David Henley and Henk Schulte Nordholt (eds)
*Environment, Trade, and Society in Southeast Asia; A Longue Durée Perspective.*

*Environment, Trade, and Society in Southeast Asia* was published to honor Professor Emeritus Peter Boomgaard. Peter Boomgaard himself has never been shy about tackling several centuries in one publication and it is therefore very appropriate that Fernand Braudel’s ‘*longue durée* perspective’—the subtitle of the book—forms the unifying element in this volume. The subtitle also befits the 300th volume in the KITLV Verhandelingen Series, a milestone in itself.

The chapters cover a wide range of topics. In the introduction, the editors, David Henley, and Henk Schulte Nordholt argue that a *long durée* perspective helps to overcome the compartmentalization of conventional historical periods. The next five chapters could have been grouped under the heading ‘environment’. Greg Bankoff sketches changes in forests in the Philippines, using a ‘deep forestry’ approach. He is critical of a purely anthropocentric focus in forestry studies, and attempts to give climate, soil, fire, and other, living agents (foremost white ants) their due place as shaping factors. William G. Clarence-Smith discusses the possible origins of the ponies, donkeys, horses, and mules in Southeast Asia. Jan Wiseman Christie gleans inscriptions to make a plausible argument that Javanese states of the late first millennium and early second millennium were destabilized by devastating volcanic eruptions and accompanying earthquakes. Anthony Reid brings together information about seismic activity in and around Sumatra and Java in historic and prehistoric times and concludes that ‘in a zone as seismically active as Indonesia we must expect history to be discontinuous, through the effect both of volcanic eruptions [...] and of tsunamis’ (p. 77). Linda Newson assesses the role of fertility to explain demographic change in the Philippines prior to 1800, examining people’s age at marriage, along with factors such as abortion, infanticide, penis inserts, slavery, and debt bondage.

The following four chapters focus on trade. Raquel A.G. Reyes offers a ‘glimpse’, as she puts it, of the global trade in Southeast Asian *naturalia* between 300 BCE and 1600 CE. David Henley tests the usefulness of Reid’s ‘age of commerce’ paradigm for Southeast Asia. He discusses two possible early ages of commerce between the seventh and thirteenth centuries and asserts that what statistical evidence there is, shows that the volume of long-distance trade in these ‘ages’ of commerce was incomparable to the trade in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Heather Sutherland sketches the development of Makas-
Kwee Hui Kian argues that the Chinese became dominant in inter-insular trade in early modern Southeast Asia, because, for various political and social reasons, local traders, Indians, Arabs, and Europeans were constrained in their commercial expansion.

The last two chapters stand somewhat apart from the rest. Henk Schulte Nordholt shows change and continuity in the role played by militias from the pre-colonial ‘contest state’ up to the present ‘patronage democracy’. Jean Gelman Taylor demonstrates the potential use of pieces of art as historical sources to study the longue durée.

All authors are renowned scholars and the articles are without exception well written. Each article is in its own right a useful contribution to its respective field, and no doubt will find its way to many readers. But the question that puzzles me is, what has the longue durée perspective as the book’s principal framework added to the analysis? Sometimes I could not help forming the impression that the extremely long periods under scrutiny have produced a kind of history in which large chunks of the story (or the empirical evidence) have been left out and no specific characteristics of the period have been addressed. Other articles, in contrast, I found thought provoking, although I do not necessarily agree with the conclusions. For instance, Greg Bankoff, Jan Wisseman Christie, and Anthony Reid make a strong case for a bigger role of ‘nature’ in human history. Reid explains ‘in part’ the supposed absence of established settlements on the west coast of Sumatra as a result from disruptions by ‘severe earthquakes and tsunamis’ (p. 73). I would maintain, however, that what I have elsewhere called the ‘comb model’ of the west coast (a multitude of short rivers, in contrast to the few large rivers on the east coast) prohibited the emergence of stable polities based on the control of trade, and is a more compelling explanation for the alleged lack of established settlements.

An exemplary use of the longue durée perspective comes from Heather Sutherland. She shows how the longue durée amends, if not corrects, the histoire événementielle of the apparent rise and decline of Makassar. When Makassar is understood as a node in a cluster of settlements, its defeat in 1669 at the hands of the Dutch was neither catastrophic nor definitive. Peter Boomgaard must be pleased with such a contribution from his former PhD supervisor.

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