

Agiografia
e culture popolari
*Hagiography
and popular cultures*

In ricordo di
Pietro Boglioni

a cura di
PAOLO GOLINELLI



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Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Verona
(28-30 ottobre 2010)

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Il presente volume è pubblicato grazie al sostegno del Dipartimento di Tempo, Spazio, Immagine e Società (TeSIS) dell'Università degli Studi di Verona.

Agiografia e Culture Popolari. Hagiography and Popular Cultures. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Verona (28-30 ottobre 2010). In ricordo di Pietro Boglioni / a cura di Paolo Golinelli. – Bologna : CLUEB, 2012

444 p. ; ill. ; 21 cm

(Biblioteca di storia agraria medievale / diretta da Bruno Andreolli, Alfio Cortonesi, Massimo Montanari ; 37)

ISBN 978-88-491-3703-3

In copertina: La liberazione della figlia indemoniata dell'imperatore. Verona, Porta bronzea di S. Zeno.

Progetto grafico di copertina: Oriano Sportelli (www.studionegativo.com)

CLUEB
Cooperativa Libreria Universitaria Editrice Bologna
40126 Bologna - Via Marsala 31
Tel. 051 220736 - Fax 051 237758
www.clueb.com

Finito di stampare nel mese di novembre 2012
da Studio Rabbi - Bologna

The Interplay of *criollo* identity, colonial politics, and gender in the enduring popular appeal of Rose of Lima

Oliva M. Espín

This paper provides a brief overview of the life of Rose of Lima and analyze her role in South American popular religious culture and the influence of gender in the development of her cult.

Born in 1586, barely 50 years after the Spanish conquest of Perú, Isabel Flores de Oliva, known to the world as Saint Rose of Lima (1586-1617) was the first canonized saint of the Americas.¹ Rosa's ancestry was partly Indian, although in the social hierarchy of colonial Lima, she was considered "Spanish."² During her short life people believed she had effected many miracles. She was particularly revered for her care of the sick and poor and for miraculous cures of Indians and African slaves as well as her protecting the city of Lima from earthquakes and the attack of pirates through the power of her prayers. True or not, the populace of Lima considered her a saint during her lifetime. The Catholic Church confirmed the popular beliefs by canonizing her as a saint in 1671.

Her contemporaries – and later the Church – thought that the extreme penances she had performed since childhood pointed to her ho-

¹ At the end of the millennium there were only three canonized women in Latin America: Rosa de Lima (1586-1617), canonized in 1671; Mariana de Jesús Paredes de Quito (1618-1645), canonized in 1950; and Teresa de Los Andes (1900-1920), canonized in 1993. Other women were beatified and canonized recently (e.g., Laura Vicuña from Chile; María de San José from Venezuela, Conchita Armida from Mexico).

² According to Peruvian historians there were no European women at the time in the region of Perú where her maternal grandmother was born, therefore, her great-grandmother must have been an indigenous woman.

liness. She slept on a bed of broken glass, pieces of metal and rocks; walked around the garden every day carrying a heavy wooden cross; hung herself from her hair; burnt her hands; starved herself... Her inventiveness for physical self-destructive behaviors seemed inexhaustible, much to the chagrin of her mother and her confessors.

Her burial in 1617 nearly caused a riot; those who wanted to touch her or get some relics from her clothes or her body were feverish with devotion. At her canonization by the Catholic Church in 1671 she was declared patron saint of the Americas, India, and the Philippines by Pope Clement X. To this day, Rosa remains the most popular figure among Latin American saints (rivalled perhaps only by her contemporary Martín de Porres, canonized in the 20th century) (Millar Carvacho, 2003). Aside from Lima, small towns and villages in Perú and other places in South America continue to hold festivals and processions in her honor. In Europe and the United States there are multiple churches and institutions that honor her and several towns named Santa Rosa. During her lifetime and immediately after her death, her prominent cult helped to agglutinate the incipient identity of the residents of Lima while the Spanish Crown promoted and used Rosa's canonization to strengthen its empire in Latin America.

Rosa's personal life is full of contradictions. Her parents, living under serious economic constraints, were intent on marrying Rosa to some rich man to capitalize on her beauty. Instead, she refused marriage adamantly, although she never became a nun. She became a Dominican Tertiary like her most admired Saint Catherine of Siena, remaining "in the world" as a lay person. She surrounded herself with a group of women who devoted their lives to God and she worked embroidering and cultivating flowers to help support her family. That she opted for virginity outside of the convent challenged the expectations of her family and social context. Rosa's refusal of both marriage and the convent, opting to become a *beata* – a woman living her spiritual calling to prayer and virginity in her family's home – gave her a special status in colonial Lima. Although financial problems may have prevented her family from providing Rosa with the dowry needed to enter a convent, she defended her decision not to join a convent on the basis of divine intervention. She declared that the statue of the Virgin of the Rosary in the Dominican church she visited in Lima on her way to entering a convent would not allow her to rise from a kneeling position. Instead, the baby

Jesus in the Virgin's arms asked her to be his wife and miraculously gave her a ring that said, "*Rosa de mi corazón, se tú mi esposa*" ("Rose of my heart, be my wife.").

As it is true for so many other women aspiring to sainthood, by "marrying God" despite apparent restrictions on her sexuality, Rosa provided herself with the freedom to do what she wanted. Indeed, sexuality of the sort encountered in marriage gave most women in her socio-cultural context very little fulfillment. It had to do more with the husband's desires than with the woman's. Moreover, the consequence of sexuality was one pregnancy after another in rapid succession, often leading to death from childbirth at a very early age. Teresa of Avila makes explicit comments on this topic in some of her writings. Catherine of Siena made her vow of virginity in childhood, immediately after one of her older sisters died in childbirth. Rosa and many others who chose not to marry were not this explicit but, no doubt, this concern was present in their minds.

One of the puzzles one encounters when studying women saints is how the story of their lives present a perplexing mixture of compliance with stereotypes coupled with an ability to "use" or twist those same stereotypes to serve their own needs. I first encountered this paradox several decades ago in my research on Latina women healers (Espín, 1988; 1996). The women I interviewed for that study talked about how surrendering to the dictates of supernatural forces helped them to act in ways they deemed appropriate even though their actions may have challenged or even contradicted the traditions they supposedly espoused.

In a sense, all women saints transgressed the established norms of female virtue. By definition, had they not transgressed the established norms of appropriate women's behaviors, they would have never been known by those who would make them the object of their devotion. But the inherent contradictions embedded in women's pursuit of sainthood seem to have escaped their hagiographers. Paradoxically, their hagiographers characterized them as examples of typical, prescribed womanhood to encourage other women to follow the established norms obediently, making them seem more acceptable to the hierarchy and imitable by the faithful. But obedience is not the hallmark of their actual behavior. Rosa engaged in forms of accommodation and resistance characteristic of women saints. She appeared as virtuous and obedient while actively disobeying the authority of parents and confessors and acting

as an independent agent. She rationalized her behavior as following the will of God. Considering the limited options available to her, she created relatively independent strategies in her self-styled search for sanctity. The story of Rosa and other women saints' lives suggest that women, though constrained by difficult circumstances and having limited resources, may resort to bold, even apparently self-destructive measures, to assert their own capacity for action and resist being just passive victims. In this way their lives are lived paradoxically against the grain of societal scripts...while limited in their choice of possibilities by those same scripts. The crux, for each woman, is in the specific intersection of subjectivity and social power; in "dissecting how [oppressive] regimes compel submission on the level of [her] subjectivity" (Bergner, 2005, p. 17). And in finding ways in which her personal experience of oppression can be harnessed and subverted.

Like other women saints, Rosa is the constructions both of popular piety and hagiographical writing. As a living individual, she constructed and modeled her own life and identity after available interpretations of sainthood for women, influenced by their own personal histories and psychological makeup. Rosa constructed her life on the basis of understandings about women's bodies and women's sanctity available to her. In so doing, though, she constructed herself as different from other women contemporaries. She challenged her confessors, family, and even her hagiographers to interpret her life in ways that both fit and subverted acceptable interpretations of women's lives. What forces in her own individual history made her uniqueness possible? The real Rosa and her motivations remain a mystery to us. However, the fact is that she resisted the life that had been planned for her. Her lack of conformity and her independent decision-making conspire against the hagiographers' efforts to make her appear only as an accommodating and submissive woman, even despite her own bizarre means of self-assertion.

The issue of extreme physical mortification still remains, though. But, regardless of how bizarre the behavior of Rosa or other self-mutilating saints may seem to us today, the reality is that their behavior is not so foreign to modern women. In our time, at the beginning of a new millennium, women frequently resort to "controlling" their bodies through dieting, plastic surgery or other means, which produce physical suffering, while sustaining an illusion of control over their lives. Women "control" their bodies when they feel deprived of control in oth-

er areas of life. Research on the etiology of eating disorders clearly links them to more or less desperate attempts to control one's life (Brumberg, 1988; Vanderycken & van Deth, 1994, Weinberg, Athanássios Cordás & Albornoz Muñoz, 2005). In our post-modern world, women self-sacrifice and self-torture in the name of physical attractiveness or health. In the case of Medieval and early Modern women saints, such as Rosa, the theological interpretations of the value of expiatory prayer and self-immolation, particularly applied to ideals of virtue and sainthood for women, provided the intellectual foundation and rationale for their behavior (e.g., Brumberg, 1988; Maitland, 1987, Vanderycken & van Deth, 1994). I contend that many women today engage in behaviors for the sake of aestheticism in ways similar to what women in earlier centuries did for the sake of asceticism (Vanderycken & van Deth, 1994). Then, as now, the search for perfection through the body is, for any woman, entangled with and influenced by the vicissitudes of her individual history combined with sociohistorical circumstances. Even though conscious motivations may be different in different sociohistorical contexts, privatized behaviors may serve a social purpose. Rosa's behavior was motivated by both private and public understandings and experiences, as one would argue about some apparently paradoxical self-destructive behaviors in contemporary women (e.g., Davis, 1999). Indeed, "the experience and the perception of sanctity and insanity [or any form of behavior considered abnormal] are culturally [and historically] relative, and whoever would presume to sort one from the other [...] is bound by that same reality" (Graziano, 2004, p. 8).

Regardless of Rosa's reasons for her choices, we can see in them the social construction of women's bodies and roles in early colonial Latin America and its implications for the construction of popular culture and national identities reflected in her life.

Her status as a *beata* and her reputation of being a living saint garnered her considerable prestige and made her a central figure in her city. In the birth of colonial Lima and *criollo* identity, Rosa substituted the *Virgen del Rosario* (Our Lady of the Rosary) who had been the symbol of the Spanish *conquistadores* and of Rosa's own Dominican order. Perhaps only another woman could give birth to this new identity as the Virgin of Guadalupe had in Mexico.

Rosa's role in the creation of Peruvian national identity is a consequence of her popularity. Her canonization was the first successful at-

tempt at acknowledging the possibility of holiness in the New World. According to Peruvian historian Fernando Iwasaki (1994), about 60 individuals died in “*olor de santidad*” (literally, “the smell of sainthood”) in Lima alone between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. “Were the protagonists of these texts really saints? Or did the authors of these colonial hagiographies have other specific purposes in mind?” asks Iwasaki (1994, p. 49). He concludes that there is no contradiction in these two purposes. The “effervescence” of sanctity in Perú became the best testimony of the value of the task of evangelization that the Spanish Crown was carrying out in the Americas. The different religious orders actively pursued the canonization of their members who had died in *olor de santidad* and in so doing made the name of Perú known in Europe. The hagiographies of colonial Lima not only made the names of the presumed saints known to people outside of Lima, but also the names of slaves, women and petit bourgeois merchants, in addition to those of rich merchants and prominent political figures. Their role as witnesses and participants in the events narrated in the hagiographic texts inscribed them in history. In other words, it gave significance to marginal, humble people who otherwise would never have been known to history. Most of the saints these hagiographies describe, including Rosa and Martín de Porres, belonged to the lower and marginal classes. The witnesses of these people’s lives, whose names are recorded in hagiographic texts and canonization documents, for the most part, belonged to the same social strata. In any case, these hagiographic texts that present the lives of *limeños* as described by other *limeños* constitute an expression of colonial values while providing us with a description of the vicissitudes of daily life in colonial Lima. Iwasaki thinks that the eventual success or failure of the canonization of the protagonists of these texts is less important than the portrait of colonial Lima they present. These texts give us a sense of the building of a “*criollo*”³ community in which the saints themselves were involved.

Another Peruvian historian, Luis Miguel Glave (1993), describes the chaotic situation in all of Perú at the turn of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Of the 6000 “Spanish” males in Lima, 2,500 belonged to a religious congregation. Many of the others were penniless men looking for fortune. These men roamed the countryside more or

³ Descendants of Spaniards born in the Americas.

less aimlessly. Contrary to present day perceptions, the Church hierarchy and the Colonial administrators were more concerned about the problems created by these men than about the Indians. Scenes of violence were common. Licentiousness was also common among authorities and the clergy. Disputes between the religious orders as well as disputes inside convents where *peninsulares* (those born in Spain) refused to obey *criollos* and where those of Spanish descent humiliated those who were not “*Españoles*” were common and bitter.

In the middle of this chaos, Rosa (as well as Martín de Porres and the other *limeño* saints) built her own identity and constructed her own version of sanctity. Rosa, the only woman ever canonized among the saints of this historical juncture in Perú, inaugurated a trend, followed by many women in Lima during her lifetime and lasting several centuries: the presence of *beatas*, lay women who lived their lives suffering and praying for forgiveness for their sinful city. In a city fragmented by racial differences that privileged Spaniards and their descendents, Rosa also made provisions before her death for the foundation of a convent of cloistered Dominican nuns that would admit women of all races (not just those of pure Spanish descent). This convent is still in existence.

Eventually, Rosa became a symbol. As symbol, her struggle for self-control was obliterated by her hagiographers, her devout followers, and the Spanish crown. As already mentioned, the canonization of Rosa de Lima was used by the Spanish monarchy for their own purposes: she became “proof” of the benefits of the Spanish conquest of America. Two illustrations of this point: The *Archivo de Indias* in Seville holds a large stack of documents referring to all the festivities ordered by Queen Mariana, then Regent of the Spanish throne, in 1671, to celebrate Rosa’s canonization all over the territories of the Spanish Empire. Several allegorical paintings⁴ produced after her canonization depict Rosa holding the Eucharist in a monstrance above her head. Standing to

⁴ “Santa Rosa Defendiendo la Eucaristía” (135 cm × 110cm: Anónimo, Escuela Cuzqueña, 18th century - private collection); described as *Santa Rosa luchando con el Rey de España contra los enemigos de la Eucaristía* [St. Rosa fighting with the King of Spain against the enemies of the Eucharist]. And “Santa Rosa Defendiendo la Eucaristía” (101 cm. × 75 cm.) Anónimo, Escuela Cuzqueña, 18th century (Museo de Osmá, Lima, Perú); described as *Santa Rosa defensora tridentina ortodoxa de la Eucaristía* [St. Rose Orthodox Tridentine defender of the Eucharist]. Both reprinted in Flores Araoz et. al, 1995.

her right side with his sword drawn is the King of Spain whom Rosa is assisting in defending the Eucharist from the Moors standing to her left. I am quite sure that Rosa never saw a Moor in her life but, of course, the allegory is about siding with the Spanish Crown against the only “enemies of the faith” that the unknown painter could imagine.

Being used by others for their own purposes is the unavoidable destiny of anyone who becomes “famous,” particularly famous members of powerless groups. But-aside from whatever manipulative intent on the part of the Crown and the Church-Rosa was a symbol for the populace of Lima. According to a specialist in the study of Rosa, Peruvian historian Teodoro Hampe-Martínez (1997), through Rosa, all *limeños* had a “direct line to heaven” and Lima was represented in the heavenly court. The first saint of the Americas was a *criolla* – a person of Spanish descent born on South American soil – and thus, through her, *criollos* had received a “seal of approval” from God. Her canonization process, where all sectors of *limeña* society were widely represented as witnesses and unified by their commitment to her elevation to the altars, demonstrates her symbolic value and appeal in the later construction of *criollo* identity.

Through the centuries, Rosa image has persisted and transformed itself. At least three hundred biographies of Rosa exist today. She has been the object of legends and narratives, the central character in songs and films. Popular piety in Perú and other countries has constructed and reconstructed Rosa to fit its understandings of life and reality.

For example, “*Rosa de América*,” a black and white Argentinean feature film from 1946 in which Delia Garcés played the role of Rose of Lima. Garcés was a beautiful woman, as Rosa was supposed to have been. She played many other glamorous roles in Argentinean cinema but none made her as famous to the Latin American public as her role as Rosa. There are other minor films about her, comic books, and also controversial articles from those who could only conceptualize her as a mentally ill young woman.

In Lima, Rosa’s house has been transformed into a museum. In the middle of the central courtyard one can see the well where Rosa threw the key to the chain she had wrapped around her waist. There is a church next to the house; its walls are decorated with paintings that represent Rosa’s dream of working for Jesus in heaven.

Because, as it happens with other female saints, representation of Rosa’s, “marriage” to Jesus as a grown man was too evocative of sexual-

ity, Jesus as a baby was offered to Rosa by his mother, the *Virgen del Rosario*. Thus, Rosa is frequently represented embracing a baby. Therefore, for villagers in the Andes, Rosa is another mother with her child. Her feast and processions are associated with fertility in the minds of the peasants. Thus assimilating pre-Christian traditions to the official Catholic cult.

According to Luis Millones (1993), Santa Rosa is a symbol of how Lima sees itself since colonial times. For Millones, Rosa represents all the frustrations of the populations of the Peruvian and South American Andes. Her image appears on the tables of *curanderos*; she is honored and venerated next to the images of a legendary Inca rebel who sacrificed himself for his people. Obviously, the Inca himself images Jesus. But for the Andean population, Rosa is not the bride of Christ. She is a goddess of fertility: women with a child, a woman who can make the earth bear fruit (partially because her feast coincides with a very dry month in Perú). In other words she has been transformed and re-transformed with time.

The festival of Santa Rosa, in the Chilean town of Santa Rosa de Pelequén shares all these characteristics and more. The image of Santa Rosa that is taken out for the procession during her festivities in this town is black. Here is another transformation in that a white *criolla* has been transformed into a black woman.

Indeed, Rosa's cult, transformed through the centuries in Latin America, Europe, the Philippines and possibly other areas of the world, seems to show endless possibilities. Her image and story are renovated to fit the needs and conceptions of life of those who venerate her.

As Antoine Vergote says,

In contrast to the almost iconoclastic austerity of the great mystical traditions, popular religion clearly adheres to the most visible signs that establish a psychical contact between man and the supernatural universe. Here the saints, acting as mediators between man and God, take on a special importance. Whereas God may remain distant and beyond all representation, the saints can be known, the stories of their lives recounted, their virtues and acts represented by an eloquent system of iconography. They are idealized, endowed with quasi-divine powers, and the most human prayers, needs, can be addressed to them. This more external form of religiosity fosters another side of faith; it emphasizes a more direct and affective expression of it by linking the everyday tribulations and doubts, joys and pleasures, to the aims of faith" (Vergote, 1988, p. 185).

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