## "Lee Kuan Yew

# The Beliefs Behind the Man"

Review > Southeast Asia

**When reading or listening to scholarly analyses on what a certain writer or poet wanted to express when composing their work, I never forget one such person who, when asked if he had been guessed correctly, reacted succinctly "Hell, no!" Yet, the effort of trying to trace the beliefs behind a man should not be rejected out of hand. In our case, gratitude and respect are due to Michael D. Barr, a research scholar at Queensland University of Technology for updating and modifying his PhD thesis of the same title.**

*By András Hernádi*

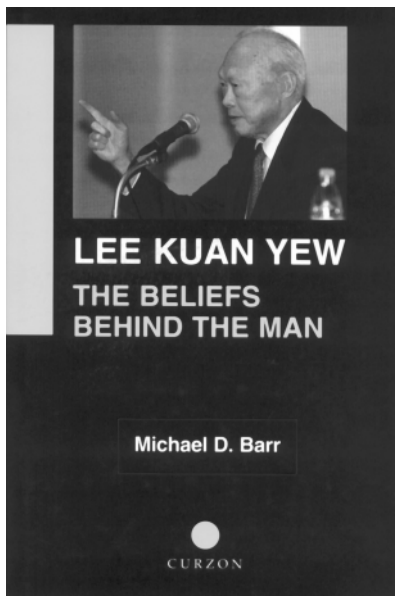
His undertaking to explore "the development of Lee Kuan Yew's political thought", that is of a person still alive and as controversial in his evaluations at home and abroad as Mr. Lee happens to be, is in itself praiseworthy. Yet readers must hardly be able to conceal their amazement as to why and how the author could resist the inevitable temptation to ask Mr. Lee to give him at least one appointment. (Barr points out in his Introduction that he has "never met Lee, and so" has "not been overwhelmed by his formidable person".) In my view, though, he might just as well have given the former Prime Minister - now still Senior Minister - of Singapore the chance to react, if for no other reason but to obey the old Latin proverb, audiatur et altera pars, i.e. let the other party also be heard. The author's initial "fairly uncritical", later "critical" admiration of Lee may well have stood in his way. Barr's words (fully shared by this reviewer) summing up Lee's accomplishments would by no means have insulted this "figure of international stature" who "is credited not only with Singapore's economic miracle, but with being a leader of economic development throughout Asia. He is also a leading figure in the contemporary revival of Confucianism throughout the Chinese world and was the principal architect of the "Asian values" campaign of the 1990s (p.2).

It is to Barr's credit, even if he underlined at the outset that he was not going to write a biography, he was clever enough to do so in Chapter 2 (Father of the Nation) in such a thorough and interesting way that his words could be selected as required reading material in Asian Studies for college and university students alike. Who would have thought, for example, that when, at the age of seventeen, Lee and his class mates had to write an essay on the future of the world, their principal at Raffles Institution returned the essays with the comment that "out of this class one of you will be Prime Minister of this country"(p.10), without doubt referring to Lee?

Barr's efforts to trace such tidbits, if necessary even by making use of personal interviews and correspondence with former classmates or colleagues of Lee, do not tail off as the book progresses. His precision and thoroughness are best illustrated by the fact that each of his chapters is followed by a notes section, normally one-third or one-quarter the length of the chapters themselves.

The chapters elaborate Barr's views on Lee's progressivism, elitism, cultural evolutionism, and geneticism, then to move on to analyse Lee's political technique, followed by his achievements. Each chapter is wittily headed by a motto-like citation either from Lee himself or cained by his biographers, thus giving readers regarding a hint about the "message" to follow. Such "aids" do come in handy, especially when the analysis is not very easy to digest.

Barr should definitely be praised for his treating Toynbee's "Challenge and Response" thesis as one source for Lee's model of crisis-driven development (pp. 82-85). Although a method widely applied by politicians fearing or even fighting their domestic and foreign adversaries, the new element worth our attention here is that, in my opinion,




Lee was using it not just as a tactic but also as a strategy and, most importantly, not in his personal interest, but in that of his country. It is equally important to point out that progressivism was something Lee himself felt to be a must. When globalization took off as a catchword, "Lee had adapted his theory of the elite to the new world order" (p. 119). Barr later cites Lee as declaring in 1967 (!) "The moment we cease to change, to be able to adapt, to respond effectively to new situations, then we have begun to die" (p. 171). And finally, despite showing all "-isms", concepts, and theories which have played a role in forming the beliefs behind the man, the author points out that "Lee was not interested in ideas 'as ideas themselves', but only "insofar as they can galvanise ... society" (p. 174).

Judging by the immense amount of excellent, straight-to-the-point citations, Barr must have gone through so many sources, it would make him an ideal candidate to set up special archives on Singapore and Lee himself. As the former is rightly considered the most successful example of a Third World country that has joined the ranks of the First World, while the latter is thought to be by many fellow politicians one of the brightest statesmen in the world today it may be well worth the effort to set such archives up. One of the founding volumes, his own book, has already been written. Congratulations Mr. Barr! <

**reference**

- Barr, Michael D., *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man*, NIAS monograph series, no.85, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press (2000), 273 pp, ISBN 0-7007-1245-3

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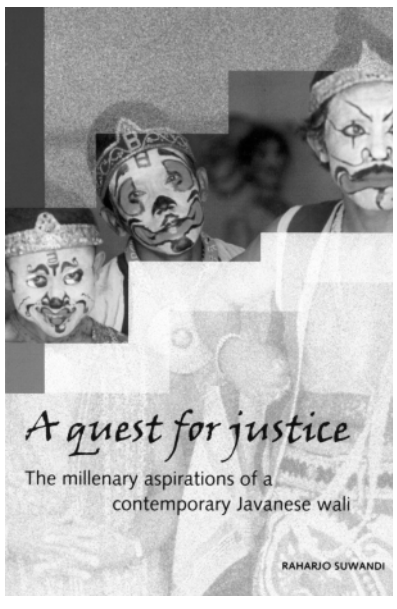
# *The Rise and Fall of a Javanese Saint*

Review > Southeast Asia

**It was with some surprise that I discovered that the book under review was not about a Muslim saint in Java. Through his close association with an enigmatic popular figure and the movement that coalesced around him in the area of "Lively Rock", Raharjo Suwandi traces how one Javanese sought enlightenment and placed himself in absolute distinction from colonialism, the state, and even Islam as "foreign accretions" to Javanese culture. Not until page 70 of "A quest for Justice" is it explained that he was popularly assigned the name of "Wali" (the Islamic term for a saint) in recognition of his spiritual prowess.**

*By M.F. Laffan*

Through biographical reconstruction, Suwandi shows how Embah Wali embraced extant Javanese notions of hierarchy, placing himself among "the little people" (*wong cilik*), and developed his own bipolar theory of "reality" (*nyata*) based on the *wayang* tradition and the experience of colonialism (pp.77 ff). Embah Wali resolved this in terms of maleness (as positive giving) and femaleness (as negative taking) (pp.89-92); with all experiences contributing to the very nature of "life" (*urip*). On the path to developing his personal ideology, Embah Wali had experimented through periods of asceticism and withdrawal, enforced on one occasion by serious illness. Ultimately, though, he rejoined society acknowledged as a saintly authority by the crowds of people who visited his courtyard, a place where Embah Wali urged all to do as they saw fit. Embah Wali did not instil his ideology in others, although a select few chose to adopt and redefine it.




Suwandi gives a marvellous living picture of how a single figure can hold a movement together in contemporary Java. He explores Embah Wali's aspirations for the then sultan of Yogyakarta, Hamengkubuwana IX, as the embodiment of the Just King or Ratu Adil foretold in the prophecy of Jaya Baya (pp.103ff). This millenarianism, enunciated through complex word-play and *wayang*, was but a part of the Embah Wali experience, an experience Suwandi first encountered as "another Java, locked in time and place of yesteryear" (p.3). Nonetheless the curious assemblies held in his compound in the tumultuous early 1970s, where some *wong cilik* sought supplication whilst others simply danced, reflected the inner turmoil of Indonesian society at the time (pp.109-38). That Embah Wali's symbolic power was an alternative source of direction to the authoritarian state was most clearly demonstrated in a ceremony to complete a bridge spanning the two halves of Lively Rock in 1980 (pp.128-38). With the more stable years of Suharto's rule, the Embah Wali phenomenon faded, hastened by the destruction of the bridge and the death of the sultan in 1987. With Embah Wali's own death in 1990, Lively Rock became a disputed inheritance, and Suwandi felt able to transform his thesis into a book.

As a book there is much to enlighten, although one is distracted at times by needless repetition. But this is of minor concern. Rather, I am interested in the historicity of Suwandi's approach. In his foreword, Jim Fox declares that this is "a work of anthropology that speaks to the history of Java" (p.vii), and observes that it is appropriate that it should find publication in the same series as Sartono Kartodirdjo's *Peasants' Revolt in Banten*. (Sartono had once called for studies of millenarian movements on Java.) Certainly Suwandi has connected Embah Wali with the popular Javanese desire for justice as manifested in the person of the Ratu Adil. However the historical parallels he invokes require more cautious interpretation. As an example, Suwandi refers to the movement led by a certain Kiai Jasmani in 1888, which also invoked the prophecy of Jaya Baya, and with due reference to Sartono, Suwandi remarks on the anti-Dutch and anti-Chinese sentiment proclaimed by its leaders (p.27). In this there are parallels to Embah Wali's critique of colonialism. However Jasmani's movement, and probably the version of the Jaya Baya prophecy in circulation, was different. An examination of the *mailrapporten* of the time suggests that Jasmani's movement was focused in Islamic terms, terms that Embah Wali would have rejected personally, but which might have been applied by his many regular visitors.[1]

It would have been interesting for Suwandi to have developed the material on local Muslims beyond the footnotes of this work, as when Embah Wali is described by the men of the mosque as "the ugly old man" (p.147). Beyond questions of local Muslim attitudes to Embah Wali, the underlying "Indic" mode of Javanese civilization emphasized by Suwandi needs to be questioned with greater rigour (pp.142–42). Like Embah Wali, Suwandi seems to have screened out Islam as one more foreign accretion on the "true" Javanese culture. But this is of course a personal bias, and *A Quest for Justice* remains an interesting and personal sketch of the genesis and decline of a popular figure in East Java. Doubtless several similar figures have arisen in the most recent turmoil of post-Suharto Indonesia. As Suwandi noted in his book, Embah Wali was but one holy man among many around Blitar. <

**reference**

- Suwandi, Raharjo, *A Quest for Justice: The millenary aspirations of a contemporary Javanese wali*. (Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 182). Leiden:KITLV Press (2000), pp. x + 229, ISBN 90-6718-134-X., ill.

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Note >

1 See Mailrapporten van 1888, nos. 597, 664, 728 and 740.