

Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

Social Histories of Work in Asia

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Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

Profits From an Unfree Work Regime in Colonial Java

Jan Breman

Amsterdam University Press

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‘And there came strangers from the West, who made themselves lord and master of the land. They wished to reap the benefits of the fertility of the soil, and ordered the inhabitants to devote part of their labour and their time to fulfilling other tasks’ – there used to be talk namely of rice, which the Javanese people needed to stay alive – ‘other tasks, that would produce greater profits on markets in Europe. To persuade the common man to perform these tasks, nothing more was needed than the simplest of politics. He would always obey his Chiefs. It was therefore only necessary to win over the Chiefs by promising them a share of the profits ... and it was a complete success.’

Multatuli – *On free labour in the Dutch East Indies, and the current colonial agitation*. Amsterdam 1862: 38-39

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Prologue: The need for forced labour

The cultivation of coffee on Java for the world market started in the early years of the eighteenth century. This study examines colonialism and its impact on the social structure of the main coffee producing area in Southeast Asia. The advent of Dutch domination considerably contributed to the expansion of the world economy, a process of long duration. The *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC; Dutch East India Company) sought colonial commodities in various parts of the Indonesian archipelago. The coffee plant, imported from southern India, proved to thrive in the highlands surrounding the colonial headquarters in Batavia and the VOC's agents encouraged cultivation of this exogenous crop. At first, they bought the harvest from peasant growers, but what started as a regular commercial transaction soon evolved into the compulsory cultivation and delivery of coffee at a price far below the market value. Rising demand for this new consumer good in the Atlantic world led to pressure on the growers to supply more and more beans. This required the VOC to extend its control deep into the hinterland. In the Sundanese region of West Java known as the Priangan lands, the VOC did not achieve this by building up its own machinery of governance. It remained at a distance, installing indigenous chiefs and binding the peasantry in servitude to them. This system of indirect rule, imposed through regents and the lower ranks of the Sundanese aristocracy, kept management costs down. The same mode of cheap exploitation continued after the fall of the VOC and the emergence of the early-colonial state in a regime that lasted far into the nineteenth century.

The history of colonial rule on Java has focused mainly on the coastal areas and the lowlands and much less on the more inaccessible hilly and mountainous country in the deeper hinterland, far out of sight of Batavia. The sparse population living in tiny, scattered settlements and engaged in shifting cultivation gave these regions the characteristics of a frontier zone, a type of colonization which was strengthened by the arrival of newcomers from elsewhere who opened up the wilderness, either on their own initiative or at the behest of the gentry. Labour was a scarce commodity which the VOC and later the early-colonial state tried to appropriate it by imposing restrictions on the mobility of the peasants. Coffee growing was a lucrative business that relied on forced cultivation. The cooperation of the native aristocracy was indispensable in requisitioning both land and labour. Such total control of these factors

of production was given a veneer of justification with the erroneous argument that it simply represented a continuation of obligations that had been imposed on the population since time immemorial. Coffee cultivation played a major role in the regime of exploitation, yet it has received scant attention in colonial historiography.

This book aims to offer more than the past history of a neglected region, the Priangan highlands, of a system of indirect governance that had already been replaced in other parts of Java in the early nineteenth century by making the village community the cornerstone of colonial management. The cultivation of coffee for the expanding world market was based on unfree labour, a mode of employment that was first applied in the Priangan highlands and remained pivotal when it was made the organizing principle of what became known as the *cultuurstelsel* (cultivation system) in 1830. The aim of my study is to establish how labour and land were mobilized, why forced cultivation became the mode of surplus extraction and what impact this brutal system of taxation had on the economy and society.

My account is based on the study of a large quantity of records and secondary sources. I have read through a large number of archives deposited in both The Hague (National Archives) and Jakarta (Arsip Nasional) but only those I have referred to are included in the bibliography. The Dutch edition (2010) has more references and quotations but I did not want to overload this English edition with too many details of archives only accessible in Dutch. I was shown the way to these old sources, mostly handwritten, by existing compilations of archives, not least that of Frederik de Haan, who was given the assignment in 1900 to 'conduct a historical study of the development, impact and consequences of the system established by the VOC regarding the Priangan Regencies'. He continued his work after being appointed conservator of the colonial archives in 1905. De Haan did not restrict his task to that of archivist but – as his original assignment required – went a step further and, after many years of identifying, collecting and cataloguing his sources, published his research findings in eight parts (1910-12). His work, *De Preanger Regentschappen onder Nederlands bestuur tot 1811* (The Priangan Regencies under Dutch Rule until 1811), was presented in four volumes totalling around 2,500 pages. I refer to this study frequently, especially in the first half of this book. For the later chapters, I was able to draw on another compilation, *Bijdragen tot de kennis van het landelijk stelsel op Java* (Contributions to the History of the Land Rent System) by Salomon van Deventer. Van Deventer was an official in the colonial administration on Java when he was given the assignment,

while on leave in the Netherlands in 1863, to collect and catalogue official documents relating to the introduction of the land rent and cultivation system. The first volume of his study, published in 1865, described the origin of the system. Parts 2 and 3, which appeared a year later, examined the working of the system from 1819 to 1836 and after 1836, respectively. The last part is incomplete because the resignation of Minister for the Colonies Fransen van der Putte, a declared opponent of the cultivation system, prevented Van Deventer from finishing his work of documentation and the publication of his findings. In the final part of this study, I draw on a third source, *Algemeen Verslag der Uitkomsten van het Onderzoek betreffende de Koffijkultuur in Java* (Account of the investigations concerning coffee cultivation in Java), a report submitted in 1868 which was included in the parliamentary papers for 1870-71.

The abolition of the Priangan system in 1870 marked a turning point. Administrative reform led to native chiefs in the region being stripped of the power they had enjoyed until then, while the cultivation of coffee was organized along different lines. Government commissioner Otto van Rees reported in 1867 on the how and why of the change in governance. Until the end of colonial rule, only a small number of insiders who were interested in the history of coffee cultivation and how it was managed were granted access to his findings and recommendations, while they remained closed to the wider public. The report, which disappeared into the archives, is an important document because it offers insight into the debate pursued within a small circle of policy-makers. These deliberations addressed the streamlining of a regime founded on exploitation and oppression but which was presented to the outside world as something else, as introducing good governance and imposing an economic discipline that the peasantry was supposed to have sadly lacked.

The colonial policy pursued from the metropolis in Europe and its social impact on the native population has been a recurring topic of study. That also, and especially, applies to the *cultuurstelsel*. Its introduction by the early-colonial state was immediately accompanied by assessments for and against the system and that debate never flagged. No matter how different opinions are, they all acknowledge that the forced cultivation of crops for the world market found its rationale in the objective to generate the highest possible surplus, appropriated as profit by the metropolis. Much more disputed than the drain of wealth from the colonized economy is the question whether the heavy taxation on the native population improved their welfare – in other words whether it boosted not only growth but also development – or held the peasantry strangled in poverty, and thus

resulted in stagnation or even underdevelopment. In the Epilogue to this volume I position myself in this debate by rejecting the views of recent and reputed colonial historians who argue that the onerous system of forced cultivation, intentionally or unintentionally, also opened up new channels of progress for the peasantry. In contrast to these authors, I have highlighted in my findings the *faits et gestes* with which the Priangan producers, predominantly hailing from land-poor and landless underclasses, continued to resist for a century and a half the coercive coffee regime to which they were exposed. My conclusion is that their sustained unwillingness to act in compliance with what the colonial authorities ordered them to do was of decisive importance in the ultimate decline and fall of the cultivation system.

Before moving on to my account, I would like to take a few words to explain why this study, which spans a period of 40 years, has taken so long to complete. The first steps were taken shortly after the mid-1970s. The initiative had its origins in the Comparative Asian Studies Programme (CASP), a research unit set up within the Comparative Sociology Department at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. Under a cooperation agreement with the Socio-Economic Department at Bogor Agricultural University in Indonesia, staff from Rotterdam were seconded to Bogor on long-term teaching assignments. Our shared research interest focused on the longitudinal study of change processes in rural Java. Under the agreement, the Rotterdam group would begin by documenting the historical sources available in archives and libraries on the Cimanuk River basin, which descends from the Priangan highlands to the coastal plain of Cirebon. It was to become a substantial operation, both in terms of manpower and time.

I devoted myself initially to studying the peasant economy and society close to the north coast, the region to the east of Cirebon. The research resulted in a series of publications under the auspices of the CASP and a monograph entitled *Control of Land and Labour in Colonial Java* (1983). I later conducted anthropological fieldwork in the same area, first alone and then with Gunawan Wiradi, one of our Indonesian counterparts. We reported the results of our village study, started at the end of the twentieth century and completed in the years that followed, in *Good Times and Bad Times in Rural Java* (2002). Jacques van Doorn and Wim Hendrix began researching the impact of coffee cultivation in the Priangan highlands long before the cultivation system was introduced. Wim Hendrix was the team member responsible for accessing the colonial archives. He described his findings in great detail in an unremitting flow of internal

working papers, adding his own critical comments. He also built up a collection of the sourced material, arranged by theme, which took on the dimensions of a small library. One of the historical documents he came across while gathering this source material was the report drawn up by Otto van Rees in 1867 to bring the Priangan system to an end. In an interim CASP publication, *The Emergence of a Dependent Economy* (1983), Van Doorn and Hendrix summarized developments at the halfway stage of the project and outlined the contours of the late-colonial era that was to be studied to complete the research project. The Van Rees report led to a major change in the colonial administration of West Java. The library of the University of Amsterdam has made the document, transcribed and annotated by Emile Schwidder, available online (Rapport van Rees UvA-DARE). The original Dutch edition of this book – *Koloniaal profijt van onvrije arbeid; het Preanger stelsel van gedwongen arbeid op Java, 1720-1870* – was published in 2010 (Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam) and was also translated into Bahasa Indonesia. It was brought out in a slightly abbreviated format in 2014, entitled *Keuntungan kolonial dan kerja paksa; sistem priangan dari tanam paksa kopi di Jawa, 1720-1870* (Yayasan Pustaka Obor, Jakarta).

The whole project not only demanded considerable stamina and a broad perspective on the part of the research team, but assumed that their academic work would continue. That latter assumption proved incorrect. In 1986/87, the Faculty of Social Sciences at Erasmus University was trimmed down and there was no room in what survived for the Comparative Sociology Department. Jacques prematurely became professor emeritus. Wim also took retirement, while I was appointed to the chair of Comparative Sociology at the University of Amsterdam. Our splitting up in different directions derailed the Cimanuk project and made it impossible for us to keep to our agenda. But the scale of the work already done and the enormous database that had been brought together with such perseverance meant that the research, which we had embarked on with great enthusiasm, could not simply be abandoned. Wim Hendrix continued, now without pay, to retrieve files and official memoranda from archives and track down documents in libraries, to make them accessible, adding his incisive comments. In 1993, I agreed to write the entire history of the Priangan system, from its introduction to its abolition. This endeavour, recorded in this volume, was interrupted frequently and sometimes for long periods. That it was ever completed at all is due to Wim Hendrix's persistence. I dedicate this book to him and to the memory of Jacques van Doorn, to mark the many years of friendship we shared.

I am grateful to the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) for the grant awarded to me for the translations. Susi Moeimam has been very helpful in seeing the Indonesian edition to press while Andy Brown has once again translated my words into English. At an early stage Benedict Anderson patiently read through the Dutch version of my book manuscript. He made very helpful suggestions for alterations and additions but also strongly recommended bringing out an English edition. John Ingleson did the same and I am deeply grateful to both of them for their warm support.

Jan Breman

Amsterdam, December 2014

I The company as a territorial power

Intrusion into the hinterland

The name Parahyangan for the highlands of West Java dates back to the early-colonial era. The name, commonly referred to as Priangan, has been attributed different meanings. The most common one refers to this remote and mountainous region as a heavenly abode, where the land reaches into the sky. The vast wilderness was believed to have been more settled and inhabited once upon a time. According to one interpretation, the lands in the region had become wild and uninhabited. This recalled the social disruption following the fall and eventual destruction of the pre-colonial Hindu state of Pacacaran. Little is known about the history, organization and scale of the centre which must have been somewhere close to present-day Bogor. Archaeological finds from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries provide evidence of its Hinduization but not of the agrarian order underlying it. De Haan (I 1910: 23) reported on the remains of this civilization at the start of the twentieth century. Prabu Siliwangi, the last ruler of the fallen kingdom, continued to fight against Islamized rivals operating from harbour principalities on the north coast. He was finally defeated in the second half of the fifteenth century by attacks on his territory from the harbour principalities of Banten and Cirebon (Ten Dam 1957; see also Ekadjati 1980).

Under the banner of the new religion the coastal rulers expanded their power to the thinly populated highlands. In the early stage of colonial domination this led Cirebon to claim control over the hinterland. A rival to fill the political vacuum in the Priangan region was the empire of Mataram in Central Java that underwent a process of expansion from the end of the sixteenth century. As Mataram's power grew, it annexed regions and peoples which had previously had little or no history of outside intervention. The ruler of Sumedang – who came to the court of the Susuhunan, the king of Mataram, on his own initiative, after a journey alleged to have taken three months (Van Rees 1880: 14) – was rewarded for his offer of fealty by being proclaimed his sovereign's governor in all lands to the west. The growing power of Mataram was evident from its subordination of regional chiefs and the immigration of small bands of colonists from more densely populated areas who opened up river valleys in West Java. Under the supervision of headmen who accompanied them, the colonists spread throughout the region and prepared the land for regular cultivation. The colonization also had a strategic purpose, to prevent the harbour principality of Banten from

extending its power into the Sunda highlands. The political supremacy of Mataram facilitated the Javanization of especially eastern Priangan, a region that – unlike the northern coastal zone – had until then lost little of its original Sundanese identity. It is quite plausible that the name Parahyangan dates from this time, referring to the unknown and unsettled lands over which there was still little control and which were far removed from the court that acted as the magical centre of the empire. In the 1670s, Cirebon was forced to acknowledge the primacy of Mataram, and its subordination was sealed by hypergamous bonds of marriage between the royal families.

After the failed siege of Batavia in 1628-29, Mataram was gradually forced to relinquish all claims to territorial control in West Java. At first, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) was content to secure the countryside around its urban headquarters. In the course of time, this belt, initially only a few kilometres wide, increased in size, prompted by the need to grow food and provide building materials for Batavia. Privately operating entrepreneurs were granted permission to grow paddy, vegetables and other daily necessities. Within a short period, the first sugar mills appeared – the forerunners of an agro-industry that would remain in this region until the early nineteenth century. Later, these private estates went over to producing crops for export. The first franchise-holders were Europeans, Chinese and, to a much lesser extent, Javanese. Over time, the latter disappeared entirely, while the Chinese grew stronger. Employed by European owners, a number of these Chinese managers became entrepreneurs in their own right who remained dependent, however, on the VOC to market their produce. Henceforth, the cultivated belt around Batavia expanded on both flanks along the coast and gradually crept southwards until it reached the foothills. This first outer zone acted as a porous buffer to the remote and still unknown hinterland.

In the seventeenth century, after gaining a foothold on the coastal tract, the VOC was no longer satisfied with solely building its urban headquarters and occupying the surrounding countryside. The Company became a stakeholder in the struggle for control of the highlands. A first treaty in 1677 regulated the transfer to the VOC, as recognition for services rendered – military assistance in putting down an uprising in eastern Java – of the rights that Mataram had acquired over the Sundanese highlands in the previous century. None of the parties had a clear idea of the scale of the area covered by the agreement, also known as Pasundan. At first, the VOC was very cautious in making use of its new mandate. Local lords were told that they now had to obey both the Susuhunan of Mataram and the VOC. This simple instruction should also be seen in the light of the claims of the sultan of Banten to large parts of West Java, especially Krawang, Cirebon

and Sumedang. The withdrawal of Mataram had revived the aspirations of the Banten sultanate to regain and expand its stamp on the hinterland. The VOC successfully frustrated these ambitions in the years that followed. The rulers of Cirebon saw their subordination to Mataram replaced by an even more far-reaching dependency on the VOC. A treaty from 1681 obligated the priest-rulers of Cirebon to accept the suzerainty of the Company, a loss of autonomy that materialized in the building of a fortress, trade privileges and the surrender of all claims to adjacent highlands.

At the time when Mataram was expanding into the Sunda lands, both gentry and peasants initially fell back on the might of Banten. The sultan's protection extended to armed conflict which, as Mataram withdrew from West Java, took the form of attacks both along the coast and in the Priangan highlands. Such raids were common from the 1670s onwards. Bands operating under the leadership of Muslim leaders like Sjech Yussuf and Kiai Tjiliwidara strongly resisted outside intrusion in the area under the VOC's control, which was as yet hardly pacified. Eventually, this threat was also removed by sending military patrols to back up the persistent pressure exerted on local gentry. In the early eighteenth century, a rabble-rouser named Prawatasari caused considerable problems in the Priangan lands. Hailing from Giri, in Central Java, Prawatasari was alleged to have been sent to the Sunda highlands by 'fanatical clerics' to resist the new occupier. Known as a devout *haji*, he aroused the religious zeal of the population to resist the foreign infidels. The VOC ordered the regents to clamp down on the followers of this 'Mohamatan zealot', who subsequently sought refuge, together with his disciples, in remote Jampang. An expeditionary force sent to this sparsely populated and inaccessible southern part of the Priangan returned with the news that Prawatasari had been killed and his disciples dispersed. To avoid the risk of leaving a pocket of resistance behind in Jampang, all those who had settled down there were rounded up and brought back as prisoners. A large number of them managed to escape en route, many others did not survive the journey, and the remainder were designated a new place to live on the north coast (De Haan III 1911: 341-3). However, Prawatasari's reported death proved premature and in 1704 he resurfaced as the leader of an army of some 3,000 men in the hills above Cirebon, which further grew in size as it advanced to the coastal zone. The fact that he was able to advance to the immediate vicinity of Batavia suggested that some of the chiefs appointed by the Company were not to be trusted. The suspects were summoned to Batavia, imprisoned on charges of insurgency and then, having been put on trial, were lashed, beaten, branded and sent in chains to the Cape, banned for 50 years. This

punishment was also intended as a warning to the Priangan regents who were ordered to capture the insurgents within six months, otherwise they themselves would be arrested and punished. Despite all these threats and the continually rising price on Prawatasari's head, the unrest persisted and the fugitive remained at large. He was finally tracked down and arrested in Kartasura in 1707 and executed (Ricklefs 1993: 337, note 90). His elimination did not mean, however, that the VOC's rule in the highlands subsequently went unchallenged. Only three years later, there were reports that a new religious leader had emerged in Jampang and was rapidly gaining support among the population. He announced that his master was soon to join him, with a large company of followers (De Haan III 1911: 470). Within a year, this movement had expanded into the Batavian lowlands. The arrest of a number of leading insurgents could not prevent the agitation continuing in the years that followed. In 1715, there were reports, again from Jampang, that a certain Raden Dermakoesoema had gathered together a group of about 100 followers and was actively trying to persuade the chief of the region to support him. The VOC reacted to this news by holding the chief himself responsible for the uprising. He was accused of tolerating and supporting the rebels for many years and of being a 'good-for-nothing, a *madath* (opium) smoker and a cheat', and was sent in chains to Ceylon. After this experience the authorities in Batavia decided not to appoint a new chief for Jampang and to entrust the region in the future to the regent of Cianjur, who had remained loyal to the high command (De Haan III 1911: 470-1).

Enclosing the principalities of Cirebon and Banten on the coast by cutting off their communication lines inland allowed the VOC to put an end to Mataram's presence in the Priangan. A second treaty in 1705 confirmed the surrender of all the rights the now severely weakened Central Javanese kingdom had enjoyed in the Sunda territories. From then on the VOC acted as the only legitimate heir to Mataram's former possessions, whose exact size and location were never delineated. The border was clearest to the east, where the Cilosari river traditionally marked the dividing line between Java and Sunda. By 1706, the VOC's power was now so well established that it entrusted control of the land and people in the Priangan to the Pangeran Aria Cheribon, who had come to power as the company's agent. He was authorized to pass on the VOC's instructions to the local gentry and present their requests to the Company. When he died in 1724, the Company did not appoint a successor, no longer needing an intermediary. The directors in Batavia now did their business directly with the regents, individually or collectively. The eastern highlands, which initially continued to belong to

Cirebon, were subsequently split off from allegiance to the sultanate and were then elevated to the rank of regencies.

For a long time, the VOC remained unaware of the size and nature of the possessions it had acquired towards the end of the seventeenth century in West Java. The unrest continued and southern Priangan in particular remained a hotbed of resistance against the authority of the Company until deep into the eighteenth century. Clear geographical borders only became necessary much later as more and more became known about the landscape and greater demands were imposed on the inhabitants. The administrative structure was not established in any definitive form until the start of the nineteenth century. Under the new structure, the lowlands along the whole north coast of Priangan remained under the direct command of Batavia. In the broad buffer zone that had emerged between Batavia and Buitenzorg (Bogor), private estates were set up whose managers delivered their produce to the VOC. From the beginning, the southern border had been formed by the Indian Ocean. The eastern border remained essentially the same as under the agreement with Mataram and to the west, much later, a more precise border was demarcated with the sultanate of Banten.¹

The foundation of Batavia was driven by mercantile interests and ambitions. The VOC's Eastern headquarters became integrated in much older networks of maritime trade that linked the Indian Ocean to the Pacific and extended from West and South to East Asia. A large number of harbour principalities, which rose and fell over the course of many centuries, acted as fulcra in this long-distance trade and Batavia adopted a similar role after it was established in the seventeenth century. The settlement grew to become a prominent centre of commercial activity in contact with a large number of similar coastal enclaves within and beyond the archipelago. The proximity to and interaction with outsiders – Gujaratis, Parsis, Bengalis, Klings, Arabs, Siamese, Malays and especially Chinese – underlined the international character of the trade. Only a very parochial view of history, like that which held sway in the late-colonial era, could see the arrival of the Dutch in the early seventeenth century as a decisive break in a trend that had already existed for centuries. Not only had they been preceded by other Europeans, notably the Portuguese and Spanish, but the newcomers also had to be satisfied with a modest position in this multi-ethnic trade network driven by competition and fierce rivalry. From the very beginning, the VOC aimed to achieve nothing less than complete control of trade in tropical products. Its main concern was to outdo its

1 These borders had been established as early as 1642. See Van der Chijs 1885: 474.

competitors and establish its own monopoly by concluding contracts that gave the Company sole marketing rights, by blockading 'hostile' harbours, by capturing ships carrying competitors' cargo, by destroying what were referred to as 'pirate's nests'. Raids over land were largely limited to the coastal belt, targeting Cirebon or Banten. The troops needed for these campaigns were recruited from among the Buginese, Balinese, Ambonese, Madurese or Makassarese, contingents which were often readily available in the environs of Batavia. Like all mercenaries they were taken on and dismissed as the VOC saw fit, and the same troops could sometimes be found fighting on the other side. However, the exercise of power was primarily directed seawards and was supported by an extensive and far-reaching network of fortresses and trading posts. This was the role initially played by Batavia: the headquarters of a naval empire with little or no need for expansion inland.

This later perspective on the arrival of the Dutch in the archipelago was brilliantly construed and analysed by Jacob Cornelis van Leur shortly before the sun set on the Dutch colonial mission. His reappraisal of the patriotic doctrine of 'we came, we saw, we conquered' offers a more sophisticated view of early European expansion in Asia. What this reconstruction still lacks is an understanding that the long-distance trade was based on a more inwardly located mode of production that was predominantly – though not exclusively – agrarian in nature. The commercialization and monetization that dominated economic life in the small trading enclaves centred on harbour principalities was decidedly less developed in the main agricultural empires of inland Asia. Nevertheless, the long-held assumption that these societies lacked complexity and distant trade connections – consisting of a simple division between lords and peasants and an institutional structure typified by constant fluidity and turmoil at the top set off by an introspective, essentially static and subsistence-oriented village economy – must be considered obsolete. I am tempted to see the transformation of the VOC from maritime power to territorial ruler of wider tracts of Java in the light of my rejection of this erroneous interpretation. It means that the Company has to be seen as not only a maritime but also territorial power, as 'a political body exercising a particular form of sovereignty, as a Company-State' (Weststeijn 214: 27). This major turning point occurred at a time when the Company's trade within Asia was declining and the volume of goods being shipped to Europe steadily increased. The political and commercial transformation as made manifest in the records of the VOC was defined by shifts in the balance of power in the global economy, a process that would gather speed in the eighteenth century.

Retreat of princely authority

The intrusion inland in the second half of the seventeenth century was precipitated by the need to take sides in the domestic political constellation that was in constant turmoil. Lack of familiarity with the terrain made it difficult for the VOC's officials to manoeuvre their way through the bewildering variety of local ranks and titles. They tried to impose some order on it by using European synonyms: the most prominent of all, the Susuhunan of Mataram, was given the title of emperor, and below him were kings and princes, governors and barons, squires and captains, with local names being used for the remainder. The tendency of many local notables to claim a higher rank than they actually held only added to the confusion. Some local chiefs could trace their lineage all the way back to the Pacacaran royal family, claiming that their ancestors, by intermarrying at opportune moments, had transferred their loyalty to the rulers of Cirebon. The chief with the most senior pedigree, the *bupati* of Sumedang, called himself Pangerang, which VOC officials initially interpreted as 'prince'. Eventually, however, Batavia decided to treat all the highest ranking notables the same, making no distinction between them. This meant that the *primus inter pares* now went through life as a regent. Since it can be assumed that the differences in hierarchy could not have escaped the notice of the VOC for long, ignoring them so demonstratively can be seen as a clear signal that it intended to completely restructure the administrative management of the region.

Under the traditional order, which the VOC considered neither efficient nor effective, the exercise of authority was based on the principle of concentricity, with the Susuhunan of Mataram as the figure in which all power was concentrated (Moertono 1968: 112). He resided in his palace, the *kraton*, which was surrounded by domains that he governed directly. This epicentre of authority was in turn encircled by provinces governed in his name by a *bupati*. There were also differences between these latter territories: the 'outer regents' of Mataram, as the Company called them (of which the regent of Priangan was one), enjoyed greater autonomy than those in charge of provinces closer to the centre of the empire. These differences were not only geographical. In the Hindu-Javanese tradition, the prince was the embodiment of all power, a luminary radiating light with decreasing intensity as it moved away from the source. The mystic force that was the organizing principle of authority did not permit a territorial demarcation of the empire. The prince hardly moved around his realm, remaining in his *kraton*. His army was also quartered in the palace, rather than on the

borders. The empire was in a constant state of flux and continued to exist as long as the ruler remained the symbolic, even sacred, pivot. His power rested not on territorial jurisdiction, but on the exercise of authority over obedient subjects. Powerful was the chief who had a large peasant clientele which he could mobilize to build temples or irrigation canals or for military campaigns and upon whom he could impose taxes.

Exercising symbolic authority in this way was of course not sufficient in itself. The ruler could not do without a governance apparatus, to control and exploit his own territories and so that more distant provinces could be ruled in his name. In the Hindu-Javanese order, these tasks were not performed by civil servants in the Western sense of the word, but by a managerial elite. The governors were appointed under the condition that they themselves were responsible for controlling and exploiting their subjects in such a way that, in addition to collecting taxes and providing manpower for the prince, there was sufficient left over for the governor and his entourage.

During the later Mataram period the king's administration was essentially a hierarchical line of separate, self-sufficient and highly autonomous units of power, vertically linked by the direct and personal ties between the several power-holders/administrators. Apart from the binding ties of a common servitude and loyalty, there did not seem to be any horizontal administrative relationship which could limit the monarchs' (inferiors') independence from each other. (Moertono 1968: 104)

Moertono quite correctly called this system imitative as, at each lower level, the authority of the chief remained undivided. Vassals also issued land to clients and ruled in the domains entrusted to them with absolute power. In other words, they were not officials to whom tasks were delegated, but lords in their own right. This made the political balance thoroughly unstable. The arbitrary manner in which those in power at every level treated their inferiors – there was always a risk that a patron would favour a rival – forced his clients to restrict their loyalty. It was a game of strategy and counter-strategy in which the stakes remained covert as long as it served the interests of both parties to maintain the relationship. A variety of mechanisms kept the tensions between centre and periphery under control. Marrying into a high-ranking family gave a client direct access to the patron, but this of course also gave the latter a lever with which to control the new family member. Through such marital arrangements, the gentry of Priangan had allied themselves with the ruling dynasties of Pacacaran, Cirebon, Banten and, finally, Mataram. Some prominent families

even claimed ties with all of these lineages, a claim for which there was often sparse factual evidence.

A long sojourn at court was another way that governors could show their loyalty. They were expected to at least attend the annual audience (*pasowan*) and permission to be absent was considered a sign of trust.

The *pasowan*s had a special function, namely to enhance the glory of the king. On special occasions, like the *Garebeg*, literally all of the king's officials from every part of the country were required to come. The glitter and pomp displayed on these occasions, and certainly not in the least, the great number of persons attending, were perceptible evidence of the king's greatness and authority. But from the point of view of the officials, to be included in such events was a great honour, particularly as the strict hierarchical arrangement of seating, the distinctive colour of their apparel and paraphernalia, and the number of persons in their entourages clearly displayed their exact place in the bureaucratic hierarchy (Moertono 1968: 99).

In the eighteenth century, Priangan regents would boast that their forefathers had swept the courtyard of the palace in the capital of Mataram. This information did not have the intended impact on colonial chroniclers, who tended to see such demonstrations of the subservient origins of the regents as evidence of disdain and worthlessness, rather than recognizing this symbolic chore as a sign of past prestige and glory. Staying at court for an unlimited period prevented the gentry from managing the day-to-day affairs of their own territories with adequate propriety. They solved this dilemma by appointing deputies authorized to act in their name during their absence. This system of substitution was not limited to the highest level of administration, but was applied right down to the lowest tiers of governance. Although the chiefs were entitled to appoint their substitutes from their own entourage, the presence of these shadow figures was illustrative of the inherent duality in the management of authority that allowed superiors to keep a close watch on those immediately below them. In addition to alliances through marriage and being retained at court for unstipulated periods, another way in which rulers could exercise their power was through the use of force. The chastising hand of a patron extended not only to a disobedient client, but also to the rebel's family and retinue. Imperial rule on Java was in precarious balance. Nevertheless, no matter how repressive and immutable the system appeared to be, the regime also allowed for mobility, since capable newcomers could force their way up to the seat of

the emperor from below or from without to grasp power for themselves. If they were more ambitious, they might even attempt to dismantle the system altogether and replace it by another. Such a radical transformation, a break in the existing structure of relations, occurred when the VOC penetrated into the Sunda lands.

A treaty agreed in 1677 brought Mataram rule in Priangan to an end and the VOC now had absolute control of the region. The transfer of power was formalized in 1684, when the Priangan nobility was summoned to Cirebon to receive their new instructions. The region was parcelled out in separate units, each given in charge to a regent. This administrative demarcation underwent several changes until five units remained – Sumedang, Cianjur, Bandung, Limbangan and Sukapura. These divisions were established, abolished, split up and merged again, often more than once. One significant intervention was not to acknowledge the vassalage of the gentry in the hinterland to the ruler of Cirebon. The decision to retain the native chiefs was a result of both the low managerial capability of the VOC and the compelling need to keep administrative costs as low as possible. The exercise of power was however completely reorganized. Although the first generation of regents came from families who had previously held positions of eminence, it did not mean a continuation of the *ancien régime*.

Territorial demarcation and hierarchical structuring

The early style of governance excelled in arbitrariness and indifference, as can be seen in the unexpected changes in the number and size of the regencies and the refusal to treat the chiefs as anything other than convenient pawns. Even after they were appointed, the regents could not be at all sure that they would be allowed to stay and dismissal or transfer were frequent occurrences. But was this high-handedness not equally a feature of the earlier despotic rule? The same applied to the rules of succession. Whenever there was a vacancy, there was no guarantee that a successor would be designated from among the previous regent's sons and it was not uncommon for an outsider to be chosen. The criterion for being appointed was not the length of the candidate's lineage, but his proven or suspected loyalty and trust in representing the interests of the VOC. Who would have dared to claim that this was a new practice that violated the traditions and customs of the kingdom of Mataram, which had so recently been displaced? From 1704, the Company undertook to provide the regents with a letter of appointment, stipulating the regent's tasks as a keeper of order and supplier

of products, but offering no great security of tenure. What seems at first sight to be a rather hasty and indifferent approach, with regents and regencies being designated haphazardly, was partly due to ignorance of the principles on which the indigenous power was exercised. If nothing else, it goes some way to explaining why the VOC found it so difficult to structure power relations to its own advantage. The regent families had no other choice than to accept the supreme right of the Company to appoint whoever it chose. After the death of the regent of Cianjur in 1707, for example, his eldest son travelled to Batavia to pay his respects (De Haan IV 1912: 346).

The advent of the VOC as the sole authority in the region represented a clear political break with the past in two respects. The first was that power was now based on territorial jurisdiction. The new regents held authority over all the inhabitants of their regencies and over them alone. This put a stop to the confusingly complex situation in which peasant households lived in a landscape with vague borders, and often had neighbours who were clients of another lord (see Breman 1979 and 1987a). It would take a long time for the new structure to materialize, but this slow impact – partly a consequence of the VOC's strategy of not intervening in the internal affairs of the regencies – did not detract from the importance of the introduction of a form of governance based on territoriality.

The second break with the past was the imposition of a uniform hierarchy on the relationships between the new regents and their superiors in Batavia. An impression had been prematurely created that the direct predecessors of these regents owed unconditional obedience to the ultimate ruler: the emperor of Mataram, or the sultan of Cirebon or Banten. For various reasons, all the parties involved later acquiesced in this interpretation which, in my view, is incompatible with the 'frontier' nature of the Priangan highlands in the pre-colonial and early-colonial eras. Furthermore, large parts of the region would retain a multi-stranded character along lines of allegiance in different directions until deep into the nineteenth century.

Under the old regime, the power of individual chiefs varied considerably. Only a few were directly accountable to the far-off royal court. The others had to acknowledge them as their superiors on the basis of hierarchical gradations that were often invisible to the Company officials. As already observed, this confusing and ambiguous configuration soon came to an end. The gentry who were appointed to rule the newly formed territorial units were all given the same rank and title, that of regent. More importantly, the idea of Priangan as a region in which the exercise of power had already crystallized into a more or less fixed pattern by the time the VOC arrived requires correction. This erroneous perspective is based on a view of the

coastal hinterland not from the aft deck of a merchant ship – according to Van Leur, the perspective from which colonial history was written – but from the courtyard of the *kraton*, the royal palace. It was a distortion that not only had its origin in the *babad*, indigenous records, but also permeated the annals of the VOC. This should come as no surprise, as the Company's chroniclers described indigenous structures on the basis of what they had been told by members of the aristocracy. It was very rare for them to make contacts beyond this received wisdom. In my view, however, the dynamics of power in Batavia's hinterland largely focused around local heavyweights intent on improving their status despite having very little room to manoeuvre. To consolidate or extend their power bases they were forced to seek support from higher up, which often entailed them entering into temporary as well as variable alliances.

This contrasting interpretation also offers a different explanation for the stubborn resistance and continually changing coalitions that the VOC encountered during its slow penetration inland from its coastal enclave. Another development that received little attention was the change in the balance of religious power. When the Portuguese first visited the coast in 1522, they found no Muslim rulers, but this had already changed when they returned in 1526. Islam had started penetrating the hinterland from the north coast before the VOC followed suit, but its social advance is neglected in the colonial records. The explicit Islamic identity of the leaders of resistance movements that made life difficult for the VOC and its allies was an indication of shifts in the basic frame of society, the consequences of which can only be assessed from a long-term perspective. When analysing the resistance that the VOC encountered to its efforts to expand, one needs to bear in mind that the instigators did not always or automatically act on orders from above – the *kraton* of Mataram or the priestly dynasties in the harbour principalities – but were responding to the loss of their own room for manoeuvre and the abrogation of their local power. Furthermore, the rebels often did not belong to a well-established elite, who rightly felt their position threatened, but had simpler origins and, while attempting to gain greater prestige, found themselves caught up in a political maelstrom. Only later would it become clear whether they had chosen the right side and could claim favours from the new ruler or would be labelled 'fanatical and mutinous zealots' who were fair game to all comers.

In this early-colonial era, the VOC forced the Sundanese nobility to accommodate themselves to a structure of authority formed along territorial lines and with a hierarchical structure headed by a regent. Once established, the regency became in the course of time – in fact up to the moment when

indirect rule was abolished in 1871 – a much tighter straitjacket for the supra-local elite than the more fluid situation they had enjoyed during the pre-colonial era. The Priangan retained the character of a ‘frontier’ until deep into the nineteenth century. This was largely due to the fact that, when the VOC started to intrude into the highlands, the region was sparsely populated. Expeditions sent reports back of an inaccessible landscape of mountains and valleys, and of thick forests and marshes teeming with wildlife. Early travellers never failed to give special mention to tigers and rhinoceros, because of the threat they posed to people and crops. The few settlements comprised little more than a handful of peasant dwellings and a poverty-stricken habitat. Even the *kota*, the residence of the regent, had only a few hundred inhabitants, the majority of whom were the *bupati*’s family members and servants. The constant stream of guests who presented themselves at the *dalem* – later termed *kraton* – included minor chiefs who were also accompanied by their own retinues. But even with these temporary residents, the population of the settlement remained small in scale. It was a centre of political power in a rural environment from which it was hardly distinguishable. There was little or no communication between the separate regencies. Connecting roads were rare and, though simple carts were in use it was much more common for people to carry goods by buffalo or on their own head or shoulders. The simple technology limited both the volume of goods and the distance it could be transported.

The Priangan highlands as a frontier

Cultivation entitled rights to the land but, if a local lord had taken the initiative to open up the land and had perhaps help provide the means to do it – by for example, supplying food and tools while the land was being cleared and more general logistical support – he would claim a percentage of the yield. He would not take his share immediately, to give those tilling the land time to build up a reserve stock, but after some years. In addition, the lord himself owned fields – known as *balubur* – in the immediate vicinity of his residence, which were laid out and tilled by his clients. Sometimes such a notable figure had worked his way up through his own efforts, but the custom was for a local influential to be designated the peasant households falling under his jurisdiction by a superior. There was a long and complex chain of patronage that led right up to the highest power – the emperor or sultan, later succeeded by the VOC – and down through the regents and lower chiefs to the peasants who spent their lives in servitude. How this

servitude operated in practice escaped the observation of the VOC officials, whose contacts with the indigenous population extended no further than the chiefs. The Company aimed first to shield the Priangan region from external claims and then to put an end to the persistent wrangling between the regents. These disputes, which could lead to armed conflict, were part of their struggle to defend, and if possible increase, their own political power and economic gains. The chiefs tolerated no competition in their own domain, but tried to recruit clients from households that were already in servitude to another lord.

In the peasant order that the VOC as it were inherited, labour was more important than land. Chiefs laid claim to peasants' labour power by attaching them in bondage. Their subordination was a source of conflict between higher and lower chiefs. If these disputes seemed to be about land issues, it was because the land was to be ruled, intended for peasants to be settled on and thus to become subordinated to the lord. This dependence took the form of patronage that extended to higher echelons. Benedict Anderson described this power configuration as follows.

The administrative structure, while formally hierarchical, is in effect composed of stratified clusters of patron-client relationships. Both in the regions and in the center, officials gather around them clusters of personal dependents on the model of the ruler himself. These dependents' destinies are linked with the success or failure of their patrons. They work as administrative and political aides, and have no real autonomous status except in relation to him. They are financed by portions of the benefices allotted to their patron by his patron, or by the ruler himself if their master is highly enough placed. Just as the power of the ruler is measured by the size of the populations he controls, so the power of the subordinate official (patron) is gauged by the size of the clientele that he heads. (Anderson 1972: 34)

Jacobus Couper, who summoned the heads of the regencies in eastern Priangan to Cirebon in 1684 (those in the west not yet being demarcated), expressed the size of their jurisdictions in terms of the number of households allocated to each of them. The ceremonial appointment of the regents was accompanied by a warning not to interfere in affairs beyond the borders of their own territorial jurisdiction and not to attract people from other regions. That this warning had not the slightest effect became clear in 1686, when the regents were again summoned to come to Batavia with a record of the names and places of birth of all the people falling under their authority.

Anyone not on the list would from then on be treated as vagrants (Kern 1898: 26-7). This first attempt to register the populations of the regencies would be much repeated, each time producing a result in which, quite rightly, the VOC would have little confidence. Another early instruction from the VOC ignored the divisions between the local chiefs, encouraging them to cultivate new paddy fields in their territories. One of these was the Pangerang Aria Cheribon, whose letter of appointment as upper regent of Priangan in 1706 urged him to open up new land. The prince excused himself for his failure to recount the population of the Parahyangan by saying that the inhabitants had dispersed in all directions because of lack of food.² The very extensive use of land added to the low degree of sedentarization.

On the more densely populated plains along the north coasts of Java, peasants already practised a more advanced form of agriculture. The fields were irrigated and surrounded by dykes, and they had cattle and better tools to till the land. The terraced *sawahs* or irrigated fields that came to dominate the landscape here, were much less common in the Priangan highlands. Colonial sources gave the impression that peasant colonists had brought wet land cultivation with them from Central Java. In this view, the prospect of generating agrarian capital by investing labour in improving the value of the land was insufficient to persuade peasants in the Priangan region to settle down in one place to live and work. Agronomic research has shown that the technique of constructing *sawahs* was already widespread among the population of Java before the tenth century (Setten van der Meer 1979). It seems unlikely that the inhabitants of Priangan and other highlands were not familiar with this knowledge. Inscriptions dating from the fifth century AD and old Sundanese manuscripts show that wet land cultivation did not come to West Java at the same time as Islam, but must have arrived much earlier (Hoadley 1994: 26-7). So why did this mode of cultivation, which had become more common in the more densely populated lowlands in the seventeenth century, make such little progress in the Priangan highlands? The inhabitants of these regions would long display a stubborn preference for rainfed agriculture, despite its lower yield. Contemporary chroniclers suggested a different reason for what became branded as non-economic conduct. The lords of the land found it much more difficult to cream off the

2 Elsewhere in his report on the situation in which the country found itself, he gave a different reason for the migration: 'The people of the Priangan do not settle down quietly and peacefully because their large number of headmen are in conflict with each other and stir up the commoners to revolt, and consequently they forget about their obligations to the Company.' (Van Rees 1880: 90)

surplus from nomadic peasants and thus, according to Andries de Wilde (1830: 222), the latter were of no use at all to the government or anyone else. Not only was their yield much lower, it was also more difficult to estimate its volume. For the peasantry, remaining footloose was an effective means of avoiding lords wishing to lay claim to as much of their surplus as possible. According to an early nineteenth-century report describing the situation in interior Banten, the surplus the gentry eventually succeeded in appropriating was little more than 'a handful of rice and a few farthings'. This makes it clear why both the old and new elite urged their clients to practise wet land cultivation. Yet, despite all these efforts, what was largely seen as the destruction of the forest by primitive peasants would continue until deep into the nineteenth century.

Although Priangan gradually became less wild and inaccessible and expeditions were able to provide information on areas about which little had previously been known, the higher and more distant lands in particular remained largely uncultivated (see the map of the Priangan highlands). Colonists moved into the region from the valleys, but significant population growth was hindered by the absence of roads while the rivers were only navigable in the plains. Andries de Wilde, who founded the Sukabumi estate in the early nineteenth century and cultivated a small part of his huge property – covering an area larger than a province in the Netherlands – described the remoteness of the landscape where he started his pioneering work.

In each regency, interminable mountain ranges and plains of enormous dimensions lie wild and desolate, yet would be extremely suitable for the cultivation of rice and other crops (De Wilde 1829: 15).

The southern regions of Priangan in particular were almost uninhabited. It was possible to travel for hours without seeing cultivated fields, huts or other traces of human activity. Colonial historiography attributes the low level of development to the exodus of the original population after the fall of the Pacacaran empire in the early fifteenth century. In this colonial interpretation, the victory of Sultan Hassanudin of Cirebon led not only to the fall of the Siliwangi dynasty, but also put an end to the Hindu civilization that had until then been dominant. Islam, after first gaining a foothold in the coastal zone of North Java, now also penetrated inland. The mild-mannered and peace-loving inhabitants of the highlands were unable to withstand their war-mongering neighbours from Banten and Cirebon. Holding on to the Hindu faith of their forefathers, they left the land of their birth to avoid

the enforced introduction of the new religion by the sword. The memory of their origins remained in the name they gave the land they left behind: *tanah preangan*, abandoned land. This apocryphal legend, recorded by V J.C. van Beusechem in 1836-7, is an invention of a past that never existed. It is more plausible that peasants abandoned their lands when there was reason to, for example during times of unrest, or came from elsewhere to escape the grasp of local lords, opening up the forested wilderness to which they had fled. Peasant life in Priangan under the *ancien régime* was always typified more by continual mobility than by settling down indefinitely. In the mid-eighteenth century, rebels in Banten still absconded to Priangan to escape subjection by the Sultan (Ota 2006: 61-2). The conversion from Hinduism to Islam did not bring about any sudden change in this situation. The religious transition took several generations to complete. A source from the end of the eighteenth century reports that, while strict Muslims lived on the coast, the religious practices of the inhabitants of the hinterland were mingled much with superstition (Ota 2006: 32-4). Lastly, there is little plausibility in the claim that Hinduism on West Java was once the foundation of a complex agrarian civilization and incorporated a large kingdom. Besides Siliwangi, there were a small number of other political formations, including Galuh in east Priangan, but these alliances were not deeply rooted or long lasting, dissolving as quickly as they were formed. What is known as Pacacaran was probably little more than a loose collection of local and small-scale kingdoms (Guillot 1991: 70). The Sunda highlands were never the heart of a highly organized agrarian order now veiled in mist. The region appears to have always been as it was when the VOC arrived: a frontier territory, sometimes expanding, sometimes contracting again, and slowly populated by colonists from outside.

Clearing the land for cultivation

The settlements that the early VOC agents encountered in the hinterland were without exception small, had few inhabitants and were almost exclusively located on or close to rivers. An initial census, dating from 1686, records 508 *negorijen* (settlements). Almost three-quarters of these (353) comprised ten households at the most. The largest had more than 20 households, but only a little more than a tenth of the total fell into this category (De Haan III 1912: 203). Many of the inhabitants had no permanent place of residence, leading a nomadic existence in the forest or in open fields. They lived in small family bands and survived by growing food on

a plot of land that they first cleared by burning away the vegetation and then cultivated using primitive tools. Little was written during the VOC era about their *modus operandi*, but a Swedish traveller through the Cirebon and Priangan regions in the late eighteenth century recorded that they cleared plots of land and then planted rice by making holes in the ground with a stick and dropping two or three grains in each. The harvest followed around three-and-a-half months later, during which time the peasants did little to tend the plants. The advantage of low maintenance was offset by the unpredictability of the yield. If there was insufficient rain or wild animals damaged the crops, the peasants' efforts came to nothing (Stützer 1787). De Haan also comments on the simple technology of these slash-and-burn cultivators.

... they have no buffalo; their only tools are a *bedog* (machete), *parang* (sickle) and *kored* (a hooked metal tool to pull roots out of the ground); they cooked their paddy in a bamboo basket. (De Haan III 1912: 216)

After one or two harvests, which yielded little, they would abandon their huts, made of branches, leaves and other non-durable materials, and move somewhere else, where they would also stop only for a short time. Usually, after some years, they would return to places they had abandoned earlier, where nature would have recovered from their previous presence. They also survived by hunting and gathering, which made them vulnerable to predators living in the forests and mountains of Priangan. Known as *jalma burung*, bird people, these *huma* or *gaga* cultivators, who possessed nothing and roamed around continually, were looked down upon for their rough and ambulant way of life. Settling them was considered a precondition to make them more civilized. From this perspective, a nomadic existence could easily lead to social impropriety (Geographische en statistische bijzonderheden 1835: 378).

Tipar tillers were also shifting cultivators and tended rain-fed fields, but they were agronomically more advanced than their *huma/gaga* contemporaries. They had better tools, including a plough or hoe, and a few head of cattle, which allowed them to till the land more intensively and increase their yields. Their huts, built to last five to seven years, were still simple, but were starting to look more like permanent dwellings. Their fields, also known as *tegal*, were located around the places they settled and were often abandoned *humas*. They would plant a tree on a plot of land to indicate that they had temporarily taken possession of it and intended to return in the future. The *tipar* peasants did not live clustered together,

Gaga (slash-and-burn) field of a nomadic cultivator in Jampang in the early twentieth century. The felled trees are laid out over the terrain to prevent erosion of the top soil and to terrace the hillside.



Source: F. de Haan – Priangan, vl. 1, p. 376

but spread out over the land around the settlement. The scattered habitat made it difficult to determine their share of the total population with any accuracy, but they were in the majority until the early decades of the nineteenth century. The first step towards sedentary existence had been taken but not yet completed.

The *tegal* peasants were gradually ousted from their dominant position as tillers of the land by the owners of *sawahs*, irrigated paddy fields. *Sawahs* did not become commonplace in Priangan until the early-colonial era. Contingents of colonists from the coastal plain moved into the region in the seventeenth century, at the invitation of the regent of Cianjur, who was subordinate to the sultan of Cirebon, to construct irrigation systems and make the land suitable for permanent cultivation (De Roo de la Faille 1941: 420). In bad times, for example successive failed harvests or serious political unrest leading to war, not only did the influx of settlers come to an end, but there was even evidence of outmigration. Early-colonial sources speak of *buniaga*, strangers, who would arrive and join the inhabitants of an existing settlement. The longer they stayed, the more rights they acquired

and, although they would initially be dependent on a previously established peasant household, they would gradually till the land more autonomously themselves. There would also undoubtedly be incidences of one or more peasant households settling somewhere outside the boundaries of existing settlements and opening up wilderness land (see Peluso 1992). Due to a lack of information, we can only speculate on the extent of such 'wild' colonization. There is little more evidence of members of the landed gentry ordering their subjects to cultivate new land within their jurisdictions. This would take the form of group colonization, with clients of local headmen setting out with bands of peasants, to reclaim new areas, often close by but sometimes further afield. The report on an official survey of indigenous land rights, conducted in 1867, refers to large-scale migrations and attributes this form of organized mobility to a combination of economic and political motives.

There can be no doubt that the landed gentry promoted the development of sedentary farming and that colonists from other regions played a prominent role. Oral tradition does not stipulate when and how *tipar* peasants started to irrigate their fields, and whether this was at their own initiative or at the instigation of local chiefs, but it was a change that signified a break with their previous way of life. As sedentary cultivators, their socioeconomic security increased, with a lower risk of failed harvests, higher yields and the possibility of protecting their settlements against external threats, such as attacks by wild animals or robbers. The price they had to pay was the loss of the independence they enjoyed as footloose peasants, and it was for this reason that orders from above to lay out *sawahs* remained unheeded. The colonial explanation for what was seen as a rejection of progress was that the nomadic cultivators were lazy and satisfied with their hand-to-mouth existence. Nineteenth-century sources abound with this interpretation; in 1809, for example, the Prefect of the Cirebon-Priangan Regencies wrote to Marshal Daendels, the Governor-General, that he had given orders that more paddy be grown to combat hunger during the periodic food shortages. But his instructions to construct 'muddy fields' had little success.

Urging on my part to expand the cultivation of paddy to ensure sufficient healthy food in the bosom of the Prefecture is contrary to the customs of the inhabitants, is considered onerous by them, and may be seen as one of the causes of their uprooting and moving elsewhere. (De Haan III 1912: 212)

By remaining footloose, the peasants were able to escape the grip of the lords. If they settled permanently, the landed gentry nearly always laid

claim to a larger share of their harvest. The gentry justified this practice by stating that they bore the costs of cultivation, and guaranteed the peasants' survival, offering them protection or even imposing it upon them. The peasants held ownership rights to the fields, while the builder of a water canal held control over the common land that it could be used to irrigate. Colonial enquiries carried out in the mid-nineteenth century confirmed that official permission was not required to take unenclosed waste land into cultivation (Van Marle 1860: 13). The inhabitants of a settlement were permitted to use the surrounding uncultivated land not only to graze their cattle and gather wood but also to grow crops on an occasional basis. Ownership rights to fields could only be claimed if they had been prepared for permanent cultivation, a time-consuming investment that required not only tools and draught animals but also a great deal of labour to build the *sawah* terraces.

The question whether the footloose peasants clung to their freedom or were prepared to exchange it for a form of socioeconomic security that would restrict their mobility is misleading, because in practice they were not free to choose. Nobles could only acquire clients by subordinating them. There was such an abundance of unenclosed waste land that the nomadic tillers had little difficulty in escaping the 'protection' offered to them. The only way for the gentry to restrict their mobility was to tie agricultural labour to the land. The sparsely populated and scarcely cultivated Priangan was essentially a region of 'open resources'. The Dutch ethnologist Herman Nieboer saw the incidence of unfree labour in pre-industrial societies as a consequence of free access to land. He argued that, if land were freely available, there would be no voluntary supply of labour and it would have to be acquired by coercion (Nieboer 1910). From this perspective, the Priangan peasants did not go in search of a patron, but were forced into servitude by the gentry. Sedentarization was the perfect means to put an end to the nomadic existence of the peasants. Laying out *sawahs* not only made it easier to cream off the now greater agrarian surplus of the peasants but also to tie them down in servitude. As clients, they enjoyed the support and protection of the lords in constructing paddy fields and in conflicts with third parties.³ Conversely, the peasants had to hand over a share of their

3 De Haan gives an interesting example of the mutual support between patron and clients: '... a Chief in Cianjur has to contract out his clientele, so that he can pay a fine imposed upon him because one of his clients has committed a murder – a curious example of the solidarity between the Headman and his subordinates: the Head is punished for the misconduct of his clients and so retains them as his property.' (De Haan I 1910: 31)

***Sawah* (irrigated rice field) in Sukabumi in the early twentieth century**

Source: F. de Haan – Priangan, vl. I, p. 368

harvest to their patron and perform various services for him. In addition to tending to their master's fields, the peasants also had to be available at all times to carry out a wide variety of tasks in and around his house and grounds.

The relatively free space in which peasants were accustomed to move around as shifting cultivators slowly made way for a landscape covered with irrigated paddy fields. Although this process was accelerated by the influx of colonists from elsewhere, the transformation of shifting cultivators into sedentary peasants was of much greater significance. This progressive trend towards sedentarization may not have been the root cause of the subordination of the population of Priangan to the nobility but it certainly gave it a very powerful impetus by enabling the gentry to claim a share of the expanded food production of the peasantry and requisition their labour for corvée services. De Haan concisely summarized the motivation for coercing peasants into servitude: 'The wealth of a chief is determined by the number of hands at his disposal' (I 1910: 19). The VOC supported the gentry in their attempts to gain influence and status by acquiring clients. The Company's agents ardently promoted the expansion of sedentary agriculture from an early stage and called on local chiefs to put a stop to the peasants' mobility. An instruction dating from 1686 outlawed all those who failed to place

themselves under the control of a chief and insisted on remaining vagabonds (Van Rees 1880: 81).

Perennial cultivation of land by sedentary peasants had a positive impact on public order. The instruction received by the Pangerang Aria Cheribon on his appointment in 1706 urged him and the chiefs under his control to expand the 'paddy plantations' in their districts (De Haan II 1911: 250). The VOC's policy of imposing a hierarchical order of governance was not restricted to the top echelons but extended down to the base. Peasants were to subordinate themselves to the authority of a chief and would no longer be permitted to transfer their allegiance to a rival contender of power. For their part, chiefs were not permitted to persuade the clients of a rival chief to defect. Despite all these ordinances and regulations the area covered by irrigated paddy fields remained limited. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, even in the immediate surroundings of Batavia, food was still more commonly grown in dry fields and *sawahs* remained relatively rare (Hooijman 1781: 322).

The composite peasant household

The transition from swidden to sedentary agriculture brought about far-reaching changes in patterns of settlement. When shifting cultivators became sedentary, permanent settlements emerged. This transformation in their way of working and living certainly did not take place suddenly or evenly but evolved gradually over a long period of time, perhaps with temporary relapses into the former way of life. In the absence of records, it is only possible to speculate how the process developed. Although the interplay between the landed gentry and the peasantry was clearly the trigger, I believe it would be incorrect to assume that the initiative always came from the lords. Sooner or later, however, the emerging aristocracy, driven by its desire for distinction, succeeded in laying claim to a large part of the land and yield of the *sawah* farmers. They attempted to justify these claims by taking the credit for having instigated the cultivation of the land. As late as the early nineteenth century, Pieter van Lawick van Pabst,⁴ at that time prefect of the Priangan lands falling under the jurisdiction of Cirebon, reported that the regent could not lay claim to any land that peasants themselves had cultivated (De Haan IV 1912: 778).

4 Referred to hereafter as Lawick.

The process of agrarian sedentarization also set in motion a progressive differentiation among the peasantry. Constructing irrigation systems and laying out terraced fields required much more labour than dry-land cultivation. Growing paddy in *sawahs* also took longer – around five and a half months – and labour needed to be continually available during this period, compared to *tipar* farming, where it was required only at the start and end of the three-month planting cycle. Preparing the soil was not very time-consuming and in terms of hours worked, it was much more cost-effective than tilling irrigated fields. Becoming a client for a noble, which sedentary peasants could hardly avoid, therefore meant a considerably heavier workload. The yield may have been higher and more dependable, but much of the surplus was cancelled out by the compulsory tribute. On top of this, sedentary clients were obliged to perform a wide variety of services for their patron, from which nomadic peasants were able to escape far more easily.

How did the owners of *sawah* fields fulfil this much higher demand for labour? It was no longer sufficient to call on the members of their own household, as dry-field cultivators were accustomed to doing during peak periods. Irrigated farming and the additional corvée imposed on the client required far more hands than the household itself could provide. The only solution was to acquire extra labourers. In my view, this must be seen as the origin of the *cacah*, a complex and stratified household that included not only the owner of the fields and his immediate family members, but also one or more sharecroppers and/or farm servants, known as *num pang*. The population was not an undifferentiated mass of peasants, each cultivating their own plot of land, but was divided into several categories. Patronage did not end with the peasant landowners, but continued on downward to the base of society. The head of a *cacah*, called *bumi* or *sikep*, was patron to the sharecroppers and landless labourers who served him as clients. These subordinate households cultivated plots of land that belonged to the head of the *cacah*, which he had entrusted to them in exchange for a share in the yield. It was in essence a sharecropping agreement which assured the *num pang* a third or half of the harvest: the smaller share if they provided only their labour and half if they used their own tools and draught animals. Their dependency was not only economic, but also social: *num pang* meant ‘co-habitant’ or ‘dependant’, concepts with a very literal meaning (De Roo de la Faille 1941: 421).

Similarly dependent, but more inferior in status, were the *bujang*, boarders or farm servants. The *bujang* did not form their own households, but lived in with their masters. They were young bachelors, sometimes members

of the master's family, who had the prospect of promotion to sharecropper if they started a family. The sharecroppers themselves could become *bumi* or *sikep* by cultivating land locally or elsewhere and achieving the full status of independent peasants by establishing their own *cacah*. Access to as yet uncultivated land was a precondition for this upward mobility and they were dependent on the protection and support of the gentry to cultivate it. Conversely, the head of a *cacah* could escape subordination to his *juragan* (lord or patron) by deserting him and becoming a client of another member of the gentry. He could then take refuge as a *numpang* under the protection of a new *juragan* (Scheltema 1927-28: 281).

Servitude was inherent to the composite peasant household, and was expressed in the relationship of dependence between *gusti* (master) and *ngawula* (servant). Hoadley has made a number of interesting comments about this social configuration in the Priangan landscape in the pre-colonial and early-colonial eras. I disagree, however, with his conclusion that the *cacah* was based on a relationship of debt (Hoadley 1994: 37-43). He offers no evidence for this claim, for example how the debt originated and why some peasants were subject to it while others were not. In my view, clients were forced into servitude not because they were unable to repay a debt, but because lords at different levels in the social hierarchy desired bonded subjects. This started at the top with the regent and continued right down to the subordination of farm servants by the landowners. The principle of servitude has its roots in the exercise of power through subordination. The first generation of Priangan regents appointed by the VOC were assigned a specific number of households, ranging from several hundred to more than a thousand. This subdivision was based on an implausibly low census figure, according to which the six regencies together had a population amounting to a total of less than 6,000 subordinate households. Although the term does not appear explicitly in the early Company records, I am inclined to believe that these units, which – according to the information provided by the household heads themselves – included their dependants to make up the *cacah* household as the cornerstone of the settled peasantry. The sources provide no conclusive evidence of the average size of such a household, often quoting widely varying numbers. It would be incorrect to interpret this variation as proof of the unreliability of early-colonial reporting. As mentioned above, composite households could comprise several families – including 'co-habitants' or 'dependants' – but could also be much smaller, especially in their early phases or, later, when dependent servants may have left to set up their own households. Unlike wet-land owners, dry-land cultivators did not need households with so many members and their unit

of cohabitation was consequently less complex. Structuring the peasant population within a hierarchy was a condition for the levying of tribute which, as we shall see later, would under the VOC become heavier than ever before. The head of a composite peasant household had sufficient labour at his disposal to practise irrigated agriculture, firstly to meet all his own food needs, secondly to produce a surplus for his patron, and lastly to impose a state of servitude on the servants and sharecroppers dependent on him to fulfil the services he himself was obliged to provide as client of a lord.

Over the course of time, an increasing number of peasants undeniably developed into sedentary and permanent cultivators of the land. Tying them to their fields and settlements meant that they had left their nomadic past behind. Those in power packaged this change of lifestyle as beneficial for the peasants, projecting the image of a rustic man of the land as a prototype of the happy and contented villager portrayed in later colonial documents.

The *sawah* builder or owner of regularly irrigated paddy fields enjoys the greatest prosperity and is, in that respect, the most peace-loving and, in all respects, the most respectable. The prospect of a fixed annual income that is more than sufficient to fulfil his simple needs ensures that he does not exceed the bounds of his social obligations. He does not wish for any other property, and is not tempted to acquire it by criminal means (Geographische en statistische bijzonderheden 1835: 377).

With the increase in the number of inhabitants – which took place slowly and was more the consequence of a gradual decrease in the tendency to heavily underestimate the real size of the population than any genuine rise in numbers – some of the features that gave Priangan the character of a frontier society disappeared. It should not be forgotten that the colonization process continued until the late nineteenth century, and the population continued to be mobile even after the most primitive stage of nomadic agriculture was no longer the dominant means of livelihood. Although people did settle down close to their land, they could also leave again. The division of the population into agrarian classes suggests that the pattern of cultivation remained predominantly local. Landowners and sharecroppers fulfilled their basic needs by tilling land available in the vicinity. There were, however, peasants known as *panukang* who left their own villages to tend their master's fields, which were dispersed among several settlements. Landless labourers also found employment in various localities and did not work for one and the same landowner throughout the year. This leads me to conclude that there was an agrarian underclass that was relatively nomadic