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SOME RECENT BOOKS ABOUT BORNEO, SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC: A SURVEY

AVM Horton

A glut of books about Brunei appeared in 1988-1990. Kebawah Duli Yang Maha Mulia Paduka Seri Baginda Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Negara Brunei Darussalam, was the subject of at least two biographies in 1989. The first, by a respected British financial journalist, Mr James Bartholomew, is not likely to be on sale in the Abode of Peace. The second, by Lord Chalfont, is virtually an admitted public relations exercise (p 11), apparently intended as a rebuttal to Bartholomew. The following year, 1990, saw the second printing of Yang Dimuliakan Pehin Tuan Iman Dato Paduka Seri Setia Ustaz Haji Awang Abdul Aziz bin Juned's *Menjadi Tetamu Allah*, first published in 1987, a chronicle of His Majesty's first full pilgrimage to Mecca.¹ Since that time the Sultan has fulfilled the *haj* on at least two further occasions, most recently in June 1992 / Zulhijjah 1412. Meanwhile, Yang Dimuliakan Pehin Orang Kaya Amar Diraja Dato Seri Utama (Dr.) Haji Awang Muhammad Jamil Al-Sufri DK DSLJ DPMB POAS PHBS PJK LittD has been continuing his prolific researches into the history of his homeland. His portrait of the late Seri Begawan Sultan, *Penyair Diraja* (1989), was succeeded by at least two additional publications from his pen in 1990, namely *Latar Belakang Sejarah Brunei*, a slim pamphlet, and *Tarsilah Brunei: Sejarah Awal Perkembangan Islam*, an altogether more substantial volume in which his ingenious theories about Brunei's past are expounded in depth and at length.

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Researchers will long remain grateful to Sylvia C Engelen Krausse and Gerald H Krausse for their multi-disciplinary *Brunei*. "More than a mere work of bibliographical reference", this publication provides "some most informative annotation, so that the reader can arrive at a reasonable overall picture of ... Negara Brunei Darussalam" (King 1990: 217). There are, undoubtedly, some important omissions; but, as Professor Victor T King adds, "it is usually not difficult to point to items missed by bibliographers". In the final analysis, 'Krausse and Krausse' remains the most valuable example of its genre currently available.

Professor Donald E Brown awards a similar accolade to Mr David Leake Jr for his volume *Brunei: The Modern Southeast-Asian Islamic Sultanate*: "... judged as an introduction to Brunei for the general reader", Brown summarizes, "Leake's book is probably the best there is. Its coverage is very wide, surveying topics from the archaeological, historical and mythical past up to the social, economic and political concerns of the present ... Many readers will be particularly interested in Leake's discussion of conditions, events and personalities in the most recent years. ..." (Brown 1990).

Brown himself has been a (if not *the*) principal driving force behind Brunei historiography for the past quarter of a century.² His latest full-length book, *Hierarchy, History, and Human Nature: The Social Origins of Historical Consciousness* (University of Arizona Press, Tuscon, 1988), explores the relationship between social stratification and the writing of history. The essence of his thesis is that the reliability of domestic historiography tends to improve directly in proportion to the degree of openness of a society. In other words, the more closed a society, the more flawed its version of its own history tends to be; and *vice versa*. This is true even of a society which shifts over time from being 'closed' to being 'open' (or in the opposite direction). It is noted further, that sound historiography and open stratification tend to have certain 'concomitants' such as individualism, a uniform conception of human nature, biographical writing, realistic portraiture, and an interest in the social and natural sciences. Conversely, the absence of such traits usually accompanies closed stratification and unsound historiography (p 315).

Brown begins his study with Negara Brunei Darussalam, which, being a typical caste-organized society, has an unreliable historiography (pp 2-4). He then contrasts India (generally a closed, caste society which is ahistorical) with China (essentially the reverse). The next area to be studied is South-East Asia (including a particularly interesting further section on Brunei, pp 75-85);³ and in the remainder of the study the author roams further afield both in time and space, encompassing the ancient Egyptians, Assyrians, Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, Classical Muslims (Islamic historiography receives high praise; pp: 220-230), Medieval Byzantines and Renaissance Florentines. The scholarship in this prodigious volume is first rate. Of all the publications noticed in the present survey, *Hierarchy, History and Human Nature* is unsurpassed.

Returning to Brunei for a moment, the year 1988 saw the appearance of two contrasting works. The first, *Brunei Darussalam in Profile*, is a prettily-packaged handout issued by Shandwick plc. The second, *Partai Rakyat Brunei: Dokumen Terpilih*, comprises a collection of partisan documents accompanied by an introduction written by Haji Zaini Haji Ahmad. Its main theme is the rise and fall of the radical Brunei People's Party which has been banned in the Abode of Peace since the abortive uprising of December 1962. Just as in the case of Bartholomew 1989 (mentioned above), so prospective purchasers are likely to search in vain for this title on the bookstalls of Bandar Seri Begawan, Seria and Kuala Belait.

A recent volume of memoirs by Mr Denis Healey, British Defence Secretary at the time of Konfrontasi in the 1960s, yields a particularly intriguing snippet of information:

"With Confrontation over [1966]", he recalls, "we [the British Government] were free to look objectively at the future of over commitment East of Suez. We soon decided that we should withdraw from our base in Singapore during the seventies.[T]he Tunku [for his part] was unworried, asking only that we should put