Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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according to the claims the lord imposed on his clientele. Just as the head of a *cacah* had to be aware that a co-habitant or boarder might desert him, a higher lord who demanded too much ran the risk that his clients might transfer their loyalties to a rival. A Sundanese saying expressed this perfectly: ‘Turn your face, change your lord’ (Moestapa 1946: 210, note 6). Such switches of allegiance sometimes entailed moving to another locality, but not necessarily (De Haan I 1910: 361). Peasant and lord were separate social positions, but they depended on each other. There was no lack of lords at the tail end of the peasant order, not only because the gentry owned a large share of the agricultural holdings, which were cultivated by sharecroppers, but also because the head of a *cacah*, albeit a peasant in his own right, was himself a *juragan* to whom dependants were bonded. Society in the Priangan was therefore not divided into two segments, but a multiplicity of interdependent strata based on patronage, in which patrons had dependants while they themselves could be clients of higher lords. It was a society characterized by vertical ties, in both directions. The top and the base of the pyramid were linked through a chain of mediation. This rectifies the view that only regents practised clientelism. As De Haan correctly observes, the large majority of the *rahayat* did not serve regents, but belonged to the retinue of lower-ranking chiefs. Van Rees came to the same conclusion in his report while, remarkably, Pieter Engelhard took this view as early as 1804 (De Haan IV 1912: 411). Lords tended to use discretionary latitude in their treatment of their clients, taking account of their circumstances. If a peasant was unable to pay his full tribute because of a failed harvest or some other temporary setback, his patron would settle for a smaller share than he was entitled to. He might also demand smaller shares from new clients to keep them content. The threat of desertion or defection to another lord may also have tempered the severity of the terms of servitude. The relationship was fluid and negotiable, varied according to the situation in which both parties found themselves and with its closeness and duration. A good lord knew how to tie new clients in servitude and to keep them that way, while a good client would subordinate himself, but with reservations and always one eye open for more attractive options.

**Peasants and their lords in the early-colonial era**

Servitude is primarily seen as a form of subordination, with the emphasis on the burdens that it brought for the clients. But, as mentioned above, they consented to their dependency in the expectation that the patron would be
able and willing to restrain his claims on their labour power and the yield of their harvest. Furthermore, as with patronage in general, the relationship was not only economic in nature. A patron’s entourage served to enhance his power and prestige and make him more resistant to competition from his rivals. In his description of the state of Java in 1799, Van Hogendorp showed that he was aware of this facet of servitude, despite the critical tone of his final judgment.

The armed Troops, that the Regents could mobilize in this way, are little more than an unruly, undisciplined Mob who, at the first shot, fall or flee, and are more troublesome than helpful, and are therefore of no use at all to Society, and never shall be, as experience has taught us so often. And not only do the Regents make such misuse of corvee or personal Servitude; but their Pepattijs, Brothers, children and many Mantrie’s or lower Chiefs extract from the Dessas, that the Regents have given them, as many people as they can muster, with no other intent than to show their status and greatness. (Annexe LL, Eindresumé III 1896: 154)

Van Hogendorp was of course correct in concluding that the peasants had little appetite for fighting. Large-scale and regular conflicts or far-off raids were relatively rare. They would only be called upon to settle occasional conflicts closer to home: disputes between a lord and a rival, attempts to persuade or coerce peasants to defect from their patron, or just mobilizing them for a show of force or grandeur. An important facet of patronage, as suggested by the passage quoted above, was the use of clients for a public display of prestige. As already observed, the wealth of a regent was expressed by the ‘number of hands he had at his disposal’. Riding around on a horse with an armed entourage, large hunting parties, tournaments and receiving higher or lower chiefs in the presence of spectators at public meetings all served to illustrate the grand status of a patron, while the retinue of clients basked in the glory and power of their lord. Such a display of prestige required that the peasants treated their superiors appropriately. But the man who prostrated himself at the foot of the regent and crawled towards him in humble submission was in his turn a lord who demanded shows of horomat, respect and the greatest possible humility, from his subordinates. The landowner was never sure of his property, as the lord could seize it at any time. Regents and chiefs in the Priangan would still requisition the horses and daughters of their clients until the mid-nineteenth century (De Haan IV 1912: 439-40). Such dispossession of property was considered an honour rather than theft. Adapting themselves to the customs of the indigenous
elite if and as long that suited them, colonial administrators did not stop at urging chiefs to make their womenfolk available for sexual favours. A few colonial commentators expressed their disgust at such practices, of which even residents were guilty (Van Hogendorp 1913: 40).

Under the colonial regime, the relationship between peasants and their lords changed radically. This was of course primarily due to the tribute imposed by the new rulers. How this happened and what impact the much higher taxation had on the agrarian order will be examined in detail in the next chapter. What I wish to emphasize here is how these claims brought about far-reaching changes in the structure of society. An early indication of this process, which would undoubtedly have taken place even if the VOC had not penetrated inland from the coast in the second half of the seventeenth century, was the pressure exerted on nomadic peasants to adopt a sedentary existence. However, as described in the first chapter, the arrival of the Company accelerated the opening up of the Priangan. Even more significant was the administrative organization of the colonized areas on a territorial basis. Higher and lower-ranking chiefs were no longer rivals in the struggle for power but were assigned an area of jurisdiction, within which they could – in fact, had to – conduct themselves as lords and were authorized to impose taxes on all the inhabitants, but had no rights to subordinate those living beyond their demarcated borders. Of course, it took a long time for this new regime to take hold. Ties with dependants who lived far off, beyond the designated jurisdiction of their lord, continued to exist for many years and were expressed in displays of respect (bakti) to their former patrons. The lords of Cirebon, for example, stubbornly continued to consider the chiefs they had nominated in Cianjur as their vassals (De Roo de la Faille 1941: 420). The VOC took decisive steps to end such practices.

The policy of territorial confinement also applied to the peasants, though in their case it was implemented with hard-handedness. The ban on them transferring their allegiance to another chief, which came into force in the mid-eighteenth century, considerably weakened their options for changing patrons or moving elsewhere. Sedentarization was considered an indication of the progress of civilization in colonial times, as proof of growing security since the people no longer felt it necessary to keep moving around. A change presented as an improvement was actually a deterioration, in that they were no longer able to negotiate the terms of their servitude. This resulted in the situation that inspired Nicolaus Engelhard to describe the claims and power of the chiefs as a yoke from which the peasants could no longer escape (Engelhard to Elout, 12 April 1821). Not only were dependants no longer permitted to terminate the relationship with their lord, neither could they
The regent of Indramaju, accompanied by a *haji* (drawing by Rach 1770). According to colonial archivist F. de Haan, this is the only known portrait of a regent from the VOC period. De Haan noted that the native nobility were eager to imitate the dress style of VOC officials – the regent is wearing knee-breeches and a cocked hat. He failed to mention, however, that colonial civil servants also adopted native codes of distinction, such as *payungs* and the palanquin.

Source: Perpustakaan Nasional Indonesia Collection, Jakarta
use it as a threat if he raised their tribute. The ban on wandering from place to place, introduced in the early-colonial era and reissued repeatedly in the nineteenth century, had the same effect. The punishment for anyone not heeding the order to have a permanent abode was to be put in detention. Later, the government started to detain vagrants in workhouses in the main negerij of the regency, where they could be hired as coolies. An instruction dating from 1833 reaffirmed that vagrants who could not be found guilty of a specific crime must be consigned to ‘agricultural establishments’ and set to work (Van Deventer 1866: 177).7

The colonial policy of reorganizing governance put an end to the flexibility and fluidity that had characterized the relationship between lord and peasant. Authority was exercised much more than before on the basis of clearly defined task descriptions that established mandates and competences with orders that were carried out along hierarchical lines. Giving primacy to the interests of the VOC and later those of the early-colonial state required on the one hand a greater emphasis on the subordination of the peasants to their lords, while on the other hand restricting the diverse and discretionary claims that the latter imposed on their subordinates. Withholding the option for peasants to transfer their allegiance to another lord in fact intensified the burden of their servitude. A long series of early-colonial instructions to restrict the claims that the lords imposed on their dependants did not immediately have the desired effect. As we shall see in the following chapter, however, this did not mean that the instructions of the colonial authorities were simply ignored. The chiefs continued to cling to the institutions that were familiar to them and tried to defend their own interests and preferences, but eventually had to bend in the direction in which they were being pushed. They lost their freedom of manoeuvre and operated from within an apparatus over which they had no control. They found themselves trying to please both their own lords and give priority to the wishes of the colonial officials. Their negotiating space declined and it became increasingly difficult for them to escape the claims imposed on them by their foreign superiors. How this process developed and what impact it had on the peasantry will be described in the following chapter.

7 These were depots where labour could be hired out for public works or to private employers which Van Sevenhoven, in his function as Director of Cultivation, wanted to set up (see Chapter 7).