
This may well be the first comprehensive history attempted for New Guinea and surrounding islands. Histories certainly exist, but they divide along the political boundary between the presently Indonesian and independent halves of the island and between the post-contact period of documented history and long period of settlement that preceded it, known to us mostly through the archæological record. Historical treatments further divide between those focused mostly on the actions and accomplishments of colonial agents, based upon archival sources, and those focused upon the experiences and perspectives of local peoples, known mostly from anthropological research. Clive Moore’s attempt to bridge these various scholarly domains and divisions makes New Guinea a truly pioneering work.

Moore begins the story about 40,000 before the present (BP) when humans were already established in parts of what would emerge after the last Ice Age as New Guinea. While scholars have tended to see New Guinea as marginal to southeastern Asia, the archaeological evidence suggests an impressive level of cultural achievement: the early development of long distance sailing, massive population growth and rapid migration based on an affluent foraging economy and, as early as 9,000 BP, the invention of intensive irrigated agriculture. The strength of the “core culture” established over the millennia was such that the waves of Austronesian-speaking peoples who began migrating from southeast Asia about 5,000 BP were able to colonize only the coastal regions. For the most part, anthropologists have tended to picture Melanesians as living in discrete cultures, bounded by language and custom. One gains quite a different sense from the perspective of long-term history, which reveals patterns of considerable movement and exchange of people, trade objects and ritual systems. In the most original chapter of the book, Moore also challenges the long-established view of New Guinea as isolated from the outside world by examining evidence that peoples in the far western regions of New Guinea were involved in Malayan trading networks as long as 2,000 years ago.

Moore devotes five chapters--a bit more than half the book--to early interactions between the inhabitants of New Guinea and adjacent islands and various European intruders. The account touches on visits by Portuguese and Spanish explorers and traders, dating from 1511, but most attention is paid to the later visits and incursions by Dutch, French, German and British explorers, adventurers, missionaries, traders and settlers. I expect most regional scholars will find the sections dealing with the Dutch to be of the most interest. Moore shows how Dutch involvement, which led to the annexation of eastern New Guinea in the mid-nineteenth century, was deeply influenced by long-established Malay and Chinese trading networks built up over hundreds of years. The story of direct European entanglements, while well-told, is far more familiar. While Moore touches on a wide range of events and trends, he tends to emphasize the importance of commercial trade in such commodities as bêche-de-mer, pearls, bird of paradise plumes, gold, whales and human labor. He devotes a particularly useful chapter to a wide-ranging discussion of how Melanesians responded to European interventions and the relevance of their responses to our understandings of early contact.

Moore most clearly reveals his historical priorities by devoting a mere 25 pages to the entire twentieth century—that is, virtually the entire period of colonial and post-colonial rule. He justifies that by pointing out, accurately, that there is already an abundance of studies on this period. The general effect, however, is to stress continuities over change. Whether Moore has
hit the proper balance is debatable (I don’t think he has), but this ambitious study is nonetheless an invaluable contribution summing up in engaging prose much of our accumulated knowledge of the region while revealing exciting lines for future research.

University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

JOHN BARKER