Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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indirect rule was abolished in 1871 – a much tighter straitjacket for the supra-local elite than the more fluid situation they had enjoyed during the pre-colonial era. The Priangan retained the character of a ‘frontier’ until deep into the nineteenth century. This was largely due to the fact that, when the VOC started to intrude into the highlands, the region was sparsely populated. Expeditions sent reports back of an inaccessible landscape of mountains and valleys, and of thick forests and marshes teeming with wildlife. Early travellers never failed to give special mention to tigers and rhinoceros, because of the threat they posed to people and crops. The few settlements comprised little more than a handful of peasant dwellings and a poverty-stricken habitat. Even the kota, the residence of the regent, had only a few hundred inhabitants, the majority of whom were the bupati’s family members and servants. The constant stream of guests who presented themselves at the dalem – later termed kraton – included minor chiefs who were also accompanied by their own retinues. But even with these temporary residents, the population of the settlement remained small in scale. It was a centre of political power in a rural environment from which it was hardly distinguishable. There was little or no communication between the separate regencies. Connecting roads were rare and, though simple carts were in use it was much more common for people to carry goods by buffalo or on their own head or shoulders. The simple technology limited both the volume of goods and the distance it could be transported.

The Priangan highlands as a frontier

Cultivation entitled rights to the land but, if a local lord had taken the initiative to open up the land and had perhaps help provide the means to do it – by for example, supplying food and tools while the land was being cleared and more general logistical support – he would claim a percentage of the yield. He would not take his share immediately, to give those tilling the land time to build up a reserve stock, but after some years. In addition, the lord himself owned fields – known as balubur – in the immediate vicinity of his residence, which were laid out and tilled by his clients. Sometimes such a notable figure had worked his way up through his own efforts, but the custom was for a local influential to be designated the peasant households falling under his jurisdiction by a superior. There was a long and complex chain of patronage that led right up to the highest power – the emperor or sultan, later succeeded by the VOC – and down through the regents and lower chiefs to the peasants who spent their lives in servitude. How this
servitude operated in practice escaped the observation of the VOC officials, whose contacts with the indigenous population extended no further than the chiefs. The Company aimed first to shield the Priangan region from external claims and then to put an end to the persistent wrangling between the regents. These disputes, which could lead to armed conflict, were part of their struggle to defend, and if possible increase, their own political power and economic gains. The chiefs tolerated no competition in their own domain, but tried to recruit clients from households that were already in servitude to another lord.

In the peasant order that the VOC as it were inherited, labour was more important than land. Chiefs laid claim to peasants’ labour power by attaching them in bondage. Their subordination was a source of conflict between higher and lower chiefs. If these disputes seemed to be about land issues, it was because the land was to be ruled, intended for peasants to be settled on and thus to become subordinated to the lord. This dependence took the form of patronage that extended to higher echelons. Benedict Anderson described this power configuration as follows.

The administrative structure, while formally hierarchical, is in effect composed of stratified clusters of patron-client relationships. Both in the regions and in the center, officials gather around them clusters of personal dependents on the model of the ruler himself. These dependents’ destinies are linked with the success or failure of their patrons. They work as administrative and political aides, and have no real autonomous status except in relation to him. They are financed by portions of the benefices allotted to their patron by his patron, or by the ruler himself if their master is highly enough placed. Just as the power of the ruler is measured by the size of the populations he controls, so the power of the subordinate official (patron) is gauged by the size of the clientele that he heads. (Anderson 1972: 34)

Jacobus Couper, who summoned the heads of the regencies in eastern Priangan to Cirebon in 1684 (those in the west not yet being demarcated), expressed the size of their jurisdictions in terms of the number of households allocated to each of them. The ceremonial appointment of the regents was accompanied by a warning not to interfere in affairs beyond the borders of their own territorial jurisdiction and not to attract people from other regions. That this warning had not the slightest effect became clear in 1686, when the regents were again summoned to come to Batavia with a record of the names and places of birth of all the people falling under their authority.
Anyone not on the list would from then on be treated as vagrants (Kern 1898: 26-7). This first attempt to register the populations of the regencies would be much repeated, each time producing a result in which, quite rightly, the VOC would have little confidence. Another early instruction from the VOC ignored the divisions between the local chiefs, encouraging them to cultivate new paddy fields in their territories. One of these was the Pangerang Aria Cheribon, whose letter of appointment as upper regent of Priangan in 1706 urged him to open up new land. The prince excused himself for his failure to recount the population of the Parahyangan by saying that the inhabitants had dispersed in all directions because of lack of food. The very extensive use of land added to the low degree of sedentarization.

On the more densely populated plains along the north coasts of Java, peasants already practised a more advanced form of agriculture. The fields were irrigated and surrounded by dykes, and they had cattle and better tools to till the land. The terraced sawahs or irrigated fields that came to dominate the landscape here, were much less common in the Priangan highlands. Colonial sources gave the impression that peasant colonists had brought wet land cultivation with them from Central Java. In this view, the prospect of generating agrarian capital by investing labour in improving the value of the land was insufficient to persuade peasants in the Priangan region to settle down in one place to live and work. Agronomic research has shown that the technique of constructing sawahs was already widespread among the population of Java before the tenth century (Setten van der Meer 1979). It seems unlikely that the inhabitants of Priangan and other highlands were not familiar with this knowledge. Inscriptions dating from the fifth century AD and old Sundanese manuscripts show that wet land cultivation did not come to West Java at the same time as Islam, but must have arrived much earlier (Hoadley 1994: 26-7). So why did this mode of cultivation, which had become more common in the more densely populated lowlands in the seventeenth century, make such little progress in the Priangan highlands? The inhabitants of these regions would long display a stubborn preference for rainfed agriculture, despite its lower yield. Contemporary chroniclers suggested a different reason for what became branded as non-economic conduct. The lords of the land found it much more difficult to cream off the

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2 Elsewhere in his report on the situation in which the country found itself, he gave a different reason for the migration: ‘The people of the Priangan do not settle down quietly and peacefully because their large number of headmen are in conflict with each other and stir up the commoners to revolt, and consequently they forget about their obligations to the Company.’ (Van Rees 1880: 90)
surplus from nomadic peasants and thus, according to Andries de Wilde (1830: 222), the latter were of no use at all to the government or anyone else. Not only was their yield much lower, it was also more difficult to estimate its volume. For the peasantry, remaining footloose was an effective means of avoiding lords wishing to lay claim to as much of their surplus as possible. According to an early nineteenth-century report describing the situation in interior Banten, the surplus the gentry eventually succeeded in appropriating was little more than ‘a handful of rice and a few farthings’. This makes it clear why both the old and new elite urged their clients to practise wet land cultivation. Yet, despite all these efforts, what was largely seen as the destruction of the forest by primitive peasants would continue until deep into the nineteenth century.

Although Priangan gradually became less wild and inaccessible and expeditions were able to provide information on areas about which little had previously been known, the higher and more distant lands in particular remained largely uncultivated (see the map of the Priangan highlands). Colonists moved into the region from the valleys, but significant population growth was hindered by the absence of roads while the rivers were only navigable in the plains. Andries de Wilde, who founded the Sukabumi estate in the early nineteenth century and cultivated a small part of his huge property – covering an area larger than a province in the Netherlands – described the remoteness of the landscape where he started his pioneering work.

In each regency, interminable mountain ranges and plains of enormous dimensions lie wild and desolate, yet would be extremely suitable for the cultivation of rice and other crops (De Wilde 1829: 15).

The southern regions of Priangan in particular were almost uninhabited. It was possible to travel for hours without seeing cultivated fields, huts or other traces of human activity. Colonial historiography attributes the low level of development to the exodus of the original population after the fall of the Pacacaran empire in the early fifteenth century. In this colonial interpretation, the victory of Sultan Hassanudin of Cirebon led not only to the fall of the Siliwangi dynasty, but also put an end to the Hindu civilization that had until then been dominant. Islam, after first gaining a foothold in the coastal zone of North Java, now also penetrated inland. The mild-mannered and peace-loving inhabitants of the highlands were unable to withstand their war-mongering neighbours from Banten and Cirebon. Holding on to the Hindu faith of their forefathers, they left the land of their birth to avoid
the enforced introduction of the new religion by the sword. The memory of their origins remained in the name they gave the land they left behind: tanah preangan, abandoned land. This apocryphal legend, recorded by V J.C. van Beusechem in 1836-7, is an invention of a past that never existed. It is more plausible that peasants abandoned their lands when there was reason to, for example during times of unrest, or came from elsewhere to escape the grasp of local lords, opening up the forested wilderness to which they had fled. Peasant life in Priangan under the ancien régime was always typified more by continual mobility than by settling down indefinitely. In the mid-eighteenth century, rebels in Banten still absconded to Priangan to escape subjection by the Sultan (Ota 2006: 61-2). The conversion from Hinduism to Islam did not bring about any sudden change in this situation. The religious transition took several generations to complete. A source from the end of the eighteenth century reports that, while strict Muslims lived on the coast, the religious practices of the inhabitants of the hinterland were mingled much with superstition (Ota 2006: 32-4). Lastly, there is little plausibility in the claim that Hinduism on West Java was once the foundation of a complex agrarian civilization and incorporated a large kingdom. Besides Siliwangi, there were a small number of other political formations, including Galuh in east Priangan, but these alliances were not deeply rooted or long lasting, dissolving as quickly as they were formed. What is known as Pacacaran was probably little more than a loose collection of local and small-scale kingdoms (Guillot 1991: 70). The Sunda highlands were never the heart of a highly organized agrarian order now veiled in mist. The region appears to have always been as it was when the VOC arrived: a frontier territory, sometimes expanding, sometimes contracting again, and slowly populated by colonists from outside.

Clearing the land for cultivation

The settlements that the early VOC agents encountered in the hinterland were without exception small, had few inhabitants and were almost exclusively located on or close to rivers. An initial census, dating from 1686, records 508 negorijen (settlements). Almost three-quarters of these (353) comprised ten households at the most. The largest had more than 20 households, but only a little more than a tenth of the total fell into this category (De Haan III 1912: 203). Many of the inhabitants had no permanent place of residence, leading a nomadic existence in the forest or in open fields. They lived in small family bands and survived by growing food on