

VNR's work is staggering. I can only hope that in collecting these essays, this volume will make the bounty of VNR's scholarship even more accessible.

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The Skull of Alum Bheg: The Life and Death of a Rebel of 1857. By KIM A. WAGNER. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxix, 288 pp. ISBN: 978019087023 (cloth, also available as e-book).
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In *The Skull of Alum Bheg*, Kim Wagner tells a compelling story of the 1857 Indian uprising embedded in a macabre account of the fate of the skull of one of the rebels. Wagner sets his narrative not in the usual sites of Delhi or Lucknow, but in the remote station of Sialkot in the Punjab, where large contingents of both British and Indian sepoy troops were posted. The work does not venture outside the military side of the revolt, which Wagner regards as the “impetus” for the larger rebellion (p. 74); as a consequence, the activities of the sepoy participants take center stage. Throughout, Wagner endeavors sympathetically to understand the motives of the rebellious sepoys, as well as the fears of the beleaguered British residents of Sialkot as they confronted the unfolding tragedy of the summer of 1857. The skull itself, which came to light in an English pub in 1963, provided the stimulus for the book when its current owners, uncomfortable with this “thing” in their house, solicited Wagner’s opinion as to what to do with it (p. xxi).

The setting in Sialkot gives familiar events—from the greased cartridges to the initial outbreak at Meerut and on through the widening circle of rebellion—a fresh perspective. Using standard archival materials together with the few existent indigenous accounts, notably those of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the less well-known Shaik Hedayut, Wagner, in a crisply written narrative, shows the reader how a remote garrison became caught up in rebellion, and how the sepoy Alum Bheg, allegedly a “principal leader,” paid for rebellion with his head, severed from his body (p. xix). Inevitably, Sialkot vanishes from the story for pages at a time as Wagner explores the larger issues that shaped discontent. Of the famous cartridges supposedly greased with polluting cow and pig fat, he argues that the sepoys’ actions “were shaped by the fear of being ostracized—by their brothers in other regiments and by their families back home” more than by the composition of the grease itself (pp. 40, 43). More generally, all change of whatever sort “represented the same basic fear: that under British rule no one would be able to maintain their religious and ritual purity” (p. 60). This emphasis on religion, Wagner argues, made the rebellion appear not as a political choice, but as a just struggle fought to “preserve the moral order and fabric of north Indian society” (p. 80).

As the uprising spread across northern India following the fall of Delhi, Wagner turns his attention to Sialkot, where distance secured a fragile peace for several months. As with the sepoys’ fears, so too does Wagner illuminate, from private letters, the ominous sense of foreboding of the town’s white residents. Some fled, while others stayed until it was too late; some urged conciliation of the mutinous sepoys, while others demanded implacable violence. In the end, sparked by an outbreak in nearby Jhelum, Sialkot’s sepoys rose on

July 9. Even in revolt, Wagner maintains, the sepoy maintained a “shared military identity” that enabled them to continue as “functional military units” (p. 134). Still, within little more than a week, John Nicholson’s Flying Column, supported by heavy cannons and Sikh levies, brutally crushed the Sialkot mutineers.

The suppression of the revolt was accompanied by an orgy of retributive punishment. As Wagner describes it, for the British the struggle was one between “good and evil,” with all those who fought the British “guilty of treason and betrayal,” hence deserving of whatever punishment the British chose to administer. There could be “no question of undue severity” (p. 154). Together with indiscriminate killing and mass executions, one such punishment stood out: blowing from guns. In a chapter evocatively entitled “Sharp and Short as the Cannons Roar,” Wagner uses the execution of Alum Bhag to ask what purpose this spectacular punishment—this “ultimate tool of exemplary deterrence” (p. 177)—served. In the crucible of rebellion, he argues, such executions served “to shore up British self-confidence” (p. 183). But, of course, in so doing these executions simultaneously revealed that in the final analysis “brute force” alone sustained British rule in India (p. 185).

In his concluding chapter, Wagner returns to Alum Bhag’s skull, and asks what the practice of collecting such artifacts tells us about the colonial encounter. Such collecting, Wagner notes, was widespread in the colonial world, and perhaps reached its climax in 1898 with Kitchener’s despoliation of the tomb of the Mahdi and retention of his skull. The eventual fate of Alum Bhag’s skull, Wagner concludes, serves as “a poignant reminder” of the violence implicit in all collecting and exhibiting of remains of indigenous people since the nineteenth century (p. 215).

With its engaging yet authoritative and thoughtful style, and its focus on the “experiences of ordinary people” (p. 7), *The Skull of Alum Bhag* could well interest the general reader and will usefully introduce undergraduate students to the enduring problems of rebellion and violence in the colonial world.

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The Voice in the Drum: Music, Language, and Emotion in Islamate South Asia.

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It is rare that a book offers an original literary experience while extending the boundaries of experimental ethnography. *The Voice in the Drum* is a hybrid work of fictional ethnography that alternately reads like a historical novel, a survey of drumming traditions, a multi-layered cultural analysis, and a fieldwork diary in exploring its core theme: the overlapping relationships of melody, rhythm, and text in Islamic ritual practice. Richard Wolf grounds this text in meticulous fieldwork and erudite social analysis. Based on over twenty years of research with diverse musical communities, this is a landmark publication in the ethnomusicology of South Asia that focuses on Islamic ritual and on “sounds ... seldom taken seriously as music, and practitioners [not] accorded much respect” (p. 7).