

"Syncretism."

South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia, ed. Peter J. Claus and Margaret A. Mills
(Garland Publishing, Inc., 2003)

Copyright © Garland Publishing, Inc.; not to be reproduced without permission

In its most common form in the study of South Asian cultures, syncretism denotes the combination or alliance of opposing religious or philosophical doctrines, often with political undertones, that results in public and private rituals and commonly accepted local practices which appear to the observer to link orientations that are normally disparate, if not disjunctive. The term favors the description of a state or condition of uneasy union, but can be extended to describe the process by which such conciliations occur. Syncretism as both process and description hinges on the assumption that those observed have inappropriately mixed cultural and religious categories that are intrinsically alien to each other. With several notable exceptions---the Mughal emperor Akbar, Dara Shikuh, Kabir, the Sikhs---scholars have tended to locate examples of syncretistic religion and ritual at the non-textual village or local level, and especially in areas that are deemed remote from the centers of traditional society. While the term is occasionally used to delineate the mixing of sectarian positions, for example the fusion of Saiva and Vaisnava theologies within the Hindu traditions, it is more often than not associated with the products of inter-sectarian or inter-religious encounters, such as that of Hindu and Muslim, producing a mixed product that mysteriously exhibits features of both.

Although scholars sometimes use the term positively, in the sense of "synthesis", more often than not the term is derogatory. The first modern use of the term (1625) described misguided attempts at reunion of the Protestant and Catholic churches as syncretism. In the history of religions, syncretism was applied particularly to the "mixed" religions of the Hellenistic and Roman eras, in implicit or explicit contrast with "pure" Christianity. Part of its power and appeal as a descriptor, however, lies in the fact that syncretism never describes directly, but indirectly through metaphors with negative valuation. This valuation emerges only by examining the entailments of the metaphoric construct (cf. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* [University of Chicago Press, 1980]), which will invariably seek to explain the abstract through concrete analogies, forcing the interpreter to rely on a model that reifies and objectifies its subject. Historically it has not been the syncretistic outcome of this process of combination that has concerned scholars, as much as the basic "elements" leading to this strange combination. Because of its ahistoricism and underlying essentialist bias, syncretism is beginning to lose favor as an explanatory model in critical scholarship. On examination, every "pure" tradition turns out to contain mixed elements; if everything is syncretistic, nothing is syncretistic.

But precisely because of its effective use of clichéd metaphors and in- or misdirection, syncretism continues to shape much of the scholarship that examines the popular and folk cultures that fail to adhere to the dominant religious and social constructs of south Asian society at large. The metaphors can be reduced to four broad models of interaction and encounter: [1] influence and borrowing; [2] the "cultural veneer"; [3] alchemy; and [4] organic or biological reproduction. The first two are rudimentary and focus

on the description of a static condition, while the latter attempt to define both the condition and process.

Metaphoric presuppositions and entailments. The metaphors of syncretism presuppose original, essential, and axiomatic categories of cultural and religious experience, which are also exclusive, regardless of the past or present relevance of Orientalist and colonial perspectives. Yet the pristine and exclusive identities given to various religious and social groups in South Asia today through primordial narratives are frequently themselves the products of modern political processes. The first Indian census of 1871 attempted to define exclusive religious identities; the gazetteers created by colonial officials such as W. Crooke and H. Rose served much the same purpose for the recording of ritual processes and the charting of social organization. A similar logic has justified the attempts of reformers (whether Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh) to "purify" their religions of foreign accretions.

[1] Borrowing and Influence. These terms describe transactions in which two groups or individuals are affected by each other through direct and indirect contact, respectively. Borrowing suggests that one group has taken and incorporated an idea, custom, or specific item from another. The implication of this model of physical exchange is that the borrowing group is dependent, lacking in creativity, and fundamentally incapable of defining itself. This model does not, however, adequately encompass the complex process that can perhaps better be described as "appropriation," wherein the borrowed item is transformed through the process of incorporation, thus fundamentally altering both the appropriated and the appropriator (true synthesis). The same holds for the model of "influence", which originally derived from the astrological concept of emanations from the stars and the parallel inflow or affluence of waters. Influence as the exertion of action through unseen forces by one thing on another is a decidedly more sophisticated model than borrowing because of its astral or hydraulic base metaphor (celestial radiations or mixing of flowing waters vs. the exchange of concrete objects). But the advantage gained concomitantly dissolves into mechanistic vagueness, precisely because the factors are understood to be unstated or unconscious, without any acknowledgement of selectivity or volition on the part of the "influenced" person or culture. Examples of influence (which pervade much of the secondary literature in the history of art, ideas, and literature) nearly always define the "source" as dominant over the passive recipient, which is also therefore "derivative" and less authentic.

[2] The "cultural veneer". Syncretism is often used to describe the product of the large-scale imposition of one alien culture, religion, or body of practices over another that is already present. This spatial model (also known as "overlay" or "envelope") creates a politicized topography that describes a state or condition, but does not explain any of the processes by which this condition has been achieved. The entailments of the metaphor of veneer, however, reveal a decided ambiguity. Veneer is, of course, a thin and delicate layer of ornamental wood laid over and bonded to a thicker, sturdier foundation of course wood or other material. When juxtaposed, the two parts are only artificially conjoined; they can be separated at any moment, and they will always retain their intrinsic characteristics. One need only think of the many theories describing the advent of Islam in South Asia to see the pervasiveness of this model. Although Muslims have shared the geographical space of South Asia with Hindus and others for more than a thousand years, many still deny to their religion any kind of indigenous status, which is reserved exclusively for Hindus who were there first. Analyses of other large-scale contacts (e.g., Christian "rice-conversions") follow similar patterns.

[3] Alchemy. Perhaps the most popular model of syncretism is that of alchemy, which secondarily shares in the hydraulic metaphor of influence, while maintaining a chemical basis of interaction (reaction). There are two types of combinations that can be forged in the alchemical crucible, one irreversible, the other not. The irreversible combination of fluids or the dissolution of a compound results in the creation of a solution, which is a new entity; chemically the resulting reaction would produce a new substance with by-products, such as heat and light. This syncretic end product is a new creation, which may or may not have any use; it may, in fact, be lethal to those who come into contact with it. The more common alchemical model of syncretism, however, is that of the mixture, a colloidal suspension of two ultimately irreconcilable substances. The result is a temporary mixture that will invariably separate over time, because the component parts are unalterable and must remain forever distinct and apart. The implication is that the parts remain recognizable, the concoction requires constant agitation to remain viable; it cannot endure. What remains, as in all of the models of syncretism, are the original component parts that have been mixed against what was intended by nature; religious or cultural essence triumphs over history.

[4] Biological Model. The biological model of syncretism generally articulates two or more contributing "parents" that produce offspring through a mysterious miscegenation. The offspring is either an obvious blend of the parents containing clearly identifiable characteristics or features, or it is deemed to be a hybrid (plant) or half-breed (animal). The implication is that like all hybrids, the result is sterile, i.e., incapable of reproducing itself, thereby ending the lineage. This form of syncretism, while acknowledging the viability of the immediate result, holds little hope for continuation, and is, therefore, usually discounted as unviable.

When applied to South Asian cultures, it is easy to see how the explanations that hinge on syncretism really serve only to concretize the initial religious or cultural categories presumed to be self-evident by the interpreter. Folk culture, precisely because it frequently does not adhere to the strictures of dominant religious and ideological modes of organization, is frequently described in such demeaning terms. While syncretism has often been invoked to explain what does not "fit" into the dominant intellectual and cultural categories, it has almost without fail served to relegate its subjects to a secondary status.

Tony K. Stewart and Carl W. Ernst