

the Venezuelan Queen

By Maria Cristina Gonzalez

As you approach the mountains of Sorte in the Estate of Yaracuy in Venezuela during the autumn equinox, you might think you are no longer in Venezuela but in Western Africa, about to enter a tribal ritual. In a way, you will be right. You will hear drums so loud and strong your heart will have to change its rhythm to keep up with the music and excitement. Your first image will be fire. Candles will impose their light on a dark night. In just a matter of minutes you will realize you are in the presence of a ceremony. A crucifix will rule from the top of the altar; below it is a statue of the Virgin Mary. However, your attention will be captured by the figure just below the Virgin, sitting at the center of the altar: A white woman with the hips and hair of a Venezuelan Native, sitting on a tapir. La Reina, Maria Lionza.

La Reina (The Queen) for years has been called the Mother of Venezuela for holding in her rituals and appearance a mix of African, Spanish and Native Venezuelan races. Her myth is a provocative jungle fairytale whose colors and textures change depending on the storyteller. However, one thing is always clear in all the stories about Maria Lionza: she rules the land of Sorte and takes care of all Venezuelans.

The most frequently told story goes as follows: Forty guards stood at the front of a cave that held captive a beautiful native princess. Her father, the Cacique (a Native tribe's Chief) Yaracuy of the Jirajara tribe, had ordered them to imprison her inside to prevent her green eyes from meeting their own reflection. But by now, after so many fairytales, we understand that no matter how many times you lock away the princess in the story, nothing will stop her from breaking free to follow the course of her destiny. The princess escaped her keepers and ran as fast as she could towards the lake. Seeing herself for the first time, she could hardly find anything dangerous in her appearance. She had her father's dark cinnamon skin and the long black hair of her tribe. It was her green eyes that set her apart from the rest. They held an abyss, a mystery from another world, the world of the dead. They were, some said, the eyes of doom, for light eyes were a mark of overriding

bad luck. They were the reason for her confinement. She had been held prisoner by her own father because of the prophetic words of the tribe's wizard. The wizard, after a dream, had determined that the birth of a green-eyed Jirajara Princess would bring death to the tribe.

The Princess dipped her hands into the cool water, and as she let it run over her face and through her fingers, she realized she was being watched. A giant Anaconda, ruler of the lake the Princess had violated, had been staring at her from the moment she knelt down

YOUR FIRST IMAGE WILL BE FIRE.

beside the water. Thinking she might be the target of an angry python, the princess tried to turn back. But snakes are much faster than people, and without a moment's hesitation the Anaconda had wrapped itself around her body. However, this vicious animal was not hungry; instead it had fallen in love with the princess' beauty and wanted her for itself. Nonetheless, a crime as vile as stealing the daughter of a Cacique, favored by the gods, cannot go unpunished. The Anaconda would learn that lesson. The rage of the gods made the snake grow bigger and bigger, as if pumped up with air, until it finally exploded. The burst made the lake overflow, bringing death to the whole tribe and giving birth to a new goddess, the goddess of the lakes, the goddess of the land, the goddess of all nature: Maria Lionza.

Nowadays Maria Lionza is worshiped by many who consult her on their problems and pray for her to bring them good fortune. Some people say that even Ruben Blades, the salsa singer, has her to thank for his success. And he did thank her in a way, by writing her a song under her name. It is a name that is the name of the Catholic Virgin, a name that allows her to sit on an altar below a Crucifix.

Maria Lionza is a Native Princess with a Spanish name who dances to African drums. There is no better way to describe La Reina and no better way to describe Venezuela.

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