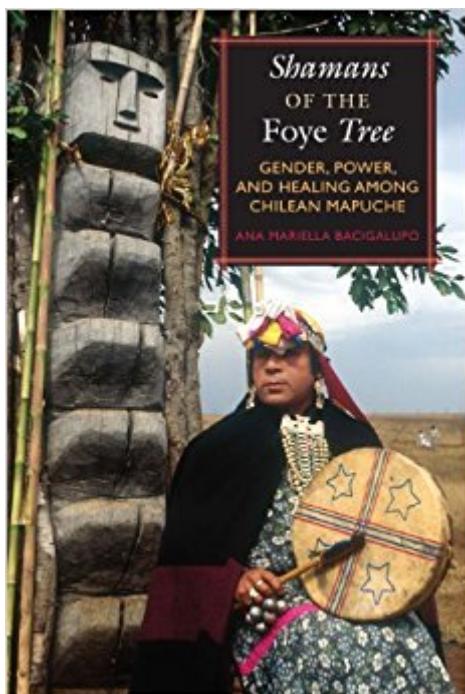


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# Shamans Of The Foye Tree: Gender, Power, And Healing Among Chilean Mapuche



## **Synopsis**

Drawing on anthropologist Ana Mariella Bacigalupo's fifteen years of field research, *Shamans of the Foye Tree: Gender, Power, and Healing among Chilean Mapuche* is the first study to follow shamans' gender identities and performance in a variety of ritual, social, sexual, and political contexts. To Mapuche shamans, or machi, the foye tree is of special importance, not only for its medicinal qualities but also because of its hermaphroditic flowers, which reflect the gender-shifting components of machi healing practices. Framed by the cultural constructions of gender and identity, Bacigalupo's fascinating findings span the ways in which the Chilean state stigmatizes the machi as witches and sexual deviants; how shamans use paradoxical discourses about gender to legitimize themselves as healers and, at the same time, as modern men and women; the tree's political use as a symbol of resistance to national ideologies; and other components of these rich traditions. The first comprehensive study on Mapuche shamans' gendered practices, *Shamans of the Foye Tree* offers new perspectives on this crucial intersection of spiritual, social, and political power.

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

An excellent study of this unique group of folk healers of the Mapuche nation of Chile and southern Argentina. Although not uncommon in many parts of the world, the female-identified male healer/shaman assumes this identity to penetrate the unknown realms of the unconscious mind and spiritual universe. Extremely misunderstood by religious zealots and uneducated laymen, the Shamans of the Foye Tree were demonized and persecuted for their gender identity and therapeutic role they exercised in their communities. Dr. Bacigalupo enters this complex world of alternative realities and presents a clear and unpretentious view of this social group of healers, bridging the ethno-scientific between the socio-cultural disciplines examining human variation and wisdom.

Book for college class - good read

For those in gender studies, a fascinating look at gender, shamanism and a native american society that is (for now) still in tact. Might shed some light on how native North Americans looked upon gender difference, magic and healing. Excellent photos, solid writing.

As one who has recently published a historical novel about the sixteenth century invasion of the land now called Chile by the Spaniards, I have read over the years pretty much everything written on the aboriginal Mapuche, and as much as I could find about their culture, past and present. Unfortunately, this remarkable book was published late in my research on my novel, in which a sixteenth century machi is central. Early accounts of the Mapuche by the Spaniards describe some machi as homosexual, a heinous sin at the time. Bacigalupo's complex, rich and nuanced explanation of the spiritual sexuality of modern machi corrects, in my eyes, the blindered vision of the zealots of a time and place in which the priests were the scholars. Shamans of the Foye Tree should be fascinating to anyone interested in gender studies, shamanism in general, and in particular, the Mapuche.

Through the lens of contemporary spiritual practices, this self-described experiential ethnography offers a sensitive analysis of one of southern cone South America's largest indigenous populations. The shamans to which the title refers are machi, a dispersed group of Mapuche healers, spiritual leaders, and ambiguously positioned political figures originating from areas today composing southern Chile's Bio-Bío, Araucanía, and Lagos regions. It is much more than a monograph in

ethnobotany or aboriginal religion. While the foye (also known as canelo and drimys winteri) is a sacred plant favoured in ritual congregations and healing, it also carries the symbolic conviction of "Mapuche identity and resistance to national ideologies and practices" (1). For Bacigalupo, shifting gender performances of machi (in private, public, ritual, and everyday contexts) are seen to at once delineate and disrupt socio-cultural and political frontiers. Importantly for both female and male machi, the foye's hermaphroditic qualities legitimate co-gendered ritual identities, as well as transvestism and sexual variance, setting these shamans apart from dominant gender norms. In this sense, the physical bodies of machi become sites of contestation and difference between Mapuche and non-Mapuche, "the places where power, hierarchy, and healing are played out" (8). We learn about how illness and accusations of witchcraft manifest themselves in the midst of uneven assimilations of dominant cultural values and practices. A chapter on gender in the Mapuche cosmic order is complemented by subsequent analyses on modern gender identities, specifically machi responses to normative ideologies and rituals around marriage, sexuality, masculinity, and homophobia. The ensuing narrative conveys the creativity and complexity of political agency among a contemporary colonized people, rendering the text equally relevant to anthropologists of religion and shamanism, as to scholars of power and inter-cultural relations, and to health practitioners working in indigenous milieus worldwide. Bacigalupo's reflexive attention to representation is subtle and effective in evoking the possibilities for Mapuche cultural--and by association political--expression within Chile's male-dominated, Catholic society. Refreshingly, the political is not reduced to the civic sphere alone, nor Mapuche women and men presumed to act according to uniform political interests. This opens onto respectful consideration of debates and disagreements among Mapuche people over the risks of representing complex aspects of their culture to non-Mapuche audiences. In this case, majority Chilean discourses on concepts like homosexuality, transgenderism, and normality limit machi in their public expressions of shifting gender identities to generic, ideal gender types that machi perceive as more comfortably resonating with non-Mapuche clients and Chilean society at large. Since Chile's democratic transition in 1990, the government has instituted bi-cultural initiatives aimed at transforming the state's relationship with Mapuche people (over 6% of the country's population). In this period, politicians have increasingly appropriated aspects of indigenous culture, such as publicly celebrating machi rituals, as a means of seeming pluralistic. Nevertheless, the imagery underlying such displays routinely draws on dominant Chilean gender notions that relegate domesticity and spirituality to the female sphere. Since the formation of the Chilean state, these have served to strip machi of their political power (Chapter 6). Conveniently for instructors, several chapters can stand on their own, making the book amenable (either as a

whole or in its respective parts) to class assignments on subjects from gender studies and the anthropology of religion, to political anthropology and field methods. While certainly accessible to undergraduate audiences (I have taught it to 3rd and 4th year undergraduates who found the material fascinating), the breadth of contemporary issues addressed in this work promises the critical engagement of a good cross-section of upper-year and graduate students. Much more than serving as rich reference material on Mapuche relationships to human, natural, and spirit worlds, this ethnography poses to serve as a guiding example for ethical field research and experiential ethnography among contemporary indigenous peoples.

This postfeminist experiential ethnography is an excellent example of how to conduct ethical field research and write a reflexive narrative that recognizes indigenous people as practitioners and intellectuals--in all their variation and contradiction. The book's beautifully written prose weaves the experiences of the anthropologist, shamans, and other Mapuche subjects together with their joint theorizing of their experiences. Bacigalupo then invites numerous poststructural and postfeminist scholars to join the conversation in terms that are understood by shamans and scholars alike. The result is a perceptive, decolonized narrative that takes seriously the gendered discourses and practices of shamans in a variety of ritual, historical, political, sexual, and everyday contexts. The book ends with the author's brilliant discussion of the ways one could resolve the ethnographic conundrum of the public secret. Should shamans' co-gendered practices remain public secrets so that they can avoid further discrimination and misunderstandings in national discourses? Or should we openly acknowledge the complex forms of knowledge that emerge from their co-gendered practices in order to legitimate them and open up the possibility for indigenous political mobilization? Well-written and incisive, this superb book will be useful for both graduate and undergraduate students.

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