
This paper engages the narrative around the origins of “La Negrita” or the Virgen de Los Angles, the Patron Saint of Costa Rica. The icon of La Negrita is a 20-centimeter, dark colored statue of a mother and child that has been attributed to the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. According to Costa Rican national folklore, the icon appeared to a woman of African descent (a mulata, or parda, possibly enslaved) on the outskirts of Cartago, the colonial capital around 1635. The 17th century in colonial Costa Rica had already witnessed the presence of Africans, who in the company of Spanish conquistadors, traveled the wealthy but undeveloped cacao coast of the Caribbean and entered the highlands of Cartago. With the emergence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from West Africa and the hundreds of Yoruba (see Lohse’s doctoral dissertation, 2005), who were enslaved and brought with both the Spanish and Dutch to the small Central American nation, Costa Rica has faced a particular conundrum with its historical relationship with Africa and blackness. Very much known for its national narratives of exceptionalism which maintains the purity of a population hailing from direct Spaniards lineage, Costa Rica consistently has denied an enslaved African presence. This act has silenced recognition of an African sensibility that certainly has contributed to the cultural identity that is now famously "tico." In many cases, the powers that be strategically co-opted ancient African symbols into
larger, nationalist icons in order to control the insistent presence of African spirituality preserved by the Africans who helped build colonial Cartago and develop the surrounding cacao plantations that would provide Costa Rica with its economic livelihood. One such symbol is of La Negrita, the patron saint of Costa Rica.

My work discusses the narrative of La Negrita from an Africanist perspective. I will provide a larger discussion of the icon in West African cosmology that retains ancient Egyptian influences, and in particular place great emphasis on the role of gender which is markedly absent from much scholarly discussion of La Negrita in its Catholic rendition. Kent Lohse has made a significant contribution to scholarly studies on the African presence in 17th century Costa Rica; richly ascribing agency to the lives of enslaved and free Africans living and working in Cartago. His Master’s Thesis on La Negrita, *Slaves of the Virgin*, documents with clarity the narrative of how the statue takes on both cultural and aesthetic value in Costa Rica, which though a 400-year process has “whitened” the icon and removed her from any relationship with Africa. Russel Leigh Sharman comments on the respective timeline of the icon, which spans from, “La Negrita’s appearance to a mulata girl in the 1630s, to her appropriation by white elites in Cartago in 1782, her adoption as national patroness in 1824, and her contemporary adoration [as La Virgen de Los Angeles] and disassociation with colonial slavery” (2006: 842).

Cartago in the 17th century had an African population of about 20% (both free and enslaved). As a way for the Catholic Church to maintain a hold on this population, its labor and miscegenation, they designated a settlement outside of the capital called *La Puebla de los Pardos*, for people of African descent. Miguel Bonila, a Cartago priest, documents the “official” narrative of the apparition in 1826 which fixes the dates as 1635;
In the area that is today “Los Pardos: there lived a simple woman. Upon a rock, near a spring, this humble mulata encountered the extraordinary image. In her home, she put it in a box and returned to collecting sticks. A second time, the same amazing sculpture appeared upon the rock. This repetition did not concern her: she took the image thinking that there were two of the same. But the holy Queen was having fun with this simple soul because the woman came near the rock again she encountered the same apparition for the third time. Afraid and unsure, she went to the box and did not find the other images except for the one she was carrying. She ran to the priest and explained her case. After hearing the story, the priest put the image in a chest. But the image disappeared from there as well, and for a fourth time she was found in a field upon the same rock by the priest and the same woman. From there was she was returned and placed in the Tabernacle. [The next day], she was not there. Resolved, the parish priest and congregation when to the rock, where they found her once again… A thatched roof was built over the rock where her Sanctuary was constructed (Bonilla 1985: 127-129).

However, the veneration of La Negrita was limited to a handful of local Black residents, when the Bishop, on August 2, 1650, established La Cofradia, a lay organization charged with maintaining and promoting the worship of La Negrita. The Catholic Church felt, “devotion to the Virgen de los Angeles something only blacks could be interested in” (Martinez 1985:211). For much of the 17th century, devotion to La Negrita was reserved for people of African descent. Therefore, the production of meaning outside of an assumed African spirituality by the Church and colonial state became a method to subdue and control African descended populations.

In many ways, La Negrita’s power was intimately connected to her blackness and was a viable threat to colonial powers. This is where I suggest a more detailed Africanist discussion. Perhaps, the icon is not that of the Catholic Virgin Mary and Child, as ascribed in Costa Rican folkloric memory, but an African relic of a female African goddesses, in particular that of the ancient Egyptian Isis, who in many images is found nursing baby Horus. The myth of Osiris contains a virgin birth by Isis, mother goddess, to Horus; a narrative considered one of the most elaborate and influential stories in ancient Egyptian mythology. Certainly, if one looks beyond
the European colonial archive, the evidence of rich African cosmology was present and maintained through rituals, prayers and iconography throughout the African diaspora. It would not be difficult for Africans to continue their worship of Isis under the moniker of the Virgin Mary as a way to shield their spiritual practices (and power) from their colonizers. This example is well documented throughout the African Diaspora. My paper argues that the Costa Rican Catholic Church understood the powerful threat of African spirituality and thus appropriated this icon of “La Negrita” into a symbol of Costa Rican nationalism. By the 1880s, the Costa Rican Catholic Church began to promote the cult of the Virgin (a symbol of the humble working peasants in the face of the Spanish) and nationalism as one. Though slavery did not end until 1824 in Costa Rica, all narratives that associated La Negrita with a slave past or African sensibility was eradicated in an attempt to move the “white” nation forward in its new identity as an independent country. La Negrita “is [now] fully disassociated with questions of race and remade in the image of the rural working class” (Sharman 2006: 850). Housed in the magnificent Basilica of Cartago and honored by an annual pilgrimage where millions of devout Costa Ricans crawl the final steps to the Church in prayer, La Negrita is associated with her ability to heal, not with her African origins. The Costa Rican desire to understand the icon only as a Black Madonna which in turn becomes “whitened” enough to represent the general Costa Rican citizenry, negates the influences of richer meanings attributed to ancient African spirituality clearly understood, acknowledged and maintained by the Africans brought to Costa Rica during the 17th century slave trade. Very telling is the fact that in 1739, the Africans worshipping La Negrita were accused of “so-called pagan traditions that arose around her feast day” (Sharman 2006: 846). It was at the presence of these African rituals that the Catholic
Church began a dedicated appropriation of La Negrita, taking her out of African hands and into a “white” national narrative that remains firmly in place in the 21st century.