

EDSON, GARY. *Shamanism: A Cross-Cultural Study of Beliefs and Practices*. Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, 2008. Pp 287. ISBN: 978-0-7864-3409-1.

Shamanism: A Cross-Cultural Study of Beliefs and Practices is divided into nine chapters, and numerous sub-chapters. The book opens with an introduction titled 'Spiritual Exaltation' and concludes with a summary called 'Transcendental Shamanism'. With these titles I was expecting an exhaustive discussion on 'spiritual' and 'transcendental', but instead the first chapter offers broad definitions and discusses shamanism as an early religious practice, while the last provides, slightly disappointingly, a short summary of the book's main ideas. The seven chapters in between deal with, among other subjects, belief-systems, magic and power, symbols, imaginations, rituals, healing and divination, spirits—all well-established topics in the literature on shamanisms. This vast approach runs the risk of addressing too many topics with superficial treatment, something that Edson does not entirely escape.

Edson focuses his analysis on the ability of shamans to function as 'transmitters' between the human and the supra-human worlds. The discussion centres on the belief that shamans are able to communicate with the spirits. Edson elaborates this with an impressive number of examples from different cultures from virtually all corners of the world. These include the Maya-culture and early Egyptian religion which are mentioned with surprising frequency (see for example pp. 64–65, 78, 178, 208), along with examples from the more classical Siberian shamanic milieu. Combined, this wealth of examples offers a broad comparative approach where practices at the first glance appear similar.

Yet to scholars specialized in the practices, thoughts and symbols utilized in connection with shamans, suggestions of worldwide similarity raise significant problems. Can all action concentrating on beliefs and including a mediator between the human and supra-human spheres be understood as 'shamanism'? Central here become the numerous associations the broad concepts 'shaman' and 'shamanism' create. This renders them as nearly useless analytical concepts, unless they are narrowed and clearly defined according to specific research questions. Adding to the confusion is the practice of many scholars to utilize the concepts of 'priest', 'fortune-teller', 'medicine-man' and 'shaman' as synonymous.

These outcomes raise the question of whether it would not be analytically more appropriate to write about 'shamanisms' in the plural. Or perhaps preferable would be to utilize native concepts for religious experts instead of utilizing 'shamanism' as an umbrella covering almost everything. While Gary Edson is aware of these problems, the vast geographic origin and diversity of historic periods of his ample examples occasionally renders his analysis confusing to follow. His writings hold the distinct danger of transforming the concepts of 'shaman' and 'shamanism' into empty signifiers without intrinsic analytical value.

In addition to focusing on practices and world-views related to the key-figure, the shaman, Edson expands his analysis to central topics often addressed by the literature on pre-literate religions. These include questions on the purposes of magic, on how symbolic thinking emerges, the functions of rituals and so forth. Thus this book also functions as an introduction to primal religions and to the discussion surrounding the emergence of religious thoughts and practices. Here it continues the discussion initiated, among others, by Piers

Vitebsky in his likewise richly illustrated book *Shamanism* (Vitebsky 1995), the works of Åke Hultkrantz (Hultkrantz 1988, 1989, 1996), and the volume published in 2004 and edited by Marika Namba Walter and Eva Jane Neumann Friedman titled *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture*. The latter book appears further to hold the greatest importance for Edson's analysis besides the classic writing of Mircea Eliade (1964).

However, the last decade has seen the emergence of several critical studies of the earlier Western research tradition connected with shamanism. This critical scholarship focuses in particular on the fascination, romanticization and nostalgic tone that descriptions of shamanistic pasts often entail. For example the research of Mircea Eliade, entailing grand cross-cultural comparisons, has been scrutinized by Henri Paul Francfort, Roberte N. Hamayan, and Paul G. Bahn (2001) as well as by Andrei Znamenski (2007). These critical studies are not mentioned in Edson's otherwise voluminous reference list nor are they incorporated into his analysis. Surprisingly, references to articles on shamanisms in the second edition of *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Jones 2005) are also absent whereas the bibliography includes questionable works by authors such as Olga Khariditidi (1996), the author of fictional shaman-novels.

The book is richly illustrated with pictures and photographs by the author, which makes it a beautiful piece of work. However, I am left with the impression that instead of merely providing illustration, the book ends up being governed by images of the author's collection of masks and carvings, instead of by the theoretical understanding of shamanic ideas and practices one had hoped to receive. Can this book be recommended to students of comparative religion and anthropology? With some hesitation I recommend it to beginners in the field of shamanism-studies. However, readers need to pair the book up with a complementary text on how to avoid the kind of excessively broad comparisons practiced by Edson, as well as on how to engage in methodological discussion while escaping exoticism and nostalgia.

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BOOK REVIEWS AND CRITICAL ESSAYS

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