

Shamans in Asia

Shamans are not remnants of a mythic past. While their practices have never vied for modern status, they remain capable of healing many modern minds.

Review >
Shamanism

By Amit Ranjan Basu

Chilson and Knecht's edited volume is a collection of six essays on shamanism, originally published in *Asian Folklore Studies*, 1984-1999, brought out to celebrate the journal's sixtieth anniversary. The editors felt that, 'although the study of shamanism had given much in the last two decades, there was no book widely available that gave first-hand ethnographic accounts of shamans in different areas of Asia' (p. vii).

Between humans and spirits

In his introductory essay, Knecht discusses conceptual issues, highlighting Mircea Eliade's approaches to the study of shamanism. Knecht suggests that in treating psychosomatic disorders, shamans are capable of acting as medi-

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ators between humans and spirits. It is unfortunate, however, that the editors did not consider Kakar's contribution (1982) on traditional healing methods in psychotherapy.

Knecht observes that 'from a world-

wide perspective shamanism appears to be such a variegated phenomenon that it is impossible to state with certainty whether shamanism in general is in decline or not' (p. 22). In many large cities modern shamans attract and sustain numerous believers seeking advice on business activities, political performance, and family problems.

F. Georg Heyne discusses the social significance of the shamans of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki, an ethnic group of two hundred that he studied in the late 1990s. As the group's protector and healer, the shaman fulfils important tasks and functions. When the group lacks a shaman, spirits become dissatisfied, causing sickness and misfortune. Despite having a special 'psychomental' state, shamans were never officially the heads of the clan or its political leaders (p. 46).

Anwarul Karim interviewed eleven Bangladeshi healers from the weaving, oil pressing and farming communities in the late 1980s. Eight of these healers were women who belonged to landless families. He studied five distinct groups



Richard Walker/Honolulu Star-Bulletin (walkerphotos.net)

Performance of
Taegam Nori (Korean
Shaman Dance)

of shamans: *Faquir, Ojha, Baul faquir* and *Bedia*, observing that 'shamanistic cure and psychoanalytic cure are quite parallel (sic). Modern medicine cannot always guarantee a permanent cure, but both modern medicine and shamanism can bring temporary relief to the patient, the one by drugs and the other by means of symbols' (p. 82).

Jean Mottin writes about the shamans of the *Hmong*. Four million *Hmong*, said to be among the earliest settlers in China, now live in China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Mottin thinks 'shamanism is an important form of religion in the world, yet it is one of the least understood forms' (p. 87).

The Korean shamanic practices of *Chaesu Kut* are vividly captured by John A. Grim. The majority of practitioners in contemporary Korea are women, known as *mudang*. Because of the low status attached to *mudang*, the term *mansin*, 'ten thousand spirits', is now preferred. His rich descriptions and comparative analyses bring out the similarities in shamanic practices across cultures that link the world of spirits and religion.

Takiguchi Naoko is the author of the final two chapters on shaman communities of the Miyako archipelago. She describes the structure of Miyako theology, and in her second chapter, provides a detailed ethnographic case study of a Miyako shaman, making use of the shaman's diary which contains details of initiation and practices.

Though the book offers examples of ethnographic research on shamanism in Asia, the scope of the volume seems

limited considering the depth and complexity of Asian heterogeneity. The book does not offer critical approaches to ethnography, nor does it engage with contemporary anthropological theories that have questioned the construction of 'folk'. Despite its limited scope, *Shamans in Asia* will attract scholars for the charm of its rich ethnography. <

- Chilson, Clark and Knecht, Peter, eds. (2003) *Shamans in Asia*, London: RoutledgeCurzon pp. viii + 199, ISBN 0-415-29679-X.

Reference

- Kakar, Sudhir (1982) *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Traditions*, New York: Alfred A. Knoff.

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