Southeast Asia
in the
Age of Commerce
1450–1680

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The Lands below the Winds

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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 fifteenth 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 [Boserup 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; Plasencia 1589: 181]. Islamic law, which required that sons receive double the inheritance of daughters, was never effectively implemented [Salech 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 Widaya: 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 1932; Pigeaud 1967: 206–09; Dhaminavit 1956].

Even more characteristic of an essentially Southeast Asian genius were [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; Dasmarinas 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 virile, 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" [Dasmarías 1590A: 444]. 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 [Stutterheim 1930: 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.1 Spanish officials gave a beating to any Visayan they found wearing a penis pin [Dasmarías 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 Huñu named their subincision of boys' penises [pasamate] after the Arabic circumcision [Valeri 1985].

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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: 15). 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 1624: 321; cf. Morga 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 Chams of southern Vietnam [Aymonier 1801: 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: 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 [Plasencia 1589: 813; Dasmariñas 1590A: 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” [sikattoi, from root katto, “cut off”]. A not untypical female career in this elite group is that of Karaeng Balla-Jawaya, who was born in 1634 to one of the highest Makassar lineages. At the age of thirteen she married Karaeng Bonto-maraunu, later to be one of the great Makassar war leaders. At twenty-five she separated from him and soon after married his rival, Karaeng Karumrung, 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, Karaeng Tangngalla, 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 Karaeng Leengkese, the brother of Karaeng Balla-Jawaya. 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 1960s 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 Vollenhoven 1918: 79; Nash 1965: 253; Diamour 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 (and 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: 46; 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” (Barrosa 1518 II: 176; cf. Barros 1563 II, vi: 24; Eредa 1613: 31, 40), while Javanesse, 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 1590A: 427].

Within marriage, on the other hand, the fidelity and devotedness
of Southeast Asian couples appears to have surprised Europeans. The women of Banjaraspin, 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 by death [Schurhammer 1977: 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 positing 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 beating 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 Mora [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: 354]. 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: 17–18]. 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 maid servant 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 ["Tweede Boeck" 1601: 77], for Europeans and others in Vietnam, Cambodia, Siam, and Burma [Dampier 1697: 268; Dampier 1699: 40–41; Symes 1827: 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 by 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: 306; 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 own country . . . 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 (Dasmarías 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, Ayuthaya, 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; Pallecoix 1854: 3: 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 impurity 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, 51). Muslim-influenced law codes show 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 2½ tahil by the judge. If a marriage is suitable, he shall be made 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 muisan [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 kiss 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; Dasmarías 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: 1: 10–14,
Saleby 1905: 66, 92–93; Hsieh 1820: 20], the stern model imposed by some rulers on the cosmopolitan trading cities cannot have penetrated their hinterlands in any depth.

The *talak* formula of Islamic law, whereby a man could divorce his wife (but not the reverse) by thrice repeating a simple repudiation, was also known in the cosmopolitan ports of the region and took its place as part of God’s law in the Melaka Code (*Undang-Undang Melaka*: 132–33). Since the economic and social position of the divorced Southeast Asian woman was at least as strong as that of the man, however, this religious prescription had little effect on the practice of divorce. As the great Arab navigator Ibn Majid (1462: 206) complained, Malays “do not treat divorce as a religious act.” A Spanish observer in Brunei noted that husbands were entitled to divorce their wives for the most trivial reasons, but that in practice “they usually divorce voluntarily, both together wanting it; and they agree to return half the dowry and to divide the children if they have them” (*Dasmariñas* 1590B: 9).

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 envoy 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 ("Tweede Boeck" 1601: 149; Mandelslo 1606: 115; Barrow 1606: 226). La Louberè [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 (Bouinias and Paulus 1885 I: 228).

Second, the spectacularly opulent weddings of the rich and highborn 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 premarital 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 highborn Makassarese
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" [Pallieux 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 [Beekman 1718: 42; Chou Ta-kuian 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 Louhère [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: 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 heated 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 gonorrhea. Modern studies of relatively isolated, animist peoples in North Borneo in the 1930s [Muruts] and eastern Indonesia in the 1960s [Sumba] have shown an incidence of gonorrhea 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 copulate with a healthy woman and thereby return the "alien" element to her [Mitchell 1982: Jordaan and de Josselin de Jong 1985: 356-57; La Bissethère 1812: 67]. Although such attitudes could have made gonorrhea 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: 33-34; Zollinger 1851: 338]. But until the twentieth century there is no reliable way to distinguish gonorrhea 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 Sejarah Melayu [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: 261; Snouck Hurgronje 1893: 113; Rutter 1929: 73; Forth 1981: 11]. 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-
pines, less affected by external Islamic influences than the Manila area at the time of the Spanish arrival. "It is considered a disgrace among them to have many children," noted Loarca [1582: 119], "for they say that when the property is to be divided among all the children, they will all be poor." Another observer noted:

Women dislike to give birth many times, specially those who inhabit towns near the sea, saying that in having many children they are like pigs... After having one or two, the next time they get pregnant, when they are already three or four months, they kill the creature in the body and abort. There are women for this calling and by massaging the stomach and placing certain herbs... the pregnant woman aborts [Dasmariñas 1590A: 413; cf. Pedrosa 1983: 13-20].

One belief that the Visayan penis pin was partly designed to reduce the likelihood of pregnancy as a result of intercourse [Carletti 1606: 84], and reduced fecundity among users of the pin in Borneo has been noted by a modern ethnographer [Appell 1968: 205].

The growing numbers of Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims, particularly in the cities and irrigated rice areas where the female work load was less heavy and insecurity less constant, appear to have chosen to have larger families [Dasmariñas 1590A: 427]. Whether the family was large or small, children of both sexes were cherished and indulged. "The union of families is such," wrote La Loubère of Siam [1691: 74], that "no person in this country dreads marriage, nor a number of children." The frequently acerbic Crawford [1820: 31] conceded that "in the relation between parent and child... the character of the Indian Islanders appears most unexceptionable and most amiable."

Female Roles

It is already clear that women had a relatively high degree of economic autonomy in premodern Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, it was taken for granted that the opposition of male and female characteristics was a fundamental part of the cosmic dualism. Perhaps for this very reason it was not thought necessary to create artificial markers of gender through dress, hairstyle, or speech patterns, none of which stressed the male-female distinction. A rash of recent studies on the anthropology of gender in Indonesia has uncovered a variety of expressions of the complementary opposition of male and female. Maleness is typically associated with white [semen], warmth, sky, form, control, and deliberate creativity; the female with red [blood], coolness, earth, substance, spontaneity, and natural creativity. The

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 1983; Keeler 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 male," 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 89 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 [Siamese] 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 they haggled over pepper prices with "a great woman merchant [cooop-vrouw] 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 [Pombejra 1984: 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 1831: 251].

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-Roelofs 1962: 108; Lombard and Salmon 1983: 74]. Some royal women used their access to capital to good effect. In the 1660s the wife of Sultan Hasanuddin of Makassar, Lomo' Tombo, owned ships which she sent on very profitable trade missions to Johor [Speelman 1670 A: 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 formidably female traders. In Cochin-China they haggled over pepper prices with "a great woman merchant [coop-vrouw] 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 [Pombejra 1984: 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].

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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 Ayutthaya in 1643, and Lady Mo, who rescued Khorat in 1826 after leading an escape by several hundred captive women (Gerini 1905: 178–83). Women were also said to have played a spirited part in the defence of Madura against Sultan Agung of Mataram in 1634 (de Graaf 1958: 96). 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-kwan 1597: 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 estri) 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 1544: 154–55; Scott
1666: 155]. Among the few nonroyal women celebrated in the chroni-
cles 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 Javanese 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 excep-
tion 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 1852 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 cen-
tury 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 Tan-
ette 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 Liit 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; Schweig Guth 1951: 84–90].

The association of learning with the formal religious systems
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 tradi-
tion 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 [Alcina
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, Is-
lamic, and Chinese traditions of statecraft. Austronesian societies,
however, which include Polynesia and Madagascar as well as Indo-
nesia 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 neighboring Bugis state of Wajo he found that four of the six great chiefs [arung] were female [Brooke 1848: 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 at the peak of their commercial importance. Pasai, the first major Muslim port below the winds, had two queens in succession between 1405 and 1434, just before it was eclipsed by Melaka as the main Malacca Straits port [Cowen 1938: 299–300]. The only woman on a Burmese throne in this period was Shin Sawbu [1453–72], who presided over the emergence of Pagan 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. 1608–22], of pepper-rich Jambi in east Sumatra [1630–c. 1655], of Kelantan on the Malayan east coast [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 Gede 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 all of sorts that shee ruleth as if shee were soleleye queene of that countrey” [Scott 1666: 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 [1641–90] 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: 226]. 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 nautious to them. . . through the Tyrannical 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 business-like 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 orangkaya of the port capital began to lose their influence to forces less interested in trade.

Festivals and Amusements

What, then, is the right way of living? Life must be lived as play, playing 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 1938: 19

Because their climate was mild and their basic diet of rice, fish, and fruits more dependable and available than in most parts of the world, Southeast Asians had natural advantages in escaping from the constant 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 entertaining one another (La Loubère 1691: 35; Verhaeck 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 categories 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 (jen and main, respectively) cover a wide range of activity, from bullfights and theatre to illicit lovemaking. Much of such amusement was of course private and scarcely accessible to the historian. It became public at the great seasonal