Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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the landowners who laid claim to the largest share of the means of existence. Because they had greater carrying capacity, it was reasonable to tax them more harshly than the class that possessed little or no agrarian property. In an attempt to increasingly raise the level of the tribute as a result of the growing demand for colonial goods on the world market, the VOC and later the government switched to a more widely distributed means of collecting it, which was intended to have a levelling effect. In practice, the system of coffee cultivation meant that the main landowners designated land-poor and landless households to do the work that had been imposed on everyone under the rules of public servitude. The social structure was already based on a division between lords and peasants; the colonial regime, with the tribute as its main component, simply reinforced these divisions and the complexity of the hierarchical order. One indication of this was that, in 1860, of the 108,816 households that practised agriculture in the Sunda highlands, more than a third possessed no paddy fields, a significantly higher percentage than elsewhere on Java (Enklaar 1871: 134). Another source set the landless class even higher, at more than half, pointing out that the area of land used to grow food was growing more slowly than the population (Aardrijkskundig en statistisch woordenboek van Nederlandsch Indië, 1869: 832-3). The Priangan system had helped advance a process of proletarianization in that small landowners in particular found themselves having to sell their sawahs and even having to give the buyer money to relieve themselves of the oppressive burden of labour (Scheltema 1927-28: 292). Abandoned paddy fields were not rare and local chiefs would add them to the land they already had appropriated. The colonial sources devote little attention to how this agrarian underclass emerged in the Priangan Regencies. I will examine the social and economic polarization that developed over time more closely at the end of the following chapter. The small paddy growers of the Priangan had been turned into coffee coolies. Besides growing paddy and coffee there was hardly any other economic activity in the region. The report for 1846 noted the lack of regular market places and sheds to store goods in the residency. Warung stalls offered a variety of food and goods for daily consumption in the headquarters of each regency, but this was on a very small scale (Report on the Priangan Regencies 1848: 90).

Good governance

The cause of the crisis that developed in extracting the tribute was not primarily sought in the heavy burden under which the population laboured
or the meagre payment the planters earned for their work, but in the way coffee production was managed. Although it was now accepted that it had to be organized along different lines and that it was no longer possible to further postpone a modest increase in the price paid to the producers, what primarily emerged was the need for the colonial bureaucracy to come closer to the workfloor and become more directly involved in the manner of exploitation. This came down to eliminating the authority of the regional aristocracy, on which the Priangan system had been founded since the early eighteenth century. This modality had been chosen in the time of the VOC because of the lack of insight into and control over the structure of native society. The rationale was that the new rulers, operating in a landscape that was alien to them, had insufficient reach to take charge of the collection of the tribute at the source. The forced cultivation and delivery of crops for export to the metropolis was allegedly the continuation of a pre-existing practice deriving from the servitude of the peasants to the landed gentry. This was a biased appraisal of their relationship devised to legitimize the claim on the labour power of the population. The lords of the Priangan acquired more power than they had ever had before and the peasants found themselves – as a result of the policy of sedentarization, territorialization and hierarchization – confined in a relationship of subordination that they had not experienced in the pre-colonial era. Deserting or looking for another lord who was less demanding, as frequently occurred in the past, was no longer an option. When the early-colonial state was set up in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the existing method of raising taxes in the Priangan Regencies was maintained. Elsewhere on Java, a different form of indirect governance was chosen, namely the desa system, which was also a colonial invention (Breman 1979 and 1980). In the Sunda highlands, the government remained at a distance from the workfloor of peasant production. The continued mediation of the regional gentry was required to ensure the servitude of the peasant settlers in growing and delivering larger quantities of coffee. This mode of production, now designated more correctly than previously as the Priangan system, combined high profits with low costs, as supervision and management were paid at the expense of the monetary reward received by the peasants. The principle of cheap governance on which colonial exploitation in the Sunda highlands had been based was abandoned in the final quarter of the nineteenth century when there was a growing awareness that the disadvantages of indirect rule were greater than their advantages. What had so long been an exception to the governance model introduced in the rest of Java earlier in the century now had to be adapted to it. In that sense the abolition of the Priangan
system accommodated the desire to streamline the colonial bureaucracy across the island.

Behind the expressions of praise, repeated _ad nauseam_, for the way in which the chiefs had contributed to the system of forced cultivation throughout the years, serious doubts had always been voiced about the genuine willingness of the regents and their subordinates to commit themselves to increasingly high targets. The assumption that the landed gentry managed to get the peasants to do more than a small number of colonial officials would be able to achieve could no longer be taken for granted. Certainly, the idea that the peasants’ servitude towards the regents was the best way of overcoming their aversion to forced cultivation was still to be found in official memoranda, but the question was whether the native chiefs actually performed their tasks as surmised. The high command in the metropolis became increasingly doubtful about this as time passed. These sceptical voices culminated in the accusation of failing management, as the coffee report bluntly stated (Coffee Report 1870-71: 2759). The criticism manifested a reversal of the previously so favourable opinion of the exceptional qualities of the generously rewarded taskmasters of the coffee production, who had successfully persuaded the people of the Priangan to abide by the rules of the cultivation system and made sure they continued to do so. That this was no longer the case was blamed on the chiefs and not on the peasants. Underlying the criticism was the suspicion that the lords did not possess the necessary entrepreneurial acumen to raise the tribute to the required level. This appraisal was based on the conviction that the regents’ feudal lifestyle did not equip them to act decisively and to show their subordinates the way forward to progress. Was the parasitical way of life of which the local chiefs were now accused not, however, the logical consequence of a policy initiated in the VOC era, to place the lords on a pedestal and force the population to remain subject to them, and to use this servitude as a lever to impose an excessive tribute?

In a retrospective review of his time in office, the architect of the cultivation system continued to adhere to his standpoint that eroding the position of the native chiefs would weaken colonial authority (Van den Bosch 1864: 104). On the other hand, there was no lack of early supporters of the view that giving the native chiefs a privileged position would be counterproductive. Andries de Wilde already considered the regents superfluous in his time. He proposed shortly and sharply that these good-for-nothings should be relieved of their functions, allocated an annual allowance and allowed to keep only the paddy fields that were their own personal property, while
their positions as coffee managers should be taken over by Dutch officials (De Wilde 1830). The course adopted by Godert van der Capellen after the restoration of Dutch rule ran completely counter to this advice: permitting the native chiefs their dignity, showing them the respect that their elevated status required, but also restricting them to a role that permitted them no economic interest of their own. They must not show any entrepreneurial ambitions at all and were explicitly forbidden from any commercial activities, such as engaging in trade, transporting goods, or acting as business partners. Permitting them only a purely decorative significance, limiting them to displays of prestige so as to instil in their subordinates their duty of unswerving loyalty, did not however affect their position as managers of the coffee production. They were not permitted to engage in business activities at their own risk and expense, but as managers working for the government they had to meet high standards. The contradictory nature of these obligations was not a subject of discussion, but as the years passed the colonial rulers became increasingly irritated by the regents’ insistence on idle ostentation, their privilege to do nothing other than make a show of their prestige and status. This displeasure was expressed in the administrative reorganization of the Priangan that now followed.

Van Rees, the special investigative commissioner entrusted with this delicate operation wrote in the letter accompanying his final report in 1867 that the special rights claimed by the gentry in the Priangan were the figment of colonial imagination and practice. The backward nature of native governance should be replaced by the modus operandi of the regular bureaucracy that had already been introduced in the rest of Java half a century earlier. The incentive for excluding the native aristocracy from the exercise of colonial power was partly the observed desire of the Sundanese chiefs for a life of pomp and circumstance as far removed as possible from the common people. The appearance of the regents in public, surrounded by their entourage of clients, had the air of a display of sacral authority that harked back to the behaviour of the princes in the pre-colonial era. It had all the ceremonial trappings of sovereign authority, with the priyayi surrounding the ruler according to rank. In this courtly atmosphere, a form of stylized behaviour developed, emphasized by the proximity of courtiers around the regent, that removed itself from the milieu of the common people, while serving as a model for them. Even the simplest of peasants carried themselves with a modesty and dignity that outsiders found striking. The ‘modern’ colonial observer took objection to the demonstrative display of native humility towards superiors, but was also aware that it helped maintain peace and order.
The aristocracy, to which the peasantry naturally showed their first allegiance, could no longer do anything right in the eyes of their foreign rulers. The respect and courtesy to which the local chiefs were entitled, according to Van der Capellen, had made way for contempt and condescension. Behind their facade of eminence, they were seen as displaying no outer, let alone inner, features of civilized behaviour, but only rank vulgarity, boastfulness and triviality. Van Hoëvell, who would make his name as a colonial critic, painted an extremely negative portrait of the regent of Cianjur whom he visited to pay his respects during his tour of Java in 1847. His host proved indeed to be a wealthy man. His palatial house was richly furnished in European style but ‘with little taste, with large mirrors, paintings and sofas’, which Van Hoëvell found ‘nothing special’. He also met the regent at a reception at the house of the Resident. The chief was accompanied by his wife, an entourage of courtiers and servants, and the traditional eight dancers. The liberal clergyman’s detailed description of what he witnessed was heavy with contempt (Van Hoëvell I, 1849: 23). The mixture of traditional and modern was typical not only of the regents but
Office of the Resident in Bandung. The seat of the Dutch colonial bureaucracy in the Priangan Regencies was initially in the Cianjur foothills but was relocated here in 1864. The building had, of course, to exceed the *kraton* of the regent of Bandung in magnitude and splendor (photo pre-1880).

Source: KITLV Collection

applied just as much to the district chiefs, who imitated the European way of life, wearing Western clothes and furnishing their houses with mirrors, hanging clocks, billiard tables and silver cutlery. 'You will miss nothing but the good taste', one liberal noted sarcastically (Van Soest III, 1871: 180). Veth spoke with similar disdain of the regent of Bandung, who had surpassed his rival in Cianjur in wealth and appeared in front of European guests in 'garments glittering with diamonds'. At receptions, courtiers would crawl along behind their lord on their knees, as he strutted along with his stick, hat, cigar-holder and spittoon (Veth III, 1882: 253) "Too lazy even to carry his own *sirih* box" was the comment of one European who witnessed this display, on whom the finesse of court etiquette were clearly lost.38

38 This portrait would not be complete without drawing attention to the extent to which the privileged expatriate class had adopted local customs and styles. De Haan pointed out that 'no self-respecting pure-blooded Dutch lady would be seen without a servant carrying her *sirih* box. In elite circles, the women had adopted the habit of chewing *sirih* and blackening their teeth. One
The district head of Banjaran surrounded by his retinue of servants and officials. [Banjaran lies to the south of Bandung, at the foot of the Malabar mountain.] A payung is held above the wedana’s head to demonstrate his authority (photo pre-1880).

Source: KITLV Collection

In the nineteenth century the Priangan regents assumed the airs of minor princes who had to show respect to no native sovereigns above them, renamed their humble dalem a ‘kraton’ and demanded that their clients pay court to them in the best traditions of the kingdom of Mataram. They showed their European masters that they had adapted to the demands of the modern world: they drank champagne, kept stables of racehorses, gave their sons an education and held official positions. Towards their own people, they tried to articulate their sacral-royal status. As in the Mataram period, or at least how it was portrayed, the hierarchical structure of native society in the nineteenth-century visitor came across a member of Batavian high society, the wife of a former Director-General, on the back porch in sarong and kabaaï, her hair loose, on a mat on the ground, surrounded by slave girls doing some kind of work or another, while the lady of the house was cleaning vegetables; next to her ladyship was a large silver spittoon, into which she would, from time to time, spit long streaks of blood-red sirih juice’ (De Haan I, Personalia, 1910: 252, note 1). The sarcasm underlying this portrayal of the East Indies lifestyle of the elite in the mid-19th century must be understood in the light of the more bourgeois European lifestyle increasingly adopted by the subsequent generation of colonial officials and their families.
Priangan reflected on a smaller scale how the inferior chiefs paid homage to their overlords. It was a ceremonial ritual accompanied by great public displays of prestige and which appeared to have withstood the test of time. Hunting parties and tournaments showed how feudal the lifestyle of the native aristocracy had become while, in the eyes of the colonial officials, such behaviour simply proved how useless and superfluous the elite had become. The guests themselves paid for these lavish affairs, since they had to provide everything required free of charge. The regents assumed the right to lay claim to all the possessions of their subordinates. The moderation and kindness that early sources attributed to the lords in their treatment of the peasants was replaced in this revised colonial perspective by an emphasis on the regents as tyrants, exercising their power like veritable despots. The government had not succeeded on alleviating the misery of the people of the Priangan.

Private ownership unknown to the native, not even over his wife and children, if the will of his chiefs came into play. (Phitzinger Report 1863: 146)

From this perspective, the chiefs subjected the people to an advanced form of subordination that left the latter no space to build up a decent existence. This critique was accompanied by the suggestion that the poverty of the peasants, if it existed, was caused by the fact that all surplus generated by their labour was expropriated by their lords. In 1861, in the magazine he himself edited, Van Hoëvell addressed a comment to Multatuli, intended not only to place the author in the camp of those who criticized the cultivation system but also entreating him to show some understanding for colonial officials, who were genuinely concerned about the miserable lot of the Javanese peasants. It was not they who were the root of all evil, it was the native chiefs who behaved with impunity. The liberal leader reserved his wrath for the chiefs of Lebak and their counterparts in the Priangan and he expressed his deep regret that Multatuli did not wish to see the Dutch government as an ally in his crusade against them. The dissenting author, however, pronounced sentence by accusing the government and the chiefs of conspiring to prevent the Javanese people from improving their lives. By choosing to fight his battle on a broad front, he incurred the displeasure of both the liberals and the conservatives at home.

**From protectors to exploiters**

The colonial authorities now openly expressed their suspicions that the native chiefs were not only unsuited to take responsibility for collecting the