Cities and the slave trade in early-modern Southeast Asia

Slave raiding and slave trading were common features of the insular Southeast Asian world throughout pre-modern times. The importance of slavery and bonded labour in Southeast Asian societies can hardly be overrated. Manpower was attached to fellow-countrymen in various forms of dependency. The causes of bondage and enslavement could be very different – be it debts, punishment, starvation and war captivity, or slave raiding and trade. The relative weight of the several categories of slaves, serfs and other types of bondsmen is notoriously difficult to assess, the more so as they overlap and tend to blur. The majority of those bonded labourers were employed close to their place of origin. But there was also an interregional trade in slaves, who were transported over relatively large distances as saleable property. Kings, courtiers and smaller merchants all participated in the trafficking and transportation of slaves.

Cities were allegedly the most greedy consumers of human slaves. Following the general patterns of trade, most slave traffic over long distances ended up in one of the major emporia, whose bustling merchants’ crowds attracted large numbers of bonded labourers to satisfy their need for manpower and retinue. It is commonly assumed that in urban economies, where labour was scarce, bonded labour was the dominant source of manpower, and slaves made up a large part of the urban population. Most current literature on the early-modern city in Southeast Asia emphasize the importance of the slave trade in peopling the urban centres in the region. Thus, Clifford Sather’s (2004:1223) entry ‘Slavery’ in Southeast Asia; A historical encyclopaedia from Angkor Wat to East Timor reads: ‘The large cities of premodern Southeast Asia – Angkor, Ayudhya, Melaka, Aceh, and Makassar – required, in their precolonial heyday, a large labour force that was provided not by spontaneous migration and wage labour, but by the large-scale importation of slaves.’ This almost mirrors Anthony Reid’s (1983:13, 1988:133) assertion that precolonial cities were living off the labour of bonded men, women and children imported from the outside. Reid (1980:248) also asserts that slavery reached its peak during the heyday of ‘commercially oriented urban development’ in Southeast Asia, that is the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth century.
Quoting the French historian Marc Bloch, Reid states ‘the slave was everywhere’.

The assumption that Southeast Asian cities were largely filled with bought slaves is based upon two types of evidence, both more or less indirect. One is the fairly large corpus of European observations of Southeast Asian societies. They contain indications of the demographic size of cities, and give testimony of the existence of a brisk slave trade in the region. But it might be worthwhile to look more closely into the connection between urban demography and slave traffic.

A second type of evidence is formed by what might be called the colonial analogy. The issue of slavery and slave trade is closely connected to the discussion of the commercial dynamics in Southeast Asia, and therefore with the gradual establishment of European and particularly Dutch power in the archipelago. From the seventeenth century onwards, the Dutch East Indies Company fitted into the established pattern of slave trade in the region. Encountered by the shortage and dearness of hired labour, the Company quickly adopted pre-existing modes of labour recruitment. Gradually, its establishments, like the Asian emporia before them, became magnets to which the slave trade gravitated.

Indeed, there is much more information on slavery in colonial cities. Although it is tempting to see a continuous pattern of large-scale slave trade from precolonial into colonial times, this assumption might be flawed. The abundant evidence on the massive presence of slavery in colonial cities confronts us with several questions, with a relevance to our assessment of the nature of cities and slavery in precolonial and colonial Southeast Asia. In the first place, if slaves were so abundant in colonial establishments, how important were slaves to the urban economies of indigenous Asian polities? Second, to what extent should we pursue the analogy between ‘indigenous’ and ‘colonial’ cities? And third, what were the effects of the establishment of forts and towns by the Europeans on the pattern and volume of the slave trade in the world of the Indian Ocean and the Malay Archipelago?

Southeast Asian slave cities

The characterization of Southeast Asian urban centres as being demographically dependant on slave imports goes a long way. But attractive as the claim may be, it raises several questions, first of all about their empirical foundations, but also about the number and sort of slaves who assumedly populated the cities in such large droves. One obvious problem is the want of precise information. Much of the early evidence of large numbers of slaves in Southeast Asian societies comes from the Portuguese apothecary and traveller Tomé Pires, who visited the region in the 1510s. Unfortunately Pires is not very spe-