Chapter 7

Conclusions

7.1   A Dialogue of Cultures

The ancestors' rites within the Catholic Church are a manifestation of the degree of acculturation of the Catholic Church in Taiwan, and vice versa, of the degree of acculturation of Taiwanese culture in the Catholic Church. In the previous pages, I pointed out how these types of rituals are the most significant link between the two religions, and more importantly, between the two cultures. By culture, I mean the symbolic system that embodies within itself religious symbols.

Only with this premise, it is possible to analyze and find meaning for the contradictions and contrasts that arise with contact between the two religious systems of the Taiwanese popular religion and the Catholic Church.

Therefore, the main line of inquiry of this work was research based on the acknowledgment of the symbols belonging to both religious cosmologies, and on the understanding of how these symbols establish bridges and bonds between these two cultures. A conspicuous number of works by other anthropologists, particularly those made in Taiwan with the view of analyzing the Taiwanese popular religion, helped me to define the three types of supernatural beings that formulate the Taiwanese popular religion: gods, ancestors, and ghosts. I demonstrated how this type of division is still real for many Catholics in Taiwan, and I analyzed the complex historical encounter between these two different cosmologies and worldviews.

The theoretical background of this research is principally based on the work of two eminent scholars; Marshal Sahlins on the contact between Hawaiian people and Captain Cook[1], and the book written by Tzvetan Todorov about the conquest of America by the Spaniard conquerors led by Cortez[2]. I have chosen these two authors because their works are based on

---

1. Sahlins, *Islands of History*.
2. Todorov, *The conquest of America*.

the cultural analysis of a historical encounter between two different peoples and cultures. From a theoretical point of view, I could not directly relate Sahlins' work with the situation I found in Taiwan, because Sahlins' analysis concerns the contact between a culture and an event, and his analysis deepened at the precise moment of encounter. As I have shown above, the contact between the Catholic Church's cultural world and the Taiwanese cultural contest includes not only the moment of the encounter but a complete historical process. Before arriving in Taiwan, the Catholic Church – and especially the Dominican missionaries – had experienced centuries of evangelization in China, and already passed through the dispute about the Chinese ancestors' rites. During this long time, the events that happened between these two different worldviews molded both the relations between the two cultural systems and the Catholic Church's views about these rites. It is important to remember that the Dominicans, were the only missionaries on the island before 1949, and were fierce adversaries of the Jesuits during the earlier period of China's evangelization. They opposed Ricci's "Indications and Permissions" and prohibited their believers from maintaining their ancestors' tablets and venerating them. This rejection and opposition continue even today, in fact, some of the Dominican Fathers in Taiwan, despite the Church permission, do not allow the use of a "community tablet" in their Churches, because according to them, the missionaries should take account of one of the Han people's tradition: "people outside the family cannot worship my own ancestors". Clearly, if you do not want to allow me to do something, you can easily find many justifications.

What I have borrowed from Sahlins was the idea that this type of relationship should be analyzed within a cultural context. Only by considering and analyzing both cultural systems where these two religions are embodied, is it possible to try to understand their reciprocal relations and how these relations are embodied in the everyday life of the people. Nevertheless, while Sahlin's work analyzes the encounter, the contact, and the cultural explanation of this contact, I felt more attracted to the idea of understanding what happened after the first contact. In other words, I wanted to discover the progression that can be defined as cohabitation and cohabitation between two different cultural systems. Consequentially, I focused my research on what happens to this particular category of people, namely, the Taiwanese Catholics, who embrace and live within two different cultural systems.

Unlike Sahlins and his static structuralist conception of culture, I consider culture as a more dynamic and creative entity. To consider culture as a static structure means losing sight of the many and various situations that are present within the same cultural environment.

7.2 The Place of the Dialogue

If culture is a public system of meanings, everybody who lives in the same cultural context can arbitrarily choose the meaning apt to interpret a specific event. Of course, this arbitrariness is always linked with each individual's existential personality, knowledge, economic situation, etc. Arbitrariness is mediation, a negotiation between the public system of meanings, the particular conditions of everyday life, and the practical circumstances of each person. I want to stress that these two different systems of meaning encounter each other in the space represented by the person. By considering the person as a place of dialogue – dialogue that comprehends all the set of compromises, receptions, etc – the three levels suggested by Todorov (the axiological level with its value judgment, the praxeological one with its action of rapprochement or distancing, and the epistemic one which represents either knowledge or ignorance of the other's identity), are placed in a more dialectical relationship. Inside the space represented by the person, it is possible to evaluate the new symbols, it is possible to accept some of the new symbols and to take a certain distance from others. It is even possible to decide to dislike the new symbols but at the same time be completely ignorant of them. On the other hand, it is possible to choose the New and reject the Old. Moreover, within every person, these options and or choices could be changed rearranged, and realigned in different ways in order to solve old and new problems.

This situation becomes evident in the Taiwanese Catholic context. As seen Catholics in Taiwan live in a completely non-Catholic environment. Oftentimes, only one member of the family is Catholic, while the rest still believes in popular religion. Most of the time, during the Chinese New Year or the Clean Tomb festival, Catholics join their parents in these rituals, praying to their ancestors and sometimes going to the temple to burn incense and offer food to the gods. Several Catholics told me that, during the Lunar New Year celebrations, they go to the Mazu temple just because "my mother asked me so, probably when my mother passes away, I will not go to the temple anymore". As Geertz wrote in "The religion of Java", "religious patterns do not become embodied in social forms directly, purely and simply, but in many devious ways, so that religious commitments and others commitments-to class, neighborhood, etc.- tend to balance off, and various "mixed type" individuals and group arise which can play an important mediating role"[3]. Despite the fact that some points of these two religions seem incompatible, society is built by persons, relationships, neighbors, friends, etc. This fact relaxes the tensions and makes possible a kind of harmony between different beliefs and perspectives of the world. This happens because religious symbols are embodied in a wider symbolic system that we call culture. The symbols chosen by a person do not belong only to the religious

---

3. Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* [in en] (University of Chicago Press, 1976), 356.

sphere, because the choice is made from among all the symbols embodied in culture. Thus it can be asserted that in Taiwan, there has been and there still is, contact and a mutual interpretation of the two cultural systems, and within this, dialectical relationship people find the symbols which are apt to give meaning to their everyday life. It is this dialectical encounter that became history: the symbols of one cultural system slowly penetrated and rooted themselves within the other system, and vice versa.

One day during class, our professor shared with us a story about a young woman who arrived with other people from mainland China in Taiwan on a fishing boat. They left Mainland China in order to find a better life, but as soon as they reached Taiwan, the local people killed them. After leaving her body, her soul entered the local temple and started to complain to the god of that community; she complained so much that the god let her enter into another body, a body of an already married woman who died some days before. The professor described this story as a case of resurrection; I was very surprised, so a classmate in order to explain this fact to me said: "Are you not Christian? She resurrected like what happened to your Jesus."

This case aims to explain how the symbols of the new religion have penetrated into Taiwanese culture so that my classmate (a non-Catholic) was able to use a Catholic reference (without perhaps having a full understanding of it) to help me in my understanding of a purely local phenomenon linked to the Taiwanese folk religion. It is evident that there has been a contact, and after the contact, there has been a reciprocal interpretation, an interpretation that not only influenced the Catholics but also, generally speaking, all of the Taiwanese people. It is through these dialectical relationships that people find the symbols apt and able to resolve their problems. Sahlins defined the "structure of conjuncture", as the practical realization of the cultural categories in a specific historical context and as expressed in the interested action of the historical agents, including the microsociology of their interaction[4]. Sahlins stressed the fact that Captain Cook appears as an ancestral god to the Hawaiian priests, but more like a divine warrior to the chiefs; and evidently something else and less to ordinary men and women, and that observing from different perspectives with different social influences objectifying their respective interpretations, people come to a different consensual view. Thus Social communication is as much an empirical gamble as worldly reference[5].

In my view, although I completely agree with Sahlins words, I still believe this concept is not enough to understand the encounter between these two cultures and especially the situation in Taiwan, where these two symbolic systems have already cohabited for a very long time. In today's Taiwanese context, the historical agents are not the Western missionaries, but the Taiwanese people who already live within these two symbolic systems. Everyone who encounters Catholicism, apart from those who convert

---

4. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, xiv.
5. Sahlins, x.

themselves, could be considered an agent of this historical process. Certainly, the agents are Mister Guo or Mister Gao (Chapter 4), the elder brother of Miss Li, and also my classmate who explained to me the concept of Jesus' resurrection. The risks mentioned by Sahlins could only be real when a structure encounters new events, but in the Taiwanese situation, being the person the space where this encounter happens, the two symbolic systems are both present and real, and the change is already present in this place, not only potentially but concretely. As consequence, what Sahlins considers as risks, are not risks but integral parts of the culture; in fact, they *are* culture.

7.3 The Textile of Dialogue

As Geertz has said, the variety of lifestyles arises out of the ways in which the variety of these practices which make them up are positioned and composed. It is not, to adapt Wittgenstein's famous image of a rope, a single thread that runs all the way through them that defines them and makes them into some kind of a whole. It is the overlapping of differing threads, intersecting, entwining, one taking up where another breaks off, all of them posed in effective tensions with one another to form a composite body, "a body locally disparate, globally integral"[6].

In this book, I have attempted to present to the reader this composite body. My point was not to understand how the missionaries (Self) acculturate themselves to the Chinese culture (Other) or how the Chinese worldview (Self) receives or rejects the message of Catholicism (Other) because for me, as an anthropologist, both of them are Others and what I am studying is their dialectical encounter and cohabitation. Adapting this concept to Geertz's metaphor, and borrowing a concept pointed out by Nicolas Standaert[7] it is possible to say that the situation being analyzed is a textile, where what I have described as symbolic systems – and perhaps the symbols itself – are these ropes. Each person arbitrarily – and I still repeat that this arbitrariness is always linked with personality, and existential, practical, situations, etc. – can choose how to weave these ropes. Moreover, as a woven cloth or textile, it is possible both to notice the various colors of the threads and to recognize the shapes these threads form on the textile. Therefore, as Standaert pointed out, between total absorption – the appropriation of a foreign element in its entirety – or total rejection, my textile metaphor reformulates the monochrome cloth with spectrums of infinite combination and permutation. In my view, this metaphor can be used on two different

6. Clifford Geertz, "The World in Pieces: Culture and Politics at the End of the Century," in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 218–263.

7. Standaert, "Contact between Cultures: The Case of Christianity in China (Some Methodological Issues)"; Nicolas Standaert, *The Interweaving of Rituals: Funerals in the Cultural Exchange Between China and Europe* (University of Washington Press, 2008).

levels: the personal and the social levels. On the personal level, the "ropes" are the symbols embodied and embedded within these symbolic systems, while on the social level the "ropes" are the person himself.

According to Standaert, the metaphor of the textile illuminates and illustrates what happens to specific fibers and shows the usage, meaning, form, and function of the textile as a whole. Thus this metaphor helps comprehension of how there can be very different reactions at the same time, within the same person – as Miss Li's parent – or within the same geographical setting – as the Resurrection Parrish – or within the same social group. Therefore, in order to better understand this weave which has been the real object of my research; it was necessary to examine the basis of the two cultural systems.

In addition, at the same time, it is necessary to study the historical weave which made it possible to observe the peculiarity of the present-day weave. In the nowadays historical moment of this encounter, or better, this dialogue is changing more and more. This is brought out in an ambiance (Taipei City) which is involved in the increasing phenomenon of Westernization that is very visible through the architecture, the lifestyles, and the enormous phenomenon of people traveling to the USA or other European countries to study for a Master's Degree or a Ph.D. program, etc. Therefore, the basic context is changing, and the symbolic systems and the symbols and meanings which can be attributed to these symbols are multiplying. On the one hand, the younger generations tend to leave their parent's home early because they study in another city and thus there is no longer any direct experience of ancestors' rites. On the other hand, the influence of the traditional cultural roots remains very strong, and powerful symbolic system in Taiwan. It is true many young people do not have direct experience in performing the rites of their ancestors, but these rites and the family and social responsibilities that they entail are learned when the person must perform them (perhaps because the father is dead). Therefore, existentially, the solution is sought only when the problem arises.

The weave of this textile is becoming more and more complex and multicolored. Only with in-depth knowledge of the "ropes" can there be an appreciation of its diversity of shapes, shades, and colors.