Living with Spirits: Spirituality and Health in São Paulo, Brazil

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Introduction

"On Borinquén the spirits were everywhere. They rose from the mist of rivers, blew in from the sea on the juracán winds. They sang in the voices of the coquís, the tiny tropical frogs in the hill. They hid in the dreams of the haunted suburbanites in the cities. And in the evenings they walked the ancient streets of Old San Juan so visible that one could almost see the spirits in the moody air where El Morro brooded by the harbor. …. In death, the dead did not die." (Steiner 1975: 479-480) These words of the Puerto Rican novelist Stan Steiner are a good introduction into the world of the spirits of the dead. The belief in the existence of this world and the possibility to communicate with the spirits is widespread. In Latin America it is integral part of *espiritismo*, a belief system that embraces a range of beliefs and practices and has developed in Puerto Rico, Brazil, and other Latin American countries a strong link to healing.

I came across *espiritismo* for the first time in Puerto Rico in 1990. At the start of my PhD research, I found numerous publications on Puerto Rican *espiritismo* in the library of the Universidad Nacional de Puerto Rico from the beginning of the twentieth century. They indicated vibrant spiritist communities across the island around that time. More recent articles confirmed the ongoing lively existence of spiritist practices (e.g., Brignoni, 1970: 11-G). But I had problems finding people to speak about spiritism as over time hostilities toward spiritism had pushed them into hiding (Schmidt 1995, 2009). Only with the support of a colleague whose aunt was the president of a small spiritist center I managed to enter the close

community of Puerto Rican spiritists. Since then, however, *espiritismo* stepped out of the shadows, encouraged to some degree by a growing number of academic studies. 20 years later, when I began my research on mediumship in Brazil, I was surprised to see the vast number of Kardecist centers in Brazil openly advertising their meetings and Spiritist hospitals offering healing services across the country. Nevertheless, despite this widespread presence, there is still a reluctance to acknowledge the significance of *espiritismo* in supporting individual and collective wellness. I also noticed that people practicing it, prefer the term *espiritualidade* which has a wider understanding as *espiritismo.* While *espiritismo* is used for the teachings of Allan Kardec and highlight the communication with spirits, *espiritualidade* has a spiritual element which includes in addition to spiritist teachings elements from Christianity and African-derived religions. In this chapter I use *espiritismo* in reference to Kardec's teaching and *espiritualidade* to indicate the wider spiritual framework.

The chapter is divided in three parts. The first part introduces *espiritismo* and some of the key literature on *espiritismo* and healing. The second part presents information from an interview and related conversations about the importance of *espiritualidade* for health and wellbeing in Brazil. The interviewee spoke about his struggle with health and other personal problems and his journey toward a sense of wellbeing. I use his case to stress the complexity of *espiritualidade* and healing on an individual level. I then move on to the transfer of positive energy (*passe*) at which I participated with him and reflect on my own (bodily) experience. Shifting the focus onto the researcher, the third section leads to a wider discussion about reality, other worlds, and the importance of our bodily experience for the understanding of a different ontology.

Introducing *Espiritismo* and Healing

The term Spiritism (*espiritismo*) covers a range of different beliefs and practices, in particular when seen in combination with Spiritualism. Both are umbrella terms that have developed distinct traditions. The common aspect is a belief in the spirit world and a possibility of communicating with spirits. The practices that are the focus of this chapter are based on the ideas of Allan Kardec (1804-1869). Born as Leon Hypolite Denizarth Rivail in Lyon, France, his teachings codified the communication with spirits via mediums in a novel way. His books published in French in the middle of the nineteenth century (e.g., Kardec 1974, 2010, 2017) became popular in Latin America where they instigated the development of local beliefs systems such as Puerto Rican and Brazilian *espiritismo* (e.g., Bacon 1910, Delanne 1909). These systems combined Kardec's teachings with aspects of popular Catholicism and African and Amerindian religious ideas.

Though Kardec was not the only spiritistic figure, he is still one of the most well-known. His books translated into Spanish and Portuguese can be found in most, if not all, spiritist centers across Latin America. Most centers follow similar patterns of weekly classes in which potential mediums learn to develop their skills and public sessions for the delivery of communications from the world of the spirits. However, different from Kardec's original teaching, Latin American Spiritism gained a practical orientation and became known for their healing offers (Hajosy Benedetti 1991, Koss-Chioino 1996), though without official recognition.

Inspired by Kardec's teaching, Latin American spiritists had initiated social projects early on, such as promotion of literacy, campaigning against the death penalty, and fighting for better social conditions (Rodríguez Escudero 1978). These projects were regarded as an attack against the government and met with prosecution. Spiritist practices were forbidden across Latin America in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and shunned as illegal medical practices. The Catholic Church even excommunicated spiritists, declining to marry or bury them (Hess 1991). Nevertheless, Spiritism flourished across Latin America and

developed various local healing-oriented systems (e.g., Harwood 1977, Garrison 1977a, see also Schmidt 1995, 2009).

While Kardec's teaching was centered on the improvement of one's future existence by doing good (as human as well as spirit), the new systems focused on improving living conditions and helping people here and now. This revised orientation led to the development of spiritist hospitals in the middle of the twentieth century that look from the outside like any other hospital, but offer spiritist treatments, often combined with other alternative therapies such as Yoga and meditation (e.g., Araújo Aureliano 2011). In these hospitals and in other spiritist centers, healers treat patients while channeling spirits of deceased medical doctors (e.g., Greenfield 1987, 2008; Kurz 2017). Other treatments are transfer of positive energy (*passe*) from the healer or from good spirits (or a combination of both) to the patients (Carneiro et al. 2017: 74); and disobsession (*desobsessão*), in which the healer persuades a spirit who is identified as causing a problem to leave the patient. In both cases, the patients will be cleansed from negative influences caused by spiritual entities perceived as interfering. Spiritist centers also offer wider support via the communication with spirits. An article in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* stated in 1990 that 36-60% of Puerto Ricans 'have visited a spiritist at some time in their lives' (Hohmann et al., 1990: 328). The psychologist Mario A. Núñez Molina (2001) even describes Puerto Rican *espiritismo* as an Indigenous healing system which people use as an alternative to the official health system. In Brazil, one can find several health professionals that are practicing Spiritism and are involved in the *Associação Médico-Espírita* (the Medical-Spiritist Association).

One key feature of spiritist healing is the diagnosis of the roots of the problem. Spiritists believe that spirits can influence the destiny of humans, though sometimes involuntarily. To find the correct treatment, one must discover why the spirits interfere with the human world. However, healing involves a lifelong commitment. Patients who visit a

spiritist center with a problem are often instructed to change their lifestyle as a way to cope with their problems whether they are physical, psychological, or social.

Already in 1903, Puerto Rican spiritists campaigned for the acceptance of Spiritism as a new psychiatry however unsuccessfully (Bram 1972:374-375). In 1909, the Medical Society of Rio de Janeiro organized a conference about the dangers of Spiritism (Moreira-Almeida/Silva de Almeida/Lotufo Neto 2005: 9). Decades later, Puerto Rican Spiritism became the focus of medical anthropological studies that studied mainly female Puerto Rican spiritists in New York City who were described as mentally unstable. Spiritism became known as "Puerto Rican syndrome" and spiritists diagnosed with "paranoid schizophrenia" (e.g., Garrison 1972, 1977b, Comas-Díaz 1981, Koss 1970, 1972, 1977, Harwood 1977, Bradford 1978, Kuntz 1985, see also Schmidt 2009 for a critical discussion). These studies highlighted the double prejudice that lingered in the literature about Spiritism (see Schmidt 2000), in that gender appeared to play a curious role in the high rate of diagnoses. Spiritist surgery in Latin America also attracted interest among scholars (e.g., Greenfield 1987, Pollak-Eltz 1982). However, their focus remained on a biological approach to healing (e.g., Greenfield 2009; see also Kurz 2018).

Recently, however, there is a change among Western scholars influenced in part by Edith Turner (e.g., Turner 1993), Stanley Krippner (e.g., Krippner 2008) and others in consciousness studies (e.g., Emmons 2014, Young/Goulet 1994). Krippner's work was influential due to his standing in psychology and his interest in Spiritism that led to several publications – often in collaboration with local researchers – on Spiritism in Brazil (e.g., Krippner 2008), the Philippines (e.g., Krippner/Taubold 2004) and the diaspora in the US. From a medical point of view, Alexander Moreira-Almeida's research on Spiritism in Brazil is equally crucial (e.g., Moreira-Almeida/Lotufo Neto 2005, 2017). Under his leadership, the section on Spirituality, Religion and Psychiatry of the World Psychiatry Association published a Position Statement on Spirituality and Religion in Psychiatry that gives guidance

to health professionals on how to deal with phenomena they cannot understand without disrespecting the belief or practices of their patients (Moreira-Almeida et al. 2016). Following these changes, new anthropological studies on spiritual healing (e.g., Pierini 2020, Rocha 2017, Seligman 2014) present powerful insights into the bodily experiences and their impact on health.

Research on *espiritualidade* and *bem estar* in Brazil: Mateo's Life Story

The following case study is part of an ongoing research about spirituality and wellbeing in Brazil. My previous study on spirit possession and trance (Schmidt 2016) introduced me to the diversity and availability of vernacular forms of spirituality and spiritual healing in Brazil (e.g., see Greenfield 2008, King 2014, Gomberg 2011, Rabelo 1993, Toniol 2018). The focus of these studies is often on healing, ignoring to some degree the perspective of the patients. I began my research in 2016 with two online surveys asking the participants for information about the significance of spirituality for their own sense of wellbeing. While the first survey went out to people working in health care, the second one was sent people identifying as spiritual or religious (Schmidt 2020). In 2018 I had the chance to return to Brazil and to meet some of the participants of the surveys who had expressed interest in further participation. In this chapter, I reflect on my conversations with one of them, Mateo (not his real name) who described how the involvement with two spiritual centers helped him to cope with his depression, HIV, and other medical conditions developed over time. During my time in São Paulo, I was able to visit both centers and conducted further interviews with other members, including the leaders and some of the healers. I participated in healing ceremonies in each of them and had informal conversations with a range of other participants, some regular members of the communities but also patients that came for the healing ceremony alone.

Mateo was at the time of the interview 64 years old, divorced and employed as administrator in a publishing company. Mateo used the term *espiritualidade* (usually translated as spirituality) as self-identification and not *espiritismo* though one of spiritual centers he attended could be categorized as spiritist while the other is close to African derived spirituality. One of the reasons for his self-identification can be the secular orientation of spiritism. Most spiritists do not regard spiritism as religious or even spiritual unless they are member of a Spiritist Church because they regard spiritism as a communication technique (Schmidt 2016: 118-127). This secular orientation is strong among people working in spiritist hospitals in Brazil. When asked to self-identify their belief for instance in the national census, they would usually identify themselves as Christians though recently Brazilians shifted to *espiritualidade* as umbrella for all kinds of beliefs and practices (Schmidt 2014). For Mateo, the term *espiritualidade* captures a bricolage of ideas and practices, including aspects of Christianity located outside the religious (i.e., institutional) sphere. The term *espiritualidade* expresses a fluidity of practices and the reluctance to be restricted in any way.

Mateo grew up as Catholic but stepped away from the church as adult. He did not like the church and stayed for years "without religion, with nothing." He had his own beliefs. But, as he explained, at some moments in life, one needs something else. And at such a moment he began to study different spiritual practices and tried various therapies. In the 2016 survey Mateo wrote that *espiritualidade* helped him in his "understanding of life, the reasons of the things that are around us and happen during our life (lives)." When asked to describe the significance of *espiritualidade* for his wellbeing, he wrote "definitely yes. To understand a little bit more about our former lives makes it easier to accept problems, sufferings but also good things such as successes and happiness, too." He defined wellbeing as "happiness is fundamental to it, but it is not the only factor. Health also counts a lot". When asked how open he discusses his beliefs with health care professionals, he wrote that he mentioned it only if they signaled openness. But that "many do not accept it and mock". Nevertheless, for

him *espiritualidade* has great impact on health, in particular, as he clarified, when dealing with depression.

After an email exchange, we met in person in 2018 in São Paulo. He also invited me to visit the spiritual center with him. Our conversations circulated around different moments of crisis, which impacted on his life and led him toward *espiritualidade*. At first, he spoke about his two divorces which led to an experience of loss and great suffering. He began to become involved in *espiritualidade* "because I needed something else." The second divorce hit him even more than the first one and he described how he suffered for 6-7 years, until he saw the light and turned again toward *espiritualidade.* This time his journey took him to the spiritual center which he still attends. He described it as the place "that completely filled me, it opened the doors to my soul". He discovered a new dimension that he did not know existed.

His involvement with the spiritual center helped him when he developed depression with suicidal tendencies. He contracted HIV and even considered asking someone to kill him. He said that he was in pain, that the pain was too great. In this time of crisis, the spiritual center became his strong hold, and he began to attend the weekly meetings regularly. Even the recent death of his father had not drawn him back into depression as he has learnt to handle life (and death) better. "I began to understand death very naturally when my dad left a month ago. I did not stay in a bad place for long. I understood that his time was gone, that he is now in another dimension where I also will go. We all leave this earth. I understand this now very clearly. I understand and am not afraid of death any longer. It does not hurt me, even when it happens to me."

The death of his father meant that he is now the sole carer for his elderly mother who has Alzheimer though he has help from his siblings. He mentioned that he is in a new relationship (for 3 years) that provides further stability in his life. However, at the core of his life are the two spiritual centers. In one, which he describes as center of healing he attends a

weekly course about *espiritualidade* while the other, which he labels as spiritual center, is his spiritual home. When he first visited this center, he talked at length with the leader. “We talk about everything. I think he [the leader of the center] is an enlightened person because there is a moment, when he spoke to me as if he knew everything, as if he was looking inside me, as if he knew everything that happened.” The center helped him “to live well”, to gain a purpose in his life: “people need to believe in something, something greater, and not only to believe but also to look for something, so that we have a purpose, so that we can find a purpose in life.” In this way, the connection with the spiritual center gave him purpose in life and connected him with a greater community that included the spiritual realm.

In the final section of the interview, Mateo spoke about a medical incident that highlighted the importance of spiritism for him. He was diagnosed with a heart problem and needed heart surgery. While the procedure was covered by his health plan, the diagnosis upset him enormously. At that time, he had stopped visiting the spiritual center but returned to it after the diagnosis. He spoke with a member who worked in the health care sector and also consulted the spirits. He asked whether there was anything the spirits could do. “And they replied ‘yes, you will be fully taken care of. You can stay calm’”. He then checked the list of surgeons available on his health plan and saw one surgeon listed who he identified as a spiritist. “The first time I met him, I stayed over two hours talking to him. He explained everything about the surgery and afterwards we kept talking, mostly about *espiritualidade*. I was absolutely delighted with the doctor. I was not afraid anymore.”

The positive outcome of the surgery had a wider impact on his life. Mateo mentioned that he does not worry any longer. “I am more at ease now. I put all my tensions and fears in the hands of someone who is looking after me.” Asked whether his life is now in harmony Mateo confirmed that he feels more settled and not so much stressed as before. Despite of ongoing health problems as well as the responsibility to care for his mother, he felt settled at the time of the interview. He had learnt to cope with the situation but also learnt that

espiritualidade was not a one-off healing but an ongoing process. At various points in the interview, Mateo referred to the importance of self-improvement by attending courses and workshops, learning different therapies and so on. Also important for Mateo was that he could discuss his medical condition freely within other members of the spiritual center. He described them as his spiritual guides who were there for him in moments of crisis. By accepting him as he was, they helped to stabilize him and to cope, as Mateo said, with death and his own mortality.

Mateo's story demonstrates the importance of *espiritualidade* for wellbeing in a wide, holistic way. His life story illustrates his constant self-improvement via self-study, attending workshops, and studying different therapies. It also shows a notion of medical and spiritual mobility. While this tendency has been discussed for the UK (Carrette/King 2005) and other Western countries, Mateo's case study and some of the other interviews show that the "spiritual market" in Brazil has developed in a similar direction. The big difference is that Mateo and other participants placed *espiritualidade* with its many variations at the core of their search for wellness. Mateo mentioned that he became less afraid of dying due to the assurance given to him by the spirits that he would be fine, days before his surgery. This aspect is often overlooked in studies of *espiritismo* and healing, though the healing orientation of modern Spiritism was documented already by the medical anthropologists studying Puerto Rican Spiritism in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Garrison 1972, Koss 1970). Mateo's case study illustrates his lived experience which motivated or drove his search for self-improvement and his personal search for *espiritualidade*.

Already Kardec taught in the nineteenth century the need for constant learning. His books such as *The Spirits Book* (1857), *What is Spiritism?* (1859) and *The Book on Mediums* (1861) set out the training programs that are still used by many centers today. But he also highlighted the importance of self-study which Mateo's life journey illustrates. Not only has Mateo moved away from the tradition he grew up with, but he also moved around in his

search for help. He studied various therapies and practices and tested their efficiency before moving on to the next one while embedding all within the wider system of *espiritualidade*. Indeed, this kind of mobility was common among many people I encountered. While I struggled initially to understand why Mateo was studying courses in one center but referring for spiritual guidance to another, it was not a contradiction for Mateo. Mateo even could not understand my misunderstanding as I initially thought he spoke about one center instead of two.

In addition to self-study, Mateo's case also affirms the importance of relationship, and not just among humans, but between humans and the spiritual world as well. The weekly meetings in the spiritual center were even more important than the training courses and he always tried to attend them, despite occasional problematic personal circumstances (i.e., needing to find someone to look after his frail mother). The meetings were more than gatherings of likeminded people for Mateo. He looked especially forward to the *passe* in which positive energy is transferred from the mediums to the participants and the aura is cleansed. As outlined above, healing starts according to the teaching in *espiritismo* with the identification of the roots of afflictions. The roots of afflictions can lie in deeds of previous incarnations or can be caused by harmful spirits. However, the reasons remain often hidden for the afflicted. As mentioned above, Mateo had to learn that the things he saw were not dreams but visions, messages from the spirit world. However, these contacts can be disturbing. The transfer to positive energy will cleanse the aura of the participants so that harmful spirits move on and stop afflicting pain or causing other problems (Carneiro et al. 2017: 74). This flow of energy has become so important to Mateo that his life seems centered around the weekly meetings. It is also his connection to the world of the spirits as the positive energy is drawn from them. When attending with him one of these weekly meetings, I noticed that though he chatted with several members and listened to the reading, his attention

increased when the leader announced *passe* to start next. He became calm and relaxed by the transfer of positive energy that was for Mateo the highlight of the weekly meeting.

The Materiality of Energy: Reflection of Attending *passe*

At this point I will shift to my experience when I participated at the *passe* with Mateo. While I had attended *passe* before, my experience changed after attending the meeting with Mateo. Upon arrival he introduced me to the leader as well as some members and I was able to speak with the leader for a while. When more and more people arrived, we sat down on one of the front rows of chairs and waited for the meeting to start. After a couple of speeches and readings, it was time for the *passe*. The light was dimmed and two sets of two chairs (i.e., four in total) were put back-to-back at the front. During the next hour attendees were invited to sit on one of the chairs while some of the regular members were asked to conduct the *passe* for a group of four. After a while I was also invited to participate. Due to my previous experiences with *passe* I sat down without hesitation on one of the front chairs. While I did not notice anything during the next minutes, I felt calm and relaxed. After everyone was given the opportunity to participate, the room was lightened again, and the meeting ended.

However, when returning home in the evening, I noticed something unexpected. For some years I carry a Fitbit watch which not only counts steps but also my heartbeat. I don't look at it much apart from checking my exercise regime in the evenings. On this Monday evening I noticed that during the *passe* my heartbeat has slowed so much that the Fitbit categorized it as sleep. While my mind was much engaged – my thoughts wandered from Mateo and his story, my other conversations on that day and more – my entire body relaxed, and my heartbeat slowed down. I felt calm and did not notice the time passing. While I had attended spiritist meetings before with a similar feeling of calm, it was the first time I recorded a physical response. Even during Yoga sessions, the Fitbit Watch never recorded a

slowing of my heartbeat. So, what was different this time? To answer this question, I will reflect on my prior involvement with the spirit world.

I came in first-hand contact with *espiritismo* and African-derived religions a year into my PhD research (Schmidt 1995). While originally, I planned to research traditional medicine in the Caribbean, I changed my topic toward vernacular religions after my first visit to Puerto Rico. I spent my first research visit mainly in the National Archive and worked my way through numerous leaflets, papers, and newspaper articles on Puerto Rican *espiritismo*. During a visit to New York City and the Puerto Rican Studies collection at the City University of New York I expanded my reading into medical anthropology and found out that Puerto Rican spiritists were often classified as paranoid schizophrenic. I disagreed vehemently with this disrespect against a different ontology but kept my distance, nevertheless. While I longed to gain ethnographic insights, I followed the core teaching in anthropology at that time and avoided to become too involved. Going back to Puerto Rico for another research visit I was finally able to conduct interviews and participated in meetings. However, as soon as it got too personal, I stepped back. I remember for instance that when I asked a *babalowo*, a priest of an African derived religious community, for an oracle reading and he mentioned something about making peace with the dead, something in me shut down. At that time, I was still grieving the death of my mother, who was a committed Lutheran and would have disapproved my interest in mediumship religions. My anthropological training supported me in stepping away as I was taught the need to distance oneself from the field to remain objective. But I started to realize later that there are different forms of objectivity as well as different forms of subjectivity. During a post-doc research, I turned toward performative studies. Following Richad Schechner and Victor Turner but also the French school of *ethnoscénologie* (e.g., Pradier 1996, see also Schmidt 2008), I saw Performance Studies as alternative that enabled me to admire a performance while keeping my distance. While I am still reluctant to put myself in the center of my investigation and shy away from

an auto-ethnographic approach, the ethnographic context is at the heart of my approach to the field. Doing research on the Caribbean diaspora in New York City I became fascinated by the ceremonies I attended and admired the polyphonic bricolage. But when a *mambo*, a Vodou priestess, asked whether I wanted to become initiated I declined with the explanation that my aim was to study all communities impartially. My response, as I understand now, was still influenced by a search for objectivity, forgetting that the lived experience and the narratives coming out from the field can also develop a kind of objectivity, located in the lived context.

My interview with Mateo and my visit to the spiritual center took place years later. While I had lost at that time both of my parents, I was no longer handicapped by grief. During my first research in Brazil in 2010 I had become in close contact with Brazilian mediumship religions. I had attended various spiritist healing sessions as well as ceremonies of African-derived religious communities and had gained insight into the world of the spirits and *orixás* (African deities). This experience led me to develop this project on spirituality and wellbeing to study the positive impact of spiritual practices on health. Though I was unable to spend a long time in the field, my familiarity and experience had prepared in such a way that my body responded. I became able to let go of my inner restrictions to keep distance, and, in Edith Turner's words, to sink in.

As the editors of the book outline, anthropologists approach the existence of other worlds usually as symbolic, aspect of the culture of the other world. This was also my approach as my short reflection of passed research experiences shows. While I was always arguing for the diversity of experiences and criticized the categorization of mediumship experience – or any other form of non-ordinary experience – as irrational, I frequently replied to questions about my own experience that as an anthropologist I was not interested in truth or judgement calls about the reality of spirits. My constant mantra was that it does not matter what we think about the spirits, but how the communities deal with them. My physical response during the *passe* in São Paulo shows, however, that my body challenged this

reluctance to engage with a different reality. One could say, of course, that *passe* is not about spirits but about transfer of energy (even though spiritists argue that the energy derives from the spirits). Hence, while my body responded, it could have been a reaction to the energy and not a confirmation of the existence of spirits. My physical response is not necessarily therefore evidence to validate the existence of the spirits (see Csordas 2004). Nevertheless, the way how my heart slowed, and my body relaxed can be seen as verification of the energy. The material dimension of the healing with energy was unexpected for me. But lowing blood pressure and easing tensions are definitely health improvements, and if I would have continued attending the meetings, I might have seen an improvement of my wellbeing.

Reflecting about my experience reminded me of Edith Turner and her article about the reality of spirits as well as her last publication, 'The Body and the Spirit', derived from her presentation at the Esalen Institute in 2013 (Turner 1993, 2018). In her 1993 article Turner reflects on the different experience among the Ndembu in Zambia when she attended a healing ceremony decades after her first visit. When she and her husband, Victor Turner, came to the Ndembu for the first time, in the 1950s, they distanced themselves from their belief system. However, by putting a barrier between their way to see things and the Ndembu, they denied "the people's equality with us, their 'coevalness', their common humanity as that humanity extended itself into the spirit world." (1993: 9). But when participating in a healing ceremony, they experience a wave of curative energy. "We had been participating as fully as we knew how, thus opening ourselves to whatever entities that were about." (ibid.) In 1985 she returned to Zambia and attended once again healing rituals. This time her experience went further, and she saw "with my own eyes a large grey blob of something like plasma emerge from the sick woman's back. Then I knew the Africans were right, there is spirit stuff, there is spirit affliction, it isn't a matter of metaphor and symbol, or even psychology." (ibid) Turner concluded that a peak experience in a ritual is only possible if the researcher sinks oneself fully in it. This seems to have happened with me while visiting

the center with Mateo. While I did not see anything during the session, my body responded. It might have been that my mind was still too busy analyzing what had occurred while my body began sinking in. Hence, my reaction could reveal an ongoing division between my mind and body while the other participants live in a more holistic manner where mind and body are one. But I am a rather analytical, rational person. I am trained to observe and prefer standing at the edge of a ceremony instead of dancing in front of the drums, despite of my enjoyment of the music and performance. I am reluctant to accept the survival of the spirits of the dead, perhaps because I live with so many around me. It might be that the reason why my body was able to sink in was because a *passe* is not about seeing or communicating with spirits but about energy. However, this is my distinction, not one made by the participants who regard the energy in the passe as coming from the spirit world. Nevertheless, healing with energy is a core feature of spiritual healing worldwide (see Schmidt 2021). And, as Turner, writes, part of various cultures though under different terms such as 'power', 'energy', fei or chi which she describes as "the energy of life", and "the heat of one's hands when healing" (2018: 99). She even mentions her own experience during *passe* rituals in Brazil and writes "I have indeed sensed something very like electrical energy when submitting to the healing *passes* of women adepts in a mass meeting of Spiritists in Brazil" (Turner 1993: 11). Her sensing an electrical energy and my slowing of the heart-beat point to the materiality of the spiritual realm and the materiality of healing. However, we need to keep in mind, as Csordas points out, that ethnographic evidence is not evidence in a juridical way, but it is "marshaled in order to identify cultural patterns and social arrangements, and ethnological evidence in order to identify regularities across cultures" (2004: 474).

Concluding Thoughts

"People actively seek for a connection to a spiritual realm. They sometimes feel as if they could enfold all things within their arms, they feel it with their body, with a shiver or an expansion of the heart." (Turner 2018: 99) The existence of the spiritual world is one of the cornerstones of *espiritismo*. It impacts decisions even about medical treatments and influences the sense of wellness. As Kardec's teaching highlighted the importance of self-improvement and the need to lead a good life, *espiritismo* does not offer a quick therapy, but involves a long-time, and even life-long, commitment to the world of the spirits. In addition, practices such as *passe* can initiate healing and improve health when practiced over a long period. The patients get cleansed from negative energy and receive positive energy from the spiritual realm, all while in communion with a group of like-minded people. In this sense there can be no doubt of the positive impact of *espiritualidade* on health as also Mateo's story demonstrated. His narrative provided the ethnographic evidence, to use Csordas' term, for the intertwined relation between spirituality and healing.

However, my reflection of my own experience illustrates that *espiritualidade* can have a physical impact, whether one believes in the power of spirits or not as my experience shows. While participating at the *passe*, my heartbeat slowed. The energy that is usually perceived as formless and without materiality, created a material reaction which could in the long term stimulate healing and recovery. As Turner and others pointed out before, the division between 'our' rationality and 'their' rationality creates a barrier and prevents understanding. To present anthropology as scientific discipline, anthropologists had warned students of the danger to go native. When researching matters of belief, scholars such as Evans-Pritchard who himself was religious – he converted to Roman Catholicism during the second World War – took belief as a subjective matter out of the anthropological consideration. Reflecting on his own experience during his research among the Azande, Evans-Pritchard wrote in 1965 that "there is no possibility of [the anthropologist] knowing whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not,

and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration." (Evans-Pritchard 1965:17). Following to a certain degree in his footsteps, Matthew Engelke writes that an ethnography is richer if "the problem of belief is raised and *left open*" (2002: 3, my emphasis). However, Engelke makes here a noteworthy comment about the materiality of belief. Reflecting on a study of witchcraft, Engelke praises the author for openly stating that he does not believe "in invisible forces or beings", and "neither does he claim that they do not exist" (Engelke 2002: 3, referring to Ashforth 2000: 249). But then he adds "exist, that is, *as physical manifestations*" (ibid, my emphasis). Hence, while Engelke stresses the importance of subjective belief when doing research on religion, he rejects the physical dimension of the spiritual world.

I want to take the debate beyond the questions whether spiritual beings exist on an immaterial or material level. I am not arguing here to ignore the foundations of our discipline. I still see the importance of objective distance, contextualization of the ethnographic narratives, and methodological reflection of the lived experience. Instead, my discussion about my experience has inspired me to accept the material dimension of the spiritual realm and its impact on healing. Consequently, I now argue against approaching the other worlds merely as symbolic but for accepting them with a material dimension. As my experience illustrates, it would open new ways of studying. I am not referring here to an expansion of cognitive research that already studies heartbeat, brain waves and so on of people in trance or other forms of non-ordinary experience but for a more embodied way of doing research. By monitoring our own body, reflecting on our own physical experience during healing rituals, we can discover new ways of understanding the other worlds. While reflection should be always at the core of any anthropological study, it is usually restricted to emotions, attitudes, and conscious and unconscious behavior. The aim is often to reflect on our bias during the research, hence directed toward our position. My point goes in a different direction. I argue that a reflection of our physical responses might open the avenue to a new understanding of

other worlds and other bodies, and perhaps a new insight into our world. As the editors of the book have outlined, embodiment is not the same everywhere. They encourage us therefore to reconceptualize 'embodied experience' and ask whether we can move beyond the notion of different worlds. If we break down the barrier and re-conceptualize the other worlds as part of the same world, we might reach a new understanding of our experience and the experience of other people. Understanding how our bodies as researchers respond when confronted with a non-ordinary experience is just the first step in this direction.

Biographical Note

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