

An ethnography of reading in a spiritist study group

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ABSTRACT

As a religion, Kardecism confers fundamental importance to the study of its own body of literature, understood as the complement to religious revelation. Based upon ethnographic research in a traditional middle-class Kardecist centre in Porto Alegre, this article examines some ways through which the Kardecists, structured in small groups, interact with this written tradition. The group is fundamental in forming a spiritist identity for two reasons: firstly, it delimits internal alliances, whether or not these are translated into differences in doctrinal views. Secondly, it is one of the spaces in which the spiritist orator is formed by learning to make use of formulas extracted from a specific repertoire. Inspired by the discussions on orality and literacy and by the recent proposal for an ethnography of reading (Boyarin 1993), I aim to show that, if the spiritist speech is constructed as orality supported by texts, there are also very important informal dimensions to be considered which contextualize and actualize these group's relation with sacred texts.

Keywords: ethnography of reading, literacy, oral communication, spiritism.

As a highly literate religion, Kardecist spiritism confers a special status – alongside charity and its ritual practices – to the reading and interpretation of its own particular religious bibliography, beginning with the ‘Third Revelation’ or ‘Codification’ of Allan Kardec, a text that functions as a source for defining religious authority and identities.¹ Becoming socialized into spiritism means learning, studying and discussing in depth its canonical authors and works; in other words, entering a universe of debate and reflection dominated by a written and literate religious tradition, permeated by a ‘secondary orality’ – in Ong’s sense (1982). Aware of this perception of the importance of literate culture in spiritism, I spent over a year and a half observing a study group in a traditional spiritist centre, located in a middle class district close to the centre of Porto Alegre. The following text is an ethnography of reading among spiritists, inspired by the work of Jonathan Boyarin (1993) and accompanying an ongoing discussion concerning the “thematics of orality and writing” (Goody 1987, 1988; Havelock 1996a, 1996b; Olson 1997; Ong 1982) within the religious universe.

Suggested reading lists as rites of authority

¹ Kardecist spiritism is centred on the works of Kardec, essentially *The Spirits Book*, *The Book on Mediums*, *The Gospel According to Spiritism*, *The Genesis* and *Heaven and Hell*, a set called the ‘Kardecian Pentateuch’ (Kardec 1982, 1984, 1991a, 1991b, 1997). The label ‘basic works’ covers the first three titles of the set since these are considered by spiritists to form the essential base of the Codification, the latter being the complete set of Kardec’s work. *The Spirits Book* is the basic reading material for the study groups, along with the teaching pamphlets produced by the Brazilian Spiritist Federation (FEB).

For the purposes of our discussion, it is worth pointing out that rather than serving as a preparatory survey, the reading lists suggested to me by the spiritists comprised my first immersion as a researcher into the field. Being initiated is primarily a question of the novice receiving guidelines to reading material, whatever the newcomer's reasons for joining the group. Spiritism contains an established hierarchization which presumes not so much unequal knowledge but the inequality of *understanding* between spiritists and non-spiritists. When I went to purchase *The Spirits Book* for the first time, in the bookshop of the Sociedade Espírita Allan Kardec (Porto Alegre's oldest spiritist society, founded in 1894), an older member told me to buy the three basic works if I really wanted to study Kardec, since they formed a unified set.

This kind of spontaneous advice is frequent in this environment, seen as the duty of those who have accumulated more *time in spiritism*. While the idea of a "hierarchy of potential"² functioned as a criterion of internal differentiation among spiritists, the "length of time in the doctrine" was also used by informants as a kind of complementary form of hierarchical classification, undoubtedly important in a religious system which attributes such a high value to the equality between participants.³ For example, when I asked a medium about the doctrinal lecture which she had given, she replied: "Look, who am I to lecture people, I just commented on a section of the Gospel." Another common manifestation combines modesty and identification of one's own veteran status: "without any pretension of knowing something, this is my conviction based on my modest 28 years of being involved in the ranks of spiritism."

This lack of pretension, combined with the claim to authority based on "28 years of being involved" comprise a kind of *rhetoric of humility*, a value with endless implications in spiritist religiosity. It not only indicates the presence of a 'Christian attitude,' associated with giving charity, it also places the medium in a position of dependency and self-deprecation which favours the *passage* of the communicating spirit.

When I carried out observational work in the Livraria Espírita Luz e Caridade, the manager of the bookshop expressed his desire to meet me. We arranged to meet in the spiritist centre on a Tuesday afternoon, when a doctrinal lecture with laying on of hands was due to be held.

In existence now for 65 years, the Instituto Espírita Luz e Caridade is one of the most well known and prestigious spiritist centres in Porto Alegre. Located in a middle-class district of the *gauchá* capital, it consists of two buildings, each with its particular uses: the first houses the Social Welfare Department, with a crèche for around 100 children, workshop activities (tailoring, dressmaking and furniture restoration) and organization of fundraising events. The entrance to the site is occupied by the Spiritual Department building, where the day-to-day activities of the institution's users are focused: lectures, healing, fraternal assistance, prayers and irradiations (public), disobsession, study groups and medium evolution (private). The ground floor also houses a small library and room for small group activities, which take place at fixed weekly dates and times, respecting the considerable emphasis placed by spiritists on punctuality.

Austere and spartan with its grey and white tones, the centre was adorned with notice boards, a few posters, a glass-paned bookcase with the covers of early editions of books by Allan Kardec, Gabriel Dellane, Camille Flamarion and Rochester – emphasizing overall the simplicity of the environment.

² An idea first suggested by Maria Laura Cavalcanti (1983).

³ The positional hierarchies in the evolutionary ranking are never explicitly discussed among spiritists. There is no talk or establishment of an evolutive ranking. However, spiritists are trained to identify tendencies towards conflict or attitudes condemned as *signs of low spiritual evolution*.

After listening to the talk and receiving the ‘pass’ (or healing touch), I was invited for a chat over tea and cakes. Present at the encounter were two older men, Jader and Alberto, both directors of the centre, accompanied by their wives, Andréa and Graça. I was not only quizzed about my work, but also my personal relationship to spiritism, since mere ‘scientific interest’ was deemed poor justification. During these initial contacts, I noted an inverse relation between the curiosity of my anthropologist peers concerning my choice of study object, although the big question for both was my potential spiritist identity. While, for anthropologists, assuming a spiritist condition would compromise the necessary objective distance, for spiritists this was the precondition for an adequate understanding of the doctrine, since “reason cannot advance if it does not proceed hand-in-hand with faith.”

A series of provocations were made during our conversation as a way of testing my positions, especially when they discussed Chico Xavier and the impossibility of a reasonably informed person not recognizing the authenticity of his *mediunic work*. As I did not confront any of these claims and since they were aware of my curiosity in taking part in a study group, rather than merely witnessing medium sessions, my interlocutors fitted me into the category of *sympathizer* of the spiritist doctrine. As I later perceived, there was a continual expectation within the group that I would *adhere* to the doctrine, a native term designating conversion to spiritism and indicating the central role played by the notion of *free will* in this religious system, where acceptance of the doctrine cannot dispense with a *rational examination of its postulates*, even though experiences of suffering or loss may be considered the initial motivation for a person’s entry into a spiritist centre.

I was taken to meet Alberto, a man of about 50 years, a retired military officer and director of the centre’s spiritual department. After the tea, he asked me about my educational training. Without giving me the chance to explain my anthropological project in more detail, Alberto declared: “The most important book for you to read is *The Genesis*, by Allan Kardec. It contains lots of the things that might interest you.” This reading suggestion struck me as highly unusual, so precise based on so few elements. Later I realized that he had treated me as someone who had gone there in search of *guidance*, within a continuum that spans from *consolation* to *instruction*. As an anthropologist, I did not escape the reach of this certainty. Although what had led me to the centre had been the pretext of conducting research, having discarded the alternative of being an adversary of the doctrine, the only place left for me was a “potential spiritist.” From this point on, I would be *learning* the spiritist doctrine, receiving the same treatment as all the other novices and being required to submit the group’s norms of functioning. My informants’ attitudes therefore varied between a curiosity concerning the research and the superiority claimed by veterans in comparison to my position as a neophyte, forever in the expectation that I would eventually join.

A spiritist study group

I was put in the group ran by Andréa, his wife, which was held on Thursdays at 6.30pm. On first day, I entered a room where I found about ten people sat around a table. I explained to the coordinator what I was doing there: he interrupted me mid-explanation, saying it was not Andréa’s group but that I was welcome to stay if I so wished. Somewhat at a loss, I accepted the invitation. This proved to be a crucial decision since, as I later discovered, I would have been unable to switch freely between one group and another. The groups were not only distinguished by what I presumed to be the difference between *beginner* and *advanced* members, but also defined alliances and networks within the spiritist centre, demarcating identities, which were primarily determined by affiliation to a particular style of interpretation of the spiritist doctrine. The group I joined boasted a more ‘liberalizing’ type of reading,

highlighting the social aspect of various doctrinal positions and, sporadically, opposing what it deemed as the ‘conservatism’ and ‘narrow outlook’ of the ‘other group.’

Although there was no homogeneity of positions, the participation in a particular study group had a clear identificatory function in the spiritist universe.

One evening, Graça (the wife of the centre’s director), who was a member of the ‘other group,’ joined our study meeting. Known for her propensity for polarizing debate and assuming clearly marked positions, her presence provoked an ardent reaction from Ronaldo, the coordinator, who asked her: “What are you doing here? Your place in the other group.” Even after this feeling of transgressed boundaries had been voiced, Graça remained in the session and Ronaldo ended up provoking a debate. Discussion turned to the maturity of the Brazilian people in deciding their decisions and the trust they should place in their governors. Graça then made her stance, proclaiming that

when the people, like a child, are immature and even so try to act, the situation ends up in a real mess, a disorder; that’s why firm-handed government is necessary, like a severe father, assuming responsibility for taking decisions for the well-being of the people.

Her speech was immediately identified as ‘sympathizing with authoritarianism,’ and a fierce debate ensued in which the existence of a *collective karma* was even invoked in order to interpret the Brazilian context. While recognizing the implicit interest of the debate in itself, it is important to stress that, provoked by the group’s director, it served to make explicit and demarcate differences for the participants, actualizing a play of identities and belongings internal to the centre.

The relationship to written sources was another important way of shaping the group’s identity. Affiliation to a particular exegesis of the spiritist doctrine, in which different emphasis on certain references, more specifically what counts as a *complementary* reading to basic works, is just as important as the style of interpretation undertaken.

Both Ronaldo and his friend Aldair – a chemist with 28 years involvement in spiritism – criticized what they called an ‘awestruck’ acceptance of Emmanuel (the spiritual mentor of Chico Xavier) through allusions to what they deemed to be ‘stereotyped phrases,’ such as ‘marvellous Emmanuel.’ Without overtly denying his importance, the coordinators insisted that this awestruck attitude was contrary to the meaning of spiritism, since it *obscured the rational examination of messages and induced fanaticism*. The coordinators alleged that many people depended on clichés without working to acquire a proper knowledge of Kardec’s work, nor that of his successors.

As someone calling for a return to the original sources of the doctrine, Ronaldo also claimed that: “for us, spiritism is Kardec’s work plus the works of Léon Denis and Gabriel Dellane” – which would certainly have possessed another implication had the author indicated as supplementary reading to Kardec been Chico Xavier.

The study group sessions took place weekly with an average of ten people attending. Typically, some people sat around the table while others preferred to sit further away in a second row of chairs. The proximity of group members to the coordinator indicated above all a willingness to take part in the debate.

Some read the texts; others closed their eyes, brow furrowed, head slightly bowed to avoid being disturbed by the others while they listened. What appeared to me preparation for trance was a *state of concentration*. Spiritists believe that a sudden interruption of situations of concentration and trance can harm the medium physically and emotionally.⁴ As in other

⁴ “When a medium is concentrating, naturally exteriorizing fluids, any kind of shock affecting the nervous system not only causes him or her to lose concentration but may also be damaging to their health. Those awoken violently may suffer serious accidents due to the vibratory shock and even disembodiment, due to inhibition of the

situations, the medium in a state of concentration may also be trying to maintain *positive vibrations* for the smooth running of the meeting. As Cavalcanti (1983) has already pointed out, prayer is associated with an *interlocution with a higher being*: hence, anyone seen by others to be visibly in a state of ‘dialogue of higher relevance’ is removed from the circuit of permitted interlocutors.

Within the spiritist belief system, any ritual activity demands a preparation of the environment in which *carnate beings* collaborate with *embodied beings* to perform a *spiritual cleaning* of the environment, undertaken before the session, *balancing the fluids present*. An interval between different activities is always necessary to ensure that this equilibrium is re-established. For example, the study group never takes place on the same day as the disobsession meeting, since there is a risk of *the environment not yet being clear of the spiritual presences who occupied the space*. A reasonable span of time is therefore required between one activity and the next.

The activity of the study group divided into: 40 minutes reading and debate on a passage from the *Book of Spirits* and a little over an hour of reading and debate on a handout produced by the Brazilian Spiritist Federation (FEB).⁵ As with all spiritist activities, punctuality was extremely important, even though people did not always agree over the exact time. The function of the group director went beyond simply directing activities to include moral observations, sometimes rebukes for late arrival, sometimes comments on participants in which a certain irony could be felt. Over time, I realized that the admonishments and irony were part of an endless series of power games and claims to authority. One day Ronaldo reproached Antônia for being 15 minutes late. This medium, highly respected in the centre, replied: “according to my watch I’m on time, yours must be wrong.”

Like in a classroom, the group members were continually reminded that any irregular behaviour had to be explained.

Jokes and gibes, although less frequent, may air tensions and allude to rivalries and personal differences within the group. In spiritism, although it is permissible to remark on attitudes that suggest a person’s spiritual delay, the rule is not to comment on someone’s *stage of spiritual evolution*. Humour is sometimes the only way to make mutual evaluations and interpersonal comparisons, as in the following example: “Zeca is more evolved than us, so he doesn't have this problem of bad karma.” This was an ironic allusion to comments circulating in the centre on the moral behaviour and spirituality of this medium. By making explicit unauthorized comments on a colleague’s spiritual evolution, irony functions as a resource for inverting and equalizing any presumed hierarchy: “This problem of turbulent marriages which most people go through doesn’t apply to Clóvis and Antônia, they’re the group’s pair of love-birds.”

The jokes made at the expense of this couple, much admired for the perceived closeness of their relationship, fulfil the same function as the previous example. However, this banter is not always appreciated. In the second case, it was interpreted as sarcasm and given short shrift by Antônia, who replied unsmiling “That’s not true. We have our problems too,” thereby breaking the light-hearted word play which had been going on.

In a value system heavily marked by mutual controls, incentives towards assuming full responsibility for verbal expression and an egalitarian decorum, it is understandable that during debates the very clearly marked expression of sometimes strong and explicitly

magnetic forces that maintain the vital organic tonus. Even when this does not occur, they may still suffer a fall in blood pressure. Other disorders will appear, throwing the medium off balance, albeit sometimes for just a few days.” (Toledo 1993:157).

⁵ The teaching pamphlet contained doctrinal texts, passages from books by Kardec, Emmanuel, André Luiz or a spiritist intellectual from the FEB. Each unit also contained questions and proposed exercises, along the same lines of school text books.

antagonistic positions is encouraged – something I witnessed frequently. In spiritism, even the slightest remark is loaded with meaning. Consequently, considerable emphasis is attached to an individual's responsibility for the language they use, yet the egalitarian ethos prohibits any public expression of personal conflicts and differences going beyond the *fraternal divergence of opinions*: ideally at least, verbal expression is marked by an absolute respect for the other and their individuality. It should also be pointed out that continually sustaining an ethos of formality became extremely difficult for a group that involves both friendships and prior acquaintance. These jokes sometimes alluded to gender differences, marital status, profession, age and politics. Filtered out by Kardecist egalitarianism, these differences reappeared through playful remarks during group dialogues.

I should not imply that I was exempt from these tensions: indeed, here I am reminded of Bárbara Smith's citation (2002) of Michael Thompson (1979) on different cultural styles of dealing with monsters:

For example, some people and communities typically seem to close their doors to shut out monsters, others try to convert them, some are prepared to enlarge or rearrange their houses to take them in and, of course, some people and communities regularly go ahead and kill them. (Thompson *apud* Smith, 2002:17).

I am unsure whether I was considered to be a kind of monster by informants or whether they had a strategy for dealing with monsters outside of disobsession rituals, where such monsters are rationally convinced and gently indoctrinated to follow the Christian spiritist mediums. Furthermore, although the monster of social illegitimacy and the feeling of being a minority hemmed in by the dominant opinion seem to have been lifted from spiritists for decades now, but the entry of someone like an anthropologist always has the potential to reawaken the collective memory of persecution, activating reactive mechanisms to prove and demonstrate the truth of their system.⁶

Reading, dialogue and the training of a spiritist orator

Sessions are divided into an opening prayer, an oral reading of a chapter section, comments from the coordinator and debate, reading and debate on the teaching pamphlet and a closing prayer, always spoken by a group member at the coordinator's request. Participants are also asked to read tracts by the coordinator, as well as comment on the read extracts.

The coordinator introduced debates and prevented members from drifting off into parallel conversations, correcting the direction of the discussion when he or she feels it has drifted away from the central point. Given the need for the spiritist orator to be trained, emphasis was placed on displaying a model of clear oral expression and didactic rhetoric, acting as an example to be followed by the others. Ronaldo's speech was grammatically correct, without slang or linguistic mannerisms, always stressing the presence of an educated and scholarly model of expression.

Debate began with the oral reading of *The Spirits Book*, examined and discussed paragraph by paragraph. A colleague would read the selected passage and the coordinator would inquire whether the reader or anyone else wished to comment on the section. Whatever the response, Ronaldo always closed the discussion with some kind of generalization, albeit

⁶ Elsewhere (Lewgoy 2000) I have developed the thesis that although formally condemning dogmas and rituals, Kardecism ritualizes in other ways, whether by considering life as a trial or by considering the world as a kind of 'school.' The spiritist centre also lacks diplomas, baptisms by fire or explicit proofs for beginners, except perhaps when he or she assumes specific tasks such as a house worker, orator or medium. This means that initiatory trials may in fact surface at any moment in spontaneous and incisive form.

not necessarily relating to the analysis of the text. Each the session was opened up for debate, some kind of conclusion had to be reached, linked to the idea of *teaching*. For example, one day a passage from *The Spirits Book* was discussed concerning scientific opposition to spiritism. The coordinator began the debate asserting that “there are relative truths in the text, since it was written more than a hundred years ago and there are things that even the spiritists of the time lacked the means to understand.”

After a short debate on the relations between science and spiritism, the coordinator asked us to re-read a phrase on societies in the upper spirituality:

In the world of spirits, as in our own, there are higher and lower classes of society. Let inquirers make a study of what goes on among spirits of high degree, and they will be convinced that the celestial city is not peopled solely by the ignorant and vicious.

My reading of Part 11 of the Introduction to *The Spirits Book* led me to conclude that it amounted to a reply to certain objections, as a corollary to a broader argument that spiritism does not belong to ordinary science; rather, it is located on a higher evolutive plane level. For the group, other implications had to be extracted from the discussion. What I had judged to be a positivist (Comptean) argument, was interpreted in more Platonic form by the coordinator:

Our world is a poor copy of what occurs in the upper spirituality, both in its higher levels and in its lower sectors which are also organized. Both act upon us in teams (gangs, forts). In the lower spirituality there are teams calling themselves avengers, they act across the globe, especially on those people who they believe are indebted to them, obsessing them. There are teams of evolved spirits who control the freedom of the less evolved (backward), although respecting their free will, even in those cases where they act by obsessing embodied beings. There is no direct interference, particularly since growth generally occurs through pain and suffering, but afterwards we are even thankful.

Elvira, another active member of the group, intervened to say that “we come to be tested. Everything is programmed by evolution to see how you will act to evolve.”

To which the coordinator added:

Yes, we come to be tested – the obstacles derive from our past lives or this life. After we’re 20, we already begin to accumulate debts in this life. By the time we’re 40 or 509, we start to repay debts accumulated in this life.

From the lofty perspective of my Cartesian ethnocentrism, the line of reasoning in the Introduction to *The Spirits Book* fitted neither with the isolated comments on each paragraph (or a small set of paragraphs) nor with the form in which the group discussed the text. Not that the debate was disconnected from the order of the text: there was presumed to be a methodical continuity in the reading of Kardec’s work, as well as the progressive incorporation of *truths* contained in the text. Hence, the following week, the reading had to resume precisely at the point where it had stopped the week before. Instead of a linear incorporation, the aim was to achieve a *practical application* of the textual contents. The group’s reading served as a pretext for discussion that went beyond the text: the latter stimulated debate, rather than delineating it.

The commentary exercise aimed to extract a *doctrinal teaching* from each passage read. The study group’s implicit rule of exegesis was always to try to totalize, to extract a *teaching*, even where this was based on textual fragments. In a world view which denies the existence of the accidental, there are no real fragments since these can always be recuperated by an implicit teleology which the exegete works to reveal. However, this exegesis presumes a

spiritual method of approaching the text rather than a logical set of instructions. A perfect text would refer to the difficulty in understanding faced by the reader lacking the capacity, humility or even requisite determination to interpret the text successfully. The most that was stressed was the unsuitableness of a particular affirmation. As the coordinator emphasized, “as *The Spirits Book* is the doctrine of the spirits, not even they were allowed to know everything, only that which their epoch and their level of evolution enabled them to understand.”

The possibility of correcting the text, although it allowed room for a historical critique of the doctrine, failed to shake the belief in the predominance of *essential doctrinal truths*. In the absence of any underlying methodical doubt and presuming the essential had already been established, it simply made no sense to insist on maintaining an attitude of systematic doubt in relation to the text, typical of *sceptics* and *materialists*. By following the reading methods inaugurated by Kardec himself, any contradictions or failures to comprehend were either resolved by allegorical interpretation or subsumed by the emphasis on the *spiritual meaning* of the work as a whole or on the principal *teaching* contained in or between the lines of the text. *Teaching* or *spiritual meaning* implies that the read text is a bridge access to knowledge, rather than containing it, when accompanied by the appropriate spiritual attitude.⁷ Not only an intellectual process was involved in the group’s reading methods, but a *growth* in which the *spirit* itself is implied, whether through the assimilation of the textual content, the circulation of *vibrations in the environment*, or the exchange of experiences within the group.

One of the expected effects of the *acquired teachings*, as knowledge with moral and spiritual implications, was the regeneration or *intimate reform* of the individual. Mere erudition, isolated from moral conduct, was much criticized by the group, explaining the repeated criticisms made of ‘scientists’ and ‘intellectuals,’ reproached *for failing to combine their knowledge with a Christian morality* whose maximum expression is given by spiritist *revelation*.

The group simultaneously manifested a moral view of the individual as a free moral agent responsible for their actions, and another connected view dominated by a psychologizing discourse on the ‘inner’ individual and his or her emotions. *Intimate reform* was an important way of developing the inner person, such as in prayer, integrated within an individualist outlook which enthroned it as a condition for the authenticity of external actions. Some defended a position of ‘all or nothing:’ either intimate reform is fully undertaken or rendered impossible by small defects. More liberal members saw it as a goal to be gradually achieved despite small defects or backward steps.

Two basic kinds of example were used: the more technical examples, in which narratives on mediunic séances were shared, including their problems and solutions, and examples of a moral nature, which related spiritist doctrine to political settings, personal examples, news and day-to-day events.

The technical comments were frequently exemplified by oral narratives. One time, commenting on the work of indoctrination, Ronaldo recalled that:

in a development session, a woman entered into contact with an Egyptian Pharaoh and his disciples, who had been stuck for thousands of years without evolving; this was followed by months of doctrinal work.

These narrations involve setting up a mirror game in which the written reflects experience and vice-versa within an endlessly circular debate.

⁷ Olson (1997) claims that the allegorical and spiritual reading of the Bible – one which seeks a spiritual meaning between the lines – predominated until the Protestant Reformation, when the impulse surfaced that led to textual criticism, especially linked to the separation of the text from its interpretations.

A second rhetorical resource frequently used was *concordance with scientific advances*, such as the claim that “the discovery of chromosomes was already foreseen in the novels of André Luiz.”

This image of science was often combined with a Rousseauian idealization of nature, generally taken to be perfect in contrast to the ‘irrationality’ and ‘backwardness’ of human behaviour. The news that an Indian had been burnt to death by middle-class youths in Brasília provoked the following comment from Antônia:

Recall how the irrational monkey saved the human child, and then compare what these boys did to the Indian. Sometimes I wonder whether we’re not the least evolved creatures on the planet, that we’re going to need many more incarnations to learn Jesus’ lesson “love one another.”

Comments on news stories not only interpreted the world in the light of spiritist doctrine, they brought spiritism up-to-date with the moral dilemmas and contexts faced by the group members in the present.

The work of interpreting extratextual contexts through the discussion provoked by a reading of the sacred texts shares various similarities with the Jewish religious school in New York described by Jonathan Boyarin (1993), suggesting a common feature of courses and seminars providing religious training for lay people. This is the space of a communitarian and spiritual reading.

Doctrinal equality and informal hierarchies

The group narratives and exegeses also demonstrated the hierarchical component of the spiritists’ discourse, founded on the pre-eminence of spiritism over other religions and, consequently, of spiritists over other people. This was also a polemical topic within the group. Some argued that “claiming to be a spiritist guaranteed nothing, just as knowing all the evangelical precepts, if they are not applied on a daily basis.” How to explain the moral capacity of many non-spiritists, of *missionary spirits*, like Gandhi or Mother Teresa of Calcutta, people belonging to the ranks of other religions, or even lay people known by group members *spiritually higher than many spiritists*? Sometimes the following question surfaced:

– And if our rulers were spiritists? Wouldn’t this help solve many of our problems?

Other: – But declaring oneself to be a spiritist doesn’t guarantee anything. The person can be from any religion. How many barbarities have been committed in the name of religion. It’s not a question of changing our inner selves, not our rulers.

Hence, the *superiority of understanding* counted for nothing, in the view of some group members, unless associated with a greater moral responsibility, requiring a program of *intimate reform*. Although the core reference was spiritist doctrine and the arguments invoked ideally had to gravitate around this reference point, the valid statements and the arguments brandished lent a highly personal flavour to the discussion. This meant more than learning a set of intellectual contents: it also involved the capacity to relate the doctrine to the life of the believer. In this sense, the authority of a person’s speech derives from extradiscursive factors – such as the credibility of the speaker as a medium and a *recognized worker*, his or her *length of time in spiritism* – as well as discursive factors such as skill in the use of phrases, clarity of exposition and the rational force of arguments.

A young couple with *little group time* tended to monopolize discussion, polarizing all the debates. Some older members of the group often became annoyed with the regular interventions from the couple and one of the comments frequently overheard was “who’s he?” or “he’s a good talker, but I’d like to see in practice,” which could be translated as “what

right has he to speak like a valid interlocutor in this group?” Since spiritism is a formally egalitarian system, the hierarchical structure is implicit, a fact extending to the right to speak and the way of expressing oneself verbally: it is left to participants to have a sense of their place in the groups to which they belong. Here what mattered more was the career in spiritism, each person’s moral references, rather than what was perceived as empty verbosity, through a hierarchic anti-intellectualist language which morally controlled any unauthorized outbursts within the group.

As in other contexts in the spiritist centre, hierarchy was present in a subtle form but never made explicit since it contradicted the egalitarian ideology permeating this religious system. Maria Laura Cavalcanti (1983), discussing native conceptions of the individual and person, had already called attention to the existence of a hierarchy of potential within spiritism, to which I added above ‘length of time’ as an informal variable. Another important factor is the overlapping between hierarchy and responsibility in spiritism: a hierarchical respect for a medium corresponds to an expectation relating to the performance of the latter’s function, as well as greater moral control over his or her personal life.

As mentioned earlier, hierarchical positions in spiritism overlap charismatic leadership (implicit in the hierarchy of potential between mediums) and bureaucratic leadership (where what matters is the functional responsibility of the post), resulting from the tension between the differential evaluation of the mediums and the egalitarian emphasis of the organization.

Since rational critique is foreseen in spiritism through the notion of ‘free will,’ it is normal for the debates concerning the superiority of the spiritist system are transposed to a hierarchization of the intellectual differences among humans as a question of accepting the spiritist revelation. Now, as this implied an obvious difficulty of assimilating the superiority of a non-spiritist in comparison with a spiritist, the latter was always able to be compensated at another level by the impassable inequality of understanding, which reserves an exclusive space for spiritists.

This matches remarks by Laplantine & Aubrée (1990), who suggest that Brazilian spiritism is more relational and intimate than European spiritism, more centred on communication, and with the conclusions of Sidnei Greenfield (1999), who argues that this intimacy transfers the traditional clientelist relations of Brazilian society to the religious plane. As in other institutions which emulate a state doctrine in Brazilian society, such as the bureaucracy of the civil service and the army, a markedly egalitarian ideology is very often relativized by forms of hierarchization deriving from a particularist and personalized dimension, as resistant as it is incapable of justifying itself in the abstract.

Prayers and speeches: the spiritist orator in action

All spiritist works are opened with prayers, conceived as a direct relation of elevation and contact with the higher spirituality (Cavalcanti 1983). Learning was emphasized as a combination of timing, precise linguistic behaviour and a particular corporeal attitude. The body technique was well known: people closed their eyes and concentrated with their hands on the table or resting their arms on their legs, manifesting *respect, humility, subordination* and *elevation*. Timing varied, but long group prayers were not recommended, lasting one or two minutes at most. The prayer was spoken aloud in a tone of supplication with pauses, using the first person plural or ‘royal we.’ Improvisations on a basic formula were allowed when related to the purpose of the meeting. If the meeting was set to involve *study*, phrases in the prayer would mention this, although without using a predetermined text.

The terms adopted in the prayer were taken from a repertoire of maxims and phrases that signalled ‘the religious’ through an analogy with an erudite model filled with composite expressions such as ‘auspicious energetic field,’ ‘we negotiated’ or ‘venerable entity.’ This

religious use of language is set within a particular literary and rhetorical view of verbal expression, marked by archaisms, a predilection for composite categories (some times three-worded) and the recurrent use of moral maxims during speech acts. In the case of prayer, there is a certain hierarchical order of mediums to be respected, according to the importance of each one:

We ask God, our supreme father, Jesus, Allan Kardec and our spiritual friends to enable this moment of meditation and learning to be successful, allowing a positive spiritual field to harmonize our energies, harmonized in love, dedication to our neighbour and the desire to learn, and that only spirits of the light illuminate our thoughts in this such important work which we hereby begin.

In first place, the prayer was oral and collective, and could be complemented by the group recital of a learnt prayer, such as *Our Father*. In this sense, it followed an open formal structure allowing local and individual adaptations within a schema known and used by everyone. Spiritism values an attitude taken and seen to be *interior*, explaining the encouraged liberty to improvise around the theme. The scaled sequence of references was protocolar: an elocution of the type “we give thanks to God, our spiritual friends and Jesus” would be inadmissible since it would disrespect the hierarchical order from higher to lower.

Prayer is an amply developed theme in spiritist literature and talk, retaining different connotations in addition to the shared reference to a spiritual disposition of connection and dialogue with a higher spiritual plane. In this sense, it is an important pole of reflection on spiritual contacts, containing different subjacent uses and beliefs. In prayer, the believer establishes a contact with the higher plane, but within the spiritist conception of the person (a relational composite of forces and entities attracted by affinities and shared karma), the latter is conceived as a irradiator of a kind of force which attracts various types of spirits. The result of this is the continuous production of a spiritist imaginary on prayer that thematizes its function and applications in a wide range of circumstances. One time Ronaldo claimed that in meditation he had concluded that whenever one prays, “a double prayer should be made by the brother on the same wave length; a third prayer is also needed by obsessed brothers, whether embodied or disembodied.”

The coordinator also stressed the importance of *praying aloud*, “otherwise *the less evolved spirits*, who need sound, will not hear.” This comment led to a wide-ranging discussion on the group members’ views and practices concerning oration. For some, prayer was not just an invocation or recital, but an intuitive state to be maintained 24 hours a day. For others, this depended on the day and *the person’s spiritual state*, according to the *climate which a type of vibration and prayer is perceived to create*. Elvira, the group’s oldest member, around 75 years old, stated that she usually prayed in the morning and at night before sleeping. One time she thought she was praying too much and reduced the number of prayers slightly. Elvira then added that she had become ill by letting her guard drop (“feeling pains all over my body, I closed my eyes and saw only darkness”) and allowing spiritual enemies to attack. She had to pray intensively, but only managed to rid herself of the affliction with the help of a niece, also a medium, which helped her to cleanse her house.

Other members claimed that praying does not even require words; it is more a state, a loving thought which spreads through the universal cosmic fluid. Here once more an open set of beliefs is expressed, which I shall define as a prayer complex. First of all, since thinking encompasses language in spiritism, it is comprehensible that prayer can be effective without words by functioning as a state.

The reference to the *heart* introduces a new element into the prayer complex, linked again to the spiritist concept of the person. The heart symbolizes a disposition or attitude of

genuine faith, the condition of possibility for prayers to take effect. In other words, it points to the use of a free individual will not entirely identified with rationality, in the sense of a 'spiritual fervour.' Kardecists believe that faith must be compatible with reason, but add that "faith without reason leads to fanaticism, while reason without faith leads to materialism and atheism." In the Christian tradition cultivated here, the dimension of the 'heart' recalls the attitude of evangelical simplicity against hypocrisy and wisdom against soul-less science. Along with the sphere of *charity*, it therefore acts as a permanent endorsement of the critical attitude against those spiritists focused excessively on intellectual research.

As discussed earlier, this fits with the spiritist separation of language, taken as *a mode of communication dispensable for spiritists, since for them thought is enough*. The network of actioned categorical oppositions (which we can place under the rubric of the emblematic tension of *spirit versus letter*) also derives from the hierarchical opposition of *thought versus language* – an expression of the wider opposition of *spirit versus matter* – in which the entire linguistic vehicle, like a crutch from the material world, is merely an instrumental support for communicating thought, encompassed by and dependent on the latter, which gives it value and meaning.⁸

The opposition between *improvised prayer* and *memorized prayer* introduces the need for a new formal context. Rather than memorizing a prayer, verbal and rhetorical markers are used, along with time demarcation and modulation of the speaker's voice. Novices must use mnemotechnical injunctions that take into account the tone of voice and the rhythmic and semantic recurrences observed when veterans lead the prayer. In the group, the closing prayer was given by any of the members, always at the coordinator's request without prior warning as a way of stimulating this formal construction of improvised prayers. Beginners tended to give shorter prayers, but maintained their basic structure: a reference to the topic studied, a hierarchical sequence of thanks from the highest spirit to the lowest, actualization of the special use of language through composite words unusual in everyday speech, a modulated tone of voice for the prayer, use of the royal we.

Although prayer does not necessarily require words, spirits consider themselves ethically inspired to *provide instruction and consolation for embodied and disembodied brothers closer to the material world*. Just as those in this stage of evolution still *need sound*, the linguistic form, praying aloud, is also necessary. Although there are no obligatory prayers or compulsory times for them to be made, the spiritist books cited by the group's members are unanimous in recommending awakening and the moment before sleep as the minimum. The morning prayer supplicates for harmony during the day, while the evening prayer – associated with the reading and meditation on a passage from the Gospel – is related to the belief in the wandering of the spirit from the body during sleep, subjecting the person to unusual and risky spiritual contacts.

Differences in style and conceptions of praying could be found among the group, including age and generational nuances. While older members like Elvira tended to view prayer as a codified practice with a set place and time, younger members did not make this kind of segmentation, demonstrating more sympathy for the perception of prayer as a state associated with the subjective intuition of the *climate*, categorized by the opposition *light versus heavy*. In actuality, these younger members combined these two outlooks, albeit with

⁸ The subordinate and instrumental position of the body and language compared to the spirit and thought, in spiritism, does not mean a negligence with *vehicles*, but a large set of precepts and cautions: in the body, the interdictions on vices and excesses; in speech, a continual rhetorical training. Here we return to the idea of a hierarchical, rather than egalitarian, opposition between matter and spirit. This relation allows us to comprehend that, although the spiritual world is a model and value for the visible world, certain categories of inhabitants of the spiritual world are closer to the material than inhabitants of the material world – producing an opposition between a superior spirituality and an 'inferior' spirituality.

clear prominence given to the perceived ubiquity of prayer, encompassing without suppressing the conception held by the older members. Their reading emphasized the anti-ritualist inclination of spiritism, which also suggests the possibility of “being a spiritist outside the centres” and the spiritist movement itself. Hence, the group registered internal variations which were not just its own, but shared among spiritists in general: between the inevitable codification of prayer in public rituals and private practices, on one hand, and its diffuse assimilation into a continual and undifferentiated state, on the other.

The oral discussion on prayer raised another point, rarely systematized in the doctrinal literature. This concerns an opposition between an ethical dimension and a magical dimension in oration practices. The ethical dimension corresponds to a kind of categorical imperative of spiritist religious practice: there is an unconditional duty to address and submit oneself to the *higher spiritual plane*, without expecting privileges or calculating consequences. Prayers involve the idea of reducing the individuality of the medium as a condition for the reverential connection with the *forces on high*. However, the imagery surrounding the effectiveness of prayer almost always point to body techniques: the appropriate mental attitude, how the person should breath, whether the voice needs to be used or not, and so on. This fusion of expressive and technical dimensions introduces the magical dimension into the reflection of informants, although it is not always explicitly named. Since the contact and influence of the spirits is a permanent fact in their world view and notion of the person, prayer necessarily takes into account the perception of a relational conjuncture of spiritual contacts for the medium, but the courses of action may be directed towards an evangelizing understanding of all these contacts, or the technical (‘magical’ in an etic sense) use of prayer to drive away these influences. Here, Elvira’s narrative on the infirmity caused by reducing the quantity of prayers exemplifies this magical dimension, as well as the ambiguities of the conception of prayer for the spiritists.

Finally, the prayer complex can be compared to a situational logic which emphasizes aspects differentiated within the encompassing and flexible mould of the spiritist belief system, which allows both dimensions, ethical and magical, to be present for the same person at the same time. This enables prayers to be conducted in the form of a dialogue, closer to the view of *authenticity* or the *heart*, a symbolic construction in which the spiritist theological tension between *thought* (higher level, interior state) and *language* (lower level, exterior formalization).

Alongside prayer, doctrinal speech is another area where rhetorical and corporeal techniques are used and in which the maxim predominates, a kind of multiple use formula. However, it involves a distinct formal structure to the one employed in improvising prayers. While the latter was regulated by improvisation on a theme, following a particular rhythmic and semantic structure, here the formula becomes a doctrinal maxim. It is not easy to describe the illocutionary force of the maxims in spiritist rhetoric. They are a kind of condensed *teaching*, which allows the mnemotechnical fixation of the doctrine in a corpus of short phrases – for example, “we came to this world to be tested” or “pray and watch” – that perform a didactic function, as in a sermon. The depth of a person’s level of doctrinal apprehension may vary, but knowledge of these maxims and their explications comprise the minimum repertoire to be incorporated by a spiritist in their religious career. In addition, the maxim functions as a verbal signal, allowing the discursive transition from the plane of the particular to the general and vice-versa, from text to commentary and from the latter to examples and narratives. In the study group, they appear in many introductions to speeches, such as the ones cited above. But in doctrinal speeches, they can serve as discursive operators, filling in gaps in the speech and also functioning as conclusions. Socialization in spiritism is permeated as a whole by the use of maxims in speech, such as:

We came to the world to be tested
 Our world is a poor copy of the spiritual world
 Suffering is the pathway to spiritist doctrine

The use of doctrinal maxims enables each passage of text read in a group to be associated with various types of discursive acts from specific commentaries to personal experiences involving mediunic exchanges, past lives, merits and flaws, examples of ‘missionary spirits,’ and so forth. These operations serve to weave discursive fragments into small totalities, which condense the basic principles of spiritist doctrine into clichés.

The inflection of the sentences in the so-called ‘royal we’ – the first person plural – was another linguistic fact shared by the study group and speeches alike, along with fraternal greetings, as part of a *modus operandi* which took written expression as a model for speech. Following this schema, the speaker would be able to talk for hours on end on the basis of book passages chosen at random. But he or she can also conclude their speech at any moment, a fact bringing us to the second feature involving the inculcation of an oratory *habitus* within the study group: namely, the fitting of speech within the time available – or, in other words, the formation of a discursive timing.

The adaptation of speech to the time available is none of the most valued abilities in Kardecist spiritism. Observing a doctrinal speech followed by the laying on of hands, we can see that the speakers always manage to remain within the available time-span, very rarely passing the time limit or finishing much before the planned time. The strict observance of times obliges the speakers to develop a strategy for fitting into the time available: this is based on rhetorical resources learnt in the study group. A planned speech deploys a repertoire of *teachings* and maxims, where the speaker uses a generalization, signalling a block of the speech, sewing it to another and, as the end of the speech approaches, finishes by recapitulating the main points already announced at the start of the speech. If it is a commentary chosen ‘at random,’⁹ the formula for improvisations will function in which maxims and generalizations are continually combined and discussed during the allocated period of time, feeding a discursive flow constituted not only of the traditional structure of a ‘beginning-middle-end,’ but also various small ‘beginnings-middles-ends’ in which verbal formulas perform the role of additive particles between the segments of the speech.

As the end approaches, the orator relates the last conclusion spoken to the main theme. Thus, it is the formal oral structure of spiritist rhetoric, both at the level of maxims and the small discursive generalizations sequentially included within the speeches, which allows improvisation – apprehended from the native point of view as *inspiration*¹⁰ – to be successful, remaining always within the allotted time-span.

The symbolic efficacy of spiritist speeches is largely due to their discontinuous legibility, or in other words, the capacity for the recital of maxims to fit in always with the randomly-chosen general theme, but also the multiple chances for a mixed audience to identify with the speech and build a general meaning out of its smaller segments, without the need to comprehend it as a whole. Small discontinuous discourses are strung together through a continuous oratory and semantic rhythm, allowing any apparent inconsistencies and

⁹ In actual fact, ‘random’ is not really the correct term. Usually the speaker says: “Here, in the Gospel, the following passage came to us...”

¹⁰ Asking speakers about their procedure for giving a speech with randomly chosen passages, many of them said to me that they felt transformed when they started to speak, explaining that this could only be an *inspiration* from the spiritual world.

ambiguities in the flow of discourse to be perceived by the audience as part of a larger semantic continuity.¹¹

This does not mean that all speeches can be reduced to this description, nor that this comprises a model exclusive to spiritism or even that it can be generalized to the entire universe of those claiming to be spiritists. Perhaps the moments most typical of speeches with this formulaic content are those aimed at converting sympathisers rather than addressing actual spiritists, especially when the orator's words are accompanied by a musical background.

Conclusion

Reading as a group, whether aloud or in silence, was conceived as an activity with a variety of purposes, always related to other practices undertaken by members in the various spaces and activities of the spiritist centres. Those studying also lay on hands, provide fraternal assistance, mediunic evolution, instruct spirits in disobsession – all activities that provoke questions to be discussed in the study group, the spiritist centre's most reflexive and dialogic internal forum for doctrinal development. Encompassed by the imperatives relating to the spiritist's practical and ritual formation, it is comprehensible that exegesis in the study group follows a subtle coherence between fragments read in common and a presupposed set of doctrine, in a format very different from the *lecturer* valorized in university settings (Bourdieu 1991). Never a mere acquisition of knowledge, study functions badly, from the spiritist viewpoint, when not sustained by a 'spiritual inspiration,' a successful and balanced connection with the spiritual forces supposed to be present in any human situation. It is this 'spiritual inspiration,' combined with the formal and informal relations of authority among the various participants, which ensures the coherence and reproduction of an orthodox meaning in whatever direction that a study group debate might take.

This takes us to spiritism's simultaneous valorization of dependence and free will – to adopt the terms of discussion used by Cavalcanti (1983) – in which the value attributed to the intellect is ambiguous and conditional. As the symbolic centre of knowledge and individual decisions, it is encompassed by the larger imperative of *moral progress*, with the paradoxical introduction of an anti-intellectualism within a system which places such high value on study and knowledge.

As well as the need to reproduce the 'correct reading,' conversation and readings in the study group stressed the discipline found in the form through which a rhetorical skill was generated, the linguistic *habitus* of a spiritist orator. In this *habitus*, the verbal conjunction of a discontinuous discourse through a continuous oratory rhythm, fundamental in the readings of randomly selected passages, was based on the belief of the orator's subordination to a *spiritual plane* that *inspires* his or her words, and which was indissociable from the value of the different reading practices found in the study group. Spiritist reading also related to the doctrinal sedimentation operated in its complementary literature, which produces an endless exercise of commenting and reiterating its sacred texts. As well as referring to each other, many of the texts published by spiritism have a characteristic of redundancy, function always as keys for the totality, summarize, synthesize and recapitulate the main points of the system. In a tradition initiated by Allan Kardec himself, these works can be read at various levels with clearly didactic aims, from the layperson's initiation manual to the most specialized and speculative text aimed at the initiated. Condensation, along with the insertion of spiritism within the Christian tradition through the spiritual genealogies, bases its symbolic efficacy on

¹¹ Here I am developing an idea by Northrop Frye (1986), applied to another context: oral culture is characterized by the conjunction between continuous versification and discontinuous prose, while in written culture the opposite is true.

the semantic elasticity of its discourse, ever adaptable to the pragmatic objectives of the context at hand. This semantic elasticity in spiritist discourse allows it to include everything from a return to the Biblical inspiration of the New Testament, where spiritists can find the entire meaning of their doctrine encapsulated in the maxim “love your neighbour as yourself,” to highly specialized discourses, aimed at a niche public.

Talk and study in the study group were essentially the talk and study of the converted, simultaneously ‘ontological’ and ‘dialogical’ to adapt the distinction made by Jonathan Boyarin (1993) between the New and Old Testament. The group's members studied and discussed not to accept or refute the doctrine but to be able to continue the work of personal initiation, taking part in the spiritist centre’s work activities and proselytize.

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