

Walter E. Roth

The Animism and Folklore of the Guiana Indians

The re-issue of this annotated compendium honours a landmark compilation of the cosmology and beliefs of three of Guyana's indigenous peoples – Arawak, Carib and Warau.

Walter Roth arrived in British Guiana in 1907 to take up a combined appointment as the government stipendiary magistrate, medical officer, and Protector of Indians in the Pomeroon District. The title of his compendium makes clear that Roth ranked indigenous belief systems as inferior to those of the Indo-European world, however in recent decades, these so-called myths and folklore are being reinterpreted as sophisticated metaphysical systems of belief that take their place in stature alongside those of Western philosophy.

We can read the narratives that Protector Roth so carefully compiled on different levels. Firstly, as a window into the fascinating neotropical world, with its endemic profusion of plant and animal life forms. Secondly, we can also marvel at this glimpse into the sophisticated cosmology and complex world views of Guyana's first peoples, even while recognizing that the narratives, stripped from their social context and translated into English, have lost much of their meaning. We can reflect on the ways in which knowledge and instruction about what it is to be human are passed down through the tales – precepts and wisdom and information all encoded in a vast linguistic tapestry. Sadly, only a fraction of indigenous peoples today continue to speak their languages, while the landscapes and the ways of living have changed. But Walter Roth's labours of love endure in his many publications, which in turn can aid us all in our creation of the imagined community of Guyana.

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