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OPENING THE HIDDEN LAND: STATE FORMATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SIKKIMESE HISTORY

BY SAUL MULLARD

Brill: Leiden, 2011. 282 pp. \$144 (hardback).
ISBN 9789004208957.

REVIEWED BY MONA CHETTRI

According to local, historical narrative, the formation of the Sikkimese state begins with the consecration of Phun tsoqs rnam rgyal as the first king, or *Chos rgyal*, of Sikkim and the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty in 1642. According to the Tibetan *Gter Ma* (hidden treasures) teaching, Sikkim was considered to be a *sbas yul*, a hidden land blessed by Guru Rinpoche/Padmasambhava and set apart from the mundane world as a paradise for the practice of Buddhism (p. 9). This hidden land was prophesised to be 'unlocked' by four yogis travelling from four different directions who would then meet at the centre, identify the first *Chos rgyal*, and establish the first administrative system of the *sbas yul*. State formation begins with the coronation in 1642 and is consolidated with the signing of the *Lho Mon Gtsoq gsum*¹ Agreement in 1663.

Thus begins the long established and accepted narrative of the formation of the Sikkimese state. It is against this background that Saul Mullard's monograph makes a challenging, interesting, and original contribution to the study of Sikkimese history, as well as to the history of the Himalayan region in general. Using a variety of seventeenth and eighteenth century Tibetan texts as his primary source, Mullard focuses on religious narratives and their influence on state formation, which he argues is fundamental to the legitimacy of the monarchy, political structures, social hierarchy and norms in Sikkim.

At the very outset the author draws an important distinction between historical narratives which are predominant in Sikkim and history as an academic discipline. Academic history is constructed through the analysis of primary and secondary evidence, the interpretation of that evidence according to theory, and an attempt to understand the human condition at a given time. Sikkimese history, on

1. A legal document signed by representatives of three ethnic communities of historical Sikkim: Lho pa (Tibeto-Sikkimese), Mon (Lepcha), and the Gtsoq (Limbu) acknowledging the supremacy of *Phun tshogs namgyal* (p. 140).

the other hand, is grounded in a methodology where there is no hierarchy of evidence and oral accounts are placed on par with documentary evidence (p. 17). According to Mullard, Tibetan historiography may not always engage in a scientific examination of historical facts, but revolves around a different form of inquiry that has its own socio-religious value (p. 16-17). Thus, the book is a negotiation between local, religious narratives and a methodical, historical analysis of those narratives in order to present an objective understanding of state formation in Sikkim. At the same time the book engages in a detailed analysis of the processes behind the transformation of religious and political narratives into an uncontested history of Sikkim, presenting a collage of the past as never been seen before.

Despite the chronological diversity within the cited sources, the book tries to establish a sequence of events that contribute to state formation in Sikkim. Chapter One is an introduction to the main themes and theoretical underpinnings of the book. In Chapters Two and Three, Mullard analyses local and religious narratives related to the origin, migration, and settlement patterns of the Tibeto-Sikkimese (groups of Tibetan origin) in Sikkim who are accredited with the founding of the kingdom. From these narratives numerous themes are extracted that contribute to the understanding of the religious worldview and related practices of the Tibeto-Sikkimese. This is achieved by contextualizing narratives from the text in the social and political environment of a particular period and locating the evolution of the Sikkimese state within regional politics. Each successive chapter uses a variety of Tibetan sources (religious texts, legal documents, and texts that deal with the past, events and actors in the past that Mullard classifies as histories or quasi-histories) to discuss the evolution of the monarchy, administrative system, and inter-ethnic relations in the fledgling Himalayan kingdom. Considerable analytical attention is given to the predominant narratives of the coronation of the first *Chos rgyal*, the religious and political symbolism of this act, the gradual expansion of the Sikkimese state, and the introduction of Tibetan legal codes in Sikkim. Chapters Four and Five focus on the religious domain and discuss two religious figures who, according to Tibetan narratives, were instrumental in the formation of religious structures and the establishment of religious patronage by the state. A discussion of chronological inconsistencies within traditional narratives leads to the 'coronation conundrum', where it is difficult to establish the exact year of coronation of the first *Chos rgyal*. Mullard uses this 'conundrum' to pose important questions on the symbolic value and meaning of the coronation in a wider political context. He questions whether its importance in Sikkimese history is derived from the need for a historical marker, the 'moment' of the foundation of Sikkimese statehood (p.138), rather than the social, political, and religious meanings and consequences that it might actually have had in seventeenth century Sikkim. Chapter Six analyses two important

manuscripts that provide a rare insight into early Sikkim. The chapter begins with a critical analysis of the narrative around the important *Lho Mon Gtsong gsum* Agreement, which is revealing of the precarious balance between Phun tsogs rnam rgyal and other indigenous Lepcha and Limbu leaders. The systematic analysis of the Agreement highlights the prevalence of animosity, war, and turbulence as opposed to the dominant local narratives of mutual recognition and submission of the Lepchas and Limbu groups to the rule of the Namgyal dynasty. The other manuscript that is analysed in detail is a census of the Lepcha and Limbu population which is revealing of the administrative system under Phun tsogs rnam rgyal. The final two chapters are dedicated to the construction of historical narratives of Sikkim as a result of and in response to external influences. These chapters draw a direct relationship between these narratives and the construction of Sikkimese history, especially in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which saw the increasing importance of the British colonizers in the region who then imposed their own interpretation of the history of the region.

The political significance of religious and local narratives and their influence on the construction of Sikkimese history are themes that are well inter-woven throughout the book and shed light on prevailing socio-political structures in Sikkim and Tibet. For example, while the opening of the hidden land/Sikkim has an intrinsic religious intent and meaning, Mullard locates this explanation against the turbulent political situation in Tibet and the neighbouring regions, and argues that Sikkim could have been a literal hidden land for those escaping political or religious persecution in Tibet.

The monograph has been published as a part of Brill's Tibetan Studies Library series and makes extensive use of Tibetan terminology, literary, and religious traditions, which might be unfamiliar to those readers unacquainted with Tibetan texts and cultural contexts. Mullard, however, provides adequate references and explanations that help navigate through the chapters and the book will resonate with audiences interested in the history, people, and politics of Sikkim as well as those of Tibet, Bhutan, and even Nepal. As a process, state formation may not always follow a linear, predetermined pattern or may not be interpreted or recorded as chronological, historical data; instead, they might be preserved as historical narrative, as in the case of Sikkim, open to changes and biases. Thus, the book challenges the imposition of a universal, Eurocentric notion of state formation by highlighting the various forms and processes that underlie it, thereby widening its appeal to an audience beyond those interested in Himalayan studies.

The absence of archaeological and other physical evidence and the diversity of important dates and events within the documentary evidence exposes the book to the risk of conjecture and extrapolation. However, using multiple sources of information and the intensive research of texts, Mullard clearly and carefully steers the book away from such pitfalls thereby creating a body of work that will

have extensive influence on research on Sikkim.

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NEPAL: NOSTALGIA AND MODERNITY

BY DEEPAK SHIMKHADA, ED.

Mumbai: Marg, 2012. 128 pp. \$68.00.
ISBN 978-9380581088.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL BALTUTIS

Recent tumultuous political events in Nepal, resulting in the ending of the Shah dynasty's 240-year reign, have generated a wealth of scholarship throughout the social sciences, especially in anthropology, political science, and religious studies. The book under review, dealing with the visual and performative traditions of contemporary Nepal, implicitly places itself within this wave of scholarship. One of the goals that this scholarship has in common – and, further, has in common with local authors, leaders, and politicians – is the establishment of an elusive “new Nepal” that successfully negotiates Nepal's traditions with the elements of modernity that have rapidly transformed the nation and its cultures. Hence this volume's subtitle of “Nostalgia and Modernity.”

As a Marg publication whose General Editor is the eminent art historian, Pratapaditya Pal, the volume's focus on the arts of Nepal (more specifically, on the arts of the urban Kathmandu Valley, the traditional home of the Newar people and the traditional geographic referent of this term) has resulted in a beautiful edited volume/coffee-table book that, though of only 128 pages, contains over 120 glossy color photos. Distinguishing itself from standard coffee-table books, however, are the volume's eleven essays (plus the editor's introduction), written by prominent authors, scholars, and artists from the US, Europe, and South Asia. These eleven essays are divided into three sections: Architecture, Visual Arts, and Performances and Religious Traditions. Each essay, approximately ten pages in length, handles one example of a changing artistic form in Nepal in its respective category.

More, however, than a series of “salvage ethnographies” about a country and its traditional peoples being subject to forces of modernity, the essays in this volume present the tensions felt, the adaptations made, and the productive relationships forged among the individual architects, artists, and ritualists who are actively negotiating with these forces. Though many of these essays include Westerners as agents of