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Dark Shamans: Kanaimà and the Poetics of Violent Death

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Dark Shamans: Kanaimà and the Poetics of Violent Death. Neil L. Whitehead. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. ix+ 310 pp., notes, index. \$19.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8223-2988-3. [dukeupress.edu]

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Dark Shamans: Kanaimà and the Poetics of Violent Death is an important book that contributes to several current discussions in anthropology, including ones in Amazonian ethnography (particularly the new discussions of predation, cannibalism, and dark shamanism); the anthropology of violence and war; the politics of postcolonialism, modernity and witchcraft; and the relations between the local and global. *Kanaimà* is a practice of ritual mutilation practiced among the various ethnic groups of the highlands of the circum-Roraima region. It is, as well, a dramatic imagery of primeval destruction, terror, and death constructed at the local, regional, and national levels of Venezuela, Guyana, and Brazil. Performance and poetics serve as unifying tropes to examine the discourse of *kainamà*, rather than its frequency in terms of a statistical analysis over time or its structural/functional consequences. The text moves beyond the sociological aspects of this form of assault sorcery in order to comprehend cultural meanings from an anthropological perspective. The analysis focuses on narratives found in the ethnohistorical and anthropological sources, as well as those collected by Whitehead in the field. The book not only addresses the ongoing debates of Amazonian ethnography and shamanism, but also links the violence of *kanaimà* to the globalized expressions of violence and terrorism present in the increase of witch killings in South Africa; of ethnocide in Rwanda, Bosnia, and other areas of the world; interreligious rioting in Indonesia; as well as the “cultures of violence” in liberal democracies. The author’s intention is to contribute to the comparative study of violence in order to suggest new practical and theoretical issues that anthropology must address if it is to remain a credible source of cultural and social commentary.

The book is organized into six chapters that include Whitehead’s own engagement as an anthropologist in the magical phenomenon; historical reconstruction of the phenomenon; narrative accounts of the ritual; extensive dialogue with ethnographic and historical material concerning the phenomenon and its relation with shamanism; and a comparative approach that examines the cultural meanings of *kanaimà* on the global stage. *Kanaimà* is analyzed both as a real practice and imaginary phenomenon that, taken together, yield its cultural meanings.

To visualize the impact of the terror and cruelty of *kanaimà* practices, the text includes a dramatic narrative of Whitehead’s brush with a *kanaimà* attack and his ensuing sickness and bad luck. It offers the testimony of an avowed

killer, and other stomach-turning testimonies that describe the modes of attacks and ritual mutilations that promote a lingering and horrendous death. The practices can include piercing the victim's tongue with snake fangs, inserting and rubbing repeatedly the tail of an iguana or an armadillo in the rectum to strip the anal muscles, cutting the sphincter muscle, and ramming herbs up the anal tract to initiate the putrefaction process that terminates in the sucking of the "sweet" juices of the cadaver by the *kanaimà* practitioners. Before dying the victim is unable to speak or to take sustenance by mouth and is incontinent. Death is caused by acute dehydration through diarrhea. The mutilation of the orifices have sexual connotations and are useful for understanding the relation between violence and gender, although daily relations of gender are not explored. Whitehead's personal experience, along with the insistence of his collaborators in research, lead him to affirm that *kanaimà* is performed by real men and is present in everyday life. He legitimizes this observation by citing in two different parts of the book the testimony of a trained nurse-midwife of Patamuna/Makushi origin, who affirms having seen twenty to thirty cases in the last thirty years. However, the book is not an ethnographic description that examines the praxis of *kanaimà* in daily life or local settings.

Beginning with colonial contact and moving through to the present, Whitehead traces the origin and periods of resurgence of *kanaimà* practices as a local and a regional phenomenon. *Kanaimà* is understood as emerging from the shamanic complex, one in which dark shamanism characterizes the mythologies, cosmologies, and cosmogonies of the indigenous peoples of this region, and in which shamanic practices aiming to poison, mutilate, or kill are highly developed. *Kanaimà* emerged from this context. It is a form of "assault sorcery," that is, "a magical attack that results in physical harm or death to an individual" (p. 205), whose current expression has been shaped by colonial and postcolonial settings. It is not "war shamanism," since the choice of its victims is arbitrary and thus does not lend itself easily to a functional interpretation. On the other hand, *kanaimà* practitioners go to war under certain historical and political conditions. These include missionary presence, suppression of native warfare, gun warfare, mining activities, and modernity.

In dense dialogue with ethnohistorical and anthropological sources, as well as with native narratives, Whitehead argues that the expression of *kanaimà* must be understood as part of a shamanic triad resulting from colonial and missionary activities: the *kanaimà* practitioners, the beneficial shamans (*piya*) and the "*alleluia*" singers. Missionary activities caused the decline of the reputation and prestige of the traditional *piya*, and, consequently, the *kanaimà* practices already present in the native shamanic system increased. In the midst of the rise of assault sorcery and the demise of traditional beneficial shamanism, the singers of the *alleluia* religion, a messianic response to Christian evangelism, became a third actor in this historical drama, providing a protective force for potential victims of *kanaimà*.

The ambiguous power of shamans and their practices has been recognized since early anthropologists became fascinated with the topic. However, it is only in the last decade that attention has come to examine more closely the dark side of shamanic practices and cosmology. A new discussion has surged among lowland ethnologists in which issues such as predation, cannibalism, warfare, and violence are recognized as integral parts of shamanic cosmology. The analysis contained in *Dark Shamanism*, like those contained in the book edited by Whitehead and Robin Wright, entitled *In Darkness and Secrecy: The Anthropology of Assault Sorcery and Witchcraft in Amazonia* (2004), focuses on the cultural force and meaning of the violence of dark shamanism.

Drawing from Michael Taussig's vision of history as sorcery and his discussion of modernity and magical practices, Whitehead's analysis examines the resurgence of *kanaimà* practices as hypertradition in the face of the development of mineral mining in the region during the nineteenth century, of diamond mining in the early to mid-twentieth century, and of the postcolonial projects of education, health, and democratization of the last two decades of the twentieth century. Within the larger context of postcolonialism, *kanaimà* is constructed internally as a practice of resistance to state control and cannibalism. From outside the context of postcolonialism, it is an imaginary phenomenon that takes on larger proportions than its actual practices. It is a metaphor of death, evil, savagery, and pre-Christianity, which is expressed in national canonical literature as well as in popular culture, including magazines, pamphlets, and theatrical performances. Whitehead says: "In this sense *kanaimà* is a joint and mutual cultural production not just by practitioners but by victims, bystanders, and outsiders, as well" (p. 30). On a more global scale, the imagery of the *kanaimà* witch can be compared to other historical and mythological figures (the werewolf, vampire, golem-frankenstein, cannibal, and the serial killer).

The book is recommended for the dialogue with, and the interweaving of various sources at, various levels in order to argue and to interpret *kanaimà* violence as an authentic and legitimate form in the face of the violence of the state. However, the reader should not expect an ethnographic description of the praxis or the pragmatics of *kanaimà* at the local level, nor one that examines the *kanaimà* practitioners' social roles and organization within local politics. Also, there are certain threads of the argument that call for further discussion, particularly with reference to the last paragraph of the book, where Whitehead returns to his discussion of the relation between *kanaimà* imagery and that of "the werewolf, the vampire, the golem-frankenstein, the cannibal, or the serial killer" (p. 252). Unlike these figures, "who are all simultaneously victims of their monstrous condition, the *kanaimà* is a *man*" (p. 252, emphasis in original). In a chapter published in the volume he edited with Laura Rival, entitled *Beyond the Visible and the Material*, Whitehead asserts that *kanaimà* violence is a complex sociocultural expression that is "intimately connected to the affirmation of political or cultural group-identity, cultural construction

of manhood and the formation of individual psychology” (2001:24). In *Dark Shamanism*, an expansion of that chapter, there is little systematic attention to the latter two themes, and we are told relatively little about gender relations or about the individual *kanaimà* practitioners, their subjective motives, and their relation to his discussion about “serial killers.” Hopefully, these will become topics of his next work about the cultural meaning of *kanaimà* violence.

***Die If You Must: Brazilian Indians in the Twentieth Century.* John Hemming. London: Pan Macmillan, 2003. xxxiv + 855pp., illustrations, maps, bibliography, notes, references, index. \$67.50 (cloth). ISBN:1-4050-0095-3. [www.panmacmillan.com]**

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John Hemming’s monumental history of indigenous peoples in Brazil began with the celebrated first volume *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians*, which detailed the tragic consequences of the European discovery of South America up to the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1790. Then, in *Amazon Frontier: The Defeat of the Brazilian Indians* he traced the next hundred year trajectory of decline in the (mis)fortunes of Brazil’s Indian populations as Amazonian regions were explored and exploited. His third and final volume in this series opens on 7 September 1910 with a glimmer of “new hope” for Brazil’s Indians—the creation of the Indian Protection Service (SPI) under the enlightened direction and inspiration of Cândido Rondon, a Lieutenant Colonel in Brazil’s military and a disciple of Auguste Comte’s positivism. Indeed, the volume’s title, “*Die If You Must*,” is drawn from the motto of the SPI in its first days, the exhortation never to kill, but die if necessary in the protection of Brazil’s Indians.

Hemming organizes this roughly century-long history as a kind of interplay between governmental or government-sponsored organizations and policies, such as the SPI or large-scale mining interests, and the indigenous populations that were inevitably effected by those entities. This dual history is of course strategic. The fate of indigenous populations in Brazil has, since 1500, been most dramatically influenced by policies and actions of non-Indians, ranging from mining and logging to constitutional definitions of “Indian-ness.” Centralizing the role of the SPI—and later of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI)—gives Hemming a framework for presenting both the history of Brazil’s Indians since 1910 and the history of public policies and popular attitudes regarding Indians.

Hemming’s survey of indigenous history is exhaustively geographic, organized regionally to cover all of the major areas of Brazil. In each of these