

Book Review

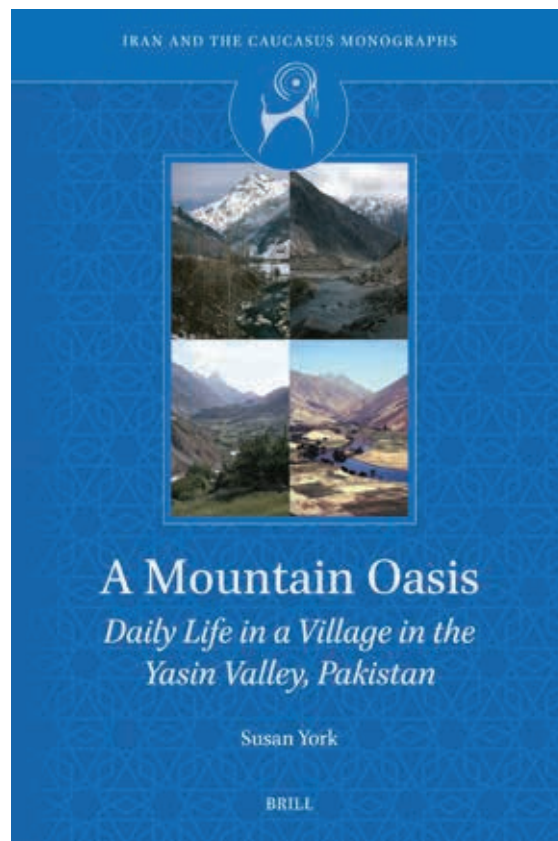
## Review of *A Mountain Oasis: Daily Life in a Village in the Yasin Valley, Pakistan* by Susan York

Leiden: Brill, 2024. 289 p. ISBN: 978-90-04-68482-9

Reviewed by Fizza Batool

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2024.9466>

---



---

### Recommended Citation

Batool, Fizza (2024). Review of *A Mountain Oasis: Daily Life in a Village in the Yasin Valley, Pakistan* by Susan York. *HIMALAYA* 43(2): 162-165.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Susan York's book on the village of Barkulti in Yasin Valley is an important contribution to the existing literature on Gilgit-Baltistan, it fills the gap of the little anthropological research in the Hindu Kush–Karakorum region. In her brilliantly written monograph, she documents the daily activities in the village in the years of 1982-1983. It provides extensive accounts of social and economic life, the subsistence economy, and its essential component of interdependence and cooperation, and highlights the social relations embedded in it to sustain life in the remote and harsh climate region. The thick and rich documentation provided in the book seems very fresh and does not give the impression to the reader that the research was carried out forty years ago for her doctoral dissertation. The book is divided into eleven chapters with a prologue and epilogue. The book lives up to the title of "daily life in the village" by providing the rhythms of daily life during different seasons, changes in the agro-pastoral economy, food, celebrations, crafts, and decorations.

*"In her brilliantly written monograph, York documents the daily activities in Barkulti in the years between 1982 and 1983. She provides extensive accounts of social and economic life, the subsistence economy, and its essential component of interdependence and cooperation."*

- Fizza Batool on *A Mountain Oasis: Daily Life in a Village in the Yasin Valley, Pakistan*

This book successfully captures the traditional life before the arrival of so-called development initiatives and highlights the advantages and difficulties of living in the high mountain region without romanticizing it. While introducing the setting of the village, its society, religion, and language, the author lucidly registers the religious harmony in the village when she observes (p. 12) "...although the village population was predominantly Ismaili Muslim, this did not prevent marriages being arranged between Ismaili and Sunni households". She goes on and explain how the villagers

practiced an agro-pastoral subsistence economy in the single-crop region. She argues that the key to the subsistence economy was mainly interdependence, cooperation, and sharing which was not just limited to an individual household but expanded to the whole village. Starting from building and maintaining irrigation channels to taking animal manure out from the stores, plowing, sowing, threshing, and milling always brought everyone together. She records a clear division of labor in the household, where men were mainly tasked with the heavy and laborious work of manual farming, house construction, cutting wood, making tools, slaughtering animals, spinning, weaving, etc. while women were required to organize the running of the household and its compound which included cleaning, cooking, child-rearing, milking the livestock, taking care of their vegetable gardens, management of food supplies throughout the year, sewing, knitting and embroidery. Children were also encouraged to participate in household tasks according to their genders, (p.38) "...

most of the tasks were an extension of play, which tended to imitate social roles", and provided them with the necessary skills required to sustain life in this high mountain region.

The author has efficiently recorded the tasks of the house-

hold during all four seasons, spring (*garú*), summer (*šini*), autumn (*datú*), and winter (*bái*) which are allocated based on gender and age. In addition to that, she records the different crops, festivals, and celebrations associated with the agrarian activities during these seasons. However, the author does not record the yields and productivity of different crops in agrarian settings that prevailed before the intervention of different institutions. She gives the complete and elaborate routine of men and women in the household, ranging from questions of who owns what, who does what, and who

gets what. A turn in the daily routine in the village comes during the summer when, (p.127) “relationships with the mountains entered a different phase”, referring to the fact when senior women were chosen and sent to the high pastures, where they stayed throughout the summer, and were responsible for, (p.129) “running the settlements, controlling and guiding daily milk processing activities”. Pastures played an important role in agro-pastoral economy, food culture, people’s diet, and livestock health. Overall, summer pastures could be called a nutrition bank and refreshment for everyone as can be seen from this quote, (p.142) “...life in the high pastures was one akin to that of a small dairy farm. There was a plentiful, varied, and rich diet of bread, tea, milk, butter, buttermilk, yogurt, cream, and curd cheese”. However, it is important to highlight that pastures were not an open access area, insiders and outsiders were vividly marked, for example, (p.141) “there was a great distrust of strangers, particularly of *Gujurs*, nomadic cattle herders”, but she doesn’t explain the reasons of distrust on *Gujurs* and since when they became part of the village and or the pastures.

York argues that preparing, consuming, and sharing food was not mere subsistence activity but played a significant role for the household in the community and showed their social standing. Food preparation was mostly a women’s task. The author has recorded an extensive list of techniques, and types of breads and food prepared during different seasons and occasions. Overall, the diet of the people was quite rich in nutrition and filled with a diversity of breads, fruits, nuts, milk products such as buttermilk, curd, butter and meat in the winter. Interestingly through her thick description and documentation of the daily life in the valley, the author also documents the changing food habits and mentions the term *ḍaldā* (vegetable oil) quite often but does not expand and highlight since when it entered people’s diet and what were its implications on people’s health. Only once, she mentions (p.161), that when people received food prepared in vegetable oil instead of butter,

they considered it to be of “poor quality”. In general, the food culture and dishes prepared throughout the year in a single-crop region, presented in the book, breaks the dominant narrative of hunger and poverty that has been highlighted by the previous literature.

In a closed cycle agrarian economy, there was no such thing as waste as it is highlighted by the author, (p.168) “...everything produced by the household, livestock, trees, field crops, etc., had multiple uses.” The products which were bought and brought from the bazaar were reused efficiently. Men and women equally participated in the craft-making and decorations. York highlights that the goats were the most numerous kept animal and provided the bulk of fibers for spinning, rope making, weaving, and making rugs, whereas sheep wool was also used for spinning and weaving and knitting jumpers, scarves, and socks. In addition to that, everyone (men, women, and children) knew how to weave a basket out of willow trees. It was interesting to note that how children were introduced to household tasks through these small baskets, specially made for children, in which they collected small sticks while playing around. She highlights that some women were skilled in crafts like embroidery, but it was exported by the women of the royal families. Other crafts such as tailoring, shoe making, and wood carving are also recorded by the author.

The proverb, “...it takes a village to raise a child” comes to life when the author notes (p.226), “a child’s physical and social development was observed carefully by household members and also by the women from neighboring households”. York mentions that although a single household was a primary focus of social, economic, and ritual life for villagers, the cooperation and links extended beyond the household and were considered essential for the peaceful existence in the village. The cooperation was across all the social classes and was visible in the form of “gift-giving” and “borrowing”. It was considered an important way of expressing solidarity. In

the end, the author mentions the beginning of the transformation that started taking place in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan since coming in contact with Pakistan and also due to the building of the Karakorum highway. People's requirements to obtain cash were increasing and men started migrating out of the village which added more work to women's shoulders. Despite the extensive and intimate documentation of the daily life in the valley the author fails to document how the landmark events between 1972 and 1974, when Pakistani state authorities abolished the frontier crime regulations and the independent states of Hunza, Nagar, Skardu and Khaplu and ended the state subject rule, and introduced the subsidies, how all those changes were felt in the early years and affected the region. The author only marks in passing, "Government-subsidized grain, wheat flour, and fertilizer was also available to purchase" (p.17) but what were its implications and what was people's response towards remains undocumented. The book provides a pithy detail of activities, life, and social organization in the village but does not analyze it theoretically or analytically. However, it provides rich material for future comparative research and points out the possible research directions in the field of agriculture, changes in diet, food habits, and social relations.

*Fizza Batool is currently pursuing her PhD in the IDK program at the University of Augsburg. Working in the Hindukush-Karakorum region of Gilgit-Baltistan, her research examines how the state policy of subsidized wheat has transformed agrarian landscapes and the diets of people in a border region, specifically in the Ishkoman Valley.*