February 2010

From the Reference Desk

Tom Gilson

College of Charleston, gilsont@cofc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gilson, Tom (2010) "From the Reference Desk," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 22: Iss. 1, Article 21.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5851>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Book Reviews from page 38

the inevitable dilution and distortion that the desire to popularize begets.

Gary Edson's *Shamanism: A Cross-Cultural Study of Beliefs and Practices* provides a welcome antidote — a scholarly treatment of a subject critical for understanding the evolution of human psychology. The author brings to his subject a solid background both as an academic and a museum director. His prior related publication, *Masks and Masking: Faces of Tradition and Belief Worldwide* (McFarland, 2005) already dealt with a common accoutrement of shamanic ritual. The broader study of shamanism may be seen as a natural sequel to that earlier volume.

In a book of 295 pages, divided into eleven chapters, Edson has covered all the more important aspects of shamanism in the requisite detail with a minimum of resort to technical jargon. His research is based on abundant scholarly resources, duly noted, as well as on extensive "direct field observation" in locations as far-flung as Korea, Ecuador, Taiwan, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Russia and Mongolia. His bibliography serves the reader as a comprehensive check-list of publications on shamanism and related disciplines available in English. In his preface the author tells us that his book does "not presume to present a systematic study of the vast world of shamanism" nor does it "attempt to describe all the varied aspects of the spirit world." What it does provide is "a level of insight into humanity's attempt to understand and control the forces of nature, and many of

the shamanistic practices associated with those activities." In so doing, he engages in a thought-provoking investigation into the need of our prehistoric ancestors for psychic equilibrium in face of the unknown and the threatening, as he indicates at the end of his preface: "this book is about people and the means they developed to deal with socially, culturally and environmentally challenging occurrences that influenced their lives."

In chapter one we are given a general characterization of shamanism, including the various roles played by the shaman in the community. Essential to the exposition of any such phenomenon as this, the word "shaman" is analyzed etymologically, thus laying the foundation for a clearer understanding of the original concept. Subsequent chapters deal with the primordial beliefs underlying shamanic practice, the power that the shaman was believed to possess, based on his or her secret knowledge and contact with the world of spirits, the element of magic, the symbolism and artistic representation associated with shamanism, shamanic rituals and the state of transformation achieved by the practitioner through altered levels of consciousness and the various methods by which this transformation is effected, the shaman's powers of divination and healing (two primary aspects of his or her service to the community), and the function of dreams as a form of divine intervention and an avenue to the supramundane. In the final chapter, "Transcendental Shamanism," the author summarizes many of the more significant points of the foregoing discussion. Throughout he elucidates the particular facet of his subject under consideration with specific examples of shamanic practice

and beliefs drawn from a variety of traditions and contexts. Not bad for a book that makes no claim "to present a systematic study of the vast world of shamanism"!

A major feature of this book is the visual component: 143 illustrations, consisting of 49 plates and photographs, most of shamans, often in ritual attire and sometimes engaged in ritual performance, as well as 94 drawings executed by the author and based on models listed at the back of the book, depicting an array of ritual objects, especially the seemingly endless variety of masks associated with the world of the shaman. All illustrations, liberally distributed throughout the text and coordinated with it, are accompanied by explanatory captions, many fairly detailed. Eighteen pages of endnotes and thirteen pages of bibliography, plus a comprehensive index, round out the book which is well-bound with an attractive cover, as is customary with **McFarland and Company**. As the art of proofreading fades more and more into obsolescence, we are not surprised to find occasional "typos," but they do not in general detract from this up-to-date introduction to a large and complicated subject. This book belongs in libraries both academic and public. Its presence will help to counteract some of the nonsense which may perhaps be found alongside it.

From the Reference Desk

by **Tom Gilson** (Head, Reference Services, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston, 66 George Street, Charleston, SC 29401; Phone: 843-953-8014; Fax: 843-953-8019) <gilson@cofc.edu>

Berkshire Publishing is embarking on an ambitious project. The *Encyclopedia of Sustainability* (2010-12: 978-1-933782-01-0, \$999 prepaid) is being release over a three-year period. Plans call for each volume to stand alone as a resource as well as to be an integral part of the set. Individual volumes will focus on the relationship of sustainability to broad themes like business, law, and politics, as well as natural resources and ecosystems management. There will also be separate volumes devoted to

assessing sustainability in China and India, the Americas and Oceania, and Afro-Eurasia.

According to its editor, **Willis Jenkins**, the first volume subtitled *The Spirit of Sustainability* "intends to help readers to identify and begin to explore the moral dimensions of sustainability." In a wide-ranging collection of articles, he and his contributors offer a "pluralist" and interdisciplinary perspective that may raise as many questions as it answers. These are not easy issues. They are thought provoking and with religion, philosophy and ethics playing a major role in the discussion, there is no abiding consensus.

The volume contains 147 individual essays arranged alphabetically by subject category. Entries range from individual articles on Confucianism and Feminist Thought to those on the Jordan River Project, New Age Spirituality, the Wise Use Movement, Eco-centrism, Stewardship, as well as a variety of indigenous traditions. In each instance, the unifying theme is how these ideas, traditions, and movements

reflect values and ethical concerns related to the sustainability of the natural world. Each article starts with a helpful abstract which is followed by the text of the article. The articles are generally two to three pages in length and each has a solid list of further readings that users will find useful in expanding their research. The articles are scholarly but written in non-technical language accessible to the lay reader.

The Spirit of Sustainability lays a foundation for the *Encyclopedia of Sustainability* grounded in moral and ethical issues and concepts. Some may argue that the set might have first focused on the more practical concerns, like depleted natural resources or the need for ecosystems management. However, given the growing concern about the serious threats posed by issues related to sustainability, *The Spirit of Sustainability* was a good choice. It provides a broad-based but diverse foundation for the *Encyclopedia*, while at the same time, setting the tone for the following volumes.

continued on page 40

Overall, the size of the set and its “academic” subject matter will make it more appropriate for college, university, and professional libraries. However, larger public libraries where there is strong interest in environmental issues may want to consider making the commitment. At last check, both the first volume, *The Spirit of Sustainability* (978-1933782157, \$135) and the second volume, *The Business of Sustainability* (978-1933782133, \$135) can be ordered online.

(Sustainability is getting increasing attention in the reference literature. Greenwood’s three-volume *Encyclopedia of Sustainability* (2009, 978-0-313-35261-4, \$265) is now available and Springer is planning the release of the ten-volume *Encyclopedia of Sustainability Science and Technology* for 2012. Obviously far more technical in nature and intended for large university libraries, the projected price is \$8,100 and the ISBN is 978-0-387-89469-0.)

Depending on the type of library and the nature of the collection, some reference works are equally, if not more, appropriate for circulation. ABC-CLIO’s *The Great Depression and the New Deal: a Thematic Encyclopedia* (2010, 978-1598841541, \$180) is a case in point. These two volumes focus on a discrete but seminal period of American history that, given the current economic climate, is of increasing interest to students as well as the general public.

True to its subtitle, the *Encyclopedia* is divided into five separate themes or “depressions” that the editors feel define the Great Depression era. Volume one treats the economic, political, and social depressions while the second volume focuses on the artistic and ethnic depressions. Although all of these themes are critical to understanding this period, the section on the Ethnic Depression is particularly valuable in focusing on the plight of African Americans and other ethnic minorities. Their story is often overshadowed by the sheer magnitude of this national crisis. This set gives it the attention that it deserves.

Regarding the structure of these individual sections, each is introduced by an informative essay that recounts the essentials, as well as providing background and context. This initial essay is then followed by individual entries that consist of biographical sketches of prominent people, discussions of relevant laws, court cases and important government actions, and articles on specific occurrences, events, films, books, and other relevant works of art.

Overall, this is an effective arrangement. The introductory essays are very helpful in providing a broad and informed narrative while the entries fill in the specifics. The approach followed by the individual authors is straightforward and factual. The set is rounded out by close to 120 pages of primary source material, a chronology, and an index which, given the thematic structure of these two volumes, is essential in pinpointing specifics.

against the grain people profile

Madjid Dahmane

BORN & LIVED: Algiers.

EARLY LIFE: Algiers.

FAMILY: Married, three daughters (14), (10) and (04).

EDUCATION: License (documentary science) **University of Algiers**; Master (documentary science) **University of Bordeaux France**; Doctorate (documentary science) **University of Bordeaux France**.

FIRST JOB: As a researcher and teacher.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Researcher and associate professor.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Reading.

FAVOURITE BOOKS: Library science, information systems, competitive intelligence.

PHILOSOPHY: The creed on knowledge.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Publishing of articles, books, organizing proceedings, and conception of softwares.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Take part in setting a national library network, organize seminars on documentary systems, and set a doctorate in information sciences.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: See the development of information content industry more than it is today, particularly in multimedia edition. 🌿

As noted above, *The Great Depression and the New Deal: a Thematic Encyclopedia* could find a home in either reference or circulation, depending on need and the nature of the collection. It should also appeal to a variety of libraries including high school, public, and undergraduate. Students will find these two

volumes a valuable resource for completing short assignments as well as getting a start on larger papers. At the same time, general readers will turn to them to get facts and perspective on one of the most trying and difficult eras in American history. 🌿

Rumors from page 28

I wondered if the piracy was extending to academic books as well and asked John if this was a potential topic for the **Charleston Conference**. Coming in November?

http://www.publishers.org/main/PressCenter/Archives/2010_January/EpidemicofOnline-BookPiracy.htm

More **Charleston Conference-wise**. Was talking to the effervescent **Joyce Dixon-Fyle** <joyfyle@depauw.edu> during the 2009 conference. **Joyce** is coordinator of Collection Development at **DePauw**. **Joyce** has agreed to be our **publisher profile column editor**. See one on **Berkshire Publishing Group** in this issue, p.70.

Cara Battaglini <cbattaglini@sla.org> sent the slate of candidates for the **SLA 2011 Board**. I was excited to see that the always-do-

ing-something-great **David Stern** was one of the candidates for President-elect. **David** is listed as “Maximize Information, Providence, RI” and I found him on **Facebook**. Good luck, **David**, and hope to hear more from you! www.sla.org/ www.facebook.com/

Reportedly, **Reed-Elsevier** is holding on to **Variety** after all. You’ll remember that **Reed Business Information** had put most of its U.S.-based trade magazines up for sale in 2008. <http://www.foliomag.com/>

Recently met up with **Philip Larson** and his lovely wife **Susan**. <parker-fox@msn.com>. They are booksellers and run **Parker-Fox, LLC Books** in La Grange Park, IL. And, they just put pictures of their two cats — **Percival** and **Huxley** — on the **ATG Pets Webpage**. Do you have a picture of a pet you can send us? <hindsl@gmail.com>.

<http://www.against-the-grain.com/category/pets/>

continued on page 62

<<http://www.against-the-grain.com>>