RELIgious Syncretism AMONG NEW WORLD NEGROES

Erika Bourguignon
The Ohio State University

Re-reading The Myth of the Negro Past, and in particular the chapter on "Africanisms in Religious Life" twenty-seven years after it was written, one is struck by the great deal of work that has been carried out in this area in the intervening years, the great many studies documenting Negro life in the Americas that have appeared. Professor Herskovits' own work and that of his students, as well as work informed by other theoretical perspectives, have contributed to this documentation. And this in spite of the fact that Afro-America cannot truly be said to be, or to have been, one of the major areas of interest of American anthropologists of this period. Indeed, beginning in the late 1940's Professor Herskovits himself, and many of his students, like a number of other American anthropologists, turned their interests to the rapidly changing African scene.

In the preface to the Beacon Press reedition of the Myth (1956), Professor Herskovits suggests that the cultural focus of Negro societies is to be found in religious behavior, and it is, therefore, perhaps not inappropriate that the present paper deal with aspects of religious behavior among Negro societies, with emphasis on the area of the Caribbean. Indeed, religion in its various forms, together with family life--particularly the so-called "natri-focal family"--are probably the two aspects of life in the region that have received the most extensive documentation.

* The research on which this paper is based is part of a larger project, entitled Cross-Cultural Studies of Dissociational States, which is supported in whole by Public Health Service Research Grant MH 07483-05 from the National Institute of Mental Health.
Professor Herskovits, himself, studied religion, among other aspects of culture, in Dutch Guiana—among Bush Negroes and townspeople—in Haiti, in Trinidad and in Brazil. Additional documentation now exists for these areas as well as for Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Martinique, the other Guianas, and some of the smaller islands such as Dominica, St. Vincent and Grenada. Work has been done also on the religious life of such mixed groups as the Black Caribs of Honduras and British Honduras, on Negroes in Mexico, and in Ecuador and Colombia on the South American Mainland. In the Caribbean region, the Dominican Republic—before, during and after Trujillo—remains notably unstudied, and little detailed information is available concerning religion in most of the smaller islands; from the Bahamas and Virgin Islands in the North to the Netherlands West Indian in the South.

If we look both at the Caribbean and beyond it to such areas of large Negro populations as the United States and Brazil, it is clear that not only have studies multiplied, but the scene to be surveyed has itself changed, what with the development of such syncretic religions as Umbanda and related forms in Brazil, and of the Black Moslems in the United States.

Other changes have been political in nature: syncretic religions have been legalized in many areas where they had been illegal before (e.g., Haiti, Brazil, Trinidad, St. Vincent), and they have consequently become more accessible to study. (The religious situation in Cuba, of course, has become quite inaccessible.) Legality has also changed the position of these groups in relation to other religious groups in the society, and at times they, themselves, appear to play a political role.
under certain circumstances (e.g., Courlander and Baetje, 1966). The changing picture of Africa too, has contributed to this altered context. 2

Restudy of syncretic religions among New World Negroes at this time must then take into consideration these changes in circumstances, as well as the fact of increased available information.

The work of the intervening period has, as is so often the case, done less to answer the questions raised in 1940, than to show us a rather more complex picture. For as the picture has filled out and some issues have been clarified to a degree, others have arisen, and yet, still others have not been taken up at all.

In this latter category, we find the interesting suggestion of a possible Indian influence in Negro religion in the United States. Professor Herskovits writes:

...Yet the hysterical seizures that mark many Indian cult practices, and the dancing and singing that are integral parts of this worship, make it permissible to ask whether a relationship does not exist between these indigenous movements and both white and Negro religious developments in this country (Herskovits, 1941:229).

Nowhere, to my knowledge, has the challenge this hypothesis presents been taken up, and the puzzling possibility of such diffusion still exists. 3

One of the special attractions of Afro-American studies resides in the fact that we have here a perfect, natural laboratory, in which there exists a series of constant factors, together with some variables which we can change at will, as it were, by moving from island to island, from country to country, (e.g., W. J. Herskovits, 1956). The most orthodox forms of African religions are found in Catholic countries, e.g., Haiti,
Cuba, Brazil. To my knowledge, no one has seriously questioned whether Cuban santería, Haitian vodun or various Brazilian forms (candomblé, xango, mocumbá, etc.) "really" are African in origin. Many features of the cults in these three countries are letter-perfect replicas of their African models. Verger's pictures may lead one to wonder, in certain instances, whether we are dealing with events photographed in Bahia or in Dahomey or Nigeria as the case may be (Verger, 1934). The names of gods are the African names as are the names of specific rituals, of ritual objects, of participants, etc., etc. In the Protestant countries, most classically the United States, such cults are absent, and it is here that the greatest effort is expended in The Myth to relate Negro Protestant religious behavior to African sources. Similarly, questions have been raised about the Africanisms found among Protestant groups in the Caribbean.

The documentation of African features in Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil is now much better than it was in 1940. Descriptive materials on Negro Protestantism in the United States and in the Caribbean is also much better. While it is clear now as it was in 1940, there has been a much higher degree of retention of African forms, a much greater obvious continuity--in the Catholic countries, however one assesses the African contribution to Negro forms of Protestantism--the question still remains: how are we to account for these observations?

Professor Herskovits suggests two answers: "Catholic theology and ritual," he writes (1941:220), "are too fixed to give rise to the variation characteristic of the type of Negro Christianity engendered by Protestantism." In Catholic countries, in addition to participation in
the Catholic Church, "the heritors of African religious traditions" have developed syncretic cults. Secondly, it is indicated implicitly, if not explicitly, the content of Catholic belief, in particular belief in the saints, could be syncretized with the African belief in spirits. This has clearly been documented over and over again (see: Herzkovits, 1937). In Protestantism, presumably, such a basis for syncretism is absent.

On the basis of my own work in Haiti, I should like to suggest that two aspects of the syncretic process must be distinguished: the psychological process of reinterpreting or syncretizing elements of two or more diverse traditions and a process of institutional organization or reorganization. In the former process both unconscious, perceptual elements and conscious, intellectual elements are at work. In the latter the structural and organizational features of institutions and societies are at work.

A historian, Herbert S. Klein, in a recent paper undertook a comparison of, as he puts it, "the relationship between infidel Negro and Christian Church, in two highly representative colonies, those of Cuba and Virginia" (Klein, 1966:295). We may cite from his conclusions:

In Cuba, the Church took an immediate daily concern and involvement, and succeeded in molding custom and patterns, as well as commanding obedience to higher authorities... Not troubled by the belief that Christianity was incompatible with the slave status and working with established Iberian attitude toward the Negro and his place within Catholic society, the Cuban clergy were able to mold and modify the conditions of human bondage for the African Negro. ...the Cuban clergy effectively Christianized the imported slaves and freely admitted them into the church... In the syncretization of African religions in folk Catholicism (my emphasis, E. B.), and in the organization of cofradías, cofihdos, and religious processions, the Africans were provided with a rich cultural and community existence, which paradoxically eased their assimilation into society. ...
None of these things occurred for the Virginia Negro. ...(Klein, p. 326).

Thus, while the Spanish Catholic Church in Cuba made a strong effort to convert and integrate the Negro, slave or free, the Church of England in Virginia and afterwards the Virginia Episcopal Church, because of planter control and planter opposition—in contrast to metropolitan control in Cuba—excluded the Negro. Thus, to quote Klein again:

Denied the full rights of the Christian, with his family unrecognized by the Church or the state, with his previous religious experience rendered totally useless and destroyed, and his chances for self and community expression severely controlled if not openly discouraged by the local parish, the Virginia Negro slave faced a harsh world dominated by his master, and with little possibility of protective intervention and support from an outside institution (Klein, p. 327).

This author's main thesis, then, is that the Church of Spain, as shown in Cuba, and the Church of England, as shown in Virginia, followed different policies with respect to the slaves, and that this had a profound effect on the place of the Negro in the respective societies at that time and since then. He places the responsibility for this difference on the way in which the Church was controlled, in large measure, by the metropolis in the Cuban case, by the planters, in the case of Virginia.

Another historian, Elsa V. Coveia (1966:328-330) takes issue with Klein's interpretation, though not with his facts insofar as they concern Cuba and Virginia. She argues that the treatment of the Cuban Negro was due less to the policy of the Catholic Church than to the nature of early Cuban society. For slavery in the Catholic French colonies, as well as later in Cuba, presented a different, harsher picture. She considers Cuba and Virginia "representative" not of Catholic and Anglican societies but of societies with differing proportions of Negro and white populations,
reflecting differing degrees of dependence on the slave plantation as a way of life" (p. 329).

It is clear that much historical research remains to be done to show us the differences in religious and social regimes of the individual colonies and the reasons for these differences as well. While this work must be done primarily by historians, it is of great importance to anthropologists, if we wish to understand the development of present day institutions. While Klein and Covee have added to our information, the problem has also become again more complex: why is it that the admission of Negroes into the Church is somehow causal to the development of what Klein calls "synchronised folk catholicism"—which presumably refers to santeria and was by no means acceptable to the Church, which tried so hard to convert the heathen African? How is it that, not being admitted to the Church and not converted to Christianity, the Virginia Negro did not maintain more of his own aboriginal beliefs and practices—how was his "previous religious experience rendered totally useless and destroyed, when that of the Cuban Negro was maintained to a remarkable extent?

It is tempting to suggest that whereas Catholicism provided an opportunity for reinterpretation and syncretism at the perceptual and cognitive level—in the cult of saints and in some aspects of its ritualism—it did not provide such an opportunity within its organizational structure. In Cuba, the cofradías and societies, however, offered not only an opportunity for membership to the African but also a model for parallel organizations. The structure of the Church, itself, however, was both rigid and integrated—taking the African in, but allowing no room for innovation in dogma, ritual or Church organization. Protestantism, in many ways, appears
to have represented the very opposite: it did not integrate the African into its own rigid forms, but, particularly with the coming of Methodism, allowed for separate structures, in which both innovation and reinterpretation were possible. This was true in particular with regard to Biblical interpretation and ritual, including enthusiastic services and initiation practices (baptism, "mourning" and "building"). On the other hand, in the absence of a cult of saints, syncretism with African polytheism was obviously handicapped.

In the contrast between Cuba and Virginia, furthermore, two other elements must be noted: 1) there was generally a much greater maintenance of African languages and customs in Cuba than in Virginia (Olmstead, 1953; Bascom, 1950), in part undoubtedly due to the greater recency of the interruption of contact with Africa. 2) The family, present in Cuba, and totally fragmented in Virginia, could provide a source of cultural continuity in one case, which it could provide only to a much lesser degree in the other.

Further exploration of these hypotheses, in the context of the larger historical and regional variations may prove to be fruitful in providing some insights into the variegated results we observe at present.

If we pursue this Catholic-Protestant contrast beyond early colonial Cuba and Virginia to the present time and to a larger region, we find, as Goveia has indicated, that the conditions in the French islands were quite different from those in Cuba, and their subsequent history was different as well.

Among the islands that were French colonies in the 18th century we find most notably Haiti and Martinique. While they shared a common background under French colonial administration, their experiences in the 19th
and 20th centuries were dissimilar and their present-day societies also
differ in a great many important respects. In the present discussion, the
most significant observation is that, in Haiti, vodun is widespread through-
out the society, and may be said to represent the classical example of a
syncretic Afro-Catholic religion (e.g., Herskovits, 1934; Mitrani, 1959;
Bourguignon, 1965; etc., etc.). In Martinique and also in Guadeloupe, such
a syncretic religion appears to be absent (Leiris, 1958; Horowitz, 1967).
An explanation is offered by Leiris:

The relative lack of African survivals in the culture of
Martinique can be accounted for to some extent by several rather
obvious factors. Chief among them is that Martinique is a small
island. Escaped slaves were not able to form communities—as in
Jamaica, Suriname, Brazil and Haiti—which could perpetuate African
conditions. Supervision of slaves was strict and close contact
with the whites has been the rule ever since the time when the
first slaves found themselves working side by side with the French
guards. Furthermore, unlike the population of Haiti, for whom
independence severed contact with France, the people of African
origin in Martinique have had continuous relations with metropoli-

True enough, independence severed the Haitian's relations with France
as early as 1804, but the cults were clearly in existence before then, as
Moreau de St. Héry describes them. Haitian school books and some others
(e.g., Bastien, op. cit., p. 42) are fond of giving the cult leaders great
credit for the development of the Haitian Revolution. Why were such cults
absent in Martinique at the same time? Because there were no maroons? But
the groups St. Héry describes were present on plantations, not hidden in
the hills. The maroons of Jamaica, on the other hand, have not maintained
the purest African tradition on that island. And in Haiti, as well as in
Martinique, Africans worked side by side with French guards and were sub-
ject to the same French policies. How then can we account for the
differences between these two French colonies prior to 1804, if the size of the islands appears to be the principle difference between them?

In the subsequent period, the histories of the two islands diverge and the differences are accentuated. While slavery was terminated in Haiti with the French revolution in 1789, in Martinique it endured until 1848. And if independence severed the Haitian's contact with France, it also severed his contact both with Africa and with the Catholic Church, for with the end of slavery and of colonial status, the slave trade ceased; with independence came severe conflict with the Church, which led to an open break lasting for more than half a century. What happened in Haiti after 1804 including the special character vodun can be ascribed to the peculiar history of that country.

The continuation of slavery and French influence in Martinique after 1804 may well have led to a suppression of cults or incipient cults that had existed there before. More intensive efforts of conversion and of education there are also to be considered. Furthermore, French centralization in contrast to Haitian local diversity and lack of effective national control should be investigated as possible significant elements in this situation. Also, as shown by the recent work of Price (1968) there seems to have been a much greater traceable influence of American Indians in Martinique than in Haiti. Finally, since the end of slavery, an East Indian population has been introduced, as in Trinidad and Guyana. These, however, are only some suggestions: the problem is still open.

We may take the case of Trinidad as a further example. Trinidad became a British possession in 1797 and since then has been exposed to strong British, including Protestant, influences. But, prior to that time,
Trinidad had been a Spanish possession and large numbers of French planters had settled there in the last quarter of the 16th century. Slavery was abolished in 1833, but this did not terminate contact with Africa. Indeed, some free African immigrants arrived in Trinidad as late as about 1855 (e.g., Carr, n.d.). In addition, in the 1840's large numbers of East Indians and Chinese were also brought to the island. The resulting religious scene is one of great variety. Thus the Rada (Dehoseen) community which Carr (op. cit.) describes, is traced back directly to its founder in 1855, a free African immigrant, who came to Trinidad as a mature man, and who had been a bokono (diviner) in his native country. Although Catholic elements have been syncretised with African traditions in this group, particularly with respect to the names of the saints, the African tradition has remained remarkably pure. Of a more mixed nature is the better known Shango Cult (Herskovits, 1947; F. Mischel, 1958; Mischel and Mischel, 1958; Henry, 1965; Simpson, 1962, 1965). Here the mixture includes on the African side, predominantly Yoruba elements, and on the Christian side, both Catholic and Protestant Baptist elements. Shango is identified with St. John the Baptist. Among the elements of the Shango cult which are reminiscent of Pentecostal Protestantism is the speaking in "unknown tongues" (glossolalia) and the intensive use of the Bible. In addition to being affiliated with the Catholic Church, Shango participants may also be members of Spiritual Baptist ("Shouter") groups or have contacts with them (Mischel, op. cit.; Simpson, 1966). Spiritual Baptist represent the most attenuated form of Africanisms in this continuum of Afro-American religions in Trinidad (Herskovits, 1947). In spite of the overlap in membership that exists between them, however, these groups keep their separate institutional character.
This is not the case with M. G. Smith's "Dark Puritan" (Smith, 1963), a Grenadian, who has at various times lived in Trinidad, and who founded a cult which derived from a very personal synthesis of Seventh Day Adventism, Shouterism and Shango, which itself contains both African and Catholic elements. While this case is perhaps unique, it does indicate the possibility of a type of multiple syncretism which appears to overcome, in an act of personal innovation, the differences between the beliefs of these various groups.

Spiritual Baptists, called "Shakers" and resembling those of Trinidad in most significant aspects, are also found on St. Vincent; a cult of more or less syncretized African spirits--such as the Shango cult of Trinidad--however, does not exist there (Kenny, 1967, 1968b).

Perhaps the most highly eclectic and complex form of syncretism, on a collective rather than ideosyncratic level (as in the case of Smith's Black Puritan, mentioned above) is to be found not in the Caribbean area, but in the thriving Umbanda religion of Brazil. Umbanda integrates features of African religions, Catholicism, Brazilian Indian contributions and aspects of the belief system developed by the French 19th century spiritualist theoretician, Allen Kardec. The African elements are clearly recognized as such by the participants who represent practically the whole broad ethnic spectrum of Brazilian society. In spite of its strongly marked African roots, Umbanda can no longer be identified as an Afro-American, Afro-Catholic or Negro religion. Furthermore, unlike the Afro-American religions discussed in this paper, it does not have its principal appeal and support among the disinherited members of the lower class. In São Paulo, in particular, its appeal appears to be to the upwardly mobile members of the lower and lower-
middle class (Pressel, 1968a, b; see also Bastide, 1960; McGregor, 1967). Umbanda, then, perhaps alone among the various syncretic religions with African components has made the transition to a religion of the social whole. Indeed, one is tempted to see it as a new religion facilitating as well as symbolizing the development of a new society. Yet Umbanda seems to lack some of the key characteristics of a revitalization movement. (Pressel, 1968b; Wallace, 1956).

The study of Umbanda, which is only in its beginnings, introduces a new perspective into our theoretical analysis of syncretic religions. On the whole, the study of these religions, viewed from the point of view of acculturation, has been oriented primarily toward the past. It is true that many unanswered questions remain as a challenge to historical research. What I have in mind here is rather a different point: By looking at what New World Negroes have retained from their African past we tend to focus on the conserving and conservative aspects of Afro-American culture and on the conservative aspects of Afro-American culture and on the conservative function of the religions, in particular. Some authors, (e.g., Bastien, in Courlander and Bastien, op. cit.) tend to see Haitian vodú and other Afro-American religions as obstacles to culture change and as instruments of political conservatism and control. The example of Umbanda would tend to suggest that this is not necessarily so. A detailed comparison between vodú and Umbanda, for example, might help us delineate the social, economic and political features of a society which might influence the character of a syncretic movement in this respect. It may well be that vodú is a conservative force, that Shango in Trinidad provides compensatory outlets for its members in their strivings for prestige and power (Mischel and Mischel, op. cit.). It
may well be that lower class religions in certain types of societies function primarily to make life liveable for their adherents. Umbanda, on the other hand, seems to have overcome the onus of being a lower class religion, of representing 'African superstitions' and appears to be able to provide its members with help in the processes of decision making and in dealing with the inventory of new statuses and roles provided by the rapid social and economic changes inherent in the development of new social forms in contemporary urban Brazil.

Umbanda, then, furnishes us with an important contrast to the Afro-American religions of the Caribbean and to the orthodox Afro-Brazilian religions as well. A number of implications of this brief survey for a comparative study of syncretic religions in the New World emerge from our discussion:

1-In the ethno-historical, as well as in the contemporary context, we need to know more about the larger social field in which religious institutions, beliefs and practices developed and are developing. We need to know more about the articulation between religion and society.

2-Consequently, we need more, and more informed, historical work. The work of Professor Herskovits stimulated anthropologists to consider the African background of Afro-Americans and of their religions. We have made considerable progress in this respect since these studies were begun by Professor and Mrs. Herskovits in their work in Surinam in 1928. In addition to continuing this work, however, we need to have a better understanding of the European contribution to the process of syncretism. What were the teachings of the Churches, and to whom were they available? And in addition to the formal teachings, what were the folk beliefs and practices brought by
European settlers? For example, the French folk practices of curing as well as of sorcery, still practiced in some rural regions, need to be investigated for their impact on Martinique and Haiti respectively (see D. and M. Boghen, 1966; G. Jacquel and J. Morel, 1966). In fact, what was the nature of these settlers and of the types of contacts established by them with the Africans: e.g., the difference between contacts between slaves and masters and between slaves (or free Negroes) and European bondsmen (engages)?

3. What were the policies in the field of religion, of the Churches in the Colonies—to wit, the difference between the Spanish Catholic Church and Church of England as we have seen in our earlier discussion, and how were these policies mediated, and, indeed, by what forces were these policies influenced?

4. What was the sequence of events: sequence of colonial administrations; sequence of religious movements (e.g., the influence of Methodism in the British West Indies in the 19th century): continuation—or cessation—of contacts between the colony, or ex-colony, and the metropolis on the one hand, and with West Africa on the other?

5. What was the social organization within the various Caribbean countries at various points of their histories, and what do we know of the inter-island contacts, which appear to weigh so heavily at present?

It will have been noted, that this list is heavily influenced by the work of George Foster in respect to Hispano-America (Foster, 1960) and his concept of "Conquest Culture." Foster emphasizes the important point, that the culture of the colonial power presents itself selectively to the conquered peoples. In the instance which concerns Foster, this applies to the culture of Spain and in its impact on the American Indian. In our instance,
it concerns the culture of the various European powers and their impact most particularly on the imported Africans, slave or free. Selection may be influenced by formal and informal mechanisms: the policies of Church and State on the one hand, and the material and folk culture introduced by settlers on the other. Both of these mechanisms operate to emphasize certain cultural elements, to modify or eliminate others and indeed to innovate at times. The sequence of settlers, Foster finds, tends to confirm the patterns established by the earlier groups.

All of these points must be investigated systematically for the Caribbean area—in the present context, specifically from the point of view of religion. Such an investigation, together with what we already know of the African background, should help us to get answers to some of the questions raised in this paper, and to many more as well. It could help us to make the Caribbean truly a laboratory of comparative anthropological studies, taking both synchronic and diachronic elements into account. I hope the next few years will produce as much progress in this area, as we have seen in the period since the publication of The Myth of the Negro Past.
NOTES

1. The bibliography of *The Myth of the Negro Past* was updated by Professor Herskovits, himself, in the 1958 paperback reedition of the book, and to some extent in the volume of his papers published posthumously: *The New World Negro*. An additional bibliography is supplied at the end of the present paper.

2. The following remark surely deserves to be quoted:

   Il est curieux (ou peut-être pas) de retrouver parmi d'authentiques africains beaucoup des phénomènes observés chez les Noirs des USA et décrits par le Professeur HERSKOVITZ (sic) dans *The Myth of the Negro Past* (P. Alexandre, 1960:28, footnote 3).

3. With respect to Indian influence on "white" religion, see Hallowell, 1957, who points to the image of the Indian among both Shakers and Spiritualists; both groups were active in 19th century America, both claimed Indian influences, and both engaged in ecstatic trance states. However, the influence of Indian practices on revivalism and Pentecostalism seem not to have been investigated so far.

4. It is interesting that the writings of Allan Kuroe also influenced the development of another complex syncretic religion: the Cao-Dai movement in Viet Nam.

5. That an important contribution to our understanding of the history of the area can be gained by this approach is also illustrated, with respect to Jamaica, by Green (1964).


Moreau de St. Mery, M. L. E. 1797-1798. Description topographique, physique, civile, et historique de la partie francaise de l'Isle de Saint-Dominigue. (Two volumes.) Philadelphia:


