

## 4 Healing and Spirit Possession in the Caribbean

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This article takes a comparative look at spiritual healing and its implications among followers of Afro-Cuban Santería and the Miskitu people of Nicaragua. It shows how illness and suffering is located in a sacred domain allowing transformations on social, psychological, and physiological levels. Healing is achieved by creating a sacred reality by means of powerful symbols and spirit possession. In this process, spiritual beings are representations of people's conditions. At the same time, spirits also represent a model for healing.

Key words: Afro-Caribbean, Santería, Miskitu, religious healing, spirit possession

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Este artículo abarca un vistazo comparativo de las curaciones espirituales y sus implicaciones, entre seguidores de la santería afrocubana y el pueblo miskitu de Nicaragua. Muestra como las enfermedades y sufrimientos ocupan lugar en un dominio sagrado, permitiendo transformaciones a nivel social, psicológico y fisiológico. Las curaciones se logran creando una realidad sagrada con ayuda de símbolos poderosos y posesiones de espíritus. En este proceso las entidades espirituales son representaciones de las condiciones de la gente. Al mismo tiempo los espíritus también representan un modelo de curación.

Palabras claves: afrocaribeño, santería, miskitu, curaciones religiosas, posesión de espíritus

## Introduction

Healing is a prominent theme in many Afro-Latin American religious traditions (e.g. Cabrera, 1993; Voeks, 1997; Brown, 1994; Brodwin, 1996; Staiano, 1986). People often seek advice from these religions, or become initiated, in order to resolve some kind of health problem. Healers among Cuba's Santería followers and Nicaragua's Miskitu<sup>1</sup> are consulted for all kinds of afflictions or to counter misfortune in general. Both Miskitu and Santería healing form an important part of the religious practices and rituals that help people make sense of their suffering. In this article, I will take a closer look at the meaning of spiritual beings, and what they represent in relation to healing, among Santería followers as well as among the Miskitu.<sup>2</sup>

## Santería healing in Cuba

The Cuban religious tradition of Santería has its roots in the slave trade when many Africans from the Yoruba-speaking peoples were taken from Nigeria to Cuba. The Yoruba brought with them a belief in *orishas*, divine beings with human characteristics,

and over time some of these *orishas* merged with the saints of the Roman Catholic Church. This led to the creation of Santería, "the way of the saints," and the *orishas* became known as *santos*, saints.

The divinity Yemayá, for example, the ruler over the seven seas, became associated with the saint known as the Virgin of Regla, the patroness of the Bay of Havana. Shangó, the "owner" of thunder and lightning, was related to the female Catholic saint Santa Barbara, while Elegguá, the trickster and guardian of crossroads, became identified as the Holy Child of the Atocha (see figure 1). Other important *orishas/santos* include: Oshún, owner of freshwater and love; Ogún, lord of war and iron; Obatalá, father figure and lord of peace and purity; Orula, ruler of divination; Babalú Ayé, lord of illness; and Oyá, female warrior and guardian of the cemetery.

All of these divinities are found in hundreds of mythological stories and proverbs, which, in turn, are related to various divination systems. It is said that the *santos* "speak" through divination. The *santos* are also carriers of *ashé*, life force. As hu-



**Figure 1:** Santería objects prepared for animal sacrifice. The small "heads" with eyes and mouth of seashells represent Elegguá, the trickster divinity. He opens the "roads" in life and always receives sacrifices first (photo by the author).

mans interact and develop a relationship with the *santos* through the use of herbs, prayers, music, dance, spirit possession, divination, offerings, sacrifices as well as by using necklaces and other objects, they become empowered and take part of the *ashé*. This, in turn, is said to generate luck, health and a happy life.

When someone visits a Santería priest seeking to resolve a problem, such as an illness, the priest will divine, that is to say, read the signs, and may recommend the client to become initiated into Santería, to “make *santo*.” This is especially common in cases where the person suffers from a serious illness. The priest advises that a certain *santo* be “made” or “put in the head” of the initiate. This means that the initiate “gives his/her head” to a certain *santo* and a lifelong and very serious relationship is established. The *santo*, or divinity, who will then guide the initiate through life, is called father or mother depending on its gender.

A Santería divinity may also provoke an illness in order to tell a person to become initiated. When health is restored through initiation and the rela-

tionship to the divinity has been transformed from punishment, illness and suffering to healing and health, the ritual is considered a test, an awakening, or as evidence of the *santos*’ power to heal (Wedel, 2004: 50-51).

If the person has had little previous knowledge of Santería, he/she will first have to learn about the fundamentals of the religion and take part in rituals and sacrifices performed by the priest or someone in his network. Before the proper initiation can take place, the initiate also has to go through some minor rituals. It must further be established through divination which *santo* should be “made.”

The initiation aims at a profound transformation of the whole lifeworld of the devotee who is “reborn” and will acquire new relations to both the spiritual and social world. During the seven-day initiation the devotee is secluded from the outside world and cared for by a Santería priest who will become the initiate’s godmother or godfather (see Wedel, 2004: 100-105).

On the preparatory day the initiate, known as *iyabó*, rips his/her clothes to pieces and bathes in



Figure 2: Drummers with the sacred batá drums during a Santería ritual (photo by the author).

a river, the domain over which Oshún reigns. On the first day of the proper initiation, the *santo* is “made.” The head of the *iyabó* is shaved, and sacred stones and other objects belonging to the initiate are washed in a herbal mixture said to contain large amounts of *ashé*. Sacrificial blood is also poured over the stones and the objects. In this way, *ashé*, life force, is also released. The *santo* will then “live” in the stones and the devotee will communicate with the stones in dreams and through divination. The initiate is also dressed like a king or queen according to the *santo* which is “made,” and given a new, royal, name in the ritual language that is called *Lucumí*. From now on, he/she is addressed as *iyabó* by everyone.

The following day the initiate, dressed in beautiful royal clothes, sits on a throne beside his/her altar and receives visits from family and friends. He/she is now close to the divine world of the *santos*. On the third day a profound divination is performed and the initiate is told about his/her problems and illnesses as well as advised on how to live a healthy and prosperous life, what people, situations and food to avoid, and so on.

The fourth day is the “day of presentation” when the initiate dances in front of three sacred *batá* drums (see figure 2). The music, dancing and singing, will “call down” the *santos* who may possess the participants. The initiate may also fall into trance and begin to dance in accordance with his/her *santo*. Yemayá, for example, dances by moving her skirts and imitating the movements of the sea; Shangó will swing his double-axe and pretend to take down lightning from the sky. The atmosphere is usually intense and several people may fall into trance.

During the next two days the “newborn” is kept in isolation before returning home with his/her personal objects representing the *santos*. The *iyabó* is then considered very pure and close to the divinities, and will have to follow certain rules and prohibitions for one year. These include not looking in the mirror, not shaking hands with people, not visiting hospitals or cemeteries, and always wearing white clothes and white headgear. The year ends with a

great feast during which the initiate is brought back to normal life.

The *iyabó* has now created a life-long relationship with both the divine world of the *santos* and with the priest/priestess who performed the initiation. The priest/priestess becomes the initiate’s godfather or godmother, while other godchildren of the godfather/godmother will be the initiate’s “brothers” and “sisters.” This newly created family is often considered more important than that into which a person is born. It implies both social and existential support as well as social and economical obligations.

People who go through the initiation often give very emotional accounts. The story of Eva<sup>3</sup> is one example (see Wedel, 2004: 16-27). She was about 40 years old and suffered from a heart problem when she went for a divination to the Santería priest who would later become her godfather:

He told me about my illness, that I had to do *santo*, and that it was Obatalá that I had to make. He told me secrets and problems about my life that only I knew about. I said, “With him I will make *santo*.” ... When the ceremonies began, all my doubts disappeared, and I felt very calm. ... [I] danced in my beautiful white dress. I was like dizzy, it was very strange, very emotional (Wedel, 2004: 22).

Through the initiation and its profound divination, dance, music and possession, Eva began to re-evaluate her illness experience: “Otherwise I would not be in this religion, otherwise I would not be happy” (Wedel, 2004: 23), she said. While going through the initiation, Eva also understood there was a special purpose with her life: “The *santos* told me that I had to work a lot with *espiritismo* [spiritism]<sup>4</sup> and help others to resolve their health problems” (Wedel, 2004: 22). Her spiritual and social life also changed and she acquired a new narrative of her past and present situation:

I was born to help others and I was born to become a *santera* [Santería priestess]. ... It's my way in life. ... I feel more peaceful and secure, like someone is protecting me. My *santos* are my family ... My godfather is also my new family. ... I consider him my father, and I am his daughter (Wedel, 2004: 24).

Another example is Mercedes (Wedel, 2004: 136-140), a woman in her fifties who suffered from a mental problem and chronic gastritis. After separating from her husband, her problem began: "I took poison and pills. ... I wanted to kill my child and then myself. ... The doctors said it was a trauma. I was given eight electroshocks in total and a lot of drugs, but I didn't get much better" (Wedel, 2004: 138). At one time she participated in a Santería ceremony when the divinity Oshún possessed one of the participants and told Mercedes she had to become initiated. Some time later she went through the initiation:

I was fed, bathed, and given new clothes. I was like a child who is born. It was quiet. I felt peace and a great tranquility. ... I was told [through divination] what I had to do and what was going to happen to me. Some of these things have already taken place. I made Caridad del Cobre, Oshún (Wedel, 2004: 139).

Mercedes was also told to have a doctor to examine her stomach, to continue with her psychiatric medicine, but to discontinue the electroshock therapy. As with Eva, the initiation produced a great change in her life and gave her a new illness narrative. Today she feels very emotionally attached to Oshún:

I have never been back to the psychiatric hospital. If I feel bad I have my medicines and I put on my collar [Santería necklace]. I still have my stomach problem, but it is not so bad. When I was ill I cried a lot, but now I laugh, instead. I laugh with a high voice, and people say I laugh like Oshún. ... I am not the

same as before. I used to be impulsive with a strong character, but now I am more passive and tranquil and I don't argue with anyone. I just laugh because that's my character (Wedel, 2004: 139-140).

In a similar case, Lucia, a woman in her thirties, was told during a Santería ceremony that she should become initiated in order to avoid a serious illness. She had discovered a lump in her breast and as her mother had recently died of breast cancer, she decided to become initiated. Lucia had a profound spiritual encounter and remembers how she felt very peaceful during the initiation: "My godmother did everything for me. ... I felt like a little child who is discovering new things, like I was born again" (Wedel, 2004: 153-154).

When she danced to the beat of the sacred drums, Lucia felt the presence of her dead mother:

I could feel the spirit of my mother dancing with me and telling me to dance. ... I left, I left in a manner so beautiful I cannot explain it. I know I was there dancing but at the same time I went away. I felt the music in my mind and in my heart, and I saw my mother (Wedel, 2004: 154).

After the initiation Lucia went for an examination of her breast and was told she had a tumor but that it was not malignant:

First, when you make *santo*, during the *itá* [divination], they will tell you which way to take in life [and] ...if you have your guardian angel [*santo*] you will be told, through dreams or when you are awake, "Don't do that," or "Do that," or "Don't eat that" (Wedel, 2004: 155).

For Eva, Mercedes and Lucia, the relationship with the Santería divinities and the initiation process transformed their experience, and they developed a new narrative of past and present events of their lives. They became emotionally attached to their

protecting divinities and acquired a strong faith in Santería. While feeling healed, they began to understand their situation in a new light and in relation to the Santería world view.

### Miskitu healing in Nicaragua

The Miskitu people in the Autonomous Region of the North Atlantic in Eastern Nicaragua have a long history of relations with outsiders and with people of African origin. As early as the mid-1600s, Miskitu-speaking groups began to intermarry with escaped African slaves (Dennis, 2004: 26-27). The Miskitu have also been, and still are, influenced by the Creole population of African descent living along the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua.

Miskitu cosmology and its ideas about illness and healing is today a mixture of indigenous, Afro-Caribbean and Moravian Church beliefs. Local healers constantly pick up new healing methods and ideas from other religious traditions in Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean. One example is the use of Santería objects in Miskitu rituals, such as a candle with the seven most important Santería divinities, the *Siete potencias Africanas*, depicted on the glass container (see figure 3 and 4).

Among the Miskitu, many ailments and problems are considered spiritual in origin and treated by local healers. Illness is often related to disturbed relations with spirits or dead ancestors, strong smells and a lack of harmony and balance, and is associated with curses and sorcery. Healers, who deal mainly with spiritual afflictions, include *curanderos* (herbal/spiritual healers), *sukias* (shamans), and *profetas* (prophets).

The Miskitu are occasionally troubled by a so-called “culture bound” syndrome (Dennis, 1985) known as *grisi siknis* (“crazy sickness”), a highly contagious affliction and a serious social problem in which people are said to be possessed by spirits. In 2003 and 2004, for example, a large-scale epidemic affected a number of Miskitu villages. The majority of the victims were adolescent women. However, people of all ages can catch the malady and during the last years there have been places where more men than women have been afflicted. Dennis (1985,



**Figure 3:** A candle made of glass with the seven most powerful Santería divinities. It is used in healing rituals by Miskitu healers, both when the candle is burning and when empty (photo by the author).



**Figure 4:** Herbs are being prepared for a sick man said to be suffering from a sorcery attack. Note the Santería glass containing water and a crucifix (photo by the author).

2004) and Jamieson (2001) have related the problem to stress, female sexuality and anxiety in relation to rebellion against parental control.

The sufferers will first experience a period of recurrent headaches, dizziness, anxiety and anger. When the attacks begin, they become hysterical and violent, rip off their clothes, lose consciousness, suffer severe convulsions and are considered extremely dangerous. They may also experience leg, stomach or other pain. On occasions, objects such as insects, small animals and metal nails are said to have been introduced to the body of the sufferer through sorcery. These are removed as part of the treatment.

Both individual cases and large-scale outbreaks occur, commonly in small villages, boarding schools and at worksites where many people live and work together. When, for example, *grisi siknis* struck at the *Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua* outside the town of Puerto Cabezas in 2006, only boarding students at the undergraduate level living at the university compound were affected. Those who lived in Puerto Cabezas and visited the university during daytime were unaffected by the syndrome.

Medical personnel have never found any organic cause of the problem although extensive tests of blood, urine and drinking water are usually carried out during mass-attacks. Most recover after being healed, but a few individuals will feel depressed for some time afterwards. Some have recurrent attacks later in life. Frequently, at the place of an outbreak, there have been tense and disturbed social relations with gossip and accusations of supposed sorcery both before and during the epidemic. Once the afflicted are healed, social relations usually also improve.

During a *grisi siknis* attack, which commonly occurs at a certain time of the day, whole groups of possessed individuals may run around in the village or neighborhood hurting themselves and others with machetes and knives, threatening and frightening people. They may also run into the river or the bush and disappear. Afflicted women are sometimes said to be raped by young men during possession. This situation puts the victim's family under great

stress as they must stay home from work and watch over the afflicted. The attacks may last over a period of weeks, or even months, if no healer intervenes and successfully controls the outbreak.

Healing, which may take a week or more, is mainly performed by *curanderos* who use different rituals including Christian prayers, spiritual cleansings and herbal therapies. During large-scale epidemics, a *curandero* who is an expert on *grisi siknis* is usually brought in. The healer commonly relates the problem to sorcery, but will seldom openly name the sorcerer, as this may lead to a situation of revenge and physical violence. Despite this, the healing work is considered dangerous for the healer and his/her assistants as it is said that the sorcerer may try to strike back and, for example, cause an illness through sorcery. Therefore, the healer usually demands a large sum of money before beginning the therapy.

When a healer and his/her assistants arrive at the place of an outbreak, they first organize a meeting with all the villagers or those concerned (for example, students and teachers if the problem is affecting a boarding school). Generally most people are already convinced that the problem is caused by sorcery. This is confirmed by the healer who also informs them that the therapy will take some time, but that nobody will be openly accused. A healer explained:

I ask them if they have seen strange animals and persons and heard strange sounds in the village the last two, three months. They will say "yes." I ask many things and we conclude that a "criminal hand," *mano criminal* [a sorcerer], is involved. I tell them that we will work day and night, that we will discover who has done this, that they should not be afraid, and that the victims will become well during the week. I also say that we will not reveal the names of the sorcerers. As they are often taking part in the meeting, I also warn them not to provoke us. I say that we are capable of many things, and that I personally will send them to prison if they continue.

The healer first cleanses and protects the village. He/she buries metal nails in the form of a cross; burns certain sticks, plants and herbs together with sulfur and other ingredients; and sprinkles a secret liquid at the four corners of the community. This works as a purifier against bad influences and is said to affect the sorcerer who will become ill and be forced to leave.

The victims of *grisi siknis* are often brought together in a communal house or church where a small altar is set up with incense, burning candles, herbs and a pair of scissors with a knife between the blades. These objects are aimed at warding off bad spirits and hindering evil forces. During the treatment, close family members will visit the afflicted during daytime and give emotional support, food, and water. They will also tie up the afflicted during attacks in order to prevent them from running away.

The names of the victims are written down on paper which is also placed on the altar. Finally, the inside of the building is cleansed from bad influences and the healer puts on a special costume. Each day the afflicted inhale, and are bathed and massaged with, various herbs. They may also drink the herbal mixture. Visiting family will also be bathed a few times with the herbs. If family members have had sexual intercourse, are menstruating, or have been handling a dead person, they cannot visit the afflicted as this is believed to worsen the situation.

As part of the treatment, a secret, sacred plant, locally known as "Africana number 1," may be placed on the forehead or in the neck of the first victim when in a state of trance. The person will then begin to speak and respond to the healer's question about the identity of the sorcerer, what kind of treatment and herbs that must be used, and so on. Day and night, the healer and his/her assistants take turns to pray and read from the bible, while mentioning the names of the afflicted. At night, during great secrecy, the victims may be cleansed with animal blood and bones as well as other ingredients.

The afflicted usually have frightening visions. Many see a huge black man riding a horse covered with blood. Others see a *duende* (gnome), a short

man with four fingers, on horseback. This figure will force the victim to drink a cup of blood and then to mount the horse. The possessed will try to grab a knife or machete and run around with other possessed persons. At this stage, they will not recognize unaffected villagers or relatives. On the contrary, these persons will be perceived as devils with eyes shining like spotlights.

During mass-possession, all those affected are generally treated together in the same house. Gradually, they transform their experience of the attacks. A healer explained the procedure:

We have to do the therapy in a very strict and ordered way. Otherwise they [the afflicted] will become worse instead. No sex, no drinking, no pagan thinking or talking. It's very sacred. We also become part of the suffering of the patients. We pray with them on our knees beside their beds. We sing and read from the bible. When they cry, we cry together with them. Each day the attacks become less severe and less frequent.

On the third day their vision begins to change. First it has been very violent and aggressive with blood and knives. Then it changes and the spirit transforms into a nice person. On the fifth or sixth day, they [the afflicted] will cry for him. They say things like "I am sad because he's greeting me from far away. I want to go with him but I can't." When they say this the attacks have almost ceased and we know that the person will become well.

The first vision may also be less scary; the *duende* may smile and try to convince the person to go with him. A 15 year old girl who had suffered from *grisi siknis* explained how she experienced her first attack:

I first became irritated and got a headache and became dizzy. Then I saw, a chaparro, ["a little guy"], with a cap. He wanted to take me away to be his mistress. Then I lost consciousness. When I woke up I had a lot of pain and headache.

The girl's mother explained that during the attacks, her daughter had severe convulsions and hurt herself, that her body became very stiff, and that she breathed very lightly and irregularly. The girl was finally healed by a *curandero* in her mother's house.

The mixed feelings towards the Miskitu spirits and their ambivalent characters are also present during individual cases of *grisi siknis* and during other related problems and afflictions. The *duende* or other figures in the Miskitu cosmology, such as the mermaid, known as *liwa mairin* or *sirena*, may seduce and have sexual relations with people. There are many narratives of both men and women who have had sexual relations with a beautiful male or female *sirena*, during sleep. Finally, however, the spirit will carry the person away who will drown in the sea or the river.

There are also stories of people who are said to have been taken by the *duende* and physically disappeared into another dimension. Some are gone forever, but some also return to the ordinary world of humans. When they come back, it is often said that they have learned the art of music and of healing as the *duende* is known to be a good musician and herbal healer. These musical skills are also noticeable during *grisi siknis* attacks when someone begins to whistle and sing; it indicates that the person is troubled by the *duende*.

Discussing the outbreak of *grisi siknis* in 2006 at the *Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua*, a 17 year old student described how some of the male students in his class, and then himself, were struck by the malady:

One of my companions had a headache and was shivering. This came back for some days. He also had nightmares about a *duende* coming and trying to take him away. He was like sleeping, but he saw the *duende* coming with a machete, blood and bones. First he wanted to escape, then he screamed and demanded that we let him go with the *duende*. He wanted to run and we had to hold him down and bind him. Other male companions were later affected. Then female students were also af-

ected. The first one affected mentioned [in a state of trance] the names of the others that would become affected. My name was also mentioned. Later on, when I was sitting in the class-room studying, I suddenly felt a headache and I told my companions. Then I became affected and I screamed. "In the eye" I saw the *duende* with machete, knives and blood trying to take me away. It's similar to a dream. We were 7 men and 17 women who were affected. We all lived in the same compound. Then a reverend came and cured everybody with herbs.

An employee at the university, who is also a nurse, recalled how a group was put together. It included both university staff and personnel from the Health Ministry: "The situation was super-complicated. We had 27 affected students. They were isolated and we took samples of blood and urine, but they were all negative. Then we gave them anti-depressants to make them rest, but it didn't work." Another employee remembered how the victims became very violent and acquired an "incredible force that came from within."

The father of one of the afflicted female students then arrived at the scene. He was a Protestant Reverend, a skilled herbal healer and supposedly knew about "*duende* medicine." He was asked to heal the afflicted. First, he placed a plant on the forehead of the first afflicted during trance, who, according to some of the students and teachers, revealed the names of the plants which were to be used in the healing therapy. The healer also declared that two young male students had caused the attack by practicing sorcery, although their names were not revealed. The afflicted were treated with various herbal baths and cleansings, and after a few days the attacks ceased.

#### Concluding remarks

The healing process within the two religious traditions discussed above can be considered successful if the victims feel that they have been healed. This does not, however, have to imply that they are com-

pletely cured in a biomedical sense. The Santería follower Mercedes, for example, still suffered from chronic gastritis after the initiation, and some of those who have been healed from *grisi siknis* may suffer from depression after the therapy. When a healed person feels better, “treatment can be considered successful even if the underlying disease conditions remain largely the same” (Strathern and Stewart, 1999: 111).<sup>5</sup>

The Santería and Miskitu traditions point to the importance of social support and emotional involvement during the healing process. These healing techniques are similar to what Hippocrates is said to have recommended to his students: “Let your best means of treating people be your love for them, your interest in their affairs, your knowledge of their condition, and your recognized attentiveness to them” (Bulger, 1973: 9). The patients show strong emotions during and after the healing, and both Santería and Miskitu healers show compassion and empathy for the victims and guide them to become “emotionally (as well as intellectually) ‘attached’ to the symbols of their mythic world” (Helman, 2007: 275).

In an attempt to understand how symbolic and religious healing work, Dow (1986) offered a universal structure involving both the healer and the patient. This model, in turn, was based on works by Moerman (1979), Kleinman (1980), Csordas (1983), and others. It was later discussed by Helman (2007: 274-275). It can be divided into five steps (see also Csordas, 1994).

The first step implies that the healer and potential patients have a coherent system of beliefs and a certain mode of perceiving the world – a mythic world (Dow, 1986). In small scale societies, this world view is common to most members, while in large scale societies it may be shared only by those belonging to a certain cult, religion or lifestyle. The next phase implies a so-called symbolic bridge (Kleinman, 1988) – a link between individual experience and the social and spiritual world. Through this link, the patient understands his or her affliction and its resolution in terms of symbols of the mythic world. By using different theatrical and

rhetorical techniques, the healer then activates the symbolic bridge by convincing and persuading the sufferer that the “problem is explicable in terms of the symbols of the mythic world” (Helman, 2007: 275). Thus, the problem is redefined as, for example, afflicting spirits, sorcery, or the evil eye.

The healer then persuades the patient to become emotionally involved in the healing process and to personally relate to the symbols of the mythic world as well as to larger social and cosmological concerns. Subsequently, some kind of ritual is performed where a therapeutic change takes place. A transformation of experience occurs as the patient re-evaluates and reconsiders the past and the present. In the last step the patient is healed and has acquired a new way of imaging and conceptualizing his/her experience in symbolic terms. A successful outcome will affect mind and body, as well as the patient’s social relations and relations to the spiritual world.

Among both Santería followers and the Miskitu, there is a structure that seems to follow Dow’s model of symbolic-religious healing and his emphasis on meaning and symbols. There are certain techniques, such as divination, praying and the use of sacred objects, to make the sufferers understand that their problem is explicable in terms of their respective mythic worlds. Through the rituals, the afflicted transform their experience and develop a new attitude and a new way of understanding themselves and their problem. Suffering and illness experiences are reorganized, reconstructed and reformulated – they are “expressed anew in the language of the sacred” (Danforth, 1989: 55).

The relationship with a world of divinities and spirits is crucial here. In Santería, the initiate develops a close relationship to his/her *santo*. Often, the divinity is first said to have provoked an affliction, but by going through initiation and by becoming identified with the divinity, the problem ceases and the divinity becomes instead the protector or “guardian angel” of the initiate. Similarly in Miskitu healing, the frightening spirit who forced the negative and harmful possession on the sufferer is converted into a nice and compassionate friend.

Spirit possession exists in many cultures (Bourguignon 2004) and, as with the issue of healing, it is important in many Afro-Latin American religions, such as Vodou (Thylefors, 2002); Candomblé and Umbanda (Sjørsløv, 2001); Palo Monte (Wedel, 2004); and the cult of María Lionza (Placido, 2001). Possession, broadly speaking, “constitutes the crucial step in constructing a new clinical and sacred reality for people and in transforming their condition from one of sickness to one of health” (Danforth, 1989: 58; see also Lambek, 1993). Through the idiom of spirits and divine beings, illness and suffering is reinterpreted as signs of possession and given concrete form in an environment where there exist certain procedures for resolving the problem (see also Good, 1994: 128-130). In this way, afflicting spirits are transformed into supporting ones through culturally specific rituals.

Spirits help people interpret the world and they can represent people’s conditions on different levels; both positive and negative social relationships, and both well-being and illness. Spirits are representations of people’s conditions as they may be a sign, or expression, of social, psychological and physiological conditions or state of affairs. Similarly, spirits represent a model for healing and health as they can change a person’s condition from illness to health.

## Notes

- 1 Fieldwork in Matanzas and Havana, Cuba was carried out during fifteen months, 1996–2001, and mainly funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency/Department for Research Cooperation. Fieldwork in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua was carried out during eleven months, 2005–2008, and mainly funded by the Swedish Research Council. In Nicaragua, I would especially like to thank: Dr. Manuel Ortega Hegg at Universidad Centroamericana, Managua; Lic. Pablo McDavis, Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua, Puerto Cabezas, and Julian Morgan, Puerto Cabezas.
- 2 During the past 25 years, a large number of studies have focused on religious and ritual healing, emphasizing the symbolic, sacred and spiritual forms of therapy (for an overview, see Csordas and Lewton, 1998; Baer, 2005).
- 3 All names have been fictionalized in order to protect the narrators.
- 4 The Cuban form of spiritism, espiritismo, is a variant of the European spiritism developed by Alan Kardec during the nineteenth century (Brandon, 1993: 86-87; Wedel, 2004: 51-53).
- 5 An important question that has been posed during recent years in the fields of psychoneuroimmunology and placebo studies is the possible physiological effects of healing (Moerman, 1979; Hirsch, 2004). Moerman and Jones (2006: 340) claim that there is an effect on human biology and physiology in healing, based on what they call the “meaning response,” and van der Geest (2005) has shown that this process is functioning not only in religious rituals, but in hospital work as well.

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