



Dark Shamans: Kanaima and the Poetics of Violent Death

Neil L. Whitehead

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On the little-known and darker side of shamanism there exists an ancient form of sorcery called *kanaimà*, a practice still observed among the Amerindians of the highlands of Guyana, Venezuela, and Brazil that involves the ritual stalking, mutilation, lingering death, and consumption of human victims. At once a memoir of cultural encounter and an ethnographic and historical investigation, this book offers a sustained, intimate look at *kanaimà*, its practitioners, their victims, and the reasons they give for their actions.

Neil L. Whitehead tells of his own involvement with *kanaimà*—including an attempt to kill him with poison—and relates the personal testimonies of *kanaimà* shamans, their potential victims, and the victims' families. He then goes on to discuss the historical emergence of *kanaimà*, describing how, in the face of successive modern colonizing forces—missionaries, rubber gatherers, miners, and development agencies—the practice has become an assertion of native autonomy. His analysis explores the ways in which *kanaimà* mediates both national and international impacts on native peoples in the region and considers the significance of *kanaimà* for current accounts of shamanism and religious belief and for theories of war and violence.

Kanaimà appears here as part of the wider lexicon of rebellious terror and exotic horror—alongside the cannibal, vampire, and zombie—that haunts the western imagination. *Dark Shamans* broadens discussions of violence and of the representation of primitive savagery by recasting both in the light of current debates on modernity and globalization.

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