

The Colonial Landscape and its Convict Contractors

ANOMA PIERIS

University of California, Berkeley

Conventional urban histories of Singapore identify the city as the product of individual colonial administrators. This paper approaches the idea of city building from a different historic position—not of the planner, administrator but of the convict, contractor. The history of the labor force that constructs the colonial landscape reveals how urban spatial categories often contribute to colonial subject formation. Spatial transgressions by a group of persons who are denied citizenship, such as convicts, become a political issue for legitimate citizens. When the spaces transgressed are in fact produced with convict labor, issues of familiarity and prohibition become hopelessly entangled. My intention here is to examine just such an entanglement of colonial policy and polity through an incident described as a ‘public riot’ My material is drawn from 19th century colonial histories which represent the official view of these incidents.

INTRODUCTION

During the course of the 19th century, colonial rule in Southeast Asia changed from the laissez faire policies of the East India company to one of bureaucratic State administration. The British colonial government in Asia for example shifted from its center in Calcutta to individual colonial cities such as Singapore, Rangoon and Hong Kong in competition with other European colonial powers. The competition for trade in the South China Seas between opposing European regimes, provoked the hardening of administrative policies at the strategic European entrepots and was accompanied by an intensification of colonial power in the region. By the latter half of the century the colonial administration and its cities had expanded sufficiently to usher in the age of industrial capital.

During the same century the British colonial port city of Singapore grew from its inception in 1819 as a small colonial settlement to a busy urban entrepot that controlled the strategic entry point into the region. Unlike many of the British colonial cities in South Asia which were administered as conquered territories the status of an entrepot was one of free trade and voluntary settlement. While Singapore and the two previous Colonial Straits settlements Penang and Melacca remained

under the jurisdiction of the colonial authority, the Asian immigrants who populated these cities were afforded a considerable mobility and freedom. This distinction of Straits settlement identity as one of mobility and opportunity proved attractive to large rural populations from China, India and the Malayan mainland. The free port status of Straits settlement cities such as Singapore is critical to understanding the history of their urban development.¹



Fig.1. Plan of Singapore Town and Adjoining Districts by John Turnbull Thomson 1846

If we are to analyze the importance of the Colonial urban plan at these strategic entrepots two important issues become increasingly evident. The first was the need for colonial ideology to find effective ways to penetrate the social structure of voluntary settlers. The second was the need to construct the colonial city and facilitate its function as a free port controlling trade in and out of the region. The urban grid was introduced so



ORIGINAL HUTS FOR CONVICTS, SINGAPORE
(From *Life of Sir Stamford Raffles*).

Plate IX.

Fig. 2. Original Huts for Convicts Singapore from *Prisoners their Own Warders*

as to help categorize and regulate the diverse subject population of the settlement. My argument is that the Colonial government introduced 19th century European urban planning in Singapore as a means of communicating the colonial ideology while simultaneously consolidating their regional power.

While this strategy satisfied the two most important issues that concerned the colonial government in Singapore, the actual execution of the colonial urban plan met with several obstacles. The voluntary nature of Asian settlement during the early period in the city's history retarded its urban development. While cities in conquered territories were constructed by 'submissive natives' under colonial supervision, this same strategy could not be applied in the case of voluntary migrants. The 1819 city plan conjectured by its founder Stamford Raffles was poorly executed in his absence. After Raffles departure in 1823 a strategy had to be thought of to facilitate the city's development. The Asian subjects proved reluctant to clear tiger and snake infested jungles so the colonial government had to turn to other sources of manual labor.²

The colonial urban project envisioned by Raffles for Singapore came to fruition due to the introduction of a discrete group of subjects in the form of Indian convict laborers. The official reason for penal transportation which began in 1786 was the need to break up the hereditary Thuggee or bandit caste in India.

The colonial government in India intended to limit the chances of escape by transporting their members to alien environments. The transportation of Indian convicts to Southeast Asia was now expanded to intersect with the need to construct an urban infrastructure. Their arrival in the Straits settlements from 1825 - 1860 facilitated the construction of colonial cities and underwrote the enlightenment ideals of 19th century urbanism. Penal policy in turn was conceived so as to accommodate a large mobile population of prison laborers. The appointment of warders from among the prison population ensured the economic benefits of this free labor. By the middle of the 19th century the convicts in Singapore numbered 2000 in a population of 100,000 persons. They were included and participated in the activities of the 8000 strong Indian population whose role as domestics, laborers and petty administrators allowed them to permeate the entirety of the colonial urban settlement. The development of the 'showcase settlement' visualized by Raffles was to depend heavily on the industry of Indian convicts who were trained for the projects execution.³

THE CONVICT LANDSCAPE

Prison commissioner McNair's book *Prisoners their Own Warders* published in 1899 argues for the efficacy of the Singapore prison system. In his opinion the mobility of the

prisoners in Singapore had certain advantages over those in the European cellular prison. According to McNair the first group of 122 convicts lived in independent commands while filling in the commercial square and marking the roads across the island. They were posted at various strategic points for road maintenance. In 1841 when the convicts built the first jail in the form of a brick hospital building the convict village was situated *outside* its enclosure. Convicts lived there *with their families* marking their attendance through a monthly roster. At any given time 50 percent of the convict population were involved in public works away from the prison.⁴

In comparison, in Europe the moral order of the 19th century was being articulated in a new architecture of penal institutions. Michel Foucault describes how prisons built on cellular and panoptic models were used to isolate the individual prisoners and facilitate the process of surveillance and reform of the individual.⁵ In Europe's Asian colonies, in contrast, government concentrated on the augmentation of the population in the settlement rather than the moral reform of the individual prisoners. In fact reform was considered quite pointless since the colonial administration saw little difference in the morality of the 'native' and the prisoner.⁶ Additionally the institutional divisions within the penal population were invaded by the demands of particular cultural practices. The Colonial government in Singapore being reluctant to bear the added expense for the supervision of convict labor appointed warders from within the convict population. Unlike in Australia where British convicts undertook building projects under military supervision, labor in Singapore was divided along racial lines with convict supervisors reporting to a few European officers.

This ambiguity of convict space and colonial space was to provoke frequent debates between the European residents and the colonial government. Conflicts occurred largely because the degree of convict mobility was kept conveniently ambivalent by opportunistic administrators. Laws instituted in favor of stricter

regulation were constantly being revoked by the governor using arguments which the residents perceived as being in the convicts favor. Prison reports represented the convicts as an industrious body of men who required little control or supervision. Great pains were taken to demonstrate the profitability of their labor to the progress of the new settlement.

The administration in the Straits settlements was quick to combine new convict arrivals with proposals for expanded public works. According to McNair the prison administration trained the prisoners in construction methods so as to facilitate fairly complex urban projects of infrastructure and architecture. He describes how convicts were taught to mark out building plots and survey land so as to generate the urban maps of the island. 'Intelligent' prisoners were taught architectural drafting and drew working drawings for major colonial institutions. Within the prison system they were taught masonry, carpentry, brick-making, tile making and iron-work and those with superior skills were chosen to form a select group of convict artificers.

They convincingly reproduced European architectural prototypes for St. Andrews Cathedral, the General hospital, the Police stations, the Court house, the Government house and a number of other public institutions. In the Indian district at the margins of the city convicts constructed several hospitals, asylums and corrective institutions. In short they helped articulate Colonial authority in urban space through a range of new disciplinary institutions. They were constantly engaged in the maintenance of the urban landscape that they had constructed. McNair further describes how convicts entered the colonial administration as prison warders, municipal workers, firemen and manual laborers.⁷ While it is true that the convicts did not design the urban environments it is important to realize that their construction was nevertheless under convict supervision.

THE COLONIAL LANDSCAPE

John Cameron a colonial tourist writing in 1865 under the title *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India* describes how the city of Singapore was divided according to the activities and the ethnicity of its residents. At this time the European settlers who were two percent of the total population had easy access to every part of the city except perhaps the ethnic quarters. Their preferred territory would be the British mercantile houses surrounding the commercial square and the Eastern bank where the public buildings such as the Town hall, the Court house and Cathedral were situated. Their bungalows each with 10-15 acres of garden were located around two miles outside the center. The 'native' town extended from commercial square further inland. Here residential and commercial uses and public and domestic spaces were contiguous. The 'native campongs' (villages) were situated on the far Eastern side of the river. The colonials and the 'natives' seemed to dwell in discrete urban environments contained one within the other. The public streets which crossed these ethnic boundaries became the sites for contestation.⁸

The 19th century colonial map of the city was developing as an index of the terms of citizenship and of marginalization. The



MORTAR MILL GOVERNMENT HOUSE SINGAPORE

Fig. 3. Mortar Mill Government House Singapore from *Prisoners their Own Warders*

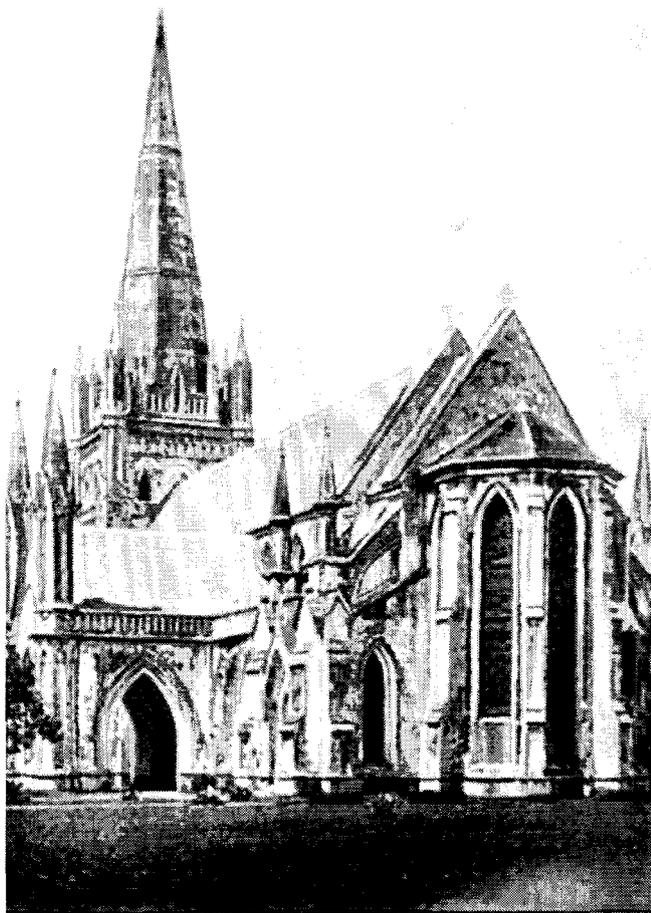


Plate No. 1.
CATHEDRAL, SINGAPORE.

Fig. 4. Head Tindal Maistri of cart makers and wheel wrights from *Prisoners their Own Warders*

development of the colonial city as a mode of social regulation and classification became most clearly visible when its order was contravened by its migrant population. The colonial public spaces were so frequently appropriated by ‘unruly’ Asian festival processions that it challenged their ideal construction. To mention just a few instances ‘riots’ appear in the colonial records in 1824, 1842, 146, 1851, 1854, 1856, 1857, 1863, 1864, 1867 and 1888.⁹ They are most often described as reactions to colonial legislation that grow into factional skirmishes.

CONTESTING THE COLONIAL LANDSCAPE

On Wednesday September 10, 1856, Mohurrum a Sh’ite festival celebrated by the Indian convicts became an opportunity for “a public riot.”¹⁰ Charles Buckley, editor of the Singapore free press who compiled an anecdotal history of these years, relates how the incident was reported. What was described as rioting by the European residents was in fact a public protest against the banning of the scheduled festival. According to his account a few hundred prisoners came out on the streets, in a bid to reclaim their lost freedom. “The prisoners forced their way out of their lines and lighting their way by torches carried their



HEAD TINDAL MAISTRI OF CART MAKERS AND WHEELWRIGHTS.

Fig. 5. St. Andrews Cathedral from *Prisoners their Own Warders*

taboot in procession through the public streets to the house of the Resident Councilor and to the Government offices”. Once they had vented their grievances writes Buckley they were persuaded to return quietly to the prison. In former years however “they were allowed to indulge in their Saturnalia without restraint, their taboot was the gayest and their processions the noisiest to be seen on public streets.”¹¹

Buckley writes that a year later in August 1857 in view of the previous years protests the local government decided to repeal this order and allow the convicts to parade the public streets during this same festival. The Governor stated that permission was granted under the conviction that “to refuse it would have the effect of needlessly exasperating the convict body, and of driving them to acts of desperation more dangerous to the peace and good order of the town than those that occurred the previous year.” According to Buckley the convicts in fact refused to ‘avail themselves of the permission given them.’

The idea of the incident as an organized public protest and the attempt made at negotiating its terms counters its identification as a public riot. Its enactment in spaces produced through convict labor both the public street and the government offices calls attention to the implications of its prohibition. The marginalization of the convict reveals the privileged claims to public territory that legitimize the citizenship of the European residents. A history of Mohurrum ‘riots’ reveals how this marginalization was moralized by colonial officials.

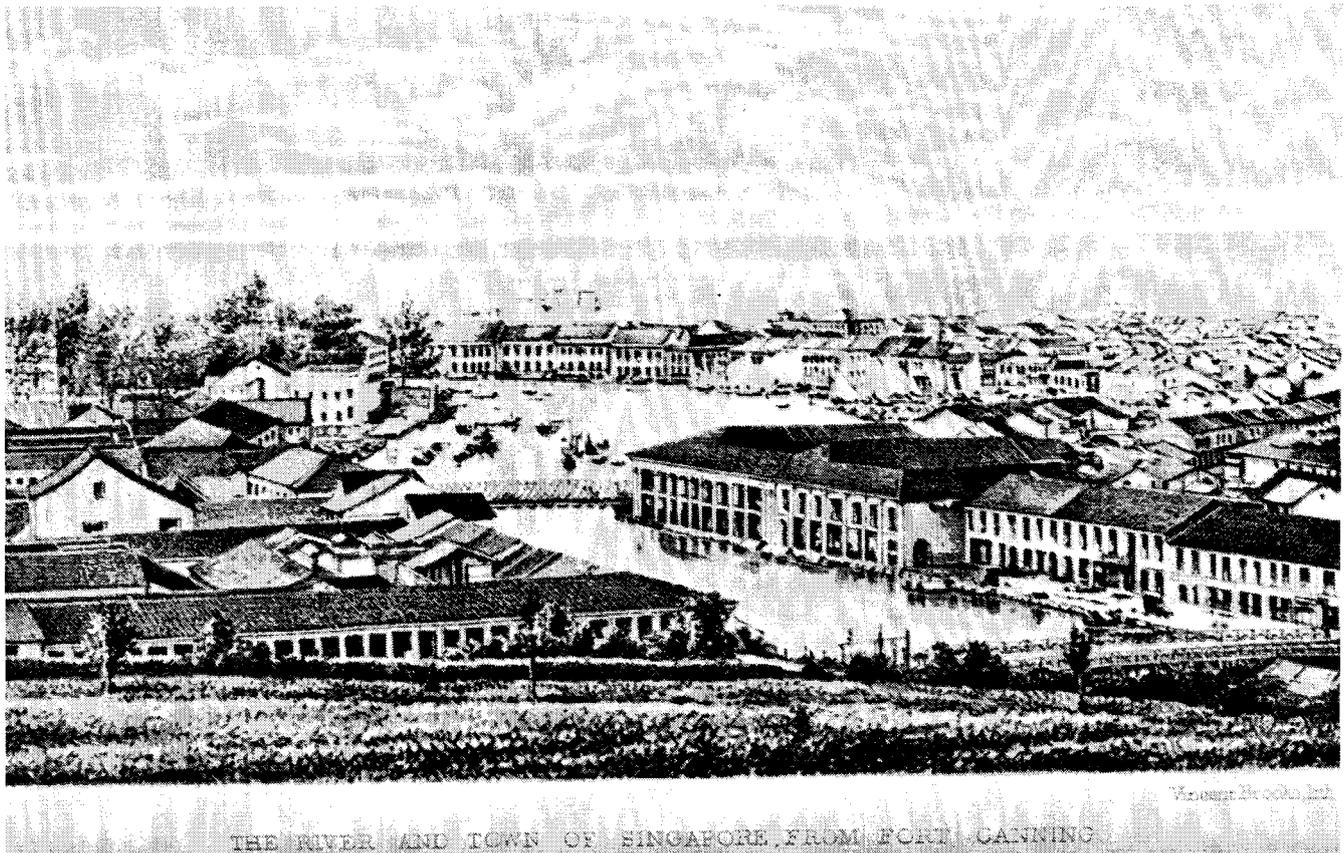


Fig. 6. The River and town of Singapore from Fort Canning from *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India*

While Mohurrum was one of many Asian processions threatening the order of colonial public space its insurgent expression earned it extraordinary attention. M.L. Wynne, a police commissioner in Penang who wrote an entire volume on the subject titled *Triad and Tabut*, gives a description of its carnivalesque character. Accepted notions of morality and immorality traveled side by side with religious figures such as mendicants, Hindu yogis, frenzied devotees and child carolers complemented by fools, drunkards, unbelievers, straw dummies and men dressed as tigers. From a religious point of view the inextricable presence of various religious figures was equally baffling to Wynne since Malays, Hindus and Sunni Muslims participated in a Shi'ite celebration. Elite Sunni Muslim families who rejected Shi'ite beliefs looked upon the festival with disapproval. Rioting during the same festival occurred in Singapore in May 1842 and in Penang in May 1867. Researching extensively on the cause of the Penang riots Wynne attempts to draw connections with the Thuggee caste in India and the Assassins a violent Shi'ite sect in the Middle East who were reputed for banditry and physical violence. Since the prisoners were often drawn from the Thuggee caste and featured prominently in Mohurrum processions this connection can be seen as an official effort at defaming Mohurrum and justifying transportation.¹²

Wynne's argument which identifies convicts as thugs and bandits is a familiar refrain which in fact is used to conceal the actual diversity of the convict population. Despite colonial attempts at criminalizing the convict as a homogeneous group

penal records indicate that convicts were from a cross section of class, caste and religion. Many cases of debt, fraud, land disputes or political opposition had convictions of transportation. For example those convicted for participation in the 1844 political rebellion in Ceylon were deported to the Straits Settlements. These distinctions however were not visible in the distribution of labor. The construction of the convict even fictitiously as a figure of danger was additionally used by the colonial government to manipulate convict-migrant relations. The emergence of the convicts as a discrete community increased both their mobility and positional superiority within the Asian population. This 'dangerous' body of individuals could be deployed for the control of the rest of the native population. McNair describes how Indian convicts were used to pursue and eliminate Chinese rioters during the 1851 riots. He describes incidents in which convicts captured robbers or pirates and delivered them to the colonial government. The Chinese in turn circulated stories about human sacrifices by convicts in 1852 and 1857 and regarded them as potentially dangerous. Interpretations of convict identity became embedded in a larger rhetoric of urban danger.

CONTESTING THE CONVICT LANDSCAPE

The prison riots of 1856 and the protests of the European residents falls within a pattern of confrontations that were to periodically destabilize the urban order of the colonial settle-

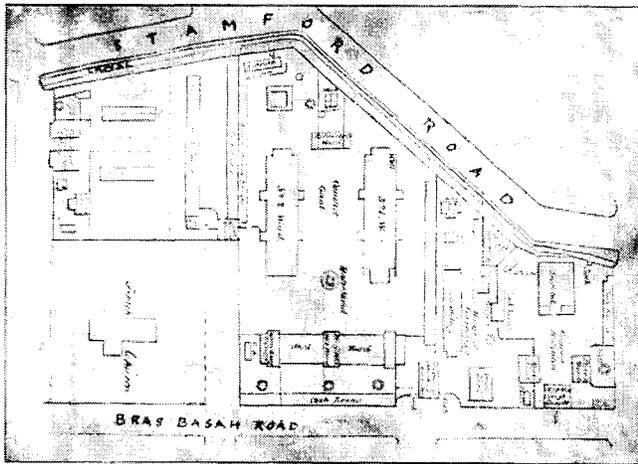


Plate X.

DISTRIBUTION OF JAIL BUILDINGS, SINGAPORE.

Fig.7. Distribution of jail buildings Singapore from Prisoners their own Warders

ment. The Singapore free press in turn reported these confrontations. In contrast with the limits imposed on Asian self expression regular public meetings were held in the Town hall between the administrators and the European residents. They addressed a range of concerns from taxation to armed robbery and verandah use and in addition held public meetings during or after every public riot.¹³

The subjects of these debates frequently addressed the public liberties taken by the convict population. The issue of convict liberties typically provoked the following two arguments. The first argument was regarding convict privileges which seemed in contradiction to their penal status. According to the residents the convicts were in fact provided with opportunities unavailable to other native communities and consequently behaved as though they were their superiors. Evidence of liberated convicts who had accumulated small fortunes through prison labor suggested that punishment had been surprisingly advantageous. Evidence of former convicts becoming land brokers, or contractors suggests a relationship between their final vocations and the industries learned in the prison.¹⁴ The residents argued that female convicts, even murderers, seldom have the opportunity to complete their sentences before offers of bail would be proffered along with marriage proposals.¹⁵ The fact that certain prisoners having served their term seemed reluctant to return to India suggested that incarceration had taken on a very different interpretation.

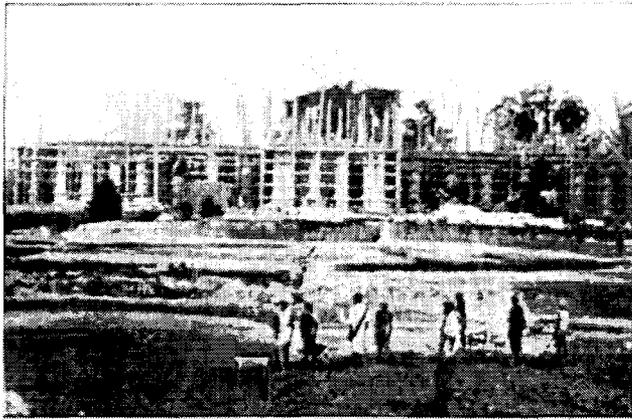
The second direction taken in the public debates was regarding control over the caliber of the convicts sent to the settlement. The reputation of the settlement depended on the perceived docility of the prison population. Primarily the residents agitated for the diversion of Hong Kong convicts to other penal colonies in view of repeated mutinies and murders on transport vessels. A meeting in 1848 discussed the tragedy on the vessel *General Wood* which was transporting 92 Chinese convicts who murdered 26 passengers. The residents sited other cases of similar murders on board the *Freak* 1841, on the *Harriet Scott*

1843, on the *Ariel* 1844, and on the *Lowjee Family* in the same year. The transportation of European convicts was in turn a cause for public concern. In 1855 when a European named Thom, a wife murderer, convicted in Calcutta, was sentenced to imprisonment in Singapore, both the Chinese and European resident communities protested in a memorandum that was sent as far as the British parliament. The Indian convicts in contrast were seen as relatively docile and was described by the Governor in 1856 as 'harmless settlers.' This was a perception that changed drastically after the Indian mutiny in the following year.¹⁶

The public rioting at the Mohurrum festival in 1856 triggered a pattern of sporadic rioting that recurred in January and February 1857. According to Buckley rumors of the coming trouble in India reached both the bazaar and the convicts through new arrivals. Kurruck Sing a convict who had been recently released was arrested and deported to Penang for 'tampering with' or attempting to influence Sikh prisoners. When the mutiny broke out in May of that year Lord Elgin arrived in Singapore and speedily diverted troops to India so saving "the British Empire in India." A Levee held in the government house in his honor became a public opportunity for the European and Chinese residents to present addresses regarding their faith in the colonial administration.¹⁷

With the large number of political prisoners taken during the Indian mutiny the nature of convicts to the settlements became more transparently threatening to its resident population. The Indian government afraid of a native uprising ordered that field redoubts should be constructed as places of refuge at all principle centers. A number of dangerous prisoners were transported to Singapore in order to make room in Calcutta jails for mutineers. On 17th November a public meeting was held to protest the sending of mutineers to the Singapore prison. When a group of mutineer prisoners arriving in Singapore in March 1858 attempted to seize their ship en route the residents began once again to agitate against penal transportation. In May 1858 when 190 convicts considered too dangerous to be incarcerated in India were transported to Singapore, the residents appealed once more and having succeeded had them relocated in the Andaman islands. Due to the general paranoia regarding their penal policy the Indian government in 1860 agreed to cease transportation to the Straits Settlements. In this same year with some degree of consternation the convicts constructed the increasingly defensive model of their third penal institution. They are said to have commented that what was once a village had now become a 'closed cage.'¹⁸

The events of 1860 and the end of transportation marked the beginning of an increasingly reformatory penal model. The convicts who were trained in new industries in an increasingly regimented industrial system completed their sentences and were rapidly absorbed into the larger 'native' population. Prison tours and tourist accounts of prison industry suggest new applications of panopticism. With the transfer of the Straits settlements from the direct control of India to the crown in 1867 these distinctions were reinforced by political strategies and the prisoners were employed in constructing the elaborate Govern-



GOVERNMENT HOUSE GARDEN BEING LAID OUT BY CONVICTS

Fig.8 Government House Garden being laid out by convicts from *Prisoners their Own Warders*

ment house as the local seat of power. When a cellular penitentiary was finally introduced at the end of the 19th century it was designed to segregate prisoners from diverse ethnic groups who were being convicted within the Straits Settlements.¹⁹

CONCLUSION - THE BUREAUCRATIC LANDSCAPE

In conclusion I would like to discuss the end of the 19th century as one in which a new urban landscape was beginning to emerge. In Singapore the rhetoric of urban danger which was associated with convict publicity was used to justify increasing urban regulation. Laws dealing with public health and sanitation invaded 'native' space in efforts at its rationalization. The prison became a site for scientific and medical experimentation. 'Native' agitation in turn gradually transformed from factional confrontations to discrete underground movements with regional nationalist alliances. The Mohurrum festival was to increasingly become the venue of inter-communal secret societies such as the red and white flag societies whose membership included both the Chinese and the Malay -Indians. Unlike the publicity of their former protests their activities were increasingly concealed from the colonial government.²⁰ Where once a marginalized body of convicts had been openly deployed to construct the unity of the colonial project now the hardening bureaucracy provoked reciprocal bodies of resistance.

NOTES

- 1 Singapore was founded in 1819 by Stamford Raffles a British colonial agent in a hasty attempt at consolidating British colonial authority in the region. The population of the settlement included Europeans, Chinese, Malays and Indians. For a detailed account of the first urban plan. see Buckley pp56-58
- 2 The 1824 census shows 74 Europeans, 16 Armenians, 15 Arabs, 4,580 Malays, 3,317 Chinese, 756 Indians, 1,925 Bugis. Total 10,683 Buckley p38
- 3 According to Sandhu the breaking up of the thuggee or bandit/dacoit caste in India was one of the colonial arguments for a policy of transportation.
- 4 McNair gives a detailed description of the prison administration from 1825 - 1873 p39
- 5 Foucault Michel *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison*
- 6 Arnold, David. p 163
- 7 Mac Nair pp84 -112
- 8 Cameron pp 49 -79 descriptions of Native part of town, Eastern division of the town and Indian Bungalows
- 9 Buckley's account describes 1851 The anti Roman Catholic riots, 1863 Factional riots, 1854 The great Hokkien Teochew riots, 1867 The Penang riots, 1888 The Verandah riots.
- 10 The Mohorrum festival is held on the first month of the Muslim Lunar year and celebrates the death of Hasan and his brother Husain with fasting and public mourning. (from Hobson and Jobson)
- 11 CB Buckley p 531
- 12 Wynne pp152 -201
- 13 Buckley describes debates regarding: 1835, 1855 piracy, 1843 armed robbery and verandah use, 1845 import of ice, 1849 excise acts, 1862 gambling.
- 14 Siddique and Shotam, *Singapores Little India* pp10-11
- 15 C.M Turnbull p49
- 16 Buckley pp 648 -657
- 17 ibid pp 475-478 p482
- 18 Mc Nair p78
- 19 pp143-178
- 20 Wynne makes this connection between the Klings (Indians and the Red and White flag societies p194

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