CHAPTER 27

Re-Africanization in Afro-Brazilian Religions: Rethinking Religious Syncretism*

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, the Afro-Brazilian religious field has been deeply recast by the emergence of what is today frequently referred to as, the 're-Africanization movement.' While in southeastern Brazil this movement occurs principally via Yoruba language and divination courses, as well as through ritual borrowings from other Afro-American religious traditions, in the Northeast Region a debate about syncretism in Candomblé predominates. These two movements,

*I would like to acknowledge the comments and criticisms offered by Paul C. Johnson concerning an earlier version of this chapter.

1 The expression 'Afro-American religions' designates every religion of African origin, produced by the colonial encounter of African, Amerindian, and European cultures in the Americas. Within what is called today 'orisha religion,' different local traditions—Afro-Brazilians, Afro-Cubans and so forth—are all reclaiming a common African (Yoruba) past. I analyzed the issue of tradition in Afro-Brazilian religions in a previous work (French: Capone 1999; English translation: Capone 2010).

2 Among all the old anthropological categories employed to understand the cross-cultural encounter, a conceptual triad has received both close attention and strong criticism: syncretism, creolization, and hybridity. Anthropologists have expressed ambivalence about all three terms, as metaphors that historically have "an objectionable but nevertheless instructive past" (Stewart 1999: 40). The work of Palmié (1995, 2013) has proved how this system of interactive metaphors requires a deep understanding of their own histories and contextualization. Along with the term creolization, historically used to refer to social and cultural formation in the colonial period (Mintz and Price 1992 [1976]), the notion of hybridity has its own "preconstraints" and can be hardly stripped from its "racist past" (Stewart 1999: 45). On hybridity see also Werbner (1997), Stewart (2007), Engler (2009), and Palmié (2013). However, despite its 'birth sins,' syncretism is also an emic category, extremely significant in religious actors’ narratives at the core of symbolic struggle for legitimacy. Since the work of Stewart and Shaw (1994), we have known that contingencies of power inflect syncretic and anti-syncretic processes. In this article I will focus on the agency of Candomblé practitioners in reinterpreting syncretism—generally understood as the merging of different forms of belief and practice—as a way of stressing their cultural roots while downplaying the cultural mixture omnipresent in every belief system.
'de-syncretization' and 're-Africanization' have certain characteristics in common, which could imply that their objectives and aims are the same. Both movements, for example, reject Afro-Catholic syncretism in Candomblé and are characterized by a continuous search for any elements relating to allegedly lost religious practices. The ‘recovery’ of lost fragments of ancestral knowledge is alleged to help reconstruct the supposed purity of a religion originating in Africa. In reality, however, we will see that these two movements, apparently so similar, display very different views on the issue of legitimacy and hegemony in the Afro-Brazilian religious field. Furthermore, the re-Africanization movement sheds new light on the formation process of Afro-Brazilian religions, revealing two distinct types of syncretism around which the Afro-American universe revolves: first, an ‘Afro-African’ syncretism, as it is often defined by practitioners, said to have existed prior to slavery, and originating in the belief in the unity of ‘African culture’; and second, an ‘Afro-Western’ syncretism, represented by Afro-Catholic syncretism, that must be rejected in the quest for purity.

These two types of syncretism foster distinct views of the past and the ‘African collective memory’: one that emphasizes continuity between African and Afro-American cultures, and another that highlights discontinuity as the product of slavery and the loss of real and symbolic ties with the land of origin. ‘Afro-African’ syncretism, recovered through re-Africanization, becomes therefore a ‘good’ syncretism between ‘sister religions,’ allowing other Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Umbanda, to rediscover their African past and worldview through connections with, and ritual borrowing from, other African-derived religions.

Transnational Networks and the Struggle against Syncretism

One of the most significant developments in the field of Afro-American religions is their expansion across ethnic and national barriers. In recent decades, they have left behind their former status as secret and persecuted religions to become public and respectable, reaching people from different social backgrounds, as well as foreigners who import them to their own countries. The spread of these religions has created networks of ritual kinship that now span national boundaries, giving rise to transnational communities of worshippers such as, for instance, Brazilian Batuque in Argentine and Uruguay, and

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3 Umbanda is usually divided between ‘white’ Umbanda and ‘African’ Umbanda. For Umbanda as part of an Afro-Brazilian religious continuum, see Capone (1999; 2010).