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## Migrants' religious spaces and the power of Christian Saints - the Latin American Virgin of Cisne in Spain

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## Working Paper 147

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Migrants' religious spaces and the power of Christian Saints – the Latin American Virgin of Cisne in Spain



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# **Migrants' religious spaces and the power of Christian Saints – the Latin American Virgin of Cisne in Spain**

Eva Youkhana

## **Abstract:**

Religious institutions such as the Catholic Church are gaining in importance again in the wake of the economic crisis in Spain. They act as a reference point and meeting place which keep the faith community together. Tangible assistance is offered and transnational communication structures and family bonds are sustained. With its patron saints, the Catholic Church serves as a place of remembrance to produce and reproduce senses of belongings that date back to the early colonial era. Social relations of migrants are manifested in a space which symbolizes the power and glory of the former Colonial regime.

Taking the example of the congregation of San Lorenzo in an immigration neighbourhood in Madrid, I discuss the role and agency of religious artefacts in re-producing collective identities and allocating social and financial resources. By focusing on the object itself, the functions and cultural meanings of the figure in different historical contexts become apparent. The religious staging around the object of the saint show spatially and chronologically comprehensive chains of interaction which reflect deep seated power relations between the immigrant and the host communities.

Keywords: transnational religious spaces, agency of objects, colonization, politics of belonging, Madrid

# 1. Introduction

Migrants resort to conceptions of belonging that are socio-spatially coined and that are tied to memorizations of landscapes, lifestyles, and cultural-religious imprints. Senses of deprivation are stressed and gain particular meaning, the more the challenges in the host country pressurize the immigrants, threaten their livelihoods and increase their yearning for their supposedly lost home. Essentialized conceptions about the collective are reproduced that are based on primordial ideas of origin. Studies on migration address these “groupist” imaginations using methods that refer to national and ethnic belongings without questioning their source. In studies on migration these groups are often taken for granted (explanans) instead of treating them as entities that still need to be explained (explanandum). Avoiding methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2006, Brubaker 2000) and essentialism might produce new results about historically based processes of communitization that are otherwise disregarded. Looking at the example of Latin American immigrants in Spain, conceptions of belonging emerge as a consequence of colonialism and evangelization, which had enforced an effective administration, bio-political control and economic exploitation. Cities and communities were founded and legitimized by the church and patron saints that were to combine old and new religious beliefs. Local ideas of belonging were replaced by territorial ascriptions while the livelihoods of the local population were widely destroyed.

The veneration of the figure of the *Virgen del Cisne* exemplifies syncretistic ideas of Christian communities in Ecuador and in the immigration country Spain. The study of the origins and symbolic valorization of the *Virgen* offers insights into the transcultural and migration dynamics between both countries since colonial times, in which claims to common goods were enforced by both the Catholic Church and the communities. In addition, coherency is shown with the extensive destruction of the Palta culture in the region around Loja.

The hypothesis here is that politics of space and place were established during the colonial period by means of evangelization and for the purpose of controlling and exploiting land and population. By using a concept of space that is thought in terms of networks and by taking a material perspective it is shown alongside a recent conflict about the dominance of interpretation over the figure of the *Virgen del Cisne* how and by whom ideas about belonging are produced today and in the past. The continuities in power relations and claims by the Catholic Church become apparent and are activated in the diaspora by means of the figures of the local patron saints.

## 2. Theoretical approaches: Place-Making and *agency* of things

Human and material dispositions are represented in cultural imaginations and ideological reflections that are based on repetitive practices, rituals and institutions on which power relations are deposited (cf. Althusser 2010/1970: 71f). Interdisciplinary approaches that integrate the complex interrelations between material, discursive and symbolic principles of life are rarely available. The access through a concept that defines space as a differential unit (Lefebvre 2006/1974, Schmid 2005, Belina 2013) – and thus as a hybrid product of articulations of heterogeneous actors and their interactions – provides a good starting point for an alternative understanding of the communitization, identity constructions and related politics. These politics concentrate on social locations where people live, move, work and materialize as well fill their notions of the real with meaning (de Certeau 1980: 218, cf. Leitner et al. 2008: 161). Schroer (2008) stresses the importance of place-making, processes of forming and negotiating space in times of crisis when they add to social exclusions and discrimination of lifestyles and positionings of immigrants. The study of place-making processes (Belina 2013: 107f) seems to be particularly productive for the analysis of conflicting identity politics when the relationality of the observed interactions (Pierce et al. 2010: 56) is involved. The treatment of spaces and places, the practices, productions and representations, indicate different interests and agencies behind the single actors (cf. de Certeau). The study of the relationships and practices of religious actors and their materializations at certain places may indicate both the continuities as well as the ruptures of notions of belonging and the (re)formation of social groups in situations of migration.

The present analysis relies on a concept of space based on relational and network terms through which the local observations can be included into the dynamic societal contexts. This approach brings into focus the local manifestations and materializations of religious belongings and the emotional and ethical and political attachments that arise out from them. In this article, objects and the intentions of social actors behind them come to the fore. Alfred Gell (1998: 13f), in his influential work on “Art and Agency”, provides the basis for the investigation of a new scientific field in which objects merge with human beings through the existence of social relations between humans and things, and between humans through things in an art work or artefact. According to Gell a cognitive process (abduction) is initiated by an interactive process between human being – thing – human being that allows interpretations about specific intentions of a social actor. The object becomes the patient bearer of agency (patient) that was ascribed to it by the social agent. Assigning this image to an artefact or art work, the producer of this work, the painter, sculptor or technician would be the agent, who transfers agency and thus his intentions. The object with its ascribed material dispositions (indices) then assumes the role of the agent when being observed. As a consequence of this causal chain, the observer in turn becomes the patient, the one to whom the intention is targeted, and so on. This causal chain shows that power on actions can be transferred through things, so called secondary agents (ibid: 17), those who cannot act upon without depending on human beings. Symbolically laden art works such as the figures of saints are part of an interactive system that deduce intentions from the appropriation and production of objects. It relies on the recipient and his expectations of the prototype, in Gell’s terminology the social and political function which the object gets. This deduced intentionality leads Gell to conclude that things also have agency that therefore can strongly influence social relations. “I view art as a system of action intended to change the world” (Gell 1998: 6). Humans can achieve and legitimize power over other humans through sacralized objects. Certainly, Gell’s concept of agency with objects can only be understood in relation to the intentions of human actors and is therefore context specific. This means that things cannot be self-sufficient agents. “Action cannot really be conceptualized in other than social terms. Moreover, the kinds of agency which are attributed to art objects (or indexes of agency) are inherently and irreducibly social in that art objects never (in any relevant way) emerge as agents except in very specific social contexts. Art objects are not self-sufficient agents... ” (Gell 1998: 17).

This correlation between objects and power is evident in studies on religion where social institutions are to be legitimized by putting the objects into a reference framework of a holy cosmos (cf. Berger 1973: 33). By means of symbolic acts, rites and processions (Bell 1992: 91f), power is produced and maintained. The appropriated spaces, the sacralized objects within, their owners and servants merge in symbolic representations that are used by political rulers, for example for decisions about social inclusion or exclusion (Knott 2005: 19).<sup>1</sup> In order to explain the hidden mechanism of power, Bourdieu (1992: 82) refers to the execution of “symbolic power” that does not emerge on the level of physical force but on the level of an unconscious but accomplice-based relationship, remaining beyond any critical questioning.<sup>2</sup>

Through the “hidden relationship of being quasi-bodily conjoined, the symbolic power is executing its effects” (ibid). According to Bourdieu people can unconsciously incorporate the intentions of others, particularly when it comes to repetitive, corporal acts within which man-object relationships are created through ceremonies. According to Miller (2005) objects (of a ceremony) are the more powerful the less apparent they are to the participants. “Objects are important, not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not ‘see’ them. The less we are aware of them the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behaviour, without being open to challenge”.

Figures of local patron saints get the position of a powerful object through their means of production and through the practices and representations of the immigrants, by which the ascribed curative and punitive forces even get more powerful in the diaspora. Despite its transnationalization they are keeping their local anchoring and are getting a stronger traditionalized appearance, as is shown by Odger Ortiz (2007: 29f) giving the example of the veneration of saints by Mexicans in the United States.

Here, theoretical approaches to agency of objects are combined with space-theoretical concepts (place-making) to provide an interdisciplinary research perspective, in order to analyse the importance of the veneration of the figure of a local patron saint *Virgen de Cisne* from Ecuador for the production of belonging of a migrant community in Madrid. The concept of belonging used here draws on international studies on the relationship between (notions of) belonging and migration that identify therein the interaction between both positions ascribed by society and own positionings (Anthias 2013) as well as an expression of emotional attachments and shared ethical and political values by human beings (Yuval-Davis 2011, Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013). The present concept of belonging also integrates the material components for the production of belonging in a triple way and thus provides a possible connectivity to sociological approaches that try to break with binary thinking. Belonging emerges not just between humans but between humans and things and humans through things able to create and transfer belonging. The material can appear threefold, firstly, through the body, the corporal and bodily owned moment, secondly, the tenure relations and distribution of goods (access to resources and livelihoods), and thirdly through symbolically laden artefacts (material culture) that appear as bearers of agency (Youkhana 2014). This reading takes leave of a “sociology of the social” (Latour 2005) which focuses on questions about the origins of power relations and why they exist but not on how these power relations are established. A sociology of collectives, as Latour names it, integrates objects and humans as actors into the analysis and, in comparison, tries to show how the social is bound together, power asymmetries become consistent and how and with which instruments they could be contested (ibid).

The analysis of the relevance of an art work, the figure of the *Virgen del Cisne* for the production and performativity of belonging at different spaces of representation in the migration of Latin Americans to Spain, deals with power negotiations by means of an artefact that comes into action laden with

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<sup>1</sup> According to Knott, his approach has its roots in the 1930s and van der Leeuw’s phenomenological typology of sacralized spaces.

<sup>2</sup> Gell’s concept of abduction is applied to this cognitive but unconscious process.



different intentions. The paper analyses a conflict between the Ecuadorian/Latin American community in Spain and the Catholic Church about gaining control over the symbolically charged artefact which represents local, national and religious relations in a different way. The study is based on field research, qualitative and expert interviews, participatory observations and interviews in front of the church and literature research from 2010 – 2013 which was realized in the frame of the Research Network on Latin America: Ethnicity, Citizenship, Belonging.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.1 Politics of place and the production of belonging by the Catholic Church

The example of the *Virgen del Cisne* in San Lorenzo shows places of religious encounters used as spaces of remembrance and devotion in which meaning is produced through social interactions and symbolic offerings. Individual experiences, appropriations and perceptions transfer the church building into a symbolic reference point for the production of belonging in migration. The example shows that place-making holds both a material and a discursive component, whose elements impart identity (Bürkner and Zehner 2012) and authenticity (Belina 2013: 111f). The analysis of place-making by the institution of the Catholic Church and the association of the Ecuadorian migrants giving the example of the conflict about the *Virgen del Cisne* in its historical and spatial relations, making it possible to draw conclusions about the production of belonging and related politics of belonging. It becomes apparent that notions of belonging by the Latin Americans visiting San Lorenzo can be formed by an institution defending claims to power and property and is thus trying to affirm a domineering position within the migrant community. The historical review illustrates that not just the religious doctrine but the recourse to other subdomains of social life, administration and education, maintains Catholicism as an integral part of Latin American societies. By the syncretism of Christian/Catholic and pre-Columbian symbolism, notions of belonging were developed that now accompany migrants to Europe and Spain. The conflict around the *Virgen del Cisne* in San Lorenzo indicates the continuity of notions of belonging that were ideologized in Christian terms during the Conquista to support and legitimize feudalism and Catholicism. The attempts by the 'Asociación Virgen del Cisne' to (re)appropriate a religious figure with local as well as national (Ecuadorian) and probably trans-regional significance, draws attention to identity politics of the Catholic Church in Spain, which found it necessary to return to its own history by making powerful religious symbols available once more, in response to the Latin American immigrants. The acts of the association can be interpreted as an attempt to become independent from the hegemony of the Catholic Church in Spain. The empowerment of the members of the association by organized processions and the appropriation of the *Virgen del Cisne*, that can be assessed as a strong partner, to speak with Alfred Gell, was an affront for the Catholic Church. In order to break with the empowerment of the association and to claim back the religious terrain, the Church had to regain the interpretative predominance over the figure. While increasingly losing space in Spain, the intervention into both the religious practices and the politics on migration is all the more important for the attempted reconstitution of its claims to power.

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the results were presented in the project's Working Paper Series (<http://www.kompetenzla.uni-koeln.de/wp.html>) and in project's anthologies (<http://www.kompetenzla.uni-koeln.de/publ.html>).

### 3. The colonial ties between Spain and Latin America and the role of the Catholic Church

In the first decade of this century, Latin America underwent a change from having a net immigration balance to having a high level of emigration, above all due to the series of economic and financial crises (Steinhauf 2002, Kreienbrink 2008).<sup>4</sup> In part promoted by bilateral treaties, migrants from Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia provided the Spanish economy with workers for the expanding construction, agricultural and services sectors (Gil Araujo 2009: 107, Stroschio 2010).

In addition to economic pull and push factors, these developments of Latin American migration to Spain should also be considered in terms of the historical ties between Spain and Latin America, their shared colonial history, the administrative and political similarities, economic developments, and the transcultural dynamics. Since colonial times, the religious ties and the conception of a shared tradition of faith have been key components of a relationship which has expressed itself in transnational institutions, bilateral treaties and economic dependencies, and migration dynamics. The missionary work of the Catholic Church has had considerable influence on the social, ethical and political foundations of Latin America. The colonisation of large parts of the New World by the Spanish and Portuguese (in addition to other European powers) led to the widespread extirpation of indigenous populations and the destruction of their cultures.

The successful evangelisation of large parts of South and Central America by the Catholic Church is closely linked to the figure of the Virgin Mary, which became an important instrument in the religious, economic and political conquest. The veneration of saints and their relics agreed on by the Council of Trent in the 16th century was subsequently propagated by the Jesuits, who played a crucial missionary role in particular in the Andes region.<sup>5</sup> Held in four periods in Trent and Bologna from 1545 – 1563, the Council was a reaction of the Roman Catholic Church to the demands of teaching of the Reformation, but also the humanistic reformatory demands served the Jesuits as a vehicle for the development of Christian missionary work (Schubert 2003). Agreed on in the third period held in Trent, the decree on the veneration of the saints was created as a tool for promulgating the Church's teaching. In fact, as the example of Guadalupe shows, it also contributed to the domestication and control (Favrot Peterson 1992: 40) of the indigenous population groups.<sup>6</sup> The populations of the southern Andes region, who in part were still nomadic, were particularly affected by this domestication. At the same time as the destruction of the temples, religious statues and symbols of the indigenous population, replacement figures and places of worship were offered to meet their religious needs (Zires 1994: 285). Local ties were created, which was also important to provide a workforce during the mining boom for gold and silver (Crain 1990: 44).

The various images of Mary were adapted phenotypically to the regional population groups. Commissioned in part by Christianised elites and in part the work of colonial sculptors, figures of identification were created which embodied both the European Mother of God and also native mother deities. Through political alliances between interest groups on both sides, the native religions could thus be incorporated into the colonisation project by the figure of Mary and by the reinterpretation of existing mother deities. By means of their active participation in the lively

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<sup>4</sup> Spain, previously known for its net emigration balance, has within this short period experienced an increase in immigration. Whereas in 1998 only 1.6% of Spain's population were of non-Spanish origin, according to the National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (INE) the figure had increased by 2009 to 12.08%.

<sup>5</sup> In the third period of the Council, a decree was passed on the veneration of saints and their relics, as well as the veneration of images of Christ and the Virgin Mary.

<sup>6</sup> Favrot Peterson (1992) shows the role played by the figures of the patron saints in the aggressive indoctrination, and how the iconography reacted to the social realities of racial "mixing". As a syncretic symbol of the Conquista and also of the liberation, the *Virgen de Guadalupe* symbolises the Marian veneration in Latin America.

ceremonies in honour of the Virgin Mary, the bodies of the indigenous populations themselves were colonised (Prien 2007: 125, Nadig 2008: 253).<sup>7</sup>

The role of the Virgin Mary as missionary and figure of indoctrination is also reflected in the language of the Conquistadores, who referred to Mary as “La Conquistadora” (Chamorro 2012) and carried banners of the Virgin Mary into battle. Although symbolising the power of their enemies, the Virgin Mary was gradually accepted by the native populations as their own representational figure. The local populations adopted and adapted the figure of Mary in order to gain access to the power concealed behind the name and the image (ibid.: 2). The mixture of Catholicism and the local beliefs in the form of patron saints, miracles, and places of pilgrimage was pursued by the missionaries for two reasons. Firstly, they wanted to quickly convert the often rebellious “Indios” and ameliorate the negative effects of the enforced conversion, and secondly they wanted to ensure the broad acceptance of the new faith (Zires 1994: 295 after Nutini 1980). With the development of religious orders and brotherhoods, the saints and Mary became central devotional objects of the indigenous people and central components of their ethnic-religious identity. Equating the Virgin Mary with the symbol of the earth (Farrel 1982: 534), fertility, love, ethnic pride as the embodiment of higher values and desires established a powerful symbol of the colonial order (Nabhan-Warren 2006: 243). During the liberation movements, the Virgin Mary was co-opted as the starting point for ethnic and national identity constructions in the emerging Latin American states, as shown by Zires (1994) and Favrot Peterson (1992: 45f) for the example of Guadalupe.<sup>8</sup>

To this day, the Virgin Mary serves as a link between the Amer-Indian and the European worlds and is thus a product of the trans-Atlantic migration dynamics and transcultural processes. By means of association with their country of origin, she serves as the patron saint for Latin American emigrants (Nabhan-Warren 2006: 246). She is, according to García (2012: 15), part of an autochthonous collective and territorial identity. The religious locations characterised by her are perceived by believers as islands in an endless sea of foreignness (Jansen and Keval 2003: 44), a focus for their dreams, wishes and expectations of the life in the new country.

### **3.1 The origins of the *Virgen del Cisne* and socio-spatial practices and politics in the colonial period**

The *Virgen del Cisne* in Loja province, Ecuador, is one of the most venerated religious figures of Latin America. Like the *Virgen del Qínche* (Quito) it was created by Don Diego Robles, a Spanish sculptor of the colonial period at the end of the 16th century<sup>9</sup>. Historical records and oral accounts provide two explanations for its origins. It is said that the residents of El Cisne commissioned the figure from Don Diego Robles, who was supposed to have been in Loja at this time. Others assume that the *Virgen del Cisne* was produced in Spain, in the wake of the decision of the Council of Trent to promote the veneration of patron saints.

The name of the Parish of El Cisne can be traced back to the Knight Order of the Swan, originally founded under the Franciscans in Brandenburg, Germany, in 1440. Fraile López de Solís, Bishop of Quito in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was a member of the Order and is said to have founded El Cisne in 1560 after having undertaken a tour of inspection of the region with Alonso de Mercadillo, the conqueror and founding father of Loja. According to legend he found the region inhabited by the semi-nomadic Palta tribe so attractive that he founded El Cisne there<sup>10, 11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> A central demand of indigenous social movements from Latin America today is the “De-Colonisation of the body” by means of alternative cultural practices as a contribution towards forging identity.

<sup>8</sup> Cruz Peralta (2011) uses the example of the Huasteca in Mexico to argue that the brotherhoods linked to patron saints in the early 18th century were the melting pot and the basis for the ethnic groups identified in the region today.

<sup>9</sup> From: <http://www.vivaloja.com/content/view/339/155/>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. [www.vivaloja.com](http://www.vivaloja.com)

The *Virgen del Cisne* and her inclusion in the beliefs of the local Palta tribe is dated to a Marian Apparition in 1594. A girl tending goats, Angelita Cochumba, met a heavenly *señora* several times and after some hesitation became friends with her. According to various oral accounts<sup>12</sup>, she helped the girl with weaving and herding the goats and said: “Do not worry about the plague and famine. I will make sure that your desperation will soon disappear.”<sup>13</sup> The *señora* and the girl met for two weeks, but on the day that the locals finally decided to leave their village the girl came in tears to the usual meeting place and said: “Dear Señora, we have got to leave today. I am so sad because I have to part from you. – Be calm child. Be calm. This famine will pass. Go and say to your people that they should not leave but should erect an image of me that they should protect and venerate. I will support them with the construction of a temple in this place, so that I can always be near you.”<sup>14</sup>

The indigenous worshippers of the *Virgen del Cisne* attributed supernatural powers to her, both positive (such as being able to prevent epidemics) as well as negative. For example, she caused a hurricane in order to punish her followers after they had tried to remove her image from the appointed place. “The indigenous people thought that it was a curse of the Holy Virgin because they tried to move her from her designated location of El Cisne, so that they returned to the place, despite the resistance of the authorities. They finally understood that God would not allow El Cisne to be deserted and the image moved from its original location.”<sup>15</sup>

Tying the population to a place by the ritualised veneration of a patron saint in this way served as an instrument for their improved administration and control. This also meant that they were available as a labour force for the feudal *encomiendas* (Crain 1990: 44, cf. Prien 2007, Dussel 1988). At the same time, senses of belonging, collective ethnic identities and loyalty to the colonial power were generated by this politics of place. The *Virgen del Cisne*, or *la Churona*, as she was known locally because of her long black locks, was believed to have supernatural powers, and this was used to legitimise the political and administrative decisions of the colonial administration. The object made by human hands, the figure of the Virgin Mary herself, became for the indigenous people a sign of their belonging, and imprinted itself on the imagination of the believers, above all through the organisation of the annual processions (Riofrío 1996 / 1924).

Despite all the missionary work and the colonisation, the resistance of the indigenous population against colonial rule persisted in the relationships to the images of the Virgin Mary. This is also reflected in the continued veneration of Pachamama, the Earth Mother of the Andean region (Rösing 2006: 70). The combination of the divine abilities of the Pachamama with the life-giving powers of the Virgin Mary resulted in a special religious identity. In the context of Latin America, the Virgin Mary today can be interpreted not only as a symbol of subjugation but also of the opposition of the faithful. According to Favrot Peterson (1992: 47), she symbolises equally victory and defeat, liberty and oppression. Studies of Amer-Indian beliefs come to the conclusion that the Andean people are only Catholic by name, despite of rather because of the passionate veneration of the Virgin Mary, which emphasises both their resistance and also the ability of Catholicism to absorb resistance (Prién 2007: 219f after Harris and Bouysse-Cassange 1988).

There can be no doubt that the Catholic Church, with the aid of the Marian veneration introduced from Europe, established a religious hegemony in Latin America, although this is now being challenged by new confessions such as the expansive Pentecostal movement. To this day, the Virgin Mary represents the dreams, desires and expectations of a large proportion of the population in Latin America itself as well as in its diaspora (Nabham-Warren 2006: 243f). The Marian veneration of

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<sup>11</sup> The Palta tribe only survived this intervention for a few generations, and it remains a mystery to historians why no traces remain of their social organisation, economic order, and heathen beliefs (cf. Castillo and de los Angeles 2008: 21); cf. also Wikipedia (<https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paltas>).

<sup>12</sup> Also in the recent film account: Loja Ecuador – Historia y Romería Virgen del Cisne

<sup>13</sup> “Que no se preocupa por el peste y l’hambruna. Yo me encargaré que la desesperación pronto desaparezca.”

<sup>14</sup> Translated from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSFujjHN4lo>

<sup>15</sup> Text taken from <http://www.ivecuador.org/index> (own translation)

Latin American migrants is a social resource for the construction of collective identity, but it is also an instrument with which institutions can improve the integration of immigrants in the host countries (García 2005, Itçaina 2006).

## 4. The Catholic Church and Latin American immigration to Spain

Latin America is the region with the largest proportion of practising Catholics worldwide.<sup>16</sup> Catholicism also dominates the cultural and religious lives of the Latin American migrants. According to the Spanish Episcopal Conference, the presence of Latin American Catholics in Spain makes it possible for the Catholic Church to present itself as an institution which understands the complex and problematic situation of the immigrants in the face of increasing xenophobia, racism, violence and discrimination. The immigrants are regarded as a reserve force for a doctrine which is under threat in Spain. "The presence of the immigrants provides the Church with an opportunity to see this as a blessing which helps the Church to meet its vocation as a sign, factor and model of Catholicism for our society in the concrete life of the Christian communities."<sup>17</sup> (*Conferencia Episcopal Española*, 2007: 19).

This perception of the immigrants is the result of the fundamental changes which Spanish society is undergoing. Much to the concern of the Catholic Church, its importance as a religious authority has declined considerably in some population groups in recent years. Although 77% of Spaniards identify with Catholicism according to official statistics, only 17% of the population are practising Catholics (Collado-Seidel 2008: 301ff). The failure of past Catholic initiatives for the re-evangelisation of the Spanish population explains why the presence of the Latin American immigrants is seen as an opportunity and a blessing for the Catholic Church (*Conferencia Episcopal Española* 2007). However, the acceptance of Latin American Catholicism by the Catholic Church in Spain is not as straightforward as it might at first appear. Some continue to view the religious practices in Latin America as inferior, populist, superstitious, and primitive. According to García (2005), there are no Latin American priests or chaplains in Spain, which leads him to conclude that the Catholic Church in Spain finds it hard to accept migrants from this region as Catholics with their own views about faith, liturgy and religious practices (cf. *Conferencia Episcopal Española* 2007: 12).<sup>18</sup>

Despite these reservations, the Catholic Church fills an emotional gap felt by the Catholic migrants in times of increasing economic difficulties in Spain and a tightening of migrations policies. In the few clerical documents which address the strategies with regard to migrants, the Catholic Church presents itself as a haven for immigrants<sup>19</sup>. With this image, according to Callado-Seidel (2007: 310), the Church was countering the secularisation of the Spanish population after the Franco era, in which the church and state were ideologically and institutionally intertwined by a "national Catholicism."<sup>20</sup> By occupying the topic of migration, the Spanish Catholic Church had once again established itself in the public sphere, according to Itçaina (2006: 1471f). He goes on to state that the Catholic Church legitimised its dominance in the public sphere by various strategies for supporting immigrants, (for example help with job seeking) and establishing open houses. By playing an active role in the establishment of standards and values and exerting influence on the integration programmes, the Church was able to redefine its position in Spanish society (ibid.: 1481).

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<sup>16</sup> 90% of the residents of Madrid who come from Latin America say they are Catholics (according to Wikipedia: Colombia 90%, Argentine 90%, Bolivia 92%, Ecuador 72.3%), but with increasing membership of free churches and other confessions.

<sup>17</sup> "La presencia de los inmigrantes ofrece a la Iglesia una oportunidad y ha de ser vista como una gracia que ayuda a la Iglesia a hacer realidad esa vocación de ser signo, factor y modelo de catolicidad para nuestra sociedad en la vida concreta de las comunidades cristianas."

<sup>18</sup> Conferencia Episcopal Española, 2007, "La Iglesia Española y los inmigrantes", XC Asamblea Plenaria 52, p. 12; Paola García, "La inmigración: un nuevo reto para la Iglesia católica española", in *Anuario Americanista Europeo*, No. 3, Redial-Ceisal, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Documento final del VI Congreso Mundial de la Pastoral para los emigrantes y los refugiados, Vaticano, s.e., 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Art. 6 of Fuero de los Españoles, 1945.

## 4.1 The Sunday mass in Lavapiés

Every Sunday, people crowd into the small Church of San Lorenzo in Lavapiés, a traditional poor quarter in the heart of Madrid. In particular Ecuadorians and Paraguayans, but also Colombians, Bolivians, and Dominicans fill the narrow streets in the neighbourhood as they hurry to get to the church in time to get a seat. Hundreds of Latin American Catholics converging for the mid-day Sunday mass brings everything to a standstill. Up to 500 worshippers manage to squeeze into the church, where the young Spanish priest conducts the services with rituals and sermons which are comparable to those in Latin America.

A survey conducted in front of the church, which first had to be authorised by the priest, showed that the Latin American worshippers had travelled from all over the city to attend mass, some of them from outlying districts. A few Spaniards from the neighbourhood attended because they liked the colourful activities.<sup>21</sup> Interviewees gave a variety of reasons for their regular attendance. A 30-year-old Ecuadorian woman from Loja said that in the church she felt as if she was back home – like in Ecuador. A 40-year-old man, also from Loja, Ecuador, said that the church was a place of prayer and reflection, really just a place like any other, but it had “something of home pasture”. Another Ecuadorian man mentioned the opportunities offered by the church for Latin American rituals and ceremonies, for example celebrations of the *Quinceañeras*.<sup>22</sup> The church and the priests offered a 50-year-old Ecuadorian woman comfort in a time of need: “When my mother died in Ecuador and I could not travel there to say a last goodbye, it was the priests who offered me consolation.”<sup>23</sup> She emphasised that the priest catered particularly for the South American worshippers and their customs in the mass, and unified them by bringing effigies of various patron saints. A Paraguayan woman (25 years old), whose patron saint has also found a home in San Lorenzo, drew attention to the organisation of the parish, which could in part explain the large attendances: “The priest sends out messages with invitations to the important events”.<sup>24</sup> These text messages go out automatically to everybody who has registered their phone number, informing them regularly of upcoming events and services.

The interviewees gave no other reasons for visiting the mass apart from feeling that they were accepted and understood in the church. The survey gave no indications that the services, practical legal aid, or help with finding employment offered by charitable institutions of the Catholic Church in times of crisis were also important in San Lorenzo. A Paraguayan woman (39 years old) expressed it in the following words: “The *parroquia* does not offer any other support services, but we like it here because there are dances like in our country and the mass is similar to ours in Paraguay.”<sup>25,26</sup>

The responses of the worshippers suggest the various functions of the church community for meeting spiritual needs and the wish for belonging and entertainment. At the same time, the church acts as a point of reference and an interface between two worlds – one in the distant Ecuador, Paraguay, or Bolivia and the other in Spain. The priest pays visits to the homes of the parish members, accompanies communication processes, and both reawakens and soothes the longing for the home country, and the parish provides a forum for exchange, with a sense of belonging. Religious traditions and rituals can be acted out together, while offering a semi-public cultural meeting place in

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<sup>21</sup> Many of the 60 interviewees worked in the construction sector (52% of the men interviewed) or were domestic helps (54% of the women interviewed). Only 20% said they were unemployed. This is lower than the official figures, according to which more than 35% of immigrants are jobless (with an upward trend) (inquiry made in April 2011)

<sup>22</sup> This is a rite of passage celebration for 15-year-old girls, who are entering into a marriageable age and adulthood.

<sup>23</sup> “Cuando murió mi mama en Ecuador, no podía ir para despedirme. Pero podía encontrar apoyo espiritual en la iglesia. El padre me ayudó, estuvo a mi lado en un tiempo más difícil.”

<sup>24</sup> “Los padres mandan mensajes para invitar a ciertos eventos.”

<sup>25</sup> “No nos ayuda la Parroquia, pero nos gusta porque hay bailes y es como en nuestro país, la misa se da como en nuestro país.”

<sup>26</sup> Data from a survey in April 2011.

the middle of Madrid which is highly visible in times of social displacement (Youkhana and Sebaly 2013).

One reason why the formerly deserted church has become so crowded goes back to 2005, when for the first time in Madrid the figure of a Latin American patron saint, the *Virgen del Cisne* (Virgin of the Swan) was presented in a Catholic Church. The “*Asociación Virgen del Cisne*”, founded by the Ecuadorian immigrant Carmen Ballagán and her husband in Madrid, brought a replica of the *Virgen del Cisne* to Spain. The couple ran a bar in Lavapiés which was frequented by many of the Ecuadorians living in the immigrant quarter at that time. They said that their aim was to establish new religious customs in the Spanish capital with the help of the effigy – namely Catholic processions with Latin American patron saints. Carmen Ballagán, Chair of the Association, explained in the documentary film “*La Churona, History of a migrating virgin*” from 2010 that she wanted to show Spaniards more of the rich Ecuadorian art and culture.<sup>27</sup> The first procession in honour of the *Virgen del Cisne* took place on 10 September 2005. Tens of thousands of worshippers came together. “Previously,<sup>28</sup> the only Virgin to have been on the Plaza Mayor had been the patron saint of Madrid, the *Virgen de Almudena*”<sup>29</sup>, explained Ballagán. The event marked the beginning of a new era for the San Lorenzo parish, because after the procession the *Virgen del Cisne* found a new home there. According to the church’s priest at that time, the Latin Americans filled it with new life. A young Spanish woman who regularly begged in front of the church on Sundays said: “You cannot imagine how abandoned the church had been. A handful of people would come, no more!”<sup>30</sup>

As the title “History of a Migrating Virgin” suggest, the documentary draws an analogy between the Virgin Mary and an immigrant woman. According to the film’s director, María Cristina Carrillo, the intention is to show the importance of the Ecuadorian national patron saint for the immigrant community and to reflect their social ties to their home country and their emotions in a foreign country. The film also shows the conflict between the Association and the parish over the question of who should have control of the statue.

## 4.2 The conflict about the statue of the *Virgen del Cisne*

The conflict about the control of the statue of the *Virgen del Cisne* between the Association and the parish priests led to the “Virgin” once again becoming an immigrant. She was brought to Spain and introduced in the church, was taken out of the church, brought back, and then removed again. A particular topic of disagreement were the claims of the Association in newspaper articles (online-articles in *El Comercio*, *Redes Cristianas*, *EspEcu*, *El Universo*, *El Latino*, *El Pais*) that the donations of the worshippers were intended to support a hospital in Loja. Despite the efforts of mediators, the conflict could not be resolved.

Accounts of the conflict<sup>31</sup> indicate that the two sides could not agree about what should be done with the replica statue of the Virgin, and they accused one another of trying to gain an advantage, because the statue became a commercial resource for both parties according to the journalist of the Spanish migrant newspaper “*Latino*”, Soraya Constante, in the documentation “*La Churona*”. On the one hand the Sunday masses revitalised a deserted parish and money was generated for church projects. On the other hand, the Association collected donations for the development of educational projects in Loja, the original home of the veneration of *Virgen del Cisne* in Ecuador. Carmen Ballagán said the “*Asociación Virgen del Cisne*” aimed not only to venerate the Virgin, but also to support the community in Loja. According to reports of the Universidad Técnica Particular in Loja<sup>32</sup> the money

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<sup>27</sup> María Cristina Carrillo, dir., *La Churona. Historia de una virgen migrante*, Quito, Ecuador para largo, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> i.e. before September 2005. (Author’s note).

<sup>29</sup> “Antes, la única virgen que había entrado a la Plaza Mayor era la patrona de Madrid, la Virgen de Almudena”.

<sup>30</sup> “No te puedes imaginar que abandonado estaba la iglesia. Había un puñado de personas, es todo.”

<sup>31</sup> [http://www.elcomercio.net/mundo/ecuatorianos-en-el-mundo/Churona-salio-bar-nueva-casa\\_0\\_131388047.html](http://www.elcomercio.net/mundo/ecuatorianos-en-el-mundo/Churona-salio-bar-nueva-casa_0_131388047.html)

<sup>32</sup> [<http://www.utpl.edu.ec/comunicacion/2006/07/virgen-de-el-cisne-venerada-en-madrid>].



collected during the processions in Madrid was used to fund a hospital in Loja. This form of cooperative development aid is common, along with individual money transfers, as a way of providing targeted support for the home communities of migrants. The annual blessings by the mayor for the migrated family members and the faithful in the diaspora at the processions in honour of the *Virgen del Cisne* in Loja<sup>33</sup> are a sign of good networking and mutual recognition.

The donations became an issue of dispute not least because the two sides could not reach an agreement about how the money should be divided between them. The priests felt that the Association were taking an advantage.<sup>34</sup> “The Association and its founders want to profit from the Holy Virgin and her Ecuadorian venerateds. They organise celebrations with the Virgin in order to collect money.”<sup>35</sup> According to one of the priests, the Marian statue had only been brought back to the church several days after the second procession in September 2006, in breach of the agreements that had been reached. “The couple<sup>36</sup> wanted to keep the money and thus control the parish”.<sup>37 38</sup> The Association had also enclosed the *Cisne* with a collection urn, for which they had kept the key. They had offered to divide up the donations as a way of resolving the conflict, but under these circumstances the church had not felt able to house the statue any longer. Subsequently, the priest travelled to Loja in order to bring another replica to Madrid, with the official authorisation of the Archbishop of Loja. This brought the conflict to an end. The parish church, as the owner of the second replica, was the legitimate home for the patron saint and established itself as the religious centre for the Ecuadorian Catholics. In addition, it ensured its entitlement to all rights regarding the use of the *Virgen del Cisne* and the income generated by donations. The elder of the two priests summed up the situation in April 2011 as follows: “We help the immigrants. Why shouldn’t the immigrants also help us?”<sup>39 40</sup> The younger priest regularly travels to Loja in order to learn more about the traditions and customs of the Catholic celebrations in Latin America.<sup>41</sup> By setting up a Christian network, which includes personal visits to the families of members of the parish, the Church has established itself as a communications medium and an interface between migrants in Spain and their home communities in Ecuador. The *Asociación Virgen del Cisne* disappeared from sight in the neighbourhood and the parish. In the film “La Churona” it later resumed the veneration of its patron saint in Ciudad Lineal. The Association not only organised the procession of the *Virgen del Cisne* in the following year (2008) but also a “Miss Ecuador in Spain” contest, as well as an arts and crafts fair, for which an admission fee was charged and in the course of which real estate was being offered for sale<sup>42</sup>. The epilogue of the documentary “La Churona” mentions Carmen Ballagán’s entrepreneurial spirit: “In September 2009 she organized the second Miss Ecuador España contest. On this occasion there was no homage to the *Virgen of El Cisne*”.

The attempt of the *Asociación Virgen del Cisne* to occupy a religious space, to organise its own ceremonies, to create alternative places of identification with their own religious symbolism and then to generate and control resources for charitable and / or commercial purposes failed due to the opposition of the local Catholic parish, acting in consultation with the Archbishopric of Madrid according to the parish priest. The similarities between the recent conflict about the *Virgen* and aspects of the history of its origins highlight the autocratic character of the Catholic Church. Since the conflict, the organisation of the annual processions for the *Virgen del Cisne* in Madrid has been supervised by the parish priest of San Lorenzo. On the other hand, the conflict also casts light on the

<sup>33</sup> Cf. the processions in the documentary “La Churona”.

<sup>34</sup> Accessible in the archives of El País, El Universal y páginas ecuatorianas [en.Latino.com; elcomercio.com; especu.com].

<sup>35</sup> “La Fundación y sus fundadores querían aprovecharse de la Virgen y los ecuatorianos. Organizaron fiestas para la Virgen donde recolectaron dinero” Interview, 17.04.2011

<sup>36</sup> Founding member of the Fundación

<sup>37</sup> “La pareja quería quedarse con el dinero y así quería dirigir a la parroquia.” Interview, 17.04.2011

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Father Juan José, 7 April 2011.

<sup>39</sup> “Estamos ayudando a los inmigrantes, ¿por qué los migrantes no deberían ayudarnos a nosotros también?”

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Father Don Emilio, 19 April 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Father Juan José, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. The documentary “la Churona”.

intentions of entrepreneurially-minded actors who utilise religious symbols such as the *Virgen del Cisne* in order to create representational spaces in which to bring together the Ecuadorian community and in this way to strengthen their own position.

## 5. Conclusions

This study of socio-spatial processes of appropriation and immigration shows the conflicts which can arise when the wish for a higher profile, more participation and the desire to improve living conditions in both Spain and Ecuador comes up against established power and claims of ownership, for example by the Catholic Church. To improve the basis for negotiations, recourse was taken to assigned classifications by means of a representational figure, subdividing people of a specific territory into social groups and thus generating inclusion and exclusion mechanisms. Considering the access to the figure of the *Virgen del Cisne*, the transport of the object to Spain, and the associated intentions, it could be shown how territorial belongings and social demarcation lines were established historically and have been maintained to this day. Interest groups confront one another with claims of different goals (annunciation by the Catholic Church vs. commercial interests of independent migrant associations), but in both cases the figure is used to reproduce and strengthen local ties and allocations. Both parties in the conflict used the figure of the *Virgen del Cisne* to justify their intentions, to bring together the followers in their own interests, and thus to create emotional and cognitive identifications by symbolic valorization (place making). The *Virgen del Cisne* is used as an economic and political resource and representationally for the politics of belonging in each case. The sacralised object, the *Virgen*, its changing owners (the Asociación Virgen del Cisne and the Catholic Church) and its Latin American worshippers come together for symbolic representations (processions of veneration) in order to legitimate their various claims. This symbolic power is based on repetitive practices relating to the *Virgen del Cisne* and the establishment of an object-human relationship through which the worshippers unconsciously internalise the wills of both institutions.

It is shown that the investigation of an event such as this conflict and its underlying historical links and relationships provides a good starting point for migration studies which are aimed not only at focusing on the material foundations of social relationships, but at drawing research away from groupist ideas of the social in order to concentrate more on practices and situations and thus on the empirical base. As this study shows, the critical consideration of social and religious communities, rather than taking these to be natural and given as in methodological essentialism (cf. Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2006), can open up new perspectives for transnationalism research and research into processes of communitisation.

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