Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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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.
The village system did however have one aspect that retained a link with the old situation: the *ngawula* system lingered on at the level of the village community. The local influentialss elected as *pamong desa* were allocated apanage fields and *panukang* from landless households to tend to them (De Klein 1931: 126). That signified a continuation of the master-servant nexus at the foot of the peasant economy. Admittedly, it was no longer the organizational principle of the larger social order in the Priangan Regencies, but continued to be practised as a local-level relationship structuring in particular the interdependency between landowning and landless members of the village community. The decision to anchor local government in the Priangan in the *desa* system came at a time when many commentators were posing critical questions about the policy that the peasant settlement should be seen and preserved as a self-managing community. This reappraisal was inspired by the growing awareness that the village elite did not necessarily act in the interests of their colonial bosses.

The government, for example, wants a chief who will represent the interests of coffee cultivation, but the inhabitants of the *desa* prefer one who does not care about the coffee gardens. (Nederburgh 1877: 444)

Besides the problem of too many ‘free riders’, who were allocated apanage fields without doing anything to earn them and who did little or nothing to contribute to fulfilling the community’s obligations towards the government, there appeared to be, behind the image of a close-knit community whose members felt intimately tied to each other and worked together for the common good, a completely different reality. Undoubtedly, scepticism was long allayed with the suggestion that the ancestral institution had been derailed by negative influences from outside. But it was not possible to maintain for long the myth that outsiders were to be blamed for the reported factionalism and abuse of power. Where the emphasis had previously been laid on the social cohesion and communal consensus of the inhabitants, the divisions between the various classes at local level now came more to the fore. The discussion focused on the election of the village chief. Should the villagers be given a free hand and was it advisable to appeal to tradition and adhere to a periodical change in *desa* leadership if, from the perspective of good governance, a permanent appointment seemed more attractive? The alternative was for the government to put a stop to the fiction of the ‘freely elected village chief’ and appoint someone themselves. This step would, however, have its price. This official would be entitled to a salary, estimated to come close to an outlay of ten million guilders a year.
(Nederburgh 1877: 462). Good governance was important, but should not cost too much. Adhering to the fiction that the desa was led by someone chosen by his fellow villagers without undue interference from outside had the great advantage that the community would continue to bear the cost. This situation would remain unchanged until the end of colonial rule. Furthermore, Nederburgh added to his cost-benefit analysis, European authority had now penetrated to the foot of peasant society and would no longer tolerate the desa management engaging in usury and blackmail. The village chief and his associates, together constituting the village council, remained but would henceforth perform their duties under the strict but just surveillance of their Dutch controllers.

The desa system was under pressure from two sides. Although its room for manoeuvre was rigorously hampered from above, perhaps even more significant were the dynamic forces that undermined communal unity and consistency from within. In his account, Nederburgh devoted considerable attention to the erosion of the corporate basis of the peasant order. This was the consequence of a process of social emancipation. He argued that a powerful and closed village system evolves in a relatively undeveloped stage of society, when the inhabitants of a community depend on each other for protection and support. They are prepared to sacrifice their freedom, and respect and obey the leadership of the settlement. But if the power of the state increases and it treats its subjects justly and fairly, as happened under Dutch rule, then...

... the desa system is no longer strictly required to guarantee the security of individuals. Many begin to experience the ties with the desa community and the guardianship of the desa leadership as cumbersome. They hanker after distribution of communal property, individual enjoyment of commonly held goods and personal freedom. (Nederburgh 1877: 438-9)

In drawing up the balance, the Resident concluded with satisfaction that the Javanese people were on the right track and were moving forward along it slowly but surely. The desire for freedom that was signified by the dissolution of the desa community must of course not be achieved at the expense of the rights and interests of the colonial state.

And this was where the whole fable faltered. As the native people moved forward along the road to development, they were under strict surveillance and soon found themselves frustrated in their progress by the services the government required them to perform. The attempt to abolish the servitude of the peasantry to the native aristocracy did not change the fact
that it was maintained in the exercise of colonial power and authority. This applied first and foremost to the behaviour that Dutch officials expected of their inferiors. Just as the regents would surround themselves with an entourage whenever they left the *dalem*, the Resident, Assistant Resident and *controleur* would be accompanied by native civil servants on their tours. And not only to act as interlocutors and interpreters where necessary, but to make the differences in rank clear by their presence and body language. The lack of familiarity between Javanese and European officials that Nederburgh referred to was not in the first place due to their different positions in the hierarchy. The Western officials may have had more power but their Javanese counterparts were better equipped to interact with the native population.

If the Javanese, by nature indolent and slow, are spurred on by an energetic and irascible European, they become bewildered, while Javanese chiefs know and understand only too well the sluggishness of the common man, as they too are averse to haste and act completely according to
their nature, winning over the inherent slowness of their subordinates with patience and by continually cajoling them and leading them in the right direction. (Nederburgh, 1877: 409)

The European officials had a whole retinue of their own, including messengers, guards and coachmen. On top of these came the household servants, the number of which varied depending on the rank of the patron. Their service to their master was an expression of his standing, his right to prestige. It remained customary to summon villagers from far and wide to take their turn to perform corvee services for the convenience of the Governor-General. Again, this was no different to what the regents were accustomed to do. The colonial officials had adopted ways of acting and interacting that they had not brought with them from Europe but had their origins in the mannerisms of the Javanese and Sundanese aristocracy. Stripping the Priangan regents of their ‘traditional’ powers was accompanied by growing criticism of the arbitrary and extortionate ways in which they exercised their authority. Yet, when European officials engaged in similar practices, even if they were punished, the matter was settled behind closed doors and there was rarely any public discussion. Colonial servitude was more than just a personalized arrangement. It was enmeshed in the institutional setting of colonial rule. Corvee services were the name that the government used to justify the widespread mobilization of tributary labour. Many of these unpaid labourers were used to uphold law and order. Posting guards along the main roads made it easier to maintain surveillance of all traffic. Travellers who experienced problems with their transport en route were pleasantly surprised when a group of locals appeared from nowhere and pushed their carriages uphill or repaired a broken wheel as quickly as possible so that their delay was kept to a minimum. The villages acquired guardhouses from where conscripted sentries took their turn to conduct nightly patrols and sound the alarm if they encountered anything out of the ordinary. In this way, the colony turned into a night-watch state. In addition to law and order, the government also considered it important that the peasant landscape was kept neat and tidy. Travel reports are full of praise about the neatness of the main settlements and villages.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, it had been an altogether different story. Van Sevenhoven, the first Director of Cultivation, had described the peasant settlements on Java as shabby and completely without order, making them easy targets for all kinds of wandering reprobates. The houses were set far apart and he found the scattered clusters of hamlets messy and uncared for. He wanted to change that by designing the peasant habitat
A *gardu* (watchhouse) alongside the road on the outskirts of Batavia. Since the time of Daendel’s authoritarian rule, each village in Java had to be guarded at night by watchmen to ward off danger and raise the alarm by beating the drum hanging at the entrance (photo pre-1880).

Source: KITLV Collection

according to a fixed pattern: in a square, with gated access to the fields, which could be closed off and guarded, the houses built in rows, bordered by a main alley and crisscrossed by narrow paths, with a hedge, moat or stone wall encircling the whole settlement. This upgrading and cleaning up of the peasant abode would instil a feeling of community among the villagers and keep outsiders at a distance (Van Sevenhoven 1840). He clarified his noble intentions with a model village plan contrasting the situation as it had been and would now become. The design he made demonstrates a well demarcated regularity in a way that would make it easier to exercise law and order and achieve what had so far eluded the colonial authorities:

42 See colour plates VI and VII. The maps comply so closely with Van Sevenhoven’s plan for improving the peasant settlements that they could have been drawn at his instigation. However, I did not find these drawings in the National Archives with his 1840 memorandum but with the documents relating to the draft of the cultivation act of 1863. NA, Ministry for the Colonies, Van Alphen-Engelhard collection (1896 and 1900), 363.
to frame the exact size of the habitat and allow for a reliable headcount of the population. Just as the coffee gardens had to be neat and tidy to facilitate inspections, the peasants’ houses also had to be neatly arranged and easy to oversee. In his design for the model village, Van Sevenhoven juxtaposed the settled peasants – who behaved decently and properly – against an underclass that had completely gone astray and therefore posed a threat to public safety. The latter used to roam around in the wide vicinity and were suspected of clinging to their footloose existence to evade the reach of authority. In the colonial mindset, vagrancy was synonymous with lawless. In the eyes of the architect of this plan, permanent settlement in the village would promote sociability and strengthen community feeling.

In its efforts to gain some grip on the lives and work of the population, the government employed the method of counting and measurement. James Scott called this unrelenting desire for classification ‘state simplifications’.

These typifications are indispensable to statecraft. State simplifications such as maps, censuses, cadastral lists, and standard units of measurement represent techniques for grasping a large and complex reality; in order for officials to be able to comprehend aspects of that ensemble, that complex reality must be reduced to schematic categories. The only way to accomplish this is to reduce an infinite array of detail to a set of categories that will facilitate summary descriptions, comparisons, and aggregation. (Scott 1998: 77)

But the regime of registration in which the colonial authorities excelled was also intended to impose social order and discipline wherever it was lacking. The attempt to confine the workforce in the coffee gardens and the peasants in the village was seen as part of a mission to elevate native society to a higher plane of civilization. Ever since Daendels the authorities had tried to concentrate the population in more compact and manageable settlements so as to keep them under constant surveillance. In the Priangan Regencies, the habitat pattern continued to be widely dispersed, but here too the colonial administration had insisted that the kampungs be tidied up. In the same way that planting the trees in the coffee gardens in neat, regular rows and erecting a fence around the whole garden facilitated surveillance of the planters, the villagers were ordered to plant hedges around their yards, gravel the paths and fit gates at the entrances to the localities. In his report, Van Rees noted the excellent state of the roads, adding that he had never seen ‘such neat and regularly constructed settlements as those in this region’ (1867: 57). A separate official, the camat gunung, was
given responsibility for keeping the village clean and had the authority to put those who refused to cooperate in the sticks (De Klein 1931: 85; see also Oosterzee 1882: 394). For a century and a half, first the agents of the VOC and then the government’s officials had persisted in the belief that the peasants had plenty of time on their hands. That assumption was reflected in the ease with which the colonial authorities imposed obligations of servitude, in the firm conviction that there was no need to pay for them. The accusation that the native people failed to behave economically applied in reality to the directors and management of the Dutch enterprise. This even resulted in the Governor-General issuing a circular in 1847 ordering that ‘all work that served no purpose or only for decoration or ornamentation and which kept the people from their agricultural tasks should be avoided at all costs’ (Circulaire nuttelooze arbeid 1852: 295). This clearly did not help, as a Gids voor de Controleurs bij het Binnenlandsch Bestuur, drawn up in 1878 by Chief Inspector for Cultivation Van Gorkom, repeated that mobilizing labour just to make the coffee gardens appear neat and tidy was inadmissible.

Besides the fact that corvee labour had to be provided free of charge, this also had to occur in a way that expressed the subordination of the native population and their great respect for their European superiors. The obligation to servitude had not disappeared but was imposed directly on the people by the colonial administration. The change that had taken place in the Priangan, the substitution of obedience to the native chief to direct subalternity to the government and its officials was not the subject of criticism, or even of discussion. The passage below illustrates this deferential behaviour, adding that this spirit of subordination guaranteed the preservation of the established order.

It is striking that, as soon as one has passed the borders of Bogor, the natives not only greet Europeans but usually go and sit at the side of the road; if you encounter a man on a horse, he will immediately dismount (this is incidentally the custom throughout Java), while women generally avert their faces. Although such displays of subservience appear a little exaggerated to me, I am of the opinion, taking the small number of Europeans into consideration, that there are many advantages accrued to this show of docility, and that it would be politically inopportune to completely suppress it among the natives. (Croockewit 1866: 312)

The eclipse of the native chiefs in the Sunda highlands as part of the good governance operation was conducive to the transition to what Scott called
‘high modernity’, an administrative restructuring founded on a firm belief in social engineering on the basis of a prior plan of action. Implementing the plan required the willingness to deploy the coercive power of the state to achieve radical and utopian changes in people’s working and living habits, moral conduct and worldviews. A precondition for realizing this far-reaching transformation is the absence of a civil order – or silencing it so that it has no opportunity to resist such high modernist plans.43 ‘Seeing like a state’, as I would like to emphasize, was the ideological formula for the dirigistic style of the late-colonial administration that took shape in the Dutch East Indies towards the end of the nineteenth century. This, with the proviso that Scott’s observation with regard to the subjugation of native populations elsewhere in the world applied here too: that the pretension of an all-encompassing plan of social reform to improve their well-being was wafer-thin.

The contours of a new economic policy

In the history of the Dutch East Indies, 1870 is recorded as a decisive turning point in the economic development of the archipelago. In that year, a series of agricultural laws were enacted bearing the stamp of Minister for the Colonies Engelbertus de Waal. Parliament approved the basic principles of a new economic policy that would regulate the phasing out of the system of forced cultivation and laid down the conditions for admitting private capital to the colony. While the colonial economy had until then been founded on the monopoly of the state, these changes heralded the beginning of the era of free enterprise capitalism. What the government envisaged and expected in 1870 seemed to be confirmed by what happened in the years that followed. Yet there was no question of a sharp break with the past. First of all, the forced cultivation of coffee continued, albeit with the suggestion that it had changed into peasant-directed production, although the government continued to prescribe the conditions under which it took place. The administrative reorganization had led to an eclipse of the regents’ power. The lower chiefs had become government officials and continued to be the first point of contact for the people, so

43 In Scott’s words: ‘the legibility of a society provides the capacity for large-scale social engineering, high-modernist ideology provides the desire, the authoritarian state provides the determination to act on that desire, and an incapacitated civil society provides the leveled social terrain on which to build.’ (Scott 1998: 5)