

BOOK REVIEW

Savara, 'Mistis Timur Menenggara', Isu 18, April - Jun 2026, Pelita Tenggara Entreprise dan IBDE pp. 1-80.

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The issue number 18 of *Svara, Borneo: Mistis Timur Menenggara*, is a breath of fresh air. It takes Borneo as a subject of inquiry approached from the contemporary arts perspective and steeped in power analysis. This makes the accounts presented through the mediums of essay, poetry and fiction urgent. Each piece in the collection takes position on critical topics today such as decolonization of knowledge, cultural politics, state-capital collaboration and sacredness. The editor Hafiz Hamzah has made sound judgement in curating the collection by integrating aesthetic and geographic dimensions. Borneo is represented from the viewpoints of Sabah, Sarawak and East Kalimantan. Collective memory, the West and East Malaysia divide, identity politics, revivalism and cultural imperialism are headlines from Sabah and Sarawak. From Kalimantan, ecology and political economy depicting the realpolitik of exclusion and the dark side of development took centre stage.

By accident or design, Borneo is conceived in a neat dichotomy between the soft power of the East Malaysia and the hard power of Kalimantan. This raises a question as to why cultural hegemony is the preferred lens to view power in the context of the East Malaysia. This question is pertinent because culture, whilst appear non-political, in reality, interpellates. It constructs a subject who internalises the social and political order and becomes its most passionate believer. In *Svara*, the subject animates in the voices of Kiah and her reminiscences; in the dilemma of a poet torn between faith and ancestral legacy; and in the rekindling of nostalgia among the cultural firsters. The prominence of culture has made the pieces necessary not only because they were sincere introspections, but also, they allow reader to observe the operation of cultural power. This matter is relevant especially in the two articles, 'Borneo Literature Bureau' by Benedict Samling and 'Dayang Bintang' by Dayang Nurhazieqa Hamzani, as they represented two different currents in the cultural hegemony in Sarawak: the assertion for ethnic distinction and the search for a decolonising narrative.

The article 'Borneo Literature Bureau' argued that the languages spoken by non-Malay ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak are facing an acute crisis resulting from their marginalisation in the mainstream language use in the writing and textual forms. Malay language is construed as the dominant language that dominated the narrative and the thinking process into a Malay centric. Aspiring authors from the non-Malay ethnics like Iban, Bidayuh and Kadazan-Dusun found

themselves having to sacrifice their cultural identity by writing in Malay in order to make their writings available to a broader audience. The article proposed a solution which it believed capable to uplift the ethnic languages by reviving the British-era institution the Borneo Literature Bureau (BLB). BLB is presented as a panacea and by reviving it, the voices and the writings of the people from various cultural background would become visible. The article stated that the closure of BLB in 1976 after it was taken over by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka had triggered the decline in the ethnic literatures. The publication of stories and tales in ethnic languages had ceased because of the loss in the institutional support that they once enjoyed. Even more telling, the idea and the discourse pertaining to the ethnic identities had become the victim of the closure. It was believed that a reborn BLB would be an act of knowledge and cultural justice for the diverse ethnic groups.

‘Dayang Bintang’ asked a critical question: why was there a lack of decolonial and anticolonial thought and awareness in Sarawak. Several instances were cited to show the continuity of colonial narrative and discourse. English language continued to be presented as a superior language for development and modernity; the legacies of Sarawak has essentially earmarked for the Brooke Rajahs institutions; and the narrative and identity of the nation were embellished by the Brooke-centric positioning that the Brookes’ government was not a colonial project but a joint-rule with the native chiefs. The author offered two possible reasons for the persistency of the colonial mindset today: the exclusivist tendency of nation-state; and the misunderstanding and scepticism towards a Malay-Muslim nationalism had discouraged the progress in alternative discourse. The article underscored the challenges faced in the decolonising of knowledge that has been hindered by the prevalence of Brooke hegemony and the isolation of the discourse which did not conform with the known blueprint.

I found the article revealing because they exemplified the case where culture is understood as a cause and a solution for a problem. The lack of recognition toward ethnic languages is thought to be a consequent of the national language policy. The call for sectarian or ethnic autonomy is not a unique problem to Sarawak but an example of a phenomenon described by Jacques Bertrand (2024) as “sub-state nationalism”. It characterises the weakening influence of the core state to exercise greater control over the sub-territory, hence, enabling the sub-group to assert more autonomy and distance from the centre. Cultural identity is often used to assert autonomy, for example, in reviving a tradition or language. The article, however, has isolated the political background to concentrate on the cultural dimension alone. As a result, a wider or perhaps, more persistent problems such as disconnection between politics and community and unmet aspirations are matters which are not only material but also potentially capable in empowering the ethnic community to have a better control in shaping and preserving their collective identity and heritage. Furthermore, the transformative role that the ethnic communities have played through the medium of national language should not be disregarded. One of the contributors to *Svara* Borneo’s issue Clariessa Kesulai is an accomplished poet and writer whose works deal with spirituality and the clash of tradition. To tell her story about religious experience from a non-Muslim position is not only trailblazing but also educational. Sarawak born poet and novelist Jong Chian Lai who writes in Malay language has won SEA Write Award in 2006.

The intractable Brookes’ legacies in Sarawak are manifested as a cultural-knowledge problem which is persuasive but also overstating the Brookes’ hegemony. Indeed, Brookes enduring legacies, as the author of ‘Dayang Bintang’ correctly noted, was the museum, while many others

like economy, health, infrastructure and governance were left much to be desired. Another Brookes' legacy was history as each of the rajah had a book to speak for their reign. James Brooke's personal secretary Spencer St John wrote a biography *The Life of Sir James Brooke* (1879) that was based on the first rajah journals. Charles Brooke encouraged his district officer C. Bampfylde to write a book *History of Sarawak under its Two White Rajahs* (1909). The third and final rajah Vyner had enlisted Robert Payne to write *The White Rajahs of Sarawak* (1960). Nevertheless, the Brookes side of history were far from being authoritative. His European officers, missionaries and novelists had also written their side of history that were often not flattering to the government. We can hardly say the Brookes got their history right.

On the last note, the theme *Mistis Timur Menenggara* is a curious one. People in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei today rarely refer to a geographic bearing like *timur* or *tenggara* when describing themselves to the people outside their state. Our neighbours in West Kalimantan who visited Sarawak would describe themselves as *orang Sambas*, *Pontianak* or *Mempawah*. State identity remains an important way to describe and distinguish. Ultimately, people in Borneo understood themselves and each other as people of the land, coastal, river or *hulu*.

Reference

Bertrand, J., 2024. *State and Sub-State Nationalism in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.