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Colonialism and Toponyms in Singapore

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Abstract: Place names do not simply refer to physical locations. They are linguistic symbols full of connotative meaning, carrying a range of cognitive, social, historical, cultural, and ideological significance. Naming (or renaming) has been a key aspect of the colonisation process, through which the colonisers have used language to assert their power over the colonised. Singapore has a very rich history, which includes pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. This paper examines selected toponymic changes in Singapore that occurred against the backdrop of colonialism. Given Singapore's colonial past, as well as its multilingual and multicultural context, the paper aims to provide a thorough and insightful documentation of selected toponymic changes, while uncovering the underlying reasons that motivated them. Four place names (as they are currently known) are investigated in this paper: *Jalan Besar*, *Havelock Road*, *Middle Road*, and the *Padang*. An analysis of historical data revealed that toponymic changes associated with these places during colonial rule mostly reflected the asymmetrical power relationship between the colonisers and the colonised. The paper also highlights the historical processes in which naming deviated from such expectations.

1. Introduction

Names are a way of communicating cognitively, emotionally, ideologically, and socially [1] (p. 99). Nyström [2] (p. 40) adds, "Names are not only practical labels, instead they are packed with meaning in many senses." Toponyms (or place names) are not simple referring expressions of a physical location. Instead, they are "brimful" of connotative meaning and both social and cultural significance [1] (p. 99) [2,3] (p. 143). More than a means for attaching meaning to one's surrounding, place names also "act as sources of information, facilitate communication, help us to know and serve as repositories of values" [4] (p. 655). Basso [3] even goes as far as suggesting that they are "among the most highly charged and richly evocative" of linguistic symbols, as they elicit an "enormous range of mental and emotional associations" (p. 144), including that related to history and social activities.

Given their symbolism, place names are a means for groups to "assert ownership, legitimize conquest, and flaunt control" [5] (p. 121). Power lies in the hands of those who have the right to name and, by extension, decide what is commemorated and ignored, what is remembered and forgotten. Therefore, naming, or renaming, is an essential part of the colonisation process that reflects the asymmetrical power relationship between the colonisers and the colonised.

Singapore has a rich history that includes pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Considering Singapore's colonial past, as well as its multilingual and multicultural context, this paper aims to provide a thorough and insightful documentation of selected toponymic changes, while uncovering the underlying reasons that motivated them. Furthermore, as Helleland [1] (p. 102) notes, place names are "mirrors reflecting various scenarios and activities of the past", an essential part of a

group's cultural heritage that ties the past to the present. This paper also seeks to contribute to the growing research and documentation of the history of Singapore.

The paper begins with a discussion on toponymy and colonialism, particularly that with regards to Singapore. Following this is a detailed documentation of four selected toponyms—*Jalan Besar*, *Havelock Road*, *Middle Road*, and the *Padang*—based on the analysis of historical data, including that of maps of colonial Singapore.

2. Place Names

Place names have a symbolic role in representing abstract or concrete national, as well as local, sentiments and goals [4] (p. 653). Thus, they are often used as a means to reinforce political ideologies [6]. According to Saparov [7], place naming, as top-down discourse, is an important vehicle for a state's or nation's ideological system:

> The conscious use of place-names by a state can be seen as an instrument to preserve the unity and uniqueness of the nation; to enforce in the national consciousness its moral right to inhabit a particular territory; to protect its land from the territorial claims of its neighbours; or to justify its own territorial claims. A recreated or artificially created place-name landscape is a symbolic part of national identity. (p. 180)

Therefore, naming is never a "neutral" exercise [8] (p. 89). Instead, it is often used as a means to assert an asymmetrical power relationship, including that between the colonisers and the colonised. As Monmonier [5] (p. 121) notes, place names "possess a symbolic power that can inflame as well as claim." As Ashcroft et al. [9] put it, "'Naming' becomes a primary colonising process because it appropriates, defines, captures the place in language" (pp. 391, 392). Additionally, it functions as a "mechanism for naturalising hegemonic power structures" [10] (p. 457).

Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu [10] (p. 457) point out that the process of renaming was often carried out in for the purpose of "removing signs of earlier regimes and honouring a new set of heroes, campaigns and causes". This was evident in early Singapore, which had witnessed a number of toponymic changes when power was shifted into the hands of the British [11]. Yeoh [12] (p. 300) summarised colonial Singapore place names as "honouring the perceptions and priorities of powerful European namers rather than those of the people living in the places so named".

Colonial place names mostly belonged to one of three categories. The first category consisted of street names, such as *Arab Street* in the Muslim quarter, that were used by colonial administrators as markers, seeking to order and divide the numerically dominant colonised groups into "recognisable containers" in order to prevent united resistance against them [12] (p. 300). The second category consisted of place names that sought to commemorate European personages, such as public servants (e.g., *Clarke Quay*, *MacPherson Road*), "deserving" citizens (e.g., *Farrer Road*, named after a municipal president), and British royalty (e.g., *Alexandra Park*, *Queensway*) [12] (p. 300).

Place names that were based on places associated with the British empire, as well as Britain itself, made up the final category [12] (p. 300). This included battle places from the First World War (WWI), such as *Flanders Square* and *Somme Road*. Other toponyms referred to places within Britain so starkly different from their locality that it suggested that settlers were seeking to "escape the impress of the tropics and native culture and symbolically exist in British settings" [13] (p. 316). For example, names such as *Devonshire Road* and *Chatsworth Road* were highly detached from their local environment, and they instead "conjured the idyllic imagery of the English countryside" [13] (p. 315). The fact that these place names reflect the cultural assumption of the settler only highlighted the cultural imperialism that accompanies colonisation, thereby reinforcing the superior status of the colonisers.

Although these places were officially named by municipal committees, their official place names were often ignored by the natives. In fact, most residents were aware of the fact that the various ethnic communities of the native population had place names that differed greatly from the Europeans [14]

(p. 49) [15]. Some of these place names, as well as their toponymic changes, will be discussed in the next section.

3. Selected Toponymic Changes in Singapore

This study was conducted in a mixture of archival research and analysing secondary data. The National Archives of Singapore (https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline) has an extensive collection of maps and most of them are viewable online, whereas some need a request to view to be submitted.

In this section, the paper investigates four local place names—*Jalan Besar*, *Havelock Road*, *Middle Road*, and the *Padang* (see Figure 1). Besides documenting the official toponymic changes that had occurred over the different periods of Singapore's history, this article also looks at the toponyms various ethnic communities had used to refer to these places, as well as their origins. The following place names were selected by virtue of how they had either undergone noteworthy toponymic changes or demonstrated historical processes in which naming deviated from the norm of that period. These toponyms have not been investigated in great detail to date. The aim of this study, therefore, is to add to the growing body of research on the toponymic practices in post-colonial Singapore (see [11,15,16]).
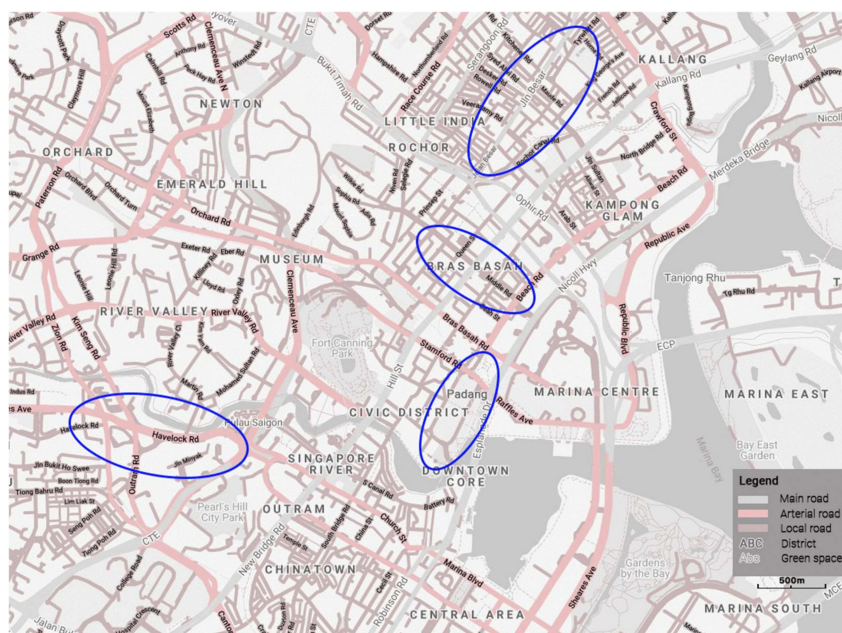

Figure 1. Singapore town centre with the locations of the toponyms investigated (adapted from google.com/maps).

3.1. Jalan Besar

Jalan Besar (Figure 2), which translates to "big and wide (besar) road (jalan)", is the Malay name of what is now a one-way road that links *Rochor Canal Road* and *Lavender Street*.

The interesting aspect of this name is that the Malay name, *Jalan Besar*, remained unchanged over the years. This is remarkable in view of the many streets within the area that were named after WWI heroes. The Municipal Committee, consisting of British, Chinese, and Indian members, decided on August 5, 1926 to name the streets in the area to commemorate 13 British generals and admirals: *Allenby*, *Beatty*, *Cavan*, *French*, *Hamilton*, *Horne*, *Jellicoe*, *Kitchener*, *Maude*, *Milne*, *Plumer*, *Townsend*, and *Tyrwhitt* [17] (p. 29). Savage and Yeoh [15] also noted that there were two streets named after French generals, *Foch* and *Petain*, as well as several others that reflected WWI battle places such as *Flanders*, *Somme*, and *Verdon*.

The origin of this road is firmly entangled with the fortunes of the early agricultural endeavours in the area. Up until the late 1840s, *Jalan Besar* was a swampland; this was before the district's northern

part, which had drier land, was transformed for agricultural purposes [18] (pp. 19, 20). Thangamma Karthigesu [19] states that, in the earlier half of the 1800s, European settlers had sought to develop the area for the growth of crash crops, since the climate was thought to be ideal. This included Joseph Balestier, the very first American consul to Singapore, who opened a sugar cane estate in the area, as well as others who started nutmeg plantations. Balestier is commemorated by the road that bears his name still, *Balestier Road*. Unfortunately, these ventures failed due to high tariffs and disease. The most successful venture was that by brothers Richard Owen Norris and George Norris, who purchased land in the area 1830s and developed plantations for betel nut, nipah palm, and tropical fruit such as mangosteen. It was during this time that a road was constructed through the swampy estate, connecting Rochor Canal to the north.

Figure 2. Modern-day *Jalan Besar* (Terence Ong, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jalan_Besar_2.JPG).

The road was partially completed by the late 1836 [20] and appeared for the first time on a map from about 1845 [21]. Over time, the district was further expanded and saw higher traffic between its centre and peripheries, leading to the extension of the road further north to Lavender Street [19]. It was at this time that it got its official name, *Jalan Besar*. The road was only officially opened in 1883 [22] (p. 194).

Although the origin of its Malay name is not clear, it is possibly linked to the fact that *Jalan Besar* was the first "major" road in *Kampong Kapor* (also known as *Kampong Kapur*) [22] (p. 194). The fact that it was a "major" road could have been the reason why it was named with the Malay word for "big and wide" (besar).

The road was known quite differently by the Hokkien and Cantonese, who referred to it as *Kam-kong ka-poh thai-tu long* and *Kam-pong ka-pok thong-chü fong* (公加薄割猪廊), respectively. These translate as "the slaughter-pig depot in *Kampong Kapor*", referring to the municipal abattoirs located in the area [23] (pp. 96, 97) [24] (pp. 199, 207).

Not only did *Jalan Besar* refer to the road that ran parallel to the older *Serangoon Road*, it also referred to the district bounded by the latter, *Lavender Street* and the *Rochor Canal* [25,26] (p. 259). According to [25] (p. 259), the district was a "multicultural melting pot" as it attracted people of various ethnicities, especially since it was located between the Malay and Indian enclaves *Kampong Glam* and *Little India*.

3.2. Havelock Road

Havelock Road (Figure 3) was named by the Municipal Commissioners to commemorate a British hero, that is, Major General Henry Havelock (1795–1857). Havelock had led a force that successfully

captured Lucknow during the 1857 Indian Rebellion, but he subsequently died from dysentery [22] (p. 172). The road was officially named in March 1858 [15].

Figure 3. Modern-day *Havelock Rd* (Terence Ong, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Havelock _Road_2.JPG).

According to Savage and Yeoh [15], *Havelock Road* was formerly known as *Magazine Road*. The latter having derived its name from the Government Powder Magazine that was located in the vicinity [27,28]. However, it appears that *Magazine Road* in fact referred to a road that ran perpendicular to *Havelock Road* (e.g., see [28]). This suggests that *Havelock Road* and *Magazine Road* were two separate toponyms that referred to two different (but connected) roads. This is further supported by the fact that no indigenous name of the former, which will be discussed below, make any reference to the magazine, especially since these names are usually derived from prominent landmarks in the area.

It seems more likely that *Havelock Road* was one of the roads that were added around Pearls Hill [29] and connected the Government Powder Magazine to the port area [27].

Although the road was given various names by the different ethnic groups, these odonyms were similarly reflective of either significant landmarks or activity that had taken place in the area. *Havelock Road* was associated with light industries and the manufacturing of arrack. The latter was evident in some of its given names in Tamil and Malay. The road was called *Masak Ârak Sadakku* (Tamil) and *Jalan Masak Arak* (Malay), meaning the street where arrack is distilled [14,15]. The Chinese referred to *Havelock Road* as *chiu long lo* (jǐu láng lù/Chiu Long Lo) (酒廊路), which translates as "spirits shed street" [14] (p. 55) [15] (p. 248). The Hokkien and Cantonese names were *Chiu-long lai* and *Tsau-long noi* (酒廊内), meaning "within the spirit depot (district)" [23] (pp. 90, 91) [24] (pp. 196, 212).

Havelock Road was also called *Hong lim pa-sat* (芳林巴), meaning "Hong Lim Bazaar" in Hokkien [23] (pp. 90, 91) [24] (p. 198). According to [23] (pp. 90, 91), this referred to the *Cheang Hong Lim Market* set up along the road by the late Cheng Hong Lim in 1882. The market was supposedly located near the police station, where stones were broken for use on the roads, giving rise to another Hokkien name *Kong chioh-a* (石仔), meaning "stone-breaking street".

In addition, the Cantonese also referred to the road as *Pak-khei-lun chik kai* (北其直街), or "Pickering strait street", as *Havelock Road* runs into *Pickering Street*, named after Singapore's first Chinese Protectorate, William A. Pickering [23] (pp. 90, 91) [15].

3.3. Middle Road

There are two possible explanations for how *Middle Road* (Figure 4) derived its name—the road was located at the midpoint between the Sultan's residential compounds and the Government Area, as well as between the *Rochor River* and the *Singapore River* [30] (p. 5). The road first appeared in G. D. Coleman's "Map of the Town and Environs of Singapore" [31]. Although it was first printed in 1836, the map was based on an actual survey conducted by Coleman earlier in 1829, suggesting that *Middle*

Road had existed from as early as 1829. One of the interesting aspects of *Middle Road* is the plethora of non-official names that refer to it.

Figure 4. Modern-day Middle Road (Terence Ong, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Middle_Road,_Singapore_2.JPG).

Middle Road cuts through the centre (in the north-south direction) of what Lieutenant Philip Jackson had designated as "European Town" in his Plan of the Town of Singapore [32]. According to Savage and Yeoh [15], the road formed a "demarcation line between the boundaries of White colonial civic town and the ethnic settlements". The area west of *Middle Road* (and north of the Singapore River) was mostly populated by Europeans, whereas the opposite side of the road saw several ethnic enclaves, such as the Malay settlement of *Kampong Glam*. It was also home to three major ethnic communities, that of the Jews, Hainanese, and Japanese.

The Jewish community occupied the northern sector of *Middle Road* from the 1920s to 1930s, which was located closer to *Selegie Road* and today's *Short Road* [15]. Although there is little information on how the Jewish community had referred to the road, detailed records of the Hainanese and Japanese names of *Middle Road* exist. To the Hainanese, the road was known as *Hainan yi jie*, or *Hainan First Street*, suggesting the significance of the road to the community [30] (p. 6). On the other hand, the pre-war Japanese community referred to *Middle Road* as *chuo dori,* which translates to "central street" [15]. Oral history interviews by Blackburn [33] revealed that, after the Japanese Occupation during the Second World War, the road was also referred to as *nihonjinkai* or "Japanese Street" and, less commonly, "Little Japan". The Japanese also referred to *Middle Road* as *Shitamachi*, meaning "downtown" [15]. These Japanese names eventually fell out of use when non-military Japanese residents were repatriated.

The road was also known as *Mang-ku-lu* by the Hokkiens and *Mong-kwo-lo* (芒路) by the Cantonese, both of which translate as "Bencoolen road" [23] (pp. 108, 109). This name can be traced to the fact that *Middle Road* was part of *Kampong Bencoolen* or "Bencoolen village", named after an area in southwestern *Sumatra* that was under British rule.

Other names of *Middle Road* originated from physical landmarks located in the area during the early 1900s. The Hokkien name *Sek-a-ni le-pai-tng pi* (色仔年拜堂), or "Beside the Portuguese church", refers to *St Joseph's Church*, which was built for the Portuguese community on twelve lots of land secured by Father Francisco da Silva Pinto e Maia in the early 1800s [23] (pp. 110, 111) [34].

One other Hokkien name is Sio-*po ang-mo phah-thih* (小坡毛打), meaning "European foundry of small Singapore" [14] (p. 58) or "small town European foundry" [15]. This makes reference to the foundry that was originally owned by the engineers and mechanics Messrs. Cazalas and then later by the Chinese firm Ban Hap Kongsi [14] (p. 58) [15]. The Hokkien and Cantonese names *Mang-ku-lu thih-chhio pi* and *Mong-kwo-lo thit chhong pin* (望久), which translate as "beside the iron-foundry in Bencoolen", make reference to the same foundry [23] (pp. 110, 111).

Middle Road was also known as *Hai-lam hue-kuan pi* and *Hoi-nam wui-kwun pin* (海南) in Hokkien and Cantonese, respectively [23] (pp. 110, 111) [24] (p. 197). This translated as "beside the Hailam (Hylam) Kongsi house", referring to the Hainanese "clan house" that was located on *Malabar Street* [23] (pp. 110, 111). The Hokkien and Cantonese also referred to the road as *Mang-ku-lu chhia-kuan* (望久) and *Mang-ku-lo shau-chhe kuk* (望久手局), meaning "Jinrikisha (or rickshaw) depot in Bencoolen" [23] (pp. 110, 111). Jinrikisha was Japanese for "rickshaw".

Additionally, *Middle Road* was a place name that was used for more than one location. Prior to 1977, *Middle Road* also referred to a British military area located in northern Singapore. At present, it is known as *Old Middle Road*. Ng [22] (p. 48) notes that such homonyms, whereby the same place names are used for more than one location, were common in England as well as in Singapore during the colonial rule. Locally, these homonyms were often found in British military areas and later renamed with the addition of the word "Old" at the beginning of the name [22] (p. 48). There seems to be no existing explanation accounting for this observation.

3.4. The Padang

Today, the *Padang* (Malay for "field") refers to the open field, located between the *Singapore Recreation Club* and the *Singapore Cricket Club*, that lies north of the *Singapore River* (Figure 5). Sir Stamford Raffles had instructed Major-General William Farquhar, then Resident and Commandant of Singapore, to reserve the area between the *Singapore River* and the *Old Lines* (an ancient wall built for defence) for public purposes before he left Singapore in early 1819 [15]. However, he returned later in October 1822 to find that his instructions had not been followed, with European merchants having established mercantile firms and godowns in the reserved space. He eventually designated the *Padang* as a new site for public buildings [15]. Three such structures were eventually built beside the field—a courthouse, government offices, and an English Church, as seen in Jackson's Raffles Town Plan from 1828 [32]. Furthermore, as Lai [35] (p. 56) notes, the public square was one of eight components identified by Robert Home [36] that made up the "Grand Model" of British colonial settlement.

Figure 5. *The Padang* (Terence Ong, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Middle_Road,_Singapore _2.JPG.

Over the years, the *Padang* has undergone toponymic changes. One of its earliest names was the *Plain*, when the area was originally zoned in 1820 as a playing field [37] (p. 95). It was then referred to as *Open Square* in the 1828 Jackson Plan. Savage and Yeoh [15] also note that the field was previously known as *Cantonment Plain*, having derived its name from the *Sepoy Cantonment* that was located in the vicinity. However, Jackson's town plan appears to suggest that the *Padang* (referred to as *Open Square* in the map) was a separate plot of land from *Cantonment Plain*, which was located slightly further

inland (see [32]). A "Native Cantonment" was situated within close proximity of the latter (northeast of the *Cantonment Plain* in [32]). Hence, it is possible that *Cantonment Plain* did not actually refer to the field that came to be known as the *Padang*.

Between the 1840s and 1940s, the *Padang* was referred to as the *Esplanade*. One of the earliest mentions of this name can be found in Thomson's 1844 map [38]. During this period, the *Esplanade* underwent two land reclamation efforts, one in 1843 and another in 1890. This resulted in a field much larger than what the *Open Square* was before. The field was known as *Toa-kok cheng chau-po* (大葛前草坡) in Hokkien, meaning "the grass field in front of the Supreme Court" [14] (p. 54) [23] (p. 86, 87) [24] (p. 205). This was a reference to the courthouse that faced the *Padang*. In Tamil, the *Esplanade was* called *January Thidal*, which translated as "January place", because of the annual sporting events held at the field on the first of January [14] (p. 54).

The field was also known as *Raffles Plain* between the 1890s and 1910s, as evidence by maps produced during that period (see [39,40]). According to [22] (p. 8), "Plain" was one of more than eighty generic elements used in Singapore place names. It is also interesting to note that it was mostly British maps that referred to the place as such, whereas local maps commonly used the name *Esplanade*.

The *Padang* was officially named so in 1907 [22] (p. 150) [15]. What is worth noting is the fact that the *Padang* was given a Malay name when it had an existing English or European name. This was unlike most English colonial toponyms adopted during that period. Savage and Yeoh [15] point out that this could be attributed to the fact that Raffles had come from *Bengkulu*, an Indonesian province, and was familiar with "the Malay notion of public space".

4. Conclusions

This paper aimed to examine selected toponymic changes that occurred against the backdrop of colonialism in early Singapore. Four place names—*Jalan Besar*, *Havelock Road*, *Middle Road*, and the *Padang*—a combination of a district, an open space, and two roads, were investigated and documented. The toponymic changes of *Havelock Road* were the most consistent with those described in existing research, since it was simply renamed to commemorate a British war hero. The other place names were more "interesting" in that they deviated from such expectations—*Jalan Besar* was a place name that remained unchanged even though many streets within the district were named in commemoration of European heroes and WWI battle places, *Middle Road* was not readily accepted by Singaporeans of the time and was referred to in a variety of nonofficial place names by the various ethnic communities that resided in the area, whereas the *Padang* was given a Malay name unlike most English or European toponyms adopted during the colonial period. It can also be noted that none of these places have undergone toponymic changes between the British's withdrawal and the present, suggesting that there has been little motivation to reclaim (and decolonise) local toponyms—something else worth exploring in future research.

Although past research has either sought to categorise and identify patterns in colonial toponyms or provide a compilation of all street names, it is the close analysis of individual toponyms that has shed light on the various of aspects of Singapore's history that ought to be recorded. This only goes to show how the study of local historical toponymics is still an expanding field and that it is important that more work is done to document the country's past.

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