

# **A Pirate's Life for Me: Maritime Folkloric Practices as Religious Syncretism during the Golden Age of Piracy**

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## **Abstract**

Historians and anthropologists analyze the accounts of folkloric practices in seafarers' diaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a way to understand the prevailing cultural practices at sea. During this time period, historians note a political dichotomy between Christian and Muslim ships and crews as well as accounts from sailors of religiously mixed crews. These accounts describe a movement away from strict religious practice toward an amalgam of folkloric practices. Existing literature refers to this movement as an example of cultural syncretism rather than religious syncretism, which combines two religious systems to create a new system of religious beliefs and practices in which neophyte sailors are enculturated. This research analyzes academic discussions on the sharing of folklore and superstition, the presence of religious and spiritual talismans aboard ships, and the cultural and religious significance of those superstition and talismans to argue seafaring culture at the time was a confined and distinct religious practice. It will use the "spiritscape" (Agius, 2017) conceptual framework as a

foundation for the argument of religious syncretism present aboard European and American ships during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Framing at-sea superstition as a religion shifts the perspective about sailors – including merchants, corsairs, and pirates – away from romantic and mythologic stories and toward a more realistic historical culture.

*Keywords:* Religious Syncretism, Seafaring, Folklore, 17<sup>th</sup> Century, Spiritscape

### **Introduction**

The mythical and folkloric practices of pirates and sailors are well known in everyday life due, in major part, to fictional media, such as Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the anime *One Piece*, or romance novels. These fictionalized versions of such folkloric practices provide media landscapes with schema of what sailing practices consisted of during the Golden Age of Pirates. Ideas such as women not being allowed on ships, the existence of mermaids, and the sexual appeal of pirates pervade popular culture. Sea monsters and other mythical constructs are heavily associated with pirate media; the Kraken and Davy Jones' Locker, for example, both play significant roles in popular pirate films. Harlequin romance novels, in particular, provided a very sensual and desirable depiction of sailors and pirates in classic bodice ripper novels. All of these ideas about piracy and sailing during the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> provide a very romantic version of the spiritual, folkloric and mythical behavior of pirates and sailors.

Seafaring folklore in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries is based much more on reality than popular culture acknowledges. Even predating the Golden Age of Pirates, cultural practices skewed religious aboard ships. Issues between European and Mediterranean ships existed along both political and religious lines, drawing a dichotomy between Christian and Muslim ships and

crews (Lehr, 2019). While this divide pays direct respect to Abrahamic religious practices among religiously homogenous crews, it is the religious heterogenous crews that draw interest.

Scholarship has already documented the cultural syncretism found aboard ships of mixed cultural background (Rouleau, 2007). However, what it fails to acknowledge is that folklore, and the practices which accompany folklore, often fall under an umbrella of religion. Thus is the question, how does environment play a role in the evolution of religion? In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, specifically, ships with crews of heterogeneous cultural practice moved away from strict religious practices toward an amalgam of folkloric practice. Seafaring folkloric practice acts as more than just an example of cultural syncretism, but as an example of religious syncretism, resulting in a distinct religious practice.

### **Religion and Syncretism**

A ship's crew is a microcosm of culture, reflecting the culture of her<sup>1</sup> motherland. This is most common with culturally homogenous crews. Zunner-Keating et al. (n.d.) define culture as "a group's beliefs or practices or sense of identity, to symbols and objects, or to shared knowledge." When a crew is culturally homogenous, it is that uniform sense of identity that the crew rally behind. This is true for crews from 17<sup>th</sup> century England and Spain, particularly, as they come from places with much more uniform cultures with supermajority religious practices, a key aspect of culture is. For the sake of clarity, it is important to define also religion. Zunner-Keating et al. (n.d.), for uniformity, define religion as a "system of beliefs, symbols, [and] practices that have at least some supernatural elements." The phrase "supernatural elements" is

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<sup>1</sup> "Her" is used to align with the common way of referring ships (and other vessels) by a pronoun.

critical, as it can mean anything. This is an incredibly specific wording meant to allow for that kind of loose consideration. A supernatural element of a religion can be a deity, a spirit, or, even, a creature of some kind. So, say, for example, a belief system has with it the idea that an animal is spiritually and cosmically significant, such as cats throughout ancient Egyptian history (Barbash, 2025), that belief system could be classified as a religion under this Zunner-Keating et al. definition. With culturally homogenous crews, ones which typically follow the same religion, it is reasonable to expect that they all hold belief in the same supernatural figures or elements. It is when a crew is not culturally homogenous that things begin to blend.

The blending of culture is a documented phenomenon, especially aboard 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century crews. This blending often results in a new, unique cultural practice; a “melting pot” perspective of culture often called cultural syncretism. This is the term Brian J. Rouleau (2007) uses when analyzing how culturally heterogenous crews came together to create new cultural practices. The cultural practices to which he refers, however, are folkloric practices. The superstitions and spirituality of these crews are being blended to create a new folkloric system, one that drifts close to religion in nature. Anthropologists use the term religious syncretism to describe this phenomenon. In religious syncretism, we see the creation of a new religion through the blending of two different belief systems. Using this term is more accurate when describing the phenomenon which occurred on the ships Rouleau (2007) describes, but this will be described in more depth later. The blending of folkloric practices, though not specifically analyzed during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, has been discussed, focusing on sailors a century earlier. Using the term “spiritscape” – a portmanteau of the words “spirit” and “landscape” – Dionisius A. Aguis (2017) describes how mariners upon the Red Sea in the 16<sup>th</sup> century brought

their unique folkloric practices together, sharing and blending these practices into some of the foundational spiritual and folkloric beliefs of Islam. This concept is the basis upon which the blending of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century folkloric practices will be built.

It is also worth mentioning the historic precedence of religion as a more mobile, and therefore mutable, experience than simply a stationary, or fixed, one. Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui (2015) describes a kind of “wandering religion of Ancient Greece, using Jonathan Z. Smith’s (2003) taxonomy of religious spheres. Smith’s (2003, as cited in de Jáuregui, 2015) taxonomy identifies three categories of religion, one of which – and the one note here – is an “anywhere” religion. The idea that a religion can be practiced “anywhere,” rather than in a single, prescribed location, can also lend itself to the argument that the blending of folkloric practices aboard ships can be considered religious syncretism. The ships of culturally and folklorically homogenous crews act as temporary holy places, and, later, the ships of culturally and folklorically heterogenous crews act as new and temporary places of worship for these created religious practices. This will be further examined later.

### **Religion at Sea**

Religion and religious practices have not avoided maritime travel. It is well-documented, particularly between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, that religion was a motivating factor in exploration, particularly into the New World. Catholic relics and reliquaries have been noted aboard Spanish ships as conquistadores and missionaries came to the New World. These talismans – crosses, statues, and other religious paraphernalia – acted as symbols of their faith and belief in God (Egan, 2021). Though these were aboard vessels with the intention of

spreading religious practice and faith, particularly Christian and Catholic, that does not necessarily preclude the practice of religion aboard ships. Martha J. Egan (2021) describes one particular way priests at sea would practice their religion through folklore or superstition: breaking off pieces of a Pope-sanctioned necklace and dropping them into the ocean. This was done as an offering to ease their travels, a clear example of superstition performed by Catholic priests at sea, who are, for all intents and purposes, sailors in this context. This harkens back to the idea that culturally, and therefore religiously, homogenous crews will continue to partake in the practices with which they are familiar. This practice is further noted even a century earlier. Ships sailing the Red Sea have been found to house cultural and folkloric symbols, such as the Evil Eye and particular pain colorings, reinforced the Pre-Islamic cultural and folkloric practices of the region (Agius, 2017). The Evil Eye was also worn as a protective talisman by sailors in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, just as Catholic priests wore crosses as protective talismans. The presence of talismanic relics aboard ships and symbolic ship cosmetics are emblematic how culturally homogenous crews practice their folkloric beliefs when at sea. These practices demonstrate that religion was not strictly practiced on land and that the ability of an individual to practice religion when travelling, especially in a way that was seen as excessively dangerous, was critical to the spiritual well-being of crews.

In the definition of religion from Zunner-Keating et al. (n.d.), a religion must also include a supernatural element. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, sailors – particularly those who prefer Christianity or Catholicism – held firm beliefs that there were monsters at sea. These are the kinds of monsters that pirate and sailor media use as mythic antagonists and were ones that were truly feared. Hippocampi, tritones, sirens, and “other [diverse kinds] of Monsters” (Batman, 1581) were said

to be encounterable at sea. The Kraken, a monster previously mentioned as being known through pirate-centric pop culture, is also found in this compendium of seafaring dangers. The names listed are mythical and by contemporary standards are complete fantasy, but there was a period of history where these monsters were genuine threats to sailors. The existence of these monsters and sea creatures fits into the supernatural element of religion; especially those researchers and marine biologists now know – or generally assume – to have been entirely fictive. Supernatural elements continue to be seen in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, though more focused on sailors' individual behaviors rather than sea monsters. Ocean spirits and ghosts have also both been critical aspects of seafaring spirituality and folklore. Today, a lasting belief from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there are still fishing communities along the Arabian Peninsula that believe *jinns*, pre-Islamic spirits, are responsible for less than favorable finishing conditions (Agius, 2017). Similarly, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, ghosts appeared aboard ships, confronting sailors as karmic apparitions (Rouleau, 2007). In both cases, spirits and ghosts play an integral role in the folklore of sailors, determining seafaring outcomes or acting as a mirror of justice. Apparitions act as a metaphysical or purely spiritual aspect of religion in these cases; the spiritual world impacts the physical world and creates a supernatural connection between the realms, and, thus, another supernatural element of religion. This goes even beyond how the spiritual world impacts the physical; there is also a physical impact upon the spiritual. Agius (2017) identifies through his fieldwork not only a historic but a contemporary belief in protection magic across the Red Sea. This protective magic is seen through talismanic power and offerings of food to the sea spirits. Protection magic, by way of the language used to refer to it, is a supernatural element, thus qualifying these folkloric practices as religion. Further, the belief in magic at all, even if a mariner is not performing or facilitating the magic, qualifies as a supernatural element, due to the nature of it being believed at

all. The supernatural and the folkloric are often intertwined, but it is these systems of belief in monsters, spirits, and magic that sets it apart. There are systems of prevention and manifestation that come along with the supernatural, attributing it more to religion than mere fairy tale.

It is, as mentioned, when the ships house culturally heterogenous crews that there begins a shift in priorities. Rouleau (2007) describes the camaraderie that was built aboard ships through the sharing of folklore and stories – which he specifically refers to as “yarn.” The yarn informs neophyte sailors on the goings-on aboard a ship and, even if the sailor does not necessarily believe the superstition, creates a superstitious and folklorically motivated sailor. When joining a new ship and crew, adhering to the folkloric practices of the crew were of the utmost importance. Each new sailor underwent a process similar to enculturation, where they were taught, through what was often called “yarn spinning,” the culture and hierarchy of the crew, and if they did not adhere to these new rules, there were consequences (Rouleau, 2007). The enculturation process, in this case, allows for neophyte sailors to be brought into the new, unifying folkloric belief system. If a sailor has a religious preference, it becomes private, “as long as they kept [their “previous beliefs”] to themselves” (Rouleau, 2007). These practices become the religion; these ships become religious grounds. The religious grounds are, then, able to shift and move depending on necessity. This syncretic religion becomes an “anywhere religion” (Smith, 2003, as cited in de Jáuregui, 2015), a moving house of worship with practices important upon the ship and through their travels. The transportive aspect of “anywhere religion” is also present among crews and ships on the Red Sea in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These practices are, as mentioned, pre-Islamic, but still incorporate a unified practice paying respect to spirits and ancestors, alike. In their travels, sailors prayed and visited tombs to leave offerings as thanks for good travels as well

as because that was the cultural practice of the region (Agius, 2017). These practices, unlike Caribbean sailors during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, are unified under similar cultural and religious backgrounds, so these sailors are only turning the religious and folkloric practices into “anywhere” practices as part of their “spiritscape.” The practices accounted for in diaries and interviews demonstrate a distancing from religion in favor of the superstitious practices. Having a unified folkloric belief system at sea created a unified culture unique to each ship. Folkloric belief was culturally important, and that cultural belief was tantamount to religious practice in its severity. Folkloric and religious beliefs were seen as interchangeable, meaning folkloric and spiritual practice aboard ships become a temporary, prioritized belief system. This spiritual belief system becomes the religious backbone of the ship’s cultural make-up.

### **Conclusion**

What makes this process religious syncretism, specifically, when scholars have considered it cultural syncretism for so long? Agius’ (2017) “spiritscape” framework is key in this understanding. The spiritual landscape of the sea is informed by pre-existing folkloric belief and practice but simultaneously disconnected from it. Sailors are introduced to a microcosm of culture and enculturated in it the same way one is enculturated into a larger cultural group. This microcosm of a cultural group, based on adherence to spiritual and folkloric beliefs, rituals and supernatural ties, can be considered a veritable religion, if only a temporary one. This temporary religion is cultivated and curated at sea, creating a religious practice that not only decentralizes traditional religion but also decentralizes locale. These religious practices are not structured by rigid rules and focus more on the camaraderie built aboard a ship.

Given further scholarship, this system of folkloric practices syncretizing into new religious practices among heterogenous crews can be applied to the mythological side of the sailing coin: pirates. Pirates exist in media as a romanticized, often strictly fictional, aspect of sailing during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, but these sailors are still just that: sailors. Pirates are treated as folkloric and mystic figures in their own right and are the fantastical subject of romance novels. If further scholarship can begin to contextualize the actions of pirates as folkloric and therefore religious behavior, pirates as a historical concept will no longer be as romanticized. This shift would bring pirates into a unified cultural and religious understanding of sailors, in general, encapsulating them into the folkloric and religious beliefs that insist upon unity and brotherhood that other sailors experienced.

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