

INÁCIO FERREIRA: THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE INTEGRATION BETWEEN MEDICINE AND PARANORMAL PHENOMENA

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ABSTRACT

Paranormal or psychic phenomena may impact society in several ways. Sometimes they are institutionalized through academic organizations. In Brazil, through spiritism, paranormal phenomena have been integrated to practices of mainstream Western medicine for almost a century in dozens of spiritist psychiatric hospitals throughout the country. The present study aims to present a historical investigation of the Spiritist Sanatorium of Uberaba, one of the oldest and most important spiritist hospitals in Brazil, since its foundation in 1933 until the death of its first director in 1988, Inácio Ferreira. We have also studied Ferreira's life as a physician, since he was the first major spiritist psychiatrist in Brazil and probably in the world. Ferreira conducted research, wrote and published several books reporting case studies of patients at the Sanatorium, their treatment and follow up. His work at the Sanatorium reached press, lay audience and researchers from several countries. Ferreira had a prominent role in pursuing the integration of psychic experiences with conventional medicine, in institutionalizing spiritist practices and representations regarding the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders, mainly ideas referring to the importance of the influence of discarnate intelligences and past life experiences on mental health. He was the major promoter of these principles and practices in Brazil and abroad. Ferreira's work often raised resistance among physicians and was not adopted by Brazilian academic medicine. We are not aware of any academic study on Ferreira or his work at the Spiritist Sanatorium of Uberaba. The present historical paper is a brief report of an ongoing investigation that aims helping to fulfill that lack in historical studies.

INTRODUCTION

Paranormal or psychic phenomena may impact society in several ways. Many times they are institutionalized in religious and/or healing traditions. More rarely, this institutionalization happens through academic organizations. In Brazil, through spiritism, paranormal phenomena have been integrated to practices of mainstream Western medicine for almost a century in dozens of spiritist psychiatric hospitals throughout the country (Almeida, 2007; Moreira-Almeida e Lotufo Neto, 2005). The integration between conventional medicine and paranormal phenomena has been institutionalized by the foundation of dozens of spiritist psychiatric hospitals throughout the country (Puttini, 2004). In Brazil, the union between medicine and spiritism was more intense than any other place (Aubreé & Laplantine, 1990; Hess, 1991).

Most Brazilian spiritist hospitals did not produce publications with wide circulation describing in depth the combination of medical and spiritist treatments. A major exception to this pattern was Inácio Ferreira M.D., from the Spiritist Sanatorium of Uberaba, state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. During 55 years he directed and worked at the Sanatorium, one of the oldest and most important spiritist hospitals in Brazil. The present study aims to present a historical investigation of the Spiritist Sanatorium of Uberaba since its foundation in 1933 until Ferreira's death in 1988. We have also studied Ferreira's life as a physician, since he was the first major spiritist psychiatrist in Brazil and probably in the world.

METHODS

This study works with the cultural history's concepts of practices and representations. We aim to investigate the process where the spiritist view of mental disorders produced new practices for the understanding, diagnosis and treatment of madness. The history of the Spiritist Sanatorium of Uberaba will be studied as an institutionalization that marks in a visible and permanent way the existence of a group (Chartier, 1988). This historical investigation is mainly based upon primary sources: books, articles, letters, notebooks, documents, patients' charts and other first hand materials produced by our historical subjects. We also interviewed people who worked with and/or had close relationship with Inácio Ferreira and his work at the Sanatorium.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The physician Inácio Ferreira (1904/1988) was born in Uberaba, state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. In 1924, he was admitted to the medical school at University of Rio de Janeiro¹, getting his MD degree in 1929 (De Vitto, 2008).

In 1928, a group of spiritists started building a spiritist psychiatric hospital, the Spiritist Sanatorium of Uberaba, that was opened in December 31st, 1933. Despite being a materialist, Inácio Ferreira accepted to be the physician assistant and the clinical director of the Sanatorium, beginning his duties in early 1934. The hospital, like all spiritist hospitals, is a nonprofit one, devoted mainly to care for poor patients. It was opened with 60 beds, being 10 allocated for free treatments (Baceli, 1987).

Ferreira stated that during the first year of his work at the Sanatorium, he only used orthodox medicine to diagnose and treat mental disorders. The complementary spiritist treatment was provided by volunteers and was based on passes (laying on of hands), prayers, and mediumistic séances of disobsession². Around one year after beginning his work at the Sanatorium, Ferreira declared having accepted Spiritism (Ferreira, s/ed.). Since then, until his death in 1988, he integrated conventional medical therapies to spiritist treatments.

Throughout his career he wrote and published books of several genres. Six of them were directly related to Spiritism and Medicine: "Têm Razão?" (Are they right?) (1942), "Novos Rumos à Medicina I e II" (New directions to medicine vol. I and II) (1945;1948), "Espiritismo e Medicina" (Spiritism and Medicine) (1941), "Psiquiatria em face da Reencarnação" (Psychiatry in face of reincarnation) (1940), and "Peregrinos da Vida" (Pilgrims of life) (1982). At these books, Ferreira presented evidence for spiritual etiology for many cases of madness and for the efficacy of spiritist treatments. Some of his books were translated to Spanish.

The main thesis advocated by Ferreira was that conventional medicine limited its own possibilities of investigation and therapeutic interventions when it refused to study the spiritual factor of mental diseases and the hypothesis of reincarnation. Spiritism (supporting the role of spiritual influences and past live experiences), together with psychosocial and biological factors, would be an essential tool for a qualitative leap in psychiatry, leading to a better understanding and treatment of mental disorders.

The cause for such resistance would be the materialistic dogmatism and the authoritarian character of the academic milieu, bound to the *magister dixit*, self-interests (religious or financial) and prejudices regarding to spiritism (Ferreira, 1944, 1944a). Ferreira's claims raised strong opposition from part of medical class and Catholic Church.

¹ This school of medicine, founded in 1808, is the second oldest in Brazil. Rio de Janeiro was Brazil's capital between 1763 to 1960. Sources: <http://www.medicina.ufrj.br/>; <http://www.medicina.ufba.br>, accessed in 14/04/2008.

² Obsession is considered a persistent negative influence of discarnate spirits. Disobsession is a mediumistic séance where a spirit who would be causing obsession communicates through a medium and is counseled to stop doing harm to the patient (Kardec, 1868).

In addition to psychosocial and biological causes of mental disorders, Ferreira added spiritual influence and past lives experiences. In his clinical practice at the Sanatorium, he first used to interview patient and his/her family and to perform a physical and mental status examination. His first target was to detect any organic cause for the mental disorder. If he did not find any evidence of an organic origin, patient was observed during some days at the psychiatric ward using no medication. During this time Ferreira used to ask, in a mediumistic meeting, for some information regarding the patient's disorder and its etiology. If information gathered from clinical observation and mediumistic sources pointed to a spiritual cause, spiritist therapeutics were initiated, isolated or in conjunction with conventional medical therapies.

Ferreira claimed that the high cure rate obtained with very scarce resources were an evidence for the efficacy of spiritist therapy³. According to a report of the activities developed from 1934 to 1944 at the Sanatorium, 1,352 patients were admitted, 554 (41%) were discharged cured, 210 (16%) had improved (16%), 163 (12%) were transferred, 241 (25%) were removed and 51 (4%) died. In this period, 423 cases were classified as obsession, being the diagnostic classification that allowed for a greater percentage of cures, to nearly 100%⁴ (Ferreira, 1993; Moreira-Almeida & Lotufo Neto, 2005).

His books were not written in technical language, they seem to be directed also to the lay public. The style is often emotional and grandiose, announcing the advent of a new era for medicine. The abounding case reports, despite not describing the psychopathological details, provide good illustration and try to prove the spiritist theory for mental disorders, but he usually did not provide strong evidence of truly paranormal phenomena (Moreira-Almeida & Lotufo Neto, 2005). One example is described below:

A 38 years old woman suddenly started showing marked behavior changes. At late night she often left home in agitation saying that a voice from a dead person was calling her. She was admitted to the Sanatorium where symptoms persisted in addition to fearful and paranoid behavior. Mental examination showed that level of consciousness, memory, and orientation were preserved. Thirteen days after patient's admission to the hospital, a medium in trance in a mediumistic meeting said that an obsessing spirit caused her disorder because, in a previous life, she had done much harm to the obsessing spirit when it was incarnated. The obsessing spirit communicated through a medium and was persuaded to release the patient. After that, the patient had some improvement in her clinical, but still kept some symptoms. Ferreira raised the hypothesis that she might have another spiritual influence. It was confirmed a few days later by a manifestation of another obsessing spirit at mediumistic meetings. Patient's total recovery was obtained just after the second obsessing spirit having accepted freeing her. Patient was soon discharged with no symptoms despite the use of no medications; her therapy was totally based on spiritist therapeutics.

The influence of Ferreira's medico-spiritual practice expanded largely beyond Brazilian spiritists. His works reached press, lay audience and researchers from several countries, mainly between 1940s and 1970s. We were able to have access to letters that he received from Argentina, Bulgaria, Chile, Paraguay, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Spain, United States, and Venezuela asking for diagnosis and treatment of a wide range of mental disorders. Spiritualist/spiritist magazines from several countries (Conocimiento de La Nueva Era – Argentina; Cosmos - Puerto Rico; Prismas – Venezuela; Voz Informativa – Mexico; Light - United Kingdom, and La Revue Spirite - France) published articles about Ferreira and his work.

³ It is worth to note that Ferreira published most of his books before the “psychopharmacologic revolution”, when contemporary standard psychiatric medications were developed at the 1950s decade (Rosenbloom, 2002). So, Ferreira wrote his books in a period when almost no effective treatment to severe mental disorder was available. We have started the investigation of the impact of psychopharmacologic revolution over the therapeutics used at the Sanatorium.

⁴ Inácio Ferreira reported several cases of “spectacular cures” due to spiritist therapies. However, most of the current standard methodological rigor such as randomized controlled clinical trials was not available at that time (Dehue, 1999).

Karl Müller, president of International Spiritualist Federation, published two papers about Ferreira's work at the magazines "Yours Fraternally" (official organ of the International Spiritualist Federation) and "Spiritualisme Moderne" (published by the Belgian Spiritist Union).

Inácio Ferreira published dozens of papers in spiritist magazines from Brazil ("Revista Internacional do Espiritismo" and "O Revelador") and Argentina ("Revista Constancia", from the Argentinean Spiritist Association) proposing the spiritist view of mental disorders as an essential complement to conventional medicine. He was invited to deliver lectures in spiritualist congresses in Brazil and Argentina (at the Argentinean Spiritist Confederation and at the Pan-American Spirit Confederation - CEPA).

In 1947, Natalio Ceccarini (president of Argentinean Spiritist Confederation) delivered a lecture in Buenos Aires: "Dr. Ignacio Ferreira: Spiritist and revolutionary of psychiatry". This address was published as a book in Spanish prefaced by Inácio Ferreira (Satto, 1951).

In 1959, Argentinean spiritists made a proposal to Consejo Nacional de Salud Mental of Argentina to build a spiritist hospital in Buenos Aires. This proposal was refused. As an answer to this refusal, Salvador Satto published a book in 1961 (The spiritism at psychiatry's defendant's bench) asserting the importance and efficacy of spiritist therapies. The case of Ferreira at the Sanatorium was an important topic in the book.

Ferreira's book "Novos Rumos à Medicina" (1945) was in the reference list of a parapsychology course offered in 1958 by the Institute for High Studies of Montevideo.

Ferreira was in touch with several physicians and people interested in psychic research and parapsychology, in addition to researchers in the field. These contacts usually aimed to obtain more information regarding Ferreira's diagnostic and treatment methods; reports of cures and cases suggestive of reincarnation as well as arranging visits to the Sanatorium. Joseph Hansell from Metaphysical Research Foundation (USA), staff from Instituto Internacional de Parapsicologia de Puerto Rico, and Enio Hernandez Freitas, director of Instituto Venezolano de Parapsicologia were some of these contacts. By indication of Karl Müller, Ian Stevenson, from University of Virginia (USA), contacted Inácio Ferreira and exchanged some letters with the Brazilian psychiatrist about his work at the Sanatorium and the book "Psiquiatria em Face da Reencarnação" (1940). Stevenson visited Ferreira and the Sanatorium in 1960s.

Ferreira's work on spiritist psychiatry raised strong resistance from Brazilian medical community. Just later in his life, Ferreira was honored with several awards. In 1979, the Medical Association of Minas Gerais (the state where he lived) awarded him by his 50 years of work in medicine. Rotary Club, in 1980 and in 1987, awarded him in acknowledgment for his services to Uberaba (his city) and with a "Merit in Medicine". Also in 1987, the School of Medicine of Triângulo Mineiro and the Society of Medicine and Surgery of Uberaba paid tributes to him. He was also a very active member of Freemasonry, having received several homages in it. Despite those acknowledgments for his life devoted to medicine, Ferreira's practices integrating spiritism to medicine were not adopted by Brazilian academic medicine.

Inácio Ferreira had a prominent role in pursuing the integration of psychic experiences in conventional medicine, in institutionalizing spiritist practices and representations regarding the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders, mainly ideas referring to the importance of the influence of discarnate intelligences and past live experiences on mental health. He was the major promoter of these principles and practices in Brazil and abroad. We are not aware of any academic study on Ferreira or his work at the Spiritist Sanatorium of Uberaba. The present historical paper has a more descriptive approach because it is a brief report of an ongoing investigation that aims helping to fulfill that lack in historical studies.

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