Haitian "socialized ambivalence" reconsidered.

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In the October 1972 issue of this Review, Dr. Carolo Sterlin presented a "critical analysis" of my article "Haïti et l'ambivalence socialisée: une reconsidération." Since Dr. Sterlin did not provide a summary of the article, I wish to do so at present, and at the same time, to deal with one or two of the issues, or rather pseudo-issues, he raises.

The term "socialized ambivalence," coined by Professor Herskovits, serves as a framework for the discussion of the Haitian élite, as observed by me almost 25 years ago, and beyond it, as a basis for the discussion of certain more general problems of culture contact and culture change. The term is used by its author as descriptive of the "tendency to manifest...rapid shifts in attitude toward people and situations" (Herskovits 1937:295). Neither he nor I attempted to formulate this phrase as a psychiatric concept or to establish its relationship to ambivalence as it might be found in schizophrenic patients, as suggested by Dr. Sterlin. While there may be pain for the individual in such socialized ambivalence, the phenomenon under question arises out of a situation typical for his group, and is reflected in its institutions, nor out of idiosyncratic pathogenic situations reflected in the patient’s symptoms.

The body of the article presents a single, full Rorschach protocol (11 pages), the subject being a young man of the mulatto élite. While I consider this young man typical of his group in many ways, the protocol
is unique and quite unlike any other I collected in Haiti (Bourguignon & Nett 1955, Bourguignon 1956). Its interest resides precisely in its uniqueness: the subject gives us, in addition to a large number of interpretations of the inkblots, a striking number of associations to these responses. Here it should be noted that the article presents an analysis of this content in cultural terms, not a formal analysis of the structure of the protocol as such. The inference that socialized ambivalence is found in this subject is drawn from this analysis of the content of the protocol and not of the structural aspects of the Rorschach, as Dr. Sterlin seems to suggest. The content of this protocol indicates, in addition to many minor references, four principal poles of cultural and historical attraction and repulsion: Haiti and the United States, Africa and France. The demonstration of these contradictory attitudes toward his opposing poles of orientation and the relationship between the subject's statements and those of others of his group are presented and discussed at length. In conclusion and in response to issues raised by several anthropologists (Mintz 1964, Whetten and Szwed 1968, 1969), socialized ambivalence is contrasted with syncretism as a mechanism of culture change. It is noted that a) while syncretism is a cultural process, socialized ambivalence is an element of social character which has a negative effect on the functioning of institutions and b) syncretism is a cognitive phenomenon, while socialized ambivalence is a phenomenon of value conflict.

Dr. Sterlin rejects the term socialized ambivalence and this notion of value conflict—he prefers to think of value conflict as an "ideological and normative postulate" of what must be called occidental
intellectual imperialism, although he does not use these terms. If we are to believe him "linear unidimensional and unidirectional values" characterize the Westerner whereas the people of the third world, presumably, thrive on contradictory values. Unfortunately, under these circumstances, the Haitian elite seems to suffer from being by far too Western for its own good, by far too much nourished on the soil of Western civilization. Métraux even spoke of vodun as a "Western paganism"! One might be tempted to argue also that faced with such overwhelming contradictions as are the people of the third world in the throes of modernization they have perhaps no choice but to make the least of a bad situation and to acclaim their ambivalence as a supreme good and their uncertainties as "flexibility." At the same time, Dr. Sterlin himself illustrates the concept of "ambivalence" and of contradictory attitudes which I speak of, for in another paper (n.d.) he speaks of the "failures of négritude" where the individual is torn between his spontaneous self-image and the image the dominant white culture forces on him. Which moment of Dr. Sterlin's perceptions, then, are we to believe? Perhaps, then, I should thank Dr. Sterlin for having provided in this way a list of additional evidence to my base for Haitian socialized ambivalence.

References

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