

Book Reviews

Lenore Manderson, *Sickness and the state: health and illness in colonial Malaya, 1870–1940*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. xix, 315, illus., £40.00 (0-521-56008-X).

“The waste of only a single cent a coolie a day on a labour force of forty thousands means a direct loss of 126,000 Straits dollars (almost £15,000) per annum; and to increase the efficiency of the labour by a cent a day means a corresponding gain” (Malcolm Watson, *Rural sanitation in the tropics*, London, 1915, p. xviii). Watson’s observation may appear a little crude but it depicts a reality—a reality which the book under review tries to capture in its all possible dimensions and with rare clarity. In recent years issues relating to colonialism, disease and medicine have engaged the attention of several scholars, yet one seldom comes across a book like Manderson’s that leaves so little to be desired.

The agenda is very clearly set out in the preface. The locale is colonial Malaya, and the period covered includes both the high tide and the ebb of conventional colonialism. The overarching framework is that of political economy (which the colonial project definitely was to a considerable extent). The author uses it to question state initiatives in the areas of health and medicine. She is greatly concerned also with the significance of “biomedicine as a cultural system”. The colonial discourse on medicine was mediated not only by considerations of political economy but also by several other factors. Polity, biology, ecology, the circumstances of material life and new knowledge interacted and produced this discourse. The emergence of tropical medicine at the turn of the century is seen in this light. It is argued that tropical medicine itself was a cultural construct, “the scientific stepchild of colonial domination and control”. The author thus tries to contextualize health in a framework that explores the interplay of global forces and local circumstances. While explaining the local factors, a great merit of the book lies in its treatment of “gender at work”. The colonial construction of sex and sexuality pervaded the epidemiology of disease and the

remedial action. Similarly, the colonial reading of the local social hierarchies influenced the character and course of medical interventions. To these two aspects Manderson gives her maximum attention.

The introductory chapter is followed by anthropologically interesting explorations into “corporeal reality”. Colonial Malaya, thanks to its strategic location and resources, received migrants and profiteers from different parts of South-East and South Asia, and Europe. This brought together (in an uneasy relationship) different social and cultural systems. In Malay medicine there coexisted Hindu “mythology”, Arab pharmacopoeia and Chinese acupuncture. This medical pluralism was gradually pushed aside by western medical practices and with this Manderson finds a “dramatic” decline in infectious diseases and mortality. In support of this claim, she provides several statistical tables (16 in chapter 2 alone). By 1920 mortality fell considerably but a close look at table 2.6 shows that the fall was not “dramatic”. It was gradual; from 39 per 1,000 in 1901 to 22 in 1937, and infant mortality from 320 per 1,000 in 1901 to 155 in 1937. Table 2.8 shows 133 cases of cholera in 1902, which in 1910–15 rose to 1,685, but state intervention brought it down to 186 in 1920. Similarly there were only 39 cases of typhoid in 1901–3, but 2,379 cases were reported in 1946–48. Yet the author concludes that from the mid-1920s, largely as a consequence of water and sanitation control, there were few cases. Plague luckily was uncommon (only 765 cases reported for the entire period 1900–50). Except in the case of malaria (where reduction in mortality was very significant from 5.29 per thousand in 1928 to 0.95 in 1937), in the case of beri-beri, tuberculosis and pneumonia the reduction in mortality was largely marginal. Though overall the mortality rate declined, it was definitely not “dramatic”.

The author is at her best when examining in subsequent chapters the notions of race and gender that determined the colonial understanding of the etiology and epidemiology of disease. The administration

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distinguished between expatriate and indigenous communities, the old-arrivals and newcomers, and between men, women and children. The town was the most domesticated space, in contrast to the untamed and unpenetrated hinterland. "The sewer and the well were sites of cultural conflict." Towns were centres of medicine as well as disease. In chapter 5 the author gives a graphic account of city life in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, ably supported by statistical analysis. Here one gets a deep look into crowded housing, filthy habits, and "blowing pathogens" which state "incursions into private space" could hardly control. The next chapter deals with the politics of health, its cruelties and control at the site of work, i.e., the lucrative plantations. Again the focus falls on the mode of recruitment, the dietary habits of the coolies and the prevalence of numerous infections. But here all this had a direct economic bearing. Though the planters were reluctant to invest in sanitation, governmental interference proved effective. For example, the death rate of the Indian labourers in Negri Sembilan came down from 195 per thousand in 1911 to only 53 in 1913. Given the political will, it was possible to improve.

Closely related to the health problems of the immigrant labourer, travelling merchants and the army on the prowl, was the plight of numerous unfortunate women. From their brothels emanated "confused sounds of sex and tears, lust and abuse". "Domesticated" women suffered in silence. Manderson portrays this "sensual field" with great sensitivity. Until the turn of the century, women and children hardly received any attention. Even later, the official sources refer to men's infections, not women's. Information on women's health is thus indirect. Colonial records divided the whole female population into two categories—mother and whore. The latter disappeared from the state records when the government "abolished" prostitution in the 1930s. For the former, the state offered partial training to the *Bidan* (traditional midwives), a few infant welfare clinics and domestic science in the school curriculum. It was cheaper to organize a few

classes than to expand social and medical services. Interestingly, however, a gradual shift occurred from breast to bottle feeding, and the products of Nestlé and Glaxo were made available even in remote rural areas!

Capitalism was thus the real winner in battles against illness. The state consciously chose to serve capital while keeping the "dysfunctional side effects" of capitalism under control.

As the book aims at reconstructing the social history of sickness, there is not much on medical education or medical research *per se*. Referring to the establishment of research institutions in Saigon, Tunisia, Algeria, etc., the author feels that these offered "national" scientists a field station to pursue their interests in diseases. But how "national" were they; which "nation" did they serve? What effect did colonial medical experiments have on their helpless subjects? In 1904 Fraser's "Durian Tipus Experiment" involved the use of a group of unsuspecting labourers as "guinea-pigs". A Malay scholar Hairuddin bin-Harun raises these questions in his unpublished doctoral thesis on health policy and medical research in Malaya (University of London, 1988). Surprisingly Harun does not figure in Manderson's list of references. Again what effect did the new knowledge have on the traditional medical man (the *Bomoh*) who was both derided and used at the same time. Could colonial medicine produce a few Malay medical scientists? The author admits that, unlike in India, in Malaya there was no great interchange or borrowing of ideas. Maybe Manderson's sole reliance on English language sources does not allow her to see the *Bomoh* perspective as Harun does. This, however, should not deflect us from the value of this work. Lenore Manderson's command over archival data is truly breathtaking, her writing forceful, and her conclusions poignant yet unpolemical.

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