

represented by articles and a few monographs. Her criticism of current theories remains relatively thin, if compared with the analytical works of Bengt Holbek, Max Lüthi, and some other twentieth-century classics that she does not mention in her bibliography. On the other hand, her ideas about the narrator's freedom in devising plots and multiple arrangement of connected tales that lack clear boundaries deserve serious attention (162, and elsewhere). The main value of the book to an international audience lies in providing a broad survey of scattered publications of Tamil tales. It is a vast treasury of carefully arranged plots and topics, a landmark in introducing Tamil folklore to the rest of the world.

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Ülo VALK

University of Tartu, Estonia

WOERKENS, MARTINE VAN. *The Strangled Traveler: Colonial Imaginings and the Thugs of India*. Translated by Catherine Tihanyi. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002. xvi + 360 pages. Map, illustrations, thug lexicon, references, index. Paper US\$24.00; £17.00; ISBN 0-226-85086-2.

*The Strangled Traveler* is the latest addition in the scholarship on the Thugs of India. As the author mentions, the word "Thug" has found place in the English dictionary and in common international parlance signifies criminal acts executed by deception (116-7). The Thugs of India were brought to the notice of the world in the early nineteenth century by the British colonizers, specifically by Colonel Sleeman who headed a decade-long campaign to exterminate the Thugs and the practice of *Thuggee*. Since then it has been revealed that Thugs were a sect who practiced strangulation of highway travelers as part of their devotional sacrifice to the Goddess Kali. The unique features were the art of deception, the style of murder by a *roomal* (scarf/handkerchief), and the religious association with the crime.

The author of *The Strangled Traveler* tells us how Sleeman not only headed but engineered the campaign and the information about the Thugs for posterity. At the end of a ten-year-long campaign, he declared "India's roads are finally safe" (99) and the claim implied that the British had rid India of one of its many evils. Sleeman also claimed to be the first knowledgeable person about the secrets of the Thugs. And the secrets of the Thugs were many, as *Thuggee* was practiced most secretly, often without the knowledge of family members, and the traces of crime were almost perfectly removed. Sleeman gained informers, recorded depositions of the Thugs, and also wrote the "Conversations" he had with many arrested/jailed Thugs. Sleeman's official records and published writings became the first expansive source on the organizational and criminal aspects of *Thuggee*, and have remained the only "authentic" source about the Thugs since 1830s. Sleeman's writings horrified as they fascinated their readers.

Martine Van Woerkens' work, first published in French in 1995, is a reevaluation of the Thugs post the ideas of Michel Foucault and Edward Said. It proposes to study the Thugs in

a larger frame than that which evokes either fascination or horror. In the first part of her book she deals with the motivations that lead Sleeman to propose a campaign and the British government to support it, and establishes that these lay outside the rubric of “colonizers bringing order in chaotic colonies.” She advances her study with an “etymological” analysis based on the words of the secret language of the Thugs, *Ramasi*, as collected in the lexicon *Ramaseeana* by Sleeman. In this admirably detailed analysis, the author attempts to construct the worldview of the Thugs from their dictionary and brings forth many interesting aspects of the same. It is of particular importance here that the dictionary of the Thugs does not corroborate as strong a connection between the Thugs and religious institutions. Indeed, the Thugs were religious in their social and criminal life, and did seek divine engagement by the observance of a large number of omens (considered directions from the goddess), yet their language does not affirm the kind of “cult of Kali” as signified by Sleeman and his contemporaries. Another important point that the author establishes is that the Thugs did not live as “community” but came together for a specific reason, and could belong to any religion, caste, or community. Van Woerkens deconstructs Sleeman’s imagining by the study of his motivations, the political dynamics in India at the time, and the possible groups from where the Thugs may have come, and by the study of *Ramaseeana*. In the second part of her work she studies literary and cinematic representations of the Thugs, most importantly the novel *Confessions Of A Thug* (1839) by Meadows Taylor, a colleague and competitor of Sleeman. She juxtaposes this to Sleeman’s “imaginings” and comes up with interesting observations—which further leads to the question regarding the “reality” of Thugs: what, exactly, was it? This is something we may never know. I wonder if this is strictly a problem of the lack of sources other than “colonial imaginings” or a problem inherent in the method of deconstruction—which “deconstructs” the elements of the colonizers’ imaginings, but is unable to offer an alternative image.

Van Woerkens’s work also delves into the popular fiction produced in France, and the Hollywood films on Thugs, but these happen to be the weaker sections of this book and the author depends on available literary/film critics and theoreticians. Contemporary scholars consider historical documents also to be “constructs,” but these have essential differences from literary “constructs,” which in turn also differ from audiovisual representations, and necessitate different methodological tools.

The title of the book *The Strangled Traveler* (the same in original) is misleading—as the book is certainly not about the *travelers* strangled by the Thugs, about whom information is nearly impossible. Ironically, it plays on the same attractive elements—horror and fascination—which were the leitmotiv of the colonial imaginings.

This book has been excellently translated by Catherine Tihanyi and is a pleasure to read.

Sadhana NAITHANI  
Jawaharlal Nehru University

## NEAR EAST

KURPERSHOEK, P. MARCEL. *Oral Poetry and Narrative From Central Arabia, 4. A Saudi Tribal History: Honour and Faith in the Traditions of the Dawāsir*. Studies in Arabic Literature 17/4. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002. 1022 pages. Illustrations. Cloth €225.00; US\$261.00. ISBN 90 04 12582 5.

This hefty volume presents the Dawāsir tribe and their valley of Wadi ad-Dawāsir as an integral