
NEREIDA BELTRÁN RODRÍGUEZ

El Espiritismo de las mujeres puertorriqueñas:
De las extraordinarias pioneras a sus herederas
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Indexed Interview

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Indexed Interview

Sandra Enríquez Seiders, PhD

Digital Story

A Family Perspective: Brígida Álvarez Rodríguez – [1:41 - 12:01]

Other Themes

1. **What is your understanding of Spiritism?** – [14:21 - 18:12]
2. **Gender and Spiritism** – [18:32 - 19:46; 25:48 - 26:21; 26:40 - 27:05]
3. **Spiritist Work in Puerto Rican Politics** – [24:08 - 25:33]

Clara Román-Odio [00:00:00] I am Clara Román-Odio from the project *Spiritism by Puerto Rican Women: From Remarkable Pioneers to Contemporary Heirs*. I'm interviewing Dr. Sandra Enríquez Seiders, professor of History at the University of Puerto Rico in Utuado and author of *Brígida Álvarez Rodríguez: A Woman, A History*. She is also the author of the book *Spiritism in Utuado: The History of the Baldoni Sisters* and numerous historical articles. Today is July 28, 2019 and we are interviewing Dr. Enríquez Seiders at the Spiritist Center "Amor al Bien" in Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico. I am very grateful for your participation in this project. Could you please tell me your full name and date of birth?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:00:57] My name is Sandra Enríquez Seiders and I was born on August 29, 1950.

Clara Román-Odio [00:01:11] Thank you. Thinking about family values, gender, and Spiritism, and about the origins of this movement, your great-great-grandfather, Mr. Salomón Álvarez Domenech, was one of those responsible for the arrival of Spiritism to Puerto Rico in the middle of the 19th century. Could you tell us something about his role in the introduction and dissemination of the Spiritist doctrine on the Island? Well, according to the history books and documents that I got, he received articles and books that came from abroad. It is thought that those books that arrived here in different ways, such as in suitcases, because here that was totally forbidden. Remember, it was the time when Puerto Rico was under Spanish rule and everyone had to be Catholic here. In fact, the government persecuted those who were not Catholic. And Salomón made a difference. I think all the intellectual elite of the late 19th century, like Salomon, were Kardecian spiritists. I am talking about Manuel Corchado y Juarbe, Alejandro Tapia y Rivera; and I think that Salomón Álvarez belonged to that group, but he was well

persecuted by the government because in those times the government and the State were one and the same.

Clara Román-Odio [00:03:06] How did he resist persecution by the Church and the State?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:03:14] Well, I also want to tell you that Spiritism has always been linked in some way with, for example, the uprising known as Grito de Lares (“The Cry of Lares”) as with the autonomous movement in Puerto Rico. So, as he is hunted by the State, when I start this research, I realize that he is moving from town to town. First from Quebradillas, then from Ponce. I keep finding materials in Ponce, then he goes to Humacao, from there to Caguas, and finally he settles in Vega Baja, which is where his daughter is born. Well, the question is, why is he moving? That’s very interesting. Sure, because he’s being chased. Right? But I also think that he could have belonged to those movements because if there was a relationship between those movements and Spiritism, that’s reason enough for him to start moving from town to town.

Clara Román-Odio [00:04:35] And how exactly did he contribute to the dissemination [of the doctrine]? I understand that he had a printing press, but what kind of work did he do?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:04:46] Well, he had his own printing press. And not only that, but he published numerous newspapers *El Nivel (The Level)*, *La Luz (The Light)*, all free-thinking newspapers. Well, you can imagine that, for the state, that was a mortal sin. So...but he never stopped, he went on. All his newspapers, all of them, were free-thinking, spiritist newspapers.

Clara Román-Odio [00:05:21] Thinking about family values, gender, and Spiritism, how do you think Mr. Salomón’s spiritist work impacted his family values and the cultural and gender norms he practiced at home?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:05:40] Well, I think that, even though he had another child, his son died very young. Later, when Brígida was already married, he had a second child. But, I think you are what you learn at home and Brígida was definitely a free-thinking, modern woman for her times. Brígida even dared to get civilly married during the time of Spanish rule. It was the first civil marriage registered in our history. In the time of Spain, she dared to get a civil marriage. So that fact, right, of her daring to do something like that, well, why does she do it? Because she learned from her father, and as the Kardecian Spiritism establishes, that there is no difference between man and woman and promotes making a woman a free-thinking woman, with her own ideas, etc., etc. Then, that definitely had to have been key in the life history of Brígida.

Clara Román-Odio [00:07:19] Brígida Álvarez Rodríguez was your great-grandmother, right?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:07:22] Yes.

Clara Román-Odio [00:07:23] So, she was a journalist, owner of a printing press, and an educator. Could you tell us about her civic work and also about her spiritist work?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:07:41] Well, she, after her father's death, inherited the printing press. She gets married. They already lived in Vega Baja. When this gentleman from San Juan arrived, he came to work in Vega Baja and that's when she met Fernando Enríquez who was my great-grandfather. But she still produces those newspapers. However, unfortunately, I truthfully don't know how much of a Kardecian spiritist her husband was. I don't think he lived that philosophy of life and, in fact, her name doesn't even appear. The name in the papers is the husband's name, not hers. But newspapers are still produced in Vega Baja. Then he goes to San Juan because he becomes secretary of the House of Representatives in 1917 with the Jones Act and she stays alone in Vega Baja with many children. She never complains, you know.

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:09:05] But you know what? When he dies and educated women are given the right to vote, she gets involved in politics. She belonged to the Liberal Party. Not only did she fight for the women's vote, but she also ran and was elected to a position as a municipal Council in her town. And that, imagine, a woman of that time, daring to be in politics. Not only does she dare and run, she gets elected. It means that the people knew her. As an educator, I don't have any details, right, that she was a teacher. But yes, the people I interviewed told me that she did an incredible job, that she helped everyone who came to the house with their homework, and I know that. In fact, when the movement to name the first high school came up, because Vega Baja didn't have a high school—the children had to go and study outside of Vega Baja—they named that first high school after her. Why did they name the school after her? Because she definitely does an incredible job in Vega Baja so that the Vega Baja people would have a school and the children would not have to go to another town to complete their studies.

Clara Román-Odio [00:10:34] You did some pretty detailed research on the history of that school. Could you tell us a little about what happened to that school in terms of the name that was given and taken away, etc.?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:10:51] Well, the first high school was named after Brígida Álvarez. But, as time went by, a modern school was built in Vega Baja and it was named after a man, a very important politician of that time. Lino Padrón. He was a socialist and by that time

the socialists joined the Republican Party and went to the elections as the coalition party. Imagine, he was a very important character in history, so it happened that Brígida's name was forgotten. People forgot all that and the high school started to be known as Lino Padrón. It wasn't until I began, many years later, to investigate the figure of Brígida that I managed to rescue the school and have it named after Brígida, as it originally was.

Clara Román-Odio [00:12:02] There are some aspirations, you mentioned the values and aspirations of the Spiritist doctrine as a doctrine that supports gender equality. How is it different? In what sense is it different? How is this aspiration and this statement different?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:12:29] Well, I think, because history tells us how women have always been dominated, right? And suddenly Allan Kardec comes and establishes that there is no difference between men and women, because in terms of reason, both men and women are equal, right? That women have the same capabilities as men, because you imagine all those women who for so many years were subjected to male rule, suddenly they read Allan Kardec. Definitely, in some way, they are going to identify with Kardec's ideas. Another very interesting thing is that, as I have studied several women, who were also Kardecian spiritists, many of the daughters of these initiators of Kardecian Spiritism also adopted Kardec's ideas, as for example Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón's daughter, Carlota Matienzo. She was also an educator and she was a Kardecian spiritist. I want to tell you that the first residence for women at the University of Puerto Rico was named after Carlota Matienzo. The same thing happened with the daughter of Manuel Fernández Juncos. His daughter was also a Kardecian spiritist. So, that philosophy of life was lived, I imagine, since childhood in their homes.

Clara Román-Odio [00:14:16] What is your understanding of Spiritism and how did you become interested in this field?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:14:21] Well, first of all I want to tell you that I am not a Kardecian spiritist. I would have loved to be a Kardecian spiritist! Just with the values that Kardecian spiritists have! In my house that was never discussed. I discovered that my family was Kardecian spiritist when I began to study that in my house. I did know that my grandfather and his brothers, Brígida's children, none of them had been baptized. Another thing was that they were anticlerical, but that was like a taboo here in Puerto Rico, that was not mentioned in the homes. It wasn't until I began the investigation that I discovered that in my family. Well, we were raised within the Catholic Church. We went to nun's schools, so I never heard that. It wasn't until, as I say, I started my research, that I discovered that my whole family was Kardecian spiritists.

Clara Román-Odio [00:15:36] How does your historical academic work contribute to the

doctrine or to spiritist practice in Puerto Rico?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:15:46] Well, now I can talk about Kardecian Spiritism. It even bothers me when sometimes people kind of despise Spiritism. That's why I always point out the difference between what is Kardecian Spiritism (scientific) and what I personally call folk Spiritism. They are two completely different things. Folk Spiritism in Puerto Rico is like a mixture, I would tell you, of Santería or the practices of our indigenous people, etc. But that's not scientific Spiritism. I don't dare to talk much about this because I don't practice this philosophy of life but, for example, the Kardecian Spiritists condemn the reading of cards, for example, games of chance, of all those things. They condemn that. But, here in Puerto Rico, there is a tendency to generalize and that is not true. So, I think that wherever I have gone, even though I am not a Kardecian spiritist, I try to make people understand the difference between the two.

Clara Román-Odio [00:17:07] How has your understanding of the spiritist doctrine matured?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:17:13] Well, as I tell you, even though I was educated in a Catholic school, where the same nuns also made us believe that it [spiritism] was evil. I even remember that I had friends whose parents were Masons and I remember how the Church, even the nuns, pointed them out because the parents were Masons. So, I sometimes feel that not only what I have learned, but through my research and the lectures I have given, as somehow people are beginning to change the idea they have about what a Kardecian Spiritism is, that they are two completely different things.

Clara Román-Odio [00:18:13] You have invested years of your career in this research about women and you have found Spiritism in that trajectory. How do you feel about what you do or what you have done in this field that connects gender and Spiritism?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:18:32] Well, since I started to write, I have written stories about women. But I think Brígida's work impacted me in an incredible way. And then, when I began to work on suffrage, which was really my doctoral thesis, to which I dedicated a lot of time in my life, because I was just reviewing the press in Puerto Rico, from 1919 to 1945, all the newspapers. You begin then to meet all these women that the great majority of them, you have already seen, were Kardecian spiritists. And that was like a spark, right? For me to continue with all this and especially when you start reading and looking... I mean, I think that the Kardecian Spiritism was key in the decision making of many of these women, from Luisa Capetillo, Ana Roque de Duprey, who were key women in this movement and in the struggle for suffrage, to get the vote of women.

Clara Román-Odio [00:19:47] You have published several books on the topic and offer talks on this issue around the Island. Can you comment on how Puerto Rican women have responded to your work?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:20:05] Well, I think there has been very good acceptance not only from women but even from men. And I have not necessarily gone to Spiritist Centers to talk about it. I have also given talks outside about this and I believe that people are also beginning to change their vision, not only in terms of women's struggle to get the vote and rescue women who were in anonymity, but also to change a little bit the vision they have about this which is not, for me, a religion. It is a philosophy of life.

Clara Román-Odio [00:20:53] In what sense is the spiritist doctrine still in force?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:20:54] Well, in Puerto Rico, there are not as many spiritist centers as there were, for example, at the beginning of the 20th century, right? Because once the invasion of the United States comes, then comes the separation of Church and State. And then, those spiritists who had to hide in the past to be able to celebrate their meetings, now they don't have to hide. Now the spiritist centers begin to proliferate throughout the Island. But I don't know if I am right, right? Because as I told you, I am not a Kardecian Spiritist. But I find that there are very few spiritist centers now in the towns of Puerto Rico. But there is and I have already met many young people, right, maybe, as they say, passing the baton to a young generation to continue with all this.

Clara Román-Odio [00:22:13] Thinking about the impact, in the social and political body of the Island, how do you think Spiritism has contributed or continues to contribute to the social welfare work in Puerto Rico?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:22:28] Well, no, not right now. I don't know, I can't answer that question right now, but I do want to tell you that when the Kardecian Spiritism started in Puerto Rico, I know of many places where the spiritists even built hospitals. That is the case of Utuado that I worked on in the book of the Baldoni sisters. Utuado had a hospital. I also know that Salomón, my great-great-grandfather, tried to establish a center as well as a hospital in Vega Baja. And I have worked with another very interesting woman, Rosario Bellber; and Rosario Bellber established in Aibonito (she was from San Juan), where poverty was extreme, a hospital for those children of limited resources who were sick and were leaving the hospitals (remember that tuberculosis, all those illnesses, had their day at the beginning of the century in Puerto Rico) so that once they left the hospitals, they would have a place to go until they recovered and returned again to their families. People from there call it medical attention. So definitely the

Kardecsian spiritists did an incredible job in terms of public health.

Clara Román-Odio [00:23:59] And how, from your point of view, have politics in Puerto Rico been connected to spiritist work?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:24:08] Well, I don't think that the current politicians in Puerto Rico, none of them, are Kardecian spiritists. Well, back then yes. Manuel Corchado y Juarbe, for example, who was our representative in Spain, was a Kardecian spiritist. So, it definitely must have played an extremely important role. And José de Diego, Luis Muñoz Rivera, those were all spiritists. One thing I want to tell you is that when José de Diego becomes Speaker of the House for the year 1919 (1917, excuse me, when the Jones Act is granted to Puerto Rico), we had two legislative bodies then, he becomes Speaker of the House of Representatives and in that first assembly he asks that (Luis Muñoz Rivera had already died who was a very important politician in Puerto Rico) he asks that the Spirit of Luis Muñoz Rivera be present in that first assembly and that's what is recorded. That's what is recorded in the minutes of the Assembly of the Legislative Body in Puerto Rico.

Clara Román-Odio [00:25:34] How do you think Spiritism has impacted Puerto Ricans in general and women in particular?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:25:48] I don't dare to say that at this time, right? But at the period that I studied, which was the struggle for suffrage, it definitely had... it was like this open door, for the women who read Kardec to say, "Look, I can empower myself;" "I can achieve this." And I think that was fundamental in the decision making of all those women, especially in the struggle to get their right to vote.

Clara Román-Odio [00:26:22] Do you have any final comments with which you would like to leave us, when we think about this relationship, particularly of anarchy and Spiritism or women's political struggle and Spiritism?

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:26:40] Well, definitely. All that group of women, those initiators, those who took the reins to fight for their rights, definitely the Kardecian spiritist ideas were present in each one of them.

Clara Román-Odio [00:27:06] Thank you very much for your time.

Sandra Enríquez Seiders [00:27:09] Thank you for the interview.