

## Subaltern Speaks Episode 3 Transcript

Yasamin 0:05

This episode of subaltern speaks is the sequel of my previous interview with Professor Victor Rivas on the origins and characteristics of the syncretic Venezuelan cult of Maria Lionza, which combines African Indigenous, Venezuelan and Catholic beliefs. And this episode, Professor Revas and I discuss Maria Lionza's immense influence in shaping Venezuela's post colonial, national and spiritual identity in the 20th century. And how her worship is a microcosm for other movements which seek to decolonize indigenous spiritualities from oppressive and discriminatory structures. I wanted to talk more about that in the onset as a symbol of modern day post colonial Venezuela, and basically her significance in the society there. So given how our podcast is centered on topics of decolonization, I wanted to talk about Maria Lionza's role in decolonizing, then as well as spirituality and how her growth in popularity has provided Venezuelans an alternative to basically the Catholic Church, which is the established religion, and eminent source of guidance, not just in Venezuela, of course, in all Latin America. So to get us started on that, I mean, you already mentioned, you talk a lot about what it is, I just wanted to ask you, why do you think it took it took such a hold in Latin America?

Dr. Rivas 1:44

The why Latin America? Well, that America would have been that that crossroads, right. So you get the idea of a place where you are having the confluence of minimum three very influential cultures, I keep stating that the Asian contribution tends to be left out. But for the purposes of talking about Maria Lionza, and many other similar expressions of religiosity in Latin America is the crossroads of the three principal cultures that make up the majority of the population of Latin America, the Europeans and their descendants, Indigenous original peoples of the territories, we're calling Latin America, and then the African descendants of the forced slavery, migration, right. So you have this combination of these racialized groups. And it is, during the time where these groups were being racialized. So not only during colonial times, but most prominently the 18th and particularly 19th century, where the groups are so racialized that in reaction to talk about the post colonial aspect, in reaction to the movements of independence, because we have to understand that the territories we're calling Latin America today, the modern nations were previous colonies, of not only the empire of Spain, but you have Brazil, that was the colony of the empire of Portugal. So Portugal and Spain as empires had holdings, colonial territories all over the world, including in Asia, but why this one in particular, in Latin America, then, in the beginning of the 19th century, the movements of independence are occurring, here's where different peoples societies in Latin America from Mexico all the way down to, to the southern cone of Argentina and Chile, and everything in between, are essentially taking a chance to rebel, to go against the monarchy, the beginning of the 19th century to take advantage of a historical takeover by Joseph Bonaparte of the Hispanic peninsula. And in doing so, these different nations in the case of South America led by Bolivar in the north, they are calling for a differentiation that is closest to mean to be American versus

being the cousins or the subjects of Spain, but or the American cousins of the peoples of Spain. So they want to differentiate themselves. So right there you begin a process of identification, they will definitely mark the difference between the two being American, Spanish American versus being from the peninsula from Spain itself. So in that process at the beginning of the independence movement, add to that now that after the independence movement are successful at different moments, and they start becoming the original nations that we understand that we know today, but it's well separate, eventually, Colombia separate Argentina separate Mexico separate, they will, in fact, start to establish their own national histories. If up to that point, the official histories were always favoring the European, in particular, this Spanish account of the events of history at this point where they are now reinventing themselves, right, in the 19th century, they will now start pushing that Spanish history a little bit to the side and say, hey, let's go back and let's rescue our original history. That is, let's start to recognize our Indigenous past. In that process, they did leave out the descendants of the African communities and the population, even though in some cases, they were very important figures that contributed to the movements of independence. But that process of identification of the African element is not going to happen until later, in the 19th century a little bit later, still a lot of resistance, cultural resistance to that acknowledgement. There's even a problem here is even a problem that is extremely controversial.

Yasamin 6:45

Yeah, so yeah, it was. So it seems as if like, the, in the Latin American context, basically, the word Creole basically means Spanish, Spaniards, like ethnically, Spaniards were born in the Americas and mostly of like Spanish blood, they were way more comfortable with having like Indigenous peoples, like incorporated into their history. But somehow when it came to Africans, it was like, oh, that's different. And they were I guess, more. Yeah, they had different completely different reactions to that, which I find very interesting how they are much more willing to accept the Indigenous and incorporate them. Yeah, than the Africans. Yes,

D. Rivas 7:35

That is true. But then you see many efforts that also occur towards the end of the 19th century, and then the beginning to try to follow suit throughout the 20th century, where they're trying them very, very hard to incorporate the participation and importance of the African descendants in the different regions of Latin America into their national histories. But that is occurring and we see that though, in the cult of Maria Lionza, as it's then understood and began to be represented and then studied, as we said earlier, towards the beginning of the 20th century, where you had serious scientific typological studies of this expression of religiosity, they started noticing that there were images that not only drawings, paintings, but also busts little, perhaps, a carved piece of wood, that there will be painted to represent the Indigenous and the Creole, and then also the African. And so you will see these representations. That's why you have these three, they do represent the ethnic makeup, racial or racialized makeup of, of the nation, of Latin America as a whole. So that the religion itself, again, always being evolving, it's incredibly characteristic being pushed, at every turn at every different stage of history and

cultural change. Case in point, the incorporation of the Viking once these ideas and narratives start become a part of the history of the Americas at large. The Vikings do come to the Americas we understand that. That's a story that precedes now Columbus. Now, that has to be incorporated belatedly, right towards the end of the of the 20th century to the narrative of what does it mean to be Latin America. So this religion, this cult appeals to the to the larger population. You don't stop being a Christian, you don't stop being a particular Catholic as a Venezuelan but you also, on this side, get to the specific needs, you get to also add this belief system, to your tools, to your toolkit of belief systems. So you, you don't cease being Catholic, you don't cease Christian, but a caveat. So here's warning. The cult of Maria Lionza is called the cult because the official stance of the church, the Catholic Church, from the Vatican, and all the people who are part of that system. So the priests that are in Venezuela as well do not recognize this form, or especially religiosity as a as a religion. That's why they prefer to continue using the term cult.

Yasamin 10:54

I mean, you already answered a question I wanted to ask, which was like, how, what's the stance of the Catholic Church on Maria Lionza, as you said, well, they don't recognize it. They don't. That's why they call it a cult. And it's also how like the power of language has, so by calling it cult, they quickly, like marginalize it, they quickly push it to the side. But if they call it a religion, that's like something that's too much, yeah, giving too much credit to it, basically. So they say, Oh, it's a cult. It's a cult or something like that. But on the political side, so that's the spiritual realm. But as I was personally looking, researching, and I lived in Latin America, I had a lot of Venezuelan friends, I remember Hugo Chavez, he was a very spirited man, he had very strong opinions. And I certainly remember him basically, questioning, questioning, I call it like, basically the conquest of Latin America by the Spanish, he basically challenged it and he actually, directly, he called it out as being such as being a genocide and as being a crime against humanity. And even so much so that he even changed the day. Basically, what is Columbus Day in the United States for what we know is Columbus Day in North America. In traditionally, in Latin America, it was called Dia de la Raza, Day of the Race. But he changed it to dia de la resistencia, the Day of the Indigenous Resistance, which I found incredibly back in, I guess it was in 2004. Around that time, and I just thought, well, Hugo Chavez was, I mean, I noticed is a very controversial topic, because I know, given the circumstances as well, a lot of Venezuelans have strong opinions about him and his legacy. But putting that aside, he was basically he was very ahead of his time, because here in North America, you're just dwelling on these questions of reconciliation of, you know, with the movements like Black Lives Matter, or questioning the historical legacies of the Europeans that came here and put these institutions that now we have in Canada, in the United States. And we're kind of questioning that, and we're kind of challenging the narrative. But he was doing that back in 2004, when there was no Black Lives Matter. There was no talk of reconciliation with the Aboriginal people, as we do here in Canada, at least. There was none of that. But he was already putting these questions forth in Venezuela in Latin America. So I basically wanted to ask you your opinions on that how Hugo Chavez basically changed the worship of Maria Lionza, that he kind of made it, did he allow for it to be practiced more publicly, for example, or that he gave a major popularity boost to Maria Lionza?

Dr. Rivas 14:11

Yes. So again, the complexities to understanding and the practice of her religion go into so many different questions, so many aspects. In this particular case, political, it depends on the point of view, you can see where this person this particular historical character of one. You actually had intellectuals, full fledged intellectuals being apologist for the decal, do this military strong man hold the position of president for decades at the beginning of the 20th who is promoting the idea that the government on the center should allow for the practice and for these belief system, in particular towards Maria Lionza, to be to be to be practiced. It should not be banned, it should not be censored. In in the 1950s, here you have another military dictator, holds the presidency under a dictatorship. And then he also allows and promotes the idea that Venezuelans in general the whole population are free to, to worship in such a cult. Even though you're going to church, you're going to the cathedral, you went to the local churches, you're also still practicing on the side, you make maybe a pilgrimage to the mountain resort in Yaracuy. So again, remember that policymakers in the 50s is the one who commissioned the statute that we talked about earlier. So it becomes more of a public and that tacit, that tacit recognition, that tacit permission allowance of the image to be so publicly displayed in the center of Caracas and the capitol. It's like saying to the rest of the nation, and those believers that hey, it's okay, go for it. Move forward. And you have a situation where Lieutenant Colonel Chavez tries to do the attempted coup against Carlos from that experience. And then suddenly, Chavez is tied in to the populace to the popularity, he becomes so popular that even while he's in jail, responding for the crime of attempted overthrow, right, of a coup attempt, I guess, a democratically elected government doesn't matter if the government was unpopular, it was just still a crime, political crime. He's in jail. And at that time, people start incorporating a special praise a special prayers and alterations to, to the to the living character, the living being overcharged, that he, he starts developing his own. People call it a cult of personality. And that happens that leads to the elections in 1999. He's reelected a new constitution, and then the era of Chavez begins 99, then in 2000, so it is your right when you bring up that Chavez was very forward thinking in terms of decolonizing the status quo? What does it mean to decolonize, the status quo, you begin with different aspects of cultural practice, what we call the everyday practice, our system of education, our laws, system of law, the way in which we consider the different strata in in society, the poor, the middle class, the elite, or the richer then, of course, the minus 1%. But so you start we consider, reconsidering, what does it mean, to know what is knowledge. And so in all of these issues, controversial government was, in fact, going against the grain of the status quo of Western culture, Western democracies, United States in particular. And they did not see eye to eye was the way in which the United States in particular, were practicing their politics. In relation to the rest of Latin America. There's a long, long history of interventions, there's a long history of influence that we don't have to go into right now. I think that your audience will understand this, but nonetheless, the media did portray Chavez as being extremely controversial. And it doesn't matter which side of the political spectrum one stands, then and now, but the fact is that Chavez did bring in a lot of cultural changes to not only Venezuela with the region to Latin America as a whole. In doing that, you mentioned, Yasamin the change of how is the culture we celebrated the 12th of October. So October 12, as you said, the day of racing, that idea of

celebrating those three particular racialized groups that we talked about earlier, European, Indigenous and African descent in the Americas. And the day was supposed to celebrate these confluences and their contributions to each other.

By the time Chavez decrees the change of the name and the way in which we celebrate, and the consciousness, the political social consciousness, that we should decolonize and practice, and reconsider what 12 October means, and what do those meetings and in contribution to the three particular racialized groups means to us? It's not that we owe everything to Europeans, as official history, to celebrate. But rather, we should take more into account the effects of the so called encounter, that's a problematic term because encounter would presuppose that Indigenous people wanting to have this encounter. But this confluence of these three groups, over time, and given the different tragic histories as well. Nonetheless, here we are, here we are, for the past 500 years, practically. We are a different group a different identity, and in a decolonizing move at the beginning of this 21st century, to rethink the events of the 12th of October in all that means, historically, is to consider the idea the notion that there was a genocidal genocide or event that followed Columbus's historical crossing of the Atlantic. That is the conquest and then the colonization of the of the territories that were on tour of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Add to that, add to that the story of the African diaspora the slave trade, right. So that's how we begin to decolonize there are many other elements of the Maria Lionza cult or religion that can be used also to decolonize. Not only that, to recognize those three racialized groups, as you saw in the representation, the three powers, but you also have stories that are now being recuperated, if you wish, rescued, and they're incorporated and new into the changing syncretic representations of the cult of Maria Lionza was one of them was the idea of the Vikings being part of the Latin American story. Another one is this look at the at the liberating cult now they've incorporated not only obviously, the government already mentioned, but also, we're seeing representations of overcharges as being now the latest member of the cult of liberators, not only of Venezuela but of Latin America. So there's a rethinking there. Now, those people who are participating in this form of religiosity that is Maria Lionza by actually incorporating over time is they're saying quite out loud. They're saying, Hey, he is a worthy member of that liberating cult of the cult of liberal leaders. He is there in company and lead by symbol believer.

Yasamin 24:00

I was wondering like that, to what extent has like Venezuelans themselves like maybe within their education system within like their popular culture, how has their perceptions of their own history and towards the Spaniards changed there even have been a change ever since like Chavez came? Because I mean, you mentioned that he transformed the society and has, I don't know, not even 20 years he was in power. He died in 2013. So yeah, about 15 years. Yeah, so how did that change the perspective of Venezuelans themselves and who they are as a people and their culture and their Spanish colonization.

Dr. Rivas 24:48

Right. So to speak about the legacy of Chavez going in a direction that is quite different. It is also related to material answer. So Chavez his main concern was to make the population aware of each other and aware of the differentiation of the social classes, and that the poor, or if you wish, poverty was racialized. Poverty was typically a topic that would be approached as well, we do have a lot of poor people in Venezuela and Latin America, in general. But the poor are people from all different races, if you want to visualize it in that sense. But the reality and numbers, the reality of people with feet on the ground, doing their surveys and talking to the population, and just simply a fact, if you go to Venezuela, and you go to the, to the poor areas, the visual reality is that the majority of the poor are the descendants of the African slaves in Venezuela, along with the Indigenous, and depending on how we talk about Indigenous those who are still remaining, and who will continue to remain in their, in their traditional places. If, if the Indigenous people have not been a part of the urban realities, if they have not come to these cities, and then incorporated themselves, either as part of that fabric of society, or as, quote, citizens, quote, unquote, and this is a very controversial point, it's been 200 years in the making. Chavez, Chavez made a point that he actually put into the Constitution, where there are large sections that give the right in the constitution to the Indigenous peoples the protection of the Indigenous peoples of Venezuela, more than 30 different ethnic groups. Recognize in Venezuela, the numbers used to be larger, but the representative speakers are petitioners with the culture have since died away. So the numbers are dwindling. But to recognize, up to the point of 30 different ethnic groups in Venezuela, that have a constitutional right is one of the legacies, he also promoted the idea that Afro Venezuela in their culture must also be protected and not pay too much attention to the cultures that are coming from outside primarily. The cultural hegemony is held by the United States, right about Hollywood talk about the TV programs and you name it products. So, United States and then Europe. So, it is not a question of ignoring, or discarding the Western contributions from Europe and from the United States, but to not let that override our national our local cultures, which include the racialized aspect of the culture, which is brought in a consciousness and social consciousness that was meant to take notice of the racialized poor, the majority, the descendants of African slaves, and mixed in with Indigenous populations as well, all the different groups. Right. So Chavez brings this to populations attention, and that becomes a problem for a group that if we want to talk about Creole, are people who were holding power also racialized. The majority tended to be the sentiments of the Europeans in one way or another. So power was held by people who were essentially white Venezuela. If you were to put up a portrait of all the Presidents all the way up to Chavez, they're all the white, older white men. Chavez is the first person who looks like the rest of the people of Venezuela. He is essentially, essentially, what one would consider the son of Mario Lionza, he is the child of those three different groups. And they represent the population of Venezuela that is also one of the big appeal of the cult of Maria Lionza, to the Venezuelan population. As you want to add one more aspect that I think it's important to point out in terms of decolonizing practices, if you consider that the Catholic Church has been the institution, the religious institution, that was controlling, from the onset from the colonial times, throughout independence, and then after independence, the very, in a very influential way, the makeup of the fabric of particular Venezuelan society and other Latin American

nations as well. In the 19th century, there was, it was hard fought to separate church from state, again, one of those liberal ideas that conservatives and liberals were fighting for their civil wars, in the 19th century, trying to determine how to self govern. The liberal idea at the time, was this idea of one of them was the idea of separation of church and state. And the church had been seen, even towards the end of the 19th century, in the beginning of the 20th century, in different parts of Latin America, still a major culprit that kept the marginalized populations in poverty, that captured the Indigenous in particular, and the descendants of the African population, most notably in poverty, that is lack of access to education, and to educational systems, that their policies it Catholic Church control, this is a controversial statement. But it is a fact that was fought over in the 19th century, creation of the nation's modern nations. And then in the beginning of the 20th century, still a lot of criticism from intellectuals. You have Jose Carlos Mariategui, the advocating for the Indigenous peoples. In the 1920s, he's advocating for the rights of Indigenous people to have education and have access to education to participate in the general makeup of this social fabric of the nation. Whereas the Church was saying, No, no, no, no, we got to keep them at bay, we are because they're not going to learn and they still had a very retrograde stance towards marginalized populations that are particularly Indigenous and African centered. This is the problem with the Church at the beginning of the 20th century. You can see then, how different governments depending on their, on their views, politically throughout the 20th century, and ending with Chavez and Maduro, the different stances that they might have had against the Catholic Church, and how the Catholic Church might have reacted to any of their own policies, especially the last 20 years. The Catholic Church and Chavez, a locked horns, a lot of times, and it has to do with this long history of how the Catholic Church was influential in society. And to your question earlier about how the different governments might have allowed or disallowed dependency this in practice, many, many governments in Venezuela are allowed to practice about it. This allowed it and again, for different reasons, incorporating the population into the national participation right, and then belief systems and or even becoming sympathetic with the general population. And we're not talking about the elite, right? The 1%, we're talking about the middle class. And then below the middle class, so these are the groups that are being spoken to and then having conversation with regarding the allowance of the cult of Maria Lionza.

Yasamin 35:08

To conclude, I mean, I have one more question to ask you. Given the current state we are in and the increase the awareness, interest and awareness about the destructive colonial legacies on conquered peoples, or some would say, subaltern peoples, and especially in academia also in the mainstream. Do you think there is substantial value in studying Latin America syncretic religions? Particularly in our case, Maria Lionza, do you think it sheds light on subaltern voices? Or helps us better interpret Latin American history in less Eurocentric ways? What's your opinion on that? Do you think there needs to be more research essentially, especially in in the English speaking world, or even Spanish?

Dr. Rivas 36:09

I agree 100% that more attention and more research that would help the world population not only here in the West, North American academia European academia, but in general, just disseminate and share these findings about what these different religious expressions mean, because in a lot of cases, such as in the case of Maria Lionza, in particular, you will see that the makeup that is the components, the different parts that make up the religion are definitely representatives of marginalized or subaltern groups. In this case, we have been speaking about the Indigenous populations, their myths, how that's been incorporated into the cult and the descendants of the African population, the descendants of the slave trade, in particular in Venezuela, Caribbean nation and how these groups the Afro Venezuelans, incorporate a lot of their practices from their own diverse groups from Africa. And we refer to syncretic religions that are meant to incorporate, that is their very nature is that of incorporating all the different points of views especially of the marginalized, or the subaltern groups as a population, these are groups that are called marginalized because they were excluded from the general construction of the legal aspects of society, the civic aspects of society, by what does it mean to be a citizen of a nation in only the elite would have access to the concept of being a citizen, thus leaving out the rest who we identify as the marginalized or the subaltern. So, yes, we definitely need to look at other expressions, hopefully the future show you can have somebody talking about some? Most definitely.

Yasamin 39:02

Oh, yes. Yeah. So if we can conclude this, thank you so much, Professor Rivas for your time that you put in this and to come here and speak to me about these topics is definitely extremely valuable. Thank you so much for your time and have a great day Professor Revas,

Dr. Rivas 39:22

Thank you for inviting me. Thank you. Thank you so much. It was a pleasure to be here.