This book is one of the most significant contributions to the understanding of Muslim Bumiputera politics in Sarawak since Sanib Said’s *Malay Politics in Sarawak 1946–1966: The Search for Unity and Political Ascendancy*. It is also worth noting that Faisal S. Hazis’ work goes beyond contemporary ethnic-based politics in Sarawak, representing an ambitious attempt to assess the capacity of the Malaysian state to dominate the national fringe. In this sense, Sarawak is perceived as a site of political manoeuvre among various social forces (competing groups) in the state as well as a political means for central state leaders to extend their control over the peripheral society.

As a trained political scientist, the author borrows Joel Migdal’s state-in-society approach which suggests four ways to ascertain efforts towards maintaining domination. Firstly, the capacity to penetrate society in order to shape people’s lives. Secondly, the ability to extract available resources and thirdly, to regulate social relations in order to preserve certain norms and culture. Lastly, the capacity to distribute resources or to allocate goods and services to members of the society.

Within the provided framework, Faisal explores how the state has compromised its institutions with local strongmen, represented by Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu (PBB)’s prominent leaders, to maintain its political domination over the Muslim Bumiputera community in Sarawak. The second chapter traces the formation of social forces in Sarawak before the rule of Brooke and how they had evolved throughout the Brooke and the British colonization years. The author first discusses the emergence of Malay noble families in Kuching and the subsequent break-up of Malay political forces after the Second World War. He then elaborates on the rise of Muslim intelligentsia in Sarawak politics and how they managed to obtain favour from the central state leaders in governing Sarawak, surpassing the old Malay power centres and the Dayak intelligentsia. The author has persuasively argued that Muslim Bumiputera politicians have not only achieved political ascendancy over other ethnic groups, but also political domination in Sarawak. It was unprecedented that Malay voters rallied around a single party, PBB, during Rahman Yakub’s administration in the 1970s. Chapters 4–6 focus on the consolidation of Muslim Bumiputera forces from 1981 throughout the Mahathir era. Though the leadership underwent severe political struggles, it eventually managed to overcome all challenges and rose as local strongmen were able to resist the will of central state leaders. Those chapters also illustrate how the local strongmen exercised control.
over the Muslim Bumiputera community through Islamization, the civil service and patronage system.

Chapter 7 is an interesting micro-analysis of village-based politics, where about 90 per cent of the village population is Malay Muslim. It sheds light on the scope and methods of penetration of the ruling elite over the community to create political legitimacy at the grassroots level. Islamic programmes, the civil service and both institutionalized and ad-hoc material goods were proven to be among the most effective social and political controlling means.

In his concluding remarks, the author confirms the findings of many other well-known scholars including Zakaria Ahmad, William Case and Harold Crouch that Malaysia is a relatively strong state. However, he argues that the Malaysian state is a limited government that is constantly challenged by local strongmen. Hence no single group monopolizes power. He attributes the incidents of corruption and the practice of money politics in Sarawak to the state’s compromise in facing the demands of social groups, in this case the strongmen politicians of Sarawak. But he argues that the compromise of central state leaders brought stability to the periphery.

Hazis’ book has many strengths in terms of data and analysis. Evidently he carried out excellent primary research that has presented us with useful and interesting information such as Muslim conversion cases during Rahman Yakub’s years, the socio-economic information of Malay villages in the southwest and details of developmental projects and financial grants promised by BN candidates during elections across nearly three decades. To the development projects, he adds an interesting category, ‘Islamic Projects’, and pays attention to a particular region like southwestern Sarawak. The Appendix is also worth mentioning as it contains electoral results of Muslim-Bumiputera seats in both state and general elections in Sarawak from 1970 to 2006.

In addition to state leaders, the federal factor is also taken into consideration. By adding a study of a village community in Chapter 7, he conducts a three-level analysis—local, state and federal—which has hardly been done in the study of Sarawak or, possibly, Malaysian politics.

There is one point which requires clarification: the boundary between state and social forces. The author seems to presume that the national government is a neutral state which is free from the contestation of different groups. National laws, policies and programmes are regarded as reflecting the state’s will and the concerns of federal elites are treated as national interests. On the other hand, Rahman Yakub and Taib Mahmud are perceived as local strongmen who often undermined state institutions for personal gain. However, the book shows that the ruling elite from the centre were also actively involved in patronage politics and made use of state institutions as a means of ‘vote-fishing’ during elections. They also engineered the Islamization process as well as building an expanded civil service in the same way that the local strongmen expanded their political influence. It is thus fair to say that
both local and national ‘strongmen’ sought political domination by weakening state power. The point that the local strongmen have been ‘tolerated’ by central state leaders as a way of maintaining the state’s control at the national fringe is somewhat unconvincing. I propose that the federal elite are not neutral in the promotion of national interests, but are also pursuing their own agenda.

Despite this shortcoming, Faisal S. Hazis’ work on Muslim Bumiputera politics in Sarawak is an excellent reference for students, researchers and academics who are interested in the contemporary politics of Sarawak. It deals successfully with the complex realm of Sarawak Bumiputera politics and is clearly presented.

References

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Tuked Rini, Cosmic Traveller: Life and Legend in the Heart of Borneo
MONICA JANOWSKI


Few young Kelabit know who Tuked Rini is. I hope that reading his Legend will be enjoyable for them and will make them more aware of their heritage. I hope that it will nourish in them a desire to cherish the language and poetry of their ancestors (p. 148).