In the Cuban religion known as “Regla de Ocha” or simply “Ocha,” Ochún is the goddess of rivers, sensual feminine love, gold, honey, beauty and wealth. Ocha belongs to a family of religions founded in the 19th century by ancestors of the West African Yoruba people who were kidnapped and taken to labor on the plantations, in the mines, in the industries and in the great households of the Americas. This goddess is closely associated with the West African Yoruba goddess Oṣun, the Brazilian Candomblé goddess Oxum and the Trinidadian Shango goddess Oshun. This ceramic vessel, or “soup tureen” (sopeña), is a Cuban altar of the goddess, and the companion statue reveals the “syncretic” relationship between the gods of Ocha and the saints of the Roman Catholic Church.

“Syncretism” is the emergence of hybrid cultures where the lives of colonizers and colonized converged. In Cuba, as in Brazil and Trinidad, the West African captives were missionized by the Roman Catholic Church, and they identified similarities between their gods and the saints of the church, using the latter to camouflage their enduring but prohibited commitment to the gods of their forbears or interpreting the saints as alternative incarnations of the same entity. Consequently, the Cuban version of this religion is often called “Santería,” or “the Way of the Saints.”

Ochún came to be identified with the patron saint of Cuba, la Caridad del Cobre – an apparition of the Virgin Mary in the Cuban town of El Cobre. Like the river goddess, la Caridad is associated with water. Reportedly, la Caridad first appeared to three boatmen known as los tres Juanes, or “the three Johns” – a black man, a white man and an Indian whose shared boat and shared name emphasize the racial hybridity and alleged interracial harmony of Cuban society. It was la Caridad who rescued them from a near-fatal storm. Indeed, many Cubans regard both Ochún and la Caridad as mulatas, offspring of a confluence between African and European ancestry and heritage.

Ochún and la Caridad also share yellow and gold as their emblematic colors, and Ochún’s emblematic number is five. For these reasons, the vessel is yellow and gold, and its iconography dominated by the number five: a five-pointed crown and five bracelets of yellow metal, as well as a yellow protective necklace with five tassels and accent beads (glorias) in a multiple of five. Note that the necklace recalls the form of the Roman Catholic rosary. The two paddles of yellow metal atop the vessel altar mime the paddles of the boatmen on the statue and embody the power of the river goddess and saint to advance and guide the worshipper amid life’s turbulence.

An initiate of Ocha receives a half-dozen such vessel altars, each for one of the multiple divinities in his or her spiritual ensemble. Each color-coded vessel contains numerous numerically coded and ritually activated objects invoking the power of a specific god and miming the installation of that god in the initiate’s head.