RELLIGIOUS SYNCRETISM AMONG NEW WORLD NEGROES

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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 (1958), 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 "matri-focal family"—are probably the two aspects of life in the region that have received the most extensive documentation.

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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 Netherland West Indies 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 Bastien, 1966). The changing picture of Africa too, has contributed to this altered context.²

Restedly 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, then 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., M. 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 santo (Haitian voyou or various Brazilian forms (candomblé, yoruba, macumba, 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, 1951). 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: Herskovits, 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 psycho-
logical process of reinterpreting or syncretizing elements of two or more
diverse traditions and a process of institutional organization or reorgan-
ization. In the former process both unconscious, perceptual elements and
conscious, intellectual elements are at work. In the latter the struc-
tural and organizational features of institutions and societies are at
work.

A historian, Herbert S. Klein, in a recent paper undertook a compari-
son of, as he puts it, "the relationship between infidel Negro and Chris-
tian 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
involveinent, 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, cabildos, and religious
processionals, the africans were provided with a rich cultural
and community existence, which paradoxically eased their assi-
milation 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 curtailed 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 Covela 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 "syncretized folk catholicism"—which presumably refers to *candomblé* 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