AN ORIENTAL ENCOUNTER

Interculturality, Awe, and Equivocal Compatibility at the Egyptian Coptic Mission of Santa Cruz de la Sierra

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Abstract: An ethnic church from the Middle East without a missionary tradition has grown in a decade to several hundred parishioners in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia. Using anthropology and ethnographic methods, this article argues that interculturality, even if marked by subjectivity, equivocations, culturalism, and ephemerality, can also be characterized by the seduction of symbols, mutual appropriation, and inclusion. I will give particular attention to the role of assigned beauty and awe in the constitution of meaning and show that shared relational intelligence and the emotional security provided by the priests allow for semiotic distortions to be overcome.

INTERCULTURALITY WITHOUT HIERARCHY

The fear of conversion among members of the Christian minority of Egypt has led many Coptic parents to tattoo their children with a small blue cross on their inner wrist (Hassan 2003, 140; Zibawi 2006, 44). This indelible reminder of Coptic identity is intended to prevent the temptation to apostasy by inscribing group identity on the body, even at the risk of exposing the child's, then adult's, minority status to the public. This practice is thus deeply embedded in a historical, cultural, and political context pertaining to Egypt. It is therefore extraordinary to have local adolescents and adults in the Bolivian city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra adopt this symbol. Equally extraordinary are ritual hymns sung in Coptic, the pharaohs' language, by Bolivian altar boys during Sunday mass. For an ethnic religion embedded in one single cultural context, in which being Coptic has held an exact correspondence with being Egyptian for almost the entirety of the Coptic Church's two thousand years of existence, this appropriation and display of Coptic identity markers by young Bolivians is a remarkable event. A Christian church without missionary traditions, known for its icons, hymns, and monasticism, is unprecedentedly attending to Bolivian parishioners of diverse social backgrounds from the city of Santa Cruz.

Located in the Bolivian lowlands, Santa Cruz has for the past few decades experienced considerable economic and demographic growth, becoming Bolivia's richest and fastest-growing city (Kirshner 2008, 151) and attracting flows of Aymara and Quechua migrants from poorer regions of the Andes (Stearman 1985). About 25 percent of the population in the whole *departmento* is of Andean origin (Gustafson 2006, 355). Santa Cruz is also a socially, politically, and racially polarized city, where some of the powerful local elites openly articulate an anti-indigenous discourse and oppose the indigenous and leftist president, Evo Mo-

Latin American Research Review, Vol. 50, No. 1. © 2015 by the Latin American Studies Association.

https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2015.0002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rales, and his Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) through a regionalist movement (Gustafson 2006; Fabricant 2009).

While religious studies in Latin America have tended to focus on Catholicism, folk religions, Afro-Latin and syncretic religions, or the rise of Protestant denominations (Parker 2008b, 326), new proselytizing religions are today entering the Latin American "theoscape," such as Islam (Montenegro 2002) and now Orthodoxy. The meeting between the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt and inhabitants of a large South American city convenes two cultural ensembles without ethnic borders or shared histories. The West, its modernity, its hegemony, and its religions backed by powerful carriers are neither at the point of departure nor at the receiving end. The radicality of such an encounter calls for research on Orthodoxy in Latin America and on the worldviews contained and propagated by Coptism and Orthodoxy and their interaction with Latin American societies; it also calls for studies on religious interculturality within the global South, and on Coptism itself, as its inculturation in Bolivia implies an exit from what is essentially an ethnic religion and an opening to universalization, and hence proselytizing.[1]

To study "interpenetrations of civilizations," Paula Montero (2006, 23) proposed the notion of "cultural mediation," a social and symbolic space of normative relations between religious institutions and local cultures. An anthropology of missionaries today should thus focus on communication and interculturality rather than (solely) exploitation and acculturation. Similarly, for Cristián Parker (2008b), religious encounters should be understood and studied as cultural ones (although he implies a somewhat pessimistic view that sees interculturality as potentiality carrying cultural conflicts). Interculturality refers to the contact and interactions between two cultural ensembles, a notion larger and therefore distinct from official forms of interculturalism across Latin America and particularly in Bolivia, officially a plurinational state (Fabricant and Gustafson 2011, Lowrey 2006), and from concepts such as multiculturalism, multiethnicity, hybridity, and *mestizaje* that may entail longer, more "structural" interactions, whether peaceful or not.

My interest in this article is not to focus on strictly religious aspects such as causes for conversion.[2] Rather I mainly explore two aspects of a multifaceted and complex encounter. The first section emphasizes the lack of asymmetry that singularizes this encounter in comparison to most proselytizing enterprises in Latin American history, characterized by situations of hegemony over or symbolic dominance of the other. Between a minority culture in the Middle East that is still traditional, patriarchal, and conservative and the periphery of a South American town, no relation of hegemony implied in proselytizing could be detected. Furthermore, mutual ignorance of the other preceded the culture contact, as no

1. Coined in 1953, the term *inculturation* refers to the adaptation of missionaries to indigenous cultures (see Crollius 1991). By extension, it refers to the adoption of non-Western cultural and identity markers by Christian missionaries. It seemed operative to use that term and category in the context of a foreign religious body (Coptism) attempting to negotiate, consciously and unconsciously, the surrendering, holding, and adaptation of Coptic dogmas, values, symbols, and habits.

2. On this subject, see the seminal anthropological works of Hefner (1993) and Buckser and Glazier (2003).

https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2015.0002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

party had fully shaped preconceptions of the other. That is not to say that the *cruzeño* public had no repertoire of otherness for Egyptians or Orthodoxy, or that the Egyptian Copts lacked associations about Bolivia, but that such repertoires were probably sparsely populated by vague notions. In other words, there is no "savage slot," as Michel-Rolph Trouillot called it, assigned to one party. The Egyptian clergy's effort to acclimate Coptism to Bolivia takes place within this context.

Interdependently, the second section of this article analyzes the omnipresence of equivocations of interpretations and distortions of appropriations that populate the encounter. The surprising lack of cultural curiosity about the other's context and history and, more importantly, the presence of errors of interpretations do not prevent, I will argue, welcoming, affection, identification, and appropriation. Both Marshall Sahlins's notion of "working misunderstanding" (1981) and João de Pina-Cabral's idea of "equivocal compatibility" (2002) highlight that mutual errors and contradictions do not prevent seduction and cohabitation between two distinct cultural universes.

WHO ARE THE COPTS, AND WHAT IS THE COPTIC CHURCH?

As Coptism might be unfamiliar to Latin Americanist readers, a short preamble on this Orthodox denomination will highlight the historicity of its mission to Bolivia. The Coptic Church is known as one of the oldest Christian churches. According to tradition, St. Mark the Evangelist came to Alexandria in the first century; from there, Christianity spread to most of Egypt until it eventually replaced the classic religion of the pharaohs (Zaki 2005; Tagher 1998). Today the Coptic community represents nine to fifteen million individuals, making it the largest Christian community in the Middle East (Thomas and Youssef 2006, 2; Gabra 2008, 1).[3]

The Coptic Church has always been a minority if not an oppressed church. It emerged and organized first under Roman repression of Christians until the third century AD, then under the dominance of the Byzantine Christian empire, which brutally repressed theological dissidence in Alexandria (Meinardus 1970, 2006; Bagnall 2007). From the Moslem conquest of Egypt in the seventh century until today, Copts have lived as a minority church under Moslem rule (Tagher 1998). Probably as a consequence of this, the Coptic Church does not have a missionary tradition.[4] "Missionary" in Western social sciences typically refers to the Catholic (and later Protestant) tradition of proselytism outside the boundaries of Christian societies, a practice linked to European expansion and hegemony; the typical models are Catholic congregations such as the Jesuits or Franciscans. There is no comparable tradition or congregation in the Coptic Church and his-

3. Demographics are politically charged, which explains the wide range in the estimation.

4. The Coptic Church would contest this assertion. In the Coptic narrative and for the clergy, their church, founded by one of the Evangelists, has always been missionary and the ministry is missionary in essence. In addition, according to hagiography, several early Christian missionaries to Europe were Copts such as St. Maurice, an Egyptian Copt said to have evangelized a region now in Switzerland; and, still according to tradition, several Coptic monks traveled to Ireland in the early Middle Ages, where they brought their monastic traditions (Partrick 1996).

https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2015.0002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tory. As members of a minority church, the Copts did not support an underlying political or ideological project. They were, as John H. Watson (2000, 75) put it, busy surviving as a community rather than expanding abroad. The exhaustive eight-volume *Coptic Encyclopedia,* published in 1991 by Macmillan, does not have any entry for *mission* or *missionary.*

With a small migration of middle-class Copts out of Egypt since the 1970s, Coptic communities of various sizes have prospered in such Western centers as London, Toronto, New York, and Los Angeles (e.g., Meinardus 1997; Botros 2006). Priests have accompanied or followed to minister to this growing diaspora. The millennium-old correspondence between religion and ethnicity was broken only by the effort carried out by the last two popes (Cyril VI and Shenouda III) to expand the church's influence beyond its traditional borders. In 1962, Pope Cyril VI tentatively sent a priest to Kenya and soon after another to Nigeria (Watson 2000, 72–92), which constituted the first formal break with the centuries-long absence of mission. However, sub-Saharan Africa has always been a familiar terrain rich in historical memory for a Coptic hierarchy; the Nuba and Ethiopian churches were directly under Coptic control even during early Islamic dominance of Egypt. Thus the next missions would emerge in the African context: priests were sent to Uganda, Tanzania, and Nigeria in the 1970s under Shenouda III. However, the Coptic Church did not conceive missions outside Africa and by the year 2000 did not have any familiarity with the Spanish-speaking world or Latin America.

Out of Africa and into Bolivia

In 2000 in Cairo, Pope Shenouda III ordered a monk with a reputation for being personable and open, Hessham Faragalla, then known as Friar Youssef Anba Paula, from the St. Paul monastery in Upper Egypt, to travel to and settle in Santa Cruz de la Sierra. He was ordained as a priest for the occasion. The Pope and the Coptic hierarchy believed then that four Coptic families had migrated and were living in the Bolivian city. The theoscape in Bolivia and Latin America in general at that time was characterized by a plurality of religions dominated by Catholicism, evangelical cults as well as, in rural areas, various folk religions and syncretic cults (Harris 2006; Orta 1995, 2006) and, on the believers' side, by established conventions and conversions.[5] Orthodoxy was relatively new. The few studies on Orthodoxy in South America (e.g., Canovas 2006; Strelko 1975) have implied a correspondence between ethnic identity and Orthodoxy, a religion of migrants; studies on Coptic communities outside Africa have relied on the same association (e.g., Botros 2006). In Latin America, the first Coptic Orthodox church was built in São Paulo, Brazil, but it has mainly served a few ethnic Middle Eastern Orthodox migrants and has failed to or has not been willing to expand.

Soon after he arrived in Santa Cruz in 2000, Father Youssef discovered that the four Egyptian families had migrated further to the United States or returned to Egypt. In an unknown country, speaking little Spanish, without social and

5. Two issues of *Social Compass,* a decade apart, on religion in Latin America (see Parker 1998, 2008a) emphasize the great religious changes in the continent (see Parker 1998, 2008a).

https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2015.0002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

institutional support, he found himself isolated and at a loss about what to do. He could not rely on a specific missionary training or on the backbone of any office in Cairo to provide him with directions. The Coptic Church does not have a missionary framework, ethos, or methodological templates available to its priests and friars in unfamiliar territories.[6] In addition to loneliness, Father Youssef had to deal with what he calls "culture shock," in particular what he considered then a lack of modesty in clothing. He nonetheless founded a small church in the back of a small house at the periphery of Santa Cruz and started a weekly mass (Youssef 2010, 2).

In less than twelve years, the Coptic Church of Santa Cruz has grown to between 180 and 220 parishioners. It has a clergy of four Egyptian priests who are all fluent in Spanish: a bishop, two priests, and a monk, all in the same location. In 2006, it expanded to Paquio, an isolated rural community located about three hours north of Santa Cruz.[7] These successes call for analysis, especially given the exigencies of Orthodoxy (a three-hour-long mass, of which parts are hidden; the complexity of the liturgy; and the high social demands on parishioners).

For the first few years after his arrival, Father Youssef celebrated mass and other rituals in Arabic and Coptic. The very few Orthodox families in the area, originally from Lebanon or Palestine, were delighted to have an Orthodox priest available. According to Father Youssef's own admission, however, attendance was sparse. There was no Coptic liturgy available in Spanish; the liturgy was eventually translated from Coptic and Arabic from several sources. The trajectory of the Coptic Church in Santa Cruz evidences both a lack of preparation and the empirical character of its inculturation. One should note that the liturgy was translated without resistance on the church's part, even though liturgy in Coptic constitutes a strong identity marker for both the church and its community (Zibawi 2006; Abdel-Sayed 1980). And, as Father Youssef improved his Spanish, the part of the mass celebrated in the local language increased and with it, attendance.

In 2002, the Coptic Church purchased a small estate in a relatively impoverished neighborhood north of Santa Cruz and built its first church, which was completed in 2004 and became a cathedral in 2006. The architectural style of the St. Mary and St. Mark Cathedral is distinctly Coptic and Middle Eastern Christian, with round domes and an adjacent walled compound. The interior has the hallmark of Coptic identity: thirty icons, designed and painted by an Egyptian nun who traveled to Bolivia and stayed for six months to complete her work. As I will show, the exotic appeal of these icons has played an important role in seducing cruzeños. The altar is separated into two areas, one public and one hidden, as in most Middle Eastern and Armenian churches, where part of the liturgy is celebrated hidden from worshippers.

The consecration of the new church in 2004 was a turning point in the Copts' public relation to the Bolivian city as the local media covered the event, attended

6. Coptic priests outside Egypt usually rely on fellow Egyptians to help them settle.

7. According to local memory, the first families migrated from the highland and colonized the area in the 1970s, which evokes the trajectory of Andean peasants who became rural smallholders in the north of the department (Stearman 1985, 152–189).

https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2015.0002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1 The St. Mary and St. Mark Coptic Cathedral at Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Photograph by the author.

by local politicians and officials, giving it considerable publicity. In 2006, the visit with great pomp of Shenouda III constituted a new turning point, giving the Santa Cruz church tremendous legitimacy within the Coptic world and the ecumenical community of Bolivia. The Bolivian media covering the event both increased the publicity for the church and underscored its exoticism. It is notable that during the pope's visit, a classical concert was held in the church. This evidences the inculturation of Coptism in Bolivia, for in Coptic Egypt, it is strictly forbidden to bring musical instruments into churches. Pictures and videos of the event show Shenouda III, the guardian of Orthodoxy, attending and approving of the concert.[8] That same year, Father Youssef Anba Paula was ordained as a bishop in Cairo and became Anba Youssef, with a diocese covering most of Spanish-speaking South America as well as Spain. St. Mary and St. Mark became a cathedral. The church's clergy expanded as well, with the arrival of three more priests in 2007, 2008, and 2009. The physical expansion of the church compound was financed with donations from Egyptians living abroad, principally in North America. Coptic churches and communities in Toronto, Montreal, Boston, Los Angeles, Texas, and New York also regularly send groups of professionals and

8. See Youssef (2010, 26) as well as videos posted on the church's Web site: http://orthodoxbolivia.org/diocese/history/.

https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2015.0002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

youth to Santa Cruz. Visits by foreign physicians, dentists, engineers, translators, and educators, all Copts, have enhanced the services provided by the church and made Coptism appealing to the have-nots. Long stays by foreign students with an Egyptian background (second-generation Americans, Canadians, or British) also give a decidedly cosmopolitan air to the church, which seems greatly appreciated by the younger parishioners.[9] Thus, the Santa Cruz Coptic community is embedded in a web of transnational relations and friendships that are vital to its growth.

Authenticity as inculturation

Because of its lack of a missionary tradition, the Coptic Church does not have a historically long (even if essentially strategic and instrumental) reflection on cultural difference such as the one developed by the Jesuits since the sixteenth century. It may have a missionary memory, but it is far from the missionary ethos of the Catholic and Evangelical Churches. The founding antecedents in late antiquity could be said to incite and inspire the current missionizing: one could reply, then, that it could have inspired Coptic initiatives also in the 1920s or in the nineteenth century, which did not occur. Thus the current Coptic missionizing is without precedent. The Coptic clergy cannot rely on a missionizing culture such as Catholic congregations, known for recording and reflecting upon their field experiences and developing tools to overcome cultural differences, such as the ones in Africa in the 1970s.[10] In the absence of texts, training, methodology, or framework, these seem to be replaced by empirical process, intuitions, bricolage, and improvisations.

For the Coptic Church in Bolivia, questions surrounding inculturation therefore emerged with acute immediacy. Which of the Coptic traditions should be surrendered and which should not? What should be the place of traditional liturgy, in particular of Coptic hymns, in the Bolivian setting? Should it convince Bolivians to change some of their habits to bring them closer to Orthodoxy?

The first question to arise was the cult's language. As Father Youssef improved his Spanish, Mass was increasingly celebrated in the local language and less in Arabic—out of necessity and not to follow a missionizing principle. A few words should be said here on the Coptic liturgy, which constitutes a powerful Coptic identity marker within the context of Islamic dominance in Egypt (Zibawi 2006; Botros 2006). In Egypt, the entire Coptic mass is sung. Hymns are sung in Coptic,

9. Interestingly, it is common that the Egyptian parents of such youth later visit Santa Cruz and are hosted at the St. Mary and St. Mark compound. These older Egyptians seem amazed by the Bolivian appropriation of what they believed were exclusively Egyptian markers (Coptic hymns, tattooed crosses, etc.). Some of the foreign students have stayed for up to one year, usually housed on the Coptic compound, facilitating friendships with Bolivian Copts. (I first came to learn about the Santa Cruz Coptic Church through one of my students, herself an Egyptian Copt who had traveled to Santa Cruz with a group of fellow Copts from New England to help construct a new building on the compound, now a hall for community activities, the El Karma building).

10. According to Bishop Youssef, there is only one report in Arabic about the Kenyan Coptic experience.

https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2015.0002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ancient Greek, and Arabic. Altar boys are a large choir importantly designated to sing these hymns and not only to serve the priests. Since the Church does not have a missionary office in Cairo, Bishop Youssef used personal networks in Spain to have the liturgy translated into Spanish. Many but not all of the hymns were translated. Mass is still entirely sung with the same millennium-old melodies but in Spanish (for the unaccustomed ear, the effect is astounding). There are still parts of the considerably large Coptic liturgy that are being translated into Spanish on site by a task group created by Father Anthony Ramzi. The presence of musical instruments inside the church is also strong evidence of inculturation, as explained matter-of-factly by Bishop Youssef in a personal communication: "In Egypt, musical instruments are strictly forbidden inside churches. But here, in Bolivia, music is everywhere. People are born with music. So we have allowed guitars and drums."

The separation of men and women in church constitutes another central social tenet of the Coptic mass, although the obligation is not enforced in Santa Cruz. When facing the altar women sit to the right of the aisle and men to the left. From what I observed, neither the priests nor the parishioners ever intervene when that rule is broken (if a husband follows his wife and sits with her or, more typically, when a young man sits close to a girlfriend). This practice is induced during social events and informal conversations. Modesty from women is also expected though not enforced either. Those familiar with Orthodox and Middle Eastern Christian practices would be surprised to see women with bare arms in a Coptic church, as the photographs here show, women who nonetheless do wear a white veil emblematic of modesty.[11]

Many of the constraining social demands of Coptism are on women, such as modesty; however, most of the converts to Coptism and the pillars of the St. Mary and St. Mark community are precisely women, including highly educated ones whose political views, interestingly, happen to be very progressive. One can thus wonder if the features of Coptism that resist adaptation actually make it more attractive to the non-Orthodox: if what is presented by the Coptic clergy or seen by cruzeños as authentically Coptic and different, and which turns out to be socially demanding on parishioners, contributes to the seduction of Coptism. What is negotiable, adaptable, and eventually changed and what is not may not depend on the strict observance of moral or theological rules but rather on an intersubjective gray zone populated by a conversation between dogma and the perception of attractiveness: the rigidity of dogma can be attractive to non-Orthodox or, rather, what cannot be changed and incultured contributes to the success of the Church and its image of authenticity. Hence, the separation of men and women in the church or the white veil with which women cover themselves are both tenets of Coptic tradition and elements of its inculturation.

11. The lack of discipline and even explicit, heavy proselytizing might be related to the Coptic experience in Egypt, where Copts have denounced forced conversion to Islam, both in history (Zaborowski 2005; Tagher 1998) and in contemporary times (Thomas and Youssef 2006), especially among the rural, poorer Copts (Marshall 1999). In the noted Coptic cult of martyrs, most of the latter died for having refused conversion.

https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2015.0002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

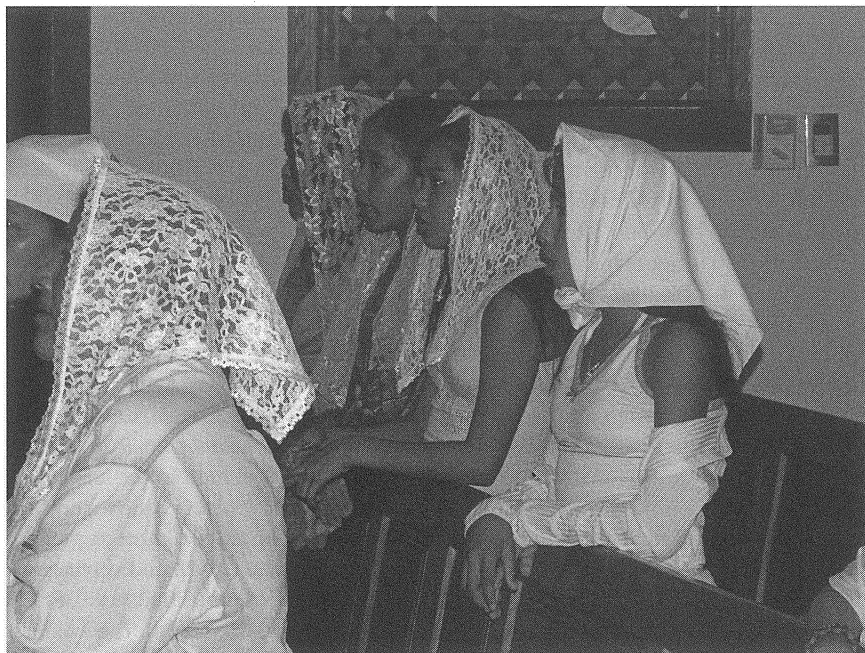

Figure 2 Wednesday Mass at St. Mary and St. Mark. Photograph by the author.

From minority status to a Christian-majority country

The Egyptian priests and occasional Egyptian visitors seem rather unaware of and uncurious about Bolivia's tumultuous history, its long duration of social polarization, and the ideologies and debates that have traversed the society, particularly in Santa Cruz, for the past few decades (Postero 2007; Fabricant 2009; Gustafson 2006). Even in the religious field itself, the various theologies that have animated the Catholic Church since the 1960s or the politicization of religious institutions in Latin America for the past few decades (Parker 2008a, 2008b), evidenced by the openly conservative positions of the Archbishop of Santa Cruz, do not seem to reach a Coptic clergy entirely absorbed by religiosity and piousness. Politics seems totally absent from the St. Mary and St. Mark community.

The Egyptian clergy came to Santa Cruz with its own ethos in regard to the political and the ecumenical. For most of its history, the Coptic hierarchy restricted itself to an ethos and a policy of discretion. Watson (2000, 73–92) considers this one of the reasons it was not a missionary church. To a large extent, the Egyptian clergy in Santa Cruz is genuinely rather than strategically uncurious about the stringent political, social, and religious debates that traverse Bolivian society. Indeed, the contrast between Christian religious life in Bolivia and in Egypt could not be more striking, as to a large degree the four Egyptian priests moved from a society where they have been in contemporary times a "minority under siege" (Thomas and Youssef 2006) to a Christian country. For instance, in

https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2015.0002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Egypt the renewed enforcement, since 1971, of the Hatti Humayun decree dating from the Ottoman occupation, which severely restricts social and religious activities of Christian and Jewish minorities, complicates the building of new Coptic churches.[12] The freedom to worship is thus central to Copts' demands in contemporary Egyptian politics.[13] In Santa Cruz, the Copts were able to build their cathedral without contingencies and have enjoyed the same type of support (as well as sheer curiosity) from local authorities as do other denominations.

BOLIVIAN APPROPRIATION: EXOTICISM AS AUTHENTICITY

Why have cruzeños been attracted to Coptism? Why do some attend almost three-hour-long masses and convert to such religiously and socially demanding practices? The questions of who converts and why have been central to many studies on religious changes in Latin America over the past few decades that rely on variables such as class, education, and ethnicity (e.g., Harris 2006; Parker 1998, 2004; Capiberibe 2007; Montenegro 2002; Orta 1995).[14] As long as Coptism rhymed with ethnicity, the Orthodox clergy did not worry about conversion to Coptism; it became an issue when Coptism expanded beyond the border of Egyptian identity.

This article, being anthropological in method and scope, remains a qualitative rather than a quantitative study. Certain facts, however, are obvious in regard to class and age. First, the Coptic Church of Santa Cruz is not socially homogenous, and class may not be a predominant factor in motives to convert. I estimated that roughly half of the parishioners qualify as working class, with relatively stable professional occupations, and a quarter as poor, living in precarious conditions. Some of the women are single mothers, struggling economically to raise several children. About one quarter of parishioners qualify as middle and upper class, mainly business owners, doctors, lawyers, and military officers' families. This diversity, though obviously moderate, still puts this Orthodox church in a category different from socially homogenous churches. It also suggests, as I observed, that the Egyptian priests are personally at ease with individuals from varied social backgrounds. Second, age is also a variable, as about three-quarters of worshippers seem younger than twenty-five years of age. Most of the youngest worshippers, including the many university students, are children or grandchildren of the Andean migrants studied by Allyn Stearman (1985), although many youth

12. The application of this decree, as well as of Sharia law, has varied greatly over time. Hatti Humayun has been applied more strictly since the overthrow of Nasser in 1971 (Thomas and Youssef 2006; Tagher 1998; Hassan 2003; Chaillot 1980, 2011).

13. Anti-Copt repression is not the subject of this article. Several recent killings have obscured views on Coptic history and experience under Moslem domination that cannot be summarized in a few definite sentences. The persecution and occasional killings of Copts by radical groups and the discrimination by government agencies and local police in Egypt is well documented but appears to be relatively recent and indexed on the expansion of the Islamic Brotherhood in Egyptian institutions since the 1970s (Zaki 2005, 920–948; Thomas and Youssef 2006; Marshall and Assad 1999; Chaillot 1980, 2011).

14. The definition of *conversion* is problematic here. Almost all Bolivian Copts were first baptized as Catholics. Some, however, have chosen to be baptized again as Orthodox Copts. This concerns mainly, but not only, those who have married in the Coptic Church. Such baptisms have brought about strong criticism from the local Catholic hierarchy, calling it "double baptism."

https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2015.0002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

are of mixed background, with at least one parent or one grandparent originally from Santa Cruz.

Interviews and observations have thus underscored several points. First, the ecumenical stance and, to some degree, the pro-Catholic discourse of the local Coptic clergy, instead of highlighting Coptic uniqueness, has avoided alienating segments of the public and has attracted Catholics. Second, the "exoticism" of Coptism—the church's decoration, the dressing habits of the clergy, the sheer appearance of the latter, the forms of liturgy, and the multitude of symbols that greet the eye and ear—have had a strong effect on a public avid for religious novelty and authenticity. Third, the rigidity, conservatism, and strong social content of Orthodoxy, far from deterring the public, emphasize its authenticity in the eye of the potential parishioners. Finally, the relational intelligence and the commitment of the Coptic clergy in Santa Cruz has impacted the development of a community, as have the social and health services provided by the church.

Men in Black

Differences in forms are repeatedly evoked by parishioners to explain their attraction to this new church in Santa Cruz. Such forms include hymns, icons, or cult languages unknown to the public (ancient Greek, Coptic, and Arabic). According to Mario, age fifteen, whose grandparents migrated from Cochabamba and who lives a few blocks away from the church, it is the liturgy that mesmerizes him: "What do I prefer? The hymns. I also like the sound of Coptic [language]." Sandra, a twenty-two-year-old university student from a close-knit family of *trabajadores* (workers) who works as a Spanish translator for the church and thus has access to original books in Coptic and Arabic, says, "the drawings and paintings [in the Egyptian books] are extraordinary. There is not anything like this in Bolivia. . . . I like the incense, the smoke and smell of the incense everywhere inside the church." Simona, a pious, working-class, single mother of four, originally from a small town of the *departamento,* evokes the veil that women cover themselves with, the obligation to cover one's mouth after receiving the Eucharist, and the priests' clothing. Several parishioners asserted that they were first intrigued by the church's exotic architecture as they walked or drove by. Others marveled at the hidden part of liturgy.[15] The role of assigned beauty and awe in both the constitution of meaning and the drive for personal appropriation should not be thought of as an interesting detail but as a central element of the culture contact. Awe, stupefaction, wonder or, as historian Caroline Bynum (2001) put it, *admiratio,* a sentiment conducive to *imitatio,* or appropriation, emerges as a mimetic response to otherness in the absence of an available repertoire preceding the encounter.

One specific episode, however, is reiterated by one worshipper after another: the first impression produced by these tall, bearded men with imposing crosses on their chests, their hair hidden by a hood, and a simple piece of black clothing entirely covering the body. (In some instances the robe is white, as shown in

15. In Orthodoxy, priests celebrate part of the mass behind a curtain.

https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2015.0002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 3 Coptic Mass at Paquio. Photograph by the author.

figure 3.) Almost all Bolivian Copts I interviewed evoked this first visual impact. The Egyptian priests have become self-conscious of their appearance and how they are noticed in public, something they were not used to in Egypt: "People in the streets . . . were very amazed by my black clothes and my beard" (Youssef 2010, 13). Awe can be interpreted here as a form of equivocation, for the Coptic

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priests' original appearance in Egypt is quotidian, while in Santa Cruz or Paquio it unintentionally incites wonder. In Benjaminian terms, the aura of black clothing in Egypt would be the expected and formal deference to holy men, a deference that the Coptic clergy in Santa Cruz longs for, obtaining wonder instead—and affection, as I will show below, which is an opposite of formal behavior.

The point is not to add to the lure of the Orient as criticized by Edward Said but to evoke the centrality of the relation to new forms as one of the reasons for the power of attraction of Coptism in this Latin American city. Difference and attraction appear at the heart of this intercultural encounter, *omne ignotum pro magnifico*, and Coptic religious and artistic forms seem enchanted to the Bolivian public. In Max Weber's (2001) famous argument, science and rationalization dried the world of its mysteries by ostracizing the magical.[16] Social scientists in the past twenty years have debated about the extent to which new (or old) religions have reenchanted the world (e.g., Murdock 1997; Motta 2009; Elkins and Morgan 2009), agreeing at least that the Weberian concept remained operative. Interestingly, for David Morgan (2012), it is the visual culture of religions that enchants the world. Art forms are central to the relation to Coptism for the cruzeños I have observed; interestingly, art is also important to traditional Coptic Orthodoxy: according to Zibawi (2006), if the Coptic Church in Egypt is central to Coptic identity, icons are central to the Coptic Church's identity. One should also recall that in Orthodox Christianity, art is conceived as transcendental. (The same can be said of the Catholic relation to art, but not, as is known, of Protestantism.)

Awe followed by appropriation is directed at both objects and immaterial symbols. A middle-aged couple asserted that their home has "become more Coptic" since they had bought an icon representing Mary and a couple of small framed paintings representing pharaonic scenes, including one with ancient gods. (The Coptic compound includes a small store where various Egyptian items, religious and others, are sold.) A young adult with a tattooed cross on his wrist proudly explained how he felt more Copt with it. He knew about its significance in Coptic history. Yet he added with a smile how it attracted attention and wonder from his university classmates, and how the symbol's sheer beauty and exoticism provided him with recognition. Another anecdote epitomizes these equivocations. After an open-air mass I observed in Paquio, a middle-aged farmer, when asked about her reasons for attending Coptic mass, responded fervently, "to be more Catholic." (Interestingly, the young priest overheard her, smiled, and said nothing.)[17] The inability to distinguish Orthodoxy from Catholicism and thus this lady's equivocal presence at a Coptic mass, as well as many of the appropriations observed, evoke Portuguese anthropologist João de Pina-Cabral's notion of "equivocal compatibility" (2002, 105–125, 2010): an intercultural situation where two persons differ, con-

16. Interestingly, Marcel Gauchet's (1997) seminal work on the question, the central argument of which is that Christianity dramatically accelerated the secularization of the West and the disenchantment of the world, did not consider Orthodoxy.

17. Adding to worshippers' confusion, the Coptic priests are locally called and call themselves *padres*, using the same term as for Catholic priests and thus ignoring the Spanish term for Orthodox priests, *pope;* a confusion not occurring with Protestant churches' distinct term, *pastor*, which might help prevent equivocation.

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sciously or not, on the interpretation of their interaction; yet, equivocation does not prevent compatibility. The miracle is this: errors, mutual or not, discovered or not by one party, do not prevent the relation from flourishing. This concept is actually very similar to Marshall Sahlins's (1981) earlier concept of "working misunderstanding," where several actors agree on a common practice although each is moved by distinct reasons and agendas. Intercultural appropriations are, almost by definition, semiotic distortions, jumping from one context to another via, in this case, enchantment's attraction: a mimetic relation to an artistic, linguistic, or religious sign adopted with little regard for its original meaning and context (again, what Walter Benjamin called the object's aura). As Sahlins (1999, 412) put it, "externalities are indigenized, engaged in local configurations and become different from what they were." The disjunction between intention and aura prevents neither the act of appropriation nor, at a personal level, a relation between the said parishioner and the priests. Appropriation signifies a double set, or succession, of agencies: the act of taking, and taking for one's use, interest, or pleasure, not for the sign's aura. Equivocations, and possibly appropriations, result from a lack of symbolic capital to restitute the sign's aura and locate the identity marker in its historical, cultural, or political context. The emptier the repertoires of otherness involved in the encounter, the more likely miscommunications are to occur. Whatever repertoire (Bolivian, Catholic, etc.) the Paquio lady was mobilizing to make sense of the information she was receiving, it contained no entry for Orthodoxy.

Given the centrality of the new in the Bolivian Copts' discourse, we can also wonder if it is lassitude with (Catholic) routine and not just the scientific mind that carries the disenchantment of life and the world—in which case exoticism would be a reenchantment. As Morgan (2009, 5) showed, enchantment, disenchantment, or reenchantment of the world rely entirely on subjective perceptions rather than on an objective state of a society's relation to science. As he put it, for Canaanites and Babylonians, the world may have seemed like an empty place. This would of course imply a temporal arc that would limit Coptism's power of attraction—an arc of conversion time where exotic forms populate the early phases while community fabric and emphasis on the relational populate later ones.

Anticonversion

Adherence to Coptism has here a complex relation to Catholicism.[18] With one Pentecostal exception, all of the parishioners I was able to interact with were Catholic before they joined the Coptic Church. Several parishioners who were (re)baptized as Copts explicitly asserted that they converted to Coptism because they "felt deeply Catholic"; all engage in a discourse that does not oppose Coptism and Catholicism and in which their personal religious trajectories are described with linear consistency. They have become Copts; yet most do not acknowledge that they are no longer Catholic. We call this phenomenon anticonversion: a con-

18. I will distinguish here, for purely operative rather than conceptual purposes, between formal conversion (with a Coptic baptism) and informal conversion (of Coptic parishioners who were not [re]baptized as Copts).

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version without apostasy, where the "new" faith is conceived as the deepening of the former one, its better version; these individuals try to reproduce their own "original" identity through conversion.

This relation to Catholicism intertwines a discourse of fraternity and closeness between Coptism and Catholicism with a discourse of authenticity that critiques contemporary Catholicism without rejecting its foundations and heritage. The discourse of religious fraternity is often worded in terms of personal experience and not in reference to theological commonalities, which most worshippers do not appear interested in. One parishioner, an Antiochian Orthodox Christian by birth whose grandfather had migrated from Palestine, evokes his personal ties with Catholicism in affectionate terms. His wife is Catholic; he was educated, the only Orthodox child, in a Jesuit school; several of his nephews and cousins are Catholic. He also happens to be personally close to the bishop and was instrumental in the organization of several events in association with the Catholic hierarchy in Santa Cruz.

According to Tagher (1998), Watson (2000), and Meinardus (2006), the Coptic Church has entertained antagonistic relations with the Catholic Church for most of its existence, an experience marred by deep historical controversies and resentments nourished by theological debates dating back to the Byzantine occupation of Egypt and beyond. Since the 1970s, however, the Coptic Church (in Egypt) has embraced an ecumenical agenda. In 1973, Shenouda III visited Rome, the first such visit in history, signing a common declaration with Paul VI. Since then, public signs and discourses of rapprochement have multiplied (Meinardus 2006). In Santa Cruz, the Coptic clergy and parishioners have a marked ecumenical and practical approach toward other Christian religions. Bishop Youssef himself has a strongly pro-Catholic discourse, emphasizing similarities, ignoring differences and history, and constantly seeking public rapprochement with the Catholic hierarchy in Bolivia. While there is open criticism of Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, considered "not Christian," (other) Protestant faiths are evoked positively. Whether this is or is not a strategy to establish, legitimize, and enroot the Coptic Church in the country, it does have this effect.

Bolivian Copts, too, emphasize similarities between Catholicism and Coptism. The largest common denominator between Orthodoxy and Catholicism in liturgy, theology, and traditions may be the centrality of the Virgin Mary. The advent of Protestantism in Latin America, by questioning the place of this figure, may facilitate the perception of commonality between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. The focus on the figure of Mary by Orthodoxy thus appears as a bridge between the two denominations. A business owner, who describes himself as *marianista* for he strongly believes he was cured from a disease in adolescence by his belief in Mary, was attracted to Coptism precisely because of its emphasis on the Virgin. Although he did not convert formally to Coptism and keeps attending both Catholic and Coptic masses, he also asserts that he is a Copt.

Generally, Coptism is seen by parishioners as a more authentic version of current Catholicism, a way to criticize the latter without rejecting it. The most recurrent adjective used to compare Coptism and Catholicism is *recto* (straight, just). "Here it is more *recto*," several parishioners told me, and, to illustrate, some com-

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mented: "Forty-five minutes of mass is not the same as two hours and a half, here it is more serious"; "At mass, people listen to the padre, they are not distracted as at Catholic mass." Two middle-class ladies, one of them from a prominent family dating back to colonial times, insisted on the moral rectitude of Coptism. Some of the formal differences between Coptic and Catholic practices (gender separation at church, white veil, length of mass, etc.) are evoked as being Catholic "in the time of our grandparents." A young couple (husband and wife interviewed together) said: "What interests us is the doctrine that is true [*recta*] and without modification." The discourse of authenticity is common in conversion and religious conservatism.[19] Religious conservatism may satisfy a search for meaning and people's need for ritual expression (Parker 2004, 59). In this sense, the search for authenticity finds a justification in objects, art forms, and "mystery." These exotic and aestheticized symbols are perceived as proof of Coptism's authentically Christian and ancient roots.

It should be noted, interestingly, that this religious conservatism does not seem to coincide with a political one as most parishioners asked about their political opinions expressed progressive views. One university student who is deeply attached to angelology and the cult of Mary and disapproves of contemporary Catholicism for being too liberal is also a registered member of MAS. She has been a Copt for eight years, was rebaptized as a Copt, and married according to the Coptic ritual. All of the middle- or upper-class parishioners I have evoked in this article also have a progressive discourse and social agenda. One of them is locally engaged in human rights work while another works for indigenous peoples' rights.[20]

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF BOLIVIAN COPTISM

The weaving of a Coptic community fabric in Santa Cruz owes considerably to the services provided, the social obligations of Coptic priests, and the bishop's personality. The Coptic Church in Santa Cruz offers several social services that have contributed to its rapid development. It has a health center with a physician, a dentist, a radiologist, and a nurse offering free services; a kindergarten in English; and a free housing complex of six houses for the poor. The church compound itself holds a computer center, a library, classrooms where children do their homework in the evening, a kitchen, and a dance floor for its folk group. The evenings are usually festive, at least during the period when this research was conducted. The church's architecture, which strictly reproduces the gated Coptic (and largely Middle Eastern Christian) religious compound, is conducive to sociability. It contains a church and several buildings on all sides, allowing for a large, enclosed square in the middle where most social activities take place. With a single, formal gate at its entrance and a long, open corridor leading to a square, the street is pushed back, removed from the Coptic community and its activities.

19. The vast literature on the subject includes Capiberibe (2007) and Dulley (2010).

20. Members of the upper and middle classes I have observed and interviewed for this research were too few to generalize from (about a dozen extended families total); I noted, though, that they did not correspond to the elitist, anti-Andean upper-class members depicted by Gustafson (2006) and Fabricant (2009).

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In the evening, most of the public is constituted of young adults, adolescents, and children. Several have formed a folk group that rehearses in the evenings and performs for visitors, most of them overseas Egyptians who volunteer for community work. By securing donations from Egyptians, the church has avoided soliciting money from its own, mainly underprivileged parishioners. In the eyes of several interviewees, particularly the most educated ones, this avoidance has legitimized Coptism and made its clergy perceived as compassionate and dedicated rather than opportunists, an accusation discreetly leveled against other faiths.

Coptism's social content

In Egypt, priests regularly visit families, inquiring about health, economic situation, and family matters. These personalized relations between priests and families allow for some level of social control over the community by priests. The Bolivian Copts I interviewed evoke this practice fondly; it seems to make them feel considered and relevant. In Santa Cruz, it has also brought about a sort of anthropological study by the Egyptian Copts whereby their observation of families, family relations, and society led to reflection and eventually to social involvement and a social agenda. The services mentioned above were not what the Coptic Church had in mind when it first moved to Santa Cruz.

The state of family structures in Santa Cruz seems to deeply trouble the priests as well as visiting Egyptians. Large, single-parent families led by women, sometimes with children from different fathers, shock their Orthodox morality. They see an overwhelming lack of social and family control that brings about premarital sex, children born out of wedlock, wandering adolescents, and school failures. One of the priests unhappily observed that "here [in Bolivia], some people are very liberal, some grow up without a father, some dress in a sexy way. . . . Here, people party a lot." In an interesting psychological approach, use of vocabulary, and self-reflection, the priests believe that the children and adolescents' "search for father figures" has brought them to the Coptic Church and made these children consider them (the priests) as surrogate fathers.[21] The awareness that they provide emotional security to deprived youth and beyond reinforces a sense of responsibility beyond religiosity.

One of the community projects aims at reinforcing family structures. In 2011, the church bought land in the northern outskirt of Santa Cruz and built a group of six houses that were legally donated to poor, woman-led families. By securing them financially, it is assumed, these women would no longer depend on temporary male companions.[22]

The bishop's friendly, playful, and affectionate personality is probably an important factor in the church's trajectory and development. Relational intelligence

21. The priests, sometimes annoyed but most of the time amused, can often be seen with groups of children holding to their arms and necks, something that, as they said, would not happen in Egypt but that they let occur in Santa Cruz.

22. It should be noted that, as Father Anthony put it, "The [Coptic] Church [in Egypt] is used to working with women because it is [Coptic] women who suffer most from [extremists'] oppression."

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seems shared by both sides of the intercultural encounter and makes possible the development of vertical (between parishioners and priests) and horizontal (among parishioners) personal ties. The sentiment of personal integration in this religious community is probably the single most important factor in retaining parishioners and in developing religious loyalty; this was summarized by an older, working-class lady: "I like the unity between the groups of various ages." Most Bolivian Copts emphasized access to the priests and their personableness, arguing that "with Catholicism, you only see the priest at mass"; "The priests are always here, advising us."

A recurrent term in the priests' discourse on "Bolivia" is *cariño* (demonstrated affection). "Bolivians are *cariñosos*" seems a leitmotif used to describe if not to praise behavior. In the evenings, several children hanging from the arms and neck of Father Anthony seem the norm, while several adolescents play with the amused Friar Rowais, who later told me: "Soon after my arrival, I realized how simple, patient, tolerant people are; it is easy to communicate." This echoes the bishop's reflection on his arrival: "They inquired about who I was, where I came from, why I came to Santa Cruz, and what religion I believed in. I realized how friendly and how social they were" (Youssef 2010, 13).

It is important to note that the Coptic priests allow for this affection to take place, notwithstanding the formal deference they are used to in Egypt—and that they still expect in Bolivia. The distance between parishioners and priests, and the respect, if not the admiration for the latter in the Christian community of Egypt, contrasts with the informality of many social relations in Santa Cruz, which clearly rubs against the priests, who complain, for instance, about being called "Joven!" by shopkeepers.

For anthropologist Paula Montero (2006), cultural mediation is a type of intercession that appears inherent to missionizing in foreign lands. In case studies in her book, Catholic missionaries act as mediators between indigenous populations and the larger nation-state. In the Coptic experience in Santa Cruz, the roles were reversed, with local women acting as mediators for the transplanted Egyptian priests. Located at the interface between Orthodox priests and Bolivian institutions, cultural repertoires, and labyrinths of all kinds, these women oriented the foreign priests and helped them acclimate and improve their Spanish. For years, a formal group of older parishioners, mothers and grandmothers from the outer rings of Santa Cruz, took the future bishop to a farmers' market, an experience that empowered the women and made them feel integrated in this new church. Several of these ladies assumed a motherly tone to evoke how they explained to the bishop, and later to the other priests, when to trust or distrust local merchants, which street to take, how to obtain a driver's license, and so on. They also undertook a pedagogic function toward the local community. In this market, as in their neighborhood, they are asked questions about these mysterious bearded men in black. "They ask me if they are shamans. I explain that they are priests [*padres*], Orthodox priests," said one of these ladies. In another instance, one of the younger Coptic priests traveled to visit colonial towns in the Bolivian highlands with two siblings from the Prieto family for two weeks. Since he did not speak Spanish at the time, this mainly touristic visit (to shrines to the Virgin Mary in

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Figure 4 Bolivian Copt with Coptic cross tattooed on wrist. Photograph by the author.

various cities) was possible only because of these youth. On several occasions, a descendant of Orthodox Palestinian migrants acted as intermediary between local authorities and a Coptic cleric unaware of the local who's who, while one of the middle-class female converts used her networks among the local media to have journalists cover events organized by the church. These examples of friendliness and dedication suggest that relational intelligence is shared by locals who have welcomed and helped the Egyptians. In Weber's application of the Goethean concept of "elective affinities" to sociology, the meeting of two distinct ensembles and their transformation into a new, powerful entity is made possible by their original sharing of one identical property (Weber 2001; Howe 1978). The Egyptian clergy and cruzeños not only seem to have compatible sociability but they equally and explicitly value sociability, thus consciously leading to mutual appreciation.

CONCLUSION

The growth of the Coptic Church in Santa Cruz over the past decade proves that Orthodoxy has an appeal of its own in the ever-larger Latin American theoscape. As my ethnographic results have shown, the abundance of symbols and arts of the Coptic Church pits it against other religions such as Protestantism and Islam, where the relation to God is not supposed to be mediated and where art might not be conceived as transcendental. Appropriation of Coptic art, symbols, and obliga-

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tions is facilitated by a lack of prior mental associations to Egypt or Orthodoxy. Bolivians, often the subject of exoticism in (mainly Western) narratives, can consume exoticism, too. If differences may induce both appropriation and conversion, a church's inculturation based on formal concessions could, then, be strategically inadequate. Finally, as I showed in the last part of this article, if differences seduce, shared relational intelligence allows for Coptism to be adopted and for Bolivians to be appreciated, while Egyptian and Middle Eastern sociability may contribute to the church's success. Appreciation of the new religion appears to be more experiential than to be a search for theological truths; the drive to convert owes to the serendipity of the personalities involved. The radicality of the encounter is thus matched by the radicality of its outcome: while Pina-Cabral's and Sahlins's concepts of anthropological miscommunications, as well as Parker's notion of interculturality, highlight colonial or postcolonial situations with occasionally hostile outcomes, interculturality here reveals relations marked by inclusion, seduction, and a lack of hegemony or friction between two parties coming from the global South.

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