

BOOK REVIEWS

***Brunei: From the Age of Commerce to the 21st Century.* By Marie-Sybille de Vienne. Singapore: NUS Press, 2015. Softcover: 345pp, xviii.**

This volume is an English translation of Marie-Sybille de Vienne's *Brunei de la thalassocratie à la rente* (2012). There are few general historical studies of Brunei, and de Vienne points to a particular hiatus in this field in that the Sultanate's model of development "has remained largely ignored by the social sciences and has not been the subject of much social debate" (p. 11). In his Foreword to the volume, B.A Hussainmiya emphasizes that the author is "daring and forthright in her analysis", and that the book is "candid and it treads on sensitive issues" (p. xvii).

De Vienne addresses key concerns in Brunei affairs, all of which are politically sensitive in the Sultanate: the economy of oil and gas, and the difficulties of economic diversification; ethnic issues and the special position of the Malays and Islam; and the administrative apparatus, legal framework and nature of governance. The overriding dilemma is the problem of reconciling an absolute Malay-Islamic Monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*) with the needs of a modernizing state in a globalized world.

In the introductory sections of her book, de Vienne does not set out a thesis and how it is situated within an existing body of literature. Instead the Introduction commences with a brief geography of the state (pp. 3–4); and Brunei's *raison d'être* as "the best port in West Borneo" (p. 5) and "a relatively strategic site" (p. 11). Even the Prologue does not provide a central thrust to the book. We are presented with introductory statements on sources and methodology (pp. 15–20), but the methodology really only comprises a discussion of her sources. Furthermore, a comprehensive study of

Brunei affairs — ancient, colonial and modern — would also have had to include the numerous dissertations and theses written by Brunei students and others, many of them written in the United Kingdom and Brunei.

Nevertheless, the historical narrative is very well written, comprehensive and organized. The chronology runs from prehistory, and the relationships with Srivijaya, imperial China and Malacca. de Vienne supports an early date for elite conversion to Islam (pp. 38–39, 43, 45–49). She covers “the golden age” of Brunei (for her 1500 to 1578) very convincingly. We then have 305 years of “new commercial routes and internal rivalries (1600–1905)”, the engagement with neighbouring competing sultanates, and political retreat and territorial decline with the increasing presence of the European powers (Spanish, Dutch and British). A brief chapter is devoted to the British Residential system from 1906 and the modernization of the polity, through to full independence from Britain in 1984.

For this reviewer the book becomes considerably more interesting in the post-independence period. From 2000 to 2014, there was an increasing emphasis on “Islamic issues and the slowing down of economic diversification” (p. 152). de Vienne’s comparison of the Brunei economic model with the Gulf States reveals that, though the Sultanate relies on “hydrocarbon rent”, it has been cautious with regard to diversification into local financial services (and accompanying indebtedness), and “favours the accumulation of surpluses, invested and managed abroad” (p. 200).

There are interesting discussions in section IV “*Adat Istiadat* and Societal Management” (pp. 202–81) and the brief concluding section “Durable Consensus?” (pp. 283–87); this is where the author is at her most “daring”. She addresses the ways in which the Sultanate is governed and controlled ideologically, ethnically, demographically, and administratively. de Vienne presents an interesting argument posed as a series of paradoxes; the most significant being the pursuit of modernity through substantial investment in education and training (and technology and infrastructure) while at the same time indulging in the “reiteration [and reconstruction] of ostentatious rituals”, maintaining “an archaic way of managing the social body”, and engaging in the “redeployment of monarchical symbolism” (pp. 203, 236). De Vienne says “The legitimising rewriting of history and the imposition of an ‘orthodox’ Islamic behavioural norm thus become the foundation of a ‘Bruneian’ cultural identity in which the monarchy, exemplary as well as

legitimate, proves to be the privileged instrument of the divine project for the sultanate of Brunei Darussalam” (p. 261). An official historiography with school textbooks and other volumes which set out the approved and internally agreed history of the Sultanate and the royal genealogy is presided over by the History Centre (*Pusat Sejarah*) established in 1982.

Being “Malay” and a citizen and the privileges which go with these credentials (free education, health care, exclusive access to employment in public administration and the armed forces) are also underpinned by a process of Malayization and Islamization, assimilating other groups into the majority Brunei-Malay population through religious conversion, and linguistic and cultural incorporation. But among the major set of problems de Vienne identifies comprises a “ponderous” civil service, overstaffing and inefficiency, accompanied by a general “culture of secrecy and growing religious rigour” (pp. 203, 233).

Finally, a technical matter: the bibliography is styled “thematic”, and, though obviously designed to be user-friendly, it is somewhat complex and some of the categories seem a little curious. It is often problematical to allocate some publications to a particular category, and, in some cases the choice seems quite arbitrary. Furthermore, much of the source material is drawn from published work, though there are some unpublished theses referred to, mimeographed work, and collections of papers, but little in the way of primary archival material to add nuance to the historical narrative.

Overall, Professor de Vienne’s study (in both English and French) will become a standard reference work for the study of the Sultanate. It contains a wealth of information and some perceptive, detailed and bold analysis of economic, social, cultural and political issues. One hopes that the volume can be regularly updated because the next ten years promise to be interesting and testing times for the Sultanate and Professor de Vienne has established a firm basis for future work.

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