

Historical Perspectives on Prostitution in Early Modern Southeast Asia

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**Presented to the 2nd International Symposium of
ANTROPOLOGI INDONESIA**

Globalization and Local Culture: Dialectic towards the New Indonesia

18th-21st July 2001

Andalas University, Padang

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The reprinting of the 1978 publication, *Women and Prostitution: A Social History* by Verne and Bonnie Bullough in 1987 was indicative of a growing interest in a topic that had previously received little academic attention.¹ Increasingly aware of the importance of gender perspectives and stimulated by public debates regarding the economic and social bases of prostitution, specialists working on Indonesia have also begun to investigate the subject of commercialized sex. Over the last fifteen years historians and others have traced expansion in the sex trade to various factors: the acceptance of concubinage in court circles, especially on Java; a greater exposure to Western values; a widening imbalance in rural-urban economic development, and above all, an increase in poverty. Regardless of the arguments presented, however, this research is primarily concerned with the developments since the mid nineteenth century.² The present paper attempts to provide a deeper historical base to the discussion by focussing on the early modern period (ca. 1500-1800). It aims to place the growth of “prostitution”

¹ Verne and Bonnie Bullough, *Women and Prostitution: A Social History* (Prometheus Books: Buffalo, New York, 1987).

² See, for example, John Ingleton, “Prostitution in Colonial Java,” in *Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Indonesia*, David P. Chandler and M.C. Ricklefs, eds. (Clayton, Victoria: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1986); Alison Murray, *No Money, no Honey. A Study of Street Traders and Prostitutes in Jakarta* (Singapore; Oxford University Press, 1991); Gavin W. Jones, Endang Sulistyarningsih and Terence H. Hull. *Prostitution in Indonesia Working Papers in Demography*, 52 (Canberra: Australian National University, 1995). This has been translated as Terence H. Hull, Gavin W. Jones, Endang Sulistyarningsih and Terence H. Hull, *Pelacuran di Indonesia: Sejarah Perkembangannya*. Jakarta: The Ford Foundation. Sinar Harapan, 1997). There are numerous publications in Indonesian, see Hull et al, *Pelacuran di Indonesia*, pp. 129-37.

within a framework that demonstrates how the commercialization of sexual exchanges in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago was intimately related to the growth of urban centers, especially those under European control. Because of an increase in global trade, it is in towns and cities that we find a status-oriented elite, an expanding demand for domestic slaves, an increase in foreign men, and the feminization of poverty. Comparative data suggests that prostitution may be the world's oldest profession, but it arises in a specific type of socio-economic environment that is in turn related to historical developments.

Urbanization, Status and Women

Although there are several words for prostitute in Indonesian/Javanese, linguistic evidence also suggests that categories introduced from outside may have helped to delineate a specific group of women, since the word *sundal* (harlot, whore) is quite probably derived from *candala* (Sanskrit, meaning outcaste). An intriguing reference in a seventh-century Chinese source even warns travelers against casual sexual relations. "In this country," the writer notes, "there are poisonous girls. When one has intercourse them one gets painful ulcers and dies."³ Nonetheless, it is interesting to draw a cross-cultural comparison and note that the Thai word for prostitute is *naang klaang muang* (literally, woman in the middle of a city)⁴ because what we today understand as the sex trade is closely associated with urban centers. As one authority has put it, "prostitutes and the city have long gone together."⁵ This comment is highly relevant to the Malay-Indonesia archipelago, where the sixteenth century onwards saw an unprecedented growth of port cities, particularly along the well-traveled trade routes that led from Aceh to Banten past the north coast of Java to the 'spice islands' of Maluku. In this cosmopolitan environment

³ W. P. Groeneveldt, "Notes on the Malay Archipelago and Malacca compiled from Chinese Sources," *VBG*, 39 (1880), p. 13.

⁴ Personal communication. Titima Suthiwan, 6 April 1998).

⁵ Richard Symanski, *The Immoral Landscape: Female Prostitution in Western Societies* (Butterworths; Toronto, 1981), p. 20

where commerce was a primary concern we can locate a sizeable and growing urban status group with substantial ambitions, especially in towns like Melaka, Batavia and Makassar that came under the control of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). For men and women in this cohort, prestige and social standing rested on the maintenance of large households with a sizeable female component. Albeit in a modified form, the relationships between men and women in these households were patterned after the lifestyle associated with Indonesian royalty and nobility.

In this context, it is pertinent to note that a recent study of prostitution in Indonesia has argued that the modern sex trade can ultimately be traced to the Javanese “feudal system” because the supply of women to the *kraton* was considered part of the *upeti*, or tribute to which a ruler was entitled.⁶ Indeed, there is little doubt that Indonesian palaces housed large female populations. When he was received at a royal audience in Mataram in 1648, for example, Ryklof van Goens noted with amazement that most of the retainers were women, and reckoned the female population of the *kraton* at around 10,000.⁷ In Aceh the royal palace also included an estimated three thousand female women who acted as guards, waited on the Sultan and his family, and carried out necessary tasks like gathering firewood and carrying water, and similar if smaller establishments can be tracked throughout the archipelago.⁸

There is no need here to reiterate the cultural reasons behind this form of male-female relationship, since it is well known that the display of many women was an essential component in the affirmation of royal legitimacy, a public symbol of a ruler’s virility and a demonstration of his kinship network. It is perhaps worth while mentioning, however, that this kind of display was not confined to men, but was an integral aspect of

⁶ Hull et al, *Pelacuran di Indonesia*, pp. 1-3.

⁷ Rijklof van Goens, *Javaense Reyse. De Bezoeken van een VOC-gezant aan het Hof van Mataram 1648-1654*. Darja van Wever, ed. (Amsterdam: Terra Incognita, 1995), p. 104.

⁸ Takeshi Ito, “The World of the *Adat Aceh*.” Ph.D. Dissertation, A.N.U. 1984, p. 26.; Leonard Y. Andaya, “Aceh’s Contribution to Standards of Malayness,” *Archipel* 61 (2001), p. 55.

power in general. The queens of Aceh and Patani, for example, also maintained large female establishments. In other words, a female-heavy presence was an essential component of power.⁹ For the women involved, acceptance into a royal or noble household could bring considerable benefits to both herself and her family, no matter how low their birth. A dramatic example from the seventeenth century is the case of a Bugis slave girl who rose to become the chief queen of Jambi.¹⁰ Social attitudes encouraged village and rural woman to see the trip to the capital and attachment to a high-ranking family as a potential source of advancement, even though it meant separation from their family and place of birth. Thus, while legends and folklore often throw up stories of rape and dishonor as women are forcibly taken as servants or sexual partners, communities in certain districts were proud of the beauty of their womenfolk and the status acquired by association with the distant and almost mythical ruler.¹¹

However, I am arguing here that it was not *kraton* model as such which provided the basis for the growth of prostitution but the adoption and adaptation of this model by a growing class of urban dwellers. A demographic study of Java in the nineteenth century indicates that concubinage may well have been absent from most villages, and this impressionistic evidence suggests that this was largely the case in earlier times.¹² To have more than one wife was a primate indicator of wealth and therefore was beyond the reach (or desire?) of most villagers. Certainly few men in port cities like Banten and Melaka could afford to maintain households as large as those of the princes and aristocracy, but it was common for an individual of means to maintain one or two secondary wives and a large number of female slaves. In Banten, for example, an Englishman in 1605 remarked

⁹ Leonard Y. Andaya, "Aceh's Contribution," p. 56.

¹⁰ Barbara Watson Andaya, *To Live as Brothers: Southeast Sumatra in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu; University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), p. 129.

¹¹ Murray, *No Money, No Honey*, p. 108; Hull et al, *Pelacuran di Indonesia*, p. 2.

¹² Peter Boomgaard, *Children of the Colonial State: Population Growth and Economic Development in Java, 1795-1880* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1989), p. 143.

that a Javanese man would have to support between ten and forty slaves for each of his wives.¹³ These slaves would be occupied in attending the women of the household, especially on any public occasion. latter, normally occupied in domestic work, could well be available as sexual partners. The same pattern was adopted by the Eurasian and Dutch women who were the wives of VOC officials. In 1689, for example, Cornelia de Beveran listed the duties of 59 slaves, who included girls, boys, youths and women– they “each had a task”, attending her when she went out, taking messages, helping in the kitchen, playing on musical instruments during meals, embroidering, weaving.¹⁴ The statistics make the point even more forcibly; by 1730, for example, 71 per cent of the inhabitants of Makassar were slaves.¹⁵ The pattern is even more evident in Batavia, whence as many as 10,000 slaves were brought between 1661 and 1682. In 1679 they comprised 59% of the residents in the inner city; by 1749 this figure had even risen slightly to 61%.¹⁶

In these developing urban centers, the idea that an entourage of slaves and retainers was essential to demonstrate social status was highly influential in commercializing sex because maintenance of a large slave establishment was expensive. In the early seventeenth-century an observer in Banten captured the problems nicely. “The gentlemen of this land are brought to bee poor, by the number of slaves that they keepe, which eate faster than their pepper or rice groweth.”¹⁷ One way of ameliorating this situation was to employ domestic servants and slaves in occupations that that yielded immediate profits. They could thus contribute to the household income through the sale

¹³ Samuel Purchas, ed., *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1905) III: 440.

¹⁴ Marijke Barend-van Haeften, *Oost-Indië Gespiegeld. Nicolaas de Graaf, een schrijvend chirurgijn in dienst van de VOC* (Zutphen: Walburg Press, 1992), pp. 157-58.

¹⁵ Heather Sutherland, “Slavery and the Slave trade in South Sulawesi, 1660s-1800s,” in Anthony Reid, ed. *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), p. 269.

¹⁶ Hendrik Niemeyer, “Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur. Batavia 1619-1725,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Free University, Amsterdam 1996, pp. 43, 51-4 is a rich source for this period; see also Raben, “Batavia and Colombo,” Appendix III.

¹⁷ Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, III: 440.

of thread which they spun, or cloth they had woven.¹⁸ The world-wide tendency that obligated any woman with social pretensions to remain largely indoors was already well in place among elite society, but female slaves could hawk small items in the street or market. With the compliance and even encouragement of their owners, they could also make extra money through the sale of sex. In early seventeenth-century Goa in India we find an example that has direct parallels in Indonesia. Here female slaves and servants made goods at home, and then were sent out to sell items such as needlework, or food. According to one European observer, men bought from them “not because of the conserves and needle workes” but so that they could “fulfill their pleasure with slaves.”¹⁹ In late sixteenth-century Brunei, female slaves similarly “sold their bodies,” paddling through the city waterways on small *perahu*, singing and playing musical instruments, while calling out, “orang laki membeli perempuan muda” (Men, buy a young woman). In Patani, too, men also allowed their female slaves to solicit customers, as long as the profits were delivered to them; female slaves could also be rented out to others.²⁰ In short, prostitution becomes a feature of this period because there was a growing number of urban dwellers who had material aspirations beyond their resources; augmenting their income through the sex trade was a convenient and readily available option.

Urban Centers and Demography

A second factor that encouraged the growth of prostitution was the sexual imbalance of urban centers, especially those under European control. A principal reason for this was

¹⁸ G.P. Rouffaer and J.W. Ijzerman, *De Eerste Schipvaart der Nederlanders naar Oost-Indië onder Cornelis de Houtman 1595-1597* (The Hague: Linschoten-Vereeniging, 1915-21) I: 129.

¹⁹ A. C. Burnell and P.A. Tiele, *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten to the East Indies* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1885) II: 186.

²⁰ John S. Carroll, “Berunai in the Boxer Codex,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (hence *JMBRAS*) 55, 2 (1982): 14; H.A. van Foreest and A. de Booy, eds. *De Vierde Schipvaart der Nederlanders naar Oost-Indië onder Jacob Wilkens en Jacob van Neck (1599-1604)* (The Hague: Linschoten Vereeniging, 1980) I: 225.

the growing numbers of Chinese men who arrived in Indonesia after 1567, when the Beijing lifted its prohibitions against maritime travel. Batavia became a primary magnet, and in 1625 alone five Chinese junks arrived, each carrying around four hundred men.²¹ By the 1730s the largely Chinese male community accounted for about 20 percent of Batavia's population and helps explain why there were twice as many men as women.²² The lower-class Chinese men who made up the bulk of these human cargoes came from communities where marriage was normally possible only through the payment of a brideprice, and the "purchase" of a wife was a familiar concept. In addition, they commonly found they could only operate effectively in commerce if they established connections with the women who dominated the peddling and market trade.

In less frequented areas of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, it had been customary for a trader to take a "temporary wife" who would assist him in buying and selling, act as a housekeeper and sexual partner, and provide him with the network of relatives so valuable in any commercial enterprise. In return, a woman and her family received tangible gifts and rewards, quite possibly specified in a marriage "contract," while the wife also acquired linguistic skills and an enhanced status within the community. For as long as it lasted, this was a real marriage, where a woman could expect that her husband would be faithful. Should a foreigner be guilty of adultery, one Dutchman warned, "he will be in grave trouble with his wife."²³ Since all commoner marriages were easily dissolved, the departure of a foreign husband did not bring the stigma some societies attached to an "abandoned" wife. In the words of a contemporary

²¹ Leonard Blussé, "Western Impact on Chinese Communities in Western Java at the beginning of the 17th century," *Nampo Bunka: Tenri Bulletin of South Asian Studies*, 2 (1975): 28; see also his *Strange Company: Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women and the Dutch in VOC Batavia*, *Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land en Volkenkunde*, I, 122 (1986), especially pp. 73-96.

²² Remco Raben, "Batavia and Colombo: The Ethnic and Spatial Order of Two Colonial Cities, 1600-1800," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Leiden, 1995, p. 95.

²³ Van Foreest and De Booy, *De Vierde Schipvaart*, p. 223.

observer, “When [a trader] wants to depart he gives whatever is promised, and so they leave each other in friendship and she may then look for another man as she wishes in all propriety, without scandal.”²⁴

As I have argued in an earlier article, as large numbers of foreign men began to arrive in the region it proved increasingly difficult to maintain the delicate arrangements governing the “temporary wife” custom, since traders from overseas saw a “purchased” wife as a deserving of little respect.²⁵ Among the single and often poor male migrants a growing tendency to collapse marriage, concubinage and slavery into one made the status of their “wives” ambiguous. The average Chinese trader, for example, found it cheaper and less troublesome to buy one or two slaves who could satisfy his domestic, commercial and sexual needs but could be resold should they prove unsatisfactory. They could also be employed as prostitutes. Although the Chinese cohabited with women from Java and other areas, such as Kalimantan, they preferred to buy Balinese slaves, partly because of their fair skin, partly because they were not averse to cooking or eating pork, and partly because they were regarded as hard working.²⁶ Yet they too were often used as source of income for their husbands; it is revealing that the Betawi word *lacur* (from Balinese “poor,” “unfortunate,”) provided the root for the modern Indonesian term for prostitute, *pelacuran*.

The arrival of European men simply contributed to this trend. While far less numerous than the Chinese, Europeans were disproportionately represented in the large centers of Batavia, Makassar and Melaka and other towns under VOC authority. Like the Chinese, Europeans generally arrived without women, since only VOC employees above the rank of merchant (*koopman*) were permitted to bring their families with them to the Indies.²⁷ At the upper levels Europeans often copied their Asian counterparts with large establishments. One Dutch bachelor in Batavia had a “harem” of fifty slaves that was said to be “assorted from the different nations of the East and combining every tinge of complexion from the sickly faded hue of a dried tobacco leaf to the shining polish of

²⁴ Van Foreest and De Booy, *De Vierde Schipvaart*, p. 223.

²⁵ Barbara Watson Andaya, “From Temporary Wife to Prostitute: Sexuality and Economic Change in Early Modern Southeast Asia.” *Journal of Women’s History* 9, 4 (Winter 1998), pp. 11-34.

²⁶ Raben, “Batavia and Colombo,” p. 177.

²⁷ Blussé, *Strange Company*, p. 163.

black marble.”²⁸ While such men could in a sense maintain their own brothel, common soldiers, traders and low officials were ready clients for street prostitution. Although many could not afford marriage, and indeed were not permitted to repatriate local wives, city administrations still saw cohabitation as a punishable offense. The rapidity with which concubines took on new “husbands” when their previous one departed or died simply reinforced the European view that they were prostitutes. In outlying posts the situation was far less controlled, and European lodges far from the central authorities often became virtual brothels. In 1636 the Dutch resident in Jambi complained that English had gained undue trading advantages by maintaining women in their houses and allowing high-ranking princes access. Meanwhile, there was no way of preventing his own men from purchasing sexual access from local women.²⁹ Such men rarely felt any personal obligations to women they had bought or paid to provide sexual access. Impoverished English factors in early seventeenth-century Sukadana, for instance, sold their “whores” to buy food.³⁰

The Consequences of Slavery

As we have seen, a significant factor in the growth of urban prostitution was the growing number of female slaves and the expectation that they should deliver some kind of profit to their owners. High prices were paid for attractive and talented women, and the competition for quality “goods” was keen. While females from certain areas, such as Bali, were particularly favored, the purchase of any woman was a profitable investment because of her earning capacity and her ability to reproduce. By the end of the eighteenth

²⁸ John Barrow, *A Voyage to Indochina* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford in Asia, 1975. Reprint of 1806 edition), p. 206.

²⁹ *Dagh-Register Gehouden int Casteel te Batavia* (Batavia and The Hague: Bataviaasch Genootschap; Nijhoff; Kolff, 1887-1931), 1636, 44; VOC 1099 Jambi to Batavia 18 Jan. 1631, fo. 142-4.

³⁰ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680. Volume I. The Lands Below the Winds* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 156.

century females could fetch two or three times the amount paid for males of the same age.³¹

Undoubtedly it was female slaves were the chief victims of the commercialization of sexual relations. Once a woman had been enslaved, she was regarded as available to any man who could assert his social or physical control over her. Indeed, in Dutch sources the terms “slavinne” and “hoor” are frequently used interchangeably. Although indigenous society was not always kind to female slaves and bondswomen, there were accepted traditions that governed behavior between master and servant, and which provided for recompense in the case of abuse.³² In the heightened commercial climate of the early modern period, these traditional restraints were often ignored with impunity, especially by those in high places. A case from Jambi, reported in 1631, helps illustrate the point. One of the female slaves belonging to a leading court figure earned money for him by prostitution. However, she ran away and appeared in the VOC lodge, claiming that she was a free woman and that her mother was upriver buying rice. She asked the mestizo supervisor of the VOC slaves if she could stay with his pregnant wife until her mother returned. Her attempt to present herself as an “honorable” woman apparently failed, for according to her own account, the supervisor sexually abused her. Further, when he discovered her origins, she was evicted to avoid disputes with her owner. Without any income, and surrounded by potential customers within the relatively safe walls of the Dutch compound, it is hardly surprising that this unnamed woman hid “in nooks and crannies” to prostitute herself “both night and day” with VOC employees and their slaves. Condemned as an immoral and corrupting runaway, she herself was further victimized when she was abducted by a group of Javanese men.³³ Female slaves probably

³¹ Reid, “Introduction,” in Reid, ed. *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency*, p. 27.

³² See, for example, Mason Hoadley and M.B. Hooker, *An Introduction to Javanese Law: A Translation and Commentary on the Agama* (Tucson: Association for Asian Studies Monograph No. 37, University of Arizona Press, 1982), p. 165.

³³ VOC 1099 Jambi to Batavia 18 Jan. 1631, fols. 142-4.

suffered equally bad or worse treatment at the hands of their mestizo and European owners, both male and female. Certainly evidence of degradation and humiliation is not difficult to locate, and it is not surprising that some women were driven to take desperate measures. In another case from Jambi, a female slave avenged herself on her owner, a Dutch soldier who had kept her in neck-chains for five months, by arranging for his murder by a Javanese man.³⁴

Even when freed, it was not easy for a former slave to step out of a world where she may have been sexually available to strangers for many years. While male slaves in Batavia generally outnumbered females, freed females tended to remain in Batavia. This meant that women made up an overwhelming number of the ex-slave (*mardijkers*) population, their numbers swelled by the manumission of slaves who converted to Christianity, or who set free by the wills of deceased owners.³⁵ Far from their natal kin, they had neither family support nor the resources or skills which could easily generate income. Petty trading or domestic service combined with sexual availability was sometimes the only way to survive. Batavia provides a telling example of how cities could create precisely the kind of environment in which commercialized sex thrives, particularly because of the disproportion between the sexes, the lack of social controls which were found in smaller communities, and the growing number of near-destitute women. The district known as the “oostervoorstad” was inhabited largely by former slaves and their offspring with a preponderance of poor females; in 1686, for example, there were 1131 males in this district, but 1823 women. It is not surprising that this

³⁴ John Bastin, *The British in West Sumatra (1685-1825)* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965), p. 143. For the treatment of female slaves in Batavia by their mestizo mistresses, see J.S. Stavorinus, *Voyages to the East Indies* (Dawsons: London, 1969. Reprint of 1798 edition, translated by S.H. Wilcocke), I: 319; VOC 1226 Jambi to Batavia 12 April 1657, fo. 461v.

³⁵ Niemeyer, “Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur” is a rich source for this period; see also Raben, “Batavia and Colombo,” Appendix III.

district gained a reputation as an area where sexual favors could easily be bought.³⁶ The situation for many was one of pure economics. “Simply put,” remarks a modern author, “men are willing to pay more for sexual access than for almost all other forms of female labor.”³⁷

The fear of further poverty acted as a cumulative goad to the sale of sex, for in the European cities indebtedness could be a punishable offense. In 1674, for example, six Melaka women were incarcerated in a VOC jail because of their debts.³⁸ Dutch records from Batavia show that it was relatively common for a domestic concubine/servant to be washing, selling, cleaning, and providing sexual services privately and/or publicly because her master had agreed to pay her debts. Many women deliberately sold themselves back into debt bondage, paying for their support by supplying their owner with the profits drawn from trading in sex. The case of a Banda mestizo in 1643 who kept a number of female slaves as prostitutes, earning from each about half or three/eighths of a real per day at a time when the standard wage for physical labor in much of the archipelago was a quarter of a real is simply representative of what was widespread practice.³⁹ A minister in Batavia in fact complained that in many cases female slaves were maintained not because they were required for household work but “merely to deliver the earnings obtained from their bodies.” In another typical case a native woman named Maria testified that every day her husband forced her and her female slave to earn “dishonest money” by through prostituting themselves with Europeans and others.⁴⁰

³⁶ The association between arak (rice wine) houses and prostitution is suggested in Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, II: 463, 468, 470; Niemeijer, “Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur,” pp. 260-61, 371.

³⁷ Symanski, *The Immoral Landscape*, p. 3. Susan Abeyasekere, *Jakarta: A History* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 103 notes the increase in street vendors and prostitutes in Jakarta during the Depression.

³⁸ M.J. Bremner, trans. “Report of Governor Balthasar Bort on Malacca,” *JMBRAS* 5, 1 (1927), p. 94.

³⁹ Blussé, *Strange Company*, p. 168.

⁴⁰ Niemeyer, “Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur,” pp. 228-9, 260-2; Blussé, *Strange Company*, p. 168.

European sources thus demonstrate that in most urban centers in Indonesia a flourishing trade in sex services had already developed by the seventeenth century, with incoming traders and foreigners as the principle customers and low-ranking women or slaves as the suppliers. Increasingly, casual sex with newcomers was becoming a common means for the very poor to make a living. Indeed, in conversations with VOC officials in 1665, a ruler in east Sumatra made it clear that his concern to prevent the “dishonoring” of local females by Dutch men was not intended to stop consenting women from receiving payment for sexual services, since these must be considered a wage (*loon*).⁴¹ Nor is the increased visibility of women exchanging sex for money a distortion resulting from the preoccupations of European sources, for a feature of this period is the growing indebtedness of ordinary people as local economies became increasingly monetized.⁴² Among non-elite groups, for whom pre-marital chastity was not a matter of great concern, prostitution presented one solution to economic hardship since then as now there was a typical pattern of returning resources earned in this manner to the family.⁴³ Should a family be particularly pressed, daughters could also be mortgaged as debt-slaves, which meant that they served as domestic servants who were also available for sex.⁴⁴

Dutch authorities in Indonesia waged an ongoing but unsuccessful campaign to control the sale of sex. In the nineteenth century official resignation led to the regulation of prostitution, but in earlier times it was thought that the sex trade could be eliminated by punitive measures and by categorizing prostitution as a crime. This itself was a

⁴¹ Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague. VOC 1249 Jan van Wesenhage’s report on Inderagiri, 13 Jan. 1665, fo. 68.

⁴² See further Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680. Volume II. Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), Chapter V.

⁴³ Symanski, *The Immoral Landscape*, p. 273; Murray, *No Money, No Honey*, p. 108 mentions that in contemporary times one prostitute may be able to support around eighteen relatives.

⁴⁴ Daniel Beeckman, *A Voyage to and from the Island of Borneo* (London: Dawsons, 1973. Reprint of 1718 edition), p. 42

reflection of developments in Europe, where municipal authorities in medieval times had tended to view the sale of sexual services as a “necessary service for journeymen and out-of-town visitors.”⁴⁵ In the sixteenth century, however, such attitudes began to change, in part because of a growing tendency to see the whore as a symbol of worldly forces which endangered a man’s spiritual well-being.⁴⁶ Regulations in colonial cities thus mirror trends in the metropole. As early as 1622 the regime of Governor-General Jan Pietersz. Coen had proclaimed that “concubinage and adultery” should be controlled because they incited “unrest, discord, manslaughter, murder and other fearful incidents.” A women’s “house of correction” was set up in Batavia in 1641, and in Melaka females condemned for “adultery and prostitution” were incarcerated and shut up in a “separate abode.”⁴⁷ Punishments were often severe, and judges were usually unsympathetic towards a plea of poverty. In 1697 Aletta Abrahamse, whose husband had been serving for five years in Sumatra, was accused of leading an “openly adulterous life” in his absence. Although she argued that her husband mistreated her and that she was forced into prostitution because he contributed nothing to her upkeep, she was condemned to fifty years in the spin-house and a fine of eighty rials.⁴⁸ From time to time European women are also cited for crimes relating to prostitution; Lysbeth Jansz. from Rotterdam, for example, was sentenced to ten years in the correction house because she worked out a notorious “whorehouse”, owned by one Sara van Lamay.⁴⁹ In such cases, however, European offenders seem to

⁴⁵ Merry E. Wiesner, “Spinning Out Capital: Women’s Work in the Early Modern Economy,” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz and Susan Stuard, eds. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 243.

⁴⁶ Merry Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 101; on Christian attitudes, see further Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, pp. 62-71.

⁴⁷ Raben, “Batavia and Colombo,” pp. 209-10; F. de Haan, *Oud Batavia* (Batavia: Kolff, 1922) I: 293; Bremner, “Report of Governor Balthasar Bort on Malacca,” p. 94.

⁴⁸ Niemeyer, “Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur,” p. 255.

⁴⁹ Niemeyer, “Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur,” pp. 260-61.

have been treated more lightly than Indonesians. For example, a Dutchwoman who ran a brothel in the Zuidervoorstad and collected a monthly payment from the earnings of four slaves escaped with a fine, while the women themselves were publicly flogged. All were condemned, however, to spend six months in the female correction house. Even if flouted, VOC regulations thus meant that there was some risk involved in purveying sex. In order to avoid conflict with the authorities, householders who sent their slaves or bondswomen out to solicit often gave them a few stuivers of cloth so they could claim they were peddlers.⁵⁰

Predictably, the sale of sex also became associated with gambling, liquor and drugs. Through their connections with Europeans, prostitutes and concubines were frequently able to acquire access to supplies of opium, the sale of which had been forbidden in a number of areas but which was much desired because of its addictive qualities. The taverns, coffee, food and arak houses often owned by women and frequented by men acted as exchange points for the sale of sex. An inn in Melaka was owned by “a common strumpet” married to an Irish pirate; a woman from the island of Flores called Black Moll kept an establishment in Batavia known as the Red Lion.⁵¹ Brothels, sometimes operated by agents of VOC officials, sprang up outside the city walls, near the wharves and around the fort (because of the ruling that soldiers could not bring women into the barracks). Prostitution also flourished in the markets, where women sold food, vegetables and handicrafts were obviously highly suited to interaction between the sexes. In the market at Banten for example, there was a space where “traders and adventurers strolled”, which would have been ideally suited for meetings, assignments, deals and financial arrangements of all types, including sexual.⁵² Popular street

⁵⁰ Niemeyer, “Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur,” pp. 256, 259-60.

⁵¹ Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies* (1727; reprint, London: Argonaut Press, 1930), II: 45; Rabin, “Batavia and Columbo,” p. 110; Niemeyer, “Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur,” pp. 260-61; Blussé, *Strange Company*, p. 169.

⁵² Rouffaer and Ijzerman, *De Eerste Schipvaart*, p. 112 and illustration facing p. 110.

entertainment, another means by which poor and untrained women could earn an income, was similarly linked with prostitution. In the sixteenth century the Portuguese Bishop of Melaka had even banned the dancing girls commonly employed as entertainers because they used “lewd words” and “think it a fine adventure to have lovers, whose conversation they seek during the day and much better at night.”⁵³ The same pattern can be tracked elsewhere; by 1778 the Dutch on Java had prohibited *ronggeng* parties among workers unless an estate owner had given permission. By 1800 all such entertainments had theoretically been banned, since according to Stamford Raffles “The common dancing girls of [Java] . . . are called *ronggeng*, and are generally of easy virtue . . . as to render the title of *ronggeng* and prostitute synonymous.”⁵⁴

In the same pattern found elsewhere, attempts by Batavia’s administrators to regulate this trade opened up new opportunities for pimps and procurers who could circumvent official ordinances.⁵⁵ Because older women had traditionally played a mediating role in marriage negotiations, they often fell easily into such positions, especially if they lacked family support and economic resources -- often the fate of freed but aging slaves . A light-hearted Malay poem of the period thus tells of a widowed procuress from Bali, “the sweet old lady with the bold mouth/highly skilled in the art of deceit” who helped a Portuguese trader to abduct the concubine of a Chinese.⁵⁶ The depiction of such women in VOC sources is less appealing. One case concerns a certain Nyai Assan, who operated from Batavia in collaboration with incoming captains. Her methods were simple, as illustrated in the case of a woman called Rokibar. Previously,

⁵³ J.V. Mills, trans. “Eredia’s Description of Malacca, Meridional India and Cathay,” *JMBRAS* 7 1 (Sept. 1930), p. 39.

⁵⁴ Boomgaard, *Children of the Colonial State*, p. 163; Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1965. Reprint of 1817 edition) I: 340-42. Some *ronggeng* dancers, however, were trained in special schools and were highly skilled artists.

⁵⁵ Symanski, *The Immoral Landscape*, p. 148.

⁵⁶ Vladimir Braginsky, “The Gentleman in the Pink Hat, or the First Malay ‘Film’: Notes on *Syair Selambari* or *Syair Sinyor Kosta*,” *Indonesia Circle*, 63 (1994), pp. 174-182.

Rokibar been the slave of a Dutch woman but as a Christian she been freed when her mistress died. She had then married a native Christian goldsmith, also a former slave. Nyai Assan made her acquaintance, and they became friends. One day, having gained Rokibar's trust, Nyai Assan suggested that they should go out sailing on Batavia's harbor. Apparently drugged, Rokibar became seasick, and Nyai Assan told her she would feel more comfortable if they transferred to another vessel. By the time Rokibar recovered, Nyai Assan had gone. The captain, having bought her for 150 rijksdaalders, took her to Palembang together with three other Javanese women. Obviously expecting a high price, he delivered the four women to the ruler's palace, but they were rejected following claims he had made them pregnant. Rokibar stayed in Palembang for four years as the captain's property, finally making her escape to the Dutch lodge. Here she lived with a Company slave for three years before bringing her case to the authorities.⁵⁷

Comparative research has not been a feature of historical work on Indonesia, but it is useful to remember that the combination of factors outlined here – the growth of cities, an expanding urban elite, the expansion of slavery – is by no means unique. In Japan, for instance, it seems very clear that the explosion of prostitution entrepreneurs and unlicensed prostitutes coincides with the development of a commercial and monetary economy in the early modern period. This accelerated class stratification in town and rural areas by producing a large class of urban workers dependent on daily wages as well as many landless farmers for whom the sale of a daughter could be the only means of obtaining much needed cash. Public authorities, it has been suggested, were willing to overlook such practices because they provided a means of livelihood for the very poorest people.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ VOC 3525 Slave Reports (M) 25 Feb. 1778, n.f.

⁵⁸ Sone Hiromi, "Prostitution and Public Authority in Early Modern Japan." In Hitomi Tonomura, Anne Walthall and Wakita Haruka, *Women and Class in Japanese History* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1999), p. 183.

A scenario even more similar to that of Indonesia can be found in the northern Sudan, where the intrusion of market forces and the impact of a monetized economy also led to the commercialization of sexual behavior. In the eighteenth century the Sudan (which was also traditionally termed Sennar, the state without cities), experienced an unprecedented expansion of commercial capitalism and the development of an urbanized middle class. Here too men of high status maintained households of many women, and often used their control over the sexuality of their female slaves as a source of self-enrichment. This growing middle class emulated their superiors in acquiring slaves for sexual use. In difficult economic times, however, the existence of clients and a market for sex drew in an increasing number of free women as providers. In other words, prostitution had arrived.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Prostitution has established itself as a legitimate topic for historical research only in the last twenty years. Scholars of Southeast Asia have already seen potentialities here for furthering understanding of the region's social history, particularly in regard to the complex interaction between gender, race and class. Although detailed studies have only been undertaken in regard to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is material for developing a stronger and more comparative historical base. This is an important task in premodern Southeast Asia, where we must begin to think more critically about assertions regarding the "high status" of women, long touted as one of the region's distinctive features.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Jay Spaulding and Stephanie Beswick, "Sex, Bondage and the Market: the Emergence of Prostitution in Northern Sudan, 1750-1950," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5, 4 (April 1995), pp. 512-534.

⁶⁰ Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, pp. 146, 162; Shelly Errington "Recasting Sex, Gender and Power: A Theoretical and Regional Overview," in Shelly Errington and Jane Monnig Atkinson, *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 2-3.

In cross-cultural terms, it is possible to see prostitution as one result of a complex set of economic and social developments that were inextricably caught up with the growing European dominance of international trade. In the western world, and in some Asian cultures, the commercial sale of sex has very old roots; but in Africa, the Americas and in Southeast Asia it appears to be associated with a spectrum of changes -- increased foreign presence, coin currencies, the emergence of towns -- which were all helping to transform local societies. In modern research on prostitution there is a healthy debate about whether the woman who sells sex is a victim, or making a rational choice, but in premodern Indonesia any discussion of this issue is complicated by the extent of female slavery and the ambitions of the downtrodden. Still to-day, for example, the great hope of many prostitutes in Jakarta is to become an expatriate's "contract wife" (i.e. for the period of his contract).⁶¹ But although prostitution may have complex causes, in Indonesia as elsewhere we face the grim and undisputed fact that poor and uneducated women all too often see participation in the sex trade as their only means of economic survival.

⁶¹ Murray, *No Money, No Honey*, pp. 116-8.

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