

ARTIKEL ULASAN/REVIEW ARTICLE

PATRICK SULLIVAN, SOCIAL RELATIONS OF DEPENDENCE IN A MALAY STATE: NINETEENTH CENTURY PERAK

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Sullivan's essay published last year by the Royal Asiatic Society is one of a number of recent publications by Western scholars on pre-colonial state systems which purport, *inter alia* to update, supplement or even challenge the findings presented by J.M. Gullick in a book which must now be considered a classic in this field (Gullick, 1958). As such these books present us with rather different, indeed often contrasting pictures of "traditional" Southeast Asian state structures. For this reason, and because this essay has already been scrutinised for its empirical accuracy in the pages of this journal, I propose here to consider the book as part of the Western discourse on Asia, i.e. as a contribution in the field of "orientalism" (cf. Said, 1978). Assessing the contributions in this way means asking to what extent the different pictures of state structures painted by recent writers are due more to contrasts in theoretical perspective than to empirical/historical variations in Southeast Asia itself; whether recent models are as a consequence in some sense "better" than those already in existence (e.g. Gullick's model); and what issues are raised by an examination of changes in the western (here mainly Anglo-Saxon) image of traditional society in Malaya. Once we accept the critique of positivist notions of the development of social science made by Said among others, the answers to questions such as these are by no means as straightforward as has commonly been assumed, at least by Western scholars. These questions then can be seen to raise issues of fundamental significance for the whole enterprise of anthropology, when the latter is conceived as a western discourse on non-Western societies; a discourse deeply imbued with questionable assumptions concerning objectivity, scientificity and the like.

The main argument presented in Sullivan's essay on Perak in the nineteenth century is that local social organisation came increasingly to be shaped by servile relations - relations which have their origin in a much earlier period of Malayan-Indonesian history, but which were

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consolidated and intensified in Perak in this period in response to increasing world market demand for tin. Sullivan provides us with a sketch of the social, economic and political history of Perak, showing how the intensification of tin production could come in only two ways. Firstly, increased production could originate from the autonomous enclaves of the Chinese mining communities, producing communities which relied for their reproduction on outside sources of labour and means of consumption. Secondly, increased tin production by Malays relied on the intensification of servile relations of slavery and debt bondage, since only in this way could *orang besar* recruit necessary labour, and ensure the reproduction of that labour force in the absence of developed markets in labour power and rice.

The essay is of potential interest for a number of reasons. It represents in some ways a challenge to existing models of precolonial social and political organisation in Malaya, as well as of other areas in the region, largely because it challenges the assumptions about precolonial egalitarianism so central to other writings on the ethnography of Southeast Asia. Specifically Sullivan's is one of a number of attempts to focus more attention on the study of slavery and debt bondage in the region, a field which has previously been neglected. At the same time Sullivan's work is important at least as a manifestation of a number of recent attempts to combine the insights generated by theoretical models developed by social scientists with the data of history. This seems particularly important in the Southeast Asian context where it is clear that there are now no pure precolonial social values, in spite of the continued use of the highly problematic concept of "tradition" in the modern context. Only a careful consideration of the transformation wrought by colonialism and post-colonial development will allow us to assess the ways in which tradition has been constructed and used in modern scientific and political discourse in the region. Evaluating to what extent Sullivan's essay represents a successful attempt to combine these concerns is beyond the scope of this review, and is indeed better left to those with a more detailed knowledge of both historical and contemporary conditions in Perak. For as Sullivan himself points out, a major weakness in previous models of Southeast Asian state structure has been the tendency to ignore important historical and geographical specificities in favour of somewhat essentialist generalisations about "traditional Southeast Asian society".

Therefore instead of evaluating Sullivan's contributions in these areas, I propose briefly to evaluate a further claim made in his essay, namely that the insights offered by a particular group of social scientists and philosophers (viz the French structural Marxists) remain pertinent in the context of Southeast Asian studies. For it is

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reliance on the work of scholars such as L. Althusser, M. Godelier, C. Meillassoux, E. Terray and P.P. Rey, to name only the best-known of this group, that gives definition to Sullivan's work.

It should be noted at the outset that Sullivan's essay is somewhat out of date, if only because it fails to take into account recent developments in this field, particularly of the increasingly sophisticated body of writings critical at least of some of the grander claims made by Meillassoux et. al. (for a discussion of some of these see Kahn and Llobera, 1981). After all Meillassoux's central argument about the bases of power in segmentary societies, the validity of which Sullivan accepts almost without question was sketched out as long ago as 1960 (Meillassoux, 1960), and Sullivan might have treated such theories with somewhat more skepticism than he does.

Being out of touch with recent theoretical discussions does not, however, constitute a crime in itself, particularly when we reject traditional views of the progressive nature of the development of the social sciences. What is perhaps the real difficulty with Sullivan's use of these models, indeed with all work on Southeast Asia which relies on the insights of structural Marxism (and here I must include my own publications), is that this paradigm precisely fails to reject traditional positivistic assumptions about the scientificity and or better *potential* scientificity of social enquiry. In other words, at least in the opinion of this reviewer, it is the general claim made by structural Marxists to have successfully opened up the possibility of an objective science of pre-capitalist societies that is at the same time the fatal weakness of the whole endeavour. For Althusser et. al. a study such as that envisaged by Sullivan is not primarily to be evaluated as part of the Western discourse on Southeast Asia, not in terms of its apparent fit with the empirical situation in Perak in the nineteenth century, but instead in terms of the canons of scientific practice first laid bare in the writings of Karl Marx.

There are in my view two ways to evaluate such a claim. The first is by reference to the work of Marx himself, the second by reference to the social and political conditions of the context in which such models are used. It is not my intention to turn this review into an exercise in "marxology". Suffice it here to note that there is a substantial body of opinion which would reject the structural Marxist view of Marx's own contribution, and which would argue precisely that the strength of Marx's own work lay more in its social and historical specificities than in its discovery of a general "science of history", and that, moreover, if Marx had anything general to say it was precisely to do with the social, historical and political *context* of knowledge. One need not need

to go to the extremes of phenomenology or pure praxis epistemology to call into question the Althusserian assumptions about Marxism science.

The issue of the relation between theory and its social and political context is perhaps best raised by considering another recent contribution to the study of precolonial State systems in Southeast Asia, a contribution which also lays claim to being an alternative existing paradigms. I choose here to refer briefly to A.C. Milner's book (Milner, 1982) not because it is in any sense more successful than Sullivan's but because in taking an opposing position it leads us back to the kinds of questions I posed at the outset.

While Sullivan has in a sense presented us with an objective model of a Malay state structure, and in this sense has not broken radically with Gullick, Milner purports instead to present us with a subjectivist model, i.e. a model of nineteenth century politics which accords with the ways in which the Malays themselves saw the situation. Somewhat rewritten, Milner's critiques of Gullick and earlier European scholarship might have been addressed to Sullivan. In attacks, for example, the nineteenth century view that politics in Malaya and Sumatra was economically motivated, being particularly critical of the view that the state was "little more than a commercial venture" (17). It is, of course, somewhat unfair to treat structural Marxism as though it were simply a further example of 19th century economism, and yet as I have argued elsewhere it has clearly failed to escape the kinds of vulgar materialism which it precisely sought to criticise (see Kahn and Llobera, pp. 306ff). In any case Milner's book marshalls a considerable amount of evidence based on an analysis of both the Malay language and *Hikayat* dating from the period under consideration which can be said to demonstrate that Sullivan's model does not accord with indigenous models of the political process. If this conclusion seems to me to raise certain fundamental issues for those seeking to generate knowledge of genuinely precapitalist (and contemporary non-capitalist) social systems in Southeast Asia, issues relating to the role to be played by indigenous conceptions in such analysis. Traditionally, of course, the problem is nearly avoided by structural Marxism, which simply relegates such issues to the realm of ideology, and treating the latter as it would any other social phenomenon (as determined by the mode of production, if only in the *last instance*). And yet the traditional problem in anthropology is so easily resolved once we begin to question the positivistic assumptions of writers like Althusser, or indeed when we read the work of Marx himself in different ways.

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I am however not, I hope, engaging in the kind of knee-jerk empiricism of traditional British anthropology by appealing to the importance of indigenous conceptions. Not am I suggesting that Milner's solution, referring to what are after all in Sullivan's terms simply chronicles of ruling class ideology, is necessarily the correct one. Perhaps the problem is most clearly manifest in Milner's own justification for taking such a model as more accurate than the objectivist model of Gullick. Milner explicitly recognises the dangers of relying on sources originating from the *raja* themselves, and yet concludes that we are justified in so doing in the absence of evidence that anyone seriously disagreed with them. Countering Milner's presentation would therefore presumably mean citing evidence of peasant rebellions or at least peasant dissidence in 19th century Malaya.

There are in my view three major and related difficulties with the justification offered by Milner, and a brief consideration of them allows us to return to the validity of the structural Marxist model presented by Sullivan.

Firstly, the enterprise outlined by Milner, modelled on the project for cultural anthropology outlined by writers on Southeast Asia like Clifford Geertz, entails at base a contradiction. For if anthropology is to consist solely in the translation/interpretation of existing indigenous meanings, then one must ask: why and for whom? If as in this case the whom is the western consumer of non-Western world views, and the why a mere delight in cultural contrasts (perhaps to sharpen up our own worldviews), then is not the whole exercise, couched as it is in anti-positivist terms, at least somewhat hypocritical?

Secondly, we are compelled to ask how the accuracy of such translations and interpretations is to be assessed. Even the printed text of a Hikayat is far from unambiguous, to say nothing of the utterances and unstated assumptions of other cultures. Even a claim to have understood the basic cultural assumptions of our closest associates, much less of people among whom we have lived for only relatively short periods of time, must be at least suspect.

Thirdly, and most importantly, it must be recognised that the only valid way to judge the accuracy of a social or cultural model, is in terms of its reception by the people such a model purports to describe. Milner has to some extent recognised this, although he continues to appeal to the (western) consumer of his writings as the ultimate adjudicator. However if we accept the point made above about the inadequacies of a positivist epistemology, the typical consumer of Milner's writings should have little if any role in the evaluation of his proposed model.

The ultimate irony, of course, is that neither the model proposed by Sullivan, nor that outlined by Milner is amenable to this form of assessment, for both purport to demonstrate the empirical facts of history which is now past and with whose subjects by definition (since it is supposedly a pre-capitalist history) neither Sullivan nor Milner stand in any kind of relationship. In other words, and in spite of claims to the contrary, the position advocated by Milner suffers from the same positivistic defects as does that favoured by Gullick, Sullivan and other western writers on pre-colonial Malay.

The reader would be correct in concluding that the position outlined above is extremely negative to the basis of the anthropological project as it has been perceived and is perceived by structural Marxists and more traditional anthropologists alike. Lest this review appear overly nihilistic, a number of concluding points appear to be in order.

Firstly, it should be noted that in one important respect, Sullivan's project is both ethically and epistemologically more feasible than that proposed by either Milner, or some of the French structural Marxists and that is because it is concerned primarily *not* with the real pre-capitalist formations in Malaya, but specifically about the effects of the nature of capitalist transformation of society in the Malay peninsula. Because it is in the very context of capitalist transformation that the modern social science has its roots, because the late nineteenth century transformation of Southeast Asian societies and economies remain a significant formative influence in the modern situation, and because this transformation brought Malaya into real social, political, economic and cultural relations with the West, then it seems to me nothing precludes such a study by Western social scientist.

Secondly, and in spite of what has already been argued, the assessors of the validity of Sullivan's models are not nineteenth century Malays and Chinese, but are instead the people of modern Malaysia. Ironically, but inevitably, the validity of the variety of models proposed to describe the Southeast Asian past will ultimately be determined by the influence such models have on the making of its future. A resolution of the academic debates, therefore, depends entirely on what sort of future we all want that to be.

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PATRICK SULLIVAN, SOCIAL RELATIONS OF DEPENDENCE IN A MALAY STATE: NINETEENTH CENTURY PERAK

Paul H. Kratoska

The brief for this review is to examine *Social Relations of Dependence in a Malay State: Nineteenth Century Perak* by Patrick Sullivan as a work of history. Sullivan states that his "primary aim" in the work is the description of "dependent" social relations (slavery and debt-bondage) in Perak" prior to their abolition "by British fiat" in 1883. He then uses this material to "reconstruct Perak society in the nineteenth century" and more broadly to indicate the course of its historical development. (p. xiii) Sullivan's approach is to examine the "actual social relations" of daily life (as opposed to epiphenomenal "social institutions") and specifically (because it is the "relationship found to be most useful for comparative social analysis") the transfer and appropriation of labour. Since "systems of labour use" as well as classes in a society may be in conflict, Sullivan claims that this approach yields a "concept of social dynamic" that is "absent from other theories". (p. xviii)

The monograph represents a very welcome effort to use social science theory to go beyond descriptive accounts of Malaysia's history and analyze the processes of social change. Regrettably, the results are unsatisfactory because Sullivan lacks sufficient command of the empirical data for the period with which he deals. His use of sources is faulty and his reconstruction of Perak history contains assertions that his data will not support.

Sources

Sullivan has included a "Note on Sources" with the monograph wherein he points out that he has of necessity drawn his information from "impure" sources which were for the most part "originally collected for political purposes completely at variance" with his own. Any reinterpretation of colonial history, he continues, must "come in terms with partisan sources". How Sullivan thinks this should be done is not indicated, but it can safely be said that his own efforts in this line are unsuccessful. Sullivan also states that the work of recent historians of Malaya "has contributed little" to his thesis. This claim is patently untrue. While Sullivan has made an admirable effort to incorporate material from official reports and published accounts written by colonial administrators in his study, much of his information on Perak history is drawn from the works of Peter Burns, Dianne Lewin and Barbara Andaya, although his understanding of Perak -- or lack thereof -- is not the fault of these writers. Admittedly Sullivan fails to cite several standard works that deal with nineteenth century Perak but there is no virtue in this omission.¹

The problem of using tainted sources is not whether they contain valid information -- it would be difficult for any writer to get absolute everything wrong -- but rather how to separate the rice from the chaff. Sullivan has not devoted sufficient attention to this matter. In several instances he impugns sources and then make use of information drawn from these sources without explaining why in one case the material is acceptable and in another not. For example, a statement by J.M. Gullick is disparaged on grounds that Gullick's source was Frank Swettenham, "an administrator not known for his objective assessment of the facts" (p. 25 n. 54), but Swettenham is Sullivan's authority on many points concerning Perak history and Malay society. Sullivan also quotes Sir Hugh Low to the effect that W.E. Maxwell's "presence inhibited the people from speaking to him (Low) freely" and that Maxwell "was 'a little rough and hasty in his ways with the natives, especially the inferior classes...' and most of his (Maxwell's) informants were Malay aristocrats" (p. 76), yet Maxwell is cited repeatedly as an authority on slavery and other matters. Again Sullivan points out that Isabella Bird based her comments on slave

¹Among the relevant works which do not appear in Sullivan's bibliography are the following: C.D. Cowan, *Nineteenth Century Malaya*; W. David McIntyre, *The Imperial Frontier in the Tropics*; Khoo Kay Kim, "The Origin of British Administration in Malaya" JMBRAS 39, 1 (1964) pp. 52-91; C.N. Parkinson, *British Intervention in Malaya*; Emily Sadka, *The Protected Malay States*; Chai Hon Chan, *The Development of British Malaya 1896 — 1909* (App. B: Slavery in the Malay States of Perak and Selangor); Aminuddin bin Baki, "The Institution of Debt-Slavery in Perak", *Peninjau Sejarah* 1, 1 (June 1966).

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on published reports rather than on her personal observations which were "detailed and acute in other matters". (p. 45) He goes on, however, to state that Raja Muda Yusuf was "fairly reliably" reported to have brutalized a recaptured female slave, giving Bird as his authority. (p. 61)²

Some of Sullivan's footnotes give a spurious authority to statements which are in fact unsupported. He writes, for example, of agricultural production in which "a family and their slaves and debt-slaves clear and cultivate the land, the produce of the slaves being reserved for their owner's use". (p. 26, Sullivan's emphasis) The footnote to this sentence refers the reader to an article on land tenure by W.E. Maxwell, but the pages cited only make passing reference to slaves and contain nothing about debt slaves or the disposition of produce.³

Elsewhere Sullivan accepts the accuracy of an account of slavery in Perak on grounds that the writer "has little reason to exaggerate". (p. 39 n. 153) An even more astonishing observation in the same vein occurs a few pages further along where Sullivan says "there is no reason to doubt" a statement made in 1875 that "three quarters of the Malay population were in the condition of debt servitude" except that "the number does seem very large". (p. 46 n. 10) This statement is peculiar in itself and, since Sullivan on the same page estimates the debt slave population to have been around 10,000 persons (p. 46 n. 9) and a few pages earlier places the Malay population of Perak at 59,682 (p. 34), there would seem to be every reason to doubt the claim.

Sullivan appears to feel uneasy about this material, for the text is full of disclaimers: "The available data does not permit a definitive answer", information "is lacking" so "we cannot know for certain", and the like. He also makes liberal use of expressions such as "it is possible", "almost certainly", "would seem", and "can only be accounted for"⁴, although most of the issues to which he refers are

²Bird herself says she heard the story before coming to Perak. *The Golden Chersonese*, p. 300.

³Sullivan refers the reader to page 89 which says a person derived his right to a holding "from the fact that he and his family or slaves had reclaimed it from the forest", and to page 104 where there is reference to the efforts of a landholder with "the cooperation of his family and slaves". "The Law and Customs of the Malays with Reference to the Tenure of Land", JSBRAS 13 (June, 1984). For another footnote of this sort in Sullivan's work see p. 71 n. 3.

⁴This collection is drawn from a single, especially rich paragraph on page 28.

anything but certain and admit of several possible explanations. Even if the evidence Sullivan submits were to be allowed to stand, there remains a further difficulty: this information does not sustain his interpretation of Perak history.

The History of Perak

Sullivan's review of Perak history begins with the myth of the White Semang (concerning putative aboriginal origins of Malay society) and events that occurred "one morning in non-historical time at Bukit Siguntang in Sumatra (the origins of the Malacca dynasty as presented in the *Sejarah Melayu*). He then describes Minangkabau, Achehnese and Malacca contributions to the polity and society of Perak, arguing that the considerable contributions of the former two entities have been slighted. In Sullivan's view Perak society until its disruption by the British was made up of a conjuncture of a "village-based autonomous community" taking its social pattern from the Minangkabau, a federation of territories under a monarch who shared power with his chiefs drawing on Achenese traditions, and a "centralised court-based administration" inspired by Malacca. (pp. 5-6) This argument is interesting and useful, but in the final pages of his monograph Sullivan adds a further, highly contentious feature to the discussion: "At some time in Malay history autonomous matrilineage declined and power became expressed through hereditary patrilineal claims to territory and control of the flow of produce within it." (p. 72)

The seventeenth century brought "the advent of the Dutch and the tyranny of tin". Much depends on Sullivan's account of the development, yet he treats it in a cursory way and fails to demonstrate what he later claims transpired during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first sentence contains a careless misstatement that the Dutch became "Perak's favoured trading partner" in the "mid-seventeenth century". To the contrary, as Sullivan proceeds to explain the trading station established by the Dutch in Perak in 1651 was promptly destroyed by the Malays, and despite repeated Dutch efforts to replace it and assert control over the tin trade nothing was accomplished in this line until 1746. Even then, as Sullivan also notes, the monopoly granted the Dutch by the Sultan was routinely evaded.

It is Sullivan's contention that the pressure of Dutch demand for tin was so great that it triggered a major realignment of Perak society, specifically that it was "the decisive factor in the reduction of the

Malay population to a status comparable to that of chattel slaves".⁵ He fails, however, to substantiate the premise that tin exports from Perak were sufficiently great to produce such a change.

It is possible to make a rough calculation of the amount of manpower that was required to produce the tin exported by the Dutch from Perak during this period. A Dutch report of 1678 states that purchases were then some 450,000 pounds annually, but by the early 1700s the level had fallen to about 100,000 – 150,000 pounds per year. Dutch exports from Malacca later in the eighteenth century exceeded 500,000 pounds in some years but by this date included tin from Selangor and elsewhere in the peninsula.⁶ Not all Perak tin was sold to the Dutch; some went to Indian merchants and some to English traders, but Sullivan claims that pressure on the Perak social system was the result of Dutch buying and that can be taken to have fallen in the range of 200,000 to 500,000 pounds per year. According to a nineteenth century report a worker in a Malay mine could produce on the average 43.5 kilograms, or 95.7 pounds, of tin per month. (Sullivan p. 30) On this basis exports of 500,000 pounds would have required the full-time employment of about 435 men, a level of effort that seems insufficient to have brought about the far-reaching changes that Sullivan claims took place. In practice, according to a Dutch account written in the eighteenth century, work in tin mines was sporadic and was interrupted by numerous other activities including *kerah* or corvée labour service. An 1826 account indicates that work was carried on intermittently by persons of all ages and both sexes. Moreover, after 1776 a proportion of Perak's tin output was produced by mines using Chinese labour.⁷

Sullivan offers a calculation indicating that 17% of the Perak population was employed in producing the state's tin exports. The figure is based on the abnormally high 1678 export figure, and a popu-

⁵On page 75 this assertion is repeated with slightly different wording: "It was the impact of European expansion on the indigenous mode of production that reduced much of the Malay population to the status of chattel slaves."

⁶Dianne Lewis, "The Tin Trade in the Malay Peninsula during the Eighteenth Century", *New Zealand Journal of History* 3, 1 (1969), pp. 57-60, 63, 65.

⁷Barbara Andaya, *Perak, The Abode of Grace*, p. 397. Another 1826 report indicates that the right of mining tin was held by "the Rajah or local Chief" but that it was "not unusual to allow others to undertake the working of mines on paying him a stipulated tax or duty, and this custom is said to prevail in Perak and other Malayan states". India Office Library, Home Miscellaneous Series, vol. 669 no. 36, pp. 712-714.

lation estimate made by Dutch observers in 1621. Sullivan says it is dubious. In fact it is wrong and must be disregarded because Sullivan confuses kilograms and pounds in making the calculation. Reworking using a common unit of weight the figures indicate that 7% of the 1621 population would have sufficed to produce Perak's 1678 tin sales to the Dutch.⁸

According to Sullivan, although the Dutch were always segregated from Malay society and had difficulty in enforcing their claims on Perak tin, "it may be supposed that the secondary effects of Dutch presence struck deep. The Dutch demand for tin would have placed great burdens on the population required to mine it, while at the same time strengthening the power of the rulers". (p. 12) As indicated above, the evidence does not support this supposition. Moreover, the last part of his proposition is by no means a corollary of the rest. Concerning power in coastal Malay states, Bennet Bronson has suggested that the upriver hinterland producing a needed resource had considerable leverage over coastal ports and that in such a case relations "will be rather more egalitarian than less consistently coercive than is usual in relations between high- and low-order centers in an ordinary state". The coast is likely "to develop a trading system offering manufactured or maritime products" to induce the hinterland to "enter the regional economy voluntarily".⁹ In the case of Perak, Graham Irwin (who has overlooked) states that tin in the seventeenth century was generally purchased by Indian traders who dealt with rulers or chiefs living near the coast. These traders brought cloth to exchange for tin and had to give advances to the coastal officials or merchants who then undertook to purchase the tin: "the Malays involved in the tin trade were unable to secure up-country tin unless they had cloth with which to pay for it".¹⁰ Irwin's account argues strongly in favour of Bronson's thesis.

Slavery

The result of the Dutch demand for tin, according to Sullivan, is that "In the nineteenth century the uses, treatment and status of

⁸The data is found in Sullivan, p. 12 n. 77 and p. 32.

⁹Bennet Bronson, "Exchange at the Upstream and Downstream Ends: Notes toward a Rational Model of the Coastal State in Southeast Asia", in Karl I. Hutterer (ed), *Economic change and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia: Perspectives from Prehistory, History, Ethnography*. Ann Arbor: Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia 13 (1977), p. 1.

¹⁰Graham W. Irwin, "The Dutch and the Tin Trade of Malaya in the Seventeenth Century", in Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling (eds), *Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (1970), p. 273.

¹¹Aminuddin I. Iwanan, hamba di bandar bayar. See

purchased or captured slaves were the same as for Malay debt-slaves. Both could accurately be termed chattel." (p. 68) Sullivan's discussion of slavery is directed toward this point, and he uses it to form a hypothesis concerning modes of production in Perak.

There are, as Sullivan points out, difficulties with the available evidence on slavery in the Malay states, nearly all of which is found in European sources. Slavery was an important institution to the Malay elite and was at risk, and it was an emotional issue for British officials who faced pressure from England over the matter. Accordingly the questions of whether European observers were given accurate information, whether they correctly interpreted what they were told, and whether they prepared full and accurate reports according to that understanding, are highly problematic. There is also a difficulty with terminology. The English word "slave" is used to translate a variety of Malay expressions, primarily *hamba* and *abdi* but also some 10 or more variations.¹¹ The Malays who provided information to British officials insisted on these distinctions, but to the colonial administration they had the common characteristic of involuntary servitude so were all called slavery and were collectively condemned.

Sullivan chooses not to define slavery and debt bondage because of distortions that he feels would arise from analyzing "a particular form of social relations" in isolation and synchronically. The entire study, he suggests, can be seen as "a definition of the terms 'slavery' and 'debt-bondage' in a Malayan state". (pp. xiii-xiv) This tactic sounds like a more useful contribution to historical understanding than it turns out to be in practice, for by offering no definition of his own Sullivan is forced to fall back on the definitions of others, accepting that whatever his sources refer to as slavery is the same phenomenon.

According to Sullivan slavery in pre-colonial Malay society was a "relatively benign traditional practice" (p. 75), a means of achieving security and more a matter of the "ways of etiquette" of the Malays than real slavery because "the vital element of coercion that characterises slavery, and later debt-slavery" was lacking. (p. 64) His evidence for this point is the Malay folk tale the Hikayat Hang Tuah, in which the father of Hang Tuah voluntarily becomes a *hamba* of a major chief of Malacca. (pp. 63-64) Debt slavery at this time, Sullivan thinks, was a "quasi-kinship" relations, and the "necessity of forming

¹¹Aminuddin bin Baki lists the following terms: orang berhutang, orang hulur, ining, hamba, tawanan, hamba di-rangghah, hamba habshi, hamba serah, anak/keluarga hamba, anak mas, and hamba bayar. See "The Institution of Debt-Slavery in Perak", *Peninjau Sejarah* 1, 1 (June 1966).

quasi-kinship ties was very great" because the population of Perak was heterogeneous and nearly all were immigrants over a four hundred year period. (p. 74)

By the mid-eighteenth century, Sullivan continues, the status of *hamba* and radically deteriorated, and the "exploitation of Malay debtors had departed from traditional practice". As evidence of this changed perception Sullivan cites Raja Chulan's introduction to the *Misa Melayu* where the writer refers to himself as a 'useless' and "weak outcast" *hamba* whose life is "like a piece of trash". Here Sullivan reveals a serious misunderstanding of Malay usage. The word is used conventionally in Malay literature and no conclusion can be drawn about the status of slaves in Malaya society from Raja Chulan's use of the word in this context.¹²

For the nineteenth century Sullivan examines reports concerning the treatment of slaves, and provisions concerning slavery found in the Malay legal codes. The evidence is contradictory, with some British officials reporting cruel treatment and others submitting reports favourable to slave owners. Sullivan suggests that it is necessary to be "highly suspicious" of the motives of officials who painted a dark picture of slavery because such information was used to justify British rule, but adds that later reports of kindly treatment "should not be unhesitatingly credited". (p. 62) He concludes, however, by saying "That the exploitation of Malay debtors departed from traditional practice can be seen in the reports of colonial observers; Maxwell for instance says, 'by Perak Malays.... the national customs, which are favourable to the debtor, have been openly disregarded, and even a kind of oppression has been practised'". In support of this view Sullivan quotes Frank Swettenham to the effect that Malay custom was no longer followed as before. (p. 66) These statements are the basis of Sullivan's claim that the distinction between debt slaves and chattel slaves no longer applied. It would be useful to know why his strictures concerning statements by colonial officials are not relevant in this instance.

Sullivan proceeds to argue that there were two distinct modes of production in nineteenth century Perak, one independent and based upon "the autonomous family who rendered produce to the local ruler only in the form of taxes and occasional corvée labour" and the other

¹²Sullivan's interpretation is the precise equivalent of drawing conclusions about servants in England from the fact that colonial officials routinely signed themselves "Your Most Humble Obedient Servant".

dependent mode wherein "the person and the entire service of the labourer were appropriated by another". (pp. xix-xx) He includes both chattel slaves and debt slaves in the second category. Logically this distinction is clear, but it does not correspond to a real division in Perak society. Although debt slaves are placed in the dependent mode of production, Sullivan states (citing Hugh Low as his authority) that "Most slave-debtors lived with their families at some distance from their creditor's compound, retained the entire produce of their labour, and very seldom were required to render any services to the creditor". (p. 62) On the other hand, persons in the independent mode of production were required to render corvee labour (*kerah*), a topic not discussed by Sullivan and a serious omission in an essay which undertakes to analyze the "appropriation of labour" (p. xviii) in a Malay state. To British officials both *kerah* and slavery were forced labour and unacceptable, although in differing degrees. For members of the Malay elite the control of manpower was a matter of great importance, and *kerah*, debt slavery and chattel slavery in their permutations were variant ways of securing labour. An approach which separates these arrangements, as does Sullivan's, obscures one of the central features of nineteenth century sosio-economic relations in Perak.

Conclusion

There is very little to be said in favour of this monograph. It is the product of a respectable amount of industry, but its generalizations and conclusions do not follow from and are not supported by the data presented, while the empirical evidence itself is erratic and unreliable. The argument itself comes perilously close to being circular. Sullivan's starting point is what he sees as the system of labour relations in nineteenth century Perak, whereby debt slaves -- or "much of the population of Perak" (p. 75) -- had in effect been reduced to the status of chattel slaves. This state of affairs constitutes his principal evidence for claim that Dutch demand for tin was sufficiently burdensome to alter Malay social institutions in the eighteenth century. However, Sullivan's evidence that such a state of affairs actually prevailed in the nineteenth century comes down to the claim that heavy Dutch demand for tin would have produced such an outcome. Supporting materials are presented but they are not sufficient to verify the claims made concerning either the tin trade or slavery, and in any case Sullivan successfully discredits many of his sources. The argument of the volume cannot be derived from the data and appears to be a logical construction. Operationally the test of data in the monograph -- certainly its most perplexing feature -- seems to have been the

consistency or otherwise of given points with the logic of the argument. The results of this process, however, cannot be empirically sustained.

There is a lack of information about many aspects of Malaysian history and it is possible to construct a number of logically sound versions of what may have happened that are consistent with what is known. The exercise is not especially useful, but it is surely preferable to constructing a version of the past which is inconsistent with what is known.

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