New Media and Communication Across Religions and Cultures

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Chapter 13
Capillitas:
Religion, Communication, and Syncretism in Small Roadside Communities in Venezuela

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the analysis of a small religious and funerary culture practiced alongside Venezuelan roads, where many car accidents cause a great number of deaths every year. After a car accident has caused the death of a person, family members build a small cenotaph known in Venezuela as capillita, where a variety of ritual practices are developed. According to family members, the capillita has to be built at the exact location where the victim "took his last breath." This small funerary culture is a vivid expression of rich and complex processes of religious syncretism that combines and integrates elements originally coming from Catholic, Jewish, and African-Venezuelan practices, along with popular agrarian myths and legends. Communication processes, sometimes among distant communities, located in different roads and highways, are based on family visits and religious meetings, where messages are exchanged face to face. But capillitas are not only funerary monuments where family members and neighbors come to communicate with the deceased, visit and bring candles, flowers, water, liquor, and food, they are also signs of warning to passersby and, particularly, to drivers who are usually blamed for car accidents.

INTRODUCTION

Syncretism and fundamentalism can be viewed as opposite reactions to the processes of modernization and globalization. André Droogers (2005)

We would like to begin with a short story that we learned during a field trip in our research about road *capillitas* in the state of Zulia, at the west side of Venezuela, where we have been carrying out investigations since 1996. But, first, let us tell you that *capillitas* (Spanish for little chapels) are, in fact, no more than cenotaphs built along the Venezuelan roads at the exact place where somebody has died in a car accident. Cenotaphs are funerary monuments where there is no body buried. In our research we gathered information about more than four hundred *capillitas* in the western region of Venezuela.

As we said, in 1996 during one of our field trips to the Lara – Zulia highway, we encoun-

tered a small *capillita* that had been built to commemorate a man who worked as a lottery salesman (Figure 1). He had died in a car accident a few years before, and the neighbors we interviewed told us that this lottery man used to travel in public transportation between the city of Cabimas, where he sold lottery tickets, and his small road village, where he and his family lived. Every day he travelled in the morning from his village to Cabimas and went back in the afternoon. In one of these trips back home the car that he was travelling was involved in a serious accident and he died. After the usual nine nights of funerary prayers, his family built his *capillita* at the place where the car fell and, therefore, where he, according to his family, *dio su último suspiro* (took his last breath). He was buried at a cemetery in Cabimas.

As usual, every Monday his family went not to the Cabimas city cemetery but to this little cenotaph, to pray and talk to the soul of their beloved, put candles, flowers, water and, in

Figure 1. Beautiful semi aerial capillita located by the Perijá road in the state of Zulia, Venezuela. Notice de flowers and the vivid colors. March 2009. Photo by David Enrique Finol.

some cases, beer. According to the family, the candles were to help light his way to heaven, the flowers to beautify his way, and water because "when people die in a car accident they die thirsty" so "they come to this place (to the cenotaph) to drink".

One day, one of the neighbors from the village asked the soul of the deceased lottery salesman to hint him a "winning number", and, later on, following the example of the former, another neighbor did the same thing. So the custom spread and began to generalize. One day, one of these petitioners won the lottery and, as one can imagine, this first winning confirmed –to his followers- the power of the spirit of the deceased man to make predictions; for others, the power to make "small miracles", which is the real proof of a soul having special powers over ordinary life. As thanks, every lottery winner will make a ritual offer to the soul in his *capillita*, an act that confirms the beginning of a new road religious practice.

As we can see in this story, it is the beginning of a small set of beliefs and rituals that has been growing since. This small example shows the way many *capillitas* have become the center of a particular, long-lasting religious practice, to which villagers feel attached. Their initial components may be summarized in Figure 2.

This kind of popular religion is an expression of *a rich syncretic process* in which we were able to identify many influences, and where conflicts and contradictions are solved in order to cope with the stress of ordinary real life, a life marked by frequent and terrible car accidents, where members of these small road communities die every day, alongside drivers and passengers.

RELIGION AND SYNCRETISM

As it is known, the term syncretism was first introduced by Melville Herskovits (1956), who defined the concept as "the process by which old meanings are ascribed to new elements or by which new values change the cultural significance of old forms" (in Balme, 1999, p. 9). As seen, Herskovits in his definition emphasizes meaning and values and adds little to the elements, forms and processes by which syncretism take place. The concept has switched its focus to encompass new cultural phenomena, and new definitions have tried to give to it a more heuristic performance. Marzal, for instance, affirming the importance of meaning, also states that interpretation is the most relevant process of syncretism, a process by which "religious forms from other traditions are accepted, but meanings are added or changed" (in Casanova, 2012, p. 73). Rey, in a definition based in Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, proposes a *théologie populaire*, and, consequently, suggests «*considérer que le syn-*

Figure 2. This figure shows how deaths caused by car accidents deaths evolve in a manner that contribute to the creation of road cults like capillitas.

Lottery → Car accident → petitions → offers

Hazard → death → prayer → beliefs/rituals → religion
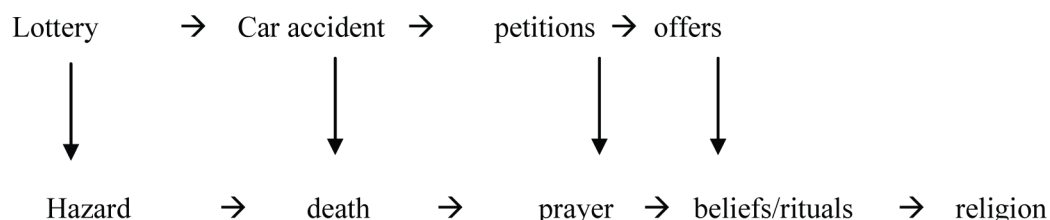
crétisme religieux est au départ un processus théologique, épistémologique et intégratif qui ne peut être expliqué dans toute sa complexité sans prêter une attention particulière au lieu d'où il émerge » (2004, p. 454).

But also, syncretic processes may be defined, as McGuire and Maduro (2005, p.412) point out, as "the mixing of elements of two or more cultures into a combination that is qualitatively different from any of the 'donor' cultures"; and in spite of prejudices that arise from some institutionalized religions that see syncretic religious practices proper of the "poor", "superstitious" or "uneducated", in the end syncretic processes are at the root of all religions and cultures, a conclusion that Shaw and Stewart present like this: Syncretism is a ''process by which cultures constitute themselves at any given point in time'' (in McGuire and Maduro, 2005, p. 413). Even if today's institutionalized religion systems might be more resistant to syncretic processes, they are also, in a large measure, the result of various rich, unattended, unexpected, and lengthy processes of syncretism. As Beyer (2005, p.417) says, institutionalized religions are "previous and legitimated syncretizations".

Even in today's world, where globalization appears to be the main trend, syncretism as mixing cultural phenomena, instead of becoming weak, has appeared even in very conservative religious realms. As Kale shows, information technologies and an increasing migration almost all over the world have made and will continue to make easier "spiritual experiences and spiritual experimentation" (2004, p. 102), a cultural and social phenomena that Parker Gumucio calls "l'éclosion de nouveaux types de syncrétismes magico-religieux" (2004, 168). It is, none the less, in this strong economical, technological and political process of globalization that, surprisingly,

we are confronted with a powerful revival of indigenous religions, traditions, rituals, and visibility of ethnic groups, particularly in Latin American countries (Parker Gumucio, 2002).

Although some researchers have neglected the concept of syncretism, we believe that it is a very useful one. According to them, syncretism does not add to a better understanding of the phenomena by which a religion system or an ensemble of beliefs is perceived as the result of various syncretic processes. Nevertheless, our field experience has shown that what it is important when dealing with syncretic phenomena is to establish and correlate the components that intervene in a specific religious practice and the level of mixing processes that occurred in a particular religion or set of beliefs.

New forms of syncretism have emerged from today's close relationship between media and religion which, in many ways, imitate the old forms of cultural mixings. In what Hoover (2008) calls new "emerging 'spiritualities'", Parker Gumucio (2002) identifies as "à ma façon" ou "sans Eglise", and Kale (2004) calls "do-it-yourself spiritual mélange", it is possible to find many people who:

…look for symbols and other resources outside the boundaries of specific religious traditions, seeking to create something new, synthetic and meaningful that works for them. While some of these resources necessarily come from the historic religions, it is the acquisition and combination of them (…) in unique and uniquely meaningful ways that is the task of the autonomous individual self (Hoover, 2008, p. 6).

But in these contemporary cases, there is a strong influence of the individualistic ideology of modernism, which is present and dominant;

these new, particular, and emerging forms of syncretism are expressions of fresh ways of dealing with spiritual and sacred concerns, most of them related to media and urban cultures, whereas in the case of *capillitas* religious practices we find a strong feeling of collective beliefs. In the road villages we have visited we have found that along with the building of *capillitas* and all the beliefs and rituals that surround such activity there are a strong sense of community, where sharing of beliefs works together with practices that involve partaking in community activities, exchange of favors, food and material resources. While in urban modernism separation between religion and social and everyday life is marked by strong boundaries, as a consequence, among other factors, of complex processes of mediation, in our road communities such boundaries are weak and fragile.

According to Esterman, a similar phenomenon seems to occur in Andean, rural communities:

… en ce qui concerne l'aspect religieux …, il ne peut y avoir une dichotomie ou une séparation entre le sacré et le profane, entre le monde religieux et le monde séculier, étant donné que la mise en relation est la caractéristique fondamentale de la pensée andine (in Ameigeiras, 2008, p. 310).

According to our hypothesis, these weak boundaries facilitate and contribute to process of cultural syncretic phenomena in rural, road communities.

HISTORY OF *CAPILLITAS*

The history of Venezuelan *capillitas* seems to go back to the history of cenotaphs, which is as ancient as the first human expressions of mourning and grief? Cenotaphs were of a particular development during long wars abroad, when it was impossible to repatriate dead bodies, and, at the same time, it felt necessary, by the community, to create a physical and symbolical expression of remembrance and love.

In the case of Venezuela, the funeral building of *capillitas*, as we have pointed out elsewhere (Finol and Finol, 2009), is a practice that was brought to the country by the *canarios*, Spanish inhabitants of the Canary island, who emigrated massively to the Latin-American country. Around 150.000 Canarian nationals arrived to the Venezuelan shores only in the 1950s. In the Canary Island roads is easy to see hundreds of *cruces* (crosses) and *altars* (altars) rememorizing people who died in car accidents and whose bodies were buried elsewhere.

Four Religious Sources

As a syncretic process, this religious road practice, that has emerged and developed from car accident deaths, and that expresses itself in funerary monuments known as *capillitas*, shows at least four sources of religious content that have mixed in unattended ways (Figure 3).

First of all, there is the main presence of Catholic religion, to which most people state to be attached to. This allegiance appears not only in their catholic beliefs but also in the prayers, particularly the *Padre Nuestro* (Our father) and *Ave María* (Hail Mary), and the saying of the Rosary during the post-wake nine nights of prayers.

One interesting aspect of the manifested allegiance to the Catholic religion is the fact that its official authorities usually campaign to discourage road villagers from building *capillitas* and participating in rituals around them, particularly when such rituals, as it is

Figure 3. At least there are four important sources of religious beliefs at the origin of capillitas cult. The mixing of these sources has created new, rich, and enduring road religious practices.

Christian Evangelic   Catholic religion

Capillitas

Jewish religion   Indigenous/African myths and legends
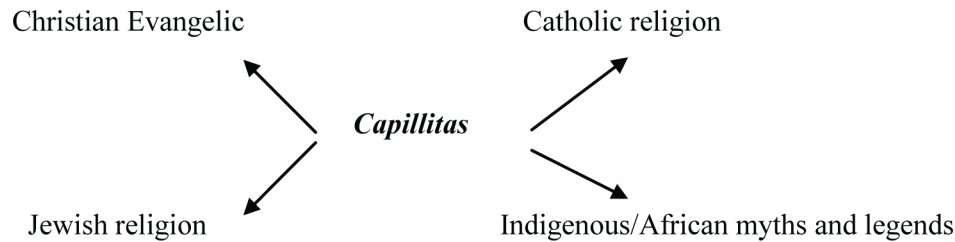
the case, are mixed with alcohol consumption, beliefs in miraculous ghost, and animistic practices. Even though the interviewed *capillita's* practitioners are frequently conscious of the Catholic Church's rejection to their belief, they do not feel any contradiction between their religious practices and the teachings of the Catholic Church to which they manifest allegiance. For some of them there are no religious borders. But even for those who feel some contradictions their main concern seems to be truthful to their individual belief, a phenomena that Hoover relate to the growing individualism created by modernity, education and media:

(It) has been a decline in the authority of religious leaders, institutions and doctrines. For a variety of reasons, people today are taking more responsibility for their own faiths, spiritualities and religious identities. Along with the decline in public confidence in institutions in general, religious institutions have also lost their prominence and their clerical authority is less important in determining what people believe and the way they live their lives (Hoover, 2008, p. 5).

For road villagers the long standing absence of catholic churches and priests in their rural settlements is one of the most important causes of their weak allegiance to the church rule and the frail obeisance of religious officials. Sometimes they resent that being poor and not educated are the causes why they do not receive proper attention.

Second, there is a growing conversion of people from these road communities to Christian Evangelism, and they have begun to show differences with Catholic people in their views towards *capillitas*, since theoretically they do not believe in their construction as funerary monuments to which, at least formally, they attach no religious value. According to members of the *Roca Firme* Baptist Church, when people die they just go to heaven or to hell but nothing remains in that place where the person took their last breath. Nevertheless, we have interviewed members of this religion who, in spite of their belief, have built a *capillita* to their loved ones when they die in car accidents. This behavior shows, on the one hand, the need for building some kind of representation of grief and mourning, a place to which relate and express emotions and feelings; and, on the other hand, it also shows the force of social pressure because the community expects some visual and spatial marking of the death.

But we have found other powerful sources of inspiration for the building of road *capillitas*, one which is comparable to similar

practices in urban environments. In fact, in urban and rural scenarios religious behavior is frequently associated to these sources: fear, and apprehension. As Hoover points out, "people motivate themselves to look for a vision and a meaning, to orient themselves toward symbols, ideas, and values that deal with fear, anxieties and fundamental questions" (2000, p. 49).

Third, there is at least one unexpected Jewish symbol used in the *capillitas* by people who visit these small funerary monuments. That symbol is the small stones left as evidence of the visit, as you can see in Figure 4.

For us it was hard to see the connection between this ancient Jewish tradition and its use by people who mostly identify themselves as Catholics or Christian Evangelists, on small road communities ranging from 30 to 100 people. Finally we discovered that in Coro, capital city of the state of Falcon, in the northwest of Venezuela, there is an old Jewish cemetery, founded in 1832 by a small community of Sephardic Jews who emigrated from the Dutch island of Curaçao, situated off the Venezuelan coasts. This cemetery is considered the oldest Jewish cemetery in South America.

So we believe that people from Coro and other neighboring towns learned the use of small stones to mark and symbolize the visit to a tomb, and as an imitation process it begun to spread, slowly, among some Catholics who moved to the villages alongside the roads or went to pay their respects to their loved ones. When asked about the origin of their ritual of leaving stones over the *capillitas*, people just say that they learned it from their parents or grandparents. The use of this symbol benefits also from the fact that the semi-desertic condition of most of the Falcon state provides plenty of small stones.

Finally, a fourth source of these religious practices that has grown around the *capillitas* are indigenous-agrarian myths and legends mixed with African practices, brought by slaves, that explain some beliefs and rituals practiced by members of these small road communities. Among the most important elements that we have identified from this source are, for example, the beliefs about the need for the soul of the dead to drink water, about the idea that people who die unexpectedly usually die thirsty. Symbolism of water and its different meanings are well known by anthropologists and researchers in religious studies. Although semiotic processes involved in symbolisms of water are various and polysemic, it is important to underline that in the context of funerary practices, like the building of *capillitas*, water is a symbol of life, which explains why on each Monday mourners places small quantities of water at the interior of these small cenotaphs.

These kinds of practices are sometimes identified for some scholars as magic, and Parker Gumucio calls "*néo-magie-religion*" the new type of syncretism that characterizes our modern societies: "*La néo-magie-religion n'est pas de la magie pure. Elle est toujours un syncrétisme avec de religions locales ou universelles*" (2004, 183). However, there are continuous flows between different religious systems at different levels. But even magic intervenes as a source of religious views. Moreover, as Amodio says, « the logic of the magic universe overflows the historical world, multiplying itself in an effort to control the breaks up of everyday life through religious forms" (2009,p. 41).

But we think that what becomes important in these transactions between different religious sources is the dynamic tension of forms and contents that shape new meanings,

Figure 4. Two cenotaphs built at the Falcon-Zulia state road where small stones have been left on the roof as testimony of recent visits. January 2009. Photos by David Enrique Finol.

new visions, and new solutions to the deep conflicts of life and death. As we said in 2009,

The funerary micro-cultures like the one we have presented here are a case, concrete and dynamic, of processes of syncretism that originates in the tensional convergence between the great, institutionalized religions, tributaries of the social life of these small communities and the practical beliefs derived from their everyday life (Finol and Finol, 2009, p. 117).

It is in these lively tensions where conflicts between religious contents and forms become effectively resolved in unexpected ways. These new religious ways allow practitioners to cope with the hardship of life and death.

Capillitas, Identities and Religious Practices

The very nature of syncretric practices shows again how difficult is to defend the idea of a unique, pure, permanent identity among human beings. O the contrary, syncretic processes demonstrate how complex and even contradictory our own identity can be, and how processes of identity formation are plagued with conflicting elements looking for ways of semiotic articulation and re-articulation.

In the set of rituals and beliefs that arise from and express in the construction of *capillitas*, where the mixing and blending of forms might be considered as conflicting among themselves, we see a process of identity formation, a syncretic identity, that has a strong influence in managing everyday problems, particularly in dealing with the frequent deaths that cars and speed bring to the community life. In a sense, it is the violent death of car accidents that pervades most of the community activities and contribute to the formation of their own identity, a process where also the

road itself emerge as a place whose meaning goes beyond its being as a communicational space. In that sense, the road becomes also an articulation of the community culture, the road is a kind of media that brings the external life, the life of the passersby, the foreigner, the stranger, the other.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Now, from this religious experience and taking into account the main subjects of this workshop, we have asked ourselves some questions that seem to us pertinent for our discussions. As you can see, we have presented here an example which seems to stand on the opposite side of the process of globalization, since these small communities have no Internet, no cell phones, and no traditional phones; sometimes they receive signals from only a few radio and television stations but no cable TV, and sometimes not even newspapers. But also, these are communities where there are no institutionalized religions since there are no priests and almost no churches.

If it seems difficult to understand urban religions without taking into account the powerful media, a presence that pervades almost every corner of social and cultural life, what is going on in small rural villages, where the presence of media is almost inexistent? Certainly, the media are not the only influence that separates urban and rural social and cultural systems. It is necessary to take into account also de differences of structured social contacts, transportation systems, social hierarchies, technologies, and, last but not least, spatial configuration, among other dependent variables. Of course, media affects all these dependent variables and it is, in turn, affected by them.

And yet, we should ask ourselves if the way of living and integrating, of tolerance and understanding, of these small communities are telling us something about our globalized world and the conflicts and the intolerance we have witnessed for such a long time. Of course, we are not proposing a return to this way of life. What we are suggesting is an effort to discover and understand the structural mechanisms of communication, of dialogue and understanding, by which, in spite of their differences, in these small communities there are no strong conflicts in daily practical behavior or in matter of religious beliefs.

But also we should ask ourselves about the process of real communication, the one that can be found not only in exchanges of information, but also in sharing of emotions, feelings and common-interest matters, carried out in similar or symmetrical conditions between senders and receivers, as it usually occurs in dialogues; real communication that usually takes place, in these small communities, at dawn or at sunset, and where matters that concerns everyday life are discussed.

Members of these small communities have a strong verbal and visual contact, not only among family members but also among villagers who have usually known each other for a long time, and who frequently marry among them. Is it, maybe, their small size as a community which allows them to better communicate, and by doing so enables them to solve conflicts and misunderstandings?

If so, as a consequence, in our world of highly developed technologies of communication, should we stress the need for improving real communication and not just exchanges of information? Is it that the global world has lost sight of the local? Of its possibilities of close contact and real communication? Shall we stress the importance of building smaller communities even in the center of big cities? Is that possible?

Parker Gumucio (2008, p.317) states that "current *interreligious* conflicts are, almost without exception around the planet, *intercultural* conflicts and they must be approached as such", something that seems confirmed in the analysis of the funerary culture we have presented here. So, if he is right, the questions are: how to deal with the interrelations between cultures and religions? If the globalized world has succeed in promoting acceptance of different cultures, how to foster acceptance of different religions?

Focusing on religious relationships, is it possible to argue that the life experience of *capillita* builders -where boundaries and limits are weak, and where inclusion is a "natural" way of building religious and social relationships- is at least one of various possible ways of understanding differences, of resolving conflicts, of acceptance and tolerance, of finding similarities instead of differences, of, finally, looking at what unites us instead of what separates us

And finally, is it possible to conclude from our experience that, in fact, as Drooger (2005, p.463) says, syncretism and fundamentalism are "opposite reactions" to globalization? And, therefore, the better we know the deep mechanism of syncretism the faster/easier we will achieve integration and understanding?

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