Problems of Religious Syncretism

As we have seen, throughout the period of slavery the black gods were forced to hide behind the statue of the Virgin or a Catholic saint. This was the beginning of a marriage between Christianity and the African religions in the course of which, as in all marriages, the two partners would change more or less radically as they adjusted to each other. Long before the scholars began to talk about the phenomena and processes of acculturation, Nina Rodrigues drew attention to this syncretism between the cross of Christ and the stone of the orixás. Distinguishing between the Africans, who in his day still existed, and the Creoles, who were beginning to establish their own candomblés, he noted that the Africans simply juxtaposed the saints and their own deities, considering them to belong to the same category though completely separate. Among the Creoles, however, Catholicism was already infiltrating the African faith and transforming it into an idolatrous cult of statues conceived as images of the orixás. "In the mind of the African Negro the religious ideas instilled by Catholicism have always coexisted—and still coexist—with the fetishist ideas and beliefs brought over from Africa. The Creoles and mulattoes, however, show a manifest and unrestrainable tendency to identify the two teachings."

Rodrigues quite rightly sensed that syncretism was an ongoing process and that its degrees should be distinguished, but he failed to recognize a phenomenon that was to counteract it. This was the African sects' resistance to assimilation—the "back to Africa" movement that I have already mentioned. Present-day observers are always struck by the priests' careful
differentiation of their beliefs from those of Catholicism and spiritism—at any rate in cities like Bahia where there is no police persecution. (An immediate consequence of police persecution is that to avoid prison sentences devotees of African religious sects swear that they are "good Catholics.")

One candomblé priest told me that Catholicism and the African religions are alike in believing that everyone has his guardian angel, but, while the Catholic is simply aware of this as a fact, the African knows the specific name of his angel: it is that of the orixá who "protects his head." Another similarity between the two religions is that both the orixás and the saints once lived on earth. Thus the two cults share a common point of departure in what might be described as euhemerism. But, added this priest, the Catholic canonizes his saints, while the African knows nothing of canonization. The orixás manifest themselves—i.e. they descend into the bodies of their votaries, causing them to fall into ecstatic trance—whereas the priests forbid the materialization of saints. So far as spiritism is concerned, it is a cult of the dead, who enter into the medium in order to communicate with their devotees. In the African religion the eguns (the souls of the dead) do not manifest themselves in trance. "They do not descend, they appear," and they do so in the form of masked individuals who impersonate them. Or they may "speak from without," and then the voice of the dead on the island of Itaperica is heard. To put it briefly, in the sects we are concerned with, the orixás manifest themselves inwardly, the eguns outwardly. We are a long way from spiritism. Moreover, spiritism is a somber religion. The room is dimly lighted and lugubrious. The believers sit on benches, eyes closed, heads bowed in concentration. The only sound is an occasional sniff or gulp, a breath caught and held like the breathing of a woman in labor straining to deliver the spirit. The African religion is a joyous one, celebrated in an atmosphere of music, singing and dancing, festivity; faces reflect sheer gladness. These descriptions are accurate. But other priests, less afraid of offending their presumably Christian questioner, go much further in analyzing the differences. One even exclaimed: "I don't want anything to do with the saints. They're dead—eguns. But the orixás now, they're encantados!"—a remark that brings out the profound difference between a cult commemorating people who have died and been canonized and African polytheism, which worships the forces of nature—the sea, the storm, the sky.

Rodrigues's distinction between African and Creole candomblés must therefore be modified if it is to hold good today. As we shall see, it is now meaningful only if the distinction is drawn instead between the traditional Ketu or Gégé candomblés and the Bantu, Angola, Congo, or caboclo sects.

Nevertheless both types closely equate the gods, voduns, or orixás with the Catholic saints. The colonial mask remains firmly affixed to the black
god, even when the two are not identified in any way. This so-called syncretist phenomenon is not particularly Brazilian and actually predates the slave trade. The evangelization of blacks began in Africa a couple of centuries before the settlement of Brazil, and certain Dahoman gods and some of the Congo Negroes’ spirits had already been identified with Catholic saints.4 And in Cuba and Haiti, in Louisiana voodoo, and in the xangôs of Trinidad, we find correspondences between saints and African deities transplanted to America that are analogous to those found in Brazil.5

The prevalence of this phenomenon can be explained only by the structural, cultural, and sociological parallels (to the extent that we have seen them in action) that facilitated the infiltration of Catholicism into the African sects and its reinterpretation in African terms. Briefly summarized, they are:

1. The structural parallel between the Catholic theology of the saints’ intercession with the Virgin Mary, the Virgin’s intercession with Jesus, and the intercession of Jesus with God the Father and the African cosmology of the orixás as mediators between man and Olorun.

2. The cultural parallel between the functional conception of the saints, each of whom presides over a certain human activity or is responsible for healing a certain disease, and the equally functional conception of the voduns and orixás, each of whom is in charge of a certain sector of nature and who, like the saints, are the patrons of trades and occupations, protecting the hunter, the smith, the healer, etc.

3. The sociological parallel between the Brazilian “nations” or the Cuban cabildos and the Catholic fraternities.

But these parallels, which facilitated the approximate equation of saints and gods, were complemented by more specific parallels between individual saints and gods. Obviously Omolú, the god of smallpox, could be identified only with Saint Lazarus, whose body is covered with sores and who cures skin diseases, or with Saint Roch, whose dog licks wounds, or with Saint Sebastian, whom popular prints show bound to a tree, his flesh bleeding from arrow wounds. Oxóssi, god of hunting, could be linked only to warrior saints like Saint George and Saint Michael, whose statues show them impaling dragons with their lances or crushing some other monster under foot. Yansan is identified with Saint Barbara because she ate the “magic” of her husband Shangô and therefore spits lightning, while Saint Barbara is the patron of artillerymen and offers protection against thunder and fire. (According to legend, her father was struck by lightning when, enraged at her refusal to abjure Christianity, he tried to decapitate her.)6 Ribeiro also suggests another reason. Chromolithographs often depict Saint Barbara “standing before a tower with three windows, holding a martyr’s palm branch and often a chalice and the Eucharist,” and Ribeiro
believes that this symbolic reminder of her role as comforter of the dying may have helped to link her with Yansan, the only goddess who does not fear death, participates in the *achêché*, and watches over the dead in the "*balé* room." Saint Francis is linked with Òrókò because he is the saint of nature and pictures show him talking to the little birds under a leafy tree. The Beji, the divine twins, naturally seek out other twins like Saints Cosmas and Damian in the Catholic hagiography.

The importance of popular lithographs and statues is undeniable, and many writers have called attention to it. Nor should we forget the stories of the Golden Legend or the superstitions of rural Catholicism, even though the latter were not recognized by the church. Shangô is identified with Saint Jerome because, according to unofficial tradition, Saint Jerome is the husband of Saint Barbara, while Shangô is the husband of Yansan (Saint Barbara). Nanamburucu is identified with Saint Anne because Saint Anne is the mother of Mary and the grandmother of Jesus, while Nanamburucu is the "oldest" deity of the Afro-Brazilians and the ancestor of all the *orixás*. As Ribeiro says: "This suggests that the mythological kinship between the various deities of the African pantheon and their position in the hierarchy must be taken into account in analyzing the identification of these deities with the Catholic saints," as must their specific functions and the way they are depicted in popular prints.

But with a little good will correspondences are not hard to find, which is why a certain *orixá* may be identified with different saints at different times or in different places, as the table below clearly shows. Exù, for instance, may be the Devil because he is one of the masters of black magic; Saint Anthony because he leads people into temptation, is given to evil thoughts, and disturbs ceremonies (Saint Anthony was tormented by demons); Saint Peter because he opens or closes the ways and is the gatekeeper of the *candomblé*, having his *pegi* at the entrance to the houses, as Saint Peter keeps the gates of Heaven, opening and closing them with his great bunch of keys; or Saint Bartholomew because of the saying that on this saint's feast day, August 24, "all the devils are turned loose." Conversely, one saint may be identified with various *orixás*. Our Lady of Pleasures is sometimes identified with Obá because in Africa Obá is the patron of prostitutes, sometimes with Oxun because she is the goddess of sensual love. Saint George, astride his white horse, his lance couched, may be either Ogun, god of war, or Oxossi, god of the hunt.

All the same, the richness and complexity of our table of correspondences—this jumble in which several *orixás* represent the same saint and several saints represent the same *orixá*—is somewhat disquieting. We need a guideline to help introduce some order into this chaos of contradictions. To begin with, it should be noted that the table gives all identifications known for Brazil without any indication of the date of the research on
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¹ God, St. Anne, N.S. of Bomfim, St. Barbara, The Devil, St. Anthony, St. Michael the Archangel, St. Jerome, St. George, St. Sebastian, The Holy Sacrament, St. Lazarus, St. Francis, St. Barbara, St. Rita (Nagô house) are listed for each location.

² Virgen de las Mercedes, The Holy Sacrament, Christ Crucified, The Souls in Purgatory, Anima Sola, St. Anthony, The Devil, St. Peter, St. Barbara, St. John as a Child, St. Albert, St. Humbert, St. James, St. Joseph, St. John the Baptist, St. Lazarus, St. Patrick are listed for each location.
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Sources: a = Nina Rodrigues; b = Manoel Querino; c = Arthur Ramos; d = Edison Carneiro; e = Thomas Kockmeyer; f = Pierre Verger; g = Donald Pierson; h = Roger Bastide; i = Onyedra Alvarenga; j = Jean de Rio; k = Magalhães Corrêa; l = Gonçalves Fernandes; m = Vicente Lima; n = René Ribeiro; o = Wal-
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demar Valente; p = Pierre Cavalcanti; q = Jacques Raimundo; r = Abelardo Duarte; s = Leopold Bethløl; t = M. J. Herskovits; u = Dante de Layano; v = Octavio da Costa Eduardo; w = Nunes Pereira; x = Milo Marcelin.
which they are based. Yet syncretism is fluid and dynamic, not rigid and crystallized. In Nina Rodrigues’s day, for instance, Shangō was identified with Saint Barbara, patron of lightning.

The identification of the protectors in the mind was strong enough to overcome sex discrepancies. Whenever I pressed fetishist believers to explain this physically absurd ambivalence, they would always come back with the question: “Isn’t Saint Barbara the patron of lightning?” Among some blacks a still more curious inversion is found. Shangō’s wife is Oxun; Saint Barbara’s partner in protecting people from lightning is Saint Jerome. They simply turned this relationship around and made Oxun, Shangō’s wife, the husband of Saint Barbara and hence Saint Jerome.¹¹

Logic, however, proved stronger than functional analogies, and today the orixás are associated with saints of their own sex. Shangō has become Saint Jerome and Yansan Saint Barbara. Similarly, when Gonçalves Fernandes made his study of syncretism in the terreiros of Recife, he found certain equivalences that have now completely disappeared. Ogun, for example, was identified with Saint Paul, Oxun with Our Lady of Pleasures, but the latter has been replaced by Our Lady of Carmel, who, being the patron saint of the city, is very popular in Catholic circles. (For the same reason Oxun became the most popular female orixá in Recife). Yemanjá was identified with Our Lady of Sorrows or Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, probably by analogy with Bahia.¹²

Correspondences are born and die with every age. But when we study them in space rather than time, we find even wider variations. Some of them are the same everywhere—Yansan and Saint Barbara, the Beji and Saints Cosmas and Damian. Generally, however, they change from Bahia to Alagoas, from Maranhão to Recife, from Rio to Porto Alegre. This is because Brazil grew out of independent settlements separated by veritable deserts, with no channel of communication except the sea. Thus every African center had to invent its own table of correspondences. Of course the same factors were at work everywhere, so that despite the chaos the correspondences are always comparable,¹³ but local circumstances naturally affected their operation. In Bahia, for example, Yemanjá is still identified primarily with Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of the Beach because she is the beloved protector of sailors and because every year the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception emerges from her church to bless the sea. In Porto Alegre, however, the procession of fishermen and sailors is dedicated to Our Lady of Navigators, so it is she, not Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, who is identified with Yemanjá.¹⁴ In Bahia, Ogun is identified with Saint Anthony because Bahia was the capital of Brazil during the colonial period, and Saint Anthony, who had victoriously defended the city against foreign invasion and been rewarded with the title of lieutenant, was an appropriate symbol of the warrior spirit. In Rio, however, where the blacks have always been more resentful of the
whites and where Saint George used to take part in the Corpus Christi processions mounted on a real horse and acclaimed by the crowd, the Negroes wanted their own black Saint George, protector of murderers, capoeiras, and upholders of the black cause, so Ogun was linked with him rather than Saint Anthony.

Sometimes variability is so great that the correspondences change from one cult center to another. In Recife, for example, in the time of Gonçalves Fernandes and when I was there, Oxun was identified with Our Lady of Pleasures in Joana Batista's house, with Our Lady of Carmel in Master Apolinário's, and with Mary Magdalene in the African Center of Saint George. In Joana Batista's house Shango was identified with Saint Jerome, in Master Apolinário's with Saint Anthony (probably because of the color prints showing demons tormenting Saint Anthony as he emerges from the fires of Hell), and in the Saint George center with Saint John the Baptist (because of Saint John's Eve bonfires). In Joana's house Ogun, who was usually equated with Saint George, was called "Saint Paul in the Portuguese language." In the Eloy terreiro Saint Anne, generally the Catholic equivalent of Nanamburucú, was the counterpart of Oxalá (apparently a vestigial survival of the androgynous character of that African deity). It seems that originally every priest followed his own judgment in his intent to disarm the whites by masking his deities and labeling them with the names of Catholic saints.

The apparent confusion in the table of correspondences may also be due to the researchers' failure in some cases to indicate the ethnic origin of the sects they studied. It is possible that the Dahomans do not react to the Catholic hagiography in exactly the same way as the Yoruba. In fact two phenomena that ought to be clearly distinguished are often confused by the Africanists: regional syncretism and ethnic syncretism. My attention was called to this by the fact that in Pórto Alegre, Herskovits found identifications different from those previously reported by Arthur Ramos for Exú and Shangô and for Saint Onophrius, whom Ramos linked with Osain, Herskovits with Odé (a form of Oxóssi). Herskovits states that the "nation" he visited was Oyo; Ramos does not cite the source of his information. When I visited Pórto Alegre, however, I found that the Gégé table of correspondences differed slightly from that of the Oyo "nation." Obviously geographic isolation is a factor in regional variations, but so is the isolation of the "nations," which are kept apart by rivalry. This isolation, to which I have already called attention, still persists in the form of competition and rivalry between candomblés. It has produced the same results as geographic isolation: variations in orixá-saint correspondences. As of now Dante de Laytano is the only scholar to have made a systematic study of these divergences between "nations." Unfortunately his findings have been published only in part, but they are sufficient to show the importance of the cultural affiliations of the terreiros.
Four Gégé Houses

- Oxalá: The Holy Spirit
- Yansan: Saint Barbara
- Oxóssi: St. Sebastian
- The young Yemanjá: O.L. of Navigators
- The young Omolu: St. Jerome or St. Anthony
- Oxun-maré: O.L. of the Rosary

One Nagô House

- The Sacred Heart of Jesus
- The young Yansan: St. Catherine
- The old Yansan: St. Barbara
- St. Roch
- The young Yemanjá: O.L. of the Good Journey
- The young Omolu: N.S. of Bomfim
- O.L. of the Immaculate Conception

It would be useful to conduct a similar study in other regions of Brazil before drawing any final conclusions.

But it seems to me that the most important lead to follow in introducing a little logic into our table of mixed-up correspondences is the protean character of every deity. Arixás are not confined to a single form. There are at least twenty-one Exus, not just one. There are twelve different forms of Shango, sixteen different forms of Oxun. It is therefore likely that each form (or at least the principal ones) will have its Catholic equivalent. Hence it comes as no surprise to find one orixa corresponding in our table to several saints or Virgins. What at first seemed capricious now appears as a more harmonious arrangement. Nina Rodrigues identified Yemanjá with Our Lady of the Rosary, whereas today she is identified with the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. The explanation is that we are dealing with two different Yemanjas, since there is one Yemanjá who is always identified with Our Lady of the Rosary. Again, Oxalá is said to be the Eternal Father, although most scholars equate him with Nosso Senhor de Bomfim, but the difficulty disappears when one remembers that Oxalá is split into Oxaguiam and Oxalufan. Kockmeyer’s table of correspondences for Bahia allows for this to some extent by carefully distinguishing an old and a young form of each god. Dante de Laytano does the same for Porto Alegre. But we still need to go beyond this dualism and envisage the totality of the divine forms. Then we would see that Saint Jerome is not the counterpart of Shango in general but of Shango Ogodo, so that this correspondence does not prevent or contradict the identification of Shango with Saint Anthony, Saint John, or even Saint Barbara, thee saints being linked with other forms of the same god (Saint John the Baptist with Sangô Dada, Saint Mark with Osseinha, Saint Anthony with Shango Nile, and Saint Barbara with Shango Bonin). I believe that a study of this sort would simplify the problem of syncretism, especially in the case of Exú,
Shàngó, and Ogun, although it would not completely eliminate the contradictions in our table of correspondences.

So far we have tried to define syncretism from the outside. We must now try to comprehend it from within—i.e. to discover the emotional or mental attitudes at work in the black psyche when it identifies its vodun or orixá with a Catholic saint. We must try to find out what inner feelings or images underlie this syncretism. I devoted almost the whole of one of my stays in Bahia and Recife to this problem, yet, as my studies progressed, I found that so far as the Negro was concerned it was nonexistent; it was a pseudoproblem. I had been reasoning according to the logic of Western thought, which is based on the principle of identity and noncontradiction. I had imagined that all outward syncretism must have its psychic counterpart, whereas the black did not see the contradictions that I saw, and psychic syncretism, if it exists, takes quite different forms from the outward syncretism with which I had assumed it to be linked. It is true that the endless questions I put to African cult members forced some of my informants to rationalize their faith, but on the whole I felt that their replies were largely dictated by the form in which I stated my questions and that I had forced my black friends to step outside their own mentality for a moment and assume mine. A spiritist who attended candomblés saw the orixás purely as effluents of the astral world—benign (guardian angels) or malevolent (Exú). Hence the names by which they are called, whether African or Catholic, are of no importance since these are purely spiritual forces. The mãe pequena of a former Gêgê house that had been taken over by an Angola sect told me that there are two hierarchized heavens. The first contains God, Christ, and the Virgin, and immediately below it is the heaven of the orixás. This was an admission of the superiority of Catholicism and of white to African civilization, but she hastened to add that it represented only her personal belief, not that of her colleagues. An obô of Shàngó and a Recife baba/orixá gave me the most logical replies, based on euhemerism. According to them, in the beginning there were only the orixás, and they accepted the bloody sacrifices. But orixás, like mortals, die and reincarnate themselves, and in the course of their posthumous evolution their souls were reincarnated in the bodies of white Europeans. Yet since they were still the same all-powerful orixás, the people recognized them as gods, despite their changed physical appearance, and canonized them, and these are the Catholic saints. This explains the belief that the spirit of the orixá and the saint are one and the same and that the saint’s name is the Portuguese translation of the orixás. These rationalizations drawn from my own experience may be supplemented by one made to Renê Ribeiro by a Recife priest: “The saint we worship is a saint who never died. . . . There are the saints of Heaven (those of the Catholic church), but ours too have the power to speak with God. . . . When Jesus Christ ascended to Heaven, some of the apostles and
some of His followers accompanied Him to the celestial court. ... Others remained in the world where animals can speak. ... Those other saints live in the ayé—in space."

In general, however, the priests do not confuse saints and orixás, although they attend church and call themselves good Catholics. "We are no longer Africans," they like to say. "We are Brazilians, and as Brazilians we are obliged to worship the saints of the church too—especially as they are the same spirits under different names." This notion of a purely linguistic difference is the one that recurs most frequently in answers to questions. The saint is the orixá under a Portuguese name. For most daughters of the gods the problem I am posing is therefore no problem at all. If you ask a child what the wind is, he will reply with a simple tautology: the wind is the wind. The filhas give the same kind of answer. Why is Yansan Saint Barbara? Because he's the same. Tradition weighs so heavily on the beliefs of the faithful that they become oblivious of the contradiction between Catholicism and the African religion. As I said just now, the problem is a pseudoproblem. But this is true only of certain strata of the population or certain "nations." Thus our study has led us to take social structures into account and to open up the question of inward and outward syncretism—i.e. to reexamine it in the light of relationships between the levels of psychic life and the levels of society. In fact there are almost as many forms of syncretism as there are social strata. We need to reexamine the question as a whole.

First there is syncretism on the ecological level, which is quite understandable because the whites had to be given the impression that the members of the "nations" were good Catholics. It was therefore only natural that an altar with statues of the saints should occupy a conspicuous place in the candomblé, one immediately visible to any outsiders who might drop in. The defining characteristic of the ecological space is juxtaposition. Material objects, being rigid, cannot merge; they are located side by side within the same framework. Consequently the degree of syncretism is denoted here by the relative closeness or separation of what might be termed the Catholic and the African areas of the sacred space. Both in Bahia and in Pôrto Alegre every traditional terreiro has a Catholic altar and one or more pegis for the orixás. (In Recife, so far as I know, only the terreiro of Father Adão conforms to this norm.) The Catholic altar is located in the dancing room and often faces the entrance to make it more visible to visitors. The indoor pegi for Oxalá, Shangô, etc., is hidden away in the obscurity of a special room, where the stones of the gods repose in dishes and receive offerings of blood and food from their daughters. The outdoor pegis for the "open air" gods—Exú, Ogun, and Omolú—are scat-
tered about the grounds in the form of small closed houses. Sometimes one finds both a cross and Exú's little hut at the entrance to the *candomblé*, but the cross stands neither on nor immediately beside the hut. Here again the two spaces, the Catholic and the African one, do not impinge on each other. Moreover the Catholic altar has no functional role in the ceremonies honoring the *orixás*. The daughters of the gods do not salute the statues of the saints as they do the *pegis*, by prostrating themselves, or as they salute the drums that evoke the gods and cause them to descend, by kneeling before them and touching the leather drumhead. Indeed, when they dance they turn their backs on the saints. One feels that this altar is just an extraneous decoration lacking any deeper meaning. It is true that the choice of statues to be displayed is dictated by the symbolism of the *orixá*-saint correspondences, but that is as far as it goes. Here both spatial and social distance between the objects are at their maximum.

In the Bantu *terreiros*, where as we have seen the collective memory is less well organized, the objects are closer together, though still separate. The aesthetic needs of the blacks, which here are not counterbalanced by the desire to respect a mythology not entirely their own, compel the babalorixás to decorate their *pegis* to make them look more appealing and thus attract larger congregations. With this in mind, they adopt features they have admired in Catholic churches and chapels. For instance, they may cover the dishes in which the stones rest, immersed in blood or oil, with immaculate cloths or drape the ceiling with a canopy that falls in graceful folds. In what we have referred to as "proletarian" *candomblés* the very smallness of the house makes it necessary to bring the Catholic and African spatial areas closer together. Since it is difficult to find room for a Catholic altar, statues are replaced by colored prints hung on the walls, and since there is not room for all of them in the tiny dancing room, many are hung in the *pegis*. Thus the two theoretically separate spaces tend to impinge on each other. In the Recife *terreiros* such closeness is the general rule.21

In every case it is spatial rather than social distance that is abolished. That is to say, morphological syncretism cannot be taken as an identification of divinities with saints,21 although it certainly promotes it. Finally, in *catimbó* (which, it is true, is more Indian than African, but which blacks have penetrated) the bowl of *jurema* lies next to the Christian rosary on the rustic table that serves as the altar, the *caboclo*'s cigar next to the Catholic candle. In Rio *macumba*, and still more in Umbanda spiritism, the Catholic and African areas are completely merged, and the *orixás* are totally identified with the statues of their Catholic counterparts.22 The substitution of the statue or print for the stone in the *pegi* means that the two spaces have become one, so that the *orixá* and the saint can totally fuse in the affective awareness or the imagination of the
votaries. The degree of psychic syncretism thus keeps pace with the degree of ecological syncretism so closely that it is impossible to tell cause from effect.

Moving along to the next level, that of rites and organized ceremonial structures, we distinguish two elements: the temporal framework within which the actions are performed, and their organization. The temporal framework presents the same problems and solutions as the spatial one. For members of traditional candomblés there are two religious time frames that do not intersect. During Holy Week the terreiros are closed, not in mourning but because the orixás have been sent away. During the month of May at the Casa das Minas, the Engenho Velho candomblé, and Father Adão’s house in Recife, as well as in other cult centers, the litanies of the Blessed Virgin are recited in front of the altar in the dancing room. In Bahia at the conclusion of initiations everyone renders thanks to God by attending Catholic mass at the church of Bomfim. In Recife the daughters of Oxun go to mass at Our Lady of Carmel. Yet never is there any mixture of the Catholic and African rites. They are juxtaposed in chronological time exactly as we have just seen objects juxtaposed in space. Depending on the month or the moment, one shifts from one time frame to another without ever confusing the two.

Nonetheless the blacks’ transplantation of African ceremonies from one hemisphere to another presented a difficulty: how to localize ceremonies linked to a certain rhythm of nature and society in a country having a different seasonal rhythm. The way this difficulty was resolved in Recife (though not in Bahia) represents the first instance of synchronization of the Christian and Yoruba time frames. The great festivals of the orixás were celebrated on the feast day of the corresponding Catholic saint. The Service for the Protection of Psychopaths (which supervises the activities of the xangós in Recife) even tried to fix the dates of the major festivals of the African sects to coincide with the major feasts of the European calendar—Epiphany, the feasts of Saint John, Saint Anne, and the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas—but the babalorixás raised such violent objections that it had to yield. This shows that the African calendar did not entirely coincide with the Christian one. Generally speaking, however, and excepting the festival of the new yams (which celebrates the beginning of the African year), Exú is celebrated on Saint Bartholomew’s Day, Shango on the Feast of Saint John, Ogun on April 23 (Saint George), Omolú on January 20 (Saint Sebastian), the Beji on September 27 (Saints Cosmas and Damian), Oxalá on New Year’s Day, Yansan on Saint Barbara’s Day, etc.

But combining the two calendars did not make the rituals any less heterogeneous nor did it standardize their organization. A mass may be interposed in the sequence of movements and actions, but it is not incorporated into the African ceremony. One goes to church in the morning and at night;
one dances to the throbbing music of the drums to the point of ecstasy. In the less traditional sects, however, extraneous elements are sometimes introduced to embellish a ceremony, and in this way the process of syncretism takes another step forward. This is most conspicuous in the Bantu sects and in macumba (which is essentially Bantu by origin). René Ribeiro cites an innovation (introduced by the only Chamba cult house in Recife) that in effect injects into the initiation ritual of a future yalorixá elements borrowed from reisado or congado folklore. Queen Ginga's embassy to the King of the Congo and the display of the gifts exchanged between the two kingdoms in testimony of friendship are transformed into an embassy from the entranced sons of Ogun to the enthroned daughter of Yansan and the display of the yalorixá's diploma as a gift from Shangó. What has happened here is exactly what we observed at the end of the preceding chapter in the case of myth. The babalarixá was no longer familiar with the ritual of enthronement for a yalorixá and had to search his memory for some appropriate procedure to fill the gap. In both cases the syncretism occurred purely as a means of patching holes in the collective memory.

In the same study Ribeiro cites another instance of syncretism which is much more significant from our point of view. Fernando Ortiz stressed one difference between Christianity and the African religions that in his opinion precludes genuine conversion without a complete change of mentality. A black, he says, may accept the admission of miraculous saints to his pantheon but he can never accept a god who dies ignominiously on a cross. Yet there is actually an African deity—Shangó—whom Frobenius characterized as “the dead and resurrected god.” Why, then, is this god never identified with Christ in our table of correspondences? The deity who corresponds to Christ is Oxalá, and even he is not conceived of as Christ crucified but as the good shepherd leaning on his crook. Ortiz's point is well taken, and we should not be misled by the terminology used by Frobenius, which smacks too strongly of Frazer's ideas. Shangó does die, but in exactly the same way as Ogun or Oxun, who sink into the ground. In each case what has to be explained is how a king or a living woman could mysteriously disappear and become a god. We are a long way from Christian dogma. But there exists in Recife a version of an African ceremony which in Bahia has remained pure. This is the invocation, prior to the ceremony, of all the orixás, even the “old ones” who no longer descend. It is performed kneeling, to the accompaniment of the shiré. In Recife this ceremony too has been contaminated by folkloric elements borrowed from the reisado and has assumed the new form of “praising God.” In the reisado the songs of praise are addressed to the statue of Christ on the Cross and accompanied by maracas; here they are addressed to Oraminha as the father of all the Shangós. Ribeiro explains the contamination and the important role Shangó plays in the ritual by the myth telling how Shangó, like Christ, died as a king and was reborn as a
If this interpretation is correct, it would indicate that the African mentality has been radically transformed and Christianized to allow Shangô to be identified with Christ on the Cross. The ritual syncretism would then be explained by an earlier assimilation of collective representations involving a shift from one social stratum to another.

This is possible. A study of other ceremonies will lead us to the same conclusion. As we have seen, the African (or his descendants) may participate in Catholic rites. When he does, he transforms and reinterprets them to fit the values of his own civilization. If he goes to mass after the initiation ceremony, the Latin words he hears are not, in his mind, addressed to God but to his personal orixá. If he walks behind the statue of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in a procession, he believes he is walking behind Yemanjá, not the Virgin. The washing of the church of Bomfim in Bahia, which takes place in January, is a typically Portuguese festival. It was introduced by a soldier going off to war in Paraguay who promised Jesus that if he returned unhurt he would wash the atrium of His church. The blacks adopted the custom, but in doing so they changed its meaning. They say that they do this in honor of "the old one." But Jesus, who died at the age of thirty-three, can hardly be described as old. Obviously "the old one" must be His African counterpart, Oxalá.

Moreover the blacks attend this festival not as individuals or as families but in group; each candomblé sends its own truck. And lately, the water they bring with them in flowered containers is not just ordinary water; it comes from the sacred spring of Oxalá. Now the Africans have a ceremony called "the water of Oxalá," which consists chiefly of purifying the gods once a year and renewing their mana by washing them with water from this sacred spring. Two similar ceremonies have been merged. One might almost say: his repetita placent . . . deis. The washing of the church has been reinterpreted in African terms as a doublet of the ritual for purifying the divine stones. Conversely one of the musical instruments used in the African ceremonies for summoning the divinities is a little bell known as the adjá. Since the adjá resembles the little bell rung during the mass at the moment of the consecration of the Host, in Recife it is sometimes used to call the attention of the congregation to the climax of the fetishist ceremony: the praying of Orixa, the greatest of the orixás. Here the African rite is reinterpreted in Catholic terms.

Thus the level of ceremonial organization leads us back to collective representations just as the ecological level did. Indeed there is in syncretism a constant shifting back and forth between the various levels of social reality that must reinforce one another in order to function. But this does not prevent each level from remaining relatively independent within the whole phenomenon. Each follows its own laws of development. One
might say that there is a spatial logic that is not the logic of actions, just as the logic of actions is not the logic of ideas.

Now that we are entering the domain of collective representations, we must distinguish between religion and magic. Syncretism does not work in the same way in both. The law of religious thought is the law of symbolism and mystic analogies or correspondences. The law of magic thought is the law of accumulation, intensification, and addition. The slaves who were taken to Brazil were of widely different ethnic origins and they sought analogies between their respective deities. Of course there was no question of identifying them—of confusing Zambi and Oxalá, for instance—or of merging them; it was simply a matter of recognizing equivalences. Each “nation” retained its own gods, but they were linked by all kinds of mystic correspondences. One might say that they presented the same supernatural reality in different languages or different civilizations. What was needed was some kind of dictionary that would make it possible to pass from one religion to another, thus demonstrating the unity of the slave class in respect to ethnic origin. The task of compiling such a Yoruba-Dahoman dictionary had already begun in Africa. It was simply continued in Brazil and extended to include the Bantu. Obviously it was a dictionary of analogies, not synonyms. The Nago Exú was not the Fon Elegba. Neither was the Bantu “man in the street” (Bombomgira) the same as Exú. But these three deities had common as well as divergent characteristics; they were alike. It was in classifications of this sort that Catholicism found its niche. Catholic-African syncretism presents nothing new or extraordinary compared to syncretism among the African religions themselves. The African gods are not identified with the Catholic saints. How often have I heard Bahia blacks protesting against Exú’s being referred to as the Devil! They are well aware of the gulf that separates the two. “No, Exú is not the Devil. He’s not bad.” How can one find the perfect Catholic counterpart for Oxalá, originally an androgynous god? No adequate translation has been found, and Oxalá vacillates between the two sexes, between Nosso Senhor of Bomfim and Saint Anne. In any case not all the orixás can find counterparts in the Catholic hagiography; the African pantheon is more extensive than the Christian one. As a black said to Kockmeyer: “Everything the church has we have too, but we have a lot more besides. The Catholic priests don’t know everything.”

Devotees of the African cults are therefore quite aware of the differences between the religions, but they are also aware of their resemblances. Hence it is just as feasible to compile a table of correspondences between orixás and saints as between orixás and voduns.

Syncretism, however, assumes different forms depending upon the nature of the collective representations that come into contact. And when we
move from religion to magic or to healing, which is merely another form of magic, we are moving from one group of collective representations to another group that does not follow the same structural laws. In fact religion constitutes a relatively closed traditional system linked to the total social and cultural life, confined within the boundaries of the tribe or "nation." Hence when two religions come into contact, the result will be either religious stratification, with one of them being considered the only true religion and the other relegated to the realm of mysterious cults or black magic, or an attempt to establish equivalences between the gods and place them on a common value level. But the two religions will always tend to persist as entities. The law of magic is the exact opposite and always has been, from classical antiquity to the present day, from the land of the Eskimos to the South Sea islands. Magic is associated with the omnipotence of desire and retains all the excited illogicality, all the unyielding passion, of desire, which never gives up hope. Specialized sorcerers certainly exist who practice only certain types of rites, who have their own formulas and procedures. But if these procedures fail, they have to take stronger measures and find more powerful techniques. Beliefs that originate in the emotions are not willing to recognize defeat. Failure does not arouse skepticism toward magical practices; it just forces them to become more complicated. In order to succeed, the sorcerer takes more precautions. He goes through every name of the god or spirit he is invoking because if he omitted one he would draw a blank. He invokes him in all languages, for if he did not use the most mysterious and archaic tongues, the spirit would not hear his call. He piles action upon action, words upon words. In this respect magic is rather like some experimental science based purely on "experiments to see what will happen." The sorcerer tries out everything he knows or can think up in the hope of achieving his goal. This law of accumulation, which is characteristic of magical (in contrast to religious) thinking precisely because it is bound up with individual or collective desires, actually sets in motion the process of syncretism.

Newly arrived in Brazil, the black found himself exposed to a popular Catholicism that was familiar with and treasured the "potent prayers" of medieval Europe against various diseases, sterility in women, and the accidents of life, and that in the colonial or imperial chapels amassed ex votos testifying to miracles performed by the Virgin or the saints in response to desperate prayers or promises. With such "experimental" proof before his eyes, he could not fail to recognize that the whites, like the Negroes, were the masters of benign or formidable powers. Some connection may even have formed in his unconscious mind between the stronger mana of the Catholic religion and the whites' higher place on the social ladder. This explains why he grafted the Catholic tradition onto his own—but not before he had rethought and reinterpreted it in terms of magic. He then fortified and enriched it with procedures drawn from his
own tradition, mixing Christian and African rites to make them more efficacious. And it must be stressed that he did not borrow from Catholicism alone. Since the law of magical thought is the law of accumulation and ever-increasing complication, the black looked everywhere for ways to intensify magical dynamism. This explains why Mussulman magic survived although the Mussulman religion died out. The non-Moslem black unhesitatingly accepted it to enrich and fortify his own magic, adding the mandingas of the Malê to his own spells. This is why blacks were not afraid to use Indian techniques during the colonial period or to pore over the books of Cyprian of Antioch or Albert le Grand in the nineteenth century and even over Tibetan or Rosicrucian books of magic in the present day. Far from promoting skepticism, the spread of education and literacy widened the scope for potential syncretism.

Nevertheless these borrowed elements introduced into African magic changed in character and function. Magical syncretism is not the automatic result of contact between civilizations or of the pressure of the Luso-Brazilian civilization on the civilization of slaves or their descendants. Strictly speaking, magical elements were not combined with Catholic ones. African magic was supplemented, enriched, and intensified by the use of Catholic techniques that in this newly created complex immediately acquired a magical character. The black does not see the priest saying mass as a priest but as a formidable magician who would like to reserve all his secrets for whites and withhold them from blacks, so as to maintain white supremacy. Father Ildefonso was asked by a babalorixa named Chico: “Where do you hide the key for opening and closing the body?” Catholic rites are not seen as religious rites but as magic ones, efficacious in themselves. To quote another dialogue reported by Father Ildefonso:

“Father, I’ve been ill for six months and getting worse for the last two. But if I confess I could get well.”
“Father, you don’t know. [Obviously he was afraid to say: “You don’t want to.”] If you confess me, I’ll be cured. My neighbor had a spirit tormenting him. When Father Gaspar came to see him, he confessed and was cured. My mother has consulted the feiticeiro, but he couldn’t do anything for me. . . . Now there’s nothing for it but confession.”

We may note that Chico’s candomblé shows the highest possible degree of syncretism in all the magical expedients I have mentioned: African deities in the form of saints, Oxun in the form of Our Lady of Lourdes (because of the spring), magic herbs, toads, snakes, lizards, dolls, molasses—the whole lot, even down to the fortuneteller’s crystal ball. “The small change is for summoning the saint. The string helps. The crystal ball tells who cast the evil spell. The person appears in it. The ball
changes color; it turns black or blue. Sometimes a knot forms in it. When
the white ball turns black, there's nothing to be done. The person will
die."

Magic always tends to be quantitative. The balangandan worn by
Bahian women is a silver frame hung with the fíga of the ancient Romans,
the Jewish Star of David, the symbolic fish and dove of Christianity,
African horns to protect against the evil eye, candomblé drums, keys, the
four-leafed clover of European sorcery—a touching conglomeration of
world-wide magic. This syncretism is facilitated by the relative
homogeneity of magical symbols all over the world and throughout the
ages—the phallus, the knot, the eye, and the hand—and by the monotony
and poverty of the substances used—excrement, nail clippings, hair,
strongly scented herbs, strangely shaped roots. Thus syncretism assumes
different forms in religion and in magic according to the different laws that
govern the structuring of the various types of collective representations.

But the divergence between religious syncretism (through correspon­
dences) and magical syncretism (through the piling up of elements)
should not make us forget that the differences between Africa and
Catholicism diminish (a) as we move downward from the supreme priests
to the sons and daughters of the gods, then to the candomblé members still
tenously attached to the sect though operating on its periphery rather
than at its center, and (b) as we move from the traditional to the Bantu
sects more or less complicated by caboclos and from there to the macumba
of Rio.

This evolution is easy to understand. In the first case, moving downward
from the priests or priestesses, we come first to highly Africanized indi­
viduals on a lower intellectual level who are less interested in myth than in rites,
less concerned with collective representations than with practices,
because of the favorable effect these may have on their lives in general.
Next come people who belong to the Brazilian rather than the African
society and who in their hyphenated allegiance to two different mental
worlds derive reassurance from identification with the orixás and the
saints. In brief, the intensity of the syncretism varies with the degree of
participation in institutionalized groups.

In the second case several factors tend to bring the African religion and
Catholicism closer together. First, the Bantu assign a more important
place to magic in the activities of the candomblé than do the Yoruba.
Anyone privileged to spend a few days in both types of candomblé and
observe the type of callers received by the babalorixás or yalorixás and the
advice given to them will recognize this essential difference. As for macumba, it openly crosses the line separating religion from magic,
particularly black magic. The macumbeiros are constantly being asked to
make despachos against football clubs, politicians, or rivals in love. Thus
the law of magical syncretism, which brings Catholicism and Africanism
together, tends to replace the law of religious syncretism, which confines itself to compiling a dictionary of correspondences or analogies. Another factor is that the Bantu songs, like those of macumba, are generally in Portuguese, and their composers indiscriminately use the god’s African name and the other name by which he is known—that of the Catholic saint. By calling the orixás by their Portuguese names, they identify the two in the minds of the singers or listeners. A last point to remember is that the color of the participants grows lighter as one passes from the traditional terreiros to the Bantu ones and then to macumba, which has as many white as mulatto devotees—and far fewer pure black ones. Interracial marriage finds a parallel in the marriage between civilizations. “Mulattoism” is a cultural as well as a biological phenomenon. Macumba is a mulatto or rather a mixed-blood religion (since it combines Indian elements with African and white ones). But this cultural mulattoism can only be explained by, and always occurs together with, mulattoism in the form of the mixing of races or blood through marriage or concubinage.

While the ecological and ceremonial levels led us in a rising dialectic to the level of collective representations, our study of the latter has led us, in an inverse dialectic, to a lower level, that of social structures.

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Civilizations may meet and live side by side without mutual penetration. Contrary to what one might expect, this does not happen because they shut one another out in mutual hostility. A state of war is not prejudicial to cultural fusion. It brings the civilizations together as much as it separates them, because to win a war it is necessary to learn from experience and borrow the victor’s most effective weapons. We have seen how, in Brazilian quilombos such as Palmares, the saints made their way into the chapels of the runaway slaves fighting against the white planters. So-called counteracculturation movements begin to operate only after a more or less prolonged exploitation of one ethnic group by another, so that the civilization to which one returns is not the authentic one of former times but a mythical version of it, and the counteracculturation always bears in its wake some of the characteristics of the rejected civilization. Cultural exchange seems to be at its lowest in times of peace, not war, as the example of India shows. In peacetime, civilizations in contact are mutually complementary—cattle raisers or crop raisers, pure agriculturists or craftsmen. This state of complementary though hierarchized activities was typical of Brazil in the days of slavery. Under this system of labor the blacks and whites could not get along without one another. The black was his master’s “hands and feet”; he supplied the indispensable labor force without which the white would never have been able to establish himself and prosper in Brazil. On the other hand the white provided the minimal security his slaves needed, protecting them against raids by wild Indians.
and the hazards of disease, infirmity, or old age. As I have shown, before the "nations" came into being, the great plantations replaced the African village for the slave, providing him with a cooperative environment in which security made up for the loss of liberty. The two worlds, the world of the blacks laboring in the fields and that of the whites living in the casa grande, did not interpenetrate. Africa simply coexisted with Europe.

But in addition to these rural slaves there were the house servants, maids and black nurses, and the mistresses selected by the master for his sexual pleasure. Two courses were open to the black who could not bear his subjection: to revolt or to seek integration into the dominant group, even in a subordinate position, for the sake of the advantages this would bring him. This integration, however, entailed the de-Africanization of the black in his new environment and a parallel though less profound Africanization of the white. In any case, from the colonial era on, the two systems existed side by side—the encystment of the different races and the integration of individuals into one community. These two phenomena are constantly at work in the network of interpersonal or interracial relations in Brazil. The social class has of course replaced the closed caste. But class barriers, especially when their hierarchy coincides with a color hierarchy of some sort, still confront the black with the same dilemma as before: encystment or participation. The degree of syncretism or assimilation depends upon the degree of encystment or integration of individuals into the global society. To be more precise, both cases actually constitute integration (since individual isolation, far from promoting the preservation of some kind of culture, tends to turn men into animals interested only in survival), but in one case it is integration into a partial community, in the other into society as a whole. In the conclusion to Part I of this book we saw that the abolition of slave labor completely disorganized the black group, leaving it without any institutional frameworks—even deleterious ones—to support it. In this situation we found that the candomblés provided one of the rare community niches within which uprooted men deprived of all social ties could re-create communion.

Yet today candomblé members too are caught up in the movement of integration into Brazilian society as a whole and as a result of economic competition in the labor market (which arouses or revives color prejudice and racial discrimination) are forced back upon themselves and compelled to form encysted communities. Today one should perhaps distinguish between cultural encystment, which would reach its highest point in the candomblés, though without leading to racial encystment, and racial encystment, which would be strongest in the southern part of the country, though without leading to cultural encystment. However well justified this distinction may be, it should not distract us from the first correlation we established: the correlation between the degree of participation and the degree of syncretism, especially since, as we have seen, the principle of
compartmentalization enables the black to participate in the economic or political activity of the region he lives in while remaining loyal to his African norms and values. We must always view the facts of syncretism in the dualist context of Brazilian society. Even Pierson, who, in *Negroes in Brazil*, places so much stress on miscegenation and racial democracy, is forced to admit that when one moves from the lower to the upper class one finds oneself in a totally different world. Hence encystment and integration into a community and integration into the global society always operate in tandem, and we may safely follow this lead in seeking to understand the phenomena of syncretism.

In Bahia multiracial integration occurs within the framework of cultural encystment. Whites and mulattoes are linked with *candomblé* life primarily in the capacity of *ôgans*, the patrons and protectors of the *terreiro*, or as its political friends. The godparent relationship, which links the various levels in the hierarchy of color, takes the form of godparenthood *de santo*—i.e. the godfather pays all or part of the expenses of an initiation. The most prestigious members of the Negro group belong both to the world of the *candomblé*, where they often hold important offices, and to the Luso-Brazilian world, where they may be businessmen, property owners, or members of Catholic fraternities. Consequently syncretism, which was originally merely a mask, a means of distracting the white man's attention and evading his watchful eye, is transformed into the system of equivalences, of correspondences between saints and *orixás*, that I have described in some detail. The saints and *orixás* are not confused; they are not identified—or at any rate not completely. In fact in Ketu, Jesha, or Nagô *terreiros* they are quite sharply distinguished. But they are linked, as the blacks are linked with the whites without completely merging with them. In Pôrto Alegre, as we have seen, the survival of the *batuques* varied even more clearly with the social distance between the black masses and the middle- and upper-class whites. Yet the blacks are Catholics too; they were integrated into Brazil primarily through Christianization. So here too correspondences were established, facilitated by the blacks' participation in the festivals of the Rosary, although never to the point where saints and *orixás* were merged. To put it briefly, the more closely integration adheres to the community type, or the greater the social or cultural encystment within which it occurs, the less profound the syncretism. What I have said about the Yoruba religion also applies exactly to the Dahoman religion of Maranhão. It may be noted that in the *Casa das Minas* most of the *voduns* have never found a Catholic counterpart. Here the syncretism is primarily between the calendar of African festivals and the Brazilian calendar, civil as well as religious: Christmas, Carnival, the feasts of Saint John and Saint Sebastian.

In the areas of *pagelança* and *catimbó*, however, the blacks are much more thoroughly integrated into the surrounding society, as is reflected in
the acceptance of *caboclo* spirits. The same is true of Rio, where the surrounding society is white and preponderantly Catholic rather than of mixed blood. Syncretism occurs as the saints are accepted and gradually replace the *orixás*. But the black is never integrated directly into society as a whole; his integration always proceeds by way of the social class system and—as has been true from the outset—by way of the dualism of Brazilian society. It is certainly integration, but with what? With the lower-class masses of mixed-bloods or part-whites. That is, with a Catholicism that is not the official one but the superstitious Catholicism of medieval European peasants. With a society in which miscegenation Africanizes the whites as much as it de-Africanizes the blacks. Hence integration with a class (the form that black integration into the global society assumes) does not do away with the African religions altogether but, by pushing syncretism to its limits, denatures and corrupts them. The corruption takes different forms in rural areas and in big cities—i.e. according to whether the black is integrated into the lower peasant class or into the urban proletariat. The next two chapters will go into this.