

SIMONE PRODOLLIET: *Händlerinnen, Goldgräber und Staatsbeamte. Sozialgeschichte einer Kleinstadt im Hochland Südwestsumatras*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1996. 372 pp., DM 69,-. ISBN 3-496-02574-3

Prodolliet reconstructs and analyzes the local history of a small town, Muara Aman, in the highlands of Rejang-Lebong in Southwest Sumatra (Indonesia). Her book is part of a larger project of Swiss anthropologists on Sumatra's transition from a subsistence economy to a market oriented one. It is a contribution to the current discussion about the role of local markets and their relation to international economies, and it pays attention to the often neglected social dimensions of market expansion and its impacts on household economies and social spaces. A special merit of the book is that it contradicts the widespread cliché of markets as being an age-old tradition all over Southeast Asia and of women as being empowered due to their prominence in the marketplaces.

Prodolliet focuses on a society that was unfamiliar with the institution of markets before the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was the infrastructural requirements of gold-diggers working in the mining industries and the integration of Rejang-Lebong into international economies during the colonial period that created the need for trade and for a local market to provide products that were produced outside the subsistence sector. Thus the establishment of a market and the town Muara Aman was supported by special measures of the Dutch administration at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Muara Aman was mainly inhabited by migrants. In times of political and economic crisis the market nearly disappeared a number of times. After 1960 it was strengthened again by the arrival of many people in search of work, including greater numbers of Rejang families.

The author describes in detail the history of diverse social groups and their respective intentions and strategies. The impact of colonialism in strengthening the positions of the traditional leaders is of interest. Furthermore, it becomes clear why members of many ethnic groups migrated to Rejang-Lebong, turning Muara Aman into a multi-ethnic melting pot: Chinese, Javanese and Sundanese came as *kulis* to work in the gold-mining companies that were privately owned by Europeans; other Javanese took part in transmigration programs organized by the government in order to develop agricultural, especially wet-rice production; many Minangkabau and Malays as well as a few Indians and Arabs came as traders, and shops were mostly run by the Chinese. Most of the newcomers were men. The few women who migrated to the area worked as prostitutes in the mining companies.

These different groups of newly arrived people lived among the indigenous agriculturally-oriented Rejang without serious problems as is indicated, for instance, by the many mixed marriages that took place. Fissions between the diverse social groups of the multicultural society in Muara Aman were first created by the economic crisis in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In situations of economic competition, Rejang traders refer to their relatives as clients and thus revert to stressing their ethnic identity. Prodoliet notes the current growth of what are perceived as political, social, religious, and ethnic divisions within the population.

As regards the present situation, the author conducted a very detailed census, covering many aspects of economic and social life in Muara Aman in her fieldwork. Her tables prove that besides the majority of the households, which are in a flexible way engaged in petty commodity production and petty trade, there is a growing middle class with a distinct life-style. In the traders' households there is little division of labour between the sexes, because women are very involved in selling at the markets. Yet men still occupy the important trade positions: this can be explained by the historical fact that trade was originally conducted by foreign males. In accordance with the official state ideology, women in middle class families define themselves primarily as housewives, and they are primarily engaged in status production. These findings are not surprising, but they become substantiated by means of the statistical data, which also show a considerable heterogeneity within the social groups.

The historical part of the book, which is thoroughly researched, is very vividly presented, although we do not learn much about the role of women, probably due to the lack of data. The middle part includes the portrayals of the lives and families of several influential male traders. This person-centered manner of description is later abandoned. When it comes to the present the reader learns neither about the interaction between researcher and researched nor about the emic views of the people in Muara Aman or their concrete ways of communicating. It would have been of great interest to study, say the informal social activities of women and men at the markets, and it would have been a pleasure to hear, - by means of citations - some of the voices of the people who can be seen in the interesting photos presented in the appendix.

*Judith Schlehe*