Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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The VOC refused to acknowledge that desertion and defection were a consequence of the system of forced cultivation. They attributed it to the footloose character of the Priangan peasants, who would up and leave, even abandoning their wife and children, at the slightest provocation. Perhaps they did not like maltreatment by their chief or had other objections that were evidence of their lack of discipline and unwillingness to lead a more regulated and settled life. Land flight, absconding to the mountainous upland beyond the reach of claims from higher up, is how Scott has characterized the footloose life and preference for swidden agriculture segments of the peasantry in Southeast Asia resorted to in their counter-strategy to avoid being governed and taxed in subalternt regimes of dependency (Scott 2009). The Company’s complaints of such ‘vagrancy’ continued until well into the next century, showing that the policy of immobilization did not produce the expected results, despite the rigorous sanctions imposed on malefactors. The fiasco can partly be explained by the inaccessibility of the region, together with the Company’s limited reach of control. In this light, it can be concluded that Mossel’s estimate in 1754 that the Priangan lands had 31,479 inhabitants (Bijvoegsel beschrijving Soendasche eilanden 1781: 272, note c) is little more than a shot in the dark. Knowledge of the hinterland, as well as of the nature and size of its population, remained very superficial. The early expeditions sent out to learn more about these remote regions included land surveyors and map-makers but, notwithstanding all these efforts, such attempts initially had little success. Despite its strong words and sometimes equally strict sanctions, the Company remained floundering in a society that was inscrutable and offered its members a wide range of options for escape and evasion. The only way the VOC could gain control over peasant labour and deploy it for the forced delivery of goods and services, especially coffee, was to rely on the loyal collusion of the native chiefs. The following section examines to what extent this was a realistic proposition.

**Indigenous management**

The VOC employed the local chiefs as contractors doing the bidding of their Dutch superiors. They were held accountable for implementing the system of compulsory delivery of goods and services. The Company’s officials had no direct contact with the peasants and were not interested in how the chiefs carried out the orders they received and handled the problems they encountered. It would nevertheless be incorrect to see this governance at
arm’s length as a continuation of the old regime. The position of the chiefs had changed radically, and their role was substantially different from that of their predecessors. As before, they were subject to an absentee superior, but now their subordination was clearly, even primarily, economic in nature. The chiefs became the jobbers of the colonial mode of production. Like the peasants beneath them, chiefs of all ranks would be punished for violations of the cultivation regime, ranging from negligence to refusing to carry out orders from their superiors to outright resistance. The Company pursued a policy of zero tolerance to disobedience in any form. In De Haan’s words, wherever coffee grew, the cane was there, too, at the ready (I 1910: 282).

Money was a much more positive incentive in obtaining the loyal cooperation of the chiefs and the people. The VOC used it so sparsely because it wished to earn as much as possible from coffee by minimizing the share of the proceeds that it passed on to the producers and their bosses. The main issue, of course, was how much the planters received for their labour. At first, the Sundanese peasants received nothing at all for the work they performed until the first harvest, i.e. four years after the trees were planted, not even an advance on what they would ultimately be paid. Throughout this period, the Company used the labour of the peasants for free. And when they did deliver the beans, the sources show that they were paid very little. The price cuts introduced shortly after the successful introduction of coffee cultivation have already been mentioned. The VOC proved very inventive in finding ways to cut its costs. The weight of a pikul, initially 125 pounds, was increased in a series of stages. In 1777, the term bergse pikol (mountain pikul) was introduced. This meant that the weight of a pikul varied from 200 to 300 pounds, depending on the regency, while regents continued to be rewarded according to the old measure of 146 pounds per pikul. As a result of this typical example of mercantile cunning, the payments to the peasants declined sharply. The regents received the old price since, without their cooperation, growing coffee would not have been possible. Company officials at all levels creamed off the surplus earned from this increase in the weight measure to fill their own pockets. This also explains why the weight of a pikul – always higher in the mountains than on the plains – varied according to the place of delivery. In addition, the VOC was very innovative in lowering the value of the money it used to pay for the coffee beans. In 1782, part of the payment was made in paper vouchers of little worth, and which were circulated little further than in Batavia. Much more harmful to the people of the Priangan was the circulation of low-quality farthings and other coins. After 1780, due to a shortage of copper money, coins known as ‘bonken’ came into circulation. They were worth so little
that the peasants traded them for salt as soon as possible, which was a more valuable means of exchange. It can be concluded from this evidence that the gradual monetization of the indigenous economy took place at various distinct levels which were hardly interconnected, if at all.

The combination of punishment and reward was not enough to assure the VOC of a steadily growing supply of coffee from the Priangan region. The Company therefore gradually stepped up its supervision of the chiefs. A first step was the appointment, in the early eighteenth century, of a high-ranking official with the title Commissioner of Indigenous Affairs, later referred to simply as the Commissioner or Indigenous Commissioner (De Haan IV 1912: 1304). While the Governor-General primarily concerned himself with trade and focused his attention seawards, there was a growing need for someone below him stationed in the colonial headquarters to keep an eye on inland affairs from Batavia. Although a formal instruction was never issued for the Commissioner’s portfolio, his mandate and the power attached to it increased rapidly. After 1730, all correspondence with the regents passed through his hands. He acted with a considerable degree of autonomy and took decisions befitting a position of high authority: changing the borders of regencies, granting exemptions from or enforcing cultivation systems in districts, opening up the hinterland to improve the infrastructure, etc. In 1745, an instruction was issued that when he went on tours outside Batavia – though not in the headquarters itself – he would be accorded full military honours. The upgrading of this office in the hierarchy of the VOC was undoubtedly related to the increasing significance of coffee. Initially, the Commissioner was also charged with maintaining law and order. He was assigned guards and native police constables, who were responsible for punitive operations. The transfer of crop cultivation from the coastal plain to the highlands meant a change not only in the Commissioner’s area of command, but also in how he worked. He and his staff no longer patrolled the lowlands, but went to the highlands in person to ensure that the orders issued to the regents regarding the delivery of coffee and other commodities were being followed to the letter.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the Commissioner rarely dared to venture outside the immediate environs of Batavia. Later, he would occasionally undertake short tours to the interior, which were made more difficult by the bad state of the roads. Rather than travel by coach, he would go on horseback or be carried in a sedan chair. There were a handful of European agents who stayed permanently in the hinterland to oversee delivery of the colonial tribute. The original intention was to have one of these ‘coffee sergeants’ in each regency, but in practice this rarely happened.
As their name suggests, they were lower-ranking officers in the VOC’s military branch. It was not until 1790 that they were made into full civil servants and given the title of bookkeeper. These inspectors, who operated close to the workfloor and acted as the Company’s eyes and ears, were in turn closely watched by a small number of native overseers to make sure they didn’t engage in any underhand business with the regents, for example not delivering all harvested and processed coffee beans to the Company’s warehouses or tampering with weights or payments. The Commissioner received only a meagre salary from the Company, from which he also had to pay his small staff of inspectors and guards. And yet his income rose to an astronomical level, due to a system of reward that was customary in the early-colonial era. Most of his wealth stemmed from his cut in cultivation and trade, such as a commission on the purchase of coffee and the sale of other goods, especially opium, from taxes on markets and presentations. He also received large sums of money from regents and lower chiefs who depended on his goodwill. The landed gentry did nothing more than what they were accustomed to doing under the emperor of Mataram: presenting gifts to mark appointments or promotions, at New Year, when visiting
Batavia, or to accompany requests for favours, in short a mixed bag of tributes and bribes. The regents were tied hand and foot to the Commissioner by the advances they received. As early as 1741, the regent of Cianjur authorized his patron in the higher echelons of the VOC to conduct all his financial transactions, a precedent that was followed by the other regents in later years. It was not unusual for the Commissioner to make payments on behalf of the regent without the latter’s knowledge. A newly appointed regent was not issued with proof of appointment until he had undertaken in writing to take on the debt of his predecessor and to stand as guarantor for the commitments of the other chiefs. In this light, it is not surprising that a large part of the money required to pay for the products acquired by coercion never left Batavia. The regent was the actual supplier of the coffee. Generally he would receive an advance payment, based on a calculation made in the first half of the eighteenth century, equal to about a third of the ultimate price. He would spend half of the remaining balance, the amount the Company was willing to pay up in the end, on transport costs, while the other half was intended for the peasant producers. This formula would hardly change in the years that followed, nor would the unwritten rule that those at the bottom of the chain received what was left after all other payments had been made. Occasionally, as in 1777, the entire coffee revenue disappeared immediately into the pockets of the Commissioner as payment for advances and interest on loans.

The figure of the Commissioner fitted perfectly into the tableau of eighteenth-century Batavia as the headquarters of the VOC. High-ranking Company officials lived, like the high nobility of Java, a life of pomp and circumstance, with country houses and stables and an extensive entourage of quartermasters, servants and slaves who accompanied them when they travelled. All this took place at the expense of the local people, partly because these excursions entailed tournaments, hunting parties and festive receptions, for which the local chiefs and their clients had to supply a wide variety of goods and services: accommodation, horses, food, drink, women – and all in abundance. Nepotism was rife and open. Promotion was possible without the protection of a prominent figure, but came more easily if you were from good, preferably aristocratic, stock back in Holland and could use the contacts that came with such a respectable background. Despite its initially rather low ranking in the hierarchy, the position of Commissioner became one of the most lucrative jobs that the Governor-General had at his disposal. Once appointed from among the latter’s circle of close favourites, the newcomer could soon loosen his ties of dependency and establish an almost unassailable position. It is not an exaggeration to
see the Commissioner as the white *patih* of the Governor-General. He was the one who actually exercised the Company's authority in all interactions with his native counterparts. His office, with all its powers, was strongly patrimonial and thrived in a tribute-based society. The Commissioner held court in the capital. His desire for prestige, the display of ceremony that surrounded him, his gracious acceptance of the homage and the gifts of the chiefs that came to visit him, as they used to visit the court at Mataram, were all the features of a system of neo-patrimonialism that formed the facade behind which the tributary mode of production was developed and refined.

The social proximity between the VOC officials and the regents by no means meant that the former considered the local chiefs their social equals. They treated them with disdain and a lack of respect, saw them as barely civilized and accused them of repressing and exploiting their people. The fact that the system of tribute forced them to act in this way was completely ignored. An instruction from 1778 tried to put a stop to the worst forms of extortion by paying the coffee growers directly and on the spot, but little came of this in practice. The coffee sergeant, who usually had no command at all of the local language and had never seen a coffee tree before being appointed, kept a close eye on the regent’s actions. In theory, the regent ranked higher than the sergeant, known in the interior as *Toewan Mandor*, but the chief was often treated as though he were the inferior of the two. Although it gradually became less acceptable to refer to the natives, including those with positions of status, as ‘black dogs’, the tone remained objectionable, right up to the highest level (De Haan I 1910: 305-6). And this browbeating was not only verbal. While on tour, the Commissioner would not shy away from giving a district chief a good dressing down, which included kicking, slapping and beating, and on one occasion the regent’s substitute was put in the stocks. Whether it was also normal to treat the common people with equal roughness is not reported. They remained outside the field of vision of the small number of Europeans who had contact with the society they had colonized. In De Haan’s words: ‘The eyes of the Dutch officials looked out over the squatting Sundanese to the coffee trees beyond’ (1910: 306).

Despite the Company controlling the Priangan from early on, its knowledge of the social order in the region increased only at a snail’s pace. The principle of indirect rule that formed the basis for exploiting the land and its people, meant that the interior remained unfamiliar and alien territory until deep into the eighteenth century. After the outer frontiers had been demarcated, the land was rapidly appropriated, but it took a much greater effort to gain a grip on the social ties that bound the colonized population. The Company had hardly any understanding of the peasant order, having
no desire at all to descend to this inferior level of society. Delegating the collection of the tribute to the rural gentry, however, made it crucial to gather strategic information on the composition, background and *modus operandi* of the Priangan elite. This ‘intelligence’ was acquired in practice and was not a goal itself, but served solely to facilitate the Company’s primary objective: the forced cultivation and delivery of colonial commodities. It soon became clear that the *patih* was the pivotal figure in the economy of the regency. As the direct executor of the regent’s orders, this official in effect managed the work performed in his master’s service. This early insight led the Company, in 1706, to reserve the right to appoint and dismiss the regent’s right-hand man. The VOC’s officials, however, continued to lack guidelines to help them navigate through the tangle of main chiefs and minor heads that made up the regent’s apparatus – *toemenggoeng, kepala tjoetak, ngabehi, demang, oemboel, patinggi, jaksa, mantri*, etc. – and they soon lost their way. The names of course held the key to understanding how indigenous governance was organized, but for outsiders it remained a mystery who did what, how far their authority extended, and how they ranked in relation to each other. The confusion partly originated in the fact that power and authority were not exercised along lines of territoriality. The agents in the Company’s outposts were further hindered by their inability to interact with the people. Candidates were not required to have even a minimum command of the language. More often than not, the reverse was true: chiefs were expected to have a reasonable knowledge, if not of Dutch, then of *pasar* Malay. The instructions forbidding desertion and defection, for example, were published only in these two languages. But the Priangan aristocracy spoke mainly Sundanese or a debased form of Javanese. It is not difficult to imagine the communication problems that this must have caused.

**Under the Company’s control**

In 1744, the regent received an order to inspect his territory ‘in person or by his Pepattij’ once a year and to submit a report to the Commissioner (De Haan IV 1912: 334). As the locus of colonial management was gradually transferred from the regency to the districts, inspection duties were also increasingly focused at this level. An instruction from 1778 ordered the inspectors to monitor the payments to the coffee growers (four *rijksdaalders* per *bergse pikol*), draw up a monthly statement of production figures, conduct a survey of the number of villages, dwellings and inhabitants involved in the cultivation of compulsory crops and the transport of the tribute...