BOOK REVIEWS

Cacopardo, Augusto S. *Natale pagano. Feste d'inverno nello Hindu Kush*, Palermo: Sellerio, 2010; 476 pp.; bibliography, 4 maps, 8 photographs, glossary, index. SBN Pal0229009.

The dense and rich volume (in Italian) by Augusto S. Cacopardo, dedicated specifically, but not exclusively, to the winter feasts of the Kalasha population of the Birir valley (Chitral, N.W.F.P., Pakistan) is divided in three parts I: *Il contesto* (the context); II *Feste Kalasha d'inverno* (Kalasha winter feasts); III: *La comparazione* (a comparative approach) preceded by an ample introduction (pp. 11–35) and followed by *Epilogue*, *Appendix* (*Chronological table of Birir winter feasts*, *Glossary* and cartography), *Bibliographic References*, *Analytical Index* and *Acknowledgements* (pp. 414–476). Such an organization of the contents of the book is very effective, considering the enormous amount of data which the author had to organize in his effort to give a systematic illustration and a comparative anthropological and historic-religious analysis of the winter festive cycle of the Kalasha.

For an appropriate understanding of the type of work carried out, the section of the *Introduction* (pp. 414–476) is particularly relevant in which the author discusses the main points of the anthropological debate in relation to his work: always in a problematic way and without forgetting to mention the theoretical and practical difficulties which, like all field researchers, he inevitably had to deal with. Cacopardo does not appear to subscribe in full to any particular school; a position we may appreciate if we consider that certain forms of methodological fideism, as is well known, can indeed turn into a

cage, golden as it may be. His broad knowledge of the relevant literature and his referring, in turn, to different theoretical approaches in the course of his analysis, are, in the end, a good guarantee that the reader is provided, at least, with the largest possible array of data; on which, he remains free, of course, to reason otherwise.

After the introduction, the first section of the work, subdivided in three chapters, is dedicated to the illustration, based on personal observation, of the broader world of which the Kalasha of Birir are a component (the necessary topographical indications to geographically delimit the area investigated are given in the maps of pp. 436-438. Unfortunately the photographic material is not equally adequate). The A. offers a general cultural and historical frame by providing a synthetic, but very apt, reconstruction of the main events in the history of the Hindu Kush/Karakorum region which the author calls *Peristan* stressing its former cultural unity, in times preceding the advent of Islam (Ch. 1 pp. 39-65). He then proceeds to describe the traditional system of production and the symbolic system underlying it, as well as the polytheistic religion of the Kalasha in the light of research carried out by scholars of comparative religion (Ch. 2, pp. 66-99). A socio-cultural illustration of the Birir community closes this first section. The focus (Ch. 3, pp. 100-121) here is first on the

-Kalasha Muslims), and then on the annual ritual cycle of Birir. The substantial delimitation of the investigation to a specific geographical area within the Hindu Kush presented as the protagonist in the subtitle is therefore quite clear.

The A. is perfectly aware of the objective limits of his approach in recruiting informants, and of the problems of communication with them. These, however, are difficulties commonly encountered in researches of this kind, which, inevitably, are never as transparent in their methodology as would be desirable.

relations between Muslim converts and polytheists (Ch. 3, pp. 100-105) have great documental value for a better understanding of the itineraries followed by the spread of Islam in the Hindu Kush, and not only there. They describe indeed concrete instances and provide close-up views of processes which may very well have been typical in the Islamization of all the mountain areas of Central Asia in the last three

centuries, when the spread of Islam gained the greatest momentum. They significantly enhance the scope of comparison by disclosing an horizon which goes beyond the rhetoric of the conquest and the forcible conversion, fostered by the *jihad* launched at the end of the XIX century by the Amir Abdurrahman Khan in the Afghan region of Nuristan (formerly Kafiristan), bordering the Pakistani district of Chitral where the Kalasha are settled. We learn for example that among the first Kalasha to embrace Islam in Birir were the members of a small inferior caste (intermarriage was forbidden) of serfs/artisans who, on the basis of the pervasive pure/impure bi-polar model, with many intermediate degrees, through which the Kalasha perceive their social and natural environments, were considered the quintessence of impurity. This is rather interesting in the light of research I conducted as member of an ethno-linguistic mission organized by Prof. Antonio Panaino of Bologna University in cooperation with the Academy of Sciences of Dushanbe in the summer of 2010 in the Yaghnob valley of Tajikistan among the local sedentary population.

the ones described by Cacopardo and similarly located in isolated places and adorned with goat-horns; and on the other, Islamic shrines, frequented by pilgrims, believed to be the burials of holy men who played an important role in the conversion of the area. The relevant point here is that in some cases these venerated figures have names clearly connected to the artisan-class, as for example Chub-tarash

-

In the second section of the book, the author aptly adopts a writing style in first person to embark in a narration which, though not coinciding exactly with his field-journal (but excerpts from the actual journal are interspersed in the narration, bearing witness to the awareness of the author of the role played by the point of view of the observer), remains quite close to it by following its temporal sequence, making the reading extremely light and pleasing. The pursuit of scientific ends is successfully combined, here, with an enjoyable style which pleasantly approaches the travelogue genre. It must be remarked, however, that the adequateness of an informant should be evaluated not only in relation to the needs of the researcher, but also with regard to the technical precision of the information to be recorded, selected and transmitted. The readiness of an informant to

fulfil the wishes of the researcher is a well-known sore point in this type of research (especially when linguistics is involved).

Divided in four chapters, this central part of the work includes a description of the arrival of the author in Birir, the presentation of his informants and assistants and, especially, the illustration of the rituals of the winter festive sequence (Ch. 4, pp. 125–246, and Ch. 5, pp. 247–320), where the author extensively relates his direct experience, in 2006–07, of the Winter Solstice Festival of Birir, and of the other winter feasts which followed it. The reference to the dates of the Gregorian calendar is most welcome, because the local reckoning of

determine the beginning of a celebration, is not very clear. The text mentions, rather fleetingly, that the moment of the central astronomic phenomenon, the winter solstice, is deduced by direct observation of the course of the sun (p. 266); which is quite perplexing, not only because of the unpredictability of atmospheric conditions, but also because the moment of the solstice must be known beforehand, since it marks the climax, and not the inception, of the festival. The absence of any connection between the winter ritual cycle and the Kalasha calendar system is thus rather disappointing. The information given on this aspect is indeed quite scant. It appears that the dates of festivals may very well oscillate. But how, one wonders, and within which limits? Observation of lunar phases is mentioned in connection with

s in a *nom nomek* praise-song transcribed on p. 168): must we think then of a lunar-solar time-reckoning system? And how about the seasons? How are they subdivided? The presence of a term like *cil'a* (p. 279), designating the period of time which ends with Salgherek – a true turning-point in the

in which the author recognizes, quite correctly I believe, the Iranian calendar term *cilla* (the forty days), appears to hint at a precise parallel

winter feasts. Indeed, forty days more or less elapse between the end of the Chaumos Winter Solstice Festival and the first day of the new year. A more in-depth analysis of the Kalasha calendar could have provided extremely useful indications on the matter, and would have maybe even allowed us to determine, more or less precisely, the time in history when these Iranian influences penetrated the Kalasha world.

In the following chapter of this second section the reader is offered an accurate and productive comparison between the Chaumos of Birir and the Chaumos of the two Northern valleys of Bumburet and Rumbur, formerly observed by the author in 1973 and described at length also by other researchers (Ch. 6, pp. 295-320). A chapter dedicated to Kalasha cosmology concludes the section (Ch. 7, pp. 321-333). Maybe a rather short one, considering that it deals with

the entire system is to be unravelled.

The last section of the book, as its title recites, is devoted to comparison. Chapter 8 (pp. 337-356) deals with the relations of the broader Hindu Kush/Karakorum region with the Indian world and with Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit Hinduism. Cacopardo recalls here the main points of the comparative studies formerly carried out by other scholars, to show subsequently to which extent the Kalasha pure/impure polarity which he considers typical of Peristan may be compared to the structurally homologous one of the Indian world. He then proceeds to compare the Chaumos with Indian festivals and concludes the chapter with a brief, but quite dense, overview of the cultural parallels offered by the rather heterodox forms of Hinduism found among the Pahari people of the Western Himalayas. At the end of the chapter he ventures to suggest,

culture area possibly spanning, in the past, the whole great Asian chain from its Western reaches in Afghanistan to its Eastern ones in Nepal as far as speakers of Indo-

356), characterized by religious systems based on a model broadly akin to the Kalasha one. Chapter 9 (pp. 357-390) extremely interesting and even enlightening in some points is entirely dedicated to the comparison of what observed among the Kalasha with the available data on the winter feasts of the archaic European world, where the critical reconstruction of the ritual figures of the Divine Visitor and of the God that Dies and Resurrects impersonated in European folklore by the Carnival King, is accompanied by an intriguing proposal of a Dionysian reading of Chaumos. In Chapter 10 (pp. 391-414), the last, the author tackles the thorny issue of the possible relations between the data offered by Peristan and what is conjectured about the religion of the proto-Indo-Europeans. With great caution and due attention, accompanied by

absolute clarity on methodological choices, Cacopardo shows here quite effectively how, starting from the analysis of a contemporary case, it is possible to ascertain the degree of validity of the criteria proposed for the reconstruction of an archaic past. A brief *Epilogue* finally sums up the main findings of the whole investigation helping the reader to pinpoint in his mind the complex picture emerging from the analysis of the data presented in the volume.

The vast bibliographic (pp. 439 466) apparatus is up-to-date and exhaustive. Together with an essential analytical index, it concludes a work which sheds new light on unique phenomena seen in the light of contemporary anthropological debate. A work to be considered, therefore, a precious source of information for all those who investigate the complex issues connected to the winter ritual cycle of Indo-European peoples as well as, more in general, for researchers in religious anthropology and comparative religion.

Simone Cristoforetti