# A Revisitation of Religious Syncretism in Twentieth Century Yemen

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*This paper makes the case that current studies of hybridity in Yemeni religion would benefit from the adoption of more critical and granular typology. Hybrid religious systems in Yemen are examined and analyzed. The work of the scholar of Yemeni religion in the twentieth century, Dr. Eraqi-Klorman, is the primary source for the Yemeni religious phenomena examined and her conclusions are reevaluated using a new framework. The paper makes the case that uncritical use of the terminology around religious hybridity can lead to the legitimization of asymmetric power dynamics, if unwittingly. The categorization system of Ernest Gellner is put forward as especially helpful and likely to avoid this consequence. The history of the use of the term "syncretism" in academia is also examined for the sake of context.*
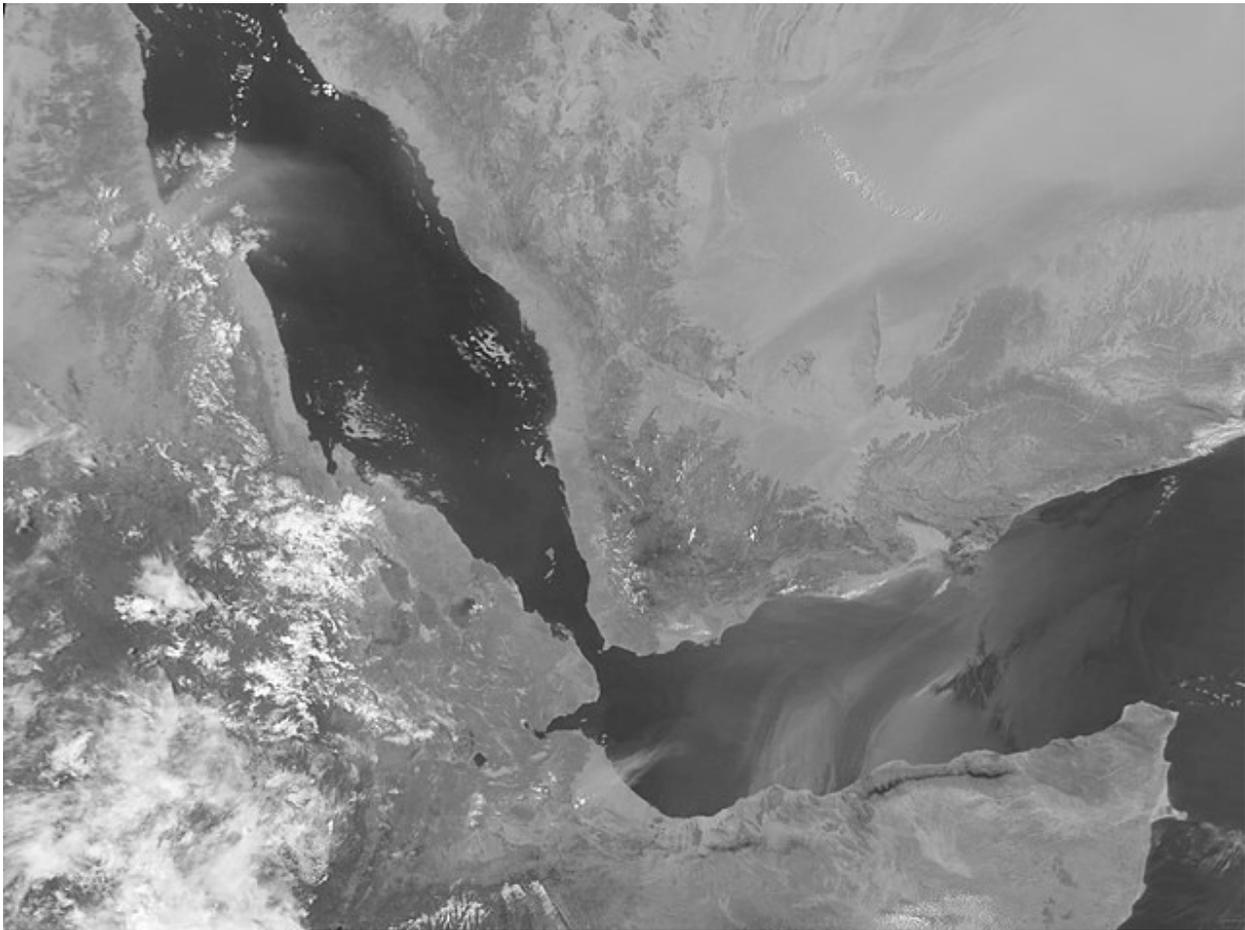


*The Jews represented mysterious beings, possessing supernatural powers that could cause either good or evil. Their mystical-magical knowledge and practice contributed to the creation of a sort of popular Muslim- Jewish syncretistic religion, and also intensified the Jews' perception as the ultimate "other."*
— Bat-Zion Eraqi-Klorman, "Yemen: Magic, Religion, and Jews"

By the start of the twentieth century, the Yemeni worldview had come to include a diverse host of djinn and demons, who were understood to freely engage in both beneficial and malicious activities that affected human prosperity. A particularly interesting demonic entity, which first appears in thirteenth century accounts of the region, is said to be spawned by ill-intended witches. After dissolving a human and drinking the resulting liquid,[1] the witch would then give birth to the demonic entity, who was only visible to her. However, far from being a simple and loyal servant, the demon, due to its ravenous sexual appetite, eventually turns on the witch to heinously violate its own "mother."[2] Demonic entities such as these haunted the dark and uncharted corners of the Yemeni night. From the abandoned wells and the homes of the recently deceased to the Arabian desert and the unexplored islands, demons abounded.

In order to commune with such entities and to expel them, the people of Yemen often sought out the aid of Jewish religious specialists, capable of placating or driving out demons. Jews occupied a mysterious aura in the Muslim consciousness. Magic, demons, and arcane rituals were considered Jewish specialties. Jewish specialists were therefore sought out to deal with all manner of occult activities. Their presumed proclivities also

lead to them being labeled the ultimate "Other" in the minds of their Muslim neighbors.[3] Rich descriptions of these practices, and much more, are found within the volumes of work produced by Bat-Zion Eraqi-Klorman. Her work is laudable as she dutifully draws attention to the asymmetric power relations in Yemen between the dominant Muslim majority and the Jews by addressing this "Othering." Unfortunately, Eraqi-Klorman concludes by employing an underdeveloped notion of syncretism that does not draw sufficient attention to the complexities of the inter-communal tradition-lending described so well in her work. In this article, I will offer a more critical analysis of the hybrid religious traditions in Yemen, as described in the work of Eraqi-Klorman, that makes allowances for the complexity of religious culture in the region.[4] In so doing, hidden power dynamics will be illuminated in a manner that demonstrates the many ways in which the dominant religion and its specialists maintained the status quo of power- relations in twentieth century Yemen.

**Criticism and Reevaluation of Syncretic Analysis**

This paper uses Ernest Gellner's categorization scheme, which was developed as a way to

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[1] This is attested by Ibn al-Mugawir, a thirteenth century Khurasani traveler. For more information and context, see G. Smith, "Magic, Djinn and the Supernatural in Medieval Yemen: Examples from Ibn Al- Mugawir's 7th/13th Century Guide," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 13 (1995).

[2] Smith, 11.

[3] "Other" is here used in the Husserlian sense. All things good and conventional Muslims were not, Jews were considered to be.

[4] Bat-Zion Eraqi-Klorman, "Yemen: Magic, Religion, Jews," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 39 (2009): 130.

more granularly study religious situations characterized by hybridity.[5] The typology's granularity comes from its allowance for the simultaneous presence of multiple kinds of relationships a host tradition might have with outside religious traditions. Before the development of typologies like this, scholars were forced to rely on language that included axioms based on asymmetric power-dynamics.

The word "syncretic" carries certain unfortunate connotations in relation to power, which this paper will lay out. When one uses this or related terminology uncritically, one might easily contribute to an emic political-cultural apparatus that aids in denigrating certain religions and specialists as lesser. The hope is that utilizing Gellner's framework will alleviate the problems that arise when using connotative terminology like "syncretic."

Syncretic theory was first applied in academic anthropology in the seventeenth century when Christian scholar-missionaries went into the brush of Sub-Saharan Africa to spread the values, practices, and languages of their cultures. They had expected to encounter mainly indigenous religious communities, endogenous to their immediate geographic and cultural contexts.[6] However, a high number of Sub-Saharan Muslims and Christians already lived alongside adherents of indigenous religious systems.[7] Islam was the majority religion as far south as Zanzibar, and Christianity was a well-established force in many indigenous societies. Yet, as Sub-Saharan Christianity was often unrecognizable to the European missionaries, they tended to labeled these communities "syncretic."[8] As a result, they unintentionally demonstrated their ethnocentric biases. Christianity was, after all, no less a hybrid religion in Europe, having adopted myriad disparate traditions from European pagan traditions.

As the leading sentiment in anthropological studies shifted toward secularism in the 1980s and 1990s, syncretic analysis came under scrutiny.[9] Consequently, the overt ethnocentrism had subsided in academic works by the 1970s. Despite this development, many still took affront to the usage of the term, leading to the questioning of the very underlying metaphysics of the anthropology of religion.[10] The consensus in the field held that all religious traditions would be found to have adopted elements of other religions if one were to apply syncretic analysis more

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[5] Ernest Gellner, "For Syncretism. The Position of Buddhism in Nepal and Japan Compared*," Social Anthropology* 5, no. 2 (June 1997): 277-291.

[6] John Thornton, *The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491-1750* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 25.

[7] The largest cities in Sub-Saharan Africa, during the seventeenth century, were Zanzibar (a Muslim- majority city) and Gondar (a Christian-majority city). Elsewhere, in West Africa most prominently, native religions, like Yoruba, existed alongside Abrahamic faiths.

[8] Particularly in East Africa, Christian practice often regularly included practices like Ancestor Worship, which were considered antithetical to genuine Christianity by the Europeans.

[9] Antony Billington, *Mission and Meaning* (Paternoster Press, 1995), 272.

[10] The metaphysical axioms of academic anthropology were heavily based in traditional Western ideas of linear societal progression. This became only more problematic in an increasingly self-aware and self- critical academic community.

broadly, rendering the term meaningless.[11] What's more, the word syncretic itself carried with it historic issues and applying the term to religious traditions was understood to implicitly justify asymmetric social power-dynamics, and seemed to evoke implicitly comparisons to "un-syncretic" and "pristine" traditions. The suspicion among academics was that this perspective was employed by members of dominant religious traditions to disenfranchise and devalue those traditions deemed syncretic.[12]

In such a milieu, where the very term had nearly been abandoned, Ernest Gellner set out to salvage syncretic analysis. While acknowledging the value of various criticisms, he maintained that the analysis of what had haphazardly been labeled as syncretic in the past could still advance the discourse in the field of religious anthropology. Gellner argued that there was still utility to be found in syncretic analysis, even if the models constructed whilst engaging in the application process needed to be used carefully:

> As academic observers, we need always to ask whether it is a question of an entire tradition or a single ritual, or some other aspect of practice. We have to acknowledge that interested participants are very likely to take the part for the whole and make sweeping judgments more detached observers cannot concur with. Questions of power are certainly central to this whole debate.[13]

Gellner thus proceeds to categorizes hybrid relationships between disparate religious traditions into four separate situational phenomena: bricolage, syncretic, synthetic, and accretion/complementary. He places three of these situations on a spectrum of increasing assimilation: bricolage, syncretic, and synthetic. Accretive religious relationships are set apart as unique, but they may, as explained below, give rise to syncretic manifestations.

Of the categories present in Gellner's typology, bricolage was the only one that he presumed would be accepted by Post-Modernist academics.[14] Of situations characterized by bricolage, Gellner says it is "the combination of numerous elements of diverse origins with no stable synthesis envisaged."[15] Academically documented phenomena that can be labeled bricolage are rare, as they are definitionally based on anecdotal evidence. One might imagine a scenario in which an individual inhabiting a location that bears the influence of more than one religious tradition combines, perhaps at the spur of the moment, elements of these religious traditions in an unorthodox manner. One might accurately categorize such a practice as bricolage if it never develops into a regular practice.

Gellner defines syncretic traditions as religions characterized by a mix of disparate

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[11] Billington, *Meaning,* 265-269.
[12] Billington, 265-269.
[13] Gellner, "For Syncretism," 289.
[14] Gellner, 288.
[15] Gellner, 288.

elements, usually from only two religions.[16] When a tradition or ritual from an outside religion begins to be practiced consistently in another, we can accurately describe it as syncretic. These traditions will appear to mirror or "parallel" the practice as it is present in an outside religion. Often, there will be tension around these adopted practices and their justifications, as they have not yet been fully enveloped within the host religion.

In some cases of syncretism, such as among the Marhajan dalits of Nepal, two traditions align themselves, adopting particularly popular aspects from each and seem to develop into a distinctly unique tradition. The devotees in this example are fully aware of the syncretism and see it as a positive aspect of their religiosity.[17] In other cases, such as with the Pure Land Buddhists, they might reject any claims made that note the apparent mixing.[18] This might be unsurprising. The disparity of syncretic traditions often leads to situations where a tradition based in axioms seemingly incompatible with a host religion is adopted. Buddhists might adopt some form of a caste system, for example, if some spiritual need is perceived to be sated by doing so. A caste system is an anathema to Buddhist philosophy as it is typically professed.

Novel traditions are usually adopted by a host religion to meet a specific religious need. If, for example, in a time of war or oppression, members of a religious community are decimated and made low, they might experience a need for a way to increase their community's power to defend itself and a need for an ability to influence their own fate. They then might adopt rituals or traditions from an outside religion that are seen to sate this need. One can observe such an example in 8th-century India. The Rashtrakuta dynasty of Karanataka were adherents to a sorcerous and warlike sect of Saivism.[19] Their imperial cult conducted magical rites intended to cause illness to grip their enemies and to grant the king God-like powers and knowledge.[20] In the power vacuum following the collapse of the pan-Indian Gupta Empire, Kannada kings began to raze and pillage the other lands of India.[21] Their victims and enemies, though not Saivites, adopted the magical practices and adapted them to their own traditions.[22] This could easily be described as syncretic within Gellner's typology.

If communities with syncretic aspects continue to develop them, systematizing and maintaining a consistent performance over time, they begin to assimilate traditional power structures and morph to fit their interests. If a syncretic tradition becomes more and more enveloped within mainstream practice, the syncretic tradition could begin to more closely resemble what we might more accurately label a synthetic.

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[16] Gellner, 288.

[17] Gellner, 288.

[18] Pure Land Buddhism shows signs of Taoist influence, as can be seen from their disregard for the Buddhist tradition of philosophical debate, in favor of non-examined spiritual intuition as a method for uncovering further phenomenological insight.

[19] Saivism is an Indian religious tradition focused on worshipping the figure Shiva as a deity.

[20] Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism (*Columbia University Press, 2002), 129.

[21] Davidson, 129.

[22] Davidson, 129.

Synthetic traditions are those traditions that are characterized by having adopted parts of other traditions, whole and intact, into its own practice, and then systematizing them into orthodox belief and/or orthopraxical practice over a long period of time. This leads to these practices crystallizing into a stable form that is not easily recognizable as having borrowed elements from other sources. This leads to synthetic traditions taking on an independent identity, despite the hybrid background of their beliefs and practices. This identity formation is a result of both the systematization of hybrid beliefs and practices, as well as the passing of time. The borrowed elements in synthetic traditions become so integral to the religion over time that to remove it would render the tradition almost unrecognizable.

Gellner makes the case that all world religions fit into this category best. Sikhism is a clear example of a synthetic religion. An integral component of Sikhism is that, like Islam, religious iconography is officially discouraged. Sikhism's founder, Guru Nanak (1469-1539), engaged in both Muslim and Hindu rituals, while not performing any rituals involving iconography.[23] If in the present, a Sikh sect were to remove this facet of the religion, however, it would present such a fundamental departure from the Sikh religion that an overwhelming majority of Sikh adherents would deny it the label "Sikh."

Religious situations are accretive or complementary when two religions exist alongside each other, providing for the same communities, but often in open competition.[24] In these situations, religious adherents will peruse the spiritual services of each major tradition in the region. Often, one religious tradition will be dominant in an accretive environment. When this is the case, the dominant religious group can seek to regulate the perusal of spiritual services by non-dominant groups. Unlike syncretic situations in which one tradition generates parallel practices so that it is unnecessary for their devotees to go elsewhere for their services, accretive situations actively encourage going elsewhere, as two religions compete to provide services. Accretive situations also possess the possibility of leading to the generation of syncretic practices, as adherents who use the services of an outside religion might learn and adapt the practices into their own religion. Some prominent examples include Thailand and Japan. In Thailand, devotees will seek soteriological aid from the local Buddhists and direct pragmatic concerns toward local non-Buddhist authorities. In Japan, Buddhist monks typically handle death services and Shinto priests commonly handle worldly supplications.[25]

## Yemeni Religion in the Twentieth Century

Two world religions were represented in Yemen during the early twentieth century: Islam and Judaism. The Islamic community, which was initially established during the seventh century, came to be divided between the Shi'ite Muslims of the Zaydi sect and Sunni Muslims of the Salafi

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[23] Irfan Habib,"A Fragmentary Exploration of an Indian Text on Religions and Sects: Notes on the Earlier Version of the Dabistan-i-Mazahib," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 2001* (2001), 474–480.

[24] Gellner, "For Syncretism", 289.

[25] Gellner, 287.

sect by the thirteenth century.[26] Tradition maintains that Jews were present in Yemen since Biblical times. By the Modern period, their population comprised almost entirely of Jews of the Mizrahi ethnicity. The Zaydi have historically been the group in power, ruling the nation during most of the early twentieth century. They are very puritanical concerning orthodoxy, rejecting the validity of the cults of sainthood present in other Shi'ite sects.[27] Traditionally, Zaydi Imams have also denied the existence of any supernatural entity other than God himself. Salafis are a Sunni sect known for their conservative jurisprudential customs. They are more inclined toward mysticism than other Sunni sects, as is evidenced by the number of Salafi Mullahs who have written large tomes on arcane knowledge hidden in the Qu'ran. The Mizrahi Jews of Yemen are subordinate to their Muslim neighbors, enjoying a diminutive status as a protected people. They are particularly known for their Kabbalistic and magical practices.[28]

Eraqi-Klorman's work in Yemen largely focuses on the interactions between the Mizrahi Jews and their Muslim neighbors. In urban spheres related to places of authority and power Jews were segregated and kept away by the Muslim majority to ensure that they had no chance of corrupting them; Jews were viewed by Muslims as possessing an intrinsic mystical nature, an amoral character, and a corrupting presence.[29] In the rural, tribal domain, Jews and Muslims interacted much more frequently, primarily in the economic sphere but also in the religious. Further, their perceived natural affinity for magic and mysticism often attracted oppression. Whenever a drought came, or a demon was thought to possess a child, Jews were the first to be blamed.[30]

Aside from uncritically labeling the phenomena she documents as syncretic, Eraqi-Klorman's work does not offer a detailed analysis of the variety of hybridic forms, as it loses granularity by assigning all of them the label "syncretistic." In the following section, this rich diversity will be further explored using Gellner's typology. As mentioned above, Gellner suggests that when applying the term syncretism, one has an obligation "to ask whether it is a question of an entire tradition or of a single ritual, or some other aspect of practice" that can accurately be described as syncretic.[31] The same questions might well be asked when attempting to responsibly apply any of the terms of Gellner's typology, including bricolage, synthetic, and accretive.

Therefore, one might begin applying this theoretical framework by asking which of Gellner's four types best describes Yemeni Religious Culture of the early twentieth century when viewed as a symbiotic whole. Eraqi-Klorman offers a long list of well- established hybridic beliefs and practices that in effect render the application of the term bricolage to the whole of Yemeni religious culture inappropriate. At the same time, it is also clear that Yemeni religious culture has not solidified into a synthetic whole that might be considered on par with the other so-called world

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[26] Sect here denotes a school of Islamic jurisprudence.

[27] The other main Shi'ite groups are the *Jafari* and the *Imamiyyah*, both of which partake widely in saint veneration.

[28] Eraqi-Klorman, "Magic," 125-127.

[29] Eraqi-Klorman, 128-129.

[30] Eraqi-Klorman, 128-129.

[31] Gellner, "For Syncretism," 289.

religions. At least as the evidence is presented in the sources, the Muslims and Jews of Yemen generally saw themselves as belonging to separate religions.

One could describe the situation as syncretic or accretive, but neither is a perfect fit. There are most certainly many examples of syncretic adaptations, see examples below, that are well-established but not accepted by an overarching orthodox or popular worldview that unselfconsciously combines both Judaism and Islam. Nevertheless, there are also examples that demonstrate that Yemeni Muslims and Jews maintained a complementary, accretive coexistence (see examples below), as the laity seek to satisfy a wide range of needs that are not all addressed by the religious institutions with which they identified.

One can easily observe the Jewish and Muslim hybridity in some aspects of Yemeni religiosity and come to the conclusion that Yemeni religion is syncretic, in the conventional sense of the word. However, there is an obvious difference in adopting a practice, native to an outside religion and perusing outside religion to get access to a certain practice. The allowance for these idiosyncrasies is more likely to produce new insights into a religion or its specific practices and traditions. Continuing with Gellner's suggestion that we ask about the whole of the religious culture and also specific practices, we can also ask what practices we see that can be didactically described as bricolage, syncretic, synthetic, and accretive.

As we begin to discuss bricolage, it should be noted that Eraqi-Klorman's work is focused on two main points. First, she aims to describe the prevailing attitudes toward Yemeni Jews by their Muslim neighbors. Secondly, she seeks to draw attention to the roles of Yemeni Jews as the providers of religious, magical services for both Jewish and Muslim patrons. Because she focuses on well-known and long-standing relationships between Yemeni Muslims and Jews, there is, of course, very little in her work that can reasonably be described in Gellner's terms as bricolage. However, one can easily imagine something as simple as including a Hebrew prayer in your pre-meal ritual just once, perhaps you thought it appropriate because you were a Muslim eating Jewish food. If it happens irregularly and does not become a well-established and well-known practice, then it should be described as something less formalized than syncretic, and in Gellner's typology, there is only bricolage remaining to employ. A widening of the current study to include a broader range of historical and ethnographic sources would likely reveal ample anecdotal examples—for they only need to be anecdotal to be described as bricolage— that could be insightfully described as bricolage to highlight their unsystematic character.

Perhaps the clearest example of what Gellner would critically describe as syncretic can be observed in the Muslim responses to a sequence of Jewish messianic figures. In the eighteenth century, Yemeni Islamic Messianism reached a peak of popularity.[32] The Ottoman Empire had tried to conquer Yemen since 1849 and had inflicted mass suffering upon the Yemeni people. It seems that in the chaos of the Ottoman campaigns, many Muslim Yemenis took the claims of the Messianic figures seriously, with many investing their hope and faith in them. Pretenders claiming

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[32] Bat-Zion Eraqi-Klorman, "Muslim Supporters of Jewish Messiahs in Yemen," *Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 4 (1993): 714.

the mantle of the Islamic Messiah known as the *Mahdi* began with Faqih Said, in 1840, and Sharif Ismail, in 1846.[33] Shortly afterward, Jews, who were experiencing the same hardships as their Muslim neighbors, began expecting a messiah of their own. In the new reality of constant and mortal war, all Yemeni communities were faced with a new spiritual need: one for salvation on earth. Muslim communities had met this need with the raising up of Messiahs. Thus, Jewish communities did the same. Never did a Jewish Messiah and an Islamic one co-exist in Modern Yemen. In the absence of a *Mahdi*, many Muslims accepted Jewish Messianic figures.

There is a long history of Jewish Messianic figures who have captured the imagination of large numbers of Yemenis, including Muslims. The most notable of these were Shukr Kuhayl I (1861-1865) and Shukr Kuhayl II (1868-1875).[34] Both of which were accepted as messiahs by many among the Muslim community, notably Salafi Sunnis. However, both were also defamed as anti-messiahs by Zaydis in the region and would later be executed, seemingly at the order of Zaydi religious leaders.[35] This fact demonstrates the efforts of the Zaydi Shi'ites to maintain power over which forms of syncretization and hybridity was allowed to be practiced by minority religious groups.

Shukr Kuhayl I and Shukr Kuhayl II were supported for their views on the imminent end-times, sating the Yemeni Muslim spiritual need for hope and salvation in the absence of their own messianic figures. The Muslim needs that allowed for the political emergence of a messiah did not end with the deaths of Faqih Said and Sharif Ismail. The Ottoman wars continued, and the resulting death and suffering did not abate due to the lack of a *Mahdi* in Yemen. Thus, Muslims were willing to paint a thin veneer of Islamic paint over the Jewish messiahs, both in the mouths of the Messianic figures and by thinking of them as heralds clearing the way for the coming *Mahdi*.

Furthermore, the *Mahdi* prophecies are at best on the periphery of Muslim theology. The *Mahdi* is a figure that, in the minds of most Muslims, is mysterious and vague. Even the singularity of the *Mahdi* is uncertain. Many Muslims hold that the first four leaders of the Islamic community after the death of the prophet Muhammad, known as the rightly-guided successors, were *Mahdis*. Many also hold that there is only one.

Imams give sermons on the Islamic messiah less often than on Qu'ranic material and much division exists over who and what the term *Mahdi* connotes. Muslims in Yemen took the disparate beliefs based on Tanakh prophecies and aligned them with Islamic messianic lore, adopting these figures into their religious praxis. As such, it is reasonable to describe this aspect of Yemeni religion as syncretic.

Synthetic religious traditions are those which have enveloped aspects of other traditions within themselves in a systematic fashion.[36] The envelopment into Islamic orthodoxy of ideas about the value of Jewish piety, as documented by Eraqi-Klorman, seems to fit into this category.

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[33] Eraqi-Klorman, 714.

[34] Eraqi-Klorman, "Magic", 128.

[35] Bat-Zion Eraqi-Klorman, "The Messiah Shukr Kuḥayl II (1868–75) and His Tithe (ma-aser): Ideology and Practice as a Means to Hasten Redemption," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 79 (1989): 199–217.

[36] Gellner, "For Syncretism," 288.

Muslims in twentieth century Yemen saw piety within the Jewish community as a spiritually beneficial state of affairs for all Yemenis. This belief seems to be an old one, as written sources expressing it are at least hundreds of years old.[37] Often, Muslims would encourage Jews to adhere closely to their religious obligations, even going so far as to bring unobservant Jews before Muslim judges and Imams, so that they could chastise and punish them.[38] This was done to preserve the purity of the entire Yemeni population. As can be observed from both communities praying together for rain, Muslims thought the Jewish communities to be equally important to God.[39] It seems Muslims encouraged Jewish piety to safeguard the Yemeni community, both Jewish and Muslim, from God's retaliations and punishments. Thus, as even Muslims engaged in systematizing it, this represents a synthetic aspect of Yemeni religion.

A broad analysis of Yemeni religion would likely not reveal many synthetic aspects of Yemeni religious practice, as Jews and Muslims maintained a distance from each other's identities. This did not have to have been the case. The final independent ruler of Yemen seemingly engaged in actions aimed at uniting Jews and Muslims under his spiritual and secular rule. In the first years of his reign (1904-1948), Imam Yahya Muhammad Hamid ed-Din (1869-1948) declared that the djinn of Yemen were as much his feudal subjects as the men.[40] This dramatic decree, being addressed to his human subjects, this decree implicitly told them that he had the power and authority to control the djinn and protect mortal Yemenis from them. Yahya, unlike all Zaydi imams before him, sent out demonological directives to his subjects, possibly aimed at leading Jewish demonologists to see him as an authority on the matter.[41] He was the de-jure spiritual leader of the Zaydis, though he also held secular authority over all Yemenis as the ruler of the land of Yemen. The Zaydi community, as mentioned above, had historically been consistent in their denials of supernatural entities or occurrences, outside of God.

Especially in the Zaydi consciousness, belief in demonic entities was considered a Jewish superstition and was to be avoided by good Muslims. It was therefore a dramatic move when Imam Yahya broke with this tradition. One might fairly presume that he did this in a move intended to raise support in the Yemeni Jewish communities, especially given other more overtly pro-Jewish decrees he later gave. He would later ensure Yemen would be the only nation in the Middle East to allow unrestricted Jewish through-traffic to Palestine.[42] Further, Imam Yahya would give back Jewish land, taken from Yemen's Jews by his predecessor.[43]

Throughout his rule, Yahya would engage in many actions that seem to bring Yemen's Jews more and more under his spiritual authority. Whether in declaring himself the most capable

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[37] Eraqi-Klorman, "Magic," 128.

[38] Eraqi-Klorman, 128.

[39] Gellner, "For Syncretism," 288.

[40] Mikhail Rodionov, "Jinn in Hadramawt Society," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 38 (2008): 279.

[41] Rodionov, 279.

[42] Aharon Gaimani. "Rabbi Yihye Yitzhak Halevi and His Relations with Imam Yahya," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 2 (March 2010): 239.

[43] Gaimani, 237.

of protecting Yemen from demons, a service mainly performed by Jews, or setting himself up as the conduit by which Jews could visit their holy land, Yahya seemed to be attempting to merge the religious hierarchies of Yemen under his aegis. Were this his goal, the creation of the nation of Israel and his assassination ensured his failure. Were Imam Yahya to have been successful, Yemen might have eventually become more characterized by a synthetic Muslim-Jewish organic religion.

Using the lenses of Gellner's framework, there are several aspects of Yemeni religion that can be viewed as accretive and complementary. Jewish specialists were seen by both Jews and Muslims as the authority on demonological matters. These specialists were consulted for their exorcist skills by both communities. This is best characterized as an example of an accretive environment. Eraqi-Klorman writes, "Jews were thought to possess the powers to control the demons and exorcise them from humans."[44] As one of the spiritual needs of the Muslim population was not being met by their own religious tradition, here being the need for demonological rites to ward off demons and djinn, they sought out the services of the specialists of a competing religion.[45] Jews were thought to have the ability to speak to demons inherently.[46] Demonological beliefs in Yemen demonstrate a high degree of mixing, as evidenced by both communities seeking out the same demonologists and exorcists. This allows one to categorize Yemeni demonology as accretive. Eraqi-Klorman also mentions that some Muslims often sought to demonize Jews for their perceived demonological predispositions. This further fits Gellner's typology, as it makes allowances for dominant groups regulating and suppressing the accretive activities of those groups with less power.

**Conclusion: The Insights that Arise out of Applying Gellner's System**

Ultimately, although Eraqi-Klorman's body of work contains invaluable accounts of Muslim and Jewish interaction in early twentieth century Yemen, both her descriptions and her analyses are stifled by her application of a theoretically underdeveloped conception of syncretism. Moreover, the uncareful employment of the terminology of syncretism allows for her work to be interpreted in support of the Islamist purist who would interpret what she documents as immoral. In this paper, I have applied a more nuanced and careful theoretical typology that distinguishes between a variety of relationships that emerge when multiple religions overlap in the same public sphere. The resulting analysis offers a far more nuanced description of the relationships and developments in Yemen that occurred during and due to centuries of interaction between Yemeni Muslims and Jews. While attempting to categorize the whole of Yemeni religious culture, it became evident that there are reasons to describe the symbiotic whole as syncretic, but there are just as many reasons to conclude that it is accretive. Nevertheless, we found that at the global level, the diversity of religious manifestations denied simple categorization. While examining smaller

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[44] Eraqi-Klorman, "Magic," 129-130.

[45] Due to the Jews being perceived as being inherently mystical by the Yemeni Muslims, they were sought out to fulfill some of the more arcane spiritual needs of Yemen's Muslims.

[46] Eraqi-Klorman, "Magic," 129.

units of religious culture, however, we found practices that could accurately be described as syncretic, synthetic, and accretive. Given more resources, we would likely also find anecdotal evidence of bricolage.

As a result of the above analysis, it is now possible to distinguish phenomena that are less disruptive to the status quo of power dynamics in the region, such as is seen in the synthetic idea that Jewish piety affects the entirety of the Yemeni people, from phenomena which are quite disruptive, as seen in many of the accretive practices described above. When they took the responsibility to ensure pious Jewish conduct, Muslims were necessarily asserting their superior position in their power dynamic.

Jewish communities are not recorded as performing a similar action towards their Muslim neighbors in the sources we have and, indeed, they could not have. Yemeni Muslims, due to their favorable position in the asymmetric power structure, had the privilege to take a paternalistic attitude towards the Jews. This sentiment and in the Jewish acceptance of this dynamic implicitly legitimized Muslim ideas of Islamic supremacy. In the synthetic envelopment within the Muslim faith of the value of Jewish pious practices, we see the employment of Muslim power to suppress transgressive Jewish religiosity. Furthermore, in the examples of Jewish messiahs who gained many Muslim followers, we see the regulation of Jewish influence and employment of their power. Both main Jewish messiahs were killed by Zaydi Muslims and, in so doing, Jews were made to accept a weaker position in the Muslim-Jewish power structure. As mentioned, syncretic situations often reveal hidden power dynamics, as a more powerful religious community seeks to regulate syncretic activities with and in weaker religious communities. This seems to be illuminated here as well.

Nevertheless, the accretive relationships involving Jewish demonological specialists demonstrate a reversal of the predominant Yemeni power structure. In these accretive situations, Yemeni Jews enjoyed a position of power and authority over their Muslim neighbors. However, as mentioned by Eraqi-Klorman, even in this realm, Jews were oppressed. They were often labeled the perpetrators of supernatural ailments in Yemen.

These complexities of the relations of power in twentieth century Yemen have been brought to light so that they can be more easily analyzed through the application of Gellner's robust typology. Hopefully, this paper will, in some small way, influence further studies of Yemeni religion to use more granular typologies without reinforcing the asymmetrical power relations between Muslims and Jews. It is hoped that the consistent application of theoretical frameworks that are mindful of the potential for unwitting endorsement of negative power dynamics will avoid any further cases of etically playing partisan to asymmetric power structures.