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Singing To The Plants: A Guide To Mestizo Shamanism In The Upper



Synopsis

In the Upper , mestizos are the Spanish-speaking descendants of Hispanic colonizers and the indigenous peoples of the jungle. Some mestizos have migrated to towns and cities, such as Iquitos and Pucallpa; most remain in small villages. They have retained features of a folk Catholicism and traditional Hispanic medicine, and have incorporated much of the religious tradition of the , especially its healing, sorcery, shamanism, and the use of potent plant hallucinogens, including ayahuasca. The result is a uniquely eclectic shamanist culture that continues to fascinate outsiders with its brilliant visionary art. Ayahuasca shamanism is now part of global culture. Once the terrain of anthropologists, it is now the subject of novels and spiritual memoirs, while ayahuasca shamans perform their healing rituals in Ontario and Wisconsin. Singing to the Plants sets forth just what this shamanism is about--what happens at an ayahuasca healing ceremony, how the apprentice shaman forms a spiritual relationship with the healing plant spirits, how sorcerers inflict the harm that the shaman heals, and the ways that plants are used in healing, love magic, and sorcery.

Book Information

Paperback: 544 pages

Publisher: University of New Mexico Press; Reprint edition (June 30, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0826347304

ISBN-13: 978-0826347305

Product Dimensions: 6.8 x 1.5 x 9.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars 36 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #198,684 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #149 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > New Age & Spirituality > Shamanism](#) #176 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Other Religions, Practices & Sacred Texts > Tribal & Ethnic](#)

Customer Reviews

Gorgeously written and eminently practical... Scholars will appreciate the depth and breadth of the learning here, and would-be ayahuasca pilgrims should consider this a must read. --Cultural Anthropology, 25(4), 2010
Meticulous and rewarding... a fresh and evocative journey into the magical-realist world of indigenous plant medicines... infused with the colorful detail and ring of authenticity. --HerbalGram: The Journal of the American Botanical Council, 88, 2010
This

extraordinary book is as thorough an account of any shamanistic complex as is available today... surely one of the more lucidly written books in the broader field of religious studies. --Religious Studies Review, 36(3), 2010 An exhaustively researched and detailed study, unique among its kind, and an absolute "must-have" for college library collections strong in anthropology and information on indigenous religions. --Midwest Book Review, 5(2), 2010 His own experiences with the potent hallucinogen ayahuasca are woven seamlessly into local, regional, and even global contexts... Â Serious scholarship blended with subjectivity and self-reflection. --Medical Anthropology Quarterly, 25(1), 2011

"Eminently readable, clear, and engrossing... This is really outstanding, important work. I would not hesitate to say that this could become one of the classics of its kind." --Kā,Ā,an Arik, PhD, University of Chicago, author of Shamanism, Culture and the Xinjiang Kazak: A Native Narrative of Identity "The author is a consummate scholar, a compelling and elegant writer, an authority on hallucinogens... His rare combination of qualities gives multiple dimensions to the story he tells--spiritual, anthropological, and political. Impossible to put down once you pick it up." --Wendy Doniger, DPhil, PhD, University of Chicago Divinity School, author of Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities "A rare mixture of exhaustive scholarship and gripping first person account... Find room in your backpack. You'll want to return to this one again and again as your journey unfolds." --Richard Doyle, PhD, Penn State University, author of The Ecodelic Hypothesis: Plants, Rhetoric and the Evolution of the NoĀfĀ sphere "Encyclopedic in scope, theoretically nuanced, eminently readable, and thoroughly spellbinding. A tour de force... the definitive work on this topic." --Bonnie Glass-Coffin, PhD, Utah State University, author of The Gift of Life: Female Spirituality and Healing in Northern Peru "This is a classic volume that provides an unsurpassed understanding of the healing power of shamanism, its use of spiritual rituals and visionary plants, its light and dark sides, its sophistication and humor." --Stanley Krippner, PhD, Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, co-author of Spiritual Dimensions of Healing "The real deal--scholarly and quite compellingly written... Treated as an apprentice, the author was able to gain insights into the rituals, beliefs, and practices that form the social context and the inner world of shamanism." --David Lukoff, PhD, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, author of "Visionary Spiritual Experiences and Mental Disorders" "Elegantly written... incorporating thoughtful analyses of psychological, cultural, and spiritual perspectives. A very valuable contribution to the literature." --Ralph Metzner, PhD, Green Earth Foundation, author/editor of Sacred Vine of Spirits and Sacred Mushroom of Visions --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This eloquent compendium presents us with an encompassing anthropological view of the ayahuasca cult as practiced in a certain region of the Peruvian today, including personal, cultural, regional, religious, ethical, ethno-botanical, medicinal, zoological, botanical, legal and sociological aspects. Stephan Beyer spent many years undergoing a formal shamanic apprenticeship with two main teachers, one male, one female, becoming an adept in the process. In a first, theoretical part of the book, we meet these widely esteemed mentors, learn what healing with the sacred plant medicine involves and what effects it has - what it can do and what it does not do - followed by a general discussion of shamanism and of various kinds of magic. Shamans are performers and have often been called tricksters, talking, cajoling or even bullying us into better organization of self, as the author empathically explains. In the mythical otherworld visited by these healers, adventures are traced, visions followed, spirits encountered, remissions engendered and lost souls retrieved. The Peruvian province of the soul has its own flavor and is peopled by many entities unknown to us. That makes it attractive and repulsive at the same time, a fascinating foundation for inner fermentation. A second part of the book is dedicated to the actual medicine. Ayahuasca or yagé is commonly a mix of two plants - the vine itself and the small-leaved chacruna (*Psychotria viridis*) but may contain other ingredients, giving rise to individual potions with special effects. Working with any of these brews makes it imperative to know the plants one is about to consume in order to enjoy their beneficial effects or avoid them where deadly. Like in Chinese or medieval European medicine, we are talking correspondances. Acquiring this knowledge the traditional way - essentially fasting and roughing it - Stephan gradually acquaints himself with many different plants, naming and describing them again for us in his plant and animal Vademecum at the end of the book (Appendices A and B). Chapter by chapter, the world of the mestizo shaman unfolds: we learn about magical sounds, ways of harming and healing, sucking & blowing doctoring, spirits, magic stones and darts, shamanic herbalism, ending up with an overflowing cup of ingredients to bring to the practice of ayahuasca ingestion and its effects. As anyone acquainted with the medicine will readily confirm, drinking it usually leads to a thorough purge in the form of vomiting and/or diarrhea. That actually sounds worse than it is, since one is wretched with a noble aim in mind. To get well it is necessary to clean out the old and make room for the new. The mareacín produced by the "vine of the spirit", i.e. the mental and physical state it induces, may be compared to the effects of the two most popular natural entheogens of the Americas, peyote and San Pedro, except stronger. As usual, dosage is of vital importance. Part III discusses the history and ritual context of ayahuasca use, taking us into the deep jungle. When exactly it all began, we do not know but it seems safe to assume that the

indigenous tribes were familiar with the practice millennia before it reached the white man or even the man of mixed blood. In fact, it took the rubber boom of the late 19th century to bring these ritual healing ceremonies to the fore in order to produce the cults of Santo Damião, Barquinha or the more individualized healing sessions of the mestizos living on the river banks of the no longer virgin forests. Unfortunately, the shamanic tradition as still encountered not too long ago seems to be disappearing. Like in many other cultures, the young do not want to take upon themselves the hardships of learning the old way, and many consider the healing practices of their elders as outdated. Money rules instead. This brings us to the present (Part IV), with ayahuasca tourists trampling herd-like along the old river paths in hope of finding a way out of their mental malaise and back home. Some are in serious physical trouble and, just like their local counterparts, could not be helped or healed by Western medicine. That's the lure. Is this globalized stream of well-intentioned Westerners making things better or worse by being there? And what does the law say, for that matter? The author takes a thorough look at the legal situation of ayahuasca and wonders what the future will bring. Fortunately, he is a reporter more than an advocate, making his dense book a captivating read. Not to mention the admiration one feels in the presence of such vast knowledge! And: this would not be a scholarly work if it didn't reveal its sources and give us an index as a beacon for recognition and return. Susanne G. Seiler

Singing to the Plants A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper By Stephen V. Beyer Finally, someone has taken the time to write a pretty damned comprehensive book about the world of indigenous shamanism. Far too often reports of ayahuasca use, the world of plant healing, and the traditions of humans interacting with the spirits of plants and animals and non-ordinary beings are written by people who don't have a context with which to frame those reports, and the result is skewed by a lack of knowledge of the region and the cultures of the people who live within it. Beyer, on the other hand, has spent considerable time in the region, has listened to what the locals and curanderos themselves have to say; has personally worked with ayahuasca and other plant medicines over several years. He's also apparently read and digested everything else ever written on the topic, with an eye to incorporate the historical perspective of people who studied or lived with indigenous peoples who incorporated shamanism into their daily lives. And Beyer makes his virtual encyclopedia an effortless pleasure to read. He works with a full palate of writing skills, understanding and a fine ear for detail. Coupled with a larder full of anecdotes, Singing to the Plants is as good as it gets if one wants to know what the heck shamanism in the Upper is all about. Put it this way: Any writer willing to investigate deeply enough in this topic to discover that Tabu cologne is a favorite of the spirit of

Ayahuasca, has done his damned homework. Good for him. And, of course, good for us. Peter Gorman, author of *Ayahuasca in My Blood--25 Years of Medicine Dreaming* *Ayahuasca in My Blood: 25 Years of Medicine Dreaming*

The rampant mythologizing of Ayahuasca no longer serves the work. This book brings perspective to Ayaville. Like a good shamanic brew all the ingredients are well balanced. There is science, humor, relevant ruminations on "la madrecita," magia, and lots of good faith toward Mestizo Shamanism. Mr. Beyer has provided an outstanding contribution to the field of ayahuasca lit. Shamanism, in my view, is now an evolving wisdom culture and Singing to the Plants is a melodious icaro in itself to the cause. Buen trabajo, hombre.

This is an informative & well written read on the topic of Ayahuasca in general and Peruvian/Mestizo shamanism in particular. I was more interested in the second half of the book which addressed Ayahuasca in a larger context, but that is just a matter of preference. I just am not interested in diving too deep into the brujeria aspect of the shamanic experience...although it is a strong force that shapes their tradition. Regardless, this is an essential book to have in your library if you're interested in understanding this powerful plant medicine.

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