

***Frauen und Feen. Entwicklung und Wandel einer Beziehung. (Besessenheit in Yasin/Nordpakistan)* by Maria Marhoffer-Wolff. Culture Area Karakorum Scientific Studies. Köln (Cologne): Rüdiger Köppe Verlag 2002. ISBN 3-89645-157-X, 1 map, 3 diagrams, pp. 401.**

Reviewed by Elisabeth Schömbucher, Heidelberg

Frauen und Feen (Women and Fairies) is an ethnography of women's living conditions and their states of possession in the Yasin valley in Northern Pakistan. As a member of the interdisciplinary research project *Culture Area Karakorum* (Kulturraum Karakorum), funded by the German Research Council, the author was interested in indigenous medical knowledge systems and local concepts of illness. When she began her fieldwork in 1989, concentrating on birth control and fertility problems among women, she soon came across young women who were possessed by fairies. Not unlike some other anthropologists doing fieldwork in South Asia, she was immediately fascinated by the object of her observation and consequently embarked on a "long and difficult process of clarification and differentiation" (p. 13). The results of her research were first submitted as a Ph.D. thesis at the University of Tübingen in 1996.

The Yasin Valley in the Northern Areas of Pakistan (northeast of the larger Chitral Valley) is part of the Eastern Hindukush. Its population is rather heterogenous in terms of religion and language. In the southern part of the Valley, Khowar, the language of neighbouring Chitral, predominates, whereas in the northern part, the Yasin dialect of Burushaski is spoken. The southern part is inhabited by a minority of Sunnite Muslims, the northern part by Ismailites who form the majority of the population of Yasin.

After a brief description of her research methods (visiting various settlements in the Yasin Valley, accompanied by a male research assistant while living in the house of a local family), the author introduces the reader to the living conditions of women, such as gender-specific socialization (chapter 2), seclusion and marriage (chapter 3) and childlessness (chapter 4). Living as a new bride in the house of her in-laws with a husband who is often absent for long periods is surely the most difficult stage in the life cycle of a woman. This is the time when young women come into contact with fairies, and are likely to be possessed by them. One is reminded immediately of I.M. Lewis's *Ecstatic Religion* and his concept of "peripheral possession", which relates the possession of young women to their social situation as oppressed brides. Surprisingly, however, Marhoffer-Wolff makes no attempt to "explain" possession, but simply "demonstrates" (p. 100) how some of the strongest, most self-confident and persistent of these Muslim women, who

are usually represented as oppressed and passive, are able to shape their conditions of living once they have become associated with the fairies.

In order to “demonstrate” this specific form of possession, Marhoffer-Wolff begins by describing the realm of the fairies (chapters 6 – 8). The fairies, known by the Persian term *parí*, dwell in the higher regions of the mountains, an area considered ritually pure in contrast to human settlements, which are regarded as impure. The *parís* indulge in great luxury, with golden palaces and delicious food (which, however, they do not eat). *París* always take young fairy boys along with them on their journeys to the precincts of human settlements. If a fairy boy falls in love with a beautiful young woman among the humans and wants to marry her, the fairies take her with them to the fairy-world, which must seem a paradise to any human being. Among the reasons why the *parís* take young women into their world, the people of Yasin point out that freshly married young daughters-in-law are in a state of extreme purity and are also attractive, because they wear beautiful clothes, and take special pains with their appearance. It deserves particular emphasis that women of Yasin regard the love marriage with a fairy boy as an ideal union, quite in contrast to the customarily arranged marriage between human partners.

Chapter 9 is devoted to the relationship between a young woman and a *parí*-boy. A woman who has contacts with a *parí* is called a *mómalas*, literally ‘the woman who is afraid’. For the young woman this is a frightening experience, and she is forbidden by the *parís* to tell anyone about her visits to their world. Her family at home finds her behaviour increasingly peculiar. She sleeps a lot, seems to be depressed, and cannot, or does not want to, work. A healer is summoned to find out whether a *parí* is really responsible, or whether the girl is simply pretending to be in contact with fairies. From chapters 10 through 12, the author concentrates on the specialists for the treatment of possession, the *xalífa*. *Xalífa* are religious functionaries in the Ismaili community, and some of them are famed for their extraordinary ability to deal with *parís*. Exorcisms (*arzahím*) are family affairs, in which only the males are permitted to participate. Women would be too weak to risk the temptations of the *parí* and thus would be in danger of becoming possessed by them.

In most cases the *parí* can be expelled from the young women after a number of elaborate and more or less costly exorcising rituals, but sometimes the *parí* won’t consent to leave the woman. In such cases people say that the *parí*-boy has already married the girl and that further attempts at exorcism would jeopardize her health. Instead, contact with the *parí* is cultivated in an extensive process of transformation in which the *mómalas* and her family learn to deal with the situation. The *parís* come regularly on specified days and, through their *mómalas*, distribute prophecies for people who ask them for advice (chapter 13). As a matter of fact, only a few *mómalas* hand out prophecies for fear of causing conflicts among the

persons concerned and their relatives and neighbours. Quite in contrast to other spirit media in South Asia, *mómalas* do not gain in experience in old age; instead, they lose their power as they grow older. Due to their increasing impurity and decreasing attractiveness, they are finally abandoned by the fairies, who are attracted solely by young girls (chapter 16).

The author's cautious approach to the phenomenon of possession in Yasin, namely by depicting attitudes towards, and discourses on *mómalas*, is reflected in chapter 17. It is only here, at the end of her book, that she attempts to define the term *mómalas*. And in this way she is able to avoid the evocation of undesirable associations the reader undoubtedly would have had with terms such as "possession" and "shamanism".

Marhoffer-Wolff's book cannot be read quickly, inasmuch as it elaborates step by step the *mómalas* and the indigenous conceptions about their contact with the fairy world. Nevertheless, the reader's patience is rewarded in the end. The book offers insights which reveal parallels with other possession cults in South Asia. The author shows the lengthy process of dealing with fairies once they have entered into contact with human beings. Not only the person possessed, but her family as well must get acquainted with the new situation and go through long-term negotiations to decide whether the fairies could be exorcised or whether the relation with them should be encouraged and cultivated. Marhoffer-Wolff also demonstrates that possession cannot simply be categorized as an illness, but might very well develop into a proficiency in ecstatic techniques, as shown for instance by Gananath Obeyesekere in his famous *Medusa's Hair*. Yet whereas in most other areas in South Asia (as, for instance, in possession cults among South Indian fishermen, studied by the present reviewer), women gain ecstatic expertise over the years, in the Yasin Valley the opposite development takes place: aging women there gradually lose their ecstatic abilities, which appears to be a consequence of their gradual loss of ritual purity, thus making them increasingly less attractive to the fairies. The phenomenon might be better understood against the background of the culture-specific spatial orientation in which the sphere of high altitude, where the fairies dwell, is associated with the highest degree of ritual purity.

To put it briefly, the author's method of discussing indigenous world views on possession in Yasin without any recourse to sociological or psychological explanations provides an array of insights which would have been lost, had she clung to the current anthropological approaches. Her "multi-perspective approach", taking into consideration both the female perspective of the *mómalas* and the male perspective of the *xalífa*, not only meets an important methodological demand in anthropology, but also reveals the existence of conflicting discourses on the phenomenon. Marhoffer-Wolff shows, among other things, that even in a male-dominated society, as is the case in the Yasin Valley, women have been agents resisting

male efforts to “cure” them from their “fairy illness” for a considerable period of time. Contrary to what has been predicted by some ethnographers (cf., e.g., Karl Jettmar *et al.*: *Die Religionen des Hindukush*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1975), the pre-Islamic belief in fairies in northern Pakistan is far from being threatened by extinction. Instead, it persists as a kind of counter-discourse within the dominant Islamic society.

***Aspects of Migration and Mobility in Nepal* edited by Susanne von der Heide and Thomas Hoffmann. Series Man and Environment No. 2. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 2001. ISBN 99933-0-361-5, 242 pp.**

Reviewed by Susan Thieme, Zurich

This second contribution to the series Man and Environment shows once more that people in Nepal are increasingly diversifying their livelihood strategies, using migration as one of them. The book contains studies of selected examples covering the high mountain region of Nepal, its central hill region and the Terai. The authors explain the various dimensions of migration and mobility and their impact. The list of contributors provides an interesting mix of Nepalese and non-Nepalese authors, including representatives from Nepali politics, international organisations and universities.

After a foreword by Hon. C. Pd. Bastola, the first part of the book includes two papers on migration in general. M. Schneller draws attention to the impact of migration on the stability of the international political system. Unfortunately, he does not illustrate his theses with Nepali example. Based on an impressive amount of tables and figures, H. Gurung provides a quantitative analysis of domestic and international migration trends in Nepal since 1950. He also interprets the Population Census of 1991 in anticipation of the results of the Census of 2001, which was unfortunately released shortly after the publication of this book, and summarizes the results as follows: “It is apparent that development interventions of the last four decades have had only a marginal impact in highland Nepal. This explains the strong propensity for highlanders to migrate to other regions”