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Ropes to God: Experiencing the Bushman Spiritual Universe

Bradford Keeney, editor
Ringing Rocks Press (April 2003)
Unknown $39.95 (216pp)
978-0-918172-39-6

“Only the strongest doctors actually see the rope of light that goes to the Big God. You cannot decide on your own that you will see this rope. The Big God must open it for you,” says a Bushman, an aboriginal of South Africa, about his spiritual experience of the communal healing dance, as recorded by the editor. A cultural anthropologist, psychologist, shaman, and author, Keeney danced with the Bushmen for more than ten years. Though other anthropologists have studied the Bushmen, recording and interviewing them about their healing dances, Keeney is the first to become an active participant.

This is particularly important, according to Keeney. “Raw spiritual experience is most highly valued by the Bushmen. This experience is born and expressed by the movement of their bodies, not from the ruminations of reflective discourse.”

Keeney recorded the stories of their mystical experiences, photographed their healing dances, and filmed them. The resulting DVD of these dances is included with the hardcover edition of the book, giving the viewer the sense of energy and excitement generated by this ancient communal experience. The photographs show the ecstatic faces of the dancers, their gestures, and their relationship to each other in the dance, while the illustrations of their rock art show symbolically what is beyond words, such as the ropes and ladders to God.

The book is divided into several sections, some exploring Keeney’s thoughts, descriptions, and explanations of the dance, others providing recorded descriptions of the healers. These stories are told in a matter-of-fact tone, while still carrying the passion and excitement of the experience, and are grounded in images of “ropes to God” (the paths of light to God), “arrows and nails” (forms of energies), and “ostrich egg” dreams (a sign that the dancer was ready to climb the ropes to God).

For the Bushmen, the dance is especially important as they appear to have no oral or written tradition. “You must learn to wake up to God,” according to a Bushman doctor, Cgunta Lelae. “We wish that everyone would start dancing and wake up to God. We pray for other people of the world. We hope they start dancing with us.”

Ropes to God is the eighth volume in a series called “Profiles in Healing,” dedicated to helping traditional healers around the world tell their stories. It may not be for the casual reader (the Bushmen stories are somewhat repetitive), but for students of anthropology or shamanism, this book, especially with its accompanying DVD, adds new dimension to native spiritual understandings.
(May / June 2003)

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