

Nurfadzilah Yahaya, *Fluid Jurisdictions: Colonial Law and Arabs in Southeast Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020. Pp. xi, 241. \$49.95 hardcover (ISBN 9781501750878). doi:10.1017/S0738248021000353

In recent years, legal historians have witnessed a spate of publications on questions of law, empire, and mobility around the Indian Ocean. Works by a number of historians have, from different vantage points, asked how one might think of histories of law and the circulation of legal ideas in broad trans-regional spaces. One might consider Nurfadzilah Yahaya's *Fluid Jurisdictions* a new addition to that the literature, but this would discount the active role that Yahaya has played in shaping the conversation from its outset. Although this is her first book, it is one that bears the imprint of her long engagement with the discussion on law in transregional spaces.

The setting that Yahaya's analysis unfolds in, Southeast Asia, is a felicitous one for the legal historian. Its arms stretch in many directions: the region is home to diasporic communities from around the South China Seas, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea; it is the latter that takes up most of Yahaya's attention. Southeast Asia is also a site of many colonial pasts: of Arab settlement, and of Dutch and British colonization. And as Yahaya admirably lays out in her introduction, it is a space that is teeming with law, and layered with legal histories.

A thick thread that runs through the book reads law as framework for governance, a common theme in work on colonial law. Across a few chapters of the book—principally Chapters 1, 3, and 5—Yahaya maps out the development of different categories of legal thought, classification, and governance that emerged out of British and Dutch colonial rule in Southeast Asia. As colonial authorities articulated juridical categories like “Arab,” “Native,” “Foreign Oriental,” and even “Islamic law” itself, Arab litigants played on their legal and bureaucratic boundaries. Yahaya's ability to read between different colonial sources, both Dutch and English, allows her to think comparatively. This allows her to show how similar strategies in different colonies could produce remarkably different outcomes. If the story of governance by law is an old one, her comparative analysis breathes new insights into it.

But rather than let the story of law in Southeast Asia emerge simply as one of governance, Yahaya interweaves chapters on legal practice among the diasporic Arabs of the region. Chapters 2, 4, and 6 examine the strategies that Arabs mobilized in their engagement with a burgeoning colonial legal system. Part of this involved forum shopping, a strategy and historical phenomenon with which legal historians are now deeply familiar. But Yahaya moves beyond forum shopping, showing how legal actors in Southeast Asia mobilized different forms of legal writing to insert themselves into and route

themselves around the colonial legal bureaucracy. In a particularly revealing Chapter 2 on powers of attorney, she explores how Arabs in Southeast Asia used those instruments to carve out vectors of legal connection across oceans and through multiple jurisdictions, ones that carried forward across multiple generations. In Chapter 4, she draws attention to how Arabs used petitions to direct colonial officials' attention to the inadequacies of colonial variations on Islamic law that were being administered in courts. Yahaya uses these petitions to point out how, in doing so, they simultaneously sought to create separate jurisdictions for themselves while appealing to power of the colonial state to grant those accommodations. In Chapter 6, she explores the contests over trusts and estates, highlighting the work that translators and other legal intermediaries did in facilitating Arabs' engagement with the legal system—sometimes much to the chagrin of colonial officials. On and through paperwork, the Arabs of Southeast Asia drew up a chessboard on which they could engage with colonial legal authority.

Yet despite the legal posturing and positioning that Arabs in Southeast Asia engaged in, Yahaya concludes that they were unable to leave a significant imprint on the colonial administration of law in the region. Drawing on the writings of Brinkley Messick, she argues that although Arabs were able to make a dent in the legal *archive* through their manipulation of documents, they were ultimately unable to shape the legal *library*—the body of legal doctrine or thought that gave expression to legal governance. Although the distinction she makes is a useful one, it is difficult to shake the feeling that her library may be half empty: whether the maneuverings of Arabs in Southeast Asia were able to shape the Arabic legal library (to say nothing of the Malay or the Javanese) is a question that is still on the table. It may be that the genres of legal writing that Yahaya relies on tend to obscure doctrinal changes, or that reflections on doctrinal change appear in different genres altogether; the *fatwa* (legal responses) literature can often be more robust in this regard than *fiqh*, which is usually more constrained in its conventions. In any case, one of the promises of an oceanic legal history is that it allows us to speak not just of non-Europeans as acting strategically within juridical frameworks established by Europeans, but as people who actively thought about those changes and strategies, and their implications.

Whether one has a complete library or not, this is a marvelous book that draws on multiple languages and archives to write a history that cuts across empires, colonies, and other political formations. Yahaya's work showcases her broad reading of the histories of law and of empire, and asks us to think more closely about what these might look like in fluid legal spaces like those of Southeast Asia. More importantly, she asks us to read more closely the different convergences and entanglements between diasporic Arabs and the colonial legal system. She writes clearly and with admirable economy; she tells this wide-ranging story in just 171 pages of prose. For that alone

she deserves praise. But, truth be told, there is much more to celebrate in her book, which will undoubtedly reshape the nature of the conversation on colonial Southeast Asia for many years to come, as historians take up her invitation to bring the documentary practices of mobile legal actors in conversation with the histories of Indian Ocean empires.

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Christopher Tomlins, *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. 352. \$29.95 hardcover (ISBN 9780691198668).

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Nat Turner is best known for his role in a singular event. In the summer of 1831, Turner convinced a number of other enslaved people to wage war against the white slaveholders of Southampton County, Virginia. In a single day of fierce and explosive violence, Turner and his fellow rebels killed some fifty-five white men, women, and children. After a series of confrontations with white militias, Turner escaped and went into hiding for more than 2 months. When finally captured, Turner was incarcerated, tried, and executed on charges of conspiracy and insurrection.

Christopher Tomlins's *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History* complicates the "event" of Nat Turner's uprising as a clear and defined historical moment. Instead, Tomlins challenges us to consider the creation of Nat Turner in life, death, and memory as a historical phenomenon through which to explore larger questions about evidence, discovery, and conjecture. For nearly two centuries, Turner's story has been the subject of much projection and speculation. Writers, artists, and scholars have cast him as an unhinged lunatic, a freedom fighter, a brilliant misanthrope, and a messianic warrior. Because only fragments of evidence survive, he often emerges as the creation of contemporary imaginations more than as a product of the past. Turner's role in a violent attack against slavery has made him a particularly seductive flashpoint for such creative license, drawing him into the present when scholars grapple with questions of racial justice, violent protest, and organized resistance in our modern age.

In the Matter of Nat Turner explores these tensions between history and the present, between archival research and speculation, and between what is documented and knowable and that which is fragmentary and elusive. Tomlins