

Introduction¹

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A preoccupation with hybridity is natural in a period like ours marked by increasingly frequent and intense cultural encounters. Globalization encourages hybridization.² However we react to it, the globalizing trend is impossible to miss, from curry and chips – recently voted the favourite dish in Britain – to Thai saunas, Zen Judaism, Nigerian Kung Fu or 'Bollywood' films. The process is particularly obvious in the domain of music, in the case of such hybrid forms and genres as jazz, reggae, salsa or, more recently, Afro-Celtic rock.³ New technology (including, appropriately enough, the 'mixer'), has obviously facilitated this kind of hybridization.

It is no wonder then that a group of theorists of hybridity have made their appearance, themselves often of double or mixed cultural identity. Homi Bhabha for instance, is an Indian who has taught in England and is now in the USA. Stuart Hall, who was born in Jamaica of mixed parentage, has lived most of his life in England and describes himself as 'a mongrel culturally, the absolute cultural hybrid'.⁴ Ien Ang describes herself as 'an ethnic Chinese, Indonesian-born and European-educated academic who now lives and works in Australia'.⁵ The late Edward Said was a Palestinian who grew up in Egypt, taught in the USA and described himself as 'out of place' wherever he was located.⁶

The work of these and other theorists has attracted growing interest in a number of disciplines, from anthropology to literature, from geography to art history, and from musicology to religious studies. In this issue, the contributions discuss Africa, Japan and the Americas as well as Europe and range from the 16th century to the 21st, from religion to architecture and from clothing to the cinema.

The topicality of the subject may encourage us to forget earlier contributions to the study of hybridity and hybridization. Gilberto Freyre, for instance, was one of the first scholars anywhere to make cultural hybridity a central theme of a historical study, in his case one of colonial Brazil. In the 1940s, Americo Castro offered an interpretation of Spanish history in terms of the interactions between three cultures, the Christian, the Jewish and the Muslim.⁷ In the 1950s, Arnold

Toynbee reflected on what he was already calling ‘encounters’ between cultures.⁸ From the 1940s to the 1970s, the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin explored what he variously called ‘heteroglossia’ (*raznorečie*), or the ‘dialogue’, ‘polyphony’ or ‘inter-animation’ of languages.⁹

Some people, whom we might describe as ‘purists’, were deeply shocked by the arguments of Freyre, Castro and Toynbee when they were first published. Today, by contrast, we are prepared to find hybridization almost everywhere in history. Historians of the ancient world, for example, are becoming increasingly interested in the process of ‘Hellenization’, which they are coming to view less as a simple imposition of Greek culture on the Roman Empire and more in terms of interaction between centre and periphery.¹⁰

Again, historians of the European missions to Asia, Africa and America now recognize that the ‘converts’ did not so much abandon their traditional religions for Christianity as make some kind of synthesis between them. Sometimes the mixture was obvious to the missionaries, as in the case of the ‘heresy of the Indians’ discovered in Jaguaripe in Bahia in 1580.¹¹ In other places, the synthesis seems to have been invisible. A study of Christianity in early modern Japan claims that the so-called ‘converts’ incorporated Christian symbols into the indigenous symbolic system, producing a hybrid religion sometimes described as ‘Kirishitan’, from the Japanese way of pronouncing the word ‘Christian’.¹²

Many different phenomena in many different places and periods have now been studied from this point of view as examples of hybridization: food, clothes, language, architecture, music, sport (football, cricket, *capoeira* ...), and not least, especially in our age of diasporas, people who live in two worlds and try to combine elements from both in their daily life. The variety of objects of study in this field is more than matched by the number of terms that are current today in the writings of scholars describing the process of cultural interaction and its consequences. Indeed, we have far too many words in circulation to describe the same phenomena. Five metaphors in particular dominate discussions, drawn respectively from zoology, metallurgy, economics, cooking and linguistics – hybridity itself, the melting pot, exchange, the cultural stew and ‘creolization’.

The vivid botanical or zoological metaphor of ‘hybridization’ (in French *métissage*, in Spanish *mestizaje*) emerged from everyday terms of abuse such as ‘mongrel’ or ‘bastard’ and has produced synonyms such as ‘crossing’ or ‘cross-fertilization’. Two important studies of culture organized around this concept appeared in France in the 1990s, Jean-Luc Amselle’s account of West Africa today and Serge Gruzinski’s history of the cultural consequences of the Spanish conquest of Mexico.¹³

However, hybridization is a slippery, ambiguous term, at once literal and metaphorical, descriptive and explanatory. It also suffers from the disadvantage of appearing to exclude individual agency. The term ‘hybridity’ evokes the outside

observer studying culture as if it were nature and the products of individuals and groups as if they were botanical specimens.¹⁴

An alternative model for discussing the consequences of cultural encounters comes from language: cultural ‘translation’ or ‘creolization’. The phrase ‘cultural translation’, first employed by British anthropologists, has the advantage of drawing attention to the work that has always to be done in order to adapt ideas, artefacts or practices as they pass from one culture to another.

Another linguistic model that has been extended to non-linguistic forms of culture is the model of ‘creolization’. Widening out from studies of the Caribbean, linguists have come to employ this term to describe the situation in which a former *lingua franca* or pidgin develops a more complex structure. Building on already existing affinities or congruences, two languages in contact change to become more like each other and so ‘converge’ to create a third, which often takes most of its vocabulary from one of the parent languages and its structure or syntax from the other.¹⁵

Following this model but also broadening it, some scholars have written about the ‘creolization’ of whole cultures. The Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz describes Creole cultures as those that have had time ‘to move towards a degree of coherence’ and ‘can put things together in new ways’.¹⁶

A number of scholars have discussed the relevance of this linguistic model for the study of the development of African-American religion, music, housing, clothing, cuisine and for the martial art known as *capoeira*. They have studied the process of cultural convergence in particular places and periods such as Jamaica in the 17th century or Brazil in the 19th century, once again using the term ‘creolization’ to refer to the emergence of new cultural forms out of the mixture of old ones.¹⁷

Problems remain, both conceptual and empirical. For example: are there what might be called ‘dis-analogies’ as well as analogies between language and culture as a whole? Is creolization a universal process? Is it more or less intense or rapid in some places or times? What motivates borrowing, especially what might be called the ‘cultural selection’ of items to be borrowed? For some scholars, the primary motive appears to be utility.¹⁸ For others, such as Robert Ross, in his article in this issue, the point is for the borrowers ‘to make some sort of statement about themselves’, or (as sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu would say) to construct an identity by distinguishing oneself from others, certain others or ‘reference groups’ in particular (the bourgeoisie, westerners, Parisians and so on).

Another difficult question concerns what emerges from the mixing or hybridizing process. Do individuals, groups or whole cultures simply collect and juxtapose elements from different cultures, magpie-fashion? Do they combine them in original ways in a kind of *bricolage*? Or do they achieve a synthesis out of which new forms will emerge?

A final important question is whether creolization can be resisted. Between the early 17th and the mid-19th centuries, the Japanese government attempted to protect the country from western influences by a kind of closure. Since that time, individual Japanese have tried to limit the impact of western culture by compartmentalizing their lives into native and foreign domains, a process that is surely related to the ‘juxtaposition’ discussed below by Mario Perniola.

The essays that follow should be read as contributions to an ongoing and intense debate.

References and Notes

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