Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Breman, Jan.
Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market: Profits from an Unfree Work Regime in Colonial Java.

Amsterdam University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66310.

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and which receives little attention in the literature. References to these footloose labourers can only be found indirectly. In his 1836 monograph, for example, Van Beusechem referred to the low incidence of marriage in the Priangan Regencies in the preceding years and suggested that it was because a considerable proportion of the population was permanently on the move (1836: 8). The significance of this phenomenon cannot be understood without considering the claims that the landed gentry made on agrarian labour, both in opening up the region and in collecting the colonial tribute. This requires taking a closer look at the gentry itself, a social class that lived from the yield of agrarian production without taking an active part itself in cultivating the land.

Higher and lower-ranking chiefs

‘Regent’ was the name the VOC used for the select group of native chiefs that held power in the Priangan (De Haan I 1910: 338-57 and IV 1912: 325-38). That their numbers remained limited to five was more a matter of coincidence than a well-considered choice based on knowledge of the ranks and statuses of the indigenous aristocracy. The first chiefs to be designated as regents were those who could provide evidence – either real or fake – that they had been appointed by the ruler of Mataram. The VOC’s directors had no understanding at all of the intricacies with which these lords competed with each other for power and status, though they were aware that attaching clients from among the population was a decisive factor. The Company tried to impose some kind of order on this opaque situation by taking decisions on the spur of the moment, with no clear vision of their purpose or reach. The lord of Sumedang could claim the oldest rights but his influence declined as that of vassals of the sultan of Cirebon, especially the lord of Cianjur, increased. However, the VOC soon enforced restrictions on the efforts of this harbour principality to extend its reach of control inland. It could do this only by assigning to itself sovereign rights and demanding unconditional loyalty. From then on, Batavia would decide which of the candidates for succession would be chosen. This would usually be a son, though not always the eldest, and if it were more opportune for some reason or another, it might be an outsider. Van Beusechem described this unpredictability in 1836 as the prerogative of absolute power. A regent could be dismissed if there were any doubts about his loyalty or good conduct. This happened to the regent of Bandung in 1802. The VOC also periodically reviewed the administrative jurisdiction without warning. The regencies
of Parakanmuncang and Bogor, for example, were abolished only a short time after being established. Sukapura and Limbangan, on the other hand, remained part of the Cirebon Priangan territories in the early nineteenth century, until the divisional administration introduced by Daendels came to an end in 1815. The territorial demarcation established after Dutch authority was restored remained intact until the end of colonial rule and, through strict implementation of the earlier policy of exclusion, the region retained its separate status. The claim, however, that the ancien régime was preserved in the highlands of Sunda ignores the far-reaching reforms that first the VOC and later the early-colonial state introduced.

The policy of territorial demarcation made no distinction between individual regents. This did not of course mean that their ancestral lineage, the size of the population in their jurisdiction and how this affected the colonial tribute were no longer of any significance, but they were all treated equally under the same rules, the essence of which was ranking them in juxtaposition. Relations between the regents were characterized by jealousy. The main principle of territorial rule was that the entire population of a regency were subjects of the regent, while he could lay no claim to clients living beyond his borders. The colonial officials tried to create order in what they considered administrative chaos, where clients of rival lords often lived side by side. The reform carried out, based on the principle of territoriality, was justified in the name of proper governance, but the real motive was to make it easier to collect the colonial tribute. The VOC established its authority by cutting the chiefs’ ties with their former rulers. This transfer of subordination was a long process and the new regime would only have acquired legitimacy gradually. Colonial administrators were uneasy about affairs being conducted behind the scenes without them ever finding out the truth about what was going on. They had every reason to fear that the chiefs were conspiring behind their backs and to be concerned about their hold over what they considered a seditious population. To defuse this threat in advance, the VOC had no qualms about encouraging the chiefs to pass on information about each other and stoking up their jealousy (De Haan I 1910: 342). The regents finally stopped resisting their territorial confinement when the benefits proved greater than the disadvantages.

5 ‘Their favourite pastime was to keep a close eye on everything their neighbours were doing, with the malicious pleasure of an old spinster, and to gossip about it to all and sundry, which made it extremely difficult for the Company to keep a check on the situation, and explains why its officials saw this dissension between the Regents, which was also cherished in the bosoms of the different families, as a useful means of governance.’ (De Haan I 1910: 343).
The regents were expected to reside in the dalem or dajeuh (the Sundanese name for their residence), a complex of buildings initially constructed from bamboo or wood. They spent most of their time here, isolated from the outside world. At first, these residences were quite modest, their status clearer from their size than the material comfort and luxury they offered, but over time they began to look increasingly like palaces. The practice of keeping a permanent house in Batavia and turning up at random to ‘pay homage’ to their superiors in the Company’s headquarters – just as their predecessors had regularly made the long trip to the court in Mataram – had become less common by the early nineteenth century. With their authority now territorially delineated, their superiors urged them to remain in their regencies. One old custom that was preserved was that each regent was permitted to retain two patih: one to run the lord’s elaborate household and the other to take care of affairs in the regency and represent the regent in his dealings with lower chiefs and their following. Patih were usually a sons or other close relations of the regent. The patih responsible for external affairs would issue orders to the lower chiefs in the regent’s name and was the hub through which all lines leading to the dalem first had to pass. As the highest-ranking servant, this patih lived close to the regent, but outside the enclave in which the latter lived a secluded existence.

The regent himself was considered too elevated to be troubled by day-to-day affairs. He remained at a distance and had little more to do than act eminently and emanate the sacred power that he personified. Roorda van Eysinga, who visited the regent of Bandung in 1821, had few good words to say for his host. The main negorij in which the regent’s household was located may have been larger than a village, but it offered little more in terms of facilities. With three walls enclosing his court, the regent was both invisible and unapproachable for his people. His rare public appearances were accompanied by great pomp and circumstance. He was surrounded by a swarm of subjects carrying flags and lances. In Cianjur there were radèns (notables) everywhere, wrote Nicolaus Engelhard in 1797, contemptuous of what he had observed during his short visit to the regent’s headquarters. The presence of lower-ranking chiefs meant that their duties in their own jurisdictions were taken care of by substitutes (De Haan IV 1912: 397). The larger population of the regent’s negorij was intended to display his authority and enhance his prestige. Its residents were not subject to the same obligations as the majority of the inhabitants of the regency. This attracted people who were looking for an easier life than cultivating the land, so that the main settlements acquired a reputation as magnets for layabouts and good-for-nothings. It was always possible to find someone prepared to do
all kinds of jobs that could not stand the light of day (Geographische en statistische bijzonderheden 1835: 379-80).

The patih was assisted by a chief of police, who was responsible for maintaining public order. Criminal acts were investigated by the fiscal or jaksa who would also mete out punishments. The jaksa had a staff of constables and a small contingent of prison guards. However, this indigenous apparatus gradually lost its authority to deal with police and judicial matters and the jail in the headquarters would be used only for petty criminals. The resident made sure that more serious crimes, like murder and manslaughter, were tried by the circuit judge. Travellers from Sumedang to Cirebon would no longer be confronted with the sight of iron cages hanging on poles and displaying the chopped-off heads of robbers to frighten off others (Roorda van Eysinga 1830: 218). Lastly, the entourage of a regent would include a high priest, a chief panghulu and a chief kalipah, who would also be one of his kinsmen. Their presence and leadership in religious matters emphasized the sacred nature of the regent’s authority.

Below the regents, who – with their patih, jaksa and ketib (a religious official) – were at the top of the pyramid of notables, there was a long chain of lower-ranking chiefs. The most important of these were in charge of the districts, territorial areas also established and demarcated by the colonial administration. Like the regencies, their number and size were arbitrary and also changed randomly. In 1836 the Priangan Regencies had a total of 73 districts: 23 in Cianjur, 14 in Bandung, 22 in Sumedang, 6 in Limbangan and 8 in Sukapura. Thirty years later, after being divided up, merged or abolished, 66 remained throughout the entire residency. Until 1790, the district chiefs were appointed by the regent, but he did have to put forward the candidate of his choice to the Commissioner for the Indigenous Population for approval. After 1790, this authority was transferred to the resident. In 1802, Pieter Engelhard, prefect of East Priangan, ordered that the cutak (district) chiefs should no longer hang around in the main negorij of the regency, but had to reside in their own districts, so that they could keep a closer eye on matters there. In an instruction dated 19 June 1808, Daendels ordered them to choose a village, as close as possible to the centre of their district, as their place of residence. The same instruction included the provision that one or two lower-ranking chiefs could be appointed in all other villages in the district; in the larger localities, desas, these were known as kuwuo or mantri and, in the smaller hamlets with between six and ten households, it would be a prenta or petingi. All habitations or kampungs with fewer households were to be incorporated into a neighbouring desa. This meant that the inhabitants would actually have to move there. With
this blueprint the policy of territorial demarcation extended to the base of peasant society.

The administration of the main village in a district was set up in a similar way to the headquarters of a regency, though on a more modest footing. The chief’s residence was smaller and built of less durable materials than the dalem where the regent held court. Like his superior, the district chief had a substitute who stood in for him during his frequent visits to the main negorij. Lower-ranking chiefs were expected to gather at his residence, whether he was there or not, as a show of their subordination and their instant willingness to carry out all of his orders. The colonial authorities put a stop to this practice, which they saw as frustrating the efficacy of governance. This clash between domestic and externally imposed views on how to exercise authority was of course settled in favour of the latter but, again, it was a gradual change that did not occur overnight.

The native chiefs belonged to two classes. The members of the high nobility, including the regent and his deputy, the head jaksa, the high priest and the district chiefs were menak. They could speak Javanese or Djawareh (a mixture of Javanese and Sundanese) and used this language in their correspondence. A small percentage of the privileged class learned the language by receiving instruction. In the early nineteenth century Resident Van der Capellen took the initiative of tutoring chiefs’ sons in skills that would enhance their administrative capability. The menak were closely related to each other. The indigenous structure of authority was kinship-based, as the key positions – including higher religious ranks – were usually filled by members of the regents’ families. The regents themselves made a significant contribution to the reproduction of the following generation. The regent who ruled Sumedang from 1836 to 1882, for example, had 101 children, 53 of whom were still alive when he died. He gave them all a number and kept a register, so as not to lose count (De Haan I 1910: 359). The list was, however, more than just a memory aid; the sequence of their birth played a significant role in the allocation of positions. One wife was, of course, not enough to provide him with so many offspring. The more selir (additional wives) a regent had, the greater his prestige. It also allowed him to consolidate his power by entering into marriage ties with lower-ranking chiefs (Bijdragen tot kennis 1870: 271). Providing jobs for his close relatives was an obligation that a regent had to fulfil, but it also had another purpose: it enabled him to build up a network that extended from the top to the bottom of the social hierarchy, through which he and his retinue could keep a watch over what was happening in their domain. Of course, this network could also be used to serve conflicting interests, generating divisions between the holders of
formal positions. Marriage ties in any case played an important role in the competition for prominence. In 1805, Lawick noted that the regent of Parakanmuncang ‘had married and remarried so often that most of the chiefs were related to him’ (De Haan IV 1912: 390).

The second class of chiefs were the sentana, referred to in colonial reports as landed gentry. They had their roots in the agrarian order and retained close contacts with the peasantry. They bore titles like *asep, ujang* or *agus* as an indication of their distinguished origins. A chain of command extended down from district level to the peasantry at large. At the base of the hierarchy of nobility, the *lurah* or his deputy, the *panglaku*, received orders from their superiors. The orders were brought by the *lengser*, a messenger whose name indicated that he did everything instantly, and came from the *bale-bandong*, a kind of office that served as an administrative centre in the district. The orders that were sent down the chain came from the *camat*, who acted as substitute for the district chief. The Javanese name *wedana* was not introduced for the district chiefs in the Priangan Regencies until 1846. Before then, they were known as *kepala cutak*, a reference to their most important task: collecting the share of the paddy harvest that the peasant landowners were obliged to relinquish to the regent. The village priest, the *lebeh* or *amil*, also played an important role in these worldly tasks. He did not restrict himself to officiating at religious meetings and teaching children about the Koran, but helped collect the *padi zakat*, the tenth part of the paddy harvest destined for the religious leaders and which eventually reached the high priest in the regent’s entourage, via the district *panghulu*. As one of the few who could read and write, it became the task of the village priest to register births, marriages and deaths. He was also responsible for vaccinating children against cowpox and helping to collect the tenth part of the harvest destined for the regent.

Behind this line of command, there were many other chiefs whose duties, mutual relationships and position in the hierarchy are more much more difficult to pinpoint with precision. Colonial administrators were thrown into confusion by the enormous diversity of ranks and distinctions that they found themselves confronted with: *umbul, temanggung, patih, wedana, panglakue, ngabeh, lurah, petinggih, pencalang, pangerang, demang, kliwon, mantri, kepala, lengser, pangkat, priaji, jaksa, camat*, etc., etc... It was an endless and colourful parade of important and less important dignitaries, the infinite differences between which the VOC, and later the governor, had great difficulty in distinguishing. They vainly sought the key that would show them where these notables fitted into the hierarchy: who gave orders to whom and about what, and how was this reflected in the demarcation of
tasks between them? These were questions with no conclusive answers. The hierarchy was not necessarily arranged in a clear-cut vertical ranking, with superiors and inferiors. Chiefs could belong to the entourage of the same higher lord, alongside or even in conflict with each other. They were rivals competing for power, not officials with clearly defined mandates within an administrative apparatus. They had no qualms about transferring their loyalty to another patron or poaching clients from their rivals. Their room for manoeuvre contracted, however, as the Priangan started to lose its frontier character. Nevertheless, out of sight of the colonial administrators, defections to another lord continued until deep into the nineteenth century.

Rendering servitude

The introduction of territorial demarcation did, however, reduce this tendency to switch loyalties. It was no longer possible to achieve upward mobility by seeking the protection of another regent or moving somewhere else with your entourage and cultivating new land. The head of a cacah could work his way up to become what was known in the colonial records as a ‘minor chief’, just as notables in higher echelons tried to gather more clients around them so as to strengthen their standing with their own, or perhaps another, lord. The important issue was not how many clients a regent needed to fulfil the duties of his office, but how he could bind his clientele – a hard core of trusted followers with a looser and more fluid group of less trusty ‘hangers-on’ – in servitude by rewarding them for the services they performed for him. These included an endless flow of goods and services from below, a sizable proportion of which had to be set aside for redistribution. The collection of ‘donations’ was widespread (De Wilde 1830: 188-9). The seizure of goods and corvee ran from above to below, imposing the heaviest burden on the landless peasants at the base of the hierarchy. De Wilde described this situation succinctly: ‘In all these respects, the chiefs follow the example of their regents; and, as such, each is in his rank a greater or lesser oppressor of the common man.’ The top of the pyramid was linked to its base not directly but through a profusion of intermediaries over which the colonial administration had little oversight and even less control. Yet it was here that the hierarchical order was most dynamic – continually

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6 Hoadley describes the situation in similar terms: ‘A chain-of-command, a hierarchy of power, or even the delegation of authority existed only to a very limited extent in Javanese governmental practice.’ (Hoadley 2004: 148)