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Coast Salish Spirit Dancing: The Survival of an Ancestral Religion. By Pamela Amoss.

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for coping. We all need to understand their strengths and to share their concerns.

Dorothy W. Hewes
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Coast Salish Spirit Dancing: The Survival of an Ancestral Religion. By Pamela Amoss. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978. 212 pp. Cloth. \$16.50

In *Coast Salish Spirit Dancing* Pamela Amoss investigates the resurgence of Native American religion in Washington State. Starting with a brief historical sketch, Amoss proceeds in the text to describe and analyze modern Winter Dancing and ends with a reassessment of this religious revival from an historical perspective. Although trained as an anthropologist, Amoss combines ethnographic fieldwork with historical questions to produce a broad portrait of the Coast Salish experience.

Amoss makes her most important contribution to Native American studies by emphasizing the vitality of Coast Salish culture. Instead of searching for ethnographic materials before Native knowledge is "lost," as many anthropologists do, Amoss portrays spirit dancing as an ongoing expression of Coast Salish beliefs. As Amoss observes, "the beliefs of the modern Coast Salish, while clearly related historically to the aboriginal religious system, have evolved in new directions." (p. 141) The Coast Salish evaluate and respond to modern problems through a religious system that gives coherence to their society.

For Amoss religion provides a key to the Coast Salish world. She contends that "an understanding of contemporary Coast Salish views of how the supernatural realm works is essential to an understanding of the functions of spirit dancing." (p. 42) Both aboriginally and currently supernatural power underlies Nooksack religious practices. (43) Amoss explains the continuity of Native religious beliefs by exploring man's relation to the spirit world. "The guardian spirit system," she argues,

is based on the assumption that man can establish contact with supernatural power through a vision experience. The vision encounter endows the person

with a song and dance which are at the same time visible proof of his contact and the means to mobilize the power of the vision. The vision experience is an intensely private affair and no one else has any right to mediate between the seeker and his vision. The song and dance are part of a public demonstration of the seeker's supernatural power and as such must conform to certain cultural standards. (p. 48)

Amoss understands the connection between groups and individuals through her direct observations of Winter Dances. (p. 87) She maintains that religion is the means by which individuals deal with the realities of living. (p. 82)

But here lies the major error in her discussion. To Amoss's way of thinking, spirit dancers do not actually have religious experiences. She rejects the dancers' explanation of reality. Instead, she questions "how man as a reasonable creature can rely on beliefs that cannot be substantiated by reason" and seeks an underlying explanation for their "interpretation of reality that is beyond the province of verification by experience or experiment." (p. 125)

Amoss frames her discussion within two interrelated points. First, when she investigates the spirit dancers' explanations of reality, she adopts an ethnographic perspective. Second, when she traces the development of modern spirit dancing, she adopts an historic perspective. In linking these two levels, however, Amoss adopts a Eurocentric perspective. Thus her examination of the Salish religious revival contains a crucial contradiction. Amoss cannot explain why many modern Coast Salish people are rejecting (or compartmentalizing) Christian doctrines in favor of their traditional religious framework. On one hand, Amoss admits to "a continuing difficulty of functional explanations" concerning Native American religion. At the same time she also maintains that:

All religious systems offer supernatural justification for the value system which motivates individuals to perform the necessary social roles; a religious system that incorporates the trance experience into its beliefs and practices draws on an additional source of emotional support. What is probably a pan-human capacity to assume altered states of consciousness

can be culturally defined to provide a direct sensory evidence for the validity of the system of which the trance is a part. (p. 121)

But Amoss's pan-human explanations are not meaningful to the Coast Salish people, for "native theory has no explicit answers" to such questions. (p. 122) In short, Amoss's analytical framework is inappropriate for explaining the unique expression of the Coast Salish spirit dance.

When, for example, Amoss discusses the central feature of modern Coast Salish religion, the possession trance, she adopts an outsider's perspective in order to uncover the "latent" functions which underlie the possessions. The trance is reduced to a "learned pattern of behavior" that is "associated with certain kinds of stimuli." (pp. 135-136) The resulting "culturally approved trance state" simply fulfills "the emotional needs of individual dancers." (p. 139) Amoss thus reduces the Coast Salish's most important religious experience into a western psychoanalytical framework. Religion is nothing more than an emotional escape valve for oppressed individuals.

Amoss's Eurocentric assumptions about the nature of religion severely constrict her evaluations of modern spirit dancing. *Coast Salish Spirit Dancing* lacks a methodology to incorporate observations about the Indians' religious world into a general history of the Pacific Northwest. Instead, Amoss adopts an environmentally-deterministic view of Coast Salish history (pp. 6-8) and plays down the religious significance of assumed "economic" activities. (pp. 10-12) She even asserts that potlatching—a ceremony now intertwined with spirit dancing—has always been a purely secular affair. (pp. 87-88) Even a cursory evaluation of Northwest Coast mythology reveals the religious significance of potlatching (Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* [London: Cohen and West Limited, 1966], and Irving Goldman, *The Mouth of Heaven: An Introduction to Kwakiutl Religious Thought* [London: John Wiley and Sons, 1975]). But, as with other aspects of her historical reconstruction, Amoss evaluates the religious world in simple functional terms. (pp. 161-167)

Amoss's methodological shortcomings reflect a deep-seated confusion in Native American studies. The cross-cultural generalizations blind scholars to the values and attitudes of the

specific People under study. Instead of investigating how Coast Salish religious values shape Indian decision-making, Amoss presents a general view of the psycho-social impact of unverifiable religious beliefs. The Coast Salish, on the other hand, operate in a world constantly verified by religious experience. In order to understand Coast Salish decision-making—for motivation lies at the core of historical investigations—the scholar must understand the Coast Salish world. While Amoss succeeds in presenting an informative discussion of spirit dancing, the task remains to incorporate such a religious perspective into a richer Northwest coast history. The religious focus of the Coast Salish must be accepted as the starting point for a discussion of their development.

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Chief Left Hand, Southern Arapaho. By Margaret Coel. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981. 338 pp. Cloth. \$17.50

In *Chief Left Hand, Southern Arapaho* Margaret Coel has written a romanticized historical biography of the well-known, nineteenth century Arapaho leader. Relying heavily on published secondary sources, in conjunction with some primary manuscript material, Coel has made a disappointing effort to portray the life of Left Hand from his birth to his death.

The book is basically divided into two sections. The first section depicts Left Hand's childhood and his eventual ascendency to leadership among the Southern Arapahoes. The first chapter begins with a concise but rather simplistic description of Arapaho culture. Since sources on Left Hand's early life are scant, the author uses general information on Arapaho culture to draw inferences about his childhood. She suggests that there is some evidence that the young Left Hand was closely associated with John Poisal, a trader who married Left Hand's sister. The future Arapaho leader learned to speak English from Poisal and, Coel argues, thereby gained the essential skills which pushed him into the forefront of nineteenth century Southern Arapaho relations with Anglo-Americans.

Left Hand's recognition as a political leader came during a