

THOMAS, NICHOLAS and CAROLINE HUMPHREY, editors. *Shamanism, History, and the State*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994. viii + 232 pages. Table, illustration, index. Cloth US\$44.50; ISBN 0-472-10512-4.

Based on a conference at King's College, Cambridge, that took place in October 1989, this volume presents nine essays that attempt new interpretations of shamanic activities in their historical and political contexts. The reader of these "case studies" will realize how differently shamanism can appear if studied from a perspective sensitive to history and the historical vicissitudes of such political institutions as the state.

The essays in *Shamanism, History, and the State* range widely over the religious landscape of Central and North Asia, South India, Madagascar, Oceania, and South America. There are, interestingly, two excellent and fascinating essays relating to ancient Rome: "Astrology and the State in Imperial Rome" (146-63) by Tamsyn Barton, and "The Roman and the Foreign: The Cult of the Great Mother in Imperial Rome" (164-90) by Mary Beard. The inclusion of these studies in the volume may have resulted from a definition of shamanism as including all forms of inspirational religious practice. To students of shamanism such a definition is too broad to be acceptable; even Barton frankly admits that astrology and its practitioners "do not fit easily within even the loosest definition of shamanism" (146). Beard also makes it clear that her study is "not about shamanic activity or inspirational religion in the Roman Empire as a whole" (166).

During the last several decades the scientific study of shamanism has been largely guided by the ethnologico-phenomenological approach, which was skillfully employed by Uno HARVA (1938) and which has since been refined and elaborated by ELIADE (1964), PAULSON (1964), and HULTKRANTZ (1973). Eliade, for example, defined shamanism as archaic techniques for the attainment of states of ecstasy and trance, during which the shaman is capable of making spiritual journeys to the heavenly and subterranean realms. Eliade pursued the process of becoming a shaman and studied the shaman's activities as healer and psychopomp, taking into account the mythic conception of the universe, the belief in various types of spirits, and the notions of heavenly and subterranean deities. He also paid careful attention to the religious meanings of shamanic costumes and drums.

The volume contains a polemic against the phenomenological approach to shamanism. More specifically, the editors charge that Eliade's phenomenological study of shamanism is charged with "essentialism" (2, 5, 6) and devoid of historical and political context: "It avoided associating particular varieties of shamanism or forms of shamanic practice with the peculiarities of political and social environments. It instead turned toward generalities, toward a general project of characterization" (1). The purpose of the editors is to balance this by analyzing and interpreting shamanism politically and historically, taking shamanism very broadly to be forms of inspirational religious practice that emerge as the result of dynamic historical processes. Shamans for them are political actors or mediators of historically constituted social contradictions and resistances; hence they are primarily interested in contextualizing shamanic activities in their political and social contexts.

The approach adopted in *Shamanism, History, and the State* is not a matter of surprise, however. ELIADE himself anticipated such a reaction to his methods when he stated:

The sociologist, for his part, is concerned with the social function of the shaman, the priest, the magician. He will study prestige originating from magical powers, its role in the structure of society, the relations between religious and political leaders, and so on. . . . The sociology of shamanism remains to be written, and it will be among the most important chapters in a general sociology of religion." (xii)

As a historian of religions, Eliade recognized the importance of history for the study of

religious phenomena. But he did not feel obliged to practice historiography in his study of the history of religions (e.g., shamanism). He was firmly convinced that someone else would restate shamanism from different perspectives, including that of historical and political anthropology. Rereading Eliade's *Shamanism* in the light of the volume under review is a refreshing and stimulating experience, confirming the strength of his phenomenological understanding of shamanism. The book is certain to remain a standard work on shamanism for the foreseeable future. It is also true, however, that some aspects of shamanism that remained behind the curtain in Eliade's work have now been brought to the forefront.

As the editors modestly state, this is an "exploratory book" (11). Nevertheless, it presents high-quality essays written by seasoned social anthropologists, historians, and classicists. Especially interesting is Roberte Hamayon's essay "Shamanism in Siberia" (76–89); Hamayon, drawing on her *La chasse à l'âme: Esquisse d'une théorie du chamanisme sibérien* (1990), presents a clear picture of the structure of shamanism in hunting society from a structuralist point of view. Also noteworthy is Peter Cow's "River People: Shamanism and History in Western Amazonia" (90–113). He argues that *ayahuasca* shamanism did not originate in the forested tribal region of Amazonia but in urban contexts, and that it has been exported from there to isolated tribal peoples among whom it has become the dominant form of shamanic healing. Caroline Humphrey also offers insightful observations in "Shamanic Practices and the State in Northern Asia" (191–228). In view of the fact that the shaman's ascent to the sky is a politically charged matter, she argues that it occurred only in particular historical circumstances; after the consolidation of the state, she says, shamans claiming celestial ascent are found exclusively in marginal areas far from centers of political power (197).

Taken as a whole, *Shamanism, History, and the State* is a rich, intellectually satisfying book that deserves to be read by all students of anthropology, the history of religions, and the classics.

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