

DE LIMA, MARCEL. *The Ethnopoetics of Shamanism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 265 p. ISBN 978-1-137-44368-7 (hardcover).

The Ethnopoetics of Shamanism discusses three cases of writings focused on individuals connected in different ways to shamanism, broadly defined as a phenomenon involving the practice of a person who ‘embodies the ability and the will to achieve an altered state of consciousness, often on the verge of derangement’ for purposes involving ‘the supernatural’ (p. 1). The three cases are the life story of Lakota shaman Nicholas Black Elk (first published in 1932), writings about Maria Sabina, a Mazatec healer (from 1957), and Carlos Castaneda’s series of books (from 1968). The author’s stated aim is to insert these texts into their ethnographic and literary contexts to discuss ‘the representations of shamanic practice in the Western world in the last century’ (p. 1) which he suggests develop from conceptions of shamanism as ranging from diabolic to exotic to artistic (p. 209). While the term ethnopoetics has been used to explore patterns of performance by writers such as Dennis Tedlock, the concept as used by Marcel de Lima seems to have a broader and somewhat evaluative sense, granting the status of poetry, as a form of literature to be taken seriously, to the songs and speech of the shaman.

The book begins with a short introduction to shamanism as a phenomenon, relying mostly on the work of Mircea Eliade. Although de Lima mentions some debates and differing views within anthropology, including critiques of shamanism as a viable cross-cultural category, the phenomenon is mostly discussed as a unified practice. Some aspects of the definition seem to rise from a specifically Western worldview, such as the claim that shamanism deals with the ‘supernatural’. De Lima also notes that ‘shamans raise problems of representation and categorization and are often seen and used as a repository for what is not otherwise adequately represented in a culture’ (p. 1). Thus, he argues that shamans can serve as a prime example of ‘the primitive other’ onto which Westerners may project their views.

The range of the latter is shown in how de Lima’s discussion links the representations of shamanism to several fundamental issues; at one point ethnopoetics is defined as ‘poetry of experimentation of the human potential in all times and places’ (p. 56). These issues are mainly approached through classic Western dichotomies such as good and evil or rationality and magic. De Lima explores ideas of how the concept of truth is related to poetry, dreams and the use of hallucinogens, drawing also on various examples in Western literature. On the one hand, this conceptual background makes the implicit context of the discussion seem straightforwardly arranged into categories, but on the other, it brings out the contradictory relations between those categories without fully clarifying how de Lima sees these relations. While it seems that some are taken to be aspects of cultural or social reality on some level—e.g. the distinction between sacred and secular—others seem to be portrayed as more historical and thus debatable, like the relative values of ‘reason’ and ‘magic’. Of course, from an anthropological perspective distinctions like sacred and profane or natural and supernatural are not universal. Therefore, while applying them to the cultural contexts of the discussed cases is problematic in itself, I feel the book would have benefited from taking a more in-depth look at the assumptions underlying

the ethnographic and literary contexts under discussion. Despite questioning ideas of rationality and reason, the book places shamanism within such a specific category that the rational worldview seems to retain an implicitly dominant position.

All three cases are stories about specific individuals, the first claiming to present an autobiography; the second combining biography, descriptions of shamanistic performance, use of mushrooms, and transcriptions of songs; and the third possibly entirely a work of fiction. Ethnographic works focused on specific individuals have often been controversial, raising questions of how representative they are, whose voice is heard, how translation and editing, among other elements, influence the results, and how being singled out impacts the life of the subject. As de Lima notes, this is also true of the cases he discusses. However, perhaps the most controversial of the three cases is that of Carlos Castaneda, whose works claim to depict Castaneda's apprenticeship to Don Juan, a Yaqui shaman—apparently a character invented by Castaneda. De Lima presents interesting reviews of Castaneda's work by Edward Spicer and Edmund Leach, both of whom question the ethnographic validity of the texts but deem them interesting in terms of offering other sorts of materials to consider.

De Lima calls Castaneda's work experimental ethnography, but I find this a bit problematic as there is so little information about the experiences on which the writings are based. Of course all writing is related to the experiences of the author and is in that sense cultural and even ethnographic, but distinguishing between ethnography and fiction as genres has its benefits. To me, the explicit and reflexive discussion of how engagement with events, experiences, and interaction informs the process of knowledge production is definitive of ethnography as a literary genre and an important aspect of its value as a practice. While Castaneda's work may be interesting for other reasons, in this sense it is not ethnographic, and makes questionable de Lima's claim (p. 180) that Castaneda models 'a more participatory approach', that studies of shamanism should emulate. Of course, especially after the ontological turn, Castaneda's work is also not unique in opening up the possibility of different realities (see p. 181).

To me, *The Ethnopoetics of Shamanism* is most interesting in terms of thinking about ethnography and representation: the discussion of shamanism provides the contextual ground against which these more general ideas come into view. It is interesting to look into a familiar topic through unfamiliar eyes and realize that commonly made distinctions within anthropology may hardly register from an outsider's view. The contexts given in the book are both narrower and wider than they tend to be in anthropology; treated as poetic creations per se, the visions of Nicholas Black Elk and the songs of Maria Sabina are seen as both individual works and part of a universal global poetry. From my anthropological perspective, I missed the aspect of culturally and socially defined discourse and practice as a contextual level that could enter into dialogue with the individual and the universal. Another difference I noted was the view of time scales in evaluating research. When de Lima referred to 'the scientific view of anthropology' hostile to shamanism, for example, I wondered what he meant until I realized he was considering anthropology during, say, the 1950s, which I would distinguish from more recent research but which de Lima treats as part and parcel of anthropology more broadly construed.

BOOK REVIEWS

This leads me to what I perceive to be the main question in the book and the discussions in which it engages—how is difference conceived, evaluated and employed by the shamans, the researchers, and the readers? Whose perspective/s are they/we after and to what ends? After all, it is more likely to be the magic of difference rather than the difference of magic that will save us from a destiny of ‘one insipid global, village-like amalgam’ of culture created by increasing secularism and technology (p. 99).

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