

the symbolic, geographical, ecological, social, and political dimensions of colonizers in their attempt of modifying the landscape. This argument is further developed by Amity Doolittle (chapter 6). She describes how attitudes and the practices of colonizers towards forest and their uses have persisted until present time, especially in the context of national politics and policies. Thus, both colonial and postcolonial states share importantly common features: an imposition of Western notions of “private property” over traditional customary practices and a strong emphasis on commercialization of forest resources benefiting local elites. As Doolittle makes clear, today – as in the colonial past – forest-dependent people continue to be blamed for the dramatic changes occurring in the landscape and for the progressive decline of forest cover.

Reed Wadley (chapter 5) explores the creation and maintenance of boundaries as an integral component of territoriality, with a special focus on the upper Kapuas River over the last two centuries. Such boundaries do not only set off a state’s territory from other states, they also include more intangible boundaries, ethnicity, notions and perceptions of the environment that are constantly being rethought. State boundaries establish rights of access to land and natural resources, set off national territories, and are meant to control the movement of local people, who – nevertheless – tend to ignore them. On the other hand, challenges to state-level boundaries may come in the form of inter- and intracommunities disputes that redesign patterns of land use and exploitation of forest products. Interestingly enough, as Wadley reminds us, “the earlier colonial attempts to divide rival tribes and kingdoms are still remembered in fuzzy fashion by today’s local people, and they use these memories in their on-going competition over resource access with one another” (153).

The colonial construction of knowledge about local peoples and their environment is further taken on board by Michael Dove and Carol Carpenter (chapter 7). In their analysis of the “poisonous” *upas* tree of the East Indies, they show how the shifting image of this plant (seen in the early colonial era as a metaphor of the challenges that forest and their people posed to colonial project) have slowly been modified over the centuries, especially in response to the changes of nature and direction in the colonial project.

The volume’s part three is mainly concerned with the social-political transformations that have taken place in Borneo in recent historical times. Drawing on his 40 years of research amongst the Rungus of Sabah, George Appell provides a detailed account of how Western ideologies and a distorted understanding of people’s cultural practices have led to the progressive exhaustion of vital natural resources. For the Rungus, the transformation of the landscape has not only produced spatial disorientation, but also the dislocation of memories of the past – hence badly affecting communities’ internal cohesion, solidarity networks, and traditional livelihood. Compared to the Rungus of Sabah, the Kelabit of Sarawak described by Monica Janowski (chapter 9)

appear to have been more successful in coping with the new transformations and externally induced contingencies. For instance, they have been able to increasingly adopt permanent wet rice agriculture by migrating to nearby areas best suited for wet rice cultivation while reducing the production of upland rice. Overall, this strategic switch has led to surpluses in rice production. On the other hand, the Kelabit have been able to retain both the older symbolic economy of rice (a central ceremonial ingredient at *irau* “naming” feasts) as well as a modern symbolic economy where rice features as cash crop. In both cases, rice is a source of prestige and cultural reproduction, and – in fact – its sale allows people to sponsor *irau* feasts. In his concluding chapter, Graham Saunders brings together different points of view and perceptions of the Borneo environment (indigenous, Arab, Chinese, and European). As he cautions, there is no doubt that the Borneo environment will continue to change in future years and “whether this will be regarded as ‘development’ or ‘exploitation’ will depend largely on one’s point of view and whether it brings benefits or not to those affected” (289).

This scholarly, yet accessible book, will be of value to practitioners in the social and political sciences, as well as to informed generalists interested in Southeast Asia history and dynamics of change. It is also an essential reading to anyone working beyond academia in the field of development, conservation, and property rights.

Dario Novellino

**Whitaker, Mark P.:** *Learning Politics from Sivaram. The Life and Death of a Revolutionary Tamil Journalist in Sri Lanka.* London: Pluto Press, 2007. 251 pp. ISBN 978-0-7453-2353-4. Price: £ 19.99

Sivaram Dharmaratnam, perhaps the best-known journalist in Sri Lanka under his pen-name “Taraki,” was abducted by gunmen in Colombo on 28 April 2005, and found dead the next morning. As a former militant, expert on counter-insurgency, founder and editor of the highly influential TamilNet website, and columnist in the Colombo *Daily Mirror*, Sivaram’s uncompromising coverage of the political and military situation had placed him in particular danger following the emergence on his native East Coast of the progovernment Tamil militia led by Colonel Karuna, as a breakaway faction of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Describing him as “a brilliant journalist,” Reporters Sans Frontières recorded in its 2006 annual report that “After arresting one suspect, police abandoned the investigation.”

Sivaram, who knew all the key figures in Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict and seemed to have sources of information unrivalled by other political commentators, had told friends that he feared for his safety after police raided his house in 2004, and progovernment media accused him of being a spy for the Tigers. One of those friends, the American anthropologist Mark Whitaker, had been working for years on this unusual book, planned as an “intellectual history” (3) of Sivaram, but which has proved in the event to be his extended obituary.

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Sivaram emerges from the book as a very much larger-than-life character, Whitaker's portrayal of the sheer extent of his autodidacticism and breadth of reading may strike some Western readers as overdrawn, but for a variety of historical, personal, and economic reasons there are many such people in South Asia, from whom Sivaram is distinguishable more for the power of his intellect than for the bricolage of his personally-assembled knowledge. Moreover, his personal "*opposition* to professional scholarship of all sorts" (13) was political rather than an enforced response to personal circumstance. It was also, to some extent, a rhetorical device – otherwise why take such trouble, over so many years, to ensure that his scholarly scribe took down his political and strategic analyses in such detail?

Two important questions arise, which I wish Whitaker had addressed more straightforwardly. The first is methodological: much of the book comprises "verbatim" conversations culled from meetings and discussions over a 24-year period, and while it is made clear that Whitaker sometimes had his tape recorder running, such occasions are not always differentiated from the times (which, given the varied circumstances under which their conversations took place, must have been many) when he reconstructed their debates from written notes or from memory. Sivaram was highly articulate and prone to pontificate. Even so, it often stretches the imagination that he should have presented his verbal arguments quite so coherently, especially given the quantities of alcohol being consumed at the time. A discussion of the problems inherent in directly transcribing direct speech, and of how Whitaker addressed those problems in preparing his text, would have helped clarify the status of the presentation.

The second question, far more troubling, is ethical. Sivaram was killed because of his influential opinions, and his involvement in the events forming the backdrop

to this narrative. Many others who figure at different points in the narrative have also been killed. Yet Whitaker constantly names living individuals without ever, as far as I can tell, concealing their identities. Nor is it clear whether their permission was sought before exposing them in this way. It is, frankly, astonishing that such issues are never raised.

In general, the book is well-written and readable, though there are some surprising, recurrent spelling errors regarding Sri Lankan names and places. But why should it be of interest to non-Sri Lanka specialists? The reasons, I suggest, are two-fold: the first concerns its distinctive approach to the biographical genre itself; the second stems from the subject matter.

Whitaker claims with some justification that his book transcends earlier anthropological uses of biography as a device intended to "*exemplify* the life of a 'typical' person of the society under consideration" (14). Furthermore, what distinguishes his book from later reflexive attempts to give their subjects a more active voice, is that the latter too, in the end, failed to solve "the ... problem of the motivation underlying the biographical impulse" (15), which remains exemplary. By contrast, Whitaker's book is "subject-led" in a more fundamental way: its subject is a person "whose work, writings, and life are obviously more important than the fact that some anthropologist is writing about them" (17). Which leads neatly on to the second reason for reading this book: in an era where so much attention is focused on the strategic, political, and moral no-man's-land between nationalism and terrorism, Sivaram's distinctive, if ultimately doomed, attempt to facilitate political resolution in Sri Lanka through personal action, cannot fail to move and fascinate all those implicated in similar issues elsewhere.

Anthony Good

