

Dialogism and Syncretism: (Re)Definitions / *Dialogismo e sincretismo: (re)definições*

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ABSTRACT

This work seeks an adequate definition of syncretism within the theoretical context suggested by dialogism. One of the issues examined here is the usual description of syncretism as a possible dialectical operation. This discussion also points to the use of syncretism in the analysis of cultural practices. In order to do that, it refers to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin as well as the writings by researchers of his oeuvre.

KEYWORDS: Dialogism; Syncretism; Religion; Cultural Practices

RESUMO

Este trabalho busca uma definição adequada para sincretismo dentro do contexto teórico sugerido pelo dialogismo. Um dos focos está no exame do sincretismo como possível operação dialética, à qual tem sido frequentemente associado. Esta discussão também aponta para o sincretismo na análise de práticas culturais. Para tanto, recorre ao pensamento de Mikhail Bakhtin assim como a trabalhos de estudiosos de sua obra.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Dialogismo; Sincretismo; Religião; Práticas culturais

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Welcome to the melting pot that never quite melt
Where the politicians prosper while we tighten our belt
And they talk an awful lot about brotherly love
But when the nitty meets the gritty it's brotherly shove
*Jon Hendricks*¹

Dialogism

Despite the currency the term dialogism has enjoyed in Bakhtinian theoretical works for the past few years, it would be wrong to attribute its coinage to Bakhtin. As a matter of fact, Bakhtin himself apparently did not use the term in any of his major works (HOLQUIST, 1990, p.15). He wrote at length, however, about the dialogue amongst utterances and discourses, and despite the focus of his analysis on literary works, his theory of the dialogue often suggests its applicability in other fields. According to Robert Stam, the fundamental freedom Bakhtin attributes to such an operation suggests a flexible use of his theories. It is this freedom that allows us to enunciate, for instance, a term such as “Bakhtinian dialogism” in order to grasp the scope of dialogical relations as described by Bakhtin (1989, pp.187-218).

Michael Holquist goes further to envisage dialogue *within* the frame of dialogism; he stresses that “what gives dialogue its central place in dialogism is precisely the kind of *relation* conversations manifest” (1990, p.40), thus highlighting the interfacing dimension of dialogism. For Bakhtin, all discourses are in permanent interaction, an interaction which could be perceived as an infectious network of dialogues. Referring to dialogism in the context of a culture, Robert Stam clearly states that it

refers in the broadest sense to the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices [...] the matrix of communicative utterances that “reach” the text not only through recognizable citations but also through a subtle process of dissemination (1989, p.190).

¹ HENDRICKS, J.; MORENO, J. Taxi Driver. In: MORENO, J. *Línguas e amores*, CD 849 346-2. Rio de Janeiro: Verve-Polygram, 1991.

Stam also reminds us that

dialogue and monologue (cannot) be seen as in absolute opposition, since a monologue can also be dialogic, given the fact that every utterance, including the solitary utterance, has its 'others' and exists against the backdrop of other utterances (1989, p.189).

It would be up to the perceiver (reader, spectator, potential critic), equipped with her/his decoding repertoire, to detect such a network. In this sense, a text is never just a text, but a moment in a system of interacting discourses.

Holquist writes that dialogic relations are molded by "the conditions that must be met if any exchange [...] is to occur at all" (1990, p.40). These relations are thus not necessarily egalitarian as the term dialogism might suggest at first, but are instead inflected by power. This issue – that refers to the political relations that occur among discourses – is central to the understanding of syncretism as a form of dialogism, which I try to develop below.

In a dialogical network, the possibilities of political positioning of the elements interacting will depend on the possibilities of their *articulation*. Articulation is a practice that exposes and connects a set of elements (which can be utterances or discourses, for example) whose historically shifting identities are modified in the process of being articulated. These discourses are thus not seen as closed, delimited instances; their openness is essential to the process of articulation. Articulations can occur not only among signs and discourses but also among lines of thought, political positions, and cultural tendencies. This conception of the openness of signs and discourses is quite close to Bakhtin's theories on the transformational power of dialogue. Referring to cultural practices, Dick Hebdige describes their articulation as

a continually shifting, mediated relation between groups and classes, a structured field and set of lived relations in which complex ideological formations composed of elements derived from diverse sources have to be actively combined, dismantled, bricolaged, so that new politically effective alliances can be secured between different fractional groupings which can themselves no longer be returned to static, homogeneous classes (1988, p.205).

In this sense, articulations can be viewed as relationships of possibilities, which are not conformed to rules *a priori*. The occurrence of articulations will thus depend on the political context that makes them possible. According to Stuart Hall,

An articulation is [...] the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made? So the so-called “unity” of a discourse is really the articulation of different distinct elements which can be articulation of different ways because they have no necessary “belongingness” (HALL *apud* GROSSBERG, 1986, p.53).

Dialogues can thus be viewed as (articulatory) *relationships* occurring between (or among) different utterances or discourses. That which is attributed to conversations in the text by Michael Holquist quoted above could be extended to other kinds of interaction. Bakhtin demonstrated, several times, how dialogues are organized in novels – whether they were verbalized by characters or not. It shouldn’t be difficult, however, to apply these ideas to other forms of expression, such as audiovisual media.²

Even when we take into account the gamut of possibilities of the dialogical world, strategies that are defined by interpretation, as I noted before, can determine the directions of a dialogic approach. Such directions are not implicit by the essential nature of dialogue – they are instead a product of the reading of this dialogue. In this sense, dialogics seems to radically differ from dialectics, despite their apparent similarities.

Hegelian dialectics, which presuppose a clash of contraries in order for a third, “higher unity,” to be (re)produced, imply the *opposition* of struggling parts. These parts are themselves either bound to disappear or to be irrevocably transformed for the operation to be concluded. This relationship is distinguished from what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe describe as *antagonism*, a relationship that would maintain

² Bakhtin extensively demonstrated how dialogues – whether verbalized by characters or not – are organized in the novel, which is, despite its wealth of discursive interacting possibilities, a single-track medium, to use Robert Stam’s expression in *Subversive Pleasures* (1989, p.202). In film, for instance, which is basically a *multi-track medium*, discourses can arise from the diverse elements that compose the narrative, say, distinct visual elements in one single film shot. Relations between subsequent shots can also be read as dialogues. (A shot can be defined as the extension of a projected image that is, in its turn, limited by two cuts, one before, the other after the frame. These are moments that are defined in the process of editing).

identificational differences between (or among) confronting parts (1986, pp.93-148). In dialogue, the relationship that ensues does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of the implicated parts. The interaction may be transforming, but it does not imply annihilation, nor does it foretell the (re)production of a synthesis as a result of (a conflictual) clash. In an antagonistic relationship – as Laclau and Mouffe describe it – the very maintenance of the Self depends on the continuation of the Other. In other words, the antagonistic parts that engaged in dialogue do not submerge in but rather *ride on* the relationship; dialoguing parts do not disappear from interacting but instead gather the necessary means to recognize their own selves in the operation. It is this conception of dialogue that will be informing my use of the term syncretism in this work.

Thus, Bakhtinian dialogism is not essentially informed by “the either/or issue of dialectics,” as Michael Holquist phrases it (1990, p.41); it does, in fact, require the *maintenance* of the dialoguing “voices” in order to take place, which would approximate it to antagonism instead of opposition. In the latent struggle for hegemony that lies in any dialogical form, that would not necessarily lead to the silencing of one of the uttering voices – which would mean the end of the dialogical relation. Instead of the suppression of parts implied by the dialectic path, dialogism might then suggest the formation of “historical blocs” – and I borrow here from the thought of Antonio Gramsci. Moreover, in the words of Bakhtin, “the dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it” (2008, p.278). Thus, not only does Bakhtin make a distinction between dialectics and dialogue, but he also situates dialectics as an event *within* a greater dialoguing world. Bakhtin’s depiction of dialogism, then, disagrees with the standard Marxist reasoning, whose historic materialism instead privileges dialectics as a general explanation of the world.³ Thus, dialogism, unlike dialectics, puts the emphasis on the act of reading *the possibilities of phenomena* instead of attempting to fathom their essential nature or (as it often occurs in Marxist works of criticism) their function in an ideological design.

3. Marxist thought may have suffered from what Ernesto Laclau (1990, p.xi), commenting on the demise of Leninism, diagnoses as follows: “the more ‘universal’ the idea to be embodied is, the greater the distance from the historical limitations and the social agents intended as its bearers will be.”

Syncretism

Few concepts in the history of thought have been as equivocal as syncretism. Often confounded with a form of synthesis or understood as the merging of differences, a closer look at the etymology of syncretism can suggest other definitions. My contentions here are: first, to argue that syncretism is more related to Bakhtinian dialogue than to dialectics; second, to question the usual association of syncretism with religious phenomena.

Syncretism can be defined as a type of dialogic articulation in which elements engage in a dialoguing relationship within and/or among different fields of discourse. And one of the features that would distinguish syncretic relations from other kinds of relations is that the elements involved interact, dialogue and establish specific power relations in the form of (often antagonistic) alignments and still keep their distinctive identities.

However, due to the multiple meanings and uses that have been ascribed to the term syncretism, it becomes imperative to formulate a functional definition as well as to test its usefulness. In order to fulfill that, I will search for a tentative definition of the term, tracking its possible etymology and its uniqueness; I will also evaluate some of its uses and their historic impact on the term's relevance for the purposes of this work. Nevertheless, far from an attempt to retrieve any "original" meaning the word might have had, my work here will instead try to bring about some of the political content syncretism can still convey.

The first known, written record of the term *sugkretismos* can be found in Plutarch's text. As Carsten Colpe describes it, the word

was probably based on *sugkretos* (Ionian form of *sugkratos*, "mixed together") and was explained by popular etymology or by Plutarch himself as referring to the behavior of the Cretans who, despite the discord habitual among them, closed ranks when an external enemy attacked them (1987, p.218).

Drifting away from Plutarch's "original" use, religion historians in Europe made use of syncretism to describe the first centuries of Christianity, when there occurred the

phenomenon known as the “Hellenization of Christianity.” Most authors have limited their texts to issues of liturgy or scripture interpretation, focusing on the process of Hellenization and its incorporation by the official canon of the Catholic Church. This period of European history has often been emblematically depicted as a process leading to an eventual synthesis. Researcher René Nouailhat, writing about the period, expands the scope of the term:

The phenomenon of hellenization is inserted in a global context of syncretism, which occurs at all levels of expression (institutional, legal and political, religious and moral, etc...) of the *collective consciousness* of that period (1975, p.213; emphasis added).⁴

In other words, the process of syncretism – even though Nouailhat confines it to that specific period in history – occurs at many ideological levels, not only at the religious one, despite the insistence of some historians. Moreover, Nouailhat’s term “mental collectif” [collective consciousness] suggests an even wider scope for this process, which can entail a plethora of cultural practices.

As the etymology thus suggests, syncretism was first used to describe a definite political situation. However, the almost exclusive use of syncretism in religious thought gained currency in the 19th century. The strictly theological appropriation of the term may have stemmed from the fact that, at the time, for the Cretans as well as for other Mediterranean populations, political discourse was inseparable from religious discourse. And despite this tendency towards specialization, theologians have used the term in different ways, ways which seem to have driven syncretism away from its supposedly original meaning. It has, since Plutarch, gone through so many changes that certain authors, such as Helmer Ringgren, suggest the impossibility of an etymological/historical search for an “unambiguous” concept:

The term syncretism is often used without a clear and unambiguous definition. Now, definition is often a difficult enterprise, and especially so in the area of religious research. Neither etymology, nor a historical analysis of the use of the term appears to be particularly illuminating (1969, p.24).

⁴ Text in original: “Le phénomène de hellénisation du christianisme s’inscrit dans ce contexte global de syncrétisme, qui se manifeste à tous les niveaux d’expression (institutionnel, juridique et politique, religieuse et morale, etc...) du mental collectif de cette période.”

Such statements can either contribute to a total abandonment of a project of tentative definition or may, instead, become a challenge for the researcher who tackles it. Ringgren at once reaffirms the “belongingness” of syncretism to the field of religion and its “inadequacy,” which would be a result of its vagueness. What seems to displease researchers is the fact that as a tool for interpretation, syncretism has lost its *adaequatio intellectus et rei*, that is, correspondence of mind and object. This scholarly dissatisfaction implies more than desire for definiteness; it implies faith/trust in the possibility of exact discourse as well as in the possibility of coincidence between sign and referent – in other words, a pre-Saussurean ideology, which relies on a system of references, instead of a system of differences.

From a post-Saussurean perspective, however, the history of the uses of syncretism can be illustrative of some of Bakhtin’s ideas about language. One of them is that language is in permanent transformation; in other words, language can never be frozen in any stage, for it keeps being re-created continuously. This is in fact what happened to the term syncretism itself, which seems to defy exact definitions and, in order to be useful in this work, will undergo but a provisional definition. In a Bakhtinian sense, the very contact between utterances (as well as subjects) prevents such semantic closures. In the words of Michael Holquist, “A dialogic world is one in which I can never have my own way completely, and therefore I find myself plunged into constant interaction with others – and with myself. In sum, dialogism is based on the primacy of the social [...]” (1990, p.39).

Syncretism, therefore, cannot be detached from this social (historical/political/cultural, etc.) context, since the term itself is a depiction of a form of contact between and among signs and discourses. Moreover, if we situate it away from dialectics and, instead, bring it into the context of dialogism, it may become more clear how syncretism precludes a synthetic outcome. From this perspective, a “dialectical syncretism” can be seen as an oxymoronic notion. Syncretism would not belong to the realm of predetermined certainties obtained in dialectical operations, in which the confrontation of elements is bound to result in synthetic outcomes that, in their turn, will engage in other confrontations. In his cogent attempt to define syncretism, Carsten

Colpe makes a careful distinction between syncretism and synthesis, stating that the “Reconciliation of cultures or an integration of cultures into a higher unity are better represented by the term *synthesis*, which [...] is to be understood as a complex of synthetic phenomena” (1987, p.218).

It is in this sense that syncretic relations, then, can be better explained by Bakhtinian dialogics than by Hegelian dialectics. For the probable etymology of syncretism foregrounds the political paradigm of articulation and identity, a paradigm under which the factional inhabitants of Crete, rather than forming a homogeneous whole, compose a heterogeneous front of distinct communities in altered relations to each other. As such, the discursive alignment implicit in syncretism remains contingent to relations of power and subject to change according to historical specificity; the elements united in it are denied any a priori “necessary belongingness,” and are precluded any sense of an originary fixity both to their identities and to their relations. In this manner, syncretism designates articulation as a politicized and discontinuous mode of becoming. It entails the “formal” coexistence of components whose precarious (i.e., partial as opposed to impartial) identities are mutually modified in their encounter, yet whose distinguishing differences, as such, are not dissolved or elided in these modifications, but strategically reconstituted in the ongoing war of position. It’s the pot that never melts, as the poem sung by Jon Hendricks goes.⁵ As Benitez-Rojo puts it,

A syncretic artifact is not a synthesis, but rather a signifier made of differences. What happens is that, in the melting pot of societies that the world provides, syncretic processes realize themselves through an economy in whose modality of exchange the signifier of *there* – of the Other – is consumed (“read”) according to local codes that are already in existence, that is, codes from *here* (1992, p.21; emphasis in original).

Insofar as syncretism thus testifies to its elements’ permeable boundaries, the political and methodological efficacy of strict relations of contradiction/complementarity between identities presumed as fixed (as in, for example, dominant

⁵ It is in this sense that syncretism, as it is developed here, may act as a foil to the contradictory logics of the essentialism/anti-essentialism debates. Often the structure of these debates sets up essentiality as presence and anti-essentiality as absence, thus precipitating the notion that if differences are not fixed, they are lost or disappear.

models of, say, class struggle, heterosexuality and/or objectivistic dialectics – often functioning as undergirding structures for subordinations in the social) can be radically questioned. It is this implicit relational challenge that most dramatically distinguishes syncretism from synthesis as well as hybridity – a term used interchangeably with syncretism in some of the most illuminating works of the Anglophone cultural critique of the past few years. Some of these works, especially those which deal with identity politics, have featured the concept of hybridism in an effort to stress the non-essentialism of articulations of composed cultural practices. In such works, the celebration and radicalization of the hybrid has served to dismantle essentialist notions of ethnic and cultural identity, but the ideological underpinnings of hybridism remains without examination or criticism.

Etymologically linked to animal breeding and agriculture, the concept of hybridism may imply (and often does) the “pure” origin of elements – in other words, their fixed and essential identities – that could be detected before hybridization. As one of the entries for hybrid in *Novo Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa* (1975, p.722; my translation) explains, it is “originated in the crossing of different species,” either animal or vegetal.⁶ Archetypically, hybrids are characterized by sterility and “un-naturalness” (as the mule, which is the product of the breeding of a horse and a donkey). Hence, hybridism does not imply the elimination of essentialism in the “offspring” in the product of breeding. Hybridism can also displace this essentialism onto the genitors, which are then classified in static, homogeneous categories.

Moreover, this reference to parents and offspring threatens to reinforce the ultimate essentialism of sexual(ity) difference, even as it might highlight the heterogeneity of ethnic and cultural identity.⁷ In this sense, hybridity harbors the danger of contributing to the hegemony of the heterosexist metaphor which also informs numerous, oft-cited theories of the natural and of material relations. The specific logic implicit here, that two contrasting entities “come” together to produce a third, masquerades as both universal and transhistorical. It is akin to what Foucault has called “the meagre logic of contradiction,” an Aristotelian notion that has enjoyed special

⁶ Text in original: “originário do cruzamento de espécies diferentes.”

⁷ For a criticism of essentialist representations of sexual difference, see Butler (2003), and Straayer *Bakhtiniana*, São Paulo, 11 (3): 62-81, Sept./Dec. 2016.

prominence since the nineteenth century, and of which he finds evidence in the “sterilising constraints of the dialectic” (FOUCAULT, 1980, pp.143-144).

Indeed, such logic can be seen to naturalize not only dominant, teleological conceptions of progress and evolution (which are also germane to eugenicist notions of ethnic and cultural purity), but also totalizing and reductive accounts of the mechanisms of struggle that privilege conflict as *the* means of change. The prevalence of theories of historical development and social transformation informed by such logic no doubt plays a role in the maintenance of the current hierarchical forms of subjectivity.⁸

Thus, while not rejecting conflict as a form of struggle, I question its privileged epistemological status in the presently dominant regime of truth. It is my contention that the power relations implicit in syncretism exceed autotelic logics of contradiction and synthesis, and challenge the hegemony such hetero-logics enjoy. Indeed, considering the subject position(alities) occupied by (sub)cultural practitioners of syncretism, and the ones they embrace (and critique, but don't simply contradict) as they traverse sexualities, genders, races and classes in articulation, we feel the demand for more nuanced understandings of resistance processes and strategies. Hence the importance of syncretism to the project of thinking struggle.

Syncretism and Religion

Even though syncretism may not be applied exclusively to religious phenomena, as described above, its use in this field remains very much alive. In this sense, it may prove worthwhile to examine this use in order to map a trajectory of the term.

That can be seen, for example, in the official discourse of the Catholic Church

(1990).

⁸ In terms of historical development, what I am referring to here is a certain conception of dialectics in which the term describes the operation of a teleological system that fixes the identities of the elements a priori by reducing their relations to a contradiction. The telos thus serves to resolve that contradiction, by what Laclau and Mouffe call a (Hegelian) “cunning of reason.” See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1986, p.95). In terms of social transformation I am referring, for instance, to Gramsci's distinction between “war of manoeuvre” and the favor it has enjoyed (presumably due to fear of “recuperation”) over “war of position” in theorizing struggle. From this perspective, war of manoeuvre reduces struggle to contradiction and aims at attaining a spectacular (though temporary) victory over oppression; war of position involves a more thorough and strategic, if never totally negational, approach to struggle. See Gramsci (1978).

which, in Brazil, is hegemonic amongst many other religious institutions. Catholicism kept its status of state religion during the Brazilian Empire (1822–1889). Its positionality within the supposedly lay state that was established with the Republic in 1889 has been decidedly ambiguous. Nevertheless, despite the proliferation of neo-Pentecostal sects of the past years, the Catholic Church still occupies a predominant place in official discourses. Thanks to that hegemony, public spaces in Brazil invariably display catholic emblems – whereas they usually do not display symbols of other religions.

The interpretation that the Catholic Church makes of syncretic phenomena is in fact representative of the (rather biased) appropriation the term has undergone for the past centuries. The Catholic Church, today, would hardly characterize itself as syncretic. Indeed, ecclesiastical discourse actually has, for the past fifteen centuries, emphasized the foundational, “original” role of the Catholic Church. This image-building process has bestowed the institution with the stature of an “original whole,” rather differentiated from a “compositional” or “hybrid” articulation (or ensembleness) such as those which are suggested by syncretic arrangements. Catholic policies towards syncretism thus reveal an important point: the syncretic is here viewed as “impure” (which would bring it closer to the “hybrid”), a trait that would rather belong to a demonized other, one who would not be able to keep essential “purity.” In this sense, it is not enough to establish hegemony; demonization is part of an ideological operation that secures structures of power that can be threatened by the other’s uncertainty. As anthropologist Mary Douglas (1988, p.162) puts it, this is a tendency that seeks to make “existence into an unchanging lapidary form. Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise. Most of us indeed would feel safer if our experience could be hard-set and fixed in form.”

The capacity to decide over purity (as well as over authenticity), which was for a long time a prerogative of the Catholic Church – in the European sphere, at least –, was to be reaffirmed by the scientific practices which equipped colonialism with discourses about the other. This tendency, which was reinforced by the Enlightenment and Positivism, continues to our days despite the intense theoretical and ideological transformations in recent anthropological (as well as theological) discourse. The

persistence of this tendency is made evident in the present *Webster's Dictionary* (1993, p.2319) definitions of syncretism: “flagrant compromise in religion or philosophy; eclecticism that is illogical or leads to inconsistency; uncritical acceptance.” For Eurocentric science, the articulatory practices of subaltern peoples were taken as illegitimate and contradictory acts, much in the same way their oral history was considered unreliable when compared to the colonizer’s written history. The most widespread Portuguese language dictionary in Brazil, the *Novo Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa*, also follows this tendency and defines syncretism as an “artificial gathering of ideas or theses of disparate origins; a confused overall view of a complex totality” (1975, p.919; my translation).^{9 10}

However, in apparent contradiction with the official policy of the church, Catholic missionaries have often resorted to syncretic practices in order to overcome problems of evangelization. This is what had happened in Europe, when folk Christianity, which inherited pagan practices, was more or less tolerated by the church. Syncretic practices in the Americas, for instance (more or less condoned by the church), were featured as early as the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. That happened, for instance, in the “civilizing” endeavors of the Jesuits amongst the Guarani peoples in South America, as Clovis Lugon (1968) showed in his study of the Jesuit colonies in the Parana river basin in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The official discourse of the Catholic Church, however, only reluctantly admitted syncretism in the 20th century, after John XXIII’s Vatican II council. More recently, the Catholic Church has again reclaimed the term as part of the discourse of the theology of liberation. This change has allowed the church to incorporate – officially – missionary strategies that demanded the renegotiation of the canonical catechism. This has happened in peripheral communities (that is, non-European nor Europeanized) that, despite four centuries of missionary work, have remained recalcitrant to conversion. Nevertheless, the church keeps safeguards in the admission of syncretic practices; it has

⁹ Text in original: “reunião artificial de ideias ou de teses de origens díspares.”

¹⁰ The *Novo Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa* also supplies the following definition, which differs from the alternatives offered by the *Webster's Dictionary*: “fusion of culturally different, or even antagonistic elements, in one single element, retaining some originary signs perceptible (1975, p.919; my translation).” Text in original: “fusão de elementos culturais diferentes, ou até antagônicos, em um só elemento, continuando perceptíveis alguns traços originários.”

had to assure its hegemony in a complex process that combines enforced evangelization, acculturation, assimilation and, ultimately, unavoidable resistance.

Commenting on the conclusions of the Council of Puebla (1984), scholar Manuel Marzal assures his readers that despite the syncretism of the praxis, there it retains a “real Catholic substract.” Marzal goes on affirming that

this Catholic devotion of the people in Latin America has neither impregnated enough nor succeeded to catechize some autochthonous and black cultural groups. In their turn, these groups possess a wealth of values and keep “seeds of the Word” as they await the living Word (1985, p.412; my translation).¹¹

In other words, the peoples that resist Christianization are always potential Christians, for they possess the (dormant) “seed of the Word” awaiting to be fecundated by the “living Word.” Syncretism is then but a *temporary transition* towards a synthesis which will assure Catholic hegemony.

That is why certain practices are carefully monitored by church representatives, who have developed what anthropologist Hugo Nutini calls “guided syncretism,” a rather oxymoronic term if we take into consideration the motivations that make syncretism possible within the context of a Gramscian war of position, that is, the very initiative of the parts involved in alignment. In his description of the cult of the dead in Tlaxcala, Mexico, Nutini lists the elements that were deliberately introduced in the community by the church since the 16th century, as well as the elements that have remained from pre-Hispanic times, aligning each group under what he designates as the categories of “guided” and “spontaneous” syncretisms. He acknowledges the power relations between the two types of syncretisms, but asserts that

Guided syncretism may be regarded as a necessary condition for the emergence of a final synthesis [...] while spontaneous syncretism is a subsidiary development, which takes place in institutions or domains that are marginally situated, both with respect to a given socioreligious ensemble and in relation to the syncretic matrix itself,

¹¹ Text in original: “Esta piedad popular católica en America Latina no ha llegado a impregnar adecuadamente o aún no ha logrado la evangelización de algunos grupos culturales autoctonos o de origen negro, que por su parte poseen riquísimos valores y guardan 'semillas del Verbo' en espera de la Palavra viva.”

and whose syntheses usually coalesce after that of the main guided thrust (NUTINI, 1988, p.408).

This reasoning pictures a vertical movement that tends to overestimate the action of institutions such as the Catholic Church (an external factor) in the creation of syncretisms, allowing little space for the contribution and initiative of the social groups (moved by internal factors) who are confronted by invading cultures. It is as if the European institution had enough power to allow (or not to allow) the amount of syncretism that was to be practiced. Thus, an important omission on this view is, instead, the amount of syncretism that *the local group* decides to incorporate; in other words, what is the identification of the local group towards the Christian practices which would not eliminate their cultural identity altogether?

Another very important point in Nutini's discourse is that of the "final synthesis." As I have noted, many writers – and such is the case of Nutini – situate syncretism as a teleological step that would necessarily lead to some sort of synthesis. Such conceiving of syncretism can only be understood in the light of the hegemony dialectics have held for the past centuries in European(ized) thought. We are here, anyway, far from the more horizontal idea of syncretic relations the Cretan example might suggest.

Until the late 20th century syncretic phenomena were seen as signs of underdevelopment and primitivism. Such position was shared by the state (which regularly repressed African-Brazilian religious practices), by political parties, the educational system and the media. It was shared, as well, by influential authors, such as Nina Rodrigues, Edison Carneiro and Arthur Ramos, who wrote extensively about African-Brazilian religious practices.

The works of Roger Bastide, Pierre Verger and Gilberto Freyre would shed new lights onto this issue. The work of anthropologist Roger Bastide, *Estudos Afro-Brasileiros* [African-Brazilian Studies] (1941), for example, conflates both ideas: writing about African-Brazilian religious rituals, Bastide does not depict syncretic practices as step towards synthesis, but instead equals syncretism to synthesis. His use of syncretism tends to determine a "freezing point," which can be identified as the conclusion of a line of development. His work, however, has to be contextualized within

a tendency of thought that strived to define and delimit cultural practices in order to turn Brazilian culture into a stable and apprehensible object. It is a difficult task, if we take into consideration the extremely variable forms that can be grouped as “African-Brazilian religious practices.” The variability of these practices, however, can reveal much of the character of “Brazilian culture” as a whole.

In this sense, the ethnographic discourse produced about Brazil is especially important in this work, for it was this discourse that helped shape much of what is understood today as the dialogical and syncretic forms of Brazilian cultural practices. It has also strongly influenced Brazilian literature, theater, cinema, which often dealt with the problematic of defining “Brazilian culture,” since this issue is at the hub of a series of paradigmatic tensions that have historically informed political and artistic practices in the country.

Moreover, in the past decades it has become virtually impossible, in any discourse concerning Brazilian culture, to ignore the presence of these religious practices in all regions, social groups and ethnicities in the country. Once despised or diminished as social forces, they are especially valued today, as authentic expressions of Brazilian culture. Today, these practices are taken into account in election polls, marketing researches and in the programming of radio and television. And not unlike in other parts of the Europeanized world, in today’s Brazil syncretic phenomena tend to be celebrated in a positive way.

Epistemological Underground

From the ethnographic perspective, the syncretic “encounter” of African deities with Catholic saints was often interpreted as a subterfuge for the communities in order to avoid the police repression they suffered until the 20th century. In other words, the African communities established in the Americas would have worshipped Catholic saints in order to provide a cover for their own deities. Accordingly, these syncretic practices are still considered by many Christian religious purists as manifestations of confusion and ignorance.

However, a different definition of syncretism may shed another light on the same phenomena. The very etymology of syncretism suggests the realignment of forces which, from the perspective of the oppressed, points to a change in the hegemonic equilibrium. Still from that perspective, the elaboration of syncretisms can be reexamined according to another paradigm: instead of interpreting the alignment of religious entities as a result of religious persecution, this alignment can be seen as the production of specific knowledges, which in their turn stem from a cultural confrontation in a context of power relations. In fact, the supposed “disguise” of religious entities seems to follow certain rules that suggest more than just coincidence. Otherwise, how would it be possible to understand the symbolic affinities among figures as distant as the Yoruba Oshun from West Africa, the Taino goddess Atabey from Cuba and the Virgin Mary brought from Spain by the colonizers and accordingly (re)cognized by the enslaved Amerindians and Africans? Such affinities can be tracked in the narratives that accompany the three deities; they can also be recognized by their iconic representations. These affinities, in fact, have become such a strong tie that this complex entity has become the p(m)atron saint of Cuba, embodied by La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, a symbol deeply rooted in popular cultural practices (and which was never censored by the regime that was established on the island in 1959). Its representation can be seen in the images in which the Virgin hovers, articulately, above a drifting boat which carries three personages: a European, an Amerindian and an African, hence suggesting the formation of a multi-racial Cuban identity.¹² Not unlike the worshipping of Yemaya in Brazil, in which dwell deities of different origins (Amerindian, African, Eurasian), these entities keep an ongoing dialogue, in antagonism (not in opposition), one that allows for the recognition of these origins.

The dialogical confrontation that produces these syncretisms can also be understood – according to the classical model suggested by its etymology – as an encounter of groups under a common oppression. It would not be possible to equal the suffering of the African population in the Americas with that of the European peasants who were forced to immigrate from Europe seeking a better life. But these peasants, in their turn, also brought a set of beliefs and religious practices that suffered the

¹² A brilliant description of this syncretism can be found in Benitez-Rojo (1992, pp.12-16).

persecution of the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations. The popular Catholicism of the European peasantry, overtly polytheistic – and often accompanied by possession rites¹³ – was the target of Catholic persecution since the very beginning of the Middle Age. The abrogation of several saints that took place in the past decades (as it was the case of Saint George, who was declared historically improbable and would not have churches in his name any more)¹⁴ is but a sign that this persecution continues. Despite that, the worshipping of these saints survives. It was exactly that devout peasantry that formed the majority of European immigrants who came to countries like Brazil during the colonial period and after independence.

The process of syncretic recognition and alignment that took place in the Americas can be seen as part of what Clyde Taylor (1989, p.102) appropriately calls “epistemological underground,” that is, a flow in which oppositional knowledges, dispersed in a field in which the effect of domination separates and subordinates them in historically specific and continuous ways, manage to find structuring connections and thus challenge hegemony. It is this current that makes possible the communication of subaltern subjectivities, connecting women, ethnic groups and minorities that otherwise would be segregated in separate compartments.

The abrogated saint George can supply us with an example of such connections. Would it be just a Christian icon, used to cover up an African deity made illegal by the colonial authorities? What matters, here, is *not* the mere replacement of the deity “Ogun” (West-African? Yoruba? Fon?) by “Saint George” (European? Anatolian? Cyrenaic? Palestinian? Cappadocian?). What matters is that they can be understood as an articulation of an entity of two faces recognized under oppression, and that is

¹³ That is the case, for example, of the Tarantella rituals in Sicily, in which women are bit by spiders (usually inserted in their vaginas), fall into trance, dance and serve as oracles. These ceremonies sometimes take place inside Catholic churches. The *tarantella* is known as a folk dance that veils the ancient traditions that produced it.

¹⁴ Archbishop Paulo Evaristo Arns (2004, p.99), from São Paulo, reveals in his biography that he demanded from Pope Paul VI that Saint George – patron saint of England *and* the popular Corinthians Football Club in Brazil – should not be abrogated. He’d have said, “Holy Father, our people does not get it. Saint George is very popular in Brazil, especially because of Corinthians sympathizers, the most popular football club of São Paulo” [my translation; text in original: “Santo Padre, nosso povo não está entendendo direito a questão. São Jorge é muito popular no Brasil, sobretudo entre a imensa torcida do Corinthians, o clube de futebol mais popular de São Paulo”]. The Pope apparently understood the problem and wrote, “We cannot harm neither England nor Corinthians” [my translation; text in original: “Não podemos prejudicar nem a Inglaterra nem o Corinthians”]. Arns keeps the Pope’s note to this day.

(re)established in a current of signifiers. This current of dialogues – it is important to note – *does not* have a “beginning” in “Africa” or in the “Middle East,” nor does it have a predictable ending. The syncretic transformations underwent by these entities (as they are “consumed” or “read”) can vary, always according to the contexts that summon them. Moreover, the followers of the syncretic religious cults disagree with the traditional ethnography when dealing with the various sources that inform their own cosmogonies and practices. For many African-Brazilians (so defined by ethnic or cultural identity), this process would have begun with the diaspora itself.

Thus, it is in this epistemological underground that syncretism can occur with the strength suggested by its etymology. Syncretism can only be understood as a concept that underwent transformations in a historical process and, in this sense, in contexts of relations of mobility and power. In order for us to learn whether it still has any usefulness (and perhaps some precision) in the criticism of cultural practices, it will be required to take into account its etymology and the entire semantic load embedded in its history. Understood as a dialogical process, this concept can recuperate its richness as an instrument of analysis.

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