

Muhammad Suhail Mohamed Yazid, *He Who Is Made Lord: Empire, Class and Race in Postwar Singapore*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2023, xii + 260 pp. ISBN: 9789815104301, price: SGD 35.90 (paperback).

The office of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara (“He Who is Made Lord”), which existed between 1959 and 1965, is often overlooked in the history of Singapore’s decolonization and nation-building. In public memory it is largely associated with the ceremonial office of the President, although the latter was only inaugurated upon Singapore’s secession from the Malaysian Federation in 1965. However, according to a recent monograph by historian Muhammad Suhail, attention to the institution of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara in this crucial transitional period of Singapore’s history is an important window into key aspects of its trajectory of decolonization. Based on research conducted for his MA thesis at the National University of Singapore, Suhail has written a penetrating book that points towards the historic and ongoing contradictions in postcolonial Singapore’s entanglements with empire, class, and race. More broadly, *He Who is Made Lord* is a reflection on ritual symbols of power, and how postcolonial elites staked claims to political legitimacy at historic moments of power transfer.

The empirical core of this book focuses on the period between 1959 and 1965 and the role of Yusof bin Ishak, the sole Yang di-Pertuan Negara, who held this office as Singapore transitioned from limited self-government to membership in the Malaysian Federation (1963–65). Unlike the government of the Federation of Malaya, which retained and accommodated its hereditary Malay rulers from the outset, Singapore had no corresponding monarch. Rather, the socialist party platform of the People’s Action Party, which took power in 1959, was doubtless aware of the revolutionary dismantling of the colonial order, as symbolized by dissolving the post of governor-general in their territories to sever ties with the British monarch, as in Pakistan and India.

What, then, was this new office—akin to the colonial governor-general—and why was it created? How did a well-known Malay intellectual assume this unusual position at the end of the British empire in Singapore? *He Who is Made Lord* argues that the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was an “avatar of empire, class, and race” (p. 26) in decolonizing Singapore, a constructed office which reveals tensions within the values of anticolonialism, multiculturalism, and equality, upon which Singapore’s founding myths was based. While aspects of the biography of Yusof bin Ishak are central to the book, this is less a political biography than it is one about the nature and significance of this office.

Following two introductory chapters that set the historical context in postwar Singapore, the core of the book’s contributions lies in chapters three to

five, which are organized thematically around a key question centered on the themes of empire, class, and race respectively. Each chapter traverses roughly the same period between 1959–1965, which makes each chapter useful individually as a teaching resource; chapter titles are clearly formulated to highlight each chapter's research question and narrative tension.

Chapter three, "Imperial, or Malay(an) Symbol?", elucidates the various locations of symbolic political power in late-colonial Singapore, and the unlikely triumph of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara—against ideas of a Sultan of Singapore or a "decolonized" governor-general—as an "indigenous construction" (pp. 99–106) at the intersection of both colonial and local Malay(an) agendas. The slippage between Malayan and Malay here is intentional, since there were considerable overtures made to symbolisms and cultures in the Malay World, notably, the royal titles in the Federation. Chapter four, "Commoner, or Privileged Elite?", likewise underscores the tension between multiple aspects of the office. Whereas the Yang di-Pertuan Negara as "commoner" reflected the socialist PAP government's efforts to create an equal society against colonial class distinctions, its candidate of choice may also have had other aspirations to symbolic power in the model of the Malay sultans. Chapter five, "Multiracial, or Communal Icon?", explores the tension between an aspirational ideal and reality, probing the ways in which the PAP government's desire for merger with the Malayan Federation may have also produced concessions in seeking a "Malay" figure to represent Singapore. The book concludes with a pithy reflection on the relevance of this history in postcolonial Singapore.

*He Who is Made Lord* is a tightly argued book which makes an important contribution to the history of modern Singapore. By centering on the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, Suhail shifts the gaze away from the great patriarch of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, to foreground alternative voices whose political visions have not always been fully acknowledged. In Suhail's account, students of post-war Singaporean history gain a fuller appreciation for how an Anglophone elite educated in London and Cambridge were forced not only to contend with and overcome what Lee Kuan Yew famously described as the "three Cs"—colonialism, communism, and communalism—but also a locally-embedded Malay political culture which reflects international politics. A deft balance between the political agendas in the office of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, and Yusof's own agency in negotiating and characterizing the office to fit with his own hopes and aspirations for Singapore, is a strength of this book.

To be sure, there were notable areas where the Yang de-Pertuan Negara did *not* occupy ceremonial office, for instance, as Chancellor of the University of Malaya, another symbolic position which was instead offered to Lee Kong Chian, one of the wealthiest (Chinese) businessmen resident in the colony of

Singapore. Instead, Yusof became the chief Scout, encouraged youths, and visited Malay kampongs on ceremonial tours of the Southern Islands, but one also wonders to what extent his symbolic power was ultimately limited in a context of multiple centers of power and prestige jostling for room in the postcolonial society. Or put differently, where were alternative locations of power which the PAP government had to negotiate?

Suhail eschews a more direct political critique of contemporary Singapore, choosing instead to conclude the monograph with Singapore's secession from the Malaysian Federation in 1965, reflecting on the shifting signifiers of values like freedom, equality, multiracialism, and democracy, which remained the source of heated debates. The questions he raises about the ongoing presence of imperial hierarchy in postcolonial societies, a political party with socialist roots governing over a profoundly unequal capitalist society, and a society where public discourses of "racial harmony" mask other invidious forms of racism, point towards the coexistence and contradictions within the multiple narratives constituting *the* Singapore story, which requires further unpacking.

I attended a book launch of *He Who Is Made Lord* at the National University of Singapore in September 2023, on the eve of a highly anticipated Presidential Election, which launched its current president, Tharman Shanmugaratnam—an already distinguished politician and prior cabinet minister—into office. The unusual "elected presidency" of Singapore has functioned in many ways as the contemporary analogy to the Yang di-Pertuan Negara; an invented, ostensibly apolitical office constructed by an incumbent government to serve the considerations of electoral politics and political power. Since its inception in 1993, the elected presidency in Singapore has been subject to multiple redefinitions and the object of multiple political aspirations and agendas, including the scope of the officeholder's discretionary fiscal powers, their relationship with the government, and indeed, their racial and religious identity. Suhail's historical meditation on the individuals who claim to represent the nation, and how those claims are made, is thus a timely intervention into the predicament of postcolonial societies and their elites.

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