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(1)

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Abstract: Although syncretism is frequently described in the history of Buddhism in Asia, little has been discussed regarding its presence in Buddhism in western countries, where the concept would be helpful for analysing the popularization of Buddhism and its new combinations. From this point of view, the first aim of this article is to present a new heuristic category, one that contrasts the more rigid concept of identity established by so-called "Protestant Buddhism." Given the growing dilution of Buddhist identity and its tendency toward syncretism in Brazil, this paper works with the heuristic concept of a "Buddhism in Syncretic Shape." Since this concept is useful for better understanding some groups in Brazil, it is suggested that it can also provide interesting insights for the study of Buddhism in the West. This concept will be developed through a detailed description of Shingon in Brazil, which has undergone a religious synthesis with Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian religions.

1. Introduction

It is possible to imagine that many Buddhists in western countries wake up early for their religious practices, while others are still sleeping. Many of these Buddhists were inspired by books, and generally tend to have an educational and economic level above that of the larger society. For many of these practitioners, the most important morning practice is individual meditation, often through the concentration of the breath and attention to the body posture. For others, the main spiritual training is another kind of contemplative practice or sutra chanting. On the weekends, they may join meditation sessions, retreats, or collective sutra chanting and discussion. Because of these practices, many Buddhists have done some reflection on the necessity for and implementation of adaptations to Buddhism in a western context, many times reducing

Buddhist beliefs and devotional aspects to a minimum, in a practice that often emphasizes a psychological approach or social engagement and transformation.

However, there are many ways to live as a Buddhist in the west. Even if Buddhists are still a minority group, and frequently an elite group in western countries, Buddhism still popularizes itself, receiving other influences in the process. In Suzano, for example, a town on the periphery of São Paulo, Brazil, every morning people receive "blessings" with the "priests", in a ritual of consulting with Shingon monks. This ritual consultation is performed in two small rooms. The majority of participants are women and are Brazilians without Japanese heritage. Each visitor pays a small amount for the so-called consult and "bless" (port. *benzimento*), entering into a queue to be attended. During this waiting time, each of the devoted writes down his or her problem or the problem of someone for whom the participant has come. Most of the situations that they hope to resolve are problems of health, unemployment, or family disharmony and it is frequent that *quimbanda* (black magic) is seen as the cause of the problem. On the weekends, there are ceremonies frequented by Brazilians, such as the cult for ancestors and the ritual of fire (jap. *goma*), and there are also ceremonies for protection against car or home theft, ceremonies with clear social appeal. Though Shingon is a small group in Brazil, its characteristics demonstrate a pattern of adaptation that is very distinct.

The first objective of this paper is to demonstrate that Brazil is a very different environment for the reception of Buddhism as compared to Europe or the USA. Subsequently, the presence of Shingon in Brazil will be described, as will be the existing religious "combinations" of these Buddhists and sympathizers. In this case, the influence of globalization is slight, and therefore different patterns of syncretism and adaptation are clearer. After this, I will propose a heuristic concept of "Buddhism in Syncretic Shape," systematizing different patterns of Buddhism in combination, illustrating them through some Brazilian examples. Given the importance of syncretism as a central concept in the dilution of religious identity and in its potential role in the study of Buddhist identity combinations, it is important to think about syncretism and Buddhism in western countries in more general terms. It is suggested that this type of reflection on Buddhism and syncretism looks potentially useful for the analysis of converts and sympathizers to Buddhism in western countries not included in theories of Buddhist identity as it is constructed through examination of the more intellectualized

influence of the so-called "Buddhism in Protestant Shape."⁽²⁾

2. The Brazilian Folk Environment and its Impact on Buddhism

The history of Buddhism in Brazil is mainly related to Asian, particularly Japanese, immigration. Few Brazilians had interest in Buddhism before the 1960s, in contrast to the situation in Europe and the USA, where there was much earlier philological research being done. With the beginning of Japanese immigration in 1908, Buddhism came to Brazil, but its definitive institutionalization occurred only after the Second World War and after a redefinition of the *nikkey* identity. It is possible to observe two great waves of Japanese immigration in Brazil, the first before the Second World War (composed of approximately 190 000 immigrants) and another between 1952 and 1965 (approximately 50 000 Immigrants)⁽³⁾. The greatest sites of concentration were the states of São Paulo (70 percent of the immigrant population) and Paraná (12 percent). The Japanese immigrated originally to work on coffee farms, substituting for the African slaves liberated in 1888. Throughout the twentieth century, the Japanese and their descendants (*nikkeys*) made social and economic progress in agriculture and in the subsequent migration of many to the urban zone. With a population of approximately 1.7 million Japanese and Japanese descendents, at present, Brazil has the largest *nikkey* population outside of Japan. Since the 1980s, through the immigration of Chinese and Tibetan groups, there has been a great diversity of Buddhist activity in Brazil. Before the 1980s, however, the influence of Buddhism in Brazil remained restricted to Japanese Buddhism, and was therefore associated with ethnic Japanese identity, despite the fact that many *nikkeys* had abandoned the Japanese religions. According to the last census, a significant number of individuals in Brazil declare themselves Buddhist ⁽⁴⁾.

How does the social and cultural environment of Brazil affect the adaptation of Buddhism, especially for converts and sympathizers? It is difficult to generalize because each Buddhist group has important particularities, but there are some general tendencies. Despite the important influence of globalization in the adaptation of Buddhism in Brazil, I think that there are Brazilian characteristics that generate distinct forms of adaptation. Indeed, the influence of Catholicism on religions in Brazil already suggests that others concepts could be applied to the study of Buddhism and its history in Brazil. Brazil is also a country in which multiple religious convergences between many different religious movements are common phenomena, pointing to the tendency

toward a positive view of religious combination and syncretism. Many people appear in the statistics as Catholics, but baptized as infants, they later committed themselves to another religious practice. This is demonstrated by statistical facts that indicate an acceptance of some Buddhist concepts. A recent survey showed that belief in the existence of God is shared by an overwhelming majority of 99 percent.⁽⁵⁾ But despite this, it is still possible that certain Buddhist concepts could be accepted. A belief in reward or punishment after death is assumed by 69 percent of Brazilians. The same research showed that 15 percent of the Brazilians surveyed believe that they will reincarnate, second only to the number expecting reward or punishment after death. A study carried out in 1992, from ISER (Advanced Institute for the Study of Religion), showed that 64 percent of Brazilian Catholics accept reincarnation and are acquainted with some forms of Spiritism or Afro-Brazilian religion (Carvalho 1992: 2). Although reincarnation and karma have distinct meanings in Brazil, as compared to those of orthodox Buddhism, the popular concepts are already there. In addition, a relationship to the ancestors, present in the majority of Japanese Buddhist movements in Brazil, presents a possibility of cultural acceptance in mainstream Brazilian religiosity, since ancestor worship was also common among the Indian and African peoples that formed the Brazilian nation, and played an important role in the formation and devotional practices of Umbanda. The influence of Spiritism in Brazil, with its concepts of reincarnation and karma, indicates a possibility for the acceptance of some important Buddhist beliefs, not through their orthodox formulation in Buddhism⁽⁶⁾, but through a peculiar syncretic reappropriation, as I will describe in the case of Shingon in Brazil. Conversely, "Asian" elements are present in Afro-Brazilian religions and New Age movements in Brazil, with a folk Brazilian meaning. In particular, there are already in many Umbanda centers an oriental line, with Hindu and occasionally Buddhist contents. In books produced by the Afro-Brazilian religions, it is not rare the presence of oriental and Buddhist elements (Corrêa 1999).

Indeed, as an environment of reception for other religions, Brazil is well known by its tendency toward syncretism. An analysis of the history of religions in Brazil reveals the great importance of syncretic cults, mainly of Indian and African influence. Officially rejected since the beginning, the syncretic cults would express cultural elements of resistance for many followers, given the historic association of Catholicism, the official religion, with colonialism. The worship of ancestors and nature spirits through magical

and sacrificial practices were characteristics of the religious practices brought to Brazil by ethnic African slaves. Although perceived as witchcraft and officially persecuted by the Catholic Church, they had a strong influence on folk customs and devotional practices. Japanese immigrants, having come to Brazil since 1908 for work on coffee farms, owing to the liberation of slaves in 1888, lived in a predominantly Catholic nation, but one deeply syncretic in its religious practice. At the beginning of the twentieth century a tendency for more religious liberty was initiated, namely the separation between religion and the state, ratified in the Brazilian Constitution of 1891. This religious liberty was reflected in the presence of Protestantism and some new religious movements, like Spiritism. Spiritualism, while in decline in Europe and the USA since the beginning of the twentieth century, presented a growing appeal to the middle class in Brazil, who found in the doctrines of Allan Kardec a rational foundation for practices and ideas already present in African religiosity. In the 1930s, the religious movements of African origin were influenced by Spiritism, spawning the Macumba and Umbanda traditions. In this period, syncretism began to acquire a peculiar connotation, associated with the Brazilian national identity and with the valorisation of *mestizaje*.⁽⁷⁾ In a syncretic process that applied these concepts to African religiosity, and in spite of political persecution, arose Umbanda, a syncretic version of the African practices in southern Brazil, which received from Spiritism intellectualized concepts of reincarnation and karma. In this epoch was also established a more traditional African religiosity in the establishment of Candomblé. Called Xangôs or Batuques depending on the region of country, Candomblé arose mainly from the late immigration of the *nagô* African ethnics in the nineteenth century, suffering the influence of Catholicism and other African ethnics that were obliged to live together in Brazil under slavery. The practice of Candomblé is the worship of nature gods (*orixás*), each devotee having an initiation and special association with one of them. The relationship between the adept and these sacred forces is made through offerings and detailed rituals, as well as practices of trance and possession. Since the 1950s, Umbanda and Candomblé, despite their incompatibility with Catholic practices, essentially were no longer officially persecuted and therefore able to conquer a relative number of adepts in a quick process of urbanization of the Brazilian population in subsequent years.⁽⁸⁾ At present, many new religious movements with Pentecostal origins have acquired an importance that has threatened the hegemonic situation of Catholicism, but it still presents an incontestable majority. Diverse new religious movements, many of them influenced by the concepts

of "New Age" religion, also have penetrated and found a space within the Brazilian religious field. In this context, a wide concept of syncretism has been utilized for the description of so-called postmodern religiosity, its characteristics anticipated and intensified in Brazil.⁽⁹⁾

3. A Case Study: Shingon in Brazil

3.1 General aspects of Shingon

The development of Tantric Buddhism, also called Vajrayana, began mainly in the sixth century in India, in the period after the development of Mahayana Buddhism. Due to the influence of Tantrism, ceremonies and Hindu gods were incorporated into Buddhism through a reinterpretation of the ways and conditions of enlightenment. The term Esoteric Buddhism (jap. *mikkyō*) has been utilized to describe the Tantric Buddhist stream that arrived in Japan during the ninth century and that since then has developed itself in contact with the local influences of other, subsequently established Shinto and Buddhist sects. Tibetan Buddhism is normally described as a result of the syncretism between the Tantric Buddhist stream and the local Tibetan religion (*Bon*). Aside from the differences due to different interactions with local religions and cultures, the Tibetan stream of Tantric Buddhism is distinguished from the Japanese one because in the Tibetan case, Tantric texts of a later period were also incorporated. Through a more intense contact with the Indian culture, owing to geographical proximity, the influence of Indian religiosity was also comparatively higher. In China, Esoteric Buddhism developed during the Tang dynasty, in the eighth century. In the case of Japan, Esoteric Buddhism was established through Kūkai, posthumously honored as Kōbō Daishi, and Saichō, founder from the Tendai School and known by the title Dengyō Daishi. They had embarked for China in the first years of the ninth century and brought the esoteric teachings established in China to Japan. Beyond the presence of esoteric Buddhism in the traditional schools of Shingon and Tendai, an esoteric influence has contemporarily reappeared in diverse new religious movements in Japan. Kūkai established his school mainly in Mount Kōya, and after his death a series of divisions and disputes occurred. At present Koyasan is only one of the many branches of Shingon (Yamasaki 1988: 37).

Because Shingon includes a complex doctrine and an innumerable set of ritualized

practices, only some aspects will be described here, in order to understand its adapted meaning in the Brazilian context. In contrast with exoteric Buddhism, Shingon is esoteric in the sense that its internal practices and teachings should only be transmitted personally, from master to disciple. The main scriptures — the *Dainichi-kyô* and *Kongôchô-gyô* sutras — are not based on the historical Shakyamuni Buddha, but in the teachings of Dainichi Nyorai. As is narrated in legend, the teachings were to have been discovered in an iron tower by the third patriarch Nagarjuna, the first historical figure in a series of patriarchs from Shingon, whose eighth representative is Kûkai. The main deity is Dainichi Nyorai, who is responsible for the original teaching and understood as the essential energy of life and universe, being that the other deities are a manifestation of this energy (Yamasaki 1988: 64). The main set of Shingon practices is often explained in the two main sutras, specially the contemplative ones, exploring the purification of the activities of body, speech and mind. The instruments of purification are generally based on mudras, mantras and mandalas, in a process that is frequently described by the term *kaji* (mutual empowerment), describing the interaction between the practitioner and the deity chosen for the practice (Yamasaki 1988: 106).

Traditionally the adept has a guardian deity, known in the initiation ritual, and he performs several contemplative activities, often associated with visualization, mandalas and the use of nature elements.⁽¹⁰⁾ The ritual is a very important and complex element in Shingon, offering diverse ceremonies for specific deities or for groups of deities, many with specific purposes, either worldly or not. In a more popular, devotional use, the term *kaji* is also often utilized in rituals intended for worldly purposes, empowered through the energy generated by interaction with the deities.⁽¹¹⁾ In this sense, a very popular and public ceremony is the *goma* (fire ritual), performed traditionally for the Fudô Myô-ô bodhisattva, in which special wooden sticks and requests are ceremonially burned. The historical origin of this ritual seems to be the Brahmanic ceremony to Agni, in which requests and prayers are understood to be carried to the heavens by the smoke and flames. In Shingon, one also finds this original and magic meaning of mutual empowerment for a worldly purpose, although the central message is the symbolic burning of delusions and attachments through the fire of wisdom (Yamasaki 1988: 74). In a more popular context, there are consultations and devotional practices directed to laypeople, in which karma is an important element for specific problems such as illness or the negative influence of spirits. In accordance with the folk religion of Japan, it is also popularly believed that deceased spirits, above all ancestors, influence karma.⁽¹²⁾

Beyond these characteristics, it is interesting to describe the general aspects of syncretism in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism. The first aspect is a syncretic tendency in its expansion, found in the incorporation of Hindu elements and also Shinto deities in Japan. The tendency to juxtapose the *kamis* from Shinto with bodhisattvas was intensified with the Shuguen-dô movement in Japan. These incorporations can be justified even doctrinally: everything is understood as manifestation of Dainichi Nyorai, and through this concept elements of other religions can be potentially incorporated as special manifestations or local aspects of the truth. Another aspect of syncretism in Shingon practice is the presence of diverse magical elements, ever since its origin. Far from being denied, these aspects were emphasized in diverse moments in Shingon history, often understood as a reaffirmation not only of worldly life, but also of the self and of human desire (Yamasaki 1988: 8-10, 72-79). Traditionally these ideas appeared to conflict with the original formulation of Buddhism, but through Shingon they appear in a Buddhist school that is considered very orthodox in Japan. Frequently Shingon designated Mahayana Buddhism as being very far from the interests of common people, because Mahayana valued more philosophical aspects.⁽¹³⁾ As I will describe, in Brazil these magical aspects correspond to the requirements of temple visitors, even if the Shingon practices are interpreted within other parameters and superposed onto other practices. Lastly, another characteristic that facilitates the incorporation of other practices is the historical tendency of splits and separations through the formation of new schools that act in similar ways but potentially have differences in teachings and style. This occurred due the esoteric characteristic of transmission as realized from master to disciple. Each master or each disciple, after the master's death, can eventually incorporate elements of other practices.⁽¹⁴⁾

3.2 Practices of Shingon in Brazil

In this section, I will describe the general presence of Shingon in Brazil, paying special attention to the activities in temples that have demonstrated a more syncretic presence. The empirical material was possible through field research that included observation of activities and ceremonies, general qualitative interviews with adepts, and in-depth interviews with three monks and five laypeople selected on the basis of their commitment to Shingon. This description is also supported by an analysis of the

activities programs of the last few years and some information brochures supplied by the temples. The field research was initiated in 1999, but interrupted in 2000, and later continued from March to May of 2002.

In 1934 Reverend Shinba arrived in São Paulo via the ship Kawamachi-maru, initiating the activities of Shingon in Brazil. He initially established himself in an independent way, but his temple subsequently joined with Koyasan. Another temple from Koyasan, called Koyasan Koyaji, was founded later, in the district of Cidade Antonieta, in the eastern zone of the city of São Paulo, the present headquarters of Koyasan Shingon in Brazil. At present, Koyasan has six temples in its mission in Brazil, and the risk of extinction exists in the majority of these temples, because the immigrants and priests are very old and many descendants are not interested in the continuity of temple activities. There are now around nine priests in Koyasan, the majority of them being immigrants who dedicate themselves to a monastic career only once they have reached pension age. There is, however, one more dynamic temple from Koyasan with a higher presence of Brazilians, located in Suzano, a town near São Paulo. With the old name of Shingonshu Daijo-ha, this temple was only later incorporated into Koyasan under the name "Church Shingonshu Kongoji." The founders were Japanese immigrants called Oda, Nishioka, and Anzai, who donated the space where the temple was built. This temple in Suzano receives many sympathizers from the city of São Paulo, with around fifty visitors daily, mainly Brazilians. On the weekends, especially during the ritual of fire, there are approximately 300 people, more than half of which are Brazilians without Japanese heritage. Despite this there are only some Brazilians and descendants aspiring toward sacerdotal roles. At present there is only one Brazilian priest, who stays in Suzano. There were some Brazilians who were Shingon monks, but they did not remain so.⁽¹⁵⁾

The majority of sympathizers and adepts from the Church Shingonshu Kongoji come from the city of São Paulo and their first contacts are made orally. Many Brazilians without Japanese heritage visit the temple, many of whom are middle class or below. The presence of many Japanese descendants often occurs during funeral rites. The so-called consultations and blessings are an important element for visitors to the temple, being performed daily in two small rooms, separated from the monks' residence and from the main building. The participants call the monks *padres*, a Portuguese word normally used in the Catholic Church. The main motivations of these visitors are health,

financial, or familial problems. The great majority of Brazilians do not have a formal association with the temple, or a more doctrinal or intellectual understanding of Buddhism, although some of these sympathizers have visited these consultations and weekend ceremonies for many years. Beyond the Shingon temple, many also practice other traditions simultaneously, such as Catholicism, Spiritism, or Seicho-no-ie, a new Japanese religion very popular in Brazil. Despite this, some do consider themselves Buddhist and have done so for decades, visiting the temple regularly, but participating in other religious practices as well.

For ethnographic reasons, and as the empirical data of participant observation, it is important to relate one of these typical consultations, to illustrate the presence of syncretism through the suspension of barriers between Shingon and Afro-Brazilian traditions. Each visitor pays a small amount, receives a password, and stands in an informal queue, awaiting a free room for the next session. Meanwhile each visitor writes out his problem or request. During the ceremony in which my participation was permitted, there were twelve people, of them only one was male and only one had Japanese heritage. The majority of the women were housewives and the only man was unemployed. The participants belonged to diverse age groups and social classes, although they were predominantly middle class. All participants sit down in chairs against the lateral walls. The priest had a Shingon oracle in front of an altar with an image of Kôbô Daishi. Initially, the priest reads the paper with the visitor's problem, clarifying all possible confusion with a conversation in the front of the group. The most frequent problems were related to health, followed by financial difficulties. At first, while still in a group, the priest speaks with each participant, investigating possible causes and solutions of the problem. As I understood it, in this first phase the solutions are not spiritual. Sometimes the monk gave practical advice, for example, the appropriate kind of lawyer for a specific case, or what might be a better orientation for an unprofitable business. Regarding health problems, he gave medical advice, which was affirmed by the priest's specialization in Chinese medicine and his knowledge of homeopathy.

In a second phase, a more spiritual consultation with each participant occurs, as a form of investigation into the spiritual cause of the problem. The spiritual causes are mainly divided into two categories. The first great reason was ancestor karma, which would

have important consequences in the descendant's life. According to the priest, for example, the problem of divorce faced by one participant was caused by an abortion sustained by an ancestor. This causal relation with the ancestor's karma was also common in the case of participants' illnesses. A second general cause of problems was *macumba* (black magic)(16), expedited from someone in order to make evil for a participant, or as a more direct influence from some deceased spirit. This spiritual explanation was expected by some participants as a possible justification for evil and for the problem. The only man present, who was unemployed, asked: "nothing works, is everything for me closed, will it not be *macumba*?" This association is confirmed by the priest's vocabulary, which employed the term "*macumba*," "bad spirit," or "bad influence from deceased spirits" (port. *encosto*), when he tried to make intelligible the spiritual causes of these problems. In Brazil, these words are closely associated with Spiritism or Afro-Brazilian religions. After the spiritual explanation of the reasons for each individual problem, the priest solicited concentration from all participants, and a specific mudra was made, showed by the priest. Then a purification ceremony was performed, with the recitation of a specific mantra. Then each participant was individually purified again, through a new mantra. After that the priest performed another individual consultation to verify whether or not there were still some spiritual obstacles or if the spiritual problems were resolved. At this time, the priest explained some concepts of Buddhism, such as the importance of reverences, the meaning of mudras, or the role of Kôbô Daishi for Shingon. For a participant identified as suffering from strong *macumba*, a specific ritual was performed, with a specific sequence of mudras and mantras. For some visitors there was nothing more to be done, for others it was necessary that a determined number of masses (port. *missa*) be performed, a ritual performed daily, only by monks, for the spiritual pacification of the laypeople's ancestors. During these ceremonies, through the adept's solicitation, the ancestors' karma is purified as a way to avoid negative consequences in a descendant's life.

Many participants understand the ceremony as a blessing or, to take the spiritualistic ceremony of "passes hands" (port. *tomar um passe*), a kind of blessing. Often, they refer to Shingon as a good means to undo black magic (port. *desfazer trabalhos de macumba*), normally ignoring the more traditional or intellectual concepts of Buddhism. The practice is directed toward solutions for worldly problems, based especially in the concept of karma and in magical elements syncretized from Brazilian religions. A level

of syncretism is also shown in the reappropriation of words and expressions from Roman Catholicism. In a stricter sense, the suspension of limits between religious systems, in the case of this Koyasan temple, occurs especially in this magical context. The cause of a visitor's problem is often understood to be a result of the karma associated with ancestors or of some black magic realized in Afro-Brazilian religions. The desired result, the elimination of the problem, is obtained through consultation with the priests or in rituals for the ancestors. These elements are understood simultaneously in the context of Brazilian religions, and with the information they have about Buddhism.

Magical and popular elements also exist in the weekend ceremonies, but in this case they appear to be associated more with the Shingon ritual orthodoxy. These ceremonies are attended by more immigrants and Japanese descendants, but approximately half are Brazilians without Japanese heritage. The most popular ceremonies are the ritual of fire (jap. *goma*) and the ritual in memory of ancestors. The *goma* ceremony, undertaken normally for Fudô Myô-ô, and featuring complex symbolism, receives a peculiar interpretation as consequence of its location in Brazil. For many, the ritual objective is the "cut of spiritual obstacles." According to interviews, the ash left after the ritual is used with water in diverse ways, against bad spirit influences for example. Besides this there are annual ceremonies like the "happiness cult," the "astrological cult," the "abort cult," performed to pacify the spirits of aborted children, and also the "lantern cult." The lantern cult is performed in memory of the ancestors, as it is in Japan, with the objective that through this ceremony they can live in peace and happiness.⁽¹⁷⁾ Another annual ceremony is the commemoration of the birth of Buddha. As in Buddhist temples in Japan, in Brazil there is a traditional offering of sweet tea before a small image of Buddha as a child, although in Japan the occasion is also marks the arrival of spring (jap. *hanamatsuri*). After this ceremony, the sweet tea is distributed between the adepts who bring bottles to collect it, because the tea is considered good for warding off general health problems.

Indeed, an important influence in the adaptation of this temple is the significance of certain social problems, often found in the Third World. The absence of a health care infrastructure or of insurance, for example, or a high rate of unemployment and persons with financial difficulties, are reflected in motives for a temple visit. Some aspects of

life in the city of São Paulo have already been described as important social influences on religious practice(18) and the same phenomenon occurs in this temple. For example, one such factor is the feeling of insecurity felt by many of the inhabitants of São Paulo, due to the high rate of criminality. This gives a special relevance to some of the ceremonies performed, such as the "*goma* cult against car theft" and the "*goma* cult against house theft". Another tendency that appears more increased in the case of Shingon, is the presence of more devotional elements in the practice of Brazilian converts, often associated with benefits and graces. Beside the main temple, for example, there is a small sanctuary dedicated to Jizô bodhisattva. Devotion directed toward Jizô was popular with immigrants because he protects travellers and children, which was very important during the trip to Brazil and during the difficult beginning. Now this devotion has attracted some Brazilians as well, and there are Brazilian adepts that pray and leave offerings of fruits and food for Jizô.(19) In a big marble plate below, it is possible to read in Portuguese: "With the pilgrim stick symbolizing the domain about the nature elements and the sphere meaning the divine sapience, this saint presides the worldly things. Besides other innumerable graces this venerable saint from earth provides us the salvation of the despaired, the protection of children, of farming and distance from the evils that afflict man. Here we record the gratitude to Mr. Kiyoshi Senzaki who donated the image for us. Erected in 26.3.1967."

In the city of Suzano there exists a Shingon temple other than the Church Shingonshu Kongoji. Due to a division in the temple that belongs to Koyasan, another Shingon temple was built in the city, called Buddhist Church Nambei Yugazam Jyomiyoji. This temple belongs to Shugundô, a movement founded in Japan in the thirteenth century, and important in the syncretism of Shingon and Shinto practices that occurred at that time. Presenting a magnificent and traditional construction, the temple in Brazil is frequented only by immigrants and descendants. Although near it physically, this temple is a clear contrast to the Church Shingonshu Kongoji. The monks speak little Portuguese and the Buddhist Church Nambei Yugazam Jyomiyoji is very traditional, and associated with devotees of Japanese ethnicity, even though the numbers of these devotees has rapidly decreased in the last years. One interesting aspect of this temple, however, is its incorporation of some devotional and popular elements of Brazilian Catholicism. In this sense, one important characteristic of the altar is the presence of a lateral image of Our Lady Aparecida (port. *Nossa Senhora Aparecida*). She is venerated

as the manifestation of the Virgin Mary in Brazil and is a traditional object of devotion in popular Catholicism. Being the Patroness and symbol of Brazil, devotion to her was very popular with Japanese immigrants in rural zones. The image appears beside the mandalas of Shingon, in the center is a great image of Fudô Myô-ô, the central object of Shingon devotion at this temple. Besides the incorporation of Our Lady Aparecida as a devotional image, there are around three pilgrimages each year to the city of Aparecida do Norte, an important and traditional point for this Catholic devotion. In the photos on lateral walls, the group often appears to be accompanied by Catholic priests during these visits to Aparecida do Norte. At this temple, it is also possible to affirm the presence of syncretism, due to its incorporation of Catholic elements in combination with Shingon meanings.

Beyond the temples associated with Koyasan and the Buddhist Church Nambei Yugazam Jyomiyoji, there are also some small independent temples, thought to be derived from Shingon (Osaki 1990: 95-96). Regarding Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, there still exists two Tendai temples in the city of Diadema, following a syncretic pattern similar to what occurs in Shingon.(20) Besides this, there are some new religious movements influenced by Shingon based in São Paulo.(21)

4. "Buddhism in Syncretic Shape"

4.1 Diluting religious identities through syncretism

One of the main difficulties of the research on syncretism is the ideological and historical connotation that the term contains, which causes some authors even to reject the concept. Despite its use in other contexts before the sixteenth century, its use in theological discourse frequently produced a pejorative connotation for the term.(22) In contrast to the tendency toward negative interpretation, syncretism was sometimes positively valued, as for example in Latin America, because it presented cultural elements of resistance against the official Catholic hegemony historically associated with European colonization. Despite the historical presence of a pejorative use, the elimination of any negative connotation in the scientific use of the term has been pursued, because as a neutral term it can be used as an important category in Religious Studies (Rudolph 1979).

Another difficulty for the research of syncretism is the relatively free use of the term,

which hinders the formation of a more precise concept. Although sometimes a more instrumental and formal definition is proposed, the term is generally used in vague, inexact, and often contradictory ways.⁽²³⁾ Maybe the source of these contradictions and variations is the difficulty in systematizing the contributions of different geographical regions or different religions, given the specificity and peculiarities that influence the occurrence of syncretism. Although some proposals about syncretism were developed in Europe, these studies rarely include the research developed in Latin America, where syncretism is more of a cultural characteristic than a process.⁽²⁴⁾ On the other hand, it is rare that reference, in the studies about syncretism in Brazilian religions, is given to works about syncretism in other historical epochs and geographical regions. This difficulty is probably due to the diversity of local studies that can serve as a model for research about syncretism. In Europe the main models for the concept of syncretism are the histories of Hellenic religions in antiquity (Stolz 1996:18). In Brazil, and perhaps in all of America, the main model seems to be the anthropological works on African religions. These studies had important contributions from social scientists such as Herkovits and Roger Bastide, who developed lines of analysis that still today influence the interpretation of the phenomenon (Ferretti 1995: 41-113 and Reuter 2002: 171-282). In the USA, the use of syncretism in Anthropology, independent of its older use in the History of Religions, appears throughout the works of Boas, in work about integration and race, and was established as an instrumental concept within the work of Herkovits on Afro-American religions (Greenfield 1998). In accordance with the culturalist theory, syncretism was often used as a reinterpretation, the result of contact between two cultures. More recently, with the tendency of the USA and many countries, for the substitution of assimilationist politics with the concept of a multicultural society, syncretic phenomena has often been rejected in favour of the valorisation of an ethnic identity, and the concept of syncretism in the academic community has varied due to these political changes (Stewart 1994: 6-23). Because religious combinations have been utilized ideologically and politically for different uses in particular cultures, many researchers proposed the study of the political discourse about its local validity through syncretism and anti-syncretism.

Despite these difficulties, syncretism remains a central concept for the study of religious combinations and I believe that a stricter and more formal use of the term is theoretically possible. A general and heuristic concept of syncretism is the "suspension

of barriers between two systems," as proposed by Ulrich Berner.(25) This suspension of limits generates a social process of religious combination and the suspension of the concurrency between these systems, through the appropriation, reinterpretation, and juxtaposition of external elements. Bechert also proposed different levels of syncretism, which contemplate the necessary limits to the use of the term and could be specially useful in the study of syncretic patterns in Buddhism outside Asia.(26) At the first level can be identified a reappropriation of elements, which represents syncretism in a more free use of the term. This occurs when elements are incorporated and reinterpreted inside another religion, but tend to occupy a marginal character for adepts and for the institution. A paradigmatic example for this situation, mentioned by Bechert, is the appropriation of Krishna in Jainism. In this sense, more recent uses of syncretism could be mentioned, gleaned from attempts to understand combination in so-called postmodern religiosity.(27) In a stricter sense of the term, syncretism is a process in which the incorporated elements possess a comparable weight to that of the existing elements. In this more restricted use, a real suspension of limits occurs, the juxtaposition and identification of elements belonging originally to different systems being common. In this use of the term, through diverse factors, the result of a syncretic combination can be represented as a creation of different truth levels, or syncretism can be better described by concepts such as integration and assimilation. Diverse examples for this second meaning can be found in Asian religions, like the relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal or in Java, or even the adaptation of Buddhism to peculiar local religions in the Far East through the *bodhisattva* concept. A third level of religious combination is synthesis, which is associated with syncretism but can be differentiated through the formation of a new movement. In synthesis, two religious systems contribute to the formation of a distinct third system.(28) While syncretism is a process, synthesis has a result different from the original elements. Often forming new religions, a classic example of synthesis is the Sikh religion, a combination of Hindu and Islamic elements.

4.2 Patterns of Buddhist combination in the West: insights from Brazil and Shingon

The presence of syncretism in the history of Buddhism is frequently mentioned with regard to its adaptation in Asia,(29) although its presence in and explanatory value for Buddhist practice in western countries has been little researched. It is natural to suppose that this "suspension of barriers between two systems" can also arise in Buddhism in

western countries, in a different pattern of religious combination that should be better described. In a broader sense, potential motives for religious combination is the new situation of simultaneous presence of diverse Buddhist schools in western countries, as well as the potential interaction with other religions. The peculiarities of different Buddhist schools are not important for some adepts, which can also stimulate combinations. Many differences between schools and even religions, which make sense in Asia due to local contexts or geographical distances, can have less meaning in western countries. Religious differences present in the Asian context can be viewed for immigrants and descendants as resemblances between minority groups in western countries. All these factors can generate new religious combinations, many of them temporary and tentative, as much for adepts as for institutions.⁽³⁰⁾ Here the concept of syncretism emphasizes this processual and dynamic adaptation of Buddhism in western countries. The association of many Buddhists with New Age groups or even with other forms of knowledge, such as psychology and science, also demonstrate influences that can be considered through the concept of *bricolage* or syncretism, used in the broad sense of the term. These elements are the mirror of a diluted Buddhist identity, adding to the fact that the adaptation of Buddhism in western countries is still in process. Beyond this, reflection on syncretism in Buddhism is especially helpful for countries like Brazil and Latin America in general. In the case of Brazil, given the tendency toward multiple religious practices and syncretism mentioned above, contrary to the European countries and the USA, syncretic tendencies certainly presented a considerable influence in the adaptation and interpretation of Buddhism.

For these Buddhist combinations in western countries, it is reasonable to assume that the three *structural* levels proposed for the study of syncretism can occur, from the incorporation of external elements in a religious "grammar" to a whole new synthesis. Sometimes these religious combinations do not follow a pattern that could configure syncretism in a stricter sense, although a *bricolage* of different elements is recognizable. Moreover, it is important to distinguish between three *functional patterns* of Buddhist combinations, able to develop these different structural degrees of syncretism. The first functional pattern occurs in the *ethnic religious combination*. In the general case of immigrants and their descendants, different practices often reflect different levels of social belonging. In the case of institutions, the incorporation of elements from the mainstream society is something normal and reduces the ethnic strangeness, attracting

possible converts and the new generation. In adepts, the simultaneous acceptance of Buddhist rituals and ceremonies of other religions is possible, since often participation in Buddhist rituals is understood as a family obligation or tradition. In these contexts of multiply religiosity, a theoretical perspective that analyzes ethnic religiosity only from a "monoreligious" point of view is often inadequate. Religious combinations can express a more differentiated reality, which can be analyzed through different levels of identity. Regarding religious identity, Hans Mol proposed that there are different identities in the personal, group, and social levels (Mol 1978: 10-14). These identities can converge or diverge, which can be reflected in religious practices. In the case of Japan, he quotes a correlation between community identity and Shinto, the family identity and Buddhism, and personal identity and Christianity.

In the case of Buddhist *nikkeys* in Brazil, religious combinations often perform an integrative function, incorporating elements from the majority, and from Catholic society, and simultaneously reducing and preserving ethnic difference. In Brazil it is not rare to find the *butsudan*, the Japanese Buddhist altar for the ancestors, in families long since "converted" to Catholicism, Umbanda, or Spiritism. It is also common for Catholic figures to be placed with Buddhist images and the names of ancestors in these domestic altars. Although a heresy in the Christian thought, oriented to monotheism, there is frequently no idea of mutual exclusion or conflict because religiosity is sensitive to social context and can be changed accordingly. Indeed, the identification of different levels of identity in religious practices is very probable in societies that featured syncretism and multiple religious practices already. In contrast with the environment of reception of most western countries, religions frequently assume functional and contextual aspects in Japan and Brazil. As a result of this encounter between the Brazilian and Japanese religiosity, for *nikkeys* it is possible to recognize a pattern that mixes Brazilian and Japanese religious features. An approach based on the identity of Brazilian *nikkeys* can indicate the characteristics of this *nikkey* folk religion.⁽³¹⁾ Doctrinal contradictions and ambiguities, something difficult to understand in a syncretic religious practice, can be better analyzed through the role of different practices in the life of an individual or a group. Different and even contradictory religious practices reveal the paradoxes of the different social roles that the same person must often exercise in modern and multicultural societies. In the case of *nikkeys* in Brazil, if Shinto was the Japanese religion that traditionally represented ethnic belonging, and

was chosen at birth ceremonies, then in the case of Brazil a national belonging occurred symbolically through a Catholic baptism. Traditional Buddhism in Japan, as much as in Brazil is reserved for funeral ceremonies and for the worship of ancestors inside a family religiosity. Historical elements accompany a change in the ethnic identity of *nikkeys* and its consequence for religious practice, interpreted as a strategy of acquaintance and social interaction. From this historical point of view, Catholicism progressively came to replace the state Shinto that had reflected the ethnic identity before the Second World War, through the decision of a definitive permanence in Brazil. The Japanese influence on the *nikkey* identity, however, is often preserved at the ethnic and family level (Maeyama 1973, Shoji 2002).

This ethnic pattern of Buddhist combination can be seen at the Buddhist Church Nambei Yugazam Jyomiyoji. According to interviews, the presence of Our Lady Aparecida represents the establishment and integration of the Japanese in Brazil. Even if this temple is one of the most traditional Buddhist temples in Brazil, these Catholic elements show the hybrid character of the Brazilian *nikkey* religious culture. Ethnic Shingon in Brazil has a very different pattern of adaptation in comparison, for example, with tendencies found in the practices of Shingon in the USA (Prebish 1999: 26). The influence of Brazilian religions in these adaptations, however, do not always imply an ethnic reception or even an active adaptation, being only the result of border transformations inside the *nikkey* group, transformed through the new generations and through interaction with Brazilian society. If in the *nikkey* temples the ethnic gap is reduced through similar incorporations, often this approximation occurs only at the symbolic or religious level, but not always with the real participation of Brazilians. Our Lady Aparecida can stay with the Shingon mandalas and Fudô Myô-ô, but Brazilians are not always encouraged to do the same.

For the study of converts and sympathizers, it is important to make a more sharp distinction between a functional pattern of *conceptual religious combination* and a *religious combination for worldly benefits*.⁽³²⁾ In the *conceptual religious combination*, some parallels between different doctrines or myths are established, and a syncretic view depends on concepts that provide for the addition of different elements or practices from other systems, through a relativization of truth content and a subsequent integration. In a more formal approach these concepts for doctrinal relativization can be called *entry points*. These entry points can be, for example, the assumption of a mystical

unity of religions or the idea of a New Age. In the case of Buddhism, the Mahayana concepts of 'skillful means' or the *bodhisattva* are examples of possible bridges with other religions. Sometimes, the idea of an "essence of Buddhism" is also a good example of an entry point for a syncretism between different Buddhist strands. The entry points make possible the filling of *doctrinal gaps*, independent of whether they appear through a lack of knowledge or really do exist. Due to a perceived necessity for doctrinal completion, these gaps are filled with elements from other systems, as is the case for many religious combinations. Indeed, the perception of doctrinal gaps is normal for the majority of Buddhists in western countries. For some, Buddhism is still intellectually difficult and the orthodoxy is often cultural distant, frequently existing only in the insufficient or inaccurate translations available. The practice of Buddhism mirrors a more diffuse sympathy toward Asian religions, understood through a holistic philosophy or in an individual and mystical way (Campbell 1999). Through interaction with a new social environment and with local religions, new Buddhist contents can arise. Even a translation of a religious text can potentially be read as a religious combination, since the translated elements are often used by other religions already established. For other Buddhists, the doctrinal gap is not produced by a lack of knowledge, rather the necessity of combinations is perceived as an attempt toward a necessary integration. The perception is that many doctrinal differences between schools or even religions can have less meaning in some western contexts, and that a conscious combination toward synthesis is something valuable.(33)

In contrast, combinations of practices or rituals appear more frequently in a simple accumulative way, often without so much reflection. Specifically the *religious combinations for worldly benefits* are frequently unstructured and the result of an individual choice. The logic of this type of religious combination is that different practices, separated from their original doctrinal context, are united according to the worldly and practical benefit being pursued. Because they are isolated from an associated doctrinal meaning, they are combined with practices through *bricolage* or syncretism, without a sense of contradiction or exclusion. In a particular case, this pattern of combination for worldly benefits seems to be especially valid in for a magical understanding of Buddhism, something important for Shingon in Brazil. The magical aspects do not exclude the importance of correct behaviour and individual ethics for a desired benefit. However, given that the basic rule of magic is often effectiveness, real

or perceived, it is natural to think that a simple addition is possible, if a multiple religiosity is possible. As Bastide writes about practices for magic protection, "in case of doubt, two precautions were better than one" (Bastide 1971: 160). In the case of a magical pattern, consequently, a formal synthesis in the form of a doctrine or new synthesis rarely occurs. Being a more magic conception of the world, without borders and even independent from religious systems, there is a place for the fusion of elements belonging to different practices through the desired benefit. *A potential state of syncretism* always remains in this case; the decisive impulse for the combination is not given by the religious concepts, but by the religious results. Being more oriented to a worldly result, the practices are often accumulative, existing often in the suspension of barriers between two or more systems and configuring the syncretism in a more strict sense. In this folk context, often associated with a karmic Buddhism in Brazil, the existence of syncretic conceptions in adepts and sympathizers is also stimulated by a lack of access to or the inexistence of more formal and specialized sources, as books or specialized reviews.

These different ways of religious combination in sympathizers and converts can be seen at the Church Shingonshu Kongoji, but with the clear predominance of a syncretism originating from practices aimed at worldly benefits. This is the result of the encounter between a Japanese and Brazilian religiosity oriented toward the religious pursuit of practical benefits in this world. Because this search for concrete benefits through Buddhist magical practices is almost nonexistent in the bibliography on Buddhism in western countries, the rest of this item will detail the meaning of religious combinations for some priests and adepts at the Church Shingonshu Kongoji.

According to interviews with priests at the Church Shingonshu Kongoji, the magical aspect of practice is confirmed and emphasized. The first motivation is the miraculous, and the solution of problems, especially health problems. Over time, not rejecting these miraculous aspects, the priests try to make the adept better understand the other meanings of Shingon and therefore make visitors adhere more consistently to Buddhism. Multiple religious affiliation is permitted, but it is affirmed that this is not necessarily convenient or fruitful for spiritual development. In an interview, a monk affirmed that he tries to avoid the Christian vocabulary. For example, when the visitors utilize the expression "graces to God" as religious gratitude during consultations, he tries to correct them and suggest the use of the expression "graces to our ancestors." He

also affirms the use of concepts from Spiritism and Afro-Brazilian religions because there would then be a basis for a common spiritual reality, and the adepts understand these concepts easily. For example, the term *macumba* is utilized because "*macumba* is the African tantra." For a similar reason this priest often uses the words *encosto* (influence of deceased spirits) and *passe* (spiritual blessing), concepts often used in Spiritism, instead of the similar Japanese and Shingon words, *reishô* and *kaji*. He also emphasizes that the concept of karma, incorporated into Spiritism, is derived from Asian religions and is a normal word for Brazilians. Through the influence of Spiritism, therefore it would be easier to understand the Shingon methods. However, as a distinctive aspect of Shingon, he points out the importance of ancestors' karma as a cause and a possible source of evil remediation for the adepts, aside from the contemplative practices. Personally, this priest wants to emphasize the contemplative aspect particular to Shingon, through the introduction of meditation on the Sanskrit A-Syllable. Instruction in meditation is a request from some adepts. Despite this intention, he says that for this to occur more commitment is necessary, and that the priests have little time to introduce meditation, because a Shingon priest must perform many rituals, aside from parallel activities for their own financial survival.

At present, the majority of adepts and sympathizers do not have contact with this more contemplative aspect of Shingon. For one adept who has frequented the temple in Suzano since the 1980s and considers herself Buddhist, the temple is a place people can go to find solutions to problems of health, to protect their businesses against robberies or to clear negative influences. She recites a Shingon ritual at home, in her words, because where she lives there would be many *macumba* activities. She also frequents Seicho-no-ie, a Japanese new religion that has had considerable success in Brazil. Due to this magical tendency, the syncretism has an accumulative character, with a union of practices and concepts, seeking similarities instead differences, and therefore justifying a multiple acquaintance with diverse religions. As she described, many sympathizers see something similar to an Umbanda center in this temple from Koyasan, institutionally and ceremonially. Consequently, while in some western contexts Buddhism is understood as a philosophy and the knowledge obtained through textual sources is very important, practically the contrary occurs in syncretic Buddhism. In this case, the verification of results and the validation of Buddhism through similar practices from other religions is a substitute for a way characterized by a knowledge and purity of

tradition through texts. Actually, this difference could explain the relative doctrinal unfamiliarity of adepts and sympathizers. The indifference toward a more formal and intellectual aspect is related to the preoccupation with the immediate and practical results that Buddhism can bring. This is reinforced by the ritualistic tendency of Shingon, increased by the difference between priests and laypeople. Moreover, there are virtually no publications that exist and can be acquired in the temple, or doctrinal courses about Buddhism. Only some old brochures with descriptions of practices exist, which only some older adepts possess. It is therefore very difficult to find any information about Shingon in Portuguese. As a result, the practice of Shingon with other Brazilian or New Age religions, through resemblance and juxtaposition, is not understood as mutually exclusive. On the contrary, a magical worldview is the common ground of these practices, illustrating a combination that characterizes syncretism in its more strict sense.

Each adept has therefore a relative liberty of combination, which reflects a contemporary religious tendency, not only including magical elements, but also including individual reasons for personal combination. Indeed, institutions are often mentioned only so far as they affirm a more individual view. This can be illustrated by an adept living in São Paulo. Being Buddhist and having visited Shingon for many years, she read books about Asian religions and New Age religion, in contrast to the majority in Shingon. She sought Shingon due to a health problem and her suffering continues she says, but now she is quiet and has more self-control. Although she values a more popular aspect of Shingon in Suzano, she misses a more intellectual aspect and doctrinal continuity through books or courses. In contrast with others Buddhist groups, especially Zen groups, she feels that in Shingon there is a liberty and a more popular tendency because in Zen groups, for example, "the doors are not open for all and always, they are for people that want to sit and meditate." She has a Shingon altar at home, built according to what she learned from Shingon, but also incorporating Catholic and African images. For her, Shingon is an open and individual way.

Asked about Catholic influences in Shingon, it is possible to perceive recognition and rejection at the same time, with a higher valorisation of the individual aspect as an important characteristic of Buddhism. Catholic features become attractive *and* are rejected through Shingon: "People in Shingon have the necessity of images, of objects

and of a superior person with mental or spiritual powers to cure them, remove their problems, give them direction for life. [. . .] The Brazilians in general, due to Catholicism, due to our culture [. . .] They arrive with the idea that the priest will do, the priest will bless and you are cured, the priest will pray and move away the evil. Some way this helps, because he really will bless you, he will do a ceremony that is going to move away certain spiritual things, what they also for example do in the [Shingon] center, they will put away negative energies that you normally, because you are distracted, because you do not have the direction or you do not have the opened and developed chakras; then you will search this help to follow your way. But it is not the priest that will do, you will do. Buddhism has this characteristic. You are always able to do. You will drive your life. You will do. The Universe, the Father, this God, He gave you mind, memory, intelligence, a perfect, healthy, physical body, and you will drive, you are able."

The Afro-Brazilian religions also appear in her understanding of Shingon, where it is possible to see a new suspension of barriers. She considers karma and the ancestors' cult as a common point between Buddhism and African religions. She states that even in the case of the Catholic Church it is possible to practice the worship of ancestors through a mass for the surname, which she one time requested when she could not go to the Shingon temple in Suzano. An ex-militant from the black movement in Brazil, she interprets the injuries and problems of black race through the concept of ancestors' karma. The descendents of Africans in Brazil would have many problems due to the consequences of slavery, such as violent deaths and suicide. The fact that the descendents were forced to come to Brazil, their lives in Africa violently broken, would be a reason for this historical karma. On the other hand, she sees many other resemblances between African religiosity and Shingon, such as the importance of nature elements, and more aesthetic aspects like the use of white clothes, mantras, bells, and drums. She sees bodhisattvas as intermediates, much like the Catholic saints or the *orixás* in Candomblé. In her case, she identifies with Candomblé, in which there are several *orixás*, associated with nature elements, and each adept is associated with one. The same would exist in the case of Shingon as well, she says, because each person has a relationship with a particular deity. When one knows his bodhisattva through a consultation with the Shingon priests, one then tries to know better the history and the mantra of this bodhisattva. She says that Fudô Myô-ô is her deity, being among others

things, the bodhisattva for the cure of illnesses and physical pains.⁽³⁴⁾ She identifies Fudô Myô-ô with her orixá in Candomblé, called Abaluaê. Reinterpreting Abaluaê, she states that he was burned but "arrived at nirvana through physical suffering."

5. Conclusions

It is natural to suppose that a pattern of anti-syncretism and syncretism can also occur in Buddhism in western countries. In contrast with a clearly defined Buddhist identity, here a heuristic category that has syncretism and self-definition as its main concepts is proposed. Syncretism was often utilized in the study of Buddhism in Asia and is an important category in the history of religions, but there are few studies about syncretic phenomena in western countries, where the influence of Protestant Buddhism is more emphasized. In many cases, however, the theoretical perspective derived from research on religious combinations can help where Buddhist identity is an impossible or difficult task.

In the practice of ethnic Buddhism, the simultaneous practice of other rituals, due to a progressive ethnic integration, can introduce local elements into Buddhism. For converts and sympathizers, syncretism develops through the simultaneous interaction with diverse Buddhist schools and through the potential interaction with local religions. In a "Buddhism in Syncretic Shape," in accordance with the syncretic attitude of suspension of limits between different systems, there is often the practice with other religions or adaptations through influences from New Age and ecological movements. These elements are the mirror of a diluted Buddhism, caused by the adoption of separate components. Since many differences of doctrine and practice are not important or not perceived as relevant by converts and sympathizers, Buddhism is sometimes adopted as a philosophy of life without a religious practice, often as a practice without a religious doctrine, or even diluted in aesthetic and esoteric ways. Attracting people for different motives and not as a whole, this type of adoption is often open to *bricolage* or even syncretism with other elements.

Aside from this, reflection about syncretism in Buddhism is especially helpful for countries such as Brazil and Latin America in general. In Brazil's case, syncretic tendencies certainly present a considerable influence in the development of Buddhism within the encounter of a Japanese and Brazilian religiosity oriented toward worldly

benefits. In the religious interpretation of Syncretic Buddhism, there is no attempt to "purify" Buddhism from subsequent historical interpretations or even eliminate the magical elements. Therefore, in contrast with an approach that uses textual sources as religious basis, Syncretic Buddhism often has more devotional elements, ceremonies, and symbols present, frequently associated with more popular and magic influences. The importance of the individual perspective in this Syncretic Buddhism appears in the context of a free combination and interpretation instead of an individual responsibility for salvation. The main characteristic of this form of Buddhist practice is that Buddhist identity is not clear, being diluted through diverse influences. This configures a syncretic behaviour that is often difficult to define, but there are tendencies and some patterns of combination, based on the reasons for and directions of Buddhist practice.

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Notes

(1)I would like to thank Prof. Frank Usarski, Prof. Peter Antes and Prof. Martin Baumann for the academic exchange, Kara Vincent for the English revision and editorial assistance and to the people that I meet in the field for the shared information. [Return to Text.](#)

(2)The concept of a Protestant Buddhism was originally elaborated by Obeyesekere in a Sri Lankan context (a recent description is in Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, mainly Part Three). Although, the concept of "Buddhism in Protestant Shape" can have a heuristic value also in England, the USA, and Australia (Baumann 1997: 284-285), as a consequence of the importance of Protestantism for these countries and a similar emphasis and motivation toward Buddhism by westerners. For a general description of Protestant Buddhism and the simultaneous valorisation of textual sources, see King 1999: 150-154. For discussion of a "Protestant Buddhism" in England, through the FWBO (Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) and the English Sangha, see Mellor 1991. [Return to Text.](#)

(3)For more details about Japanese immigration in Brazil see, among others, Saito 1980, Takeuchi 1994 and Yanaguida 1992. [Return to Text.](#)

(4)In a preliminary release of the census of 2000 from IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), around 246,000 Brazilians declared themselves Buddhists, starkly concentrated in the southeast region of the country. Despite the small number in comparison to the Brazilian population (around 170 million), this number is higher, for example, than the number of declared adepts of Candomblé. Restricted to world religions, Buddhism is certainly the religion that has the most adepts in Brazil, after Christianity. The number of Buddhists is, for example, twice the number of Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. It is well known, however, the difficulty of analysing any quantitative religious data in Brazil, due to a multiple religious affiliation. Some Buddhist groups in Brazil see it as no problem to have a Catholic affiliation and a Buddhist practice. [Return to Text.](#)

(5)Report “*Um povo que acredita*,” Veja Magazine, Dec.2001. [Return to Text.](#)

(6)For an analysis of the process of internalization of the reincarnation concept in a Tibetan group in Brazil, see Usarski 2002b (a revised analysis is only available in the Portuguese version). [Return to Text.](#)

(7)For an analysis of this process as a reaction against the social ascendance of immigrants, see Queiroz 1988. [Return to Text.](#)

(8)For more details, see Montes 1998, Sanchis 1997 and Usarski 2002a. In this sense, it is interesting to contrast the virtual disappearance of the African cults in Protestant America, as illustrated in Bastide 1971:152-169. [Return to Text.](#)

(9)See Sanchis 1997 for a study of the history of religions in Brazil. Because the tendency toward syncretism is not an isolated religious phenomenon, but a cultural fact for all of Latin America, Christián Parker has defended the concept of a "syncretic thought" in the popular ideology of Latin America. For details, see Parker 1996: 315. About the syncretism of New Age groups in Brazil, see Amaral 1998. For a study about Umbanda, see Negrão 1996. [Return to Text.](#)

(10)For a general description of Shingon practices, beyond Yamasaki 1988, see

Goepper 1983. For a more detailed description of Shingon mandalas and Chinese influences on their elaboration, see Ten Grotenhuis 1999: 33-95. [Return to Text.](#)

(11) In this sense, the term frequently used is *kaji kitô*, according to Yamasaki 1988: 78. [Return to Text.](#)

(12) For a resume of folk religion in Japan, see Reader 1993: 44-63. [Return to Text.](#)

(13) Yamasaki 1988: 9. Indeed, the pursuit of this-worldly benefits (jap. *genze ryaku*) is defended as the central theme of religion in Japan (Reader and Tanabe 1998). [Return to Text.](#)

(14) A probable hypothesis is the positive correlation between syncretism and esoteric practice in the Buddhism of western countries. This has already been indicated in studies about Buddhism in Asia by Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 462, for Sri Lanka, and Spiro 1982: 162-163 for Myanmar. In the case of Shingon in Japan, see Yamasaki 1988: 37. The esoterism in Buddhism, frequently of Tantric origin, tends toward the teaching of masters based on initiations, which would generate a potential for fragmentation and independence of teachings throughout generations, thereby becoming a Buddhism more open to individual influences and other religious ideas, frequently associated with magic contents. [Return to Text.](#)

(15) Among them are the pioneers Rev. Gonçalves and Rev. Murillo Azevedo, who subsequently converted, respectively, to the Higashi and Nishi branches from the Jôdô Shinshû School. According to interviews, the motives were, in both cases, the syncretism with Afro-Brazilian religions. [Return to Text.](#)

(16) In this context, the black magic originated from Afro-Brazilian religions that has the objective of injuring someone, is frequently associated with the so-called lower spirits. The popular term "*macumba*" is normally used by *quimbanda*. [Return to Text.](#)

(17) In a second informational paper distributed by Koyasan: "This mass arose through a legend that says that offering it, we are able to live in peace and to have happiness, protected by the spirit of our ancestors." [Return to Text.](#)

(18) See for example Jensen 1998: 84-85, in her description of the clientele of Umbanda

in São Paulo. [Return to Text.](#)

(19) A devotional aspect of Shingon in Brazil is briefly described by Clarke 1999: 204-205. [Return to Text.](#)

(20) One of these temples is called Jogan-Ji Fudô Myô-ô and was built in the 1970s, being considered a tourist destination of the region. According to my fieldwork, the temple is directed by two priestesses and is associated with the temple Tyoujiu-ji Kihara Fudô-Son in Japan. Fudô Myô-ô is the main deity in this temple and there is also an emphasis on consultations, and the ritual of fire (jap. *goma*) is still performed. The other temple from the Tendai branch in Diadema is the Kannon Community, which has become somewhat decadent after the death of the founder. Until some years ago a ceremony with a walk on fire was performed annually, a special practice of Tendai, which attracted popular attention and the media. In the practices, there are consultations and blessings for curing illness or solving problems. The syncretism with Buddhist deities of the Catholic devotion of Maria and the Afro-Brazilian deity Iemanjá are some other popular local features. [Return to Text.](#)

(21) Agonshu, an example from the so-called 'new, new' religious movements, is already established in São Paulo. It has many Brazilian adepts, mainly attracted for the solution of worldly problems. Although Agonshu does not belong to esoteric Buddhism, it is strongly influenced by the Shingon format. Another example is Shinnyo-En, an independent group associated with the temple Daigoji and strongly influenced by Shingon practices. For an overview of the Japanese new religious movements in Brazil, see Clarke 1999. [Return to Text.](#)

(22) See Colpe 1995. Plutarch first used the term “syncretism” for the behaviour of the Cretans, because they would minimize internal disputes in order to combat external enemies. Centuries later, Erasmus used the term in a similar sense. The term was first used with a pejorative meaning during the reconciliation efforts between Molinists and Thomists in the sixteenth century and between Lutherans and Calvinists in the seventeenth century. [Return to Text.](#)

(23) Some of these contradictory uses associated with History of Religions practiced in Europe are documented in detail in Berner 1982: 5-79. [Return to Text.](#)

(24)Ulrich Berner, for example, wrote a detailed study about the use of the term syncretism in the academic literature, intending to elaborate a complete typology for the uses of the term (Berner 1982: 83-116). However, he practically excludes the history and contemporary practice of religions in Latin America, which are traditionally associated with syncretism. Michael Pye has directly acknowledged this deficiency, but he could not incorporate the contributions from this region either (Pye 1994: 218).

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(25)This is the definition of syncretism found in Berner 1982: 85, from the definition of religion as system in Luhmann. Berner also develops a complex typology of syncretism, which will not be utilized here and was criticized by Pye 1994: 221-222. [Return to Text.](#)

(26)Bechert 1978:21. Berner described similar levels in his classification, with concepts of relationship (a system with limits), syncretism (suspended limits), and synthesis (new system), see Berner 1982: 83-87. A similar, although independent, proposal appears in the study of syncretism in the Afro-Brazilian religions, according to Ferretti 1995: 91.

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(27)See Lipp 1996 and Sanchis 1997. In this context Amaral has proposed the concept of "syncretism in movement," in which religious identities are not solidly established, but always alter themselves due to the appropriation of new elements and the abandonment of others, according to Amaral 1998. For some, syncretism is near to the concept of *bricolage* proposed in another context by Lévi-Strauss, but some authors distinguish more sharply between these two terms, reserving the term *bricolage* for the cases in which the creation of new cultural forms is the result of ready and isolated elements with a more traditional use in other cultures. One example is Werbner 1994: 215. Some authors try to incorporate aspects from the research about *bricolage* to the study of syncretism, such as Roger Bastide, see Reuter 2002: 232-250. [Return to Text.](#)

(28)Besides Bechert, other authors have defended this differentiation, such as Berner 1982:92 and Pye 1994. In other research this difference is not very sharp, syncretism being not only a process but also a possible state, as described in Colpe 1995: 219. The Afro-Brazilian Umbanda religion in Brazil, for example, is frequently described as a syncretic religion, because syncretism appears not only in its formation but also in its theology, potentially open to external influences. For more details, see Negrão 1996.

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(29)The distinction between Protestant Buddhism and syncretic and popular influences was emphasized, for example, in studies about Theravada Buddhism in Asia. In the Sri Lankan context, for which the concept of Protestant Buddhism was initially created, the influence of spirit cults and syncretic tendencies with Hindu elements in Buddhism was justified as a consequence of the distinction between the worldly (*laukika*) and the supramundane (*lokottara*) (Bechert 1978: 219, Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 16). Historically syncretism is also present in Protestant Buddhism, since it presents the influence not only of Protestant concepts but also from Theosophy. The main point is that Protestant Buddhism represents a tradition, essentially invented, that affirmed that the more syncretic, magic, and popular aspects would be deviations from the essence of Buddhism (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 241). In Protestant Buddhism the influences of other religions or magic aspects are frequently represented as corruptions from the true tradition or as "accessory" elements for right religious practice. In confrontation with the rationality of Protestant Buddhist soteriology, the appropriation and reinterpretation of Hindu and popular elements resulted in new Buddhist practices, mainly devotional and directed toward this world, incorporated into the process of social class formation in Sri Lanka. These devotional and popular elements were already present and they were always incorporated in some way into Buddhist practice, in a process of simultaneous influence. In the case of Sri Lanka, today these two basic forms of Buddhist practice have the tendency to form a new synthesis (Idem: 449-456. For more details, see specially Part Two). In another example, in his study on Buddhism in Myanmar (former Burma), Spiro describes the differences of interpretation between the Buddhist soteriology of monks and the laypeople, influenced more by a worldly karma and by the worship of spirits (*nats*). The latter introduced magical and more popular elements into Buddhist practice, which live together with a more intellectualized worldview (Spiro 1982: 187 and throughout the descriptions in Chapter Seven). Besides Theravada, syncretic influences were always present in Asian countries, mixing Buddhism with popular and magical practices or with other religions, sometimes in a more intellectualized way. See, among others, the contributions about syncretism and Buddhism by Bechert 1978, for a comparative view and case studies about religious syncretism in Nepal, Java and Bali, Indian and Japan. For a historical approach on syncretism in the religions of central Asian, including influences on

Buddhism in Mongolia and Tibet, see Heissig and Klimkeit 1987. [Return to Text.](#)

(30)For a description about the eclecticism of Buddhist groups in the USA, see Seager 1999: 216-231. This eclecticism mixed practices, and had the difficult task of defining a Buddhist identity. Another description of this tendency, labelled "diffuse" affiliation, can be read in Tanaka 1998: 296-297. One important contributor to this theme is Tweed 1999. This article seems especially interesting for the Brazilian case, because it emphasizes the difficulty in finding criteria to define religious identity, mainly in cultures with a tendency toward multiple religious affiliation or syncretic combination. About a possible criterion for religious identity, Tweed defends only self-identification and asserts that it is necessary to abandon normative and essentialist criteria for the classification of Buddhists, such as, for example, the taking of the three refuges or the practice of the five lay vows (Tweed 1999: 80). Moreover, he points out the hybrid character of contemporary religious identity, creating the category of "sympathizer." A "sympathizer" would be one that shows empathy for, and even adopts practices and readings of, a determined religious tradition. [Return to Text.](#)

(31)As Michael Pye writes regarding the Japanese religion, "the contemporary primal religion in Japan is [in comparison with Shinto] a more general and more neutral religious complex with its own vitality and its own persistence. Buddhism and the various, in many cases locally influential new religions also stand in a complex relationship with this unnamed primal religion" (Pye 1996: 3) and "Japan's new primal religion however has no institutions, no spokesmen, and no thinkers" (Pye 1996: 5). Similar arguments could be used for Brazilian *nikkey* religiosity, but with a pattern including Brazilian religions such as Catholicism and Spiritism. These characteristics can be labeled as a common religion instead a primal religion (Reader and Tanabe 1998: 27). [Return to Text.](#)

(32)Here, adapted for the Buddhism of western countries are similar points described by Roger Bastide in the syncretism of Catholicism and Candomblé (Bastide 1971: 154, Reuter 2002: 223-272). Also related, Rudolph made a similar differentiation between a reflected or conscious, and a folk or unconscious syncretism (Rudolph 1979: 207-208). [Return to Text.](#)

(33)An approach orientated to the integration of different strands is discussed by

Baumann 1995: 299-309, through the examples of the FWBO and Arya Maitreya Mandala in Germany. Rawlinson also describes the FWBO as an ecumenical sangha in his typology of Theravada Buddhism in West (Rawlinson 1994). Freiburger 2001 also offers some case studies in his view of the contacts between Buddhism and other religious traditions. [Return to Text.](#)

(34)In Japan, this relationship is more formalized and normally defined in the initiation ritual, in which the adept casts a sprig of anise on a Shingon mandala. For more details, see Yamasaki 1988: 176. [Return to Text.](#)