

BETHEL UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL

DYNAMIC INTERSECTIONS:
SYNCRETISM, FORM, AND MEANING

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BY

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Introduction

One of the key dilemmas facing the missionary ethnomusicologist on the field is this question: How does one know when using a particular traditional music form is endangering the church with syncretism and when it is simply an expression of culturally appropriate contextualization? This paper will seek to examine the implications of form and meaning and to explore their intersections with various aspects of syncretism.

Intersections of Form and Meaning

Rather than wrestling with yet another complicated or inadequate definition of syncretism, the ethnomusicologist may find it helpful to evaluate the situation in terms of a schema offered by Charles Kraft in his insightful work *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (1996). Kraft's model (outlined below) is useful because it demonstrates that the presence or absence of syncretism can be determined by the meanings that underlie the forms being used.

It is an accepted anthropological and missiological paradigm that meaning is located in the minds of people¹ rather than inherently embedded in the forms used (Feld 1984, 2; Kraft 1996, 10-11). Thus, it is the attitude of the heart and the true allegiances of people, not the forms themselves, which are the key to establishing a church free of syncretism (Kraft 1996, 377).

<u>Forms</u>	<u>Meanings</u>	→	<u>Result</u>
Local	Local	→	Local Religion
Foreign	Local	→	Christopagan Syncretism
Foreign	Foreign	→	Domination Syncretism
Local	Christian	→	Appropriate Church

In Kraft's model above, local forms infused with local (pagan) meanings normally amount to the "status quo" of the local religion – which in many cases is some form of animism,

¹ Feld says, "We cannot speak of meaning without speaking of interpretation (whether public or conscious)" He goes on to list the listener's interpretive moves as locational, categorical, associational, reflective, and evaluative.

atheism, or materialism. In Yakutia, Siberia, where this writer serves, one of the local forms of worship is “feeding the fire.” A powerful spirit (*ichii*) is believed to reside in the fire; feeding it gifts of food and drink is the traditional way of insuring the spirit’s favor and protection. While feeding the fire has tremendous spiritual significance for the Sakha people living in Yakutia, it has no such significance for the camper who throws marshmallows in the fire to watch them burn. Although the form is similar, the meaning in the mind of the person tossing the food makes all the difference.

Alternately, foreign (Christian) forms can be infused with local (pagan) meanings. This is Christopagan Syncretism, in which the outward forms may look Christian, but the unseen worldview of the person’s heart remains unbiblical. Unfortunately, Christopagan Syncretism is a commonly-seen form of syncretism not only overseas but in American churches as well. It can be seen in the wearing of crosses for good luck and safety. It even touches our music performances. When “Amazing Grace” is sung by godless performing artists, it can only be surmised that the meaning to them is more along the lines of the “brotherhood of man” and “world peace” than the need for sinners to repent in order to receive God’s grace.

The third option is one in which the foreign forms along with their foreign meanings have been accepted by the receptor culture, resulting in Domination Syncretism. This is a variety of syncretism distinguished by

...western forms of organization, worship, music, preaching, training, doctrine, buildings, and all the rest, plus the western meanings that go along with them. ... Although the people are usually conscious of the fact that they are practicing a foreign religion, they think that’s the way Christianity was intended to be (1996, 377).

In this model, the foreign forms are so integrated into the receptor culture’s perceptions of “right worship” that it may take drastic measures on the part of change agents for acceptance of local forms to begin taking root. One indigenous Christian leader in North America laments,

...our problem today is no longer a misguided white missionary, but the erroneous teaching of that long gone missionary that has been adopted by us as Native leaders and now appears as a “Native perspective.” What we are left with ... is a fear, distrust, suspicion, alienation, and rejection of much of our own culture as followers of Christ (Twiss 2002, 39).

The ideal contextualized option is one in which local forms are infused with Christian meanings; not foreign meanings, but rather meanings drawn from Scripture that are appropriate for that cultural context.

It should be pointed out that is sometimes quite appropriate to borrow forms; many societies value using outside forms for a variety of purposes. Kraft observes, “Any society can, of course, borrow cultural forms from another society. If, however the proportion of borrowed forms is very high and the proportion of the indigenous forms very low, the character of their Christianity is strongly affected” (1996, 377).

Thus, the meaning behind the form (in the eyes of the local people) distinguishes between forms that are being used in a syncretistic way and forms that have been critically contextualized. A given form may be used in the church, but its contextual appropriateness depends completely on whether the people are giving the form materialistic, western, animistic, or other pagan meanings as opposed to Christian meanings. It makes sense then, that the ethnomusicologist must work toward a change of the heart and mind, not just behavioral change. A change must be made so that biblical thinking is behind the forms that are used, rather than uncritically adopting all local forms and genres regardless of their meanings.

Critical Contextualization: Discerning the Implications of Form and Meaning

There remains an even higher challenge, however, for the national church in its interaction with western missionaries – the challenge of determining which forms are most

effective for expressing Christian meanings in the local context. Paul Hiebert's "four steps of critical contextualization" (1985) are excellent in this regard; they are arguably the most well-conceived formulation of this process to date. Hiebert's paradigm supports the importance of discovering meanings associated with forms. He doesn't, however, maintain that those meanings are unchangeable – just that they must be discovered and dealt with in a conscious way.

Hiebert's standard involves several steps, none of which can be skipped without endangering the process: 1) Gather information from locals about the forms and their current meanings as well as the functions of those forms in the local culture; 2) study biblical teachings and principles that relate to the forms in question; 3) evaluate the local forms in light of the related biblical teachings; and 4) encourage the local people, based on what they have learned in this process, to make their own decisions about whether they should accept, reject, and/or alter the forms in order to create an appropriate, contextualized Christian practice.

It is important to note that these final cultural decisions are not the responsibility of outsiders, whether they be visitors, missionaries, or para-church agencies. Hiebert says,

To involve the people in evaluating their own culture draws upon their strength. They know their old culture better than the missionary and are in a better position to critique it, once they have biblical instruction. Moreover, they will grow spiritually by learning to apply scriptural teachings to their own lives (1985,187).

Hiebert summarizes the process of critical contextualization as one of studying the forms "with regard to the meanings and places they have within their cultural setting and then [evaluating them] in the light of biblical norms" (1985, 183-192). Again, the focus is on meanings within the cultural setting (i.e. the minds of local people) rather than the meanings in the minds of the missionaries. Equally important, the evaluation is carried out not in light of western norms but in light of biblical, trans-cultural norms.

The Importance of the Mind and Heart

Harold Best, in his landmark book, *Unceasing Worship*, writes with great insight and prophetic challenge about the heart motivations and various expressions of Christian worship, contrasting (in Chapter 11) idolatry, authentic worship, and syncretism. He says,

There is a fine but absolutely clarified line between authentic and idolatrous worship. The line is not drawn by the things that we use but by what our mind and heart choose to make of them. Our prayer should always be “Search *me*, not the artifact.” There is no need for God to search an artifact, for as Paul says, it is nothing, and there is no truth or falsehood in it (I Cor 8:4; 10:19). These lie with us, and it is for us to sort them out under the guidance of the Spirit (2003, 171).

In addition to the passages mentioned by Best, a crucial scripture passage dealing with cultural forms and the attitude of the heart is Romans 14, which speaks about various debatable practices that were the controversial issues of the day – eating certain foods and observing certain religious days as special. This key passage applies directly to the question of using cultural forms in the life of the church; it should be studied thoroughly by any local church struggling with these issues. The crux of the issue is address in Ro. 14:14, “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (NASB). This places the answer to questions about cultural issues squarely where it belongs – in the heart of the worshipper. If the worshipper can use the cultural form to worship God without shadows of idol-worship darkening his mind, then he or she is free to use the form, because the form itself is not unclean, it is neutral.

What often happens, however, is that the person who cannot use a cultural form with a clean conscience thinks that the issue is not within himself, but with the form. As a result he condemns those who can with a clean conscience use the form in worship to God. This judgmental attitude must be revealed as an inappropriate response. Romans 14:1-5 clearly states

that in these debatable cultural matters, each worshipper is responsible for the attitude of his own heart:

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. *Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind* (NASB, emphasis mine).

Significantly, this passage describes the one who cannot use the form with a clear conscience as the “weaker brother” – hardly an encouragement for this person to complacently remain in his weak state. This weaker brother should hope for future growth; he should pray for grace from God to become “stronger” in these matters. Until then, he must obey his conscience (Ro. 14:14), while understanding that the issue is in his heart; it is an issue of weakness, rather than a problem with the form itself.

It is not only the weaker brother who must be careful not to judge; the stronger brother is warned as well; he must not “regard with contempt” the brother who cannot eat with a clean conscience. Barry Liesch, in *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church*, gives an excellent summary of Paul’s attitude in these situations:

These cultural, Christian Jews, says Paul, need acceptance too and should not be looked down on for *not* acting on the freedom they have in Christ. Paul looks evenhandedly at both the “weak” and the “strong” in disputable matters, attempting to avoid attitudes of snobbery and exclusivity (2004, 191).

Liesch argues for diversity in using the music forms of other cultures (and sub-cultures within our own society). He submits that though the music/meat analogy is not specifically drawn by Paul, it is fair to apply it in this case because for Jews, the question of meat offered to idols was based on “the issue of bad associations, a central issue relative to music... The eating

of meat offered to idols teaches that *bad associations* (i.e., meat with idolatry) *don't spoil the goodness of the materials*" (2004, 194 emphasis mine).

So are the forms of music neutral or intrinsically good and bad? Liesch draws a parallel with languages, pointing out that

most people would view the structure and syntax of spoken languages... as morally neutral. Are music languages and musical materials (apart from words) also morally neutral?...consider the words of Jesus: "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him "unclean"?... What comes out of a man is what makes him "unclean." For from *within*, out of men's *hearts*, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice. ...All these evils come from inside and make a man "unclean" [Mark 7:18, 20-23] (2004, 194-5).

I believe that Liesch is correct to emphasize that this is an issue of the heart; we should take seriously Christ's words that in these matters of culture, what God has declared "clean" only becomes unclean by the condition of the heart of the worshipper.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that emic understandings of the intersection of form and meaning in socio-cultural thought are key to detecting the presence or absence of syncretism. Kraft's grid helps us to see the relationships between various kinds of syncretism, whereas Hiebert's model aids in facilitating wise choices for adopting old forms, borrowing nearly-related forms, and transforming otherwise unusable forms for use in the church. Liesch's helpful summary of Paul's teaching regarding stronger and weaker brothers reminds us that judgmental attitudes are not appropriate from either side of the argument.

Best sums it up concisely: "Once a culture is transformed by Christ, its artistic dialects and processes can remain as they are even while bearing new fruit. The changes that might occur – radical or ordinary – will then come from within" (2003, 178).

Works Cited

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