Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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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
tribute, but also put their own interests ahead of those of the government. The cultivation and delivery of coffee, lucrative as it was for them, was not their only – or even their primary – source of income. According to calculations by Resident Overhand in 1849, the regents had earned twice as much in the previous year from their share of a tenth part of the paddy harvest than from coffee. Of the total of 50,318 guilders that the regent of Cianjur earned in 1848, according to this official report, his income from the sale of paddy amounted to 32,368 guilders, he earned 500 guilders from taxes on the slaughter and sale of cattle, a further 2,200 guilders from the tax on *warungs*, and lastly 15,250 guilders from the cultivation and delivery of coffee. His colleague in Bandung, who earned a total of 86,524 guilders, made twice as much from coffee: 30,000 guilders. But his share of the paddy was also worth much more, at 51,224 guilders. The compilers of the coffee report, in which this overview was included, warned that the regents themselves has presented the figures, which did not include what the compilers referred to as ‘unknown legal and illegal benefits’. In other words, the declared account of the regents’ earnings was on the conservative side. The same applied to the statement of the average incomes of the regents between 1862-64 submitted to Commissioner Van Rees by Resident Christiaan van der Moore in 1866-67: 299,498 guilders. The regent of Bandung accounted for about half of this, while those of Limbangan and Sukapura had to settle for a meagre sum of a little more than 20,000 guilders. Besides these considerable differences between the chiefs, the strong fluctuations over time are also striking. These were mainly caused by good or bad coffee harvests and widely fluctuating revenues from paddy taxes. The only two constant factors were the great unpredictability in the pattern of incomes and expenditures of the regents and the colonial administration’s lack of insight into their magnitude and composition. The uneasy feeling that the figures were arbitrary and concealed a hidden reality could no longer be avoided.

Van Rees confirmed this suspicion by determining that, of the total of 168,521 households in the Priangan, no fewer than 20,030 were exempt from colonial servitude. That meant that nearly an eighth part of the population was at the disposal of the chiefs for their own convenience. This substantial segment probably included not only the *rahayat*, the class of peasant-landowners that made up the entourage of the landed gentry, but also the *panukang*, who tended the chiefs’ fields as dependent sharecroppers. According to colonial officials, the servitude of the peasants towards their lords was driven by the latter’s love of ostentatious displays of prestige. The claims they made on the peasants’ labour power served no productive
purpose at all. Exempting households from growing coffee meant the available labour was being underutilized, and that the volume of tribute was suffering at the expense of the chiefs’ indolence. This interpretation, however, ignored the fact that the gentry persistently used this exempted category of peasants to cultivate land to grow paddy and thereby to increase their incomes. A government investigation into the land rights of the local population conducted in later years showed that sawahs were laid out by peasants providing corvee services in the regencies of Cianjur, Bandung and Sumedang until the second half of the nineteenth century (Eindresumé II, 1880: 32-5). Cultivating land at the initiative of local lords was undoubtedly the main reason for the emergence of large-scale landownership which gave the Priangan highlands the character of an agricultural frontier in the early-colonial period. The concentration of cultivated land in the hands of the chiefs increased as they took possession of holdings abandoned after their owners had left or died. There were also cases of owners being forced to relinquish their agrarian property (De Haan I, 1910: 368). The heavy burden that landownership entailed also facilitated its transfer to members of the higher or lower landed gentry, as they were exempt from servitude (Eindresumé II, 1880: 52). This source, which presented the results of the government’s investigation of land tenure, confirmed that the landed gentry controlled a large share of the cultivated land, either through inheritance or in the form of fields which went together with the office they held. The fact that the fields were widely dispersed and were assigned to large number of sharecroppers concealed the extent of this large-scale landlordism. Because servitude was based on landownership and notables were exempt from this duty, the unequal distribution of ownership led in the long term to a critical shortage of compulsory labour.

While the government’s attention was focused on the main export crop, the chiefs made every effort to expand the land used to grow food and to acquire as much of it as possible for themselves. Land registered in the colonial administration as belonging to the chiefs by virtue of their position had often in reality been expropriated from its original peasant owners and their descendants. The coffee report made note of this trend towards dispossession and how it had led to the accumulation of agrarian resources in the hands of the rural elite. The refusal of the lords of Priangan to give priority to colonial interests – the cultivation and delivery of increasing volumes of coffee by their subordinates – and the fact that they put their own interests first led to their final exclusion from governance. The earlier courtesy towards local chiefs increasingly made way for a coolness bordering on hostility, expressed through a growing number of complaints about
their misdeeds. This achieved such proportions that orders were issued from higher up for greater moderation in reporting the chiefs’ misdemeanours (Van Deventer III, 1866: 323). The government took the opportunity offered by the regents’ abuse of their power to present itself as the true benefactor and protector of the people’s interests. They would do what the chiefs had failed to do: ensure that the burden of servitude was shared more justly and less unequally. In the contest between the government and the native chiefs over scarce labour, which had been going for a century and a half, the latter had stubbornly resisted the loss of their right to lay claim to the peasants’ labour power. This is demonstrated by the persistent complaints of first VOC agents and then colonial officials about the insufficient distribution of obligations under the system of forced cultivation. That was the main reason for the abolition of the distinction between *bumi* and *numpang* towards the end of the eighteenth century and the replacement of the *cacah* formation by the *somahan*, the core household, as the basic unit for the tribute in 1839. The unequal distribution of the burden reflected the tradition of corvee services, where some classes of the population were heavily burdened while others were exempted and where available manpower was underutilized in general. The chiefs in the Priangan exempted many people from other obligations – including cultivation services – so that they could be used to advance the chiefs’ own interests and prestige. As late as 1869, the Colonial Report noted that the Resident of the Priangan Regencies personally and in clear terms had to urge regents and district and village chiefs to assure a more equal distribution of corvee services.

In administrative jargon, the chiefs’ manner of granting exemptions was designated as ‘arbitrary’. Concerns were sometimes driven by a desire for reform, but more often by irritation with the fact that these practices withdrew valuable labour power from the system of colonial exploitation. The motivation for wishing to distribute cultivation services more widely was to improve production; since the time of Daendels, the focus had not been on combating the ‘arbitrary’ exercise of power by the chiefs but on making the collection of the tribute more efficient. ‘Extortion’ was another term that was popular in bureaucratic circles to describe a wide variety of counterproductive practices by native managers. It was undoubtedly a justified accusation with its roots in the fact that lower chiefs did not receive any form of regular reimbursement. They were in the service of regents or their officials, but received meagre payment for their efforts, inadequate to fund their lives as minor gentry. They were entitled to a third share of the *cuke*, which was collected at the source. For their involvement in the cultivation and delivery of coffee they had to wait and see what remained
for them after the cultivation commission had been paid to the regent. This was often very little or nothing at all. They made up the deficit with what were known in the Company era as ‘hidden profits’. All actions that were inextricably and traditionally bound up with the native aristocracy were denounced as ‘arbitrary’ and ‘extortionate’. From this perspective, good governance was seen as the task, even the apostolic mission, that the modern colonial government was expected to pursue.

The whole society was autocratic, both in structure and attitude. Blind obedience and unconditional subordination to one’s superiors had, through centuries of custom, struck deep roots in the hearts of the people. No wonder that, with this unbridled power on the one hand and almost boundless submission on the other, the Javanese lordly regime was not a powerful and benevolent autocracy but an unprincipled, unpredictable and often intolerable tyranny. A completely different spirit inspires the Dutch government. Its aim is to further the welfare of both Mother Country and Colony by creating and maintaining law and order. (Nederburgh 1877: 434)

The unpredictability, arbitrariness, abuse of power and other failings of which the native chiefs were accused must be understood in the light of the hierarchical structure of the colonized society. The way the regents exercised their authority was arbitrary by nature. They distributed favours and imposed obligations unequally, exempting some from servitude and demanding it from others, and withholding payments or meting out punishment as they saw fit. Chiefs, no matter how insignificant, were exempted from performing compulsory services for the government and when the substantial lower class of gentry were no longer able to claim this privilege, they were permitted to send others to perform their cultivation or corvee services in their place. The lack of precise instructions and rule to which subordinates could appeal was neither coincidental nor exceptional, but purposeful and systematic. The descendants of local chiefs told of punishment which subordinates could appeal was neither coincidental nor exceptional, but purposeful and systematic. The descendants of local chiefs told of punishments meted out in the past for not following orders. One particularly brutal taskmaster was the son of the regent of Cianjur, who as kumetir was in charge of coffee cultivation in the early nineteenth century (Inlandsche verhalen 1863: 293) But it could be worse – the regents would not shy away from murder as a form of punishment. In these accounts, it was the higher and lower chiefs who incurred the wrath of their lords, but they would have been equally as cruel in their treatment of the peasants. Justifying such excessive behaviour as traditional ignores that fact that it was to a
large extent the product of early-colonial rule. The regents in the Priangan lands were elevated to the level of rulers, since giving them greater power than they had enjoyed before was seen as a perfect way of guaranteeing the collection of the tribute, in the form of the compulsory cultivation and delivery of coffee. The policy of sedentarization, territorialization and hierarchization had confined the peasant population in an authoritarian regime and denied them any power to resist. In short, rather than perpetuating a pre-existing system of autocratic rulers versus submissive followers, the subordination of the peasants had been enforced with help from outside.

It is most certainly true that, according to the standards of the Dutch bureaucracy – or at least the modern-colonial interpretation of them – arbitrariness and extortion did occur. The question is, however, whether such practices were not also the result of insufficient control over the chiefs by the regents, and of the peasants by the chiefs. The ‘gaps’ in the system of colonial rule also occurred in native management: it was unable to close all loopholes and lacked the bureaucratic expediency to respond promptly and effectively to problems as they arose. The confinement of the peasants in the Priangan system did not prevent them from resisting the heavy burden imposed especially on their labour power. They did not engage in open or violent action against their lords or the alien rulers, but adopted more subtle ways to resist, such as evading their duties, sabotage and other forms of disobedience, which eventually brought the coffee regime to a standstill. There was certainly a lack of administrative efficiency and effectiveness in the Sundanese highlands. Making use of ‘traditional’ leaders and institutions to enforce the cultivation system did not lead to a system of perfect control but to one of compromise and striking the best possible deal. Coffee cultivation did not transform the landed gentry of the Priangan into a dynamic, let alone dynamizing, economic vanguard, but merely offered new, rich sources of income from which the majority of the peasants hardly benefited. To break through the stagnation that this brought about in the exploitation of the people and land of the Priangan, the colonial mission had to be reformulated. Governance at arm’s length had to be replaced by more direct and close-up intervention by European officials, and the system of coffee cultivation had to be transformed into one that was also attractive to the producers.

The way in which this occurred will be considered, albeit summarily, in the following chapter. Here, my further argument focuses on the administrative reforms that were introduced in the Priangan Regencies and their ideological underpinning. The high-ranking official entrusted
with the reorganization marked this change of course by establishing that the Priangan peasant was by no means insensitive to the privilege of being free ‘to do as he himself sees fit with his own will, his time, his labour, his family and his possessions’ (Van Rees 1867: 60). This viewpoint tied in closely with the thinking of a new generation of colonial policymakers who, like their predecessors, were imbued with their beholden duty to show the people the way to progress and prosperity. Without careful guidance, however, the peasants – once freed from the burdens imposed by their native lords – would not be able to take this path under their own steam (Nederburgh 1877: 436). This facade of well-intentioned guardianship concealed scepticism and doubt on the part of the government. The long-pursued policy of indirect rule had failed to consistently increase the colonial surplus and improve the lot of the common people. Direct surveillance by colonial officials close to the base of native economy and society was considered necessary to achieve these noble objectives. It was considered obvious that exchanging the authority of the regents for that of colonial officials would be an improvement. But was this assumption necessarily true? In 1865, shortly before Van Rees embarked on his mission, the Assistant Resident for Cianjur was dishonourably discharged for cruelty to prisoners and improper treatment of native chiefs (Fasseur 1995: 271). It is significant that the good governance operation was conducted without Van Rees saying a single word about this unusual incident. Of course, the offence was discovered and the perpetrator punished. However, this well-intentioned explanation – offered by Fasseur – did not change the fact that the rotten apple had been removed without the whole basket being inspected more closely. Where the defects of the regents’ authority were now scrutinized in great detail, white officials had to commit serious violations before they were called to order. I noted earlier how, as Assistant Resident in Sumedang, Kinder de Camarecq had solved a case of cattle theft by giving the ‘offender’ a public flogging. Despite the fact that his handling of the case was based on intimidation rather than factual evidence and that the victim barely survived his repeated beatings, this deed assured him the reputation among his peers, also retrospectively, of being a bold and resolute official of the old school (Gonggrijp 1919). Besides such wrongdoings and abuses of power, did the colonial apparatus not also contain other elements that were little different from what, according to the norms of modern bureaucratic governance, was considered so pernicious in the rule of the regents? Van Hoëvell himself referred to the bragging and flattery that was considered desirable behaviour in the entourage of the Governor-General.
... he is the sun, on which all eyes are focused; if he laughs, then everyone laughs, if he looks serious, the whole company looks serious, and if he is sad, then all those who approach him weep with him. (I, 1849: 9)

Douwes Dekker (Multatuli) and Vitalis were particularly vocal but also quite exceptional in bemoaning the lack of space for critical voices within the colonial apparatus.

The reform operation

The longer-standing intention to restructure regional governance started to take shape after the middle of the nineteenth century, on the basis of recommendations made by various past Residents. Their aim was to bring the administrative machinery of the Priangan Regencies more in line with the colonial bureaucracy introduced half a century earlier elsewhere on Java. What they disagreed on was the urgency of a far-reaching reorganization. After his appointment as a member of the Council of the Indies in 1864, Van der Wijck, Resident from 1855 to 1858, issued a report in which he stated in no uncertain terms that he considered the imminent reform of the administration and taxation system in the Priangan Regencies a highly risky undertaking. Current Resident Van der Moore was, however, a firm advocate of the need to change the regime by depriving the region’s aristocracy of their far-reaching rights to self-governance. He felt strongly that the time had come to make a decisive change. Minister for the Colonies Fransen van der Putte sent a confidential letter to Governor-General Baron Sloet van de Beele on 25 April 1864 requesting him to ‘urgently make a change in the Priangan system a matter of investigation’. On 16 June 1866 it was decided to entrust this important assignment to Otto van Rees who, after a successful career as a civil servant, had been appointed to the Council of the Indies. He was issued with the following instruction:

to organize a mission to the Priangan Regencies, with the objective, after consulting the head of the regional administration and the Regents, of submitting definitive proposals regarding the question of changing the so-called Priangan system, on the same basis as that on which the other regions on Java are structured.39

39 NA, Ministry for the Colonies, Vb 29 June 1870 A22/184e.