

## Friends in High Places: The Art of Survival in Modern Day Burma

>> A film by Lindsey Merrison. 2001. 88 minutes (56 minute version available).

**F** *riends in High Places* documents the lives of spirit mediums in present-day Myanmar. Mediums, called *gawak-nats*, channel *nats*, spirits "between Buddha and humans" who are for the most part nobles murdered by kings and lords.

People pay the mediums to help them gain the help of the nats in solving troubles which range from husbands in prison to ungovernable daughtersin-law. Successful intervention calls for a pwe, an elaborate, dramatic and expensive performance by the medium and his group which includes dance, music, food, song and drinking. As one of the narrators confides, "most people are interested in nats only because of the mediums."

And the mediums are indeed interesting, cross-dressing homosexual men who get drunk to advise clients on their problems, stage the dramatic *pwe* performances, dress up as their patron *nats*, and give readings of the future all the while supporting their large extended families. The film's primary focus is the medium Ah Swan, but it also features a number of others to give some sense of

## 6 + 1-888-828-AEMS

the variability within the profession: some mediums are more reserved and closer to Buddhist monks, others are younger and more like pop stars. The movie of course covers the medium's performances and professional duties, but in inter-

The makers of *Friends in High Places* have created a beautiful and fascinating film. The cinematography and editing are superb.... The film illuminates rather than narrates. views we also learn how they apprentice in the profession and see one medium-bride's marriage to his nat. The film introduces some of the complications of life as a medium, the stress of repeated encounters with troubled people, the patronage by people who prefer to remain anonymous, and the medium's marginal and yet powerful social position. One medium says, "My clients bring their problems into my

home. I don't need to go out on the street to learn how cruel life can be." Yet, as Ah Swan tells the camera with a fifth of brandy in one hand and a foreign cigarette in the other, "I do what I want."

Mediums enjoy a privileged place in society because of their dramatic skill and, as the filmmakers imply, because of their "friends in high places," which may refer to their contact with the nats, but may also refer to their influence with members of the military government. One well-off woman who sponsors a *pwe* tells how her husband was thrown in jail "for what we don't know—bad luck, I think," but who was released after she went to see Ah Swan. The ambiguity of her narrative and Ah Swan's posing during the telling suggest that more went on than she is willing to tell.

The makers of Friends in High Places have created a beautiful and fascinating film. The cinematography and editing are superb, the writing, pacing and development of the story reveal the character of the profession steadily and gracefully, and the cut-aways during interviews reinforce the mood of the piece and strongly convey the context of the events. The film illuminates rather than narrates. In many cases the mediums themselves tell us their story: where an outside voice is required, a two shot of bilingual "aunties" (who are still subtitled in a very clever capsule of bilingual interviewing) gloss ideas and practices while adding measurably to the charm of the film. This style may bother some: it has a classic anthropological indeterminacy to it, but it appears to be very true to experience. Likewise, the filmmakers have inserted dramatic performances for the camera by mediums that are affecting and appropriate to the story, but are unusual in ethnographic documentary.

Complex and compelling, this film would be best for college audiences, although upper high school grades would also enjoy it. Both students and researchers in Visual Anthropology, Performance Studies, Gender and Gay Studies, Study of Religion and Myth and specialists on Myanmar would all benefit from seeing this fine film.  $\blacklozenge$ 

*Friends in High Places* is available from Documentary Educational Resources. Price is \$225 for purchase or \$65 for rental.

## Sign Up!

Join our mailing list to receive your free subscription to AEMS News and Reviews. Give us a call at 1-888-828-AEMS (2367) or reach us via email at aems@uiuc.edu. We're interested in your feedback—on our Web site, the newsletter, and our other services. Please share this newsletter with your colleagues! **www.aems.uiuc.edu**