

CLASS STRUCTURE AND ACCULTURATION IN HAITI¹

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Haitian culture today shows a variety of patterns of behavior and attitudes resulting from the historical processes that have marked its development. These have theoretical interest, not only for our understanding of Haitian culture, but may also have a bearing on the analysis of other Afroamerican areas, as well as on the study of processes of acculturation in general.

It has been attempted to break down the processes of acculturation and culture change into a series of concepts, designed for purposes of analytic discussion. The terms used—retention, reinterpretation and syncretism—were coined by Herskovits (1945). Retention refers to the integral maintenance of old cultural material. Reinterpretation refers to the maintenance of such material with change of use, meaning, form and/or function. Syncretism refers to the amalgamation of old and new cultural materials to form an essentially new series of cultural elements: traits, complexes, patterns.

The purpose of this paper is to apply these concepts to acculturation as exemplified in contemporary Haiti, with particular attention to the stratification of Haitian society. What sort of class structure do we find in present-day Haiti? How does this class structure affect the manner and extent to which the members of the various classes are exposed to culture contact? Is the operation of the acculturational processes uniform among the classes? Are the three processes of retention, reinterpretation and syncretism sufficient to deal with all observational materials referring to culture contact in Haiti, or are there other concepts which seem to be called for by the data?

While no exhaustive demonstration can be attempted in the present paper, some working hypotheses may be suggested.

Haiti's population was originally derived from the West Coast of Africa and from France. As a consequence of a successful revolution in 1804, the country was isolated from the outside world for approximately one hundred years, and during that period of isolation a stable cultural amalgam was formed. However, prior to this period of independence and isolation, the basic social structure had already been set during the French colonial era, which came to an end in 1804. Although, with the revolution, slavery was abolished and the colonists were driven out, the resulting changes did not so much modify the structure of the society, as its personnel. The westernized mulattoes moved up one step in the social ladder and took over the dominant positions. The gap between this group—the contemporary élite, comprising about 3 per cent of the population—and the large masses of the people, is as great as that between the European masters and their African slaves ever was. These divisions, which we might refer to as "groupings of classes," affect all aspects of contemporary Haitian life. The differences between these groupings should be thought of primarily as differences in culture, and above all in goal orientation, rather than as differences in skin color, although, on the whole, such differences do exist.

It is within this complex population that we wish to observe the operation of the acculturative processes mentioned earlier. Here retentions refer to African

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materials maintained unchanged in the contemporary culture of Haiti. Retentions were found only among the masses, the physical and spiritual heirs of the Africans brought to Haiti during the period of slavery. Pure retentions are found in such aspects of culture as motor behavior, rhythm, choreography, music, grammar, elements of technology, elements of religion and food preferences. With the exception of food preferences and certain elements of religion, motor behavior may be suggested to underlie all the other retained aspects of culture. The retentions appear to operate primarily on an unconsciously patterned, un verbalized level. Their persistent endurance may perhaps be best accounted for by the observation, that these elements of culture are acquired in the earliest experiences of the child. It must also be noted that these particular areas of culture were not, and are not now, exposed to considerable acculturative pressures, if any.

Reinterpretation and syncretism were similarly found to be primarily characteristic of the masses. These processes appear to require the ability of a given cultural element to be verbalized, to be, in Sapir's (1916, p. 415) phrase "conceptually detachable." In the case of reinterpretation and syncretism, new elements are taken over from the culture with which contact is established, and are integrated into the predominantly African way of life of the masses. Reinterpretation and syncretism are made possible by the receptivity that essentially marks Haitian culture. By receptivity here is meant the capacity for cultural elaboration and invention as well as for the acceptance of foreign materials. This is true especially in the field of religion, but also elsewhere. In the area of religion, syncretisms have frequently been pointed out, for it is here that they are the most striking. It must be stressed that the African elements of the population came from a variety of different tribes. Thus we note that in the religious patterns of *vodun*—the name under which Haitian popular religion is best known—we find contractions and inner syncretisms of a variety of elements from African sources, as well as European ones. Thus the following syncretistic possibilities exist: between several elements of the same African region; between several elements of different African regions; between African and European elements. In the first case, two distinct supernatural entities of the same African region become one, such as Ogun and Shango, both of Yoruba origin, become Ogun Shango. This new entity is in its turn syncretized with one of European origin, St. James the Elder. Other types of Afro-Catholic syncretism occur in the course of ritual, in which Catholic prayers precede essentially African services; the sign of the cross, baptism, and other Catholic elements similarly have been integrated into *vodun* worship. In general it may be suggested that reinterpretation and syncretism are characteristic of an old and settled acculturation, outcome of a period of culture contact that took place in the past.

With reference to the ongoing culture contact, however, another process has been observed, which we may call compartmentalization. This process appears to characterize individuals of all classes who are currently exposed to acculturative pressures. Compartmentalization represents still another mode of dealing with materials derived from different cultural contexts. It is akin to syncretism in that it involves the element of simultaneity. In compartmentalization, as in syncretism, two patterns of behavior are preserved. While in syncretism the two patterns are complementary in the same situation, in compartmentalization the two patterns are simply relegated to different spheres of life, and not integrated into a total structuring of behavior. This separations of patterns is found, for instance, among the peasants of Furcy. In the spring of 1948, the government attempted to introduce into this area the planting of potatoes, and to stimulate this development, seed, fertilizer and labor were to be provided for the peasants on a sharecropping basis. The peasants were willing enough to accept the governmental offers, but the potatoes were considered exclusively as a market crop. For their own consumption, the peasants continued to raise corn. When

asked whether fertilizer was used for the growing of corn, the answer was prompt: fertilizer goes with potatoes, which are to be sold. Corn is grown in the age old fashion, to be eaten by the peasants, and no fertilizer is necessary. The same type of adjustment is also found in the field of religion, as for instance in the case of one Protestant evangelist. This man considered the ability of certain individuals to transform men into animals to be a peculiarly Haitian talent. He did not consider such belief to have any relation to *vodun*; he had rejected all he considered *vodun* belief and all participation in *vodun* activity in order to become a Protestant. While rejecting *vodun* participation, and accepting Protestantism in its place, there was no realization on the part of this man to what extent his world view was informed by *vodun* belief. Compartmentalization makes it possible to accept simultaneously contradictory patterns of belief and behavior. This contradictory co-existence is made possible by the fact that the territory each of these patterns covers is walled off from the other, so that no transfer, no conflict and no ambivalence result. On the whole, we find that most instances of compartmentalization occur largely among people of the upward mobile groups of the masses and the lower rungs of the élite. They belong to those areas where change is occurring, either through adoption or through imposition. Although a new element may be introduced or an old one discarded, this is not far-reaching enough to demand a reorganization of the total patterns of experience. Nor is the new element akin enough to the old culture to be integrated through the mechanisms of reinterpretation and syncretism.

Among the élite and the upward mobile members of the masses, we find a characteristic that has been called "socialized ambivalence" (Herskovits, 1937, p. 295). This is a patterning of emotionally contradictory attitudes, rather than a patterning of specific cultural content. While the cultural content to which socialized ambivalence refers is as a rule verbalized, the presence of ambivalence is not a conscious matter. As the term ambivalence indicates, we have here a simultaneous attraction and hostility toward the same object, and we find that it characterizes individuals who are attracted to opposite ways of life. The presence of socialized ambivalence in the élite may be understood in view of the observation that the life of the élite individuals involves strong elements of discontinuity, especially with reference to *vodun* belief. That is to say, the élite child in its early years is reared largely by members of the masses, who teach the child the créole language, and who use elements of *vodun*-related folklore to teach and to control the child. These early teachings are strongly contradicted as the child enters school, and comes, especially with adolescence, increasingly under western influence. In Benedict's (1938) term, the socialization of the élite child is "discontinuous" while no such discontinuities exist for the masses. Among the élite, ambivalence is present with reference to Haitian tradition, Haiti's African past, and the outside world, toward France and America, toward religion and toward sex, toward birth control and standards of beauty, toward the masses and toward one's own self, as well as many other areas of life. The élite are aware of their own cultural background to a degree impossible for the masses. They are exposed to the culture of the masses from the day they are born, for they are reared largely by servants, and créole is the first language they learn. They are proud of their country's tradition and they identify with France; they hate the United States for its occupation of Haiti and its Jim Crow attitude, but they are attracted and fascinated by the United States. They are fascinated by Africa, and often romanticise their African past, but they reject all identification with Negroes. Whereas syncretism helps to present a complete picture of the universe, a harmonious world view, ambivalence is essentially disruptive, not only of a harmonious world view, but also of a successful self-identification. There is, it must be noted, an important distinction to be made, between socialized ambivalence and the other acculturative processes mentioned before. Whereas retention, reinterpretation,

tion, syncretism, and compartmentalization involve primarily objects and behavior patterns, socialized ambivalence involves primarily attitudes, whether expressed verbally or in overt actions; not only that, but that which is here patterned is not the actual content of the attitudes, which will vary according to the occasion and the individual. The patterned, socialized aspect is the quality of ambivalence itself, ambivalence as a character trait. This character trait, in turn, forms part of the total psychological structure, typical of the Haitian élite. Retention, reinterpretation, syncretism and compartmentalization are essentially psychocultural processes of acculturation, which make it possible for a culture group to deal with new experiences arising out of the contact situation, while maintaining an essentially integrated view of the world. In the case of socialized ambivalence, however, we are concerned with an aspect of character, or personality, which itself may be seen as arising from the pressures on a given group, particularly, here, those sections of the élite, such as the young and the poorer groups, who are socially and economically least secure. Socialized ambivalence is characteristic of people on whom constantly new pressures are impinging, who are pulled into opposite directions, being attracted to both and hating both. It is closely related to both hatred and fear, a projection of hatred on others. Haitian society contains a great many realistic conflict situations. The élite, unlike the masses, have no acceptable, culturally patterned way of expressing aggression, such as through magic, or through accusing others of magic, which we find among the masses. They have no evil *vodun* priests, secret societies and *zombies*, which present acceptable ways of localizing their fears for the masses. Nor do they have the gods of *vodun* to protect them. While in their childhood they became acquainted with *vodun* practices, tales and proverbs, they were later forced to reject these. Insofar as they have rejected them and are nostalgic, they are ambivalent. While the child of the masses is permitted to grow up with the beliefs and world view he acquired in childhood, the élite individual must reject his childhood world view as he grows up. It is this discontinuity in the process of maturation which is shared by all members of the élite, which leads to the lack of integration which we find in their world view and thus to their characteristic ambivalence. As their class position and the accepted orientation of their elders pulls them toward the west, their childhood pulls them away from it. With reference to socialized ambivalence, we may thus say that this typical feature of the Haitian élite is, in psychological terms, essentially based on the discontinuity of their cultural conditioning, which at the same time represents and symbolizes the diverse psychological, social and cultural pressures to which they are exposed.

While acculturation, then, involves for the masses of the Haitian people integration and incorporation of new and foreign materials, it represents, in contrast, a situation of multiple pulls for the élite, in response to which this group has developed a character structure of which socialized ambivalence is a salient characteristic.

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