

BOOK REVIEW

Saul Mullard. *Opening the Hidden Land. State Formation and the Construction of Sikkimese History*. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library, Volume 26, Leiden Boston: Brill, 2011, pp. 281. ISBN 978 90 04 20895 7 (14 illustrations; 2 maps; 1 lineage, 8 appendices with original texts and translations, two bibliographies and index)

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Sikkim and Bhutan have often found themselves together at the crossroads of history and the documentation of their past is important to both.

While neighbouring Bhutan has recently seen several books on the history of the country (Sonam Kinga, *Polity, Kingship and Democracy. A biography of the Bhutanese state*, Ministry of education, Bhutan Times, Thimphu, 2009; Karma Phuntsho, *The History of Bhutan*, Noida-London: Vintage books Random House India, 2013; Yoshiro Imaeda, *The successors of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel Hereditary heirs and reincarnations*, Thimphu: Riyang books, 2013; Yoshiro Imaeda, *Histoire médiévale du Bhoutan. Etablissement et évolution de la théocratie des 'Brug pa*, Tokyo, Toyo Bunko, 2011), there has been a dearth of books on the history of Sikkim until now. Therefore Saul Mullard's book is more than welcome to the academic community working on the Eastern Himalayas. Of course we should not forget Khenpo Lha Tshering, *mKha' phyod 'Bras ljongs kyi gtsug gtor sprul pa'i rnal 'byor mched bzhi brgyud 'dzin dang bcas pa'i byung ba brjod pa blo gsar gzhon nu'i dga' ston. A Saga of Sikkim's supremely revered four pioneer Nyingmapa incarnates and their torchbearers*, Khenpo L. Tshering, Gangtok, 2002, and the momentous work of Saul Mullard and his Sikkimese counterpart Hissey Wangchuk, *Royal Records: A catalogue of the Sikkimese Palace Archive*, IITBS, Andiast, 2010.

However, is Saul Mullard's book a 'history book' as such? This question is underlined by the author himself in his lengthy and impressive Introduction/first chapter and the excellent review of his book by Luke Wagner in the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* EBHR 41 (pp. 129-132). Wagner's review makes ours somewhat redundant since we tend to agree with it.

Besides the wealth of information, references and documentation on Sikkimese history that the book contains, it should not be mistaken so much for a history of this state but rather, as the book title clearly enounces, as an essay on *the construction of Sikkimese History*.

Saul Mullard follows the post-modern criticism of history and in particular the theory of Hayden White which he explicates at length (p.13-17) and largely adheres to in his study. According to White, and therefore Mullard in our case, “History is constructed by historians on the basis of their own preferences. These preferences take the form of ideology [...], argument or explanation [...] or emplotment” therefore, “all history is metahistory” (p.13-14). For Saul Mullard “it is important to make a distinction between the local historical narratives of Sikkim and the wider historical methodology and to accept in part Hayden White’s discussion of the representation of reality as narrative but also admit that narrative plays a fundamental role in articulating the past.” (p.16).

This first chapter is dense with theory and methodology as the author discusses different interpretations of the term ‘state’, defining “the Sikkimese state as a community living under an organisational structure where power and authority is defined in the form of a structured hierarchy [...]” (p.21). He also argues that “the Tibetan concepts of state and social organisation were fundamental to the organisation of the Sikkimese state.” (p.22) and that “the key religio-political theory is that of *chos srid lugs gnyis*” (p.24-25), the spiritual and political/temporal rules.

In addition to this, the first chapter also deals with the early inhabitation of Sikkim and the Lepcha migrations, the *gter ma* and identification of Sikkim as well as providing a complete guide to Mullard’s extensive sources.

This reviewer would have preferred for such a rich and complex chapter to be divided into two with the theories and methodology to be placed in a separate chapter.

The following chapters shed a fascinating light on the myths, the narratives and the figures, both religious and secular, who contributed to the formation of the state. Chapters 4 and 5 provide great insights into the role—as well as their rivalry—of Lha btsun chen po and Mnga' bdag Phun tshogs rigs 'dzin, the two religious figures considered in the historiography as the ‘founding fathers’ of Sikkim.

At the same time, Saul Mullard never loses perspective and places the ‘historical events’ in the particular context of Sikkim with its indigenous population and the overpowering influence from Tibetan culture in all its aspects.

These two components of the Sikkimese state get untangled in the 18th and 19th centuries with external forces from neighbouring countries, Bhutan, Nepal and British India which all wanted to annex the new state (ch. 7). It was the threat posed by British India that led, according to Mullard, “to the proliferation of histories and an attempt to redefine Sikkim as a nation” (p.186) and a state established peacefully “in accordance with the prophecies of Guru Rinpoche.” (p.188).

Saul Mullard’s book is really fascinating, thoroughly researched and very important not only for the history of Sikkim but also for the religious history of Tibetan culture and the Eastern Himalayas. Saul Mullard chose a complex subject tangled between different countries. He unravels it in his work through his immense knowledge comparing “later historical narratives” and “key sources from the period of Sikkimese state formation” (p.191).

Re-evaluating the state formation process is really the leitmotif of the book and Mullard, in his conclusion, argues against some of Hayden White’s ideas saying that “Whilst it is true that ‘history’ can be manufactured for a number of reasons [...] it is also true that these manufactured histories can provide insight [...]” They are “a sociological beacon of a society (or its elite’s) ideological parameters, its norms or its values” (p.191).

This reviewer agrees with the author’s re-evaluation of Sikkimese history within a political agenda but would caution the author concerning the consequences of negating any religious agenda in its state formation. As the author himself explains, the dual structure of government is a characteristic of culturally Tibetan states, and to dismiss the role of religious traditions in the formation of the Sikkimese state (p.196) might be in itself problematic and a simplification of a complex situation which is only partially documented.

But certainly the scholarship here is original and brings a totally new approach to the history of Sikkim through thorough research and comparative assessments of the available sources, many of them unknown till now. The primary sources which constitute the appendices are in themselves an added value to this work.

The writing is clear with personal touches which make the book enjoyable to read. The author expresses himself with great conviction, even with a passion which sometimes makes him forget the length of his sentences (up to 6 lines!).

A very evident shortcoming of the book is its lack of a detailed map and scholars not familiar with this part of the Himalayas will sometimes be at loss locating some of the more obscure toponyms.

However, this is a minor issue compared to the overall achievements of this formidable, courageous and ambitious book. It is an outstanding contribution and a first on that period of the history of Sikkim, using Tibetan and Sikkimese sources. It also contributes extensively to the history of the Bhutan-Tibet-Nepal-Sikkim relationships and therefore to the Himalayas.