

Matthew A. Cook, *Annexation and the Unhappy Valley: The Historical Anthropology of Sindh's Colonization*

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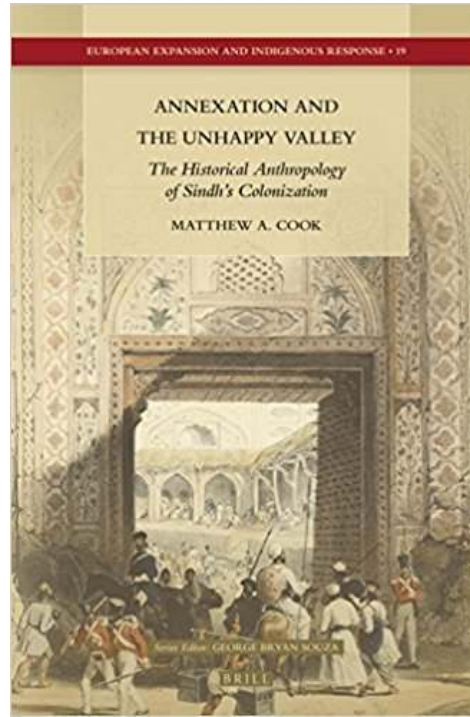
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Matthew A. Cook. 2016. *Annexation and the Unhappy Valley: The Historical Anthropology of Sindh's Colonization*. Leiden and Boston: Brill. 261 pages.

- 1 To a great extent, *Annexation and the Unhappy Valley* is a product of its time, in that it takes up the challenge represented by the wider drive since the 1990s to seek to transcend metropole-colony divides and produce greater interconnectedness —“connected histories”—something that we see taking place both in relation to South Asia and empire more widely, and transcending disciplinary boundaries.¹ By encouraging “Empire historians” and “historians of colonial rule in India” (clearly not necessarily the same thing) to communicate more productively with each other, Cook’s study in historical anthropology directly contributes to new strands in present-day imperial history writing. It also provides valuable insights as to the way in which colonial transitions —such as territorial annexation in the case of 1840s Sindh—could splinter key communities, introducing important shades of grey into what has often been depicted as a black and white picture. Its inter-disciplinary approach provides a fine-grained, nuanced and firmly situated analysis of what were in practice multiple agents and multiple views involved in the same “event,” thus underlining the added value of using a socio-cultural approach for understanding the past.
- 2 In terms of what is covered in this study, *Annexation and the Unhappy Valley* comprises four chapters. The first one, “Merchants and the East India Company in Sindh” (Cook 2016:21–68), examines support for the Company and how this related to socio-cultural distinctions within one particular key community of local collaborators, Bhaibhand merchants, who used their relationship with the British to challenge the internal dynamics of the wider Lohana community to which they belonged. Chapter 2 “Conspiracy and Military-Fiscalism” (pp. 69–132) pursues the same theme of identifying distinctions within groups but this time picks apart and then re-assembles the multi-sided debate that took place among the British (both in India and back in London) over the “ways and means” of Sindh’s annexation in the early 1840s. Chapter 3 “Just Governance and Colonial Violence” (pp. 133–79) then highlights contradictions between ideas about “just governance” and “colonial violence” as these were subsequently played out in the context of Sindh following annexation. This points emphatically to what Cook regards as the central place occupied by physical force and, in the process, it underlines contradictions between what an institution such as the Company claimed to do in theory and what it actually did in practice. Finally Chapter 4 “Court over Board” (pp. 180–223) traces discontinuities between power-holders in Britain and South Asia with the aim of challenging dominant constitutional perspectives that, for Cook, misjudge the extent of the Board of Control’s control over Company actions in the field. During a period of British territorial expansion in the subcontinent, as Cook’s study makes clear, there were important differences of opinion that divided, and therefore complicated, British interests. Apart from anything



else, the Board of Control back in London was often presented by the Company with a fait accompli in terms of actions taken, undermining its authority in practice.

- 3 *Annexation and the Unhappy Valley*, like most studies, demonstrates both strengths and (occasional) weaknesses. On the plus side, it introduces the reader to a story that is still not sufficiently well-known or well-understood, though whether it qualifies as a “post-annexation void” (p. 19) is debatable. Cook is meticulous in his excavation of official and non-official archival material collected in London and from different parts of South Asia (e.g. Maharashtra and Sindh). Drawing on official documents alongside handwritten commentaries, notes and more personal sources, he shines the spotlight on a large quantity of interesting discursive material and accompanying debate, linked in various ways to an “infamous” episode in the expansion of British power in South Asia. This was Sindh’s military annexation in 1843 and its consequences, perhaps best known outside academic circles thanks to the misattribution of “*peccavi*” or “I have sinned/Sindh” to the British general involved, Sir Charles Napier. It is not Napier but the recently-established humorous magazine *Punch* that was responsible for this pun. However its use was an accurate reflection of the level of contemporary censure of Napier’s actions, with critics accusing him of having dealt unfairly with Sindh’s local rulers, or Amirs. Few historians have written, and (as far as this reviewer is aware) no historical anthropologists have previously attempted to work, with such close attention to their sources, on the developments under scrutiny here. It is however somewhat curious for this reviewer at least that neither the Introduction nor Chapter 2 contain any acknowledgement of the 1952 study by H. T. Lambrick which pioneered awareness of the controversies bound up in why annexation took place, Napier’s role in these events, and the divided response to British actions that ensued in India and back in London (Lambrick 1952). Certainly, for this reason alone, *Annexation and the Unhappy Valley* represents a welcome and long-overdue concerted effort to dissect and discuss with forensic intensity the “anatomy” of the fall-out from Sindh’s annexation in the years and even decades that followed.
- 4 And, undoubtedly, as an exercise in historical anthropology, by bringing together a wide range of contemporary “voices” albeit with their particular axes to grind in relation to post-annexation developments in Sindh, historical awareness of this often-overlooked part of South Asia is enhanced, and others are bound to be inspired by the richness of the archives on which Cook has drawn to pursue their own innovative explorations of nineteenth-century Sindh in the future.
- 5 On the down side, for this reviewer at least, the chapters are sometimes painstaking in terms of the sheer detail they contain. For someone with a prior knowledge of the context, this is manageable, but—while the author seems to discount (at least in places) the importance of historical contextualization—for those readers who lack much prior awareness of this background, such meticulous discussion could prove challenging and in places hard to penetrate. My other reservation concerns how this historical detail drawn from exhaustive and close archival engagement is connected to wider theoretical (anthropological and/or historiographical) debates to which reference is made. Quite a lot of the discussion related to this is placed late on in chapters, that is, after the historical evidence rather than before it. Perhaps this is a disciplinary difference—the present reviewer is not a historical anthropologist—but certainly for historians evidence often works most effectively when it is clear what this material is supporting and what it is challenging in terms of wider thinking. Hence, the book’s very insightful appendix —“Anthropology, Context and Archives”—rather than appearing as a stand-alone section

that is added at the end, could—arguably—have been more usefully integrated into the main body of this study.

- 6 Structural quibbles aside, *Annexation and the Unhappy Valley* represents what can be achieved when anthropologists turn their critical inter-disciplinary eye on the past. Consequently, it contributes hugely to our collective grasp of a key turning-point in Sindh's history, as well as offering historians additional theoretical models and approaches with which to enhance their own disciplinary methodologies.

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NOTES

1. Prakash 1995; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Chakrabarty 2000; Lester 2001; Burton 2003; Wilson 2004; Cooper 2005; Lambert and Lester 2006; Howell 2009.

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