

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ANNE VALLELY, *Guardians of the Transcendent: An Ethnography of a Jain Ascetic Community*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2002, ix + 296p., Index. \$70 cloth; \$27.95 paper.

Anne Vallely's ethnography, *Guardians of the Transcendent: An Ethnography of a Jain Ascetic Community*, is as poetic as it is insightful. In 1996-97 Vallely lived with and researched an ascetic community of Terapanthi Jains, a group of the largest order of female ascetics under a single leader among Jains in India. In the opening of the first chapter, "Reeboks and Renunciation in Rajasthan," Vallely begins with an extended meditation on the nature of the Reeboks she had bought in Montreal before her fieldwork, reflects on their out-of-place nature in the sands of Rajasthan, recounts the effort needed to take them off and put them on (while the ascetics around her slipped their sandals on and off with ease), and describes her growing realization that the sneakers would "definitely have to go" – indeed, they would have to be liberated (12). As metaphor and teaser this opening works beautifully and sets the tone for the chapters to follow. The reader is drawn into Vallely's experiences during her fieldwork, including its challenges and her acceptance of the insights that it would bring to her.

Divided into three sections, the ethnography proceeds by discussing the nature and distinctiveness of Jain ethics; the rituals that create and separate ascetics from householders; the role of demons and desires in the lives of ascetic nuns; the ways in which renunciants are intrinsically involved in the very world they renounce; the roles of devotion and divinity in a religious order that proclaims self-reliance and independence over all other values; and an insightful commentary on female ascetics and their role, duties, and responsibilities in the Jain spiritual and worldly universes.

Vallely's ethnography most centrally marks a serious contribution to the anthropology of religion and gender. For those interested in the nature of religious belief and experience, Vallely demonstrates how male and female ascetics, renunciants of worldliness, are linked to the "householders," or the lay public, who are attached to worldly concerns and objects. The spiritual and the worldly are intimately wedded in Jain ascetic life and unable to be truly separated. The complex relationship between religious ideology and practice is beautifully demonstrated, calling into question the utility of studying religious texts without the lived practices of the people who claim to follow them—and vice versa.

For readers interested in the cross-cultural study of gender roles, Valley explores how the life of the female ascetic—a life lived without marriage, children, or other domestic responsibilities—is an extension rather than rejection of the life of the female householder. The female ascetic’s “innate” talents for devotion to the guru (rather than her husband), duties to the order (rather than her household), and physical control of her body, contribute to the common Jain belief that the exemplary Jain nun is to be celebrated but is not truly exceptional. The life of the female ascetic is both experienced and viewed by others as an extension of a gender-appropriate life for a woman. Monkhood, by comparison, is seen as a “heroic rupture” with the worldly, a greater, harder-won achievement than the life of the Jain nun.

While it concerns a very specific group of people within a specific religious order, Valley’s ethnography contains insights into a range of issues pertinent to many anthropologists. The nature of gift-giving, demonic spirit possession, personhood, and ethics will interest readers with a range of ethnographic expertise. Further, readers who are looking for models of how anthropologists can place themselves in their texts with honesty and insight will also be appreciative of the model Valley supplies.

There is little to critique here. Instead, the reader is left with curiosity about the parts of the Jain world that Valley leaves largely unexplored in her fieldwork and the kind of insights she could bring to them. Equally intense fieldwork with the householders, in particular, would be sure to be intriguing. Also, do nuns or monks ever renounce their renunciations? It would be fascinating to know more about those who have tried and foregone the life of the ascetic. The reader is left wanting to know more stories about Reeboks and Rajasthan, Valley and the Jains.

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