



POSSESSION IS 9/10 OF PSYCHOLOGY

The spirit realm is at least as real as any psychoanalytic theory for the patients of Maximo Gonzalez, of the Adult Outpatient Unit of

Lincoln Hospital, in the Bronx. In the interest of healing, let alone "understanding reality," Gonzalez and a handful of others in community mental-health facilities throughout the United States are prepared to leave the sanctuary of their theories, and work together with the spiritists, mediums, and Santeria priests (*santeros*) so central to their clients' cultures and lives.

MAXIMO GONZALEZ: Everything began because so many of my clients told me they were believers.

INTERVIEW: Isn't it extraordinary that your clients would talk to a psychologist about their spirit dealings at all?

MG: If they were talking to an Anglo, it probably would be, but I'm Cuban. I have this poster of Cuba hanging on my wall. They think all Cubans should be familiar with such things.

I: Did you have specific goals for your work with the *santeros*?

MG: Once we realized that between one-quarter and one-third of our clients had experiences with spirits, we began to be aware of the possibility of misdiagnosis. What may look like psychosis at first glance may not be at all. For instance, one client of mine had been given Thorazine after she told a doctor about her relationship with a spirit. We need these spiritists and *santeros* to help us understand whether a patient is being consistent, if you will, within the rules of the game. A fourteen-year-old girl was recently referred to us from child services to see if she was having psychotic episodes. After many psychological tests and interviews, including the key consultation with spiritists, it became

clear that the girl was simply a very good spiritist—not a psychotic. Sometimes it becomes impossible to work with clients who insist that all their problems come from witchcraft. Many of these clients are absolutely convinced that whatever psychotherapeutic issues I might bring up are totally irrelevant. If that is the case the best role I can have is to urge the client to take the appropriate steps to find the solution within their own belief system. I'm not a medium. I'm not a *santero*. I can only work with the feelings around witchcraft. We've developed a referral system here of spiritists, *santeros*, *paleros*, and others—people we know aren't going to rip our clients off.

I: How did you develop the referral system?

MG: We started twelve or fourteen years ago by asking our clients who their favorite *santero* or spiritist was. I found I was surrounded by a huge, invisible net, and I hadn't realized it. So I went and talked to them.

I: How did they receive you?

MG: Generally they were very open, very

gracious, not in the least defensive. They knew far better than we did that we weren't going to take anybody away from them. Rarely did they see psychologists as competition. Their attitude was more "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." And since the concept of psychotherapy doesn't exactly make much sense to them—it's hardly something they believe in—they saw us more or less as medical advisers. Caesar has a pill for anxiety, to bring on sleep, etc.

Sometimes a *santero* would send us a referral. They will say to their clients, "Your problems are not due to anything supernatural, but rather to poor judgment. We can't help you with that." So they send them to us. With one of my clients, one of our therapeutic goals was for him to get healthy enough so that his *santeros* would agree to work with him again. *Santeros* are also quick to deny their services to the psychotic. "You're crazy," they say. "You have no spirits, no nothing. You belong to the doctor."

I: Do you feel that something more than the power of suggestion is at work?

MG: "The power of suggestion" is the basket that is used to throw away whatever we can't understand by the simplest scientific methods.

I: Would you seek out a *santero* or a spiritist yourself?

MG: Well, people generally go when they're in crisis, so as long as one is living a peaceful and quiet life the question doesn't really come up. People very close to me have gone, though, and very recently, to find out if Fidel will fall soon.

I: What is it that you feel *santeros* and spiritists have to teach you?

MG: Many are wonderfully skillful interviewers. Their language and empathic skills are quite extraordinary.

What I've learned through all this is that it matters little what I believe. What's important is what the client I have in front of me believes. We in the psychiatric/psychological community have a tremendous arrogance about our beliefs—our whole psychochemical conception of the universe. The things that oppose that conception are brushed aside as impossible, when, in effect, reality is so complicated and we know so very, very little about it.

ELIZABETH HANLY