

BOOK REVIEW

Brunei: From the Age of Commerce to the 21st Century, Marie-Sybille de Vienne. Singapore: National University of Singapore (NUS) Press in association with Institut De Recherche Sur L'Asie Du Sud-Est Contemporaine (Research Institute of Contemporary Southeast Asia) (IRASEC), 2015, xviii + 345 pp. ISBN 978-9971-69-818-8 (Paper). First published in French by CNRS Editions in 2012.

The cover image says it all: Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei looking regal and resplendent in black tunic with yellow sash bedecked with an array of medals on a motorcade on the occasion of his 59th birthday on 15 July 2005 against the backdrop of the iconic Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque. Here one witnessed a contemporary Malay Muslim monarch ceremoniously sheltered by the yellow umbrella with the golden dome of a mosque as background altogether representing and symbolising the national concept of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) (Malay Islamic Monarchy). It has been a while since the appearance of a book-length work of this small Malay Muslim absolute monarchic state that straddled on the northeast coast of the island of Borneo like twin teardrops.

Negara Brunei Darussalam meaning the Abode of Peace as Brunei is officially known is emerging as a nation-state with an increasing vocal presence within the ASEAN fold in the past decade. Typical and reflective of its Malay-nature, Brunei eschewed from confrontational behaviour preferring quiet diplomacy and behind-the-scene consultations and discussions in securing consensual agreement within ASEAN as well as with other nation-states. The sultanate's announcement in April 2014 of adopting the Islamic *syariah* law of *hudud* sparked an adversarial response from many quarters mainly from abroad including Hollywood celebrities purportedly declaring a boycott of Brunei-owned hotels in the U.S. and Britain. Undeniably, this energy-rich sultanate is not going to bow to anyone's dictates but that of its reigning monarch who holds absolute power in all matters of state and religion.

Historical works on Brunei are far and few hence the present volume is most refreshing and welcome scholarship. The paucity of objective academic works on the sultanate owed to a host of reasons *inter alia* the issue of difficult and/or non-accessibility to source materials from within and without, the sensitivity of the subject matter as history is well-known to be a double-edged sword, and court historians from within tended to present royal-sanctioned versions of past developments.

Therefore against this less than agreeable ambiance Professor Marie-Sybille de Vienne's efforts is an accomplishment of sorts in producing a most invaluable volume that offers not only an unbiased but also an insightful view of "emerging" Brunei. From her vantage at Paris (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales) economic historian Vienne presents a *tour de force* of Brunei's historical growth from the 7th century CE to contemporary times (closing on 2014), virtually an encyclopaedic sweep that is unlikely to be surpassed. Apportioned into four main parts and closing with a conclusion, the volume's 345 pages cover the geographical imperative, from a thalassocratic state at its zenith (16th century) to cowed under British colonial hegemony (1906–1941) to autonomy and independence (1984), post-independent (1984–2014) management of its resource-rich wealth, and in balancing tradition and modernity of the social fabric.

The author appropriately adopted the *longue duree* approach arguing that "it is necessary to ground analysis in historical data gathered over a long timeline, in order to understand the contemporary stakes and propose perspective for the future" (p. 11). Rightly fits into my own viewpoint of the function and purpose of history, namely that "to know the past affords the understanding of the present thereby enabling the planning for the future". Therefore what is the future for Brunei? Apparently the "survival" of the sultanate "depends on the sustaining of consensus, secured by a hydrocarbon rent capable of financing both a 'welfare monarchy' and a royal dynasty" (p. 285). Prospects for the medium term appears to be sustainable whereby the "welfare monarch" assures care of its citizens literally from cradle to grave.

The major threat, however, the author forewarns, are the paradoxes from within, viz. MIB versus *syariah*; a highly hierarchical society vis-à-vis the royal family; a resurrection of the *Melayu Brunei* tradition that at the same time "adherence to a Middle Eastern norm that was unknown in the Malay world until the [early] 1980s and partially reinvented" (p. 286); zealous societal policing and the increasing number of students abroad; a public stance of regional integration but a private preference of isolation; retention of British military presence albeit a token force and public condemnation of Western involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. It seemed that the paradoxes are the "threats" and risk factors. The trigger, the author poses in a question: "is there not a risk of the implosion of referents, or else collective awareness of the country's contradictions should a shock from the outside (an attack on foreign personnel or installations, a crisis in the whole region) or a succession crisis arise?" (p. 287). Such possible scenarios are ever rearing their unwelcome appearance on the tropical horizon in these uncertain times.

Overall the straight-forward and uncluttered style of prose undoubtedly are agreeable to both specialists and general readers. A lexicon (glossary) proved useful to a non-specialist audience in explaining non-English terms and the assortment of titles including their etymology. The thematic bibliography lends a helpful tool for students, specialists, and to those interested to further their understanding of particular aspects of Brunei. The detailed and informative footnoting throughout the text and the dozens of illustrations (tables, graphs, maps, and dual-tone photographs) are assets to greater comprehension of the narrative.

On the down-side one can take exception to the fact that the Japanese occupation of Brunei (16 December 1941 to 10 June 1945) was merely given less than one and a half page of text (pp. 104–105). But, more importantly, the impact of this brief but important watershed on the monarchy and on the "young nationalists" and also on the general population was not touched upon. For instance did Shaikh Azahari's wartime sojourn in the Netherlands East Indies and likewise Pengiran Mohammed Yusuf's in Japan had any impact on their respective mind-set?

Similarly expectations of new insights and/or source materials to the Brunei Rebellion 1962 are also disappointing. Referred by the author as the "1962 Crisis", the narrative that covered half a page (pp. 118–119), had the present reader anticipating "new" and "refreshing" interpretations, and/or utilisation source materials drawn from yet to untapped sources or newly opened archival files in Western archival collections. Nonetheless this is not at all surprising as this episode remained a highly delicate topic within the sultanate and beyond. No party would risk jeopardising relations with one of the world's wealthiest monarch.

Again on the rather sensitive and perhaps even controversial issue of the Amedeo financial losses involving Prince Jefri, the brother of the monarch, received only a two-page coverage (pp. 146–148) notwithstanding the serious and long term repercussion that this fiasco caused. Despite the author postulating "three consequences" drawn from this financial crisis, more detailed analysis particularly the causal factors that brought about such adverse circumstances would be most helpful not only to the sultanate but to other nation-states in embarking on nation building through economic modernisation and diversification. The decision-making process as well as the effectiveness of a check-and-balance instrument are both crucially important where national funds (always limited) are being allocated for development, restructuring and/or diversification of the national economy. Brunei's ASEAN neighbours and other countries in the South (Afro-Asian Third World) are all struggling to find the best "formula" for success. Learning from Amedeo's shortcomings in various aspects

would undoubtedly contribute to the learning curve. However, again the sensitive nature of the Amedeo debacle involving a blood relative of the reigning monarch might ruffle too many or the wrong feathers for academic lessons or learning curve notwithstanding.

There is little reservation of how the scholarly audience would greet this present paperback undeniably with welcoming arms. But reception from Istana Nurul Iman (Brunei's royal palace) and from the *rakyat* (citizen of Brunei) are the *real* measure of the contribution of this academic work. It is with fervent hope that this present volume be appreciated for its high scholarship and objectivity from within and without the Adobe of Peace.

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