

Syncretism of Diasporas— Theme 2.1 The Spread of Religion

Religious syncretism—the combining of practices from previously distinct traditions—is one of the keys to understanding religions that move by diasporas as well as religions carried by missionaries and pilgrims. After analyzing the individual examples of syncretism, **compare the evidence of the effects of the Jewish and Afro-Brazilian cultural diasporas.**

One of the earliest diasporas—or dispersals—of people who carried their religion with them was that of the Jews, who were forced to scatter throughout the Roman Empire after the destruction of their holy temple in the year 70 CE. In later centuries, pushed and pulled by many different historical forces, Jews settled in communities from China to the Americas, spreading Judaism by building synagogues and schools, and by practicing their faith.

Find examples of syncretism in Yiddish, one of the languages spoken by Jews.

Yiddish is a Germanic language written in Hebrew characters. It developed between the ninth and twelfth centuries in southwestern Germany as an adaptation of Middle High German dialects for Jews living in central Europe. When Jews were encouraged to settle in Eastern European areas occupied predominantly by Slavic speaking peoples, Yiddish adapted some Slavic language influences. Examples of Yiddish words in English: chutzpah (has a lot of nerve), spiel (long story), shtick (eccentricity), nosh (snack), oy (sound of disappointment or disapproval), schmooze (chat), maven (expert), klutz (clumsy person), kvetch (complain), and drek (worthless stuff).

African religions moved with the African diaspora to the Americas, through the transport and enslavement of millions of Africans. Santeria in Cuba today is a popular Afro-Cuban religion that combines Spanish Catholicism with the Yoruba and other traditions of West Africa. Candomble, in Brazil, is an Afro-Brazilian religion born of slaves brought to Brazil to work the sugar plantations. Candomble fuses orishas—Yoruba gods—with Catholic saints. For example, in the modern Brazilian state of Bahia, the coastal city of Salvador looks to an orisha as its patron saint: Yemanjá, the goddess of the sea, is also likened to the Virgin Mary.

Find elements of syncretism in these photographs of Santeria in Cuba.



What are the similarities and differences between the effects of religions spread from a central point outward with the effects of religious diasporas.