



Sayings of the Ancestors: The Spiritual Life of the Sibundoy Indians

John Holmes McDowell

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The Sibundoy valley of southwestern Colombia is the home of a unique Indian culture—one that blends Incan elements with those of the aboriginal natives. Moreover, Sibundoy bridges two domains, the Andean highlands and the Amazonian basin, and inter-mixed with all of these elements are European influences, particularly folk and orthodox Catholicism. From this cultural enclave, John McDowell presents here a body of oral material collected from the Santiago Ingano community.

This corpus of material is made up of some 200 "sayings of the ancestors," proverb-like statements, many concerned with dreams and the forecasting of future events. From an analysis of these sayings emerges a cosmological view of the Sibundoy Indians, a glimpse of their spiritual world. It is a world where spirits constantly impinge on the activities of everyday life. It is a world where the sayings can both warn of spiritual sickness and offer the way to spiritual health. For the Sibundoy the sayings go back to the first people, the "ancestors," who established for all time the models for a proper life. The study of the sayings is rounded out with references to the parallel fields of mythology and folk medicine as these contribute to a clearer understanding of their roles and functions in Sibundoy life.

Sayings of the Ancestors provides a fascinating body of original folkloric and ethnographic material from a unique cultural locus. It is also an engrossing demonstration that what seems a miscellaneous group of small beliefs can be seen as the components of a larger world-order. The book and its interpretive findings will be a valuable resource for folklorists, anthropologists, and many Latin Americanists.

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