Syncretism in Vodu and Orisha
An Anthropological Analysis

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Abstract
This article is a comparative and ethnographic analysis of syncretism as a theoretical tool for explaining “African-based” religions (Vodu and Orisha) in West Africa and the New World. Vodu and Orisha defy syncretism as a valid concept for explaining the creativity of ritual life because it fails to account for the historicity, the religious imagination, or the cultural context of these forms. This article discusses that despite many shortcomings and problems with syncretism as a concept, it continues to be employed across many disciplines, even as it conflates and mystifies the different aspects and elements of African religions. Syncretism approaches tend to mystify African symbols and explain away things that, from the inside, are fundamental to African systems. This article will explain and contextualize many of these flaws and deficiencies with the concept through fieldwork and archival research.

Keywords: syncretism, religion, Vodu, Orisha, Africa

Introduction
This article examines current debates surrounding the concept of syncretism in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean and grapples with more than forty years of literature surrounding the concept. The comparative, historical, and ethnographic data of my own and others find the concept of syncretism wanting. The concept of syncretism reflects a value-laden judgment ensconced in the ethnocentric typologies of Western/Christian/Muslim lenses. When African traditions are evaluated by anthropologists, we are guilty of simplifying...
and overplaying some of these internal orders, especially Yoruba and Kongo influences in the Atlantic World, because they were dynamic and diverse with numerous other traditional trajectories that were wrongly grouped into either a Yoruba, Vodu (also called “Voodoo”), or Kongo character. As MacGaffey writes, “Once arrived in St. Domingue, Kikongo-speaking Catholics continued actively to preach and to administer the sacraments, undoubtedly reinforcing Catholicism in that country. ‘Syncretism’ between saints and minkisi had already been effected in Kongo, where for example in the eighteenth century an avatar of St. Anthony of Padua was Toni Malau, a nkisis for good hunting (malau, “hunting luck”), and Our Lady of Mpinda was a rain shrine,” obscuring more than they reveal about traditional African religions (2016: 16). Many scholars have taken a more positive view of syncretism, equating it with creolization, or as Thompson calls it, “a little bit of this, and a little bit of that” (1995: 57). Structural functionalists frame syncretism as a means of reaching an integrated whole, while Marxists have focused on oppositions and power struggles between little traditions and big ones. In my work in Togo, I have come to realize that religious specialists attempt reconciliation and union of different opposing principles, and more often, of parallel or synonymous practices and philosophies of religions. Stewart and Shaw tried to escape the problematic opposition of the term by politicizing the concept and creating another oppositional term, “anti-syncretism,” which resists more than it assimilates.

We know that all religions and cultures are constantly blending traits to create new forms, and yet somehow in these approaches African traditions are always made to take a back seat to orthodox religions, and this subjective aspect of syncretism works to marginalize Vodu and Orisha, the religions I will focus on here. We might think that in 2016 syncretism has been reduced to “a straw man,” yet it continues to draw the attention of scholars across the board (e.g., Greenfield and Droogers; Martin; Starkloff; Rey and Richman; Kurtz; Schreiter). Conspicuously absent from most of this literature are publications by African agents from within these systems, and when they do appear most of them focus on parallels over oppositions (Pichardo 2012). Religions in general constantly adapt and change and are influenced from polyvalent sources; Gorovodu has been impacted by Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and regional African systems like Hausa, Akan, Adja-Fon, and Yoruba. The influence of African ritual power is too often understated and distorted by studies of syncretism.

The concept came up during filming of Chasing the Spirit, where we evaluated Gorovodu religion among the Ewes of Southern Togo (Montgomery and Vannier). My ideas about syncretism began to change in 2006 when a group of priests summoned me to their shrine to discuss pictures of Catholic saints and Hindu deities I had gifted to the bakonosajo (head vodu priest), Sofo Bisi. I presumed they were “mixing” symbols from the great literate traditions, but over time I came to realize that they were “converting” external elements, thereby making their own concepts more vivid and praiseworthy. Many high-ranking priests are products of Christian mission schools and especially the Catholic Church. When talking about “religious mixing” many talk to me within Christian frameworks in an attempt to invoke clarity since most associate “the whites” with Christianity. Ironically, most priests know more about the Christian religion than I do. One major priest, Baniba Ahudza (d. 2006) explained it to me this way: “Jesus is alive, and he is like the vodu, like Kunde, he is a trinity – father, son, and holy-ghost. But where Jesus forgives, Kunde can punish; the Ten Commandments from the Bible
are also Vodu laws, and the Vodu will catch evil-doers and bring harmony to the society in the present, not in the afterlife” (personal conversation, 2006). Among adepts, Jesus, like Muhammad and others, is passed through a Vodu-first filter that, more than working out oppositions, adds and assimilates like concepts.

Definitions of syncretism vary across and within disciplines. The term is tricky because it has both objective and subjective meanings. For our purposes, we will use Droogers simple objective definition as a “neutrally and descriptive term which refers to the mixing of religions” (7). The subjective realm includes how we evaluate the intermingling from the objective definition has both objective and subjective continuities to garner attention (Martin; Richardson; Simpson; Kurtz; Schreiter). This article will examine how syncretism is used in anthropology and its implications for West African systems of belief throughout the Atlantic World. An ethnographic case study will illustrate problems of syncretism from below, while an engagement with anthropological literature will highlight the concept’s problems and promises from above.

Syncretism approaches tend to mystify African symbols and explain away things that, from the inside, are fundamental to African systems. This leads to misunderstandings of meaning and eventually deems Gorovodu and other African orders inferior. In 1991, Andrew Apter published “Herskovits’ Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora” in which he proposed a theoretical re-visititation of syncretism that would overcome the limitations of Herskovits’ use of the concept by highlighting the indigenous idea of “deep knowledge,” which Apter harvested from studying the Yoruba. Viewed as the definitive article on African religions and syncretism, this paper aimed to reinvigorate Herskovits’ approach and show that the “syncretic paradigm” was useful for evaluating African belief systems throughout the Atlantic world. Apter said his goal was “to rethink syncretism as a way that does justice to both sides of this methodological divide: to the inventiveness of the New World African identities as well as their cultural and historical associations with West African peoples” (261). Though he acknowledged difficulties due to Herskovits’ ethno-historical method and anthropology’s crisis of representation, he missed problems inherent in the syncretism concept.

There are a few occasions where syncretism as a concept can be fruitful, particularly when it assesses a “symbiosis of identity,” and particularly in Latin America where Catholicism has a four hundred year strong presence. However, it obfuscates more than it clarifies the vast majority of the time. There are many reasons syncretism falls short as a frame for analyses of African-based religions. Most crucially is that it mistakes receptivity for naivety and obfuscates the fact that African gods throw a heavier shadow than do their orthodox brethren. That is, many Africans possess images of various Catholic saints, and merely observing their altar one would assume, “These are good Catholics,” but, from Haiti to West Africa, Catholic (and other) images have been co-opted for African gods – Saint Peter is Legba, Saint Patrick is Vodu Da, and the Virgin Mary is Mami Wata or Oshun. It was in the best interest of African slaves in the New World and West Africans alike to appear Christian in covert acts of agency later obscured by the syncretism idea. And unlike Christianity and Islam, African systems allow for simultaneous worship. Within the confines of the syncretic paradigm, two cultural
traditions mix to form a hybrid, but the actual movement of power between different groups is fundamental to these systems. The syncretism approach misunderstands this because it takes insufficient account of the historicity and context of the religious and cultural forms at issue.

Apter’s attempts to understand “deep knowledge” are a life-line for understanding syncretism, and rethinking syncretism in the African diaspora is a necessary, revisionary undertaking. But we must do more than this, since the appropriation of African powers was more than symbolic — it was actual, for example in Haiti, where such powers became foundational for a nationalist rhetoric and, indeed, a revolution (177). When priests associate Kunde, the hunter and father in Gorovodu, with the trinity of Christ, they are bridging symbolic compartments for the sake of understanding, but they still see difference. Both in Africa and the New World, external religions such as Christianity and Islam have overlapped with indigenous African systems through symbolic parallelism, or sometimes to help find common ground with anthropologists posing questions.

Today’s rituals (Gorovodu, Mami Wata, Tchamba, Yewe Vodu, and Orisha) are syncretic only in the sense that they merge ritual elements from different regions and religions, but these are more syntheses or symbolic renovations than syncretism, especially since syncretism lacks the “neutrality” of its definition (Droogers). They are processes of cultural reproduction that when understood historically and ethnographically unveil a clear view into the colonial and postcolonial contexts in which they emerge, and also illuminate the empowering strategies of ritual life that contest past and current hegemonies. Herskovits saw both West African and Caribbean religions to be responses to the European slave trade and its linkages, but the vast majority of African and the New World gods existed before European contact altogether (1937; 1938). Syncretism tends to favor a “master religion” and in the process ignores the inherent dynamism and power of the other cultural forms involved. As an editor of Anthropology Theory commented on an article I submitted there, “Only those religious practices of disempowered people are studied as syncretic” (Schiller 2015: 1).

Contemporary social theory embraces related ideas such as globalization, transnationalism, and diaspora communities (Csordas; Robbins; Stewart: 40). Terms such as creolization, hybridization, cultural relativism, diversity, and multiculturalism are associated with syncretism. But these terms fail to capture the cultural exchange of sacred phenomena and help us little toward understanding how participants harness power. Yet despite recognition of the concept’s past failures, many insist syncretism is “instructive” and a means to “set ethnographic study of cultural mixture on new tracks” (Stewart: 40), and we must ask why.

Gorovodu practitioners among the Ewes of southern Togo disagree with key aspects of the syncretism perspective. The Gorovodu priest Sofo Bisi told me in 2013, “You are asking me about these big religions but Vodu is more ancient than all of these, as I told the Cardinal in Ghana, a leaf cannot tell a root what to do. Gorovodu is this root, it means ‘roots of a tree’ (atikevodu) and all of these began in Africa, in Sudan, in Egypt, before Christ, and Muhammed.” Gorovodu gods are foreign in origin, pointing to the benevolence attached to the Muslim regional north and the exotic power of others (Friedson; Rosenthal 1998, 2005). Ewe Gorovodu peoples ritualize and perform mimetically past contacts with northern ethnic groups and slaves who married in and became the Ewes of today. These spirits share overlaps
in agency and archetype with the other macro-Vodu spirits of the Yewe pantheon: Legba, Heviesso, Sakpata, and Ogun. And yet, in the village of Gbèdala, where I conducted research, they all have their own sanctuaries and homes: Mami Wata, Tchamba, and Sakpata each has a shrine, Heviesso a forest, the Gorovudus two shrines, and so on. When people discuss goddess Sunia Compo of Gorovodu, they make associations to the god Legba, just as they will compare the Sacred Forest spirits to Hindu deities such as Krishna and Kali. But in this they are not “mixing” anything; on the contrary, they are simultaneously highlighting similarity and difference, making the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic – they are doing anthropology.

A problem with syncretism as an analytical approach is that it often misses the universality of the processes it studies: all cultures and religions of the world are syncretic, borrowing from one another. When marginalized groups or disempowered cultures of postmodernity are tagged as syncretic, they are stigmatized by negative implications that they are somehow inauthentic or impure and thus inferior. This can even provide dangerous grounds for discrimination (Said). Cultural borrowing and the fusion and creative transformation of ideas have always been the nuts and bolts of culture itself (Rosaldo; Clifford and Marcus). Rosaldo writes that all cultures are involved with other cultures and all are heterogeneous and hybrid (14-18). Gorovodu and African religions in the New World are living examples of the all-inclusiveness and power of converging cultures, but the syncretism approach, for the most part, distorts this process. The case study here, a day in the ritual life at a Vodu village in Togo, highlights some of the problems surrounding syncretism as an explanatory tool.

Ethnographic Montage

Gorovodu is a spirit-possession and healing order existing among the Ewes of southeastern Ghana, southern Togo, and southwestern Benin. It is a relatively new, “traditional” order that began with singular gods to the north of Ghana in the 1920s and 1930s, working in different spiritual realms. Still, archetypal structures, mythology, rituals, and other liturgical elements of Gorovodu are similar to those involving macro Adja-Ewe spirits, said to have inhabited the earth since time memorial. The family of gods was first assembled in the 1920s with Kodzokuma in the Ashanti region of Ghana, and has continued to grow since (Parker; Allman and Allman; Friedson). The Gorovodu pantheons vary, but the main shrines at Gbèdala house the following spirits: Kunde (King and Father), Ablewa (Old Woman, Wife of Kunde), Sunia Compo (Daughter, Linguist, God of Stone), Bangle (God of War, Son), Sakra Bode (Stool of Bangle, Older Brother, Horse, Witch-Catcher), and Nana Wango (Grandmother Crocodile, Boat Driver). Each has its individual history to the north among the Ashanti, Mossi-Dagomba, Hausa, and other northern ethnic groups, and the parent shrines of Sunya Kupo, Kude, and Sakrabundi still exist several hundreds of miles north of the coast, in central and northern Ghana (Parker; Ward). These gods were adopted and cajoled, believed to be powerful because the northern group’s resisted colonization, and many of them were known to heal the sick, enhance fertility, and deter witchcraft and sorcery during a time of exploding cocoa wealth and the inherent inequalities it perpetuated (Field; Allman and Parker; Venkatachalam). So Gorovodu itself is a “mixed bag,” with individual gods coming from a variety of foundations north, reassembled by the Ewes in the south to resolve their problems. The role of these gods is paradigmatic to the macro Vodus, with, for example, Bangle sitting in for Ogun, and Sunia Compo doing the work of Legba. The pantheon closely resembles the
Orisha and Vodu pantheons from Nigeria and Benin, and those all the way to Brazil and the Caribbean. Within Gorovodu itself are several reifications and translations of Islam and Christianity. On any given day, one can see the whole problem of “syncretism” played out through a Vodu lens that borrows symbolic components from an array of belief systems and regions. The ethnographic data I present here comes from my own research and that of others. The first vignette comes from one long day in the village during the torrential rainy season in June of 2013.

My morning at my residence in Gbèdala began as a normal Friday. We would embark on a long day of rituals, and my colleague, student, and I, were joined by several priests and many villagers throughout the day and night. We sat in the courtyard for Salah ceremony, mats were laid out, and women in white led prayers: “God is great, God is great. There is no god but Allah” was uttered in broken Arabic. The call to prayers, their recitation, and profession of the faith were performed on prayer mats facing east. Muslim kettles (buta) filled with medicinal water (amatsi) were poured in the courtyard, plants were mixed as an adept fell into trance, children (and the anthropologist) were cleansed in herbal baths at the adept’s request. Within an hour this would become a fully Vodu affair with adepts falling into trance everywhere as the trovo (spirits) “mounted their horses.” One adept in trance led me to a female priest for a morning prayer, the spirits were offered kola, gin, and a fowl. As promised the night before, a goat would go to Bangle, since a recently deceased former mentor of mine who was a Bangle adept had popped up during my òafa divination the previous day, when the priest flipped the agumaga and interpreted the message; Bangle requested “a goat, something to close the door.” How the adept knew this was a mystery, but the banglesi (wife of Bangle) was adamant that a black goat be purchased for Lord Bangle.

As the butcher (bosomfo) brought in the goat, the priest smilingly remarked that “Jesus was a goat, a scapegoat, buried in our sins.” The man who appeared during divination, a village native and my former professor and also an adept of Bangle, and being a hunter of the bush he demanded a dark goat for him and his spirit double. His spirit remained unappeased and there was constant talk that his “Christian ceremony” and burial had upset him dearly and angered the Vodus, and he was asking for a proper sacrifice to bring closure to his destiny. When his parents had held a Christian burial on their property in center-city Lomé, villagers had drummed nonstop for two days but his parents refused to reclaim his fetish and his demand to be buried in the village. He had shown up twice during cowry divination the day before and it was obvious that we needed to perform the ritual. The banglesi taunted me after changing into the black and white striped costume of her spirit-double, as she twirled majestically from the shrine to the courtyard.

We began by thanking Kunde, offering four kola nuts (goro) with the left hand, then four alilo (pieces of chalk) and a few shots of gin. We prayed, summoning sacred medicine in hopes his family would allow him his dying wishes. Next the spirits Ablewa and Sunia Compo were greeted and offered water, gin, and kola. When we got to Bangle, we flipped the cowry shells:

2 Dr. Christian Vannier from Grand Valley State University and my student Nishanth Alluri, accompanied me throughout the summer of 2013 in Ghana and Togo. Their assistance and foresight helped make this article and our next film possible.
four up, four down – he would accept our sacrifice. The goat was given a small amount of water and then sliced across the jugular, the moaning ceased, and blood poured profusely and engulfed Sacra Bode, Bangle, and the others in his warrior pantheon. A cat was offered as well, its beating heart and decapitated head placed neatly atop the fetish. Next, I gave three kola nuts with my right hand, and the same for Nana Wango (Grandmother Crocodile). She, too, was hungry, and after casting the cowries we brought her three eggs and a duck. From there we began a thorough survey of the material culture in the shrine: plants, fetishes, symbols, tools, and weapons were all evaluated and historicized. The history and biography of the fetishes/commodities is deep and the recording and transcription took hours. There were charms, amulets, posters, notebooks, medicine bottles, fabrics, fibers, plants, and more. Some magical objects such as gin, utensils, and figurines were associated with Europeans, others like plants and metal objects with the Yoruba or Fon, and still others with Ashanti, Mossi, or Hausa groups. Most, however, were uniquely Ewe, things found or fashioned by hand. We were thinking in terms of syncretism when we cataloged the material culture, and the objects themselves were certainly a history lesson in Ewe culture contact. We had planned to return to the compound for an afternoon nap, but the gods had other plans.

Mamiasii Adaku and Bokonosofo Amagbe, high priests of Mami Wata worship and Gorovodu, reminded me, with a simple gaze toward the shrine door, I had promised some things for Mami Wata as well. Her shrine was adjacent to the main shrine, and where my wife and I held our engagement ceremony in 2005, and so she was my favorite. Mami Wata is beautiful, the goddess of the sea, who takes few animal sacrifices (a welcome reprieve). She is known as Oshun in Nigeria and the Caribbean, and is assimilated with Mary as well. In her sanctuary hung fresh flowers and religious posters of Kali and Manusa Devi given to the priest during a focus group weeks earlier; these were “Mami’s reincarnations,” her family. The assistant priest came with a sachet full of offerings: bananas, pineapples, candies, perfumes, baby powder, and other “goodies.” The Mami Wata shrine appeared bone dry and neglected, and obviously she had not been fed recently. I asked my student to go to my compound to retrieve more fruits, sodas, and champagne. Mami Wata would eat well today. After hours of prayers and as the sun set we assembled all the “extras” from her offerings and placed them upon white cloth doused in baby powder and perfume, creating a rossa (offering). We proceeded with drummers in tow toward the choppy sea. The rossa was placed on the shoreline, the ocean came and gobbled up the offering, and the old woman priest fell into trance, shaking and shimmering on the ground like the great snake Vodu Da. Mami had accepted her offering. The next day a beautiful rainbow and what fishermen described as an “aura of a Virgin Mary figure” was viewed on the horizon by fishermen in the village, Mami Wata saying thank you.

As we turned to head back to the compound for late dinner we were met by a half dozen Tchambasi (wives of the slave Vodu), who insisted we grab our cameras and head at once to the Tchamba shrine across the village. Someone had fallen into trance and demanded the “Americans” come for consultation. After all, who benefitted more from slavery than America? Despite our exhaustion, we soon arrived, set up our cameras, and knelt in prayer. The reverberation from the adodo drum pulsated. In the Tchamba shrine, Atsu, a special Tchamba priest, delivered an address on slavery, discussing American and European roles, and his own ancestral history connecting him to slaves. He talked about missionaries who
came before the slave traders and the bad legacy of Christianity for Africans. His grandparents had taken slaves from the north and he exclaimed the need to carry out ceremony to atone for these “debts.” He spoke also of Islam and northern life and the heavy burden these Muslim slaves carried for their Ewe owners. Within minutes, slave spirits came with the ferocity of a tiger and many adepts were mounted and spoke northern languages they otherwise did not know: Mossi, Kabye, and Hausa. The Tchambasi whirled and shrieked demanding respect and attention, frightening children and humbling the masses. By night’s end there had been many spirit possession episodes, and I was elated about the various rituals captured on camera. But we were wearied, and as we departed Atsu gave me a special Tchamba bracelet, reminding me, “We are all dust, and into dust we return.”

When we returned to my compound and reviewed the video footage, my colleague and I realized that we had witnessed the spiritual macro-scope all in one day: Islam, Christianity, Yewe, Goro, Mami, and Tchamba, and born witness to the multiple authored spirits of Gbèdala, the inclusive African mind at work (Montgomery and Vannier 2012). We had seen a Muslim-marked prayer ceremony followed by Gorovodu sacrifice and possession in the morning, Mami Wata possession in the afternoon, and a bundle of slave spirits during the evening. As noted earlier, some of our study tools from the previous week were now hung in the shrines – Kali, the Virgin Mary, and Manusa Devi. Most would have dubbed what happened this day in the village as syncretism. Yet, though the inclusivity and variety invoked by symbols was remarkable and creative, to theorize it as syncretism obscures the meanings and power of these African spirits, who happen to sometimes speak religious languages of the Arabs or Whites. At Gbèdala multiple spirits abound, constituting a multilayered cake of religious influences, but the gods embodying persons are homemade spirits that occupy honored positions among adepts. Syncretism focuses on oppositions between religions, or encourages us to place orthodox deities on the same plane as African spirits, but this obscures the reality because the semantic power is with the Vodus, not Muhammad, Christ, or Kali. Syncretism has utility when opposing elements blend and create a new way of seeing, however, what is missed is the fact that many “combine” out of necessity, not because of choice; it makes sense to be “Christian” or “Muslim” in a world where Vodu and Orisha are deemed diabolical and sorcery.

The Islamic overlap in Gorovodu has been labeled syncretism. They may call “Allah Akbar” at the beginning of Salah ceremonies, but the possessions that happen are prototypical African manifestations (Legba, Kunde, or Tchamba) – the rites are for the *trovo* (Gorovodu gods) with Muslim symbols strained through a Vodu filter. Whereas for many Christians the revelations ended with the chapter in the Bible (*Revelation*), they are part and parcel of the religious experience for many Africans spread throughout the Diaspora. During Salah ceremonies orthodox Islamic elements such as *abdan* (call to prayer), *shabada* (profession of faith), *basmalah* (recitations from Quran), and *al-Fatihab* are all incorporated into the rituals, but offerings are made to the Vodu and they are the primary focus. And despite the Muslim overlay, it is an African foundation that offers some reprisal in a time of inequality, poverty, and conflict, as Friedson explains: “Brekete [Gorovodu] offers a way through this morass, a third stream in between the ‘transcendent’ religions to the north, and morally ambiguous traditional religion of the coast. While holding on to the core practice of spirit possession in Vodu, a powerful experience of seeing and touching the gods directly, Kunde’s moral dictates
are clear, and by the immediacy of their rewards and punishments, offer a sense of stability in troubled times” (51).

Many will talk about the “good” elements of Islam and Christianity and explain that the trooto already possess these traits. Some refer to Muhammad and Jesus Christ as themselves “Vodu spirits” with supernatural abilities. They are not acknowledging Christ or Muhammad so much as they are respecting their essence, and seeing traits and symbols in them that begin and end with their own home-grown spirits. Many Christians attend Vodu ceremonies, and some Voduists also attend church. Gorovodu does offer a third way through the morass, sorting out insecurities and prejudices by romanticizing the symbolic components of exterior orders, but followers are not mixing oppositional forces as much as they are conjoining parallels.

Figure 1. Sofo Bisi makes offerings and prayers to Bangle fetish before goat and cat sacrifice (author’s photo).

The oral transmission of knowledge and air of secrecy surrounding many African religions complicates study for Western researchers, and the negative connotations of “Black religions” only exacerbate this. When asked the reasons for secrecy, most priest-healers interviewed for this project cited rival healers looking to steal prescriptions, charlatans motivated by profit, or the long train of Christian and colonial abuses. Sofo Bisi at Gbèdala regularly fashions talisman and fetishes for Christian priests and pastors who use the “magic” to entice followers to attend church. He told me that “appropriation” also involves a “tilt of power,” assuming the bigger or richer culture has more influence, but in reality, on the ground, the less powerful groups and religions actually “co-opt” the symbols from above. “We are Vodu first, and I make comparisons to Christ and Muhammad so that you can understand the Vodu spirits.” Another priest, Honovi, saw the idea of syncretism as ridiculous because it reduces Vodu to the role of borrower and in his words “slave” (personal conversation, 2006). Honovi also cited the trickery that has come with colonial and postcolonial regimes as strokes on the same oppressive mural, and new and old governments alike have gone far to suppress Vodu
(Rosenthal 1998, 2005). Practitioners respect the power of Islam and Christianity, but many Muslims and Christians do not do the same for Vodu.

**Literature and Theology**

Syncretism as a concept was introduced by Melville Herskovits during the 1920s and 1930s and refined in the late 1950s. It was conceptualized as a study of acculturation and culture contact. Syncretism is framed as the reconciliation or union of opposing elements or principles in religion. But, what happens when this is not occurring, and when the elements are not in opposition? The dichotomous and mechanistic nature of the oppositional framing can be convoluted. But we know that each culture, with its economic, political, religious, and other institutions was already mixed or informed by long culture contact with other groups. Christianity borrowed from Judaism and Judaism from earlier Middle Eastern religions, and Sikhism borrows from Hinduism and Islam. However, opposing elements are never on an equal footing, and perhaps no religion has been more belittled than Vodu.

Sometimes syncretism can help to clarify or make sense of data, especially when looking at Christian or Muslim centered religions, but Vodu and Orisha are not. Therefore, regarding religions such as Vodu and Orisha throughout Africa and the Atlantic World, it often obscures more than it reveals. Syncretism studies in Africa have been concerned mostly with analyzing Christianity and the colonial objective (Greenfield and Droogers; Simpson; Richardson). Often theories are caught up in the cosmology of culture contact and acculturation, and bonded to traditional-Western oppositions. This is a mechanistic way to categorize cultural traits (Goody and Watt; Peel). Greenfield and Droogers, in a volume on religious syncretism, consider the concept’s multiple meanings and utility to anthropology by comparing societies from throughout Africa and Latin America over five hundred years of contact, yet they fail to justify their approach theoretically. In the case of Gorovodu, adepts have created an emic system that sometimes engages in biblical references, Muslim prayer ceremonies, or witchcraft and curing ceremonies – sometimes even within a single ceremony – but where syncretism assumes mixing, Vodu and Orisha call it co-option or “reverse conversion.”

Spirit possession is the primary goal of African religions, and manifestation of the sacred is ultimate, but when framed by syncretism this fact becomes almost secondary, exemplifying the concept’s myopic tendencies. The past is made present through possession-trance in which adepts become ancestors, slaves, animals, colonials, and more. From Nigeria to the Americas, who the adepts are, where they go, and what they believe and become all depend on the vehicle of possession. The Islamic influences of Brekete/Gorovodu came from the dream of a priest assistant when she was visited by the spirit Sunia Compo accompanied by Muslim mullahs (Friedson: 46-49). The Islamic element is obvious in things such as salah (prayer), adhan (call to prayer), and many other overlaps, branched from dreams and revelations of a female priest. She and others creatively incorporated these Islamic elements into the liturgy as a means of understanding and manipulating them. This is not syncretism but rather cooptation or appropriation. Even the pronunciation of the hadiths and prayers are far from standard Arabic, and few have attended a mosque or can read the Quran. Yet symbolic Islam is integral to Gorovodu because slaves who married into Ewe lineages, and the gods themselves, are of northern and therefore Islamic descent – the north here refers to the savannah and desert stemming from central Ghana and Togo northwards.
Syncretism in Vodu and Orisha

Of ten principal shrines I studied in Ghana and Togo, seven had forefathers or current adepts closely tied to Catholic or Protestant churches. The founder Kodzokuma himself was involved with Catholicism, as was Sofo Bisi of Gbédala. Thus, they are familiar with both Catholicism and Vodu, but most of us know little or nothing of their systems of belief. We typically write from above, offering short shrift to indigenous philosophical systems from the onset. The bulk of literature focused on syncretism in Africa has focused on African Christianity, or Christianity’s effects on tradition. But things go both ways, and we must also ask how Vodu has affected the church? That Gorovodu borrows from several ethnic groups, Islam, and even Christianity makes it interesting, but they are not mixing Christianity and animism, as often portrayed; rather, they compare and evaluate them for the sake of building consensus.

Syncretism and Slavery in Vodu and Orisha

Since slavery altered the organization of African society, much has been reinterpreted, especially more resistant social customs and those tied to religious performance. Routon’s work with Palo Monte in Cuba, and my own work with Tchamba in Togo (2016), shows how, by becoming the slave, adepts are not only informing their own personhood, but also opting for their own identities in the face of a national one. Sometimes social aspects must perish before they can be replaced and religious systems must be open for new processes to emerge. Vital elements of oral transmission are “the structures of contemporary . . . as well as the changes in collective values, social representations, and ideals resulting from these morphological upheavals” (Reis: 99). This explains why sometimes many people immediately try to rationalize and justify according to their own mindset anything that appears strange, and why “these strange elements are the first to be swept into oblivion because we can no longer fit them into the social frameworks of memory” (Bastide 1969: 242). The result of weakened African myths is not a forgetting in the psychological realm, nor is it the result of the passing of time. Rather, African memories perish because of a lack of landmarks for them to attach themselves to. Native Americans maintained some of their landmarks and sacred spaces in a way many slaves could not. Yet within the shrines spirits survived and thrived, changed and turned, and offered age-old resolutions to difficult circumstances.

Religion offers a look into the historical backgrounds and contexts of converging elements. In the New World this context was often one of resistance and revolution. In Haiti, the mythicizing of the African homeland ignited a class and racial consciousness that challenged the Christian and colonial mandate (DesMangles). Masters of Saint Domingue, and later the Haitian government, fought to abolish African folk religion. The last violent campaign was organized by the Catholic Church in 1942, and these attempts helped prevent a syncretism of religions between master and the slave (de Heusch). In Cameroon, German concession companies used slaves taken from the grasslands, where to this day they return to possess the community (Argenti). The historical situation in Jamaica made the mixing of folk and Western religions very different. We find cultural elements with high Ashanti markings (Yam festival, the Anansi spider, funeral processions), whereas Haiti flourished with the flowers of Aja, Ewe, Kongo, and Fon. In Brazil, the urban environment is contrary to the rural religious settings of Haiti and Jamaica. People descended from West African coast groups, often lumped under the label “Yoruba,” have remained most faithful to their ancestral traditions and are found
above all in Brazil (Bastide 1971: 115). The structure of lineages or family groups in Africa was replaced in Brazil by fraternities or “nations” because slavery destroyed the family-group cult. Varying contexts and settings differ, but devotees continue to patch fragments of the new reality into age-old African social structures. Yemaja is a freshwater divinity in Nigeria but becomes the goddess of saltwater in Brazil because slave populations inhabited the cities of the Brazilian Atlantic coast. This exemplifies a semantic continuity, as meanings from Africa have carried over across the Atlantic to thrive in the New World.

The historical background is integral to the process of religious movement between African and Western cosmologies, and Western traditions are as diverse as the African. The acculturation between religions occurs within the framework of a single African tradition (e.g. introduction of Dahomean elements into the Fanti-Ashanti system, or of Bantu features into that of the Yoruba), and also between separate systems such as those of Africans and Europeans (Bastide 1971). The slave environment was such that all slaves were subjected to Christianity and conversion, especially as the notion of Christianity was changed to justify slavery throughout the world. As missionary work grew so did the determination to eradicate the “savage” African cultural matrix. Bastide (1969) and Herskovits (1938) claim religious amalgamation never took the form of true syncretism, and Herskovits labeled the most common process “reinterpretation” (1938).

Syncretism in religion is, among other things, a form of assimilation and accommodation. The slaves of the New World assimilated the master’s culture from the inside by way of cultural assimilation. The act of assimilating contrasting worldviews is not just individual or personal, but also a collective and communal one. New World slaves of African descent brought the thinking of their masters into their own language and terminologies. The “eyes that be” assumed they were converting the Blacks, but the truth was to the contrary (Montgomery 2006). Their integration of Catholic saints into their worldviews accommodated the continuation of their African belief system, often concealed beneath a veil of Catholicism (de Heusch).

In the ethnographic vignette above, the ceremony began with the Islamic adhan (call to prayer) and then moved to Gorovodu spirit possessions of all sorts: Kunde, Ablewa, and Bangle. Later on, a procession for Mami Wata led to a Virgin Mary miracle. Sometime after midnight, we all strolled arm in arm to another shrine where Tchamba rituals for the slaves were held into the morning. It did not take displacement, colonialism, or syncretism to create a religious imagination that encompasses parallel symbols, it is the African imagination co-opting external elements with dignity and ease.

Gorovodu and Tchamba were born of colonialism and the slave trade. French, British, and German colonizers worked to create wealth by any means necessary. The concession companies (cocoa, sugar, rubber, etc.) mobilized labor and exacerbated economic inequality to the point that Tchamba and Gorovodu emerged as indigenous responses (Allman and Parker 2005; Argenti). Gorovodu (Kola Nut Vodu) is often equated with tradition, but it is remarkably modern in Togo today. Religion is often ingrained in ideas of accommodation and assimilation; but the African values that carried over through the slavery period were best preserved in institutions of resistance. The quilombo’s and cabildos (runaway slave communities) of the New World were a bastion for the African religious imagination that set the patterns
for so-called religious syncretism in the Americas. For the same reasons, atikevodu medicinal and prophetic healing cults have existed in the lagoons of Togo, Ghana, and Benin for centuries (Allman and Parker).

Figure 2. Bangle adept and mural painting, Salah Ceremony, Gbédala Village, June 2013 (author’s photo).

Discussion

Ethnographic and historical knowledge problematizes the concept of syncretism on the ground. Indeed, one hears from former Gorovodu adepts that Vodu taints Christianity or Islam in such a way as to render it blasphemous. Syncretism for many carries, consciously or not, a pejorative connotation, and they apply it only to situations which they disapprove of or to religious beliefs they see as inferior. The concept’s greatest shortcoming is its inability to explain the marginal cultures said to be most prone to syncretism.

For Luc de Heusch, syncretism is more promising:

Any religion, including Christianity, is ultimately a syncretic phenomenon. Historical and structural interpretations have to be brought together within the scope of the anthropology of religion. Instead of choosing between two opposed explanations we need to show how both work together. The challenge of research into Haitian Voodoo is to do just this (294).

He suggests that we find a way to make structuralism and historicism work together as analytical approaches regarding syncretism. Syncretism in comparative religion refers to a process of “religious amalgamation” of blending heterogeneous beliefs and practices (Blakely, van Beek, Thomson, and Currey). Stewart and Shaw state, “It is precisely its capacity to contain paradox, contradiction, and polyphony which makes syncretism such a powerful symbolic process in the contexts of diversity” (21). But what is powerful about it? The symbolic process has nothing to do with syncretism and everything to do with religious imagination, history, and receptivity. All religions of the world, it can be argued, manifest different forms of syncretism to varying degrees. However, even those New World religions most often referred
to as “syncretic” are conducted using African traditional forms, albeit the influence of Catholicism has been extraordinary. The psychological components that make divination possible in Latin America and Africa alike emanate from the possibilities of parallels, cultural contact, orality, individual and collective imagination and memory, and African aesthetics.

These aesthetics seem to have survived the voyage from Africa along with other principles and elements; African music and dance are at the heart of African-American music and dance. Among Europeans and Americans this music is the most appreciated and purchased element of Black culture. If aesthetics are what people consider to be truly beautiful, then it is hard to imagine anything more powerful than soul music that began in Togo and Benin, came to Haiti, and then to New Orleans. African religious practices typify a mix of aesthetic elements that are heard side-by-side and interrelated within the African religious experience. The infamous crossroads peppered throughout old blues music is none other than Papa Legba, keeper of the gates. Transformations of African culture in the New World most often included the aesthetic of religion.

Where myths, rituals, symbols, revelations, and other religious facets find common ground they mesh. When collective memories die they are replaced, and the universal capacity for revelation (whether Christian/African/Muslim or any other combination) means that imagination is at work in religious doctrine. It is incorporated inclusively among African-based oral cultures, which are more apt to admit or even celebrate their borrowing. We are all capable of creating new cosmologies or worldviews. African cosmology greatly affected and determined Afro-American religious association. Baptist faith was popular because baptism resembled African initiation rites. Methodism was powerful because it had a holy dance. Where there was a landmark for Africans to attach to, they did. Throughout the Americas, “Wherever Africans encountered indigenous and European peoples, there arose modes of religious expression which varied in some extent in their external symbols, but which often shared an essential world-view or orientation” (Harding: 19). The people shared an essential, fundamental understanding of human existence in this and the other world. The holocaust of enslavement proved unable to strip away a certain African religiosity that continues to blossom. Catholic Saints and biblical actors were incorporated and adopted at different levels, and the legacy of missionary churches has been huge. Many find being both Christian and nativist unproblematic.

Whether brought to Cuba, Brazil, Guyana, the United States, or any other geographic locale in the Americas, Africans fashioned responses to their particular social circumstance that mirrored their African values (Thornton). These included: anthropocentricity, agnostically toned thought, the import of communal worship, and the cultivation of intense, pragmatic, physical communion with representations of the divine (Blakely, van Beek, Thomson, and Currey). Included is the special role of music, drama, and dance in religious culture and expression, so vividly on display in the ethnographic vignette above from Togo. The perception that enslavement represented a fundamental imbalance of cosmic energy meant that they answered in a truly African way – with rites of healing, initiation, and purification, and the belief that certain individuals can manipulate natural forces to affect a variety of ends.

The Vodu, Orisha, and Kongo religious systems are strong and embedded in processes of revolution and constructing moral codes. Thompson calls it “a vibrant, sophisticated
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synthesis of traditional religions of Dahomey, Yoruba land, and Congo with an infusion of Roman Catholicism” (1984: 163). Throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, there was great variation of religious experiences, and many viewed visual representations of the saints of the Roman Catholic Church (chromolithographs) with informed sympathy. In such imagery they perceived – unbeknownst to the whites – ties to myths and truths they already knew. The same assimilations were made during focus groups in Togo, and even during rituals like those from the montage the orthodox elements are obvious, but the meanings less so. In both cases, though saints would fit into the same paradigmatic structure as the African deity, the concept of syncretism misses the cooption of power by assuming they mixed oppositional elements when in reality they coalesced to maintain Africanist spirit systems.

The Dahomean or Guinea Blacks of Haiti did not confuse Saint Patrick for Vodu Da, or replace one with the other. They associated the snakes with the great serpent and paid little attention to the story of Saint Patrick eradicating Ireland of its sinful serpents. For Bisi, to so disrespect snakes would be to turn your back on Da and the creator of the world. Haitians were impressed with Saint Patrick’s chromolithograph that showed him dressed in full regalia, driving the snakes out of Ireland. They saw an elder with a white beard (in Africa things white are sacred, and often attributes of Da) making an authoritarian gesture. Instead of a saint demolishing vermin, banishing all that is pagan (stereotypically African), they saw multiple embodiments of the serpent of the sky.

MacGaffey discussed how this same chromolithograph was reinterpreted by slaves from Congo (of non-Dahomean origin). In this case “Ndembia” means flat-headed rainbow serpent, and “Ndembia puns on the Ki-Kongo world for ‘to sleep’ in the sense of the ecstatic love making of two serpents, one male, the other female, who wrap themselves around the palm tree to carnally unite” (1988: 195). The iconographies of two classical African religions simply add on to that which makes cultural sense from the inside. Hence, the center post, a ritual site around which the devotees dance, is often painted with rainbow stripes and with serpents intertwined, or with a chromolithograph of Patrick himself. Even Bokonososofo Bisi (a Gorovodu priest) was once a Catholic priest. “The Catholic too is a part of me, I still use these rituals to this day,” he explained while pulling a rosary from behind the shrine and presenting it to Papa Kunde (personal conversation, 2013). But he is not part-Catholic and part-Vodu, but instead a Vodu priest with deep esoteric knowledge of Christ and others. Sometimes syncretism can help to clarify or make sense of data, as is the case here, one can see how Bisi aggregates portions of Catholic liturgy into his Vodu worldview, but regarding African religions such as Vodu and Orisha throughout Africa and the Atlantic World, it often mystifies more than it clarifies.

Stewart and Shaw state in Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism that syncretism, on a positive note, is inherently a form of resistance. Accommodation and resistance are not necessarily structural opposites, but are parts of the structure/agency dialectic, always changing shape and form. Although Africans were able to retransmit African culture and religion in the New World, they did so under difficult circumstances, to transcend the prison of slavery. Slavery continues to transcend life for Ewe Gorovodu worshippers in Africa as well, especially in Tchamba ritual, where atonement for past enslavement is essential for peace and prosperity (Wendl; Montgomery and Vannier 2016). There were different kinds of resistance, the most obvious being day-to-day forms. The other two forms are what Gabriel Debien calls “petit” and
“grand” marrage (Thornton: 7). In French, marrage refers to all forms of absenteeism, from running away to rebellion. Thornton states, “The African background of soldiers, officers, and nobles both assisted the rebels and runaways in escaping and shaped the ultimate structure of the communities that resulted” (303). The major source of resistance was probably slavery’s exploitative nature. The importance of maintaining a worldview and personality that was African was also an important component of slavery, and slaves convincing their overseers that they were Catholic or Christian had benefits in both West Africa and the Americas.

As traumatic as the Middle Passage was, it could not wipe away African memories from slaves’ minds. Resistance could come via revolution or even suicide. As Albert Raboteau writes, “The memory [of Africa] was so powerful it led them to kill themselves, confident in the belief that they would be reincarnated in Africa” (1997: 65-66). Often, spurred by revelations, Blacks would decide to revolt, take their own life, or start a quilombo or cabildo where they could practice their African religion more freely. Revelations provided this world with a window of communication to the other world. Through African secret societies, burial orders, or entertainment clubs organized on African national lines, Blacks engaged in advanced political activities, including revolutionary ones. Although slaveholders sometimes financed such activities, they were also fearful of these African institutions (Thornton; Reis). People’s attempts to re-create as much of Africa as possible in the New World were themselves resistance because the colonial and Christian institutions sought to destroy them. Gorovodu’s history in Africa is similar in that there, too; it grew as a response to colonialism and Christianity.

Religious systems “are in fact susceptible and vulnerable to change” (Houk: 170). The passing down of African religion orally in the New World has perpetuated a sense of flexibility over one of conservatism. The infamous Code Noir of King Louis the XIV precluded all but Christian worship: “While delivering their wishes to the thunder god, Chango, whose symbolic African colors of red and white and favored weapon, the double-headed axe, exactly they matched the trappings of the Catholic ringer” (Davis: 8). Having convinced the Europeans that they had somehow syncretized, Vodu evolved into a form with an unmistakable African core, of West or Central African origin.

Interestingly, African-based religious leaders are now writing about syncretism from within (Pichardo 1999; Collins; Zogbé). Pichardo gives the academic definition for syncretism as follows: “The tendency to identify those elements in the new culture with similar elements in the old one, enabling the person experiencing the contact to move from one to the other and back again, with psychological ease” (1999). Pichardo, a Santero from Cuba, opts to focus on similarities, while objective definitions of syncretism are based on differences. An emic etymology of the word “Santeria” reveals that the term was born about the time of the Inquisition to label Black slaves who were supposedly mixing up Catholic saints with African gods. The original Black Cuban terms for Santeria were “Ayoba” or “Lucumi,” from a Yoruba tongue, replacing the older Ayoba description. “La Regla de Ocha” (Order of the Saints) in the African mind has always been an order of the Orisha.

Summary

The concept of syncretism is far from a transparent or merely descriptive term – the term recognizes an integration of concepts and symbols of one religion into another by a process
of selection and reconciliation (Stewart and Shaw). As I have stressed here, though, “syncretism” has been employed in a way that is loaded and far from neutral. The concept may offer more promise in other ethnographic contexts where the power between groups and religions is less asymmetrical. Regarding African religions, it actually exacerbates this gap in power between “big religions” and “small religions.”

Like a shipwrecked vessel, African religions and cultures were not supposed to survive in the New World or along the coast of colonial Africa. But, African myth-makers proved adaptive, able to take elements from their physical, social, and psychological environments and pull them all together. Africans crafted a culture that worked from shipwrecked debris. African religions are arranged to be in dialogue with society at large and anthropologists have mistaken inclusivity and cultural appropriation with syncretism. New World religions and identities, created under specific, harsh circumstances, are as authentic as any others. The slave raiding along the Sahel and coasts of West Africa were equally trying, and Gorovodu today, too, has proved resistant to a myriad of forces ranging from dictatorships and weak states, to Christianity, to globalization and underdevelopment.

Since slavery made it impossible for belief systems throughout the Diaspora to remain entirely intact, these incomplete systems gradually transformed into a richer, more comprehensive corpus of belief, ritual, and symbolism, with individuals actively engaged in borrowing and the incorporation of new religious traits, while avoiding redundancy and contradiction (Houk). This situation gave birth to many eclectic and dynamic religious orders – like Obeah, Santeria, Vodun, and Candomble – and in time they served as mechanisms of liberation, resistance, and identity builders rather than a complex of contradiction and impurity. The Orisha of Trinidad includes elements of Catholicism, the Kabbala, and Hinduism not because its practitioners are confused, or because syncretism is at work, but because these elements fit into their mythical system. Ewes include Gorovodu, Tchamba, Islam, Christianity, and Mami Wata for the same reason – they fit.

Christ is seen by some as a Vodu spirit tied to Kunde, and Kali and Manusa Devi are Mami Wata. Most adepts know nothing of their Indian heritage. Yet, other associations are dreamed up, as Madame Tosavi did the Muslim connection to Gorovodu in the 1950s when Sunia Compo appeared to her in a dream, straddled on either side by two Muslim mullahs (Friedson). Religious imagination extends into the far corners of an African psyche creating new identities and religious forms. The religious systems that they developed are metaphors for the diverse historicity of Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. However, where the particularity of these systems ends, universal sameness begins. Oral persons do not refer primarily to a system of writing, and therefore it makes sense that for them art (including paintings, music, and ritual objects) become key symbols of religious reality. Deep knowledge of these aesthetics is necessary for decoding their meaning (Apter).

In *African Civilizations in the New World*, Bastide differentiates between various categories of syncretism. The main types are: morphological, institutional, and what Desmangles calls a “symbiosis of identity.” Symbiosis of identity is when an African deity and a Catholic saint become one, on the basis of mythological similarities, but they are never really one; most Africans used the symbol of the master as a cloak for their own spirits. As Fernandez Olmos and Paravishi-Gebert state regarding such a situation, “Erzuli, the beautiful goddess of love
who traces her ancestry to Whydah in Dahomey or Oshun in Nigeria, becomes the Virgin Mary” (12). Cuban Santeria, Haitian Vodun, and Brazilian Candomble are outcomes of a similar process of accommodation, preservation, and resistance.

Miles Richardson’s “Beyond Conversion and Syncretism” finds that for the Lucumi of Cuba correspondence between Orisha and Catholic saints became a way to “distinguish between their cultural and social identities as well as connect them” (162). In this way the Lucumi can be citizens of Oyo, Cuba, and heaven. The Ewes concur, seeing deities with many manifestations and incarnations as allowing them to live in the world of the Muslims and northerners, masters and slaves, Christians and colonials, and past and present. When we sense and understand African systems from the inside as anthropologists, we come to see shortcomings that continue to plague syncretism as a theoretical tool. Sometimes syncretism can help to clarify or make sense of data, but regarding African religions such as Vodu and Orisha throughout Africa and the Atlantic World, it often obscures more than it reveals.

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