... 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 reorganiza-
tion. 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:

39 NA, Ministry for the Colonies, Vb. 29 June 1870 A22/184e.
In 1866-67, Van Rees spent six months in the Priangan to acquaint himself with the way coffee cultivation was organized, how labour was mobilized and how the higher and lower gentry were involved. The investigation he initiated was limited to gathering the information he needed to support his recommendations. The decision to introduce radical reforms became the starting point rather than the conclusion of his mission. His resolute approach was illustrated by a meeting on 31 July 1866 in the residency capital, Bandung, to inform the heads of the five regencies of the proposed measures. Van Rees explained to them in plain language what they could expect to happen. The regents were not asked to sign the minutes of the meeting, to make sure they understood that their responses would be listened to but not taken into account. The message that Van Rees presented in his introduction to the meeting was that his respected audience did not have their forefathers to thank for their noble standing but the colonial authorities.

Van Rees submitted his report at the end of October 1867. The speed with which the architect of the reforms fulfilled his mission certainly had no effect on the thoroughness of his report. The depth of his argument is demonstrated by the fact that the first part of the report, which gave a detailed description of the history of the Priangan Regencies, was published separately shortly afterwards, with the permission of the government (Van Rees 1880). The second part, which contained four chapters (written by hand and covering pages 320-665), was considered too politically sensitive for general publication and disappeared into the archives. This part examined the working and impact of the Priangan system and discussed the proposed reforms, summarizing them per article. The fact that his findings, analysis and recommendations were kept secret made the public and political debate following the reform operation more difficult. The Dutch parliament was not permitted to see the report and the colonial policy-makers in The Hague produced an ‘excerpt’ which severely curtailed and toned down Van Rees’ original document. Van Rees extensively discussed the development of the regime of forced cultivation in the eighteenth century as a consequence of the assumption that the peasants would refuse to grow trade crops of their own free will. In his opinion, the VOC tradition had remained practically intact in this part of Java. Recognizing that the cultivation and delivery of coffee was based on unfree labour and that the coffee planters sometimes had to be driven by force to the gardens, Van den Bosch had nevertheless suggested in 1834 that nowhere else in Java the people were as satisfied with their lot. After all, the government had never seen a single trace of unrest in the region. In Van Rees’ opinion, this portrayal of the state of affairs was not reflected in reality. Pressure to increase coffee production had resulted
in a stock of 70 million fruit-bearing trees in 1856, the highest total ever achieved. The stock of trees had decreased again after this but, in 1866, 1,232 of the 1,432 desas that supplied labour for the coffee gardens lay at a distance of more than six poles from the plantations, so that the labourers had no other choice than to stay in the gardens during the five-month harvest period, living in demoralizing accommodation. Using language reminiscent of reports from a century earlier, Van Rees described how the people of the Priangan had been systematically exploited and oppressed. The fact that working in the coffee gardens did not entitle them to exemption from other forms of taxation only added to the injustices imposed on successive generations of Priangan peasants. Besides the share of the paddy harvest that had to be surrendered to the local chiefs and the clergy, there was a range of other services and taxes that the peasants had to provide as a consequence of their state of servitude. Nevertheless, the underpayment for the work they performed growing coffee over the years remained the greatest injustice. A typical feature of the Priangan system was the sealing off of the region to the outside world, to prevent both the ‘illegal’ export of coffee and the intrusion of Chinese tradesmen. The simple way of life of the mountain people had to be protected. Their labour power had to be reserved for growing coffee and they had to be prevented from using it for other purposes, apart from producing the food they needed for themselves. Cordonning off the region had caused a rise in the prices of basic necessities and, together with the heavy burden of labour – the market price of coffee was 40 guilders per pikul, of which the growers received only 6.5 guilders, the equivalent of a tax of 33.5 guilders per pikul – this sum exposed the inability of a large part of the population to meet their basic needs. Van Rees concluded that the price paid to the coffee planters should immediately be increased to the same level as that paid in other residencies.

The commissioner’s report continued with a detailed summary of the tribute that the inhabitants of the Priangan had to supply to the colonial government and the local lords in money, in kind and in labour services. The main obligations imposed by the government were the work in the coffee gardens and the additional mobilization of unpaid labour for public works (or what passed for it), while the peasants also had to surrender a fifth share of their paddy harvest to provide the primary source of income for the local chiefs and the clergy. Van Rees did not fail to point out that, until the start of the nineteenth century, the share of the paddy that had to be surrendered was fixed at a much lower level – in the Priangan lands that came under Cirebon, it was no more than a twentieth part of the harvest – and had been raised by Daendels to a tenth part for the regents and a tenth part for
the clergy. The Governor-General had undoubtedly taken this decision on the assumption that this generous gesture would assure the loyalty of the secular and clerical elite, but it was hugely detrimental to the peasants and at no cost at all to the government. The legal basis of surrendering the compulsory share of the harvest to the local chiefs lay in the system of servitude that had remained intact in the Priangan Regencies. The ‘inborn subservience’ referred to in colonial sources took on extra significance in the case of households that belonged as clients (rahayat) to the entourage of an influential lord (juragan) or master (dunugan). Engagement in such a relationship of patronage meant that servitude to the lord – in the form of tending to his fields in exchange for a share in the harvest, as well as performing services in the house and the stables – exempted his clients from providing services to anyone other than the lord. The regents and local chiefs used this ngawula relationship to exempt their subjects as far as possible from the cultivation and corvee services imposed by the colonial government. The more significant this external burden became and the more the foreign rulers understood the workings of the peasant economy, the less the landed gentry were able to protect their clients against the claim on their labour by the government and especially their obligations to grow coffee. Despite this, however, Van Rees calculated that, in 1886 an eighth part of the total number of households – i.e. 20,030 – worked exclusively at the behest of the local chiefs. He himself considered this estimate a little on the low side. The five regents together had 3,788 households at their disposal, which were responsible for tending to the regents’ extensive fields. The majority of the rahayat were therefore clients of the lower chiefs. To his observation that the relationship of patronage still existed, Van Rees added that there were degrees of servitude. Sometimes the entire population was obliged to provide unpaid services, while there was also a category (tugur) to whose labour the lords could only partially lay claim and who had to perform services by rotation. As far as the clergy was concerned, nowhere on Java were they as richly endowed with earthly goods and enjoyed such a high standing as in the Priangan. The members of the clergy did not form a separate class but were closely related to the local chiefs at the different social levels. They collected the shares of the harvest for them, made sure they were distributed to those entitled to them, supervised the irrigation works and were responsible for the agrarian calendar. The institution of servitude extended to the highest level of clergy. In 1864, head and district panghulu, mostly members of regent families, were together serviced by 3,561 subservient households, which were exempt from government services for this reason. Assured of high incomes and affiliated to the local chiefs,
the priest class enjoyed greater prosperity, influence and prestige than the mosque attendants in other residencies.

Release from servitude

How did Van Rees assess the impact of the Priangan system? He had nothing but praise for the excellent state of the roads and the ordered, well-organized main settlements (negorijen). However, he continued, the passing traveller did not see the less positive aspects of the system, which he attributed to the state of unfreedom in which the people had been forced to live for so long. Referring to early sources, he described the system's shortcomings. Progress had been held back by the chiefs expropriating all surplus and it was, in Van Rees’ opinion, only the limitless submissiveness of the peasants that had sustained such a repressive system for so long. The root of the problem lay in the subordination of the peasants to allow coffee to be delivered to the government at the lowest price and the native aristocracy to live a life of luxury. The reform urgently required was to release the people of the Priangan from their subjugation and give them the opportunity to live their lives as they wished. Using data left behind by his predecessor Steinmetz – who had initially been entrusted with the reform mission but fell ill and died – he calculated how little the peasants received for their forced labour. One indication of the lack of progress was the modest increase in the population from 707,890 in 1837 to 882,354 in 1865, a rise of 24% in a period of 28 years. Moreover, Van Rees was inclined to attribute this higher number more to improvements in the greater precision of headcounts than to any real demographic growth.

A source of concern was that, in recent years, paddy production had not grown in proportion with the expansion of the area of cultivated land and the number of agrarian households. Van Rees noted that there was undeniably a link between the heavy burden of almost or completely unpaid services that the peasants had to provide and the falling productivity of land used to grow paddy. If the individual right to own land had not been retained in the Priangan, he believed that the peasants would have been in an even more miserable position. Van Rees then addressed the impact of the abolition of the cacah system in 1839. The decision had been taken by the Resident, without permission from higher up, with the intention of allowing more labour to be requisitioned to grow coffee. The social consequences of the decision were, however, not considered. It was concluded later that it had not led to redistribution of landownership; land remained concentrated...