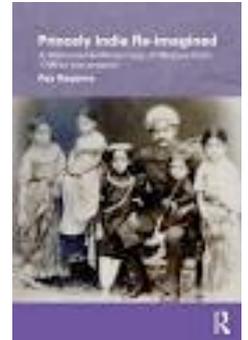


Review

Princely India Re-imagined: a historical anthropology of Mysore from 1799 to the present. By Aya Ikegame (Routledge: Abingdon & New York, 2013, ISBN: 978-0-415-55449-7, £85,00)



As Aya Ikegame points out at the very start of her book, princely states formed almost half the land area of British India, yet the Rajas who ruled those states ‘have been entirely neglected’; they are ‘truly the people without history,’ she says, ‘ghosts of the past... occasionally amusing eccentric[s]... whose role historians are little inclined to address’ (p. 1). Her new book is a major step in redressing that neglect.

The Mysore royal family was created by the British out of the remnants of the Hindu Wodeyar family that controlled the state prior to the hegemony of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan in the 18th century. As such, the Mysore crown has been regarded – in line with Nick Dirks’ influential analysis of Indian kingship in the colonial period – as a hollow institution, dependent on British power and dissociated from the religious and political network that

previously sustained royal authority in south India. By contrast, Aya Ikegame investigates new forms of agency developed by the Mysore family to legitimise their rule and establish a degree of autonomy from the colonial power.

The book is based on a combination of archival sources and ethnographic data. Collection of the latter was greatly helped by the author’s fluency in Kannada, which gave her intimate access to the Palace and members of the Royal Family. She was able to observe royal rituals, the political activities of the Royal Family, and temple rituals related to the Palace. She was able to conduct interviews, collect oral history and details of kinship and marriage alliances amongst the ruling caste and the Wodeyar family itself. She also explores the creation of a new, modern state within colonial Mysore and attempts by the

Royal Family to exemplify their kingship and dharma in the architecture and layout of the city.

Curiously, we have long had a more secure grip on the nature of Indian kingship in earlier times, thanks to the work of Burton Stein, who characterised medieval and post-medieval kingship as incorporative, incorporation being ‘a transactional and redistributive process involving priests, kings, [and] gods’ (*All the kings’ mana: papers on medieval South Indian history*. Madras: New Era Publications, 1984: pp. 45-46) involving ritual carried out by trained priests within royally-endowed temples. Nick Dirks further showed that these incorporative ritual idioms underwent changes as the hegemony of the South Indian Pallava dynasty expanded (‘Political authority and structural change in early South Indian history.’ *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 13: 125-57 [1976]). Gifts gradually became expressions of sovereignty rather than the means of its generation, and kings acted out their hierarchical relationships with local vassals and state officials through gift exchanges at huge, public temple ceremonies.

In performing earthly functions which for the cosmos as a whole are the prerogative of

deities, kings act like gods. This helps explain the homologies between palace and temple. Such links are underpinned ideologically by analogies in the *dharmasastras* between kings and kingly deities like Indra. However, medieval South Indian kings themselves were not seen as divine, though in some senses kingship was. Kings were assimilated to deities only in the sense that they exercised the royal function created by the gods. As the modern Maharaja of Kolhapur told Adrian Mayer: ‘It is sitting on the *gaddi* (throne) that brings divinity. . . . When we get off, we are only Rajas’ (‘Perceptions of princely rule: perspectives from a biography.’ *Contributions to Indian sociology* (ns) 15: 127-54 [1981]: p. 146).

Great state ritual occasions were performative attempts to bring this divine analogy into being, to gain access to the wealth and prosperity which only gods can bestow. Opulent, well-regulated temple rituals served as synecdoches for prosperity and order in the kingdom as a whole. Functionally, ritual kingship was epitomised by a triangular relationship in royal temples; in Chris Fuller’s words, ‘Priests make offerings to and perform services for the gods; the gods preserve the king, the kingdom and his subjects; and the

king protects the temples and rewards the priests' (C.J. Fuller, *Servants of the goddess: the priests of a South Indian temple*.

Cambridge: University Press 1984: p. 10). All this provides the historical antecedents for the situation Ikegame describes; for example it helps explain the significance of the Dasara ritual which forms the main topic of one chapter.

Two examples will illustrate her book's potential for sparking off comparisons and generating insights.

First, my own work in Kalugumalai temple, within the former territory of the Raja of Ettaiyapuram, south of Madurai. The history of Ettaiyapuram typifies that of many 'little kings' in south India. These Poligars (*palaiyakkaran*) drew revenue partly from plunder and partly from land rents and duties, but had in turn to pay tribute to the sovereign power, in this case, initially, the ruler in Madurai; later, briefly, perhaps Tipu Sultan or even possibly the Wodeyars themselves; but, by the start of the 19th century, the British.

Almost immediately after asserting control over the region, however, the British converted Ettaiyapuram *palaiyam* into a zamindari estate under an 1803 Deed of Permanent Settlement. The Ettappan changed

overnight — in British eyes, anyway — from warrior chief to gentleman-proprietor of a landed estate, with his army disbanded and his fort demolished. The new zamindars did their best to cushion this shock by viewing the British in the same way as previous external imperial powers. Rather than defining it in terms of land-holding and payment of taxes, like their new masters, they continued for some time to see their relationship with the British as primarily defined by services performed for sovereign overlords.

Indeed, the Raja continued to maintain all the other, non-military trappings of royalty, and Government initially did nothing to discourage this. Increasingly, though, his pretensions appeared anachronistic. For example, he would not leave the palace except with full royal trappings, and his household expenditure was, in the eyes of government, 'extravagant in the extreme'. When the estate fell temporarily under Court of Wards management, one priority was to cut back on palace expenditure.

Ikegame's book seems relevant to this story in several ways. The Wodeyars' origins were not unlike those of the Poligars of Ettaiyapuram though they had been conspicuously more successful and had

moved much further up the hierarchy. Moreover, their ‘restoration’ was virtually simultaneous with the Ettappan’s ‘conversion’ from Poligar to Zamindar, and both rulers were thereafter subject to British hegemony before losing what remained of their sovereignty after independence. There are important differences too, of course, mainly matters of scale. Zamindars may have resembled kings in their aspirations and trappings, but had nothing like the same degree of autonomy.

A second example is provided by Norbert Peabody’s *Hindu kingship and polity in precolonial India* (Cambridge: University Press [2002]), which describes the kingdom of Kota in north-west India during the 18th and early 19th centuries, a period which saw the gradual assertion of British hegemony.

Peabody’s focus is the puzzling relationship between the ruler of Kota and his regent, what he calls the ‘vexing phenomenon of powerful regents and puppet-kings’ (p. 149). In other words, the apparent manipulation of kings by powerful non-royal political actors was evident in pre-British days too, though I hasten to add that the similarities and differences between pre-British and British periods require far more investigation, as do those between northern and southern kings – and within each category, the extent to which each kingdom’s unique history influenced its colonial political formation.

Aya Ikegame’s book will certainly become a major source of material for debates of these kinds in future. This fine monograph will, I am sure, be well-received by both historians and anthropologists. 🙏

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