

Black Madonnas

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the phenomenon of Black Madonnas as a discrete grouping within the iconography of the Virgin. It addresses the question whether they are just black/indigenous/dark-skinned versions of the Virgin or whether their meaning goes far beyond Christianity. Are they venerated as the Mother of God or are they deities in their own right? They are political and personal, leading both to action and to healing journeys.

Introduction

The name of the goddess Kali literally means 'time'. Kali also means 'black'. As time is a measurement of being, Kali is in this sense identified with Bhavani, Goddess as Being. As blackness signifies absolute transcendence beyond all qualities, Kali is also identified with Durga, the Inaccessible One. The benign and terrifying aspects of Kali are thus metaphysically typified by these alternative names for the goddess.¹

I attended the BISFT summer school in Oxford for the first time this summer. The theme was 'Crossing the Lines for Justice: for a world in need of passion'. While I was there I attended a workshop where 'The Lady of Guadalupe', a dark skinned Madonna in Mexico City, was mentioned and it was suggested that she had been subsumed to a large extent by the passive figure of Mary the mother of Jesus since the onset of Christianity in Mexico. While I have sympathy with this point of view, I do not feel it is the whole story. Black Madonnas, I believe, have a unique quality which goes further than the issue of ethnicity, and a power and presence outside of the confines of Christianity. They are now widely recognized as a separate grouping within the iconography of the Virgin in the West.²

1. Thomas Cleary and Sartaz Aziz, *Twilight Goddess: Spiritual Feminism and Feminine Spirituality* (Boston: Shambala, 2000), p. 42.

2. Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London: Penguin Group, 1996), pp. 126-27.

My purpose in writing this article is to explain why I think all this is important and why The Lady of Guadalupe and others like her should be moved back from the margins and into centre stage. Black is political in the way it relates to race, gender and the environment. This is personified in Black Madonnas. I strongly suggest that Black Madonnas are continuing aspects of ancient Earth Goddesses and that they are a far cry from more passive images of Mary. They are resilient and active in processes of personal and political struggles for change.

Mary Daly points out that some scholars have categorized Black Madonnas into three types. There are those whose colour corresponds to the skin pigmentation of the indigenous population. The Lady of Guadalupe and other Madonnas in Africa are examples of this. There are those that have turned black as the result of time or an accident, for example smoke damage. Finally there are those that are black apparently for reasons other than ethnicity or chance. It is this third category that has been connected by some with ancient Earth Goddesses.³

There are numerous Black Madonnas in Europe, and especially France and Spain, although it should be noted that the collection of data has been more systematic in some areas than others. Here the population at the time these Madonnas first came to light would usually have had a paler skin colour than the statue herself. There are examples of a black woman holding a white child in her arms, for example La Vierge Miraculeuse in Notre-Dame de Marceille. Also in the north rose window of the Cathedral of Notre Dame at Chartres, the Virgin has a dark complexion while her child has a fair one. This lends weight to the view that the meaning of darkness goes beyond ethnicity. However, I think it is important to recognize that these suggested categories are not mutually exclusive. It is quite possible that the blackness of a figurine reflects the physical features of the population and is also a representation of an earlier Earth Goddess. Indeed this is believed to be the case with the Guadalupe Madonna who can be seen as a Christianized version of an earlier deity, the Great Corn Mother, who was revered during the Aztec period. In a similar way it seems to be quite possible that a figurine that has turned black through a twist of fate could be imbued over time with the qualities of the third category and honoured as such.

I want to consider the apparent connection these black figurines have to the Earth and the myths and legends that surround them, in some

3. Leonard W. Moss and Stephen C. Cappannari, 'In Quest of the Black Virgin: She is Black Because She Is Black', in James J. Preston (ed.), *Mother Worship* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 56, as quoted in Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), p. 117.

detail; and how for many people the Black Madonna takes on the power of deity. They certainly appear to be more than a black version of the Christian Mary. I also want to look at the importance of this phenomenon within political movements where people are struggling against oppression as well as within individual journeys of personal healing.

The way early female deities have become absorbed into Christianity has been fairly well documented. For example Luisah Teish, an American woman of African descent, describes in her book *Jambalaya* in the chapter entitled 'Beneath Mary's Skirts' how African slaves who were prohibited from practising their own religion 'hid' their own deities under Catholic saints. In Brazil, Cuba and the Caribbean slaves created their own black and brown versions of 'Mary' blending the Catholic Virgin with the Yoruban Goddesses.⁴ Marina Warner describes statuettes found in Sicily of Demeter the Corn Goddess holding her daughter Kore-Persephone. These images are so similar to the Christian version of the Madonna and child that the cathedral at Enna, where Persephone was said to have returned to the underworld, displayed a Greek statue of Demeter and her child on the altar.⁵ Isis is perhaps one of the best-known early Goddesses who was invariably depicted as black and holding her infant son, Horus. Isis came from the swamps of the Nile and was said to have taught women to grind corn.⁶ M. Esther Harding states that there are several cases where statues of Isis with her child have been mistaken for representations of Mary and Jesus and as such have been taken over by Catholic communities.⁷

Sara, sometimes known as Sara-la-Kali, is worshipped widely by the gypsies as Goddess or Matron Saint. She is particularly important as she is still honoured in Europe today in an organized and collective way. Every May in Les Saintes-Maries-de-la Mer, a small town in France, gypsies from different parts of Europe gather to honour this Madonna. Their festivities are frenzied and full of enjoyment and pleasure. These people are originally nomadic and often experience prejudice because of their lifestyle. They tend to live on the edge of society. They are dark-skinned and their Goddess is Black. Gypsies originally came from India and this is probably where the connection with Kali lies.

There are also Black Madonnas in various parts of England. Perhaps the most well known is the one in Walsingham in Norfolk which has

4. Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 103-29.

5. Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Pan Books, 1985), p. 276.

6. Patricia Monaghan, *The Book of Goddesses and Heroines* (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1990), p. 176.

7. M. Esther Harding, *Woman's Mysteries* (London: Rider & Co., 1971), p. 185.

been described as England's national shrine to Our Lady.⁸ There are two in Willesden in London which are only about a mile apart. One site now belongs to the Church of England. The Black Madonna is contemporary and carved out of stone and was placed there about 25 years ago. However, it is thought that a female figure has been venerated at this site for about a thousand years. This church contains a fountain which is connected to a revered spring beneath the floor. The well was reopened in 1998 and since then miraculous cures have been reported. A short distance away in the Catholic church is another Madonna. Rumour has it that she was carved out of wood from the oak tree that grew on the site of the ancient shrine.

These ancient dark, Earthy Goddesses are too numerous to mention here. I have just given a few examples of the many. Within Christianity, Mary is the Mother of Jesus, and all Madonnas are different aspects of her. However, there also appears to be a clear link between Black Madonnas and earlier pre-Christian female deities. In the words of one Mexican woman, 'My Virgin de Guadalupe is not the mother of God. She is God.'⁹ In this way the different Black Madonnas are representations of a variety of goddesses within a polytheistic system. The real issue seems to be whether this link has become complicated beyond repair and to what extent the qualities and functions of these deities can be teased out and reclaimed.

Black has been seen as a metaphor for the Earth with her dark soil and healing and restorative powers. The Black Madonnas are a personification of these qualities:

the black madonnas are Christian borrowings from earlier pagan art forms that depicted Ceres, Demeter Melaina, Diana, Isis, Cybele, Artemis, or Rhea as black, the colour characteristic of goddesses of the earth's fertility.¹⁰

It is after all within the darkness of the Earth that seeds germinate and make renewal possible.

There are numerous fascinating stories describing how particular statues came to be discovered. Many were found inside trees or bushes or under the roots. For example the Notre Dame of Foy in Belgium was discovered by a woodcutter in the heart of an old oak tree.¹¹ Another Madonna was found in a tree under which a blind man was said to

8. Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, p. 165.

9. Sandra Cisneros, 'Guadalupe the Sex Goddess', in Ana Castillo (ed.), *Goddess of the Americas: La Diosa de las Americas* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p. 50.

10. Moss and Cappannari, 'In Quest of the Black Virgin', p. 65.

11. Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, p. 156.

have been healed in Silesia.¹² Statues have been found by shepherds and farmers. The Madonna of Montserrat is thought to have been found by a group of shepherds.¹³ Some have been buried in the land and found by animals, such as sheep, goats and cows. Quite a few of these instances occurred in France. A figurine of Notre Dame de Vacquieres at Bouches-du-Rhône was discovered by a cow.¹⁴ Also of interest are the actual sites where these discoveries took place. Willow La Monte tells us that 'Many stories place their discoveries by sacred wells, on revered mountains or in holy caves and forests...'¹⁵ It feels possible to go on and on making these kinds of associations and the above only represent a very small percentage of possible examples. Black Madonnas seem quite literally to be gifts from the Earth. They were hidden away and now have been returned to us.

Closely connected to the association between Black and the Earth is Black as Wisdom. Black Madonnas have often been seen as teachers of the esoteric.¹⁶ Warner points to their association with magic in Catholic countries where black appears to have more of a connection to the devil than anything sacred. It is in these countries that Black Madonnas are particularly seen to possess hermetic knowledge and powers of wonder working.¹⁷ Daly also contributes to this view by arguing that elemental wisdom is rooted in the Earth for which the symbolism is overwhelmingly female.¹⁸

Caitlin Matthews looks at Mary/Goddess as having nine aspects. The Weaver aspect makes connections and it is in this form that she shows her magical powers. For Matthews this aspect is represented by the Black Virgins which are thought to work wonders.¹⁹ Therefore within a Christian frame of reference the Black Madonna is the dark and healing aspect of Mary. It is certainly true that many of these statues are said to have the power to bring about cures in mysterious ways. Often the healing that a particular Madonna is responsible for relates to specific illnesses or conditions. Quite a few seem to specialise in problems with the eyes, including blindness; for example Notre Dame de Foy in Dinant

12. Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, p. 163.

13. Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. 275.

14. Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, p. 230.

15. Willow La Monte, 'Part One: Black Madonna Sampler', *Goddessing Regenerated* 6 (1997), p. 16.

16. Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, p. 133.

17. Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. 275.

18. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 15.

19. Caitlin Matthews, *The Elements of the Goddess* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1989), p. 30.

in Belgium, Notre Dame de Bon Secours at Arceau in France and Notre Dame de Lumieres in Goult-Lumières, France.²⁰

Something that seems to come up quite frequently with Black Madonnas is the belief that they have the power to free prisoners. Our Lady of Tongere in Tongeren (Belgium), Notre Dame d'Orcival and Notre Dame de Rocamadou (both in France) are among the many said to have the power to free those held captive.²¹ I think this tells us something about what is important in the lives of those who pray to them. It also begins to bring the personal into the political arena.

While it can be argued that powers of healing can also be attributed to representations of Madonnas with lighter complexions, the power to resist being moved appears to be especially attributable to those that are black. There are many stories in local folklore of Black Madonnas that have apparently refused to be moved. It seems that not especially heavy statues have defied gravity. People have been unable to lift them up, boats carry them have not managed to set sail or horses have been unable to pull carts with them on.²²

It may be this quality that has made her such an important icon in resistance movements. Our Lady of Czestochowa of Poland has been a key symbol in the struggles of a people who have been subjected to invasions and colonization. She is called the Queen of Poland. Her national shrine is at the monastery at Jasna Gora. She has three scars on her right cheek, which is apparently where the painting was slashed by robbers while they were trying to steal it. This appears as another example of a Lady that would not be moved. China Galland in her book *Longing for Darkness* describes her time in Poland when she came across a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Czestochowa which was joined by members of the anti-Communist group Solidarity.²³ During this period copies of the painting were circulated to people throughout villages in Poland. She also tells how the painting was placed under 'house arrest' because of the strength of the feelings it incited in people.²⁴ I think it is worth noting that Solidarity were involved in peaceful forms of action and that they were about enabling change rather than seeking revenge. There are copies of Our Lady of Czestochowa in churches in England where Polish communities congregate.

20. Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, pp. 156, 169, 189.

21. Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, pp. 160, 207, 216.

22. La Monte, 'Part One: Black Madonna Sampler', p. 16.

23. China Galland, *Longing for Darkness: Tara & the Black Madonna – a Ten Year Journey in Search of the Female Face of God* (London: Century, 1990), pp. 197-232.

24. Galland, *Longing for Darkness*, p. 286.

In a different way Our Lady of Guadalupe is also involved in the political struggles of the Mexican peoples (and indeed the people of all the Americas) in their everyday strivings for justice. The original image is housed in the Basilica of Guadalupe in what is now Mexico City and shows her as being pregnant. She was an emblem for the Mexican people during the revolution and their struggle for freedom. Her image was on banners during the 1965 grape strikes in California and on subsequent demonstrations by Mexican farm workers in Texas.²⁵ It is also believed that she helps those who have crossed over the border into North America illegally and are in fear of being deported. It is her darkness that keeps them hidden and invisible to the authorities.

For many people who experience poverty and exploitation on an everyday basis it is probably reasonable to assume that the line between the political and the personal is often blurred. Political and personal struggles become intertwined. Our Lady of Guadalupe has not only inspired those involved in collective action but those who are on their own personal journeys of healing. In the words of one Mexican woman: 'she is our spiritual, political and psychological symbol' and 'Guadalupe is the symbol of our rebellion against the rich, upper and middle class; against the subjugation of the poor and the *indio*'.²⁶ Rosalia Mariz, another Mexican woman who was also a farm labourer, talks of how important the Guadalupe and other Mexican Goddesses were in her own personal healing. 'The beginning of releasing my own creative energies was when I started to heal myself from childhood physical and sexual abuse, as well as discrimination due to my race, class and gender.'²⁷

In 1994 China Galland spoke at a conference in California on the 'Renaissance of the Sacred Feminine Divine'. She is an American woman who went on a ten-year journey to visit Black Madonnas in her search to find the energy for her own healing from addiction. She described the most powerful encounter for her personally as being with the Dark Madonna of San Juan de los Lagos in Texas which is a variation of the Guadalupe. Her understanding of the Black is summed up in her powerful phrase: 'Mary is dark from entering lives on fire'.²⁸

The Guadalupe is clearly understood as deity by many of those who

25. Gloria Anzaldua, 'Entering into the Serpent', in Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (eds.), *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 79.

26. Anzaldua, 'Entering into the Serpent', p. 79.

27. Rosalia Mariz, 'La Virgen and Mother Nature in My Life and Art', *Goddessing Regenerated* 12 (2000), p. 23.

28. Willow La Monte, 'Part Two: Black Madonna Sampler from Old Pilgrimage Sites to Contemporary Creative Expression', *Goddessing Regenerated* 12 (2000), p. 22.

honour her. Her presence connects the peoples of the Americas to their roots and heritage as well as playing a significant role in their lives today. While to the Catholic Church Guadalupe may be seen as the Mother of God, to others 'La Virgen de Guadalupe's Indian name is Coatloapeuh. She is the central deity connecting us to our Indian ancestry.'²⁹ This view goes further than those of the indigenous peoples. It is now a more recognised phenomenon. Cecilia M. Corcoran in her article on Goddesses of Central Mexico refers to a powerful trinity representing the female divine. She describes the third aspect as 'the contemporary image of Our Lady of Guadalupe'.³⁰

When Willow La Monte, the editor of *Goddessing Regenerated*, a USA-based spiritual feminist magazine, announced in 1995 that the next issue was going to be about Black Madonnas, she had no idea that this was to be a continuing feature seven years later. Articles and information are still coming in. They are enormously important to many feminist pagans as well as to Christians. Black Madonnas are about justice and crossing lines. They cross lines between religions, between the personal and the political and invoke an intense passion in so many people. It was hardly surprising then that Our Lady of Guadalupe found her way into the BISFT conference. Black is a discreet category with a deep distinctive meaning that outstretches the literal. The image of the mother and child does not only reside within the confines of Christianity. It is also important within Earth-based religions. There are even animal madonnas with child. But that is another story.

29. Anzaldúa, 'Entering into the Serpent', p. 77.

30. Cecilia M. Corcoran, 'Finding the Goddess in the Central Highlands of Mexico', *Feminist Theology* 24 (2000), pp. 61-81.

