

The Power of the Spirits: The Formation of Identity based on Puerto Rican Spiritism

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Abstract

Based on the writings by the French Allan Kardec, Spiritism spread to Puerto Rico in the middle of the nineteenth century when it became a framework for other traditions. *Espiritismo popular* (popular Puerto Rican Spiritism) integrates Catholicism, African religious elements, and aspects of Spanish popular religion.

After explaining the history and belief system of Puerto Rican Spiritism, the article discusses the creation of ethnic identity based on Spiritism. Following the lead of Fredrik Barth the author argues that ethnicity should not be regarded as an essentialist concept but that we should look on the way it is created. Hence, ethnic groups originate in a complex process, from the relationship between the integration of individuals and the separation toward other groups. The article demonstrates how Puerto Rican Spiritism supported and supports the creation of a common identity.

Introduction

The term ethnicity has always been used in several different ways, each with a different meaning. This essay follows the formalist approach based on Fredrik Barth, integrated, for instance, in the definition of an ethnic group as 'any group of people who set themselves apart and are set apart from other groups with whom they interact or exist in terms of some distinctive criterion or criteria which may be linguistic, racial or cultural'(Seymour-Smith 1986:95). This definition indicates that various aspects can create ethnicity; as I will show in this article, religion can be one of them. Wallerstein located ethnicity in an urban environment

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when he defined ethnicity as a feeling of loyalty to a new ethnic group living in a town (Wallerstein 1960:131-133). But he forgot to explain how a migrant develops loyal feeling and why. A group needs more than a common origin to create ethnic identity. A person with Puerto Rican parents and living in the US has various choices; he/she can regard him/herself as Puerto Rican, as Latino/a, as African American, as American or even as Taino/a as Duany (1999) demonstrates. Not every Puerto Rican living off the island belongs to the Puerto Rican ethnic group (and I doubt whether such a homogenous group exists) - only Puerto Ricans setting themselves apart from other people by creating such an ethnic boundary around them do (see, for instance, the meticulous case study presented by Sánchez Korrol 1994), and sometimes only in certain situations. While some scholars as, for instance, Clara Rodríguez (1989) present Puerto Ricans as belonging to one ethnic homogenous though racially mixed group (she uses Felipo Luciano's term Rainbow People to describe Puerto Ricans), I argue that we should diversify more when we speak about a group of migrants and their descendents. As the term Latino is defined nowadays as a cultural category for a highly heterogeneous population (Suárez-Orozco and Páez 2002:3-4), the term Puerto Rican also describes a mixture of people who have only few elements in common. Hence it is important to investigate how they define the borderline between themselves and others.

In the following paper I will focus on one special cultural ingredient of identity: religion, or, more precisely, the popular religious orientation common to most Puerto Ricans, Spiritism. I want to draw attention to Spiritism as a religious phenomenon which I consider to be of great significance in Latin America, but which has been neglected. However, I will not just describe the main characteristics of Spiritism; instead I will show how Spiritism was used to define an ethnic boundary in two different contexts, in the nineteenth century between Peninsulares and Jibaros on the island as well as in the twentieth century between Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in the US. As I will demonstrate in this essay, the belief in Puerto Rican Spiritism can build among Puerto Ricans a common sense of identity - or to use Barth's term ethnic boundaries separating a group from another. I do not want to declare that Spiritism is the only distinctive criteria. Identity can be created based on various elements, and Spiritism is just one of them. Nevertheless, I argue that we have to take popular religious belief systems under consideration when we want to understand the way people create identity.

The Central Ideas of *espiritismo puertorriqueño*

Latin American Spiritism is quite distinct from Western spiritualism. While the latter is a butterfly label for various spiritual belief systems, Latin American Spiritism is in spite of all local variations always based on the works of Allan Kardec (1804-1869) and includes his basic characteristics (see Pérez García 1988 for a comparison of the development in France and Puerto Rico). Born as Leon Hypolite Denizard Rivail in Lyon, France, he began to study magnetic phenomenon around 1850. In 1855 he attended at his first séance during which he at once encountered a spirit. Two years later he published his first spiritistic book containing 1019 answers of spirits to his questions. Since then he used his new spiritistic name which had its origin in the information by a spirit: 'We have known us before, Rivail. We lived together in another existence, in Galleon, at the time of the druids, and your name was Allan Kardec' (Baumgartner 1970:91). Until the time of his death, he wrote several books about Spiritism, published a spiritistic journal and founded a spiritistic society in Paris.

Kardec was not the only spiritistic figure in his time, but he is until today the most well-known in Latin America. Under Spanish and Portuguese rule, spiritistic writings and practices were forbidden in the colonies. However, even strict control could not prevent the spread of Kardec's ideas, in particular in Puerto Rico and Brazil (see Hess 1991 for an historical overview about Brazilian Spiritism). Already in 1856, the first séance was held in San Juan; in 1871, the first spiritistic community was founded in Mayagüez and in 1879 the first society (Rodríguez Escudero 1978:43). The Catholic Church, working hand in hand with the colonial government, attacked spiritists in every possible way (for instance, spiritists were not allowed to marry in church or to be buried in a Catholic cemetery), but Spiritism developed in Puerto Rico more and more into a socio-political and non-aggressive way to oppose the Spanish rule as I will explain a bit later.

Spiritism is based on the belief in the existence of spirits and their immortality. Spirits are non-material beings who live for a limited time inside a human body. Some time after death, the spirit chooses another body to be reincarnated in. During its incorporated period the spirit has to perfect its qualities because it has to remain on earth until it reaches to highest level of perfection.

The spirits are divided into different levels, from the highest level of the angels down to the good spirits and to the bad (underdeveloped) spirits. While the inferior spirits cause disturbances, the good ones can be asked for help by humans.

This leads to the second fundamental characteristics of Spiritism: human beings can communicate with the spirits in different ways, according to their personal abilities. Some people can sense the nearness of spirits, some can see them, some can hear their voices and some can even 'lend' their bodies to a spirit for direct contact though this manifestation is regarded as dangerous for the 'mediums' (as these persons are called) who have to learn to control the spirits. The spiritistic reunions are seen therefore as the only places to 'communicate with the other world, the world of the departed ones' (Morales-Dorta 1976:35). For protection against bad spirits, a séance is often conducted by a president who is not necessarily a highly developed medium him/herself, but has to live a highly moral life.

Morality signifies the third foundation of Spiritism because only a moral life of the spirit in its free as well as in its incorporated (i.e., human) state can lead to the progressive evolution of the soul. During a séance the mediums help therefore both groups, humans with their problems caused by spirits as well as misguided spirits. The latter have to learn that it is harmful for their own evolution to cause disturbances in the material world. The Humans have to learn that only a moral life can prevent serious problems - not only in this life, but also during their next incarnations.

Aside from the belief of reincarnation which Kardec incorporated from Hinduism, the spiritistic morality is based more or less on Christian faith. Kardec himself integrated his doctrine into Christianity, even as he denounced the Catholic Church ('Spiritism doesn't bring a new morality and therefore doesn't distinguish from the Christian one', Kardec 1991:304). He declared Spiritism to be the only way out of the misery of the world, away from the materialism of our society.

This aspect constitutes part of the popularity of Spiritism from the very beginning. Puerto Rican spiritists founded hospitals, actively promoted literacy, fought against the death penalty and for better social conditions. While Spiritism started out as a 'philosophy' of the educated urban class, it soon developed into a popular religion. In the rural areas of the island, Spiritism mixed with other religious elements: The espiritismo popular, the popular Puerto Rican Spiritism, includes aspects of popular Catholicism of rural Spanish migrants, some

relics of the Taino religion as well as religious and medical beliefs and practices of the African slaves and their descendants. Recently Afro-Cuban Santería influences Puerto Rican Spiritism, even created a new form which Brandon calls santerismo (1993:108, see also Canizares 1993). The culture of the Jíbaros, the peasants in the mountains of Puerto Rico, supplies the base of espiritismo popular which emphasizes - unlike kardecism - the healing orientation of the belief system. The spirits are believed to exert direct influence on the lives of humans, and it is therefore very important to discover the reason (*causa*) of the illness. The specific form of the treatment depends on the leader who is often the founder of the group. Sometimes a meeting begins with Christian prayers or a bible lecture, sometimes with African drums. Unlike kardecism, the pantheon of espiritismo popular includes Catholic saints and African orishas which are often regarded as guardian angels. The leader usually has highly developed abilities as a medium (*mediumidades*) and conducts communal meetings as well as private consultations.

A fundamental aspect of Spiritism is the transfer of guilt from the human beings to the spirits: a person can suffer illness, lose his job, money or lover, and have drug problems and so on because of the spirits. The medium has to investigate the reason and advise the patient on what to do. Sometimes the victim has to apologize for former mistakes (perhaps done during a former incarnation), sometimes he has to ask for the assistance of good spirits, and sometimes the mediums can persuade the spirit to leave the human alone:

'You're a spirit and you have to realize it. Recognize yourself, brother, now that you have abandoned this earth and have to go back to where you can advance in your appropriate and corresponding place. You have to leave your yearning for the things of this world. Every minute more that you spend on earth prolongs your suffering and delay your advance. What you're doing is against your own good because you left the valley of tears long ago but you have been disturbed and bothered in those realms of God, searching for a material wrapping.' (Seda Bonilla 1969:495)

The therapeutic side of espiritismo popular still is the most attractive aspect of Puerto Rican Spiritism though Kardecism is practiced, too (for instance, Confederación de Espiristas de Puerto Rico), in particular among intellectuals. Francisco Matos Paoli, a popular Puerto Rican poet, has established, for instance, a flourishing group in his home town (Sánchez 1984:140).

Apart from these two ways - Kardecism and espiritismo popular - a new form of Spiritism, originally from South America, also gains converts, in particular the movement of Joaquín Trinicado (1866-1935). Though originally from Spain Trinicado migrated in 1903 to Argentina. In 1911 he founded the *Escuela Magnético Espiritual de la Comuna Universal* which has spread to various Latin American countries (Aizpúrua 1988:4).

In sum, Spiritism is not a homogenous system but a frame for several different concepts. It even cannot be called unanimously a religion, a philosophy or a science but a bricolage of ideas founded by Kardec. His teachings were used to develop various systems with different meaning and functions. We can distinguish in Puerto Rico today three different spiritistic ways: the philosophical system Kardecism, the religious-therapeutic system espiritismo popular and the religious institutions of spiritistic churches such as the Escuela de Consejo Moral. Outside Puerto Rico Spiritism became influences by the Cuban religion Santería and created a new version, called *espiritismo africano* or Santerismo.

Spiritism and the Creation of Puerto Rican Ethnicity in the Nineteenth Century

Most of the literature about Puerto Rican Spiritism focuses on the therapeutic function of Spiritism. Though in 1903 spiritists had declared Spiritism should become a new psychiatry (Bram 1972:374-375), scholars, and in particular medical anthropologists in the US, treated spiritists mainly as mentally ill people. Spiritism became known as Puerto Rican Syndrome (see e.g. the works by Garrison, Comas-Díaz, Koss, Bradford or Kuntz). Oscar Lewis characterized Puerto Ricans in *La Vida* even as an ethnic group with a high portion of mental illness - he was probably referring to Spiritism. I will not even start here to take this pejorative assumption seriously and argue against these stereotypes (see Rodríguez 1979 for a criticism of Lewis' portrait of Puerto Ricans). As I explained in a former article (2000), a therapeutic function can never explain the whole practice. In the following part I will concentrate on another but very different function: Spiritism as part of the Puerto Rican culture, a concept that influences as I will show later on even Puerto Ricans living off the island. But I have to go back to the nineteenth century, to the beginning of Spiritism on the island.

When I started my study about Spiritism in Puerto Rico in 1990, I was surprised by the ambivalent results of my first research. Though I discovered much material in the archives about the development of Spiritism (from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenties century), I had problems finding people to speak openly about their practice. I often got the answer 'Oh, yes, Spiritism.... I have heard about it. Even some professors [=educated people] are practicing it. But I not, I am Pentecostal.' (in Río Piedras in 1991). I got the impression as if Spiritism has been vanished from the island. On the other hand Morales-Dorta described Spiritism in 1976 as the integral element of Puerto Rican life and culture (1976:14). And I already knew some of the studies done by medical anthropologists about Puerto Ricans and Spiritism in the US. What had happened? It became obvious that the increase of protestant churches supported the denial of spiritistic practices. Puerto Ricans today are not as Morales-Dorta wrote mainly Catholic but a large part belongs to Protestant Churches. And some of them are even more hostile against Spiritism than the Catholic Church was. Speaking with a (white) foreigner about such a condemned belief has to be problematic. Everyone is reluctant to acknowledge a practice outsiders connect to Satanism or worse. Spiritism became a secret though still alive. Finally, I found entry in the hidden world of the spirits on the island and discovered the fascinating and lively variations of Puerto Rican Spiritism on the island. I spoke with members of the *Confederación de Espiritistas de Puerto Rico*, including its president, went to reunions of different centres, lived for a while in a house of a spiritista, and visited some botánicas, in particular in Río Piedras. After a while I looked back on the material I collected from the archives.

As I wrote in the short overview of the central ideas, Spiritism became important on the island in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was the time of the beginning of the independence movement against Spain based on socio-economical oppression. Duany characterizes the Spanish Caribbean under Spanish rule as being geographical isolated, economically underdeveloped and lacking competition, factors that explained why the development was so different from other Spanish colonies on the continent (Duany 1985:18). Nevertheless, between 1762 and 1868 the population on the island also developed some self-consciousness against the Spanish domination though different from the population on the continent. Puerto Rico experienced at this time an economical boom and an important

movement towards the world trade market. When Puerto Rico remained one of the last Spanish colonies in 1823 (together with Cuba, the Dominican Republic and the Philippines), it was economically dominated by coffee production (on haciendas) in combination with small agricultural units cultivating mixed crops, and not by sugar production as the other islands. Even the migration strategy of the Spanish government concerning Puerto Rico was different. In 1815 the Spanish government announced a *Cédula de Gracias* that allowed the immigration of Europeans different nationalities (and even different religions) in order to increase the economical development (Duany 1985:20). The ports were finally opened for trade, and the countryside inside the island was developed for agriculture. Though at the coast some sugar plantations were founded which led to an increase of African slaves, most of the new European immigrants came from poor areas, for instance, from the poor parts of Spain such as the Canary Islands. Since they lacked the capital to start large plantations with slavery, they established in the inner parts of the island small coffee and tobacco units. These *Jíbaros* became the backbone of the Creole population, small independent farmers with an attachment to the rural life on the island. As Duany writes 'social class - not skin colour or family origin - was the crucial cleavage in Puerto Rico's mixed society.' (1985:22) Duany characterizes the *Jíbaros* with a high commitment to landownership, a high percentage of family labour, commitment to Catholic customs, and lack of social mobility (1985:25). The term Catholic customs indicates already a separation between the official Catholic Church and the Catholic practices of the rural people which increased just few years later with the spread of Spiritism on the island.

As I already mentioned Spiritism arrived on the island in the middle of the nineteenth century, still during the lifetime of Kardec. Though prohibited by the Spanish government who was afraid that Spiritism could led to uprising, Spiritism soon became popular among various parts of the population. The intellectuals saw in Spiritism a philosophical system that could support the social and moral development of the society (Núñez Molina 1990:268). Spiritists became well-known for their fight for better social conditions for everyone, from hospitals to schools and more - and it attracted more and more practitioners. Soon Spiritism developed to a - what I call with reference to Giordano - social movement which leads to the creating of ethnicity. Giordano describes ethnicity as the search of a marginalised group for identity which is characterized by ethnic elements (1981:184). Ethnicity includes according to him the

possibility for suppressed groups to pronounce resistance against domination. In this sense ethnicity has all characteristics of a social movement which Giordano defines as the processual representation of a social group that shows a relatively long-term interaction of its members, a weak structure or organization, and a feeling of belonging among its members (1981:184-185). All these elements can be found in Puerto Rican Spiritism in the second part of the nineteenth century. Though it lacked a strong structure, the practitioners developed a strong sense of belonging and depended on interaction with all members in order to fulfil their goals. In this time Spiritism spread from the (urban) intellectuals to the rural population, the Jíbaros, in particular after the unsuccessful uprising in Lares in 1868. Unsatisfied by the social and political conditions people started to look for a new way to express their identity. During the nineteenth century the different economical and social conditions divided the population in two sections as Duany demonstrates (1985:16). While the poor, rural immigrants moved to the central island where they soon became part of the Creole population, the coast and its towns, in particular San Juan and San Germán remained in the hand of Spanish power. The towns were inhabited by Spanish servants, clerks, priests and militaries which lived isolated from the Creole population. New immigrants from Catalonia and Mallorca worked often as traders and business people. While the rural farmers, the producers of the goods, became more and more independent from Spain and even from the Spanish towns in Puerto Rico, the distribution of the goods and the trade - hence the money - remained in the hand of Spanish people. This difference created according to Duany a separation between traders and civil servants on the one side who were still oriented towards Spain and attracted Spanish immigrants instead of people from the island, and farmers, the producers of the agricultural goods, on the other side, who developed a sense of belonging to the island, a sense of Creole identity. In 1868 the conflict between the Creole farmers and the Spanish business people culminated in an open uprising, the Grito de Lares. Under the leadership of Ramón Emeterio Betances the rural population fought against the political oppression and proclaimed an independent state. Though the Spanish force soon stopped the rebellion, the Spanish government had to accept certain demands (for instance, the abolishment of slavery and the so-called libreta system which suppressed the sharecroppers). Though unsuccessful the Grito de Lares still remains an important cornerstone of Puertorriqueñidad and a way to distinguish them from Spanish people. Its

symbols are the Creole landholders representing the core values of the Puerto Rican character, embodied in the land (Duany 1985:32). Hence the pueblo, the place of birth, continues as major point of reference for the individual identity, not the nation. However, at the end of the nineteenth century the population again started to fight against the Spanish rule, and again in opposition to the Peninsulares, the part of the population still loyal to Spain. Spaniards became the ultimate Others (Carrión 1993:10), the group the Puerto Rican population wanted to separate themselves from. According to Serbin this interaction finally led to the development of a Puerto Rican identity and the beginning of nationalism (1990:183), a development that was stopped by the US-occupation after the Spanish-American war in 1898.

During this second event, the (short) independence movement against Spain at the end of the twentieth century, Spiritism played a significant role though in the literature mainly neglected. When after the Lares' uprising the ideas of Spiritism spread through the island, it developed a notion of a counter culture. Kardecism offered a frame for ideas in favour of social justice and morality. Núñez Molina explains that after the uprising Puerto Ricans suffered under the impression to be helpless under Spanish domination; hence the spiritistic acceptance of suffering as a way to endure for former misbehaviour was a way to make sense out of it (1987:102-103). According to Kardec's teaching life on earth was a test of our conduct as well as atonement for former sin. We should therefore accept pain without reluctance. Kardec of course never fought for national changes but individual ones based on the belief that every person has to develop his/her spirit in order to be reincarnated on a better level. The main aim of Kardecism is therefore individualistic. Nevertheless, by leading a moral life this teaching supports the improvement of social conditions for the population because every spiritist has to do good work.

Decades after the Grito de Lares spiritists became more and more involved in political issues. Though Spain officially never abolished the ban of Spiritism, the fight against spiritists became less aggressive. At the end of the nineteenth century it was even possible for a spiritist to become a political leading figure. Having the reputation of leading moral life spiritists acquired a good standing. And Spiritism became an acceptable alternative, in particular because the Catholic Church had always neglected the rural population. Fenton writes that in 1765 there have been only 660 priests on the island (1969:1/3) - for a

population of approximately 150.000 people. Because the Spanish government was afraid that the education of people from the island would support uprising, only few Puerto Ricans were ordained as priest under Spanish colonial rule. The Catholic Church focussed on the spiritual welfare of urban Spaniards and ignored the wellbeing of the rural (Creole) people. Consequently the popular Catholicism of the rural immigrants that became very popular in the rural parts of Puerto Rico was also ignored by the priests. Nevertheless, it was this kind of Christianity that became popular in most parts of the island. And when Spiritism spread throughout the island, it easily integrated aspects of Spanish popular Catholicism in its belief system. Spiritism filled the gap created by the Catholic Church by its ignorance of the rural religious practices. While the priests still supported the Spanish government and preached in favour of the central political power, most of the population practiced popular Catholicism with combination of Spiritism. But because the Catholic Church officially condemned Spiritism as non-Christian people did not confess their practice. After the US-army invaded Puerto Rico in 1898, most of the Spanish priests fled the island with the result that Pater Sherman, the US-army chaplain, announced: 'Religion is dead in the island. Whether it can be revived as a living influence is highly problematic.' (quoted by Fenton 1969:1/4) He totally ignored the popular practice even though one of the most important members of the executive council created in 1900 by President William McKinley was Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón (1855-1913), publisher, liberal leader and very active spiritist. He vehemently fought for the independence of Puerto Rico and even founded a political party. He integrated spiritistic ideas into the national political arena (Koss 1972:68-69, 1977:36-37 and Díaz Soler 1960:601ff). When the ban of Spiritism was officially lifted by the U.S. Government, it reached its peak in popularity. In 1903 Matienzo Cintrón founded the Federación de los Espiritistas de Puerto Rico, the first officially accepted association of this kind in Puerto Rico. However, not all centres joined the association because of disagreement over the character of Spiritism, whether it should be treated as religion, philosophy or what ever (Hess 1991:207). Nevertheless Matienzo Cintrón symbolizes an important change. After being banned as non-Christian and prohibited for decades, Spiritism became a symbol of Puertorriqueñidad and hence a marker of the differences between Peninsulares and Puertorriqueños. During this short time period Spiritism has shown for the first time its relevance for the creation of identity.

At the end, this change did not last very long. Soon after the death of Matienzo Cintrón in 1913, arguments over the future development and reforms of 'cleansing' the Spiritism from every 'popular' element, led to a constant decline in political influence. Another reason that led to the decline was connected to the religious freedom after the US-occupation because it allowed aggressive missionary activities. In distinction to the Catholic Church during the colonial time the protestant missionaries focussed in particular on the rural parts of the island where they fought against all kinds of popular beliefs, and most vehemently against the belief in spirits. Hence, their fight against the belief in spirits was more successful than the fight of the Catholic Church. After a while the Catholic Church returned to the island and increased their campaign against Spiritism. Still in 1948 Catholics were not allowed to participate in any spiritistic reunions, spiritists were even denied to be called Catholic (see e.g. Martínez Barrena). Nevertheless, the practice of popular Spiritism survived in spite of the pressure of the various Christian churches. Hess calculates that in 1959 around 100.000 spiritists were member of approximately 15.000 centres, most of them practicing a healing-oriented popular Spiritism, the *espiritismo popular* (1991:207) but the number was probably much higher. A research about popular belief practices conducted between 1949 and 1951 came to the result that in every village and town it was possible to buy spiritistic goods (Garrido 1952:37). While the associations such as the *Federación de los Espiritistas de Puerto Rico* lost members and influence, the popular belief in spirits continued to flourish. When in 1976 the *Federación de los Espiritistas de Puerto Rico* failed in organizing the *Congreso Espirita Panamericano*, some spiritists founded a new organization, the *Confederación de los Espiritistas de Puerto Rico*. The aim of this organization is mainly Pan-American networking through, for instance, international congresses. The members of the federation on the other side started a revival of their organization (for instance, by opening a Casa de Alma and publishing a small bulletin). Both organizations work hand in hand in national issues though the confederation dominates international events. Nevertheless, the most important way still is the *espiritismo popular* despite the strong effort of the Protestant churches to condemn Spiritism. In particular among Puerto Ricans off the island it has increased in popularity (Singer and García 1989:160). Nevertheless, it is impossible even to estimate the number of people practicing Spiritism. Most centres do not announce their practice, and most practitioners do not openly speak about their belief and practice.

The *Nuyoricans*

At this point I will leave the island and follow Puerto Ricans to New York. As mentioned above one should avoid regarding them as a homogenous entity as, for instance, Elschenbroisch does. She makes the mistake to treat Puerto Ricans on and off the island as identical; she even speaks about one Puerto Rico community of which 40% live on the island and 60% abroad (1986:45). In distinction to this approach I will follow Nelson and Tienda who use the term *Nuyorican* as a representation of the separation from Puerto Rico as well as the ongoing ties (1985:58).

From the very beginning of the migration period, New York has harboured the largest Puerto Rican community on the mainland. The presence of the Puerto Ricans in New York began in the nineteenth century. However, the first significant increase began after the US-occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898. The radical social, political and economic change after the occupation led to the immigration of more and more Puerto Ricans to the U.S. mainland, in particular to the northern cities, to New York City and Chicago after Puerto Ricans received U.S. citizenship in 1917. The citizenship facilitated the movement between Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland. In 1920, nearly every state of the U.S.A. reported the presence of Puerto Ricans in their cities (Sánchez Korrol 1994:3). The number again increased after the World War II. New York was (and still is) the non-official capital of Puerto Ricans, economical more important than the capital of the island, San Juan de Puerto Rico. Today, half of the nearly 1.7 millions of Latinos living in New York City are Puerto Ricans (Haslip-Viera 1996:14-15). Due to the fact that they can return to the island as often as they wish, the situation of Puerto Ricans in the United States is very unique. However, though there is still an ongoing migration from the island to New York, the number of Puerto Ricans born in New York has increased significantly in the last decades.

From an outside perspective the book *La Vida* by Oscar Lewis represents some of the stereotypes people have towards *Nuyoricans*: They speak only Spanish, they live in a ghetto, they do not want to intermingle with other migrant groups, and they do not like the place they live. The reality, however, is totally different. Puerto Ricans represent the largest ethnic minority in New York and also a group that can use its right to vote (unlike other immigrants) in order to fight for political issues. Step by step *Nuyoricans* have become an economic power and occupy more and more white-collar-jobs though the number of households below

the poverty line is still increasing (see Sánchez Korrol 1994:211-236). Nevertheless, identity is still a problematic issue as Juan Flores illustrates. Flores describes and analyzes the development of *Nuyorican* cultural consciousness by focusing on four moments, which do not necessarily follow in chronological order, but demonstrate a possible evolution (Flores 1984:5-12).

Flores calls the first stage 'here-and-now': On arrival, Puerto Ricans are confronted with the hostility of their environment in everyday reality, feeling rejected and abandoned. As a reaction they begin to romanticize Puerto Rico (in the second stage). In this state of 'enchantment' - according to Flores - they rediscover the African and indigenous foundations of Puerto Rican culture (my *isla* heritage) as symbols of the only free, non-colonial phases in the island's history. This leads to an increased awareness of the political oppression in the United States. By emphasizing their Puerto Rican background, they seem to get 'from the ghetto to the garden'.

The third moment can be described as 're-entry': the migrants recognize the Puerto Rico within New York City. The newly-created cultural consciousness, in connection with bilingualism, leads to the proud identification with Afro-Caribbean cultural traditions. In contrast to the construed images of the island, they develop a sense of nationality in regard to the island. In the final stage, a 'branching-out' takes place. Puerto Ricans begin to interact with selected groups within American society, first with those in closest proximity (African Americans, or other Caribbean and Latin American migrants such as Cubans), then with others sharing a similar social disadvantage, sometimes connected with a kind of shared working-class reality.

Flores's analysis must not be mistaken as a reconstruction of the 'melting-pot' concept, since the branching-out moment signifies only co-operation and not assimilation as implied in the formal 'melting-pot' concept. Flores focuses on the cultural consciousness of the *Nuyoricans* without investigating the formation of an ethnic group (ethnicity) or the loss of ethnic boundaries (assimilation). While cultural identity describes the general attitude of an ethnic community, ethnicity means the process of constructing ethnic boundaries (according to the 'new ethnicity' paradigm based on Barth). The phase in which the consciousness of cultural difference begins to create strong definitions of 'you' and 'I', or 'my group' and 'the other group' - Flores' third moment - is floating and cannot be pinned down exactly. To be Puerto

Rican (to be born as a child of Puerto Ricans) does not imply to confess everywhere that one is Puerto Rican and feels like one. One can just as well say that one is Latino/a, African American or West Indian. In this situation religious beliefs held in common can create a community where the members are proud to be special, to be Puerto Rican. Here is where Spiritism became important. Díaz-Stevens declares that 'religion ...is deeply woven into Puerto Rican culture. Tested by the crises of modern society in the most complex contemporary metropolitan area as well as by harsh deprivations imposed by a far-from-voluntary migration, the Puerto Rican migrants' faith in themselves and in their basic religious beliefs have survived with remarkable vitality. As part of their legacy, the Puerto Rican people in migration offer a new spirituality and religious mode.' (1996:148) Though Díaz-Stevens means Catholicism when she mentions religion, the belief in spirits is also a central part of this spirituality.

This aspect leads to a new perspective in the investigation of the connection between religion and identity. During the 1950s when scholars began to notice religion in the context of migration, attachment to a religion was usually viewed as a social phenomenon. Especially migrants of the third generation were considered to identify themselves with the religion of their country of origin in order to keep up the relationship with their native place and to develop new ties to their new home. Will Herberg, for instance, stated that a true integration into the *American Way of Life* could only be accomplished with the help of religion (1956:50-51). One generation later, the *ethnic revival* became a kind of 'religious substitute' (Elschenbroich 1986:97). In this period, Hans Mol considered religion as 'sacralization of identity': in his opinion religion stabilizes or modifies the difference it cannot ignore (1976:1-3).

These studies have investigated the identity of already existing ethnic groups and neglected the process of identity formation. Yet, as Elschenbroich states 'ethnic identity implies Americanization, ethnic identification is something American' (1986:125-126).

Ethnic groups do not originate from the migration of whole tribal groups but according to Barth from the complex relationship between the integration of individuals (based on a selection of cultural factors) and the alienation toward other groups. Spiritism constitutes one element among others in the creation of a common base for identification as well as of establishing borders toward other groups. Thus, Puerto Ricans can be compared to Italians in

Australia, as described by Lewins (1978:22-27). Like in Puerto Rico, identity in Italy was based on the town or the region of origin and not on the nation. Under pressure from the social environment, the migrants had to develop new ways to define themselves. In this process the Catholic Church helped Italian in representing their demands. Consequently, the institution supported Italians to create a new ethnic organisation for Italian Australians. Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, had to revitalize other religious traditions, alien to their surrounding but familiar in a Latin American context. As Harwood writes, 'because of the widespread belief in spirits among Puerto Ricans, furthermore, Spiritism [...] has somewhat the same standing as 'soul' among Blacks as a basis for ethnic identity.' (1977:183) Hence, during Flores' third moment, the re-entry, Puerto Ricans revitalize their popular beliefs system in order to define what it means to be Puerto Rican outside the island.

Puerto Rican Spiritism in New York City

In the United States different popular religions (such as Mexican *curanderismo*, Cuban *Santería*, or Haitian *Vodou*) have become a way for Latin American migrants to distinguish themselves from their Anglo-American environment; for Puerto Ricans it is *espiritismo popular*. Even Dan Wakefield cites a short passage from a conversation between a business man and a *Nuyorican* to illustrate the importance and uniqueness of the belief in spirits in New York (1959:59). As explained above, the belief in spirits is common among Puerto Ricans, but often denied in front of outsiders. This attitude is also in common among Puerto Ricans in New York City though Spiritism is indeed practiced within Puerto Rican neighbourhoods. In almost every street in New York City with more than one Puerto Rican family one can see *botánicas*, small stores of religious paraphernalia and literature. Inside such a *botánica* one can find statues and pictures of Catholic saints and other religious images, different types of candles (in different smell and colour), herbs for various functions (tea, bath, smell etc.), cards (e.g. Tarot), books about Spiritism and other belief systems (e.g. *Santería*, *Vodou*), and more. Most *botánicas* do not offer only the paraphernalia for one belief system but many. However, one cannot only buy the goods; most *botánicas* also offer consultation. Often a healer works inside the *botánica* that can even be connected with a Spiritistic centre. This observation led Lewis to the statement that Spiritism has become commercialized in New York (1968:197): 'Here the spirit doesn't come if you don't put your

money on the table ahead of time. Spiritualism [=Lewis' wrong term for popular Spiritism] here is a business and a very lucrative one at that. In Puerto Rico it is a religion.' However, my observation is that spiritistic healers charge members of their centres only for the ingredients though consultations by an outsider cost money. Much more expensive are to my knowledge consultations by a Santería priest.

Morales Dorta describes the founding of a new centre in New York based on the spiritual abilities of a (male) medium who does not work inside a *botánica*:

'As the word of his *facultades*, faculties, is spread around the neighborhood, the number of his converts begins to increase. Most always, among those coming for *consultas*, or consultations, the medium finds that they are in the process of *desarrollando facultades*, developing spiritual faculties. After a while, the medium's apartment is too small to accommodate all those who come for 'spiritual help'. So, the time has come for the medium to suggest to those who are 'developing spiritual faculties' that a formal *centro* must be established. They form a board, with the medium as president, and secure legal services for a certificate of incorporation. As soon as they are chartered by the state of New York, they begin their business as any other religious group.' (1976:33)

Unlike *botánicas* these spiritistic groups which are the most common groups, normally do not have a sign outside (and therefore do not charge). Their members belong usually to the same neighbourhood and meet two or three times a week (often twice during the week in the evening and once on Sunday). The central aspects are the commitment to the group and the development of one's strength. Núñez Molina writes about Spiritism on the island that within it lies the 'sources of empowerment for the community (1990:274). And as the following case study by Franklyn Sánchez (1984:149) illustrates, this statement can be transferred to Spiritism in New York. A 25-year-old Puerto Rican female born in New York City could not hold any job very long because she was afraid to travel alone in the subway or bus. Her parents practiced Spiritism, but she stopped attending sessions when she moved to an apartment of her own. After a very heavy attack of fear she agreed to a divination. She went to a healer asking to read her destiny in cards. And she was told that an undeveloped spirit 'wanted to block her from bettering herself'. The healer recommended different treatments, included herbal baths, prayers, and candles dedicated to her guardian spirit. Doing as she

was told the woman 'gained confidence in her own ability to control the degree to which the spirits could influence her' as Sánchez writes. While he analyses the case in a psychoanalytical manner, a spiritist would say that the woman should develop her faculties to become a medium, not only in order to help herself but also in order to help other people. One has to commit one's own ability in favour of other people; one has to work for them because these faculties are God's gifts. This non-commercial way of Spiritism is at the heart of every spiritistic centre. As Harwood comments: 'For many Puerto Ricans living in the midst of a large, alien city like New York, the *centro* becomes an important primary group outside the family and assumes many of the functions voluntary organizations perform for urban migrants the world over.' (1977:179) In the absence of a traditional sphere of social interaction (such as, for example, the system of *compadrazgo*), Spiritism offers Puerto Ricans in New York City according to Harwood a new 'set of standards for ordering social relationships'.

Thus, Spiritism represents much more than a cultural-bounded therapy as several medical studies have indicated. To define Spiritism as a 'healing-cult' (Garrison), as a 'psychiatry of the poor' (Rogler/Hollingshead) or as 'Puerto Rican group therapy' (Delgado) in order to adjust the religion to modernity in a Western sense, means to minimize a sophisticated system of beliefs and practices. Spiritism has been carried from the island to New York City as an integral part of Puerторriqueñidad. Though Kardec's teaching is popular in various parts of Latin America and has been developed, for instance, in Brazil to a largely important movement, only among Puerto Ricans has the common belief become powerful enough to define boundaries toward other groups. The reason is connected to the different importance Spiritism have had during Puerto Ricans history.

Spiritism in Brazil has probably more practitioner as in Puerto Rico. Some scholars write that the belief in the existence of spiritual beings is common to all Brazilians. However, this belief has various different expressions in Brazil, not all are connected to Spiritism; some are based on African traditions, some on Christian. Even Brazilian Pentecostalism does not deny the existence of spiritual beings but categorizes them as coming from the devil and, hence, tries to exorcise them. Nevertheless, the belief does not create boundaries between one and the Other. It lacks the identification as social movement and, hence, has not (yet) created identity. Spiritism is practiced today in Brazil in various variations such as Kardecism,

Umbanda, and also with strong religious orientation, hence quite similar to the situation in Puerto Rico. Umbanda that has the most practitioners of these variations can be compared with Puerto Rican Spiritism; but while the latter remains predominately spiritistic the first one incorporates many elements from Candomblé, the extensively practiced Afro-Brazilian religion. Hence, one cannot call Umbanda a spiritistic belief system beside its large spiritistic influences. And even if one compares the relevance of Umbanda concerning the creation of identity with the one of Spiritism in Puerto Rico, one notes important differences. Umbanda is indeed the most important popular religion in Brazil - and is sometimes called the national religion in opposition to the imported ones as Christianity (Ortiz 1991:16-17). However, it never influences the self-identification of being Brazilian. One reason is that the practice of Umbanda is often limited (in the literature) towards poor Brazilians though it was also described for the middle class. Another reason is that Umbanda is a predominantly urban practice and had never inspired rural life.

What makes Puerto Rican Spiritism unique is therefore its significance as a social movement in the nineteenth century, its relevance during the independence movement at the end of the nineteenth century, the easy way Spiritism was integrated in popular Catholicism and its integration in Puerto Rican culture. Brazil on the other hand has always been much more divers. Though Spiritism remains important in Brazil, it never influenced its large population as it did on the small island of Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, not all Puerto Ricans share this belief, and not all practice Spiritism though nearly all Puerto Ricans will know someone who does.

Another important issue is that Spiritism - even in Puerto Rico - does not count as a religion. Though I treat it as a popular religious belief system, nearly all practitioners will reject the notion that Spiritism is their religion. As the *vodouisants* (=people initiated in Haitian Vodou) say: 'We are Christians [but] we serve the loas', this is also true in Puerto Rico. Spiritism is a daily practice for spiritists, not something one does (only) on Sundays. Hence, spiritists can have various (official) religions; they can be Catholic or belong to the various Protestant denominations or even to a Pentecostal Church - and practice Spiritism. The official data about the religious commitment of Puerto Ricans in New York City tells us therefore little about their popular religious belief. Nevertheless some developments are important for the understanding of the religious practice. Levitt, for instance, writes about Latinos in the US in

general that record numbers of Latinos are nowadays rejecting Catholicism in favour of Protestant faiths; though still 65% of Puerto Ricans in the US define themselves as Catholic, already 22% are Protestant (2002:151, 153). In New York City I got the impression that the Catholic Church finally reacted to this development and started to make concessions to the large presence of Latinos. Though the Spanish service is often still limited to the basement, there is now a Spanish service in all areas with predominately Spanish speaking populations. After decades of ignorance the Catholic Church in New York learnt to accept the great amount of Latinos living in their city without any clerical support. In the 1970s Fitzpatrick wrote, for instance, that 'Hispanics still cling to the basic beliefs of the Catholic Church, but do not practice as Americans do. Regular attendance at mass and sacraments is not the sign of a 'good catholic' as it is among Americans. Folk practices are still strong and important even among youth.' (1987:133) Since then the Catholic Church has founded a *Hispanic Ministry Office* which offers social services in Spanish as well as organizes Spanish mass. More important and effective, however, is the organization of religious festivals, processions in honor of national or local saints (see e.g. Díaz-Stevens' Puerto Rican case-study, 1993). John Brogan, the director of the *Hispanic Ministry Office* during my research time in New York City, told me that they now 'have various national festivals [...] that offer people the opportunity to be themselves. And for themselves, it is rather important to share with others what they are. [...] Ecuadorians [for example] do not know anything about Dominicans.' (in 1998) The Virgen de Guadalupe, the national patron of Mexico, even becomes a common figure of identification and devotion for Latinos in the US. Latinos represent today the majority of Catholics in the US but only the minority of leaders (Levitt 2002:155). As Díaz-Stevens writes 'Centuries of neglect and isolation from ecclesiastical and other urban institutions in the homelands have taught Puerto Ricans and other Latinos that the answer to their needs is not to be found at the institutional level. (...) they have learned to be self-reliant, to look within themselves-the individual person, the family, the local community-for inner strength and the solution of their problems.' (1996:174) One consequence is, for instance, an increase of lay leadership, including women, as Díaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo write (1998:158-159). Both authors even note a Latino religious resurgence whose function they describe with following words: 'the Latino resurgence produced an idealized picture of Latino culture to help define Latinos as somehow different from the Euro-American believers, justify a plan of

action, and motivate the members for collective action' (1998:129). In distinction to former developments the Latino resurgence succeeded after 1967 in creating a sense of community among Latino Catholics despite all national differences (1998:149). In their own words: 'Rather, we insist that coupled to a generational mentalité, Latino religion consists of specific organizations, most of which have been franchised by the larger church to service Latino members. Found within almost every U.S. denominational structure, these organizations are also connected to each other in advocating the three goals [...]: maintenance of Latino cultural identity, critique of existing policy, and accountability to the Latino people' (1998:183). Despite this quite positive interpretation of Latino Catholicism we should not ignore the increase of Protestantism among Latinos as well as the large switch to the Pentecostal movement. As Díaz-Stevens confirms Pentecostalism is indeed the fastest-growing religion among all Spanish-speaking (1996:162). At the moment, the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, a Brazilian neo-Pentecostal church who spreads since two decades through Latin America and now the world, is increasingly popular among Latinos in New York City. During the time of my research they already owned three buildings in different boroughs offering daily services in Spanish, sometimes three times a day, and broadcasting on Sundays in the Spanish Cable TV channel. In Brooklyn they bought an old theatre building, in Queens they built a new and quite impressive one, and every time I went to a service it was full with people. I suspect that this Pentecostal movement will increase significantly among Latinos in the next years. With their very emotional offer to help in problematic situations they attract every week new believers.

Conclusion

Puerto Rican religious experience includes according to Díaz-Stevens apart from Catholicism (on which she focuses) various other belief systems such as African beliefs, remnants of the religion of the indigenous Tainos, Spiritism, Protestantism, Pentecostalism as well as Cuban Santería (1996:148). However, we always have to acknowledge that popular religious practices constitute, as also Levitt insists, 'the core of Latino religious life and (...) are often engaged in outside the formal church' (2002:153). The following statement of Don Justo, leader of a Spiritistic group in New York, shall illustrate once more how Spiritism forms an

integral part of the social reality of the believers. Addressing José Figueroa he said (1981:206):

'You doubts on the spiritual world. Yes, I know that you think that spiritism is an invention of peoples' minds. And I also know that sometimes you are unable to explain many things that you see. You even believe that what I have done is not going to affect the landlord. After all, the landlord might be a non-believer. To you spiritism works only if the person is a believer. Well, to us, the believers, spiritism is real. Everyone in the building knows what I have done tonight. Yes, as a matter of fact they asked me to do it. They all believe in what I have done. Even Doña Lola and Manuel are strong believers. You see, to us, the landlord is going to be affected by the spell because the spirits of light are on our side. We are building a unity which is hard for a non-believer to understand.'

In Figueroa's case-study the members of the centre live in a building neglected by its owner. During and after several meetings they discuss their problems, for instance the lack of heating, caused by the landlord who ignored his traditional duty. Finally they decided to clean the building spiritually and cast a spell on the owner 'to throw his spiritual faculties or guardian spirits off balance'. Afterwards they organize a rally against the now 'unprotected, off-balanced landlord' (1981:243). Hence, the common belief has prepared the ground for a common activity, namely, the creation of a tenants' association; as such, they then became aware of their 'interests as an ethnic group' and as a class, as Figueroa states (1981:245). Here, we can see once again that Spiritism has indeed notions of a social movement that can create identity. Though ill organized the group offered a common level of identification that empowered its members to fight for justice. And at the end the landlord agreed to their demands.

Spiritism is more than just a belief system. A community of Spiritists can create the base of identity, even construes a border between them and the Others, hence ethnicity though this development is of course not always successful. Figueroa, who did not believe in Spiritism, doubted the outcome, hence the power of Spiritism. He learnt to accept the power of common force which he connected in a Marxist approach to class-struggle. Hence, he demonstrates that despite acknowledging the outcome he was indeed the outsider in this fight, the Other across the borderline. His denial stresses an important aspect: the processual

notion of identity. Identity is nothing fixed or static; it changes in every situation according to the goals someone wants to win. Religion can serve as cornerstone in this process.

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