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Slavery, Bondage and Dependency

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Review Article

Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia

ERIC S. CASIÑO

SLAVERY, BONDAGE AND DEPENDENCY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.
Edited by Anthony Reid. St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland
Press, 1983. xvi, 382 pages.

Western civilization has had the concept and practice of slavery over the centuries in varied forms — slavery in Greece and the Roman Empire, slave-trade by Spanish, Portuguese, English, and Dutch mercantile companies; slave labor in plantation in Latin and Anglo-Saxon America. Westerners who came to Southeast Asia, starting in the sixteenth century, to trade and to colonize, encountered and participated in forms of labor utilization and labor exchange which they named slavery. A question of historical interpretation therefore has arisen among scholars interested in the social, cultural, legal, and political history of Southeast Asia. Since the terms “slave” and “slavery” have western connotations, how can they be used to describe Southeast Asian social realities without serious distortion and the risk of misconstruing the real nature of Southeast Asian social order? Should one abandon the term with its load of moral implications and substitute for it other terms like bondage, dependency, or dyadic relations? In either case, the problem remains: how to interpret the facts of human bondage and commerce in humans, which can be richly documented for Southeast Asia from the 16th to the 19th century.

This is a basic agenda in this volume edited by Anthony Reid, a historian based at the Australian National University, who has specialized in the history of Southeast Asia. The volume's title is a good indicator of its substance — a series of historical analyses of the phenomenon of slavery, bondage, and dependency. Fifteen contributors provide us with close-up examinations of five societies in mainland Southeast Asia (Burma, Siam, Angkor, Malacca, and the Malay Peninsula); and five in Island Southeast Asia (Batavia, Bali, Sulawesi, Java, and the Philippines). The absence of Vietnamese cases is not out of ig-

norance or intentional omission, but a result of failure to find a suitable contributor when the conference, which resulted in this volume, was organized in 1980 at the Australian National University to discuss the topic of slavery.

Of the fifteen chapters in the book, three are generic discussions; the rest are case-like analyses of specific instances of slavery situations. The first general discussion is Reid's introductory essay, which is a very helpful overview of the several themes and issues addressed by the other authors. One of the key issues is the definition of slavery itself. As a framework for his general discussion, Reid uses H.J. Nieboer's definition: "We may define a slave in the ordinary sense of the word as a man who is the property of another, politically and socially at a lower level than the means of the people, and performing compulsory labor" (p. 2). One may note that this definition touches the aspects of property (saleable, transportable), hierarchy (subject, low class), and compulsory (punishable, killable) labor. The rise of wage labor ended the property and exchangeability aspect of slavery, while the rise of modern states and the spread of universalist religions (Islam, Christianity) helped weaken the legal and ritual distinction between free and non-free. The demand for labor, however, would remain even after slavery as a social practice had been abolished by law.

The second generic essay (chap. 7), also by Reid, introduces the contrasting notions of "closed" and "open" slave systems. Open systems are those found in the large urban commercial centers like Malacca, Manila, Batavia, and Aceh where a steady influx of fresh slaves were brought in, allowing second — and third — generation former slaves to eventually move out of the slave category and to disappear into the general working class of society. A closed system, found in more static societies, is "oriented primarily towards retaining the labour of slaves by reinforcing their distinctiveness from the dominant population" (p. 157). One important demographic aspect of slavery is that where land is plentiful and population scarce, control over men is the index to wealth and power. Capital was measured in human capital. This was true of premodern Southeast Asia whose population in the 16th and 17th centuries is estimated at only fifteen million people. Another demographic aspect is ethnicity. In an open system, the indigenous lower classes (belonging to the same ethnicity as the ruling classes) tend to move up in prestige in relation to outsiders brought in as slaves, hence the common equation between slavery and outsider status. Reid claims that this mechanism explains the transvaluation of the Roman term *servus* into serf, and the emergence of a new servile category lower than serf, namely *slave*, a name etymologically associated with non-Roman captives from the slavic regions of the Black Sea sold in the mediterranean capitals of Europe.

The third generic essay (chap. 8), by V. Matheson and M.B. Hooker, introduces us to Malay terms and categories of servitude. Here the reader's perspective shifts decisively from western to native, from observer to insider. By

analyzing a series of eleven Malay "histories" (e.g., *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, etc.) the authors allow us to perceive slaves in the context of local laws and customs, without the distracting connotations from western meanings. In contrast to a few English terms like slave and serf, Malay uses a bewildering series (close to a dozen) of terms for slave, such as *sakai*, *biduanda*, *hamba*, *sahaya*, *abdi*, *ulun*, *budak*, *orang berhutang*, etc. An important category distinction found in the native documents is between slaves (*hamba*) of private individuals, and slaves of the royalty (*hamba raja*). Another important piece of information is suggested by the term *orang berhutang* (*utang* — debt), which suggests indebtedness to be a primary cause of people falling into slavery. Reid sums up four major paths into bondage: (a) inheritance or sale; (b) capture in war; (c) judicial punishment (in lieu of fines); and (d) failure to meet debts (p. 158).

In the remaining chapters, instances of slavery system are discussed by the contributors in reference to particular regions of Southeast Asia or particular sets of documentary evidence used. Instead of my summarizing the cases individually, it would probably be more useful to the reader to see the general patterns presented under three logical headings: (1) sources of slaves; (2) the users of slaves, and (3) the position of slaves.

SOURCES OF SLAVES

In addition to slaves who are from within a given society and who have become so because of indebtedness, the chief source of slaves are captives from the hilltribes that surround the more powerful people of the lowlands and the coasts. The best example of slaving by capture is the account by I. Endicott in "The Effects of Slave Raiding on the Aborigines of the Malay Peninsula" (chap. 10). Throughout the nineteenth century, coastal Malays used to raid and enslave the "primitive" tribes of the Malay Peninsula, now generally known as *Orang Asli* (*Semang*, *Sakai*, *Senoi*, aboriginal Malay). Other Malays used the hilltribes as collectors of forest products, so it was to their interest to protect them from slave-raiders. In either case, the hilltribes served as source of exportable labor as well as exploitable subject peoples. This pattern is well recognized in most of Southeast Asia: "the hill peoples were the frequent objects of slave-raiding expeditions, carried out either by lowland peoples or by their own neighbors and enemies" (p. 343). In Angkor, much of slave work was done by "savages" who were captured from "the people of the mountainous wastelands" (p. 44). In Sulawesi, upland Torajans were captured and sold by powerful Makassarese and Buginese. (From other sources, we know that the Moros of the Philippines also captured and sold the indigenous peoples of Mindanao, Borneo, Palawan, and the Visayas). It is instructive to note that some of the terms for slave (*ata*, *sakai*) were also the names of certain hilltribes. Once captured slaves got to the lowlands and

coasts, they were reexported to high labor-demand areas. In Island Southeast Asia, slave traffic generally moved from east to west across the Indonesia archipelago and north to south down the Philippine island chain. The main slave entrepôts were the Makassar region of South Sulawesi, the Dutch-controlled areas of Batavia, and the British-controlled Straits Settlements in the Malay Peninsula.

The reader will find a good account of the Angkor situation in I. Mabbet's paper (chap. 2), and the Sulawesi situation in T. Bigalke's contribution (chap. 15).

THE USERS OF SLAVES

The urbanizing centers of Southeast Asia, whether under native rulers or under European colonial governments, created a demand for a huge amount of labor. These high-demand areas included not just port cities like Malacca, Aceh, Batavia, Manila, Sulu, or Magindanao, but even inland areas like the pepper-growing districts of Banjarmasin. Such labor demand naturally attracted workers who were, in a pre-wage era, generally slaves or bondsmen hired out by native potentates. Slaves worked at most of the heavy and important occupations of society. Reid sums up these occupations as "rice farmers, cash croppers, fishermen, seamen, construction workers, miners, urban labourers, craftsmen of all sorts, textile workers, entertainers, concubines, domestic servants, retailers, traders, scribes, interpreters, surgeons, soldiers and even trusted ministers" (p. 22). In precolonial Burma, as described by M. Aung-Thwin (chap. 3), the state divided slaves into those attached to the crown, those commended to Buddhist temples, and those bonded to private individuals. In labor-scarce situations, the state would discourage private slavery in order to increase corvée labor. Female slaves were important not only as concubines in royal courts but as sexual partners and wives in situations like that obtaining among Chinese merchants and foreign workers who came without women to Southeast Asian entrepôts, mines and plantations. European colonizers wittingly and unwittingly stimulated slave trade, for they were among the major "consumers" of slave labor. Europeans also initiated the suppression of slavery, but this was applied selectively in order not to undermine the main labor system. They prohibited chattel slavery, but tolerated debt-bondage which was acceptable because theoretically debt bondsmen could redeem themselves, unlike slaves. Naturally corvée labor was also excluded, although it was a form of state slavery.

The three chapters that discuss European involvement in slave-trading and slave-labor as a mode of production are those of J. Fox on Dutch Batavia (chap. 11), and H. Sutherland on Sulawesi (chap. 12), and A. van der Kraan on Bali (chap. 13).

THE POSITION OF SLAVES

Both native princes and European rulers recognized degrees of bondage, placing "true slaves" at the bottom of the scale. W.H. Scott's account of *oripun* in the Visayas and *alipin* in Luzon (chap. 6) points out the gradations and degrees of servitude among the natives of the Philippines. The distinction between *alipin sa gigilid* or slaves living in the master's home, and *alipin namamahay* or field slaves owning their own house (*bahay*), appears elsewhere in Southeast Asia, where they are known as "inside" or house slaves and "outside" or field slaves. In the case of Java, analyzed by M. Hoadley (chap. 4), native practice used a graded system of "slavery", "bondage", and "dependency." The liability to tax was used to mark those in the dependency category from the rest. In other cases, corvée labor divided those dependents attached to the state from those commended to temples. Native officials from Java used to hire out their bondsmen to the Dutch VOC officials to dig out canals in Batavia, giving rise to a special labor category, the *moddenaars* (from *modder* — mud). The Dutch also introduced a distinction between chained and unchained slaves, and created a *slavenkwartier* for both chained and unchained slaves, and *ambachtskwartier* for other bondsmen, workers, and craftsmen (p. 251). An important consideration for slave owners was the fear of slaves running away, which was reflected in the chaining practice as well as in the practice of importing slaves from overseas — India, Bengal, Arakan, Coromandel, Madagascar, and New Guinea. When the Europeans turned to local sources of slaves, they closely monitored the ethnicity of slaves as a measure against ethnic coalition and possible slave revolts. This partly explains the Dutch policy of not buying Javanese slaves for work in Batavia.

CONCLUSION

Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia is one of the few books in the last decade that has illuminated the lower depths of Southeast Asian traditional society. We have already said something about its substance, and a bit about its innovative methodology. We need to say something finally on its import. We agree with Reid that the category "slavery" is one of the most important terms of comparative social concept, like trade and war. In the tradition of western scholars, the notion of slavery was studied not just in the context of labor but of political freedom guaranteed by law. Given the fact that a slave system characterized both Southeast Asian and Western or Euro-American society in their historical evolution, Reid raises the thought-provoking question of whether the idea of political liberty could have arisen in Southeast Asia before the regional nationalists forged the concept of national independence against the entrenched colonial powers. He points out that the current terms for national independence — *Kalayaan* (Philippines),

Merdeka (Malaysia, Indonesia), and *Sri* (Thailand)—are borrowed from Sanskrit, (except for *Kalayaan*), and came relatively late into their abstract, ideological usage. Perhaps this is to be expected because the concept of personal freedom and national independence, as an essential element in the credo of the nationalist states, arose only in the first half of the 20th century with the concept of the nation-state. The region, for sure, had Hinduized kingdoms and Islamic sultanates in earlier centuries, but in these premodern formations, the principal mode of integration was vertical bonding. Slavery, as Reid himself says, was but one extreme variant of bonding people vertically to chiefs, masters, creditors, and patrons. The alternative to slavery was not individual liberty but other variants of vertical bonding. But this form of society had its own intrinsic values expressed in terms of indebtedness, loyalty, honor and charisma. To search for legally guaranteed and abstract concepts of individual liberty as the antithesis of slavery, is to fall once again into the trap of imposing western concepts of slavery-versus-liberty into the Southeast Asian forms of bondage. One contributor in this volume, M. Aung Thwin, in my opinion, has succeeded in putting his finger on the crux of this paradigmatic issue. His statement although meant for Burma, could apply to the premodern social systems of Southeast Asia and the issue of slavery versus liberty:

If the ultimate value in society rests on the political freedom of the individual, tyranny more than anything else becomes the greatest fear. The condition of the individual is, therefore, always measured by the amount of political freedom from tyranny he or she possesses. If however, the ultimate value in society rests on the stability of the group, then disorder more than tyranny becomes the greatest fear. The condition of the group is then always measured by the predominance of individualism (or disorder). If the latter principle represents the assumptions upon which Burmese [and other Southeast Asian policies] was founded — and so far, everything I have studied about Burma suggests that it does — then the amount of political freedom a *kyun* [slave or bonded person] possesses is not the relevant focus or feature of kyunship, but rather the extent to and way in which kyunship (obligation) preserves the stability of the group (order). (p. 67)