

## BOOK REVIEW

*He who is made Lord: Empire, class and race in postwar Singapore* by Muhammad Suhail Mohamed Yazid. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023, 251 pp.

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It is most fitting that this outstanding contribution to Singapore and Malaysian historiography is published by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (with the University of Hawai'i having the exclusive rights to distribute the print copies in North America). The Institute (established in 1968) was renamed in 2015 in honour of Yusof bin Ishak. Yusof was Singapore's Yang di-Pertuan Negara ('He who is made Lord of the State') between 1959 and 1965, the eventful six years when Singapore became self-governing, joined the Federation of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak to form Malaysia, then separated to become an independent sovereign nation. Thereafter, Yusof served as the island-city's first President until his death on 23 November 1970. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's Senior Fellow Norshahril Saat's *Yusof Ishak - Singapore's First President* (2015) and legal historian Kevin Y.L. Tan's *Puan Noor Aishah: Singapore's First Lady* (2017) are recent volumes that recount the life stories and achievements of Yusof Ishak and his wife Noor Puan Aishah. Suhail's book presents another richly textured and multifaceted account that compares Yusof's constructed persona and public performance as the Yang di-Pertuan Negara with his background and actions at different points in his life.

Crucially, this book is as much concerned with the cultural politics surrounding the creation of the office as it is about Yusof Ishak. Suhail made excellent and incisive readings of a wide range of English and Malay archival records—including autobiographies, oral histories, government records, colonial documents—to illuminate the “competing ambitions and divergent aspirations” (p. 6) of prominent groups of actors who became invested in the design of the position and the selection of the first local-born Malayan to fill it. These groups included British colonial officials, Singapore's non-Communist political

leaders from the Labour Front and the People's Action Party, Federation leaders, and Malay nationalists in the Federation and Singapore. Suhail showed that the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was the product of compromise and negotiation among these different parties, resulting in significant ambivalence, ambiguity, and tension in its design and practice.

Chapter two explains the origins of the position—a story that is unknown to most Singaporeans today. A reader unfamiliar with Singapore's political development after World War Two will appreciate the extensive contextual information provided. A more knowledgeable reader can skip ahead to the revelation that the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was created during the three rounds of constitutional talks between Singapore's leaders and the British government between 1956 and 1958. The Colonial Office wanted to create a post of the British High Commissioner to replace the British Governor as the representative of the Crown and the British government after Singapore acquired internal self-government. The Singapore delegation did not object to the retention of a Crown representative but insisted on a local-born 'Malayan governor-general' as 'a symbol of emancipation' to satisfy public opinion (p. 51). After the post was established by the State of Singapore Act of 1958, the outgoing British Governor, William Goode, held the position for the first six months while the new government searched for a suitable first occupant. The chapter reveals the office as an innovation meant to tweak "the ritualistic practices of the colonial order to project an impression of Singapore's existence as a liberated ex-colony" (p. 28). In the subsequent thematic chapters, Suhail creatively used the discursive frames of 'empire', 'class', and 'race' to examine whether the position and the selection of Yusof Ishak as its occupant represented: the preservation or the end of British colonial rule; the entrenchment or the destruction of colonial inequities and hierarchies; the creation of a new multi-racial socio-political order or the preservation of colonial-era racial hierarchies, class inequalities and social stratification. Historians interested in imperialism, race, and class will find much to ponder in the book.

I found Chapter Three, which argued that the new position "operated in the semantic interstices of being both an imperial and Malay(an) symbol" (p. 111), the most fascinating and compelling chapter. Suhail masterfully revealed how the new appointment was caught between being the titular representative of the British Crown and the symbol of impending decolonisation. What was in a name? Plenty. The Colonial Office sought alternative names for the new Crown representative to emphasise that Singapore was advancing towards independence, but was not yet fully independent—the 1958 State of Singapore Act provided only for internal self-government under a fully elected local government (p. 94). However, Singapore's leaders chose the title of "the Yang di-Pertuan Negara" to signify a complete rupture from colonialism by invoking the titles held by Bugis and Malay leaders in 18th- and early-19th-century Singapore. They also employed the word 'negara' to 'connote the

modern nation-state' (p. 89). The title, hence, was meant to signal 'a new era of self-determination' by "conjuring the island's historical emplacement in the larger Malay world" (p. 90). Furthermore, they chose a Malay royal title similar to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong in the Federation of Malaya to evoke a sense of proximity to the latter. Historians of Malaysia should be interested in the involvement of the Federation's political leaders, especially Tunku Abdul Rahman, in the naming of the office and the subsequent search for a suitable appointee. Some Federation leaders became concerned about the People's Action Party (PAP) government's use of the office as a device to suggest an impending merger and sought to downplay the possibility. Furthermore, they disliked Yusof Ishak's appointment to the post and tried to intervene, albeit unsuccessfully (pp. 126–135). The contentions over the Yang di-Pertuan Negara position and the appointment of its occupant thus preceded, and in some ways, presaged the subsequent tensions between Singapore's and the Federation's leaders between 1963 and 1965.

The PAP government that came to power in 1959 saw Yusof and the Yang di-Pertuan Negara office not only as symbols of the end of colonial rule, but as embodied personifications of the new multi-racial, democratic socialist, cosmopolitan Singapore, where all of Singapore's major races enjoyed more equitable opportunities for socioeconomic advancement and eschewed communalism and communism (p. 166). These symbolisms became the point of departure for the next two chapters. In Chapter four, pointedly entitled *Commoner, or Privileged Elite?*, the book ruminates on the ambivalences between the Singapore government's portrayal of Yusof as the personification of an egalitarian post-colonial order, and his family background and his performance as the Yang di-Pertuan Negara (pp. 157–158). Thereafter, chapter five examined the race-based considerations behind the different elite and non-elite groups' perceptions of Yusof's suitability for the position. The chapter raises the question of whether the Singapore government's reliance on Yusof's Malay identity to "[subvert] the racialist order of colonial society", to appeal to the communal sensibilities of Malay nationalists and conservative politicians in the Federation of Malaya, and to dilute the appearance of the PAP as a Chinese-dominated party, contradicted Yusof's role as a symbol of unity and multi-racial diversity and harmony (pp. 189–192). Hence, Suhail observed that the selection and public performance of Yusof ensured the continuation of colonial racial discourses "rather than eradicating race as a compelling frame to organize life in Singapore" (p. 200).

This was a highly absorbing and enjoyable read. Suhail writes elegantly and evocatively, though there are a number of instances where I felt that poetry came at the expense of lexical precision and resulted in over-statements and mis-characterisations. Evocative pronouncements like how the British decisions regarding the Yang di-Pertuan Negara suggested that the "island remained

trapped in a colonial purgatory, in a liminal zone where states were denied sovereign equality and kept in an imperial system under the enduring dominion of Britain” (p. 209) belie the contingent and liminal nature of the period. The book’s contextual discussions showed that the office was ultimately born out of the changing winds and political tempers and situations in Malaya and Singapore at the time – it was more an interim measure meant to satisfy the strong anti-colonial sentiments of a newly enfranchised electorate than an edifice of unending colonial rule. The binary framework for the three major content chapters was indeed useful to foreground the points of contention and conflict over the design of the position and the selection of the candidate. However, this framework risks dichotomising negotiations and compromising between different stakeholder groups, and casting moderation, gradualism, and realism as contradictions and failures. In this regard, the framework establishes some evaluative goalposts that may not be realistic in the context of 1950s Singapore. For instance, chapter five was particularly instructive in unravelling how the affective potency of race created the need for the PAP to use the new office to strongly publicise the party’s multi-racial character, downplay its Chineseness, and emphasis its support for Malays.

The mark of an absorbing and thought-provoking book is the insights it provides and the new questions it provokes. In this regard, Suhail’s first book – and surely the first of many – succeeds on both counts. The insights and questions the book raises are portable and relevant for other colonial contexts. For historians of imperialism and decolonisation, the British Empire, or any European empire, the book reminds us that decolonisation was a transitional period as well as a liminal process. While the previous colonial structures and hierarchies were temporarily destabilised and held up to scrutiny, the outcomes of these processes were seldom certain or guaranteed – these structures and hierarchies could be upended or reinscribed in new forms and configurations. In addition, these moments of transition from colony to post-colony involved the creation of new institutions to replace the previous colonial institutions. Using the case of Singapore’s Yang di-Pertuan Negara, Suhail has shown how these new institutions are powerful entry points for illuminating the colliding or converging agendas and anxieties of different groups of stakeholders, including the departing imperial administration and the groups that sought to replace it.