

***Chasing Archipelagic Dreams: The Expansion of Foreign Influence in Sabah amid the End of Empire, 1945–1965.* By David R. Saunders. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2024. Soft cover: 265pp.**

Despite the substantial scholarship on how Southeast Asian states, societies and histories have developed since 1945, there remains considerable space for exploring the region’s micro-histories and localized politics. David R. Saunders’s *Chasing Archipelagic Dreams: The Expansion of Foreign Influence in Sabah amid the End of Empire, 1945–1965* is a fine example. Saunders meticulously traces the intricate intersections of hegemonic ambitions and complex rivalries that enveloped Sabah, now part of Malaysia, during the tumultuous years following the end of colonial rule, and how geopolitical factors and interests—not least the Cold War and the emergence of new postcolonial states such as Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines—aided and hindered the nationalist ambitions of ordinary Sabahans and their leaders.

Saunders begins with an historical overview (which would appeal to many historians) of how Sabah, discursively framed through “a particular fixation with the exotic” (p. 5), was seen, understood and, in due course, managed by the North Borneo Chartered Company (established in 1881) and then the British government. Seen as a verdant land of infinite abundance as well as “wild” and “exotic”, Sabah was considered somewhere that needed to be colonized and defended at all costs. Yet, according to Saunders, our understanding of its internal complexities is confounded by the fact that, until today, “much of Sabah’s history remains propped up by colonial-era literature” (p. 29) that is evidently biased and self-serving.

Local anti-colonial voices are dutifully recounted, such as that of Donald Stephens (Tun Muhammad Fuad Stephens, 1920–76), who was among the “*anak Sabah*” (Sons of Sabah) who would play an important role in defining and shaping the contours of the region’s identity and nationalism (pp. 79–87). Equally important, Saunders gives voice to the local press for contributing to ideas of Sabahan identity (pp. 87–98). Moving forward in time, Saunders’ retelling of Sabah’s postcolonial past is compelling and instructive, and one of the main arguments he advances in this richly documented and well-researched work is that Sabah experienced *even more* foreign intervention in the wake of its independence than before, the result of it being immediately drawn into the Cold War.

The second section, aptly titled “Vying Archipelagos”, unpacks the competing visions of political identity that shaped regional alignments during escalating Cold War tensions. These include the *Kalimantan Utara* (Northern Kalimantan) movement (pp. 101–26), the Maphilindo Project, which Saunders describes as “the confederation that never was” (pp. 127–55), and the Malaysian Federation project initiated by Malayan Prime Minister Abdul Rahman in 1961. During these processes, the people of Sabah were caught between the rival ambitions of more powerful external players, and although Sabah would eventually become part of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, it could not secure a lasting peace for itself because it would remain contested by other neighbouring countries.

Although ostensibly a detailed history of postcolonial Sabah, Saunders’s work resonates broadly, highlighting patterns recognizable throughout postcolonial states grappling with external domination, uneven development and resource exploitation. Indeed, much of what Saunders describes as the local tragedy of Sabah—the imposition of rule from outside, the erosion of local power and authority and the blight of uneven development compounded by resource extraction—was the fate of many other places and peoples across the postcolonial world. Basil Davidson’s powerful work *The Black Man’s Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State* (1993), for instance, was written in the same critical vein and raises similar questions about the fate of smaller (and sometimes weaker) subaltern communities in navigating complex geopolitical *realpolitik*.

Saunders’s contribution is particularly timely given Southeast Asia’s contemporary positioning at the centre of intensified geopolitical rivalries involving major global powers. Thus, while the book offers deep insights into Sabah’s specific historical experience, its broader theoretical and analytical frameworks have significant relevance for contemporary discussions within political science and Southeast Asian Studies alike. To that end, David Saunders has done a great service to scholars and students, and his book is an excellent example of how micro-studies and micro-histories can have greater universal appeal and relevance.

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