

Reviews

APPROACHES TO AMAZONIAN MAGIC AND SHAMANISM

Michael F. Brown. *Tsewa's Gift: Magic and Meaning in an Amazonian Society*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986. 220 pp. \$19.95 (cloth).

Michael Taussig. *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987. xix plus 517 pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

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These two books are so radically different in their approaches to Amazonian magic and shamanism that they balance each other nicely. Through the interplay of their contrasting aims and methods, readers enjoy a provocative new view of magico-religious beliefs, shamanic healing, and the role of anthropology in interpreting cultural phenomena.

Brown's book is about magical practices of the Aguaruna Indians, a Jivaroan group numbering about 25,000 who live in northern Peru. He argues that traditionally anthropologists have viewed magic as expressive or performative behavior fundamentally different from behavior with an instrumental or technological-empirical basis. According to Brown, this distinction has no meaning for the Aguaruna and seriously distorts any effort to understand their technological and magical behavior.

After a discussion of Aguaruna spirits, soul concepts, dreams, visions produced by psychoactive plants, and shamanism, Brown arrives at the core of his work, the analysis of magical songs. It is primarily through song that the Aguaruna attempt to influence the forces that undermine or support their activities. Called *anen*, these songs are the private property of individuals who guard them but who may, on occasion, give them away or sell them. It is a tribute to Brown's abilities as a fieldworker that he collected as many songs, together with informant exegeses, as he did.

The songs vary from a few lines to several pages of text and are packed with complex metaphors, mythological allusions, puns, and onomatopoeia. *Anen* are also composed of special-use words and terms borrowed from other languages, so that they are difficult to decipher even for native speakers. The magical messages of these songs seem based on the principle of

affinity. Thus, allusions to the sexual attraction between men and women attract game to the hunter, or references to plants with large roots encourage growth of manioc.

The author concludes that Aguaruna magic is part of the constellation of techniques used to accomplish pragmatic and common tasks. Magic does not extend technology; rather, it is part of the repertoire of behavior used to accomplish things. Magic creates a "more demanding, pervasive, comprehensive, and multidimensional order than that which can be created by technology alone" (p. 168). In sum, magic for the Aguaruna creates an ordered space in which empirical techniques, also charged with meaning, form a part. "The procedures we call 'magic' are more than a system of signs, a form of social action, or a kind of rhetoric. Not only do they speak, they explain and explore" (p. 177).

In an afterword, Brown notes that Aguaruna shamanism is thriving because the non-Indians who are entering the territory seek cures from the very Indians they are displacing.

Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man by Michael Taussig is a complex book difficult to characterize in a few words. His topics are shamanism and colonial terror among Indians along the Putumayo River in southwest Colombia. Unlike Brown, whose study falls within the empiricist traditions of American anthropology, Taussig bases his work on the Marxist aesthetics of Walter Benjamin and Berthold Brecht. He faults social scientists for imposing an order upon data that has meaning only for Westerners steeped in positivism. Thus we learn little in this book about shamanic techniques and, as readers, have no idea whether or not what we do learn is representative. Taussig's interest is in the social production of fantasy images of the Indians and the political, economic, and medical implications of these shared creations.

The book begins with an account of the rubber boom that occurred in the Putumayo region around 1900, an appalling chronicle of torture and slaughter of native peoples that rivals the infamous rubber boom of the Congo. This culture of terror was based on the search for profits, but it was carried out because of the colonists' image of the Indian as wild man. The book then moves to Taussig's fieldwork in the region, which began in 1969. We are introduced to major informants, including Indian shamans, descendants of black slaves, and white colonists, and we hear them recount their experiences with sorcery, hallucinogenic plants, missionaries, and the army.

A key insight informing much of this work is that conquered native people often take on spiritual power in the minds of their conquerors. The autochthonous peoples are associated with savagery, cannibalism, and animal-like powers of perception; in short, they come to acquire the attributes of the mythical wild man.

These attributes then allow or compel colonists to treat the native peoples brutally. Today, however, it is precisely to take advantage of these enhanced spiritual powers that non-Indian colonists go to Indian shamans to be cured.

Taussig looks at shamanic healing as it reflects the interaction between Indians and their conquerors. In focusing on this ever changing, non-ordered brutal world, the author asserts that shamanic performance, in its own non-ordered fashion, "trips up the disorder of power through its own disorderliness" (p. 412).

The diseases colonists bring to the shamans to cure are caused by envy—diseases rooted in the fact that the patients are colonizers. Colonial terror, because of its arbitrary nature, is itself like shamanism in that it is based on the subversion of order. The images of terror, death, and the wild man are channeled through the shaman, and these images form the basis of contemporary magical healing. Through the use of psychotropic plants the shamans heal their patients by undermining the very colonial power and psycho-social order that caused the disease.

The author lets the people speak in their own voices and then interprets their visions and experiences in terms of the colonial legacy. The book is at its most fascinating when he recounts the history of the region or when he re-tells the stories of his informants. To avoid an artificial order to the history and ethnography that is presented, however, Taussig jumps around in time and undercuts any sense of sequential development. Drawing on a variety of sources (least among them anthropology), he breaks down the ordered series of disciplines that make up our academic system. In sum, Taussig attempts a new anthropology where (shaman-like) insight is gained through undermining our traditional ordered and ordering approach to ethnography.

Brown's book on Aguaruna magic is an example of problem-oriented ethnography at its best. It is loaded with data that are then analyzed to increase our understanding of the key concept of magic. The reader is rewarded with new insight into an old problem. Anthropology for Brown is like Aguaruna magic in that it is used to bring order into the chaotic unknown. Taussig's work on shamanism is in many ways the opposite of Brown's. Eschewing the "magic" of traditional anthropological analysis (which searches for order), he attributes to Putumayo shamanism the ability to cure by destroying illusions of order. Out of disorder comes healing for the shaman, and out of an epistemological disorder comes insight for the anthropologist.

The approaches taken by Brown and Taussig each have their limitations, but together they work to mutual advantage. The very concepts of "order" and "disorder" have meaning only in relation to one another, and insights into one help to clarify the nature of

both. Scientific "truths" are not necessarily incompatible with "truths" derived from other perspectives; like these two works, they may instead be complementary, and thereby allow us to comprehend more fully that rich set of realities that forms our social world.



AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Jacques Maquet. *The Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 1986. xi plus 272 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

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The first part of this book, "Art in Human Experience," deals with the pan-cultural aspects of objects defined as either art by destination, that made by artists; or art by metamorphosis, that made by craftsmen (p. 18). Art by metamorphosis, in the culture of the craftsman, has a powerful symbolic purpose, when transferred out of its own culture and placed in museums, it, however, becomes Art. "Few art objects by destination were ever made in pre-Renaissance Europe or in non-literate societies" (p. 22).

The second part, "The Aesthetic Object as Symbolic," confronts the problems of meanings in aesthetic objects (p. 79). The differences between visual meanings and content message are clearly and brilliantly distinguished. In Chapter 13, "Between Creators and Beholders," Maquet indicates the sharp separation between the nineteenth and twentieth century attitudes, observing that "to try to transmit messages through symbols is to use the wrong kind of vehicle" (p. 155).

In the third section, "The Aesthetic Object as Cultural," the various aspects of style are explained by the following categories: for cultural, "like all other men"; for social, "like some other men"; and for individual, "like no other men" (p. 176).

This book is filled with insights and with personal experiential data, which the reader is invited to test by sharing: "The beholder's ego is not the conquering ego of action, the assertive ego of cognition, the introspective ego of affectivity. It is the disappearing ego of contemplation" (p. 165). By simple logic, Pro-