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Hew Cheng Sim and Rokiah Talib: *Tra Zehnder — Iban Woman Patriot of Sarawak*

Abdul Halim Ali

INTRODUCTION

Between June and November of 1947, Edmund R. Leach, an English social anthropologist prepared his report on the prospects of social science research in Sarawak. He did not think much of the available literature on Sarawak as he knew them and in fact lamented that existing literature of the time, though abundant, "give a distorted emphasis to the more exotic aspects of Sarawak". As he expressed it in the report, his viewpoint differed somewhat from that of ethnologists of the first of two decades of last century. If ethnology is defined also as life histories of groups, then one is regularly beset with problems because as stories spread in oral history from respondent to respondent, often spanning generations, an overarching distortion may occur although without a conscious attempt to lie or to mislead. Quite often, too, possessed by conviction so potent that they tend to embellish the story that they present here and there, yet a belief so zealously guarded that they believe their own embellishments in the end just to maintain group solidarity. Something if repeated very often has the force of truth thereafter. One can of course empathise with Leach's academic disconcert under such circumstances.

BOOK REVIEW

by

Abdul Halim Ali

Hew Cheng Sim and Rokiah Talib: *Tra Zebnder – Iban Woman Patriot of Sarawak*. Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Kota Samarahan, 2011, 147 pages.

Between June and November of 1947, Edmund R. Leach, an English social anthropologist prepared his report on the prospects of social science research in Sarawak. He did not think much of the available literature on Sarawak as he knew them and in fact lamented that existing literature of the time, though abundant, “give a distorted emphasis to the more exotic aspects of Sarawak”. As he expressed it in the report, his viewpoint differed somewhat from that of ethnologists of the first of two decades of last century. If ethnology is defined also as life histories of groups, then one is regularly beset with problems because as stories spread in oral history from respondent to respondent, often spanning generations, an overarching distortion may occur although without a conscious attempt to lie or to mislead. Quite often, too, possessed by conviction so potent that they tend to embellish the story that they present here and there, yet a belief so zealously guarded that they believe their own embellishments in the end just to maintain group solidarity. Something if repeated very often has the force of truth thereafter. One can of course empathise with Leach’s academic disconcert under such circumstances.

Then, more than a decade after he submitted his report, the social science in the West underwent an upheaval; new questions were posed while established wisdom challenged. Sociology together with social sciences, with the possible exception of economics, have been a springboard for radicals. It also became obvious at the time that ideas taught in various academic disciplines were flawed to explain the various intellectual dilemmas. This had ramifications in Malaysia because of its historical relations with Britain, albeit a colonial one. The continual upheaval of social sciences in the West also brought with it division even within the critics of the old orthodoxies. A series