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SYNCRETISM AND ITS SYNONYMS

REFLECTIONS ON CULTURAL MIXTURE

CHARLES STEWART

The subject matter of anthropology has gradually changed over the last twenty years. Nowadays ethnographers rarely search for a stable or original form of cultures; they are usually more concerned with revealing how local communities respond to historical change and global influences. The burgeoning literature on transnational flows of ideas, global institutions, and cultural mixture reflects this shift of attention. This increased awareness of cultural interpenetration has, furthermore, been instrumental in the critique of earlier conceptions of “culture” that cast it as too stable, bounded, and homogeneous to be useful in a world characterized by migrations (voluntary or forced), cheap travel, international marketing, and telecommunications.¹ Contemporary social theory has accordingly turned to focus on phenomena such as globalization, transnational nationalism, and the situation of diaspora communities. In this body of literature the word *syncretism* has begun to reappear alongside such related concepts as hybridization and creolization as a means of portraying the dynamics of global social developments.

In what follows I consider some current attempts to theorize mixture before turning to examine the suitability, or not, of the terms listed above. Anthropologists and other social scientists have expressed ambivalence about all three terms—*syncretism*, *hybridity*, and *creolization*. I discuss these reservations before presenting a genealogical consideration of the single term *syncretism*. My purpose in considering the history of *syncretism* up to the present is not to enforce a standard usage confined to the domain of religion; nor is it my goal to promote *syncretism* to a position of *primus inter pares* in the company of all other terms for mixture. I see my approach instead as an attempt to illustrate historically that *syncretism* has an objectionable but nevertheless instructive past. If this past can be understood, then we are in a position to consciously reappropriate *syncretism* [Shaw and Stewart 2] and set the ethnographic study of cultural mixture on new tracks.

This might seem too minimalist to readers who currently have no reservations about the term, but many anthropologists, on both sides of the Atlantic, have personally expressed to me strong reservations about ever employing the word *syncretism*. If asked why they hold this view, they are often unable to articulate a specific reason. Some, however, did express one or both of the following objections: (1) *syncretism* is a pejorative term, one that derides mixture, and/or (2) *syncretism* presupposes “purity” in the

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1. Critiques of the (old) culture concept have been numerous since the mid-1980s. Examples would be Clifford and Marcus, Clifford, Predicament of Culture; Rosaldo, Culture and Truth; Barth; Abu-Lughod; Friedman.

traditions that combine. Both of these reservations will be considered below, but it is the broad disagreement within the anthropological community on the appropriateness of the very term *syncretism* that has stimulated this inquiry. Such ambivalence reflects basic uncertainties about how to conceptualize cultural mixture.

Current Discussions of Mixture

Cultures, if we still wish to retain this term (and I do), are porous; they are open to intermixture with other, different cultures and they are subject to historical change precisely on account of these influences.² This has no doubt always been the case. Certainly decolonization and the entry into a postmodernity where master narratives of purity and homogeneity are vulnerable to doubt have contributed to valorizing recognitions of mixture where formerly they had been stigmatized as inauthentic and hence uninteresting for anthropological study. Research in the Caribbean, in Sidney Mintz's view, started relatively late precisely because this region "was considered theoretically unfruitful . . . its peoples supposedly lacked culture, or were culturally bastardized" [303].

Cultural borrowing and interpenetration are today seen as part of the very nature of cultures [Glissant 140–41; Rosaldo, Foreword xv]. To phrase it more accurately, syncretism describes the process by which cultures constitute themselves at any given point in time. Today's hybridization will simply give way to tomorrow's hybridization, the form of which will be dictated by historico-political events and contingencies. In examining cultural hybridity, writers such as Edward Said and James Clifford [*Predicament* 14–15] have lifted syncretism out of the framework of acculturation. Syncretism is no longer a transient "stage" which will disappear when, with time, assimilation occurs. As Said expresses it: all cultures are involved in one another; none is simple and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic" [xxv]. Even traditionalist movements mounted by minority groups or peripheral, postcolonial societies in the conscious, nativist effort to resist "Westernization" or "Americanization" cannot escape cultural hybridity. For Sahlins, "syncretism is not a contradiction of their culturalism—of the indigenous claims of authenticity and autonomy—but its systematic condition" [389].

In literary theory and cultural studies—some of the best examples of which are produced by cosmopolitan writers who themselves have migrated to Europe or North America from recently decolonized countries—the condition of hybridity has become something to celebrate. In Bhabha's view displacement and mixture give rise to a "Third Space" from which colonialism's failed project of promoting purity and polarity may be properly seen, criticized, and rejected [37]. For Gilroy the "black Atlantic" poses an example of a diaspora loosely linked by a variety of overlapping and criss-crossing

2. I use the term culture to refer to loosely bounded zones of difference between human groups in the world (for example, language, law, religion). Difference does not imply inferiority. Total globalization would spell the end of cultures and thus the end of culture, as Wallerstein [*"The National and the Universal"*] and Fardon [*"Introduction: Counterworks"*] point out. But none of the authors in a sampling of recent volumes on globalization [Featherstone; King; Friedman; Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*] sees this occurring. People across the world may be linked by their common access to similar goods and ideas, but they make very different sense of them. They use them to build quite different worlds. Parkin has suggested that wildly varying consumption practices, themselves grounded in "people's theories of themselves among objects," are the route by which the "exotic" returns and reasserts difference in the face of the potential global homogenization of culture [97].

historical experiences, aesthetic tastes, and political orientations. Its plural, syncretic, polythetic form rests on no generalized common culture, and in that respect furnishes an instructive model of what a nonessentialized social formation might look like. On these grounds he terms the black Atlantic a “counterculture of modernity.”

A prime example, perhaps the *locus classicus*, for these and other similar theorizations would be the following quotation from Salman Rushdie’s *In Good Faith* (1990), his first public statement after Ayatollah Khomeini issued his *fatwa* in 1989:

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotch-potch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. The Satanic Verses is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love song to our mongrel selves. [4, emphasis in original]

The Satanic Verses proved to be more than just a theorization of hybridity, but an expression of a hybridized, diasporic viewpoint that was received as a direct challenge to Islamic authority and scriptural immutability. Rushdie’s parodic and polluted Islam, the product of dislocation and estrangement [cf. Yalçın-Heckmann], threatened an Islamic “internal memory” [Bloch] predicated on the faithful, accurate internalization of the *Koran*—the “absolutism of the Pure.” To distort scripture by lampooning and misrepresenting proper names, as Rushdie did in *The Satanic Verses*, amounted to blasphemy as an instance of syncretic sin [Bhabha 226; Asad 267].

Vocabularies of Mixture

The preceding introduction sketches the place of cultural mixture in contemporary theory, global processes, and current political contests. Dissatisfaction has been expressed, however, over our terms for conceptualizing mixture. For example, the art historian Barbara Abou-El-Haj, commenting on a paper by Ulf Hannerz presented at a symposium on globalization, remarked:

To describe processes of cultural synthesis and transformation Hannerz offers “creolization,” a “corrupt metaphor” now mainstreamed top down to describe a true cultural dialectic, its former racist baggage of debasement subverted. For those of us outside anthropological and sociological discourse, the after-image lingers uncomfortably. Beyond our primary categories, global/local, we have yet to find a language capable of describing unequal exchange in a world of unequal exchanges. Is our vocabulary so impoverished because there is no such thing to be described, or because we have such difficulty envisaging it? [Abou-El-Haj 143–44]

Hannerz has borrowed the term *creolization* directly from the field of creole linguistics [Jourdan]. In particular, he uses it to allude to one particular phenomenon: the continuum [Drummond] of “mesolects” that arises in situations of prolonged contact between two (or more) historically distinct languages. The spectrum of diverse, overlapping, sometimes mutually unintelligible dialects extending from the speech of, say, European colonists to the original language(s) of the local people serves as a model for



globalization where certain knowledges, tastes, and technologies are distributed in overlapping continua between world centers and peripheral societies. As Hannerz puts it, “[t]here are now no distinct cultures, only intersystemically connected creolizing culture” [“World in Creolisation” 551]. This current consequence of creolization seems far removed from the New World conditions of forced migration and slavery that first gave rise to the term “creole” [Mintz 302]. Although Hannerz acknowledges the colonial history underlying the word *creole* [“American Culture” 11], the term’s “former racist baggage” has not clearly been subverted. A brief genealogy of the term *creole* might help us to understand its past while suggesting some new bearings for future analyses.

The word *creole*, from the Portuguese *crioulo*, meant literally, “bred, brought up,” but in usage referred to a slave raised in a master’s house.³ It denoted African slaves dislocated from their native land. In Spanish, the meaning of *creole* (*criollo*) was generalized over time to refer to anything of Old World origin that reproduced itself in the New World—plants and animals as well as humans [Palmié, “Against Syncretism” 94; Mintz 301]. The offspring of Africans and Europeans were equally creoles. The (*mestizo*) Peruvian writer Inca Gracilaso de la Vega, writing in the early seventeenth century, defined *creole* as “los que ya no eran españoles, ni tampoco indígenas [those who had ceased to be Spanish, but were not Indians, either]” [qtd. in Perl 169]. Creolization thus indicated a connection between New World birth and deculturation. Closely linked to this deculturing was a denaturing. In 1612 a Spanish Dominican theologian theorized that life in the New World brought decadence: “[t]he heavens of America induce inconstancy, lasciviousness, and lies: vices characteristic of the Indians and which the constellations make characteristic of the Spaniards who are born and bred there” [qtd. in Anderson, “Exodus” 316]. The concept of creolization fitted within the overall logic of a colonial Lamarckism that placed creoles under suspicion and subordination [Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 57–60].⁴

This outline reveals the sort of imperial history stamped into the word *creole* before it became the descriptor of a branch of linguistics; without creole people there would be no creole linguistics. The history of the word itself develops as part of a major event in the chronicle of globalization, but the early senses of *creole* suggest a different model for this process than does the continuum theory of creole linguistics. *Creole* draws attention to the inequities of power that allowed European colonizers to discursively legislate the importance of “race,” culture, and environment in determining where one fit along a chain of being that placed the Old World homeland and its subjects at the pinnacle.

When Hannerz criticizes the unfortunate biological overtones of terms such as *hybridity* and *mongrelization*, while extolling *creolization* [“American” 11], he reveals a

3. *Crioulo comes from the past participle of Portuguese criar, “to give birth to, to raise.” Criar derives from Latin creare, the first sense of which was reproductive: “to procreate, to give birth to.” The “create” in creole is thus both biological and cultural. A tension between cultural context and physical nature has been present in the word from its inception [Arrom 172; Perl; Mintz; Palmié, “Out of Place”]. The Oxford English Dictionary [1933 ed., rpt. 1970] defines creolization as “[t]he production of a Creole race; racial modification in the case of creole plants and animals.” Stephan Palmié first alerted me to the interest of this word’s history.*

4. *Segal and Handler draw attention to racial distinctions within the British colonies [11]. See Chaplin on colonial British natural philosophical views about the effects of climate on the bodies of New World inhabitants. In time, the term creole came to refer to anyone in the New World of even partial Old World ancestry. Thus creole and mestizo became synonymous, although there was still some suggestion that a criollo was purely of Old World parentage. In Mexico the mestizo was considered the product of mixture between “racial” stocks [Arrom; Knight 73], and criollos, in Mexico and other parts of Spanish America, were often considered more elite than mestizos [Helg 37].*

general state of confusion in social science terminology. How is it that the influential Mexican sociologist/anthropologist Canclini [11], as well as numerous other social scientists [Nederveen Pieterse], can embrace the term *hybridity*, when it demonstrably developed as part of the vocabulary of scientific racism in the nineteenth century?⁵ Nowadays *hybrid* may be understood to mean just “mixture, cross between two things” in everyday English. It is not restricted to biology and genetics, but its racist past is even easier to reconstruct than that of “creole.”

Words do change meaning over time, and *hybrid* has embedded within it both negative and positive attitudes toward mixture. In nineteenth-century racial thinking the hybrid was deemed to be weak and sterile—proof that human “races” were different species that could not mix—while in the twentieth century the new field of genetics showed how plant hybrids, for example, could be especially fruitful and resilient. Nederveen Pieterse gives a broad overview of the acceptance of hybridity in recent sociology and anthropology, where it is increasingly employed as a model for globalization. Virtually the only negative theoretical assessment comes from Smadar Lavie, who registers the concern that in some formulations hybridity indicates weakness, homelessness, and alienation. “This is a response-oriented model of hybridity. It lacks agency, by not empowering the hybrid. The result is a fragmented Otherness in the hybrid” [qtd. in Nederveen Pieterse 172]. This obviously echoes, if only implicitly, nineteenth century notions of the weak hybrid [Young] and this convergence is surely worth some reflection. Otherwise the notion of hybridity in contemporary theory is completely removed from nineteenth century racial notions of sterility.

The dubiousness of our mainstream words for mixture has prompted some anthropologists to avoid them altogether and opt for terms such as *bricolage*, which have no overtones outside of anthropological theory [Werbner 215]. In my view, this response avoids important issues. “Etymology is not destiny,” as Clifford has emphasized in relation to the endeavor to recast the term *diaspora* in social theory [Routes 367]. But if we are effectively to reappropriate a term like *creolization* and extend it into present usage, then we must confront its previous history. In this case the coordinates of power, race/culture, and environment—strikingly present in the semantic history of *creole*—are virtually absent from contemporary anthropological applications of the term. What, if anything, does creolization have to do with these things in the present? Historical awareness raises these questions; it challenges the credibility of our current theoretical vocabulary, and some response is necessary. *Syncretism* is another term with a controversial past and an uncertain present, and the following genealogical consideration attempts to use an awareness of past conflicts and prejudices to generate a creative theoretical response in the present.

The Meanings of Syncretism

The term *syncretism*, originally coined with a positive sense by Plutarch in the first century AD [*Moralia* 2.490b], acquired overriding negative connotations in the seventeenth century. In the wake of the Reformation, the Lutheran theologian Georg Calixtus (1586–1656) advocated the unification of the various Protestant denominations and ultimate reunion with the Catholic Church [McNeill 273]. His irenic vision of an ecu-

5. The word *hybrid* is derived from Latin, where it meant the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar. This union across animal categories provided a model for talking about procreative relations across human categories whether social (master/slave) or biological (“races”). The word remains little-attested until nineteenth-century racial theorizing takes it up. The debate over the viability of hybrids was central to the debate over monogeny and polygeny [Young 6].

menical Christianity met with some favor among Calvinists but was rejected by orthodox Lutherans and disdained by the upper echelons of the Catholic hierarchy. In the view of his opponents, Calixtus's proposed reunion threatened a heretical and inconsistent jumble of theologies—a syncretism—and the ensuing debates, which carried on for the rest of the century, came to be known as the “syncretistic controversies” [Schmid]. A negative assessment of religious mixture was perhaps to be expected, especially from the Catholic Church, which was concerned to safeguard the integrity of its doctrine and practice throughout the world.

This negative view of syncretism would remain very much in place during the ensuing period of missionary expansion lasting well into the present century. *Syncretism* became a term of abuse often applied to castigate colonial local churches that had burst out of the sphere of mission control and begun to “illegitimately” indigenize Christianity instead of properly reproducing the European form of Christianity they had originally been offered. Protestant missionaries were no less aware of the “danger” of syncretism than their Catholic counterparts, and a prime example may be found in the writing of the Church of Sweden (Lutheran) missionary Bengt Sundkler, who served his Church in South Africa over a five-year period beginning in 1937. Sundkler distinguished two types of Independent Church. The Ethiopian Churches had seceded from parent mission churches for racial or ethnic (political) reasons but nonetheless still stuck closely to the missionaries' form of Christian practice. Zionist Churches had further separated from the Ethiopians through theological innovations such as speaking in tongues, resort to healing and purification rites, and the observance of taboos and claims to possess the power (or medicine) to fight traditional Zulu diviners' arsenal of sorcery [Sundkler 55]. In Sundkler's eyes, Zionism amounted to a “nativistic—syncretistic” interpretation of Christianity, and in following this Church the Zulus were borne, as if over a bridge, back to “the African animism from where they once started” [297].

With the case of Sundkler we can see how the negative attitude of European Churches toward syncretism was transferred from the theological debates of the seventeenth century, through missionary policy and ideology, and finally, through the field research of an individual missionary, delivered at the very doorstep of academic anthropology. British social anthropologists of this period were quite aware of the differences between themselves and missionaries. In a famous passage at the very end of his *Nuer Religion* [322], Evans-Pritchard expressed the opinion that when it came to analysis anthropologists occupied a position distinct from theologians. Anthropologists could describe the sociocultural form of religious beliefs, but they were not in a position to judge the validity of these beliefs. Apparently, anthropologists implicitly accepted that *syncretism* was a theological concern. The term was thus surrendered to theologians and missionaries, who preserved its negative connotations. And these could never be kept entirely out of anthropological discourse.

The anthropological community's negative assessment of syncretism was undoubtedly reinforced when African scholars as well as the leaders of various South African Independent Churches became familiar with the concept of syncretism and, predictably enough, reacted strongly against it [Pato; Shaw and Stewart 15]. Africanist anthropologists have subsequently grown increasingly uncomfortable with the *s*-word. Some have argued against its applicability on the grounds that independent African Churches have faithfully adapted Christianity to local cultural contexts [Kiernan] and should not, therefore, be considered syncretic. Still other anthropologists have largely bypassed the word or developed alternatives such as “selective conservatism” [Wilson 548] or “bricolage” [Comaroff, *Body of Power* 12].⁶

6. In earlier works Comaroff makes greater use of the concept of syncretism [for example, “Healing and Cultural Transformation” (1981)], and the term does appear in *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (1985).

In the New World a much more positive attitude toward the concept of syncretism has long prevailed among social scientists. The simultaneous existence of two such different positions may be attributable to the relative lack of interchange between American and British anthropology in the 1940s and 1950s. This mutual isolation was reinforced by a regional division of labor whereby British or British-trained social anthropologists largely monopolized research in Africa while American-trained anthropologists carried out the majority of studies in the New World. The two opposed discourses of syncretism thus amounted to different “localizing strategies” [Fardon]—regionally generated theoretical contributions which in this case addressed the very same concept and term [Shaw and Stewart 13]. These differing theoretical discourses on syncretism did not result solely from the differing intellectual orientations of the British and American “schools” of anthropology. African and New World societies presented quite different political situations, and this made for different fieldwork experiences for mid-century anthropologists.

Whereas most sub-Saharan African societies were still under colonial rule up through the 1950s, most New World societies had already gained independence in the preceding century and had long been engaged in attempts to consolidate national cultural identities. Many North and South American countries publicly espoused versions of a “melting pot” ideology as a strategy of nation-building.⁷ The melting pot is the analogue of syncretism in the ethnopolitical domain, and it would have been difficult to criticize the one without simultaneously undermining the other. If we consider the links between early twentieth century sociology/anthropology and governmental social policy, it could be argued that American (in the broad sense of North and South American) anthropologists were disposed to develop a positive attitude toward cultural mixture.

The anthropologist Melville Herskovits, for example, considered syncretism a valuable concept for specifying the degree to which diverse cultures had integrated [see also Apter]. It was not a bridge leading to religious relapse, but rather a stage (for African Americans and other minorities) on the road toward the ideal of cultural assimilation and integration. The Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, who, like Herskovits, trained in anthropology under Franz Boas at Columbia University, expressed broadly similar views. Freyre considered Brazilian society to be fundamentally a *synthesis* of different “races” and cultures [xiii; Skidmore, “Racial Ideas” 22]. This synthesis was facilitated by the fact that the Portuguese colonizers were themselves the mixed outcome of a contact with a more advanced and darker people—the Moors—and hence amenable to cultural borrowing and racial mixture. The views of Freyre on the original mixedness of the Portuguese colonizers—a feature he called “Lusitanian Franciscanism” [xiii]—indicate that cultural mixture need not presuppose originally “pure” cultures.

Public acknowledgment and discussion of racial mixture was much more developed in Latin America than in the United States, where many states still had miscegenation laws on their books in the middle of this century. Boasian anthropology made a clear distinction between “race” and culture, and Freyre insisted upon this differentiation [xxvii; da Matta 6]. Nevertheless, in popular and political usage the Spanish term *mestizaje*, for example, embraced both racial and cultural syntheses, and its political valorization was a necessary nation-building strategy throughout Latin America.⁸

7. As Anderson points out [Imagined Communities 47–65], “creole pioneers” fought for independent nationhood in the New World. The acknowledgment of their own mixedness, or deculturation, relative to the British “homeland,” did not prompt the immediate enfranchisement of slaves and Indians. But it did mean that their nationalisms could embrace mixture in a way that European nationalisms could not and generally have not since.

8. See Stutzman; Graham; Palmié, “Out of Place”; Skidmore, *Black into White*; and Harris [110] for examinations of *mestizaje* in Latin American countries such as Ecuador, Argentina,

The Cuban historical experience provides yet another illuminating example to contrast with the North American melting pot. Cuban culture developed as various exogenous cultures (primarily Spanish and African) met and mingled. There were only creoles. The *indígenas* disappeared entirely early on. This situation prompted Fernando Ortiz, a Cuban lawyer, folklorist, and historian, to develop the idea of transculturation to depict the Cuban experience of mixture [97–103; Coronil]. Transculturation differed from acculturation in stressing that all cultures change in a situation of contact; it involves a simultaneous loss and acquisition of culture and, in the case of Cuba, it is a matter of a continuing, creative flux, never a finished synthesis. The Cuban example thus did not indicate assimilation to a cultural or ethnic dominant standard as was the case in the US, nor did it have a teleology of whiteness as did other parts of Latin America.

In less well-known essays brought to light by Stephan Palmié [“Out of Place”] Ortiz explicitly dismissed the applicability of the “melting pot” concept for Cuba and likened it rather to an *ajiaco*, a stew of meats and vegetables seasoned with hot pepper (*ají*). “The characteristic thing about Cuba,” Ortiz contended, “is that since it is an *ajiaco*, its people are not a finished stew, but a constant [process of] cooking. . . . Hence the change of its composition, and [the fact] that *cubanidad* has a different flavor and consistency depending on whether one tastes what is at the middle [of the pot], or at its surface, where the foods (*viandas*) are still raw, and the bubbling liquid still clear” [qtd. in Palmié, “Out of Place” 35].⁹

Ortiz was a public intellectual figure who, towards the end of his life, briefly held political office under Castro [Coronil]. Like Freyre, Herskovits, and Vasconcelos in Mexico [Knight 85], Ortiz could have had an effect on state policy. Different views of mixture in the Americas thus emerge—transculturation, the melting pot, and *mestizaje*—but all of them make positive associations with mixture. I would contend that the larger political context supported an optimistic view of syncretism and this was embraced by the succeeding generation of American anthropologists. An example would be Hugo Nutini, who started his research in Mexico in the late 1950s. As Nutini autobiographically writes, “[s]ince I began anthropological research in Mesoamerica, I have conceived of syncretism as a special kind of acculturation,” and he cites the research of Herskovits in Haiti which aided him in formulating his views [“On Syncretism”].

Nutini’s account of his entry into the study of syncretism evidences no suspicion that the term might have pejorative overtones. He has gone on to publish numerous studies mapping out the various forms and modes of syncretism [e.g., *Todos Santos in*

Mexico, Brazil, Cuba, and Bolivia. As Stutzman points out, for Ecuador, lurking beneath the embrace of mestizaje was an invitation to whiteness. As in Brazil (especially before Freyre [Skidmore, Black into White 37]) any admixture of white blood could be taken as decisive for producing whiteness. The 1940 Brazil census [Skidmore, Black into White 208] and post-1950 Ecuadorian censuses [Stutzman 49] show the number of “whites” to be growing, and this may be taken to indicate the appeal, and the perceived appropriateness, of the category “white” to a broadly mixed population. The category of mestizo also increased in Ecuador at the expense of other categories of mixedness such as cholo, zambo, and mulato. Latin American countries differ from the United States in their recognition of one or more intermediate categories of mixture between black and white. In the US people are mainly identified as either black or white. The category of mulatto exists in name but is little resorted to in practice, indeed it is perceived as pejorative. Williams compares North and South American racial thinking in the context of nation building.

9. The performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña rediscovers, alters and updates the *ajiaco* metaphor for the 1990s: “[t]he bankrupt notion of the melting pot has been replaced by a model that is more germane to the times, that of the menudo chowder. According to this model, most of the ingredients do melt, but some stubborn chunks are condemned merely to float” [qtd. in Bhabha 218–19].

Rural Tlaxcala], thereby introducing a neutral analytical conception of syncretism to the current generation of anthropologists. Other American Mesoamericanists have also approached syncretism as a valid, unproblematic object of analysis [Edmonson et al.]. It becomes apparent, then, that syncretism has received positive or negative connotations depending on the regional scholarly tradition within which one encounters it.

Church and State Discourses

If Africanists' conceptions of syncretism have differed from those of Americanists, this may be attributed to the pervasive influence of different larger institutional discourses on the two anthropological traditions. In Africa, the European Churches' negative view of syncretism swayed anthropological usage, while in the New World sociologically grounded state visions of ethnic synthesis and integration imbued syncretism with positive overtones. On closer examination the discourses of these two institutions—the Church and the state—were actually quite similar. Both envisioned a teleological process of acculturation, or assimilation, whereby initial differences would be eliminated on the way to adopting a dominant standard. To be sure, different Church and state social theorists often allowed that some degree of original particularity might remain even at the stage of final acculturation. Nonetheless, one may discern an overriding conviction in both institutional discourses that a stable, final phase of cultural homogeneity could be reached. For the Church, the main phase of acculturation would ideally happen in the short space of the catechistic period prior to baptism, at which time the converts became full, *bona fide* Christians. State sociology recognized a longer period of a generation or more for full assimilation to occur. One important difference was that this dominant standard was, in the case of Africa, externally imposed under conditions of colonialism, while in the Americas it was internally generated in a context of independent nation building.

We have seen how missionaries such as Sundkler mediated the institutional view of the Church to the anthropological community. A parallel case can be made for the mediatory role of social scientists such as Herskovits in the New World. In 1947, with support from the Carnegie Corporation, he founded the first African Studies program in the United States at Northwestern University and he continued as an influential figure in this field until his death in 1963 [Jackson, "Melville Herskovits" 123]. At the same time, he was no stranger to the administrators of large foundations and government granting authorities. As a spokesman for the Boasian position, he stressed the adaptability of American minorities to new cultural and environmental surroundings, and this led to a strong integrationist viewpoint. In 1925 he argued that African American culture had already assumed the same pattern as white culture. Later, during the 1930s—especially after his first field research in Africa—he developed the idea that African Americans unconsciously preserved a number of Africanisms, mainly in the areas of religion, folklore, and music. He thus represented a sometimes unpopular position between assimilationism (which he had earlier tended toward) and the insistence on African American particularity advocated by a number of African American sociologists and commentators.

Herskovits's post-1930s viewpoint offered one example of how a conviction in "acculturation" could accommodate a degree of lingering ethnic particularity. Africanisms could survive among African Americans, but they were often matters of unconscious, embodied cultural behavior such as rhythm, or forms of greeting and etiquette which he termed "cultural imponderables" [Apter 241]. These cultural traits were "focal" for African Americans but not for the dominant culture, thus they did not negate the sharing of

a common culture [Herskovits xxvi; Jackson, “Melville Herskovits” 112].

In making his case for Africanisms, he appealed to the concept of syncretism to depict how African customs were used to “reinterpret” New World realities in a distinctive process of acculturation [Apter 240]. An example of syncretic cultural reinterpretation was African polygamy, which he identified as transformed in the New World environment into a recognizable social phenomenon which he labeled “progressive monogamy” [Herskovits 168; Apter 240]. Syncretisms not only contained “survivals” from an African past but offered a mode of uniting the past and the present. In Herskovits’s words, “[t]he conclusion that we reach is that in Africa, as in the New World, the cultural processes that will be operative will be those of addition and synthesis to achieve congruence with older forms, rather than of subtraction and substitution, with their resulting fragmentation” [xxvii].

It is perhaps less well known that *The Myth of the Negro Past* was written in the space of one year, commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation as part of a large-scale study of the “American Negro.” The Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal was invited to direct this project and, with substantial funds at his disposal, he commissioned twenty different specialists to prepare “memoranda” which he would then have the advantage of reading before submitting his final report [Myrdal liv; Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal*]. Herskovits composed *The Myth of the Negro Past* in accordance with this brief. It was a building block for Myrdal’s classic *An American Dilemma*, which appeared in 1944 and would have enormous influence in the US for the next two decades at least.

Myrdal’s central argument was that racial segregation and discrimination stood as large, disturbing contradictions in a nation espousing democracy, freedom and equality for all—in short, the treatment and predicament of the African American population contradicted the “American Creed.” Writing during World War II, Myrdal stressed the analogy between American attitudes toward African Americans and Nazism, and he used this parallel to goad American moralism into rethinking and rationalizing popular attitudes. At the same time, he pointed out that once African Americans received equality of rights and employment a great many of the problems in interracial relations would be structurally resolved and the society would inevitably move toward greater integration and social justice. On the issue of culture, Myrdal took a strong assimilationist line: “[w]e assume that it is to the advantage of the American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by dominant white Americans. This will be the value premise here” [929].

The high water mark in the reception of *An American Dilemma* came in the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision where Chief Justice Earl Warren cited Myrdal’s book in passing the decision outlawing school segregation [Jackson, “Making” 264; *Gunnar Myrdal* 293]. Echoes of Myrdal’s ideas are also discernible in Martin Luther King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech where he exhorted America “to live out the true meaning of its creed” [Jackson, “Making” 265]. These examples illustrate the degree to which the Carnegie Corporation-sponsored study of the “American Negro” affected national policy and perceptions.

The involvement of Melville Herskovits in this project may thus be pointed to as a prime example of the close relationship and mutual influence that social science and American public sector social policy exerted on each other. Herskovits did not entirely agree with Myrdal’s findings, or vice versa. Myrdal was skeptical of Herskovits’s thesis about Africanisms [930], and Herskovits was much less optimistic than Myrdal about the actual progress of assimilation and the real prospects for interracial harmony.¹⁰ As

10. It should also be noted that Herskovits was not entirely pleased to be engaged in a project that, in retrospect, possessed characteristics of “social engineering.” It has been amply demonstrated that Herskovits dogmatically eschewed applied social science and even refused to

we have seen, Herskovits increasingly emphasized the African past of New World blacks and the influences that this history continued to exercise over present cultural forms. His ideas on these matters set him apart from the majority of contemporary liberal social scientists such as E. Franklin Frazier [Szwed], who, like Myrdal, placed greater confidence in the process of assimilation.

From today's perspective we might view his conceptions of syncretism and cultural reinterpretation as indicative of resistances to domination or as pointing to sites of struggle for cultural survival [Apter]. If so, Herskovits's notion of syncretism anticipated more recent studies of syncretism that have elaborated this framework of resistance and the politics of culture [Shaw and Stewart 19–22]. Although out of fashion in the 1940s and 1950s, Herskovits's work on African American history dramatically gained in popularity in the 1960s, especially with the rise of the Black Power movement in the United States [Jackson, "Melville Herskovits" 123].

Institutional Changes

The year 1963 represents a watershed in the historical development of Church and state perspectives on key issues involving the concept of syncretism. This was the second year of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and also the year that Glazer and Moynihan published *Beyond the Melting Pot*. Vatican II revised Catholic practice on many points so as to render it more compatible with contemporary realities. It stated that science and culture were domains separate from religion and legislated greater pursuit and expression in these areas [Abbott 165]. Furthermore, it promulgated the translation of Latin liturgical texts into the vernacular languages of each particular congregation [150]. In the drive to increase public comprehension of the Christian message, the Church did not stop at translation but also offered the following justification of how its message could be accommodated to the cultural conventions of various societies:

Living in various circumstances during the course of time, the Church, too, has used in her preaching the discoveries of different cultures to spread and explain the message of Christ to all nations, to probe it and more deeply understand it, and to give it better expression in liturgical celebrations and in the life of the diversified community of the faithful.

But at the same time, the Church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, nor to any particular way of life or any customary pattern of living, ancient or recent. Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with various cultural modes, to her own enrichment and theirs too. [264]

Since ancient times the Church has necessarily worked through cultural translation to communicate the gospel message, first of all to people living around the Mediterranean. The reiteration of this idea in the Vatican II decrees was a significant response to the

*join the NAACP at first (although he agreed with its main goals and did later join) because he thought this would compromise his scientific objectivity [Jackson, "Melville Herskovits" 115 ff.; Fernandez 151]. He believed that it was sufficient for social scientists to produce knowledge and that this would itself lead to the amelioration of unfortunate social situations. If African Americans were to read his *The Myth of the Negro Past*, for example, or simply learn of its findings, it would enable them to discover that they have a past, and provide assurance that they have a future as well [xxvix].*



actual predicament of Catholic churches in areas of the recently missionized and now decolonized world. Vatican II expressly allowed, for example, that where initiation rites are found in mission lands, “elements of these, when capable of being adapted to Christian ritual, may be admitted along with those already found in Christian tradition” [159]. Likewise, a 1563 decree from the Council of Trent was cited approvingly: “[i]f certain locales traditionally use other praiseworthy customs and ceremonies when celebrating the sacrament of matrimony, this sacred Synod earnestly desires that these by all means be retained” [161]. The institution of the Catholic Church was, in effect, redrawing the boundaries around syncretism by recognizing that a certain amount of cultural adaptation might not affect the content of the Christian message. Note the similarity between this position and Herskovits’s views on “focalisms.”

Widening the range of allowable cultural expressions made syncretisms more difficult to identify, but it certainly did not lead to an abolition of the concept. There was still the possibility that some adaptations of Christianity could distort or misapprehend divine revelation. A deepened understanding of cultures on the part of the Church would not only help in finding suitable local forms through which to express the true Christian message, but would also be necessary in ruling certain syntheses out of bounds:

A better view will be gained of how their customs, outlook on life, and social order can be reconciled with the manner of living taught by divine revelation. As a result, avenues will be opened for a more profound adaptation in the whole area of Christian life. Thanks to such a procedure, every appearance of syncretism and of false particularism can be excluded, and Christian life can be accommodated to the genius and the dispositions of each culture. [612]

Clearly “syncretism” still receives a negative meaning in Vatican II usage, but many practices that might have been disparaged as syncretism in the decades previous would henceforth be allowed as valid, culturally specific expressions of the one faith. This shift of “frame” is a matter to which I shall return.

Glazer and Moynihan’s *Beyond the Melting Pot* is nowhere near as important a document as the decrees of Vatican II. I call attention to it because its well-known title captures the new *Zeitgeist* that began to take hold in mid-1960s America and soon flourished in a host of movements articulating ethnic pride. *Beyond the Melting Pot* was one of the first nails in the coffin of the optimistic assimilationism of the Myrdal era. As Glazer and Moynihan write in their preface: “[t]he notion that the intense and unprecedented mixture of ethnic and religious groups in American life was soon to blend into a homogeneous end product has outlived its usefulness, and also its credibility. . . . The point about the melting pot . . . is that it did not happen” [xcvii]. They go on to elaborate that all immigrants have acculturated in the United States; it is not the case that they remain fully Irish or Italian in a fashion consistent with the current inhabitants of those countries. But neither do they become fully homogenized Americans. Instead they create a new identity and recognize themselves and are recognized by others as members of distinctive groups [13].

A full account of the post-1960s politics of ethnicity in the United States is beyond the scope of this study. It is sufficient for my purposes simply to note that subsequent debates over ethnic politics, and more recently, multiculturalism, have generally fought over the boundaries between the demands of a national culture and the rights of ethnic groups to express their particularity and have these expressions acknowledged and respected. To put it simplistically, the debate can be viewed as a contest over cultural mixture: how much should be allowed/required, and at what sociopolitical level? Under the guidance of social science, ethnic politics began to take a new course after 1963, one

that elaborated and celebrated ethnic differences and sought public recognition and tolerance rather than accepting the blanket assimilationism of the previous period. In this respect the discourse of social science apparently came to diverge from the Church discourse it earlier paralleled. While the Church was promoting a religious melting pot with its post-Vatican II notion of inculturation, American social science and ethnic politics were rejecting the melting pot idea and moving to a proto-multiculturalism.

Since 1963 the Catholic Church (Protestant Churches adopt similar stances, especially regarding missionization [Pickering]) has expanded its acceptance of culturally mixed religious expression where once it would have scorned many of these as syncretic. The American state, on the other hand, under the pressure of popular movements, has been forced to concede that some of what it once thought it had forged in the way of a common culture must now be unraveled. But such a contrast may be superficial: the two discourses might actually still be on a parallel course toward increased promotion of syncretism. It is possible that, in the long run, multiculturalism may lead to a greater and more profoundly integrated common culture. Under the melting pot ideology, citizens were mainly formed according to a Eurocentric, indeed a heavily Anglocentric, model. This teleological element in the master narrative of America has, I think, now been left behind. Granted the stimulus of improved, more comprehensive representations of other cultures in schools and in other public spheres, there is a chance that American society will now take a more profoundly syncretic course. Instead of just rolling back previous assimilationist progress, the current phase of multiculturalism may actually be laying the groundwork for further syncretization. This syncretism will proceed from below, part of a historical process in a situation where different cultural groups live in close proximity and continual interaction with each other. Baumann's ethnographic account of a local council's deliberations over options for representing different religions at schools in the London suburb of Southall is highly suggestive in this respect [182]. The multiple options considered spanned from separate daily assemblies for each faith to joint assemblies where all participated fully in each others' prayers.

Syncretism Today

The genealogy of syncretism directs attention to larger institutions, governments and Churches, that can shape the evaluation, indeed the very perception, of religious mixture. These institutions are themselves capable of reversing themselves and changing the rules, as the Catholic Church did with Vatican II, in order to maintain control. Likewise, New World nationalisms did not form their positive views of mixture solely on aesthetic grounds, but in subversive resistance to the colonial metropolitan arrogation of purity and out of practical need to assemble numbers. The history of syncretism alerts us to the political agendas that motivate claims to syncretism—or to purity. We also witness how putatively completed syntheses may be disassembled. That contingencies of power inflect syncretic and antisyncretic processes can be seen in the former Yugoslavia. In Bosnia, Muslims once considered good neighbors and fellow Yugoslavs became enemies [Bringa]. In some views the Bosnian Muslims were “really” Serbs or Croats who had foolishly and weakly converted to Islam during the Ottoman period and now needed to be forcibly dehybridized and returned to their true ethnic fold. Violence in Bosnia was thus antisyncretic; aimed at reducing people to unalloyed ethnic identities. Another case in point would be India, where some Hindu nationalists have insisted that their religion syncretically encompasses the Islam of their Indian cocitizens, thus relieving themselves of any compunction over destroying the Babar Mosque in Ayodhya in 1993 [van der Veer 204].

An anthropology of syncretism must comprehend how zones of purity and hybridity come into being: “the classificatory moment of purification,” as Williams [429] aptly phrases it. This can be achieved through a combination of historical and ethnographic case studies where syncretism or antisyncretism are at issue. If it is accepted that culture is not a stable structure successfully transmitted across generations, but rather the result, at any particular moment, of historical and social processes that both deform and confirm “structure” [Bourdieu; Ortner], then *syncretism* can be used within this theoretical framework to focus attention precisely on accommodation, contest, appropriation, indigenization, and a host of other dynamic intercultural and intracultural transactions.

If we grant the premise that there are no pure cultures, then we are led to suppose that there are no pure religious traditions either. Historians of religions have, indeed, long expressed this view [van der Leeuw 609; Droogers 9]. This should lay to rest the frequently heard criticism that syncretism necessarily assumes the existence of ideal pure traditions. All that need be accepted is that syncretism involves the combination of elements from two or more *different* traditions. But if we consider all religions syncretic, how useful can this term be? As the historian of religions Robert Baird has objected: “[t]o say that ‘Christianity’ or the ‘mystery religions’ or ‘Hinduism’ are syncretistic is not to say anything that distinguishes them from anything else and is merely equivalent to admitting that each has a history and can be studied historically” [146].

This observation does not change the fact that all religions are composites at present and will continue to innovate and forge new hybrid forms in the future. In a world that valorizes purity and authenticity it is crucial to attend to the ways in which syncretism is negotiated at the local level. Syncretism, perhaps referenced by a synonym or circumlocution, can form part of folk theories of culture [Stewart and Shaw; Palmié, “Against Syncretism”]. As such, it plays a role in directing the invention of traditions or the aggressive dismissal of neighboring traditions. The study of how a people contest, negotiate, and act on attributions of syncretism, if, that is, they do act at all, requires a switch from theology to the ethnography of theology (in both its official and popular forms). Furthermore, denials of syncretism, whether by academic analysts or the people under study, are every bit as interesting as cases where the compositeness of religious traditions is recognized and accepted.

The syncreticness of all religions may be an unexceptional fact, but pointing this out socially often amounts to an expression of power, differentiation, and social control. It is a term that has historically been applied to someone else’s body of religious practice. The bearers of a given tradition rarely acknowledge that it might be syncretic (although I think they can and should). When at the beginning of this century certain theologians pointed out that Christianity itself was syncretic, they were met with broad disapproval on the part of Western Christians [Baird 143]. Similar clashes of perspective are apparent when avant-garde cultural studies and literary theorists celebrate the fundamental cultural hybridity of postcolonial communities at the very moment when these communities are engaging in strategic, essentialist claims of cultural authenticity [Thomas 188; Asad 264].

The Ethnography of Syncretism

Lionel Caplan presents us with a timely ethnographic study of contested hybridity that illustrates this last issue. He reports on the Anglo-Indians of Madras and their fortunes over the last two centuries. Under the British, because of their mixed parentage, they enjoyed increasingly privileged positions in colonial government employment, espe-

cially after the Indian Mutiny in the mid-nineteenth century. Historical ethnography and oral histories indicate that Anglo-Indian culture comprised a mixture of forms, many distributed according to class position, on a spectrum between British and local South Indian cultural practice. Middle-class Anglo-Indian men would wear trousers and shirts, and suits for parties, while the women wore frocks, although these usually failed to pass for British style because of their garishness. In cuisine, the more elite members of the Anglo-Indian community distinguished themselves from the local Hindu population by eating beef while less prosperous families ate largely South Indian foods with their hands. As Caplan points out, their practices, which chiefly varied internally by class, amounted to a creole continuum situation [Drummond]. Yet for sociopolitical reasons the Anglo-Indians often represented themselves as wholly British in the decades before Indian independence [Caplan 755]. Postindependence, as one may easily imagine, those who have remained in India are inclined to stress their Indianness. In this case, then, we see a group—a vocal part of which has always rejected hybridity as a concept representative of their situation—that an outside observer might easily assume is culturally mixed.

Caplan's ethnography of the Anglo-Indians of Madras highlights one of the key issues in the ethnography of syncretism: the need to distinguish actors' expressed acknowledgments of mixture from the opinions and perceptions of anthropologists or other outside observers. I refer to this as a problem of "frame." Granted that we can recognize two different cultural or religious traditions in a given social field, how can we ascertain that they have indeed mixed rather than simply stand juxtaposed to one another? In brief, how can we differentiate syncretism from religious pluralism?

If we go to a hospital, for example, and see that Chinese acupuncture (or acu-moxa) is being administered in one room whereas laser surgery is being performed in the next room, we would not seriously consider this a syncretism of Chinese and Western medicine. To offer another example, in Trinidad one may encounter Shouter Baptists, followers of the Hindu deity Kali Mai, and adherents of Shango (itself a syncretism of African religion and Catholicism) all subscribing to similar beliefs and practices regarding possession [Vertovec]. At first one might be tempted to consider this the result of mutual borrowing, or syncretism, but closer inspection reveals that the possession phenomena in question can be accounted for as internal features of each of the separate religious traditions. Furthermore, none of the actors involved attributed these similarities to borrowing, but rather just to "convergence" [Vertovec]. In this case, we must once again rule out syncretism on the grounds that no "mixture" may be discerned either from our own or from the actors' points of view. We might, however, want to further analyze the local politics of this discourse of convergence.

The issue of frame emerges most importantly, for our purposes, in the very definition of religion itself, especially as regards the boundaries that are set between religion and culture. As we have seen, the Catholic Church's opening toward "inculturation" beginning with Vatican II posed one example of how religious specialists may themselves redraw the boundaries between religion and culture. Is the symbol of the lamb, for example, essential to the Christian message, or might it be replaceable by an equivalent symbol in regions where sheep and goats are not herded? Likewise, as Schreiter asks, can we allow the bread and wine of the Eucharist to be replaced by other foods in regions where they are not known [Constructing 8]?¹¹

11. For the time being, the answer to this question appears to be no. Communities in Chad and Cameroon tried substituting millet bread and millet beer for the wafer and wine of the Eucharist, but this practice was halted by a Vatican Instruction in 1980. As Schreiter comments, "[t]he Eucharist cannot be reduced to the cultural circumstances of an everyday meal" [Toward a Theology 65].

In his study of Sinhalese Catholics, Stirrat has shown how the Catholic Church initially forbade the use of drums in Christian rituals and the wearing of white as a color of mourning. The Church identified these practices as “Buddhist” and therefore as incompatible elements from a different religion that should not be mixed with Catholicism. After independence, however, when Buddhism began to set the tone of Sinhalese culture, it became important for Sri Lankan Catholics to participate more fully in this national culture rather than to be seen preserving subcultural practices that linked them with Western colonialism. Further encouraged by the Vatican II pronouncements, the use of drums and the wearing of white for mourning were reclassified as acceptable elements of Sinhalese culture that did not threaten the integrity of Catholicism. Numerous other examples, such as Mende (Sierra Leone) debates over whether participation in women’s initiation rites is consistent with Islam [Ferme], can be cited to show how widespread is this problematic division between participation in local (or national) culture and commitment to a standardized world religion.

Ultimately these frames are not stable, as clearly emerges in the case of Catholicism. Even the separate frames maintained on Trinidad may one day be altered, or collapsed altogether. What is important to see and study, I think, is that the implementation of these frames is socially, politically, and historically contingent. This is true whether the frame in question is dictated by an indigenous social or theological pronouncement or posed as an academic observation from outside the society in question. As an example, we may refer to Richard Gombrich’s study of Sri Lankan Buddhism, *Precept and Practice*. He discounts the possibility of a Hindu-Buddhist syncretism here on the grounds that Hindu elements were time-honored components of Buddhism. Gombrich further offers that Buddhism is fundamentally soteriological, and only practices directed at salvation properly qualify as elements of Buddhist religion. The Hindu deities drafted into the Buddhist pantheon are primarily appealed to for mundane, “this-worldly” ends such as gaining prosperity or curing illness. Given the narrow frame he sets up for Buddhism, then, Hindu gods are excluded; they are not aspects of Buddhist religion, hence one more reason why Sri Lankan Buddhism is not syncretic [Gombrich 49].

This position contrasts with my own study of Greek Orthodoxy [*Demons* 11], where I considered that there was a certain core of cosmological structure and “salvation idiom” basic to Christianity which, if significantly contradicted, would be grounds for ruling an innovative cult non-Christian. The panoply of demons that I studied, like the Hindu deities within Buddhism, do not perhaps conform to the letter of Christian doctrine, but they do not contradict the basic kernel of Christian Orthodoxy. I considered them tolerable variations, the stuff of local religion, but not elements that fall outside the frame of Christianity. Thus I deem the coexistence of non-Christian demons within the basic structure (or frame) of Orthodoxy to be a clear example of syncretism. Gombrich concedes something similar when he describes Buddhism as “accretive” [49], but he then seems to draw a tighter frame around Buddhism such that accreted Hindu deities and the this-worldly concerns expressed around them fall outside of Buddhism proper. That other anthropologists of Buddhism have disputed the description of Buddhist “religion” as limited strictly to eschatology [cf. Gellner 103], and even explicitly label Sri Lankan Buddhism “syncretic” [Bechert 24, 218], only further indicates the subjectivity and variability besetting the demarcation of frames.

Conclusion

Most previous definitions of syncretism stipulate that a syncretism must fuse disparate, disharmonious elements, or that it necessarily contravenes the tenets of one or more of

the initial religious systems, that it involves ambiguity, or any number of other criteria. Historians of religion such as Colpe present us with staggering sets of analytical distinctions—synthesis, evolution, harmonization, disintegration, absorption, equivalence, amalgamation, and so on—for distinguishing and understanding the phenomenon of syncretism. One might almost contemplate adopting the vocabulary of chemistry, where compounds, mixtures, and colloids are all objectively distinguishable. The study of syncretism could then be set on a par with the perception of color or sound, for which we also have an objective set of measurements to set against culturally relative discriminations. Obviously religions and cultures are far too complex and fundamentally subjective phenomena to be tamed by objective analytical vocabularies, however subtle. From the perspective that I have outlined above, these sorts of analytic distinctions about syncretism need to be examined as part of the strategic social negotiation of religious synthesis, rather than as definitive of syncretism altogether.

Ultimately the anthropology of syncretism is not concerned with pronouncing whether Buddhism, or any other religion, is or is not syncretic, but rather with studying the various arguments made for or against the notion of religious mixing. It should be concerned with competing discourses over mixture, whether syncretic or antisyncretic [Stewart and Shaw]. Wherever syncretism occurs or has occurred, it is usually accompanied by a parallel discourse that might be termed metasyncretic: the commentary, and registered perceptions of actors as to whether amalgamation has occurred and whether this is good or bad. A strictly objectivist view could never be sufficient.

In agreement with Droogers [20] I consider the social science study of syncretism to be crucially about the various discourses that seek to control the definition of syncretism in a given social field, whether promulgated by insiders or outsiders. In order to implement this anthropology of syncretism, we need to proceed with the broadest and most general definition of syncretism: the combination of elements from two or more different religious traditions within a specified frame. This much founds a consistent starting point. We can establish that two or more different traditions are involved, and what the relevant frame is, either on the basis of what the actors involved say, or on the basis of our own analytical reasoning, as long as we clearly indicate when we are taking which perspective.

Of course the differences of perspective between insiders and outsiders introduce another difference in frame. It might be the case that we will often end up studying how a given social group negotiates the claims of such outsiders as the Catholic Church or such influential individuals as the Oxford Professor of Sanskrit. Granted the long-running conflict between the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka, one could easily see how claims of Buddhist purity—or even more ominous, Buddhist encompassment of Hinduism—could be drawn upon to legitimate government policies. Indeed, Kapferer has argued that a religious scenario involving demonization and exorcistic re-encompassment of the the Tamil Hindus runs parallel to the actual violence. Some of Gombrich's own more recent work documents how Buddhist borrowings of Hindu elements of practice at Kataragama are accompanied by a denial of their Hindu origins [Gombrich and Obeyesekere 163–99; van der Veer 204]. Of course, nationalist or other political leaders do not need to wait for authoritative pronouncements by scholars to legitimate their political agendas, but they can certainly use them if they are advantageous. Anthropological assessments of syncretism do, thus, frequently affect the social contexts they attempt only to study. In part this is because an opinion on syncretism—a view on the purity or mixedness of social groups and cultures—is not just an extrinsic anthropological interest; it forms part of indigenous theories of culture all over the world. A community's evaluation of its own cultural purity or mixture may govern opinion as to the group's definitive cultural form and political destiny.

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