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The Enactment of Self and the Nature of Knowledge Among Mediums in Cuban *espiritismo*

Introduction

The day I met one of the main spirit mediums with whom I was to do my participant observation work in Havana, she surprised me by telling me that my spirit guides had kept her awake all night, ‘checking her out’. Every person has his or her spirits, she had told me, and yours came to me – ahead of you – just to make sure this was a safe place for you to be. I was taken aback, but admittedly rather pleased with my spirits who had been shrewd enough to safeguard my wellbeing. They were, it seemed, a curious extension of me; or better, I of them, for they had displaced themselves *ahead of me*, but on my behalf. I was to begin an understanding then of the special relation that exists in the religious practice of *espiritismo* between people and their protective spirit guides, their *muertos*, as people say. People’s notions of themselves, their capacities, their limitations, and their insights, were in curious ways tied to those of their *muertos*. A spiritist medium, in a sense, epitomized such a relation – she was simply not ‘alone’; she was ‘more’ than just that encapsulated by the boundaries of her skin. Somehow, she also *was* these spirits.

“I tell you from my own experience”, says Luis, a talented medium I repeatedly interviewed; “I have a *muerto* that made a promise when he lived – that every year he would go to the cemetery and sprinkle coins on the graves. And he asked me that I compliment with such a promise. Every year, then, I must now go to a cemetery, invoke his spirit, and say that I come in his name to fulfill his promise. It was a pact that he had had with the cemetery’s deities, I suppose, as a result of his involvement with the (afro-cuban) religious field. So, this he passes onto me now, and I follow through for him. It’s a responsibility that I must carry, in part, because I think that you are helping that spirit to continue its evolution”, despite the fact, he admits, that he does not fully understand what lies behind this enigmatic coin throwing. In this way, among many others, Luis has become his spirit’s extension in the world; and conversely, the spirit his behavioural guide or map. The two cannot be separated in

Luis's capacity as a medium or as a person of spiritual faith. The spirit's agency is intrinsic to Luis's own, and vice versa.

Like Luis, Cuban spirit mediums learn to *live* their spirit's missions, their personalities, their dispositions, in ways that cannot be reduced to instances of singular communion, such as possession or trance states, but must be seen as properties of a medium's ongoing relation to her world. *Yo no soy nadie sin mis muertos*, mediums will say, 'I am nobody without my spirits'.

This paper is an attempt to come to terms with a specific notion of self, or person, as it is manifest among mediums in the practice of Cuban *espiritismo*, highlighted particularly during the process of *learning* mediumship. The experience and development of mediumship in this cult of the dead is a lengthy process in which the neophyte forges, recreates, and acts upon a relationship of interactive knowledge with the spirit realm, at once particular to her and respondent to that of others. Mediums work with their *muertos*, their spirit guides, whose knowledges they convey and interpret not only in the act of consulting others, but in the course of understanding themselves. For a medium, spirits can become ways of acting and knowing, forms of being with others, approaches to the experience of life itself. Incorporating the dead here takes on a very different tone than might be at first expected. It is not simply a matter of embodying or being possessed by spirits, but of *allowing* for a spirit to manifest and produce itself into visibility. It is essentially a process of *externalizing* such existences. In Cuba, the *muertos* like to see themselves, hear themselves, and understand themselves as people; it is in this way that they can exist as agents. The onset of possession sits only at the extreme end of a continuum that is premised on the spirit medium's capacity to *recreate* her *muerto*'s presence in her life more generally. Beginning with an initial physical state of awareness, which can often come in the form of an illness, becoming a medium is a journey that results in the consolidation of spiritual presence in ways that are predominantly *social* and *material*, where the *muertos* can *become* 'selves' in the eyes of others and subsequently, themselves.

An essential part of this path is a medium's recognition of herself as a multiple being, as encompassing those very spirits: a self whose function relies on the effective co-ordination of her *muertos* in the generation and interpretation of knowledge. In *espiritismo*, spirits and people are mutually implicated: spirits are components or social fragments of people just like people are constitutive of spirits, by serving as

their physical referent. Developing mediumship, as I was to discover during my fieldwork, was an expansive process, one of *becoming oneself*, where one's self was at once a myriad of other possible personas - spirits - that could not be divorced from the medium's constitution *as a person in the world*. This 'self', then, far from an atomized individual essence or core, was more of a community or system of selves under construction; moreover, it was a self that was 'out there' rather than 'in here', produced in praxis, through social mobilization and encounter, where spirits are thought to appear and justify their existence.

Anthropology has been fascinated by spirit possession and mediation, or in, I.M. Lewis's words, "that most decisive and profound of all religious drama, the seizure of man by divinity" (1971:15). But anthropological analyses of spirit mediation have typically reiterated what Michael Lambek has called the largely unexamined premises of a naturalist paradigm (1989:36). On the one hand, possession is interpreted as a means to work out existential uncertainties in the face of social change or oppression. It is an *idiom of distress* (Kleinman, 1988). On the other, it is a clearly biophysical phenomenon – pathological or otherwise - naturalized by a dominant indigenous cultural paradigm that often condones it and proportions the means by which to recover from its trauma. Similar to discussions on personhood, it seems to me that these theorists face what the philosopher Martin Hollis has described as the difficult task of avoiding a two-way vanishing trick.

Speaking of the 'self', Hollis says: on the one hand, "if it reduces to a Humean bundle of preferences, which are then traced to socialisation and hence to the system itself, it vanishes into the system which it was meant to explain". The self disappears - it was a cultural creation, an articulation of social order and structure. On the other, "if it is a Hobbsean core, so private and so much at a distance from its public", the 'real' self may become so impenetrable as to disappear altogether from any potential attempt to understand it (1985:63). It becomes wholly individualized, then, inaccessible, Cartesian. Is the self historically and culturally determined, or is somehow *a priori* and universal, asks Hollis? Not even Durkheim and Mauss were clear on this, he says. Mostly, because it is neither just one, nor just the other.

Studies of spirit possession often seem to choose between two sides of the same reductive coin: a particular form of possession can be either a conscious means of resisting colonialism, for instance, or some latent mental instability in disguise. Sometimes both. A person can be thought to appropriate and use a particular language

of possession to express social discontent or liminality, and at the same time to *believe* in the veracity of the possession which he claims to experience, and thus, to be *used* by it also. Alternately pawn and player, both victim and calculating subject, the possessed always seems prompted into possession by factors external to himself, factors - some unconscious - which the anthropologist always appears to have mysterious access to. The spirit idiom, says Crapanzano, “seems to synthesize the psychological and sociological aspects of human existence” (1977:19), but anthropologists have appeared to be trapped into either sociologizing or medicalizing this experience, without being able to transcend the ultimately reductionist premises of each. This entrapment results, perhaps, from the simple idea that in order to understand religious phenomena one needs to discern and isolate the ‘beliefs’ that perpetuate it. But getting at the nature of ‘belief’ and its experiential effect is more than just difficult; it is a form of anthropological arrogance that assumes that there is a verifiable reality (*our* reality) to which religious belief stands in contrast, where religious symbols are treated as a precondition for religious experience, as Asad has noted, “rather than as one condition for engaging with life” (1993:51).

It is my view that my field data on Cuban spirit mediums provides us with the tools to reconceptualize the spiritual experience from within the parameters of the immanently social. To locate spirit possession in the mind, here, is to strip it of its meaning, for in Cuba the *muertos* become discernable through social process, where their existence is reaffirmed over time. If a concept of belief is applicable at all, then it must be seen in its most pragmatic version, since for Cubans, it is useless to have faith in spirits and do nothing *about it*. Possession is the epitome, so to speak, of a spirit’s process of *becoming*, which is tantamount to the medium’s *own* becoming. This is not a sociological observation but a deeply cosmological one. But the point is that the social and the cosmological here are curiously intertwined, and so must my account of them. The dead need to be put to work by the medium, called upon, prayed to, fed, represented, and recognized by social others in action in order to take on *life*; it is, essentially, the life of the *self*. What *espiritismo* points to is the need to begin with an ontology of self in an analysis of the social dimension of possession. As Marcio Goldman has noted in his brilliant essay on Brazilian *candomble* possession (1985:28), while it valuable and desirable to explore the connection between the fact of possession, on the one hand, and the relevant biophysical and social structural facts, on the other, it should be the *end* point rather than the beginning of such

analyses. Rather, any anthropological conception of possession demands a theory of the person, so that the former does not come to serve as a mere reflection of our occidental ideology (ibid: 29), which tends to pathologize or dissociate the possessed self precisely because of its very particular view of the ‘individual’.

Mediums, spirits, and selves

Espiritismo is arguably Cuba’s most widespread religious and ritual cult. While it draws undeniably from 19th century European Kardecism and North American spiritualist movements, *espiritismo cruzado*, as the most widely practiced version of spirit mediumship is known, is notably syncretic in appearance, manifesting the many and varied elements of a Cuban religious cosmos, from African deities to Catholic saints: it is mixed, unpredictable, infinitely creative, and more importantly, subject to the power of the *muertos* and their respective crosses. Demographics are at once scarce and unreliable due to the extraordinary and dynamic fluidity of the worlds of practice in which *espiritistas* find themselves: among the wider Afro-Cuban religious complex they are ‘like fish in water’, say Natalia Bolivar and Roman Orozco (1998), playing the indispensable role of mediators to the domain of the dead, the *eggun* or *nfumbi*, with whom ritual experts of other Afro-Cuban realms of practice must count. *Espiritismo* is primarily a domestic affair, where sofas and tables are moved, candles and flowers are fetched from the market, and living rooms are rearranged to accommodate an afternoon or an evening of mediumship, messages, song, and ritually induced possession. Among the participants, mediums, and recipients of such messages will be initiates and practitioners of other Afro-Cuban cults, such as *santeria*, the widely popular religion of the *orichas* or *santos*, commonly linked to the entry of slaves of West African and Yoruban origin, and *palo monte*, Cuba’s darker, more subversive religion of the dead, associated with the Bantu-speaking regions of Africa. They too come to listen to their *muertos*, and respect their advice.

In Havana, where I did my doctoral fieldwork, mediums are regarded as special; fascinating and ambiguous at once, they are often seen to possess an unusual capacity to receive or see things about other people that are not immediately obvious to others. Many describe their perceptual abilities as a talent or grace, most importantly, as a calling to serve others in their community. They can be men or women of any racial identity; they may work at *misas espirituales*, rituals where the dead are collectively summoned in prayer and lively chants, or in the privacy of their

own homes, sometimes with oracles, such as cards. Most of all, mediums are sought after to pass on the spirits' advice on matters that range from health and career prospects, to love and marriage. Theirs is a communicative responsibility to both the world of the living and to that of the dead. A medium's efficacy, her *alcanze* or vision, so to speak, can lead to her fame. She can become known via word of mouth as a *tremenda espiritista*, as people say. But, as any Afro-Cuban religious expert will tell you, a medium is only as good as her spirits and the partnership she can achieve with them: a *tremenda espiritista*, they say, will have *tremendos espíritus*. Just as every person is conceived to have a set of spirit guides that accompanies them from birth, in Cuba called a *cordón espiritual*, a medium's spirits *come* with her, much like a pre-existing blueprint. It is her task to activate and potentialize these spirits, as well as those of others, as these identities become visible through circumstance, need, and mediumistic training. To develop one's dead, and to become a medium, is to make evident the possibilities that are constituted by the spirits who also innately constitute *her*, and whose perspectives she can come to incorporate over time, in her social and physical self-awareness. While everyone has their *cordón*, the medium personifies this potential multiplicity in its most obvious way – by putting it to use.

In an important sense, the *cordón espiritual* negotiates a multiplicity engendered by history itself. Cuba's protective spirit guides and other *muertos* embody the stories and images of a historically diverse Cuban ethnic and social identity. They can be nuns and Franciscan priests, missionaries, *indios*, slaves, *cimarrones* (runaway slaves), gypsy card readers and their patriarchs, intellectuals and entrepreneurs, 18th and 19th century Europeans, dames, and creoles, independence martyrs and visionaries, Chinese, Palestinians, Arabs, artists and cabaret dancers of times past, doctors, devout Catholics, rebels, Haitians, Mexicans and African sorcerers, among others. They come with tales of woes and atrocities, black magic and God's word, political achievement and science, oppression, powerlessness, hunger and hope. An individual's spiritual make-up is, on the one hand, absolutely unique: each one's *muertos* will be idiosyncratic in their physical and biographical characteristics. And on the other, it is a reflection of a historical process that has culminated in her existence as a social being with a past, and which she is still an emerging part of, for it is also *their voices* she vindicates. Categorized only loosely by Cuban mediums as being of more or less 'light', 'clarity', 'knowledge', and 'evolution'; 'good' or 'bad', the dead are regarded as virtually human in their wishes,

need for attention, faults and vices, and kindness or charity. Knowing how to unfold and manifest their presence in one's life, as a medium, requires engaging with and looking after these same idiosyncrasies. We would be missing the point if we ignored the fact for mediums *too*, spirits are nothing if not social creatures, made *real* via their materialization in the world, among the living, and through the living. An undeveloped spirit is, I was often told, a 'sleeping spirit', mute and impotent to effect changes in the lives of those it protects.

The dead influence the living in ways that are both subtle and explicit. Awareness of the latter often provokes knowledge of the former. It is not uncommon for a first encounter with the spirit world to take the shape of an illness, for example, where spiritual help is sought after other avenues of explanation are exhausted. This is the case with Leonel, one of my key informants, who was diagnosed as a child with epilepsy but subsequently told, when medication proved useless, that his episodes were none other than instances of uncontrolled trance. He is now a gifted medium and *santero*, who puts his powerful African spirit to work through him. Others experience sudden visions, premonitions, and symbolic dreams, which all point the way toward the need to develop spiritually. This talent will normally come to recognition, sooner or later, particularly among religious families. Consider the following account:

"Since I was very little I would tell my mother that I saw things", says Ana, an experienced medium now in her 50s. "When I slept, I would say, 'mami, last night I woke up and when I opened my eyes I saw a lady, and she looked like this'. The first time that I told her that I said, 'she was a white woman, with long dark hair, and she was in front of me'. I described her. 'How strange it is because I don't know her'. 'Weren't you afraid of her?' she asked me, and I said, 'afraid, why?' I had no idea then that it was an apparition. And so my mother started to cry and in that moment she told me 'the person you're describing is your grandmother'. She had died when she was 36 years old, my mother was 15, and I had never known her. Just like that, I would describe to her the people that I would see. So she began to tell me, 'you're a medium, don't be afraid, I have that grace and all my children have it'.

A medium's encounter with her spirits is physical or sensorial at first. Indeed, even among less endowed mediums than Ana, there is an undeniable viscerality in this initial meeting, from the experience electric currents through one's body, chills, and hairs standing on end, to uncanny feelings of discomfort or ecstasy. Learning to be a

medium is to learn to give importance to these bodily events, which are highly indicative of spiritual presence (or *corrientes espirituales*, as people say).

But developing also involves being attuned to the ways in which spirits influence one's psychological and motivational impulses. With time, many mediums will notice an overlap between their moods and those of their spirits, and between the needs of their *muertos* and their own. The two become intertwined as their selves come to be experienced in a more integrated fashion. In spiritist cosmology, this effect is part of a larger process of spiritual influence that is often, in retrospective, related to larger life events or choices. In Cuban *espiritismo*, it is natural for a painter or musician to have spirits in their *cordon* who were artists in life, for example; or for a writer to be accompanied by a spirit who was an intellectual in the yesteryears; or indeed, for those immersed in the Afro-Cuban religious world to have *muertos* 'who knew of those things' while they were alive. The spirits always carry forth their tendencies and knowledges to some extent, guiding or coercing their mediums into engaging with them in order to achieve the full potential of both the living and the dead. But this influence is far from top-down or unidirectional, for the spirits must also develop through their protectees, whose free will implies that they are the ultimate choosers of what to promote and what to suppress in their spirits' personalities. Just like persons, spirits are imperfect beings. Many of them come with an accumulation of alcoholic, womanizing, violent, or troubled past lives. Hypothetically, is a person's duty to help her *muertos* evolve out of such difficulties by providing them with an alternative, namely, via her own posture towards herself and others. Needless to say, many also justify their actions and mistakes by this same token.

A medium is someone who has, over time, fine-tuned this relationship of mutual influence to her *muertos* through her increasing knowledge and control of the spirit realm. But this expertise did not come at once. Once her *muertos* have been identified, described, and confirmed by other, experienced clairvoyants, she must begin the process of objectifying them – of generating their presence in her social environment. Some call this process *la educacion de los muertos*, educating the dead; education here is tantamount to socialisation, civilization, and approximation. All of these ultimately result from the conscious creation of the spirit's visibility, both in material forms and in the medium's self-awareness. *Representing* the dead is the most

basic of such creations, for it simultaneously proportions a tangible space of spiritual interaction and *empowers* the entities with whom the medium interacts.

The most basic kind of representation is the spiritual altar, known as a *boveda espiritual*. This will be a small table in a quiet corner of the house, covered with a knitted mantel, where several glasses of water are placed, along with other items such as candles, perfume and flowers. It is thought that the water conducts the spirit's energies, their *fluidos*, and thus, that the *muertos* find in this corner the first point of entry: a bridge, of sorts. It is to the *boveda* that a learning medium will summon her dead through concentration and prayer. But this is only the beginning of their socialization.

Most *muertos* will require what in Cuba is referred to as a *representacion espiritual*. These will be rag dolls, images or statuettes, which, via their appearance or ritual association, serve as the spirit's face and body in the world. Almost every religious house in Havana is replete with such objects: from statues of *Indios* and gypsy barbies, to charcoal-black dolls that represent the *africana* or the warrior *congo* spirit, some dressed in particular colors that correspond to an *oricha*, others laden with miniature machetes, bows and arrows, jewelery and fans. Gifts of coffee, tobacco, rum, food, and flowers are placed next to them in homage and remembrance. But these tributes also *fortify* the spirit in question. In *espiritismo*, the more a spirit commits itself to the material world, that is, the more it *feeds* off it, the greater its presence will be among the living. When a medium begins to develop her *cordón espiritual* is thought to be disorganized; representing these spirits in material forms is crucial in working towards a much-needed spiritual order, in large part because it enables the establishment of such material forms of reciprocity.

In this way, neither a spiritual altar nor a spirit representation just *stand* for spirits: they also *are* these spirits in as much as they bring them into being on a different scale through a formal recognition of their presence. Leonel, whose representation of his African spirit Francisco is a life-sized, fully-clothed version of this elderly slave, refers to his doll *as* Francisco. He does not make a distinction between Francisco-the-representation and Francisco-the-real-spirit. The spirit and the image have fused, so to speak, in the creation of his sociality, his space in the world.

Learning to be a medium *is* essentially a process of creation, and more importantly, of *recreation*. That spirits need to *see* themselves in a physical light speaks to the power of mimesis in *espiritismo*, which is central to the mobilization of

the *muertos* and the knowledge they bring. In *misas espirituales*, the more explicit aspect of this mimesis is evident in the frequent ‘clothing’ of the spirits that ‘come down’ (*bajan*) on the mediums. The arrival of a gypsy woman will prompt the fetching of embroidered shawls, fans, or fine cigarettes, for instance, while if the medium is possessed by the spirit of a slave, the spirit will be given cigars, rum, and other pleasures he may have enjoyed while alive. A medium’s voice will change, her mannerisms will become slow, more deliberate; or more lively, scandalous, energetic, and flirtatious: she will *become* the spirit momentarily. But presence here is often simulated even before such arrivals. A medium will frequently mime an Indian spirit’s dance, for example, as soon as she begins to discern this entity’s willingness to descend into her body. The enactment of presence, then, can *provoke* presence, for it is the recognition that a spirit desires to make itself known.

The performance of chants and songs during spiritist ritual elucidates this last point particularly, for these *plegarias* will tend to refer to the ethnic, religious, or social identities of the spirits whose presence are being requested. “*Mama Francisca, I’m calling you mother!*” goes one such song, namely, in honor of an African female spirit, stereotypically named Francisca. “*Mama Francisca, where are you? Mama Francisca, African queen, African queen, you are Lucumi!*” (*Mama Francisca, te estoy llamando madre! Mama Francisca, donde tu estas? Mama Francisca, Reina Africana, Reina Africana, tu son Lucumi!*) As Michael Taussig argued, referring to the Cuna people of Panama with whom he worked, when the chanter sings a copy of that spirit form into existence, “far from being ‘mere’ revelation or passive copying, demonstration here has to transform reality”, where “the verses are redolent with this strange sense of continuous becoming” (1993:106). “*Why do you call me?*” the African spirit responds to the Cuban mediums, “*why do you call me, if you don’t know me?*” (*Pa’ que tu me llamas? Si no me conoces? Pa’ que te me llamas?*) A musical conversation then ensues between the spirit and those who request its help. The spirit materializes, *becomes*. The gift of the spirit medium, then, just like the Cuna specialist, is to create presence from absence.

But we must remember that this presence is also the medium *herself*. Possession makes it evident, but is in no way a necessary attribute of mediumship. Knowing one’s spirits is a project that can last a lifetime, just as the construction of oneself is a similarly indefinite process. “Individuality is a relative thing”, says Daniel, a young medium I spent time with. “It’s not that we don’t have our own spirit,

our own personality, it's simply that we must distinguish between these (spiritual) influences and ourselves. All of them filter through us, but it is we that decide what to do with them". The dead, according to Daniel, are undeniable aspects of *us*. To develop as a medium is to learn to cultivate the knowledge and the potential that becomes available through the acceptance of these aspects in one's life, so that others can be helped in the long run. *Hay tantos espiritismos como espiritistas*, spirit mediums would tell me: there are as many kinds of spiritism as there are spiritists, mainly, because there are many kinds of *spirits*. Each medium is her own creation in as much as she learns to live her multiplicity in unique ways. Because a medium's task is communicative in nature, *trusting* her dead becomes imperative, and this is a temporally distributed process, as is the knowledge that she learns to discern *as* knowledge. This is particularly relevant when it comes to oracles, which must be in some sense 'read in', rather than 'read out', where the meaning of a configuration of cards, for instance, depends entirely on a medium's (and her spirit's) form of interpretation rather than on literal reading. Ultimately, then, it is trust she builds in herself as the vehicle of her spiritual multiplicity.

Towards a first discussion

Theorizing possession, spirits, self *and* multiplicity is a tough call. There is nothing that more quickly brings out the positivist in us than to talk of ghosts, says Stephan Palmie (2003:3, borrowing a phrase from Francoise Meltzer, 1994:44). This question goes to the core of our relationship, as anthropologists of religious phenomena, to our informants' statements and accounts. And it is a highly problematic one, for they are often problematic statements from our 'rationalist' and very obviously disenchanted points of view. Palmie argues that "we cannot seem to resist transcribing spirits, gods, or the world of witchcraft into codes that satisfy our deeply held beliefs that the stories in which they figure are really about something else: category mistakes, faulty reasoning, forms of ideological misrecognition, projection of mental states, and so on, figments of individual or collective imagination that may be profitably analyzed in terms of their psychological or social functions but that cannot be taken literally as referents to a reality that is *really* "out there"" (2002:3). The idea of Cuban spirit possession and mediation in this ethnographic data constitutes a temptation of just this sort. But notions of belief, representation, or collective imaginaries make it difficult to understand the role of spirits 'out there', where Cubans themselves place them. The

task of anthropology, it seems to me, is to seek to unravel and understand the kinds of agencies at stake implied by such claims, and the relations they generate, not to reduce or discredit them. We cannot simply do away with a spiritist self, then: we must locate it, theoretically.

Cuban *espiritismo* articulates a particular notion of self and its processual development, through which spirits come into being. In as much as this is a self discovered and constructed in and through the social sphere, then, spirits must be understood as deeply *social* entities. That the medium's learning process is described as ongoing and hypothetically interminable makes clear that 'to be developed' is not a state that is thought to have a universal threshold, but an entirely relative one, that, moreover, requires a constant reconfiguration of self-awareness, knowledge, and power. A person's encounter with the dead is, in the end, an encounter with social perspective, that is, with an impetus to assume a particular behavioral and attitudinal stance in the world. That it is variable and subject to the fluidity of context reflects the nature of social life itself, for it is socially that they emerge. To have an identity, or self, is to work within a domain of knowledge relationships, and thus, action. A spiritist medium grows in insight and agency as she explores and materializes her relationship to her spirits. They are an expansion of her, just as she is of them. So, how can we theorize this?

One possibility, I would suggest, is to focus more closely on the nature and production of this social 'self', which is both the domain of the medium *and* the spirit. Indeed, this is a question not at all alien to the concerns of spiritist cosmology itself, for spirits are beings whose existence in mediums' lives is made palpable exactly through their sociality, materiality, and ability to structure the medium's response to her world. The medium's body, in short, is where they intersect.

William James noted that we have as many selves as there are others who accord us recognition and carry our image in their mind (James, 1950:294, cited in Jackson, 1998:10). Along with phenomenologists and pragmatists such as Alfred Schutz and Irving Goffman, the philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead built upon this key idea by positing the immanently social nature of minds and selves, in particular, their emergence in social experience and interaction through the mediation of symbols and gestures (Mead, 1934). Selfhood, he argued, is the ability of an organism to become an object to itself, a feat possible only by social encounter and communication through language. A thinking self, in this light, is first enacted,

not pre-given, since it is only by virtue of our embodied sociality that we can acquire self-reflexivity and auto-determination. For Mead, while “there are parts of the self which exist only for the self in relationship to itself” (1962:142), a self as a structure arises primarily in relation to the social situations it encounters and the responses these call forth. There are as many selves, he argues, as there are different social situations it must answer to, for it is social process that is responsible for its appearance. “That which we have acquired as self-conscious persons makes us members of society and gives us selves” (1962:163), and this, he says, implies the immediacy of social interaction. This view is coherent also with Csordas’ definition of the ‘self’ as elusive, existing primarily as a reflection of “self processes”, or “orientational processes” (1994:276), or of Varela’s proposal of the “virtual self” (1999:53), which amounts to an organism’s ongoing interpretative narrative of its microidentities in distinct social fields of action, out of which it emerges. The problem faced by these authors is how self-awareness is generated, and their common thread seems to be the socially distributed, enacted, and objectified nature of the ‘self’, rather than its biological or psychological predetermination. Rather than assuming the existence of a pre-given cognizer, these approaches look for the thinking self in the networks of conceptual and material relationships that constitute its environment, as well as proposing the body as central to its rationality (Johnson, 1987).

It can be argued that the process of developing and exercising mediumship is one in which an individual can be seen to multiply his social self, or selves – his spirits - by working them in an environment that incites, responds to, and objectifies them in dialectical fashion to her own bodily and psychological experience. Here, the act of ‘knowing’ oneself cannot always be separated from the act of ‘being’, for the experience of the latter is necessarily the experience of the former, immersed as it is in perspective. The world is not pre-given, suggest Varela, Thompson and Rosch in *The Embodied Mind* (2000), and neither does cognition *represent* it, as traditional cognitive science would have it. Knowledge is not there to be *internalized*, but is indeed produced by the knower through his embodied action in the world, a world which in this way, he ‘brings forth’. Meaning is entirely intersubjectively constructed and experienced, since it results from our lived histories and relations, which are profoundly social in nature. Learning, then, is not a passive but an entirely *active* process, where a particular world of knowledge becomes available via a person’s

participation in it (cf Goldman, 2007, for a discussion on Levy-Bruhl's notion of participation).

While only briefly mentioned, these insights are valuable precisely because they provide us with a clue of how to approach the relation between possession and the self in *espiritismo*; that is, in terms of a self that is not just *possessed by spirits* but develops *with such spirits* in creative response to social others, which mirror this 'becoming'. My contention is that this is an outward moving process – an expansive one, rather than a reflective one – where a medium brings into existence a series of voices, or perspectives, that are at once an intrinsic and emerging part of her and set of carefully constructed relationships through time. Spirits are 'Meadean' (inspired by George Mead), then, in that they gain in presence, and thus, *power*, as they increasingly engage with the material and social environment. To learn mediumship is to allow these selves to take shape. Rather than rendering Cuban spirits 'valid' or 'real' as cultural constructs or ideas, I therefore prefer to consider the possibility of reconceptualizing the person-spirit dynamic as a set of materialized relations, or *selves*, in constant action and re-action amongst themselves and others. In *espiritismo*, a person is plural – and the selves she manifests are a function of her engagement with her world. Each one of us, says Christina Toren, is always the unique and emergent product of the history of our relations with others, both "individually social" and "socially individual" (1999:5). Spirit mediums exemplify this observation precisely through an understanding of themselves as spiritually multiple beings.

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