# SYNCRETISM, HYBRIDITY AND AMBIVALENCE:
# PROBING THE CONCEPTS IN RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE WITH REFERENCE TO
# SACRED SITE DYNAMICS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## Abstract

*This article arises from the author's exposure and research in the field of Southern African religious collectivities as user communities at sacred sites in the Eastern Free State. The user communities consist of individual pilgrims, groups of Independent Church affiliations and adherents of local traditional religion, performing frequent visits to the sites and often staying there for different lengths of time. Customary practices and ritual performances reveal an astonishing fusion of different religious beliefs without apparent overt tensions; in fact, performances often exhibit a seamless spiritual embroidery. It was therefore important to account for these levels overlap of religious beliefs, as well as the validity of concepts historically coined to describe the fusion of religious beliefs. The concepts of syncretism and hybridity are then probed regarding their validity to account for the blending of religious beliefs. My concluding contention is that both have too much historical and ideological baggage and that the concept of ambivalence may signal a more neutral exit for the dilemma.*

**Key Words:** Syncretism, Hybridity, Ambivalence; South African Indigenous Religion

## General Observation

In ethnographic fieldwork of local cultures and religions one is consistently confronted with familiar and non-familiar expressions of culture and religion. One is therefore forced to scrutinise critically the conceptual nomenclature we find productive in order to capture linguistically the similarities as well as the dissimilarities encountered. Even more seriously, one is obliged to probe the implications of any effort to explain the apparent corollary of identity, ambiguity and opposition of encountered expressions historically or contextually. Our concepts may be the pitfalls of enthusiasm, which may not be so bad, but also of prejudiced 'othering' as though one occupies a privileged and normative position of authority.

In the history of ideas/philosophy and in particular within religious dogma and practice, philosophers, clergy and academics have sought to map the similarities and dissimilarities between different cultures and religions. Such a taxonomy of religious ideas and their differences have often been kindled by fierce contestation and debate about the true or most authentic expression to ascertain the original and pure form of the idea or practice. Even within the traditions of the major world religions, ideas and practices have been subjected to institutional demand for clarity and to 'preserve' the most authentic and purest expression and practice.

Similarly, in the history of religious thought and theological enterprise there has always been the need to capture the development and confluence of religious traditions historically and contextually.

The aim of the article is not primarily an attempt to discuss comprehensively the dominant taxonomy of assimilation between religions and cultures, but to probe the productivity of the concepts of *syncretism* and *hybridity* in post-colonial religious discourse. A final argument is then tabled that the concept *ambivalence* may serve as a better option to capture religious 'mixture' and overlap in non-essentialist terms. The preferred choice will be substantiated with empiric evidence from a fieldwork case study in the Eastern Free State, South Africa.

## Probing the Concepts of Religious Assimilation

### Syncretism

The earliest scholarly concept coined to describe the fusion of beliefs, as well as to determine the most original and purest expressions in contradistinction to variant or analogous forms of religious and cultural expression is *syncretism*.

The earliest use of the concept is found in Greek culture to designate assimilation of diverse groups as a united cluster, and soon it became the notion of the unity or reconciliation of differing schools of thought, cultures and religions. From the Greek cultural context it is evident that the concept was used in a positive way to refer to the successful combination of differing ideas and cultural practices. In the ancient world, scholars have found it convenient to use the concept where cultures in contact broaden the scope of their religion or images of gods aligned to the dominant culture or religion. It is believed that the Neo-Babylonian Empire of the 6th Century BCE extended the scope of the creative role of their primary gods of *Šamaš* and *Marduk* through influences from the existing ideas of Assyrian and Egyptian creator gods. Scholars accept that the religion represented in the Old Testament is a fusion of elements from Egyptian, Canaanite, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Israelite beliefs. (Cf., for example, Delitzsch's 1921 comparative treatment of Old Testament religious concepts and divine names with their Babylonian counterpart.) The dualism in post-exilic Judaic belief is believed to be from Persian influence, in particular with respect to a fundamental conflict between the benevolent forces of light/order (the god Ahura Masda) and the evil forces (the god Ahriman). (Cf. Henkelman & Redardeline 2017) for a fresh look at Old Persian religion). According to Schoeps (1965), Roman religion was a syncretistic religion from the outset, absorbing elements from Etruscan, Greek and Oriental religions. He even concludes that the Romans were not a very "*religionsschöpferisches Volk*" (p 157)!

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica, syncretism* connotes the fusion of religious beliefs of which early Gnosticism and Persian Manichaeism are typical early Common Era manifestations. Contemporary examples considered to be syncretism are movements such as

Durkheim (1954:246-257) uses the concept *Anomie* as a reference to the shattering of the meaning system and social cohesion of a group or culture – often as a result of severe onslaught, suppression and uprootedness. This crisis of the collapse of meaning and social order, however, often gives rise to rearrangement and reaffirmation of meanings adopted from the context and glued together as a new meaning system that transforms the older system. This interweaving of meaning following the crisis may be regarded as a form of syncretism. McGuire (1997:106-107) refers to general examples to be found in Afro-American religions in which elements of West African religion is still observable or in

Catholic Latin America amongst the local tribes after the Spanish conquest. The latter, however, implies a conflict and enforced fusion of beliefs in close proximity. The subjugation of the local Southern American Aztec and Inca peoples, as well as enforced loyalty to the Roman Catholic faith of the Spanish Conquistadores resulted in fused forms of belief. In a similar way, Crusader actions of the Middle Ages have caused fusions between Christianity and Islam in the Orient.

Generally, however, the concept of syncretism has accrued negative associations, because it was used "to imply inauthenticity or contamination, the insidious infiltration of a putatively 'pure' religious tradition by meanings, symbols, and ritual practices borrowed from an alien, impure religious tradition" (McGuire 1997:108). The negativity is quite evident during the early stages of the Reformation. In what is known as the "Syncretistic Strife" (Löffler 1912), Georg Calixt tried to relax the tension between Lutheran Evangelical theology and Catholic theology as well as other positions within the protestant movement in 1640-1686. New Age, Unitarianism and Christian Science in which multiple beliefs are assimilated.

He was vehemently opposed by Lutheran theologians from Leipzig, Strasburg, Wittenberg and Marburg. They believed that the truth was being extracted by this syncretic theology and would only cause further schisms. At Wittenburg and Leipzig, theologians went so far as to list the heresies of the Calixt theology. The syncretic branch or mutation is clearly seen as an abomination and of a lower status, and often as plain heresy.

Christian missions to and colonisation of the African continent had found fertile ground to promote the theologies and cultural ideologies of mainstream Christian denominations. Some scholars believe that an insatiable religious disposition of the indigenous African lies at the root of this religious onslaught (cf. e.g. Parrinder 1969:235 and Mbiti 1991:30.) The consequences of these missionary actions have often been judged to be syncretic in the sense that the mixing of Christianity with African forms of indigenous belief has resulted in ideas and institutional Christian off-springs that are looked upon as degenerations of the pure Christian religion. Apart from forms of legitimate acculturation, western religious fraternities have looked at Independent Christian Church movements on the continent as polluted and degenerated syncretism. However, this negative and biased appropriation is not only a western religious phenomenon, but according to Mudimbe (1994) relates to a colonial prejudice in terms of which 'African' religion and thought is perceived as part and parcel of an ideological and epistemological construct of 'inventing Africa'. The colonial construct does not only disregard Africanistic philosophy, but replaces it with categories of western epistemological hegemony. Even African theologians and scholars have joined the derogative judgement. Ebhomienlen and Ogah (2014:234) explicitly claim that the intrinsic religious character of the African has been a major factor in assimilating the foreign Christian belief with indigenous transformations. They go on to say that "the co-mixture of the western evangelist's biblical church doctrines definitely gave birth to heresies, syncretism polluting and generating religious problems in African churches". Ezenweke and Kanu (2012:73-74) have tried to draw a distinction between critical and uncritical syncretism in which case critical syncretism is equated with enculturation, and therefore acceptable religious fusion. They do not, however, engage critically with the implied privileged and colonial baggage of the concept syncretism.

Frontier colonial contexts were often the breeding grounds for religious contestation and assimilation. A remarkable twisted story of reversed syncretism is to be found in the life history of Anna Makheta Mantsopa (cf. Cawood 2014:214-215), a 19th-century prophetess of the Basutho. She was banned from Lesotho during the time of Moshoeshoe because of

her predictions of Basutho failures against intruders and skirmishes with the Boers prior to 1870. She then came to the Anglican Mission at Modderpoort, located in the so-called 'Conquered Territory' and was soon christened. However, when she started 'mixing' her indigenous prophetic skills in faith healing and ritual she was expelled by the priory because of this impurity and lack of maintaining the true Christian belief. Her services returned to her old rituals, and apparently had strong support amongst the local communities (cf. Cawood 2014:214-215). However, after her death, she was again recognised by the church, allowing her grave site inside the priory, where it is still today a major tourist and indigenous belief attraction.

## Hybridity

Critical voices from the continent have objected to the privileged and biased attribution of syncretism to branches of African Christianity, but alternative suggestions were lacking. In recent times the concept of syncretism has also been rejected as helpful or constructive in a debate where western superiority is sought to be abandoned (see, for example, Schineller 1992:54-65). It has been the advocates of postcolonial discourse who advanced the concept of hybridity in terms of its current currency. In its original application to the physical world, hybridity refers to a cross between entities in the natural world, and has only subsequently been employed in racial, religious and linguistic theory. Within Greek and Roman cultures, it was used mainly for the progeny of a citizen and a non-citizen. In early Christian faith, the mixing of marriages between Christians and non-Christians was deplored and even prohibited in the Code Theodosius (CE 365) – a sentiment continued in Christian tradition until the modern period. Western imperialism with its enshrined racial and gender bias (cf. McClintock 1995:37-56) has construed pseudo-biological models to show the inferiority of peoples from Africa and Asia as a warning against the degeneration of imperial man. In the next discussion we will see that the concept of hybridity, despite its positive illuminations of the colonial cultural condition has also become tarnished with negative sentiments of privilege and superiority.

The current conception of '*hybridity*' surfaced strongly during the colonial period and in particular in postcolonial discourse of race, identity and multi-culturalism. (Compare Quayson 2000 for a general exposition of postcolonialism). It was Homi Bhabha (*The location of culture*, 1994; cf. also Young 1995) who introduced the concept as a caption for a critique of cultural imperialism and western superiority. The concept of hybridity is employed by Bhabha to deconstruct the narrative of colonial power, but simultaneously it also exposes uncertainties of the power of the coloniser in a space where the colonised 'other' is allowed in the 'house' of the coloniser. The colonial subject is afforded a discursive space in a place of hybridity, which entails that it is at two places at the same time – an in-between space between two cultural narratives. Hybridity becomes a modality of colonised existence. It has been Bhabha's effort to define the identity of the colonial subject without reverting to essentialist identity constructions so typical of western mainstream narratives of cultural identity. The reality of this hybrid colonial identity plays out at different levels of ambiguity and mimicry, where the subject displays irreconcilable attitudes and patterns of behaviour to mimic coloniser authority and culture from a disadvantaged position. It therefore alludes to the inescapable coloniser-colonised confluence played out in literature, culture, politics and religion. The ambiguity is most obvious when the Indian seeks to be anglicised, but not being English enough, and the English seeking to be Indianised, but not able to become Indian enough. The emphasis is on the shifting positionalities where the colonised culture adapts to forms of the coloniser culture

without being really successful in it. On the other hand, the coloniser also seeks to adapt to the culture and practices of the colonised culture without becoming really successful in that attempt. In effect, hybridity was a way to subvert multiplicity – to gloss over the disturbing differences in the hope of arriving at 'normal' shared cultural and political identity – which obviously never materialised. Bhabha (1994) also goes a step further to show how hybridity is the mix that the coloniser invented in opposition to an 'Other'. This 'Other' was needed to inscribe the coloniser's sense of superiority, but simultaneously the colonised makes a mimicry of hybridity by subverting it as the 'Other's' gaze back at the coloniser. The subverting dimension of hybridity has been developed later in Bhabha's thought to capture the colonial subject's strategy of discrimination and to disturb the authority of the coloniser.

Whereas Bhabha's emphasis on hybridity is primarily an effort to discard the essentialist view of coloniser and colonised cultures (see below), hybrid ideas and institutional formations on the African scene are strikingly evident in the administrative and political arrangements, which succinctly adopted those elements that the freedom movements set out to fight. For example, the coloniser's homogenous treatment of all African cultures, which was deplorable for its disregard of cultural identity and difference, was in a way reintroduced in pan-African sentiments and in nationalistic endeavours of national identity within stages where the colonial frontiers retained little interest in diverse community and culture differences. According to Franz Fanon (1963:35-40), the colonised states fall into the trap of mimicking the 'evils' of colonialism when they employ administrative and political regimes reminiscent of the coloniser, thereby accommodating ambiguously the strategies that they set out to fight in many ways. Fanon underscores the need to foster national memories and to strive for national consciousness, but he also warns against any effort that would ignore the differences. The colonial reality will haunt the nationalism and will infiltrate the current reality forcefully and subtly. If decolonisation would only mean to dismantle the structures and ideologies of the colonial system, the humanism of the Third World will never emerge. This is the internal ambiguous dynamic of hybridity of the postcolonial state.

In religious discourse the postcolonial concept of hybridity is adopted as a strategic and less-biased measurement to address the confluence of progressive religious ideas and practices towards the formation of a new or transformed religious or spiritual mutation. The concept was intended to define the mutant religious form, irrespective of the causes of enforcement, rejection of old ideas or the natural adoption of productive ideas and practices. In this way one may look at mixed forms of Shiah and Sunni Islam, Christian and indigenous African religions, Christian and Jewish, New Age and Christianity, etc.

McQuire convincingly shows that empirical evidence indicates religious blending of individual religious beliefs and within-group religious heterogeneity are the norms and not the exception (2008:185):

> This suggests that it is not possible to make any assertions about contemporary religious hybridity as a new phenomenon without seriously considering whether scholars' earlier depiction of individual religious belonging was no more than an artefact of their definitional and methodological assumption.

A more in-depth analysis of religious hybridity in Africa is provided by Kenzo (2004). He latches onto postcolonial discourse to dismantle essentialist and cultural deterministic assumptions in terms of which African religion has been described as a receiving bucket of influences resulting in religious formations often assessed as degenerations of Christian belief. Cultures and religions should rather be viewed as part of processes of "interactivity, negotiability, indeterminacy, fragmentation, and conflict" (p. 244). Based on this assump-

tion he contends that the identity of African religion is best represented as a "matter of constructed hybridity" to which he also adds the rest of the nomenclature of postcolonial discourse, namely mimicry, bricolage, improvisation and pastiche (p. 245).

Kenzo's assessment of the hybrid nature of 'African' religion surely is illuminating, in particular the way he describes the cross-fertilisation between religious beliefs and the level of resistance to western religious traditions. These resulted in deconstructions of Christian and Islamic content in order to create space for absorbing African myth in significant ways that may only be viewed as instances of hybridity.

The hybridity described so eloquently by Kenzo, can be witnessed in multiple ways at Eastern Free State sacred site assemblies during pilgrimage visits. At Mautse and Moutoleng, the confluences and adaptations between Christian belief and indigenous healing practices as well as prayer rituals are effectively practised without apparent reflection. In fact, most of the spiritual healers claim Christian as well as indigenous ancestor affiliation. Their mutant religious ideas and practices may be regarded as forms of hybridity in the sense explained by Kenzo. However, it may also be hybrid in nature in terms of Bhabha's understanding of the hybrid ambiguity, namely that it is Christian, but not really, and thus an ingenious mimicry – the adoption *and* displacement of aspects of western religion and liturgy practice without being able to eradicate the mutant origins. Mimicry in this context entails slightly more than camouflaged behaviour in a negative sense to include genuine efforts to 'imitate' religious ideas and practices from religions in contact. The postcolonial reality has freed local peoples of the mechanism of control or purity so that the space can be reinvented in ways close to their local culture and religious practices and myth.

However, with regard to the agreement with Kenzo's portrayal of African religion as a matter of hybridity, I am not so convinced that the concept can be separated from either its inscribed meaning as a cross-fertilisation between belief traditions or its postcolonial baggage as coined by Homi Bhabha. He has started convincingly to dismantle any essentialist definition of colonial identity. In the final analysis one is not entirely in agreement that he has succeeded in that goal. One is consistently reminded that hybridity is a *de facto* colonised reality which takes its formative cue from coloniser reality. The inescapable reality of the hybrid positionality of the colonised subject remains in fact determined as an essential aspect of colonised subjectivity. It is therefore my contention that the concept hybridity cannot entirely be freed from its essentialist implications and may not be the best concept to capture the levels of religious assimilation in postcolonial religious discourse. I would therefore explore tentatively a more neutral concept for the phenomenon earlier described as syncretism or hybridity.

## Ambivalence

Although one does not deny the utility of the concepts of syncretism and hybridity, both are flawed in two significant ways.

In both instances a linear historical assumption prevails. The progression of cultural ideas and formations is viewed as an on-going process, starting from definable origins to traceable new forms. The transformation or the adaptions between older and new forms are the result of various causes towards the arrival at mutant forms of expression. The syncretic and hybrid mutations become observable as juxtapositions of historically solidified expressions of culture and religious expressions. The sequence of the confluence can be mapped and within the confluence/mutation the elements of the origins are still visible.

Linear argumentation is obviously far more prevalent in judgements of syncretism. The older or parent religious expression or practice determines the vital coordinate in terms of which further interreligious assimilation or transportation is recognised and defined. Within the major religions their faith conceptualisations and ritual practices remain the vantage point to clarify any deviation. The deviation and/or mutation is judged negatively in terms of the level of 'corruption' and degeneration from what is believed to be the standard. The mutant religious formation resulting from diachronic processes in contact with the parent tradition(s) is the syncretic member of the family. In the Christian tradition the mutant formation is often viewed as a degeneration of the authentic parent religion and discarded as deplorable practice.

Within imperialistic and colonial discourse, the historical mutant is considered generally as a degeneration. The African race was homogeneously viewed as a degeneration of western civilised culture; similarly, the adapted and transformed cultural and religious expressions are judged as deformation and degeneration. It is therefore not inconceivable that an educated person such as Du Bois (1970:98-100) consistently struggled to free himself from ideas of inferiority and blatant racism as someone from a Negro background, for the establishment and western knowledge hegemony are the lenses for signification. (Cf. also Rudwick 1972:311-318 for an assessment of Du Bois' Negro protest.)

It was convenient for dominant western religious discourse to maintain syncretism as a signifier of negative historical developments that endanger the authentic parent. The contextual and historical agency as internal dynamics to the transformation, rejection and assimilation towards more productive and meaning supporting expressions is seldom engaged. The confrontation with historically diverse variants triggered the search for the parent forms and to define comparatively the eventual mutant forms. The irony of this project has often been the fact that exact historical argumentation is lacking to demonstrate the historical conditions of influence, change, adaptation, rejection, transformation, etc. of what is uncritically accepted as the parent formation. The abstraction of mutant forms implicitly relates to abstraction and essentialising of parent forms within synchronic situatedness without a diachronic view of the indeterminacy of the parent form.

It has been noted above that Homi Bhabha struggled to free the concept of hybridity from its historical fixation as colonial reality. In the final analysis the concept remains tagged to the historical conditions of colonialism and the efforts of the colonised to define its positionality and identity. The colonial subject's place of hybridity cannot be achieved in Bhabha's discursive treatment without the historical colonial reality and its subsequent transformations through colonised agency. Whereas Bhabha avoids unwarranted judgement of hybrid formations, the same cannot be said of Christian scholarly employment of the concept. The position of Kenzo, discussed in the preceding paragraph, clearly illustrates prejudice towards the so-called African religious hybrid formations.

A further weakness of the concepts is the privileged position of judgement. The western argumentation of syncretism and Christian religious employment of hybridity are often flawed by being judgemental and plainly prejudiced. The authenticity of the parent formation is accepted as point of reference to judge variant or deviation mutations without its own internal historical dynamics and complexity. The confluence is then judged in terms of the presumed 'pure' parent and the degeneration of the 'other' religious form or expression. The autonomy of the pure parent is seldom in question. The confluence of Christianity and African indigenous religions is not scrutinised in terms of flaws in weaknesses within Christian belief and ritual. The weakness of African indigenous religion and its implied degeneration of civilised religious expression have given rise to the

negatively assessed mutant formation. The privileged position and autonomy of the western discourse are never in dispute.

It must be granted that Homi Bhabha is attracted to the concept of hybridity for exactly the opposite reason, for it captures the postcolonial critique of western imperial agenda and superiority. In his view the concept hybridity deconstructs western privileged assessment of other cultures. However, the historical complexities giving rise to a varied colonised reality named 'hybridity' are not explored sufficiently in Bhabha's treatment. Such a historical and contextual assessment of hybrid reality should imply a complex analysis of all cultural ideas, symbols and socio-political agencies with obvious variations within class, gender and sex at different levels of society and administration. Irrespective of the enormous advantage Bhabha offers postcolonial discourse with his perception of hybridity, it remains largely a discourse reality. Within his analytical discourse the concept serves the textual and discourse purpose of naming the impasses of colonial and coloniser confluence. The concept is not unpacked in depth by Bhabha in terms of the historical complexities and diverse agencies of power leading to confluence or hybrid formation. In most cases it is a discourse abstraction with Bhabha. Nuanced criticism is levelled against him by McClintock (1995:61-74) in her historical and contextual treatise of colonial race, gender and sexuality in which she also maintains that Bhabha's concept of hybridity, as well as linked concepts of mimicry (a trope of ambiguity) and ambivalence, serve discursive ends rather than complex historical and social contextual reality.

I would therefore rather explore the possibilities of the concept of *ambivalence* as a vehicle to account for the complexity and multiplicity of cultural formations and progressive religious ideas. Ambivalence is semantically defined as the coexistence of opposing ideas or feelings in the mind or in a single context. It refers to the reality in which ideas and practices assumed to be mutually exclusive coexist in a meaningful manner.

In this regard, I find strong support from Anne McClintock's (1995:4-17, 61-71) analysis of race, gender and sexuality within western imperialism and colonial realities. Ambivalence in this sense of the word constantly recognised the complex historical realities which do not seek to homogenise or generalise the transformation of cultural and religious ideas and conditions. It rather seeks to capture the complexity and multiplicity of agency in the context of multi-cultures and thought patterns. With this concept McClintock really tries to account for the complex negotiations, complicity, refusal, transformation and comprise inherently part and parcel of social and religious reality.

The concept would therefore include the dynamics of hybridity, ambiguity, sameness, opposition, conformity and conscious resistance as well as non-dogmatic exploration of belief and practice. Ambivalence thus accentuates the seamlessness as well as the contradictory within the sociocultural and religious formation and expression. It is more of a dialectic than a binary logic, in the sense that it stresses the dynamics and implied agencies subsumed in continuities and discontinuities of the historical and social reality without trying to camouflage differences and multiplicity.

Homi Bhabha (1994) may be granted the fatherhood of the concept ambivalence in postcolonial work. He has certainly contributed significantly to the current employment of the concept. It was Bhabha who made the important distinction between culture as difference and cultural difference. In the latter sense, culture is objectified for empirical purposes. Culture as difference relates to the point where more cultures meet, but they are never pre-given in an essential way. The difference can be articulated and should be pronounced, but is never a fixed given, which would imply rigidity, repetition and an unchanging order. The difference can surely be articulated, but it is free of fixations and

racial typology. Culture as difference is open to 'otherness'; it is a changing process of accumulation of ever-changing meshworks of cultural and religious expression and ritual.

Bhahba's views of culture as difference are knit into his concept of ambivalence. Bhabha, to my understanding, deals too much with ambivalence in a discursive manner. Bhabha's discursive ambivalence is part of the constructed colonial discourse that seeks to reproduce the image of a reformed recognisable 'Other'. In other words, it is an in-between discourse of being the same and being not the same (Cf. Kumar's 2011:118-124 analysis of the concepts of ambivalence and mimicry in Bhabha's writing.) Bhabha employs the concept as a reference to the postcolonial reality that seeks to free itself from the parent culture, whilst still transforming in ways reflecting the persistent older (colonial) form. Bhabha does not, however, explore the complexity of historical agency that deals with all the power discourses and actions from politics, economy, religion, race, sex, class, etc. Ambivalence remains a discursive construct for Bhabha.

Ambivalence implies for me a religious and cultural context in a non-abstracted and non-contracted historical sense. It this sense it allows the possibility to account for the progressive transformations of religious ideas and practices. It seeks to account for the complex dynamics of cultural and religious agency without an effort to revert from complexity and multiplicity. The complexity and multiplicity of religious and cultural expression and practice are not portrayed by any form of prejudice or from a privileged position.

Ambivalence in this sense is less concerned with issues of origin, but rather seeks to capture the complex historical, social and cultural reality as contextual experience. In this regard we have encountered in our research project amongst the peoples gathered temporarily or more permanently at sacred sites in the Eastern Free State, religious expressions and ritual practices in which Christian and local indigenous religious practices are conflated seamlessly. The prayer recitation of Monica, a powerful spiritual leader at Mautse in the Eastern Free State, seamlessly joins together phraseology typical of local prayer custom and the Catholic Rosary. The ritual of thanksgiving includes verbal recitations from the Old Testament alongside ancestral belief ideas. Her authority is defined as both indigenous healer and Christian faith healer. On top of it she also claims to be a prophetess with exceptional gifts.

At another site at Mautse, called *Tempeleng*, Old Testament temple architecture is represented not only in a minimalist way by maintaining the symbolic pillars/altars of the Jerusalem temple courtyard, but also in embracing the stairs leading up to the 'high place' (*bimah* in Hebrew) typical of Canaanite and Israelite shrines (Nel 2015:179). The accumulative spatial arrangement is further enhanced by the fact that the stairs in fact leads to the 'high place' as a platform beneath an overhanging rock with a round natural crevice.

## Tempeleng –Minimalist temple architecture



The rock crevice covers the face of a supplicant standing on the platform. It is believed that the supplicant may have direct access to the ancestors and God from there. In the religious vernacular it is said that one can 'telephone' God from there. In this sense it is a sacred space symbolic of the most holy place to communicate with God. The symbolic and conceptual arrangement of this sacred space is a signifier devoid of any form of religious fixity or unchanging order of a parent religious convention or a deliberate action of inversion. It is rather open to continuity and mastery of a fluid accumulation of practice and belief without fear of 'othering'. The ambivalence is real in its presentation of accumulation without any questioning of origin. These spatial arrangements and accumulative embedding and emplacement of diverse traditions and modes of ritual and belief in seamless meshworks can only be captured as ambivalence. Aspects of religion as difference (to maintain Bhabha's distinction) are reminiscent of accumulation without prejudice or reflection on origin.

The concepts of syncretism and hybridity fall short when attempting to account for these cultural and religious expressions, because one fears that such concepts would reduce the complexities and multiplicity of this religious reality. Furthermore, they might willingly or unconsciously cement a privileged and judgemental authorial position. It appears best to represent these progressive formations as true forms of religious expression without questioning the parent source and the so-called vulnerability of the indigenous African religious context in confrontation with the dominant Christian religious context of the colonial legacy. There is no reason to doubt that the 'mutant' form in this case is perceived by the participants and followers without a historical reflection about origins and contamination. This remark does not necessarily cater for an a-historical approach, but the historical perspective will deal with the complex of historical and cultural agencies informing this religious expression, not as a means to describe its formation, but to understand the complexity and multiple forms of expression. It is admitted that the preceding remark relates to the external scholarly view and does not represent the emic

view of the participant local community. Ambivalence in the instances referred to can also not be judged to be of a discursive nature only. It exceeds the ambivalence Homi Bhabha has in mind as a discursive account of the in-between realities of *the-same* and *not-the-same* from the parent cultures and religions. It is now normative and 'pure' religious expression in its diversity and complexity – it is ambivalent!

## In Conclusion

Instead of explaining the similarities and dissimilarities between variant religious ideas and practices from parent origins, it appears more productive to focus on the complexity and multiplicity of the religious idea and practice within a particular context. In a way it is a departure from formal comparative religion and a step in the direction of dealing non-prescriptively with the complex historical and contextual agencies of a religious variant. Even the concept *variant* may be problematic in this regard, because what is considered a variant in terms of comparison to other variants still houses the idea of progressive development. It is therefore understandable that with the concept *ambivalence* the question of genesis subsides to make space for interrogation of the complexity of the entire arena of the religious and cultural expressions of the population identified for closer understanding.

The concept ambivalence is obviously not without its share of semantic and logical ambiguity. One the one hand, it seeks to appreciate contextual locality and practice, but on the other hand, it also seeks to define complex religious reality discursively. The point of departure however, is to arrive at the concept inductively from the complex entanglements of a religious historical and contextual reality and not to give discursive account of impasses between parent origins and mutant transformations in an abstract or prejudiced manner. The data from field research here is not provided as final proof of the validity of the concept ambivalence as such, but indicates that this concept has productive applicability and therefore validity. The field data also does not serve any purpose of general extrapolation in terms of which the concept is guaranteed universal application. However, without the field data the substance of the argument in favour of the concept ambivalence would be seriously depleted. The methodological logic of reliable case study data also predicts that valuable insight and applicability may be gained beyond the scope of the particular instance. I would therefore argue that the concept ambivalence has applicability and validity in religious contexts with similar entanglements and dynamics, although universal application is not granted. One may then contend that ambivalence as concept suits the articulation and pronouncement of accumulation and changing formation of religion as difference better than the concepts of syncretism and hybridity.

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