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
to the Company’s warehouses, send deserters arriving from elsewhere back where they came from, report immediately on the danger of harvest failure, and so on (De Haan II 1911: 592-5). The transfer of the bulk of the administration to the lower echelons was jeopardized by the tendency of lower-ranking chiefs to remain in the close proximity of their immediate superiors as long and as often as possible. In 1744, for example, some 60 to 70 of these minor chiefs resided at the kraton of the regency of Cianjur, from where they issued orders to their substitutes. The highest VOC official to encounter them engaging in this old custom while on a tour of the interior ordered them to visit their own cutak (district) at least four times a year, also commanding the regent or his substitute to visit all the districts once a year (De Haan II 1911: 502). All these memoranda were to no avail for the time being. Half a century later, the district chiefs were instructed to be present in their cutak at least twice a year, when the coffee was planted and harvested, and to accompany the inspector during his annual inspection tour. In 1802, these measures reached their logical conclusion in the form of an instruction that the district chiefs should henceforth live permanently in their own cutak. As with earlier notifications from the commanding heights, the chiefs continued to avoid complying with them for many years after they came into force (De Haan I 1910: 360). This meant that, even at the end of the eighteenth century, the Company’s supervision of coffee production extended just about down to district level and certainly no further downwards.

The policy of territorial demarcation also brought about changes in the hierarchical order. A clear line of command developed from the regent down to the coffee planters. The system of governance that the VOC tried to introduce allowed no overlapping competences or a fusion of these differentiated, but non-synchronized channels of authority. The various chiefs were now given more discrete tasks that were ranked vertically, from high to low. The traditional right of the landed gentry to transfer their loyalty to another patron – or at least, to threaten to do so – also came to an end. As with the peasants, the Company wanted subordination to be seen as a relationship that remained fixed and could not be terminated or transferred. As a total ban proved impossible, a rule was introduced in 1728, by way of compromise, determining that clients who left their patrons would henceforth have to forfeit all their possessions (including their land and their own clients) to their former lord (Hoadley 1994: 147). It was a meaningless concession, as there was no point in defecting to another patron without taking one’s own clients. After all, it meant leaving behind the capital on which the economic power, political clout and social
status of the departing chief depended. Initially, the gentry undoubtedly did little more than take cognizance of these regulations. In the long term, however, the restrictive nature of the new configurations must have caused them to lose much of their room for manoeuvre. The ambiguous, fluid ties they enjoyed with various overlords were replaced by a more regimented top-down administration. On the other hand, the new situation had the major benefit that it assured them much greater security and stability. They no longer had to be afraid of rivals undermining their power base by encouraging clients to desert or competing for the favours of the same patron. This explains why high dignitaries from Cirebon petitioned the Company in the mid-eighteenth century to deprive the sultans of the right to dismiss them (ibid.: 125).

Structuring the administrative hierarchy along territorial lines strengthened the Company’s grip on the population of the Priangan and its productive capacity. Sedentarization, as observed above, made it easier to subordinate the peasantry to the colonial tax regime. One obstacle to achieving this, apart from the stubbornness with which the peasants clung on to their footloose way of life, was that the region was not densely populated. In its unremitting attempts to increase the supply of compulsory goods, the Company sought ways of raising the colonial tribute at the foot of society. It did this by coercing not only the sedentary peasants (bumi) in an area to cultivate specific crops, but also newcomers (numpang) who had come there to settle. The latter were seen as peasants who had run away from somewhere else to escape the excessive demands of a lord. While their new patron laid claim to the numpang’s labour power, allowing them to cultivate his paddy fields in exchange for a share of the harvest for themselves, he did not use these new clients to grow compulsory crops (De Haan I 1910: 362-3). The Company’s decision to include the numpang in the system of forced cultivation had a far-reaching social impact, and was made with that intention in mind. Its aim, after all, was to spread the burden of forced cultivation equally among all the peasants. This configuration no longer left room for the heads of the composite households (cacah), who were obliged to pay tax to the local chief unit and, therefore, ultimately constituted part of the retinue of the regent. Under the new regime, the complex composite households were split up into nuclear peasant households, all with equal obligations. In 1785, Leendert Rolff – who had been appointed Commissioner in the previous year – proposed that ‘each household, whether they were numpang or bumi, in the Priangan’ be involved equally in forced cultivation. He included this provision in the first article of his Coffee Instruction, issued in 1789 (De Haan IV 1912: 417-8; II 1911: 631-43). Whether it was actually put
into practice and, equally importantly, whether the definition of the peasant order on which it was based was an accurate reflection of the situation in reality are questions that we will return to later.

Rolff was most probably encouraged to draw up his guidelines for the cultivation of coffee by a missive from the ‘Heren XVII’ (the VOC’s Amsterdam Board of Directors) in 1788 ‘that Javanese coffee cannot be cultivated or delivered too much’. Rolff’s instruction specified how to choose the land, how to plant the trees and maintain them while they were growing, and lastly how to pick and dry the beans. He wrote the instruction on the basis of a questionnaire distributed among inspectors and chiefs. Their answers, which reflected prevailing practices, were used to draw up the guidelines. He certainly also made use of the impressions he had acquired himself during a long tour of the Priangan some years before to acquaint himself with the region, which his predecessor had not taken the trouble to do. He was driven to write the instruction by his intention to improve the cultivation methods he encountered. At the end of the report of his tour, Rolff decried the bad state of the trees almost everywhere he went, and concluded that the regents were not following their orders and deserved to be punished by way of example. The instruction specified that coffee should be grown as close as possible to the planters’ homes and they were ordered to plant as many new trees as possible until they had a thousand trees a year to tend. They were also instructed to plant a hedge around the coffee plantations, to prevent the trees being damaged by cattle. The ground between the trees had to be raked four times a year to keep it free of weeds and dadap trees were to be planted to provide shade for the young coffee shrubs. These new requirements made it clear that coffee was no longer a crop the peasants could grow in their own yards. In the first two years, they were allowed to grow rice in between the young saplings, followed by a second crop. The beans were still dried at the peasant’s home. The regents and lower chiefs were obliged to pay for the beans immediately on delivery and to exempt their subordinates from other services as much as possible during the busy harvest season. Lastly, the European overseers had to inspect the crops from time to time, using horses and manpower supplied by the regents. Rolff had the instruction translated into Javanese and ordered it to be announced verbatim at the headquarters of the regencies during his subsequent inspection tour. As with all measures introduced during the eighteenth century to promote the collection of the tribute, issuing this instruction was much easier in theory than in practice. This first attempt to design a complete and thorough cultivation manual for producing this compulsory commodity was, however, even more interesting than the
inadequate level of compliance. A similar manual had been prepared in 1778 for cultivating and processing indigo, but the instruction for coffee in particular coincided with an enormous leap forwards in the volume produced. This substantial increase, however, appears to have been more due to the steadily expanding mass mobilization of peasant labour to cultivate coffee than to any improvement in the knowledge of the inspectors. A high-ranking Company official announced confidently at the end of the eighteenth century that as much coffee could be produced as there were ships made available to transport it to the metropolis.

Tardy population growth

A measure of the success of the new approach was a rise in production to 86,000 pikul in 1793. But intensification of the coffee cultivation was accompanied by persistent land flight. Spreading the work among more people than before could not prevent the burden increasing for everyone. Desertion was sometimes the only possible option remaining, and the peasants repeatedly and in large numbers resorted to this solution. Others left because the sawahs they relied on to grow their food had been requisitioned to plant coffee (De Haan I 1910: 159). The increase in production towards the end of the eighteenth century would not have been possible without the introduction of forced cultivation in parts of the Priangan which, until then, had been spared. In 1808, Lawick reported that, as soon as the population of Tjidamar in Sukapura heard that coffee was to be planted in their district, they left immediately without even starting to prepare the land. The following year, he reported that, in the Cirebon Priangan Regencies, some of the peasants used to move temporarily to another regency (where, as numpang, they were exempt from the forced cultivation) when the planting season arrived, only to return when it was over (De Haan III 1912: 629). In some places, like the Jampangs in south Priangan, coffee was introduced on ground that, although it was not very suitable for growing the crop, it stopped runaway peasants from settling there.

Around 1720, the Priangan could still be considered a frontier region, with no more than a little above one tenth of all land taken up for cultivation one way or the other. In 1777, the population was allegedly 55,000, rose to 206,494 in 1796, and was set at 150,822 in 1808 (De Haan I 1910: 953). The first headcount is as unreliable as the other two. Even the suggestion that the highest figure is closest to reality is pure speculation. Due to a lack of adequate knowledge and access, the VOC’s statistical records at