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Métissage and Bricolage in the Making of African Christian Identities

Métissage, bricolage, or hybridizing—the argument continues over the appropriateness of metaphors in the study of contemporary religious productions, and we are invited to question and confront the dialectical or “dialogical” processes which are at work in the appropriation of differences, and the handling of disputes which are part of these processes. A detour by way of all that is involved in the Christian invention of African identities, all that individuals and groups have invested in that invention, the remnant of the colonial encounter, all this contributes to the comparisons which are made in the present writing, and to its conclusions. When we speak of the post-modern re-enchantment with métissage, with its subversive transgressions exemplified by hybridization, or of our fascination with a vanishing bricolage which now is breaking up into simple collage, we may regret the way in which the fecundity of misunderstandings inherent in any encounter has been cancelled, and especially the ambivalent postures which beset the worlds of cultural mixture, and which contribute to their instability.

Key words: *Africa · bricolage · constraints · hybridizing · individualization · mixture · prophetism · syncretism · Yoruba*

Métissage, bricolage ou hybridité, la dispute sur les métaphores dans l'approche des productions religieuses contemporaines invite à questionner et à confronter les processus dialectiques ou dialogiques qui sont à l'œuvre dans l'appropriation des différences et la gestion des différends. Le détour par les enjeux de l'invention chrétienne des identités africaines au cœur de la rencontre coloniale nourrit la comparaison et les conclusions de cet article. Dans le ré-enchantement post-moderne des métissages, les transgressions subversives de l'hybridité ou dans l'éloge d'un bricolage qui dérive en simples collages, on peut regretter la manière dont se trouvent évacuées la fécondité des malentendus inhérents à toute rencontre et surtout les ambivalences de posture qui travaillent les mondes mêlés et entretiennent leur instabilité.

Mots-clés: *Afrique · bricolage · contraintes · hybridité · individualisation · métissage · prophétisme · syncretisme · Yoruba*

Metaphors and Concepts of Blended Worlds

Conceiving a mixture, religious or otherwise, is always difficult, and raises a whole series of paradoxes at the outset. To think is to untangle and to cause to disappear that which we were trying to grasp, for the sake of a purity which had been under investigation up to that point. The use of terms relating to syncretism, mixture, or hybridity is often suspected of conceding too much to cultural purism. The intellectual's first reaction is usually to deny that there was a mixture, supposing that this term is being used, like all disorder, to conceal an order which has escaped the external view. This was one of the first crises and one of the first realizations of Bastide, confronted with Brazilian reality and with the misleading connotations of the term, syncretism: the encounter between the orisha of the Yoruba and Christian saints is not syncretic and still less is it syncretistic, if we are referring to a culture of *mélange*, fusion, or assemblage more or less conscious of heterogeneous traditions; in reality, it is a matter either of a logic of simple accumulation without confusion, or else there has been a cohabitation which has smoothed over the cracks, or else some other complex and interwoven process of reinterpretation has taken place, as anthropologists since Herskovits have argued (Bastide, 1973).

Faced with mixed or even intermingled realities, the scholarly or simply metaphorical reformulation is the rule rather than the exception. Metaphors from biology (cross-breeding or hybridization), mechanics (assemblage or bricolage) or linguistics (creolization) are multiplied and exchanged, but the problem is epistemological in the first place. The most recent theories of globalization as a cultural phenomenon tend to prefer the term hybridization to the already worn-out terms, *métissage* (race-mixing; but etymologically, *tisser* = to weave) or *bricolage* (already familiar in English) (Werbner and Modood, 1997).

But the biological metaphor of the mixing of species and races is intended above all to emphasize the mixture of types or the mixing of natures from the point of view of the separation of orders which define the primacy of modernity (e.g. the opposition between science and religion). When we place the accent on the incongruity of the hybrid product, and through the subsequent stigmatization or banalization of a monstrosity that is practically subversive, it is indeed the image of violating boundaries, the effect of trespassing which seems to make the most sense here. The metaphor is not called on a priori to illuminate the complex processes of activation which are at work in the elaboration of certain forms of incompatible syntheses. But one can always polish a metaphor, and seek through "hybridization" to conceive of cultural processes which belong to a "dialectic of hybridization" (Werbner, 1997). The boundary-crossing ambiguity of the hybrid product turns into a creative resource which can nourish productions of completely new meaning, as the analyses of Bakhtin on the plurilingualism of the Romanesque style illustrate in remarkable fashion. The "dialogic of hybridization" (or logic of dialogue) goes far beyond the resources of ambiguity of metaphors in poetry; it assumes a dialogue between two linguistic consciousnesses, or two intention-alities in language living together within one sentence (Bakhtin, 1981: 358).

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But it is significant that when we slip from an interest in hybrids as such to an interest in the cultural processes of hybridization, the metaphor changes code, and the paradigm is from that point on clearly linguistic.

The primary virtue of “bricolage”, which itself slips from a mechanical metaphor to a linguistic model, at least as used by C. Lévi-Strauss and R. Bastide (Lévi-Strauss, 1962; Bastide, 1970), was to stimulate reflection on the relations between metaphors and concepts which seemed to have a great deal to do with the elaboration of intellectual tools in social science. Beyond the vagaries of fashion and tricks with mirrors, arguments over metaphors (mixture or line of division? weaving or collage? plasticity or hybrid nature?) cannot claim to be part of any heuristic progress unless the pertinent aspects which grounded the analogical relation allow us to ask questions, which set up distinctions within the data of the study, up to the point where the metaphor collapses.

Métissage, a Blind Metaphor

One must, it is true, know how to contextualize the study of the phenomena of syncretism or cultural melange in order to better adjust the comparison. C. Bernand (Bernand, 2001: 41), like many others, is right to remind us that métissage in Latin America, before becoming a metaphor full of exotic appeal, was a historical, sociological and political reality: that of “mixed-blood” individuals, the product of sexual relations with slave owners, shameful testimony to the violence of colonial sexual relations. We can understand that métissage should have represented, in the eyes of the actors and authors of black emancipation (E. Glissant and others), a perfect model of perversion and damnation. The mixed-race societies of Latin America and Africa are far from being societies that practise race-mixing; on the contrary, they have more than other societies a heightened sense of racial classification and social fragmentation, and they are haunted by the myth of racial purity. There are practitioners of a paradoxical inversion living in the middle of Europe today; the existence of associations of “pure mixed-race” Belgo-Zaireans in Brussels testifies still to the persistence of the myths (Paulis, 2001).

The promotion of métissage to the level of a metaphor for cultural melange in our societies has never ceased to surprise and to raise questions for those who study the phenomenon and for those who play with the associated terms and images. Métissage, in discourse and in the use we make of it, is a typical example of a blind metaphor—not symbolic, but purely reflected. First, this is because over and above the image of the fusion of sexes or race-mixing, the enchantment or the diabolism of the color of the skin of a *métis*, we know there is no biological or genetic definition of a process of métissage which would allow us to ground the metaphor in some pertinent trait. The biological metaphor we want to oppose the mechanical one of bricolage, or the linguistic metaphor of creolization, contains no meaning. To speak of cultural métissage is thus to evoke a blind process which is without a subject. Mixed-race subjects, mixed-race societies are not the special agents of a culture of métissage of cultures. As J.L. Bonniol has noted:

The term *métissage* has followed its metaphorical trajectory, through biology (with associated social meanings) toward culture, even if the birth and the multiplication of mixed-race individuals does not appear necessarily to be linked to the development of mixed forms of life proceeding from multiple sources. (2001: 15)

The conduct of mixed-race people varies between mimetic strategies of becoming-white, schizophrenic splitting-apart, or a return to purity of blackness or other black movements (“Black is beautiful”). Perhaps it is in this existential and social experience of the mixed-race people, in this original ambiguity that nourishes duplicity or ambivalent postures, that *métissage* unhappily takes on meaning.

The use of notions concerning “*métisse* thought” or “*métisse* logic” sheds little light on the logics of *métissage*, and the rules here are oscillation, inflection of meaning, or relations which mirror the metaphors. The apologist for mixed-race culture, F. Laplantine, can make it into a sort of epistemological *mana*, a source of culture and intelligibility which is irreducible to its set of avatars, and end by declaring that “*métissage is an unending process of bricolage*”, all at the same time (Laplantine, 1997: 75). J.L. Bonniol, more critical with regard to the traps and stumbling blocks the notion conceals, recognizes that “the paradigm of bricolage is certainly the one that reveals the greatest heuristic value in this matter, allowing us to specify the general principle of improvisation under which many various actions have been carried out” (2001: 17).

The reality is that we learn as we go, and sometimes we find underneath one metaphor the distinctive traits that are linked to another. According to S. Gruzinsky: “*Métissage exercises its influence upon derivative materials, within a colonial society which is sustained by imported fragments, truncated beliefs, de-contextualized concepts often poorly assimilated, and improvisations and adjustments which sometimes are not yet completed*” (1999: 194). Recalling thus that *métissage* “ends up associating motifs and forms which, whatever their origin, local or European, have already become the object of one or more indigenous reinterpretations”, S. Gruzinsky uncovers in his own way what for C. Lévi-Strauss was the interest of the metaphor of bricolage, the idea of a “pre-constraint” or a pre-marking of materials which had already served some purpose and which made it necessary for that reason that certain arrangements or levels of meaning be represented.

The Constraints of Bricolage

The use we have been able to make of the paradigm of bricolage—one paradigm among others in regard to *syncretism*—is applicable to religious productions which were part of the colonial or post-colonial situation in Africa, a context which is also related to syncretisms of Latin America (Mary, 2000). But the use of this tool of analysis requires some clarification in connection with other contexts in which the extension of the concept has been found necessary—and in first place that context which preceded the emergence of syncretisms and prophetic cults in the colonial situation, which

included the missionary work of “translation” (in common parlance) or “localization” of Christianity, **the very melting pot of invention for African Christian traditions by missionary agents**, especially the indigenous ones, who practiced what today is called inculturation “avant la lettre” (inculturation practiced before its definition was widely known). At the other end of the chain there is the context which is related to **the sociology of “individual” cases of bricolage which are supposed to characterize the religious productions of super-modernity or post-modernity**. The use or re-use which can be made of the metaphor of bricolage in this latter context have to do with **a slippage of paradigm, or (if you prefer) a bricolage applied to the structural paradigm or to the already revised version that de Certeau gave of it in his vision of “exploded Christianity”**.¹

Basically, one can adopt two different epistemological postures as concerns the transfer of paradigms: (1) one contents oneself with the initial context of the performance of a paradigm by measuring the gaps or any loss of pertinence in relation to the challenge represented by new phenomena (like those which already confront us through the globalization of religious forms); (2) or else one accommodates oneself to the slippages which occur in the use of the concept, or one may even applaud the fecundity of misinterpretations, which is always done at one’s own risk, the risk of embracing the ambiguities of the object and ceasing to think them.

A few words of caution are nonetheless in order. **Actual religious bricolage is often synonymous with free improvisation**, but the initial pertinence of the paradigm supposes a reference to constraints. **The first is that of a finite ensemble of given or pre-existing materials**; the one who performs the bricolage, in contrast to what an engineer would do, does not have the freedom to create the materials necessary to the completion of his project. **He is obliged to “make do” with what he has scraped up**. One is familiar with the importance of the theme of finitude or the saturation of systems of available meaning in post-modern discourse, but one may also ask oneself if the model of the engineer or engineering in general can have any relevance in the history of religions, where the strata of accumulated symbolic material are resources that are always already there. **The second constraint or “pre-constraint” has to do with materials which have been scavenged, adapted, or improvised: they are all at once de-contextualized, and cut off from the systems of meaning to which they were connected, but the broken, fragmented elements still have to some extent the mark of their earlier uses or the heritage of earlier interpretations or successive reinterpretations**. Whence the strong idea that bricolage is a negotiation between pre-constraints that can end up, at the level of the product, with all kinds of more or less stable compromise formulas, and incompatible or unfinished syntheses which may in time become “true traditions”.

This question of “pre-marking”, which refers to the remains of the constraints of a symbolic system or of the weight of a collective memory, is at the heart of the debate over the specificity of religious bricolage in the post-modern world. If reincarnation is no longer a part of some system of enforced meaning, as for example in a cycle of **fecundation** by the ancestors in Africa, or in connection with the moral retribution to which past lives are

subjected as in Hinduism, the notion becomes a “floating signifier”, available for any kind of “collage”—this being a procedure which on the pictorial level has precisely the characteristic of “bending the perspective”. The idea of a Christian reincarnation which is discussed even among Catholics (as shown in the results to certain polls) may undoubtedly become the bearer of new meanings, but this “*bris-collage*” (play on words: *collage* means to stick things together, but *briser* is the verb meaning “to break”) evidences above all an erasure of meaning in the gaps between reincarnation, revitalization, and resurrection (Hervieu-Léger, 1999: 47).

The religious productions which we have had the occasion to study in Africa itself (syncretic cults, prophetic or independent churches) are the result of, first, a collective “indigenous” work contributed to by practitioners of bricolage in the village who claim to be prophets. These peasant prophets are strong individual personalities but it would be inappropriate to speak of their work (the work of God) as an individual bricolage. The art of all such prophets is to transform their narratives of personal revelation and their individual histories of coming to belief into prophetic signs which are addressed to their people as a whole. The entire course of the conversion of individuals who adhere to these movements also rests upon visionary experiences or prophetic revelations which testify to the strong symbolic constraints involved, and to difficult negotiations with the logics of initiations or sorcery (Mary, 1998).

Finally, we consider the bricolage which the prophets perform, starting from a heterogeneous corpus of beliefs (which one does not really believe, as much as take them as going without saying), which are aligned with the re-ordered ritual arrangements (initiation, curing, deliverance from trouble). The negotiation, at the center of these arrangements, regarding belief-positions held by individual subjects faced with problems which usually have their source in the family, is not a free composition of beliefs (as from an *à la carte* menu) carried out by individuals seeking meaning or “themselves”. In his contribution to the debate on “invisible religion”, R. Campiche (2003: 298) considers that the metaphor of bricolage, which he associates with the metaphor of patchwork, carries forward the idea of a free individual composition of belief, and lends support to certain theses concerning individualization. It is true that starting at the point where bricolage is only thought of as a collage, where belief in general (differing from de Certeau’s account of what the concept designated) no longer goes beyond individual private beliefs, one can understand this point of view. But R. Campiche reminds us that while the typical religion of today may escape from institutions, it certainly does not escape from the constraints of cultural standardization. Now, individualization understood in the right way (in accordance with the analyses of Foucault or Elias) is a real cultural norm par excellence in a society of individuals; it is the newest way to achieve social control of subjects. Therefore, at the level of the analysis of “intimate tyrannies” and of the paradoxes of the “obligation to be oneself”, and contradictions in the new cultural matrix which defines structures of plausibility in the discourse of subjects, the paradigm of bricolage can find its true pertinence.

Métis Agents Who Produce “Pure Yoruba”

Le bricolage africain des héros chrétiens (Mary, 2000) refers in its title to a symbolic work which was accomplished by African prophets engaged in working through and appropriating symbolic resources, especially the figure of Christ. But it was supposed there that these agents worked from a group of categories, initiatory, sacrificial, or some other kind, which formed in a more or less systematic way a cultural matrix which could be described (not without some arbitrariness) as African. If we speak of bricolage in this colonial context, we evoke the negotiation between the pre-constraints on meaning that weigh upon the Christian hero (and which also existed for the prophets, who had all spent time with the missionaries) and the schemes that structured the logic of initiation or witchcraft in the local traditions. In a word, bricolage is always a dialogue between meaningful material (meaningful because already in-formed) that one borrows, and incarnated forms one inherits (or vice versa). This dialectic of form and substance, of categories and content, is what many have tried to detect at the center of imaginative structurations of the colonial encounter and subsequent interactions—from M. Sahlins, and his celebrated analyses of sacrificial death of the god-ancestor Cook as absorbed by the ritual arrangements of Hawaiian priests and kings (Sahlins, 1989), to S. Gruzinsky who shows in a Mexican context the mixtures of the indigenous imagination beginning with the capture of the Christian hero by the visionary culture of the Indian shamans (Gruzinsky, 1988: Chap. VI).

The bricolage of the African prophets within the colonial situation, which represented a renewed initiative, was actually in continuity with a dialogue already begun by missionaries and their local interlocutors (*babalawo*, *nganga* and others), as has been shown by J. and J. Comaroff in respect of the “long conversation” between congregationalists from the London Missionary Society and the Tswana (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: Chap. VI). The prophetic bricolage attempts were carried out against a background of initial cultural interaction which changed things so much that one could no longer really think of their syncretic production in terms of an encounter or a face-to-face meeting between two symbolic systems or two cultural matrices. The paradigm of an inaugural interaction which presided over the Christian workshop of African identity is at the heart of all the works of historians and anthropologists who have written of Christianity in Africa; nonetheless, the work of J. Peel on Yoruba identity earns him the title of pioneer in this domain (Peel, 2000). To return to the missionary roots of the Yoruba identity, is at first to be out of step with all the black identity movements which intend to re-Africanize Afro-American cults or neo-African religions perverted by Christian syncretism in the context of the culture of slavery. This effort at re-Africanization, which aims to recover the “pure Yoruba” or the “pure Bantu”, has borrowed its categories of thought largely from a cosmopolitan global culture. But the work of Peel and others has shown clearly that the “original Yoruba” which was thought up during the 19th century is already mostly the product of a Christian imagination. Even more, it is by being converted to Christianity that the

Yoruba became Yoruba, conscious of their cultural identity and bearers of a national consciousness.

The symbolic work of catechizers and indigenous missionaries operating in the field came before the policy of inculturation "avant la lettre" of European missionaries, and their manipulation of the African pantheons associated with the diabolism of ancestors worshipped as gods. The first agents in this factory of identities were indeed the "indigenous" Christian missionaries of the Church Missionary Society, but they were indigenous people who were more white than black in cultural terms, and here we can speak of *métissage*. The best servants of missionary implantation in Nigeria were for the most part sons of freed slaves of Yoruba origin who had been baptized and trained in Sierra Leone in British missions (sometimes even sent to London). Uncertainty about identity among these African Christian agents, these "returnees" with English names perceived by local populations as *oyinbo*, "white men", and several of them noted this in their journals. The future literate elite of the Yoruba was trained by individuals who were socially and culturally mixed. The indigenous Christian activity of these catechizers and evangelists is undoubtedly characterized by a greater clarity as concerns the differences or confusions between the biblical message and the expectations of indigenous listeners, especially as concerns cures and "medicine". But this attention to differences (a reaction against the angelism or racism of some European missionaries) was translated into action in the form of attitudes which could be diametrically opposed: on one hand, there was the excess of zeal or orthodoxy in the condemnation of traditions which the first generation of converts had shared, whose very prototype and consecration was S.A. Crowther, the first black Anglican bishop (1864), who was of *egba* origin. On the other, there was the demand for "inculturation before the letter" of Christian ethics and evangelical piety, incarnated in an autonomous African church and carried forward by an indigenous clergy, as with the leaders of the second generation, among whom the greatest figure is still J. Johnson, a man of *ijebu* origin. When we follow the oscillations of these two sides, particularly the progress of Crowther who would eventually rejoin the position of Johnson, we can measure to what a great extent the cultural activity of the mixed-race folk is itself really quite ambivalent.

The role of these indigenous agents in the making of Yoruba cultural nationalism is particularly well illustrated by the contribution of another literate pastor, Samuel Johnson, author of the famous *History of the Yorubas* (Johnson, 1921). In this great novel, the consciousness of identity of the Yoruba people is recast in the categories of the biblical narrative, and this people adopts the Christian imagination of God's Plan and of his alliance with a chosen people. The indigenous missionary agents, especially those of the first generation, are nonetheless little concerned about the conscious elaboration of Yoruba or African Christianity seen as a synthesis of a traditional religion and evangelical Christianity. In the context of constant interaction, in exchanges of dialogue and in daily conversation between pastors and *babalawo*, all at once they begin to construct a cultural identity and a Yoruba Christianity which in reality are not thought of as such. We could go back in this context to the notion of an "organic hybrid" which Bakhtin

used to designate an unconscious dialogical relation played out over the long term in history, between two languages and visions of the world which have become intermingled, but without there being any subversive intention to provoke trespasses: a collision of languages (Bakhtin, 1981: 360). Only later, in the second or third generation, against a background of early syncretism, do separate claims by separatists or supporters of independence develop, concerning a prophetic Christianity called *aladura*, and at that time formal policies of inculturation practiced by missionaries (belonging to the “anthropological species” in Crowther’s term) also are evident.

Between Pastors and *Babalawo*: A Dialogical Bricolage

In the dialogue which was begun and which was kept open during the last years of the 19th century between pastors and the *babalawo*, is there no trace remaining of the Yoruba religion or the Yoruba cultural matrix, which existed at the time of the appropriation of Christian themes? For J. Peel, one cannot really speak of Yoruba religion, because the very concept of “religion”, for those who interacted with the missionaries, remains linked to the idea of religion which belongs to the world religions. But precisely that which constitutes the power and the weakness of this religion, made up of fragmentary myths, cut-up beliefs, and heterogeneous sets of practices scattered across social life, and confronted with missionary proselytism, is a tolerance for borrowing, and accessibility and openness to questioning of the official representatives of the religion. In this religious encounter which would prove constitutive of the Yoruba identity which was then in the process of being constructed, one must add in the fact that disputes and differences were formulated in the terms and according to the alternatives offered by the missionaries. But these differences were immediately appropriated and made part of a negotiation in relation to the central structures of the Yoruba cultural matrix, deeply ingrained in the history of local religious exchanges.

The sensibilities of religious experts and the *babalawo*, those experts in bricolage, with regard to the critical arguments of the missionaries have been sharpened to a very large extent by the confrontation with Islam and the dialogue with the *alufa*. Confronted with the challenge of Christianity, it was the Ifa cult, whose divinatory powers owed much to the influence of Islam, which paradoxically formed the identity-core of cultural resistance, but also participated in the dialogue, bringing with it conceptions of multiple components of the person and personal destiny. The alternative meanings in regard to such things as sacrifices, offerings, purity (spiritual and bodily), etc. introduced by Islam into the heart of the Yoruba world will serve as “conceptual bridgeheads” for Christianity’s conceptual baggage train.

In the dialectic of exchanges, the *babalawo* attempt to render thinkable the anticipation of the revelations of the Christian message, and the translation of the language of the other into their language, not without misunderstandings, but without any intention of violating boundaries. And the pastors were not idle. The back and forth between the two groups is kept up: on one side,

the invention of an Orunmila, mediator for and savior of men, and, on the other, the promotion of *orisha* as intermediaries of Olorun, or the birth of that hybrid product, the Christ of Ifa. In these dialogical stages, against a background of uncertainty and a demand for meaning, the search for ethical solutions (as regards moral retribution and individual conduct) and the various indigenous theological mediations threatened the discontinuity and the specificity of religious problems then present (material pragmatism vs a religion of salvation), but the meaning of certain discontinuities would resurface or relocate: a divine sacrifice that obliges men instead of obliging gods (the *orisha*); a historical scheme of redemption and salvation which questions the fatalistic conception of individual destiny of the Ifa.

This entire "long conversation" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991) participates in a subtle dialectic of publicizing quarrels while seeking theological bridges, all against a background of misunderstanding that, for all that it is "well understood", hides slippages of meaning more or less masked and deliberate manipulations. The paradox is that in order to illuminate these incompatible syntheses, these organic hybrids, which African Christianity forms, Yoruba or other, one must resort to the methodological fiction of a distinctive separation marking such and such a schema or category of thought of the divine, evil, or salvation, that nonetheless all the productions of meaning are in haste to move beyond. The work of analysis performed by J. Peel is constantly caught up in a kind of tension or oscillation between an attempt to conscientiously mark the differential gap between the religious schemata of evil or the forms of deliverance (sacrifice to the *orisha* or sacrifice to God), and, on the other hand, the identification of analogies and shortcuts between systems which benefit from the confusion of minds, and yet again the cognitive deficit imposed by the colonial situation, all in order to track the slippages of meaning (for example, between the power of sacrifice *ebo*, and the effectiveness of prayer, *al adua*) and to demonstrate the existence of continuity during changes. The fiction of a system of differences which helps construct the ideal-type of the figures of the indigenous mediator Orunmila and Christ the savior, allows us to make visible the game of ambiguity itself, or the work of ambivalence which proceeds from the overlapping of categories or the addition of the two figures.

In a more or less autobiographical novel, *Isarà*, the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature and the descendant of three generations of Anglican ministers, who today has been converted to the lessons in wisdom of the Yoruba tradition, furnishes us with an illustration of the way in which literary fiction depicts the dialogical paths of construction of religious identities in various situations (Peel, 2002: 142–144). The story is this: a Christian woman, who is barren, is under great pressure from her husband, a pagan, who asks her to perform a "sacrifice" to the gods in order to obtain a child, and be healed despite the impotence of the whites' medicine. After all, the husband says: Christians also make offerings to their God. Acting as a good Christian, the woman answers nonetheless that one must bear in mind the difference between the *saara* of Christians, that is, the action of grace (transparent and freely given) offered to God, and the *etutu*, the secret ritual of sacrifice of an animal which is then offered

to the *orisha*. The man hastens to argue that there is really no difference between a free gift and a sacrifice in payment of a debt, and no real difference between the transparency of whites and the secrets of blacks, and he further argues that the surgical practices of whites' medicine are neither freely given nor transparent, and that the secret which surrounds them could well raise suspicions about the removal of "loose pieces". Not satisfied with this caricature or collapse of the differences between the sorcery of whites which is not only expensive and secret, but sacrificial, and the Christian religion, the husband finishes by re-introducing the difference on another level with all values reversed. He attacks the selfishness of his wife (Christian individualism), who prefers to take care of herself by herself instead of sharing with the community through the ritual of animal sacrifice. J. Peel shows quite well that literary dialogue is up to the task of representing the game played with the metaphorical resources (including ambiguity) of the notion of sacrifice. This game keeps going a dialectic of conservation and getting-beyond or displacing of existing schemata, and the literary dialogue also represents it well. Referring in such circumstances to a typically Christian sacrifice (individualistic) or an African one (for the community) does not make us forget that each religious tradition contains a plurality of meaning, a polysemy that echoes all the others. But the initial distribution of cards between Christians and pagans is part of the game, and the essential thing is to explain which way the cards go and why we hide our differences under the shell—because that allows us to work out new forms for the categories of offering and sacrifice.

Such a symbolic work is in contrast with the use, in this case hardly dialectical at all, which can be made of the crucial opposition between form and meaning in the most recent productions of the literate elite of Yoruba Christianity, a programmed inculturation, no longer spontaneous, which pretends to discover like so many others an essence of original Christianity through a borrowing of forms from African culture. The politics of inculturation of missionary agents which J. Peel describes in his last chapter (Peel, 2000) appeals to strategies of recuperation or rhetorics of reinterpretation which explicitly reduce Yoruba culture to a stock of expressive or instrumental forms, capable of carrying a Christian message whose universal content would enable, in return, the transcendence by these forms of their ethnic particularity. The concept, in this case consciously hybridized, of inculturation, the telescoping of the language of incarnation in the Christian message and of the anthropological language of acculturation—these have not stopped generating debate in the area of missiology, but for the anthropologist it remains difficult to admit that the ritual forms and African aesthetic principles, particularly in music, should be reduced to their expressive or instrumental dimension. These forms, like Christian liturgical forms, are to be considered meaningful, and the exchange of such forms introduces a dialectic or a dialogue of meanings. The problem is that this separation of form and meaning which rules the instrumentalization of the local indigenous culture is the guarantee that the integrity of the universal evangelical message has been kept safe. Whatever those who endorse the politics of missionary inculturation may say, they cannot dare to enter into the game

of bricolage in the strong sense of the term, for that would mean risking putting the categories of spiritual experience, and of the evangelical message of which they are the guardians and archivists, in jeopardy.

Conclusion: The Risks Involved in Creative Ambivalence

In the post-modern re-enchantment with cross-fertilization, the subversive transgressions of the hybrid, in the lament for a bricolage which falls apart in simple collages, what we may regret is the way in which the fecundity of the misunderstandings inherent in any encounter, and especially the ambivalent postures which are at work in the mixed worlds (which maintain their instability)—the way all this is thrown away, emptied out.

In a study devoted to groups of Belgo-Zairean *métis*, “De l’hybride au schizophrène”, Chris Paulis concluded:

The difficulty, and here the schizoid quality, is located according to me not in the fact of being mixed-race, but in the fact of being the fruit of an encounter between two people produced by systems, one of which subjugated and hurt the other, in which one was the dominant, the other dominated, one a master, the other a servant. The *métis* has to accept the weight of the history of his two parents and refuse to take sides, accepting the fact that he finds himself at one and the same time descended from dominators and dominated, or else he can try to take sides on behalf of two opposed causes, to be now the guilty party, now the innocent, now the bad guy, now the hero, or even both at the same time. (2001: 101)

In some ways, African prophets like Harris or the “returnees” of Nigeria have been subjected to this situation, to a double bind in which the subject, confronted with two visions of the world and the strategies for obtaining salvation which stem from them, can neither stick with either choice or avoid choosing, and so **they give the impression of being on a see-saw which goes up and down, alternating between two opposite positions, and each choice is in some way the prolongation of the other.** The African prophets are perhaps more sharply confronted than others by this paradoxical situation because of their personal histories (former catechism student, seminarian). It expresses the **unstable and contradictory attitude of all those who must undergo a situation of social and symbolic domination without being able to distance themselves from it or to afford the luxury of relativizing the terms of the alternative.** The movement toward the other is also a movement against the other and the return to self is denial of self.

The mythology of relations between whites and blacks which nourishes the promises of a religion for Blacks like the Bwiti des Fang of Gabon illustrates in a particular way the dialectic of ambivalence (Mary, 1999). The Black has discovered his difference in his encounter with the White, but he has also come to understand that he has been cursed in the speech and the gaze of the White man (as the son of Shem). Whence the appeal of the black prophet, to become as white as the Whites by renouncing sorcery and fetishism. The curse nonetheless goes along with evil intent, two-facedness: it reveals that the White man is a liar, that his duplicity is equal to the Black’s. The latter

has in fact renounced himself, but without obtaining in exchange the power and riches of the White. Things could have stayed like that, could have led to a sort of relativism or pessimism concerning the value of men in the eyes of God: God is not black, God is not white. But the final prophetic revelation is that the hidden secret of the White is finally nothing but that which was initially communicated to the Black, a secret the Whites covered up by sacrificing Jesus. Thus, **by rediscovering the true secret of his original being, the Black can become whiter than the Whites**. The message of African prophets is far from the level of reverse racial ambivalence, but also far from the message of regeneration for the black race, such as historical and cultural theses of Afro-centrism carry today (Walker, 2001).

This kind of oscillation, in which the second movement does not cancel out the first, in which the return to oneself does not eliminate the ambivalence of the relation to the other, can give us the feeling of being at an impasse, but it is not incompatible with a certain creativity. The misunderstanding that is more or less well understood, like an ambivalence that is more or less controlled, can bring about the conditions for creative uncertainty (La Cecla, 2002).

NOTE

¹ M. de Certeau, who contributed to the success of the bricolage paradigm in his approach to the “plural” culture of today, in fact used the term “collage” more often and approved the use of the metaphor of the kaleidoscope also employed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (De Certeau, 1987: 88).

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