

## **Stories to tell**

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**By LUCIEN DE GUISE**

Much of history is written in images. We must be thankful that only recently has some of it been written in tweets. Could there be anything more confusing for historians of the future than the semi-literate ramblings relayed from @realDonaldTrump? They will find remarkably few visual milestones after a year of verbal surprises from the new regime. Aerial photographs of small crowds at the presidential investiture or fire engine-level photographs of a president hiding from the storm-struck people of Texas? Plenty of those but not much else.

Malaysia has a happily different story to look at. Or at least it had for the new nation's proudest moment, in 1957. The Merdeka events are known to everyone in this country, mainly from just one photograph. The image of Tunku Abdul Rahman at Stadium Merdeka is ubiquitous, as is the somewhat scratchy sound and video recording.

Most of our knowledge of the occasion comes from one moment and one camera angle. It should make us wonder more about how we see history. Now that every happening, no matter how insignificant, is accompanied by smartphone coverage, there's no shortage of memories being made. But 60 years ago, it was a very different story.

Rulers from Negri Sembilan, Perak, Kelantan, Kedah, Pahang and the Yang di-Pertuan Agong witnessing history in the making.

We recently celebrated the birthday of Yang di-Pertuan Besar Negri Sembilan and what better time to ponder how impressions are formed. Most of what

we have seen of Merdeka relates to Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. But what about his namesake, Tuanku Abdul Rahman? The first Supreme Head of State or Yang di-Pertuan Agong of Malaya of the Federation of Malaya, eighth Yang di-Pertuan Besar of Seri Menanti and second Yang di-Pertuan Besar of modern Negri Sembilan.

The head of the nation who was born on Aug 31, 1957 is rarely seen anywhere except banknotes. Now that Bank

Negara Malaysia has issued a commemorative banknote with every King of Malaysia depicted on it, we can no longer say that Tuanku Abdul Rahman's face is the only one to have appeared on Malaysian currency.

Although the deceased first Agong has been on every banknote for 50 years, his image is almost invisible elsewhere, especially when compared with Tunku's. The first prime minister did get his face on the independent nation's first postage stamp, but the first Agong at least got a better deal by being on the banknotes.

This highly specific royal exposure hasn't altered the far-from-trending profile of the monarch. In an exhibition at the Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery, it is the face and jaunty songkok of Tunku rather than Tuanku and his tengkelok that are seen everywhere.

The first stamp from independent Malaya.

Even that great record of royalty, the commemorative ceramic plate, is overwhelmingly adorned with the architect of independence and not the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong. Around the world it is usually royals who get the superior

merchandising. Prince Charles and Diana memorabilia, for example, outnumbered anything with Tony and Cherie Blair by more than a thousand to one.

The image of Tunku with his raised fist has acquired an importance so great, I'm prepared to wheel out my least favourite cliché, "iconic", to describe it. Everywhere from paintings to textbooks, there he is, endlessly recycled. Tuanku Abdul Rahman, on the other hand, sits almost unrecognisable on a platform next to two heavily plumed Brits whose names are unknown to 99 per cent of the Malaysian public and probably 100 per cent of the British public.

Procession of rulers into Stadium Merdeka on the eve of Merdeka.

## FLAVOUR OF TIME

Such is the power of images. When it comes to providing the full flavour of the time, they can be misleading. Much better to see the whole picture in the exhibition at the BNM Museum and Art Gallery: "Malaysia: 60 Somethings". To understand the path to independence, there can be no better introduction than an enormous photo of the full lineup of state rulers from 1948 seated outside what is now Carcosa Seri Negara. There are no politicians present, just the grandfathers of the present sultans of Malaysia, accompanied by forgotten British functionaries and military personnel.

UMNO Youth riding motorcycles ushering Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra along the stretch of roads from the Batu Berendam Airport until Padang Banda Hilir, Malacca on Feb 20,1956.

This was a prelude to Merdeka that is almost never seen.

Other imagery can provide an equally powerful impression of a nation in the making. Who remembers Zainal Alam? His 1955 song encouraging a strong turnout at the first Malayan election is as memorable as most of P. Ramlee's output, but it's another early view of independence that has been submerged beneath the well-worn views of Merdeka Stadium two years later. In reality, there might even have been members of the audience who wondered whether Tunku's cries of Merdeka! were ever going to end.

Federation of Malaya.

They would have perked up a little when the national anthem happened; this remains a genuinely stirring piece of music and at least the video broadcast at the time showed the Agong with a benign smile and a steady salute. The whole story of Negaraku is explained in the exhibition, and once again there is the mark of Tunku Abdul Rahman all over it.

It is fair that Tunku has received all the attention that he has. It's a shame though that his memorial, just across the road from the BNM Museum and Art Gallery, hasn't. The building is an astonishing repository of artefacts that relate to the single-minded pursuit of Merdeka. To see history from many viewpoints it is useful to look at things as well as

photos. There are 60 carefully selected artefacts in “Malaysia: 60 Somethings”, and every one tells a story. Only until next month though.

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