

Lapses like these undermine both the project that the book under review would advance and the reputation of SEAP Publications.

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*Brunei: From the Age of Commerce to the 21st Century*. By Marie-Sybille de Vienne. Singapore: NUS Press, 2015. xviii+331 pp.

There are not many comprehensive monographs on the subject of Brunei. It is a small country that tends not to capture the spotlight

on the world stage often, and so it does not attract as much scholarly attention as do its Southeast Asian neighbours. Although some have termed it a “sleepy” place, Brunei is in fact a vital country steeped in a rich history, and this book provides a valuable perspective on its complicated story. The author of this latest major work on Brunei, Marie-Sybille de Vienne, serves on the faculty of the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) in Paris. Previously, Graham Saunders’s *A History of Brunei* (2002) had stood as the only full-length study of the Brunei sultanate. One reason that so few major works have treated the country is the difficulty in accessing suitable sources, which are scattered and in diverse languages. De Vienne has endeavoured to overcome these difficulties, and she provides a helpful, thematically organized bibliography as an appendix to the book.

This work presents a history of Brunei beginning ambitiously with the end of the Ice Age and continuing to the present. But it is not just a historical treatment of Brunei, for its final section addresses such topics of contemporary importance as *adat*, the economy and social issues. The text is arranged into a short prologue, four main sections and a conclusion. Each of the main sections is further divided into subsections, each on a period in the sultanate’s history or, in the case of the final main section of the book, a dimension of “societal management”.

This book was originally published in French as *Brunei: de la thalassocratie à la rente*. At times, the fact of translation seems quite apparent, for instance in the extended, rather complex, discussion of geography in the prologue and in the dense presentation of *Adat Istiadat*. There are also a few errors, possibly attributable to translation. For instance, the book locates Kudat at the “southern extremity of the island of Borneo” (p. 3), rather than at the northernmost tip of the island. In addition, an unfortunate result of the division of the book into numerous subsections, some only a single paragraph long, is that the narrative thread is a bit difficult to follow.

As an economic historian, de Vienne is at her strongest in the final historical section, covering the time period 1984–2014. This portion of the work is devoted to conditions that have arisen over

recent decades, and offers a detailed analysis of the dominant economic role of revenues from hydrocarbon resources during this period. The study provides a much more complete treatment of this important topic than Saunders's earlier book. De Vienne notes the nation's recently mediocre economic performance in comparison with other Southeast Asian nations, but she acknowledges that corporate mismanagement, the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s and fluctuations in natural gas and petroleum prices have contributed to the economy's less-than-stellar results.

In his foreword to the book, B.A. Hussainmiya terms de Vienne's study "daring" and "candid" (p. xvii), referring particularly to her description of Brunei's ideology of monarchism in the final section of the text. This may be true, but the author does not take up a number of sensitive issues that have worried Brunei citizens and have been widely reported outside the country. For example, there is really no discussion of the royal family's internal tensions, such as those involving the investments made by Jefri Bolkihah, the younger brother of the sultan, or of the civil case in British courts in which they resulted. Even so, the author does address the delicate subjects of immigration, ethnicity and assimilation in an extensive review of the nation's demography in the book's final section.

The concluding portion of the study is devoted to an exegesis of royal customs and state ideology. This section is well researched and heavily footnoted. De Vienne closes her work by raising the question of the durability of the social and political consensus that the sultanate has maintained. She suggests that earnings generated by petroleum resources and what she calls a "welfare monarchy" (p. 285) supports that consensus. But Brunei's oil and gas reserves should last for decades more, and at the moment little seems to indicate a weakening of that consensus.

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