An Analysis of Some Aspects of Acculturation

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Ever since the end of the last century, the term acculturation has been current in the anthropological literature, and for approximately 20 years intensive work has been done in this field. However, although we have a great deal of data available concerning the results of acculturation, as Hallowell has pointed out, we know very little indeed about the very complex mechanisms involved in the formation of a new cultural analgism. However, in the light of psychological considerations, one approach to this problem is implicit in the terms “retention, syncretism and reinterpretation” used by Herskovits in the analysis of Afro-American materials.

These concepts were first formulated by Herskovits in a paper on Problems, Methods and Theory in Afro-American studies, published in Afropedesis in 1945. Retention involves the maintenance of a feature of the old culture: an object, a behavior pattern, a belief, in a changing culture. In other words, all the cultural content which stems from a period prior to the process or contact under discussion. Retentions may be maintained in various forms, either unchanged or else, with certain internal changes. In the latter case, we can no longer simply speak of retentions, but rather of reinterpretation.

Interpretation may be defined as the retaining or accepting of an element from one culture into another, with change of function, meaning, or partial identity. This process represents a problem to the ethnologist if he considers that two cultures participate in this process. However, if we cease to think in terms of cultures as reified entities, but rather in terms of human beings, acculturated to one way of living or another, the conclusion of the problem changes altogether. At its roots, reinterpretation appears to be a psychological process, and must therefore be attacked on that level, rather than on the level of the superorganism.

Let us consider an individual raised in a given culture. Unless we assume certain innate or biologically derived attitudes, we must admit that his attitudes and orientation spring from his own past experience, which in itself is largely culturally determined. Indeed, no individual may be said to live in a world of “naked” realities, but rather in a culturally constituted universe. Thus we may even go so far as to say that people in different cultures do not live in quite the same world, do not experience the same “realities”. Seen from this perspective, we shall find it not only natural but indeed quite unavoidable that, faced with previously unknown situations, the individual will attempt to deal with them in terms of what he knows, in terms of the past, in terms, thus, of his own culture. Indeed, it could not be otherwise, since no “reality” can be experienced without being culturally interpreted.

At first glance, then, it would seem that cases of reinterpretation are numerous and easy at hand. The African transplanted to the New World interpreted the teachings of Christianity in terms of his own African view of the world. Similarly, the European, when faced with African modes of behavior, interpreted them in the only way he knew how, his own. For although, as we see from the above, culture holds reality for us, this is not a fact readily apparent, and to the participant, it is in no way evident that he is not dealing with actuality, with that which is, but rather with that which is, as interpreted for him by his own experience and the experience of his group, in a word, by his culture. Thus Père Labat, describing cases of African Spirit possession which he witnessed in Martinique, in the late 17th century,

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1 Read at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, held in New York, November 16–18, 1949.
tells us that these people are so obsessed and so horrified by the devil, that when he appears to them they fall into convulsions as if they were epileptics. In contemporary Haiti, Protestant converts hold that people who smoke will become zombies. In a different context, which Fromm once pointed out that American men ordinarily do not greet each other by tipping their hats, whereas homosexuals do. Americans, observing European men greeting each other in this fashion, misinterpreted their behavior to mean just that it would mean in an American cultural context. It is simple to complete the syllogism and arrive at the culturally mistaken conclusion.

Indeed, if we think in terms of uncultivation, no conclusion except that formulated in terms of old patterns is possible. For uncultivation in one given culture presents the individual only with those choices or alternatives possible within it, or in the subdivision of it, in which the individual is raised. It does not include the great range of possible solutions to a given problem which would be present, if the solutions of all cultures were to be considered. Indeed, such a possibility is nonsense, for each culture presents a given mode of adjustment. In a culture where only homosexuals tip their hats to other men, non-homosexuals by definition do not, except perhaps under very special circumstances. And if the alternatives in child care are the carrying of children on the back or hip in a cloth, the cradleboard is not one of the possibilities. It is, then, simply a matter of enumerating the culturally permissible alternatives, to see which are those derived from a different context and thus not available in a given situation. It is this limitation of alternatives within any given culture, which makes it all possible for people to function. Without it, culture could not exist, children could not be trained, personalities could not develop, for there would be no certainty of what to expect, no ability to anticipate reactions, and predict the behavior of others. All situations would require detailed investigation and no routine choices could be made, only in extreme neuroses do we find anything approaching even remotely such a situation.

Let us, however, return to the problem at hand. As a matter of fact, neither Père Labat, nor Fromm's Americans represent genuine cases of reinterpration, but simply cases of intercultural misinterpretation. The Protestant belief in zombies, however, and the identification of the African gods with the saints of the Catholic Church, do represent cases of reinterpration.

We must, then, differentiate between two phenomena: the understanding of others' behavior is terms of the known on the part of individuals, and reinterpration as such. The first case leads to an unwarrented idiosyncratic view, one which is in no way meaningful to the actual actors in the situation. Thus, both Père Labat and Fromm's informants are passive observers in a situation in which members of another culture are the actors. On the other hand, for true reinterpretation to take place, it must be patterned and become a part of a culture, the culture which results from the contact in question, and which is different from any previously existing cultures. The reinterpretation might be something which involves the active participation of the members of the culture, such as the use of certain objects in a novel way. This is exemplified by varied uses of American tin cans in the Caribbean, or perhaps by the European use of Chinese explosives for purposes of warfare. It may however, also be a matter of folktology—that is, a more or less standardized interpretation of the behavior of another group in terms of one's own beliefs and attitudes—a culturally patterned form of projection. An example might be cited from Haiti, where some

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2 Lecture notes.
informants were firmly convinced of the widespread existence of voodoo abroad, citing, among other reasons for such belief, the fact that many people had gone abroad to be cured and had returned to visit Haitian voodoo priests. Of not too dissimilar a nature seem to be common American notions about Europe—particularly France,—and vice versa. European views of America. One might wonder here whether these forms of folk-technology do not have a very special function in the support of the cultural status quo, deriving as it were, cultural alternatives.

Reinterpretations might be divided into two groups: Those which derive their content from the old culture, i.e., modernized retentions, and those which derive it from the culture with which contact is established. The example of the Haitian Protestants cited above seems to include both these facets. Here the Haitian belief in how zombies come to being is reinterpreted to fit the Protestant concept of punishment. On the other hand, the Protestant taboo on smoking is reinterpreted to fit the Haitian belief in zombies, which has persisted in a changed pattern.

In this case of two-way reinterpretation we have an example of what might be termed "intercultural fusion." This is in many ways similar to the process of syncretism. That term, however, has been reserved for a special type of two-way reinterpretation, one in which the elements that fuse become one, rather than two, parts of one phenomenon. Thus in the above example, two elements, from Haitian belief and Protestantism are tied together, to make one argument. In the more typical case of syncretism, an individual for instance might be known by two names—or more characteristically the identity of two supernatural beings, derived from two cultural contexts, might be fused. This is true of Catholic saints and African gods in the entire Catholic Afro-American area. Similarly, in the development of Christianity in Europe, Christian elements and pre-Christian ones fused. Pilgrimages in Yucatan, derivable both from Maya and Catholic sources, are another example of the same phenomenon in a different part of the world.

Indeed, the processes of retention, syncretism and reinterpretation seem to be universal in all situations of acculturation. Perhaps we might go so far as to say that only insofar as these processes take place, can we speak of acculturation. As Hallowell has pointed out, although contact is a necessary precondition for acculturation, this alone is not sufficient in the absence of other factors, where barriers to acculturation exist, the processes of reinterpretation and syncretism may be impossible; retentions will occur in an unchanged context. Acculturation, then will not occur in the sense of the development of a new cultural amalgam. As in the case of the Ojibwe, much of the aboriginal culture may appear to have disintegrated while the great deal of the old personality constellation remains. Our analysis of accul-

1 cf. Also some of the European versions of African tribal names in the slaving literature, such as Poules and even Poulands, for Paul, both these terms meaning "chicken".


turation may also throw light on processes of cultural change in general, for in a sense it becomes irrelevant whether changes are motivated from without, by contact, or from within, by invention and discovery, or by spread from one class, or subgroup, to another. The primary value, then, of the concepts of retention, syncretism and reinterpretation is, that they permit us some understanding of the actual mechanisms of change and continuity of culture.