



**Zelený-Atapana, Mnislav. *Malá encyklopedie bohů a mýtů Jižní Ameriky* (Small Encyclopaedia of Gods and Myths of South America). Prague: Libri, 2009 (published 2010). 229 p.  
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Reviewed by Pavel Štěpánek

It is not the first book of this type by the author: some time ago (2007) the same publishing house published *Malá encyklopedie šamanismu* (*Small Encyclopaedia of Shamanism*). As far as I know, Zelený is the only Czech – anthropologist who not only systematically visits the Indians in South America, specifically in Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela and Brazil, but also periodically shares their lives with them. He observes their behaviour from inside, not from an outside scientific ivory tower, and after comparing his observations with other publications he briefly summarises them.

In his recent book the author defined shamanism as “*a state of mind, an attitude; it is in fact the most ancient spiritual discipline covering both the knowledge of the world and attempts to influence the forces of nature to one’s advantage*”. He presents shamanism as a trans-cultural phenomenon; in his explanation shamanism was obviously the first ever ideology since the dawn of history when humans started to ask questions about the world and universe. However, it did not have one single form since it was closely linked with the personality and capacities of each individual-shaman. This is a logical reason for its being later pushed back by organised religions but it has never completely disappeared. Some of the magical and religious practices were accepted by the religious systems, elsewhere the shamans existed or still coexists, with limited powers, on the fringe of society, though they sometimes penetrate up to the highest social tiers.

In his new book that has its predecessor for Central American area (almost ten years ago in 2001 a book by Kateřina Klápšřová and Čestmír J. Krátký called *Encyklopedie bohů a mýtů předkolumbovské Ameriky. Mexiko a Střední Amerika /Encyclopaedia of Gods and Myths of the Pre-Columbian America. Mexico and Central America/* was published in the same publishing house) Zelený summarises the basic terms from mythical and religious thinking of different civilizations and cultures of the vast South American subcontinent (Brazil in itself is bigger than the U.S. without Alaska). Texts are organised by regions: the high Andes, where the most significant and most known cultures originated, the Brazilian, Columbian and Peruvian Gran Amazonia, the Gran Chaco region that was in the centre of interest of and a subject of division by Argentine, Paraguay and Brazil, and last but not least, less studied regions of Patagonia and Tierra

del Fuego. Strangely enough the register does not include the very significant Orinoco region, though it is mentioned in the main headings Mythology and cosmology of the Yek'wana Indians, Mythology and cosmology of the Warao, and in smaller headings, such as Wishiratu, Imawali. For each region (very different in terms of climate and geography) the author presents myths, gods, deities, spirits, rituals, and ceremonies. He not only describes them but also interprets and explains them in order to indicate to the reader how to find his/her way to understanding the Indian soul and mind.

In the rich and plentiful mythology of various ethnic groups and tribes the author covers their past, one might even say history, and records the values and norms of their everyday life from simple activities, such as eating, to the complex ones including observations of nature and the universe. Shamanism together with animism form the spiritual profile of many cultures in the above mentioned regions with one exception – the Andes – where polytheism professed by the nations and tribes there disappeared under the pressure of the white civilization that clearly and fully adopted the Ibero-American Christian culture.

The terms, names, deities, symbols, and other elements of the rich South-American mythology, undoubtedly very exotic and sometimes totally unknown, can be easily referred to as they are clearly and alphabetically arranged. The impression is enhanced by many black/white illustrations (photos, sketches). It is not just a dictionary it offers deeper analyses and examples of specific myths.

Zelený's text contains also analyses of syncretism (the first big symposium on the topic was held in Caracas in 1992), it compares the original religion or the shamanism as such with Christianity (evil in one myth and in the Holy Scriptures with a quotation from the Bible, p. 146), and mentions the syncretic merging of original rituals with the Christian ones (e.g. Corpus Christi and Inti Raymi).

Some headings, e.g. animism, are valid throughout the world, the author, however, adds a specific South-American content by referring to a specific Indian group professing such approach to life. He also explains some purely ethnographical terms and definitions that affected the mythological interpretation. Most terms come from the original languages, not only indigenous but also e.g. African (here e.g. candomblé, makumba, umbanda) or Spanish and Portuguese.

For terms originated from the Spanish I would recommend not only an interpretation but also a reference to their etymological origin, or, at least, the present or historical meaning of the word (e.g. cabildo, eldorado). The terms already well known, such as ayahuasca, linked with hallucination practices, are not listed separately but are a part of a bigger heading, here e.g. a snake. Some terms belonging to each other (music, singing, dance), are grouped but we do not find them separately. However, a register can help you in case you are lost in some headings. In brief, it is a rather solid and very useful instrument for orientation and quick information but also for a deeper knowledge of the minds and complex reality of the most significant cultures of the vast South-American subcontinent.

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