SEXING WOMEN'S HISTORY

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FROM TEMPORARY WIFE TO PROSTITUTE:
Sexuality and Economic Change in Early Modern Southeast Asia

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The historical study of women and gender in Southeast Asia is relatively new, and has concentrated almost exclusively on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This article provides a deeper base to the discussion by examining changing attitudes toward sexual relationships between foreign men and local women during the early modern period. When Europeans arrived in the region in the early sixteenth century, they found that foreign traders commonly entered into a temporary marriage with local women who also helped them in trade. The rise of patriarchal states, penetration of elite values, increase in the number of foreign males, expansion of urban centers, and growth of prostitution acted together to change attitudes toward sexuality. Because foreigners increasingly preferred slaves or ex-slaves who could act as both servants and sexual partners, the status of the temporary wife was permanently eroded.

In March 1671, from his post in Palembang on Sumatra’s east coast, a representative of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) penned his customary letter to his superiors in the VOC capital of Batavia (modern Jakarta). There was little noteworthy to report, but he was concerned about the “intolerable cruelty” Palembang authorities were inflicting on widows of Chinese merchants. He described an incident that had occurred the previous day involving “Encik Koey’s widow,” a former slave originally from Batavia. To compel this woman to disclose the location of her husband’s wealth, her hands had been thrust into boiling oil. To add to her torment, her head was squeezed between two planks, so that with horribly swollen features and protruding eyes she no longer appeared human.

Apart from several works on prostitution, there has been no historical investigation into changing attitudes toward sexuality in Southeast Asia, despite the fact that the “high status” of women is often cited as characteristic of the region. In this context, the horrific treatment meted out to “Encik Koey’s widow” calls for closer attention, for she exemplifies a type of woman who became all too common during the early modern

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period (ca. 1500–1800): a low-ranking outsider, often a slave or former slave, who provided domestic and sexual services to a foreigner without the respect normally accorded a married woman. But the stigma attached to common law wives and the condemnation of women who exchanged sex for material gain was not a traditional feature of Southeast Asian societies. The processes underlying this attitudinal shift are a critical but as yet unresearched aspect of the history of sexuality in this part of the world.

Welcoming Foreigners

When Europeans began to frequent Southeast Asia at the beginning of the sixteenth century, they generally were struck by the hospitality they received. Virtually everywhere, locals assumed that recent arrivals would need assistance to help them deal with an unfamiliar environment, and the most efficacious way of accomplishing this was to supply the newcomer with a network of kin. Adoption of the foreigner as a son or brother was one way of establishing putative family links, and this could be most effectively achieved by providing a local woman as a companion and, if desired, a sexual partner. The kind of reception that resulted is admirably described by William Dampier (1652–1715), who arrived in the port of Mindanao (southern Philippines) in 1686.

When Strangers arrive here, the Mindanao Men will come aboard and invite them to their Houses and inquire who has a Comrade (which word I believe they have from the Spaniards) or a Pagally* and who has not. A Comrade is a familiar Male friend; a Pagally is an innocent Platonick Friend of the other Sex. All Strangers are in a manner oblig’d to accept of this acquaintance and familiarity, which must be first purchased with a small present, and afterwards confirmed with some gift or other to continue the acquaintance: and as often as the Stranger goes ashore, he is welcome to his Comrade or Pagally’s house, where he may be entertained for his Money, to Eat, Drink or Sleep; and complimented, as often as he comes ashore, with Tobacco and Betel-Nut, which is all the Entertainment he must expect gratis. The richest men’s wives are allowed the freedom to converse with her Pagally in public, and may give or receive Presents from him.7

Although Dampier refers to “pagallies” as “platonic friends,” it is apparent that frequently these relationships were ones of sexual intimacy, for soon “near a third of our men” had moved ashore “to live with their wives and pagallies.” Such arrangements were typical of the temporary marriages that were a feature of Southeast Asian economic life. Southeast Asian men always preferred to trade in places where they already had
relatives who could furnish companionship and assistance, and assumed others would feel the same. By recognizing a woman as the wife of a foreigner, be it a few days or months or even years, temporary marriages helped create the kinship networks critical to the whole commercial structure. The female “promiscuity” that displeased early Chinese observers thus reflected not merely relaxed ideas regarding interaction between men and women but the use of sexual relationships to welcome traders into the community. Ma Huan’s description of Siam in the fifteenth century nicely captures these attitudes. “If a married woman is very intimate with one of our men from the Central country, wine and food are provided and they drink and sit and sleep together. The husband is quite calm and takes no exception to it; indeed, he says, ‘My wife is beautiful and the man from the Central Country is delighted with her.’”

By the time of the first European arrivals in Southeast Asia, a continuum that linked hospitality, sex, and gifts was already well established. When Miguel de Legazpi reached the Philippines in 1565, female traders converged on the Spanish camp to exchange both wine and sexual services with his soldiers. “Many of the wives and daughters of the chiefs come to the camp along with the other women . . . This is one of their customs and it is exercised with all strangers from the outside. The very first thing they do is to provide them with women.” A hundred years later, Dampier noted that the offering of “Women is a Custom used by several nations in the East-Indies, as at Pegu [southern Myanmar], Siam, Cochinchina, and Cambodia. I did afterwards make a Voyage [to Tonkin, north Vietnam], and most of our Men had Women aboard all the time of our abode there . . . It is accounted a piece of Policy to do it; for the chief Factors and Captains of Ships have the great men’s Daughters offered them, the Mandarins or Noblemen at Tunquin.”

The custom of the temporary marriage could not have persisted for such a long time and so extensively in premodern Southeast Asian societies without the compliance, cooperation, and active involvement of the women concerned. It is clear that in places where foreigners were a rarity, considerable prestige accrued to those possessing a lover or husband from overseas. The women of Mindanao were thus “very desirous of the Company of Strangers, especially of White Men” and even the wives of nobility would look out of their windows when a stranger passed by, asking if he wanted a Pagally and sending servants “to invite him to their Friendship.” This anxiety to be seen as an associate of foreigners was consistent with a view common in premodern societies—of the outsider as imbued with sexual potency. Perceived wealth was certainly a factor in the popularity of foreigners, but even more important was their status as “stranger-kings” in a region where sexual union between local women and men
from overseas forms a dominant theme in indigenous legends. "The very poorest and meanest of us," wrote Dampier, "could hardly pass the Streets, but we were even hal'd by Force into their houses to be treated by them: altho' their Treats were but mean, [with] Tobacco, Betel-Nut, or a little sweet spiced Water."14

Dampier also makes frequent reference to the gifts local families expected in return for the hospitality they extended. "Our Men were generous enough, and would bestow half an Ounce of Gold at a time, in a Ring for their Pagallies, or in a silver Wrist-band, or Hoop to come about their Arms, in hopes to get a Night's lodging with them."15 Basic to most Southeast Asian cultures was the belief that access to a woman's body was part of a reciprocal process in which the exchange of gifts was critical. In Burma, for example, gifts from a man to an unmarried woman were regarded as the prelude to sexual intercourse and legally belonged to her if the act occurred. The idea that a woman should be rewarded for sexual intimacy is well illustrated in a later Spanish account describing how promises of jewels and slaves were used to "persuade" a young Filipino bride to enter the wedding chamber each time she made the obligatory signs of hesitation.16 This accumulation of gifts was a customary means of enabling a woman to increase her resources. According to a fourteenth-century law code from northern Siam, it was quite acceptable for a husband or parents to "have [a woman] go and live with another man in order to get money and goods from him, with a limit on the period."17 By receiving valuable or unusual gifts from foreign traders, women and their families acquired prestige items that could be displayed or exchanged, significantly enhancing their status within the community. Money was certainly among the important gifts that could be offered, but in societies such as Mindanao, where barter was still common, coins were not seen as substantially different from jewelry, clothing, or other items. In the context of foreign trade, locals invested all items with the mana that came from outside.

Temporary marriages were indispensable to successful trading, not merely due to the kinship connections they created but because throughout Southeast Asia it was women, not men, who controlled the retail trade. A relationship with a foreign merchant gave a woman a clear advantage in access to desired goods either as sole seller or as agent. But as Alexander Hamilton, an experienced trader, explained in his account of Pegu and Siam, a relationship with a local woman was highly beneficial to European men as well.

[Local women] prove obedient and obliging Wives and take the Management of Affairs within Doors wholly in their own hands.
She goes to Market for Food and acts the Cook in the Dressing of [her husband's] Victuals, takes Care of his clothes, in washing and mending them: 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 by Wholesale, and some of them carry a cargo of goods to the inland Towns, and barter for Goods proper for the foreign markets that their Husbands are bound to, and generally bring fair Accounts of their Negotiations.18

Critical in the success of the temporary marriage was the assumption that both husband and wife would display the same mutual fidelity and respect that should accompany a more permanent union. Locals expected foreign traders to comply with existing norms. The proximity of a woman's relatives acted as a safeguard to ensure that her marital rights were honored and that she was not ill-treated; in the words of a northern Thai law, parents would be "distressed" should their daughter be beaten.19 Adultery was regarded as the most heinous of crimes and should a foreigner transgress, one Dutchman warned, "he will be in grave trouble with his wife." Female anger was not to be taken lightly, since women were in charge of food preparation and "they are well versed in the Art of poisoning."20

By contrast, if both parties agreed, the dissolution of a temporary marriage was a relatively casual matter. Hamilton described the situation in Pegu and Siam: "If a Husband is content to continue the Marriage, whilst he goes to foreign Countries about his Affairs, he must leave some Fund to pay her about six Shillings eight Pence per Month, otherwise at the Year's End she may marry again, but if that Sum is paid her on his Account, she is obliged to stay the Term of three Years."21 Unlike Asian traders, who returned at regular intervals, a European was more likely to leave permanently, but it was accepted that if he failed to return after a reasonable time his wife was free to remarry. The prospect of being left with children to rear was not a cause for alarm in most Southeast Asian communities, where the commercial world provided many opportunities for individuals who were seen as links between cultures. In the first stages of interaction with Europeans, indigenous elites assumed that children would provide valuable family links with foreign traders. Hamilton noted that Vietnamese nobles had previously "thought it no Shame or Disgrace to marry their daughters to English and Dutch Seamen, for the Time they were to stay in Tonquin, and often presented their Son in Law pretty handsomely at their departure, especially if they left their Wives with Child."22

For local women, the departure of a foreign husband could thus mean social advancement rather than the stigma of being an abandoned wife.
"When [a trader] wants to depart he gives 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." Indeed, her chances of negotiating an advantageous match were enhanced, for she had probably increased her economic resources and was assumed to possess new knowledge as a result of her association with a European. Far from being condemned as "loose" or amoral, a woman who had been passed from one European to another was in her own society "rather the better lookt on, that she has been married to several European husbands."

Upper-Class Models

Hamilton's implication that Vietnam's ruler no longer encouraged sexual unions between high-ranking Vietnamese women and foreign men is significant. Indeed, by the early eighteenth century it is evident throughout Southeast Asia that the wives of foreigners were obtained overwhelmingly from outside elite circles. At lower social levels, the idea of temporary marriages with foreigners did not conflict with existing marital patterns, and though monogamous unions were the norm, the economic independence of females helped make divorce and remarriage common. At the higher echelons of society, this independence was far less evident. The purpose of upper-class marriages was to create new ties or cement old ones, and because these links were intended to be enduring, any dissolution was fraught with tension. As the numbers of foreign traders in the region grew, it became clear that most were not sufficiently influential to offer their new relatives lasting political or commercial benefits. From the point of view of well-born families, the advantages of arranging short-lived unions with such men were now questionable.

A further consideration was the restriction in elite circles on female sexual autonomy. In rural villages and among ordinary urban dwellers, premarital relations with an intended spouse were relatively common, but elite values placed great stress on female virginity before the wedding and on a husband's exclusive rights thereafter. While providing visitors with female attendants as sexual partners remained "a customary act of politeness" in many noble courts, refined society also imposed controls over the sexuality of well-born women but not of their husbands. The relative equality between the sexes common at the village level and the idea that a wife was entitled to the sole sexual attentions of her husband had almost disappeared in elite society. Here, the superior status a man enjoyed by maintaining many women had become fundamental in gender relationships. While a king might have only one chief queen and two or three consorts, he could have many concubines and slave women, some-
times numbering in the hundreds or even thousands. In effect, a ruler supported as many women as he could afford. Indications of the distaste with which women regarded this situation frequently surface in the sources, but it was accepted as inextricably linked to upper-class male prestige. In elite circles, the double standard that praised chastity and sexual virtue in a woman but not a man was well in place, a significant factor in cultures where the ruler and his lifestyle were thought to represent the epitome of refinement and project a standard for the measurement of status.

Commoditizing Sex

The idea that the standing of high-ranking men was linked to the simultaneous possession of many women is critical in the process by which sex became a commodity in Southeast Asia. In Batavia, wealthy European men were quick to emulate local nobility, enhancing their status by increasing the ranks of their female servants and openly displaying the "goods" they had collected. An Englishman visiting Batavia in the late eighteenth century was told that the "harem" of a bachelor Dutch official comprised fifty slaves "assorted from the different nations of the East and combining every tinge of complexion from the sickly faded hue of a dried tobacco leaf to the shining polish of black marble."24 Locally-born Christian wives of VOC employees, though often Eurasian and sometimes themselves former slaves, were anxious to assert their new standing and thus encouraged the acquisition of female domestics. According to one estimate, they normally required at least ten female slaves as personal attendants.25

For both Europeans and indigenous elite, maintenance of these large female establishments was expensive. An observer in seventeenth-century Banten (west Java) succinctly captures the problem. "The gentlemen of this land are brought to bee poor, by the number of slaves that they keepe, which eate faster than their pepper or rice growth."26 One way of ameliorating this situation was to employ female slaves not only as domestics and retainers, but also in occupations that yielded immediate profits. Slave women could then contribute to the household income by spinning and weaving, and by hawking such items as food or cloth in the streets or markets.27 The sale of sex was quickly seen as another means by which slaves could help maintain a household critical to the status of their master and his wives or favored consorts. In late-sixteenth-century Brunei, female slaves "sold their bodies," paddling through the city waterways on small boats (perahu), singing and playing musical instruments, while calling out, "orang laki membeli perempuan muda" ("Men, buy a young..."
woman”). In Patani, too, nobles allowed their female slaves to solicit customers, as long as the profits were delivered to them.\textsuperscript{28} In Ayutthaya, the capital of Siam, high-ranking women convicted of adultery were not put to death, as in many other places, but housed in a kind of brothel together with purchased slaves, with the head of the establishment paying a percentage of his profits to the ruler.\textsuperscript{29} One can imagine there were many clients anxious to link themselves to the palace through sexual relations with a well-born woman, albeit a disgraced one.

Nonetheless, the sale of sex may not necessarily have been totally exploitative. In Brunei, for example, there were no set prices for sexual services and although the bulk of a woman’s earnings would have been delivered to her owner, it would not have been difficult for her to hold back small items or money for her own use, given the relative freedom of slaves in Southeast Asian societies. Nor is it certain that all those involved were slaves, for the markets where women sold food, vegetables, and handicrafts were highly conducive to interaction between the sexes. There was, however, a clear understanding that a woman who had established a relationship with a man through marriage or temporary residence did not have the same sexual license as one who was unattached. The boundaries between the sexes imposed by marriage appeared in the physical arrangement of the market at Banten, where a special area was set aside for married women who had come to sell.\textsuperscript{30}

A basic factor in the commercialization of sex was the increasing penetration of a monetized economy coupled with a heightened demand for female partners. From the sixteenth century onward, the major Southeast Asian ports witnessed a marked rise in the number of single male arrivals, especially Europeans, who brought their own perceptions of the short-term marriage. Even a sympathetic observer such as Alexander Hamilton saw this arrangement as a simple commercial contract. While he would have acknowledged there could be cases of genuine attraction, he saw the practice as an arrangement whereby the services of an efficient housekeeper, a knowledgeable trader, and a sexual partner were purchased for a set period of time.\textsuperscript{31} Rather than establishing a cycle of gift giving, the financial transactions that framed the marriage absolved both parties from future responsibilities and obligations.

In societies where the use of coinage had become more widespread, sexual matters were already accorded monetary equivalencies; Javanese law codes laid down that men should make recompense to a woman they had sexually molested.\textsuperscript{32} There was also recognition that casual sex with strangers, while certainly not desirable, was an acceptable way for the very poor to make a living as long as all parties agreed. A ruler in east Sumatra stressed that his concern to prevent Dutch men from “dishonor-
ing” local females was not intended to stop consenting women from receiving payment for sexual services, since these must be considered a wage (loot).\textsuperscript{35}

Nonetheless, the money that women received even for apparently casual sexual services remained in the realm of a gift, a prestige item that held out the promise of future favors and a continuing relationship. Europeans, on the other hand, tended to place money in an economic sphere where interactions were “inherently impersonal, transitory, amoral and calculating.” They regarded money as an inappropriate gift for relationships considered personal or enduring. Sexual intercourse that was “bought” could not by definition represent true affection or commitment.\textsuperscript{36} The idea that relations between men and women could be detached from social and cultural obligations placed enormous pressure on the sexual exchanges by which foreigners had been previously incorporated.

In assessing the effects of changing economic patterns on sexual relations, Dampier’s comment on the lack of trade at Mindanao, endorsed by other observers, is therefore revealing. Here, a single crew of foreign men was a novelty, a small group that could be welcomed without undue difficulty into local society as temporary husbands. In areas where foreign traders were more numerous, absorption was far more problematic, and the status of the temporary wife consequently more difficult to safeguard. The women in Mindanao may have accepted gifts in return for sexual access, but this hardly can be termed prostitution. In other port cities of Southeast Asia, however, a flourishing trade in sex was already developing, with incoming traders and foreigners as the principal customers and low-ranking women or slaves as the suppliers.

**Male Arrivals**

The early modern period in Southeast Asia saw a growth of urban centers where foreign men were disproportionately represented. Whereas Chinese women rarely left their homeland, migration of Chinese men to Southeast Asia increased markedly after 1567, when the imperial court lifted its prohibitions against maritime travel. A modern scholar has described Spanish-ruled Manila in the seventeenth century as “indubitably” a Chinese town, and, she might have added, a male Chinese town at that. Between 1602 and 1636 the Chinese population rose from 2,000 to 25,000. Dutch-controlled Batavia was another magnet; in 1625 alone, five Chinese junks arrived, each carrying around four hundred men. By the 1730s, the Chinese community accounted for about 20 percent of Batavia’s inhabitants, with the result that there were twice as many males as females.\textsuperscript{37}
Lower-class Chinese men, the human cargo of the junk trade, came from communities where marriage was normally possible only through the payment of a bride-price, and the purchase of a wife was a familiar concept. More important, Chinese males who came to Southeast Asia found they could only operate effectively in commerce if they established connections with women, who dominated the peddling trade. Thus, while men of influence often acquired their women as gifts from rulers or nobles, ordinary men readily entered into arrangements with local females and their families. In 1694, a Chinese monk remarked of Hoi An, on the central Vietnamese coast, ""The women were very good at trade, so the traders [from Fujian, southeastern China] who came here all tended to marry a local woman to help them with their trading."" 38

The relationships that developed, however, were not without cultural dislocations. Chinese attitudes had long equated the relative freedom of "southern women" with sexual promiscuity, and Chinese men would have been unaccustomed to the independence fostered by female commercial skills and the customary privileges to which married women in Southeast Asia were entitled. An unhappy wife could easily return home, and the proximity of her kin acted as a safeguard against ill-treatment or neglect. Even in Vietnam, where Chinese-influenced law codes accorded females a lower status, the marital rights of women were acknowledged and they could look to their families for support. As one Frenchman put it: ""When a man marries [in Vietnam], he marries his master. His wife orders him about and the law shelters her from the man's mistreatment... A woman who has been maltreated by a man lies down in front of the doorway or in the middle of the street and covers her face. Then her relatives congregate and go and fetch the mandarin."" 39

Many Chinese traders found it cheaper and less troublesome to buy one or two slaves rather than become involved with a wife and her relatives. By this means they could satisfy domestic, commercial, and sexual needs without the demands of a family, and a slave could be resold should she prove unsatisfactory. In early-seventeenth-century Banten, for example, Chinese men "bought women slaves by whom they have many children," acquiring progeny that was denied many poor men in China. When they left Banten, they could sell their wives and take any sons back to China to assume the position of heir.40

But because Chinese men rarely absorbed the cultural obligations between slaves and owners, 41 wives who were also slaves were in a much more precarious position than those who had negotiated their arrangement through a contract. Far from their families, they had not played a role in choosing their husbands, they were more likely to be in competition with other women for the favors of their masters, and, of course, they
were unable to initiate a divorce. Furthermore, Chinese men never regarded them as wives. When the Dutch allowed the Balinese widow of the deceased Kapitan Cina, or Chinese headman, to represent Chinese interests in Batavia, the Chinese community was outraged. As a Chinese chronicler remarked, however virtuous, a former slave who was a "simple concubine" rather than an officially married wife could never have earned the respect of the Batavian Chinese. Indeed, without the protection of family, purchased wives were frequently subjected to physical abuse. One Englishman in Banten, describing the pitiable position of a slave-wife from southern Vietnam who had fled from her Chinese husband, observed that it was "an ordinary thing for the Chinese to beat their wives, especially she being a Cochin-chine woman, which had no friends [i.e., relatives] in town, for the Javans will hardly suffer them to beat their women."

The arrival of large numbers of Europeans also affected attitudes toward short-term unions. While Europeans were far less numerous than Chinese, they were disproportionately represented in the commercial centers under European control, notably Batavia, Manila, Makassar, and Melaka. Like Chinese, Europeans were almost solely male, and arrived without women, though many were married. A large percentage of the Spanish soldiers who came to the Philippines had left their wives in Spain fifteen or twenty years before, and, while encouraged, the reunion of couples was not easily accomplished. Among the Dutch, only employees above the rank of merchant (koopman) were permitted to bring their families with them to the Indies. Without access to women from their own cultures, and often without the means or desire to set themselves up domestically, common soldiers, traders, and low officials were usually willing to enter into brief, cheap, and uncomplicated sexual liaisons. For them, the gift-for-sex exchange was simple prostitution. In a compelling example of cultural misreading, the apparent willingness of Southeast Asian females to "sell themselves for any gain, however slight" and to accept articles that foreigners considered trinkets in return for sexual access confirmed the European view that these women were "promiscuous."

This perception of Southeast Asian females as wanton was fed by racial stereotypes regarding the sexual propensities of Asian women, as well as by contemporary European notions about the influence of climate on behavior. It was believed that European men in the tropics faced extraordinary temptations, not only because the heat undermined their ability to curb sensual desires, but also because Southeast Asian women were "lascivious" and "given to love." Repeatedly, Europeans cited evidence of what they considered ingrained promiscuity of Southeast Asian females, such as the allegedly provocative manner in which they dressed. The loose
sarong Burmese women wore, for example, often parted to show a “pretty leg and a plump thigh”; other accounts noted that local costume seemed designed to leave “a great deal of the bosom exposed.” The dancing featured during most celebrations was also viewed as flaunting the body.67 Frequent and public bathing was seemingly further indication of moral laxity. Europeans came from societies where public baths had been outlawed because they were associated with immorality,68 and they found fascinating a custom they linked with sexual permissiveness. Like Chinese, Europeans were ignorant of the strict codes that governed bathing practices. The fact that it was so widespread through the region reinforced Europeans’ opinion that Southeast Asian women, though beautiful, were immodest and did not prize chastity.69

The European view that Southeast Asian societies did not observe moral laws fostered a general attitude that rape and abduction were permissible. Long after the Portuguese lost control of Melaka in 1641, stories circulated about the way in which they “made use of the Native Women at their Pleasure, whether Virgins or married Women such as they liked they took without Controul.”50 Spanish priests in the late sixteenth century recorded similar accounts of behavior of Spaniards in the Philippines, where pregnant women were beaten and the wives and daughters of chiefs seized. “‘There is no way,’” wrote one friar, “‘to describe [Spanish treatment of local females] without offending your Majesty’s ears.’”51 The Dutch and English were not much better. The head of the VOC post of Jambi (east coast Sumatra), for example, took a local married woman as a concubine and made her pregnant, but she died in childbirth and the baby was stillborn. According to customary law, her husband was entitled to seek vengeance or receive compensation, but the Dutch head forbade him to come anywhere in the vicinity of the VOC post.52

From Wife to Concubine

Despite official exhortations, European men encountered clear obstacles to marriage, the most obvious being the lack of European and local Christian women. It is thus not surprising that frequently lower-ranking Europeans adopted what indigenous society initially viewed as a continuation of the temporary marriage concept but which Europeans re-categorized and demoted to concubinage. In Ayutthaya, VOC officials who lived with women to whom they were not married defended themselves against accusations of immorality by arguing that they “‘did not posses [sic] the gift of abstinence, and had no women of their own kind.’”53 If they were not to resort to patronage of common whores, the VOC should permit them to live with concubines.
It became increasingly apparent to local communities, however, that Europeans considered concubinage—cohabitation without a legal document and Church approval—not as a temporary marriage but as an irregular and sinful relationship. During the late seventeenth century, the Queen Regent of Spain advocated stern measures against Filipino women “who live in concubinage” since this was considered “scandalous behavior.” The view that concubines were promiscuous was fostered by the rapidity with which they took on a new husband when their previous one departed or died. Indeed, VOC employees in Ayutthaya even referred to their “wives” as “whores, sluts and trollops and the like, up to and including the director.”

Other problems arose between local societies and European administrations as a result of sexual relations between foreign men and nonelite women. There were frequent disputes, for instance, regarding jurisdiction over children; the VOC wanted the children of Dutch fathers to be taken to Batavia and raised as Christians, while local custom dictated they should stay with their mothers. In Ayutthaya, the ruler issued an edict in 1657 forbidding Thais to marry foreigners. The flagrant promiscuity associated with many European posts and total absence of sexual fidelity, a cornerstone of the temporary marriage concept, also undermined the standing of women who chose to cohabit with foreigners even if they did gain material benefits. Increasingly, these women tended to be not only lower class but from groups that were culturally marginal and economically deprived. Such liaisons were expected because European men who lived in cities and outlying trading posts mixed not with village women and their families but with females who were far from home—slaves, ex-slaves, and outsiders. It was not unusual for the sexual partners of Dutch employees in Ayutthaya to be ethnically Mon, like the trader “Jau Soet” who enjoyed liaisons of varying lengths with a number of VOC officials, including the leaders of the VOC lodge.

Without the security of a marriage document, the position of a concubine was always precarious. Some Europeans, like Chinese, preferred slaves rather than free women for domestic duties and sexual pleasure, since they were far easier to control and represented a disposable asset. Impoverished English factors in early-seventeenth-century Sukadana (west Borneo), for example, sold their “whores” to buy food. Financial considerations weighed heavily when European males considered how their sexual needs were to be satisfied. Whereas poor but free women saw such relationships as an opportunity to improve their economic position, European men increasingly came to believe that marriage or even concubinage with a local woman could lead to financial ruin. Thus, if a man’s aim was to obtain a housekeeper, a cook, and a partner in bed, it was easier to
purchase a slave or slaves to whom he owed no responsibilities and who could be resold if she were unsatisfactory, if he decided to leave, or if his resources were stretched.

Concubines, Slaves, and Prostitution

The European tendency to group concubines with slaves and prostitutes had a significant influence on perceptions of the temporary wife because in Europe prostitution was regarded as a crime. In Southeast Asia, tightening social controls over female sexuality was intimately associated with the spread of world religions, but records from various European administrations also provide evidence of their concern to eliminate "immorality." For the first time, the state established institutions specifically for "loose women." In 1674, the College of Santa Pontenciana in Manila was set aside to house "lewd women" whom magistrates placed there. Kept apart from orphans and women in distress, "lewd women" were "maintained by the king and they are to work for him." In Batavia and such other Dutch-controlled centers as Melaka, "debauched women" were confined in a building known as the "spin house" where they were "reclaimed... from their ill course of life" by being kept continually at work "under the tuition of a governess" and scourged when necessary.

The increased visibility of prostitution in historical records is not just a product of European preoccupations. A feature of this period is the growing indebtedness of ordinary Southeast Asians as economies became increasingly monetized. Among nonelite groups, for whom premarital chastity was not a great concern, prostitution presented one solution to economic hardship since then as now it was customary to channel to the family resources earned in this manner. Should a family be particularly pressed, daughters could be mortgaged as debt-slaves—domestic servants who were also available for sex. In eighteenth-century Vietnam, which saw continued warfare and consequent disruption to agriculture, mothers often helped negotiate sexual liaisons for their daughters. "Young women," noted one observer, "dispose of personal favours to procure articles of the first necessity for themselves and their families... Neither the husband nor the father seems to have any scruples in abandoning the wife or the daughter to the gallant." Indigenous rulers were clearly concerned at this trend. In Vietnam, the Le Code forbade prostitution for girls under age fifteen, and in late-seventeenth-century Burma the ruler even issued edicts forbidding parents from selling their children. One hundred years later, however, prostitutes in Rangoon often were girls who had been mortgaged for their fathers' debts and subsequently sold by creditors.

The relationship between prostitution and increasing poverty was
very evident in the growing urban centers. Cities have always been linked with a commoditization of sex, and the contrast with village life was sufficiently marked in the Philippines for one Spanish friar to contend that "prostitution does not exist in the heathen villages." As we have seen, a principal reason for a rise in commercial sex in the cities was the surplus of males, many of whom were single and transient. Europeans employed as soldiers, sailors, and clerks were ill paid, and city administrations saw cohabitation without a legal marriage as a punishable offense. A second factor was the preponderance of slaves in Southeast Asian cities, and the expectation that their activities should yield profit for their owners. By 1730, for example, 71 percent of the inhabitants of Makassar were slaves, whose earnings provided an income for their commonly mestizo owners. The figures are even more striking in Batavia, where as many as 10,000 slaves were brought between 1661 and 1682. In 1679, slaves comprised 59 percent of the residents in the inner city; by 1749, this figure had risen slightly to 61 percent. Overall, male slaves outnumbered females, but freed females tended to remain in Batavia, so that an overwhelming number of former slaves (mandijkers) were women. A third reason was the increase in unattached individuals—refugees, wandering mercenaries, and abandoned women and children—who lacked any clear basis of support. The erosion of the conventions and financial guarantees governing temporary marriages, departure of European fathers, and closing of European posts also contributed to a growing number of mixed-birth residents who no longer enjoyed the status of cultural brokers and were largely left to fend for themselves.

Among this floating mass of uprooted people was a steadily rising number of poor women, in large measure due to the manumission of slaves freed through conversion to Christianity or in the wills of deceased owners. These females did not possess the resources or skills that could easily generate income, and petty trading or domestic service combined with sexual availability was sometimes the only way to make a living. The fear of further poverty acted as goad to the sale of sex, for in European cities indebtedness could be a punishable offense. In 1674, for example, six Melaka women were incarcerated in a VOC jail because of their debts. Dutch records from Batavia show that it was relatively common for a domestic concubine/servant to wash, sell, clean, and provide sexual services privately and/or publicly because her master had agreed to pay her debts. An individual who could command the sexual services of several women could draw considerable profits. A typical case reported in 1643 from Banda in eastern Indonesia concerns a mestizo who kept a number of female slaves as prostitutes, earning from each about half or three-eighths of a real per day at a time when the standard wage for physical labor in much
of the archipelago was a quarter of a real. In 1644, one minister complained that female slaves in Batavia were maintained "merely to deliver the earnings obtained from their bodies." To avoid trouble with the law, women sent out to solicit were often given a few pieces of cheap cloth so they could claim they were peddlers.71

Batavia, with its "large and increasing surplus of male inhabitants" provides a telling example of how cities, where so many people were recent arrivals living in penury with no kin support, created the kind of environment in which commercialized sex thrives. The VOC fort and the lodges in the outlying posts became foci for the sale of sexual services, both by women working independently and those who delivered their earnings to others. Brothels, sometimes operated by agents of VOC officials, sprang up outside city walls and around the fort because of the ruling that soldiers could not bring women into the barracks.72 The district known as the "Oostvoorstad" was inhabited largely by former slaves and their offspring, with a preponderance of poor females; in 1686, for example, there were 1,131 males here, and 1,823 women. Poverty and domestic abuse thrust many into prostitution, and this district gained a reputation as an area where sexual favors could be bought easily. To a lesser extent, the same pattern is discernible in other Southeast Asian cities. One area in the town of Maindu, opposite Rangoon, was inhabited completely by prostitutes.73 In these urban enclaves, the taverns and arak (rice wine) houses were often owned by local women and acted as gathering points for those selling or purchasing sex.74 Popular street entertainment, another means by which poor and unskilled women could earn an income, was similarly linked with prostitution. As the English scholar-administrator Stamford Raffles remarked, "The common dancing girls of the country ... are called ronggeng, and are generally of easy virtue ... as to render the title of ronggeng and prostitute synonymous."75

Trade in sex also opened opportunities for poor women, ordinarily freed but aging slaves who lacked family support and economic resources. Because older females traditionally had participated as mediators in marriage negotiations, they easily took on the role of procurers. A light-hearted Malay poem of the period tells of a widow from Bali, "the sweet old lady with the bold mouth / highly skilled in the art of deceit" who helped a Portuguese trader abduct the concubine of a Chinese.76 The depiction of such women in VOC sources is less appealing. Nyai Assan, for example, was well-known to the Batavia authorities for her collaboration with incoming ship captains. Her methods were simple; she befriended lowborn women, lured them out to the harbor for a pleasure trip, and fed them drugged refreshments. They were then handed over to captains sailing to outlying ports.77
Targets for this kind of abduction were usually slaves or former slaves. Once a woman had been enslaved, she was regarded as available to any man who could assert his social or physical control over her. Indeed, in Dutch sources the terms “slavinne” (female slave) and “hoor” (whore) are frequently used interchangeably. Although indigenous society was not always kind to female slaves and bondswomen, there were accepted traditions that governed behavior between master and servant and provided for recompense in the case of abuse. In the heightened commercial climate of the early modern period, these traditional restraints often were ignored with impunity, especially by those in high places. A case from Jambi illustrates that women frequently were driven to take desperate measures. A female slave belonging to a leading court figure earned money for him by prostitution. One day she appeared in the VOC lodge, claiming she was a free woman and that her mother was upriver. She asked the mestizo supervisor of the VOC slaves if she could live in his household until her mother returned. Her attempt to present herself as an “honorable” woman apparently failed, for according to her own account, the supervisor sexually abused her. Further, when he discovered her origins, she was evicted to avoid disputes with her owner. Without any income, and surrounded by potential customers within the relatively safe walls of the Dutch compound, it is hardly surprising that this unnamed woman hid “in nooks and crannies” to prostitute herself “both night and day” with VOC employees and their slaves. Condemned as an immoral and corrupting runaway, she was further victimized when a group of Javanese men abducted her. In another case from Jambi, a female slave avenged herself on her owner, a Dutch soldier who had kept her in neck-chains for five months, by arranging for a Javanese man to murder him.

Conclusion

By the end of the eighteenth century, the temporary wife had not disappeared from the Southeast Asian scene, but the respect she once enjoyed had slipped away. The Dutch description of the horrific treatment meted out to “Encik Koey’s widow” encodes many of the changes in attitudes toward sexuality that typify the early modern period. In contrast to the temporary wife of the past and privileged Eurasian wives of colonial employees, the concubine of a foreign trader was increasingly likely to be a lowborn and marginal person, accepted neither by her husband’s associates nor by local society. The future of children born of such unions was also insecure. Among Europeans and indigenous courts alike there was a growing suspicion of the “half-caste,” who had in the past been able to reach positions of influence and importance, and in some places
religious teachings promoting female seclusion had led to prohibitions against marriages with foreigners. Though well into the nineteenth century Europeans continued to take concubines, the tendency to see concubines akin to prostitutes meant that the standing of the temporary wife had been fundamentally eroded.

Southeast Asia provides an intriguing example of the processes behind shifts in sexual attitudes. When Europeans arrived in the region, it was widely accepted that a foreign trader could establish a sexual relationship with a local woman who would act as his wife and economic partner for as long as required. Newly arrived males gained access to sexual companionship, household help, and assistance in economic activities; their wives were entitled to marital rights, while acquiring financial benefits and enhancing their status and that of their families. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the commercialization of these relationships and the debasement of temporary wives to concubines entailed a loss of autonomy and a less assured position because so often foreigners took slaves and ex-slaves as wives. Expected to contribute to their master’s income, such a woman frequently chose or was forced to sell sex, and expanding urban centers with substantial male populations provided willing clients. This growing trade in sex was highly significant in an environment where upper-class values presented a woman’s chastity and fidelity to one man as the ideal of female behavior, while a man’s sexual experience with many women was regarded as a demonstration of masculinity.

In the Western world, and in some Asian cultures, the sale of sex has very old roots. In Africa, the Americas, and Southeast Asia, however, it is associated with a more recent spectrum of changes—the spread of world religions, rise of patriarchal states, increased foreign presence, coin currencies, and emergence of towns—which all transformed local societies. Modern research on sexual attitudes in Southeast Asia has focused primarily on prostitution, but behind the grim realities linking poverty and the contemporary sex trade it is possible to discern other historical continuities. Still today, the great hope of many prostitutes in Jakarta is to attach themselves to a wealthy expatriate, to become his isteri kontrak, or wife, for the period of his company contract. In so doing, they may be able to step beyond the shadow of “Encik Koey’s widow” and regain a little of the economic security and social acceptance once associated with the temporary wife.

NOTES

1 This article is a revised version of a paper originally presented to the 14th International Association of Historians of Asia Conference, Bangkok, 20–24

2 Verengide Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC).

3 Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, VOC 1283, Palembang to Batavia, 2 March 1671, 1551. The VOC documents used in this article are housed at the General State Archives in The Hague, the Netherlands. The incoming and outgoing letters from Batavia to Amsterdam and between Batavia and other posts are bound in volumes, each of which usually covers a year. These volumes have all been assigned reference numbers. In this case, for example, VOC 1283 includes letters to and from Batavia and other posts in the Indonesian archipelago for the year 1671.


5 I have discussed these ideas more fully in Barbara Watson Andaya, To Live as Brothers: Southeast Sumatra in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 21–29, 40–41. Of course, this arrangement is not unique to Southeast Asia.

6 The derivation of the word “Pagally” is unclear, but Professor Michael Forman (Department of Linguistics, University of Hawai'i) has suggested that it may derive from a Mindanao dialect, meaning brother or sister.


8 Ibid., 248.


11 Dampier, A New Voyage, 269; Reid, Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1: 155.

12 Dampier, A New Voyage, 244.

14 Dampier, A New Voyage, 244.

15 Ibid., quote on 249, 244.


17 Aroonrut Wichienkeko and Gehan Wijeyewardene, trans. and eds., The Laws of King Mangrai (Canberra: Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1986), 73.


19 Wichienkeko and Wijeyewardene, trans. and eds., The Laws of King Mangrai, 40–44.


22 Van Forest and De Booy, eds., De Vierde Schipvaart, 38; and Hamilton, A New Account, 2: 115.

23 Van Forest and De Booy, eds., De Vierde Schipvaart, 223.

24 Hamilton, A New Account, 2: quote on 28, 96. See also p. 96 where Hamilton makes similar remarks when describing Siam. "It is thought no Disgrace to have had many temporary husbands, but rather an Honour that they have been beloved by so many different Men."


26 John Barrow, A Voyage to Cochinchina in the Years 1792 and 1793 (1806; reprint, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975), 206.

27 Samuel Purchas, ed., Purchas His Pilgrimes (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1905), 3: 440.

28 Ibid.

29 Blair and Robertson, eds., The Philippine Islands, 5: 145; and G. P. Rouffaer


32 Rouffaer and Ijzerman, *De Eerste Schipvaart*, 112, ill. facing 110. The latter also shows an area where “traders and adventurers strolled,” which would have provided a meeting ground for the sale and purchase of sexual access. A good example of the growing role of the outdoor market as a center for the sex trade is provided in accounts of seventeenth-century Vietnam. See Micheline Lessard, “Curious Relations: Jesuit Perceptions of the Vietnamese,” in *Essays into Vietnamese Past*, ed. K. W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1995), 149; and Liam Kelley, “Vietnam through the Eyes of a Chinese Abbot: Dhashan’s Hawai Jishi (1694–95)” (master’s thesis, University of Hawai‘i, 1996), 54.


35 VOC 1249, Jan van Wesenhage’s report on Inderagiri, 13 January 1665, 68.


38 Li and Reid, *Southern Vietnam under the Nguyen*, 56.

39 Ibid., 74.

40 Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, 2: 446.

"Raben, "Batavia and Colombo," 142.

"Purchas, Purchas His Pilgrimes, 2: quote on 471; and Blussé, Strange Company, 168.

"Blair and Robertson, eds., The Philippine Islands, 5: 246; and Blussé, Strange Company, 163.

"Blair and Robertson, eds., The Philippine Islands, 2: quote on 138. For similar comments in Vietnam, see Li and Reid, Southern Vietnam under the Nguyen, 77. For the region generally, see Marijke Barend-van Haetten, Oost-Indië Gespiegeld: Nicolaas de Graaff, een schrijvend chirurgijn in dienst van de VOC (Zutphen: Walburg Press, 1992), 143.

"Reid, Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1: 153.


"Blair and Robertson, eds., The Philippine Islands, 5: 225.

"VOC 1661, Jambi to Batavia, 22 February 1721, fol. 3.


"Ten Brummelhuis, Merchant, Courtier and Diplomat, 60.


58 Reid, Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1: 156.


62 Richard Symanski, The Immoral Landscape: Female Prostitution in Western Societies (Toronto: Butterworths, 1981), 273. Murray (No Money, No Honey, 108) mentions that in contemporary times one prostitute may be able to support around eighteen relatives.

63 Barrow, A Voyage to Cochinchina, quote on 305; Blair and Robertson, eds., The Philippine Islands, 5: 119; Daniel Beeckman, A Voyage to and from the Island of Borneo (1718; reprint, London: Dawsons, 1973), 42; and Li and Reid, Southern Vietnam under the Nguyen, 77.


68 Figures cited are in Henk Niemeyer, "Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur: Batavia 1619–1725" (Ph.D. diss., Free University, 1996), 51–54, which
is a rich source for this period. See also Raben, "Batavia and Colombo," Appendix III.

60 De Haan, Oud Batavia, 1:542; Hamilton, A New Account, 2:96; Barrow, A Voyage to Cochinchina, 238; and ten Brummelhuis, Merchant, Courier and Diplomat, 58–60.


62 Niemeyer, "Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur," quote on 260; and Blussé, Strange Company, 168.

63 Raben, "Batavia and Culumbo," 110; Niemeyer, "Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur," 260; and Blussé, Strange Company, 169.

64 Niemeyer, "Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur," 52–54, 255; and Symes, An Account, 252.


67 Vladimir Braginsky, "The Gentleman in the Pink Hat, or the First Malay 'Film': Notes on Syair Selambari or Syair Sinyor Kosta," Indonesia Circle 63 (June 1994):174–82.

68 The case of a woman called Rokiba who had been abducted is reported at length in VOC 3525, Slave Reports (M), 25 February 1778, n.f.

69 VOC 1099, Jambi to Batavia, 18 January 1631, 142–44.


73 Murray, No Money, No Honey, 116–18.