IV Government regulated exploitation versus private agribusiness

Discovery of the village system

As legitimate successor to the kings on Java, Raffles decreed that the peasants had to pay rent to the state for the land they tilled. The initial intention was to give responsibility for collecting the tax to the demang, bekel and loerah, the lowest level of indigenous chiefs who, as petty landlords, were closest to the agrarian population. They were in charge of collecting the tribute that had to be paid by the landowning households of each peasant locality in money or in kind. The Lieutenant-General changed his mind, however, when he received new information suggesting that the people in various parts of Java were certainly no strangers to the notion of agrarian property. The information came from officials who had gained experience with the introduction of the ryotwari system in the Presidencies of Madras and Bombay in British India. Under this system of land rule, individual peasants were recognized as the primary targets of taxation. Some members of the inquiry committee sent out by Raffles to investigate the tribute levied from the peasantry had already established earlier that individual property was also known in West Java. In addition, they determined that only the inhabitants of a settlement were permitted to lay claim to the waste land around it (Bastin 1954: 57). The report on land rights that J. Knops submitted to Raffles noted that peasants who cultivated dry land to grow rice were considered the individual owners of the fields.

The Javanese who clears such lands from the root of trees, brushwood, &c., and renders a wilderness fit for cultivation, considers himself as proprietor of the same, and especially as owner of what it produces, on which no taxes are levied. These lands admit of cultivation every second year only, which, however, is no loss to the proprietor, whose [next] harvest is more abundant in consequence. (Raffles 1814: 131)

The rights of ownership also extended to the trees that the peasant planted and excluded all imposition of taxes. The Lieutenant-General concluded from these new findings that peasants had at least the right to usage of the fields they tilled. He could not permit himself to ignore the sovereign right of the government to the land, as the colonial administration and
its right to impose taxes were founded on this principle. Raffles assumed that he had discovered the traditional structure of Javanese rural society: a community of peasants with an advanced degree of control over their own agrarian resources, which had been best preserved in areas the furthest removed from the courts of the kings.

The feudal structure that had replaced this system in the more recent past under despotic Muslim rule had rendered the old community institutions obsolete. Raffles saw it as his duty to restore the primacy of community authority and to respect the rights of the people of Java to use the land as they saw fit. This led him to propose a new, more detailed regulation based on a head tax for all landowners and issuing them with deeds of ownership. Properly introducing the land rent system required not only a much more extensive apparatus than Raffles had at his disposal, but also the creation of a very detailed system of land tenure for the registration of property rights, a survey of land use and other data on the structure of peasant production. It was a task that far exceeded the existing capacity of the colonial administration. Raffles was aware of this problem and, as an interim solution, introduced a desa-based land rent. The demang, bekel and loerah were still the linchpins of this system. But, where they had previously been seen as landlords in their own right who, commissioned as agents of the government, were responsible for collecting the land rent, they were now attributed the role of local headmen, acting as intermediaries between the peasants and the colonial bureaucracy. Raffles himself underlined the importance of this reversal of authority (1814: 115). In the new interpretation, the village headmen were seen as the first among equals and peasant households were accustomed to choosing the best candidates from among their own ranks democratically through annual elections. Raffles issued orders for this ‘traditional custom’, which he saw as having been destroyed by the despotic rule of the kings, to be restored. By taking this step, he was undoubtedly motivated by the desire to break the concentration of power in the hands of a small supra-local gentry. The designation of the village head as the collector of taxes also suited the goal of keeping the costs of administration to a minimum. As a reward for their mediation, the village heads were exempted from paying land rent, were allocated official fields from the village lands, and the right to lay claim to the labour services that peasants still had to provide.

In this way, the village head, assisted by other members of the village council, became the focal point of the land rent administration until regulations could be introduced that were directed at the peasant households individually. The reforms initiated by Raffles gave a powerful boost to the
idea of an ‘original’ form of village autonomy, the restoration of which was a high priority for the colonial rulers. Yet this early source, from which the existence of a local community of peasants is derived, contains numerous features that cast doubt on the alleged close-knit nature of this social formation. For example, it was common for peasant households belonging to the same lord to live at some considerable distance from each other. Another factor that sheds doubt on the institutional self-sufficiency of the settlements is their minuscule size. The 734 villages surveyed in the two regencies of Bandung and Cianjur during the British interlude had an average of 39 inhabitants (Bastin 1954: 81). The settlements on the northern coastal plain were a little larger but here, too, the number of huts was never more than a few dozen. Their small scale must have imposed limits on the autonomy and autarchy of these settlements.

In a number of respects and in a very short time, therefore, Raffles radically revised his original design. This rapid turnabout is illustrated by the fact that Crawfurd, the most senior member of his staff, claimed confidently in an early report ‘that there is not an acre of land in the country to which the shadow of hereditary right or title could be made’, while a year later, he opened a memorandum on the situation in Cirebon by declaring with equal aplomb ‘that the right of private property in the soil is generally acknowledged and tolerably well understood’. Raffles’ comment on this latter observation was that, in areas far removed from the courts of the despotic rulers, such as West Java, the old community institutions must have remained intact. This explanation is especially inaccurate regarding Cirebon, a centre of sultanate power where Islam gained a foothold at an early stage. These changing opinions on what the ‘original’ situation had been and where it had been preserved most purely displayed a lack of knowledge of both the present and the past. Moreover, the interpretation derived from these opinions was not based on any intrinsic interest in the country and its people but primarily in satisfying the immediate ambitions and interests of the colonial ruler. The promise to restore a vanished past was adjusted so as to be as much as possible in harmony with these ends (Breman 1979).

Raffles did make a greater effort than his predecessors to gather intelligence that was relevant for policy. Daendels had made a start by ordering accurate maps to be drawn and by drafting a survey in 1809 for all districts on the basis of 21 questions that the inspectors of the coffee cultivation in the Priangan Regencies were made to answer first (Van ‘t Veer 1963: 134). But, like many more of his directives, the quality of their implementation left much to be desired. That his English successor took a more systematic
approach became immediately clear when he appointed a heavy-duty committee of inquiry. The report the committee produced was not only more comprehensive than all earlier exercises of this kind, but also of a much higher quality. Nevertheless, this ‘statistical’ record also contained many flaws and spurious facts. In addition to the tendency, already referred to, to report findings that supported pre-conceived administrative intentions, the members of the committee were also given far too little time to do their inventory work thoroughly. The great effort that it took them to travel meant that they hardly penetrated inland and, even on the coastal plain, only visited the most accessible places. It was rarely possible for them to spend more than one day in each regency, according to the committee chairman. Another problem was their lack of command of the language. With one exception, none of the committee members were able to talk directly with the people living in the area they were investigating. Translating the questions and answers from English into Dutch, Malay and, lastly, Javanese was extremely cumbersome. As the committee only had a limited number of writers and translators, and of dubious competence, a large amount of information must have been recorded incorrectly or lost. Furthermore, the submissiveness of the ordinary peasantry towards their superiors made it impossible to ask people to give their opinions frankly and freely. When the chairman of the committee complained to his Dutch fellow members that the West Javanese regents were so reluctant to give him information, they advised him not to attach too much value to what they had to say anyway (Bastin 1954: 125).

The closer the colonial government came to the peasant’s habitat, the greater was the need for more knowledge on its structure and modus operandi. Also interesting is the attempt to bring some kind of order into this multiplicity of widely varying facts by deploying insights derived from colonial rule over peasantries elsewhere in Asia. It was of course no coincidence that, under Raffles, reports on the native population in British India became an important source of inspiration in getting to grips with the social structure and culture on Java. Neither Daendels nor Raffles held their posts for longer than three years. But the reforms that they initiated laid the foundations for an early-colonial state that did not develop to the full until after they had departed again. The impact they left behind therefore by far outweighed the duration of their governance on Java. Raffles had to justify the costs of the occupation of the colony and to persuade his lukewarm superiors in Calcutta that the domain he had acquired could be extremely profitable. As already noted, this was one of the main reasons for him to exclude the Priangan Regencies from the new system of taxation. Rather than paying land rent, the people here had to continue delivering coffee
to the government, as before. The forced cultivation of this perennial crop also meant that the authority of the regents in the Sundanese highlands remained unaffected. The difference between this and the regulations that Raffles had introduced in the other parts of Java, a difference that had already started to emerge in the time of Daendels, exposed the separate place that the Priangan region occupied in the system of colonial exploitation.

The continuation of what was in effect the coffee regime of the VOC did not generate the great profits that Raffles needed. He himself attributed the disappointing results to the costs of production, including transport to the market, which were twice as high as the selling price had been in recent years. He added to this that the planters received an unreasonably low price for their labour (Raffles 1814: 67). It is a telling comment on the gigantic rise in price that took place from the moment of delivery to the government’s warehouses inland to the arrival of the coffee on the coast. This increase, we can conclude, disappeared almost exclusively into the pockets of a series of indigenous and European intermediaries. The fall in the selling price was a consequence of the British blockade of continental Europe for overseas products during the Napoleonic wars. The stagnating sales not only kept the prices down but also resulted in overfull warehouses. At first supply continued to rise as a consequence of the large-scale planting of trees in new production area on Daendels’ orders. The response to the overproduction was exactly the same as in the earliest history of coffee cultivation on Java: mass extirpation of trees which, in some areas, led to the complete destruction of the crop. Peasants who had to deliver their harvest without receiving any payment at all did this on their own initiative. Rather than taking action to combat this dereliction of duty, the government even offered its silent collaboration (Van der Kemp 1916: 129). After production had fallen from 116,648 pikul in 1810 to 21,348 pikul in 1811 as a result of the stagnation in sales, this was compensated for a year later with a doubling of the much reduced volume. In the next two years, the recovery remained at this level, while in 1815, it rose to 60,186 pikul. That this improvement was considered likely to continue in the years after that can be concluded from Raffles’ decision in 1813 to plant more than two to three million new trees in Priangan. Still, it would take great efforts to restore the number of trees lost to their former level.

Land sale

There was another way of raising money for running expenses, namely auctioning off estates together with the peasants who lived and worked