



"So Wise Were Our Elders": Mythic Narratives from the Kamsa

John Holmes McDowell

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"So wise were our elders!" Thus exclaims Mariano Chicunque, himself an elder, expressing in a single phrase the thrust of the mythic narrative tradition he simultaneously presents and represents in his storytelling.

A remarkable body of mythology is documented for the first time in this volume. John Homes McDowell's study revolves around thirty-two mythic narratives of the Kamsá Indians who live in the Sibundoy Valley of the Colombian Andes, collected by the author from several renowned Kamsá storytellers. Each myth is given in the native language with parallel English translations that seek to capture the flavor of the original performances. Textual annotation and commentary assess the grounding of the myths in the language and culture of the Kamsá indigenous community.

Introductory chapters describe the process of transcription and translation and highlight important characteristics of the collection. McDowell stresses the collaborative nature of the enterprise, which benefits from the shared vision of the ethnographer and of indigenous consultants who were involved in every step of the process. The narratives are portrayed as a residual mythology in transit toward folktale but still evocative of a traditional cosmos. The myths are much more than inert "literary" objects, and under McDowell's scrupulous analysis they emerge as a storehouse of narrative potential whose performances still have meaning in Kamsá society and culture today.

"So Wise Were Our Elders" is a companion volume to McDowell's *Sayings of the Ancestors: The Spiritual Life of the Subundoy Indians* (1989).

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