Introduction: problematizing syncretism

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‘Syncretism’ is a contentious term, often taken to imply ‘inauthenticity’ or ‘contamination’, the infiltration of a supposedly ‘pure’ tradition by symbols and meanings seen as belonging to other, incompatible traditions. Diverse local versions of notionally standard ‘world religions’ such as Christianity and Islam are often pointed to as prime examples of syncretism in this critical sense, especially in the writings of missionaries and theologians. Interestingly, a similarly negative view of the concept of syncretism also holds sway over many anthropologists and scholars in religious studies who work without any particular religious affiliation or commitment. Yet within anthropology, where notions of the ‘purity’ of traditions have not had much credibility for some time, syncretism has been ascribed a neutral, and often positive, significance. Recently, the simmering scepticism about perennial, stable ‘traditions’ has boiled over into a number of concise statements by both anthropologists and historians (such as Wagner 1980; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Marcus and Fisher 1986), which point to the ‘invention of tradition’ while criticizing concepts such as cultural purity, wholeness or ‘authenticity’. An optimistic view has thereby emerged in post-modern anthropology in which syncretic processes are considered basic not only to religion and ritual but to ‘the predicament of culture’ in general:

Twentieth century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols and languages. This existence among fragments has often been portrayed as a process of ruin and cultural decay, perhaps most eloquently by Claude Lévi-Strauss in Tristes Tropiques (1955)... But [this]...assurnes a questionable Eurocentric position at the ‘end’ of a unified human history... Alongside this narrative of progressive monoculture a more ambiguous ‘Caribbean’ experience may be glimpsed... Aimé Césaire, a practitioner
of ‘neologistic’ cultural politics, represents such a possibility—organic culture reconceived as inventive process or creolized ‘interculture.’

(Clifford 1988:14–15)

Yet although syncretic processes currently loom large in such writings, there seems to be an uneasiness about the term in postmodern anthropology: we hear far less about culture as syncretic than about culture as collage, as creolized, as fragmented, as ‘interculture’, as subversive hybrid invention.

It is in particular the term ‘creolization’, borrowed from linguistics, which currently enjoys ‘favoured concept status’ (for example, Hannerz 1987)—which is ironic, given that prejudices about creole languages in linguistics have often paralleled those about syncretism in other disciplines. This uneasiness about ‘syncretism’ in contemporary anthropology may be due to the term evoking for some of us the existence of a ‘purity’ or ‘authenticity’ in contrast to which it is defined. Perhaps, also, its very familiarity as a word is problematic, suggesting modernity rather than postmodernity. But just as ‘fetishism’ has been usefully reclaimed from its pejorative nineteenth-century significance by current anthropological usage (for example, Taussig 1980), our aims in this volume are to recast syncretism.

Given the important place which processes of bricolage and synthesis hold in our understanding of social and cultural practice, it seems fruitful to re-examine an area in which such synthesis has long been a subject of debate: religion and ritual. It also seems unnecessarily limiting to avoid a term which already exists to describe religious synthesis because of some of the connotations it has been given by (mostly) nineteenth-century scholars. On the contrary, embracing a term which has acquired—in some quarters—pejorative meanings can lead to a more challenging critique of the assumptions on which those meanings are based than can its mere avoidance. In contrast to the more ‘neutralizing’ terms favoured in postmodern anthropology, the very contentiousness surrounding the concept of syncretism puts us on the track of this volume’s central concern: the politics of religious synthesis and the competition between discourses about syncretism.

**IDIOSYNCRATIC ETYMOLOGY AND SYNCRETISTIC CONTROVERSY**

Problems with syncretism do not seem to lie with any substantive objections to the semantics of the term—since hardly anyone would deny that different religious traditions have amalgamated in the past, and continue to interact and borrow from each other today—but with the very word itself and its history of application. A look at the etymology and historical usage of the word ‘syncretism’
is thus in order. It proves to be every bit as shifting and historically contingent as the religious boundaries to which it refers.

On semantic grounds the word could most plausibly derive from the Ancient Greek prefix *syn*, ‘with’, and *krasis*, ‘mixture’ which combined in words such as *syngkraasis*, ‘a mixing together, compound’, or *idiosyngkraasia*, meaning ‘(peculiar, individual) temperament’. Of course, the English word ‘idiosyncrasy’ derives directly from this Ancient Greek compound. The very first attestation of *syngkretismos*, the direct forerunner of ‘syncretism’, does not appear until relatively late, when Plutarch (AD 45–125) uses it in the *Moralia* (490b; in a chapter entitled ‘On Brotherly Love’ [*Peri Philadelphias*]). He makes the point that it is a necessity to be friendly with the friends of a brother, and inimical towards the enemies of a brother, ‘imitating in this point, at least, the practice of the Cretans, who, though they often quarelled with and warred against each other, made up their differences and united when outside enemies attacked; and this it was which they called “syncretism”’.

Plutarch clearly linked the word ‘syncretism’ to the word for ‘Cretans’, *kretoi*; it literally meant ‘the coming together of Cretans; a combination of Cretans’. It is difficult to know whether Plutarch was earnestly communicating a widespread folk etymology, reporting and reviving an unattested earlier word, or simply making a pun on the familiar word *syngkraasis*. Whatever the case, Plutarch’s ‘syncretism’ is highly idiosyncratic (in the modern sense of peculiar, but not uninteresting). As Kenneth George (1992) has commented, ‘Plutarch’s story should remind us that the arena of syncretism is a deeply politicized site of difference, contact and reconciliation’, and its application demands the consideration of past and present sociability. It is also noteworthy that the concept of syncretism begins its history with positive connotations, referring to a strategically practical, morally justified form of political allegiance—to a form of ‘brotherly love’. Although its significance would change, especially for anthropologists, it is perhaps worth remarking in passing that Plutarch’s notion of syncretism anticipated Evans-Pritchard’s concept of segmentation among unilineal descent groups such as the Nuer.

Syncretism does not re-emerge as a topic of discussion until the Renaissance, when the rediscovery of classical authors, especially the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, began to influence the strictly ecclesiastical readings of Christian texts. Erasmus (1469–1536), one of the most prominent Renaissance philologists, delighted in the idea that Christian theology had absorbed classical influences and viewed this as a positive achievement which strengthened and enriched Christianity (Screech 1980:21). This strain of thinking continues in many quarters today, for example among modern Greek nationalist folklorists and ideologues who seek to assert a continuity with Ancient Greece without
contradicting the Orthodox Christian faith of most of the Greek populace (Stewart, this volume).

The next historical context of the term’s usage—in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—reversed its early positive associations. During this period in Europe there was a movement among certain Protestant theologians, led by George Calixtus, which called for the reconciliation of the diverse Protestant denominations with each other (Moffat 1922). These debates, which concerned issues not only of doctrine but also of mutual access to each other’s rituals of communion and baptism, were known as the ‘syncretistic controversies’. Opponents of this movement accused its proponents of advancing an entirely unprincipled jumbling together of religions. This critical view carried the day and since then ‘syncretism’ has remained a term of disapprobation denoting the confused mixing of religions.

In a fourth historical phase during the second half of the nineteenth century this pejorative meaning again surfaces. Scholars of comparative religion at this time used it in their examinations of the religious life of the Roman and Hellenistic world, characterizing it in terms of ‘disorder’, ‘confusion’ and reduction to a ‘lowest common denominator’ (see Bryson 1992:7–10). Interestingly, it was also regarded as an imperialist strategy in which the Roman emperors, by appropriating the foreign cults of those they conquered, ‘would have all the varieties of mankind called in and restamped at the Caesarian mint’ (anonymous review 1853, cited in Bryson 1992:8). This reverses Plutarch’s meaning of solidarity in the face of a common enemy, since syncretism now becomes an assimilative weapon of that enemy. Some scholars also integrated syncretism into an evolutionary scheme, viewing it as an intermediate stage prior to Christian monotheism (ibid.). ‘Syncretism’ thus became an ‘othering’ term applied to historically distant as well as geographically distant societies, in line with Tyloorean evolutionist thinking (Fabian 1983).

Thereafter, the term has typically been heavily used but polemically loaded within the comparative study of religions. Although some historians and phenomenologists of religion observed long ago that syncretism is a feature of all religions (for example, Van der Leeuw 1938:609), it has been difficult to develop this insight in a field in which authorized clerical perspectives are often implicitly adopted, giving rise to a view of traditions as ‘given’ entities which renders syncretic forms as ‘ambiguous’ or ‘deviant’ by definition (Droogers 1989). Many in religious studies now feel that the term is so tarnished that it is no longer usable. Droogers (1989) and Bryson (1992), however, advocate a recasting of the term in religious studies similar in many respects to that for which we are arguing in anthropology.

**Within anthropology, syncretism has usually been given a more affirmative meaning. Studies of New World syncretic phenomena by American...**
anthropologists were coloured by an optimism born in the heyday of America’s melting-pot ideology. Herskovits (1941), for example, used the study of syncretized ‘Africanisms’ in the New World in pursuit of two interconnected research agendas: tracing the histories and cultures of peoples of African descent in the Americas, and developing the analysis of ‘acculturation’. The first was explicitly addressed to issues of racism, since the white American stereotype of African-Americans as ahistorical and devoid of cultural ancestry—which he called ‘the myth of the Negro past’—was (and often still is) ‘one of the principal supports of race prejudice’ and ‘validates the concept of Negro inferiority’ (1941:1).

Herskovits’ language reflects this optimistic agenda, placing syncretism in conjunction with such words as ‘importance’, ‘significance’, ‘fundamental’, ‘reconciliation’, ‘retrieval’, ‘survival’, all of which suggest the transmutation and recovery of something inestimably valuable.

Herskovits’ focus on ‘acculturation’ was a means of addressing issues of ‘culture contact’. Here he perceived the concept of syncretism as an analytical tool:

> The very use of the term ‘syncretism’ helped to sharpen my analyses, and led me to a more precise formulation of problem and of theory… It was now evident that if we accepted the proposition that culture-contact produces cultural change, and that cultures of multiple origin do not represent a cultural mosaic, but rather become newly reintegrated, then the next essential step was to ascertain the degree to which these reconciliations had actually been achieved, and where, on this acculturative continuum, a given manifestation of the process of reworking these elements might lie.

(1941:xxii–iii)

Herskovits’ distinction between a cultural mosaic and an integrative syncretism is an important one. But his depiction of an ‘acculturative continuum’ entails a concept of change as an automatic mechanism analogous to the blending of elements in a chemical process. There is no sense of social actors who could have acted differently to produce alternative outcomes. Although Herskovits’ vision of syncretism in terms of the survival of cultural meanings and identities stands in sharp contrast to the connotations of ‘confusion’ and ‘deviance’ which the term was given in the nineteenth century, the notion of a mechanical mixing remained.

What is especially problematic about the concept of ‘acculturation’ is its teleological and quantitative assumptions, such that if a person is placed in a new cultural setting he or she will acculturate progressively, proceeding along a continuum towards some ultimate completion. While people do ‘acculturate’ in the sense of picking up a dominant culture if they have to live in the midst of one
for any length of time—they must do so, of course, in order to communicate—
this does not happen in any necessarily logical, progressive way. As Peel observes
in his critique of studies of syncretism and acculturation, ‘[t]he various ways in
which…new syntheses relate to traditional culture vary not so much in degree
or quantity of indebtedness as in kind or quality’ (1968:140). Such variation
depends primarily upon how those involved interpret what they are doing rather
than upon ‘[t]he mechanical assignation of cultural traits’ (ibid.).

Whatever acculturative movement is made at any given point is, moreover,
not irreversible: the shift from melting pot to fractious multiculturalism in the
last twenty years of North American ideology is a case in point. Syntheses,
adaptations, assemblages, incorporations or appropriations are renegotiated and
sometimes denied and disassembled. Concepts of acculturation allowed only for
a progressive adaptation. Herskovits did not foresee the possibility of
‘antisyncretism’, to which we now turn.

AUTHENTICITY AND ‘ANTI-SYNCRETISM’,
MULTICULTURALISM AND NATIONALISM

‘Syncretism’, then, is not a determinate term with a fixed meaning, but one which
has been historically constituted and reconstituted. Of what use is it now? Simply
identifying a ritual or tradition as ‘syncretic’ tells us very little and gets us
practically nowhere, since all religions have composite origins and are continually
reconstructed through ongoing processes of synthesis and erasure. Thus rather
than treating syncretism as a category—an ‘ism’—we wish to focus upon processes
of religious synthesis and upon discourses of syncretism. This necessarily involves
attending to the workings of power and agency.

If we recast the study of syncretism as the politics of religious synthesis, one
of the first issues which needs to be confronted is what we have termed ‘anti-
syncretism’: the antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned
with the defence of religious boundaries. Anti-syncretism is frequently bound up
with the construction of ‘authenticity’, which is in turn often linked to notions
of ‘purity’. In Western religious discourses and scholarship in particular, the
implicit belief remains that assertions of purity speak out naturally and
transcendentally as assertions of authenticity.

Yet ‘authenticity’ or ‘originality’ do not necessarily depend on purity. They
are claimable as ‘uniqueness’, and both pure and mixed traditions can be unique.
What makes them ‘authentic’ and valuable is a separate issue, a discursive matter
involving power, rhetoric and persuasion. Thus both putatively pure and
putatively syncretic traditions can be ‘authentic’ if people claim that these
traditions are unique, and uniquely their (historical) possession. It could be
argued, in fact, that syncretic blends are more unique because historically
unrepeatable. An apt example of ‘syncretism/mixing=authenticity’ is that of Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalism which, in the hands of the ideologue Wickramasinghe, was cast as elastic and absorbent—a culture characterized by creative borrowing (Spencer 1990:285). Interestingly, Wickramasinghe drew on Hocart’s diffusionism and the writings of other anthropologists to reach his formulation. Despite viewing it as open and elastic, Wickramasinghe was none the less able to essentialize Sri Lankan Buddhist culture and view it as authentic and eternal.

A different understanding of syncretism as ‘authenticity’ is examined in Stewart’s study (this volume) of the discourse of religious ‘survivals’ in modern Greek nationalism and folklore. In the nineteenth century, Greek intellectuals emphasized the presence of survivals from Ancient Greek (‘pagan’) religion in the practice of the contemporary Orthodox Christian population. This can be understood as a strategic interpretation based upon claims of cultural continuity with Ancient Greece—an effective one, in fact, since it was partly because of this connection with antiquity that European powers agreed to help the Greeks both during and after their struggle for independence. The assertion of syncretism (by both Greeks and their European patrons) also countered the charge that modern Greeks were ‘racially impure’, and hence not successors to the ancients: cultural determinism thus triumphed over nineteenth-century biological determinism. Claims of ‘authenticity’, then, may be disconnected from notions of purity. They depend instead on the political acumen and persuasiveness of cultural ‘spin doctors’ (the ‘Multiplikatoren’ in Yalgin-Heckmann’s contribution to this volume) who convert given historical particularities and contingencies to valued cultural resources.

The premise that ‘pure=authentic’, however, tends to be the dominant reading in discourses of nationalist, ethnic or regional identity, as well as those of religious movements which are categorized as ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘nativist’. Such discourses are commonly antisyncretic, involving the erasure of elements deemed alien from particular religious and ritual forms. Selected forms may be identified as foreign and extirpated, or alternatively recast and retained through claims that they have really always been ‘ours’, thereby deleting former religious syntheses from authorized cultural memory.

This latter form of erasure is the topic of Guss’ chapter in this volume. The Day of the Monkey, a festival in the Venezuelan town of Caicara with heterogeneous cultural origins, has in the past few decades come to be viewed as a manifestation of indigenous ‘Indianness’, especially by younger male—and mostly Mestizo—participants. A large number of these young men are migrants who return to Caicara specifically for the Day of the Monkey. Caicara, formerly part of a prosperous agricultural region, was transformed through the arrival of the oil industry, whose subsequent mechanization led to unemployment. The
young men displaced to the margins by this process return each year to find a centre. Living lives of strangerhood and alienation, they create this centre through tropes of indigenous belonging by celebrating ‘Indianness’ in a festival in which all readings of religious synthesis are denied.

The erasure of syncretism is also entailed by certain forms of multiculturalism in the USA. Previously, the invention of American identity through the image of different ethnicities united together in a melting pot, masked structures of political and economic dominance, social relations of racism and the hegemony of WASP cultural and linguistic practices. Resistance to this cultural colonialism entailed secession from the melting pot and the inscription of multiple ethnic, racial and cultural identities upon national institutions such as official holidays and school curricula (see van der Veer, this volume). It has also involved the construction of ‘authentic’ identities and the erasure of signs which signal the blurring and fluidity of such identities. Such erasure is at issue, for example, in Santeria, an Afro-Cuban religion brought to the USA by Cuban immigrants. It has now acquired a significant African-American membership, among whom a movement (the American Yoruba Movement) has developed which aims to delete traces of Spanish and Catholic provenance in order to create a re-Africanized religious practice (Palmié n.d.).

Multiculturalism is not necessarily anti-syncretic, however, either in the USA or elsewhere. In India, for example, modern Hindu nationalism is, according to van der Veer (this volume), based on encompassing claims about the inclusivist syncretism of Hinduism—claims which are now often combined with Western ideas of multiculturalism. Van der Veer argues, in fact, that debates on multiculturalism play a similar role in secular nation-states to that of debates over syncretism in societies in which identities are defined through religion: each ‘refers to a politics of difference and identity’. Since India combines these by being a secular state in which religious affiliation partially defines cultural identity, it makes sense that syncretism and multiculturalism are often equated in Hindu political discourse.

That syncretism and anti-syncretism can both be paths to the construction of ‘authenticity’ and identity is underscored by instances in which both are used in the same cultural nationalist debate. Koepping (this volume) describes Japanese responses to the Westernizing transformations of the 1868 Meiji Reformation and to more recent forms of Western hegemony (and, we might add, devastating military power). One nineteenth-century response was that of the scholarly writings known as *Kokugaku* (National Learning), which involved the purging of foreign accretions from ancient Shinto sources. Such dispositions recur, Koepping argues, in contemporary *Nihonjinron* (theories of Japanese uniqueness), quasi-scientific theories of Japanese uniqueness. Yet alternative syncretic standpoints have accompanied these, appropriating rather than excising the foreign, one example
being certain of the ‘new religions’ in which the Japanese language and Shinto cosmology subsume foreign languages and religions in an integrative and universalizing exegesis.

**SYNCRETISM, INCULTURATION AND FUNDAMENTALISM**

In principle we agree with Richard Werbner who, in his capacity as discussant for our panel on syncretism at the 1992 American Anthropological Association meetings, argued that the term ‘syncretism’ should be limited to the domain of religious or ritual phenomena, where elements of two different historical ‘traditions’ interact or combine. This would distinguish it from bricolage, the formation of new cultural forms from bits and pieces of cultural practice of diverse origins. While we generally support the view that syncretism be reserved for describing interactions in the sphere of religion, we recognize that this is only a provisional demarcation. One reason is that it rests upon a culturally constructed Western category—‘religion’—which may not be significant in other cultural and historical contexts. Where religious observance is inseparable from other social practices, we lose the ability to differentiate syncretism from other sorts of cultural bricolage and hybridization.

Furthermore, to the degree that a distinct sphere of religion is identifiable, whether in Western or non-Western societies, it is likely to be historically contingent and shifting. What appear to be important religious phenomena at a given point in time may later be reinterpreted as merely ‘cultural’ phenomena, and vice versa. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, for example, viewed the wearing of white as a colour of mourning and the use of drumming in religious ceremonies as ‘Buddhist’ and therefore antithetical to Christianity. After Independence in 1948, however, Buddhists came to comprise a powerful majority dominating and setting the tone of Sri Lankan national culture. Under these conditions it became politically expedient for Catholics to minimize their cultural difference. Drumming and the wearing of white were consequently reclassified as innocuous features of Sinhalese culture of no particular religious significance, thus opening the way for Catholics to adopt these in their ritual practices (Stirrat 1992:46).

Mosse’s analysis (this volume) of South Indian Christian-Hindu interactions offers a parallel case. In the last century the Catholic Church allowed the display of caste hierarchy in church in the form of seating precedence and differential participation in Church ‘honours’. Now a number of factors militate against this. Caste has been reinterpreted as an incompatible expression of ‘Hinduism’; the Church is increasingly concerned to promote social justice in the wake of Vatican
II; and indigenous movements such as ‘dalit theology’ exist in their own right to oppose inequalities in the Indian socioreligious system.

These two South Asian examples indicate that students of syncretism cannot always specify their field of study in advance, but must remain sensitive to the ways in which people negotiate and redefine the boundaries of their ideas and practices. Importantly, the fluidity and political contingency of such boundaries as ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ become part of the very subject-matter of syncretism rather than impediments to its study.

The Catholic Church is, in fact, a recurring case in point. Especially since Vatican II, the Church has produced formulations of ‘inculturation’ and ‘indigenization’ (see Mosse, this volume). In Catholic theologians’ notions of inculturation (Shorter 1988; Schreiter 1985; Luzbetak 1988), the Word of God, the message of the Gospel, is knowledge of a transcendental, timeless and transcultural Truth that is not tied to a particular human language or cultural form, but adaptable into local idioms and symbolic repertoires. Indeed the Church now contends that communities will apprehend the Christian message better if they do so in their own terms. At an all-Africa symposium of Catholic clergy in Kampala in 1968, Pope Paul VI addressed the audience with these words:

The expression [of the one faith], that is, the language and mode of manifesting it, may be manifold. Hence, it may be original, suited to the tongue, the style, the character, the genius, and the culture, of the one who professes this one faith. From this point of view, a certain pluralism is not only legitimate, but desirable… In this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity.

(Cited in Burke 1992:161)

As anthropologists we would probably label many instances of inculturation ‘syncretism’ in so far as they involve the combination of diverse traditions in the area of religion. Representatives of the Catholic Church would immediately dispute this usage, however, and reserve ‘syncretism’ for a narrower (and altogether negative) subset of such syntheses where they perceive that the Truth of the Christian message is distorted or lost. Yet given that Western distinctions between ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ may not translate elsewhere, Catholic clergy themselves often have great difficulty distinguishing ‘proper inculturation’ from ‘illegitimate syncretism’ (Hastings 1989), and at least one centre of research has been founded to probe just this problem (Barnes 1992:171).

Some aspects of the above discourse of inculturation are also present in Protestant churches, though to different extents and in different ways (Pickering 1992; Howe 1992). Sanneh (1991) argues, in fact, that inculturation is an essential feature of Christianity in general due to its emphasis from its first beginnings on
translatability into other languages (see Waldman and Yai’s 1992 critiques). However, this ignores the fact that ‘indigenizing’ projects are often elite attempts, imposed from the top down, to control the direction of religious synthesis (Meyer 1992 and this volume).

Being global and possessing a centralized political and theological authority, the Catholic Church may approach syncretism, whether in Melanesia, Africa or Latin America, in broadly similar ways at any one time. Such global dispositions toward syncretism could, we might argue, impart a certain family resemblance to studies of syncretism where Catholicism is involved. Moreover, other religious traditions with universal claims and global dispersal, such as Protestantism, Islam and Buddhism, may also to a certain degree standardize responses to syncretism, even without the centralized authority structure and bureaucracy of Catholicism. It is important to emphasize, however, that such family resemblances are not dictated by any essential qualities of particular religious traditions.

Islamic ‘fundamentalist’ developments, for example, may exhibit certain overlaps and parallels in their anti-syncretic dispositions in different parts of the world. But rather than being the manifestation of inherent tendencies within Islam, such dispositions may instead be seen as the intersection of hegemonic Islamic discourses with common global processes, in relation to which processes many Islamic communities are similarly situated. Reformations of Islam are, firstly, often responses to the integration of Islamic communities into a Western-dominated capitalist world economy (see Bernal 1994). Contemporary patterns of mobility through labour migration for working- and middle-class Muslims and of world travel for middle- and upper-class Muslims through education abroad and through pilgrimage to Mecca (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990) may, secondly, mean that dominant discourses—such as ‘fundamentalist’ anti-syncretism—can now achieve a significant global spread. And thirdly, financial and other forms of support from Middle Eastern nations often have important political consequences within recipient communities in different parts of the world, which may confer local hegemony upon ‘foreign’ anti-syncretic discourses of Islamic revision.

Yet such processes are not entirely determined by forces beyond the community: much depends upon ‘local’ appropriations of ‘global’ discourses. This localization and contestation of Islamic reform are explored in Ferme’s contribution to this volume. She examines how the imam of a Mende village in Sierra Leone made the hajj and, upon his return, sought to bring the village in line with ‘what he saw in Mecca’: this, he claimed, would transform it into a ‘developed’, ‘European’ village. These reformist visions of ‘Alhaji Airplane’, as he came to be known, strengthened Muslim factions in chiefdom politics and confirmed certain changes these factions had already introduced into the rituals of the Sande, the women’s cult association. Sande initiation in this and many other villages was not eliminated, but became ‘Muslim Sande’ through the introduction
of Islamic elements and the abolition of the Sande spirit mask: in other words, through a syncretic process of ‘mixing’. One Sande leader, however, viewed the ‘real’ initiation as unchanged despite her apparent compliance with Alhaji Airplane and other men. For her, Ferme points out, ‘Muslim Sande’ meant only surface changes, not real religious synthesis.

**REGIONALIZED DISCOURSES**

Different positions in the social field thus generate cross-cutting sensibilities in the presence of pervasive religious traditions which are at once ‘global’ and ‘local’. In addition to dominant religious structures and discourses, studies of syncretism are also coloured by local traditions of ethnographic research. As Fardon observes in his volume on regional ethnographic discourses:

> Regional factors influence the entry (in the broadest sense) of the ethnographer to a field that is necessarily pre-imagined, the circumstances under which fieldwork will be carried out, the issues which have been preconceived as appropriate and pressing, and, in writing up, the canons of adequate reporting and the audience to whom, in part at least, the work will be addressed and whose opinions will be the most telling.

(1990:24)

In studies of syncretism, regional ethnography traditions intersect with the disciplinary histories and religious discourses we have outlined above. Thus syncretism in Africa, for instance, came to be defined primarily through studies of independent churches by missiologists; syncretism in Melanesia through studies of ‘cargo cults’ by anthropologists and sociologists; syncretism in the New World through studies of African-derived cults such as Vodun, Candomble and Santeria by American anthropologists; syncretism in Asia through studies of ‘syncretistic religions’ by Orientalist scholars; and syncretism in Europe through studies of ‘survivals’ by folklorists (see Stewart, this volume).

Some of the consequences of these intersections of religious, disciplinary and regional discourses for studies of syncretism can be seen through the example of prevailing patterns of scholarship on syncretism in Africa. Here such scholarship crystallized in studies of independent churches, especially in southern (and particularly South) Africa, most of which have been carried out by missiologists. In this literature, the vocabulary of syncretism adopted is one of pathology, hazard, decline and loss: ominous references to ‘the problem’ or ‘the dangers of syncretism’, to ‘syncretistic tendencies’ and to ‘forfeiting the essence of Christianity’ recur. One prominent scholar even characterized independent churches as forms of ‘post-Christianity’ which ‘form easy bridges back to
nativism’ (Oosthuizen 1968: xi). The *locus dassicus* of this ‘bridgehead’ idea is Sundkler’s adoption of syncretism as an explanatory concept to account for such degeneration:

> the deepest cause of the emergence of Independent churches is a nativistic-syncretistic interpretation of the Christian religion… The syncretistic sect becomes the bridge over which Africans are brought back to heathenism—a viewpoint which stresses the seriousness of the whole situation.

(Sundkler 1961:297; original emphasis)

This is a discourse about syncretism which corresponds to a period of missionization before the post-1960s era of inculturation. The pejorative characterization of syncretism in these studies may be seen as a powerful example of a means ‘used by religious elites to oppose unauthorized religious production’ (Droogers 1989:16). Kiernan (this volume) describes how, in South Africa, such derogatory labelling has generated an anti-syncretic backlash in which members of Ethiopian independent churches have explicitly denied and disowned the very term ‘syncretism’.

A backlash can also be seen in academic studies. Peel (1968), for example, criticizes and reinterprets studies of ‘syncretistic churches’. The Yoruba *Aladura* churches he worked in explicitly oppose the incorporation of African ritual elements and, Peel argues, their forms of prayer-healing and possession are not in fact syncretic as they have Western Christian rather than Yoruba origins (1968: 133–34). Instead, he prefers to reserve the term ‘syncretic’ for individuals and movements which explicitly unite Christian and ‘pagan’ Yoruba ideas and practices into an integrative scheme.

More recently, further critiques of syncretism have been developed by African scholars within theology and religious studies in South Africa. Pato, for example, takes particular issue with the way in which syncretism has been used as a form of explanation for independent churches, thus enabling important questions of European domination and of the hegemony of mission Christianity to be downplayed:

> the new society into which the African converts were integrated relegated them to the background through a strategy of hegemonic domination that denied the power of their symbols… The hypothesis of syncretism as an explanatory tool of the AIC [African Independent Churches] promotes this strategy… [T]his approach [also] does not take seriously the context in which African conversions have taken place… Yet forms of expression of the Christian faith are always determined or influenced by the social context out of which they emerge.

(1990:26)
Those contexts of domination to which Pato refers are precisely the focus of Comaroff’s analysis of Tshidi Zionist churches (1985), which thereby departs from previous studies of syncretism in independent South African churches. It is interesting, however, that the discourse of bricolage predominates over that of syncretism in her analysis, suggesting an implicit distancing from the latter term.

Such distancing from prevailing regional discourses of syncretism is explicit in Kiernan’s chapter in the present volume. Kiernan situates the development of Zulu Zionist churches in the history of Zulu defeat and subordination and in their circumstances of violence and impoverishment in contemporary South Africa. He emphasizes, however, that church members (like members of Yoruba Aladura churches) reject the integration of African ritual elements into the liturgy; he also affirms (like Peel) that Zulu Zionism is not syncretic, but a thoroughly Christian variant. He argues that the healing component of Zionist church services—often cited as a paradigmatic example of the syncretic incorporation of African understandings of divination, healing and sorcery into Christianity—is in fact a synthesis of ‘incontrovertibly Christian’ elements even while ‘it permits the conditions on which it operates to be interpreted within an African worldview.’

Studies of religious synthesis in independent African churches, then, have been indelibly marked by the ‘pre-inculturation’ missiological corpus discussed above, giving rise to a kind of ‘negative regional tradition’ around the issue of syncretism. As a consequence, many scholars in anthropology, sociology and religious studies—especially those educated outside the optimistic glow cast over syncretism in American anthropology by Herskovits and others—have located their own studies of African churches in the context of, and in opposition to, this tradition. Kiernan and Peel thus question and take apart the easy—and politically charged—assumption that all independent African churches are syncretic. We disagree with their arguments because we are sceptical about any neat separation of ‘Christian’ ritual practices from the ‘African’ cosmologies to which they are applied (see, for example, Horton 1975; Ray 1993; Meyer 1992 and this volume). Our disagreement arises at least partially, however, from our location in different regional traditions (or subtraditions) within and/or against which we are writing. Such issues illuminate in our own praxis precisely what is interesting about syncretism; they bring us back to the politics governing discourses and processes of religious synthesis.
AGENCY, CONSCIOUSNESS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

In the literature on religious synthesis and conversion, agency is sometimes ascribed to religious traditions instead of religious participants. Religions are frequently treated as analogous to ‘rivers of tradition’ which flow free of human agency, or as akin to impersonal actors (see Waldman’s critique in Waldman, Yai and Sanneh 1992) with their own dispositions towards or against synthesis: Christianity, for example, may be characterized as ‘radically pluralist’ (Sanneh 1991), and Islam as moving inexorably toward an anti-syncretic telos (Fisher 1973; see Horton’s 1975 critique and Fisher’s 1985 counter-response). Views of religion such as these often lead to explanations of syncretism or conversion by reference to equivalences between different religious or ritual forms which are presumed to favour synchronization and interpenetration. An active search for correspondences may indeed be a common strategy among agents of different religions in interaction or competition (for example, Martin 1983; Peel 1990). But just as religions are not ‘given’ entities, equivalences are not simply ‘there’ as channels through which meanings from different religions flow automatically. In order to serve as conduits for integration, they must be perceived as equivalences and given significance as such. Not only are equivalences in the eye of the beholder, but even when they are perceived they do not always facilitate synthesis. Among the Diola of Senegal, for instance, a catechism school was closed amid protests that Christian teachings about the virgin birth and the resurrection revealed to uninitiated children ritual knowledge which belonged to the men’s and women’s cult associations (Baum 1990:381–2).

To extend the ‘flowing rivers’ metaphor further: our interest is in the practical conditions and human agencies behind the building (or demolition) of embankments and weirs, not to mention the politics of water control which come into play around larger state-sponsored interventions such as the Aswan Dam. The most straightforward instances of such construction are the religious syntheses of such innovators as Alhaji Airplane (Ferme, this volume), Nishimura Shigeki (Koepping, this volume), the EPC Moderator N.K.Dzobo (Meyer, this volume) and Swami Vivekananda (Bryson 1992). Contrary to a common criticism of ‘syncretism’ as a term always applied to ‘others’ (for example, Droogers 1989: 16), one such innovator who founded a Yoruba church, Gbadebo Dosumu, acknowledged the syncretism of his church and advocated this on the grounds that most instances of ‘world religions’ involve the syncretizing of the universal and the local. In Dosumu’s writings, ‘the Teutonic festival of Easter and the English days of the week named after pagan gods are cited to support the thesis that Africans should do so too’ (Peel 1968:136).
More recently, in 1991 Chung Hyun-Kyung, a feminist theologian from Korea, astounded delegates at the conference of the World Council of Churches in Canberra by opening the meeting with an invocation which synthesized prayers and dances from Christianity, Buddhism, Korean shamanism and Australian Aboriginal ritual. After the conference, conservative theologians pronounced her guilty of ‘syncretism’. But instead of denying this charge or revising her position, Chung embraced the accusation and is currently developing a theology which celebrates syncretism as part of an Asian feminist Christianity (1993).

Contrasts are sometimes made between such figures and ordinary people who enact and reproduce ‘popular’ syntheses passively and unreflectingly (for example, Rudolph 1979, cited in Droogers 1989). But subsections of a given population often do innovate syncretic strategies, especially if these further group interests. An example of this would be the incorporation of Muslim practices by young, enterprising Giriama farmers in coastal Kenya reported by Parkin (1970). Here, claims to be mixing Muslim and ‘traditional’ practices because of affliction by ‘Quranic’ spirits constituted ‘a form of self-professed cultural diversity’ (1970: 218) enabling these entrepreneurs to avoid the cultural restraints usually imposed upon the individual accumulation of wealth. And again in Ferme’s chapter in this volume a conversation with two women from the Sande cult who disagreed over whether or not the Sande had really become ‘Muslim’, underscores that we cannot assume ‘popular’ syncretism to be discursively unavailable. Wherever religious syntheses are explicitly contested or defended—as they were by the Giriama and the Mende—they are unlikely to be ‘unconscious’. 4

Of course, such debates and disputes may subside. Syntheses or erasures may become uncontested, reproduced without discursively available intentionality (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:28–9). But if syncretic practices are no longer consciously syncretic, should they still be described as such? Ferme points out that even when religious syntheses become part of the taken-for-granted habitus, their composite origins erased from conscious memory, they nevertheless contain the sedimentation of historical experience. As such they may be available for retrieval and rehabilitation at the right historical moment, such as an Islamic reform or a revival of ‘tradition’.

A dramatic example is that of the Lemba or Varemba communities dispersed over southern Africa, which appear to be distant descendants of a mixed (Africans, Arabs and others) population on the Sofala coast. By the sixteenth century they were practising a combination of Islam (and perhaps other Abrahamic traditions) with local ritual practices. The Lemba did not retain the ‘Islamic’ identity of their ancestors, but their distinctive, syncretic forms of circumcision, burial and ritual slaughter perpetuated a sense of ‘difference’ from surrounding populations. During the nineteenth century, in a colonial context, the Lemba converted this sense of difference into a claim to be ‘the Lost Tribe of Israel’ (Parfitt 1993). Still
later, in this century, certain Lemba communities in Zimbabwe, after contact with Islamic organizations in Zimbabwe, identified elements of their tradition as Islamic and then embarked on a phase of ‘re-Islamization’ (Mandivenga 1989). Because of this historical sedimentation, past religious syntheses are always potentially available for future reconstitution. Past religious syntheses do not, as many have argued, cease to exist if they are not part of conscious representations.

Other intersections of agency with religious synthesis may be seen in distinctions in participation and expression linked to contrasts in class, race, gender and age. Kiernan (this volume) examines how different aspects of the ‘healing synthesis’ of Zulu Zionism are drawn upon by men and women, according to gendered (and age-related) contrasts in agency. For Zionist men, for instance, the power of the Holy Spirit underscores their capacity to dominate as church leaders and healers; for women, the strict Zionist moral code gives them an authorized discourse with which to check any womanizing, drinking and gambling on the part of their husbands. Such contrasts thus serve as a diagnostic of distinctions in power and agency.

Religious syntheses do not always, of course, arise from intentional innovations. Attempts to create meanings do not, in any case, always succeed; in fact, they may have unintended consequences. Meyer’s chapter in this volume explores the phenomenon, wide-spread throughout the global dispersal of Christianity, of unintended syncretism through translation. Missionaries working among Ewe communities in Ghana attempted to assimilate local meanings in their translation of the Bible, selecting the deity Mawu as ‘God’ but collectively identifying the other Ewe deities with ‘the Devil’. Having thus diabolized most of the former religion, they were taken aback by the importance the Devil was ascribed in their congregation’s ideas and practices which, Meyer argues, can be seen as grassroots Africanization, a process of ‘syncretism from below’ (see also Meyer 1992; Waldman et al. 1992; Hastings 1989:138–55; James 1988: 207–41; Lienhardt 1982).

In her contribution to this volume, Yalgm-Heckmann makes the point that anti-syncretic forms may also proceed from misinterpretations. Turkish migrants in Germany hesitate to allow their children to set off fireworks on New Year’s Eve (called ‘Silvester’ after Saint Silvester) because they construe this as a religious festival linked closely to Christmas. The fireworks are believed to comprise part of the ritual and some parents fear that if they allow their children to participate they will be conniving in their betrayal of Islam. This is a point of debate within the Muslim community because while Silvester is, in literal terms, a saint’s festival, in practical terms very few Germans perceive it in a way which could be called ‘religious’. Turkish migrants are thus at odds as to whether to classify fireworks as religious or simply cultural. Here a desire to maintain religious boundaries couples with a partial understanding of the culture of the surrounding
majority to create a situation of anti-syncretism as cultural resistance. Of course, as Yalgm-Heckmann points out, Germans also misinterpret Turkish Islamic customs, and such issues as the wearing of headscarves and the ban on pork have served as tropes of ‘otherness’ during the recent racial violence against immigrants.

SYNCRETISM, POWER AND RESISTANCE

Syncretism has presumably always been part of the negotiation of identities and hegemonies in situations such as conquest, trade, migration, religious dissemination and intermarriage. The growth of a Western-dominated world economic system, however, was accompanied by the growth of a Western-dominated world cultural system (Hannerz 1987, 1992), in which processes of capitalism and cultural hegemony transformed not only relations of power and production but also experiences of personhood, of the body, gender, time, space and religion. The appropriation of totalizing and globally spread processes such as capitalism, commodity consumption and ‘rationalist’ models of development is often inseparable from the appropriation of totalizing and globally spread religions. All of the contributors to the present volume situate their studies in precisely these processes. To select just a few examples, Alhaji Airplane dreams of a ‘Westernized’ Mende village as the outcome of his Islamic reforms (Ferre); yawning male initiation locates a European city at the hidden core of its ritual (Kempf); the leader of a new religious movement in Japan subsumes the Bible and other foreign texts within the Japanese ‘soul of language’ (Koepping); unemployed Mestizo labour migrants construct the indigenous ‘Indianness’ of the Caicara Monkey festival in opposition to the economically devastating ‘strangerhood’ of Standard Oil of New Jersey (Guss); and Turkish immigrants in Germany are involved in struggles over the meaning of fireworks, Christmas decorations and women’s headscarves, which are inseparable from their struggles against racial attacks and murder (Yalgm-Heckmann). The syncretic and anti-syncretic forms which these and the remaining contributors discuss demonstrate that the processes of appropriation which we call ‘globalization’ and ‘localization’ are far from unitary.

It is significant that many recent studies of resistance through ritual have focused upon religious synthesis in contexts of colonialism and other forms of alien domination or exploitation, although they have not been explicitly ‘about syncretism’ (for example, Fernandez 1970, 1982; Taussig 1980, 1984; Comaroff 1985; Ong 1987; Boddy 1989). Syncretism may be (or perhaps only looks like) a form of resistance, because hegemonic practices are never simply absorbed wholesale through passive ‘acculturation’; at the very least, their incorporation involves some kind of transformation, some kind of deconstruction and
reconstruction which converts them to people’s own meanings and projects. In
colonial contexts, syncretism on the part of colonial subjects could have
particularly subversive consequences, since although colonial governments
created hybrid institutions such as ‘native courts’ all over the world, they were
usually highly contemptuous and suspicious of their subjects’ use of Western
cultural elements in syncretic appropriations (such as ‘cargo cults’) whose
meanings escape colonial control (see Kempf, this volume).

In many such contexts, the penetration of Western forms of capitalism and
cultural hegemony has been—paradoxically—both subverted and promoted
through syncretism. In Kempf’s chapter in this volume, for example, colonial
and missionary discourses in New Guinea informed the introduction of
circumcision into Yawing male initiation, where it had not previously existed.
Circumcision is now identified with Christ’s crucifixion and, by getting rid of
‘black’ blood, is said to produce an inner state of ‘whiteness’ which explicitly
links initiates both to the European world of powerful materiality and to the
world of their own ancestors. Through this ritual synthesis, Yawing thus resist
colonial ascriptions of ‘darkness’ and ‘dirt’ by asserting a hidden reality of
powerful ‘whiteness’ within themselves. Yet in so doing they have internalized
colonial and missionary definitions of ‘whiteness’. Their resistance, Kempf
concludes, ‘possesses no “authentic niche” beyond the reach of colonial power’.

Kempf shows us that attempts to resist subordination with syncretized
elements of the dominant language may be caught up in contradictions in which
the contested hegemonies may be reasserted in another form (see Abu-Lughod
1990). The appropriation of dominance and the subversion of that dominance
may be enacted at the same time, in the same syncretic act. Subversion may even
be an unintended consequence of a syncretic process in which actors intend to
appropriate rather than subvert cultural dominance. These conundrums of agency
and intentionality make syncretism very slippery, but it is precisely its capacity
to contain paradox, contradiction and polyphony which makes syncretism such
a powerful symbolic process in the contexts that the contributors to this volume
describe. Nor are anti-syncretic forms exempt from such contradiction. Kiernan
explains, for example, that the ascetic Puritan individualism which allows Zulu
Zionist members to counteract subjection to others in the workplace also cuts
them off from collective political action against such subjection.

That syncretism is not exclusively at hand to subvert the dominant order is
also clear when we contrast what Meyer calls syncretism ‘from above’ and
syncretism ‘from below’, each representing different poles in a field of power.
At one pole we have the development of religious synthesis by those who create
meanings for their own use out of contexts of cultural or political domination,
such as Yawing circumcision and Protestant Ewe discourses about the Devil. At
the other pole we have the imposition of religious synthesis upon others by those
who claim the capacity to define cultural meanings: the authorization of ‘Muslim Sande’ by Alhaji Airplane and other Muslim Mende men (Ferme); Christian missionaries Africanizing their churches by ‘baptizing’ selected deities and practices (Meyer); and Hindu nationalists claiming that Hinduism subsumes Islam (van der Veer). Syncretism ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ should not be understood as reified ‘types’ of syncretism, however, and of course not all religious syntheses can be neatly assigned a position at the top or bottom of a hierarchy of power. The syncretic appropriations in Japan described in Koepping’s chapter, for example, may be seen both as responses to external domination and as discourses of reciprocal domination—and therefore as inimical to the opposition between ‘global’ and ‘local’ itself. Similarly, Matory (1994) characterizes the mutually englobing syntheses of Yoruba orisa cults and Islam as the totalizing claims of ‘rival empires’ rather than as a conflict between a ‘local’ and a ‘world’ religion. Here we may discern syncretism as more than just an etic category wholly invented by Western scholasticism. The instances just cited show how understandings of religious synthesis organize indigenous theories of culture in contexts of domination (or attempted domination). They show, furthermore how such theories alternate between two opposed rhetorics: syncretism as tolerance and syncretism as hierarchical encompassment. These theories of culture can be either pro-syncretic or anti-syncretic but they are rarely free from essentialism; indeed, it appears that essentialist theories of culture require some comment on historical composition, and thus they necessarily encounter ‘syncretism’.

SYNCRETISM AS ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology itself is both a syncretizing and creolizing discourse (as the translation and/or invention of culture) and a discourse about syncretism. Anthropologists resemble body artists who conduct syncretic experiments upon themselves. We live another culture’s traditions while maintaining our own, and then we write about this experience from intimate personal knowledge. Moreover, we have recently acquired an englobing appetite for the irony of apparently incongruous cultural syntheses, which have in many ways become icons of postmodernism—‘Trobriand Cricket’; the Igbo ‘White Man’ masquerade on the cover of The Predicament of Culture (Clifford 1988). One reason we find these so attractive, we suppose, is because we can perceive them as already broken into parts, as deconstructed in advance. ‘Invention of culture’ writings have demonstrated the strong political significance of syncretism and hybridization in their emphasis on the challenge that such reconstruction poses to essentialized colonial representations and to Western modernist forms of consciousness in general. But they also suit our current taste for the ironic and,
far from posing a challenge to us, confirm our totalizing postmodern paradigms. And just as colonial power entailed the categorizing of people into essentialized ‘tribal’ entities with fixed boundaries (‘you are the Igbo’), anthropological hegemony now entails taking apart practices and identities which are phenomenological realities for those who use them (‘your tradition is invented’). In our enthusiasm for deconstructing syncretic traditions we may have invented another kind of intellectual imperialism.

NOTES

1 We are grateful to Ken George for his permission to quote from his paper for our 1992 American Anthropological Association panel.
2 See Werbner 1989 on the location imagery used to express the estrangement of Southern African labour migrants.
3 Such an approach to missionization has faded in and out of Christian missionizing policy since the earliest times. Compare, for example, Clement of Alexandria’s (second-century AD) remark as he proselytized the Greek community of Egypt: ‘I will give you understanding of the mysteries of the Logos [the Word] by means of images with which you are familiar’ (Protrepticus XII, 119.1).
4 Such conscious intentionality does not imply ‘insincerity’. As the argument between the two Sande women illustrates, interests, strategies and ‘political’ contestations are very much part of the internal constitution of ritual or religious experience.

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