

Socioeconomic Study Of Cuban And Puerto Rican Espiritismo History Essay

The goal of this essay is to explore the socioeconomic indicators of Cuban and Puerto Rican Espiritismo in its formative Caribbean stages as well as its implications today. This will be approached through a history of Spiritism and its disbursement into the Caribbean as Espiritismo. Spiritism and Espiritismo will be used interchangeably throughout this essay. As the essay progresses it will explore the variants of Espiritismo descriptively and the socioeconomic indicators of the adherents to these specific variations. Due to the highly creolized nature of all that is Caribbean, the relationship between Espiritismo and Santeria will also be discussed; as well as its importance to the Caribbean Diaspora in the United States. The social implications of Espiritismo in relation to race in the Puerto Rican culture will also be expressed.

Spiritism was a response to the American religion, Spiritualism, propagated by the Fox Sisters of Hydesville, New York who in 1848 discovered that they could communicate with the dead through a system of "channeling" spirits, table rapping and séance. (Melton 81) Later, one of the sisters, Margaret, admitted to have been faking the original rapping marking the religion as prone to be fraudulent practice. (Melton 85) The response would come from a French educator and engineer by the name of Hippolyte Leon Denizard Rivail: who was greatly inspired by the Enlightenment trend which permeated throughout Europe as well as the entire world. He argued that his Spiritism was a moral philosophy based on a scientific approach in bridging the gap between "the 'material and spiritual' worlds" and completely separate from "the 'trickery' of the Spiritualists." Rivail wrote several books explaining his philosophy under a pen name, Allan Kardec, "a name supposedly based on previous reincarnations ascertained from mediumistic communication." (Paravisini-Gebert 172)

As Spiritism began to spread throughout France it was first picked up by the petit bourgeois, the urban working class who were greatly exposed to criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church by Enlightenment leaders and in need of an alternative form of religious expression. Spiritism, a religion which requires no initiation and provides equality for all people was easy to identify with on a personal level and it also contained the Christian morality and Saints they were so familiar with. In spite of the similarities between Spiritism and Catholicism, the practice of Spiritism was condemned by the Church as heresy and "denounced the manifestations of spirits as the work of Satan." This clearly demonstrates the Church's attempt to monopolize the supernatural and "maintain control over... the challenges of science" (Paravisini-Gebert 176) and the Enlightenment. Many scholars view Spiritism as a replacement of Catholicism for the working class both in Europe as well as those in the Caribbean. Although this religion began in France, it was not confined to that particular region. As more people began practicing, it spread to Spain where a man by the name of Amalia Soler popularized it through his writings and "around 1850 the literature began to spread in the Spanish and French Caribbean, and other parts of Latin America." (Mitchell 135)

The spread of Spiritism in the Caribbean came in the form of illegal books from France and Spain as well as those who returned to the Caribbean from studying abroad. The disbursement of this religion by the literate Bourgeoisie was fueled by the need for political protest against the Spanish Church and State inspired by the French revolutionary ideas for national independence which were so revered at the time. As in Europe, the transmission of Spiritism was remarkably smooth. Not only because it was so similar to Catholicism, but in the Caribbean environment; where the belief in spirits along with a history of ancestor worship was already present, this philosophy only reinforced what the people had already believed. (Paravisini-Gebert 177)

In Cuba, the first to become involved with Spiritism was the middle class, the upper class Cubans were mostly Spanish-born and closely identified with the then oppressive Catholic Church and Spanish colonial powers. (Brandon 176) Cuban Espiritismo was first practiced by the literate middle class who followed the teachings of Kardec very closely through what is currently called "Misa Blanca Espiritismo," (White Table) it was then belatedly that "Espiritismo [was] more suited to [them]." (Mitchell 136) Those who practice this tradition today, consider themselves to be scientists who follow a moral philosophy instead of a religion. Their rituals only involve the use of a white table, mediums to communicate with spirits, and the writings of Kardec.

The diffusion of Espiritismo to the lower classes is thought to have occurred when house servants who practiced Santeria witnessed their masters' wives "becoming possessed of the spirits of their ancestors" and walking away [physically] unharmed from it. At the same time Espiritismo began to show itself to these servants, their practice of egungun (the manifestation of ancestors through masked spirits) in their Lucumi religion was fading and Espiritismo was a perfect replacement. (Mitchell 135) The variant which stems from the absorption of ancestral spirits from the Congo (egungun) and folk Catholicism into formal Spiritism is "Espiritismo de Cordon" (of the cord). Ritual involves aspects of the previously mentioned traditions and healing is the main focus. Racial integration of this variant occurred sometime during the Ten Years' War in which:

"The terror created by the repeated massacres and the distance of the civilian population from the combating Cuban forces created a sense of peril, insecurity, and outbreaks of collective hysteria. Cordon ceremonies in which whites held hands under the guidance of their former Congo servants to invoke the spirits, hoping to discover the fate of family members or friends fighting in combat, or their own, offered solace to the besieged population." (Paravisini-Gebert 181)

According to Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert this unifying practice between blacks and whites makes Espiritismo de Cordon a practice which Cubans are most likely to accept because it is a "Catholicism removed from the Church, a simplified system of spiritual beliefs, and a trance similar to that of Africanized religions." It is a cordon or cord that ties them together as Cubans and Espiritistas. Espiritismo was also desirable to lower class Afro-Cuban servants because it "represented a kind of upward mobility which compensated for their inability to rise in the class system." It also allowed the upper white classes to practice the same thing as the lower black classes without lowering their identity in Cuban society. This is the paradox of Espiritismo in Cuba: its socioeconomic indicators are both joined through practice and separated by race. (Brandon 112,176)

The last variant of Cuban Espiritismo is "El Espiritismo Cruzao." This type of Spiritism is, as its name implies, a "crossed" practice using traditions from the traditional Kardec teachings, folk Catholicism, and traditional Afro-Cuban religions "especialmente the Regla de Palo Monte," which is very similar to

Santeria or Regla de Ocha. The most important ritual in Cruzao is the Misa Espiritual (Spiritual Mass) which is a precursor to the initiation of Santeria novices. This joining of Espiritismo and Santeria will be discussed later in this essay. (Paravisini-Gebert 183)

Unlike Spiritism in Cuba, upper class educated Puerto Ricans were the first to practice this new Anglo-French philosophy. They were eager for the liberation of Puerto Rico from Spanish colonial forces and found inspiration through the "Espiritismo doctrines of justice and charity." Although the practice of Espiritismo in Puerto Rico was illegal and seen as a "corrupting" revolutionary influence on the people; its spread into the island continued regardless. In Puerto Rico, Espiritismo served as a philosophy of political reform and its adherents began programs to replace the public welfare system which the Spanish had neglected by founding health care facilities, free hospitals, public libraries, and children's homes. The independence these Puerto Ricans were so diligently working for was granted to them from Spain for only six months when the United States was given control of the island after the Cuban-Spanish-American War in 1898. Although their right to practice Espiritismo was protected under the First Amendment, many Puerto Ricans continued to work for the independence of the island and continue to do so today. (Paravisini-Gebert 185-86)

Espiritismo in Puerto Rico contains only two variants: White Table and Indigenous Espiritismo. White Table Spiritism in Puerto Rico follows the same traditions as that of its Cuban counterpart and is mainly practiced by the middle class. Also, as in Cuba, Espiritismo easily spread to the urban and rural lower classes because of the already present belief in ancestral spirits from the slave Yoruba religions as well as the religion of the native Taino or Arawak Indians indigenous to the island. This Indigenous Espiritismo is the most popular practice of Spiritism in Puerto Rico; however it is not seen as a "European import" because it "combines the native healing systems of the Taino Indians... and the folk healing practices of both the Spaniards and enslaved Africans." (Paravisini-Geber 186-88)

Santerismo is also a popular tradition in Puerto Rico as well as in United States diasporic Puerto Rican communities, especially in New York. The combining of the two religions (Puerto Rican Espiritismo and Cuban Santeria) is a direct result from the immigration of Cuban exiles to Puerto Rico during and after the Cuban Revolution and "the search for ethnic and cultural identity in the Puerto Rican Diaspora." (Paravisini-Geber 189) In Santerismo and the relationship between Santeria and Espiritismo, we find another paradoxical relationship. Although the two religions are practiced as one by some, many of those who practice them separately harshly judge the joining of the two. In Brandon George's book *Santeria from Africa to the New World*, he mentions the problems espiritistas (adherents) have with Santerismo medium who charge for their services, which espiritistas do not. It is seen as exploitative and for those espiritistas who view Santeria with hostility, also view these mediums as charlatans who practice black magic. Santeros, although not hostile to Espiritismo because of its use as a pre-condition for initiates, condemn Santerismo mediums because they view the saints as low-level spirit guides and claim to possess powers of an orisha (Santeria gods) which they cannot have without having undergone the proper initiations. Samiri Hernandez Hiraldo mentions in her book *Black Puerto Rican Identity and Religious Experience*, the view on Santeria from an espiritista she interviewed named Alfonsina:

"According to her, Santeria spirits are pagan idols, which are often used to do evil. She emphasized the fact that Santeria came from Cuba and that it did not come to Loiza [a Puerto Rican town] right away, but through intermittent contacts with people who practiced it in the area of San Juan. Alfonsina's attitude clearly confirms the fact that Spiritism and Santeria are seen, in Puerto Rico, as distinct from one another, and that Spiritism is usually favored." (Hiraldo 215)

Today, Catholicism continues to be the main religion of Puerto Rico and in white middle class areas Spiritism is still frowned upon or practiced in secret, if by middle class whites. Brown attributes this to three problems: "the evaluation of blackness in relation to Puerto Rican ethnic identity, the effect of spiritism on blackness as an element of ethnic identity, and interethnic competition between Puerto Ricans and Cubans." (Brandon 112) Another example of these problems in relation to black identity can be found in again in Hiraldo's personal account of the black religious experience in Puerto Rico:

"For many years my grandfather operated a stand in the farmers market downtown and dealt with local farmers and fishermen as well as people from the town of Loiza where, I was told, many black people lived who were superstitious and practiced witchcraft, Spiritism, and Santeria. I learned that these practices were considered characteristic of black people in general. I also remember that during evangelistic "tent meeting" events sponsored by my church ... broadcast by loud speakers to the neighborhood, condemned these "wrong" or "false" beliefs." (Hiraldo 17)

Despite how black practitioners of Espiritismo and Santeria are viewed by Catholic or Protestant whites; Hiraldo mentions that in some places, like Loiza, they do not keep their practices secret and some are even prideful of them. This idea of Espiritismo being practiced only by blacks in select lower class areas is dissolved in Diaspora, especially to New York City. Here, it changes to represent Puerto Rican identity in a foreign land. (Brandon 113)

Brown argues that the practice of Santerismo becomes a symbol of "the homeland" and a "national or ethnic symbol representing an identity that contrasts with general American norms and values." Brown asserts that the blackness of the Seven African Powers in Santerismo serves as an "affirmation of Africa" and an important part of Puerto Rican identity as partially African. This allows for Santerismo to cease having to identify with Cuba. Brown continues to explain that this is possible only because of "new self-definitions" Puerto Ricans must undertake during their migrancy. He views the acceptance of "orishas, botanicas, and a positive approach to African heritage," as "symptom alleviation" for the migrant. Where Santerismo provides a positive approach to African heritage, the issues between espiritistas and santeros still exist. (Brandon 113)

It is now clear that in its formative years, Spiritism served as an outlet for those who were tired of colonial oppression and as inspiration for independence from these powers whether French or Spanish. It is also obvious that Spiritism is a product of the period of Enlightenment or disenchantment of the world because of the Roman Catholic Church's close ties not only with oppressive colonial powers in the Caribbean but with corruption in Europe. As Spiritism found its way to the Caribbean it also served the revolutionary free thinkers as well as the proletariat eager to keep his Indigenous traditions and identify with the upper or middle class in a society in which condemned their African roots. Spiritism now, although still viewed with contempt by the Puerto Rican upper and middle classes, can be practiced openly and with pride. Recently it has also re-emerged with popularity in Cuba and Puerto Rico as a spiritual refuge for economic hardships. Although still viewed harshly on the island of Puerto Rico; Espiritismo and Santeria have allowed for a more smooth transition for Puerto Ricans migrating to the mainland through the positive acceptance of a shared African heritage. This is shown through the acceptance of botanicas to the popularity of salsa and its acceptance in mainstream American culture. Though the search for a unique identity however, still continues for those who hail from the islands of the Caribbean.

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