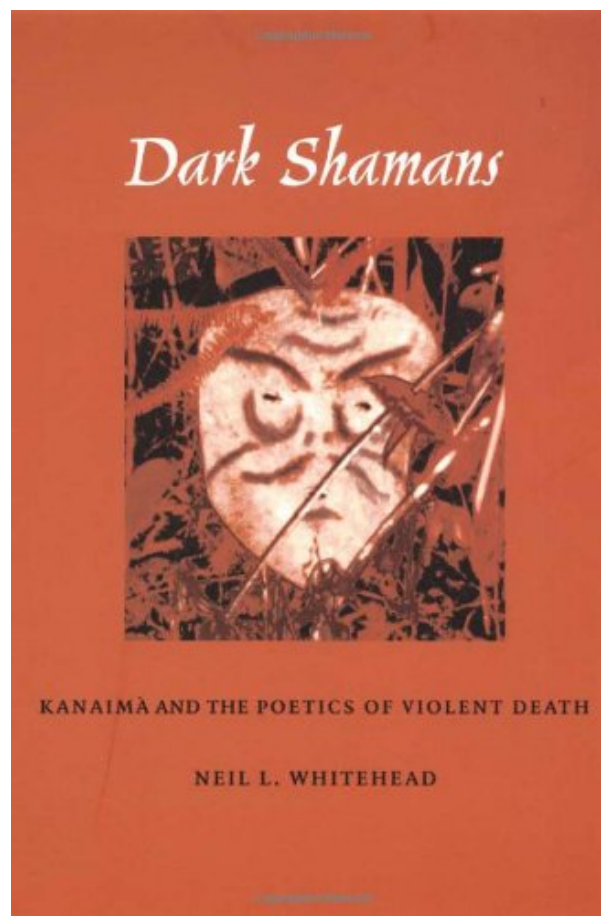


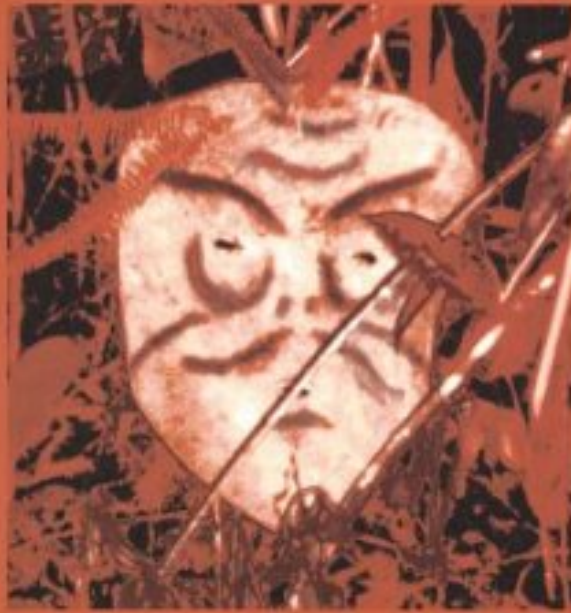
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POETICS OF VIOLENT DEATH BY NEIL L.  
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# *Dark Shamans*



KANAIMĀ 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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Academia at its finest

By Whomever

*Dark Shamans: Kanaimà and the Poetics of Violent Death* by Dr. Neil Whitehead Ph.D., Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002.

Dr. Whitehead has delivered one of the most important scholarly presentations of shamanism and its outgrowths I've yet come across. This book is explosive in its content and delivery.

Though this book does not focus on ethnopharmacology and the typical interpretations of entheogenic shamanism, and, thankfully, does not focus on the New Age, self-serving and deluded concepts of "neo-shamanism," it does, however, focus on something currently perceived to be far more insidious. *Dark Shamanism*, better known to the Amerindian populations of South America as Kanaimà or Itoto, is the practice of assault sorcery/shamanism in the Amazonia region of Guyana.

In the historical context of Amerindian studies by modernity, Kanaimà has been overlooked and marginalized as nothing but invisible spirits perceived by delusional indigenous peoples with their so-called limited perceptions of reality and ability to properly deduce information from the world of reality.

However, as Dr. Whitehead outlines in this work, it was the white scientists who created the deranged concepts of Kanaimà by not properly understanding it, or for that matter, by not taking the Amerindian populations literally as they should have. As with many anthropologists who have recently partaken in the entheogenic experiences (R. G. Wasson et al) and have discovered that the visions from entheogenic substances used by indigenous cultures are as real as "reality", so too is Kanaimà a serious reality. This reality is not one based in fantasy and delusion, but men and death, and powerfully deadly plant poisons.

Kanaimà, the practice of assault sorcery, is a method of ritual attack and murder which also often follows with the consumption of mobu, or the "nectar" of the deceased's buried body.

The practice of Kanaimà has recently seen a huge upsurge in popularity in recent years and this book will clearly outline the socio-political cause and reason for growth of this particular form of shamanism, which Dr. Whitehead argues is an outgrowth of piya shamanism, which is the more traditional concept of "healer" shamanism.

From the historical evidence presented in this book, it also appears that Kanaimà is a relatively recent development since the invasion of colonialist whites. The book outlines the political causes as well as the political controls involved in the use of Kanaimà, as well as its effects on not only Amerindian societies, but the colonialists themselves. It also outlines exactly how the introduction of Kanaimà keeps a balance in the indigenous societies, as well as acting as a method of adherence to traditional beliefs.

This book is fabulously written, extremely well argued, and while it is a heavy read, it is easy to read and I couldn't put it down. I read it cover to cover in 3 days, not spending more than about 3 or 4 hours reading each day.

While my own research has shown the word "shamanism" to be of Ural-Altai origin of the Amanita muscaria mushroom using populations of Siberia, and may have been further originated from the word semon or semen (such as in anointing oils, chrism, etc.), Dr. Whitehead uses the word to encompass all forms of indigenous magical practices. This includes Kanaimà, alleluia, piya, Haitian zombieism, and what could also be considered as black magic, voodoo magic, etc. While I'm not sure that I yet 100% agree with this all-encompassing interpretation of shamanism, it has certainly given me much to chew on in this regard which only further research will answer. Dr. Whitehead may certainly prove me wrong in this regard.

The only real contention I could muster in this fantastic pedestal of academia was in Whitehead's study of the origins of warfare in its socio-political development. While this study does look at the politico-sexual motivations of warfare and in the creation of Kanaimà, Whitehead overlooked recent work by Dr. James DeMeo in his landmark Saharasia, which proves the marginalized Wilhelm Reich's sex-economic theory first proposed in *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex-Morality*, further based on *The Sexual Life of Savages* by the famed cultural anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski.

I have Whitehead's next book, *In Darkness and Secrecy*, here by my side ready to read the second I finish writing this review.

Overall this book is one hell of a read, one hell of an eye-opener, and one great piece of literary art. Five stars all the way...

Buy it! Buy them both!

2 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Death in the Jungle

By Laurence Daley

Whitehead, Neil L. 2002 *Dark Shamans: Kanaima and the Poetics of Violent Death*, Duke University Press. ISBN-10 0822329883; ISBN-13 978-0822329886

Death in the jungle.

In pre-Castro Cuba, the sight of an erotically beautiful woman hip swaying down the street, elicited the exclamation "¡Que Bárbara! Literally this means translation: "What an animal! What a barbarian! the first phrase indicates admiration for vigor mostly male: however the latter interpretation indicates the response of a male to the stimulation caused by such sighting of such a voluptuous beauty. Perhaps in part it is also an invocation of the Afro-Cuban god of lightning Chango.

Rómulo Gallegos, living in similar milieu in Venezuela refers to this as the call of Canaima, the evil spirit of the Zuanía, the Amazonian and Orinoco jungles from whence the ancestors of the Taíno (Island Arawaks) came. Gallegos gives a principal character, an aggressive ruthlessly lustful female, the name of "Doña Bárbara." Gallegos attributes this trait to a serial rape his protagonist had suffered as a young woman.

However, this interpretation of Gallegos, is perhaps a little innocent, since in the Venezuelan indigenous milieu, as in the related Cuban Taíno and Güajiro traditions such actions were traditional and accepted as merely rights of passage. In addition, it appears that Gallegos is unconsciously adapting these character traits from the Venezuelan myth of Uyara (María Leonza), and on this superimposing his own somewhat prudish views on the matter.

Whitehead's approach is different, he address the cruel reality of the cult of Canaima, choosing to spell it with K rather than a C., and in his book reveals the truly barbaric nature of this jungle cult. Although the author's anthropological approach is scientifically phrased, the horror of this aspect of humanity is terrorizing. Perhaps the author could have touched more on the sexual aspects, and yet perhaps not. It is clear from this work that the cruelty exerted by the Spanish and other conquerors, had its counterpart in some parts of the culture of at least some Indigenous Peoples of the Americas.

This book helps one understand the often viciously cruel acts that have occurred in these jungles from the Spanish conquest, through the wild rubber industries worse moments, on to the barbarism of the Colombian Narco-guerrillas of the FARC. And in this use Whitehead's study is widely applicable outside his field.

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love the different perspectives and how 'Kanaima' has morphed over ...

By Amy

EXTREMELY informative, love the different perspectives and how 'Kanaima' has morphed over the years. Amazing sociological observations and connections. a MUST read.

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