strength in times of sociopolitical crises that jeopardize institutionality. Furthermore, it is common to see the image of the Liberator accompanying any Catholic virgin in Venezuelan homes in working-class urban areas.

The same thing is happening with the figure of former President Hugo Chávez Frías. Days after his death on March 5, 2013, he began to be considered a very powerful dead man in the working-class neighborhoods of Caracas, thus beginning the development of an entire cult around this figure, considered superhuman , which gained popularity thanks to the attribution of several miracles that will be described in later chapters.

Commander Hugo Chávez Frías is asked for various favors, serves as a spiritual guide for meditation, and is occasionally consulted by community political organizations when making important decisions. This is because, for a considerable segment of the population in Venezuela, Commander Hugo Chávez has not died; he has merely changed landscapes and continues to govern from another plane <sup>4</sup>. Even on January 23rd, he is often called *the "holy president,"* a term used by

---

<sup>4</sup>In my field records from March 2020, the category "change of landscape" appears, used by believers to emphasize that President Hugo Chávez did not die, but rather transcended to another plane, from where he continues to operate in the world of the living. Around the same time, but in 2018, the interlocutors referred to "the sowing of the commander," a phrase that also alluded to the fact that Chávez had not died either and that, with his sowing, the revolutionary legacy took solid root, which would guarantee its permanence over time.

devotees/petitioners with Catholic ties to refer to a powerful entity that intercedes before the supreme deity to continue governing Venezuela.

Currently and according to ethnographic data, the spirit of Hugo Chávez Frías, in addition to the devotions that are recorded in urban sectors of the city of Caracas, is also invoked within the Marialioncero pantheon, especially by young officiants or subjects, which shows the flexibility towards some spirits considered to be of great light and strength, taking into consideration that, according to the version of experienced practitioners and mediums, about 15 years are necessary from the death of the person for Queen María Lionza to authorize the invocations <sup>5</sup>.

According to the legendary biography of former President Hugo Chávez Frías, his connection with Marian spiritism goes back a long way. After Chávez's 1992 coup attempt, a large number of mediums did not hesitate to consider him the reincarnation of Bolívar, who, in turn, is considered by some spiritists to be the reincarnation of the powerful chieftain Guaicaipuro.

That is to say, Chávez was perceived as a divine envoy, a new messiah who would come to "awaken the people" and fight for the demands of the most disadvantaged sectors (Pollak- Eltz, 2000; Salas, 2005; Taussig, 2015), in a socioeconomic context characterized by high inflation, notorious cases of corruption and the application of neoliberal policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund, which kept the country under a general discontent that had already been evident three years earlier, on February 27, 1989 with the so-called *Caracazo* <sup>6</sup>.

## **Bibliographic References**

Amodio, Emanuele (2009). Historical courts in the cult of María Lionza in Venezuela: construction of the past and mythologies of heroes. In *Venezuelan Journal of Economics and Social Sciences*. Vol. 15. No. 3. Pp. 157-168.

---

<sup>5</sup>Mediums who invoke spirits are known as subjects in the religion of María Lionza.

<sup>6</sup>The *Caracazo* is one of the saddest episodes in Venezuelan society. It was a popular uprising that occurred on February 27, 1989, just three weeks after Carlos Andrés Pérez took office as president. It was motivated by an excessive increase in public transportation fares, which led to riots in small towns surrounding Caracas. The protests spread throughout the capital and major cities. It was imprinted in the public imagination that "the poorest came down from the hills," alluding to the fact that most of Caracas's working-class population resides in the mountains surrounding the metropolis. Looting of businesses was widespread. People were carrying food, appliances, furniture, etc. The situation was extreme, and the head of state ordered the army to control the riots by any means necessary. The following day, a curfew was declared, and the death toll was in the hundreds. The death toll: 276 according to official figures; however, the Report of the Committee of Relatives of the Victims of the Events of February and March 1989, published in 2007, refers to some 500 dead and more than 3,000 missing. The "Caracazo" represents one of the saddest episodes in contemporary history and marked the prelude to the public appearance of Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías on February 4, 1992.

Barreto, Daysi (1998). *María Lionza . Genealogy of a Myth*. Caracas. (Mimeographed doctoral thesis)

Canals , Roger (2010a). *Limage nomade. A study on the representations of the mother María Lionza in Venezuela* . Saarbrücken: Éditions Universitaires Européennes.

\_\_\_\_\_. (2010b). Studying images through images. To visual ethnography of Maria Lionza's cult in Venezuela. In: Spencer, Stephen ( ed ). *Visual Research Methods in the Social Sciences* . London: Routledge.

\_\_\_\_\_. (2012). From the mythical Indian to the indigenous myth: the representation of the Indian court in the cult of María Lionza and 21st-century socialism. In: Religion and ideology. Pages 225-256.

Carrera Damas, Germán (1973). *The Cult of Bolívar* . Caracas. Editions of the Library of the Central University of Venezuela.

Ferrándiz, Francisco (2004) *Stages of the Body. Spiritism and Society in Venezuela* . Bilbao: Deusto University Publications.

Franco, Francisco (2009). *Dead, Ghosts, and Heroes. The Cult of the Miraculous Dead in Venezuela* . Mérida. University of the Andes Publishing House.

\_\_\_\_\_. (2011). The cult of the miraculous dead in Venezuela: saints, spirits, or heroes? In: *Márgenes* . Vol. 9. No. 10. University of Valparaíso . Pp. 25-34.

Pollak- Eltz , Angelina (1987). *The Miraculous Souls. Aspects of Popular Catholicism in Venezuela* . Caracas. Andrés Bello Catholic University Publishing House.

\_\_\_\_\_. (2000). Religion and Politics in Venezuela. Paper presented at the International Congress on Religion. Buenos Aires.

\_\_\_\_\_. (2004) *María Lionza : Venezuelan myth and cult. Yesterday and today*. Caracas: UCAB Editions.

Taussig , Michael (2015) [1997]. *The Magic of the State* . Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores.

