Microbes and Other Shamanic Beings
By C. E. Giraldo Herrera (2018)
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Reviewed by Graham Harvey

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Animists and their shamans have interested many scholars involved in recent 'turns', especially those focused on ontology, performance, materiality, and embodiment. Prior to that, in various guises or constructions, they have interested scholars from multiple disciplines. Indeed, focusing on animists and/or shamans (and their putative -isms) has arguably led to the construction or shoring up of many fields of study. Giraldo Herrera's *Microbes and Other Shamanic Beings* reinforces many of the challenges to earlier scholarship, but also contests some of the rich approaches proffered recently. Much of what causes problems is wrapped up in the terms 'soul' and 'spirit', but it is the matter of bodies that propels this book forward and makes it exciting and provocative.

Giraldo Herrera is a biologist and a social anthropologist at the University of Oxford, fusing expertise in science studies with ethnography. In this book, and related publications, he makes excellent use of a sweep of literature about Caribbean and Lowland South American Amerindians as well as about medicine, epidemiology, and biology. As the book title indicates, he is particularly concerned here with relations between shamans (and their patients and communities) and microbes (especially but not only those that cause diseases). This shifts attention firmly away from metaphysics and toward bodies. Put another way, like many other books about

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shamans, this one attends to interiority but does so in a way quite unlike most if not all of them.

In 12 main chapters, Giraldo Herrera revisits history and surveys recent medical knowledge, casting new light on both. In the mix there is also art and literature, colonialism, appropriation and sovereignty, and much more. The first chapter opens with the 'Encounter' (as he labels it) between Columbus and his evangelistic companions with the Caribbean Taino. The ideas and experiences of Indigenous peoples in Amazonia and Mexico in colonial and contemporary eras are then brought into dialogue with the rest of the world, both because of what followed swiftly from the 'Encounter' and because of the global reach and relevance of Indigenous knowledges.

In the first two chapters, Giraldo Herrera establishes that the decolonization of academia needs not only to be rooted in learning how to be respectful, responsive, and responsible learners, among other things, but also in being bolder in our scholarly reflexive critique. While not exactly new thoughts, the forcefulness of this presentation is required by the argument that entails most of the book. He notes that terms like god, reality, and science are all still frequently treated as singulars in academic discourse. He presents a helpful summary of the problematic emphasis on unusual experiences (e.g. ecstasy) and alleged beings (e.g. spirits) in many studies of shamans and animists. Each of these often negates or marginalizes other ontologies. He argues that this is true even in work by many of those who clearly inspire him. Thus, any proposition that the decolonization of thought should make room for non-biological conceptions of bodies and environments (in favor of 'spirits' or unusual persons perhaps) risks allowing for the dismissal or ignoring of knowledges and realities that are as much 'natural science' as those evolved in 'the West'.

A powerful chapter follows about the 'Encounter' and the continuing influence of European Christian missionary ideas on more recent scholarship about shamans. Next, Giraldo Herrera begins to focus more closely on the microbial part of his argument. He re-reads earlier and contemporary work about shamans and animists, in order to examine 'the similarities between the notions of Amerindian shamanism and microbiology ... and proposes the hypothesis that some shamanic beings might be microbes' (p. 65). This hypothesis is developed over several chapters. These enrich our knowledge of what shamans do and how they relate to the wider world. They are worth reading, whether or not the idea of microbial medical knowledge seems attractive or plausible. Recent Amazonian writing (most notably that of David Kopenawa and Bruce Albert) alerts us to the inadequacy of 'soul' as a translation of a Yanomami term, *utepë*, which refers 'strictly speaking ... to multitudinous entities, with their own personhood

and intentionality, that inhabit, mirror and holographically constitute each being of the environment: humans and animals, plants, soils, bodies of water, rocks and even tools' (p. 66). This encapsulates both the ontological turn and new animism.

Giraldo Herrera is insistent and clear that analyses and explanations of shamans' work cannot end with their own delusion or with their manipulation of others. Western naturalistic explanations (e.g. brain chemistry) or social ones (trickery or placebo) are inadequate. Thus, complex data about eyes and microscopy, entoptics, and microbes are presented. Some of this is dense, but readers of *Body and Religion* will readily take benefit from greater understanding of bodily matters. The book's argument certainly turns on such engagement.

Returning to Caribbean and Mexican knowledges, we are treated to two chapters about syphilis. Giraldo Herrera argues that this and related treponematoses – as well as Amerindian knowledge about them and their treatment – eventually influenced European understandings, 'working as an ontological scaffold for the development of microbiology' (p. 179). The understanding of symbiotic as well as epidemiological relations between humans and microbes is potent and vital (in many senses). Giraldo Herrera has not set aside 'religion' (unless it is ghettoized as a term for the purely imaginary and/or transcendent), but has opened up yet another way to reflect on the bodily – and therefore necessarily relational – nature of religion.

Microbes and Other Shamanic Beings ends with an exciting chapter that sets out with considerable clarity and skill – and graceful writing – what it means to be a person, a relation, in Caribbean and Amerindian understandings. There is interiority here, but it is microbial rather than 'spirited' and, in this instance, to be found within eyes rather than within reflections or imaginations. Further attention to the implications for understandings of the bodies which do religion (locally or globally) will be rewarding within the wider consideration signaled by the growth of this journal.