SPIRITS AND SPIRITIST THERAPY IN SOUTHERN BRAZIL:
A CASE STUDY OF AN INNOVATIVE,
SYNCRETIC HEALING GROUP 1

ABSTRACT. This paper examines the treatment of patients by a group of Spiritist healers in southern Brazil. After describing and analyzing a healing session, the practices are shown to be deviant from conventional Spiritism in two directions: (1) they employ a technique, called apometry, that they claim makes possible the transportation of a part of the patient's body to the astral world where it is treated by disincarnate doctors who do past life regressions; and (2) although a conventional Spiritist disobsession is performed, the healers invoke rival Afro-Brazilian spirits who often are shown to have caused the patient's symptoms.

Building on the work of Csordas (1983), I hypothesize that the discourse employed by the healers moves the patient to a new reality or phenomenological world in which s/he is healed "not in the sense of being restored to the state in which s/he existed prior to the onset of illness, but in the sense of being rhetorically 'moved' into a state dissimilar from both pre-illness and illness reality... (Csordas 1983:346)." The new state, in this case, is the world of Spiritism. Unlike the Catholic Pentecostals Csordas studied who already were members of a primary group of believers, however, the patients treated by the Brazilian healers are mostly unaffiliated individuals who face the increasing uncertainty and insecurity of life in disorganized, anomic, urban Brazil. By encompassing modern science on the one hand, and aspects of the Afro-Brazilian traditions on the other, this healing group appeals to the often distraught white middle and lower-middle classes, providing them with therapeutic meaning that in many cases leads to healing, conversion, and the sense of security and safety that often accompanies identifying with and belonging to a religious group.

INTRODUCTION

In the following pages I describe and analyze the therapeutic practices of the Casa do Jardim healers. Followers of the Spiritist teachings codified by Allan Kardec (n.d., 1975, 1963) in the mid-19th century, they have built on that tradition as it has been elaborated in Brazil (Bastide 1978; Cavalcanti 1983; Greenfield 1987; Hess 1987; Renshaw 1969; Warren 1984), and under the leadership of Dr. Jose Lacerda de Azevedo, have pushed it beyond what is now accepted by mainline believers with the addition of developments ranging from...
modern physics on the one hand to Afro-Brazilian religious beliefs on the other.

After presenting case materials and explaining the treatment in terms of the healers' modified Spiritist belief system, I shall hypothesize, following Csordas (1983), that the discourse employed by the healers moves the patient to a new reality or phenomenological world in which s/he is healed "not in the sense of being restored to the state in which s/he existed prior to the onset of illness, but in the sense of being rhetorically 'moved' into a state dissimilar from both pre-illness and illness reality... (Csordas 1983:346). The new state, in this case, is the world of Spiritism with its distinctive view of humanity and the human condition. Unlike the Catholic Pentecostals Csordas studied who already were members of a group of believers, however, the patients treated by the Casa do Jardim are mostly unaffiliated individuals who face the increasing uncertainty and insecurity of life in urban Brazil by themselves. By encompassing science on the one hand, as does conventional Spiritism, and aspects of the Afro-Brazilian traditions on the other, Dr. Lacerda and the Casa do Jardim, we shall see, appeal to the distraught white middle and lower-middle classes, providing them with therapeutic meaning that in many cases leads to healing, conversion, and a sense of security and safety that often accompanies identifying with and belonging to a religious group.

For the past half-century or more Brazil's population has been growing rapidly while the society has been urbanizing. In 1940, for example, approximately one-third of the reported population of 41 million lived in urban areas. Today, in contrast, more than two-thirds of the estimated 145 million people are urban, and there are 10 cities with more than a million inhabitants. The population of greater Porto Alegre, for example, is in excess of two and one-half million.

Starting in the 1950s, and continuing through the 1980s, millions of rural laborers and sharecroppers seeking a better life relocated in the cities where unfortunately they found inadequate housing, inadequate social services, and limited employment opportunities. The general welfare, nutritional standards, and health of Brazil's urban masses today are very poor. In the midst of the poverty, insufficient employment opportunities, rampant illness, and inadequate social services, a number of mostly syncretic religious denominations have come into being, each competing for converts by offering to help those in need with their problems. One of the many forms of help each offers is healing. As a result, Brazil's urban sector contains a range of alternative healing systems each rooted in the religious traditions of its providers. These healing systems, along with the religions from which they derive, may be thought to constitute competing alternatives in the urban market place. Although first directed at the poor, all segments of the national population have come to participate in the offer to heal of these fast growing, syncretic urban religions.