Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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generation. I will return to the impact of the ban now proclaimed on free access to waste land around the village and the considerations underlying it in the last part of this chapter. Suffice to say at this point that cutting them off from access to agricultural resources denied the landless underclass the opportunity of upward social mobility by taking possession of land not yet used by others and preparing it for cultivation.

How large was the landless agrarian population in the Priangan Regencies around the time of the administrative reorganization? Of the 108,816 households that lived from agriculture in 1860, a third possessed no paddy fields (Enklaar 1871: 134). Scheltema concluded a discussion of the progressive concentration of property at the top of the agrarian hierarchy as follows.

... alongside the older form of feudal-aristocratic landownership, a new form of large-scale ownership emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century as the result of what is seen through Western eyes as usury, primarily by a class of hajis and other wealthy members of the population. (1927-28: 305)

In the light of this conclusion, it should come as no surprise that an increasing number of land-poor households were forced into a landless existence. From petty owners they became sharecroppers or agricultural labourers. Accumulation of landownership at one end of the social spectrum and a process of proletarianization at the other end determined the character of the peasant economy after the administrative reform. De Wolff van Westerrode reported in 1904 that the class of agricultural labourers were employed by their masters as attached farm servants. They lived in his household and, besides their food, they received a share of the paddy harvest. In the lower echelons of the village economy, the break with the past was less marked than seemed to have been the case at the top. The introduction of the village system now also in the Priangan contributed to this by exposing the tension between the forces of continuity and discontinuity.

Establishment of the village system

The decision by the colonial government to take over the governance and collection of taxes in the Priangan itself brought with it the necessity – as had already occurred elsewhere on Java – to designate the village as the basic unit for exercising authority. As I described in an earlier publication, the renowned village community on Java was not an age-old institution
but a colonial construction devised at the start of the nineteenth century to gain control over peasant production after the dislocation of the native aristocracy from the exercise of power (Breman 1979). My argument was based on a historical study into the way in which the early-colonial state requisitioned land and labour in the region of Cirebon. In this coastal plain of North Java, the colonial tribute was largely imposed on the cultivation of sugarcane. The introduction of the land rent system of taxation meant that the government designated the ‘village system’ as the focal point of its intervention at local level. The exclusion of the Sultan’s role in governance in and around Cirebon led to village chiefs being designated as agents of the colonial overlords, charged with forcing the peasants to produce crops for export. From 1830, the cultivation system would establish this mode of exploitation on the island of Java and its people in more concrete form. Reliance on the village system was not introduced in the Priangan Regencies, nor were village chiefs ever elected, as the Resident stated in 1858. The native chiefs did not mobilize the people along territorial lines culminating in their domination of the peasant settlements as well-demarcated and integrated communities. In this region, the village was a kaluruhan, a collection of separate hamlets, small habitational clusters in which the cacah formation could still be recognized. Despite Daendels’ order in the early nineteenth century to amalgamate them in larger, more concentrated villages, the habitat pattern in the Sunda highlands retained its scattered character. In Sukapura and part of Sumedang the people continued to live in small hamlets of four or five huts, usually about eight to ten poles from each other, until deep into the nineteenth century. In 1856 Kinder de Camarecq described the settlement of Sembir, near Sumedang, as a locality consisting of a lembur, the main kampung, and four hamlets. Another government official, Van Marle, described a similar pattern of settlement in Cianjur around the same time. The administrative reform brought this form of spatial organization, by then still different to that in the rest of Java, to an end. The decision by the regional authorities in 1865 to have the inhabitants of a kaluruhan choose a chief from among their numbers anticipated the designation of the village as the anchor point of government administration in the Priangan. The choice of local notables had always been the prerogative of native chiefs but, when the separate hamlets were consolidated into a single community, it was assumed that the village chief would be appointed not from above but by the villagers themselves. His appointment and whether he stayed or not at subsequent elections were decided in a democratic fashion that the colonial authorities tended to attribute to the ‘original’ village system. This ‘authentic and age-old institution’ was supposed to have faded away
after the intrusion of Muslim-based rule in the peasant heartland. In this reconstruction of a past that never existed, the community itself selected a number of prominent figures to represent the interests of the other villagers. Sidelining higher chiefs was interpreted as restoring a situation that had existed in the remote past. The colonial authorities professed not to interfere in the election of the desa chiefs. The landed gentry continued to exercise influence on local affairs behind the scenes for a long time and saw to it that no candidates were appointed who might harm their interests, especially their land and the proceeds it generated. What happened in reality was that local power was concentrated in the hands of a narrow upper layer of village society, consisting of former cacah heads, who had been pillars of support for the regents in the peasant landscape. They were part of a social vanguard that could now afford to promote their position and interests more actively. In accordance with standing practice, the village chiefs and other members of the village administration were allocated apanage fields from the cultivated land considered to be the joint property of the community. These fields were tilled by panukang, who were registered as sharercropers of the local elite.

The investigation instigated to decide on the land rights of the native population showed that, after the reforms had been introduced in the Priangan, the number of chiefs in the newly formed village communities was exceptionally large (Eindresumé III, 1896: 190). Having said that, it should be noted that, during the administrative reorganization, Van Rees had abolished a large group of officials who acted as intermediaries between the regents and the people. In official documents they were described as a parasitic administrative layer of influentials, who had no place in the new model of colonial governance. In the course of time the colonial authorities had increasingly forced the native chiefs into a tighter organizational straitjacket, giving them specific tasks and competences that, despite being intentionally kept vague, did not overlap and were functionally separated from each other in a vertical ranking. In short, as well as being organized along territorial lines, the exercise of power by the chiefs was also strictly hierarchically streamlined. The reforms and the new rules revealed that a large number of figures had become superfluous because the interaction between the lower and higher echelons now took place on the basis of administrative expediency. They no longer fitted in the new configuration based on what the colonial authorities essentially saw as a duality between the nobility in and around the regents’ court and the peasants in the villages, with an elongated corps of native officials liaising between them. This particularly applied to the large group of intermediaries between
district officials and desa chiefs, who were known by a staggering variety of names in different parts of Java: lurah, kewu aris, penatus, bekel, glondong, panglawe, mantri, patinggi, palang, panglaku, pancalang, demang, bahu aris, patinggi aris or priyayi (see Davelaar 1891). Kinder de Camarecq reported that the higher native officials were formerly referred to as priyayi. These intermediate chiefs owned padi fields in all the villages under their jurisdiction and also had the use of messengers, kebajan, who provided them with a variety of services as ordered. There was great uncertainty about who appointed these intermediate chiefs and what exactly their competences were (Breman 1980: 15-21; see also Mulherin 1970-71).

In a system of governance based on lines of territoriality, these intermediaries were no longer useful, but a hindrance. Their exclusion from governance was formalized in 1840 when the Resident of the Priangan Regencies announced that forthwith he himself would appoint all officials lower than the district chief, rather than leaving it to the regent – a decision that he was not authorized to take (De Klein 1931: 86-7). Although this led to little change in practice, it was a new step that heralded the erosion of the power of the native authorities. This was followed a few decades later by the formal abolition of the intermediate heads. The decision was taken after the Council of the Indies had published a memorandum in 1864 criticizing the ease with which the number of intermediate chiefs had been allowed to increase under the cultivation system. Such minor chiefs or headmen may have constituted the continuation of an old native institution, but that was not considered sufficient argument to preserve them. The native administration had never been shy of increasing the number of chiefs, who all lived at the expense of the peasantry, and this abuse had reached unprecedented levels. The time had now come to remove them from their privileged positions. When the recommendations of the Director of Cultivation and the Residents all pointed in the same direction – abolish the intermediate chiefs – the Governor-General took the same view. Vacant positions would no longer be filled, while dismissed chiefs would receive no reimbursement for the services they had rendered. They had, after all, never been formally recognized in the posts they held and were therefore not eligible for compensation. It was illustrative of their somewhat elevated status that they held apanage fields in all of the villages under their jurisdiction. Higher-ranking chiefs who were consolidated in their positions, such as wedana, who were given charge of a district, were transferred to the government payroll. Interestingly, the pretext for expelling the lower class of gentry from their role as intermediaries was that their involvement in governance was contrary to the wishes and interests of the people as
a whole. It was a continuation of the attempt to abrogate and send that
segment of the minor aristocracy that was not incorporated in the regular
bureaucracy back into the peasantry and put a stop to their involvement
in the administration at supra-local level. No account was taken of the
fact that these go-betweens were of great significance in the exercise of
power by the Priangan aristocracy. They, of course were not prepared to
allow themselves to be declared redundant in the new order and simply be
sidelined. The survey of land rights established that these figures indeed
descended back into the peasantry but continued to be identified as sentana
(Eindresumé III, 1896: 190). On the basis of their former status they were
integrated into the class of peasants although treated as before with esteem.
They retained their previous rights, such as apanage land and exemption
from government services.

A more cumbersome bone of contention was no longer tolerating the
interference of the clergy in worldly affairs, in particular in fixing the
agricultural calendar and collecting the agrarian taxes. The voluntary
donations from the peasants (zakat) fell to half what they had collected
under the previous compulsory system (Verslag uitkomsten der reorganisatie van het gewest 1874). Outside the Priangan it was rare for the
priest class to play a prominent role in regulating the production of food,
constructing water supply systems, and keeping land records. Daendels
had allocated these tasks to religious leaders in the Sunda highlands in
the early nineteenth century, rewarding them with a tenth share of the
paddy production. That meant a considerable increase in the burden on the
peasants. The measure illustrated the strong position that Islam enjoyed
in the area, even at that early stage, and which was probably the result of
the support its expansion received from the native chiefs. In his report,
Van Rees quoted a source from 1808 critically examining the piety of the
regent of Cianjur and referring to the clergy as a plague on the people.
In the decades that followed, Islam’s influence over the whole region
increased, resolutely facilitated by the involvement of higher and lower
mosque officials in a wide range of bureaucratic activities entrusted to
them under the ultimate responsibility of the chiefs. They were prepared
for their tasks by being educated in pesantren, boarding schools offer-
ing religious instruction which Van der Capellen had already referred to
earlier. Even before the end of the eighteenth century, several regents’ sons
requested permission to go to Mecca, which the colonial authorities only
granted with the greatest reluctance. From the mid-nineteenth century,
the number of pilgrims to Mecca reached unprecedented proportions, even
though the costs meant that only better-off peasants could contemplate
making the journey. If a haji was not already seen as a notable figure in the community before the pilgrimage, he was certainly admitted to their ranks on his return. The religious desire to go to Mecca was reinforced by the knowledge that returning pilgrims were exempted from corvee services. For a long time, the government was not generous in issuing passes to make the pilgrimage and, after 1825, asked 110 guilders for the privilege. When this strict requirement was abolished in 1859, the number of pilgrims rose exponentially. Only 71 in 1850, numbers rose to 2,152 in 1857 and to nearly 5,000 in 1862. Croockewit described this growth in the number of pilgrims as ‘frightening’. With the danger that threatened from these quarters in mind, countermeasures were not long in coming. Despite pious counter-propaganda, instigated by tracts which Karel Holle wrote and circulated, it proved impossible to rein in this wave of religious fervour. Just like the low-ranking chiefs, behind the scenes the clergy continued to perform the tasks that had long been entrusted to them. There was often no one else to perform the duties that had been taken away from them, while the village authorities now had the task of keeping the comprehensive local records. A survey of a desa in 1869 revealed that sixteen registers had to be permanently kept up to date. In addition, the villagers had to acquire certificates, passes or permits to do something, or not to do it. Every year, 600 pages of village records had to be kept by hand (Nederburgh 1877: 429-30).

The clergy were among the few who could read and write and these skills were indispensable in interacting with the colonial authorities. It was only when scribes began to appear in villages in the Priangan that the district chief had a local point of contact for the administration (Eindresumé III, 1896: 225 and appendix OO: 178), but for a long time it was the village priest who fulfilled this need. Disputes about land had to be settled in clerical courts, a tradition that did not change. That the higher-ranking clergy also failed to withdraw into religious contemplation and retained their interest in more worldly matters became apparent in the early twentieth century when it emerged that the head panghulu of Cianjur was the largest moneylender in the region; he loaned out his business capital, estimated at 200,000 guilders, at an interest rate of 30 per cent (De Wolff van Westerrode 1904: 71). The government was afraid that strengthening the religious feelings of the population might stir up political unrest, a fear that later events proved to be well-founded. Van Rees’ recommendation that state and church be kept strictly separated should be understood against this background. The government decided not to interfere in the religious life of the common people but also wanted to put a stop to the administrative
services that the clergy performed under the authority of the chiefs. Just as the Priangan reform did not immediately put a stop to the authority of the native chiefs, the clergy continued – perhaps more persistently and with more subterfuge – to have a great influence on the people. Being able to read and write not only made the priests indispensable for the village administration, they also used that knowledge in giving religious instruction to adults and children. Throughout the whole region, but especially in the eastern part of the residency, the number of houses of prayer and pesantren increased strongly. The close ties between society and religion could not of course have escaped the attention of the government, but the latter considered it inopportune to devote too much attention to the matter in the hope that it would have no political side effects. This hope would later prove futile, when religious movements evolved in the Priangan which found a massive following. The government was particularly concerned about Islamic religious fervour combined with political motives. In 1871, for example, a ten-year-old girl and her parents were arrested in a village in Garut after a picture of Dipanegara had been found in their house. The colonial authorities acted resolutely against any such expressions of proto-nationalist sentiment.

Shifting the onus of servitude

One important aim of the reform operation was to bring to an end the ngawula system that had held the peasants in servitude to their lords. Van Rees’ observation that the regents had succeeded in keeping hidden no less than one-eighth of their subjects – mainly from the better-off class of peasants – as clients to be used for their own purposes rather than for colonial corvee duties, illustrated that the government did not have complete control over the productive capacity of the Sundanese peasantry. Stripping the chiefs of their authority and imposing strict limitations on the size of their entourage were of course a precondition to sever the ties between the lords and their peasant clientele, but did it cause a breach in their relationship of servitude? To a large extent, this was indeed the case as the most important chiefs no longer had direct control over their former clients. They retained their prestige but now rarely left the dalem. For the lower lords, up to the rank of district chief, the situation was different. Appointed as civil servants in regular colonial service they could no longer allow their self-interest and desire for prestige to take precedence. Whatever they did, or failed to do, was now in the name of the government.