PART 2, 2009

Lebra reveals the RJR never did attack, though it did lose women retreating. Did, and does, such a level of violence work (here making the British fear worse if they did not compromise with ‘moderates’), or sometimes rebound, either on the campaign itself or by brutalizing and turning to authoritarianism what will become postcolonial elites? Could Bose not see he was calling Southeast Asia’s three million Indians to fight alongside Axis powers who, by July 1943, were already past their peak? Was his insistence on sacrifice even after Imphal failed steadfast steadfast valour or vanity? Beyond that, what is the significance of such pasts to today’s ‘overseas’ communities—hyphenated Malaysian- and Singaporean-Indians—in Southeast Asia?

None of these are criticisms, nor even suggestions such themes could or should have been accommodated in such a work. They are just notes on the wider themes these tightly organised works raise indirectly, but do not have time to tackle given the length and aims chosen. Both of Lebra’s books do what they set out to do, do it well, and thus give readers of all abilities enough to understand the whole picture, but not so much as to drown them. These may not be the most detailed books on the INA, nor the last word, but they are valuable tools.

Karl Hack

Colonialism, Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia

SYED MUHD KHAIRUDIN ALJUNIED

London: Routledge, 2009

This book provides an interestingly different approach to examining the Maria Hertogh legal controversy which provoked mass violence in Singapore in 1950. While the genesis of events leading to the controversy is carefully reconstructed and the causal factors rationalized using extensive archival material in conventional historical writing tradition, the main focus of the study is the strategies used by the colonial authorities to manage the crisis in the aftermath of the riots which broke out in December 1950.

Previous academic studies have tended to focus on the ideological, political, economic and social conditions that gave rise to the mass violence and sought to locate the violence in the context of anti-colonial movements and Islamic resurgence. This author, on the other hand, re-examines the Maria Hertogh controversy in the context of British imperialism and decolonization in Southeast Asia by applying theories on colonial rule and resistance to the empirical evidence. This work thus is refreshingly innovative, provocative and more complex in its examination of this notable legal-political controversy.

The Maria Hertogh case began as a normal legal custodial hearing between the girl’s natural parents and her adopted parent, but then became politicized—partly...
because of the media sensationalism—and evoked considerable emotion among Muslims in Singapore and Malaya. Maria Hertogh's mother, Adeline Hunter, who was married to Adrianus Petrus Hertogh, a sergeant in the Dutch army, had sent Maria to be cared for by her mother's friend, Che Aminah binte Mohamed, when Adrianus was taken prisoner in Java by the Japanese during the Second World War. Maria Hertogh was brought up in Malay Muslim tradition by her adopted mother during the war. The Hertoghs returned to the Netherlands at the end of the war when they were unable to locate their daughter.

Dutch officials in Singapore, nevertheless, continued to search for her and, when they discovered that she was living with her adopted mother in Kemaman in Terengganu, sought legal custody. This led to a long-drawn legal tussle. The Dutch Acting Consul-General in Singapore was initially given custody over Maria Hertogh in May 1950. Che Aminah lodged an appeal against the court order, arguing that Maria had been handed over to her for permanent adoption. The Court of Appeal declared the earlier proceedings null and void, but did not make a ruling on custody.

Following this, the Dutch government made strong representations to the British government, arguing that the legal decision was unclear and not in keeping with established standards, and that Maria Hertogh should be returned to her parents. Amid the on-going legal tussle a marriage was arranged between the 13-year-old Maria Hertogh and a 21-year-old Malay trainee teacher in Singapore. Maria Hertogh's parents then obtained a court order declaring the marriage invalid and, during the hearing, the court awarded custody of Maria to her parents. Che Aminah's application for a stay of execution was rejected by the court on 11 December 1950, and riots broke out that day in Singapore. More than 1,000 people were arrested and dozens convicted.

This book does not attempt to assess the merit or correctness of the legal rulings or claim to break new ground on the underlying causes, but seeks instead to examine the controversy in a broader historical canvas of colonial rule and authority. The author examines the approaches used by the British colonial authorities to subdue the mass violence in the context of theories related to colonial rule and resistance. Each of the main chapters in the book is framed around a particular British strategy. The strategies used such as proscription, surveillance, self-criticism, reconciliation and reform are closely examined in the context of the measures taken by the colonial authorities to contain the crisis.

Arrests, raids and curfews, for example, were used by the British as part of the proscriptive strategy to instil fear into the minds of the 'enemies of the colonial state' and to prevent further violence. Fear, the author contends, was thus used as a political tool by the colonial state to diminish all forms of violent opposition. The author effectively deciphers the surveillance strategy used by the colonial administration and provides a useful insight into the reconciliation and reform process conducted by the British to overcome the weaknesses laid bare by the Hertogh riots. And it is here that this book makes a substantive contribution to the existing literature on the controversy. The workings and responses of the colonial state machinery are carefully scrutinized and evaluated within a theoretical construct.
Themes of resistance and collaboration within the minority communities in Singapore are further explored in the context of colonial rule and the Maria Hertogh controversy. The book reveals how different groups within the Muslim community in Singapore continued to raise their grievances and to address the security issues as they sought to achieve some sort of reconciliation with the colonial authorities after the violence had broken out and soured relations.

The author argues that the roots of the controversy and the ensuing violence from Muslims in Singapore were the result of the British failure to address the influence of radical ideas, the effects of socio-economic marginalization of Muslims, media sensationalism of the legal controversy and the ineffectiveness of the police force in containing the threat. In doing so the author locates the controversy in the broader context of the shortcomings of colonial administration and rule in the colony. The book contends that resistance against the British colonial administration remained intense well after the riots were quelled and was manifested in various forms. Discord, tension and anxieties, he notes, characterized interactions between colonial officials and its subjects in Singapore and throughout the Empire. The case led to the colonial authorities taking legal measures to minimize the recurrence of child marriages on the island.

While the book as a whole makes a very persuasive case in explaining the underlying causes for the violence and is particularly illuminating in contextualizing the various strategies used by the British to quell the violence in a broader discourse on colonial rule, some contentions in the book are highly debatable.

The author contends, for example, that the Maria Hertogh case had considerable impact on the Alliance Party’s campaign for independence in Malaya. This claim is arguably overstated. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the UMNO and Alliance Party leader, may have gained some electoral mileage as a result of his show of support for some of the rioters who faced the death penalty, but it was the Alliance’s own strategies and some rethinking at the Colonial Office which largely determined the pace of movement towards independence. Archival records relating to Malayan independence do not indicate such a strong connection to this case.

The book also suggests that the Maria Hertogh controversy indicated for the first time a rise in aggression among loyal Muslim subjects of the Crown. This assertion, too, can be contested. The Malayan Union debacle surely, more than most other events in the post-war period, had shattered the image of a docile Malay community and had significantly wider implications then this legal controversy.

This study, nevertheless, is a significant addition to the historiography on British colonialism, resistance to colonial rule and the politics of the colonial state; in particular, the interactions between the colonial authority and its subjects during the decolonization period.

University of Malaya

JOSEPH M. FERNANDO