

Moving Away from the Indigenous Spiritist Model: The
Influence of Social Class, Academic Education
and Religious Orientation on the Medium's
Conception of the Desirable

Based on the evidence that all the mediums in this study, with the possible exception of Emiliano, began to practice **Espiritismo** following Indigenous **Espiritismo**, one can ask the following question: What are the factors that motivate several mediums in this study to move away from the indigenous conception of the ideal medium? One approach that can be utilized to examine this question is to look at the process of moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo** as one which implies the development of new values in relation to the conception of the ideal medium. The concept of value is helpful in understanding why several of these mediums have modified, innovated and/or transformed their practices and philosophy about **Espiritismo**. The conditions that determine the development of different values in relation to mediumship development is the central issue that I want to examine in this section.

The values inherent in the conception of the ideal medium are the products of cultural, institutional, and personal forces acting upon the individual (Rokeach, 1973). Besides the affiliation to a spiritist movement, which I have already described, this conception seems to be affected by

factors such as social class, academic education and religious orientation. However, the specific ways in which these dimensions will affect the mediums' value system will depend very heavily on their unique life experiences and personalities.

First, social class may be a factor which influences the medium's conception of what characteristics are desirable to have as a medium. Social classes can be defined as aggregates of individuals who occupy broadly similar positions on the ladders of power, prestige and property (Tumin and Feldman, 1971). Researchers have found that an individual's social class determines to some extent his/her values about parenting, problem solving, control of emotions, time orientation, religious behavior and mental health (Riesman, Cohen and Pearl, 1964). As Kohn (1964) puts it:

Members of different social classes, by virtue of enjoying (or suffering) different conditions of life, come to see the world differently - to develop different conceptions of social reality, different aspirations and hopes and fears, different conceptions of the desirable (pp. 159-160).

Second, the medium's academic education (formal schooling) can influence the development of values in relation to his/her conception of the ideal medium. School has always been one of the means by which cultural values are transmitted to the members of a culture. It is expected that

academic education with its strong emphasis on abstract and intellectual knowledge would influence the medium's value orientation. Third, the medium's religious orientation and background may play a significant role in his/her decision to move away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**. A medium's attitude toward religion very strongly shapes his/her healing practices and conception of the ideal medium. To be or not to be religious becomes a major issue for some mediums.

In looking at the role of social class and academic education, one may expect to find that the more middle-class and academically educated mediums are moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**. Similarly one may expect to find that lower class mediums and those with little formal or academic schooling are the ones who are moving toward Indigenous **Espiritismo**. In order to examine this relationship, I have classified the mediums of this study into three major social classes following Kohn's (1964) approach:

1. a "lower class" of unskilled manual workers
2. a "working class" of manual workers in semiskilled and skilled occupations
3. a "middle class" of white-collar workers and professionals

When the medium was not working, I took into

consideration his/her spouse's occupation. If the medium was retired, I based the classification on her/his past occupation. I considered the parents' occupation when the medium was still living with his/her parents. Combining the social class of the mediums with the three mediumship categories produced the following table:

	Indigenous	Kardecian	Mediums in Transition
Lower Class	Áurea, Mayo Ernesto, Gela Generosa 5	Peruchín 1	Luz 1
Working Class	Aida 1	Félix Emiliano 2	Luisa Juanita 2
Middle Class	Diana 1	Marcos Rosa 2	Miriam 1

I recognize that using occupation as a criteria for social stratification is too simple, however, Tumin and Felman (1971) found in their classic study of social class and social change in Puerto Rico that the individuals' occupation correlates very highly with the income they are receiving. The higher the occupation on a scale of prestige, the higher the annual income.

Tumin and Feldman (1971) also used educational level as an indicator of the individual's social class, arguing that:

First as education is the primary avenue of

mobility in the new system of values and opportunity in Puerto Rico, commitment to the values of education is probably an indication of commitment to the goals whose achievement education makes possible. Second, education correlates very highly with income and occupation (p. 44).

Following Tulmin and Feldman I will also take into consideration the medium's educational level in order to examine the influence of social class on the medium's conception of the ideal medium. The following table summarizes the relation between educational level and categories of mediums:

Years of School Completed	Indigenous	Kardecian	Mediums in Transition
0-8	Áurea Gela	Peruchín, Félix Emiliano	Luz Juanita
9-12	Diana, Aida Mayo, Generosa	-----	Luisa
More than 12	Ernesto	Marcos Rosa	Miriam

We are now prepared to examine the hypothesis that lower class mediums and those mediums with few years of school completed are the ones who I have classified in this study as Indigenous. Of seven Indigenous mediums there are five of

them who are lower class mediums. A high percent of Indigenous mediums (4/7) have completed between nine and 12 years of school. Consequently not all the Indigenous mediums are lower class mediums and a good percent of them have completed several years of schooling.

One may also expect that the middle-class mediums and those mediums who are college-educated will be more likely to be Kardecian or mediums in transition. Of five Kardecian mediums, two of them are middle class, two of them are working class and one is lower class. Three of the Kardecian mediums have completed less than nine years of school. Of four mediums in transition, one is lower class, two are working class, and one is middle class. Two of the mediums in transition completed less than eight years of school. Thus, one cannot say that all the Kardecian mediums and the mediums in transition are middle class and college-educated individuals.

However there are trends in the data suggesting that for some mediums, moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo** may be related to educational achievement and/or social class mobility. These two variables have strong influence in the development of values which are not congruent with Indigenous **Espiritismo**. As Kohn (1964) pointed out, members of different social classes have different conceptions of the

desirable. Kardecian mediums and mediums-in-transition seem to be moving towards a "middle-class" conception of the ideal medium. This middle-class conception of the ideal medium puts strong emphasis on values such as self-determination, independence, self-control, academic and scientific orientation. The adoption of this middle-class ideology may motivate the mediums to move away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**.

The medium that emerges from this middle-class ideology is a conscious one with complete control of the mediumistic trance. In addition, the medium does not depend on any ritual object in order to help others. The use of ritual objects is seen as the product of ignorance or superstition. The preference is not to **pasar** the spirit because in doing this there is a chance that one may lose control. The middle class conception of the ideal medium also emphasizes the use of "scientific" concepts rather than folkloric spiritist concepts. The medium is very concerned about being "scientific" and "rational" in his/her healing approach. Consequently, he or she considers that religion and **Espiritismo** cannot be mixed because **Espiritismo** is a "science". The medium also adopts healing practices and techniques which are seen as being more "scientific" or "modern". Finally the traditional concept of **prueba** is no

longer seen as a meaningful one by this medium because according to him/her it implies a lack of freedom and self-determination.

The healing practice of Kardecian mediums is specifically characterized by this middle-class conception of the ideal medium, while mediums-in-transition seem to have adopted some of these values but not others. Consequently, in this study there are nine mediums who can be seen as moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo** (five Kardecian and four in transition). One would not expect five of these mediums to be moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo** because they are lower class mediums and/or they have very few years of school completed (Félix, Peruchín, Luz, Juanita, Emiliano). How can we explain their adoption of values espoused by the middle-class conception of the ideal medium?

One possible explanation that can be given is that these mediums are moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo** in order to be accepted by middle-class and more educated groups. As their spiritist practices fulfill the expectations of educated and middle-class groups, the mediums' social status is increased. In addition, middle-class individuals will be more attracted to their services because these mediums are working within a middle-class world view. Moving away from Indigenous

Espiritismo may be seen as a way of increasing the medium's prestige and social recognition within middle-class groups. This process can be understood as one that involves social mobility for the medium.

One may argue that the process of moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo** may affect the medium's relationship with lower-class and non-educated groups. There is also the possibility that his/her effectiveness with poor people can be diminished because the medium may not be satisfying their expectations about the healing process. As the medium moves away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**, there is also the possibility that a distance will be created between himself and lower-class groups. The medium may become more a "psychologist" for the middle-class and less a medium for the poor. Will lower-class people lose faith in those mediums because they are not "good" mediums according to their standards? What are the consequences of not working the **causa** using the style of Indigenous **Espiritismo**? How is the healing practice of the medium affected when she or he is not using ritual objects and folk healing techniques? Peruchín and Emiliano reported that when they decided not to use prayers anymore at their centers, a good number of people did not come to the meetings anymore. Very few individuals were attending the spiritist meetings leaded by Peruchín and

Emiliano. Other mediums declared that when they adopted the position that one cannot be Catholic and **Espiritista**, several individuals were upset to the point that they decided to leave the center.

It seems to me that Don Félix is aware of these issues when he says that he uses the knife in order to please people not because he believes that a knife is necessary for healing to happen. He considers the knife to be necessary for increasing the client's faith in him. The knife seems to represent the bridge that Don Félix uses to connect traditional conceptions of healing with Western ones. Although Félix's clients are predominantly lower-class, he also sees a good number of middle-class clients. It seems that Don Félix has been able to innovate his healing practices while conserving some basic principles of the indigenous model. Although he considers himself to be a follower of Kardecian **Espiritismo**, he is not affiliated with the Spiritist Federation or the Spiritist Confederation. In addition, he does not have any contact with the leaders of Kardecian **Espiritismo**.

In contrast, Peruchín has communication with several leaders of Kardecian **Espiritismo**. One of these leaders is a very good friend of his. It is very probable that Peruchín's contact with followers of Kardecian **Espiritismo**

has very much influenced his development as a medium. He has moved far away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**, innovating his healing practices by using massages, relaxation techniques and music. It is also impressive that Peruchín's spiritist "school" is located in the center of a very poor community. He admitted that several members of his center stopped attending it when he began to move away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**.

In the case of Luz it seems that a change in her religious orientation influenced her moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**. Although she was the **Presidenta** of an indigenous center for eight years, at some time she could not accept that some members of the center also attended the Catholic Church, and she began to talk against the Church. Luz also began to give more emphasis to the reading and discussion of spiritist books. Members reacted very negatively to these innovations which led Luz to stop attending this center. She is now attending a Trincado's center, which emphasizes the discussion and reading of spiritist books and is against the mix of **Espiritismo** with religion. The members of this center are primarily from the working and middle class.

Emiliano is a working class medium who has been influenced by the Kardecian spiritist movement more than any

other medium in this study. It seems that he had never been very interested in the practice of Indigenous **Espiritismo**. Since the beginning of his development as a medium, Emiliano has been trying to move away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**.

Emiliano's values about his conception of the ideal medium are strongly shaped by his academic non-religious orientation. Unlike most of the other mediums, he does not consider himself to be Christian. He is strongly opposed to the practice of **Espiritismo** as a religion. Although he only completed eight years of school, Emiliano is a self-educated person who deeply values intellectual knowledge. For several years he wrote articles for the journal of the Spiritist Federation. He also made several contacts with spiritist intellectuals of South America. For him **Espiritismo** is, more than anything else, a philosophy of life which should be studied as a way of improving the self.

Juanita is another medium who provides evidence against the position that only the mediums who are middle-class and have strong academic education are the ones who are moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**. She is a working class medium who has completed only eight years of school. It seems that Juanita's conception of the ideal medium has been influenced very strongly by the Spiritist Federation because she was an active member of this organization for several

years. Through her involvement with the Federation, she had the opportunity to meet several leaders of Kardecian **Espiritismo**.

Of the other four mediums who are moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**, three of them are middle-class and college educated mediums (Miriam, Marcos and Rosa) and the other is a working class medium with high school education (Luisa). Marcos began to **desarrollar facultades** at an indigenous center when he was an adolescent. Later in his development, he had contact with leaders of the Kardecian spiritist movement. Influenced by this contact and the reading of spiritist literature, Marcos has moved away from the indigenous model while still preserving some of its elements. He thinks that the religious dimension has to be integrated in the spiritist practice. Thus, instead of eliminating the prayers at the spiritist meeting, he has reduced the number of prayers that are read in his center.

Marcos is also aware that if he wants to reach the poor and non-educated, it is necessary to be flexible in his practice of Kardecian **Espiritismo**. As a leader of a spiritist group Marcos believes that he has to also provide for those who are poor and are not familiar with the Kardecian movement.

Rosa has been attending a Kardecian center for more than

five years. Prior to this, she was practicing **Espiritismo** in several indigenous centers. At the Kardecian center, she was required to change her indigenous healing practices "in order to become a better medium". Rosa was told that she has to educate her guides so that they can help her without using ritual objects.

Rosa's attitude towards this situation has been one of adaptation to her new role but she has not been convinced that ritual objects are not effective. However, Rosa has begun to see ritual objects as something that she can get rid of when her guides obtain the necessary preparation and education.

The other two mediums who are moving away from the indigenous model, Luisa and Miriam, do not seem to be very much influenced by the Kardecian movement. None of them have been affiliated to a Kardecian center. They are not concerned about the status of **Espiritismo** as a "science". However Luisa and Miriam do not use ritual objects, nor do they like to **pasar** the spirits. Both of them prefer to have a conscious trance when they are working as a medium. Nevertheless, unlike most Kardecian mediums, Miriam and Luisa do not criticize Indigenous mediums. Their attitude is not that Indigenous **Espiritismo** is wrong but that they have developed a different way of working as a medium. Their

conception of the ideal medium is still very much influenced by Indigenous **Espiritismo**.

Luisa, as well as Miriam, place a strong emphasis on the values of self-control and independence. Moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo** may be influenced by the importance these values have for them. One can argue that if a medium is concerned about these values, there is a strong probability that he or she would prefer not to be unconscious, not to use ritual objects and not to **pasar** the spirits. These three dimensions are related to issues of control and independence.

As there are lower-class mediums who are moving away from the indigenous model, Diana is a middle-class medium who is moving towards the indigenous model again after making an effort to become a Kardecian medium. It seems that Diana was adopting Kardecian practices in order to satisfy the expectations of the director. As she became aware of this situation, Diana decided to stop attending the Kardecian center and to continue working as an Indigenous medium.

Another interesting relationship between social class, spiritist movement and educational achievement is found in Ernesto's development as a medium. Of the four college-educated mediums, he is the only one who can be described as an Indigenous medium. Ever since he was a

child, Ernesto has received very strong socialization within the indigenous spiritist movement. His conception of the ideal medium has been shaped by this socialization. In addition to this socialization, Ernesto is a strong Catholic believer who holds his own Mass every Sunday. Catholic religious values are a very important influence in his conception of the ideal medium. Moreover, Ernesto has adopted **Santería** as an important practice in his mediumship development. For Ernesto there is no incongruence in adopting what seems to be opposing belief systems for an outsider. Ernesto's academic education has not disconnected him from Indigenous **Espiritismo**.

As I have shown, the influence of social class, educational achievement, religious orientation and spiritist movement on the medium's conception of the ideal medium is a very complex one. It is impossible to make generalizations about the effect that any single variable may have on the development of mediums. One has also to consider that this influence is reciprocal. Ideology influences the mediums' movement and as they move away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**, they change their ideology.

Finally I must point out that in order to understand the medium's moving away from Indigenous **Espiritismo**, one also has to consider the impressive socio-cultural and economic

changes that Puerto Rican society has experienced since 1940 due to a development program known as "Operation Bootstrap" (Safa, 1974; Steward, 1956). This program was designed "to improve the standard of living of the Puerto Rican people through government-sponsored industrialization, land reform, and vast increases in government expenditures for education, public health, housing, and other social welfare programs" (Safa, 1974, p.1). As a result of "Operation Bootstrap", Puerto Rico was transformed from an agrarian and rural society to an industrial and urban one. Annual income per family increased from \$1,103 in 1940 to \$3,979 in 1970 (Safa, 1974). Illiteracy dropped from 32 percent in 1940 to 11 percent in 1970. Life expectancy increased from 46 years in 1940 to 72 years in 1970 (Michtom, 1975).

The impact of this process of "modernization" on the role of traditional healers has been examined by several authors (Gould, 1965; Landy, 1977; Press, 1971). Landy (1977) argued that the healer's role may be "one of the more sensitive roles to the pressures for change in any social system... and what happens to the curer may be an important barometer of what is going on in the total process of sociocultural change" (p. 468). It appears that some mediums in this study are responding to these large socio-cultural changes by changing traditional practices and adopting

elements of Western Psychology. For example, Don Félix's healing approach is mostly based on psychological techniques. Moreover he considered himself to be a "natural psychologist". Gela, a very traditional medium, pointed out that a great percentage of her client's problems are caused by "mental suggestion". Sometimes she uses an electric machine to give massages to her clients.

Can the indigenous practice of **Espiritismo** survive on the Island despite the so called "modernization which pervades the Island"? Will Indigenous **Espiritismo** disappear as a consequence of being considered a "superstition" by the new generations? If this happens in the future we may have another example of the destructive and negative consequences of socio-economic "progress" and the so-called process of "Americanization" of the Puerto Rican society.