Perspectives on slavery from the inside: The case of Asia[1]

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Introduction: Asian and world slaveries

Slavery as a historical phenomenon has afflicted at least hundreds of million people over the millennia, in all imaginable forms and degrees of severity, which has raised the inevitable question whether there is any globally valid definition of slaves at all. In the public mind, at least in Western context, the practice of keeping people in permanently unfree positions is associated with two historical regions. One is the Graeco-Roman Antiquity where a considerable part of the populations were slaves, to the degree that philosophers and historians have spoken of a particular slave society as a mode of production. The other is the European-led Atlantic slavery of the 16th to 19th centuries which brought some twelve million Africans overseas in the infamous Middle Passage. Work by the enslaved in Brazil, the Caribbean, and parts of North America, was of such magnitude and profit that certain historians have seen it as a significant precondition for the Industrial Revolution and thus the modernity of Europe (Williams 1994). The lives of the enslaved in the U.S. and the Caribbean have caught the attention of Western writers since at least the 18th century, as autobiographical accounts, family traditions, legal documents and other writings have been scrutinized to highlight emic perspectives of enslaved lives. The public and academic interest in their long-hidden history only seems to increase, generating research projects and multi-volume works.

The situation for the vast Asian continent is different, and the historian should not be too quick to draw parallels between the Middle Passage and conditions east of the Cape of Good Hope (Eltis 2024). The study of Asian slaveries, though developing at a fast pace, has some obvious drawbacks compared to Atlantic and Mediterranean slavery studies. While we know that enslaved people where there, in almost all Asian cultures, they are notably anonymous. All the witnesses, autobiographies and testimonies that have given North American slaves a voice, have few Asian counterparts. To study the agency of the enslaved is therefore an interesting challenge. We probably all want our subjects to be Spartacus's who actively try to mend their predicament, but we must also try to save their history from modern moralistic notions. The cry of the enslaved in the past is ultimately the cry in another language, strictly speaking unreachable to modern scholars. Even the

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concepts of agency, strategy, and resistance, are Western and must be used with care when studying historical realities (Ehalt 2025). Although slaving regimes varied a lot across the continent, they were seldom engaged in in large productive work similar to the Caribbean plantations, and where such existed, they were usually tied to colonial establishments. As a rule, slavery tended to be less male-centred than in the Americas, where slave-ships of the Middle Passage would typically transport human cargo that was two-thirds male. In fact, Asian slave populations were often mostly female. Women and children were more likely to survive raiding and be enslaved and might have been considered easier to handle than adult men. Large part of them would be used for household-oriented work. That would often give the slaves less incentive of interacting since they were normally not crowded together, thus impeding their building ideas of commonality. Skin colour and phenotype was not the issue it was in the Atlantic World, since slaves and masters could be of the same or related ethnic stock (Fynn-Paul 2021). Slavery in Asia, however, varied much, from the uprootedness that resulted from raiding and slave trade to the relatively stable social milieu of the Korean *nubi* and the Filipino *oripun* (Allen 2021). In one and the same society, one could find several categories of heavily bonded groups, which again highlights the problem of even using the Western term "slave" (Miers 2004). In all its forms, however, the societies that underpinned them seldom preserved the words and thoughts of the afflicted ones. Practices of record-keeping did not quite reach down to this level, or the records did quite simply not survive wars, upheavals, moist heat, or white ants.

Dutch couple in the East Indies with a slave boy carrying a parasol, late 17th century. From the diary of G.F. Müller, in the St. Gallen Library, Switzerland.

Looking for enslaved lives in the archival sources

I have no universally valid remedy of this conundrum, but at least I can make a few comments and provide examples from the sources I have come across and used in my own research on Southeast Asian slaveries. Interestingly, the colonial archives often offer the best possibilities to hear the voice of enslaved people. This is due to the regularity and minute detail of some records. It was essential for the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and others, who established strongholds in maritime Asia since the 16th or 17th century, to document economic activities. Slaves might be used as workers and artisans in port cities, or as domestic servants and followers in European and Eurasian families. To keep the system going, it was also necessary to wield control over the acquisition and allocation of slaves. Especially, the Dutch source collections from 1596 to the 19th (or even 20th) century have the potential of giving emic perspectives of slavery. This is not to say that they give plenty of material for the mindset of the enslaved, but certainly for the slavers, those who acquire, transport and deploy the captive humans. The brutal logic of slave work is omnipresent in the writings of Dutch East India Company (VOC) employees. At the same time, these sources offer some slim opportunities to discern "agency" of the enslaved in the sense of reacting to one's outsider status, either by striving for inclusion in the insider group, or escaping from one's predicament.

Autobiographic writings

Autobiographies by ex-slaves are exceedingly rare, but we have one from a former slave from Manggarai on Flores in the 19th century – Flores being an island mostly outside European influence until the early 20th century. The autobiography was written in the Netherlands many years after the slave, Nai, had been manumitted, but as a rare specimen of personal reflection, it merits detailed attention. Nai's life as a slave boy was not particularly harsh since he was treated as a member of the household – the "open" type of slavery often found in rural Southeast Asia where slaves tend to be assimilated (Reid 1983: 156). However, that did not save Nai from being sold to a second master who, in turn, sold him for export to Bima on the island Sumbawa when about ten years of age. The crossing of the Sape Strait between Flores and Sumbawa was traumatic:

> Several people, men as well as women, accompanied us as we walked. Finally, before sunset, we reached the destination. My warden remained with me for two nights and two days until he turned me over to others. We did not stay overnight in that place or village, but outside in a so-called suburb, since we were herded with many male and female slaves, gathered from all places and villages, staying there until further order. I subsequently understood that the place was called Reeote [Reo]. It is situated at the mouth of a small river. There lie the large ships or perahus that take the male and female slaves to other places. After the two days had passed, my warden came to take leave. He admonished me that I must serve the other

> master and mistress worthily and well and be obedient – then I would not receive beatings and punishments. Now, farewell and be in good health. Then I walked with the other male and female slaves until we were called on […] we were to walk on the plank one by one, and then inside the ship or perahu. It was dark in the ship that we call perahu, and no light was lit, so that we could not see each other but hear talking. That evening and night we sat still and were not given any food or drink. But we heard walking and rushing from the stern to the bow with sticks. We did not know what it meant, since we had never seen or heard such, and all was strange due to the movements of the ship. I and other male and female slaves complained about headache and wrongs, and some started to spew and throw up. But we had to remain sitting at our place. Finally, the day broke so that we could see each other. We saw that the boat where we sat had a hedge of planks all around, so that we should not fall into the water. We also saw large water and land at the sides, and before and behind us, but we were not in the mood to speak about it. We were all half-sick, the seasickness. But it was our luck that the weather was beautiful and the sun shone.

Arriving to their destination in Sumbawa, the exhausted slaves were given food and a place to sleep. Nai relates how "I was not able to sleep; I thought too much of my parents and brothers." On the next day, the slaves were led to a river to clean themselves, and were the taken to a large building, which made a deep impression on Nai, used to the modest houses of Manggarai.

> We remained standing until the black masters, three, four or five, came to inspect us. When they had inspected and re-inspected all, they let us be brought to our room. We did not know what was happening. Finally, they came to take us away one by one. Good or not, we must go with reluctance. Together with me and my warden were another two, three or four men with their male and female slaves. But in the course of the journey, they departed in other directions and also stopped in villages that we passed through. If they remained there or not, I do not know, but we proceeded until it had become dark. When we were at home, the family members had still not gone to bed. These people seemed to have waited for us. However, we had not talked for long when the evening meal was served. I ate and drank and went to bed. I was very happy when I went to rest since I was tired from marching. I slept so well that I did not know any sorrow anymore, sleeping with foreign people. In the following morning, when I stood up, I was very gloomy. However, these people treated me very well, just as if I was their own child.

The owner, from the Bima Kingdom on Sumbawa, was a poor man who grew rice and maize with his own hands and did not urge the boy to perform hard work. After a year or so, Nai was once again taken away and brought on a ship bound for Dutch Surabaya. There he became the servant of a Dutch colonel in a stately residence. Among his first experiences was the sight of a slave who received a corporal punishment with the stick for some offence. As he recalled, he had never been beaten under his various masters in Manggarai and Bima. After a short service with the colonel, the boy was acquired by a

navy officer who took his servant to the Netherlands in 1810. Several years later he was set free and enabled to establish a family.[2]

It is difficult to generalize from one person's life story, though the autobiography lends some colour to the traumas brought by the slave traffic. The commoditization of humans that the system engendered is indicated by the many masters who possessed Nai in Manggarai, Bima and Java, even before the age of ten. Despite the rather intimate and familial (and thus "open") circumstances of Nai's various stays, this aspect bows more to the "closed" type of slavery, that upheld the legal distinction between free and unfree and saw a child as an item of trade.

Testimonies of enslavement

More common are testimonies by people who had been enslaved by raiders from places like Sulu (Southern Philippines) and Papua (New Guinea) but been recovered or managed to escape. These give important glimpses of dynamics of slaving outside European premises (Warren 2007). Such testimonies have been preserved for the simple reason that the slaves eventually reached European-held territory and the colonial authorities were interested in mapping the menace of raiders in the region. An eyewitness account from 1778 by Tukar from the Sula Islands in the Moluccas in eastern Indonesia highlights the very movable and frightening nature of raiders from Papua which even reached the central parts of Indonesia:

> Some five months ago, he and eleven mates were sent by the salahakan [governor] of Sula to Buru [another island in the Moluccas] to fetch a sort of mushroom for caulking ships. On this journey, they met ten Papuan ships and were overcome. He and his mate saw six Burunese on the ships who had also been ravished. They went to the negeri [settlement] Fatehe, where another three people were captured. There, they divided their ships and decided that five of them would turn to Seram [in the Moluccas], and five to Tobungku [in Sulawesi]. When the last-mentioned had come to Taliabu [in Sula], they overcame two large paduwakang [type of ship] filled with merchandise, from which the small crew fled; and the robbers then went to Banggai [in Sulawesi] where they captured a ship with nine Sulanese at sea, as well as five people on land. Three of these were killed. After committing this, they went to Tobungku [in Sulawesi] where they captured 50 people on the beach who were occupied with fishing. They then went to Papua where Tukar was brought to Tidore [in the Moluccas] by Prince Bindertjaya. There, he was recognized by a cousin of a certain Ternatan carpenter Djamaly who requested him from His Highness of Tidore and sent him to his lord the King of Ternate.[3]

The multitude of geographical terms and twists of events might be bewildering for anyone not intimate with the geographical and historical

[2] Translated by the present author from a copy of a privately held manuscript, kindly arranged by Matthias van Rossum, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam.
[3] National Archives, The Hague. 1.04.02. VOC 3523, Witness account, 8 July 1778, Ternate, f. 383-4.

context, but the account provides a glimpse of the volatile conditions afflicting maritime Southeast Asia in the 18th century, seen from the angle of a victim of slave raiding. The distance from New Guinea to Sulawesi is enormous and the waterways were generally claimed by the Dutch East India Company, but these claims were not always efficacious. On the contrary, the expectations of capturing valuable human cargo were irresistible as seafarers from New Guinea zigzagged their way through the archipelagic world of Indonesia, capturing goods and slaves, killing people and causing mayhem (Goodman 2006).

Legal sources of slave lives

A further category are legal testimonies by slaves who had tried to escape or committed an offence or even been victims of an offence, studied by Eric Jones among others (Jones 2010). Though given under pressure, these can provide important information about the enslaved experience. While the sincerity of such testimonies can always be discussed, at least they intimate us with the framework in which enslaved work and life took place – the discourse of slaving experience, so to say. Through these testimonies we can read about the intense fear for arbitrary and violent behaviour of the slavers, and sometimes the double experience of subjection to colonial and local hierarchies of subordination.

We can refer such a case from Timor, where Dutch and Portuguese colonialisms had been at work since the early 17th century. In the night between 22 and 23 April 1694, seven slaves escaped from Kupang, a colonial town in the western part of Timor. It is not clear exactly why they escaped, though one of the Dutch slaveowners was a notorious brute who did not even stop short of attacking local aristocrats. The Dutch authorities at once dispatched underlings originating from the nearby Island of Ndana. About nine o'clock in the morning they sighted the slaves in the wilderness outside Kupang. The slaves ran in all directions into the forest to escape, but the woman Kapy and her young daughter Raja were left behind. Kapy was later interrogated and related to the authorities her motives of acting. As she said, she and her daughter were overcome by fear for what their master might do to them if recaptured, and Raja asked her mother to finish her off. On "the instigation of the devil", as she expressed it, Kapy stabbed her daughter with a knife she carried and then stabbed herself. The two women fell to the ground before the eyes of the stunned pursuers, who were so shocked at the macabre spectacle that they ran back to Kupang without examining the injured. Later, people returned to the place and found blood on the ground but no bodies and eventually gave up the search. From Kapy's witness account it appears that the two women regained consciousness and managed to creep away. Kapy hid in caves and rocks for two to three days until she was found by Timorese people who brought her to Kupang. Raja was also found and taken to the Dutch authorities in a dying state. The mother recovered from the self-

inflicted wound, but it did not end there. The local council decided to send her to the VOC hub in Batavia where her case would be investigated.[4] We do not know exactly how it ended for her. From the lapidary statements by Kapy, we gain some insight in the predicament of slaves in the colonial establishments; death could be preferable to the punishments meted out by their masters, and there were few efficient restraints (Hägerdal 2010: 31-2).

Such studies have been enormously facilitated in recent years by digitization projects around the world. This is the place to mention the recent GLOBALISE project in the Netherlands, where much of the vast VOC corpus is digitally transcribed and fully searchable.[5] The formerly time-consuming process of getting to the archive and surveying manuscript bundles and microfilms for references about slaves is now much less cumbersome, although we must also be aware of the possible bias inherent in digital collections.

Other conclusions about the lifeworld and agency of enslaved people can be made more indirectly, through simple statistics. Early modern European surveys of local slave communities, for example on the Banda Islands, tend to show an enormous array of ethnicities coming together for coerced labour. While we know next to nothing about these people one by one, it was a multicultural experience for the enslaved, the results of which have been elucidated by historical-anthropological research, such as by Phillip Winn on the Banda Islands (Winn 2010). Even the dry-as-dust field of diplomatic history can help us understand the world of the enslaved. Among the thousands of contracts and treaties that the Dutch and other powers concluded with Southeast Asian polities, big and small, slavery looms large in the paragraphs, and a very large part of slavery-related passages are actually about escaping, and the apprehending of escapees. Together with many other sources, it shows that the will to escape the predicament of enslaved work was virtually omnipresent, even when chances of success were rather slim (Hägerdal 2024). Finally, legal sources exist in some abundance in Southeast Asia in the form of law texts and decrees – both colonial and indigenous – and describe the handling of slaves in several contexts. These are, naturally, composed by the authorities, but even so they tell what the authorities expected from enslaved persons, and how to best handle them. For example, we have lengthy regulations about how slave ships in the VOC world were to approach their human cargo.

We may not be able to reconstruct the mindset of enslaved people with any confidence – the question is, if such can be done with any "subaltern", to cite Gayatri Spivak (1988). But there are ways to close in to the lifeworld of these people, with the triangulation of source categories which may include non-written sources from anthropology and archaeology. With the fast

[4] National Archives, The Hague. 1.04.02. VOC 1553, Dagregister, sub 3, 4, 5, 6 May 1694.
[5] GLOBALISE, https://globalise.huygens.knaw.nl/ (accessed 16-11-2025).

digitization and AI devices, this will undoubtedly increase our understanding for the dark underbelly of human labour in the coming years.

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