

BOTANICAS AND SPIRITUALISM IN A METROPOLIS

STANLEY FISCH

The 45,000 people in the Neighborhood Medical Care Demonstration area are being served by five private practitioners and by a city hospital, some distance away. They are being served in addition by spiritualists and *botanicas* (herb shops). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the extent to which spiritualists and folk medical practices contribute to the people's health care, and the nature and significance of the contribution of those practices.

It is difficult to consider Puerto Rican folk medicine without considering spiritualism. For example, it is useful to regard the *botanica* as the folk medical pharmacy and the spiritualist (or medium) as the folk physician. People purchase nonprescription items—herbs, lotions, candles, statues, incense—for curative and prophylactic purposes (e.g., to clean the house to drive out *malas influencias*). They also bring prescriptions given to them by mediums; their prescriptions direct patients to use familiar remedies—the herbs, lotions and candles they may at one time have bought without prescriptions—in specified ways to achieve specific effects (e.g., insure success in a new venture, win a husband, cure a backache, remove a hex). Puerto Rican folk medicine and spiritualism, therefore, sometimes interact.

Mediums diagnose, heal, remove hexes and less often, generate hexes. Their powers stem from having an ample “line of spirits behind the back.” Such spirits confer protection and provide mediums

with their special insight. A line of spirits can be cultivated by anyone, and anyone has the ability to become a medium, but not everyone has the will and desire to do it.

The spirits have many functions. In addition to conferring protection and enabling the medium to function, they can both cause and prevent illness. One's "spiritual protection" acts as a shield, turning away evil spirits and hexes while at the same time bringing one good luck. If one loses spiritual protection, as through a hex or failure to maintain "faith" (an attitude of openness to the advice, warnings and demands of the spirits), one can become ill. The illness may be manifested by such signs as pain, lethargy, nervousness and bad luck.

By invoking greater protection, and perhaps by exorcising an evil spirit, the medium may be able to effect a cure, but only after performing a diagnosis. Diagnosing consists of the medium's describing and interpreting (i.e., investing with meaning) the patient's history, *without* interviewing the patient. That is, through his own special powers, the medium divines his patient's history and inventories the patient's spiritual protection. By means of this feat of clairvoyance the medium not only arrives at a diagnosis, but also demonstrates his competence to the patient and engenders confidence and faith; prerequisites to a cure.

The beliefs and practices just described are part of a pattern of beliefs and associations existing among Puerto Ricans, influencing their social relationships as well as their health, and having significance for planning and providing medical care to Puerto Ricans.

The social relationship most directly influenced by the practice of folk medicine and spiritualism is the therapeutic relationship between patients and healers. Sometimes mediums practice privately and singly; here, the medium-patient relationship is on the order of the relationship just described. More familiar to me is the relationship among a group of mediums and their patients and disciples. Meeting in a *centro* ("church"), the group consists of mediums and people with aspirations of becoming mediums and therefore seeking to enhance their spiritual powers, and people who have problems or illnesses for which they want the mediums' help. The *centro* is

similar to a group psychotherapy session: a participant may get what is for him a clearer perception of his problem (e.g., "you are having trouble with your wife not because you lack manhood, but because an evil spirit is making trouble for you.") and of his resources (i.e., "spiritual protection"), and he can get support from the group.

The *centro* meeting is different from a group psychotherapy session in at least two respects: the role of the leader, and the role of the participants. The leader (*presidente*) of the *centro* has little or no role in interpreting for the participants events, feelings and interactions, as does the leader in a group therapy session. Rather, the interpretive role rests with those participants in the *centro* who are mediums, possessing "faculties" enabling them to warn, advise, cleanse or strengthen other participants. The participants share and exchange this interpretive role; the analysis of a man's marital problems could be offered by a woman, whose recurring backaches the man, in turn, might attempt to analyze. Most startling is the mediums' ability to diagnose without interviewing; thus, a medium would know of another's marital problems even if they are strangers, without the information being volunteered by the individual. Because of the special powers of the mediums, the roles they assume in the *centro*, and the necessity they feel to speak out, no matter what ("It is no good to hold back."), participants quickly become directly and intimately involved with one another. Further research should test the therapeutic efficacy of the *centro* and its appropriateness as a model for group psychotherapy.

Folk medicine and spiritualism not only influence the social relationship in the spiritualist institution, but also affect other aspects of a person's life. His attitudes, his endeavors, some of his other social relationships (e.g., with a spouse) and perhaps his health will be influenced by the particular therapeutic relationship he has with the mediums and other participants in the *centro*.

Sometimes, as suggested in the example just given of a participant with a marital problem, the perception of the problem in spiritual terms is not made clearer, but is viewed from a different angle. Whether such perception helps the participant clarify the problem

depends upon his understanding, or at least his choosing to accept those beliefs and the validity of those practices and also upon his agreeing to enter into those social relationships that help define them. Essentially, the participant chooses to believe that a distinction exists, albeit not always a clear one, between the "spiritual" and the "material." A backache, for example, having "material" manifestations, may have either a "spiritual" or a "material" cause. If a medium believes that it is "spiritual," then he will attempt to treat it. If it is "material" he will refer the patient to a physician.

If the participant accepts these beliefs, however, then indeed he may perceive his problem more clearly if it is placed in a spiritual context. Furthermore, a course of action (e.g., exorcise the evil spirit, increase spiritual protection, use folk medical remedies) is open to him, in the successful outcome of which he has great faith.

Faith is the participant's emotional investment in the process, the attitude of openness upon which a successful outcome greatly depends. It leads to a special relationship with the medium, who represents the power he wants to attain or the assistance and support he seeks. By choosing spiritualism as a way to attend to his concerns and needs, the participant in the *centro* has also chosen to enter into a set of social relationships that are presumably more desirable to him than the relationships (e.g., with physicians, nurses, family health workers) he declined to enter. Further research must attempt to define the ways in which, and the reasons why, some people choose to satisfy their health needs (in the broadest sense) through relationships with spiritualists rather than with physicians. Some people use folk remedies and rely upon spiritualists along with pharmaceuticals and visits to physicians. From them an attempt will be made to learn what contributions they see each system making to their health care.

Further research must also attempt to determine to what extent people benefit from the health services provided by spiritualists and to what extent folk medical remedies are therapeutically effective. Of almost certain benefit and effectiveness are the prophylactic measures (for example, washing the house with a special fluid

ostensibly to insure good luck or to cast out evil spirits) that are often prescribed. As repositories and disseminators of a tradition, and as a locus of power in the neighborhood, the mediums influence the attitudes and actions of those who identify with them. The people's association with the mediums may itself be therapeutic or at least productive of attitudes and habits that improve health.

On the other hand, folk medicine and spiritualism may be more detrimental than beneficial. Mediums may not always refer patients to physicians when their problems are "material" in origin, and a serious medical problem may go unattended, perhaps with fatal consequences. Mediums may take advantage of their patients, not only delaying or preventing their seeking medical attention for serious problems, but also charging exorbitant fees. (But it is interesting that a number of people, when asked about how one distinguishes good mediums from bad ones, answer that the good ones do not charge; good mediums, they say, are not in it for the money.)

Because folk medicine and spiritualism may be both beneficial and detrimental, they are of significance to the planning and providing of medical care in the Bathgate neighborhood. A significant number of people—from 30 to 80 per cent of the Puerto Ricans in the neighborhood, according to estimates—practice spiritualism or folk medicine. In some areas, such as psychotherapy, spiritualists may be the only accessible and readily available source of care. In psychotherapy, spiritualists may indeed constitute an untapped resource. If physicians were given some insight into how mediums work, and if mediums were given some training in psychotherapy to supplement their own skills, then perhaps cooperation could begin in this area, resulting in more and better mental health services for the neighborhood.

Furthermore, would it be beneficial for the Neighborhood Medical Care Demonstration physicians and pharmacy to prescribe and dispense herbal remedies along with pharmacological remedies where such "combined therapy" might help the patient understand the nature of his illness and the rationale of treatment and encourage him to adhere to the therapeutic regimen?

Finally, would it be beneficial to attempt to develop with the neighborhood's spiritualists a referral system, so that patients can receive appropriate treatment?

The practice of medicine is essentially a social relationship, conditioned by the backgrounds and attitudes of the parties to the relationship. The success of the Neighborhood Medical Care Demonstration will depend on how therapeutic and desirable a relationship it can enter into with its constituents.

APPENDIX

In the course of his study of folk medicine and spiritualism, the author had occasion to attend several séances. This is a report of one such séance that took place in December, 1967.

The meeting was attended by the following persons: Jose; Maria; Ishmael, his wife and son; Fernanda and her aunt; Ramona; Lisa; Pedro; Antonia; Flora; Hortensia; and "Chubby" and "Skinny," mother and daughter.

Maria had just returned from a visit to her physician, whom she had consulted because of a severe pain in her back and neck. The doctor had given her an injection and told her to rest. The injection had a sedative effect on Maria, and she was reposed nearly asleep across several of the chairs in the back of the meeting room.

Ishmael speaks English with difficulty; however, using a combination of English and Spanish he managed to convey that several times in the past months, when he was asleep, he found his spirit being transported. Once he went to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where he captured a spy who was trying to enter the base. Another time he went to Russia, where he saw silver bombs. He thought they were atom bombs, and he tried to lift one, but could not. At times he grows skeptical of spiritualism, but his belief always returns.

Currently, Ishmael believes some one is trying to kill him, and he has made a protection for himself—a solid disk, the diameter of a half dollar and the thickness of five half dollars, which he places in

a red cloth bag and carries in his pocket. He advised me against touching the object for fear that I might become involved.

Before the meeting started I asked Pedro about his occupation. "I'm a skilled worker," he said, "elevators, frames, control panels. I wanted to be a mechanical engineer—that was in Puerto Rico in 1956, but I quit before I even started. Family troubles, and that was it. I was in the Marine Corps for three years, then went into electronics. I worked a few years for an electrical contractor, then I went to an airline as a mechanic. Now elevators. I can't sit still in one place. I move around too much. That's why I come here, to find out about myself, what's wrong with me."

He was asked how long he had believed in spiritualism. "It runs in the family. My mother took spirits the way they do here, you know? But as a kid I never believed. No, not for me. You could have it. But I have been looking for a religion. I've been a Jehovah's Witness, one of those who bang on cymbals—Pentecostal?—Yes, Pentecostal; Protestant, Baptist, the one's who keep Sabbath—Adventist, and now I'm a Catholic and this." His wife, he explained, is a non-believer. "She's against this. I wanted to make prayers in the house, but she wouldn't let me. She believes in the saints—she's a good Catholic—but she's against this." One night, he went on, during a period when he was working nights, he came home and went into the bedroom. His wife was asleep, and as he looked at her he saw a ghost-like form rise out of her. "Talk about being scared, I ran out and put a light on and read a book, to keep my mind off it. And once, when I was visiting a friend in Puerto Rico, I was doing the dishes for him one evening. I was washing and singing, you know? All of a sudden a little boy—phfft!—goes under the table. 'I see you,' I said. He was a Greek. 'Come on, get out of there.' I hear nothing, so I turn around to look, and there's nothing there. A few minutes later—phfft!—he's back. Right away I go look, and nothing. I run out of the house. I'm afraid to see things like that—ghosts, you know? I'm not afraid to take spirits, but I don't like to see things."

During this account Pedro, in spite of what he said, was quite calm and deliberate, and very articulate. Only toward the end, when

he described his fear of seeing things, did he laugh nervously. He went on into a theological discussion. Jesus' spirit rose, proving that life exists after death; the spirit always lives. In addition, Pedro believes in reincarnation, the form depending on how well one conducted oneself in this life. But this life is hell, he said, just a wait for death, which is the escape from pain and the final release of the spirit into its own world. During sleep, one's spirit leaves the body and goes temporarily to its own world, where it can meet and talk with other spirits. That is why we sleep—to give our spirits a chance to go to their own world.

"So why do people live when death leads to a much better life?" he asked. "You know how people commit suicide. But it's no good. God calls us when He is ready. And in the meantime, as the Bible says, 'give unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's.' So we must devote ourselves to material things and spiritual things, both." Again, Pedro's discussion was clear, dispassionate and full of conviction.

By now Jose was making his preparations. The room had been changed considerably. A green carpet covered the floor. The file cabinets and boxes that had been there before were gone, making room for more chairs.

Jose signaled for silence. He was wearing white slacks and a white shirt. He tied a white scarf loosely about his neck. Everyone stood for the invocation. Jose made his invocation, adding a special prayer for Maria. Then the lights were turned out, and a record of songs praising various saints was turned on. Flora had removed her glasses and was resting her head in her hand, almost as if she were falling asleep. Antonia, Pedro and Fernanda smoked cigarettes off and on.

The meeting started slowly. The group had sung songs for Chango, Elegua and Regla, and were into a song for the seven African Spirits,¹ when Ishmael's wife took a spirit. She rose from her chair, shaking her head and moving her hands around her head. She had taken off her shoes and had partially unzipped the back of her dress. She careened about the room; people had to nudge her back into the center of the room. She spoke in a deep, slow voice, admonishing everyone to work hard.² She called for a glass of water,

which she received, and splashed each person. Then very suddenly she was out of it and walked back to her seat.

Jose got up and splashed some Florida Water³ on everyone. As he was hit, Pedro tensed and jerked in his seat. He did this often during the evening—as if he were falling asleep and then catching himself violently.

A number of people made false starts: Flora began shaking violently and hissing, but stopped abruptly and laughed. Lisa and Pedro also had a number of false starts.

The meeting was developing slowly. Maria was slumped in a corner, somewhat detached. People began talking, Quaker meeting style. Ishmael spoke to Antonia about her son, then to Ramona. Ramona spoke to Jose, saying that his business would be good. Then Ramona took a spirit, rose from her chair, reeling about, waving her hands around her head. She called for Maria, who came forward, and facing Ramona, began what turned out to be the first of a series of treatments for her illness. Ramona rubbed Maria's shoulders and arms, depositing what she had collected into a fishbowl full of water. Flora reached out and linked her right middle finger with Maria's. The cleansing was repeated three times, and then Ramona stood behind Maria's head. Ramona tensed, and Maria cried, "Oh, Dios mio! Caramba!" Once again Ramona deposited something in the fishbowl by banging on the rim. Then, abruptly, she recovered.

The meeting became slow again; Jose lit a cigar and offered one to Flora, who declined. A few minutes later she lit a cigarette.

Finally, Jose told the group to stand and form a chain. We linked hands by hooking middle fingers and raised our hands over our heads. Immediately, Antonia, Pedro and Lisa began shaking. Lisa stopped after a few seconds, and Pedro began flamenco-type dancing into the center of the circle. Antonia came out of her possession as Pedro danced back to his place and, in a full, clear voice, summoned all the evil influences ("malas influencias") to leave the *centro*. Then he encouraged us to have faith, and he recovered.

The chain broke, and as everyone sat down, Ishmael's wife had another spirit. She called for another glass of water, then for her son, who was brought to her (he had been sitting in the corner with his

father). His mother knelt before him and sprinkled water on him, and while she still kneeled she returned to normal. She took her son back to her seat.

Finally, Lisa took a spirit, got out of her chair, bent over at the waist, waved her hands around her head, spoke a few words, and recovered the way Maria often does: by straightening up and moving her hands as if pushing something away.

Immediately, Ramona began speaking. "She's talking about you, doctor," Jose said. "A man in a white coat, a scientist with a beautiful, saint-like face, was standing in front of me."

"Is there anything you want to say, doctor?" Jose asked, "The spirit is in front of you. It wants to go behind you and into you. Is there anything you want to say?"

I had an urge to voice my suspicion that Maria's illness was *brujeria*,⁴ not material, but decided against it, not knowing what effect such a statement might have.

Immediately, Pedro was out of his chair, taking a spirit. He spoke rapidly, almost breathlessly. Then he flamenco-danced around, came back to his seat and dropped into it, exhausted. Ramona then told me to wear a green scarf, and buy a statue of St. Jude.

Flora began exhibiting symptoms of a possession. Slowly and steadily she drew her fingers through her hair, making it stick out so she appeared to be wearing a flat, thick, broad-brimmed red hat, like a cardinal's. As she did this, she grunted, and slowly stood up. She moved to the center of the room and laughed. Slowly she began to turn, gradually picking up speed. Around and around she turned, then stopped and said something that drew laughter. She called for Maria and repeated the treatment that Ramona had done, except that Flora did not go to the fishbowl. Then she got down on her knees and crawled between Maria's legs twice. She called for a coconut, and when it was brought, still on her knees, she rolled it around her head, then had Maria stand on it to draw out the *malas influencias*. Jose supported her while she teetered on it; Flora rubbed Maria's feet. Then slowly Flora began crawling toward the door, carrying the coconut, Maria and Jose going with her. Ramona rose, and lined up Lisa, Antonia and Pedro behind her, and they

waited for Flora to come back. A few minutes later she did come back without the coconut, walking slowly with arms outstretched and head down. She stood before Ramona and threw her arms around her and asked something about *bruja*.⁵ She spoke in a loud, clear, jovial voice. If she was searching for a *bruja* she certainly was casual about it. Flora rubbed her forehead on Ramona's, and then repeated this with Lisa, Antonia, Pedro, Fernanda, "Chubby" and me, to the accompaniment of laughter, even from Flora.

When she was through, Flora was standing in the center of the room. She called on "Skinny" and spoke with her in a scolding tone. Then she embraced "Skinny" who seemed to faint and fell on the floor. Jose motioned people away from her. Flora bent down, rubbed "Skinny's" head, helped her to her feet and embraced her again. Then "Skinny" sat down.

Flora straightened up and fell backward. Jose and Pedro caught her and eased her to the floor. Flora, from this point to nearly the end of her possession said nothing, yet people knew what to do. Maria was made to walk over Flora. She stepped on Flora's stomach, then on her sternum, and stepped off, then she went back—sternum, stomach, then almost on Flora's groin. She repeated this again. Then Flora held out her arms, hands with palms up. Maria placed a foot on each of Flora's hands, straddling her. Flora threw her off. Then Maria got on again. During this time, Maria said she saw herself in a casket.

Finally Jose and Pedro picked Flora up. She stood with arms outstretched, looking up. She shouted something again about "*bruja*," and then, with Jose and Pedro alongside her, made a half turn, then back again and went limp. When she was straightened, she was recovered and dazed.

My suspicion having been confirmed, my curiosity got the better of me. I wanted to see how they would interpret my words. I said, "Jose, before, when you wanted me to speak, there was something I wanted to say but I held back. I knew Maria's sickness was not material. I had in my mind the word 'brujeria.' I knew it was not material, and now I see what Flora has done."

"That means sorcery," Pedro said.

Ramona said, "Ah, *comprobación*."⁶

Antonia added, "The spirit stopped him from speaking."

Suddenly Pedro took a spirit, and again he delivered a sermon. "The spiritual life is one of sacrifice." He remained in his seat and called for "Skinny," who came over and stood before him. He spoke to her about respect for her mother and about working to develop her spiritual powers. Her sacrifices, he said, would have to be "monumental." Her mother will die, and she will get tuberculosis. Her spiritual picture, however, is beautiful. Then he recovered.

Jose spoke with Flora, who had combed her hair and put on her glasses and shoes. Then he had everyone stand and he recited a benediction. Lights on, it was over.

Antonia left immediately, disappointed in the meeting, since nothing much happened with her. At the end, while Pedro worked on "Skinny," Antonia stood up and banged lightly on the rim of the fishbowl. At the beginning she had told me she was nervous. Her one possession was brief and cut short or dominated by Pedro's.

I asked Maria, after Flora had left, if the spirit had been completely removed. She thought not. They would have to do more.

REFERENCES

¹ Chango, Elegua and Regla are three of the Seven African Spirits. The record has separate songs for the first three and then a song for the seven spirits as a group. The seven spirits are seven saints—Martin, Barbara and others—with African names.

² Work, as it is used here, is spiritual work—concentration and becoming possessed by spirits.

³ A cologne used to attract spirits to a person. The spirits are attracted by cigar smoke as well as perfumes.

⁴ *Brujeria* means witchcraft or sorcery. The illness in this case is a manifestation of a spell cast upon her by persons unknown.

⁵ A *bruja* is a witch, one who can make sorcery. Flora was searching for the witch who caused Maria's illness, but the *bruja* was not among those present at the meeting.

⁶ *Comprobación* means proof. My statement was interpreted as further proof (in addition to Maria's illness) of the presence of an evil spirit. It was the evil spirit that prevented me from speaking out before about the possibility of an evil spirit as the cause of the illness.