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Shamans of the Foye Tree: Gender, Power and Healing among Chilean Mapuche

Ana Mariella Bacigalupo

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. 336 pp.

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Shamans of the Foye Tree: Gender, Power and Healing among Chilean Mapuche is a clearly written monograph based on fifteen years of research that offers a balance of rich ethnographic details and sharp theoretical insights. It combines recent anthropological concerns such as gender, sexuality, and everyday performativity with longstanding topics such as witchcraft, ritual practices, power, and hierarchies. Thus, this book will engage scholars and students from anthropology's different subdisciplines, including cultural anthropology, medical anthropology, and anthropology of Lowland South America. It also speaks to Latin American studies' focus on intertwined religious/political, and colonial/postcolonial subjectivities, as well as debates concerning indigeneity vis-à-vis nation-state ideologies. The book is also relevant to gender studies and feminist studies.

The book begins engaging readers by exploring the meanings of the *foye* or cinnamon tree to Mapuche shamans, known as *machi*. As Bacigalupo explains, the *foye* tree is important to *machi* not only as a symbol of their medical and spiritual healing power, but it also signifies Mapuche difference and resistance to Chilean national ideologies. Most importantly, its hermaphroditic flower represents *machi*'s own shifting co-gendered identities and practices. These myriad meanings constitute a summary of multiple strands that Bacigalupo weaves through the book, incorporating medical, ritual, spiritual, sexual, political, historical, and social realms, and interlacing them with gender as a situated practice.

Bacigalupo's account of *machi* gender practices is eye-opening, even for those readers who are familiar with the range of gender identities and practices documented in the ethnographic record. Demonstrating how *machi*'s seemingly cross-gender or transvestite practices do not fall under any Euro-American categorization of a "third-gender" such as transgender, which Bacigalupo critiques as Western gender binarism, the author challenges any presumed notion of gender a reader might have. According to Bacigalupo, both male and female *machi* construct themselves as "co-gendered" and "hetero-gendered" (p. 133), assuming both female and male roles, or fluctuating between them. Some male *machi* take on non-male or *weye* gender. *Machi* do so in order to acquire medical healing power and knowledge, or to conduct spiritual warfare and rituals. Drawing on vivid examples of the many *machi* she studied, Bacigalupo analyzes the complexity of these co-gendered identities and practices as each *machi* has different ways of relating his/her ritual or spiritual gender to his/her everyday gender. She also explores the nuanced details of how colonial discourses and ideologies of sexualities and sexual relations are adopted and contested differently in different *machi*'s everyday/ritual gender performances.

In addition, the book challenges reified views concerning shamanism or spirituality. While revealing how *machi* actively fight against Chileans' and sometimes even some Mapuches' stigmatization of them as witches, sexual deviants or obsolete remnants of the past, the book none the less refuses to fall into "propagandistic" publicity of *machi* (p.257). Championing the academic and public value of converting 'public secrets' into "public knowledge" (p.259), the book details how *machi* exploit or contest paradoxes arising from historical contingency to obtain or solidify power in a spiritual, economic and political sense, both within and in opposition to the Chilean state, Chilean society and Mapuche society. Far from presenting all *machi* as guardians of local values that transcend ordinary ordeals, the book depicts *machi*'s everyday conflicts and power struggles in a detailed and convincing way.

While *Shamans of the Foye Tree* constitutes a significant ethnography of Mapuche shaman identities and their performances, presenting a surprising amount of new data for both shamanic and Mapuche studies, the scholarly contribution of the work does not end there. Bacigalupo's account of culturally-constructed gender is not only a central theoretical issue, but also a metaphor for how certain context-specific and culturally constructed boundaries and connections may fluctuate and shift, sometimes purposefully by social actors. While this recognition enhances our knowledge of self, personhood, and embodiment, it is also a contribution to debates over body politics, demonstrating how a physical body can be the site where religion and politics, colonization and modernity, and ordinary and spiritual values are all contested.

As a dialogical ethnography, the book also openly debates the many contradictions of *machi* practices: the way *machi* face and mediate dichotomies between national and local, old and new, and traditional and modern assessments will hit home to readers facing their own everyday conundrums, regardless of their familiarity with Mapuche society or shamanism. Additionally, the book is an "experiential ethnography" (p.9). Bacigalupo approaches *machi* practices not only as an ethnographer, anthropologist, and historian, but also as an apprentice ritual practitioner. This not only enriches the analysis, but also adds compelling narratives deriving from first-hand experience, and contributes to anthropological debates about reflexivity. Finally, *Shamans of the Foye Tree's* many insights, along with a well organized glossary, make this book excellent for classroom use as it will draw students' interest to shamanism, gender, cultural change, and indigeneity.