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A series worth waiting for

iewed by Looi Siew Teip

PERHAPS the most remarkable thing about The Encyclopedia of Malaysia is the fact that it took so long for a work like this to appear on the market; but here it is finally, filling in part of a niche that has been left largely empty for far too long, and we can all certainly be very pleased that this publication is a work of considerable quality.

The Encyclopedia brings together articles on a wide range of topics that are specifically relevant to a Malaysian context, topics which would be of interest to readers in this country, discussed and presented with the Malaysian reader in mind.

It does not conform to your usual idea of an encyclopaedia. The articles are not arranged in alphabetical order; instead, they are grouped together into 15 volumes organised along thematic lines.

The first five volumes focus on the physical environment and the natural world, the early history of northern Borneo and the Malay Peninsula, and Malaysia's architectural heritage.

Apart from the seventh volume entitled 'The Seas', which seems to form a group with the first three volumes dealing with natural history and the physical environment, the subsequent volumes of the Encyclopedia are concerned with political, economic and social themes and the later history of northern Borneo and the Malay Peninsula, while the last two volumes dealing with the arts form a group together with the volume on architecture.

Another feature which makes this encyclopaedia different from what you normally expect of such a work is the glossy format. You find a profusion of photographs and illustrations in full colour on every page. This feature of course makes the work as a whole perfect for a leisurely browse.

The Encyclopedia encourages the reader to dip into it at random for an easy read: the articles are self-contained and they all conform to a standard two-page format occupying facing pages. The articles are grouped together into sections which are headed by introductory texts giving an overview of the topics covered within a given section, and these help to establish a coherent direction in each volume.

This uniformity makes the job of the volume editors easy but it can lead to topics not given their proper due. Turn to the 'Animals' volume, for example, and consider the article on the tiger and other members of the cat family all treated in two pages. Half the space here is taken up by an illustration showing the different members of the cat family. You get three paragraphs of text on the tiger and the panther, and a paragraph each on the other cats.

By contrast, a whole article is devoted to the sun bear in the next two pages.

The first volume groups together a hodge-podge of topics from various disciplines: physical and human geography, climatology, ecology and environmental studies. What is particularly interesting about this volume are the articles in the second half of the book which look at human activities and their impact on the environment.

Some of them look at very current environmental issues and recent developments; for example, the references, in the article on development on hill slopes, to the 1995 landslide that swept away part of the Genting Highlands slip road, the 1993 Highland Towers disaster, and the recent

threat to develop Maxwell Hill. These articles are all very well written.

They explain clearly the various causes of environmental degradation, and discuss issues of public interest, public awareness, policy and management in a balanced and objective manner.

The first section of this volume offers articles which give an overview of the geological history and the geological structure of Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak, look at the processes of weathering and erosion which shape the soils and the landforms here, and focus on specific landforms and ecosystems.

As a whole, the articles give you a good idea of the diversity of Malaysian landscapes and ecosystems. My only complaint is that many of the illustrations - apart from the cartography, which is excellent - are not very good; in fact, some of them look decidedly amateurish.

On the whole, the illustrations in the first four volumes are uneven in quality. There is some good wildlife painting in the 'Animals' volume, but this quality is by no means consistently maintained throughout the volume.

The illustrations in the 'Plants' volume are generally not as good as those in the 'Animals' volume. It is in the volume on architecture that a consistently high standard is maintained in the illustrations as well as the photography.

On the whole, the 'Architecture' volume is the best among the five that have come out so far. There is an overall air of professionalism about the volume which comes not only from the quality of the photography and the illustrations, but also the superb layout, a strong sense of direction and coherence, and the confident and authoritative tone of the text.

You get a detailed look at a wealth of topics relating to architecture and urban planning in Malaysia and at the same time a comprehensive survey of all the architectural styles found in Malaysia, from the indigenous designs of Orang Asli houses to the imported features you find in the latest large-scale projects that thrust out of the Kuala Lumpur skyline.

The comprehensive wealth of knowledge brought to life in this volume makes it a unique contribution: you will not find another book like this anywhere.

This is perhaps even more true of the 'Early History' volume. The early history of Malaysia is a subject that has been grossly neglected by historians in this country. This book fills in a very significant gap in knowledge.

The Prehistoric and pre-Islamic periods are treated in detail in this volume, which takes us as far as the early Islamic period in the 16th century. Probably for the first time ever, the wealth of archaeological finds in the peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak, which attests to our rich and complex prehistory, is here presented to the general reader and interpreted for him in an attractive and accessible manner.

A specialist on the subject complained to me about the inadequate treatment of written sources, particularly Old Malay inscriptions, in the group of articles dealing with the pre-Islamic period. There is on the whole a strong archaeological bias in this volume, even in the articles dealing with the pre-Islamic period, for which a wealth of written sources exists.

There is a discussion of Chinese and Indian sources but Old Malay sources are not only not given their due; there is even some inconsistency and inaccuracy in their treatment. This is probably an indication of the state of historiography in this country. We are sorely lacking in experts in epigraphy, and, more specifically, experts in Old Malay epigraphy, and polyglot historians who are able to consult and interpret primary texts in various languages.

Another complaint with which I sympathise strongly is the cavalier

treatment of diacritics in the text, in particular when transliterating Sanskrit and Old Malay words. In fact, the only place where diacritics are used at all is in the article on Old Malay and even there, you find glaring inconsistencies. The Encyclopedia might be primarily for the layman, who might know nothing about umlauts and cedillas, but that is no excuse to leave them out, particularly in this day and age where you can pluck exotic characters out of a computer at the tap of a couple of keys.

The volume editor has also failed to regularise different systems of transliterations of Sanskrit words used by different authors, so you find for example both Visnu and Vishnu, the former of which is printed without the requisite diacritic under the 's'.

You can find better books on Malaysian plants and animals in the market, but probably nothing which give you such comprehensive surveys covering the entire plant and animal kingdoms as the two volumes in the Encyclopedia.

The 'Animals' volume is a straightforward zoological survey taking us from the higher mammals all the way down to creatures you can only see under a microscope, leaving out marine life for the forthcoming volume 'The Seas'.

The 'Plants' volume takes an altogether different tack. There is a section giving a rather cursory survey of the plant kingdom, but that occupies less than one third of the book. You find in addition to this sections looking at different plant habitats, a whole section entitled 'Plants and Man' with articles on food crops, horticulture, medicinal plants, and timber trees.

In some respects, the most interesting page in each of these first five volumes of The Encyclopedia of Malaysia is the copyright page.

The usual copyright details, in fine print, are squeezed into a small space at the extreme bottom left hand-corner of the page. Occupying the most prominent position at the top left-hand corner of the page is a rubric identifying Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as the patron of the Encyclopedia and, below his name, is the list of sponsors of the project; the creme de la creme of Malaysian business and industry.

There you have it: the much vaunted partnership between Government, Business and Industry slapping on the project a hearty, official seal of approval. This, after all, is nothing less than the Petronas Twin Towers of the Malaysian publishing industry. Never mind the fact that both the publisher and printer are based in Singapore - not many readers are going to go after the fine print in that obscure corner.

A straight line drawn right down the page separates all these details from three more lists naming the people who were actually involved in the co-ordination, editing and production of the Encyclopedia.

First of all you have the list of distinguished figures from academia and public life who constituted the Editorial Advisory Board headed by the ousted former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

This is followed by a list identifying the editorial team responsible for the Encyclopedia as a whole and another one naming the people involved in a particular volume in the series.

As if to balance the strong Establishment presence on the left-hand side of the page, you find on the right-hand side an acknowledged champion of liberalism and pluralism identified as the Project Co-ordinator: Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir.

This heady cocktail makes you wonder: Is this work an objective, non-partisan repository of knowledge or are we going to get only what the Establishment wants us to see?

This question is certainly in my mind when I look at the politically-charged titles of some of the forthcoming volumes: 'The Modern Economy',

`Political and Economic Transformation', and `Merdeka: Birth of a Nation'.
Whatever the case may be, I believe we are all waiting eagerly for the
rest of the Encyclopedia to appear in our bookshops.

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