

Culture



Wolfgang JILEK, *Shamanic Ceremonialism in the Pacific Northwest Today*, Hancock House Publishers Ltd., Cultures in Review Series, 1982. 182 pp., \$7.95 (paper)

Marie-Françoise Guédon

Volume 2, Number 3, 1982

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078121ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078121ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Guédon, M.-F. (1982). Review of [Wolfgang JILEK, *Shamanic Ceremonialism in the Pacific Northwest Today*, Hancock House Publishers Ltd., Cultures in Review Series, 1982. 182 pp., \$7.95 (paper)]. *Culture*, 2(3), 146-147. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078121ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1982

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

against “the repressive dominion of reason from the time of Plato onward” as “the ruptured mentality of the West... contrasts with the holistic worldview of primal peoples” (p. 156). Not surprisingly, the primal vision “operates far more in the way contemporary artists function as ‘aliens’ within the dominant society — people who are peculiarly and marvelously devoted to the evolution of a metaphysics called ‘art’ ” (p. 106).

This permits Highwater to speak of the primal mind’s pure vision in terms of “a set of metaphors out of the Western mentality that conveys something of the fundamental otherness of Indians” — and then to use *that* as “a point of departure for a much larger idea” :

It is a metaphor for a type of otherness that parallels the experience of many people born into the dominant society who feel intensely uncomfortable and alien. It is this condition of alienation during the last decades of the twentieth century that has motivated this book. There is “an alien” in all of us. There is an artist in all of us. Of this there is simply no question. The existence of a visionary aspect in every person is the basis for the supreme impact and pervasiveness of art (p. 15).

In order for the visionary artist to speak through the primal mind, Highwater invents “The Altamira Connection” — a perennial reservoir of spiritual consciousness preserved in primitive cultures, “persisting beyond the reach of the dominant cultures, which would surely subjugate or destroy them if they could do so” (p. 208). “Altamira represents that sacredness of place and that perennial reality of the now which primal people have always understood as the first principle of their existence” (p. 211). Now ascendant in the culture of male dominated post-industrial society as the vision of abused and outcast “nonwhites, females, gays, and unpopular groups” — it is claimed as “The ultimate irony of our era : those who have been the most utterly defeated have become the most influential” (p. 207).

In Highwater’s description, the primal mind reveals a “nature immediately experienced rather than dubiously abstracted” (p. 206). It operates in terms of an essential “*inclusivity* which I identify with the very heart of the primal world” (p. xvi). “It is a lesson learned through a vision of the unspeakable plurality that transforms the person of wisdom into the shape of all shapes — so that the powers within and around him may live together *like one being*” (p. 67). It is the perennial spiritual awareness of transformational vision,

... that peculiar kind of experience that is not a conscious capability of many people of the West. American Indians,

on the other hand, look at reality in a way that makes it possible for them to know something by turning into it (p. 61).

The flaw in the argument is that Highwater must locate the condition of transformational vision in Native society :

Among primal peoples there is an exquisite homogeneity and a wholeness that puts each tribal member in direct touch with his or her culture and with its carefully prescribed and perpetuated forms (p. 55).

In this context, the Native visionary is permitted his rightful role as extraordinary deviant person :

The extraordinary is generally condemned and loathed by deeply traditional people, but Indians regard the extraordinary person as special and awesome, gifted and sacred. They accept perversity as a significant reality. Among Western people the “freak” is a pitiful target of ridicule — the perfect embodiment of the disdain for oddity and the inclination to regard peculiarity and deformity as punishment for sin (p. 175).

However, in order to locate the contemporary avant-garde Native artist as an outsider vis-à-vis his own people, Highwater must create a “reactionary mentality that poses as traditionalism” (p. 178). In order to manifest the “daring and contrariness” of the eternal deviant who “side-stepped or openly defied tribal taboos”, a contaminating “mixture of quasi-Christian morality, quasi-Indian activism, and a decline in their firsthand experience in Native American customs” is required to account for “the compromises of middle America that have left many Indians touched by a degraded and stereotyped ‘pow-wow view’ of themselves” (p. 196).

It is thus through a process of double alienation that the spiritual superiority of the Native artist is asserted and his value acclaimed. While I do believe that some such myth underlies the growing market for Native American art, I regret that Highwater constructed his myth almost without reference to the literature of ethnography and thus deprived the primal mind of the opportunity to speak in its own voice.

Wolfgang JILEK, *Shamanic Ceremonialism in the Pacific Northwest Today*, Hancock House Publishers Ltd., Cultures in Review Series, 1982. 182 pp., \$7.95 (paper).

By Marie-Françoise Guédon
University of British Columbia

This new publication is a welcome addition to the Northwest Coast Indian literature and to shamanic studies ; it should interest both anthro-

pologists and medical practitioners, especially those working with North American native people. In spite of its sub-title however, it is not a study of shamanic seances. The term shamanic is used here in a larger sense and applied to one type of ceremonialism which has become one of the trademarks of Northwest Coast traditional Indian life, that is the Secret Society ceremonials or Winter Dances. Among the contemporary Coast Salish Indians, the Secret Societies have evolved to become the main center of traditional activities absorbing both shamanic techniques and guardian spirit quest traditions, and this book is about the Coast Salish modern guardian spirit ceremonial, also known as "spirit dancing".

It is a complex analysis, the result of many years of psychiatric practice by Doctor Jilek and his wife in the Upper Frazer Valley of British Columbia among the Halkomelem (Upper Stalo) Indian people. "Spirit dancing" had almost disappeared among the Upper Stalo Indian and a number of other Indian groups as well. It must be remembered that Secret Societies, Winter Dances, "Spirit Dancing", and all related ceremonials were actively discouraged by governmental and church authorities and were for instance banned under the Potlatch Law until 1955. In the past twenty years with the help of Indian ritualists from other areas, "spirit dancing" has undergone a strong revival. According to Doctor Jilek, the ceremonial has also been transposed in the modern context into a healing procedure the therapeutic functions of which are explicitly recognized by the native people themselves, yet largely ignored if not downgraded by the white community, especially those authorities whose opinion is based on a few but well publicized cases of forced and violent initiations. Having witnessed the influence of "Spirit Dancing" on both individual participants and native communities, Doctor Jilek analyses the rituals from his position as physician and psychiatrist in order to demonstrate their therapeutic effectiveness; the sophistication and precision of the techniques used by the ritualists justify such practices from a modern medical psychiatric viewpoint.

The analysis itself is built on a model of socio-cultural deprivation or disintegration leading at the individual level to psychopathological symptoms gathered under the concept of "anomic depression". According to Doctor Jilek, the Spirit Dance rituals counteract the impact of the socio-cultural confusion and deprivation in several ways. Based on concepts and values presented as the core of the past traditions or "history" of the Coast Salish Indian people, the initiation process allows re-identification with the aboriginal culture not only implicitly in

its setting but also explicitly in its content: the full initiation process now includes, in addition to the acquisition of "Indian Spirits" or "Indian power", specific curing rituals borrowed from shamanic traditions, a name-giving ceremony culminating in the adoption by the dancer of a native identity supported by his or her belonging to a dancing society, the participation of the dancer's family in the arrangements and preparation for the ceremonies, and, among other references to traditional myths, a death and rebirth theme which Doctor Jilek describes as "therapeutic myth". This process begins, according to the ritualists, with a "spirit illness", the symptoms of which are found to match those of anomic depression, thereby allowing the benefits of the rituals to go to those individuals who most need them since the manifestation of these symptoms is interpreted by the ritualists as an invitation to initiate the individual who exhibits them.

Ethnologists may have difficulty accepting some of the basic definitions used by the author and may question for instance parts of the chapter on the physiology and psychology of altered states of consciousness, maybe because most of the references in this chapter date back to 1968 or 1970 at the latest and are almost exclusively clinical. I would also argue against a presentation which suggests that the Kwakiutl Indians or even the Indian communities of Northern British Columbia share with the Salish people the content and methods of their initiation rituals since even a brief comparative study indicates a large range of variations. The text is in this respect more satisfying than the photographs. Finally, as an ethnographer, I miss here the individual or personal cultural context which I have been trained to consider as essential and which contributes so much to the quality and precision of such accounts as the healing ritual described by Michael Kew in *People Need Friends, It Makes Their Mind Strong* (from the Wilson Duff Memorial Volume: *The World is as Sharp as a Knife*, U.B.C. Press, 1982). Yet a number of personal testimonies and examples are given which contribute to enrich the information. Once one has accepted the context of the research and the general intent of the book, one can appreciate the quality of this information.

All in all, the book presents a very convincing argument for the social and individual value of traditional rituals in a modern context and a beautiful demonstration of their contemporary relevance, vitality, and evolution.