



From Syncretism to Hybridity: Transformations in African-derived American Religions: An Introduction

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Abstract

In this volume, we bring together research on African derived Religions in Latin America and African American Religions in the USA. Theoretically, the concepts of hybridity and syncretism are discussed, in the introduction as well as in the papers included. The papers featured deal with Brazilian Umbanda, Cuban Santería, US African Black Hebrew Israelites, the Five Percenter movement (an offspring of the Nation of Islam), and one single person, Robert T. Browne, an activist in the Black Nationalist movement. In the religions covered – that are an outcome of the historical circumstances of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – elements taken from West and Central African traditions, European Christianity, and Kardecian Spiritism blend to new forms of religious movements. This being the “fundamental” transformation of religion addressed here, some essays in the volume also look at the further transformation of those traditions in a “glocalized” world.

Keywords

hybridity – syncretism – Santería – Umbanda – African Hebrew Israelites – Five Percenters – Spiritism

Many works have been published in the wide field of research on African derived religions in the Americas. Nevertheless, seldom is the whole spectrum (South America, Caribbean, USA and “exports” to other parts of the world) covered in one volume. This holds especially for comparisons of African derived religions – that came into existence in Latin America and the Caribbean – on the one hand and African-American Religions in North America on the other hand. In this volume, we want to bring together the discourse on African-American Religions with the discussion of African-derived religions like Candomblé and Santería. A special focus is on the theme of continuity and change with respect to West- and Central-African traditions and elements taken from European traditions (like Spiritism) and Abrahamic Religions as well as changes that African-derived religions have undergone in the process of spreading outside the countries where they originated (for example, Santería in Mexico).

This process has long been described with the label “syncretism” despite of the contested nature of the term. The right terminology is important as it reflects how we think and deal with the area of research, as “concepts [...] facilitate the creation of discourses about religion”.¹ While we can take an academic, distant approach and argue that it depends on the definition of the term we are using, contested terms such as syncretism have a life of its own and flourish outside academia. As Chryssides and Whitehead elaborate in the introduction of their recent publication on contested terms, some terms are pejorative and imply that some traditions or practices are inferior to scholarly erudition while other terms are vague and when used unreflectively can become misleading.² Syncretism is one of these contested terms that we seem not to get rid of.³ Many scholars tried over the years to deconstruct the term and to suggest (mostly in vain) alternative names. But as long as the wider public continues using the term to label a certain type of religions, scholars need to continue with the critical engagement with such concepts. Language is powerful and scholars have the obligation to challenge misleading and even inappropriate labels.

1 Chryssides/Whitehead, *Introduction: What is a contested concept?*, p. 7.

2 Chryssides/Whitehead, *Introduction: What is a contested concept?*, pp. 1–2.

3 Schmidt, *Syncretism*.

This dossier problematizes the discourses around African-derived American religions that are often used as prime examples of syncretic religions developed out of the contact between religious traditions, overlooking the point that most (if not all) religions today are products of blending. While we could argue with Michael Pye that syncretism points towards the “temporary ambiguous coexistence of elements from diverse religious and other contexts within a coherent religious pattern”,⁴ the application on African-derived American religions remains problematic. People using it often seem to imply a hierarchy between these “original” traditions, as if Christianity became inferior because of the blending with African elements. They overlook that a syncretic assemblage exists in permanent tension and can continuously change or even collapse.⁵

The title of the dossier follows to some degree the cultural theories of Nestor García Canclini who, in his book *Hybrid Culture*, rejects the term syncretism vehemently. He challenges the common dichotomy of modern vs. tradition or rural vs. urban and puts forward instead a de-centralized structure that reflects the process of mixing.⁶ García Canclini phrased the term hybrid cultures to characterize urban societies and characterizes hybridization with these three items: “the break-up and mixing of the collections that used to organize cultural systems, the de-territorialization of symbolic processes, and the expansion of impure genres”.⁷

However, the term hybridity is not without its own challenges because of its derivation from botany where hybrid can imply “infertile bastard”. For instance, Jean Benoit criticizes the use of the term hybridity as the hybrid product is not only fragile but also sterile.⁸ Hybridity would imply something unnatural, something that was created by humans acting against natural laws. However, this interpretation is not what García Canclini means by hybrid cultures which he sees with an implicit positive connotation of something that embraces elements from two or more cultures and challenges the perception of culture as homogenous and static body.⁹

García Canclini’s use of hybridity was probably inspired by Tzvetan Todorov (though not acknowledged in his book) who also looked at the mixture of cultures though not in contemporary societies as García Canclini but at the time of the conquest of America.¹⁰ Todorov himself followed the Russian literary

4 Pye, *Syncretism and ambiguity*, p. 93.

5 Pye, *Syncretism versus synthesis*, p. 220.

6 García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, p. 11.

7 García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, p. 207.

8 Benoit, *Métissage, syncrétisme, créolisation*, p. 48.

9 Schmidt, *Caribbean Diaspora in the USA*, p. 101.

10 Todorov, *Le croisement des cultures*.

studies scholar Mikhail Bakhtin who used “hybridity” to characterize the variety of speaking in novels, the mixing of styles and languages.¹¹ Every language represents a particular worldview that contradicts, adds or opposes the other, and a novelist uses different styles and languages as “orchestration of his/her topics”.¹² Following Bakhtin hybridization became defined as mixture of styles where the borders are still visible but already in the process of transformation.¹³ Following in his footsteps, Todorov used hybridization to describe the interaction between cultures that took place in America during the time of the Spanish conquest. Todorov argued that when cultural contact happens without reciprocal exchange, it ends in war and genocide. Only when the contact leads to an interaction between cultures, it becomes successful. As example he points to the integration of Arabic influence into Spanish culture.¹⁴ Instead of preserving original cultures, hybridity highlights the transformation into something new. In addition, García Canclini highlights “the tumultuous co-presence of all styles”¹⁵ and points out that the Latin American hybrid cultures have abolished the separation between traditional and modern. Applying his ideas onto African-derived American religions shows however some problems. For instance, García Canclini’s point that hybrid cultures do not need a homogenous nuclei or centre but are in a permanent transformation state, overlooks that religious systems have usually some fixed points. While new elements can be added and other elements disappear, there is a relatively stable frame. “García Canclini always stresses permanent dynamism, which does characterize the Caribbean religions, but one detects some structure at the same time”.¹⁶ The fundamental problem with the idea of hybridity is that it usually only reflects on the blending of two systems. However, African-derived American religions are not just products of the blending of two similar systems but the result of slavery. “Though the consolidation of the religions started after the abolishment of slavery, their roots are in the system of suppression that created the frame while the contents have adjusted continuously since then.”¹⁷

With the condition of slavery in mind, Roger Bastide put forward *bricolage* as a better term for the creation process of African-derived American religions. While some scholars see bricolage just as a metaphor for syncretic

11 Bakhtin, *Die Ästhetik des Wortes*, pp. 156–157.

12 Bakhtin, *Die Ästhetik des Wortes*, p. 185.

13 Schmidt, *Caribbean Diaspora in the USA*, pp. 95–96.

14 Todorov, *Le croisement des cultures*, pp. 17 and 20.

15 Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, p. 244.

16 Schmidt, *Caribbean Diaspora in the USA*, p. 102.

17 Schmidt, *Caribbean Diaspora in the USA*, p. 102.

cultural forms,¹⁸ other scholars such as Richard Werbner distinguish between syncretism as the label for religious mixture and bricolage for cultural mixture.¹⁹ However, Bastide uses *bricolage* to highlight the transformation process during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. He argues that bricolage illustrates the changes to the collective memory due to the transplantation of people during the slave trade, the opposition during the time of slavery and the adaptation of Africans in the Americas.²⁰ While the term bricolage was already introduced to anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) to illustrate a particular way of thinking, Bastide goes further and locates it firmly within the African-derived American studies. He argues that the collective memory of African-derived Americans is an ensemble of elements from different origins that are put together in a new arrangement but without changing the significance of these elements. African-derived societies filled gaps produced by the slavery not by the adaptation of elements but by a new arrangement of these elements.²¹ He argues that enslaved Africans lacked the possibility of emigrants to re-establish their lost home in the colonies, for instance by naming places with a familiar name. Instead, enslaved Africans used religions to create their own space²² as he illustrates with the Brazilian religion Candomblé. Bastide explains that within a Candomblé *terreiro* African space is re-created in a creative and innovative process he called *bricolage*. Even though some part of the collective memory sank into oblivion and new were added, the structure within the *terreiro* continued and maintained the collective memory.²³ Several Candomblé *terreiros* today honour Amazonian spirits and African ancestors while maintaining the worship of the African *orixás* at their core. But this process is not mechanical but depends on situation, time and environment. “The African-derived religions show imaginative and resourceful energy while maintaining the religious core. While syncretism implies a notion of purity and hierarchy, bricolage highlights continuity, creativity and change”.²⁴

As mentioned above, the study of Latin American African derived religions and research into African American religious cultures are, as a rule, separated fields.²⁵ This volume brings scholars of those fields together, dealing with three geographical areas as far as the land of origin of the religious movements

18 E.g. Guss, *Syncretic inventions*.

19 Werbner, *Afterword*.

20 Bastide, *Mémoire collective*, p. 100.

21 Bastide, *Mémoire collective*, p. 96.

22 Bastide, *Mémoire collective*, pp. 86–87.

23 Bastide, *Mémoire collective*, pp. 91–92.

24 Schmidt, *Syncretism*, p. 132.

25 One exception is Hödl, *African and Amerindian Spirits*.

covered is taken into account: USA, Brazil, and Cuba. The religious stratum that *Engler* and *Scharf da Silva* take into consideration is Brazilian Umbanda, whilst *Whitehead* and *Pappenfuss* deal with Cuban Santería (Regla de Ocha/Lukumi). The three essays concerned with African American religions focus on the Five Percenter Movement – an offspring of the Nation of Islam with considerable impact on Hip Hop culture – (*Gansinger*), the African Hebrew Israelites (*Miller*) and on one African American individual, Robert T. Browne (*Mühlematter*), an activist in the Black Nationalist movement and one time collaborator of Marcus Garvey. African American as well as Latin American African derived Religions result from – forced – migration: the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Therefore, the main focus of research in this field has been the mixing of elements from the cultures the slaves were taken from with those stemming from religious traditions of the slave-holders. Syncretism or hybridity have been understood mainly from this perspective. *Engler* suggests an innovative way to look at those phenomena: Instead of focusing on the question, what elements/traditions are mixed together in a “hybrid” form of religion, he holds that the main question is how we interpret religious innovation and describes Umbanda as an innovative form of religious practice that has emerged in Brazil. We can adopt that point of view, as all the papers included in this volume deal with religious innovation. While often African derived religions are looked at solely with a focus on the mixture of “African” and “Catholic” features, there is a third religious stratum involved in the kind of innovation *Engler* describes, namely Spiritualism/Spiritism and Western Esotericism.²⁶ Clearly, Umbanda centers and Cuban Santería are influenced by Kardecist Spiritism. Two of the three essays dedicated to African American religions in this collection deal with esoteric traditions. *Gansinger* discusses the role of Supreme Mathematics in the Five Percenter movement, with special reference to the Pythagorean concept of the Tetractys. *Mühlematter* gives a portrait of the life and work of Robert T. Browne – in contrast to the other papers in this volume dealing with a single figure, not a community or movement. He develops his own analytic tool, which he uses to show that the author in question cannot simply be put into the framework of Blavatskian Theosophy, as has been assumed hitherto. In a way, *Miller* also focusses on a single figure, Ben Ammi Ben Israel,²⁷ the founder of the African Black Hebrew Israelites, one group of Black Hebrews from the USA that has managed to migrate to Israel, where they settled in Dimona (not to be confused with Beta Israel, the Ethiopian Jews who migrated to Israel). *Miller* describes the vegan diet – penned “Edenic” with

26 See the overview given by Hödl, *African and Amerindian Spirits*.

27 1939–2014, born Ben Carter in Chicago, Ill.

reference to Genesis 2 by Ben Ammi – of the group and compares it to the dietary laws that Elijah Muhammad²⁸ prescribed for the Nation of Islam and rabbinic views on meat eating, with special reference to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's²⁹ vegetarianism.

The migration of the African Black Hebrew Israelites to Israel is an example of a further “religious flow” (Scharf da Silva), showing that religious innovation in case of African American and African derived Religions does not halt on the American continent, but gives birth to further religious flows. In *Whitehead's* paper we find an up to date revision of the long known fact that the Cuban Oricha Yemayá is also venerated “under the disguise” of the Virgen de Regla, a Spanish Black Madonna. She compares the worship of the Virgen de Regla in Cuba, where Santería and Catholicism coexist with the modern day veneration of this special Madonna in her place of origin in Spain's folk-Catholicism. In the second paper on Santería featured here, *Pappenfuss* enriches the perspective of the mingling of Catholic and West African elements in this religious stratum by her study of Santería in nowadays Mexico. In a similar vein, *Scharf da Silva* points at a transformation that has taken place in Umbanda thought in the process of the religion's adaptation in the German speaking world.

This way, the articles included here combine historical research, contemporary fieldwork, and theoretical as well as methodological considerations on an expanding field of religious innovation.

Biography

Hans Gerald Hödl was born in 1959 in Mariazell, Austria. He studied Catholic Theology and Philosophy in Vienna, with additional courses in Judaic Studies and Classical Philology. In 1987 he earned a Master's Degree in Catholic Theology (Magister Theologiae) and in 1990 a Doctoral Degree (Doctor Philosophiae), with a dissertation on hitherto unpublished manuscripts of the Austrian Philosopher Ferdinand Ebner and a viva voce (“Rigorosum”) in Philosophy & Judaic Studies. In 2003 he was habilitated (Dr. phil. habil.) at the Department of Cultural Studies, Humboldt-Universität Berlin with a dissertation on Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of religion. Since 2009 he is an Associate Professor at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Vienna. His main areas of research are African and African-derived Religions, Mormonism, Ritual Studies, Critique of Religion, and Semiotics of Religion.

28 1897–1975, born Elijah Robert Poole.

29 1865–1935, prominent as a „Religious Zionist“.

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