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Peer reviewed

Review: Property and Politics in Sabah: Native Struggles over Land Rights

By Amity Doolittle

Reviewed by [Elery Hamilton-Smith](#)
Charles Sturt University, Australia

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Amity A. Doolittle. *Property and Politics in Sabah, Malaysia: Native Struggles over Land Rights*. University of Washington Press, Seattle and Washington, 2005. 232pp. ISBN 0 295 98539 9; \$US50.00.

This is indeed a powerful book. The author is daughter of George Appell, one of the most important authors on the anthropology of Malaysia Borneo and so grew up immersed in an understanding of that society. In this work, she has examined the politics of control over land tenure, drawing upon both a detailed historical record and a thorough analysis utilizing a state-of-the-art political ecology framework. Her documentation is comprehensive, detailed and absolutely meticulous.

In summary, she shows the extent to which both British colonialism and Malaysian neo-colonialism have consistently demonstrated both a lack of respect for, and understanding of, the indigenous people. Certainly, the story is a very complex one and continuing high-sounding rhetoric has often disguised the oppression and associated denial of human rights that has resulted. Even though the policy and programs of government have been subject to continuing change and even absolute reversal, the underlying problems have remained remarkably unchanged.

The view from the outside world is informed largely by the rhetoric which, of course, is the perception offered by the formal media. Accordingly, Sabah is often seen as a successful society and no doubt it is for the affluent and powerful Malayan politicians and administrators. At the same time, an inquiring visitor to Malaysia needs relatively little social sensitivity to realize the immense injustice done to the traditional inhabitants. Perhaps, the only positive thing that can be said is that this occurs less in Sabah than elsewhere in Malaysia. The book totally confirms the negative perceptions that I have developed over some forty years of intermittent visiting.

At the same time, well-intentioned international organizations concerned with the provision of aid and with the development of nature conservation across the world are struggling to achieve positive results. They often do so within the dominant framework imposed by the government and this is doubtless to be commended. However, the necessary compromises often fail to make a significant impression upon the well being of indigenous people

and may even reinforce their oppression. Certainly, some programs under particularly strong leadership have occasionally demonstrated success but changes of personnel or of local relationships often ensure that this success is relatively short-lived. It is indeed an immense dilemma and prospects for significant future change appear to be extremely doubtful. The author outlines that dilemma in her closing chapter and, although pointing to potential directions of change, does not convey a sense of optimism.

Although the book confirms my pessimism, I believe it is a work of superb quality and deserves a great deal of attention from those concerned with, and involved in, aid programs of any kind. It is a model for researchers and students interested in land problems. Hopefully, it will lead in the long run to wider understanding of the problems and thus aid in the search for solutions.

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