

Syncretisms



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Opinion

My anthropology assumes syncretism as a key word for understanding the transformation in the relationship between cultures and ethnography. Within the conflictual processes of globalisation and localisation, syncretism involves, disturbs, and overwhelms the traditional ways of producing ubiquitous culture, fetish consumption, and digital communication. The term 'syncretism' not only helps with the comprehension of a context of accelerated and confused transformations, but also addresses growing communicative disorders alongside a creative, decentralised, and open movement of the term. The paradox of being an instable word inhabits syncretism, due to its continuous change of meanings. Often, the word syncretism is embellished with elegant or more conflicting synonyms, such as pastiche, patchwork, marronisation, hybridism, blending, mulattism, and acculturation: all related to the ambiguous game played by so-called cross-cultural contamination. As part of this game's excessive inconsistency, vulgarity and indigenisation, all the clichés of the trio aesthetic-ethnic-ethic are broken and stirred up, as are everyday's behaviours and lifestyles. Ultimately, through digital mixing, syncretism invests, dissolves, and reshapes the relationship between strange and familiar levels; and the liaisons among elite, mass, and avant-garde cultures.

Syncretisms are dislocating worldwide scenarios and trying to relegate the obscure clarity of binary oppositions into a boring and excessively simplified past. The anguish of homologation so long battled by the political left (or not) and now wearily stressed by a certain right wing (and some residues of the traditional left) can be now relegated to the vault of forgotten ideas. Now the word syncretism, after its philosophical and religious use, both in the superficial and derogatory sense, may be re-invented by anthropology, challenging any mutations as a restless experimentation in the name of xenophile communication. Syncretism is an ethnographically reshaped concept that spans the arts, despite (or simply due to) its inability to self-regulate or to be regulated. Syncretism is ready to launch itself as an applied ethnographic project for exact political imagination and expanded arts: as a mixture of codes that recombine ethnic and cultural differences, apparently considered as incongruous assets. Let me now clarify some specific methodological criteria.

What was considered during the 1920s and 1930s in France as an extraordinary meeting point between surrealism and ethnography now appears as a possible crossroads, regarding innovative research, distorted experimentation and ubiquitous critique.

Even earlier, in 1907, Pablo Picasso, who (like Modigliani, Braque, and others) was able to see African masks in several *marché aux puces* ('flea markets') painted *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and shaped an inventive syncretic art movement, cubism. Faces and bodies inspired by Africans were displayed next to European faces and bodies, bringing to the world another perspective, a multi-faceted one. This mix did not seem like any final synthesis of eugenics standards, but rather, the display of explosive traits opposed to each other in the very same frame. The change was radical for the European arts and will have an increasing influence in non-European contexts. In the 1980s, even the nascent cyberpunk movement showed syncretic traces of voodoo and cyberspace codes in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, a novel about ethno-cyber navigation within cyber-punk counterculture. Recently, David Cronenberg, another Canadian, has attempted to connect his fetish movies with erotic literature, digital anthropophagy, and out-of-body existence with his first novel, *Consumed*:

So many women have cancer now. Do you think a new aesthetic can develop? Cancer beauty? I mean, if there could be heroin chic, the aesthetic of death-wishing drug addict? Will non-cancerous women be begging this cosmetic surgeon to give them fake node implants under their chins and around their necks? Under their arms? In their groins? So sexy, that fullness. And it works so well as an anti-aging technique, to fill out that sagging turkey neck. Who wouldn't want it? And the jewellery, the titanium pellets piercing those tits [1].

As we have already seen, anthropophagy was an avant-garde movement in the Brazilian cultural- political urban context. Perhaps now it will be possible to outline a new literary genre: cyberphagy-A cyber-anthropophagy through which the author liberates his compulsion to devour his lover or himself. The interlacing between syncretism and fetishism is my basic

hypothesis and can only be evoked here: but Cronenberg is a maestro of visual fetishism: Could he really say anything about classical concepts of art, and therefore beauty, based on harmony, as opposed to modern theories, post-industrial revolution, post-psychoanalysis, based on sickness and dysfunction? Could he make a case for her new, diseased self as the most avant-garde form of womanly beauty? He didn't dare, but she did [1]. A syncretic artwork penetrates the body-corpse through fetishized aesthetics, with a double sense of beauty centre and sentient philosophy finally unified or, better yet, interweaved by digitally hungry techno-cultures. The success of syncretic perspectives is due to the eruption of anthropological themes in many of the contemporary world's academic disciplines, thanks to the changes in their qualifier: culture. Culture is no longer seen as something unitary and coherent that binds together individuals, genders, groups, classes and ethnic groups, but rather as something much more plural and decentralised, fragmented, and conflicting.

Syncretism has long been linked only to religious phenomena. Even now, these two terms, syncretism and religion, are often associated, just as fetishism and the sacred are also bound up with religion. Nevertheless, a process that applies syncretic modulations in the visual and urban arts (street art, public art, visual art, expanded design, fashion, advertising, literature, and even certain cinema) has spread in recent years. The subject of this work is cultural syncretism's. Cultural syncretism's that flow, undisciplined and incoherent through every layer of contemporaneity: subverting, astonishing, and confusing it. The origin of the word syncretism is almost a myth. Legend says the Cretans were always ready to quarrel with each other. They would however join forces against any external enemy. If syncretism means union or confederation of Cretans, then syncretism is a strategic defense initiative to overcome divergent internal policies and was specifically used by the Greeks to preserve their freedom whilst defeating an external enemy (certainly perceived as far worse than the familiar neighbour-enemy). The desire to unite conflicting groups and the search for alliances in the various parts of the same island were used in the subsequent migration of the concept from politics to religion. Syncretic attempts were made to forge temporary theological alliances and reciprocal combinations of different faiths or beliefs. Without any concern for the dogmatic coherence of the various Catholic churches, heresy (or instrumental tolerance) was often a risk worth taking. Hence, the word has been-and still is-marked by a sense of weak philosophical-religious depth. In the age of modernity, Western cultures' widespread use of the word syncretism indicates one of the greatest historical misdeeds. After the American continent's discovery, conquerors verified that the so-called native people (a term that will be deconstructed later) were not prone to work under slavery. Natives were killed or left to die. Children were consciously not conceived, rather than having them face such an unwelcome and fierce way of life. The idea of importing a more adaptable workforce gave rise to the African Diaspora. Slavery

was transported to another continent in order to eliminate or substitute the use of the local workforce. For this reason, some of the most creative forms of syncretism arose from the African Diaspora to the Americas. At that time, the transformation of human beings into slaves was not sufficiently abominable for the dominant social values, Catholic or State policy. Scold's bridles or masks made of iron (*mordaça de ferro*) were used to prevent slaves from talking, shouting, and rebelling. Souls had also to be converted. The slave had to accept the 'universal' moral norms and ethical values of a foreign religion, and saw their faith reduced to the ranks of animism, superstition, and magic. Meanwhile, the other, so-called, winners' religion, assumed the role of the slaves' spiritual guide for ecumenical redemption. Religious syncretism slowly arose in this scenario: a kind of implicit pacification between winners and losers. Slaves accepted conversion through the inclusion of their gods and religious traditions into the new religion.

The winners unofficially recognised the survival of the slave's original religion in the margins of the Catholic faith. Religious syncretism presented itself once more under the sign of a strategic defence compromise: slaves underwent an invasive alliance with the dominant religion; hence, a certain cultural tolerance was accepted. *Yemanjá* (1) (with her firm breasts) is therefore disguised as *Virgin Mary*; *Exú* becomes the devil; the twin's *lbêji* is split into the saints, *Cosmas*, *Damian*, and so on. *Jorge Amado*, the great writer from *Bahia*, says that *Exú* is: The most important orisha in the liturgy of *Candomblé*. He is the movement's orisha. *Exú* is confused by many with the devil in the Catholic religion's syncretism. *Exú* is mischievous and naughty; he cannot keep quiet and loves a good mess. *Exú* eats everything, drinks *cachaça*. He is an errant knight and a *menino reinador* [cheeky ruling boy]. He loves revelries. *Exú* is the lord of the routes, messenger of the gods, the orishas's postman and a restless soul. *Exú* has always been syncretized with the devil. In reality, *Exú* is just an orisha in motion who loves a good mess and confusion but, in the end, *Exú* is an excellent person. In a sense, *Exú* is the denial where only acceptance exists, some sort of opposition in the act of favours: fearless and invincible [2].

Amado's defence against *Exú's* syncretic misidentification, as the Catholic devil, is remarkable, not only because of its poetic style, but due to a philosophical perspective. On one hand, *Exú*, as *menino reinador*, dissenting and disputing everything, emancipated *Candomblé* from having to disguise itself under the Catholic religion; while on the other, he freed syncretism from any religious or mythological confusion, opening many dynamic paths regarding everyday culture. The recent independence of *Candomblé* from Catholicism makes syncretic autonomy possible in mischievous cultural senses. The newly liberated syncretism seduces those who accept the risk of travelling to reach many elsewhere, encouraging them to enjoy the route with the lord of the roads, to establish a ruling inner infant, to connect with one's inner cheeky reigning boy. The new syncretism displays signs of a mobile opposition, and sings of negativeness,

restlessness, and naughtiness. Syncretism is an orisha in motion against psychological stillness, settled reproductions, cyclical theories, theoretical certainties, and archetypal truths. Cultural syncretism refuses any synthetic polishing, dialectic gymnastics, and unilinear or progressive evolutionism. The inner concept still implies a sense of disorder, confusion, and dirt; a sense of savagery; a wistful movement, and a restless wandering. Cultural syncretism began in Brazil when quilombos were created. These were spaces of freedom, conquered by those who rejected slavery by arming themselves against the slave masters [3].

The symbolic significance of the quilombo was the escape, the so-called great escape: the act of not accepting a cultural and destructive imposition. Here the word *Marroner* was created. As one will see, *Marroner* does not include traces of any dark colour or, better yet, of any colour at all. *Marroner* does not mean the dilution of the black towards the white hue or, the opposite, the darkening of fairer hues. The process that goes by the name of whitening ('*branqueamento*') is not the origin of the word *Marroner*, either. To become a *Marroner* was a political decision to establish an area of self-governing freedom, after an escape. The birth of a quilombo, indeed. The freedom of a *Marroner* quilombo was not only a religious one, but also an enlarged and irrepressible cultural freedom. James Clifford remembers that this word is still impossible to translate in English. The source is old Spanish: *cima*, or 'mountain-top', leading to the later *Cimarron*, 'wild', 'runaway'. *Quilombolas* ('quilombo residents') were all *Cimarrons*. Their freedom was not restricted only to Afro-Americans slaves. From their very beginnings, quilombos were spaces where freedom was extended for all human beings of diverse colours and social conditions. This escape gave every single person the chance to become free, even non-slaves: thieves, prostitutes, natives, vagrants, *mestizos*. As the great and well-known philosophy has it: in slavery the real slave is the master (see Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*).

Hence, in the official American colonies, African religions survived under camouflage, while in the quilombos they were practised freely. So, the well-known process of bio-cultural miscegenation began its blending through this double and ambiguous process of escaping and disguising. With such mixing, quotidian perceptions of 'colour proportions' changed radically. *Mulattism* spread widely as a chromatic *Marroner*. This *Marroner* was not only inter-ethnic but also inter-cultural. A cultural *mulattism*, a *mulatto* culture: Brazil, known for its contrasts and its anthropophagic avant-garde, became a public display of what the future might have held for countries without borders. Through this extraordinary laboratory in progress, one can observe the transition from religious to cultural syncretism. Ronald Robertson was the first one to introduce the concept of globalisation as a mix of global and local, rather than flat homologation. I met Robertson in 1994, at a seminar of Theory, Culture & Society. Robertson presented the *glocal* concept, which enlightened me, whilst I was working on syncretisms. Another keen observer of these phenomena is Arjun Appadurai, an Indian

anthropologist migrant in the US [4]. With a critical approach, Appadurai rejects the revival of repetitive paradigmatic models, even from some lazy Marxist, to affirm that the new global economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models, neither through modernist internationalism. In his research hypothesis, he draws a fluid grid to explore the disjuncture's produced by five trends of the global culture: *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *finanscapes*, *ideoscapes*.

These ethnic-panoramic, mediatic, technological, financial and ideological flows employ the suffix '-scape' to indicate culturally constructed perspectives rather than objective relationships. In anthropology, ethnic panoramas (and their conflicts) are not linked anymore to economic uni-linear descent: they are characterised by a relative autonomy associated with the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups around the globe. The messages conveyed by the mediascape (often fetishistically incorporated by emigrants) are not uni-linear nor do they produce any flat homologations, despite being imagined by some critics. The *glocalised* viewer's ability to decode is strong; his/her placing into the narrative plots accentuates a decentralised semiotic game with a variety of interpretations. The same television show or film, for example, is watched and interpreted in different ways, in different socio-cultural contexts. The mediatic communication is exchanged in different amounts by all subjects involved in the event: the author, the text, the context, and the viewer. All such panoramic processes were elaborated before the digital revolution. Now, digital cultures have accelerated the process via web communication. Nobody is any longer only a spectator. Nobody wants to be only a spectator. Spect-actor and self-representation are keywords to look at contemporaneity subjectivity. The narrator is the listener. The latter is no longer an amorphous and passive being, fully satisfied only with the viewings. Communication does not travel in a single direction, from the sender to the recipient. Communication is increasingly multi-directional; tending to be interactive and interfacing. Digital communication, indeed, is an augmented reality. All this can explain the current situation (confused, blurred, and dull) made by heated globalisation and asymmetrical heated localisation. For example, ideologies issued by technologies and finances (or politics) solidified by serial-tv-plots, ethnicities mutually attracted by fashion, religions widespread by social network and so on. All this is not reproducing a neo-platonic simulacrum; the challenge is to look at, interpret, and transform these landscapes of *glocal* communication.

Production, distribution, and consumption of cultural syncretism emerge strongly from these floating and plural vortexes; from these *glocal* panoramas the result is a mutual contamination. The restless sense of syncretism was incorporated to such complexity. Syncretism is *glocal*. Here, productivist attitudes are affirmed against passivisation and

isolationism. The task of this work is to enter this expanded syncretic production and to resist the double mistake of those who see, in any contamination, the happy result of a multi-ethnic society; or those who resist locked in their motionless identity. Cultural syncretism is not in itself the good or the bad adapted to current times. It is not the final solution or an explicit error on the clash between diverse cultural groups or stories. Syncretism is an oxymoron proposal against the linear power of a universalising historical dialectics. Syncretism is a ubiquitous project, a decentralised model, a text-collage, an incompatible montage, a native cosmology. Philosophy has downgraded syncretism in the name of lucidity and rationality. Religion has submitted syncretism in the name of a monotheistic truth. Politics made syncretism plays, as a secondary actor, in its inflexible script. Now syncretism is back as a phantom that rejects philosophical synthesis, religious dogmas, and national supremacies. Syncretism eats, chews, absorbs, and regurgitates any cultural production, waste, or rubbish issued from the most different of world-cultures.

Note

a. In Yoruba mythology, *Emoju* is the mother of all *orisha*. In Brazil, she is the queen of the ocean. *Orishas* are African traditional goddesses connected to nature and reinvented in contemporary Brazil. *Cachaça*: Brazilian spirit distilled from sugarcane.

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