Visual Hybridity and Cultural Resistance: The Interplay of Colonialism and Indigenous Art Forms

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Abstract:

This review article considers visual hybridity as a cultural form of resistance in colonial and post-colonial contexts. It considers how indigenous performance has been impacted by, and responded to, colonial aesthetics and representation. It draws on important theoretical engagements with visual hybridity, focusing particularly on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, ambivalence, and the third space. It argues that hybridity was never simply the outcome of colonial impacts, but rather a deliberate site for negotiation, subversion and identity-making. Through a series of historical and contemporary case studies, beginning with the case of Indo-Portuguese Christian art on the Malabar Coast, to Latin American "Indochristian" art, to folk/popular traditions like Kalighat painting and Pattachitra, as well as recent diasporic art-making practices like Yinka Shonibare, and Nina Mangalanayagam, this review considers how hybrid visual practices have functioned both as meaningful tactics of survival, critique and self-assertion. The study suggests that hybridity provides an opportunity to subvert colonial authority: by reworking colonial motifs into locally determined forms and materials, the artists destabilize the symbolic hierarchies of colonial powers and call into question their claims to cultural superiority. Simultaneously, the forms provide reclamation of agency for indigenous people by inserting native symbolic systems into frameworks that have been imposed on them. In religious domains, syncretic acts permitted the ongoing existence of indigenous spiritual traditions while colonialism silenced them. Hybridity also plays a pivotal role in identity negotiation, especially for diasporic and mixed-heritage people. Through hybrid visual languages, artists demonstrate their complex in-between selves and challenge the notion of fixed cultural binaries. Furthermore, hybrid art often serves as political commentary, utilizing satire, symbolism and digestible visual language to critique social and colonial hierarchies. The debate surrounding authenticity demonstrates that hybrid pieces of art, at their worst, may not be authentic or pure; The commodification of hybrid art also can neutralize the subversive or artistic intentions of hybrid art and those analyzing it thereby emphasizing the aesthetic, marketability, and commercial appeal of hybrid forms, which does not recognize nor appreciate their deeper meanings and significance. Ultimately, this paper suggests that visual hybridity is a valuable analytical tool for analyzing art and a living and evolving method for creating and experiencing art, with ramifications for decolonial futures. Furthermore, viewing hybrid art as an opportunity to create resistance, identity formation, and dialogue, scholars and practitioners alike can better recognize the lasting effects of colonization on Indigenous cultures, honor the strength of these cultures, and support the creative and political rebirth and revitalization of Indigenous ways of being in the world. The paper ultimately stresses the significance of using contextualized and community-sensitive applications of hybrid forms, as they should be viewed as aesthetic and embodied histories that are political and provide a forum or pathway for collective transformation.

Keywords: *visual hybridity, cultural resistance, postcolonial theory, indigenous art, syncretism, mimicry, colonialism, identity, decolonial art*

Introduction

The visual hybridity phenomenon in art arises within a spectrum of independent artistic traditions engaged, transformed, or continually repurposed under the long arm of colonialism. We argue that hybridity is not simply a result of cultural domination, but frequently becomes a site of cultural resistance; a vehicle of identity as colonized peoples assert their identity, negotiate power, and/or rewrite their histories. To understand how hybridity operates demands a broader yet critical survey of postcolonial theory and art history case studies, as well as the multiple registers and ways visual practices negotiate or mediate between imposed and colonial paradigms, the legacies of colonialism, and deeply rooted indigenous traditions. This review paper surveys theoretical basis of hybridity, examples from art history and the local cultural resistance embedded to visual forms of art. It is organized in four main sections. First, the review will survey important theoretical frameworks (especially Homi Bhabha's concepts). Second, art historical cases studies will be surveyed including Indo-Portuguese art in South India and Latin American "Indochristian" art. Thirdly, we will explore how hybridity operates visually in more modern and contemporary art practices, including resistance in folk or popular forms of art. Lastly, we will reflect on the consequences visual hybridity holds for decolonial and indigenous art futures.

Theoretical Foundations of Hybridity

Homi K. Bhabha is one of the leading theorists writing about postcolonialism, highly influential for theorizing and launching scholarship about hybridity, mimicry, and the "third space" (Bhabha 1994; Young 2020). Bhabha takes hybridity not just as a mixture but as a site of strategizing and terrain of both resistance and negotiation: "the sign of the productivity of colonial power...the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal" (Bhabha in Wali Shayyal 2024, p. xx). Through mimicry colonized subjects engage in imitation of parts of the colonizer's culture but not fully; it is, as Amardeep Singh (2009) explains, "almost the same, but not quite." This imperfectness, that slippage, works to destabilize colonial authority from the inside.

Robert J. C. Young extends Bhabha's notion of hybridity in a way that considers earlier notions of double consciousness, as put forward by W. E. B. Du Bois. Young writes that hybrid identities embody the tension between how people see themselves versus how others see them (Young 2020, p. 77). Rather than gaining acceptance and assimilation, hybrid cultures require transformation from both parties: they re-interpret colonial forms but they also re-work indigenous traditions against the backdrop of new conditions.

Critics, of course, have questioned the concept. Some argue that hybridity may reproduce power hierarchies, or that it romanticizes mixed identities without fully acknowledging subaltern voices (see Young 2020). Nonetheless, hybridity remains a powerful analytic tool, particularly in visual culture: it reveals how art becomes a space of negotiation, not only of style but of meaning and authority.

Historical Case Studies in Visual Hybridity

Indo-Portuguese Art in South India (16th–18th centuries)

The church buildings constructed along the Malabar Coast in south India - influenced by the Portuguese - provide one of the most vivid moments of visual hybridity of colonialism. In her study (2021), Simona Cohen traces

how local artisans carved polychrome wooden sculpture for Catholic liturgical settings that nevertheless maintained indigenous aesthetics: forms from Hindu and Buddhist traditions, local techniques of making, and decorative motifs from local culture insert themselves into what appears to be, on the surface, European Christian iconography (Cohen 2021).

Figure 1: Yinka Shonibare. Hybrid Sculpture (Centaur). 2021. Fibreglass, hand painted with Dutch wax pattern, carved wooden mask, Stephen Friedman Gallery

Church pulpits are particularly striking examples where hybrids of humans and serpents appear; these figures combine European monstrous imagery - like mermaids or sirens - of the female form with the Indian nāga mythological forms of male and female serpentine forms. Cohen argues that while the iconography was imposed by colonial authority, the indigenous interpreters imposed their own meanings, inserting local symbolic meanings (Cohen 2021). A colonial imposition will also, however, has at its core some indigenous meanings. For example, the nāga in indigenous belief is traditionally benign and might connote amulets of fertility and protection, diverging from the demonized western (Cohen 2021).

Moreover, the replacement of Hindu temples and sacred imagery with Catholic churches did not erase native belief systems but transformed them. As Cohen shows, some churches were built directly over demolished temple sites, and local sacred practices persisted in syncretic forms (Cohen 2021). Thus, hybridity here was not a one-way subjugation but a multidirectional interchange, in which indigenous traditions survived through adaptation and re-signification.

Figure 2: Polychrome teak statues, Church of Santa Monica, Goa. From Simona Cohen, Hybridity in the Colonial Arts of South India, 16th–18th Centuries, Religions 12, no. 9 (2021)

Indochristian Art in Latin America

Indochristian art, mostly observed in Latin America, is another field of historical richness. The term denotes art that merges Christian iconography with indigenous styles and symbols. Reyes-Valerio coined the term in his foundational study on 16th-century Mexico, demonstrating how Christian religious imagery was indigenized. Saints, altarpieces, and church murals were painted using indigenous flora and fauna...along with other stylistic conventions developed by indigenous artisans to construct indigenous identity. This hybridity was more than an aesthetic choice; it was political. By incorporating indigenous visual vocabularies into Christian art, the colonized clergy and artisans mandated a vision of the world. Even as the colonial state imposed European religious structures, indigenous communities re-interpreted them. The art produced was a site of negotiation - a climate required and guaranteed the presence of pre-colonial visual forms while performing colonial liturgical functions.

Folk and Popular Art: Kalighat Painting

In addition to the formal religious art mentioned above, hybridity also manifests in folk or popular art forms as well. An interesting example of this is Kalighat painting from 19th-century Bengal. The patuas or traditional scroll painters were working under colonial conditions and updated their style to produce images that gently inverted social norms.

Figure 3: Itokri.com, "Kalighat Painting – the Folk Art from Bengal.

For example, they portrayed "Babuis" (gentlemen) and "Bibis" (women) in satirical or deviant representations, incorporating the figures with deities like Kali with strength. The patuas similarly employed and manipulated the visual language of their folk culture and tradition to present social critique of colonial bourgeois society: the Babu as "beastly," and the Bibi deviant and transgressive, but powerful. Ultimately, the images destabilized the social order of colonialism by defying stereotypes and conflicting identities. Kalighat painting not only becomes a form of hybrid visual vocabulary - it becomes a visual form of social discourse and resistance.

Visual Hybridity in Contemporary and Modern Art

Contemporary Artists: Yinka Shonibare

In contemporary art, hybridity continues to offer a powerful form of resistance. For instance, British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare utilizes African wax-printed cotton (sometimes referred to as "African fabric") in his three-dimensional dress-like garments and tableau assemblages of headless figures. Shonibare notes that the fabric cannot be understood as traditional African textiles since it was produced in Europe, sold in Indonesia, and then brought to Africa. In dressing headless European figures in the fabric, he subverts the colonial discourse. His work Scramble for Africa (2003) reinterprets the Berlin Conference through the lens of costuming and the dystopic history of colonization, embodied in the garment. Both movements are simultaneously material and conceptual: the garment itself becomes a siphon for the perplexing genealogy of commerce, colonialism, and subjectivity. Even as he is looking to European art history as his model, his examination of clothing disturbs the supposed authenticity of "African" identity and reveals locational and cultural fluidity.

Figure 4: Yinka Shonibare. Wind Sculpture II. 2013. Steel armature, hand-painted fiberglass resin, National Museum of African Art

Photographic and Video Arts: Third Space and Identity

Contemporary visual art embraces hybridity beyond just sculpture or painting. For her practice-based PhD, Nina Mangalanayagam considers photography and video arts as sites of hybrid identity: she looks at how artists of mixed heritage experience, and use their changing identification to destabilize the binaries of black and white, colonizer and colonized (Mangalanayagam 2015). Mangalanayagam uses Bhabha's trio of concepts—stereotype, mimicry, and the third space—to highlight the potential of visual media to destabilize established constructs (Mangalanayagam 2015). Her autobiographical works demonstrate that hybridity is more than a mixture; it is an experienced, contradictory, and critical process. Through her lens, we see how inherited cultural stories, conventions, and visualities help shape one's own positionality by enacting how one is seen and how one sees others. Her art is then an act of resistance, challenging visual stereotypes and reclaiming agency in representation.

Folk-Pop Narrative Traditions: Pattachitra Katha

The hybrid nature of folklore and its representation continues to grow in today's hybrid culture. For example, the Pattachitra of Bengal is an artistic/narrative tradition that fuses both folk images and stories from popular culture and mythology. Due to its hybrid nature, Pattachitra has been a focal point for much recent scholarly critique (AJBMSS 2023). Recent scholarly work on Pattachitra suggests that Pattachitra artists create new types of myth-making through their use of local semiotic systems and popular discourse and thus create a new form of collective identity (AJBMSS 2023). Pattachitra art has also been politically oriented through its connections to colonization, the survival of a culture, and the constant re-negotiations of ethnic identity and aesthetic identity under various social conditions.

Figure 5: Wikimedia Commons, Pattachitra, Art of Bengal by Ghoshavijit21, 15 October 2019, CCBY-SA 4.0

Cultural Resistance through Visual Hybridity

Hybrid art has the capacity to subtly challenge colonial authority through the mechanisms of mimicry and transformation, revealing the vulnerabilities behind imposed aesthetics. Colonial authorship is established upon certain aesthetics, including religious icons, architectural ornaments, and courtly forms, which imbue power and authority. Indigenous artists do not merely reproduce colonial signs, but upon appropriation and subsequent transformation, the repetition is no longer intact. Whether it is through indigenous styles, materials, or symbolic logic, the attention to the slippage or incompleteness within mimicry, lies in the critique that follows. Typically, this imperfect mimicry of colonialism challenges the certitude of authority by offsetting the signs of colonial authority; where its artifice is realized and the colonial sign is rendered impotent to its hegemonic claim of authority undermined. It is through mimicry, the colonized reclaim a voice- that the imagery is not neutral, but is subject to the historical, social and political context and contingency, contestable.

In this sense, indigenous creators resist their passive reception of the colonial, and readily and skillfully reconfigure foreign forms, implying a social, cultural or political agency. Indigenous people reshape the aesthetics thrust upon them, resettling them through indigenous worldview and systems of symbol. They oppose the totalizing consumption and assimilation of authority and colonialism of values by selecting and negotiating foreign materials. The act of refashioning foreign practices becomes a site of creativity, not eradicating culture, but merging cultural logics, reinterpreting and asserting on their own terms. Hybrid art is a rhetorical modality in which imperialism and remedy are transformed from a one of capitulation to one of transformation, re-employing imposed symbols for indigenous purpose.

In the context of the sacred and religious, hybridity can act as a stealth mechanism for sustaining indigenous spirituality. By inserting local iconography, mythologies, or materials into colonial religious sites and objects, colonized peoples can maintain and "re-signify" submerged belief systems. For example, traditional serpent or nāga imagery may appear within what is predominantly a European religious object; thus, ancestral cosmologies continue to exist in colonial religion. This hybrid articulation becomes both a strategy of survival and an act of resistance: despite the evidence of imposed faith, indigenous spiritual practice endures and becomes visible, albeit in varied forms.

Hybrid art has become an important way of dealing with complex identities and locations in a diasporic and multi-cultural context. Artists who fall within the "in-between" section of their existence (the intersection of Indigenous cultures and migrant communities, the coloniser-colonised relationship) are exploring their own subjective experience by employing a hybrid aesthetic. By using materials, forms, and visual languages from multifarious cultures, these artists express an interpretation of themselves that is neither completely one nor the other. In this way, they create a post-colonial artistic representation of what is often referred to as a "Third Space" where new identity possibilities exist. Furthermore, hybrid art pieces continue to honour and record history while simultaneously creating and perpetuating identity.

Hybrid art has the potential for social and political criticism; it frequently utilises familiar images that satire, inverted symbols, and sophisticated commentary regarding colonial social, political, and economic contexts. An example of this is folk artists who create hybrid visual language to ridicule and emulate the social aspirations of colonial modernity through a visual vocabulary that is reflective of the period. In some of these traditions, imaginary creatures may be used as parodic representations in scenes of family life or scenes critical of human behaviour, therefore critiquing the power structure, the corruptions, and the traditions within the dominant society where the artist is located. The critique originates from the values of Indigenous people, but it is also connected to the trends of this modern world.

Challenges, Critiques, and Ethical Considerations

While hybridity is a compelling analytical concept, considerable tensions and critiques persist. There is a danger of idealizing hybrid identities as seamless and harmonious blends, rather than reckon with the very real inequalities, violence, and coercion often defining colonial encounters. According to Young, the celebratory rhetoric of hybridity can gloss over the exploitation, racial hierarchies, and trauma embedded in colonial histories, thus normalizing the violence of colonial relations (Young, as cited in Perlego) Another tension is the issue of power differentials. Not all hybrid identities originate from a position of equality: colonial regimes historically constrained indigenous artists from exercising any real autonomy, and in fact forced some artists into particular modes of cultural production. Critics also argue that the mere survival of hybrid forms can come at a cost; adhering to hybrid aesthetics might entail losing, suppressing, or altering older traditions. The idea of hybridity is likely less precarious when it is not scrutinized closely, and it can even mask coercive circumstances, making it appear that cultural exchanges always happen on neutral territory (Scribd summary of Bhabha's concept).

The authenticity of hybrid forms of cultural heritage and artistic expression creates a conflict of interest for those people who want to consume and celebrate these forms versus those who believe that creating and consuming a hybridized form devalues and/or dilutes the original cultural tradition. However, as Acheraïou has stated, this creates an unfair assumption that anyone who is not a member of the original culture cannot be an artist in their own right and can never make an authentic artistic expression. Similarly, to label hybrid forms as derivative, and therefore, not authentic, ignores the hard work and creativity that each artist employs when they invest time and energy in creating something hybridized. Moreover, many theorists and scholars argue that by defining what is "authentic" in relation to hybridity ignores issues

surrounding commodification and cultural exploitation by global markets and dominant cultural industries. For example, Hybridity Revisited was published to address the problems and issues created by hybrid art forms that have been commodified by dominant cultural industries.

Table: Typology of Visual Hybridity in Colonial and Postcolonial Art

Type of Hybrid Visual Practice	Major Historical/Geographic Context	Forms of Resistance or Negotiation
Liturgical sculpture	South India (Goan, Malabar)	Polychrome wooden pulpits with hybrid iconography (e.g., serpent-human), reclaiming indigenous spiritual imagery (Cohen 2021)
Church mural / Architecture	Latin America	Indochristian art; integrating indigenous motifs with Christian saints (Reyes-Valerio)
Folk-popular painting	Bengal, India	Kalighat paintings that satirize colonial era social figures
Narrative-scroll tradition	Bengal	Pattachitra katha blending myth, folk, and modern social commentary (AJBMSS 2023)
Contemporary installation / sculpture	Global / Diaspora	Yinka Shonibare's use of wax-printed cotton, tableaus of colonial history
Photographic/video art	Diasporic mixed-heritage contexts	Mangalanayagam's explorations of the third space, identity, mimicry (Mangalanayagam 2015)

Implications for Decolonial Futures

The aesthetics and operations of hybrid arts are crucial in forming the cultural and decolonial framework for new artistic practice and identity construction. Hybridity creates new and liberated identities as it provides a challenge to colonial epistemologies by creating third spaces between colonisers and colonised that become sites of resistance to colonial epstemicologies and a way of creating third spaces for new and liberated identities. Hybridity is expressed through contemporary artwork, architecture, and performance. Secondly, hybrid practices extend continuity of Indigenous culture as they create space for continuity of Indigenous culture after colonialism; hybrid forms remained a place where cultural forms could be located and shared. The challenge is to see hybrid arts as the legitimate continuities of Indigenous arts, and not as colonial contamination is an important strategy for decolonizing cultural origin stories. Thirdly, hybrid arts allow for examination of Globalisation's impact on contemporary art and the shifting ways in which we create and experience culture; hybrid arts provide for an opportunity to discuss and explore the emergence of increasingly diasporically related identities and shared ways of building futures together as highlighted in the works of artist and activist Yinka Shonibare. The expressive quality of hybrid art offers a means of negotiating the tensions of cultural memory, tradition and modernity in everyday lives of contemporary communities. Fourth, there is a pressing need to enact ethical commitments when engaging with the aesthetic craft of hybrid art. Museums, collectors and scholars who work with hybrid art, are ethically committed to being cognizant of issues of provenance, power dynamics, structural imbalances of power, and from which communities' agency can be granted. Hybridity should not be exoticized or commodified, irrespective of its political complexities. Fifth, the question of eschewing stylistic essentialism is salient and brings engagement, history and politics into cohabitation within hybrid art forms; as a possible methodological turn away from 'Western colonial' narratives within the disciplines of art history and cultural studies.

Conclusion

Visual hybridity often refers to an aesthetic space that combines colonial power with indigenous creativity; however, this is more than just an aesthetic phenomenon - this is an important mode of cultural resistance. Focus can shift from the polychrome wooden pulpits found at Goan churches, to the satirical scrolls of Bengal, and the fabric sculptures of postcolonial artist Yinka Shonibare, and even photographic studies of mixed heritage; together, hybrid art offers challenges to the visual dominance of colonial regimes and provides a reclaiming of agency. While the theoretical framework of Bhabha (mimicry, third space, ambivalence) are valuable, it is necessary to approach these through a different lens of critical self-awareness. In other words, hybridity does not always liberate in the simplest way, nor is it free from the power structures within which it arises; thus it is essential to engage ethically in scholarship, and practice with an respect and commitment to communities when honor hybrid forms.In a decolonial future, visual hybridity can bridge a creative regeneration, representing indigenous traditions, while reconciling the legacies of colonialism. By studying and valuing hybrid art, scholars, artists and communities can continue to resist, rethink, and reconstruct their histories and identities.

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