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Medusa's Hair: An Essay On Personal Symbols And Religious Experience



Synopsis

The great pilgrimage center of southeastern Sri Lanka, Kataragama, has become in recent years the spiritual home of a new class of Hindu-Buddhist religious devotees. These ecstatic priests and priestesses invariably display long locks of matted hair, and they express their devotion to the gods through fire walking, tongue-piercing, hanging on hooks, and trance-induced prophesying. The increasing popularity of these ecstasies poses a challenge not only to orthodox Sinhala Buddhism (the official religion of Sri Lanka) but also, as Gananath Obeyesekere shows, to the traditional anthropological and psychoanalytic theories of symbolism. Focusing initially on one symbol, matted hair, Obeyesekere demonstrates that the conventional distinction between personal and cultural symbols is inadequate and naive. His detailed case studies of ecstasies show that there is always a reciprocity between the personal-psychological dimension of the symbol and its public, culturally sanctioned role. *Medusa's Hair* thus makes an important theoretical contribution both to the anthropology of individual experience and to the psychoanalytic understanding of culture. In its analyses of the symbolism of guilt, the adaptational and integrative significance of belief in spirits, and a host of related issues concerning possession states and religiosity, this book marks a provocative advance in psychological anthropology.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

What is most rewarding with this book, is the cultural/cognitive analysis done by the author.

Obeyesekere explains how the women with matted hair (in an Indian province) obtain their particular status in a society brimming with mythological images and tales very much pervading daily life. Very

Freudian in his approach when recording the life stories of the women (allowances has to be made for this) and subsequently how these trajectories have formed the women, the author demonstrates how the women are able to explain what has happened to them by sharing the society's knowledge of the religious myths. By drawing on these myths, and their images, the women can manipulate and appropriate these images when accounting for how they got their matted hair, and consequently the sacred character of their being. So long as their account is identifiable and compatible with commonly held knowledge of the religious myths and tales, they are plausible and deemed valid by the community. Should a tale prove unidentifiable with the body of myths and characteristics of spirits, one may very well be described as plain ol' crazy. I feel that the fundamental argument of the book is how intimate knowledge of the mythological content of the culture, and the successful manipulation of this, leads to an elevation of social status, whereas in western societies, the long since (by and large) eradication of these beliefs (in lack of a better word) will most certainly lead a person with similar symptoms destined for a diagnosis of mental illness or -unstability. This is the strongest argument in the book, one that is firmly supported by the analysis, notwithstanding the reservations one might have towards traditional psychoanalysis. It's not a light read, but getting into the cultural analysis might be a sweet reward.

Having read *Medusa's Hair* as part of my University coursework, I was very impressed. Most of the books we are asked to read are fairly dull but this book really captivated me. Obeyesekere's personal opinions on the subject of matted hair in Sri Lankan women attending the festival at Kataragama was fascinating. He has a great way of putting across his own opinion and whilst he makes a great bridge between Weber's and Freud's philosophical standpoints, he very effectively shows his position across to the reader. This may seem like a difficult book to comprehend but once read will be greatly admired.

An interesting read, but not for the casual reader. This text is a pretty advanced look at the religious beliefs and practices held in a number of Eastern countries. The writer becomes fascinated with the practice of matted hair exhibited in a number of female priestesses. He likens this matting to Medusa's hair and begins to wonder at some of the Freudian psychosexual rationalizations that could be put into play to explain the phenomena. Obeyesekere explores his theory through a number of case studies and eventually comes to what will undoubtedly be a very startling conclusion for the Western eye. I believe this book would be best suited for small discussion due to its advanced academic nature.

Speedy delivery, but I did not enjoy this book very much. It's very hard to get through.

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