

CORRESPONDENCE.

PUBLIC IMPROVEMENTS.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE SINGAPORE CHRONICLE.

SIR,

In allusion to your remarks on my communication of the 24th ultimo, I have only to observe, that reflections on the private motives of those who attempt to originate public improvements, are (besides not being very well calculated to induce them to come forward) quite irrelevant, as far as the public is concerned. It is well known that almost all improvements in agriculture, navigation, chemistry, machinery, and every other source of national wealth, have sprung from exertions made by individuals in the pursuit of private advantage; and it may be presumed without disparagement, that even the troubles and anxieties inseparable from your situation as Editor, are in some degree alleviated by the same powerful stimulant. Whatever the motives may be, which have induced me to write on the subject of public improvements, you may believe me, that a wish to hurt your personal feelings is not among them; and I now avail myself of your obliging offer of a place in your columns, for the insertion of a few observations on the condition of the poorer classes of the people, and on the effects that a continuation of similar improvements to those noticed in my last, may be expected to have upon them.

The British government has now been established here for nearly twelve years, yet the Malays, who are nominally protected by it, are still as wretchedly barbarous as they were previous to its introduction. This is in some degree owing to the circumstance of the Sultan and Tumungung having, at the founding of the settlement, obtained certain small grants of land for the use of themselves and their followers; but the principal cause is, that those Chiefs and their favorites are, through the extreme ignorance of the people, and the absence of any general interference on the part of Government, enabled to exert nearly the same despotic influence which made a wilderness of the island whilst it was in their possession, and which will, as long as it is allowed to last, be a considerable source of annoyance to every class of natives; and as far as the Malays are concerned, it will preclude all chance of improvement. If any of those poor people cultivate a lot of ground, as soon as it becomes productive it is sure to be claimed by some retainer of the native Chiefs, upon the pretext of his having caused it to be cleared at some former period, or on any other pretence that suits his purpose. Neither party has any document to prove his right, but the oppressor has an ample command of witnesses ready to prove any thing he pleases, whilst the injured party would find it difficult to procure any one who would venture to incur the dangerous enmity of an Inchi, by giving evidence in his favor. The result of this is, that the pretended proprietor may extort what he pleases, and as he is almost always a needy, dissipated ruler, whose necessities oblige him to grasp all he can get, there can be little left for the encouragement of industry on the part of the cultivator: consequently, tillage, among these people, is altogether neglected, or at least conducted in a slovenly and unprofitable manner. The same system prevails along the sea-shore; each fishing village has its Inchi or its Hadji, who calls the place his own, and assumes the privilege of levying contributions on the labor of the people, who, as long as this degrading oppression is allowed to exist, cannot, in point of fact, be considered to be emancipated from the shackles of their former government. It may be said that all this is owing to their wilful blindness, that they could be free if they desired to be so; but allowances ought to be made for their gross ignorance, arising from the debasement of mind, which is a natural consequence of slavery, particularly as it must be acknowledged that the Malays have, as yet, had but few opportunities of acquiring any useful information.

From the facility with which every kind of labor is performed by the Chinese, no other class of people is much employed by the mercantile community, a preference being naturally given to the ready services of men who have been trained to labor. Thus the Malay inhabitants are excluded from almost the only intercourse through which a knowledge of the benefits attendant on industry and independence could have reached them. The same cause has also the effect of preventing Europeans generally from being able to form a just estimate of their character, and it is too much the fashion, (considering the disadvantages under which they labor) to think unfavorably of them. It is evident that they possess physical strength at least equal to that of some of the people in the best cultivated provinces in India, and after a long residence, during which I have had some favorable opportunities of observing the habits of the people under a variety of circumstances in both countries, I feel convinced that where the Malays are certain of reaping the fruits of their labor (which until the above-mentioned impediments are removed, can rarely happen, except when in the employ of Europeans) they are equal to the inhabitants of Western India in steadiness and docility; and I have seen them endure long continued fatigue, with a degree of cheerful perseverance that would be difficult for any people to surpass.

Under these circumstances, surely any feasible means of improving the condition of this unfortunate race, is not unworthy the attention of a humane government. The alterations at Kampong Glam, will soon enable the people to see that Government does not wish to

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keep them dependent on their Chiefs; and, although the circumstance of the local authorities not at present having the power to issue grants, is a source of some mistrust and inconvenience, yet beneficial effects are already sufficiently apparent, to shew that a continuation of similar operations must tend materially to improve the character of this class of the native population. Independent of the valuable range of houses along the sea-beach, a good many comfortable cottages have been erected, and a number of people are at present employed in collecting materials for the purpose of building others; and the appearance of the place forms a striking contrast with that which it presented a few months ago, and also with the wretched appearance of the other places near it, that have not yet undergone any alteration. The wide roads, and regular arrangement, have contributed to the security of property, by bringing every house into view, and by destroying the means of concealment which afforded shelter to those who live by preying on the community. It is to be regretted that it is not in the power of Government to complete the improvements at Kampong Glam, by making similar alterations on the ground occupied by the Sultan, which still remains covered with miserable hovels and dirty intricate passages. The Sultan and his favorites do not appear to think that these changes are calculated to promote their particular benefit, as they have applied to Government for a piece of ground to be granted for the exclusive use of their followers. This has hitherto been refused, and it is to be hoped it will not be granted, as it is merely an indirect way of obtaining permission to keep a number of people in slavery. The Chiefs and their retainers look upon every measure which tends to confer security on the people as an infringement of their rights. They always look back to those times when life and property were sacrificed to their most idle wishes, and are still too deeply imbued with the vices and folly which usually attend on despotism, to leave any hope of their ever becoming good members of any civilized community. The salaries which they receive enables them to maintain a number of the most worthless characters, whose example must always have a pernicious influence on the minds of the people. If they would avail themselves of that part of their treaty with Government, which stipulates that they are to receive 35,000 dollars in the event of their leaving the British territories, the Settlement would be benefited, for their departure must in every point of view, be looked upon as a most favorable circumstance.

The principle upon which the changes at Kampong-Glam have been made, are equally applicable to Bugis Town, and improvements there could be carried more completely into effect, as the Bugis Rajah has no claim whatever upon a Government, and the natural advantages of its situation are much superior. It stands at the entrance of two rivers, on a tongue of land which contains an area sufficiently spacious to admit of being divided into six hundred good building lots; but two or three head-men assume a proprietary right to the ground, and the rest of the inhabitants, occupying about ninety-five houses, are miserably crowded upon the bank of the inferior stream. Thus five-sixths of the finest site which the island affords for a native town, are wasted under the authority of the Chiefs, which, by depriving the people of their natural rights, must have the effect, as long as it is allowed to last, of preventing their advance beyond the abject and degraded state in which we now see them.

In the interior a moderate revenue system appears to be the easiest and most natural way of promoting the security of property. Grants, or leases, having a small quit-rent, say one fifth of a dollar per acre, would have the effect of giving confidence to the people, and the annual collection would bring them sufficiently under the superintendence of Government to prevent them from being harassed by the fraud and oppression of their old masters. To render any measure of this kind effective, a few good roads are necessary, for at present there is no access to the fertile parts of the island, except by crooked foot-paths, (which even in dry weather are full of deep holes) and by long-winding creeks, navigable only at high water. The greatest part of the land north-east of the town, is covered with extensive arable marshes, although it has been described as consisting of sandy plains unfit for cultivation, a mistake, probably, owing to the difficulty of penetrating beyond the pathways which generally run on the top of narrow sand banks at an elevation of a few feet above the level of the marsh. These banks afford dry situations for roads and cottages, and the ground between them possesses

every advantage that can be required to render the cultivation of rice both easy and profitable. It is sufficiently retentive, with just slope enough to admit of drainage, and there is no deficiency of water. Of its productive qualities, the abundant crops yielded by the scattered patches now under cultivation, give sufficient proof. The aggregate quantity of rice, sown now occupies between four and five hundred acres, and the impediments above-mentioned, together with a reasonable apprehension, that the heavy tax authorized by existing regulations, will ultimately be enforced, are the only assignable causes of its not, after such a lapse of time, having extended over as many thousands.

The cultivators of rice are principally Malays and Bugis; but during the last year some Klings have commenced. The Chinese, since the gambier ceased to pay, do not appear to have tried to rear any thing but garden vegetables. The Bugis are better off than the Malays, from the circumstance of their not having so many great personages among them, still they are burthened with a few; but a proper regulation of their headquarters, upon the principle adopted at Kampong-Glam, would soon deprive them of all undue authority. The observations relative to native Chiefs are inapplicable to either Klings or Chinese, but they suffer in common with others, all the inconveniences arising from the want of a legal title to the land; and, owing to the absence of public roads are unavoidably involved in quarrels on account of passing through each others' gardens. A road running in an easterly direction across the rivers Kalung and Gellang would be the most useful to begin with. The outlay required for two good bridges would be only one thousand dollars; all the rest of the work could be done by convicts, about two hundred and fifty of whom, would, in three or four months, make a good road over the two rivers, and such small path on the other side as would be wanted in the first instance. This method of proceeding, it is presumed would in every way facilitate the occupation of the land, and render the judicial superintendence of it easy and effective. Individual rights could be properly ascertained and protected, and the people would have a fair chance of making those advances towards civilization, which are always expected to take place under a wise and equitable government.

Your's,

MERCATOR.

Kampong-Glam, 4th Feb. 1831.