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From Creolization to Syncretism: Climbing the Ritual Ladder

Syncretism has both an outside and an inside. The outside involves the actual situations of diverse social groups in contact. How and where do they meet, and under what economic and political terms? In cases of recent migration, the study of these interactions might fall into the analytical sphere of creolization, which refers to the adaptation of a person or a group in new surroundings. The inside of syncretism is the theological level where new ideas or gods may be inserted into a pre-existing system, precipitating a reconfiguration of the pantheon or the form of rituals. This paper discusses the respective spheres of creolization and syncretism, and it observes that mutual participation in rituals may be an important bridge leading from creolization to syncretism. Acceptance into the rituals of the host community can mark a momentous staging point on the way to the localization of migrants. This sharing of rituals gives an opportunity for newcomers to introduce novel elements, thus taking a step in the direction of syncretism. Rather than conflate creolization and syncretism, I see ritual as an avenue leading from creolization to syncretism.

Uncertain Mixture

The social science vocabulary for cultural mixture is notoriously under theorized, which is why researchers often use the terms syncretism, hybridity, creolization and

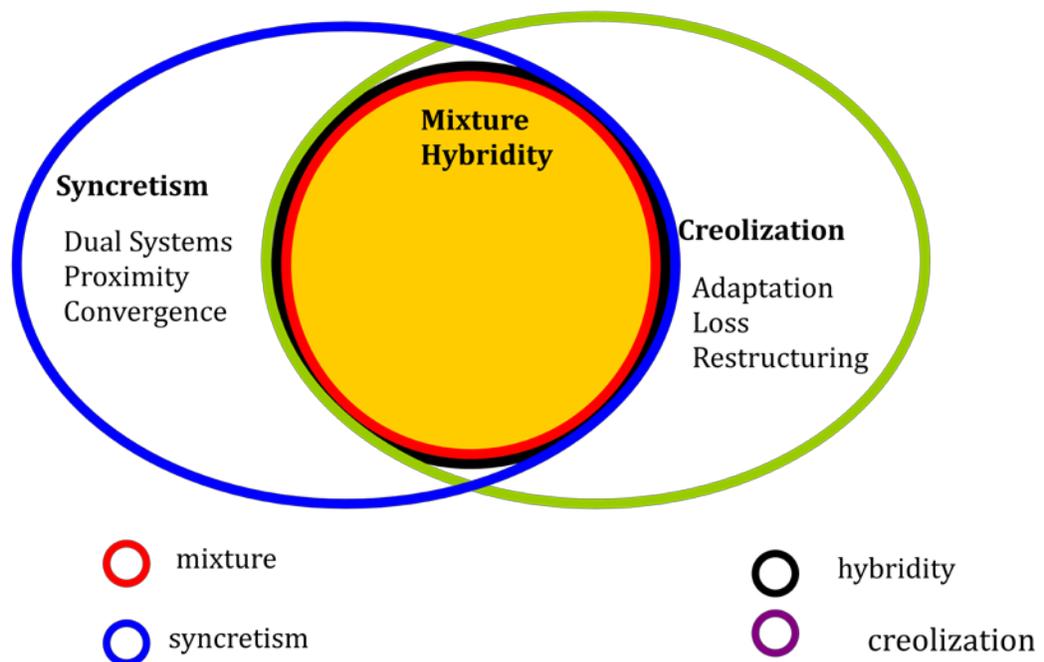
fusion interchangeably, as virtual synonyms (Robbins 2011:13). It seems that the idea of ‘mixture’ has been the common denominator encouraging conflation. While recognizing that creolization and syncretism belong to the creative flow of living theoretical vocabulary, and that they are often used evocatively (rather than analytically), I nonetheless present views on how to differentiate them. In order to disambiguate creolization and syncretism, I shift focus from mixture per se to the temporal dynamics of crystallization. When can it be said that a mixture has occurred such that a new entity has formed or an old one dissolved?

The historical semantics of creolization cover territory that does not involve mixture and thus serve to guide us away from a fixation on mixture. The earliest definitions of a ‘creole’ often insisted that this was a person of *pure* Old World descent. This was true in the French colony of Louisiana (Chaudenson 2001: 6), as well as in Spanish Gran Colombia (Palmié 2007). Although it is a complicated matter (Dominguez 1986), over the last two centuries in Louisiana the term ‘creole’ has generally referred to a white person, while people of mixed French and African ancestry have been called ‘creoles of color.’ What made early colonial creoles different from former compatriots in the Old World was the acclimatization, seasoning, indigenization, adaptation and loss undergone in the New World. Such restructuring can occur without genetic mixture, but via localization in a new environment and the acquisition of immunities, cultural practices, and new goals. Anderson’s (1991) account of Iberian settlers in Latin America, who at first identified with Spain, but later saw themselves as indigenous inhabitants of the New World in rebellion against Spain, presents a classic example of creolization as adaptation after migration. People who were once Spanish came, after a few generations,

to be non-Spanish. As their consciousness of themselves as Spanish ebbed away over the years, an established social entity fell apart. Japanese migrants to Brazil furnish a more recent example to be considered below.

The diagram below maps out the overlaps and differences between key terms for cultural mixture in contemporary theory. I take ‘hybridity’ and ‘mixture’ to be synonymous and thus coterminous in the area colored in yellow. This is the common denominator area or ‘mixture’ where all the terms overlap, although ‘mixture’ is not an unproblematic concept itself. Most importantly, the diagram highlights the areas where syncretism, creolization, and mixture/hybridity do not overlap.

Spheres of Syncretism, Creolization, Hybridity and Mixture



Theravada Buddhism as practised in Thailand, Burma or Sri Lanka presents a case where syncretism cannot be reduced to 'mixture'. It has long been noted that, theologically, Buddhism does not admit any supernatural beings. The Buddha was an exemplary human being and adherents follow his path to wisdom. In local Burmese communities, however, people also appeal to a variety of supernatural forces such as the *nat* spirits that survive from pre-Buddhist times (Spiro 1994: 194) while in Sri Lanka people resort to Hindu gods as well as local spirits (Gombrich 1971: 49). In Richard Gombrich's analysis, the Buddha and his path mediate otherworldly concerns of salvation, while people appeal to gods and spirits only to ameliorate this-worldly problems of disease and misfortune. He does not, therefore, consider Sri Lankan Buddhism syncretic, but rather as 'accretive' – i.e. as possessing two discrete modules attached to one another and operating complementarily. But one analyst's complementarity may be another's syncretism. Assessing the very same phenomenon, the German scholar Heinz Bechert (1978: 24) labelled Sri Lankan Buddhism 'syncretic'. This example suggests that two or more religions may be in unmixed relations of complementarity, accretion, proximity or 'convergence' (Vertovec 1998) and yet qualify as syncretic according to some opinions.

Further limiting cases for syncretism as mixture are found in recently converted societies where people may be baptized and yet continue to practice their former religion in some contexts. The Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, who converted to Pentecostalism in the 1970s, sacrifice pigs to the ancestors. This could be regarded as syncretism, or as a novel facet of their particular Christianity as Joel Robbins has contended (Robbins 2007: 16). In cases of mixed marriages spouses may also find themselves practising two religions,

complementarily, at two different moments. On the island of Naxos, where I have done field research, the Venetians gained control in 1204 and remained in power until the Ottomans displaced them in the 17th century. Over this long stay Catholic Venetians and Franks occasionally intermarried with the local Orthodox Christians, although this usually meant that Orthodox women converted to Catholicism. In one case, a Catholic noble married an Orthodox woman but did not demand that she convert. On the premises of his fortified little castle, known as the Pyrgos tou Belloni, one may still see the small, double-vaulted family church with two entrances that he built. One door opens to a Catholic chapel, the other to an Orthodox chapel. Thus the couple could each pray, almost in the same place, but within their two different spheres of faith. Perhaps the couple prayed together on occasion, but architecturally the two denominations retained a membrane of separation. The theologian Robert Schreier (1985) calls such arrangements ‘dual systems’ rather than syncretisms since the religions are practised in alternation. Yet, once two religions are brought into close proximity the boundary between alternation and mixture might be fluid in practice, and difficult to legislate. Such cases point to the need for analyses of other dimensions of the syncretism phenomenon. The dimension of time would be one such possibility. How might yesterday’s juxtaposition, or accretion, be a prelude to tomorrow’s mixture?

Then there is the matter of religious spaces shared by Muslims, Christians and Jews in longstanding plural societies such as those found in the Mediterranean and Balkan areas (Couroucli 2012, Bowman 2012). The shrine (*turbe*) of the Sufi saint Hadir Bābā in Macedonia actually operates as an Orthodox church most of the time. When Muslims do worship there they clear away some of the Christian paraphernalia so that

they may spread out their prayer rugs, but the Orthodox icons nonetheless look down upon them from the walls (Bowman 2012). Their prayers are not mediated by these icons, but rather by the holiness of Hadir Bābā, who is thought to be buried below the floor. They are not mixing the two religions. The case is different at the Sveti Bogdoritsa monastery, also in Macedonia, where Muslims visit the church alongside Christians (Bowman 2010). Like the Christians, they climb through a hole in the wall three times in order to be healed or protected from illness. Above this hole are suspended icons of Mary and Jesus. The Muslims do not kiss the icons or make the sign of the cross, but they appeal to the same holy power that the Christians do in crawling through the hole. Both Christians and Muslims alike also pass chains/beads over their bodies for good luck and protection against illness. Some analysts might judge this as a syncretic ritual, while others might consider it to be a one-off occasional practice, set apart in space and time from normal Muslim observance at home or in the mosque. Resorts to rosary chains or the hole in the wall do not have any impact on systematic practice or theology.

Rethinking Mixture

The above examples expose the very poor social science criteria for mixture, and this is reflected in the vagueness and subjectivity of analysis. This state of affairs may be contrasted with the vocabulary of the hard science most directly concerned with mixture, namely Chemistry, where we find clear distinctions into elements (irresolvable units), compounds (a distinctive combination of two or more elements that involves adding/generating energy) and mixtures (in which components retain their own properties and can be separated without adding/releasing energy). Indeed, the chemists' vocabulary

is much more nuanced than this as it goes on to discriminate homogeneous from heterogeneous mixtures according to how intimately combined the components are, and if the constituent parts might be visibly distinguished. There is not the space here to properly consider the attributes of solutions, suspensions and colloids, but this much is sufficient to show that Chemistry has a clear analytical vocabulary which differentiates various kinds of mixtures according to certain principles: variable versus fixed proportion; visibility or invisibility of elements; energy necessary for fusion or separation.

Chemistry focuses on units of nature that show universal consistency in properties. Furthermore, these units do not talk back. Chemical compounds do not read research reports, or change their minds about how to act. For Ian Hacking (1999: 105), they are 'indifferent' to how they are classified. In this respect Chemistry is fundamentally different from the social sciences and humanities. Although Durkheim initially set out to create Sociology as a science based on the study of 'social facts' (1982), his positivism cannot capture the 'looping effects' of classifications (Hacking 1994). As Hacking explains: 'A new or modified mode of classification may systematically affect the people who are so classified, or the people themselves may rebel against their knowers, the classifiers, the science that classifies them' (1995: 239). Social science researchers may, for example, identify a situation and denominate it as 'syncretism'. The people so described may then agree or disagree with this analysis. They may celebrate their syncretism and use it to attract new members, or they may decide to stamp it out as an embarrassment. The classification itself precipitates social changes. This factor of consciousness becomes part of the field of study in the

ethnography of syncretism. Syncretism takes on new force when the people involved explicitly recognize new elements and embrace or reject them. Until that happens (in local terms) syncretism is but an outside analytic, a scholastic classification of social phenomena.

Ritual, Pluralism and Social Process

Syncretisms arise through cultural contact and it is instructive to look at recent examples of migration to see this process in its early stages. The flood of Albanian migrants into Greece since the early 1990s offers a case in point. Albanians come to villages like Arachova, near Delphi in central Greece, and take jobs as casual labourers, often waiting in the café on a daily basis for someone to employ them. Greek political unease over high levels of illegal immigration means that they are watched and periodically deported by police, and discriminated against by the locals.

Every year Arachova celebrates its patron saint, Saint George, in a four-day festival (called ‘panigyraiki’), which cleaves into sacred and profane sections as such festivals do in many parts of Greece (Stewart 1994: 220). The morning liturgy presided over by the priest inside the church stands at the pole of the sacred while drink-fuelled dancing in the streets until late at night stands at the opposite extreme. Folkloric dancing in traditional costumes and the official athletic events and speeches of public officials form an intermediary point in a spectrum of ritual activities stretching between these two poles. The saint’s day ritual thus offers various levels of controlled access to the community’s *sacra*, spanning from Holy Communion in the church through widening popular involvement in athletics and folk dancing, through to a still more open and

unscripted night-time celebration. One could view this festival from a Durkheimian perspective as a ritual of social solidarity and autochthony where the community celebrates its cohesion and historical rootedness.

The influx of migrants might initially have reinforced this cohesive function by providing an audience of outsiders, whose presence validated the authentic belonging of the local community. Indeed tourists and other visitors had long filled this role of the other as witness, excluded from participation. During the years after their arrival Albanian migrants watched the saint's festival from the margins. Yet many of them had begun to reside permanently in Arachova, and they had begun to participate in civic life. They learned to speak Greek, sent their children to local schools and joined local football teams and marching bands.

The anthropologist Roland Moore (n.d.) reported that, after a decade, the Albanians began to join the evening dances alongside the Greek villagers. The Albanians had mastered a sense of what the occasion required and they had the spare cash to throw at the musicians to enter the dance by themselves. They even began to participate in the athletics and the folk dancing. Thus they joined the overall festival, starting at the profane end and progressing toward the higher level of formal secular ritual. Beyond its literal meaning, the expression 'to enter the dance' in Greek means to enter into the flow of things, to blend in through active participation -- in this case, joining the dance was a step toward active involvement in local society, a step toward assimilation.

Something similar can be seen in the case of Japanese Brazilians. The Japanese who migrated to Brazil in the early twentieth century remained proficient in Japanese language in the first generation, but in succeeding generations they lost the ancestral

language and they became Brazilian by formal citizenship, and self-identification, although as a minority group they embraced an ethnic tie to Japan. In short, they creolized in Brazil.

During the Japanese economic boom of the 1990s, many of these by then second and third generation Japanese Brazilians journeyed to Japan for work, settling in industrial cities such as Hamamatsu. At first the Japanese locals kept apart and looked down upon them. Although according to Japanese ideology, Japanese-ness flows from Japanese descent, people did not recognize these migrant workers as fully Japanese (Tsuda 2003: 117). As Joshua Roth (2007: 207) observed:

Nikkei [people of Japanese ancestry residing overseas, in this case Japanese Brazilians] for the most part looked Japanese, yet did not speak or behave like them. Their very body language betrayed a fundamental difference in sense of self. The public displays of affection among Nikkei couples, the use of *fio dental* (literally dental floss, that is, thong bikinis) by some Nikkei women at public swimming pools, the smells of barbecued beef and linguiça (Portuguese/Brazilian sausages), and the boisterous conversation and music that escaped the confines of cramped Nikkei apartments all presented Japanese with a jarring sensory presentation utterly different from what many had expected of the Japanese Brazilians returnees.

Every year the people of Hamamatsu hold a kite flying festival over three days in May, a celebration of the patriline and of local rootedness and belonging. One of the central acts of the ritual is for a father to place his young son on his shoulders, and for

him, in turn, to be raised on the shoulders of a strong young man – a pillar of manhood celebrating the generations. As in Arachova this festival had multiple parts ranging from formal parades with floats, through kite flying, to evening parties where revellers troop through the streets to various private homes which provide food and music. Visitors are generally only invited to watch the public parade.

Like the panigyraiki in Arachova the kite flying festival operated as a ritual of locality, casting as audience those who were not local. Joshua Roth (2002: 132) found, however, that people in the working class neighbourhoods – some of whom worked alongside the Japanese Brazilians in the factories – showed more receptivity to the Brazilians. Some Japanese even got interested in Samba drumming. Groups of Japanese and mixed Japanese and Brazilian samba drummers formed.

Eventually, at the home parties during the kite flying festival, families began to play samba music, which ‘mixed’ with the whistle and drum of the traditional Japanese music. Two different rhythms, and musical instruments of two previously discrete traditions, alternated and played off each other to the enjoyment of the participants, who found the quicker samba beat exciting. As in Arachova, the entry point was the most informal part of the festival involving music, dance and alcohol consumption. It was the thin end of the syncretism wedge, but perhaps syncretisms often begin at such points. Migrant incomers climb up the ladder from spectators, to profane participants, and it remains to be seen if they will ascend into the more exclusive official, and even sacred parts of the ritual. If they do manage to scale those heights they will have been fully localized.

The earlier view of these rituals as celebrations of autochthony and exclusive communal identity must therefore be modified to a consideration of them as but one moment in a longer temporal framework. As local society in Hamamatsu and Arachova became diversified the role of ritual changed. In plural societies the presence of others can introduce new dynamics into old rituals (Baumann 1992: 111). Rather than reinforcing the boundaries of the core community by separating 'us' from 'them' as the Durkheimian view would have it, in plural societies rituals may bring 'others' into dialectical relationship with the established community. The ritual of static social solidarity can become a ritual of social change. Rituals such as the panigryaki and the kite flying festival can catalyze the transformation of 'them' into 'us'; like the energy added to form a compound in chemistry.

The Temporality of Mixture

The foregoing examples highlight the dimension of time underlying the appraisal of mixture. Hybridity must be understood temporally as beginning at a particular moment when exogenous traditions encounter one another and appear different to each other. After hybrids are formed, they may, in time, become their own coherent entities. People may even claim that these cultural forms are 'pure'. Yesterday's hybrid thus becomes available as one of the progenitors of tomorrow's hybrid. It's hybrids all the way down. A cycle begins with the encounter between two mutually apparent zones of difference. Hybridization begins in these moments and the resulting mixtures have life cycles. People go from dynamic consciousness of their process of mixing to a situation of taking their own composition for granted. Bakhtin labelled these respectively

‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious’ hybridity (1981: 358). A pidgin language spoken between speakers of two different mother tongues would carry with it a level of conscious realization that two different languages are being mixed, reinforced by the fact that those communicating retain mastery of different native languages. The children born speaking this pidgin as their exclusive native language do not reflect on it as a mixed language; it is just their language and this is how all ‘natural’ languages have been formed over time. The juxtaposition of Japanese whistle blowing music and samba drumming is a conscious hybrid. In time it may not be consciously perceived as hybrid but as a unitary phenomenon.

How do people become aware and reflect upon the moment when they no longer belong to one tradition or culture, but have crossed over into another? In the pidgin to creole situation this transition is made when the subsequent generation learn the pidgin as a first language. Culture and ethnicity are a bit more fluid and difficult to pin down. Creolization may begin to occur after relatively short periods.

While living and working in Japan, Japanese Brazilians endure a certain degree of exclusion and criticism from surrounding Japanese society. At the same time, they feel increasing nostalgia for Brazil, and imagine themselves returning with money and commodities from Japan. While living in Brazil they strongly embraced a sense of Japanese-ness and the idea of an ancestral homeland elsewhere. The trip to Japan convinces them, however, that they are really Brazilians and that they will never be Japanese (Tsuda 2003: 370). Instead of coming ‘home’ to Japan, or re-finding home there, indications are that the majority rapidly come to view it as just a place to sojourn as a migrant labourer. After their return to Brazil people continue to address them as

'*Japonês*', but they now know more surely than ever, that they are *Brasileiros* (Tsuda 2003: 368).

Japanese Brazilians cannot easily decreolize upon return to their original mother culture. After two or three generations in Brazil Japan became foreign. This example illustrates that over time creolization creates new zones of assumed, embodied identity, while simultaneously creating new zones of difference (Knörr 2010: 733). In this case one new zone of difference happens to be the original ancestral culture from which they departed sixty or eighty years earlier. The attempt to re-settle in Japan shows the limits of the concept of decreolization because a line of 'entification' has been crossed. The Japanese of Brazil had crystallized a new localized identity based on their set of situated practices and competencies. To become Japanese (again) would involve more than just reaching down and elaborating old abilities that were still there. It demanded, rather, a new creolization that would cross them over into a zone of difference. This is the circularity of hybridity. Every creolization is a re-creolization.

Instead of focusing exclusively on the components and proportions of 'mixture' -- the concept which has been at the core of studies of syncretism and creolization -- it might be illuminating to look at the formation and dissolution of 'zones of difference' or 'spaces of identification'. How do these come into being? How fast? And how do those involved perceive what is happening? To change our angle of study we might again take some inspiration from chemistry, but now we must look at the terms for analyzing the formation and dissolution of discrete entities. The key term here would be 'nucleation', which takes place in familiar processes such as crystallization, congealing, condensation and gelling. This change in focus will allow us to highlight the crucial dimension of time

in the formation, dissolution and reformation of identities and other bodies of cultural practice. Rather than fixating on mixture, which, as we have seen, may be difficult to define properly, the focus shifts to ‘entitivity’, the quality of forming a discrete entity. The study of ritual comes to the fore in this reorientation. The creolization of migrants in new surroundings is the precondition for their admission into ritual practices, and their participation may bring new elements into these rituals resulting in syncretism.

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