Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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Published by Amsterdam University Press


Amsterdam University Press, 2015.

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Retreat of princely authority

The intrusion inland in the second half of the seventeenth century was precipitated by the need to take sides in the domestic political constellation that was in constant turmoil. Lack of familiarity with the terrain made it difficult for the VOC’s officials to manoeuvre their way through the bewildering variety of local ranks and titles. They tried to impose some order on it by using European synonyms: the most prominent of all, the Susuhunan of Mataram, was given the title of emperor, and below him were kings and princes, governors and barons, squires and captains, with local names being used for the remainder. The tendency of many local notables to claim a higher rank than they actually held only added to the confusion. Some local chiefs could trace their lineage all the way back to the Pacacaran royal family, claiming that their ancestors, by intermarrying at opportune moments, had transferred their loyalty to the rulers of Cirebon. The chief with the most senior pedigree, the bupati of Sumedang, called himself Pangerang, which VOC officials initially interpreted as ‘prince’. Eventually, however, Batavia decided to treat all the highest ranking notables the same, making no distinction between them. This meant that the primus inter pares now went through life as a regent. Since it can be assumed that the differences in hierarchy could not have escaped the notice of the VOC for long, ignoring them so demonstratively can be seen as a clear signal that it intended to completely restructure the administrative management of the region.

Under the traditional order, which the VOC considered neither efficient nor effective, the exercise of authority was based on the principle of concentricity, with the Susuhunan of Mataram as the figure in which all power was concentrated (Moertono 1968: 112). He resided in his palace, the kraton, which was surrounded by domains that he governed directly. This epicentre of authority was in turn encircled by provinces governed in his name by a bupati. There were also differences between these latter territories: the ‘outer regents’ of Mataram, as the Company called them (of which the regent of Priangan was one), enjoyed greater autonomy than those in charge of provinces closer to the centre of the empire. These differences were not only geographical. In the Hindu-Javanese tradition, the prince was the embodiment of all power, a luminary radiating light with decreasing intensity as it moved away from the source. The mystic force that was the organizing principle of authority did not permit a territorial demarcation of the empire. The prince hardly moved around his realm, remaining in his kraton. His army was also quartered in the palace, rather than on the
borders. The empire was in a constant state of flux and continued to exist as long as the ruler remained the symbolic, even sacred, pivot. His power rested not on territorial jurisdiction, but on the exercise of authority over obedient subjects. Powerful was the chief who had a large peasant clientele which he could mobilize to build temples or irrigation canals or for military campaigns and upon whom he could impose taxes.

Exercising symbolic authority in this way was of course not sufficient in itself. The ruler could not do without a governance apparatus, to control and exploit his own territories and so that more distant provinces could be ruled in his name. In the Hindu-Javanese order, these tasks were not performed by civil servants in the Western sense of the word, but by a managerial elite. The governors were appointed under the condition that they themselves were responsible for controlling and exploiting their subjects in such a way that, in addition to collecting taxes and providing manpower for the prince, there was sufficient left over for the governor and his entourage.

During the later Mataram period the king’s administration was essentially a hierarchical line of separate, self-sufficient and highly autonomous units of power, vertically linked by the direct and personal ties between the several power-holders/administrators. Apart from the binding ties of a common servitude and loyalty, there did not seem to be any horizontal administrative relationship which could limit the monarchs’ (inferiors’) independence from each other. (Moertono 1968: 104)

Moertono quite correctly called this system imitative as, at each lower level, the authority of the chief remained undivided. Vassals also issued land to clients and ruled in the domains entrusted to them with absolute power. In other words, they were not officials to whom tasks were delegated, but lords in their own right. This made the political balance thoroughly unstable. The arbitrary manner in which those in power at every level treated their inferiors – there was always a risk that a patron would favour a rival – forced his clients to restrict their loyalty. It was a game of strategy and counter-strategy in which the stakes remained covert as long as it served the interests of both parties to maintain the relationship. A variety of mechanisms kept the tensions between centre and periphery under control. Marrying into a high-ranking family gave a client direct access to the patron, but this of course also gave the latter a lever with which to control the new family member. Through such marital arrangements, the gentry of Priangan had allied themselves with the ruling dynasties of Pacacaran, Cirebon, Banten and, finally, Mataram. Some prominent families
even claimed ties with all of these lineages, a claim for which there was often sparse factual evidence.

A long sojourn at court was another way that governors could show their loyalty. They were expected to at least attend the annual audience (pasowanan) and permission to be absent was considered a sign of trust.

The pasowanans had a special function, namely to enhance the glory of the king. On special occasions, like the Garebeg, literally all of the king’s officials from every part of the country were required to come. The glitter and pomp displayed on these occasions, and certainly not in the least, the great number of persons attending, were perceptible evidence of the king’s greatness and authority. But from the point of view of the officials, to be included in such events was a great honour, particularly as the strict hierarchical arrangement of seating, the distinctive colour of their apparel and paraphernalia, and the number of persons in their entourages clearly displayed their exact place in the bureaucratic hierarchy (Moertono 1968: 99).

In the eighteenth century, Priangan regents would boast that their forefathers had swept the courtyard of the palace in the capital of Mataram. This information did not have the intended impact on colonial chroniclers, who tended to see such demonstrations of the subservient origins of the regents as evidence of disdain and worthlessness, rather than recognizing this symbolic chore as a sign of past prestige and glory. Staying at court for an unlimited period prevented the gentry from managing the day-to-day affairs of their own territories with adequate propriety. They solved this dilemma by appointing deputies authorized to act in their name during their absence. This system of substitution was not limited to the highest level of administration, but was applied right down to the lowest tiers of governance. Although the chiefs were entitled to appoint their substitutes from their own entourage, the presence of these shadow figures was illustrative of the inherent duality in the management of authority that allowed superiors to keep a close watch on those immediately below them. In addition to alliances through marriage and being retained at court for unstipulated periods, another way in which rulers could exercise their power was through the use of force. The chastising hand of a patron extended not only to a disobedient client, but also to the rebel’s family and retinue. Imperial rule on Java was in precarious balance. Nevertheless, no matter how repressive and immutable the system appeared to be, the regime also allowed for mobility, since capable newcomers could force their way up to the seat of
the emperor from below or from without to grasp power for themselves. If they were more ambitious, they might even attempt to dismantle the system altogether and replace it by another. Such a radical transformation, a break in the existing structure of relations, occurred when the VOC penetrated into the Sunda lands.

A treaty agreed in 1677 brought Mataram rule in Priangan to an end and the VOC now had absolute control of the region. The transfer of power was formalized in 1684, when the Priangan nobility was summoned to Cirebon to receive their new instructions. The region was parcelled out in separate units, each given in charge to a regent. This administrative demarcation underwent several changes until five units remained – Sumedang, Cianjur, Bandung, Limbangan and Sukapura. These divisions were established, abolished, split up and merged again, often more than once. One significant intervention was not to acknowledge the vassalage of the gentry in the hinterland to the ruler of Cirebon. The decision to retain the native chiefs was a result of both the low managerial capability of the VOC and the compelling need to keep administrative costs as low as possible. The exercise of power was however completely reorganized. Although the first generation of regents came from families who had previously held positions of eminence, it did not mean a continuation of the ancien régime.

Territorial demarcation and hierarchical structuring

The early style of governance excelled in arbitrariness and indifference, as can be seen in the unexpected changes in the number and size of the regencies and the refusal to treat the chiefs as anything other than convenient pawns. Even after they were appointed, the regents could not be at all sure that they would be allowed to stay and dismissal or transfer were frequent occurrences. But was this high-handedness not equally a feature of the earlier despotic rule? The same applied to the rules of succession. Whenever there was a vacancy, there was no guarantee that a successor would be designated from among the previous regent’s sons and it was not uncommon for an outsider to be chosen. The criterion for being appointed was not the length of the candidate’s lineage, but his proven or suspected loyalty and trust in representing the interests of the VOC. Who would have dared to claim that this was a new practice that violated the traditions and customs of the kingdom of Mataram, which had so recently been displaced? From 1704, the Company undertook to provide the regents with a letter of appointment, stipulating the regent’s tasks as a keeper of order and supplier