Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

Breman, Jan

Published by Amsterdam University Press


Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66310.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66310

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2322126
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...
largely in the hands of higher and lower chiefs, the clergy, *hajis* and well-off landowners who were most likely the descendants of former *cacah* heads. Van Rees called into question whether the *cacah* configuration had indeed disappeared. It remained clearly visible in the spatial organization of widely dispersed settlements: *kampungs* comprising several hamlets, each housing a number of households, but lacking the compact enclosure and village governance structure found in *desas* elsewhere on Java.

The regents were accustomed to living like royalty. Van Rees correctly countered their objections to the proposed changes to the regime by pointing out that what they considered their rights had been invented by their colonial masters and that the privileges of their limited self-governance were now to be revoked. With this counterargument he was in essence denying that the power of the regents lay in adherence to tradition. On the contrary, both during the time of the VOC and later, granting a limited degree of self-governance to the native aristocracy in the highlands of West Java had been a political decision erroneously presented as a continuation of pre-colonial practice. In his report, Van Rees calculated what the chiefs had earned from their cooperation throughout the years. Certainly, their lifestyles were so expensive that they were deeply in debt. These debts contributed to their high prestige, but also made them vulnerable to deception, fraud, blackmail, corruption and other dubious practices. The figures Van Rees included in his report show that the chiefs’ incomes fluctuated widely from year to year, that it was almost impossible to estimate the labour performed for them free of charge, and that the value of the coffee commission they received was often lower than that of the paddy they requisitioned and sold. In the report, Van Rees urged that the incomes and legal status of lower chiefs be improved. The practically unbridled power granted to the regents and their entourage denied subordinate chiefs at district and lower level all authority and capacity for resilience. In anticipation of the arbitrary nature of the orders they received from their superiors, lower local chiefs hastened to appropriate paddy fields, cattle and other assets and were then happy to be dismissed from service.

The large majority of the chiefs and their officials – 7,998 of a total of 9,114 – belonged to the lower ranks. Of the 1,116 supra-local chiefs, almost half (542) were higher-ranking officials – *patih*, (head) supervisors of coffee cultivation, head *mantri*, *kliwon*, *wedana*, *camat*, *petingi* – while the other half worked at the base of the native administration as scribes, gang bosses, market masters, guards, messengers, water supply supervisors, etc. The village administrations included 1,763 *lurah*, 2,876 *kobaijan*, *panglaku* and *tua tua*, as well as 1,078 constables (*pancalang*), a total of 5,715 officials.
A further 2,283 worked for the colonial administration as lower-ranking staff at government offices, warehouse employees, prison guards, postmen, clerks, native public prosecutors, dokter jawa, vaccinators, prajurit and their staff, foresters, midwives, mandur, postillions, teachers, etc. Some of these low-ranking officials, who were exempt from compulsory labour, received a meagre wage and they all lived more or less at the expense of the community, whose members performed household services for them and tended their paddy fields. Because they were paid so badly, these officials made up for what they did not receive from the regents and the government by taking what they could from the peasants. The same applied to the various ranks of clergy, who totalled 2,679. At the top of the religious hierarchy were five head panghulu, located in the regency headquarters, six head kalipah who acted as their deputies, 72 district panghulu and 99 district kalipah. This upper layer supervised 1,692 village priests (amil or lebeh), 169 precentors (ketib or imam) in the local house of prayer, 465 mudin who assisted at weddings, 96 merbot and bilal who beat the drums to call the faithful to prayer and 45 jakat scribes who wrote down compulsory contributions and voluntary gifts. Van Rees attempted to record the payments to the higher and lower priests but had to acknowledge that his final estimate was both very approximate and minimal. His detailed calculations were intended to show the total budget required to pay for the system of self-governance.

In the final chapter of his report, Van Rees left no room for misunderstanding about the urgent need for reform: freeing the population from the yoke of servitude that prevented the colonial government from fulfilling its civilizing mission and effectively addressing the development of the country and its people. The change of regime had to make the lower native chiefs pillars of public authority rather than slavish servants concerned only with enriching themselves at the expense of the common man. In the early nineteenth century, colonial policy-makers had already tried to curb the arbitrary power of the regents and restrict their abuse of their far-reaching powers. The British rulers focused on decreasing the distance between the European administration and the local people but, after Dutch rule was restored, the policy-makers had failed to bring the Priangan regents into the confines of good governance. They had no reason to do so, as the people were docile and produced increasing quantities of coffee for practically nothing. But behind the facade of self-government, the regents continued to strengthen their own influence and pursue their own interests. The idea of reorganizing the administration so as to curtail the abuses of their power by the landed gentry undoubtedly came up repeatedly. In a secret letter written
in 1840, Resident Hora Siccama had suggested cutting back the number of
native chiefs considerably, to gradually introduce the land rent system in
the region and to increase the price of coffee to the same level as in the rest
of Java. His successor Cleerens denied, however, that the population was
engulfed in poverty and resisted the abolition of the Priangan system. The
colonial leadership’s already minimal confidence in Cleerens dissipated
entirely when his Assistant Resident Nagel was murdered in Bandung at the
end of 1845. Cleerens was forced to step down and the regent of Bandung
was removed from his post. It was a clear indication of the displeasure of
the colonial government that, rather than appointing the regent’s legitimate
heir as his successor, they replaced him with an illegitimate son mothered by
a concubine. It later emerged that the dismissed regent had been innocent
of complicity and was entitled to be reinstated, or at least to have his name
cleared. Behind the scenes, the discussion on a radical reorganization of the
administration continued, fuelled by a memorandum written by Resident
Overhand in 1849. With barely concealed sarcasm, Van Rees observed that
the government could not in any case be accused of being overly hasty: ‘If,
after so many have acknowledged the need for improvement, it has not been
put into effect after more half a century, there is certainly no question of
undue haste’ (1867: 577-8).

During his tours of the region, the government commissioner concluded
that the proposed intervention would come as no surprise. News of the
imminent changing of the guard had not been kept secret, right down to the
peasantry, and Van Rees pointed out that it would be inadvisable to allow
the state of uncertainty to go on for too long. The question was whether the
proposed reform would have undesirable social effects. Former Resident
Van der Wijck predicted growing unrest, but Van Rees did not share these
fears. There would certainly be no resistance from the lower chiefs or the
regents. The latter, placated with the promise of a fixed annual allowance,
seemed – with the exception of the regent of Bandung – to have accepted
in advance that they were to be relieved of their powers. The administrative
reorganization, they had been assured, was intended to genuinely serve the
interests of the native population. And how would the Mohammedan clergy
respond? They would no longer be permitted to play a role in cultivating
paddy or collecting taxes, or lay claim to worldly authority in any form, but,
in turn, the government had promised not to interfere in religious matters.
To compensate for their loss of income and influence, higher-ranking priests
(head panghulu and panghulu) were also assured of an annual allowance
for the rest of their lives. This material pledge proved sufficient to avert
resistance from these quarters (Van Meerten 1887: 36).
Afraid to lose their power and certain that they would lose a large part of their informal income, the regents did make a last ditch effort to sabotage the reforms. Their henchmen started rumours to make the people afraid of the coming changes. The new land rent, to be paid in cash, would be higher than the value of the share of the paddy that the peasants had to surrender to local chiefs and the clergy. Furthermore, the system of private landownership that had always existed in the region would allegedly be replaced by a system of communal land tenure. Accompanied by Resident Van der Moore, Van Rees paid visits to the main negorijen and called together the village heads, local chiefs and their entourages to refute these malicious reports and to inform them of what was really going to happen: the peasants would be subject to the land rent regime, as was the case in the rest of Java. The reform, he explained, had no other ambition than to promote the welfare of the inhabitants of the Priangan lands by freeing them from the restrictive ties that prevented them from escaping poverty. In general terms, the reorganization would entail the following package of concrete measures:

- Setting the coffee price at the same level as elsewhere on Java. According to Van Rees, the government had a moral duty to take this step, which would mean that the Priangan planters would be paid twice what they now received.

- Abolition of the ngawula system, under which the peasants had to provide services to all those who were elevated above the common man by virtue of their office, birth or wealth. Recognizing this principle of subordination was incompatible with the civilizing mission that the metropolis in Europe had set itself regarding the East Indies. No one would be permitted, with the exception of the state – to lay claim to the labour power of another. This measure would be accompanied by a radical reform of the native administration, in favour of the minor chiefs.

- Abolition of the apanage or official ownership of land by chiefs, with the exception of village-level officials. Private landownership, which had always remained intact in the Priangan, was probably the reason why the gentry possessed so much land. A large part of that consisted of uncultivated lands used for hunting, but it also included the sawah carik or kaprabon, farmland that the local chiefs allocated to their clients for cultivation.

Dividing up the region, which covered an area two-thirds the size of the metropolis, would make it easier to govern. The plan devised by Van Rees included the formation of three residencies, sub-divided into twelve
sub-residencies and 63 districts, with a considerably higher number of European civil servants than had hitherto been the case. The compensation paid to the regents meant that they would not actually have much less than their average income over the past three years. This implied that the regent of Bandung would earn more than the Governor-General. Part of that was a fixed annual emolument of 20,000 guilders plus a personal allowance, while the largest part was a percentage commission on the coffee produced in their jurisdiction. Van Rees also drastically slashed what he called the exaggerated number of native chiefs and officials. Many were not eligible to be incorporated into the lower ranks of the colonial administration. The reductions largely affected the intermediate chiefs, *patingi, kliwon, umbul* and *priyayi*, who had no clearly defined tasks. They were appointed for political reasons and made up part of the network through which higher and lower chiefs exercised their authority – they would pass on the orders of their lords and report back on whether and to what extent they had been obeyed – but were not part of a well-defined line of command. Van Rees made a considerable effort to calculate exactly what the reforms would cost. It was clear that the budget for the administrative reorganization would have to be modest while, of course, he was notified that it should lead to higher revenues for the government, not lower.