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YANG DI-PERTUAN NEGARA OF SINGAPORE

On the morning of 3 December 1959, Yusof bin Ishak, smartly dressed in a beige *Baju Melayu*, arrived at the centre of Singapore town in a Rolls-Royce. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew greeted Yusof and ushered him into a chamber at the heart of the City Hall building. Dozens of politicians, officials and foreign dignitaries were already waiting for Yusof. Following his entry, the magisterial melody of *God Save the Queen* reverberated off the chamber's walls, followed by the confident tune of the new state anthem, *Majulah Singapura*.¹

All present were standing. Ahmad Ibrahim, the advocate-general, then read out the Commission of Appointment from Queen Elizabeth II, recognizing Yusof as Her Majesty's representative in Singapore. Yusof recited his oath of allegiance in Malay:

I, Yusof Bin Ishak, do swear that I will well and truly serve Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, her heirs and successors, in the office of Yang di-Pertuan Negara. So, help me God.²

Prime Minister Lee and the chief justice, Sir Alan Rose, witnessed the oath. After the signing of all official documents, both anthems echoed once more, but this time, *Majulah Singapura* took precedence. Yusof was now Singapore's first Malayan-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara

(“he who is made lord”).³ Even though he represented the sovereign power of the British monarch on the island state, the Queen’s portraits were nowhere to be seen in the chamber.

After the solemn procedures, the newly appointed Yang di-Pertuan Negara and his entourage emerged from City Hall to much fanfare. Fleets of buses and lorries had ferried schoolchildren and youths to the grand ceremony. In spite of the light drizzle, the 10,000-strong exuberant crowd greeted the Yang di-Pertuan Negara with shouts of “*merdeka*”, which was by now a familiar rallying cry meaning “freedom” or “independence” in Malay.⁴ City Hall’s grandiose structure and its colossal Corinthian columns towered over the crowd and had for many decades projected the might of British imperium. During official events, Singapore’s colonial rulers often stood at the very top of the perron, lifting their visual presence over crowds assembled at the grassy forecourt of the Padang. This spatial arrangement projected the hierarchical realities of the relationship between rulers and subjects.⁵ The Padang itself has a deeper history. As a “colonial civic space”, it was the site of commemorative events to display the might of the reigning imperial power, whether it was the British or the Japanese.⁶

That particular day, however, the crowd at the Padang was not there to marvel at the building or gaze at the colonial officials who lorded over them. Their eyes were fixed on a group of men—fellow compatriots in a new era of representative politics. As these men took their designated seats, there was the grand thundering of a 17-gun salute followed by the tune of *Majulah Singapura*. This time, there was no *God Save the Queen*.⁷ Besides the new state anthem, the ceremony also marked the officiation of another significant emblem: the state flag. Forming the mammoth backdrop of the podium, the flag—its colours of red and white, its crescent moon and five stars—was unmissable.⁸ Organizers and spectators draped the flag over skyscrapers encircling the Padang, and many in the crowd were dressed in its pristine colours. Culture Minister S. Rajaratnam hailed the flag and the state anthem as “symbols of self-respect”, propounding that they carried the “hopes and ideals” of the people of Singapore.⁹

Amid the arresting sights and sounds, the prime minister was first to step onto the elevated platform on the steps of City Hall. Like the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, he was also relatively new to his office. In June

1959, the political party under his leadership, the People's Action Party (PAP), secured a decisive win in the Legislative Assembly elections. It was the first election under a new constitution which granted Singapore full self-government after more than a century of British colonial rule. With Yusof's elevation to the highest office in the land, the aspirations of this constitution were finally met. Sir William Goode, the interim Yang di-Pertuan Negara and last colonial governor of Singapore, had received his farewell send-off a day earlier to mark his departure from both the office and the island.¹⁰ Lee declared that the "cock-hats with white plumes", the symbol of British overlordship, had now been set aside with the electoral triumph of the PAP's "collective leadership". Although Governor Goode's pontifical imperial persona was transformed into the more humbling image of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, he did not leave Singapore. Only now, with the appointment of a Malayan-born person to succeed him, the cock-hats were sealed forever. Speaking directly to the panoply of faces before him and to the thousands listening on the radio, Lee heralded Yusof as "the personification of State of which you and I are members ... he symbolises all of us. To him devotion and loyalty are due".¹¹

The adoption of new symbols like the flag, national anthem and the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was meant to facilitate a sense of common loyalty to the city-state. Lee pointed out that nation-building in Singapore was different from "older" nations because the residents of the island had barely any collective sense of nationhood. The prime minister added, "whilst we are searching for that vital sense of oneness in a common destiny, let us not forget that what we have always inculcated is a sense of belonging to Singapore as part of a larger Malayan whole".¹² This crucial caveat predicated the concept of a Singapore free from British rule on the island's future as part of Malaya. The Federation of Malaya, however, had already attained independence from Britain in 1957 without Singapore. After the Second World War, the city-state was constitutionally partitioned from the eleven constituent states of the Federation as a result of the realignment of British plans in the region. Political leaders of Singapore saw the island's new self-governing status as a progressive constitutional milestone towards the eventual reunification of both territories. Lee then concluded his stirring speech by further sanctifying

the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, calling on the people of Singapore to offer their “loyalty and affection” to Yusof.

After Lee descended from the podium, it was the Yang di-Pertuan Negara’s turn to address the people. Yusof proclaimed:

Henceforth, Singapore will determine her own destiny. The future of Singapore will depend on the unity and loyalty of her people and on their readiness and determination to carry out honestly and sincerely the principles of which the new State of Singapore is founded.¹³

Yusof went on to elaborate these principles. He urged the people of Singapore to forgo communal sentiments and to embrace a “national consciousness” based on loyalty to the State. He then drew attention to the critical role of youth in establishing a united Singapore, perhaps in recognition of the dominant demographic position of young people.¹⁴ Indeed, the youthfulness of Singapore’s population signalled the dextrous potential of a newly awakened nation emerging from the archaic order of colonial rule. After the Yang di-Pertuan Negara’s uplifting speech, there was a jubilant marchpast of contingents made up of participants from unions, businesses and political organizations, all saluting the freshly coronated Yang di-Pertuan Negara. Twenty thousand balloons were released into the sky, while ships anchored nearby blew their sirens.¹⁵

News of Yusof’s appointment also circulated throughout the world. In the coming hours, messages of goodwill poured in from within and outside of the Commonwealth of Nations, congratulating Singapore on its constitutional development.¹⁶ The most important message of them all was perhaps from the prime minister of the Federation of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who mentioned a rather intimate detail to reflect the fraternal links which bonded Singapore and the Federation. The Tunku revealed that he had sent Aziz Ishak, a minister of his cabinet who was also Yusof’s younger brother, to lead an official delegation from the Federation to attend the ceremony in Singapore.¹⁷

But the swearing-in ceremony, the grand marchpast and goodwill messages only marked the start of a longer series of extravagant celebrations as part of “Loyalty Week”. The Singaporean government poured in over \$150,000 for this week-long carnivalesque event,

organizing exhibitions, processions and performances in Singapore's many languages. Rajaratnam asserted that Loyalty Week was "both a celebration and an affirmation"; it was a celebration of Singapore's aspirations for self-determination and an affirmation of its successes in achieving those aspirations.¹⁸

The swearing-in of the first Malayan-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara was clearly pregnant with symbolic meaning. On the one hand, the intricate displays of ceremonial grandeur and the infusion of national symbols indicated that Singapore was disentangling itself from the shackles of colonial rule. On the other hand, there were traces of the island's continued emplacement within the British Empire—fragments of the colonial order were renewed, repurposed and reinterpreted. Besides the faithful broadcast of *God Save the Queen* and Yusof's oath of loyalty to the Crown, the event's immersion in pomp and circumstance preserved the rituals of imperial political culture.¹⁹ But the order of things seemed different from the days of colonial rule. There were no pompous White governors, portraits of the British sovereign or the flying of the Union Jack. The new flag and anthem were the more prominent features of the ceremony, adding a distinct nationalist flavour to the entire spectacle.

In their speeches, Lee and Yusof invoked a sense of emancipation from colonial rule and a charted path towards a shared future with Malaya. Both men further signalled a desire to foster a transcendental sense of common loyalty among the people—but loyalty to what or to whom? Was it to Singapore, the Federation of Malaya, to the Yang di-Pertuan Negara or the "collective leadership" of the PAP? In a Singapore working towards eventual independence from British rule, Lee also appealed to a sense of common destiny to be reunited as part of a "Malayan whole". Was loyalty to Singapore simply interchangeable with loyalty to Malaya? The questions here animate the historical efforts to make the office of Yang di-Pertuan Negara meaningful. While the installation of a Malayan-born appointee was meant to communicate a shared sense of unity in a society aspiring for self-determination, underlying tensions continued to bedevil the symbolic projections of the office. *He Who is Made Lord* brings the story and significance of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara into greater clarity.

In the midst of the global era of decolonization and the Cold War, complex negotiations between the British, Singaporean leaders and other stakeholders in the Commonwealth were taking place, shaping the political landscape of the city-state. On the surface, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara can be appreciated as a sign of Singapore's freedom from the fetters of the colonial order. The office represented the nation of intent in the city-state and was enshrined as a symbol which embodied the character, values and aspirations of the people of Singapore. The historical situation, however, was not so straightforward. While the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was ostensibly above party politics, the office, as a state institution, came to be bound up in prevailing power struggles.

Singaporean leaders pushed for a wide range of programmes with the aim of seeking union with the Federation and a tenable path for independence from Britain. The British, in the meantime, refused to relinquish Singapore as part of their imperial domain, while Federation leaders had other plans following their separate attainment of national sovereignty. The Yang di-Pertuan Negara was an outcome of the entangled tensions between these concurrent political projects—a tapestry made of multiple imaginings of Singapore's post-imperial future. *He Who is Made Lord* bares the shifting nature of power relations that shaped these competing ambitions and divergent aspirations. By looking into the creation and execution of the office of Yang di-Pertuan Negara, Singapore's decolonization presents itself as a multifaceted process of struggle, ambiguity and contingency.

The analytical core of the story approximately begins in 1956. This was the year when official talks on Singapore's constitutional status first began between the British government and political representatives from the city-state. Its end point is set in mid-1963 when Singapore was on the cusp of entering the Federation following the passing of the Malaysia Agreement, the basis of a political union entailing the merger of British North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore with the Federation of Malaya. This new nation-state, or "Malaysia", was to be inaugurated only on 16 September 1963 and could be taken as the fulfilment of the nationalist dream to be reunited, according to Prime Minister Lee, "as part of a larger Malayan whole".

But before the formal establishment of Malaysia, the realization of this dream was not a foregone conclusion. This brief period between 1956 and 1963 was an unsettling time for Singapore, offering a vibrant sense of possibility but also a gnawing atmosphere of political restlessness. The office of Yang di-Pertuan Negara was born in this historical context. Even though this book looks closely at this brief period, it nevertheless traverses greater temporal depth to demonstrate how the office was an artefact that was actively shaped by the many layers of Singapore's past. The following sections serve as a theoretical chart to help navigate the narrative in the subsequent chapters. Some readers may find the following sections helpful in critically engaging with the story of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, while others might find Chapter 2 a better starting point for their reading experience.

Yang di-Pertuan Negara in Context

The Yang di-Pertuan Negara emerged during “the Malayan trajectory of Singapore’s history”.²⁰ This was a period which spans a century prior to the Second World War and follows the island’s placement within the wider context of British Malaya. Reaching its zenith on the eve of the First World War, British Malaya was a loose conglomeration of British imperial dependents centred on the Malay Peninsula and tenuously consolidated as part of the wider empire. Historians have advanced many ways of understanding empires. Some consider the two related concepts of “imperialism” and “colonialism” as interchangeable when referring to the European empires from the second half of the nineteenth century.²¹ But to think about empires in the broadest way possible, one can see them as “agglomerations, often untidy and unwieldy” involving many types of cross-territorial structures of governance under the economic, cultural and political dominance of an imperial state over the world system.²² Imperialism is then the drive to preserve and expand empires, while colonialism could be understood as a specific manifestation of imperialism.

Through administrators seconded from the metropole, colonialism involved a multi-dimensional system of domination which entailed the governance of a foreign territory known as the colony. This class of

alien administrators—along with a supporting cast of military officers, technical experts and businesspeople—typically form a small minority in the colony. Under the colonial regime, the socio-political order was defined by what Partha Chatterjee has instructively called the “rule of colonial difference”, a principle which sustained the separateness of these White elites from the colonized peoples.²³ Singapore could be described as a specific type of colony called a “maritime enclave”, similar to British Hong Kong.²⁴ For much of the nineteenth century up to the early decades of the twentieth century, the island was the base of the highest-ranking colonial official in British Malaya. Singapore’s economy thrived on entrepot trade and had developed into an important economic and intellectual node; it was the nucleus of the British Empire in Southeast Asia.

This base of imperial power played a pivotal role as a hub for Malay nationalism. Historians like William Roff and Anthony Milner have shown how the island served as a conduit for ideas of modernism and self-determination within global intellectual networks.²⁵ These ideas were channelled from the region and from rest of the world and recalibrated within specific local spaces to ferment the idea of a “*bangsa Melayu*” (Malay race or nation). From the second half of the nineteenth century, the scale of imperialism intensified due to improved technologies of travel, industry and communication. These developments stimulated radical shifts in British Malaya that were marked by the increasing connectivity with the wider world, a more exploitative capitalistic economy and drastic demographic changes arising from immigrant labour primarily from India and China. Responding to colonial modernity, elites from among the “indigenous” Malays articulated the conceptual basis of a modern political community based on the *bangsa*. Yusof himself rose to prominence within this intellectual milieu. The future Yang di-Pertuan Negara was the founder and managing editor of the *Utusan Melayu*, a paragon newspaper which became a platform to deliberate the composition of the *bangsa* and to transmit ideas on modernization.

While the concept of *bangsa* gained currency among a growing class of local intelligentsia, historians have largely portrayed immigrant communities, owing to the transient nature of their labour, as being intimately intertwined with the nationalist fervour back in their lands of

origin.²⁶ This racialization of nationalism intertwines with the well-known “divide and rule” policy of British colonialism. This policy could be characterized by the lack of enthusiasm among colonial administrators to foster a post-racial society rooted to the locality, choosing instead to govern the colonial population in an expedient manner along ethnic or tribal lines. There were nevertheless local-born Chinese like Tan Cheng Lock who envisioned a Chinese community committed to Malaya.²⁷ Most political organizations established before the Second World War, however, hardly took a cross-communal orientation, with one exception being the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).²⁸ A few segments of the Straits Chinese community even saw the empire as the basis of their national loyalty.²⁹ During the inauguration of Yusof as Yang di-Pertuan Negara, Lee was truthful in claiming the novelty of nation-building in Singapore considering these disparate expressions of loyalty among the many communities in British Malaya.

The singular event that shattered the status quo in British Malaya was the Japanese invasion during the Second World War. Historians largely hold onto the view that the coming of Japanese imperial rule was a watershed for Southeast Asia. The occupation of Japanese forces in the region displaced the previously impenetrable class of European colonial rulers propped up by the “Whites-only” colour bar, notwithstanding the co-option of a few, selected members from the indigenous ruling class. This interruption provided the opportunity for another handful of local elites to lead their compatriots through Japanese patronage, allowing a new class of non-European leaders to build their prestige and influence.³⁰ After the war, things could not go back to the way they used to be. The global geopolitical landscape had been radically altered, setting the stage for a new age of decolonization.

If empire was the formation of a British dominated world system, then one way to approach the decolonization of the British Empire is to see it as the decline of that system.³¹ Other Western empires shared this experience of imperial decay. The immense wealth and influence of these imperial powers nevertheless ensured that the world system remained unequal despite the transformation of imperial dependents into independent nation-states. More specifically to the British Empire, ties of dependency were given a new lease of life in the form of the Commonwealth of

Nations, with former imperial masters exercising influence in ex-colonial states through ties of culture, defence and capital.³²

These asymmetries in the global order did not go unchallenged. In this postwar age of global decolonization, self-determination became a dominant concept through which modern communities negotiated their right to exist and govern themselves. Accompanying this was the rise of the world system of nation-states, a global hegemonic structure which presumably upheld the sovereign equality of all nation-states. This postwar international system is best exemplified by the entrenchment of United Nations (UN).³³ In a concerted push for a more equal global order, Afro-Asian states actively used international platforms like the UN to stake their positions as nation-states which were equal in status to the former imperial powers. The efforts of these Afro-Asian states eventually led to the institutionalization of self-determination as a right.³⁴

Even as the British Empire made way for the rise of new nation-states, the island state of Singapore seemed to be trapped as a colonial dependent after being constitutionally severed from the peninsular states up north. Historians of Singapore have understandably seen the initial postwar decades as a time of considerable interest as Singaporean nationalists rode on these decolonizing currents to push the British out and undo separation from Malaya. The Yang di-Pertuan Negara was a product of this historical context. Although scholars have acknowledged the establishment of the office as an important symbolic juncture in the history of Singapore's decolonization, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara has been relegated to the role of a prop in the background of a larger socio-political stage. Perhaps adhering to an ironic historical fate, the presence of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara in the academic literature conforms to the office's desired purpose—a dignified umpire insulated from the ugliness of political battles.

The conspicuous absence of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara is obvious in the representative works on Singapore's political history. Through careful scholarly labour, scholars have portrayed the 1950s as a period of intense political contestations in the city-state. For instance, John Drysdale's work has for decades been a staple reference for those interested in the vibrant constitutional politics of postwar Singapore.³⁵ Other historical works surveying a longer timeframe of the island's history, like Mary

Turnbull's *A History of Modern Singapore*, also feature the postwar decades as a politically febrile time that offered many possibilities.³⁶ In recent years, however, there has also been conscious effort amongst scholars to recover the legacies of other “forgotten” historical actors operating in this context of political pluralism. Student movements like the University of Malaya Socialist Club, trade unions and other activist organizations launched their specific struggles to define this new postwar political order. The recovery of these stories of political activism patently present a picture of a competitive socio-political landscape.³⁷ Despite the renewed interest in the climate of Singapore's postwar politics, Yusof has only received a few passing mentions for his contributions to Malay journalism, or a simple acknowledgement of his appointment as Yang di-Pertuan Negara.³⁸

This glaring lack of scholarly attention on the Yang di-Pertuan Negara is not surprising. When it comes to “ceremonial” head of states in the Commonwealth realms, scholars of decolonization often overlook the occupants of these offices, treating them as distant, non-political actors.³⁹ This assumption isolates the Yang di-Pertuan Negara as well as its appointee from the prevailing contestations for power in postwar Singapore. While the office was meant to be apolitical, its origins, establishment and operation were political. Readers will discover that the embeddedness of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara in the historical context made the office inseparable from the power struggles in postwar Singapore. In fact, the office had intensified tensions between nationalist leaders and other political stakeholders.

Among the many stakeholders in postwar Singapore, the British were perhaps the most important because they remained paramount power. Despite a deteriorating capacity to maintain their moribund empire, they still saw themselves as a dominant player in global affairs at least through the 1950s and tightly clutched onto the vestiges of their imperial dominance.⁴⁰ Indeed, the British did not stand idly as innocent facilitators to the political activities of Singaporean leaders who became increasingly brazen in pushing for the nationalist cause. The colonial state came to be the arena of struggle between the colonial power and nationalist leaders. The British, however, did not control everything in Singapore, even if they acted like they could. If examined from a global

perspective, multiple interlocking circumstances of global dimensions circumscribed Britain's position as paramount power in the national unit.

Two works in particular have been critical placing the political developments in Singapore into larger cross-territorial frames, showing how the unfolding of local events both facilitated and challenged British imperial aims in Singapore, Southeast Asia and the world. Tim Harper's detailed study on the late colonial state in British Malaya explores the dynamic interactions between the economic and social forces of decolonization.⁴¹ He has recovered the radical shifts in social and economic relations following the Second World War which led to the counterinsurgency measures against the MCP and the subsequent reordering of the colonial state. Meanwhile, Karl Hack's work on the decolonization process in Southeast Asia elucidates British defence concerns amid the geopolitical conflict of the Cold War.⁴² Strategic considerations were pivotal in deciding which colonies to decolonize and which to recolonize. The Yang di-Pertuan Negara was therefore a particular outcome of calculations (and miscalculations) of developments which stretched across national and international realms.

Yang di-Pertuan Negara and Singapore's Decolonization

Convulsions in global power relations mark the era of decolonization. But how can one conceptualize this dramatic phenomenon? Karl Hack has argued that decolonization is an ongoing process that can be traced to the period before the Second World War and remains in motion today. He further advocates for better attempts at integrating factors such as state-building, geopolitics and nation-building into studies of decolonization.⁴³ Hack's conceptual sketches resonate with Jan Jansen and Jürgen Osterhammel's more precise understanding of decolonization. They see decolonization not only as a specific historical moment when multiple empires disintegrated during the initial decades after the Second World War, but also as a "many-faceted process" attendant to the end of colonial rule over a subordinate territory.⁴⁴ The transfer of power from imperial overlords to local leaders was but one facet of decolonization. The rise of nation-states which are equal to one another (at least in principle) marked structural reform in the international system, and this

became concomitant with a change to the socio-political norms previously entrenched by empires.⁴⁵ Due to the complicated processes which stretched across multiple contexts, Hack, Jansen and Osterhammel all agree that decolonization is characterized by “vagueness and ambiguity”.⁴⁶ In response to this theoretical murkiness, Hack has even suggested a typology of different kinds of decolonization.⁴⁷ Just as imperialism was a complicated process of domination and transformation over the many aspects of human life, decolonization was its counter-process, covering cultural, political and environmental dimensions.

While it might be productive to embrace a more definite take on decolonization, it might be as fruitful to consider a more basic approach to the concept. At the heart of decolonization and across all the planes of its existence lies a critical animating force: the struggle for power. No single factor or party was solely responsible for decolonization because it was a historically contingent phenomenon which entailed fluctuations in power relations on a global scale.⁴⁸ When talking about the nature of power, Friedrich Nietzsche offers a gripping perspective. Power can be identified by its plasticity and is characterized by the capacity to remake, “to transform and to incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign”.⁴⁹

The story of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara is a tale about ingenuity. It is a story of simultaneous struggles for power between different historical actors—whether it was the colonial secretary in London or the chief minister in Singapore, the Tunku or Lee Kuan Yew—all of whom came into conflict and at times moved in concert with one another to overcome challenges and secure their dominance in the socio-political order. They embraced a selective appropriation of novelty, engineered new interpretations to existing features in the status quo and even adapted elements drawn from an imagined past. Through the imaginative blending of these materials and practices, historical actors replenished their political capital. They adapted the Yang di-Pertuan Negara for different political projects in their pursuit of privileges and power, thereby turning the office into a contested site.

Singaporean leaders toiled, persevered and competed with one another to change the prevailing socio-political order. Contending with global power relations, they seized the prevailing political currency of self-determination to establish themselves as “genuine” anti-colonial

nationalists. In doing so, they distinguished themselves as effective political leaders in the age of decolonization. Since the British had ruled out the viability of the city-state being an independent nation-state, most Singaporean leaders saw reunification with the Federation as the only feasible measure to achieve complete emancipation from colonial rule. In other words, merger would ensure their political survival as nationalist heroes while meeting security interests of Britain and other Commonwealth partners.

No other historical episode has exemplified these competing struggles for power better than the “Battle for Merger”, which has become a part of the “foundation myth” of PAP-dominated Singapore.⁵⁰ From 1961, the PAP government began to see its long-awaited catharsis for merger within reach in the form of the “Malaysia Plan”, which was intended to bring about the political union of Singapore with the Federation of Malaya. This “Battle for Merger” has largely been portrayed as a battle of wills between the PAP and its splinter party, the Barisan Sosialis (hereinafter, the Barisan). The latter openly opposed the Malaysia Plan, arguing that merger would put Singapore on unequal terms in the larger Federation. In recent years, both academic and public discourses have been fixated on the justifiability of Operation Coldstore, a crackdown by security forces a few months before merger which resulted in the detention of over a hundred suspected communists, including leaders from the Barisan.⁵¹ This controversial episode is emblematic of the intertwinement of Singapore’s local politics with the larger geopolitical forces of the Cold War.

The controversy of Operation Coldstore has led to an overemphasis on a defining event at the expense of adequately representing other circumstances at play during the historical moment. Singapore’s pursuit of political unification with the Federation was more than Operation Coldstore. There were complicated diplomatic negotiations between Britain, the Federation, Singapore and the Bornean states as well as other Commonwealth countries, which also played out on international platforms like the UN and Afro-Asian summits.⁵² Both Tan Tai Yong and Nordin Sopiee have shown that the establishment of Malaysia did not come about because of a heroic fulfilment of a grand political vision but was a result of a precarious dealings among diverse players with

differing interests, and as both authors rightly point out, these differences were not necessarily resolved upon Malaysia's formation.⁵³ Within this political and diplomatic fray, it may be challenging to precisely locate the salience of the enigmatic Yang di-Pertuan Negara.

To foreground the significance of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, one needs to look within the political tussles and diplomatic manoeuvres to identify another concurrent battle—namely on the cultural front. The symbolic dimension of culture was one terrain on which historical actors attempted to rework the entrenched norms of the colonial order during decolonization. Benedict Anderson's canonical work, *Imagined Communities*, has brought the idea of nationalism as a cultural artefact to the forefront of studies on nationalism.⁵⁴ Still, fashioning "national culture" is tricky, especially in a multi-ethnic colonial society like Singapore. The expedient nature of these cultural projects to define a cohesive national community has the potential to engender a sense of dislocation; while it may be inclusive to some, it might also be exclusive or foreign to others.⁵⁵

During the campaign for merger, the PAP government came up with its own cultural schematics to prepare Singapore for independence from colonial rule and to make headway for merger with the Federation.⁵⁶ Irene Ng's biography of Singapore's Minister of Culture, S. Rajaratnam, captures the herculean task undertaken by his ministry—which was effectively the state's propaganda department—to foster a common "Malayan" identity for the people of Singapore during this period.⁵⁷ Edwin Lee's *Singapore: The Unexpected Nation* also speaks to these nation-building efforts.⁵⁸ Both authors have discussed the promotion of Malay language, the creation of national symbols and the launch of media campaigns as part of the campaign for merger, but the office of Yang di-Pertuan Negara itself has never been the subject of focus. As a state institution meant to cultivate a shared sense of a community and inspire a spirit of self-determination, the office is a particularly unique historical artefact, one that needs to be studied as a dyad of *both* political and cultural dimensions. Furthermore, the appointee was his own man, a historical actor in his own right.

Sir William Goode, the last governor of colonial Singapore, assumed the office of Yang di-Pertuan Negara in June 1959, and Yusof bin Ishak

became his Malayan-born successor six months later. The latter held the office until its reconstitution into a presidency following Singapore's independence as a republic and separation from Malaysia in 1965. Since Yusof was Yang di-Pertuan Negara for most of the office's constitutional life, he played a defining role in shaping what it stood for. Yusof did not leave behind any personal memoirs, and thus publications on him written by biographers are critical sources for assessing the historical significance of the office. To date, Melanie Chew has written the most comprehensive biography of the late president.⁵⁹ She has extensively traced Yusof's life, including his delicate position as Yang di-Pertuan Negara during Singapore's brief yet tumultuous stint in Malaysia.⁶⁰ The greatest weakness in Chew's work is also its greatest strength. The author has gravitated towards hagiographical tendencies, but in doing so, she has reproduced excerpts from glowing interviews with Yusof's contemporaries, all of which are primary material for critical analysis.⁶¹

Besides Chew, Norshahril Saat has authored a biographical publication on Yusof to commemorate Singapore fiftieth anniversary of independence as a sovereign republic, an event remembered in popular discourse as "SG50". He tells a story of a man who was a champion of modernism, meritocracy and multiculturalism.⁶² Relying on a mix of official sources and oral history interviews, Norshahril's work can be appreciated as a revealing piece of social memory focused on Yusof's years as president of the independent Republic of Singapore.⁶³ But this publication, like other shorter publications on Yusof, largely neglect his tenure as Yang di-Pertuan Negara.⁶⁴ Kevin Tan's biography of Puan Noor Aisha, Yusof's widow and Singapore's former first lady, nevertheless provides invaluable insight into the life of her late husband. Puan Aisha's personal anecdotes are intimate glimpses into the circumstances behind Yusof's acceptance of public office.⁶⁵ This collection of biographies, however, are largely concerned about Yusof's personality, contributions and ideas, rather than on the office of Yang di-Pertuan Negara itself. To subject the office as well as the execution of Yusof's official duties to a sustained critical examination, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara needs to be historicized within the prevailing struggles for power.

Existing works on Singapore's constitutional history further perpetuate the dominant memory of Yusof as president of the independent republic

post-1965 rather than Yusof as the Yang di-Pertuan Negara. Little consideration is made of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara's cultural significance and the office's role during the historical moment; it has mainly been treated as a mere forerunner to the office of president, as a relic from a bygone age.⁶⁶ The point here is that no scholarly appraisal of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara and its role in Singapore's decolonization exists. This book is a direct response to this dearth. In order to distance the memory of Singapore's current status as a sovereign nation-state, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara must be seen on its own terms and within the historical circumstances in which it was established, free from predestination as the office of president. It was meant to signal the coming of a new age for Singapore, making the office an *exceptional* institution with a rich political-symbolic structure. In this respect, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara serves as a valuable historical artefact to examine the representations of the nation of intent in Singapore during a distinct juncture of the island's history.

Yang di-Pertuan Negara as Representation of the Nation

To understand what the Yang di-Pertuan Negara represented, some theoretical scaffolding on nation and nationalism may be helpful. Key theorists generally agree that there is no nation before nationalism and that the nation can be understood as a form of community unique to the modern era, having emerged in the nineteenth century.⁶⁷ This thesis, labelled as the "modernist theory" of the origins of nations, argues that the nationalist agenda ("nationalism") has been driven by elites to persuade other individuals of their shared interests to establish a social collective or to apply Anderson's well-worn description, an "imagined community".⁶⁸ The establishment and preservation of this social collective through the world system of nation-states is the goal of nationalism. Ernest Gellner has furthered this understanding by arguing that nationalism is the effort to make the very concrete, material realities of the state consistent with the nation, hence the idea of the "nation-state".⁶⁹ With mass participation as its modus operandi, nationalism has been facilitated by the economic, technological and socio-political changes brought about by modernity.

But the nation of intent in Singapore was not just a simple outcome of modernity. The island was colonized by a European power, and this has had important implications. Partha Chatterjee has been critical of theorists of nationalism (specifically Anderson) for imposing a universalized “modular” understanding about nationalism onto formerly colonized societies based on the experience in Europe and the Americas, thereby denying the autonomy of colonized elites to think of their own ideas of the nation.⁷⁰ These “anti-colonial” nationalisms are thus seen as an imitation of preceding models.⁷¹ Anderson’s approach takes the idea of nationalism as a political movement “too seriously”; according to Chatterjee, the battle for sovereignty had taken place long before political battles for independence, when the colonized first defended their “spiritual” domain—that of language, customs and family—from the interference of the colonial powers.⁷² Building on Chatterjee’s theoretical position, scholars like Anthony Reid have attempted to identify typologies of Asian nationalisms which differed from the nationalisms in the West.⁷³

The point that needs to be emphasized is that the nation, rather than being a universal phenomenon or innate entity, is a historically bounded entity delimited by its embeddedness within particular circumstances. In *Represented Communities*, John Kelly and Martha Kaplan postulate that the nation should not be treated as a transcendental or idealistic entity à la Anderson because the nation can only exist in representation, both in the institutional and semiotic sense.⁷⁴ In the same vein, Craig Calhoun argues that a nation is made of accepted ways of thinking and speaking, all of which form a structure of knowledge that shapes consciousness. It is “constituted largely by the claims themselves, by ways of talking and thinking and acting that relies on these sorts of claims to produce collective identity”.⁷⁵ In general agreement with Calhoun, Alan Finlayson asserts that while nationalisms are shaped by specificities of different contexts, they “operate as a certain kind of ideological discourse” through the universalization of values propagated by nationalists for all members of the nation.⁷⁶ Nationalists interpret and rearticulate the concrete realities of any action, entity or event to make it significant for others.⁷⁷ In short, the nation *needs* to be represented in order to exist.

To represent the nation of intent, Singaporean leaders competed among themselves to invest symbolic meaning in the Yang di-Pertuan

Negara, turning it into a national symbol. Michael Geisler has theorized that national symbols operate as a “mass media system”; together, they form a communicative structure to signify the nation’s existence.⁷⁸ As evident during Yusof’s swearing-in ceremony, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara appeared alongside slogans and other emblems to represent a nation of intent for Singapore—a Singapore that was free from colonial rule and reunited with an independent Malaya. A nationalist discourse invests symbolic meaning in these otherwise meaningless “objects”, and as national symbols, they in turn become “subjects” that express the nation. As sociologist Karen Cerulo points out, national symbols are both receptacles and projections of the nation:

They function as modern totems that merge the mythical, sacred substance of the nation with a specified, manifest form, one that is grounded in everyday experience of sight, sound, or touch. By blending subject and object, national symbols move beyond simple representation of nation. In a very real sense, national symbols *become* the nation.⁷⁹

The Yang di-Pertuan Negara did not contain meaning in and of itself. Singaporean leaders circulated ideas, messages and values in order to represent the nation of intent through the office. As Lee himself declared, Yusof as Yang di-Pertuan Negara became the very “personification” of Singapore.

But even as Lee and other PAP leaders attempted to seize the initiative to represent the nation of intent through the office, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara’s meanings were open-ended and far from definite. Borrowing Philip Gorski’s theoretical observations, individuals and social groups negotiated the office in two social spaces: on the one hand, there is a “space of nation” and on the other, a “space of nation-ization”.⁸⁰ The former is “objective”, concrete, specifically rooted in territoriality and the social interactions between human beings, while the space of nation-ization is “symbolic”, where “real and possible nations are or can be imagined and enacted” in which one may find “symbolic resources which nations are made and unmade”.⁸¹ The space of nation-ization is discursive as it centres on narratives, sacralization of symbols and commemorative rituals:

In a nation-ization struggle, social and cultural actors propose and oppose various conflicting visions of the nation and of the sense of being a group more generally. They struggle both over how the nation should be defined and about its relative salience as a principle of group identity and action. This struggle is simultaneously symbolic and practical, and inextricably so.⁸²

During Singapore's decolonization, different historical actors—from the blue-collar worker to the politician in the halls of power—invested meaning in the Yang di-Pertuan Negara as a means to actively negotiate their interests in an emergent post-imperial Singapore. The Yang di-Pertuan Negara was a bricolage of multiple competing visions for Singapore. As the office operated in “objective” space, a concurrent “symbolic” struggle was taking place to define what Singapore represented and what it could be. In other words, the office, when operating in its historical context, signified different things to different people.

A useful analytical frame to penetrate the instability of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara's meanings is to consider Gayatri Spivak's reflections on the interplay of two types of representation—that of “portrait” and “proxy”.⁸³ As a “portrait”, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was meant to “re-present” the character and values of the nation of intent which was emerging out of colonialism and moving towards merger with the Federation. The logic involved here is akin to that of a portrait, a tangible depiction of a figurative entity, idea or concept. But perhaps ironically, in the performance of his constitutional duties, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was the “proxy” of the British Crown. As the Queen's representative in Singapore, he also represented Britain's continued dominion over the island state. The Yang di-Pertuan Negara exercised sovereign powers on behalf of the Queen, spoke for Her Majesty and was the lasting link to a larger imperial hierarchy. The Yang di-Pertuan Negara's slipperiness as a symbol was thus premised on the office's design *both* as a representation of a nation of intent and as a representation of British overlordship. The indivisible nature of its symbolic and political structure constituted the tension at the heart of the office's historical existence.

The Yang di-Pertuan Negara was a peculiar construction. Even as Singaporean leaders explicitly sanctified the office as the symbolic

representation of the nation of intent, it did not change the fact that the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was an element of colonial statecraft. The legal basis of the office was the State of Singapore Act. Passed by the British Parliament to enact a new charter for self-governing Singapore, this edict officiated the 1958 Singapore Order-in-Council (hereinafter “the Constitution”). The constitutional predication of the office meant that the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was an institution of the modern (colonial) state with the appointee wielding authority similar to other heads of state in the Westminster system. The duties and responsibilities of these titular figures include the prerogative to dissolve the legislature, appoint the head of government, or dispense pardons to criminals. Some of these powers have to be exercised in accordance with advice from elected ministers, but others remain under the personal discretion of the head of state.

Yang di-Pertuan Negara as Representation of the Crown

The political-symbolic structure of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was made concrete through its human form. Overlaps of biography and history are therefore crucial in imagining the possible meanings of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara. Moreover, the Constitution offered no comprehensive guidance on the demeanour or temperament required for eligible candidates, suggesting that the appointee had some room to perform what he thought should be proper conduct for someone of that high office. The story which this book tells comes with an occasional conflation of appointee with the office of Yang di-Pertuan Negara. This is not meant to equate the totality of the individual with the entirety of the office but rather to emphasize the interplay of agency in projecting the office’s meanings. The very impossibility to separate both appointee and office in embodied performance sets another field of semiotic contentions which must be interrogated. At times, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was relatable as a fallible human being, while on other occasions, he remained distant, magnificent and elusive, cloaked with the shrouds of state power.

Thinking about the human element of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara prompts comparison with monarchs. The close relationship between royalty and the building of the nation-state is a much-discussed issue within the scholarly literature on nationalism.⁸⁴ This perpetuates a persistent,

long-drawn tendency to personify a community of belonging. Post-Enlightenment ideas of the individual have often been inscribed onto the nation, treating it like an entity that is autonomous and equal to others yet peculiar by itself.⁸⁵ Monarchies themselves have been harmonized into modern conceptions of sovereignty. As historian Eric Hobsbawm argues, monarchs have been used to strengthen political regimes in both autocratic and parliamentary states, making the “royal person” the focal point of national unity and sovereignty. The generational transitions between occupants of the throne further conjure a sense of continuity that links the nation’s long history with its present.⁸⁶ More relevant to Singapore, the Malay rulers of the pre-colonial political order embodied this concept through the *kerajaan*.⁸⁷ Leaders from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) later moulded the rulers into corporeal symbols for the party’s vision of a postcolonial state centred on Malay dominance.⁸⁸

The office of Yang di-Pertuan Negara derived its authority from the British Crown. It is therefore important to set its historical existence within a larger British imperial landscape during the age of decolonization. Among many studies on the British Crown, Philip Murphy’s work is perhaps the most convincing in showing how the royal family had shaped ideas of British authority not just at home, but also in the imperial and Commonwealth realms.⁸⁹ Members of the royal family negotiated their agency and authority with officials from the metropole, colonies and ex-colonies in different historical contexts, projecting shifting meanings of the Crown. Through their individual dispositions, the British monarchs have played different roles at different historical junctures.

The similarities between the Yang di-Pertuan Negara and monarchs, however, must not come at the expense of identifying dissimilarities. The office was not a seat of royalty. Unlike the thrones of royal houses in the Malay Peninsula, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara had no claims of longstanding precolonial historicity—it was established as a result of the 1958 Constitution. The nominee had to be appointed by the British sovereign, and as the representative of the Crown in Singapore, he served at the sovereign’s pleasure. In this sense, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was instead much closer to the governor-generals of the Commonwealth, both in form and substance. In fact, the office was initially conceived as

a “Malayan governor-general”. In the countries of the Commonwealth, governor-generals—along with other ceremonial heads of state such as presidents in the case of republican countries—perform constitutional functions expected of the British monarch in the United Kingdom.⁹⁰ As viceregal officers of the Crown, they act as umpires, serving the “dignified” aspect of power and transcending the vicious battles of party politics. These posts often do not have a consistent manual, making them pliable to the changing personalities of their appointees and shifting customs specific to their contexts.⁹¹ The Yang di-Pertuan Negara was therefore a specific incarnation of the office of governor-general which was tailored to the political situation in Singapore during the final years of colonial rule.

The Yang di-Pertuan Negara and the governor-generals share a burdened history, serving as the constitutional connection between a (formerly) dependent state and the Crown. When these viceregal offices were first established in the White settler colonies of the British empire-Commonwealth (known as the “old dominions”), the appointment of governor-generals became occasional episodes of political tension between local governments and London. To some, the governor-generals represented the overlordship of Britain over a particular territory.⁹² But depending on circumstances, Crown representatives were at times embraced as a proud testament of a society’s Britannic heritage.⁹³ This ambivalent relationship endured after the Second World War. In the global age of decolonization, there has been a trend within the Commonwealth towards formally shaving off constitutional linkages with the Crown. In 2021, Barbados became the latest country to establish itself as a republic by abolishing the British sovereign as its head of state, even though the Caribbean state remains a member of the Commonwealth.⁹⁴

As the world enters a post-Elizabethan era following the recent death of the Queen, who was a relatively beloved figure in the Commonwealth, one can reasonably expect this trend to continue. There is also a richer history at play here. This precedent of transitioning into a republic while retaining Commonwealth membership is based on India’s case when it transitioned from a sovereign dominion into a republic in 1949. As opposed to the situation before the Second World War, loyalty to the Crown was no longer necessary to qualify for membership of this

international fraternity—a move which the British stomached to extend the viability of the Commonwealth in the postwar world.

Understanding the governor-generals of the Commonwealth therefore helps to situate the Yang di-Pertuan Negara within a shared historical terrain with former dependents of the British Empire. In *Viceregalism*, H. Kumarasingham and other scholars recognize viceregal officers in the Westminster system or “parliamentary heads of state” as political actors in their own right.⁹⁵ The authors have chosen to work with the term “viceregalism”, which is derived from the word “viceroy”. This term is evocative of the heritage of the British Raj in colonial India where the viceroy, as representative of the Crown, had almost absolute authority in governing the colony.⁹⁶ “Viceregalism” grounds the parliamentary heads of state as particular incarnations modelled after the constitutional monarchy in Britain and is used to conceptualize the latitude available to them during exceptional moments of political crises. Responding to the lack of academic attention on the parliamentary heads of state as political actors, the authors have sought to dispel the assumption that these titular figures are merely “rubber stamps” or ceremonial personages with plenty of style but little substance. During times of crisis, parliamentary heads of state take on critical roles. They become arbiters of power, deciding who could lead governments, and at times even usurped the role of government to exercise complete authority, effectively ruling by decree.

Kumarasingham further theorizes three rights that define their scope of action during political crises: the right to rule (assume sovereign powers like an absolute monarch), to uphold (guard the principles and procedures of the constitution) and to oblige (do nothing and take on a detached path in conformity with the executive’s whims).⁹⁷ Another crucial element that influences the manoeuvrability of the parliamentary heads of state is the “viceregal-premier axis” or the relationship between the head of state and the head of government, the latter usually titled as prime minister. In decolonizing contexts, the relationship between both of them was crucial in ensuring the success of the constitutions of would-be sovereign nations.⁹⁸ As Lee Kuan Yew stated when Yusof was sworn in as Yang di-Pertuan Negara, the 1958 Constitution was fully realized only when the Malayan-born appointee entered office, suggesting the fulfilment of the decolonizing spirit behind the Constitution. This transition was in

a sense a covenant between the Yang di-Pertuan Negara and the prime minister because it seemingly expunged the coloniality that remained stuck in the structure of the Singaporean state. With the departure of the last colonial governor of Singapore, Yusof's ascendance helped manufacture legitimacy for the PAP regime, creating the impression of a "genuine" anti-colonial government in the age of global decolonization.

In recounting Singapore's historical experience with the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, this book provides two interventions which supplement the scholarly inquiry in *Viceregalism*. First, it demonstrates that much could be gained in understanding the political character of parliamentary heads of state by extending analysis beyond episodes of crisis. While Kumarasingham is accurate in stating that exigencies bring out the extent of powers invested in parliamentary heads of states, their political importance also predate their constitutional operation. The struggles that precipitated during the conception of these offices need to be taken just as seriously to better sketch a complete picture of their political inflexions. The overt political efforts to design the Yang di-Pertuan Negara both exposed and engendered strains in existing power relations.

This leads to the second intervention. What if political crises were treated as perennial? Power asymmetries are in consistent flux, and so too were the roles of parliamentary heads of state. Their positions within prevailing power relations require constant negotiations. Kumarasingham and the other authors hope to attend to the political roles of parliamentary heads of states and not confine them merely to ceremonial functions. But is the distinction between the political and the ceremonial a helpful one? The importance of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara lies in the polemics of its political and cultural dimensions. If a source of authority for these viceregal offices was symbolic power to give politics a "dignified" representation, it becomes even more critical to look at the everyday making of their significance to better contemplate their roles as political actors. Symbolic practices through national rituals help perpetuate the idea of social contracts and a certain ordering of society.⁹⁹ The term "viceregalism" must therefore be stretched to better consider the ceremonial as a political idiom because it invests symbolic substance in these offices, endowing them with authority as living totems.

Yang di-Pertuan Negara: Avatar of Empire, Class and Race

The theoretical buttress thus far sets the stage for a stirring story of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara. To tell this story, the chapters ahead follow three discursive frames: empire, class and race. These frames form the basis of meaning-making in the historical context and provide suitable entry points to access the historical struggles to represent the nation through the Yang di-Pertuan Negara. All three frames, however, are not mutually exclusive; in the historical context, they bled into and fused with one another. But this artificial separation of chapters has its advantages. It allows for the contemplation of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara on different terms, distilling the different registers of decolonization in Singapore and the textures of competing attempts to define the office.

To construct the spirited nature of power struggles in the historical context, each frame engages with three broad “counter-values” which Singaporean leaders advanced through their political projects and which the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, as the representation of the nation of intent, was supposed to personify—anti-colonialism, equality and multi-racial unity.¹⁰⁰ Singaporean leaders churned and transmitted these ideas to communicate the breakdown of the status quo and establish political capital for themselves as heroes of self-determination. It is also not an accident that these three counter-values to the colonial order conjure affinity with the values of the French Revolution, a historical event that has conventionally marked the widespread acceptance of the “nation” as the subject of human loyalties.¹⁰¹ Further attesting to the revolutionary claims of nationalism, anti-colonial nationalist movements, including the ones in Singapore, were claimants to the Revolution’s aspirations of liberty, equality and fraternity. By treating the Yang di-Pertuan Negara as a historical artefact that was made meaningful by the discursive frames of the time, the dynamic relations of power in a decolonizing Singapore take centre stage.

Each chapter constructs the unfurling of different struggles, casting the Yang di-Pertuan Negara in a constant state of ambivalence. This narrative structure borrows Sujit Sivasundaram’s framework of “recycling and movement”. Rather than fixating on continuity and change, “recycling and movement” connotes the idea that “change is constant, and every

change is changed in turn, and continuity is there but in that continuity the very idea of what came in the past...is repackaged and redefined".¹⁰² While Sivasundaram looks at an instance of colonial transition in Ceylon, the lens he offers enlightens the *decolonizing* transition taking place in Singapore. There was no overhaul of the colonial order, but what took place were conjoined efforts to dramatize change and reinvent the status quo in the service of power. The slipperiness between the values of the colonial order and counter-values of the nationalist alternative reinforces the idea that the dichotomies between these concepts were permeable enough to be absorbed into the political projects of different historical actors depending on what suited them best. These actors reinterpreted elements of continuity entrenched under British rule while selectively deploying signs of novelty. The Yang di-Pertuan Negara existed in the interstices of what was "colonial" or "anti-colonial", deployed to mean either way based on what was expedient.

Besides centring on the pliable nature of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, structuring the book according to discursive frames has an additional effect of de-emphasizing the linear flow of time. A straightforward chronological order might produce the impression that self-government was a "logical" or "natural" stage of decolonization or human progress, leading ultimately to the formation of the nation-state. This might reproduce what Prasenjit Duara calls, "the false unity of self-same, national subject moving through time", a narrative model typical in most national histories.¹⁰³ To circumvent this, the narrative that tie the chapters traces and re-traces its temporal steps because it plays with what came before and what came after, or to employ Rudolf Mrázek's description, "less as a chronology, than as, let us say, shifting sands".¹⁰⁴ The temporal manoeuvres capture the Yang di-Pertuan Negara's historical existence as a palimpsest of multiple layers of memory; the office's meanings were inexact, contingent and dependent on the interaction of elements from past and present.

In terms of space, the narrative also weaves multiple scales that stretch from the macro to the micro, encompassing global geopolitics, imperial-colony tensions and the conscious decisions of individual personalities. These narrative strategies represent the chaotic realities influencing the historical actors, underlining how decolonization played out in an open-

ended, provisional and uncertain manner. Chapter 2 is an exception. It serves as an entry point and uses a conventional linear narrative to foreground the wave of change enveloping the postwar world and to better situate the intellectual inquiry undertaken in subsequent chapters.

Following Chapter 2's contextual basis, Chapter 3 traces the efforts to subvert empire through the 1958 Constitution and the counter-efforts to preserve the British imperial system. Nationalist governments, including the one in Singapore, sought ways to uphold the status of their states as an equal, dignified political entity in the postwar world system. In everyday life, Singaporean leaders curtailed the excesses of imperial rituals which had entrenched consciousness of the supranational hierarchy of empire. They tweaked the ritualistic practices of the colonial order to project an impression of Singapore's existence as a liberated ex-colony. The British Crown, which was at the apex of the imperial hierarchy, became the subject of nationalist harassment. At the time when the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was established, two major newly independent former colonies, Pakistan and India, had emulated Ireland by dissolving the post of governor-general in their territories to remove their links with the British monarch. The case was more violent for former British dependencies in the Middle East as local kings and chieftains, previously propped up by colonial governments, were overthrown.¹⁰⁵

But different historical situations produce different configurations. The nationalist government of the Federation of Malaya, avoiding the fervour of its other ex-colonial contemporaries, continued to indulge the Malay rulers—all nine of them—as the colonial masters once did.¹⁰⁶ As an aspiring member of the Federation, Singapore faced an interesting dilemma upon PAP's rise to power: stick to the party's socialist and anti-monarchical principles as displayed by many decolonizing states in Afro-Asia, or embrace the monarchical culture of her neighbour up north to "fit in". Furthermore, geopolitical concerns of the Cold War arrested the attempts of Singaporean leaders to demand complete emancipation from colonial rule. Through a critical scrutiny of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara's blueprint and the subsequent operation of the office, Chapter 3 grapples with these questions: how did the imperial hierarchy survive in a global context of decolonization and the Cold War, and conversely, how did the nationalist leaders attempt to reconcile the lingering presence of the imperial hierarchy?

Chapter 4 complements Chapter 3, baring the situation of ambiguity that was dawning on Singapore. By delving into the design and performance of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, one can observe the extent to which Singaporean leaders continued to be trapped in practices of class distinctions that were ingrained in the colonial order. The social practices of everyday life which emphasized these distinctions continued to haunt the “new” self-governing Singapore. In trying to launch a social revolution through the promotion of their nationalist ideas, class distinctions maintained by the colonial state endured in other ways. At times, Singaporean leaders even affirmed them. With the class of White colonial administrators no longer directly governing Singapore’s internal affairs, a rising class of non-White elites had risen to power, taking the places of their former imperial overlords. This situation was intimately tied to the social position of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara. In apparent harmony with the socialist ideals of the PAP, Yusof was promoted as a commoner and exalted as an “anti-colonialist”. But in doing so, what elements of colonial class privileges—privileges enjoyed by dominant sections of the nationalist leadership—endured? How could an egalitarian symbol concurrently and contradictorily serve as a stubborn symbol of class distinctions?

Alongside the presence of imperial hierarchies and the practice of class distinctions, the spectre of race also shaped the rationalities of colonial rule. Chapter 5 elaborates on the racialized dimensions of class issues which hardened as a result of the many decades of colonial capitalism. The colonial order consolidated racial identities as observed in the colonial division of labour and politics in British Malaya. The hierarchy of class existed in tandem with a parallel hierarchy of race in which White Europeans were ranked higher than coloured peoples. The coming of self-government did not completely liberate the Yang di-Pertuan Negara from the racialist modality of colonial society. When the office was first conceptualized, British suspicions toward an Asian personage occupying Governor House were motivation enough for them to think of safeguards to preserve the racial hierarchy of the colonial order. In an attempt to overturn this hierarchy, Singaporean leaders sought to revolutionize the standards of the former office of colonial governor by installing a non-European, Malayan-born man to remediate the inequalities of White rule over non-White imperial subjects. This visible “overthrow” of White dominance presumably destroyed the image of racial hierarchy to produce

symbolic meaning in the era of decolonization. During self-government, Yusof—notwithstanding his very obvious non-European heritage—was furthermore promoted as a multi-racial symbol and was conspicuously draped with the rhetoric of freedom from communalism. But in doing so, what aspects of race did Singaporean leaders continue to accept and perpetuate to consolidate their political projects?

This book responds to these questions by curating information from a range of primary sources. These sources form the discursive structure in the historical context, depicting the ideas and actions of multiple parties, including the British officials, politicians from both Singapore and the Federation as well as ordinary people. The first group of primary sources consists of declassified official records produced and compiled by the ministries of the British government, namely the Colonial Office and the Dominion Office (later reconstituted as the Commonwealth Relations Office), respectively organized under the CO 1030 and DO 35 file series. Correspondences and reports transmitted between the British government in London and the governor in Singapore (later on, with the United Kingdom commissioner) account for the bulk of contents in CO 1030. Meanwhile, the DO 35 series is made up of a range of documents circulated within Whitehall as well as exchanges between the British government and other Commonwealth countries. These files provide crucial details on the circumstances that shaped the creation of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara not only because they contain the thoughts of British officials, but also because they record the actions, interactions and concerns of Singaporean leaders. Moreover, these declassified documents reflect the ideological traces of the colonizing power which are disguised, more often than not, by banal bureaucratic concerns. It is precisely because of their ideological nature that the documents become invaluable historical material to expose the struggle for power involved in the making and establishment of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara.

Debates in the Singapore Legislative Assembly published in *The Hansard* comprise another corpus of primary information, capturing the political rhetoric prevalent in the context in question, specifically amongst the elected representatives of the island state. Besides official documents, party periodicals and newspapers have been invaluable in examining the ideological discourse of nationalism in the historical context

because they were a dominant medium of communication accessible to the reading public then. These publications not only record the voices of the political parties and activities of workaday persons, but also help to recover the details of public appearances and speeches undertaken by the Yang di-Pertuan Negara. Autobiographical material and oral histories further supplement these sources.

As much as these historical sources ground the information presented in this book, the telling of history itself remains an inconclusive project. History, perhaps not unlike the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, is as much a form of cultural expression as a representation of the political. It is an open-ended medium to depict the power relations and stratifications of human society in the past. As readers might realize even before reaching the ending of this particular account of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, the discursive legacies of colonial Singapore, just like in any other ex-colonial contexts, still haunt contemporary life on the island, albeit subject to creative reinvention.

As a historical account rooted in the present, this book deliberately strives to accommodate the heterogenous reality during Singapore's decolonization and does not pretend to offer *the* definitive account of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, nor Singapore's experience with decolonization for that matter. Its modest aim is very much shaped by current challenges of the Singaporean nation-state, imploring readers to reflect on historical trappings and inequalities that persist today, not just in Singapore but in the global system. The thrust of this book is therefore simple, provoking and productive—*He Who is Made Lord* portrays the Yang di-Pertuan Negara as an artefact from the past with the potential to cast a different light on the present, inviting the imagining of a future that is unfettered by historical baggage, for both Singapore and the world.

Notes

1. *The Singapore Free Press (SFP)*, 2 December 1959, p. 1.
2. Government of Singapore, *Singapore (Constitution) Order in Council 1958* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1958), p. 55.
3. Government of Singapore, *Installation of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara of the State of Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1959), CO 1030/633, 30–34.
4. *SFP*, 3 December 1959, p. 1.

5. Chua Beng Huat, “Decoding the Political in Civic Spaces: An Interpretive Essay”, in *Public Space: Design, Use and Management*, edited by Chua Beng Huat and Norman Edwards (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1992), pp. 57–58. The building was former home to the municipal offices of the colonial government and was now the new home of the PAP government.
6. Kevin Tan, “A History of the Pandang”, *Biblioasia* 18, no. 1 (2022), <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-18/issue-1/apr-to-jun-2022/history-padang> (accessed 7 November 2022).
7. *Times*, 4 December 1959, DO 35/9888, 44.
8. *SFP*, 3 December 1959, p. 1.
9. *The Straits Times (ST)*, 12 November 1959, p. 11.
10. *SFP*, 2 December 1959, p. 1.
11. “Singapore Government Press Statement”, 3 December 1959, CO 1030/480.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Times*, 4 December 1959, DO 35/9888, 44.
16. *ST*, 4 December 1959, p. 4.
17. *ST*, 3 December 1959, p. 1.
18. *ST*, 8 November 1959, p. 1 and *ST*, 27 September 1959, p. 13.
19. David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 121–35.
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34. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-determination* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 71–106.
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 45. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–13.
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 47. Hack, “Unfinished Decolonisation and Globalisation”, pp. 841–43.
 48. Amongst others, Martin Shipway has advocated for this approach, treating decolonization as a complex outcome of a dialectic between the colonizer and the colonized, see Shipway, *Decolonization*, p. 5. Meanwhile, Kelly and Kaplan are sceptical of the dialectical approach, opting for the view that decolonization was a complex dialogical process beyond the colonizer-colonized divide involving an infinite number of subject-subject relations, see Kelly and Kaplan, *Represented Communities*, pp. 6–9.
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59. Melanie Chew, *A Biography of President Yusof bin Ishak* (Singapore: SNP, 1999).
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61. They include Yusof’s brother, Rahim Ishak, and former PAP cabinet minister, Othman Wok.
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67. My claims are based on the historiographical review on “Modernism” in Umut Özkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 72–142.
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69. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).
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91. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
92. Murphy, *Monarchy*, pp. 16–33. The “old Dominions” were Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Irish Free State, South Africa and Newfoundland.
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97. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–35.
98. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
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100. These counter-values to colonialism correspond to the PAP’s founding objectives, see *ST*, 22 November 1954, p. 1. Chatterjee has argued that the nationalism is a “derivative discourse” trapped in the intellectual premises of colonialism. Likewise, the counter-values offered by nationalism in Singapore accepted the same intellectual premises of the colonial order. See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (London: Zed Books, 1986), pp. 1–30.
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106. *Ibid.*, pp. 174–75.