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Breman, Jan

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II The introduction of forced cultivation

A colonial mode of production

Early accounts of Dutch expansion overseas describe the rule of the Javanese princes as feudal. Use of this term is, however, based not on an in-depth study of indigenous social organization, but suggests a rather loose parallel with the agrarian order in Medieval Europe, with princes, vassals and subject peasants as the main actors. Burger, for example, described a social landscape populated by subsistence and village-based households supplying goods and services to the feudal nobility (Burger 1975: 33). Van Leur rectified this viewpoint by arguing that the structure of power in the large Javanese principalities was different from what was understood under feudalism in Europe. The difference lay mainly in the way in which power was exercised, rather than in how the peasants were coerced into providing goods and services. Van Leur follows Max Weber in describing the pre-colonial state in the interior of Java as patrimonial-bureaucratic. It was a regime in which sovereignty and the right to property were concentrated in the person of the king. Family members and a chain of favourites shared in the king's rule, without ever being entitled to use their positions of eminence to claim any independent authority or legal security. Their main tasks were to collect tributes and to mobilize military and labour power for the monarch (Weber 1922: 679-723). More recent authors have also characterized these societies as patrimonial (including Schrieke I: 169-221; B. Anderson 1972: 8-22 and 33-43). Wittfogel suggested a different model referred to as ‘oriental despotism’ to describe the specific nature of the early agrarian civilizations in Asia. The strongly centralized despotic rule of the king was founded on large-scale irrigation works constructed with peasant labour. This is a variant of the theory of the Asian mode of production that Tichelman applied to pre-colonial Java (Tichelman 1975; see also P. Anderson 1974: 462-549).

I am concerned not as much with which label best describes the ancien régime, as with what replaced it when the VOC expanded its authority into the hinterland of Java from its headquarters in Batavia. The Company's directors themselves adhered to feudal notions when introducing the system of territorially-based governance. In their records they referred to issuing letters of fealty and fiefdoms to the regents as vassals. According to Hoadley, the measures taken by the VOC led to a feudal mode of production on West Java towards the end of the eighteenth century. During what he
refers to as a process of feudalization, the people of the Priangan were cut off from free access to land as their means of livelihood. As the new ruler, the VOC declared itself the rightful owner of all these resources and derived from these usurped rights that it was entitled to impose claims of a tributary nature on peasant labour, using the regents as intermediaries (Hoadley 1994: 148-151; 184-5). The problem with terms like feudalism or the various forms of patrimonialism remains that they are applied to other times and situations than those for which they were originally coined. This is equally true of the concepts of ‘political’ or ‘mercantile capitalism’, traces of which Van Leur identifies in pre-colonial and colonial Asia. That is one reason why I, following Wolf (1982) and Banaji (2010), prefer to speak of a tributary mode of colonial production. An essential element was the mobilization of agrarian and other forms of labour using political rather than economic means, in the exercise of authority and domination (Wolf 1982: 79-82; 400-4). The emphasis must lie on the creation of a new, externally imposed social and political order rather than on the continuation of earlier despotic rule. The system of taxation that the VOC introduced at an early stage in the regencies it had established in the Priangan must be seen in this context. Establishing governance along territorial lines, coercing the peasants to adopt a sedentary mode of cultivation and restructuring social relations according to a strict hierarchy were all given a powerful boost when the VOC, as the supreme authority, began to lay claim to the peasants’ labour and the commodities they produced. After establishing itself as a political force, feeling its way in physically and socially unknown terrain, the Company devoted itself with much greater urgency and passion to converting this newly acquired territorial power into economic gain. The VOC’s main purpose, after all, was to appropriate commodities at the lowest possible price, a type of exploitation Banaji branded as ‘Company capitalism’ (ibid.: 270). Its attention was not focused exclusively on the highlands behind Batavia, but extended along the whole north coast of Java. To assess the importance of trade to the VOC, it is necessary to examine its economic activities in the region. Taking my cue from the work of Van Leur, I rely for a case study on Luc Nagtegaal’s monograph on the VOC’s penetration into the Pasisir region on the north coast of Java between 1680 and 1743 (Nagtegaal 1988). It was during this period that the Company also succeeded in slowly gaining control over the Priangan highlands.

Nagtegaal rejects the long-standing assumption that the peasant population was predominantly – or even completely – subsistence-based and that the market had no role to play in rural Java. He shows that, on the contrary, trade was an important component of the agrarian economy. Furthermore,
the commodities on sale were not surpluses left over after the peasants’ basic needs had been met, but were grown or produced specifically for the market. Nagtegaal concludes correctly that the VOC’s problem was not the difficulty of introducing new crops which were of little or no interest to the peasants, but how to gain control of the production and marketing of agrarian commodities. There were no separate circuits in which various sorts of products were traded. Nagtegaal distinguishes three interlinked market levels, based on distance: regional, interregional and inter-insular. The merchants operating in these markets had varying amounts of capital at their disposal, but the commodities they bought and sold were largely the same. Van Leur distinguished various forms of what he called ‘peddling trade’ in his overview of early-Asian trade (1957: Chapter II). The bigger merchants often bought goods for export from peasant markets, while products from elsewhere would find their way to domestic consumers through peasant traders. The goods were moved primarily by water traffic, explaining why the main pasars were located on rivers that flowed into the Java Sea. A study of early maps suggests that there was considerable economic interaction between settlements spread along the river banks at some distance from each other. The routes to the highlands also ran along these rivers. The first expeditions to the Priangan region from Batavia did not travel overland but, as long as the river was navigable, by boat. This remained the main mode of transport until well into the nineteenth century, explaining why Cirebon was initially able to remain the main centre for collecting the tribute imposed by the VOC in Priangan.

The VOC stayed away from the peasant markets, which were generally comprised of a large group of part-time local traders, often women, who exchanged small quantities of goods over short distances (Nagtegaal 1988: 43). The Company did take an interest in interregional trade, which was focused on the larger settlements. It was, however, unable to compete with the longer established merchants who were of a wide variety of nationalities, including Hindus from India, Moors from Malacca, Javanese from Banten, Europeans (including Danes and Englishmen), free citizens from Batavia and, last but not least, Chinese. Members of the Javanese aristocracy, including local regents and high-ranking officials at the court of Mataram, were also active in long-distance trade and sometimes provided the cash or credit that was required. Merchants from Solo came to Semarang overland, hiring porters for their convoys en route. As already mentioned, the VOC had little success in these intermediate markets. Its operations were still too large-scale and inefficient and the network it built up was not sufficiently fine-meshed. What the large trading company from afar lacked was regular
and intimate contact with the peasant population. In that respect, the Company was no match for the Chinese merchants who had been established on the north coast of Java for much longer and had become more deeply embedded in the local economy. Its coastal factories suffered from high costs and complained of persistent losses. The VOC changed tack and tried to persuade the regents and the merchants who worked with them to stop selling to all parties and do their business exclusively with the Company. The attempt at monopoly initially failed because the Javanese had more to gain by encouraging competition between the traders from outside.

The VOC had little choice other than to focus on the centres of inter-regional and inter-insular trade. But this strategy could only succeed if the Company could also secure control over the more local trade circuits. That meant resorting to political alliances at trans-local level. In the 1677 treaty, the emperor of Mataram granted the VOC a number of trade privileges – including sole rights to the sale of opium and textiles and the purchase of sugar, the pre-emptive right to buy up rice, and exemption from customs duties – and placed all foreigners in his kingdom under the Company’s control and jurisdiction. Further steps were required to actually put these agreements into practice, including protecting the long-distance trade routes. By cancelling out Banten as a staple market – achieved in exchange for supporting the ‘right party’ in a conflict between the rulers of this harbour principality in 1684 – the VOC ensured that all inter-Asian trade would in the future be channelled through Batavia. Nagtegaal’s research contradicts the portrayal of a closed peasant economy in which a market was entirely lacking or limited to barter. There was clear evidence of the onset of an early form of capitalism, in both trade and production, also beyond the pasisir (Java’s coast to the east of Cirebon). The influence of international trade in the port of Banten was felt deep in the hinterland of West Java and was accompanied by a much more advanced degree of monetization than reported in later colonial accounts. The subjects of the emperor of Mataram had to pay a head tax in cash, which was collected by the local chiefs. In the Priangan Regencies, towards the end of the seventeenth century, this amounted to one real per cacah (De Haan I 1910: 26). There is no reason to believe that money was used only to pay taxes. The rural economy comprised a wide variety of activities, and part of the resulting produce was sold in markets in the harbour towns on the north coast. Goods from overseas, for example textiles from India, would pass through these trading centres in the other direction and make their way to the rural hinterland. Furthermore, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the supply of opium which the Company imported from abroad
increased exponentially and, despite resistance from Javanese rulers, was forced upon the local population.

From free trade to forced delivery

The VOC's interference in the local economy was not limited to its ambitions to acquire a hegemonic position in trade. In the early eighteenth century, it became increasingly involved in the production process itself. The Company had a shipyard in Rembang to build its own ships. Sawmills supplied the wood and ropes were manufactured from coconut fibres in Semarang. Of greater significance was an instruction ordering the peasant population to abandon the traditional method of producing indigo. Around 1700, a number of Dutch indigo-makers arrived to supervise the new process, based on the technique used on the Coromandel coast in India (De Haan III 1912: 412-3). The experiment was a failure, however, and in the mid-eighteenth century Jacob Mossel made a renewed attempt, again without success (Hooijman 1781: 301). The VOC also initiated the cultivation of coffee at the start of the eighteenth century. This commodity, at that time completely unknown to the local population, would in the course of time expand to become a monoculture. Before examining this in greater detail, however, I would like to reiterate how, in the early years of the VOC's control of the Priangan, the region initially supplied the Company with a much wider variety of products.

Under the treaty that put an end to the remaining self-governance of Cirebon in 1681, the sultan was no longer permitted to trade with Makassarese, Malays, Moors or any other foreign merchants. The inhabitants of the harbour principalities were not allowed to sail further than Bali or Borneo, and then only if they had a pass from the Company. The demolition of the city walls and the construction of the fortress – called De Bescherming (Protection), a name given with no irony intended – illustrated the coercion exercised by what remained, in effect, commerce pur sang. The closure of the transport route to and from the highlands heralded the start of a process of exploitation of the inhabitants of the hinterland, which would gradually grow in scale and intensity. The records of the factory manager in Cirebon show that the entire production of crops like rice and pepper was bought up by Chinese middlemen, who also sold textiles and opium to the local population. The VOC official complained that these brokers engaged in smuggling, so that not all the goods found their way to the VOC's warehouses. In 1691, the Resident urged in a letter that the inhabitants of