Social Organization

The inhabitants of these islands are not subjected to any law, king or lord... He who owns most slaves, and the strongest, can obtain anything he pleases... They recognize neither lord nor rule, and even their slaves are not under great subjection to their masters and lords, serving them only under certain conditions.
—Legazpi 1569: 34

Legazpi confronted in the central Philippines a more strikingly kingless society than most, and his bewilderment is perhaps extreme. Yet throughout Southeast Asia there was a combination of sharply stratified hierarchy with seeming looseness of political structure which would baffle European travellers, empire builders, and ethnographers for centuries. Kings of great power did arise within this framework, but they imposed their will on wide areas only by the force of remarkable personalities and the wealth of flourishing ports. The underlying pattern appears to have been one of descent groups constantly competing for power in the form of dependants. In this part of the world where land was abundant, buildings impermanent, and property insecure, it was in followers that power and wealth were primarily expressed.

Within these groups, descent was [usually] reckoned bilaterally in terms of the status of both father and mother, which provided one element of uncertainty about succession. Another was the sense that he who attracted followers must by definition be destined to rule. Although the ideology of a sacred line of succession from the ancestors was very strong, the flexibility of marriage, the frequency of adoption, and the reality of competition among potential successors made lineage in a genealogical sense not the most crucial part of the system.

What was crucial was the vertical bond of obligation between two individuals. The master provided protection and patronage and at times livelihood. The bondsman’s obligations varied with his status, but they would typically include assisting at feasts and other demonstrations of power, serving on voyages and military ventures, and labouring in the construction of boats, houses, and other buildings. Some bondsmen and bondswomen were acquired by inheritance, some as perquisites of office, some as gifts in marriage, while others were captured in battle or sought protection from an enemy. The most characteristic source of obligation to a master, however, was debt. At one extreme an inability to pay substantial debts or judicial fines could lead to sale as a slave. But even ordinary business relationships in which capital was advanced by one party imposed obligations on the other which went beyond the business in question. Similarly, a family which could not afford the expenses of the major ritual occasions that society believed essential—particularly marriage and death—had to acquire a patron or master to provide them. In many societies the difficulty of finding the bride-wealth a man needed to get married became a source of bondage, either to the father-in-law (brideservice) or to the payer of the bride-wealth.

In this way were built up large households or compounds in which everybody had some form of obligation to the head. It was not individual houses nor whole cities which typically surrounded themselves with a protective wall separating the loyal from the hostile, but the compounds of important people. Such lords, to use that term loosely, also had dependants scattered about the city and country. Their own strongholds, however, included close family, dependent relatives, slaves who might also act as concubines and bear children to the lord, and a variety of male and female followers. Within such establishments might be found people of such different statuses that we could call one a slave, another a debt-bondsman, a third a poor relative or adoptee; yet in the eyes of the society itself such distinctions were less important than that all belonged to a certain man or compound.

The best word to describe such a system might be “patriarchal,” were it not that women could also be heads of such descent groups and occupied important places within them. The master was in a sense the “father” of all, while slaves and subordinates were often imaged as children. If slaves could be sold, used as collateral for a loan, or confiscated by a ruler as a result of the death or defection of the master, so could children.

Warfare

Attempts to delineate “traditional” models of behaviour must always be treated with caution, and nowhere more than in dealing
with warfare. Military technology is the first to be borrowed, since the penalty for failing to do so is immediate and fatal. The age of commerce was one of particularly rapid changes, as the firearms which were transforming warfare and power relations in Europe began to do the same in Asia. Yet some social and environmental factors continued to influence Southeast Asian warfare over a very long term, even as the technology changed.

The perception of forest land as infinitely available and manpower as scarce ensured that competition was fundamentally over control of people. It was often status questions which gave rise to conflict, but the physical objective of the combatants was to seize people rather than territory. Both the constant small-scale raiding of the Philippines, eastern Indonesia, and upland regions everywhere, and the cumbersome encounters of great armies in the mainland states and Java were essentially aimed at increasing the human resources at the disposal of a chief or king. La Loubère [1691: 90] believed this was the reason Siamese armies were not very effective: “They busied themselves only in making slaves. If the Peguans, for example, do on one side invade the lands of Siam, the Siamese will at another place enter on the lands of Pegu, and both parties will carry away whole villages into captivity.”

The typical defensive response of the weaker party was therefore to escape capture by fading away into the forest and waiting for the invading force to tire of plunder and to depart. The lightness and impermanence of most urban structures and the portability of wealth kept in precious metals and cloth did not encourage a strategy of defending cities with stone walls, moats, and desperate last stands. Acehnese envoys to Turkey in the sixteenth century reportedly explained the absence of fortifications in their capital by stressing the bravery of Aceh’s warriors and the abundance of its elephants [Hikayat Aceh 1630: 165–66]; the Siamese explained the same phenomenon to Europeans by their fear that if they built forts they might lose them and not be able to retake them [La Loubère 1691: 91]. In reality, temporary flight made good sense in the conditions of Southeast Asia, though less so as urban populations grew and European patterns of warfare began to change the rules.

Even when great cities were attacked and seized, the defence was not stubborn and desperate except in the unusual case that a surrounding army cut off all means of retreat. The Dutch general Coen [1615: 119] was told that “the Pangeran of Banten fears no Portuguese, Spanish, Hollanders, or Englishmen, but only the [King of] Mataram. From the latter, he says, no one can flee, but for the others the whole mountains are sufficient for us; they cannot follow us there with their ships.” The river ports of eastern Sumatra, Malaya, or Borneo often shifted far inland in response to a seaborne attack. When an English party went to buy pepper at the once flourishing town of Indaragiri in Sumatra, they spent two days looking in vain for some trace of where it had been and then learned that the whole population had moved three days’ journey up the river in response to an Acehnese invasion six years earlier [Ivye 1634]. The most momentous single Southeast Asian setback, when the Portuguese captured the great port of Melaka in 1511, was initially seen by the defending Malays in the same light: “The king of Melaka... drew himself off from the city, a day’s journey, taking with him some of the Malay merchants and his captains and governors of the land... being of the opinion that Afonso Dalboquerque simply meant to rob the city and then leave it and sail away with the spoil” [Albuquerque 1557: 129].

It was the object of warfare to increase the available manpower, not to waste it in bloody pitched battles. Hence attention was paid primarily to mobilizing large and intimidating forces, catching the enemy off balance, and demonstrating by some initial success that the supernormal forces which decided such things were on one side’s side. “In all the countries of Below the Winds the peasantry and the army are one and the same and if the army suffers the country itself falls into ruin. Consequently, when the natives of this region wage war, they are extremely careful and the struggle is wholly confined to trickery and deception. They have no intention of killing each other or inflicting any great slaughter because if a general gained a real conquest, he would be shedding his own blood, so to speak” [Ibrahim 1688: 90].

Armies were raised by obliging the nobles and notables of the realm to bring their own men at their own expense, and these commanders were particularly reluctant to risk losing on the battlefield the manpower which was the key to their own position. When a Dutch admiral complained to his Malay ally, the ruler of Johor, about the latter’s reluctance to commit troops to battle, the sultan replied that “for him it was not like the Admiral who gave his men upkeep and wages so that they had to do whatever he said. But here each orangkaya or Nobleman had to bring a certain number of people, and each feared to lose his slaves, which are their only wealth” [Matelief 1608: 17]. Exactly the same point was made of Banten by Scott [1606: 142], Europeans, Turks, and Persians, accustomed to a much higher rate of casualties in Western warfare, were consistently struck by this reluctance to press on with a battle after the first men had fallen [Artieda 1573: 197; La Loubère 1691: 90]. The Abbé de Choisy [1687: 123]
thought that the Siamese, Burmese, and Laos made war “like angels,” firing into the air or the ground to scare their enemy rather than kill him, and attempting to round up populations and lead them off to their own territory rather than injuring them. Large numbers of people did die as a result of the famine, disease, and disruption brought about by war, but few on the battlefield. The greater ruthlessness to which warfare in the West had accustomed Europeans was undoubtedly a major reason why small numbers of them were able to obtain some crucial victories over superior Southeast Asian forces.

Southeast Asians, and in particular Indonesians from Aceh to the Moluccas, had a considerable reputation for individual bravery if not for military discipline. The indifference to death of the heroes of the wayang appears to have been a model for Javanese not only in combat but even in the bloody tournaments described by Ma Huan and others. These tournaments formed part of a careful ritual and physical preparation designed to produce the individual champion who could turn a battle by his demonstration of martial and spiritual skills. Because of the belief that warfare was a kind of trial by ordeal, in which cosmic forces determined which side was destined to prevail, the fall of a leader or champion usually brought a battle to an abrupt end [Sejarah Melayu 1612: 97, 123; Wales 1952: 103]. According to the Hikayat Banjar (432–37), the Islamization of Banjarmasin was effectively determined when opposing claimants to the throne decided on single combat to avoid a civil war. Two famous Siamese kings, Ram Kambeng and Naresuen, are especially remembered for gaining glorious victories through single combat on elephants with the enemy leader.

When the contestants were roughly evenly matched, war became a series of skirmishes and manoeuvres punctuated by individual combat. The two sides might erect temporary stockades within hailing distance of each other and engage in challenges and small skirmishes over an extended period. “There is a great deal of bravado but not much fighting” [Anderson 1826: 275]. Dampier [1697: 231; 1699: 100] witnessed two wars of this type—a civil war in Aceh in which thousands were mobilized on each side but no one evidently killed, and an ongoing series of skirmishes in Mindanao between the Sultan and the “Afrs” of the mountains. In the Moluccas this ceaseless skirmishing made it appear that “they are always waging war, they enjoy it; they live and support themselves by it” [Galvão 1544: 169]. On the Mainland, wars were usually larger-scale affairs involving the mobilization of thousands. Nevertheless, a Thai historian has calculated that Ayutthaya fought at least seventy documented wars during the 417 years of the dynasty [cited Battye 1974: 1].

For the Malay world the key element of attack was the amok. Used most frequently in the Malay chronicles as a verb (mengamok), it could mean simply to attack, but preeminently with a kris or sword in a furious charge designed to kill or scatter a number of the enemy even if one’s own life was forfeited in the process. If such a charge succeeded in wounding the opposing leader, it might be enough in itself to decide the battle. The amok of Java were especially renowned, according to Tomé Pires [1515: 266, cf. 176]: “The amokus are knights among them, men who resolve to die, and who go ahead with this resolution and die.” Even in the systematic formations of Balinese armies [see fig. 18], the attack would usually be commenced by amok specialists dressed in white as a symbol of their self-sacrifice [ENI II: 317]. Opium or cannabis was often used to inspire such a warrior to defy death [Pires 1515: 176; Fryke 1692: 48; Raffles 1817 I: 298], but probably this was only part of a lengthy ritual and spiritual preparation designed to induce a trance-like state of assumed invulnerability.

Southeast Asian chronicles and inscriptions were concerned to magnify the grandeur and charisma of rulers, and they therefore tended to attribute victory to supernatural rather than technical factors. Patani’s defeat of Palembang, for example, was attributed to the dautul [sacred kingship] of Sultan Manzur Shah [Hikayat Patani: 89]. Since power was seen as deriving from spiritual sources, it was generally believed that rulers and warriors achieved their success through ascetic and ritual preparation, meditation, magical charms, and their own god-given sanctity, as much as through the strength of their armies.

The Sejarah Melayu [1612: 71] explained one of the Malay victories over the Siamese in the fifteenth century by the demonstration of Malay powers of invulnerability before the Thai court, which immediately lost all courage for a fight. That story may be apocryphal, but we know that the Malays and especially the Makassarese enjoyed a similar reputation in Siam in the seventeenth century. A Persian envoy reported, “In general the science of mantras, spells and incantations is practised to a great extent in Siam, but no one surpasses these Makassars who put a special spell on their daggers” [Ibrahim 1688: 136].

Invulnerability to blades and bullets was considered the mark of a great warrior. In contests such as the great Acehnese civil war of the early eighteenth century both sides were considered to possess experts in this art who had become invulnerable (kebal) through the recitation of sacred formulas or the carrying on their person of an especially potent amulet, usually of metal. “The invulnerable Pang Peureuba
Fig. 18 Javanese literary notions of the battle array of Mataram in the seventeenth century. The feelers [14] represent special troops of the commander (senapati), perhaps analogous to amok fighters. The sovereign [4] is in the body of the crayfish, preceded by his sons and relatives [3], the commander [2], and the ministers [1]. Other numbers represent the troops of different nobles and officials.

was hit. His skin was as slippery as oil, so that one saw the bullets slide off” [Hikayat Pocut Muhamat: 229, cf. 249; Siegel 1979: 113, 137–38, 149; Wales 1952: 95, 133–34]. The Portuguese who encountered such a warrior on their way to Melaka in 1511 were not too far from the Malay mental world to relate how this Malay captain did not bleed from all the wounds they inflicted on him until they removed the bone amulet on his arm, “and when they took this off all his blood flowed away and he expired” [Albuquerque 1557: 61].

This belief in individual invulnerability, still alive today, should not be taken to mean that the technical skills of war were neglected in favour of the magical. No one forebore to equip himself with the best available weapons, including those of Chinese, Turkish, or European make, whenever these proved their efficacy.

The most important weapons of Southeast Asian warfare, the sword, dagger, and spear, were in the hands of everybody. No Javanese, Malay, or Makassarese was fully dressed without his kris (fig. 19). Rather than having a paid professional army, most kings relied upon the ability of courtiers to mobilize their followers for war whenever required. The physical basis of the power of monarchs was therefore fragile. Only by vigilance, charisma, good fortune, and usually ruthlessness could a great king maintain his hold on the aristocracy and thereby on the mass of their followers. Success in war created its own momentum for a king, since the captives and booty so acquired buttressed his power just as victory enhanced his charisma. For similar reasons, failure in war could see great states dissolve with remarkable speed.

Until the sixteenth century the technological advantages of rulers
over their subjects appear not to have been great. The king controlled elephants (in the Mainland and Sumatra), though these had greater psychological value than military effectiveness against a determined foe. His other great weapons were the war galleys which most major rulers kept near the palace under their own control, even if particular noblemen and villages were detailed to man each one.

Two further elements were introduced during the age of commerce which had profound results on the effectiveness of states against both foreigners and their own subjects. Cannon appear to have been introduced by Chinese, Gujaratis, and Turks in the fifteen century in the form of small bronze culverins, often highly ornate in workmanship but (like elephants) less likely to injure the enemy than to intimidate him through the suggestion of supernatural power. As more maneuverable cannon and muskets were introduced by Europeans and later manufactured in Southeast Asia, this factor tended to give rise to a small number of powerful kings able to monopolize the new technology in their domains.

The second factor was the growth of specialized mercenary forces, usually foreigners specially trained in the use of firearms. Southeast Asian states had always expected all to participate in warfare, including any foreign vessels temporarily in port. Foreign Gujarati, Malay, or Chinese vessels often played a significant part in deciding the outcome of some naval attack on a port. European trading companies exacted a higher price for such support, however. The most successful rulers of the period learned that the best way to utilize the professionalism of the European (and Japanese) soldiers in their midst was to pay adventurers and renegades as full-time mercenaries, much more dedicated to the business of killing than any earlier Southeast Asian forces.

The initial impact of these new factors must have been exaggerated by the importance of individual prowess and supernatural portents in Southeast Asian warfare. The advantage of surprise very quickly faded as the new methods were absorbed. Galvão (1544: 171) put the point nicely in relation to Maluku:

Formerly, upon seeing a man with a helmet, they said “There comes an iron head” and all of them ran away presuming that we were invincible and not subject to death. But at present they know that under that helmet there is a head that can be cut off, and a body that is not immortal. And seeing us fire muskets, they imagined that our mouths breathed out a deadly fire; and by hearing bombard shooting and the Portuguese being mentioned, pregnant women had a miscarriage because among them artillery was unknown nor had they any inkling of it. But for a long time now, they make war with us and do not hold us in much esteem, and all of them would have eaten us at one table if God had not assisted us miraculously.

To acquire the new weapons by purchase and eventually by manufacture was not difficult. More complex was the process of social and political change which new methods of warfare (and trade and production) set in train. This process transformed Southeast Asia rapidly, giving rise to states of unprecedented power. It transformed Europe even more rapidly, however, with results which would ultimately be fateful for Southeast Asia as for the rest of the world.

Labour Mobilization: Slavery and Obligation

At Achim [Aceh] every one is for selling himself. Some of the chief lords have not less than a thousand slaves, all principal merchants, who have a great number of slaves themselves. This is the true and rational origin of that mild law of slavery which obtains in some countries: and mild it ought to be, as founded on the free choice a man makes of a master, for his own benefit, which forms a mutual convention between the two parties.

(Montesquieu 1748: 239).

The importance of vertical bonding in Southeast Asia was influenced by three vital factors. First, control over manpower was seen as the vital index of power and status, since labour rather than land was identified as a scarce resource. As Scott (1606: 142) wrote of the Banten elite, “Their wealth lyeth altogether in Slaves, so that if their Slaves be sold, they are beggared.” Second, human transactions were generally expressed in monetary terms. Maritime commerce had for so many centuries penetrated their region that Southeast Asians appeared accustomed to thinking even of themselves as assets having a cash value. Third, there was a relatively low level of legal and financial security available from the state, so that both patrons and clients needed each other’s protection and support. One Chinese reported that the people of Melaka “say that it is better to have slaves than to have land, because slaves are a protection to their masters” [Hwang Chung 1537: 128]. These three conditions gave rise to a system of bonding based largely on debt, where loyalties were strong and intimate, yet at the same time transferable and even salable.

To early European traders attempting to hire labour in Southeast Asian ports the wage costs seemed unnaturally high. Table 3 shows prices traders reported paying for a day’s labour in various cities, expressed in terms of the cost of a day’s supply of rice in the same cities. The only figure which could be described as a subsistence wage is the lowest category appearing in Manguin’s list of Portuguese labour in Melaka, representing provisions for the slaves of the Portuguese
themselves. All other workers received at least ten times a subsistence wage and frequently far more.

The explanation of these rates is that there was no free wage labour to be had, except occasionally among either Chinese ("hard workers and very greedy for money"—Salazar 1590: 229) or other foreigners temporarily in port. Indigenous labour could only be rented from the owners, who evidently charged heavily for it. "It is their custom to rent slaves. They pay the slave a sum of money, which he gives to his master, and then they use the slave that day for whatever work they wish" [Ibrahim 1688: 177–78; cf. Dampier 1699: 94; Terwiel 1983: 124–25]. The Undang-undang Melaka [88–93, 162–23] contains many provisions for what happens when people "hire" [menggupah] or "borrow" [meminjam] slaves, but none for wage contracts. Even the offer of high wages did not attract "freemen" to do the job because manual labour was associated with servitude. "You will not find a native Malay, however poor he be, will lift on his own back his own things or those of another, however much he be paid for it. All their work is done by slaves" [Barros 1563 II, ii: 24; cf. Dampier 1699: 94; Scott 1606: 170–71].

Southeast Asian law codes acknowledged a number of paths by which a person could enter a state of bondage. These could be systematized as:

1. Inheriting the bondage of one’s parents
2. Sale into bondage by parents, husband, or oneself
3. Capture in war
4. Judicial punishment [or inability to pay fines]
5. Failure to meet debts.

Debts were by far the most common source of bondage, whether acquired through trading, inability to pay the bride-price in marriage, crop failure or other calamity, or gambling. Bondage can also be seen as the concept underlying all the other categories if the war captive is understood to owe his life in exchange for death on the battlefield. Even in modern times there has been a close association between debt and labour obligation in Southeast Asia, and a tendency on the part of employers to use advances rather than adequate wages to secure their labour force. In the precolonial economies the obligations attached to debt were legally and strictly enforced: "They never deny their debts. . . Whoever does not avow his debt and is caught is punished by death" [Galvão 1544: 126].

Montesquieu’s description (at the beginning of this section) of a
congenial slavery into which people voluntarily sold themselves was based on Dampier but might equally have been drawn from La Louvière (1691: 77) and a number of other European observers. It should serve as a warning against using the English word “slavery” without qualification. Most of the Southeast Asian terms which early European travellers translated as slave could in other circumstances be rendered as debtor, dependant, or subject. Although the salubility of the bondsman’s debts and obligations makes slave the closest European equivalent, slavery was never developed into an abstract legal category in contradistinction to the freedoms guaranteed by the state, as happened in Greece and Rome. There were Southeast Asian societies, especially in upland areas, which operated what I have called a “closed” system of slavery designed to retain a fixed pool of slave labour by emphasizing its ritual and legal subordination (Reid 1983: 161-63). For most groups, however, the boundary between slavery and other forms of bondage was porous and indistinct. The important question was to whom a man was bonded rather than the precise quality of that bondage. For general purposes, therefore, I use the broader term “bondsman,” reserving “slave” for those who were newly sold, captured, and transferred to private possession or for those within the closed systems.

Strong kings always sought to expand the numbers of subjects under their direct control and to limit the number of private bondsman, who were exempt from corvée obligations to the crown. Especially in Siam and Burma, the two strongest monarchies, all the population except nobles, their slaves, monks, and temple slaves were obliged to labour for the king for up to half of their time. To sell oneself to a wealthy aristocrat could therefore be quite advantageous, and the denunciation of this practice by successive kings indicates that many were taking advantage of it. The extent of private slavery was an index of the fluctuating degree of pluralism within the body politic (Lieberman 1984: 107-09, 163; Rabibhadana 1969: 110).

In the absence of free wage labour, bondage was the primary source of labour mobility. Typically it was the stronger and wealthier societies of the cities and the rice-growing lowlands which absorbed servile labour from among the stateless swidden cultivators or hunter-gatherers. Sometimes hill peoples sold the victims of their own internal warring; more often they were simply raided for slaves. The Cambodian capital at its height appears to have obtained its entire labour force by this means. “As slaves, one buys savages who perform this service. Those who have many slaves possess more than a hundred . . . only the poor have none at all. The savages are the people of the mountainous wastelands. They constitute a race apart” (Chou Ta-kuan 1297, 19). Similarly, the Malay population of the coastal lowlands of Malaya, Sumatra, and Borneo gradually absorbed animist hill peoples during the five centuries before 1960, by a mixture of raiding, tribute, and purchase, especially of children (Endicott 1983: 216-24; Anderson 1826: 297–99; Keppel 1846: 338–39).

In the maritime cities most of the servile labour came in through trade or conquest. Aceh brought thousands of captives back to its capital as a result of the conquests of Sultan Iskandar Muda in Malaya, just as the Thai and Burmese kings did by land. Melaka and Patani had a predominately Javanese labour force, most of which had come in as part of the following of wealthy Javanese traders. Slaves also came to these and other cities as one of the major items of trade. Since slave export was almost invariably linked with internal disunity, the stateless societies and microstates of eastern Indonesia, New Guinea, Bali, and Nias were consistently among the exporters. South Sulawesi exported many slaves both in the sixteenth century and the eighteenth, but not during the period (1600–68) when the whole peninsula was dominated by the strong state of Makassar. Around 1500 Java was the largest single exporter of slaves, perhaps as a result of the divisive wars of Islamization. Through the still Hindu ports of Sunda Kelapa and Balambangan, Java supplied much of the urban working class of the Malayan cities. Islamization created a major change in the nature of slave trading, since the shari‘a law forbade the sale or enslavement of fellow Muslims. Once Islam completed its conquest of Java in the sixteenth century, that island ceased to export its people. The major Muslim cities were thenceforth supplied with slaves from beyond the frontier of Islam. Aceh obtained its servile labour from Nias, southern India, and Arakan; Banten and Makassar from the Moluccas and Lesser Sunda Islands; Patani from Cambodia, Champa, and Borneo. Certain small sultanates, notably Sulu, Buton, and Tidore, began to make a profitable business of raiding for slaves in eastern Indonesia or the Philippines and marketing the human victims to the wealthy cities—or to the expanding seventeenth-century pepper estates of southern Borneo (Reid 1983: 31-32, 170).

Chou Ta-kuan’s description of the savage slaves of Angkor as a despised race, with whom no nonslave would cohabit, certainly referred to an exceptional and temporary situation in the cities. The first generation of imported or captured slaves must have occupied the bottom rung of the social ladder, but they appear to have been assimilated gradually into the dominant population as newer arrivals took their place at the bottom. Intermarriage seems to have been relatively
common, for there are numerous regulations about the status of the children of unions between slave and nonslave, even when the latter was the woman ([Undang-undang Melaka] 92–93; Morga 1609: 273; Adatrechtbundels XXXI: 183). Some slaves were formally freed in return for services or at the death of their masters. A Makassar law code provided for disputes which arose over deathbed testaments promising manumission ([Adatrechtbundels] XVII: 169–70). It was probably more common, however, for the slavery of captured or bought newcomers gradually to transform itself into a looser sort of dependency with the passage of generations and the process of assimilation into the dominant culture.

Although indigenous conceptions of bondage did not include a sharp antithesis between the categories of slave and free, the conditions of the age of commerce may have encouraged movement in that direction. This period was marked by an expanding urban culture, similar to that which gave rise to such an antithesis in the Greek city-states ([Anderson 1978: 22]). Merchants from diverse backgrounds needed legal safeguards for their slaves as property, in a way that was unnecessary in either the closed slave systems relying on shared cultural assumptions or in the agrarian autocracies. The constant influx of new captives and imports created a market situation which needed to be regulated. Moreover, many members of the slave-owning merchant class had strong roots in the Islamic world, which had a clear body of law on slaves as property.

The legal codes drawn up in Southeast Asian cities therefore paid considerable attention to slaves. Malay codes of law typically devoted about a quarter of their total attention to questions of slavery ([Matheson and Hooker 1983: 205]). Slaves were given a precise legal value, usually amounting to half that of a freeman, in terms of the compensation which had to be paid by or to the owner. If the analogy with the Greek city-states is to hold, there should also have been some progress towards an abstract idea of freedom as the antithesis of slavery. In the larger Malay-speaking cities and in South Sulawesi we do indeed see the word “merdeka” beginning to express not only “freeman” but also something close to abstract freedom for a nation and perhaps an individual ([Reid 1983: 21–22]). This kind of antithesis, however, remained centred in the cosmopolitan pluralist cities and was marginal to the region as a whole.

If labour was performed on the basis of obligation, should the system be labelled a “slave mode of production”? This would be appropriate only if slavery made possible centralized control of a large body of workers who would produce on a scale different from the household-oriented economy. There is some evidence that a dozen or more bonded women sometimes worked for a single master, producing a salable cloth surplus, and that new agricultural land was opened up by bondsmen who had no choice in the matter ([ibid.]: 22–23, 171). Miners, sailors, and construction workers were frequently referred to as slaves. The evidence on the way these men were maintained, however, shows that they worked certain days for their master and certain days for themselves, or else remitted a specified amount of their product to their lord. The Southeast Asian bondage system made possible considerable mobility of labour at the behest of the elite, but in other respects it did not involve methods of production substantially different from feudalism or a household system.

Large-scale mobilization occurred on behalf of rulers, who claimed a right to the labour of all their subjects. To aid in war, in tours by the king, and in great royal feasts or construction projects a large section of available manpower could be called upon. The most extreme demands were those of seventeenth-century Siam for corvée of six months in the year by ordinary phrai luang—a burden similar to that placed on royal slaves elsewhere. In practice, however, manpower could be mobilized only through nobles and officials to whom these subjects were attached as clients. The farther they were from the royal court, the less likely it was that any substantial part of their time would be spent on the direct purposes of the king. In peaceful, stable periods the capacity of the court to mobilize more than its most direct bondsmen was gradually attenuated by the claims of more immediate patrons.

For construction of their forts and palaces rulers tended to use the lowest category of bondsmen—war captives. In Aceh “the king uses them to cut wood, dig stone from the quarries, make mortar and build” ([Beauleux 1666: 108]). The same was true of Melaka, but in both cases the king spared himself the burden of feeding this labour force by leaving them free for half their time to earn their own livelihood ([Albuquerque 1557: 135]).

The mobilization of the artisan class was of particular importance in the production system, as rulers well knew. Since craftsmen were needed to forge the weapons of war, their mobilization by the court could be justified initially in military terms. Quritch Wakes ([1934: 141]) argues that Ayutthaya followed the four-part division of ancient Indian armies but replaced the fourth category, chariots, with artisans. The Hierarchy Laws formalized ten different sections [krom] of artisans within that half of the population mobilized for war. Each krom had its own official responsible for coordinating its service—one each
Justice and Law

A prince is like a dalang [puppeteer], his subjects like wayang [puppets], and the law is as the wick of the lamp used in these entertainments: for a prince can do with his subjects what he pleases ... the prince having the law, and the dalang the lamp, to prevent them from going out of the right way ... so should a prince, a prime minister, and chief officers of the court, direct the administration of the country with such propriety, that the people may attach themselves to them; they must see that the guilty are punished, that the innocent be not persecuted, and that all persons falsely accused be immediately released, and remunerated for the sufferings they may have endured (Javanese code Niti Praja, trans. Raffles 1817 I: 276–77).

The sources of law in Southeast Asia appear to be diverse. On the one hand, the ancient Indian Dharmasastra was frequently copied and translated in royal courts, except in Vietnam where T'ang dynasty codes played a similar role. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Islamic law books were becoming influential. On the other hand, local oral tradition continued to be interpreted by the village elders. The strongest rulers held seemingly monolithic legal powers, while in many areas each village and ethnic community maintained its own judicial system.

As in other fields, however, some characteristic Southeast Asian features animated almost all of these seemingly diverse systems. Justice was swift and direct. Plaintiffs and defendants pleaded their respective causes in person and were subjected to elaborate oaths to encourage them to tell the truth. In the absence of adequate evidence the two parties were subjected to an ordeal as a divinely sanctioned test of guilt. Capital punishment was common, especially for crimes or insults against the ruling class, but virtually every other punishment was in money terms. Offences against property, and especially denial of debts, were taken very seriously.

The Indian law books, especially the Code of Manu (Manava-Dharmasastra), were greatly honoured in Burma, Siam, Cambodia, and Java-Bali as the defining documents of the natural order, which kings were obliged to uphold. They were copied, translated, and incorporated into local law codes, with stricter adherence to the original text in Burma and Siam and a stronger tendency to adapt to local needs in Java (Hoadley and Hooker 1981: 1–29). It was regarded as important that rulers and judges should have these sacred books in their possession; yet they appear seldom to have consulted the texts in specific cases (Pallegoix 1854 I: 357; Sangermano 1818: 87; Lingat 1932: 111–12; Pigeaud 1967 I: 306–07). The sastras did not lend themselves readily to the specifics of sentencing. In practice, as is evident from the
descriptions of outside observers in various parts of Southeast Asia, cases were decided in terms of the decrees of the ruler in power and of local traditions. Even the laws decreed by Malay sultans ([Undang-
undang Melaka: 88]) acknowledged that sentencing should be determined by "the law of the city or the villages" (negari atau dusun). When the Dutch acquired influence in Java's northern ports, they tried repeatedly to oblige local rulers to administer justice in accordance with "the old law books," believing that the situation they witnessed represented a backsliding from some more orderly past [Hazeu 1905: 119–21]. Not until the twentieth century did they recognize that oral tradition was more important than written in the conduct of justice in Java.

Justice was administered by the ruler and indeed, as the quotation at the beginning of this section indicates, was seen as a vital aspect of his kingship. The ideal king heard suits personally and gave judgement in his audience hall or under the banyan tree of the town square. This was still practicable in the Philippines, where the whole village assembled to hear the datu pronounce his judgement [Plasencia 1589: 179]. Even in the large states the most important cases were heard before the king personally, as Frederici [1581: 250] noted of Pegu. Most cases, of course, were settled by the village head, or by the local governor empowered to administer justice on the king's behalf on all cases not requiring the death penalty. The governor, like the king himself, would be assisted and advised by legal specialists, but in principle he himself gave the judgement. As was said of eighteenth-century Burma, "every man of high rank" was a magistrate and therefore had a hall of justice adjacent to his house to show that the king's justice was accessible to all [Symes 1827 II: 99; cf. Sangermano 1818: 83].

The most highly developed legal system was probably that of Burma, where suits had to be submitted to the courts in writing and advocates could represent the plaintiff and defendant in the case. Yet even here "lawsuits are terminated much more expeditiously than is generally the case in our part of the world," being generally concluded in one day, "provided always that the litigants are not rich" [Sangermano 1818: 86]. In Siam petitions had also to be in writing and had to go through several initial hearings before the governor made his decision. But the principal parties pleaded their own case, women reportedly doing so more effectively than men because of their greater vivacity and fluency [Gervaise 1688: 88]. Here too, "every suit ought to end in three days," though some did last for years [La Loubère 1691: 86]. In Brunei "there is no lawsuit that takes two days" [Dasmariñas 1590B: 7], while in Banten cases generally began and ended the same evening [Lodewycksz 1598: 127].

In the island world the judicial process appears to have been wholly oral. "They have no written laws; they judge from reason... Unknown to them are attorneys, clerks, replications and rejoinders, and other ways to lengthen and protract things," wrote Galvão [1544: 127], enviously, of the Moluccans. His surprise was similar to that of Hwang Chung [1537: 127] about the merchants of Melaka: "Though they make bargains for thousands they make no written contract, but bind themselves by pointing to heaven, and this engagement they dare not break."

Throughout Southeast Asia, however, the means to decide innocence or guilt was the same. It was assumed that the divine order itself would punish the offender if he spoke falsely. The two parties to the dispute would therefore be obliged to swear elaborate oaths invoking supernatural retribution. The Burmese oath was a masterpiece of bloodcurdling horrors which fills three pages of Sangermano [1818: 87–90]: "May all such as do not speak the truth die of inflammatory diseases, pains of the stomach, and bloody vomit... May their bodies be broken in pieces, may they lose all their goods, may they suffer putrid and ulcerous diseases... may their bodies be covered with pustules and buboes,... May they be killed with swords, lances and every sort of weapon, and as soon as dead, may they be precipitated into the eight great hells and 120 smaller ones... and after they shall have suffered in these hells every species of torment, may they be changed into animals, swine, dogs, etc." According to Crawford [1820 III: 88–89] the Javanese involved in a lawsuit swore more simply, "If I swear falsely, may I meet with misfortune, but if I speak the truth, may I receive the blessings of the Prophet of God, of all the saints of Java, and of my Lord and King."

If after such oaths the two principals to a case maintained their contrary versions and there were no reliable witnesses, then the matter was put to divine judgement through a system of ordeal. The most widespread forms of ordeal were total immersion in water, with the first person having to come up for air being declared the guilty one, and plunging a hand in boiling water or molten tin. The same two methods were the principal alternatives in Burma [Fitch 1591: 309; Sangermano 1818: 90], in Siam [van Vliet 1636: 71; Gervaise 1688: 89], in Cambodia [Chou Ta-kuan 1297: 23], in the Philippines [Colin 1663: 85], in Maluku [Galvão 1544: 131], and throughout the Malay world.
[Undang-undang Melaka: 88–89; Dasmariñas 1590b: 7; Hoare 1620: fol. 172; Hsieh 1820: 17–18] Similar ordeals were still in use in Borneo within the last century [St. John 1862 I: 77; Rutter 1929: 175].

The Siamese practice was described by a Persian visitor as follows:

When the two parties of a lawsuit cannot settle their case... they have recourse to the oath of water. They carry out this test in the big river which flows through Siam, at a spot where the water is only a few hand spans deep. Both the plaintiff and the defendant are required to dunk their heads under the water at the same time. . . . The man who has been truthful in his testimony is calm and remains under water as long as he can, but the liar becomes upset and cannot control the head of his lawsuit. The falsehood of his testimony rises up through the water like a hollow bubble and bursts. His case is lost.

This test is really more effective because the Siamese claim that whenever they put their heads under water they see all sorts of frightening things [ibrahim 1688: 127].

The sceptical La Loubère (1691: 87) was less impressed with the system’s effectiveness, giving an example from his time in Ayutthaya: “A Frenchman, from whom a Siamese had stole some tin, was persuaded, for lack of proof, to put his hand into the melted tin, and he drew it out almost consumed. The Siamese being more cunning extricated himself, I know not how, without burning; and was sent away absolved; and yet six months after, in another suit... he was convicted of the robbery. . . . But a thousand such like events persuade not the Siamese to change their form.”

A variety of other alternatives were available to test the veracity of the parties. In the Archipelago it was often possible to elect to fight with particular weapons to decide the issue. In Siam the two parties sometimes walked on hot coals. The choice of ordeal appears to have been in the hands of the defendant. “It is not at the will of the judge but at that of the defendant; and if by chance the plaintiff wants not to pass through the proof that the defendant chooses, he [defendant] is given as free” [Dasmariñas 1590b: 7].

Execution was the prescribed punishment for a wide range of offences, particularly those which touched royal sovereignty. Treason was everywhere a capital offence, and usually also murder, but so were highway robbery and arson in Burma [Sangermano 1818: 84–85], the use of insulting words to a chief in the Philippines [Morga 1606: 277], stealing from or profaning a monastery in Siam [van Vliet 1636: 72], the counterfeiting of money or theft of royal property in the Malay world [Dasmariñas 1590b: 7; Scott 1606: 110]. In Aceh four royal concubines were brutally killed in 1636 for stealing silver plates from the palace, and a man was executed in 1642 for stealing a horse [ito 1984: 172–73]. Adultery with the wife of an upper-class Malay was also punished by death. In the Malay world and Java the honourable form of execution was to be stabbed with a kris to the heart. According to Ma Huan (1433: 88) not a day passed in Java without such an execution, and it was also common in Melaka [pires 1515: 266] and Brunei [Dasmariñas 1590b: 7–8]. For those traitors and others of whom a ghastly example was to be made, however, there were many more horrible deaths—decapitation, impaling on a stake, disembowelling, burning alive, exposure in some excruciating position, trampling by elephants, or devouring by tigers.

Except in Vietnam, which once again followed an East Asian pattern of physical punishments (and beheading—Dampier 1699: 58–59), there was little use of lesser forms of corporal punishment. It seemed strange to Chinese visitors that floggings were in most places “unheard of” [Chou Ta-kuan 1297: 22; cf. Ma Huan 1433: 88]. The reason for the rarity of such punishment was perhaps that given by Crawford (1820 III: 105), that a blow on the body was regarded as a mortal insult. In Siam and Burma there was nevertheless a system of beating criminals who were paraded through the streets, to ensure that they cried out the crimes sufficiently loudly [van Vliet 1636: 72; Shway Yoe 1882: 516–17].

The great majority of crimes were punished by fines or by stiffer penalties which were commuted to fines. Beaulieu (1666: 101) witnessed what he was assured was a normal procedure in one of the courts of Aceh in 1621. A man was condemned to thirty strokes of the rattan because his neighbour complained that he had been seen watching the neighbour’s wife while she bathed: “The executioner, being ready to begin, withdrew him three or four steps from the balai [court] and lifted his arm high; the condemned man then began to negotiate, and made an offer of six mas [gold coins]; the executioner demanded forty, but as the culprit was slow in agreeing to this sum he suffered such a rough blow that the deal was quickly concluded at twenty mas, which he paid in cash, and on that consideration it was necessary only to give twenty-nine blows of the rattan on his clothes... This deal was struck in the presence of all, and in full view of the judge.”

In cases of theft or injury, the condemned person typically had not only to make restitution to his victim but also to pay a similar amount to the king or his judicial representative [Pires 1515: 267; La Loubère 1691: 87; Sulu Code 1878: 91]. In Maluku, on the other hand, the judge received only one tenth of the damages [Galvão 1544: 126]. While
there was no victim, or in Banten sometimes even in cases of murder
(Scott 1606: 171), a single fine went to the crown. The law codes of the
period are filled with different fines according to the offence and the
category of offender and victim. The formula *dandaku danda* ("fine
with fines") appears frequently on early inscriptions in Java and Suma-
tra, as part of the essential royal prerogative (Hall 1976: 80). In micro-
states not much involved with trade such fines must have been one of
the major sources of a chief's revenue.

The condemned person unable to pay the fine became a slave, not
a prisoner. If it was a question of a theft, injury, or unpaid debt to
another party, the culprit would become his slave until the amount
due was paid. When the unpaid fine was due to the crown, the con-
demned man could be either sold to pay for it or retained for royal
service. The frequency with which slavery resulted from relatively
minor crimes, especially against property, led outsiders to view the
law as very strict in this respect, in comparison with the relaxed
attitude to crimes against the person (Morga 1606: 277; Plasencia
1589: 179). It should be remembered, however, that slavery was less
feared in Southeast Asia than it had been in Europe.

As for Islamic law, the extent to which it was imposed varied
greatly with time and place. In many important respects the shari'a
differs from the Southeast Asian pattern described so far, especially in
the frequency of such punishments as maiming and whipping, the
absence of any concept of ordeal, and the punishments for moral
lapses such as gambling, drinking, and sexual misconduct. Like other
trading minorities, Muslim merchants must often have been permit-
ted their own separate judicial system in non-Muslim ports. Even in
nominally Muslim Javanese states it was common to grant the stricter
Muslims of the *kauman* surrounding the urban mosque the right to be
judged by the shari'a as interpreted by a learned Muslim (Hazeu 1905:
56, 151). When the state itself became Muslim, there was some incor-
poration of Islamic law into that of the state. This process never
displaced the indigenous law completely, though it went furthest in
seventeenth-century Aceh. All the Muslim states were inclined to
borrow from the locally dominant Shafi law books in matters of com-
mercial and personal law. The Malay law codes of the sixteenth and
later centuries copied Arabic models closely on questions of sale,
investment, and bankruptcy, presumably because there were no indig-
igenous models to offer the polyglot merchant community who needed
such laws. To a considerable extent Muslim marriage, divorce, and
inheritance law was also incorporated into Malay law codes, if not
generally into Malay practice. In matters of sexual morality the Un-
dang-undang Melaka tends to give a milder local alternative as well as
the Islamic penalty (Liaw 1976: 31-40). In criminal matters and es-
pecially in royal prerogatives, on the other hand, Islam had relatively
little long-term influence on Southeast Asian practice.

The imposition of strict Islamic law against gambling and alco-
hol, and of its prescribed penalties against theft, required a strong ruler
prepared to side with the urban ulama against local tradition. The
strongest of Acehnese kings, Iskandar Muda [1607-36], was described
by an admiring chronicler as "the ruler who enforced the Islamic
religion and required his people to pray five times a day, and to fast
during Ramadhan and the optional extra fast, and forbade them all to
drink arak or to gamble" (Raniri 1644: 36). We know that this ruler
had at least two drunken Acehnese executed by pouring molten lead
down their throats (even though he drank a good deal of liquor himself
at royal feasts), while his daughter and successor had the hands of two
English employees cut off in 1642 for having tried to distill arak (Ito
1984: 170-71). In general, however, embargoes against alcohol and the
gambling always associated with cock fighting did not last for long in
any state, so deep-rooted were these practices in society.

The Islamic penalty for theft, the loss by amputation of the right
hand, left leg, left hand, and so on, for successive thefts of property
worth at least a gram of gold, was applied in a number of Southeast
Asian sultanates at the height of Islamic influence—in Banten be-
 tween 1651 and 1680 under Sultan Ageng [Dampier 1699: 97], in
Brunei in the sixteenth century [Dasmarinas 1590B: 7], and in some
Malay states and Magindanao at a later period [Skeat 1953: 55, 124;
Luwaran: 68]. Aceh had an Islamic court which sentenced thieves to
amputation throughout the seventeenth century, and a succession of
visitors reported seeing such amputees in the streets [see fig. 20], even
though repeated offenders were banished to the offshore island of
Sabang [Warwick 1604: 14; Bowrey 1680: 314; Dampier 1699: 96].
Under Sultan Iskandar Muda the practice of maiming went far beyond
Islam prescriptions, extending to the removal of noses, lips, ears, and
genitals from subjects who displeased him [Beaulieu 1660: 102;
Mundy 1667: 135].

Whereas many Muslim states added some tokens of Islamic juris-
prudence to their legal system, Aceh in this period began also to adopt
its spirit. The notion of ordeal, with its assumption that the super-
natural order would reveal the guilty one without the need for com-
plex laws of evidence, was foreign to Islamic law. Most Muslim states
continued to use a system of ordeal, the Malays giving it an Islamic
overlay by having the two parties reach into boiling water or oil or
Where a strong and humane ruler had a relatively homogeneous population to deal with, visitors were often impressed by the low rate of crime. In Ternate Galvão [1544: 129] believed that “murder hardly ever occurs,” so that it was treated very seriously when it did. At a later period, in nineteenth-century Bangkok, Pallegoix [1854: I: 367] remarked, “It is astonishing that in a city of four hundred thousand souls there are so few troubles and disorders, although the commissioners of police do not make their rounds, one does not see patrols of soldiers prowling in all directions as in European towns.” One of the reasons for this effectiveness was undoubtedly the principle of collective responsibility, whereby family members or neighbours were held responsible for any crime committed in their community. This applied not only in Siam and Maluku but also in the Malay world as a whole [Sulu Code 1878: 95; Wilkinson 1908: 5]. If a thief or murdered could not be identified, the appropriate fine would be imposed on the community where the body or other evidence was found. “In that way they often come to know the truth because he who has to pay detects the crime” [Galvão 1544: 129].

On the other hand, some of the pluralistic trading cities appeared to be almost lawless, with the authorities unable or unwilling to control the quarrelling foreign seamen in the port. Melaka in 1300 seems to have been such a city, so that foreign merchants slept on their ships for safety [Varthema 1510: 226]. Banten a century later was another, and Edmund Scott’s experience there [1606: 105] allowed him “to speake of little else but murther, theft, warres, fire and treason.” Sultan Iskandar Muda justified his own tyrannical regime in Aceh by pointing out that it too had previously been “a haven for murderers and brigands, where the stronger trampled on the weak, and the great oppressed the small, where one had to defend oneself against armed robbers in broad daylight, and to barricade one’s house at night” [Beauchesne 1666: 62].

Although it was the general pattern to allow ethnic minorities a measure of judicial autonomy, some rulers carried this principle to the borders of anarchy. The Raja of Jambi, in southern Sumatra, warned the English against his own people, who were “given much to theft; so that we are like to find no justice against them unless we take them in the action; then we may do with them as we please” [Westby 1615: 167-68]. The Europeans contributed to this lawless situation by taking advantage wherever possible of their superior arms. The first English commander in the East, James Lancaster, successfully demanded permission from the child-king of Banten to kill anyone he found in the vicinity of the English residence in that city. “After four or five
were thus slain, we lived in reasonable peace and quiet” [Lancaster 1603: 115].

Sexual Relations

Relations between the sexes represented one aspect of the social system in which a distinctive Southeast Asian pattern was especially evident. Even the gradual strengthening of the influence of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism in their respective spheres over the last four centuries has by no means eliminated a common pattern of relatively high female autonomy and economic importance. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the region probably represented one extreme of human experience on these issues. It would be wrong to say that women were equal to men—indeed, there were very few areas in which they competed directly. Women had different functions from men, but these included transplanting and harvesting rice, weaving, and marketing. Their reproductive role gave them magical and ritual powers which it was difficult for men to match. These factors may explain why the value of daughters was never questioned in Southeast Asia as it was in China, India, and the Middle East; on the contrary, “the more daughters a man has, the richer he is” [Galvão 1544: 89; cf. Legazpi 1569: 61].

Throughout Southeast Asia wealth passed from the male to the female side in marriage—the reverse of European dowry. Vietnam in modern times has been the exception to this pattern as to many others, because of the progressive imposition of the sternly patriarchal Confucian system beginning in the sixteenth century. Yet in southern Vietnam as late as the seventeenth century men continued what must have been an older Southeast Asian pattern, giving bride-wealth at marriage and even residing with the families of their brides [Yu 1978: 92–96].

To some early Christian missionaries the practice of paying bride-wealth was disapproved as a form of buying a wife [Chirino 1604: 262; Polanco 1556: 209]. Although the terminology of the market was occasionally used in this as in other transactions, the practice of bride-wealth in fact demonstrated the high economic value of women and contributed to their autonomy. In contrast to the other major area of bride-price, Africa, where the wealth went to the bride’s father and was eventually inherited through the male line, Southeast Asian women benefited directly from the system [Boas 1970: 48–49; Goody 1976: 8]. Tomé Pires [1515: 267] put it strongly for the Malays he knew: “The man must give the woman ten tahil and six mas of gold as dowry which must always be actually in her power.” In other cases bride-wealth was paid to the bride’s parents, who transferred some property to their daughter.

In sharp contrast to the Chinese pattern, the married couple more frequently resided in the wife’s than in the husband’s village. In Thailand, Burma, and Malaya that was the rule [La Loubère 1691: 51; Pallecoix 1854 I: 230; Shway Yoe 1882: 59; Wilkinson 1908A: 37]. Southeast Asian legal codes differed markedly from their supposed Indian or Chinese (in Vietnam) models in their common insistence that property be held jointly by the married couple and administered together [Lingat 1952: 38–39, 135–41, 153, 166]. In inheritance all children had an equal claim regardless of sex, though favoured children or those caring for the aged might obtain a larger share [La Loubère 1691: 52; Reynolds 1979: 935; Plascencia 1589: 181]. Islamic law, which required that sons receive double the inheritance of daughters, was never effectively implemented [Saleeby 1905: 66; Geertz 1963: 47, 81]. The stern Chinese legal principle that wives had no say in the disposal of family property found its way into some nineteenth-century Vietnamese law codes, but never into Vietnamese practice [Lingat 1952: 30–36, 92–96].

The relative autonomy enjoyed by women extended to sexual relations. Southeast Asian literature of the period leaves us in little doubt that women took a very active part in courtship and lovemaking, and demanded as much as they gave by way of sexual and emotional gratification. The literature describes the physical attractiveness of male heroes and their appeal to women as enthusiastically as it does the reverse. One of the themes of classical Malay and Javanese literature is the physical attraction of such heroes as Panji and Hang Tuah: “If Hang Tuah passed, married women tore themselves from the embraces of their husbands so that they could go out and see him” [Sejarah Melayu 1612: 78; cf. Wangbang Widyaya: 113; Rassers 1922: 29]. Romantic tales of love were as prominent as in any other of the world’s literatures. The Panji stories of the prince’s quest for his beloved are a good case in point because they became enormously popular in Java between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, spreading from there to the Malay world and in the eighteenth century to Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia, where they inspired the Inao cycle [Rassers 1922, Pigeaud 1967: 206–09; Dhaninavit 1956].

Even more characteristic of an essentially Southeast Asian genius were [and are] the earthy rhyming quatrains known as pantun in Malay and lam in many of the Tai languages. They did not always deal with matters of love, but their most characteristic spontaneous ex-
pression was as a dialogue between man and woman or the two parties to a marriage negotiation, taking the form of a battle of the sexes in which each tried to outdo the other in wit and suggestive allusion (Compton 1979). A very similar form of spontaneous contest in poetry and music was enormously popular in the central Philippines up to early Spanish times:

It [balak] is always between a man and a woman and most commonly concerns affairs of love. They use it in two ways, either answering or replying to each other vocally on amatory matters, all evil... with remarkable sharpness and quickness, or else on two instruments... On these they talk and reply to each other (Alcina 1668 III: 34–35).

They gather and join together to look each other over, they make love to one another and court each other [on these instruments] with much more feeling or sensuality... than by word of mouth [ibid.: 68–69].

As usual, Chou Ta-kuan (1297: 17) had a colourful way of describing the expectations the Cambodian women of his day had of their men. "If the husband is called away for more than ten days, the wife is apt to say, 'I am not a spirit; how am I supposed to sleep alone!'" The ideal of the ever faithful wife left behind during her husband's travels was upheld in the pages of Indian-derived epics, but not in everyday life. At Javanese marriages, according to Raffles (1815 I: 318), the groom was solemnly warned, "if you should happen to be absent from her for the space of seven months on shore, or one year at sea, without giving her any subsistence... your marriage shall be dissolved, if your wife desires it, without any further form or process." Vietnamese law as promulgated in the fifteenth century (once again diverging sharply from Chinese practice) set a similar period of five months' absence, or twelve months if the marriage had produced children (Lingat 1952: 89n).

The most graphic demonstration of the strong position women enjoyed in sexual matters was the painful surgery men endured on their penis to increase the erotic pleasure of women. Once again, this is a phenomenon whose dispersion throughout Southeast Asia is very striking, though it appears to be absent in other parts of the world. Although it is the Indian Kama Sutra which makes the earliest reference to such surgery, this probably refers to Southeast Asian practice. A careful recent survey of the ethnographic evidence (Brown, Edwards, and Moore) suggests that the phenomenon may best be understood as a symptom of the power and autonomy enjoyed by Southeast Asian women. The authors show [citing Tausug evidence, though female circumcision is today widely practised in Indonesia and was reported in seventeenth-century Makassar—Gervaise 1701: 139] that some women also undergo a clitoral circumcision kept secret from men and purported to enhance female sexual pleasure. The early Southeast Asian pattern appears to be the opposite of that in parts of Africa, where surgery was designed either to enhance sexual gratification in men or to decrease it in women.

The most draconian surgery was the insertion of a metal pin, complemented by a variety of wheels, spurs, or studs, in the central and southern Philippines and parts of Borneo. Pigafetta (1524: 43) was the first of the astonished Europeans to describe the practice:

The males, large and small, have their penis pierced from one side to the other near the head with a gold or tin bolt as large as a goose quill. In both ends of the same bolt some have what resembles a spur, with points upon the ends; others are like the head of a cart nail. I very often asked many, both old and young, to see their penis, because I could not credit it. In the middle of the bolt is a hole, through which they urinate. ... They say their women wish it so, and that if they did otherwise they would not have communication with them. When the men wish to have communication with their women, the latter themselves take the penis not in the regular way and commence very gently to introduce it, with the spur on top first, and then the other part. When it is inside it takes its regular position; and thus the penis always stays inside until it gets soft, for otherwise they could not pull it out.

The same phenomenon is described by many others, in different Visayan islands and in Mindanao (Loarca 1582: 116; Pretty 1588: 242; Dasmariñas 1590A: 417–18; Carletti 1606: 83–84; Morga 1609: 278), who agree that its purpose was always explained as enhancing sexual pleasure, especially for the women. Some peoples of northwest Borneo, notably the Iban and the Kayan, continued this practice until modern times, and their oral tradition attributes its origins to a legendary woman who found sexual intercourse without such an aid less satisfying than masturbation (Harrison 1964: 165–66).

The same result was obtained in other parts of Southeast Asia by the less painful but probably more delicate operation of inserting small balls or bells under the loose skin of the penis. The earliest report is from the Chinese Muslim Ma Huan (1433: 104). He reported that in Siam,

when a man has attained his twentieth year, they take the skin which surrounds the membrum vitale, and with a fine knife... they open it up and insert a dozen tin beads inside the skin; they close it up and protect it
with medicinal herbs. . . . The beads look like a cluster of grapes. . . . If it is the king . . . or a great chief or a wealthy man, they use gold to make hollow beads, inside which a grain of sand is placed. . . . They make a tinkling sound, and this is regarded as beautiful.

Numerous European writers note the same phenomenon in Pegu during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and Tomé Pires [1515: 102–03] described it as a special feature of the Pegu men among all the varied traders visiting Melaka. "The Pegu lords wear as many as nine gold ones, with beautiful treble, contralto and tenor tones, the size of the Alvares plums in our country; and those who are too poor . . . have them in lead." Pires adds, perhaps with tongue in cheek, "Our Malay women rejoice greatly when the Pegu men come to their country, and they are very fond of them. The reason for this must be their sweet harmony." The primary purpose seems again the pleasure of the female. When the Dutch admiral Jacob van Neck asked in some astonishment what purpose was served by the sweet-sounding little golden bells the wealthy Thais of Patani carried in their penises, they replied that "the women obtain inexpressible pleasure from it" (van Neck 1604: 226; cf. Fitch 1591: 308).

Penis balls extended as far as Makassar, where "the men carry usually one, two, or more balls in their penis, of the same size as those of Siam, but not hollow or clinking, rather of ivory or solid fishbone" [van der Hagen 1607: 82]. Islam quickly suppressed the practice, but some non-Islamic Torajans of the interior of Sulawesi still wore such balls at the end of the nineteenth century [Adriani and Kruyt 1912–14 II: 392]. At least in one part of central Luzon men used small balls "the size of chick-peas" [Dasmariñas 1590A: 443]. Although a Siamese style of bell is attested for Java by only one secondhand source [Pigafetta 1524: 95], something of the kind must have existed there prior to Islamization because the lingas of the two fifteenth-century temples of Sukuh and Cetu, near Surakarta, are embellished with three or four small balls [Stubbe 1530: 31; and see fig. 21]. Both Islam and Christianity did all they could to get rid of this custom. The Muslim circumcision ritual at puberty provided an alternative initiation to manhood. Spanish officials gave a beating to any Visayan they found wearing a penis pin [Dasmariñas 1590A: 418]. By the mid-seventeenth century we hear no more of erotic surgery in the coastal, accessible areas of Southeast Asia.

1. Some may have confused the two rituals, however. The non-Muslim Huaulu named their subincision of boys' penises (puanual) after the Arabic circumcision (Valeri 1963).

Fig. 21 Penis balls represented in a linga of the fifteenth-century Hindu temple Candi Sukuh, in central Java

Marriage

The dominant marriage pattern was one of monogamy, with divorce relatively easy for both sides. Chirino [1604: 319] said that he "was in the Philippines almost ten years without knowing of a man married to several women." Among rulers there were spectacular exceptions to this rule of monogamy, for them an abundance of wives was both an indication of status and a diplomatic weapon. Subordinate lineages presented their daughters as wives to a king "as a form of
tribute, an act of homage, and an oath of fealty" (Geertz 1980: 35). A more widespread pattern among the rich was one of casual sexual relations with slave members of the household. Such relations, which were sharply distinguished from marriage by the absence of ritual and the low claim on inheritance of any progeny resulting, are best regarded as an aspect of the bondage system.

Among the overwhelming majority of ordinary people, the pattern of monogamy was reinforced by the ease of divorce, the preferred means of ending an unsatisfactory union. In the Philippines, "marriages last only so long as harmony prevails, for at the slightest cause in the world they divorce one another" (Chirino 1604: 321; cf. Monga 1609: 275). In Siam, similarly, "husband and wife may part again at pleasure, dealing their goods and children without further circumstance, and may re-marry if they think good, without fear of shame or punishment" (Schouten 1636: 146; cf. La Loubère 1691: 53; van Vliet 1636: 86). It was noted at a later date of both the Cham's southern Vietnam (Ayronier 1891: 30–31) and the Javanese that women were particularly inclined to initiate divorce. "A woman may at any time, when dissatisfied with her husband, demand a dissolution of the marriage contract, by paying him a sum established by custom" (Raffles, 1817 I: 320). Throughout the island world the rule appeared to be that the wife (or her parents) kept the bride-wealth if the husband took the initiative to end the marriage, but had to repay it if she was primarily responsible (Plascencia 1589: 813; Dasmariñas 1590 A: 410–11; Pires 1515: 267; Beaulieu 1666: 100; Polanco 1556: 209). At least in the Philippines (Chirino 1614: 321) and Siam (La Loubère 1691: 53; van Vliet 1636: 86) the children of a marriage were divided at divorce, the first going to the mother, the second to the father, and so on.

The court diary of seventeenth-century Makassar provides a glimpse of the pattern of frequent divorce as it operated at the top of society, where political and property calculations cannot have been absent. Even here, where it might have been expected, divorce is not described as a decision by a powerful male, X, to exchange his marriage partner, but rather as "X and Y separated from each other" (sikatto, from root katto, "cut off"). A not unusual female career in this elite group is that of Karangan Bal-Pala-aw, who was born in 1634 to one of the highest Makassar lineages. At the age of thirteen she married Karangan Bonto-marbaru, later to be one of the great Makassar war leaders. At twenty-five she separated from him and soon after married his rival, Karangan Karunung, the effective prime minister. At thirty-one (in 1666) she separated from him, perhaps because he was in exile, and two years later married Arung Palakka, who was in the process of conquering her country with Dutch help. At thirty-six she separated from him, and eventually died at the age of eighty-six (Lontara bilang Gowa: 95–199). Another highborn lady, Karangan Tanggulá, was betrothed as a child to the future sultan, Mohammad Said, separated from him, and then at the age of seventeen married him. Later, aged twenty-eight, she separated from him again. She next appears in the court diary in 1649, marrying Karangan Leongkese, the brother of Karangan Bal-Pala-aw. Six years later she separated from him; but in 1657, at the age of forty-three, she returned to him and stayed until her death in 1661 (Lontara bilang Gowa: 87–119; cf. Sejarah Gowa: 66).

That the majority Muslim population of Indonesia and Malaysia had divorce rates in excess of 50 percent as late as the 1660s is sometimes attributed to the influence of Islam in sanctioning easy divorce for men. Much more important, however, was the pan-Southeast-Asian pattern of female autonomy, which meant that divorce did not markedly reduce a woman's livelihood, status, or network of kin support (van Zonnenhoven 1918: 79; Nash 1965: 233; Djambour 1959: 139). In noting the acceptance the Javanese gave to women of twenty-two or twenty-three living with their fourth or fifth husband, Earl (1837: 59) attributed this attitude entirely to the freedom and economic independence enjoyed by women (cf. Crawford 1820 I: 78–79; St. John 1862 I: 165–67).

Christian Europe was until the eighteenth century a very "chaste" society in comparative terms, with an exceptionally late average age of marriage (in the twenties), with high proportions never marrying and with a low rate of extramarital conceptions by later standards. (In England this rate rose from only 12 percent of births in 1680 to 50 percent by 1800—Stone 1984: 45; Wrigley and Schofield 1981: 254–60.) Southeast Asia was in many respects the complete antithesis of that chaste pattern, and it seemed to European observers of the time that its inhabitants were preoccupied with sex. The Portuguese liked to say that the Malays were "fond of music and given to love" (Barbosa 1518 II: 176; cf. Barros 1563 II, vi: 24; Eredia 1613: 31, 40), while Javanese, like Burmese, Thais, and Filipinos, were characterized as "very lasciviously given, both men and women" (Scott 1606: 173). What this meant was that pre-marital sexual relations were regarded indulgently, and virginity at marriage was not expected of either party. If pregnancy resulted from these pre-marital activities, the couple were expected to marry, and failing that, resort might be had to abortion or (at least in the Philippines) to infanticide (Dasmariñas 1590 A: 427).

Within marriage, on the other hand, the fidelity and devotedness
of Southeast Asian couples appears to have surprised Europeans. The women of Banjaras in, for example, were "very constant when married, but very loose when single" [Beeckman 1718: 41; cf. Valentijn 1726 III: 312; Low 1848: 196; Finlayson 1826: 309–10]. In pre-Islamic South Sulawesi fornication with an unmarried woman was overlooked, but with a married [upper-class?] woman was punished with death [Schriever 1827: 530]. Even Spanish chroniclers who took a dim view of the sexual morality of Filipinos sometimes conceded that "the men treat their wives well, and love them according to their habits" [Legazpi 1569: 61]. Galvão [1544: 89] marvelled at how Moluccan wives, "although they always go round among the men, and then nearly naked... do not fail to be very chaste and good, which seems to be quite impossible among such a debauched people." A nineteenth-century observer [Cameron 1865: 131] was probably correct in pointing a connection between the ease of divorce in rural Malaya and the affection which appeared to characterize Malay marriages. The economic autonomy of women and their capacity to escape from unsatisfactory unions obliged husbands as well as wives to make some effort to keep the marriage intact. One example of how such a pattern operated to constrain foreign men accustomed to different patterns is given by Scott [1606: 127], who commented on a Chinese marrying his Vietnamese wife in Banten that this could not have happened if the wife had been a local woman, "for the Javans will hardly suffer them to beat their women."

Curiously, when female virginity is mentioned as a major factor in marriage, it is as an impediment rather than an asset. In the pre-Spanish Philippines, according to Morga [1609: 278], there were [ritual?] specialists whose function was to deflower virgins, "it being thought an obstacle and impediment to marriage for a girl to be a virgin." In Pegu and other ports of Burma and Siam, foreign traders were asked to initiate brides [Varthema 1510: 202–04; cf. Lach 1965: 554]. In Angkor the priests broke the hymen of young girls in a costly ritual marking the passage to adulthood and to sexual activity [Chou Ta-kuan 1297: 17–181. The Western literature offers more titillation than explanation for such practices, generally suggesting that Southeast Asian men preferred their women experienced. It seems far more likely that the hymenal blood was considered dangerous or polluting to men, as is the case today with menstrual blood in many areas.

The pattern of premarital sexual activity and easy divorce, together with the commercial element potentially involved in the paying of bride-wealth, ensured that temporary marriage or concubinage rather than prostitution became the dominant means of coping with the vast annual influx of foreign traders to the major ports. The system in Patani was described as follows:

When foreigners come there from other lands to do their business... men come and ask them whether they do not desire a woman; these young women and girls themselves also come and present themselves, from whom they may choose the one most agreeable to them, provided they agree what he shall pay for certain months. Once they agree about the money [which does not amount to much for so great a convenience], she comes to his house, and serves him by day as his maidservant and by night as his wedded wife. He is then not able to consort with other women or he will be in grave trouble with his wife, while she is similarly wholly forbidden to converse with other men, but the marriage lasts as long as he keeps his residence there, in good peace and unity. When he wants to depart he gives her whatever is promised, and so they leave each other in friendship, and she may then look for another man as she wishes, in all propriety, without scandal [van Neck 1604: 225].

Exactly the same pattern is described for Javanese traders in Banda for the nutmeg season ["’Tweedee Bock" 1601: 77], for Europeans and others in Vietnam, Cambodia, Siam, and Burma [Dampier 1697: 268; Dampier 1699: 40–41; Symes 1827 I: 253; Navarrete 1676: 268]. Hamilton [1727: 28] related in affectionate detail how the system worked in Pegu, where a formal marriage ritual was held for these temporary relationships, to which both parties were bound by legal obligation. Like Chou Ta-kuan [1297: 27] in Cambodia, he appreciated the double advantage of such local wives as not only bedmates but commercial partners. "If their Husbands have any goods to sell, they set up a shop and sell them by retail, to a much better account than they could be sold for wholesale."

The boundary between such temporary marriages and durable ones must often have been uncertain, and interracial unions were a feature of all the commercial cities of Southeast Asia. Outsiders found it strange and reprehensible that religion was also no bar to marriage: in Melaka "the infidel marries Muslim women while the Muslim takes pagans to wife" [Ibn Majid 1462: 206; cf. Pires 1515: 268], in Makassar "Christian Men kept Mahometan women, and Mahometan Men, Christian women" [Navarrete 1676: 122–23]. Only when women close to the court sought to marry foreigners did it provoke strong opposition, as in the case of the ill-fated romance of a Dutch factor and a Siamese princess, which probably gave rise to King Prasat Thong's 1657 decree prohibiting Thai women from marrying foreigners [Smith 1974: 285–87].

Although temporary marriage had also been known to Islam at
the time of Muhammad (Bouhdiba 1975: 126–27), the Muslim ports of the Archipelago may have tended to restrict explicitly temporary marriages to slave women, who differed from the free in that they could be sold by one "husband" to another and had few rights over children. In Banten the practice of Chinese traders was described as "to buy women slaves . . . by whom they have manic children. And when they return to their owne countrye . . . they sell their women, but their children they carry with them" (Scott 1606: 176). The English in places may have had a similar practice, if we can believe their great enemy, Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1619: 478), who rejoiced that the English factors in Sukadana [West Borneo] were so impoverished that "they had to sell their whores" to pay for their victuals.

Prostitution was much rarer than temporary marriage or concubinage, but it began to appear in the major cities in the late sixteenth century. In every case the prostitutes were slave women belonging to the king or nobles. The Spanish described such slave women as offering themselves in small boats in the water city of Brunei in the 1570s (Dasmariñas 1590: 14); the Dutch described a similar phenomenon in Patani in 1602, though it was less common and less respectable than temporary marriage (van Neck 1604: 225). In the 1680s a particular Thai official was licensed by the king to run a monopoly of prostitution in the capital, Ayutthaya, using six hundred women bought or enslaved for various offences. This appears to have been the origin of a Thai tradition of drawing significant state revenue from prostitution (La Loubère 1691: 74, 85; Pallegoix 1854: 1: 311). Eighteenth-century Rangoon, similarly, had a whole "village of prostitutes," all slaves (Symes 1827: 1: 252–53). It seems probable that this type of slave prostitution in the major port cities of the region developed in response to a demand from Europeans and Chinese with different expectations. It may also have been stimulated by a growing sense, at least among Muslims, of the impropriety of temporary marriages with foreigners and unbelievers.

The broad pattern of sexual relations—relative premarital freedom, monogamy and fidelity within marriage (which was easily dissolved by divorce), and a strong female position in the sexual game—conflicted in different ways with the practices of all the world religions which were increasing their hold on Southeast Asia in the age of commerce. The sharpest conflict might have been expected with Islamic law, which made women both legally and economically dependent on their husbands and markedly restricted their rights to initiate divorce. Pre-marital sexual relations [zina'] were also punished very severely under Islamic law, and Arab parents until recently tended to marry off their girls soon after puberty to prevent this from occurring (Gibb and Kramers 1961: 564–70, 658–59).

The impact of these Islamic attitudes below the winds was greatest among the wealthy urban mercantile elite, whose children were already subject to greater control because their marriages involved both property and status. Even in Buddhist Siam the elite differed from the populace in guarding their daughters carefully before marriage and in retaining both the wives "they love not, and those they love" (La Loubère 1691: 53, 54). Muslim-influenced law codes showed an acute awareness of the conflict between the demands of the shari'a and local realities. The Sulu Code (1878: 92–93) deliberately ignored Islamic law and punished each type of adultery by a different fine, while the Luwaran of nearby Magindanao (17–72) recorded the full Islamic law on zina', with its capital punishment for those found in extramarital relations. The Melaka legal code (Undang-undang Melaka: 158–61) included the latter as a kind of optional addendum. If nothing else, the growing minority of international Muslim traders in Melaka made it impossible to ignore the shari'a altogether. In the main body of the code, however, the laws are set out with typically Southeast Asian flexibility:

If a man seduces someone's daughter, and the father comes to know, he shall be fined 2¼ tahil by the judge. If a marriage is suitable, he shall be to marry, and be required to pay the full expenses . . . .

If a man seizes a free woman and then rapes her, and the latter informs the judge, he shall be summoned by the judge and ordered to marry her. If he refuses to marry, he shall be fined 3 tahil, 1 paha, and pay a wedding-gift . . . . But according to the Law of God, if he is muhsan [an adult Muslim], he shall be stoned (ibid.: 84–85; cf. Moyer 1975: 185–86).

The Muslim elite of the cities in the seventeenth century took these Islamic penalties very seriously, especially when the zina' offence was between married people. Van Neck (1604: 224) witnessed the outcome of a tragic affair in Patani, in which one Malay nobleman was obliged to strangle his own daughter and another to kris his own son, after the married daughter had been caught receiving love gifts from her admirer. In Aceh and Brunei around 1600 similar death sentences appear to have been common, in at least one case by flogging to death as the Islamic law prescribes (Ito 1984: 168–70; Dasmariñas 1590: 9). Nevertheless, since such rigorous implementation of the shari'a was extremely rare even in the most Islamic parts of Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century (Snouck Hurgronje 1893: 10–14;
Young Brides!

When Europeans commented on the age of marriage in Southeast Asia, it was always to marvel at the youth of the bridal couple. Since Europe was then in a phase of late marriage very exceptional in world history—English brides averaged twenty-six years and grooms twenty-eight in the seventeenth century [Wrigley and Schofield 1981: 225]—this is not remarkable. Yet the extremely young ages of marriage reported can create a false impression. Thus the ruler of Gelgel [Bali] was amazed to learn that the Dutch envoys to his court remained unmarried at twenty-three and twenty-five, and claimed that in Bali men married at twelve years and women were betrothed at nine [Lintgens 1597: 77]. In Banten at the same period Europeans reported child brides of five to ten years being carried in procession through the streets, and claimed this was to prevent unmarried children being taken into the palace in bondage if their fathers were to die ["Tweedie Boeck" 1601: 149; Mandelslo 1606: 115; Barrow 1806: 226].

La Loubère [1691: 51] simply noted that Siamese girls married "young," since they were capable of bearing children at the age of twelve. Morga [1609: 277] reported that while waiting for his wife to be old enough for sex, a Filipino man was allowed to sleep openly with her older sisters.

Marriages at or before puberty are difficult to reconcile with the pattern of female autonomy and relative sexual freedom before marriage. There are strong reasons to believe, however, that such marriages were not the norm. First, the onset of puberty apparently occurred much earlier than in Europe, a consequence of climate as well as relatively good nutrition [Eveleth 1979: 384–87; Laslett 1980]. Craen [1606: 180, 199] reported that Indonesian girls of twelve and thirteen were sexually active, which coincides with Jacobs' more careful later finding [1894 I: 209] that Acehnese girls began to menstruate between the twelfth and thirteenth year. A survey in nineteenth-century Cochin-China found that although the first signs of puberty appeared in girls of twelve, the "average age of nubility" was sixteen years four months [Bouma and Paulus 1885 I: 228].

Second, the spectacularly opulent weddings of the rich and higborn which so impressed contemporary observers were almost certainly atypical. The same anomaly of some very youthful marriages by aristocratic women long misled historians of Europe [Laslett 1965: 84–92]. In Southeast Asia, too, the elite were anxious to avoid unacceptable liaisons by their daughters or doubtful parentage for their grandchildren, and therefore sought betrothals with appropriate spouses at an early age. In the wealthy trading cities most firmly committed to Islam—Aceh, Banten, Brunei, and Patani—the habit of arranging marriages for daughters at the age of puberty appears to have spread through a wider sector of society, in reaction to the prevailing premartial sexual permissiveness. Aceh and Banten were notorious for exceptionally early female marriage in the nineteenth century [Jacobs 1894 I: 27], while modern Indonesian census data still shows a markedly lower average bridal age in regions noted for strict Islamic adherence. Muslim Madurese and Sundanese women were marrying on average at a little over fourteen in the 1940s, while Hindu Balinese women waited until they were nearly eighteen [B.P.S. 1980: 38]. This relatively late marriage pattern for twentieth-century Balinese, who appear to have undergone no dramatic reversal of religious and ethical values since the seventeenth century, should make us cautious about the early impressions of Europeans. Similarly, recent careful studies of Philippine marriage registers have shown a mean age of first marriage for women of above 20.5, from the time when data becomes reliable in the 1820s [Ng 1979: 138; Owen 1985], even though contemporary Europeans believed that brides there were exceptionally young. Burma too appears, in the seventeenth century, to have had a pattern of marriage relatively late by the standards of most other preindustrial societies [Lieberman 1984: 20].

Third, even the elite may not have married quite as early on average as some illustrious cases suggest. One higborn Makassarese
lady has already been mentioned who married for the first time at thirteen. For all the eight aristocratic women whose birth and marriage dates are reliably given in the Makassar court diary (Lontara'-bilang Gowa), however, the average age of first marriage is fifteen years nine months.

I am inclined to conclude that marriages at the age of puberty [twelve to fourteen] were an exception, found primarily among just that wealthy nobility which provided the most spectacular wedding ceremonies. In the population at large, women probably married between fifteen and twenty-one, allowing them several years in which to begin the courting games so popular in the region.

Childbirth and Fertility

The low birthrate which characterized Southeast Asia in the seventeenth century and earlier seems to have been caused in the first place by endemic low-level warfare and instability [see chapter 2]. Even in conditions of peace, however, there may have been some significant restraints of birth, both deliberate and involuntary.

One relative constant in Southeast Asia over the past five centuries has been a longer interval between children than in Europe. One reason for this, it is now clear, is that prolonged lactation tends to lengthen the period of anovulation in mothers by an average of about nine months. Southeast Asian mothers until very recently suckled their young for at least two years. "Women [in Siam] do not suckle their children for five or six months, as in Europe, but for two and even three years, even while giving them rice and bananas to eat" [Pallegroix 1854: 224]. A systematic study of births in a nineteenth-century Luzon village has shown an average child spacing of twenty-nine months, which is almost exactly the natural interval if mothers continue breast-feeding [Ng 1979: 152–59]. Nevertheless, these Philippine mothers produced on average about six children [ibid.: 166, 169]—far more than appears to have been the case in the earlier period.

A number of firsthand accounts insist that although Southeast Asian women began their childbearing early in comparison with Europe or China, they also ended it early [Beeckman 1718: 42; Chou Ta-kuan 1297: 17; Marsden 1783: 284–85]. Some authorities, including the Burmese Census Report for 1891, gave as a reason for early loss of fertility the practice of "roasting mothers" after childbirth (Sangermano 1818: 164; Shway Yoe 1882: 1–2; Graham 1912: 148). The earliest observation of this practice is that of La Loubre (1691: 66–67) for Siamese and Burmese, but its occurrence throughout mainland Southeast Asia, Malaya, northern Sumatra, parts of Borneo, the Moluccas, and the Visayas in the nineteenth century [Jacobs 1894: I: 141–44; Skeat 1900: 342–43; Manderson 1981: 513–15] suggests that it was already widespread during the age of commerce. Women were purified and kept after the dangerously "cooling" effect of childbirth by being placed above or beside a fire for periods of between three and forty days. The consequence was frequently that women emerged "scorched and blackened," with severe blistering of the skin [Sangermano 1818: 164]. This may have made women look prematurely aged, but it is doubtful that it could really have affected fertility.

Another uncertain factor is gonorrhoea. Modern studies of relationally isolated, animist peoples in North Borneo in the 1930s [Muruts] and eastern Indonesia in the 1960s [Sumba] have shown an incidence of gonorrhoea in 80 and 90 percent, respectively, of the women examined. In the Sumba survey infertility had resulted for 25 percent of the women [Mitchell 1982; Tregonning 1965: 163]. In such societies, which were a great deal more typical before the spread of Islam and Christianity, premarital sexual relations were not prohibited. Moreover, there was a widespread belief that the way for a man to free himself from the "female contamination" represented by venereal disease was to couple with a healthy woman and thereby return the "alien" element to her [Mitchell 1982; Jordan and de Josselin de Jong 1985: 256–57; La Bissachere 1812 I: 67]. Although such attitudes could have made gonorrhoea endemic, we cannot know whether they did so. There are plenty of references to the prevalence of venereal disease, especially in Java, Bali, and Lombok [Pigafetta 1524: 94; Drake 1580: 73; Crawford 1820 I: 33–34; Zollinger 1851: 338]. But until the twentieth century there is no reliable way to distinguish gonorrhoea from syphilis or to draw any conclusions about fertility.

We are on safer ground in asserting that Southeast Asian women had some control over their own fertility and that deliberate limitation of births was a major factor. In the Malay epic Selebah Melawu [1612: 166] abortion is described as a normal occurrence. Ethnographers in many parts of the region have established that contraceptive herbs and massage to induce abortion were part of female lore [Nash 1963: 252, 265; St. John 1862 II: 261; Snouck Hurgronje 1893 I: 113; Rutter 1929: 73; Foeth 1981: 13]. The desire to limit births appears to have been particularly strong among animist swidden cultivators, perhaps because the work load of women in such systems did not allow them to spend much time in pregnancy and child rearing [see chapter 2].

A striking example of this was the Visayan Islands of the Philip-
male feature is often seen [at least by males] as preferred, but both are necessary and the union of the two is a powerful ideal [van der Kroef 1956; Valeri 1985; Duff-Cooper 1985; Keefer 1983].

Such theoretical distinctions help explain the clear boundaries between male and female domains in the house, the fields, and the marketplace. Since everyday activities formed part of this cosmic dualism, especially when they affected plant and animal life, it was not a matter of indifference whether men or women performed them. Male work included all that pertained to metals and animals—ploughing, felling the jungle, hunting, metalworking, woodworking, and house building—as well as statecraft and formal [international] religion. The female domain included transplanting, harvesting, vegetable growing, food preparation, weaving, pottery making [in most areas], and marketing, as well as ancestor cults and mediation with the spirits.

At village level these dichotomies have not changed greatly in the last four centuries. The male domain has expanded enormously, however, through the greater role of statecraft and formal religion, and the ability of larger sections of the population to imitate aristocratic mores which portray women as dependent, decorous, and loyal. In the age of commerce, assumptions of male superiority already affected the courts and the urban elite, who listened to Indian epics of Rama and Sita, studied Chinese Confucian classics [in Vietnam], or were tutored by the theologians of Theravada Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity. In 1399, for example, the Thai queen of Sukhothai prayed that through her merit she might be "reborn as a man," thus moving up the Buddhist hierarchy [Reynolds 1979: 929].

That there was a discrepancy between courtly ideals and everyday reality there is no doubt. What requires examination is the extent to which women in that period were still able to extend their spheres of action into those larger events which are the normal subjects for historians. By examining successively trade, diplomacy, warfare, entertainment, literature, and statecraft we shall see that Southeast Asian women were playing an unusually influential role by comparison with later periods or with other parts of the world.

Since marketing was a female domain par excellence, this is the place to start. Even today Southeast Asian countries top the comparative statistics assembled by Ester Boserup [1970: 87–89] for female participation in trade and marketing. Fifty-six percent of those so listed in Thailand were women, 51 percent in the Philippines, 47 percent in Burma, and 46 percent in Cambodia. Although Indonesia had a lower rate, 31 percent, this still contrasted sharply with other
Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East (1 to 5 percent). In Bangkok at the time of the 1947 census, three times as many Thai women as men were registered as owners or managers of businesses [Skinner 1957: 301]. A famous Minangkabau poem first written down in the 1820s exhorted mothers to teach their daughters “to judge the rise and fall of prices” (cited Dobbin 1983: 50). Southeast Asian women are still expected to show more commercially shrewd and thrifty attitudes than men, and male Chinese and European traders are apt to be derided for having the mean spirit of a woman on such matters [Alexander 1984: 36].

Although the casual visitor to Southeast Asia today might not be aware of the female trading role, which is now restricted to rural and small-scale markets, this has not always been the case. Early European and Chinese traders were constantly surprised to find themselves dealing with women:

In Cambodia it is the women who take charge of trade [Chou 1297: 20]. It is their custom that all affairs are managed by their wives... all trading transactions great and small [Ma Huan 1433: 104]. The women of Siam are the only merchants in buying goods, and some of them trade very considerably [Hamilton 1727: 96]. The money-changers are here [Aceh], as at Tonkin, most women [Dampier 1699: 92, also 47].

In Cochin-China every man is a soldier. The commercial operations are performed by women [White 1824: 261; also Chapman, quoted Yu 1978: 102].

Women in the Birman country... manage the more important mercantile concerns of their husbands [Symes 1837: 255]. It is the women [of Maluku] who negotiate, do business, buy and sell [Galvão 1544: 75].

Women hold a market at night [Hwang Chung 1537: 128; cf. Pires 1515: 274]. It is usual for the husband to entrust his pecuniary affairs entirely to his wife. The women alone attend the markets, and conduct all the business of buying and selling. It is proverbial to say the Javanese men are fools in money concerns [Raffles 1817 I: 353].

The prominence of foreigners and of the ruling circle in the trade of most Southeast Asian cities ensured that most of the large-scale merchants and shipowners were male. A significant number of local women did, however, join this circle. A famous one was Nyai Gede Pinateh, a promoter of Islam and “foster-mother” of Sunan Giri, whose tomb is still honoured at Gresik. She was a foreign-born Muslim whose origins are placed by different traditions in Palembang, China, or Cambodia. Around 1500 she appears to have been acting as shahbandar [harbour master] of Gresik and reportedly sent her ships to trade in Bali, Maluku, and Cambodia [Raffles 1817 II: 115–20; Meilink-Roelofsz 1962: 108; Lombard and Salmon 1985: 74]. Some royal women used their access to capital to good effect. In the 1660s the wife of Sultan Hasunanuddin of Makassar, Lomo’ Tombo, owned ships which she sent on very profitable trade missions to Johor [Speelman 1670A: 111]. The women who occupied the thrones of Aceh, Jambi, and Inderagiri in the seventeenth century similarly traded and speculated at least as vigorously as their male counterparts [Coolhaas 1964: 21, 93, 257, 775].

Besides these privileged royal women, the Dutch and English dealt with some formidable female traders. In Cochin-China they haggled over pepper prices with “a great woman merchant [coopvrouw] of Sinoa [Hue]” who had made the journey to the capital of Cochin-China in order to check the market. She represented a firm comprising two sisters and a brother which could deliver much pepper, and although she travelled with a male companion, “the woman did the talking and the man listened and agreed” [Wonderaer 1602: 80]. A woman of Mon descent, Soet Pegu, used her position as sexual and commercial partner of successive Dutch factors in Ayutthaya to virtually monopolize Dutch-Thai trade in the 1640s and thereby also gain great influence at court [Pombeira 1964: 2–3; van Opstall 1985: 109–12]. One of the Patani orangkaya who had debts with the English was a woman, Datu Newanan [Browne 1616: 108], and the Dutch in Aceh were buying up tin for export from “another Acehnese woman” [Compostel 1636: fol. 1200].

From trade it was not a great step to diplomacy, especially for those who had been both commercial and sexual partners of foreign traders. Such women frequently became fluent in the languages needed in commerce. Thus the first Dutch mission to Cochin-China found that the king dealt with them through a Vietnamese woman who spoke excellent Portuguese and Malay and had long resided in Macao. She, along with another elderly woman who had had two Portuguese husbands as well as one Vietnamese, had been the principal translator for the Cochin-China court for thirty years [Wonderaer 1602: 22, 38]. Similarly, the elderly Burmese wife of the shahbandar of Rangoon, who had earlier been married to the French commander of the Burmese royal guard, was an indispensable intermediary between foreigners and that royal court in the eighteenth century [Cox 1821: 26].
Later the Sultan of Deli, in Sumatra, ordered "a most extraordinary and eccentric old woman" named Che Laut to accompany John Anderson on his embassy to various Sumatran states. She was "a prodigy of learning," spoke Chinese, Thai, Chuliah, Bengali, and Acehnese and knew the politics of all the Sumatran coastal states intimately [Anderson 1836: 44-45].

In some parts of the island world there appears to have been a positive preference for using women as envoys, particularly in the peacemaking process. Unfortunately our most explicit source for this, Mendes Pinto, is not the most reliable; sometimes he was inclined to embellish his narrative for dramatic effect. After describing the embassy of an old woman named Nyai Pombaya from the ruler of Demak to Banten while he was in the latter port in 1540, Pinto explained that the rulers of Java had always been accustomed "to treat of the most important matters of their state by mediation of women, especially when it concerns peace...and all the reason they give for it is, 'that God has given more gentleness and inclination to courtesy, yea and more authority to women than men, who are severe, as they say, and by consequent less agreeable to those unto whom they are sent'" [Pinto 1614: 375]. While Pinto may not have personally visited all the places he claimed, there is usually a basis of fact in his stories. In this case, confirmation is available from a more careful reporter who lived in Banten for several years half a century later: "If the King...send a man to fetch someone the parties may refuse to come, but if he once send a woman, he may not refuse nor make excuse. Moreover if any inferior bodie have a suit to a man of authoritie, if they come not themselves, they always send a woman" [Scott 1606: 170]. Women frequently appear as negotiators or witnesses on earlier Javanese inscriptions [Casperis 1981: 147]. Elsewhere, in Sulawesi, the Torajans sent an old, blind, aristocratic lady to negotiate for peace with the attacking Bugis forces of Arung Palakka in 1683 [Andaya 1981: 260].

Of course men were also used as envoys, and overwhelmingly so as the international norms of Muslim and Christian states took greater effect in the seventeenth century. What the above comments suggest is that the preoccupation of elite males with ordering the political system in terms of hierarchies of status, and the obligation for them to avenge any infraction of that status [especially in Java—Pires 1515: 176; Ma Huan 1433: 88], made them dangerous emissaries for those who really sought peace. Men could not bargain as women were expected to, nor subordinate their sense of honour to the need for a settlement.

This peacemaking role is difficult to reconcile with the tradition of female warriors. Since warfare is normally an exclusively male business, every culture is probably inclined to romanticize and celebrate those exceptional women who emerge to save a desperate situation. Vietnam has no heroes more renowned than the Trung sisters, who rose up against the Chinese in A.D. 43. Thais remember two sisters who led the successful defence of Phuket in 1785: Queen Suriyothai, who was killed defending Ayuththaya in 1564; and Lady Mo, who rescued Khorat in 1826 after leading an escape by several hundred captive women [Gerini 1905: 179-83]. Women were also said to have played a spirited part in the defence of Madura against Sultan Agung of Mataram in 1624 [de Graaf 1958: 90]. If such militant heroines played a larger role in Southeast Asia than elsewhere, it is probably because status was more prominent than gender, and women were not excluded from taking the lead if the occasion required it.

More specific to the region was the habit which powerful rulers had of surrounding themselves with large numbers of women, of whom some had the role of bodyguards. The king of Angkor was said to have had four to five thousand women in his palace [Chou Ta-kuan 1297: 15-16]. Iskandar Muda of Aceh three thousand [see fig. 22], and Sultan Agung of Mataram ten thousand. At least in the two latter cases these palace women included a corps trained in the use of arms, who mounted guard on the palace and took part in royal processions [Beaulieu 1666: 102; van Goens 1656: 256-60]. A women's corps [prajurit estril] drilling regularly with rifles was still maintained in late-eighteenth-century Java by the first Mangkunegaran ruler [Kumar 1980: 4-6]. The Siamese palace similarly had a female guard [Sanam Dahar] responsible for the inner or women's quarters [Wales 1934: 146; La Loubère 1691: 100].

This pattern appears to have stemmed from the distrust which autocratic rulers felt towards any men close to them. In the island world at least, men were expected to respond immediately, with the arms they always carried, to any slight to their honour. The history of the period offers many tragic examples of where this could lead [Sejarah Melayu 1612: 98; Sejarah Goa: 40]. An unusually autocratic Aceh ruler, Sultan al-Mukammil [1584-1604], even had a woman as commander of his navy, "for he will trust no other" [Davis 1600: 150]. There appears to be no evidence that the confidence the rulers placed in these women was ever betrayed by murder, as happened frequently at the hands of males. Nor is it established that the female corps took part in major battles. Their existence therefore tends to confirm the assumption that violence, the use of arms, and the defence of a touchy sense of honour were fundamentally men's business, and that women
could be trusted not to use the arms they carried. Nevertheless, such corps probably gave rise to exaggerated travellers' tales of Amazon warriors in Southeast Asia [Ibn Battuta 1354: 279–81].

It is not surprising to find women prominent in entertainment. They were strongly represented in dance, music, and drama groups throughout Southeast Asia. In Cebu, Magellan was entertained by an orchestra of girls, and in Banten a mixed group of jugglers and actors performed for a royal circumcision [Pigafetta 1524: 154–55; Scott 1606: 155]. Among the few nonroyal women celebrated in the chronicles are a spectacular singer and dancer at the court of Majapahit, and Dang Sirat, a Malay opera star in Patani, who turned the head of the visiting prince of Johor [Nagara-kertagama 1365: 107–08; Hikayat Patani: 115–17]. In the Javanesque wayang kulit tradition the female singer was almost as central as the puppeteer, and though the latter is today normally male there was at least one very famous female exception in the seventeenth century [Sutton 1984: Pigeaud 1938: 61]. In Brunei as late as the nineteenth century the professional storytellers were women, moving from house to house to recite hikayat and sya’ir to audiences who were also largely female [St. John 1862 II: 260].

Since most premodern Southeast Asian writers were anonymous, we cannot know what share women had either in composing verses for recitation or in writing them down. In the eighteenth century there were outstanding women poets in Hanoi [Ho Xuan Huong] and Surakarta, while it may have been a Siamese princess of the period who reworked the Indonesian Panji story into Thai [Nguyen and Huu 1973: 170; Kumar 1980; Dhaninivat 1956: 139]. The Malay woman who tutored John Anderson about Sumatran politics in the 1820s, Che Laut, was also a poet and historian, while Matthes' most valuable informant about Bugis literature in the 1850s was a princess of Tanjung who was "truly well read"—at once historian, court letter writer, and collector of manuscripts [Matthes 1852: 172]. There were several poets among the ladies of King Narai's court in Ayutthaya, and the best-known epic romance of that brilliant period, the Lilit Phra Lo, describes from a female viewpoint (whether or not from that of a female author) how two court ladies lure the male hero into the palace for their amusement [Diller 1983; Schweisguth 1951: 84–90].

The association of learning with the formal religious programs probably increased literacy for men but reduced it for women. In the seventeenth century Thai and Burmese boys went to the monasteries at about their seventh year and acquired a basic literacy, whereas girls "very seldom learn to write and read" [van Vliet 1636: 88]. Islam educated boys less universally than Theravada Buddhism, but ignored girls in a similar fashion. There was, however, an older literate tradition for both sexes, which survived longer in some places than others. In the Philippines the early Spanish friars claimed that literacy in the old indigenous script was almost universal for both sexes, and that the women wrote and read "much more fluently" than the men [Algana 1668 III: 39; cf. Dasmariñas 1590A: 424]. The reason for this high female literacy, also noted in those parts of Sumatra where the old ways survived, appears to be that the old script was used for everyday pragmatic purposes, not for the male spheres of formal religion and government (see chapter 5). This unusual pattern makes it necessary to resist any assumptions about male authorship of the anonymous Southeast Asian classics, except for those which emerged from the monastic religious tradition.

Female monarchy is anathema alike to the Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Chinese traditions of statecraft. Austronesian societies, however, which include Polynesia and Madagascar as well as Indonesia and the Philippines, have been more inclined than any other
major population group to place highborn women on the throne. Sulawesi, where birth always took priority over sex in succession, may be an extreme case. Six of the thirty-two rulers of Bone (the largest Bugis state) since its fourteenth-century origins have been women. When James Brooke visited the neighbouring Bugis state of Wajo he found that four of the six great chiefs (arung) were female (Brooke 1848 I: 74–75). Where Indian (or, in Vietnam, Chinese) influences had been stronger, especially in the more exalted courts of the mainland, female rule was rare. Siam has never put a woman on the throne, and Vietnam and Burma very seldom did so. In Muslim Southeast Asia the Islamic model of male kingship seemed finally to prevail by about 1700; few women ruled after that.

Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, there was a remarkable tendency for those states that participated most fully in the expanding commerce of the region to be governed by women. Many states raised women to the throne only when all other candidates were equally unsatisfactory. Pasai, the first major Muslim port below the winds, had two queens in succession between 1405 and 1414, just before it was eclipsed by Melaka as the main Malacca Straits port (Cowan 1958: 209–10). The only woman on a Burmese throne in this period was Shinsawbu (1453–72), who presided over the emergence of Pegu as a major entrepôt in the Bay of Bengal. Japara, on Java’s north coast, was a significant naval and commercial power only under its famous queen, Kali-nyamat, in the third quarter of the sixteenth century. Similarly, the woman rulers of the diamond-exporting centre of Sukadana in Southwest Borneo (c. 1606–22), of pepper-rich Jambi in east Sumatra (1630–c. 1655), of Kelantan on the Malay peninsular (1610–71), and of the sandalwood entrepôt of Solor, to the east of Flores (c. 1650–70), were on the throne during the brief period when these states were important commercial centres. Banten never had a female sovereign, but it became the major port of the Java Sea during the long minority of Sultan Abdul Kadir (1596–1618). During five of these years (1600–05) the dominant figure was Nyai Cede Wanagiri, “the old woman that commands the protector and all the rest... although she be not of the kings blood, but only for her wisdom is held in such estimation among them of all sorts that she ruleth as if she were solely queene of that country” (Scott 1606: 130; also Djajadiningrat 1913: 153–54).

This pattern is too striking to be put down to the accidents of inheritance, particularly as the periods of female rule in Pasai, Kelantan, and Solor involved two successive queens. In the sultanates of Aceh and Patani a deliberate preference becomes quite clear. In each of these cases four successive women occupied the throne, only the first of whom was especially well qualified by descent. The century of female rule in Patani (1584–1688) embraced the whole of the period when it was a major entrepôt for the China trade. The four queens of Aceh (1641–99) witnessed the military and political decline that followed the conquests of Iskandar Muda (1607–36), but they nevertheless maintained Aceh as the most important independent port in island Southeast Asia.

Female rule was one of the few devices available to a commercially oriented aristocracy to limit the despotic powers of kings and make the state safe for international commerce (Reid 1979: 408–12). Iskandar Muda had been a particularly frightening example of the dangers of absolutism, seeking to monopolize trade with the English and Dutch while killing, terrorizing, and dispossessing his own orangkaya (merchant-aristocrats). Having experimented with the female alternative, these aristocrats of Aceh and Patani sought to perpetuate it. In Patani the first queen “has reigned very peaceably with her councillors... so that all the subjects consider her government better than that of the dead king. For all necessities are very cheap here now, whereas in the king’s time [so they say] they were dearer by half, because of the great exactions which then occurred” (van Neck 1604: 236). Similarly, Aceh in the time of its first queen was noted by its greatest chronicler to be frequented by international trade because of her just rule. The capital “was extremely prosperous at that time, foodstuffs were very cheap, and everybody lived in peace” (Raniri 1644: 59). In contrast, “the very name of a kinge is long since become naughteous to them... through the Tyranical Government of theire last kinge” (Bowrey 1680: 296; cf. Ibrahim 1688: 174). Theft was strictly punished under the queens, and property rights were respected. The orangkaya found they could govern collectively with the queen as sovereign and referee, and there was something of the quality of Elizabethan England in the way they vied for her favour but accepted her eventual judgement between them.

This was not simply a case of powerful males making use of a powerless female as a figurehead, for women were also active in both Aceh and Patani as traders and orangkaya. In Patani the level of official tribute was lowered under the fourth queen because she was said to have been independently wealthy from her inheritance and her extensive trade (Hikayat Patani: 114). In choosing to put women on the throne the orangkaya were opting not only for mild rule but for businesslike rule. As in other fields, men were expected to defend a high sense of status and honour on the battlefield but to be profligate with
their wealth. It was women's business to understand market forces, to
drive hard bargains, and to conserve their capital. In general, these
expectations of women as rulers were not disappointed. Female rule
failed only when Patani and Aceh ran out of credible candidates who
still had the charisma of monarchy about them, and when the or-
angkaya of the port capital began to lose their influence to forces less
interested in trade.

5

Festivals and Amusements

What, then, is the right way of living? Life must be lived as play, play-
ing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a
man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his
enemies, and win in the contest.

—Plato, Laws, quoted Huizinga 1933: 19

Because their climate was mild and their basic diet of rice, fish, and
fruits more dependably available than in most parts of the world,
Southeast Asians had natural advantages in escaping from the con-
stant struggle for subsistence. They may have had more time to devote
to what would today be classified as leisure than most other peoples of
that era. Certainly it appeared to Europeans that the Southeast Asians
they encountered had a remarkable amount of spare time and were
able to employ their evenings in singing, feasting, gaming, and enter-
taining one another [La Loubère 1691: 33; Verhagen 1597: 30; Eredia
1613: 39]. It may be, however, that the concept of leisure as free time,
opposed to the daily requirement of labour, is a modern product of
industrial society. For Southeast Asians of the period, participation in
festivals, rituals, and feasts appears to have been a social obligation as
important as productive work itself. Both Thais and Malays used the
everyday word for work (ngan in Thai, kerja in Malay) to describe their
participation in festive and ritual events.

Local languages did, however, recognize the more universal cate-
gories of amusement and play. The chronicles frequently relate how
the people enjoyed themselves with theatre, games, and dances; again,
the Thai and Malay words for play (len and main, respectively) cover a
wide range of activity, from bullfights and theatre to illicit lovemak-
ing. Much of such amusement was of course private and scarcely
accessible to the historian. It became public at the great seasonal