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Review

Opening the Hidden Land: State Formation and the Construction of Sikkimese History, by Saul Mullard. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2011. xxiv + 282pp. ISBN: 978-9-004208-95-7 (hbk). €105.00.

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This specialized volume on the neglected Buddhist history of the small Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim is an essential addition to the growing field of Himalayan Studies and a testimony of the enduring legacy of Tibetan culture and religion in the Himalayas. It is the outcome of a fastidious documentation and study of primary sources from various public and private Tibetan collections, and of laborious fieldwork research, spanning over several years, in the Indian Himalayas of the North-East. *Opening the Hidden Land* is the first systematic work of its kind to introduce, translate and analyze available historical sources and raise relevant issues concerning some of the intricacies and inconsistencies in mainstream Sikkimese historiography. It will undoubtedly serve as a gratifying introduction and an invaluable resource for scholars and researchers working in this region.

In Chapter 1, *Introduction*, the author offers an overview of the scope of his work providing prelusive sections on the early inhabitants to the hidden land and the impact that Tibetan Buddhist notions had for Sikkimese historiography. He specifically identifies the tradition of Terma (revealed Buddhist literature), prophesy, and the concept of 'hidden lands' (*sbas-yul*) as three key ingredients that featured in the construction and legitimation of traditional Sikkimese history. What is important for the author's main argument is how these traditional religious narratives of the seventeenth century have been used as a blueprint for Sikkimese society and its historical identity by shaping the past into a model of national identity. Chapter 2, Local Historical Narratives: Tibeto-Sikkimese Origins and the Establishment of the Sikkimese State, examines the origins of the Tibeto-Sikkimese people and the coronation of the first Buddhist sovereign of Sikkim, Phun-tshogs rnam-rgyal (1604–c. 1670). The author draws from three sources written during the period 1860–1908—the *Royal Chronicles of Sikkim ('Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*) attributed to the *dharmarāja* Mthu-stobs rnamrgyal (1874–1914) and his queen Yes-shes sgrol-ma, the official *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, and to a lesser extent a manuscript on Lama che-mtshan's arrival in Sikkim (*Bla ma che mtshan gsum 'bras ljongs sbas gnas phebs tshul*) written by Skal-bzang chosdbyi ng from Rig-'dzi n-mchog-grub-gl ing monastery. Chapter 3, Justifying 'State Formation': Territorial Expansion and the Formation of Law, analyzes The Royal Chronicles of La Sogs, a manuscript from the private collection of Densapa Barmiok A-mthing, according to which Sikkim was settled by a Tibetan descendant of the Khams-mi-nyag royal house. This

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work offers the first seventeenth-century account of the prophesy of four yogis (*rnal 'byor mched bzhi*) who are said to have opened the hidden land of Sikkim from the four cardinal directions. Chapter 4, Religion and Politics in Early Sikkim: the Case of Mnga' Bdag Phun Tshogs Rig 'Dzin, relies on the *Royal Chronicles of Mnga' Bdag* to discuss the role of one of the four yogis responsible for opening the hidden land of Sikkim, Mnga'-bdag phun-tshogs rig-'dzin (b. 1592). Chapter 5, Lha btsun chen po and the Formation of Sikkim, focuses on the early life and spiritual training of Lha-btsun chen-po (b. 1597) from southern Tibet, a key protagonist to traditional narratives on the formation of the Sikkimese state. The chapter further explores the problems of interpreting the historical sources concerning the date of the coronation of the first Buddhist sovereign of Sikkim, a date that coincides with the foundation of the Sikkimese state, which by some counts falls in 1642 or 1644. Chapter 6, Revisiting the State and Political Formation of Early Sikkim, discusses the *Lho mong gtsong gsum* Agreement signed by representatives of three ethnic communities, the Lho-pa, the Mon (Lepcha or *Rong kup*) and the Gtsong (Limbu), who acknowledged in unison the supremacy of Phuntshogs rnam-rgyal as the head of a single political order in Western Sikkim. A second document appended to the *La sogs rgyal rabs*, the *Mon pa'i mtho* [tho] *byang zin bris su bkod pa*, reveals that a good number of Lepcha and Limbu individuals held positions of high rank within the local administration. Chapter 7, *Bhutan, Sikkim and British India: The Arrival of 'Jigs med dpa' bo and the Construction of Historical Narratives*, deals with the War of Succession (c. 1699–1708) and its aftermath and the expansion of British influence in the NE Himalayas that lead to British rule in Sikkim. Chapter 8, *Conclusion: Remarks on Sikkimese State Formation and the Construction of Historical Narratives*, highlights some of the problems with traditional histories of Sikkim and the author's intention to re-evaluate the history of state formation in Sikkim.

The work concludes with eight useful appendices that include essential historical texts and passages transcribed in Tibetan script by the author: (1) a succinct chronology of important Sikkimese dates from 1604 to 1735; (2) a synoptic account of over thirty Tibeto-Sikkimese clans and twenty sub-clans; (3) a brief discussion on the population growth and distribution of the Sikkimese communities; (4) the Tibetan transcription of *The Royal Chronicles of La Sogs* (*La sogs rgyal rab*), a rare seventeenth-century text detailing the socio-economic organization of early Sikkim; (5) the Tibetan transcription and English translation of the *Stag Sham Can* section of the *Royal Chronicles of Mnga' Bdag*, and the Tibetan text from the *Mnga' Bdag* chronicles of the life of Phuntshogs rig-'dzin; (6) the Tibetan transcription of two short excerpts from Lha-bstun (*sic*!) chen-po's *Guide Book* (*lam-yig*) to Sikkim; (7) the Tibetan transcription of the *Lho mon gtsong gsum* Agreement between the Lho, Mon and Gtsong; and (8) the Tibetan transcription and an English interpretation of the document, *An Established Record and Register of Mon pa* (*Mon pa'i tho byang*). The work is completed with a functional index and a splendid bibliography of primary and secondary literature, including published and unpublished Tibetan sources such as, legal documents, manuscripts and letters.

In my opinion the author succeeds in contextualizing and bringing to life the literary sources that contributed to the 'construction of Sikkimese history' in the seventeenth century, a period that coincides with the formation of the Sikkimese state. However, the author's preoccupation with the tension between Western historiography, with its alleged objective handling of events and sources, and Sikimese histories based on religious tradition, narrative and myth, introduces a vexing problem that reads, at times, like a confession of a personal struggle with the limitations of

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the academic discipline of history, and one that is neither adequately demystified nor satisfactorily resolved by modernist and postmodern arguments of historiography in general and their application for Sikkimese religious history in particular. The discourse on the crystallization of Sikimese religious-political identity in the wake of the territorial encroaching of the Nepalese and the Bhutanese, and the colonial consolidation of British interests in the Eastern Himalayas – is tantalizing and promising, but it is only sectionally framed in Chapter 7 as the background for the composition of regional histories during this period. Given the wealth of material identified and collected by the author we may anticipate a future publication where he critically reconstructs the history of contemporary Sikkim based on the vicissitudes of the nineteenth century that marked a turning point in the political fate of the hidden land and led to a mendacious sequence of coincidences culminating in the annexation of the kingdom in 1975 by the newly-founded Republic of India.

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