



What makes *How to Love a Rat* particularly compelling is the way DeAngelo combines storytelling with a grounded, critical analysis of the broader structures in which mine clearance takes place. She is not merely cataloguing the quirks of an unusual job; she is probing how global humanitarian institutions operate on the ground and how postwar states consolidate power. She shows us how a rat can be both a detection device and a social actor, both a symbol of international goodwill and a creature embedded in the gritty everyday of Cambodian life.

*How to Love a Rat* is a unique and engrossing contribution to the anthropology of humanitarianism, postwar societies, and human-animal relations. It deserves a wide readership—not only among anthropologists, political scientists, and Southeast Asia specialists, but also among anyone interested in the complicated and sometimes surreal ways that people rebuild life after violence.

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**He Who is Made Lord: Empire, Class and Race in Postwar Singapore**, by  
Muhammad Suhail Mohamed Yazid, Singapore, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023, US  
\$29.00, paper, ISBN 9789815104301

In Singapore, there is a lack of major political transfers of power and upheaval. As a result, in local consciousness, official government positions are typically thought of and referred to in their administrative capacities. But this also means that we often neglect the historical significance of these offices, and the original intent that they were set up to serve. Muhammad Suhail Mohamed Yazid's book presents the origins of one such office, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara (head of state), set within the context of Singapore's pre-independence history. Much like the state of Singapore, the office of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was a product of the times, born in an era of flux and a result of the various competing interests and powers at that time.

*He Who Is Made Lord* provides a rich account of Singapore's short but crucial period of decolonization. Yazid lays out the creation of an office that "has been relegated to a prop in the background of a larger socio-political stage" (10) given its supposed apolitical nature. He presents an account of the different interests and political actors, looking at the process from the state and institutional perspective as well as the negotiations that were undertaken to select an individual for the post, arguing that the Yang di-Pertuan Negara was in fact "an *exceptional* institution with a rich political-symbolic structure" (emphasis in original) (17). The creation of the post, its name, its position in the government hierarchy, and the individual appointed to hold the title were all decisions that involved political actors holding a stake in Singapore's political future, and brought to the fore the tussle for power within Malaya at that time.

Indeed, the position itself was full of contradictions. For one, while there were traditional roots in the position, the title itself was "a product of innovation" (89), born out of negotiations

between different—and often competing—political actors and interests. For another, the post was modelled after royalty, yet the man who held the post for most of its constitutional life was described as being of the “common people.”

These contradictions suggest that the position itself is of analytical interest even without considering its historical significance. After all, the whole process of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara coming into fruition involved multiple principal-agent dynamics, set within the unique circumstance of decolonization. Each of the aforementioned contradictions could thus be viewed as an outcome of tussling political actors, each with their own considerations, strategies, and desired outcomes with respect to gaining independence from the British, all of which depended on their positions within the colonial administrative hierarchy.

Hence, the lack of attention to the position of Yang di-Pertuan Negara is surprising and makes the book’s contribution to furthering understanding of this period in Singaporean and Malayan history even more significant. At that time, the process of decolonization had just begun, and people had to believe in self-determination if independence was to be the eventual goal. With the Yang di-Pertuan Negara being both the Queen’s representative in Singapore and one of the “new symbols” to “facilitate a common sense of loyalty to the city-state” (3), such a view of that period in history would in fact be incomplete without understanding what role this office played in furthering the goal of gaining independence.

After all, the task of creating a shared identity was likely seen as near impossible by observers, given how diverse the people living in Singapore were, whether in terms of ancestry, ideology, or community belongingness. Attributing meaning to symbols like the Yang di-Pertuan Negara and Yusof Ishak himself would thus have been very important to the decolonization project. Hence, this attempt to “adapt elements of the past in service of decolonization” (90) using the Yang di-Pertuan Negara could be seen as not merely a nation-building process, but a nation-*making* one. When read with the hindsight of Singapore’s subsequent trajectory as a nation, it will become apparent that this meaning-making exercise using the Yang di-Pertuan Negara played a significant role in bringing attention to localized institutions that stood apart from the British Empire.


Looking forward to today, the Office of the President, successor to the Yang di-Pertuan Negara post, has also been the subject of modifications and changes resulting from negotiations between different actors in society, including a switch from an appointed presidency to an elected presidency, as well as additional guardrails to cater to racial diversity. It is undeniable that the Office of the President still occupies a place of importance within the nation, and these roots can likely be traced to the legacy its predecessor left in pre-independence Singapore.

Hence, there are helpful parallels that we can draw from the Yang di-Pertuan Negara’s life cycle to contemporary Singaporean political traditions, even though the book concentrates its analysis on the period from 1956 to 1963. One of the most significant parallels is how meaning-making and the creation of symbolic emblems are still a large part of the Singapore nation-building process. The use of major national exercises, such as Loyalty Week (after Yusof Ishak’s swearing-in as Yang di-Pertuan Negara to create solidarity and shared identity) have continued. More contemporary examples include SG50 in 2015 and SG60 in 2025, year-long festivities celebrating the nation’s fiftieth and sixtieth years of independence that involved celebrations and events, many sponsored by government coffers, all of which promoted language that celebrated Singapore and Singaporeans’ achievements. The management of race relations also remains a major topic, given the continued negotiation of race, representation, and meritocracy in this diverse, young nation. In sum, this book offers up a rich account of the background of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, which, despite being a defunct

office, still holds historical and political significance. This book would be a good read for any student of Singapore politics and society.

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**Capital Punishment, Clemency and Colonialism in Papua New Guinea, 1954–1965**, by Murray Chisholm, Pacific Series, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 2024, US\$60.00 (print); free ebook, 269pp. ISBN 9781760466459

The legal history of Papua New Guinea (PNG) is enmeshed with its colonial history, in particular the peculiarities of colonization by a country—Australia—that often denied its project in PNG was a colonial one, instead positioning itself as a steward or protector. There is of course no question now that the relationship between Australia and PNG was wholly colonial in character, focused on the extraction of natural and human resources from PNG while also using it as a buffer against Asian territorial expansion, most explicitly during World War II. In the aftermath of the war, with a wave of decolonization rolling across the globe, Australia found itself at pains to defend its continued administration of its nearest neighbour against decolonial voices on the United Nations Trusteeship Council. A key component of the Australian rationale for continuing to govern PNG was the project of “advancement,” which in the mid-century context meant something like economic development, but also acculturation to Australian and European values. This was where the law came in; criminal law in particular was regarded by colonial administrators as a social engineering tool for instructing Papua New Guineans in the ways of a new moral regime.

This use of criminal law in general, and capital punishment in particular, forms the backdrop to Murray Chisholm’s examination of how sentencing decisions in the wake of violent acts by Papua New Guineans (invariably Papua New Guinean men in the cases covered) reflected the anxieties of a colonial regime at pains to justify its own existence on the international stage. Chisholm pursues this important project by means of a series of case studies, a narrative and analytical method close to the heart of this reviewer despite their relentlessly grim content here. Over the course of six chapters that follow an introductory framing chapter for the historical context under consideration, Chisholm performs a deep dive into the archival history of criminal cases that demonstrated the way these anxieties played out in sentencing decisions. Contributing these decisions was a cast of colonial actors including Paul Hasluck, the minister for territories; Sir William Slim, the governor-general of Australia; Donald Cleland, administrator of the then-Territory of Papua and New Guinea; and several Australian judges working in the Territory.

Chisholm’s study reveals some consistent, and consistently disquieting, principles at work in the way sentencing decisions were made in this latter period of the colonial era in PNG. One was the way that capital punishment for the murders of Papua New Guinean women by Papua New Guinean men was supported by administrators like Hasluck and Slim on the grounds that it provided a precedent for the hypothetical murders of white women,