

# **Valueless Value: The Question of Production in Cofán Shamanism**

**Michael Cepek**

**Associate Professor  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Texas at San Antonio**

**Ethnography and Social Theory Colloquium  
Monday, April 2  
4:00 – 5:30 pm  
Room 105, 10 Sachem**





Value is a key conceptual component of immanent critiques of capitalism and other modern social formations. In this paper, I take value beyond capitalism by examining its questionable production in a non-Western institution: the shamanic complex of the indigenous Cofán people of eastern Ecuador. While acknowledging the ethical nature of human existence and the generative power of human action, I describe the shaman as a paradoxical figure with regard to the labor that produces him and the criteria that orient his actions. The shaman occupies a central social position, but he profits from little Cofán labor and receives mixed Cofán praise. Consequently, it is arguable that he embodies no value at all. I describe the Cofán shaman as an embodiment of “valueless value,” a concept I articulate in relation to Pierre Clastres’ notion of “powerless power.” I suggest that we can understand the social dynamics of Cofán shamanism by joining the concept of valueless value to an unorthodox strand of Marxian anthropology and contemporary anthropological writings on ethics and morality. In dialogue with these bodies of work, I seek to demonstrate the utility of a value-based approach in all ethnographic investigations that take human practice as their primary object.

Photos by Bear Guerra