

Asia. In *Aryan and Non-Aryan in India*, ed. Peter Edwin Hook and Madhav M. Deshpande, 35-54. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan.

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PAKISTAN

SIDKY, H. *Irrigation and State Formation in Hunza: The Anthropology of a Hydraulic Kingdom*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1996. xvi + 181 pages. Maps, tables, b/w plates, bibliography, index. Hardcover US\$34.00; ISBN 0-7618-0204-5.

The book under review deals with the alleged direct linkage between a complex irrigation system in a high-mountain region of the Northwest Karakorum and the process of state formation. The author attempts to prove that the "centrally-controlled hydraulic system" is a "decisive factor in the evolution of the state in Hunza" (66, 74). Following Karl Wittfogel's famous "hydraulic hypothesis," he emphasizes that "command over the hydraulic apparatus gave the Mir...political power" (75). The crucial questions are, however, if the kingdom of Hunza (as well as other neighboring political units) has ever really been a centralized state with a king who can be called a "hydraulic ruler" (82), and if, consequently, we can speak of a "state's hydraulic economy" (66), as Sidky wants to have it. According to him, the large-scale irrigation works could only have been accomplished through the energetic efforts of Tham Silum Khan III (1790-1824). Silum Khan is depicted as a supreme autocratic ruler who radically transformed the political structure of Hunza. The author concedes that before this king "the actual political power in Hunza rested with clan elders and lineage heads" (50). He further declares that "with Silim's rule, a new ideology of legitimacy emerged in Hunza, as the Mir's divine mandate from the mountain spirits was subordinated to his earthly control over the hydraulic works and, through them, land and water, the principal productive sources of the state" (73). In combination with a materialist research strategy the author outlines a purely functional model of state formation: "By levying taxes the ruler intensified the economic output of his subjects and accumulated greater wealth, which finally enabled him to invest in further canal-building projects" (62).

The main problem with Sidky's thesis is that it cannot be proved that Tham Silum Khan III was an autocratic ruler; as with every king in Hunza, Nager, Yasin, or elsewhere in Northern Pakistan, he would have feared for his life if he had dared to be despotic in Wittfogel's terms. Despite the gradual establishing of hierarchical structures and the strengthening of central authority under his reign, he was not the "chief controller of the irrigation works," and there was no "rigorous state water control" (63). Sidky underestimates the political role of noble and influential and/or numerically strong kinship groups, which virtually controlled the king and could put him in his place. If he had studied the ethnographical literature it would have become clear that Hunza represents an intermediate form of a segmentary and unitary state, at least until British rule. Thus the king dared not cut off the distribution of water to any given clan; he possessed preferential rights to water his own fields, but he had no total command over the irrigation system, unless he was prepared to risk rebellion. In addition, the ruler had to respect the landed property of kin groups according to customary and hereditary principles deriving from the segmentary kinship system. Similarly, it is not true that, for example, the construction of mosques was "the sole prerogative of the Mir" (66).

Generally speaking, there is no necessary relation, no adequate principle of causality, between the existence of a large-scale irrigation system and the genesis of a centralized autocratic rule. Other scholars emphasize warfare and the role of the king-as-protector as major catalysts for state formation in Northern Pakistan. I think, rather, that historical forces were at work, such as the fact that a dynasty extended its rule in a political vacuum by military conquest and founded a secondary state. According to my own field data from Nager and Hunza, a ruler fulfilled his obligation to protect his country if, for example, he built watch-towers (whose defensive values can still be witnessed in the vendetta-ridden Indus-Kohistan south of the Gilgit Karakorum), and not “in an attempt to undermine the prestige of the nobility, lineage heads, and wealthy landowners” (65), as Sidky writes. On the contrary, the king relied much more on a careful handling of the fragile network of relations with prominent kinship groups.

The present study is an instructive example of what happens if preconceived theoretical ideas are uncritically applied to an ethnographic case insufficiently understood by the author and based on a much too short period of fieldwork. Sidky mentions “numerous visits to Hunza between November 1990 and August 1991” (xi); in fact, as he admits on page xiii, it was altogether a “brief stay,” apparently not long enough to get a real insight into the cultural history of Hunza. It is revealing to compare Sidky’s earlier monograph, *Hunza: An Ethnographic Outline* (Jaipur 1995), a rather simplified and superficial compilation of English-language sources plus a few English summaries of German contributions, with the work under review. Whole sections of the *Outline* text are repeated—sometimes verbatim, sometimes only slightly paraphrased (without giving a reference)—in his new book (see, e.g., pages 10, 12, 14–16, 18–20, 34, 37, 50–52, and 81–90). If one subtracts the maps, figures, plates, tables, bibliography, and index, the present text is of a rather modest size.

It strikes me as odd that Sidky has disparaging things to say about the ethnographic literature on Hunza, while at the same time being unaware of and/or unable to read the numerous scientific studies written in the German language on this and neighboring regions. The history of Hunza gets an especially bad treatment in this book: on page 2 the author tells us that “what little is known about the history of Hunza comes from oral tradition,” after which he proceeds to mention just two popular legends on the ethnogenesis of the Hunzukuts (10) and to devote a few sentences to the nineteenth century (5). Suffice it to say that the important work of Hashmatullah Khan (1939) on the history of Jammu and Kashmir has been ignored; of the works of Karl Jettmar—the outstanding scholar on Northern Pakistan since 1955—only an early article published in 1961 is given in Sidky’s bibliography; similarly absent are important contributions by Irmtraud Stellrecht, Hermann Kreutzmann, and this reviewer (see the References section below). If a young Japanese anthropologist like Nejima Susumu, aware of the German scholarly tradition in research on the mountain peoples of the Hindukush and Karakorum, is taking pains to learn German, then H. Sidky too could have done better.

As history and ethnography are the weak points in his study and his theory consequently rests on shaky grounds, a few of the shortcomings in matters of detail should be mentioned. To begin with, Sidky’s spelling of the local ethnonym is not accurate: instead of “Hunzakut” it has to be “Hunzukuts” (or *Hunzukuć*) in the plural. On the term “Dard” the author uncritically follows G. E. Clarke’s problematic statements (see page 26, note 6), apparently unaware of JETTMAR’s convincing discussion of the matter (1982). An Uyum, i.e., a member of the upper and noble class called Uyongko, is by no means an “announcer of official orders and collector of state revenue” (68), which are the tasks of the Charbu and Trangpha. It is very unlikely that Tham Silum Khan III was the first to introduce a formal council, as Sidky maintains (68). One comes across vague statements that horses were imported

“from Afghanistan” (104); one could ask, What type of horses and from which part of that country? Articles have been published that would have enabled the author to be more specific. The tomb of the pre-Islamic saint Bulchithoko is not found in the village of Altit (88), but in Ganish. While explaining topographical shading, Sidky wrongly states that the inhabitants of Nager who settle across the river in the central valley would be living in a single-cropping zone (35-36). It is not true that Nomal is a neighboring village of Hindi (Nasirabad as it is called today), nor does it lie at the same altitude (34). Finally, it is embarrassing that on a plate (no. 1.2) with four photographs depicting “ethnic groups of Hunza” one picture allegedly shows a “Shin” who is in fact a Pathan *naswar* (mouth tobacco) seller, and another shows a “Wakhi” who is physiognomically clearly a Shin.

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REPLY TO FREMBGEN'S REVIEW

In his review of my *Irrigation and State Formation in Hunza*, Mr. Frembgen has raised several dubious criticisms. First, he erroneously refers to my approach as “a materialist research strategy” combined with a “purely functional model of state formation.” There is no such thing as a “functional model of state formation,” and, on the basis of what Frembgen has written, I seriously doubt that he understands what a materialist research strategy is really about. He then mistakenly accuses me of touting the hydraulic hypothesis, a point he tries to make by deliberately misquoting a sentence from page 75 of my book. Sidky, he writes, emphasizes that “... [his omission] command over the hydraulic apparatus gave the Mir ... [his omission] political power.” Whereas in fact the actual passage reads:

In sum, command over the hydraulic apparatus gave the Mir controls over the means of production. This enabled him to intensify agricultural production, dictate economic priorities and objectives, and to appropriate a significant portion of his subjects' produce in the form of taxes. In these various ways, the Mir acquired unprecedented political strength, administrative control, and wealth.

I point out the connections between *political complexity and the control of an intensifiable resource base made possible by irrigation*; I am *not* suggesting a causal connection between the management of irrigation works and political authority, as does Wittfogel. That Frembgen completely missed this central and crucial difference between the two positions illustrates the kind of slipshod analysis that characterizes his entire review.

Equally problematic is Frembgen's opinion that “generally speaking, there is no necessary relation, no adequate principle of causality, between the existence of a large-scale irrigation system and the genesis of a centralized autocratic rule.” The jury is still out on the hydraulic thesis (21–25)—Frembgen's categorical assertion discloses a total lack of familiarity with the relevant anthropological literature. However, what I find most troubling is his predilection to misconstrue my account for the sake of his arguments. Indeed, nearly all of his observations are based on such blatant obfuscations and misrepresentations.

Frembgen's next point is similarly biased and unsound. He writes:

It cannot be proved that Tham Silum Khan III was an autocratic ruler; as with every king in Hunza, Nager, Yasin, or elsewhere in Northern Pakistan, he would have feared for his life if he had dared to be despotic in Wittfogel's terms. Despite the gradual establishing of hierarchical structures and the strengthening of central authority under his reign, he was not the “chief controller of the irrigation works,” and there was no “rigorous state water control.”