



Spiritism and the Place of the Dead in Afro-Cuban Religion

I. Kardecist spirits and Cuban hybrids

A curious mix

In Havana, the *muertos* are perceived and talked about by practitioners of Afro-Cuban religion in a number of revealing ways. Metaphors of light, incandescence, ascension, evolution, and immateriality prevail in discourses dominated by reference to “good” spirits. In contrast, terms such as *muerto oscuro*, meaning the “dark” dead, evoke images of beings in the underworlds of Cuba’s metaphysical order who thrive by preying on the weak, inflicting injury and death, and causing persons to stray from their rightful paths. These *muertos* are referred to as being “materialized,” “lowly,” and “unevolved.” “Luz y progreso!” [Light and progress!], mediums exclaim in attempts to redeem these creatures from their fates, elevating them in rituals with the help of luminous spirit guides. While this spiritual taxonomy is typically more pluralistic, overlapping, and contradictory than these initial descriptions suggest, certain common ontological frames characterize such discourses and merit closer inspection. The objective of this chapter is to examine the influence of spiritism’s spatio-temporal and moral cosmology, whose historical alliance with Cuban creole religious forms arguably transmuted a typically Victorian preoccupation with evolution and progress into a set of common assumptions regarding the nature

of spiritual ontogeny. There are two questions embedded in this aim. The first pertains to spiritism's course of expansion and transformation in Cuba, as well as its early contribution to the existing religious ecology; the second, to the structure of its current ritual symbiosis and the mechanisms of self-making that bind it to most other religious practices in Havana at the root.

Kardec's new science of spirit

Cuban ontology is descended from a nineteenth-century mystical rendition of the resources of the afterlife. The following statements, purportedly direct quotes from the spirits themselves, appeared in a book entitled *Le Livre des Esprits* (*The Spirits' Book*), published in 1857 in France. The author called himself Allan Kardec (1804–1869), and his work soon reverberated throughout France and Europe and across the Atlantic, announcing that:

The material beings constitute the visible or corporeal world, and the immaterial beings constitute the invisible or spiritual world, that is to say, the spirit-world, or world of spirits.

The spirit-world is the normal, primitive, eternal world, pre-existent to, and surviving, everything else.

Spirits having to pass through many incarnations, it follows that we have all had many existences, and that we shall have others, more or less perfect, either upon this earth or in other worlds.

Spirits exert an incessant action upon the moral world, and even upon the physical world; they act both upon matter and upon thought, and constitute one of the powers of nature, the efficient cause of many classes of phenomena hitherto unexplained or misinterpreted, and of which only the spiritist theory can give a rational explanation. (*The Spirits' Book*, Introduction, section 4, online)

What Kardec alluded to amounted at the time to a reconceptualization not simply of the “beyond” being continuous with and accessible to the living, but of the conventionally held limits of empiricist science. *The Spirits' Book* was followed by *The Mediums' Book* (1861), which posited and clarified the faculty of mediumship, and further, *The Gospel According to Spiritism* (1864), and *Heaven and Hell* (1865),

both of which overturned Christian notions of divinity and sin in their reinterpretation of the gospel. Kardec had achieved this through an extraordinary collusion with the “beyond” itself. By the time of his death, in 1869, Kardec had essentially transcribed, integrated, analyzed, and published thousands of pages of metaphysical messages and writings similar to his early works, constituting either what he claimed to be direct communications to him from enlightened spirits, dictated and laid out in question and answer format, or his own attempts at interpretatively synthesizing such wisdoms.

These higher beings, speaking to him through various French mediums, had determined that a new vision of the spiritual was in order that was to be scientific rather than pious in nature, and that Kardec was to be its voice by systematizing these teachings into a voluminous body of knowledge that would become the spiritist doctrine. Kardec became known as spiritism’s “codifier,” suggesting the doctrine’s ultimate ahistoricity and truth, and after a few short years spiritism had gained an astoundingly large following due to the popularity of what a new spiritual materialism seemed to offer: first, the rejection of a hegemonic relationship with the divine; and second, the embrace of a fundamental right to understand and experience the spiritual on a personal and empirical level. Revolutionary, reactionary, exotic, and simultaneously reconcilable to strands of existing Christian and esoteric traditions, spiritism found an easy home among the European middle classes, who were fascinated by notions such as “ether” and “magnetism” and bored by priests and dogma.

Kardec’s Europe was already home to a growing assortment of so-called New Religious Movements, infused with the will to redefine and understand the immaterial dimensions of existence from within a scientific field of inquiry. Ideas of interconnected social and scientific evolution, popularized in Comte’s positivism, were seen as potentially all-encompassing: modernity was on the loose, and science embodied the promise of ultimate measurement, explanation, and redemption. The realm of the invisible or intangible was no exception. The mid- to late nineteenth century, argues Eliade, “reveals a longing for a universalistic, transhistorical, ‘mythical’ religion” (1964, 155) that manifested itself in the emergence of a plethora of new moral philosophies, from Theosophy to Christian Science. Bryan Wilson argues that societies transformed by the advent of mass industrialization and its social by-

products were made suddenly aware of their own resources, and this began to mark a shift away from a God-centered belief system (1990). Man was now to be at the core of religious/spiritual experience, to be its agent, and often its subject. Mesmerism and Swedenborgism, for instance, were movements that, according to the historian Lisa Abend, “clearly paved the way for the reception of spiritism on the continent” (2004, 509). As Peter Washington argues in his account of the colorful and contested founding of the Theosophical Society, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon*, all of these trends sought a key that would unlock the mysteries of the universe, of the occult: an ultimate source. Christianity no longer fit the role. Knowledge was to be had outside the normative formats, where these could only be seen as part of the larger story, or as transcendent narratives that were, at best, symbols for an individual’s own spiritual journey, rather than truths in themselves; it was not spirituality that was in question in the end, then, but authority (Washington 1995, 8–9). However, as Riskin (2009) has argued, these new narratives did not so much break with contemporary scientism as extend it by converting the epoch’s materialist methodologies into machineries of spiritual discovery, thereby disproving the very materialism they were meant to defend. In the second half of the nineteenth century, and in the early twentieth, science was constantly developing techniques and instruments that brought objective reality to beings, materials, and forces that had previously been either ignored or regarded as imponderable marvels by humankind (Vasconcelos 2008, 18). Spiritism was to re-enchant the world with spirits by expanding on similar imaginaries of transmission and technology and their possibilities for an understanding of the realms of the invisible.

What Kardec’s spiritism offered, in contrast with its relatively untheologized Anglo-Saxon counterpart, spiritualism, was an elaborate, even bureaucratic ontological map of the spiritual and material worlds, two basic levels of existence whose interaction was necessary, albeit often imperceptible from the latter end. The idea that was fundamental to spiritism’s vision was that a person’s spirit survives after his or her physical demise; what made this notion novel was the myriad ways in which the spirit could continue to influence the material realm, shaping the actions and decisions of the living. Furthermore, unlike spiritualism, Kardec’s doctrine posited a carefully crafted theory of repeated reincarnation reminiscent of Buddhist, Indic, and other Eastern reli-

gious philosophies in vogue at the time, coupled with a system of karmic accumulation, debt, and expiation, which fueled the motor of this cyclical and eternal process of evolution. Lives succeeded lives, in an ongoing helix of spiritual ascendance. Illness and adversity were seen in terms of necessary karmic “tests” or “trials,” the successful completion of which advanced the spirit toward the highest stages of purity, populated by saints, martyrs, geniuses, and the wisest men and women of history, such as Plato and St. Augustine.

Spiritism proposed that all effects have a cause, particularly that all intelligent effects have an intelligent cause. Spiritism also forwarded a methodology for proper communication and for the education of mediums—the instruments—in often-treacherous paths of discernment and development. Finally, along with a complex classification of good, intermediate, and ignorant spirits, and of the means by which to identify and relate to each, Kardec articulated the existence of spirit guides, protective entities with some degree of knowledge who accompany and lead the individual throughout the course of his or her life from birth and who have, in turn, had lives of their own. In Cuba this personalized collectivity of guides became known as the *cordón espiritual*, taking on great importance in the conceptual reorganization of the Afro-Cuban religious “self.” Kardec’s spiritism built on the foundations of France’s romantic socialists, such as Reynaud and Leroux, who had first revived in popular fashion the notion of metempsychosis (reincarnation) and who married Asian spiritual readings with political ideals of how to remake modern society (Sharp 2006). Spiritism took off where romantic socialism faltered. As Sharp argues, after 1848 “socialism made for dangerous conversations; religion remained an acceptable topic, and a popular one” (2009, 23).

It was unsurprising that spiritism was imbued with the political currents of its time. Progressivist and liberal, it asserted no inherently superior race, gender, class, or culture, only that there were more or less enlightened souls marching on entirely unique paths toward a state of perfection. While not designed to be explicitly anticlerical, spiritism found a historical nemesis in the Catholic Church and an important base of support among sectors of the French populace disenchanted with the dominant Catholic powers. In spiritism, the individual was liberated from established religious hierarchies without feeling disenfranchised altogether from the essence of a Christian paradigm (Sharp

1999), since much of the moral structure of the latter was retained. Spiritism also catered to both “the positivistic refusal to believe without proof and the religious impulse to know that the soul continues on after death” (Sharp 2009, 59). Science, evolution, spirits, faith, and morality: this combination proved an explosive mixture for the up-and-coming liberal, urban populations of Latin America.

Spirits and progress among Cuba’s middle classes

There is some uncertainty as to how spiritist ideas arrived in Cuba. Some sources credit the Spanish spiritist Amalia Domingo Soler for the importation and circulation of Kardec’s texts; others claim a North American route. In any case, traveling intellectuals and those with ties abroad were the first recipients and first disseminators of such ideas. By 1880, Cuban philosopher and humanist Enrique José Varona was talking of a “spiritual epidemic” (quoted in Bermúdez 1967, 15). The Cuban Catholic Church was quick to publish a “pastoral instruction” leaflet/text, aimed at condemning and containing it (*ibid.*) but which had the opposite effect. The church had in fact condemned itself by siding with the Spanish in the repression of Cuban independence fighters during the 1868–78 war, after which collaboration between the church and state increased. Bermúdez argues that we can see in the massive popularity of the early Cuban spiritist movement a reaction to colonial hegemony, to the church’s complicity with an ever more ruthless regime. As was the case with neighboring Puerto Rico (Romberg 2003, 59), spiritism began to appeal in particular to the growing creole middle classes, to those excluded from the hierarchies of Spanish-born Cuban communities and a church-mediated political system they felt they could never infiltrate (Brandon 1997, 86). The rising number of liberals and *independistas* in mid-nineteenth-century Cuba added to “an increasing interest in science, political democracy, and new ideas” (*ibid.*), especially in a population already primed for the idea that the soul survives death and can be made manifest through some sort of communicational enterprise with the living (Castellanos and Castellanos 1992, 192). The notion of a scientific faith, or of a scientific method of expressing the existence of an “other,” brought with it the promise of an altogether modern approach to religious experience, constituting both an antidote to a Catholicism whose theological precepts were for