Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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III From trading company to state enterprise

Clashing interests

There was clearly no organized resistance to the VOC’s domination and the system of compulsory cultivation and delivery. However, this does not mean that the landed gentry of the Priangan gave their full cooperation to the new regime. The regents and, through them, the lower chiefs were paid commissions for their mediation, but not generously enough for money to have been their only incentive. Most of them accumulated an enormous debt to their benefactors in Batavia. Political coercion, or the threat of it, was potentially a more important motive for collaborating. The annual appearance of the regents at the colonial headquarters gave added gloss to their superiors’ power and was intended to reaffirm the chiefs’ sense of dependence. Although this arrangement offered them no opportunity to display their own grandeur, once they had returned to their home bases in the hinterland, the regents no longer acted as the eager jobbers that the VOC wanted them to be. Far removed from their superiors in Batavia, they had wide-ranging powers which they could exercise with little fear of being checked up on. The Company had no desire to concern itself deeply or constantly with indigenous affairs. This reluctance even took on the form of antipathy, caused not only by a complete lack of interest but also by a blissful ignorance of the way indigenous society was structured and organized.

Early-colonial reports emphasized how the feudal lifestyle of the landed gentry conflicted with the Company’s economic interests (De Haan I, 1910: 356). It is tempting to suggest a deep contrast between the contract-driven thinking of the trading company and the primary concern with status among the Priangan chiefs, the former concerned with growing coffee and the latter with hunting parties. But the divergence in aims and interests denies the many nuances on both sides. I have referred earlier to the lifestyle of the VOC directors in Batavia, which in a number of ways resembled that of the landed gentry and could easily be classified as neo-feudal. As for the regents, there has been little attention to the way in which they and the chiefs below them manifested themselves as economic entrepreneurs. There are indications that the landed gentry in the Sunda lands, as elsewhere on Java, played an important role in
trade and economic activity until the Company cut them off from these direct sources of power and wealth. Above all, they continued to be actively involved in the laying out and cultivation of new paddy fields. The steady conversion of dry land into irrigated fields often took place, as in former times, at the initiative and under the supervision of higher or lower patrons who belonged to the landed elite. The cultivation work itself was conducted by their clients among the peasant population who were entitled to till the new sawahs in exchange for a share of the fruits of their labour. Alongside the coffee production chain, with its managerial network extending across the rural landscape, there was also a distinct chain of production for paddy, over which the Company had no authority whatsoever and which continued to be organized completely outside its control. This explains why early-colonial accounts contain little or no information on how paddy cultivation was organized, how it gradually expanded and how supra-local chiefs requisitioned a share of the harvest. This lack of attention also applies to the involvement of Islamic clerics in agricultural affairs. Their active role in the daily work of the peasants would not come to light until much later.

The regents and the chiefs below them had many other sources of income, the nature and scale of which the Company had little insight into. According to the doctrine of non-intervention in indigenous affairs these were customary forms of tribute based on the servitude of the population to the chiefs that continued under the new regime. It was considered improper to abolish them or take them over. That also applied to the head tax, one of these old forms of tribute which the chiefs may have used to appropriate a considerable share of the payment the peasants received for growing the coffee. Lastly, the regents received income from the modest trade that developed in their regions, earning commissions from the monthly pasar and selling goods from Batavia to the local people, directly or through their agents. Sometimes the regent himself would bring these goods back in his caravan when returning from his annual visit to the colonial headquarters. I mention all these activities not only to correct the view that the Priangan regents were primarily or even exclusively concerned with indulging in ostentatious leisure, hunting and engaging in other feudal pastimes. More important is the conclusion that the economic interests of the regents conflicted, rather than coincided, with the expansion of coffee cultivation. In the eyes of the Company’s accountants, the regents’ attempts to exempt their clients partially or even completely from compulsory coffee cultivation was evidence of their non-economic mentality.
The greater the numbers of these unproductive dependants, the greater the pomp and ceremony. That is why the main negori\ji, which was teeming with such idle servants, not only of the Regent but also of the District chiefs and other lesser officials, usually fell short of the standard norms of morality. (De Haan I, 1910: 366)

The fact that there were always so many people hanging around the regent’s kraton and that no chief went anywhere without being accompanied by a whole entourage, was a source of great irritation to their colonial masters. But even more frustrating, of course, was that so many peasant clients who should have been working to raise the colonial tribute were used exclusively to work in the sawah kaprabon, the paddy fields owned by the chiefs themselves. Only with ‘horrendous threats’ did Rolff succeed in urging the regents to include the previously exempt numpang in the system of compulsory cultivation (De Haan I, 1910: 133). In the reports on the size of the population that they had to submit periodically, the chiefs probably only listed the class customarily subject to servitude: the peasant-owners. The difficulties involved in holding the regents accountable for producing and delivering the volume of coffee required eventually led the VOC to take action. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, it transferred primary responsibility for supervising the coffee growers from the regents to the district chiefs. This new policy was laid down officially in a resolution in 1790.

The aforementioned cutak chiefs are also primarily responsible for the neglect of the coffee plantations and thus are obliged, on occasion that the neglect is the result of the extortions of the direct producers, to remonstrate them; if in the reverse case, that is if such is concealed, by its discovery [they] are to be considered and punished as accomplices and supporters. (Hoadley 1994: 162)

This forced the regents back, even more than before, into a position of mainly decorative significance, a demotion defended by reference to their ‘despotic capriciousness’. An alternative would have been to expand the number of European inspectors, but this was probably not even considered because of the costs involved. The indigenous chiefs received no stipend and the Company remained resolute in its refusal to depart from the principle of cheap governance. Furthermore, it cannot have escaped the notice of the VOC’s directors that the coffee sergeants charged with inspection had proven very susceptible to all kinds of corrupt practices.
The solution chosen by the Company may have been the cheapest, but was it the best option for increasing production? The delegation of authority to the district chiefs was little more than a cosmetic change, as the exercise of power at this level was little different from that in the regency headquarters. Chiefs, from high to low, acted as agents implementing the system of compulsory cultivation and delivery. Behind the facade of their cooperation in collecting the colonial tribute, however, they were in charge of a completely different economic activity: growing paddy. Although the paddy was not intended for export, it was of considerable economic importance, also to the chiefs themselves, and they gave this staple food preference over growing coffee at the behest of the VOC. They kept double accounts and gave priority to activities that were more lucrative and over which the Company had no control. In an attempt to ensure proper supervision, the Company issued the regent’s substitute and his district chiefs with deeds of appointment. Nevertheless, coffee production continued to depend nominally on the regents, as a consequence of which their prosperity increased. But it was arguable whether this was enough to ensure their loyalty. Nicolaus Engelhard, Commissioner in the final decade of the eighteenth century, poignantly observed that the regents would have happily exchanged their riches for their lost freedom of action (De Haan I, 1910: 146).

Failing management

The discussion among policy-makers in the latter years of the VOC on how to proceed with the system of colonial exploitation did not at first lead to any change in the production of coffee for the expanding world market. The improved results were partly due to the Cultivation Instruction drawn up by Commissioner Rolff in 1789 on where, when and how coffee should be tended and harvested. He composed the manual based on his own experience, but also obtained information from the coffee sergeants and regents. It was the first attempt to use practical knowledge to give the cultivation of coffee a more professional basis (De Haan II, 1911: 631-43). Demand had risen gradually in the course of time, sometimes increasing more rapidly in response to specific events. In 1791, for example, when a slave uprising on the island of San Domingo put a stop to the export of coffee from this West Indian colony. The price rise that this caused on the European market stimulated the expansion of cultivation on Java. Newly appointed Commissioner Nicolaus Engelhard rapidly increased the level of supply, thereby playing an important role in assuring the budget required to continue the