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COMMUNICATION
RAFFLES AND THE SLAVE TRADE
AT BATAVIA IN 1812

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BRITISH opinion in the East became sensitive to propaganda against slavery and the slave trade surprisingly early. Thus in 1772 the Committee of Circuit in Bengal, when recommending the enslavement of the families of hereditary dacoits, thought it necessary to explain that slavery in India involved only a mild domestic subordination, since 'the ideas of slavery borrowed from our American colonies will make every modification of it appear to our countrymen in England a horrible evil'.¹ In 1789 Cornwallis prohibited the collection of slaves for export, and was contemplating a gradual abolition of slavery in Bengal.² David Scott, a hard-headed East-India merchant and a Director of the East India Company, wrote in a private letter in 1796 that the salt workers in Bengal must be freed from compulsory labour, 'for slaves cannot work so cheap as free men, besides we ought to give all our subjects liberty'.³ In 1804 Wellesley ordered proposals to be made for the prohibition of slavery on Penang, since there could be no great difficulty about it on so recent a settlement.⁴

In 1811 in a report to Lord Minto, the Governor-General, during the preparations for the British invasion of Java, Raffles denounced the destructive policies of the Dutch in the Malay Archipelago, and could find nothing worse to compare them with than the conduct of the European nations in West Africa. When discussing the British empire in the Eastern Isles which he hoped would succeed the Dutch one, he wrote of slavery and the slave trade as a major cause 'of keeping down these regions in a state of bondage, ignorance and blood', but added that it was fortunately unnecessary at the present period to expatiate on these grand evils 'since by the late Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade that system of crime is prohibited in all territories in H.M.'s possession or occupation'. However, the text, though not the title, of the Act of 1807 (47 Geo. III, c. 36) referred specifically to the African slave trade, and the British authorities in the East well understood that it did not include Asia. It is difficult to explain Raffles' apparent ignorance after his years of service at Penang. Perhaps he was led by enthusiasm into sentimental vagueness. He continued with the even wilder statement that 'in the beginning of the year 1806 the Marquis Wellesley abolished slavery throughout India', and cited the prohibition of the slave trade at Madras in 1682 as evidence that 'our countrymen have, at

¹ W. K. Firminger (ed.), *Fifth Report from Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company, 1812* (Calcutta, 1917), I (Introduction), p. ccxxiv.

² G. W. Forrest (ed.), *Selections from the State Papers of the Governors-General of India—Lord Cornwallis* (1926), II, 141.

³ C. H. Phillips (ed.), *Correspondence of David Scott*, Camden Soc. 3rd ser. LXXV (1951), I, 76.

⁴ Prince of Wales Island Public Consultations, 4 Oct. 1805 (India Office, R. 428/69, pp. 85-90).

the most early periods, opposed all attempts to introduce the abominable traffic into our settlements in the East'. This latter measure had actually prohibited only the export of slaves, on economic and humane grounds. Finally, Raffles asserted that Minto's recent order 'to emancipate all the government slaves at Malacca, and to direct that hereafter no slaves shall be purchased or received on account of Government, has already given all the Malay nations an earnest of Your Lordship's sentiments'.⁵

After the conquest of Java later in 1811 Minto instructed Raffles, as Lieutenant-Governor, to discourage the import of slaves, to set an example by declining to purchase any on Government account, and to investigate slavery in Java in order that the possibility of emancipating at any rate the Government's slaves might be considered.⁶ Minto held that slavery was always open to abuse, and that however mild and unobjectionable a form it might sometimes take, it was always a violation of one of the first principles on which society is based.⁷ His moderation in 1811 did not prevent his being criticized in the House of Commons in consequence of a rumour that he had at once manumitted all the slaves in Java, although 'they were the most bloodthirsty fellows imaginable'.⁸

In 1810 Parliament asked for more effectual suppression of the African slave trade, and the Slave Trade Felony Act (51 Geo. III, c. 23) was accordingly passed in 1811. The debates referred only to the African slave trade, and members spoke of it as though it were the only one which existed or could concern them.⁹ The authors of the Felony Act, however, were better informed, and its scope was expressly extended 'to effectual abolition of the slave trade wheresoever it may be attempted to practice it', with the proviso that the Act should not extend to things done in the East Indies and the islands in the East Indian seas before January 1812. British naval captains in the East were instructed accordingly, and they and their crews became entitled to the rewards authorized by Parliament for slaves liberated, and slave ships captured and condemned.

Raffles considered that interference by the navy would be embarrassing, and argued that the Act could not apply to Java, which had been conquered only after its passing and so could not have been within Parliament's intention. He requested the senior naval officer in the Java seas to refrain from interference with the trade pending a reference to Minto. Meanwhile, Raffles contented himself with an increase in the import duty on slaves and the revival of a former Dutch regulation against the importation of slaves over the age of fourteen. This regulation, according to Raffles, 'must be applauded as having had for its object the exclusion of that condition which constitutes the greatest severity of slavery, namely the subjection of mankind after their ideas, habits and attachments are formed, and limiting the introduction to that period of life when the change cannot be felt and the misfortune is not remembered'.¹⁰

In justification of these arrangements, Raffles explained, 'Slavery on the island of Java is to be considered as exclusively confined to domestic purposes and may be viewed rather as a regulated domestic servitude than that detestable system which the legislature of Great Britain have to the credit of humanity so vigorously

⁵ C. E. Wurtzburg, *Raffles [of the Eastern Isles]* (1954), 146, 153; S. Raffles, *Memoir of the Life of Sir T. S. Raffles* (1830), 78-80.

⁶ Bengal Civ[il] Col[onial] Cons[ultations], 16 Aug. 1813, no. 6.

⁷ Ibid. 17 Oct. 1812, no. 16.

⁸ *Hansard* (1st ser.), XXI, 141 (10 Jan. 1812).

⁹ Ibid. XIX, 233-4.

¹⁰ Bengal Civ. Col. Cons., 17 Oct. 1812, no. 7.

suppressed in the West Indies'. Thus once again he showed confusion about the Act of 1807. He added that slavery in any shape, even if purely nominal, was so repugnant, and so inconsistent with Minto's benevolent plans, that the system in Java could not be defended in principle. Raffles, therefore, merely explained the origins of the system and the necessity for allowing it to be maintained by further importations.

It must be observed that on the establishment of the Dutch in the eastern islands, there did not exist any class of persons of the same description as those found in Western India, calculated for domestic purposes. The native courts and chiefs in Java and in the eastern seas, though in many cases powerful and of ancient date, are so far removed from civilization that the comforts to be derived from the attention of domestic servants are unknown to them. The Dutch, therefore, had to create a class of domestic servants, and in doing this they adopted the plan of raising children in their families from other countries, in preference to those in their more immediate neighbourhood, who from their connexions and the habits of their relatives could never be depended on. It is not for me to say whether this system was either necessary or proper. It may be sufficient to state that it has been uniformly persevered in and that on the arrival of the English there was no class of domestic servants in Java but slaves thus reared in the families of the Dutch. There are many of these who have been emancipated by their masters and who occasionally hire themselves out to strangers, but they are little to be depended upon—the sudden change of condition from actual slavery to unlimited freedom has no doubt in many instances tended rather to destroy than improve their morals and it is rather to the gradual and slow operation of a change in the general condition of the slave that we are to look forward for benefit than from any partial or immediate emancipation.

Raffles hoped that the example set by British officers in hiring free domestic servants would lead eventually to success in the difficult task of training such servants in sufficient numbers to make the importation of slaves unnecessary.¹¹

In July 1812 Captain Owen, of the frigate *Cornelia*, though aware of Raffles' request to the senior naval officer, felt it his duty to seize the ship and cargo of a Chinese trader who was returning to Batavia from Bali with 116 young slaves, together with wax, birds'-nests, piece goods, dry meat, etc. valued at 30,000 Spanish dollars. The nearest prize court was at Madras, and Owen declared that he would prefer an arrangement with the Java Government which would make it unnecessary to take the vessel there. This was natural enough, since proceedings at prize courts were notoriously slow, uncertain and expensive, and it was usually difficult to provide men for a prize crew. However, Owen professed to be actuated by tenderness for the reputation of the Java Government, because at Madras 'the case may excite some disagreeable feeling under the extremely forbidding countenance and sentiments now common to all Englishmen on this subject'. He promised to try to explain to the court the Java regulations about the slave trade and 'the necessity of some system of the sort, however modified, to supply Batavia with people who will work; although this cannot (in my opinion) save the vessel under the existing severe laws on the subject, it may soften down certain asperities which might otherwise occur on a system so well calculated to procure popularity to its most clamorous opposers'. He would try to portray the Java Government 'in the most amiable light as protectors to injured people'. He declared his awareness 'how much the honour and interest of this government is concerned in preventing the publication

¹¹ Bengal Civ. Col. Cons., 17 Oct. 1812, no. 7.

of a most flagrant error continued by it ever since the capture of this colony', and expressed surprise that Raffles should have been so misled about the Act of 1811; 'but the conviction I have of your rectitude in all things is sufficient to assure me that the principles on which you have suffered this disgrace to humanity still to exist are such as would do you credit if examined, and would sufficiently exculpate me from an improper construction of my motives for endeavouring to prevent the extended publication of the case'.¹²

Raffles was absent from Batavia at the time, so Owen had to make arrangements with Muntinghe, who was in charge of the Government. Owing to the interruption of supplies during the British blockade, there was a shortage of slaves and Owen was able to dispose of the children he had captured as apprentices, to be bound over until the age of twenty-one to serve a master 'in any lawful business'. The masters agreed to pay to the captors the head-money to which they would have been entitled if the matter had gone to court in accordance with the Act.¹³ Owen informed Raffles, while these arrangements were being carried out:

I have bound over as many slaves as possible to such individuals of good repute who chose to take them as apprentices on payment of the Treasury reward and having the transaction conducted in the presence of the Bench of Magistrates, which I consider as the guardian to these wretches. This is proper for many evident reasons, and the taking them to Madras might be seriously grievous to them. For all such emancipated slaves as may be landed here in order to prevent their appearance before an admiralty court, Mr Muntinghe has promised me that this government shall secure me the same reward as I should be entitled to by the more regular proceeding of Admiralty judgment, which is put on the double principle of preventing the British Treasury from paying for your fault and that my officers and crew in accommodating themselves to your circumstances should not lose their authorized reward—but Mr Muntinghe has reserved this for your ultimate approbation.

Owen explained that in thus departing from a strictly legal line of conduct, 'My principal aim is, believe me, to prevent the odium which must in England necessarily attach to a government which shall be known to have authorized slave trade contrary to and in spite of the strong laws'.¹⁴

Owen also intercepted the vessel in which a Dutch official named Tramberg, formerly employed at Macassar, was returning to Batavia, but released it on Tramberg's statement that the passengers were free persons. Later, Owen complained to Muntinghe:

I have since learnt, with the indignation such conduct is calculated to excite, that the said Mr Tramberg has offered some of those persons for sale as slaves and under some peculiarly aggravating circumstances. In compliance with my orders to seize all vessels so employed actually, or intending to be so employed, or having been so employed, I beg to claim immediate assistance of placing the slaves so brought here by Mr Tramberg under the protection of this government and to claim your concurrence in some proper measure for the emancipation of these people without taking them from the country and without depriving my officers and crew of their authorized reward. I have ordered the said vessel to be seized and shall endeavour to take her to Madras for adjudication, unless you shall please to make such arrangements as may render this unnecessary, and therefore I am to claim the assistance of your authority for recovering such papers and property and persons as may have been embarked on the said vessel, all such property being confiscable and all such persons subject to the penalties of the law, as well as being necessary to the examination of the

¹² Bengal Civ. Col. Cons., 5 Dec. 1812, no. 23. ¹³ Ibid. no. 24. ¹⁴ Ibid. no. 23.

circumstances in the Vice-Admiralty Court, as being concerned in this illegal and infamous traffic.¹⁵

Owen does not seem to have obtained any satisfaction in this matter.

Raffles, himself no mean 'Lifeman', objected to interference with ships of independent native countries in amity with Britain, importing slaves to Java in accordance with ancient custom.

It is well known that for a long period preceding the Capture of Java the trading inhabitants of the Eastern Islands were subjected to an arbitrary and oppressive operation of H.M.'s Orders in Council regarding the blockade of the enemy's ports, which by an evident misapplication was enforced without discrimination, until a reference to the authorities in India and ultimately in Europe occasioned its discontinuance. During the period in which it was enforced, the English could only be considered as the scourge of the Eastern Seas. Fortunately a great change has taken place by the conquest of this Island, and the inhabitants to the Eastward are daily becoming more reconciled and attached to the British interests. But should the Act of Parliament regarding slaves have a similar extensive operation, and subject every trading prow to search and transmission to India for adjudication in the event of having slaves on board, the most alarming consequences will ensue, and instead of the British influence effecting the tranquillity and civilization of the Eastern Isles, they may be expected to become a scene of rapine, violence and murder.¹⁶

Thus Raffles arrived at an opinion precisely opposite to his previous one. Before the conquest of Java, he had regarded the slave trade as the great promoter of disorder and preventer of civilization in the Archipelago, but now it was the Royal Navy's interference with the slave trade that filled this role. He averred that the evil of slavery and the slave trade in the Archipelago as a whole could only be partially removed and finally extirpated as a result of an advance of civilization, promoted by other measures for pacification and the encouragement of trade,¹⁷ although he held out to the senior naval officer better hopes for Java itself.

It is proper for me to observe that the regulations that have been established on this Island amount almost to a prohibition of the importation of slaves, and that I have reason to think the period is not very far distant when it may finally and with safety to the British character cease as far as regards this Island and its immediate dependencies, but you must be aware that the great commerce in slaves is carried on by native powers in amity with the British government but entirely independent of their authority, and that there is scarcely a native vessel of any description navigating these seas that has not slaves on board and consequently may be liable to search, which if persevered in cannot fail to have an effect similar to the system of blockade. It is by treaty and amicable negotiation with these powers that arrangements may eventually be made for the entire suppression of the trade, which the effects of violence and seizure under existing circumstances could only tend to frustrate and render difficult, if not impossible, to attain.¹⁸

The senior naval officer proceeded to reconcile the interests of the Java Government with due obedience to orders and with the rights of captors, by ordering that any slaver intercepted off Java should be taken to one of the main Javanese ports, a valuation of the cargo be obtained from the customs authorities, and a bond be taken binding the Government for the amount of the reward, as well as for the value of the ship and cargo if adjudged liable to confiscation. The ship should then be

¹⁵ Bengal Civ. Col. Cons., 5 Dec. 1812, no. 19.

¹⁶ Ibid. no. 18.

¹⁷ Wurtzburg, *Raffles*, 264.

¹⁸ Bengal Civ. Col. Cons., 5 Dec. 1812, no. 18.

released with a certificate to protect it from further stoppage. The Chinese vessel taken by Owen seems to have been dealt with according to this arrangement.¹⁹

Raffles asserted that Tramberg's case was precisely similar to that of West Indian planters who were allowed by the Act of 1807 to remove their slaves from one island to another, and that in any event Owen had abandoned all right of interference by allowing these people to land. Raffles declared that no one could desire the abolition of slavery more than he,

but if the British legislature felt it necessary to be so tender of the rights of individuals, and those too subjects of England, as to deliberate for a period of many years before it could determine on the mode by which the emancipation of slaves in our West India colonies could be carried into effect without infringing these rights, how much more delicately situated must not the government of a newly captured island be, bound as it is not only to protect the property, privileges and customs of its inhabitants, but also by the usage of conquest, which as I apprehend declares that the fundamental laws existing in any foreign colony at the time of its conquest shall remain unaltered till the sovereign authority of the conquering state shall decide.²⁰

Raffles referred the whole matter to Minto, and in the meantime refused to recognize the indentures of the 'apprentices'.

It must be evident that if Captain Owen has a right to capture the vessel, that right could only be founded on the emancipation of the slaves, and consequently that he could have no further right in the person or services of the slaves. In taking upon himself a right over their future services, not only on the assumed plea of providing for their maintenance but with the view of obtaining a personal compensation for the same, to the extent of the Treasury reward, I conceive that he has been guilty of a positive violation of any authority that might have been vested in him. Instead, therefore, of allowing the arrangement to be carried into effect and the parties to be literally sold into slavery, for the apprenticeship means nothing less, by the very authority that should have emancipated them, I have thought proper to interfere the authority of Government, and to direct that the whole of the children so imported should be kept under the immediate care and protection of Government until I am honoured with Your Lordship's commands with regard to their emancipation or otherwise, or until it is ascertained whether the provisions of the Act must necessarily be enforced or not.

Your Lordship is already so fully informed of the state of society in the eastern islands and of the difficulties to be apprehended from any sudden change that it becomes unnecessary to enter on the reasons which have operated in tolerating the slave trade for a time under its present restrictions, but I trust they will be sufficiently apparent to justify the measure I have adopted in supporting the Regulations framed under the sanction of Your Lordship, and in taking upon Government, during reference, the loss which may arise in the event of the Act being considered to apply.

I shall await Your Lordship's further instructions previous to making any essential alteration in the Regulations, but every possible restriction on the importation that can be made with safety and without seriously endangering the native commerce of the island or occasioning unfavorable propositions with regard to the British character and views, will be made gradually and as occasion offers, with a view to positive prohibition eventually, should the provisions adopted by the legislature be considered applicable to these ports. While, however, the Regulations admitted [*sic*] of the importation on any terms whatever, I shall in justice to the importers feel myself bound to support their right and to bear them harmless from any loss to which they may be subjected from an erroneous construction of the law.²¹

¹⁹ Bengal Civ. Col. Cons., 5 Dec. 1812, nos. 20-1. ²⁰ Ibid. no. 18. ²¹ Ibid. no. 16.

Before any reply was received, Raffles, not to be outdone in humanitarianism, decided that experience showed the importation of slaves by native vessels to be less extensive than might have been supposed, that imports in the past must, therefore, have been chiefly by Europeans, and that consequently imports might safely be prohibited from 1 January 1813. In 1815, he tightened up the arrangements for the registration of slaves, in order to check clandestine imports.²²

Minto had no doubt that the Act of 1811 prohibited the import of slaves by sea to any British possession, and himself, in accordance with the spirit of the Act, prohibited import into Bengal Presidency by land, and advised Bombay and Madras to follow suit.²³ He approved Raffles' quashing of the indentures arranged by Owen, without any indemnification for losses possibly sustained by the masters, and recommended that if it would be a hardship to the children to be emancipated, as they ought to be under the Act, the Government should protect and feed them, and would be justified in employing their personal services in return. It is not clear whether the Chinese importer received any compensation.²⁴

Minto explained his proceedings to the Directors of the East India Company:

Any sudden attempt to break through a long established usage would probably be resisted by the Malays and other inhabitants of the eastern islands; and if these persons, whose ferocious and sanguinary character is so notorious, should determine generally to retaliate for any real or supposed injury which they may suffer in the course of carrying on their accustomed trade, the consequences would be fatal to many innocent individuals who would become the objects of their resentment. Every necessary measure has been taken by the government of Java to make known to the inhabitants of the Eastern Islands the prohibition which exists against the transportation of slaves to a British port, but some time must elapse before they can become acquainted with the humane and benevolent views of the British legislature, and a much longer time must elapse before they are likely to be reconciled to a law which will materially affect a commerce which they have hitherto carried on without the interference of any European power.

Sir Samuel Hood, the naval commander-in-chief, had promised caution in enforcing the law.²⁵

Thus the calamities foreseen by Raffles were avoided. The navy soon seems to have lost interest in catching slavers, and the authorities at British ports in the East were not always very vigilant. The slave trade was openly tolerated by W. Farquhar, the Resident, during the first few years at Singapore.²⁶ R. T. Farquhar, as Governor of Mauritius, after an initial effort to enforce the law, adopted a more lenient attitude, and was later rebuked for 'extraordinary misapprehensions' in the matter.²⁷ He could not have misunderstood the Act of 1811, for Minto had pointed out its scope, and in any case most of the slaves imported to Mauritius came from Africa and Madagascar. Raffles, on the other hand, was able to maintain a public attitude

²² Wurtzburg, *Raffles*, 265-6. D. C. Boulger, *Life of Sir Stamford Raffles* (1899), 182. In 1813 Raffles made it a principle of policy that slaves whose masters had not duly completed the formalities of registration were entitled to emancipation (Java Public Cons., 17 Sept. and 15 Oct. 1813).

²³ Bengal Civ. Col. Cons., 17 Oct. 1812, no. 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 5 Dec. 1812, no. 25.

²⁵ Letter from Bengal (Colonial), 31 July 1813.

²⁶ Wurtzburg, *Raffles*, 613-14, 710-11.

²⁷ C. Lloyd, *The Navy and the Slave Trade* (1949), 197; *Cambridge History of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1940), II, 110.

of zeal against slavery. He joined others in boasting of the virtues of East Indian possessions where colonial goods could be grown by free labour, and pleaded for their encouragement against the West Indies. He once again regarded the slave trade as a preventer of civilization; and the need to free the people of Nias from the scourge provided him with a reason for taking that island under British protection when he was Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen.²⁸

When he went to Java in 1811, Raffles was interested in his career, in holding his job, and in achieving something for his country by the acquisition of territorial and commercial advantages. Minto was the one who wanted to 'do good' in Java. Raffles was not insincere in professing the humanitarian sentiments acceptable to Minto, but did not feel them deeply. High office compelled Raffles to grapple with practical problems and to consider the interests of those whom he ruled. He wanted to succeed in his job and to win the confidence of practical men at Batavia. Later, he found that the affairs of Java received little attention in Bengal and London, and that his reputation there would depend not on his real achievements but on the appearances he was able to keep up. His increasingly humanitarian attitude was not, however, insincere, for he became increasingly interested in the welfare of the common people of Java and the other Eastern Isles. Motives are usually mixed.²⁹

²⁸ *Quarterly Review*, xxviii (no. lv), 1822-3, pp. 124-5, 137.

²⁹ For a fuller discussion of Raffles's 'sincerity' see *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, xxviii (1955), 222-30.