

# Shadows of Slavery

## Shadows of Slavery

*in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)*



**“The moral absolutism that insists on seeing slaves only as victims without agency, robs us of the opportunity to explore some real lives of the underprivileged”**

*May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

*Antonio De Lauri interviews Anthony Reid<sup>1</sup>*

**Antonio De Lauri:** *Would you like to start with a brief biographical note? How did you become an academic?*

**Anthony Reid:** I grew up in New Zealand, but as a ‘diplomatic kid’ had to start my schooling in Washington DC and spend some time visiting parents also in Indonesia and Japan. I began the study of history only at university level, in Wellington, where we studied the history of everything except New Zealand, one might say. History seemed a better way to understand the world than did economics, political science or literature, which I also studied. Post-graduate study was perhaps above all a means to move from the periphery to the centre, at Cambridge. An academic career was not at first my goal, so much as to better understand the world and especially that part of Asia that was reinventing itself through nationalism and independence. I grew disenchanted with diplomacy as an alternative

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Reid is a Southeast Asian historian, once again based as emeritus Professor at the Australian National University, where he also served as Professor of Southeast Asian History for many years before 1999. In between he was founding Director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at UCLA (1999-2002) and of the Asia Research Institute at NUS, Singapore (2002-7). He was awarded the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize in 2002, and the Association of Asian Studies, ‘Distinguished Contributions to Asian Studies’ Award in 2010. He has written ten books on Southeast Asian history, of which the most recent is *A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads* (2015). The 30 books he has edited or co-edited include, recently, *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 3 (2011) and *Indonesia Rising: The Repositioning of Asia’s Third Giant* (2012). Of relevance to the slavery theme are *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia* (1983) and *Asian Freedoms: The Idea of Freedom in East and Southeast Asia* (1998).



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

# Shadows of Slavery

## Shadows of Slavery

*in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)*

option as the world grew smaller and the roles and autonomies of diplomats contracted. The academic life represents a continuation of that quest for understanding.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *You have carried out research mainly in Southeast Asia. Why were you interested in this region of the world?*

**Anthony Reid:** Spending a few months of 1952 in Indonesia must have been part of it. However it was as an undergraduate in Wellington in 1957-9 that I encountered the first Southeast Asian students offered scholarships to New Zealand under the Colombo Plan. They represented the new world of Asia very directly, and a very welcome breath of fresh air in the rather monochrome New Zealand campuses of the day. The sense that Southeast Asia, and especially Indonesia, represented the great challenge of the time was then common to many in Wellington. The University recruited its first Southeast Asianists, Leslie Palmier and Emily Sadka, during my years as an undergraduate, and began the teaching of Indonesian. Contemporaries in Wellington, such as Terry McGee, Anne Booth, Bill Roff and a little earlier Harry Benda, caught the same bug. It was the newness and experimentation off these newly independent countries, as well as the enormous challenges of poverty and conflict, that inspired us.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *Who are the scholars and intellectuals that have mostly influenced your work?*

**Anthony Reid:** In Wellington it was mediaevalist Peter Munz, and imperial and New Zealand historian Bill Oliver, who were most influential. John Beaglehole, biographer of Captain James Cook, was a family friend and model of dedicated research. Cambridge was exciting in many ways, but in terms of a mentor. I received the most guidance from the historians at SOAS in London, notably C.D. (Jeremy) Cowan. In terms of my mature work, however, I have to mention especially Fernand Braudel, whose *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* was an obvious influence in my *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*. Benedict Anderson, a prodigious linguist, researcher and creative mind, got me excited first by revolution as a concept in Southeast Asian history, and later in the understanding of nationalism. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote about ideas, about history and about Indonesia so beautifully and thoughtfully that I was repeatedly inspired.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *Have you collaborated with local intellectuals in Southeast Asia?*

**Anthony Reid:** An important model of how to play the academic game with sympathy, imagination and compassion was my first Head of Department at the University of Malaya, Wang Gungwu. That first job, in 1965-70, was formative for me and made important



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

# Shadows of Slavery

## Shadows of Slavery

*in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)*

friends of several Malaysian colleagues. It was an exciting time with the formation of Malaysia, the exit of Singapore, and the May 13 riots of 1969. Historians do not naturally collaborate in research and writing as scientists do, and I have chiefly written alone. The collaborations with Southeast Asians and others have mostly come in the countless conferences organized and 29 collaborative volumes edited. I have persistently done this at a Southeast Asian level, involving many countries, traditions and languages, making it obligatory to collaborate with those who know them.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *When, how and why has your interest on slavery started?*

**Anthony Reid:** In the process of researching my Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, I was constantly confronted with descriptions of slaves, slavery and slave raiding and trading in the 16th and 17th centuries. There was virtually no discussion of the matter in the existing Southeast Asian literature, while the literature on slavery focussed almost overwhelmingly on the Americas, with a nod to the Ancient World of Greece and Rome. Unsure how to approach this subject, I encouraged my first PhD student, James Warren, to look into it, and devoted one of my first thematic conferences to this subject, around 1980. That became the 1983 book, *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia*. That was a great learning experience for me, and helped define the way I have approached the subject.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *In which political context did the academic interest on Asian slavery emerge?*

**Anthony Reid:** I believe they were complex, though perhaps all connected with 'history from below', the varied attempts to focus on the lives of non-elite, ordinary people. Moses Finley wielded one spotlight out of ancient history with his *The Ancient Economy* (1973) and *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (1980). David Brion Davis wielded another out of the heavily populated field of US History, increasingly broadening his field of enquiry to see how far America differed from broader patterns of human history. Asians and Asianists were slow to address the issue adequately, because the nationalist mood of the 1950s to 1980s was more interested in seeing Asians as victims than participants in the slave systems.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *Which are the crucial questions on slavery that still need an answer?*

**Anthony Reid:** The availability of more abundant documentation on slaves than on other members of the underclasses (as demonstrated by Fogel & Engerman, *Time on the Cross*) should allow us to broaden the historical agenda in a non-elite direction. The moral absolutism that insists on seeing slaves only as victims without agency, robs us of the



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

# Shadows of Slavery

## Shadows of Slavery

*in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)*

opportunity to explore some real lives of the underprivileged, with their talents, passions and choices as important to history as those of the literate elite.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *How the academic debate on slavery can help us to understand new forms of forced labor and bondage?*

**Anthony Reid:** It can, in similar directions to question above. We should have learned from studies of slavery in the non-West that slavery is in most cases part of a spectrum of unequal relationships, whereby labour or service is exchanged for protection, security, or survival. Systems of obligation incurred through debt or the acceptance of a favour are widespread in Asia. Slavery was part of such systems, and needs to be carefully defined as such. So are modern abuses that fall into an illegal category.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *You have also worked on the phenomenon of violence. Though slavery may essentially be considered a form of violence, it is not in these terms that we generally see it. What do you think?*

**Anthony Reid:** As suggested above, I think that might be a step backward, towards the moral absolutism that makes it hard to discuss social phenomena clearly.

**Antonio De Lauri:** *Freedom is another axe of your scientific reflection. How would you define freedom?*

**Anthony Reid:** I came to the study of freedom from the study of slavery, as did Orlando Patterson. I think he asked an important question about how far personal freedom was an important value in the non-West. I came to a different answer, showing I believe that there were Asian cases where the prominence of slavery in society (together with some other factors, to be sure) allowed personal freedom to emerge as an important value. That seems relevant in universalizing the importance of freedom.

Defining freedom must be done in relational, relative terms. Freedom from what? But freedom from slavery has been historically one very important reason why societies have sought to codify freedom and defend it as a legal category.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.