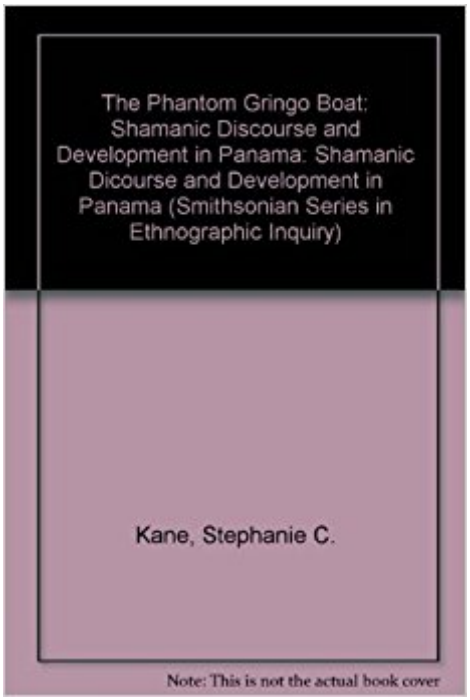
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PHANTOM GRINGO BOAT PB (Smithsonian Series In Ethnographic Inquiry)



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Synopsis

Originally published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1994, Stephanie C. Kane’s The Phantom Gringo Boat has been recognized as a ground-breaking piece of ethnological research. This second edition contains a new preface by the author and, reprinted in an Appendix, two supplementary essays on gender, the rain-forest and the state, and three reviews of the first edition. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Book Information

Series: Smithsonian Series in Ethnographic Inquiry

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Smithsonian (September 17, 1994)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1560983604

ISBN-13: 978-1560983606

Product Dimensions: 9 x 6.1 x 0.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 1 customer review

Best Sellers Rank: #1,212,200 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #52 inÃ Â Books > History > Americas > Central America > Panama #84115 inÃ Â Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences #229398 inÃ Â Books > Religion & Spirituality

Customer Reviews

"A fascinating work that will be very useful in courses on South American ethnology, development, ethnohistory, and ethnographic writing." --Jonathan D. Hill, American Ethnologist"A marvelously sensitive, stimulating, witty, yet forboding portrait of life on the tropical forest frontier between Central and South America." --P. R. Sullivan, Choice"Among the best and most elegant works of ethnography that I’ve ever read. . . . a model of ethnographic practice and representation." --Paul Stoller, American Anthropologist --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Trying to study the Embera or Choco people of southern Panama (and also northwestern Colombia) was no joke. As I read the author’s fieldwork story, I thanked my lucky stars that in India, I did my own work in a country without much direct US involvement, no anti-drug teams roaming about, where CIA-trained thugs were not in charge, where my country had not invaded, never mind created my host nation. How would my future have looked---in terms of anthropological research---if

Washington had bombed New Delhi, killing thousands, and then arrested the Indian Prime Minister, imprisoning him in Florida on drug charges? Given that set of images, you have to admit that Kane has done an amazingly good job, weaving her way between Embera, white and black Panamanian settlers in the Darien forest, and Panamanian officialdom.At first, I could not quite discern where the book was headed, though I liked its style, a kind of elliptical voice, a looking in many directions without a sharply focussed center. As I realized that this was her effort to replicate the shamanic style she wrote about, I began to admire the book more and more. The facts come together leisurely, not presented as a barrage from the start. The Embera had been pushed into establishing villages, having previously lived in scattered homesteads in the forest. Then they were encouraged to form a comarca, or autonomous region, requiring education, politics, and bureaucratic skills. Numbers of Indians and others crossed over the porous border between Panama and Colombia looking for a better life or escaping strife---the jungle grew more dangerous, but was being cut down as well. Shamans mediated between people and their precarious life situations. In the end you realize she has described Embera settlements as having a shamanic field in a dynamic relationship to the surrounding society. Disease and bad luck are interpreted in terms of that relationship. These evils empower the shamans because they `cure' them. Kane draws a parallel to state power, which `cures' such evils as undevelopment, crime, disasters, or illegal immigration. She says "by means of the social-shamanic dynamic, local culture struggles to press meaning on changes wrought by transnational forces so that they can be molded to local purpose." (pp.171-172) Though shamans could use their powers for evil, Kane finds that most do not. In my own work in Goa, there were two classes of such people, those who tried to harm others, and those who cured. Sometimes---and this was echoed in Richard Lieban's work on Cebuano sorcery---the two poles were represented in a single individual. Among the Embera, in the 1980s, "the shaman funneled anxieties and questions into the circuit of ritual power and returned them transformed."I am not qualified to say if THE PHANTOM GRINGO BOAT represents Panamanian society very well. I have never set foot there. But as a book of anthropology, I found it well-written, original, and full of concern for the people studied. In the modern style, Kane tried to place herself in the ethnographic picture, not hide behind some doubtful curtain of "objectivity". A phantom gringo boat, bearing the fruits of development and change, always appeared to be just around the next bend in the river in Embera dreams. Meanwhile, the people were left with most of the problems. It seems to me that phantom gringo boats are sailing everywhere in this world.

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