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An Introduction to Shamanism

Thomas A. Dubois
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The contemporary revitalization of shamanism as well as the incorporation of shamanic elements into many New Age movements makes it high time for a new comprehensive assessment of the tradition. In *Introduction to Shamanism* University of Wisconsin at Madison Professor of Scandinavian Studies Thomas Dubois provides a scholarly yet readily comprehensible study of the history practices and current status of shamanism—defined as “spiritual travel characterized by various culturally recognized and defined trance states” centered around a communally recognized professional who cultivates personal relations with helping spirits.

Dubois marches logically through shamanism’s history and rituals directing special attention to shamanic ceremonies music implements and verbal art and providing captivating accounts of various shamans’ trance experiences. The strongest aspect of *Introduction to Shamanism* is an outgrowth of these accounts: the great geographic diversity from which the author draws colorful examples of traditional practices. Although the pages of the book are filled with cases from places like Scandinavia and Alaska drawing on Dubois’s own research and that of many others readers attracted to more out-of-the-way regions will not be disappointed. Dubois includes examples from areas as far-flung as eastern Peru the Trobriand Islands near New Guinea and remote eastern Siberia—an area with a particularly rich history of shamanism. A quite detailed index helps pinpoint locations and practices of particular interest within the text.

Dubois ably tackles the biggest challenge that this broad array of cases presents: imposing order on the wide variety of different expressions of shamanism. He usually makes clear which shamanic elements (such as a belief in spirits’ interference in human lives) are common across cultures and which other ones (such as particular uses of music poetry and mind-altering substances in ceremonies) show wide diversity. In so doing however the book devotes far more attention to shamans themselves than to the distinct experiences of believers who do not communicate directly with spirits but rely on shamans to do so on their behalf.

The author’s expertise in Nordic culture may drive his focus on Christian contact with shamanism—especially organized Christian efforts during recent centuries to stamp it out—when he addresses adherents’ interactions with other religious traditions. The text sees minimal coverage of relations between shamanism and Islam for example. But even here in an area of less emphasis Dubois still manages to relate fascinating tidbits like how Central Asian dervishes of mystical Sufi Islam have incorporated shamanic practices.

Introduction to Shamanism will appeal to readers interested in learning the basics about these beliefs as well as those seeking a thorough academic survey of shamanic culture and religious practices.
DAVID PRIESS (March 12, 2009)

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