



Research Article

The Role of *Lurah* and *Mandur* as Labor Brokers in the Sugar Plantations of Java (1870–1920)

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Abstract

The post-1870 expansion of Java's sugar industry required mobilizing seasonal labor at industrial scale from a communal society that knew no land proletariat. This article examines *lurah* (village heads) and *mandur* (foremen) as intermediaries who enabled it between 1870 and 1920, asking why the colonial state failed to dismantle a brokerage system it repeatedly acknowledged as exploitative. Building on Eric Wolf's concept of the broker and a historical-institutional approach, it reconstructs the brokerage architecture from three documentary clusters: the *Verslag van de Suiker-Enquête Commissie* (1921), selected *Koloniale Verslagen* (1871–1921), and the *Mindere Welvaart Onderzoek* volumes, read alongside the *Kabinetscirculaire of Governor-General Van der Wijck* (5 February 1894). The analysis identifies four profit layers of the *lurah* and three functions of the *mandur*, and reads state inaction as deliberate prioritization of industrial interests rather than administrative incapacity. Coercion and market mechanisms operated within an institutional architecture framed by colonial policy choices.

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INTRODUCTION

By the early twentieth century, Java had become a leading center of sugar production, second only to Cuba globally and absorbing rural labor at unprecedented scale (Bosma, 2013). The expansion begun under the *Cultuurstelsel* (1830–1870) and reorganized under the *Agrarische Wet* of 1870 rested on a paradox: colonial capital required hundreds of thousands of seasonal workers, yet operated within a Javanese agrarian society that knew no land proletariat and remained governed by communal village structures, including collective land-use rights (*communaal bezit*) and reciprocal obligations among *gogolan*.

Through what mechanism could a production system demanding mass labor be institutionalized on a social substrate that did not, in principle, supply free labor? The answer lies neither in state coercion nor in a free labor market, but in an institutional layer positioning the village head (*lurah*) and foreman (*mandur*) as nodes of conversion between communal authority and the demands of capital.

The historiography has long been dominated by two competing paradigms. The *coercion thesis*, rooted in Breman and reinforced by Elson (1986), emphasizes continuities of coercion from the *Cultuurstelsel* into the post-1870 liberal period, reading the “free” labor market as a fiction concealing coercive mechanisms whose substance was unchanged. The *market thesis*, advanced by De Zwart (2022), De Zwart and Soekhradj (2023), and Gallardo-Albarrán, Rijpma, and De Zwart (2022), counters with real-wage data showing labor-price responsiveness and an integrated labor market by the late nineteenth century. In both, mediation is subordinate to each paradigm's central concern.

The *brokerage historiography* that is this article's point of departure places institutional mediation at the center. Early observations of the *lurah*'s role came from Van Klaveren (1953). Gordon (1999) showed that behind the *lurah*'s authority stood the colonial administrative apparatus operating through *perintah halus* (gentle command) and *perintah keras* (harsh command) (Gordon, 1999, pp. 13, 18, 27). Knight (1988, 1992, 1999a, 1999b) added that brokers could function because, by the late nineteenth century, a layer of marginal landless peasants had formed for seasonal mobilization. Ingleson (2013, 2014) and Bosma (2013, 2019, 2025) deepen the mapping of *lurah* and *mandur* as structural nodes without which neither thesis explains empirical realities. Wiseman (2001, pp. 67–68; 202–203)

notes that *mandur* rarely surface in the record, “very little is known about them and their lives”, and their brokerage role remains under-analyzed.

This historiography leaves three areas underdeveloped, and their conjunction is what this article addresses. First, observations of the *lurah*’s profit mechanisms appear as scattered fragments, never consolidated into a framework distinguishing the separable layers of that profit. Second, the *Kabinetcirculaire* of Governor-General C.H.A. van der Wijck of 5 February 1894, between the admission of KV 1893 and the regulation of 1900, has been treated as a chronological marker rather than analyzed for the policy logic it encodes. Third, regional variation, particularly the contrast between the *Vorstenlanden* (Wasino, Hartatik, & Nawiyanto, 2019) and East Java residencies such as Probolinggo, where *rietbrand* expresses *wraakzucht* against *mandur* and *lurah*, is read as exception rather than as data on local modulation of one system. Together these specify what neither thesis supplies: the mediation layer as an arrangement whose persistence was shaped by policy.

The period 1870 to 1920 is a historical arc with turning points, not a neutral container. It opens with the *Agrarische Wet* of 1870, which made brokerage structurally necessary; passes through moments at which the state acknowledged the system’s abuses, KV 1893, the *Kabinetcirculaire* of 1894, the regulation of 1900, the welfare investigation of 1902; and closes as the system met organized challenge from below in the *Personeel Fabrieksbond* around 1920 rather than dismantlement from above. Its analytical shape lies in the brokerage mechanism remaining consistent across these openings: the recurrence of the same indicators from 1894 to 1921 marks not a system evolving but one whose continuity through repeated chances for reform must itself be explained.

This article therefore asks how *lurah* and *mandur* functioned as institutional brokers between plantation capital and rural labor between 1870 and 1920, and why this proved more effective, and more exploitative, than the direct recruitment formally available under the *Agrarische Wet*. It pursues three aims: to reconstruct the architecture by distinguishing the *lurah*’s profit layers and the *mandur*’s functions; to analyze how colonial policy framed and tolerated it through a close reading of the 1894 *Kabinetcirculaire*; and to test regional variation as modulation of one system rather than local exception.

The thesis comprises two reinforcing claims. Empirically, it consolidates scattered observations into four analytically distinguishable profit layers of the *lurah*, recruitment premiums, land-rental premiums above market rates, control over marginal peasants as *voorschot*-bound clients, and capital accumulation as indigenous capitalist, with three layered functions of the *mandur* as supervisor, labor broker, and *tengugap* moneylender. Analytically, the system’s half-century persistence is read not as state incapacity but as the consequence of policy choices, what Breman (2022, p. 4) calls “a close and very effective but carefully covered up coalition between colonial administration and private business.”

The contribution is less discovery than consolidation. That the *lurah* functioned as a broker has been recognized since Van Klaveren (1953); what this article adds is fourfold: an integrated reading of the four profit layers as one extractive structure; sustained attention to the *mandur* as a parallel broker, a figure the record renders nearly invisible (Wiseman, 2001, pp. 67–68); a close reading of the 1894 *Kabinetcirculaire* as policy evidence; and the use of Wolf’s (1956) broker concept to read regional variation as systemic modulation.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section sets out sources and procedures. The analysis is in two subsections: the brokerage architecture, then a textual reading of the 1894 *Kabinetcirculaire*, with regional variation discussed within. The conclusion reflects on implications for the study of colonial labor regimes.

METHOD

This study takes a historical-institutional approach to *lurah* and *mandur* as labor brokers from 1870 to 1920. The lens is Wolf’s (1956) concept of the broker, an actor who derives power from standing between two social systems that cannot reach each other directly; its operationalization opens the next section. The thesis turns on two questions: agency, who operated the system and on what authority; and structure, how the colonial state framed or tolerated it.

Primary sources comprise three clusters representing distinct documentary registers in the colonial Dutch East Indies, each with its own production logic and audience. Cross-reading among them captures both what was reported and what each genre chose to report.

The first cluster is the *Verslag van de Suiker-Enquête Commissie* (1921), especially pp. 87–93 and 238–243, with Bijlage IX, the *Minderheidsnota* of Sardjan al. Kartosoedirdjo, and Bijlage X, *rietbrand* data for 1913–1920. Compiled at the period's close, it offers a summary already filtered through formal abstraction. The second is *Koloniale Verslagen* from strategic years (1871, 1877, 1893, 1894, 1900, 1916, 1918, 1921), chosen by event-based sampling: 1894 for the *Kabinetcirculaire*, 1918 for the densest *rietbrand* data in Bijlage Z, 1921 for the *Personeel Fabrieksbond*. The third comprises the *Onderzoek naar de Mindere Welvaart* (from 1902): the *Overzicht* (Van Deventer, ed. 1904), § 6; Volume XII *Oorzaken der Mindere Welvaart* (1914) on *voorschot* and *rietbrand*; and *Eindverhandeling*, Xc Deel III (1914), Bijlage 5. These bridge 1894 to 1921 and admit, however mediated, indigenous voice via *Sinar Djawa*.

Data processing proceeded in four stages. Source criticism assessed authenticity, consistency, and authorial position by genre, distinguishing the 1921 *Verslag*'s retrospective abstraction from the year-by-year *Koloniale Verslagen*. Relevant quotations were extracted into a working catalog (*Katalog Evidentiary KV*) with location, translation, and notes, then grouped into six concerns, premiums; *lurah* and *mandur* compensation; *grondhuur*; *rietbrand* and resistance; official articulation of brokerage; and organizational responses, which structure the analysis. Finally, key-term frequency (*lurah*, *mandoor*, *voorschot*, *grondhuur*, *rietbrand*) was tracked across years to detect shifts in official discourse.

Three techniques framed the analysis. Cross-cluster triangulation tested whether each claim was supported, contradicted, masked, or made explicit across genres. Regional comparison covered the *Vorstenlanden*, with their layered indigenous administration (Wasino, Hartatik, & Nawiyanto, 2019), alongside Probolinggo and Besuki, of highest *rietbrand* density. Quantitative data from Bijlage X and Z were integrated with qualitative reading.

Two limitations should be noted. Dutch primary sources were translated using DeepL, with secondary literature by historians working in Dutch archives (Bosma 2013, 2019, 2025; De Zwart, 2022; Ingleson, 2013) consulted to manage the risk that the political nuance of terms like *vermomde fabrieksgecommitteerden* might be lost. Second, the corpus is dominated by colonial state and industry perspectives; the *Minderheidsnota* of Sardjan al. Kartosoedirdjo is the most direct exception, but its marginal position itself demonstrates that structure's strength.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Brokerage Architecture: Four Profit Layers of the *Lurah* and Three Functions of the *Mandur*

Before the architecture, the temporal arc deserves statement. The half-century from 1870 to 1920 is a sequence of three phases marked by regulatory turning points. In the first, from the *Agrarische Wet* of 1870 to the *Koloniaal Verslag* of 1893, brokerage operated as an implicit structural necessity, underwriting the land-lease regime without formal acknowledgment. In the second, from KV 1893 through the *Kabinetcirculaire* of 1894 to the regulation of 1900, it passed from tacit operation to explicit recognition, and the state chose to discipline its abuses rather than dismantle its structure. In the third, from the *Mindere Welvaart Onderzoek* to the *Personeel Fabrieksbond* around 1920, it faced mounting pressure yet held. The analysis is thematic rather than chronological because the architecture remained consistent across all three phases; what shifted was its position among state, capital, and labor. That consistency, across openings each able in principle to dismantle the system, is the finding this section builds toward.

The framework is an instrument, not a label. If positional ambiguity is the broker's extractive resource, the task is to locate the sites where that ambiguity becomes material advantage. It first establishes why post-1870 sugar production made brokerage unavoidable, then locates the points of conversion: for the *lurah*, four along the land-lease relationship, examined as profit layers; for the

mandur, three along the labor relationship, examined as functions. Reading each as Wolfian brokerage lets the dispersed evidence of the *Koloniale Verslagen* and the *Verslag* form one extractive architecture. The same framework governs regional variation: where the broker's position shifts, as between *gouvernement* residencies and the *Vorstenlanden*, the form of extraction shifts while its logic does not.

Structural Substrate: Why Brokerage Was Unavoidable

The 1870 *Agrarische Wet* let private plantations access farmland, but created conditions of access without adequate mechanisms. Factories could not own land directly and depended on annual leases of irrigated *sawah* (Gordon, 1999, pp. 5–6). Each needed about a thousand connected hectares, while average family ownership was only some 0.7 hectares (Gordon, 1999, p. 7). Individual contracts, strictly enforced, would have meant over five thousand annually per factory (Gordon, 1999, p. 16), beyond available resources.

Individual contracts never became the norm; Burger called them a “legal fiction” (cited in Gordon, 1999, p. 16). The solution drew on the communal landholding system still dominant in sugar areas, where the *lurah* was irreplaceable: he alone had the authority, knowledge of land distribution, and social weight to mobilize land blocks at scale. Gordon (1999, pp. 17–18) identifies his double position, official representative of government, and, in sugar villages, a paid factory agent whose remuneration was often part of the lease cost.

The system was no innovation of the post-1870 industry but a *re-functionalization* of administrative structures the colonial state had built since the early nineteenth century. The Revenue-Instruction of 11 February 1814 (Article 14), cited in KV 1877, defined village heads, *petingie*, *bekel*, *loerah*, *koewoe*, or *mandoor*, as administrators of village revenue whose effectiveness rested on “*persoonlijken invloed en vertrouwelijke bekendheid met de bijzondere omstandigheden van de dorpsbewoners*” (personal influence and intimate familiarity with villagers' circumstances). KV 1871 shows the shape: in 1870 alone, over 500 *bouw* in the Preanger and about 109.5 *bouw* in Semarang were leased to non-indigenous entrepreneurs for 14 to 15 years at f 8 per *bouw*, possible only because village apparatus already worked as *de facto* broker.

That the system predated the *Agrarische Wet* is shown by the Wonopringgo factory in 1854, where a Wedana refused to intervene directly in recruitment, saying there was no point speaking with “small folk”, “*nanti lurah saya punya [akan] perintah saja [orang kecil itu]*” (Knight, 2014, p. 123). Knight's “*lurah-dominated villages*” (Knight, 2014, pp. 127–128) already worked as brokerage units for recruitment and wage distribution before the liberal framework. The *Cultuurstelsel*'s *plantloon* system, channeled through the *lurah*, “further served to underscore his control over the village unit” (Knight, 2014, p. 128), confirming that *lurah* dominance preceded the 1870 regime.

Elson (1986, p. 162) identifies the mechanism with rare precision: the post-1870 transition to “free labor” was “*a matter of appearance rather than of fact,*” for *fabrikants* did not abandon old methods but continued them, “*they strove to control peasants by domesticating their leaders, exploiting the vertical ties which remained an essential feature of rural life.*” The relevant question is therefore not why the colonial state failed to abolish this system but why it consistently chose not to.

Four Profit Layers of the *Lurah*

The literature acknowledges that the *lurah* profited from the sugar system, but almost always in qualitative generalities. This article identifies four analytically distinguishable layers as a framework for systematic reading of the primary evidence.

The first layer is the recruitment premium. This *premiestelsel* was acknowledged by the *Verslag* (1921, §4) as “*algemeen bekend*” (generally known): at 44 factories, premiums to the *desabestuur* for facilitating leases reached f 5 or more per *bouw* (Verslag 1921, p. 89). Gordon (1999, pp. 17–18) records one case where the *lurah*'s recompense exceeded seven percent of the lease cost. This was no 1921 discovery; Van Deventer (1904, p. 53) noted that the 1894 inquiry found premiums to village heads per *bouw* leased to be virtually general, from f 1 to f 10, mostly f 2 to f 5. *Controleur* J.F.E. ten Brink (1901, cited in Van Deventer 1904, p. 54) confirmed “*gewoonlijk f 2.50, maar ook wel eens 5 en 10 gulden*”

per bahoe”, consistent with 1921. A practice varying so little across three decades was not escaping oversight; it was known and tolerated.

The second layer is the land-lease premium above market rate. The 1921 *Verslag* records an entrepreneur paying f 500 to a village head to secure a renewed lease over some 30 *bouw* whose owners had refused, the commission presuming such cases more frequent where the *desahoofd* held great influence (Verslag 1921, p. 91). Van Deventer (1904, p. 54) documents an identical earlier case: f 100 *per bahoe* paid in a village “*waar de bevolking of het desabestuur aanvankelijk niet genegen was te verhuren*” (where the population or *desabestuur* was initially unwilling to lease). Mail Report 1877 no. 370 (Bosma, 2013, p. 122) confirms that unregistered transactions dominated field practice from the early *Agrarische Wet* period, leaving room for the *lurah* to act beyond oversight.

The third layer is control over marginal peasants as *voorschot*-bound clients. The 1921 *Verslag* records that when premiums were paid two years in advance, village heads became factory debtors, working to deliver land to clear their debt (Verslag 1921, p. 90). The same logic ran two levels down: peasants who had taken *voorschot* from the *lurah* could not refuse to lease. Volume XII (Verslag 1914, p. 49) notes “*het vragen van voorschot, onder zeer bezwarende voorwaarden, is algemeen bekend*” (the asking of *voorschot* under very onerous conditions is commonly known). The *Eindverhandeling* (Xc Deel III, 1914, Bijlage 5, p. 376) puts it telegraphically: “*Door geldnood bevolk. huurprijzen gedrukt, vrijwil. verhuur dikw. schijn. Afbak. der rayons door suikerond. dwingt bevolk. t. verhuur a. één fabr.,*” that is, monetary distress depresses lease prices, voluntary leasing is often a sham, and the demarcation of *rayons* compels the population to lease to a single factory. This is an admission from within the colonial apparatus that *vrijwillige verhuur*, the concept underwriting the *Agrarische Wet*’s legitimacy, was a fiction sustained by *voorschot* bondage and factory-zone monopoly.

The fourth layer is the *lurah*’s capital accumulation as indigenous capitalist, the layer least often discussed and hardest to document. This evidential thinness is itself significant: accumulation was the most concealed of the four layers, surfacing in the archive only at exceptional moments, whereas premiums and *voorschot* left routine traces. The 1921 *Verslag* records one such moment in Djombang, where members of the *desabestuur* exchanged their official-allocation land (*ambtsvelden*) for communal portions to lease them to the factory for longer terms (Verslag 1921, p. 90), an act reflecting accumulative calculation, not bureaucratic passivity. This individual mechanism has an aggregate counterpart. In Besuki and Pasuruan, the two residencies whose abuse reports triggered the 1894 *Kabinetcirculaire*, the number of indigenous households holding more than 25 *bouw* rose markedly across the period, in Besuki from 25 in 1903 to 223 by 1925, and in Pasuruan from 77 to 137 (De Zwart, 2022, p. 197, compiled from Hasselman and from Meijer Ranneft and Huender). While these figures count large landholders generally rather than village heads specifically, the concentration of indigenous landholding precisely in the residencies where brokerage abuse was most densely documented is consistent with a village elite well positioned, through the recruitment premiums, above-market lease premiums, and *voorschot* credit already described, to convert brokerage income into land. The *lurah*’s role as *voorschot* creditor was thus not only a means of binding labor but a channel of accumulation. Taken together, the four layers show the *lurah* was no passive executor of factory policy but an actor actively optimizing his structural position between two systems of power that both required him.

Three Functions of the Mandur: Supervisor, Broker, Moneylender

If the *lurah* worked the village–factory junction at land lease and initial recruitment, the *mandur* worked a different point: labor relations once production began. This temporal difference explains why *mandur* are relatively invisible in administrative documents focused on land and exceptional incidents, the keyword *mandoor/mandur* appears only four times in KV 1871 and seven in KV 1877 (*Katalog Evidentiary KV*, Table 1). This invisibility is paradoxically both proof and product of the system’s success. Three functions structure his role.

The first and most visible function is field supervision. The *mandur* was the lowest management layer directly facing daily labor: he allocated tasks, oversaw execution, and reported performance to the European *opzichter*. KV 1877 records *mandoor* presence in coffee and tobacco plantations as supervisors of work contracts, a function later transferred to cane as the industry expanded. Knight

(2014, p. 90) shows that even from the *Cultuurstelsel* era, sugar factories began building permanent cores of *mandur* as operational supervisors of machinery and seasonal labor.

The second function was labor brokerage. Beyond supervision, *mandur* acted as recruitment intermediaries: reaching peasants not yet contracted, offering *voorschot* for the factory, and organizing work groups. Gordon (1999, p. 17) records that the *lurah* managed land lease at village scale while a lower layer, including *mandur* equivalents, managed individual workers. Bosma (2013, pp. 110–111) shows the system reached the poorest segment, landless and seasonal day-laborers, through informal networks no contract could penetrate. Van Deventer (1904, p. 60) confirms wage brokerage: most enterprises paid wages directly, but some routed payment through a *mandoor* or *desahoofden*, where wages reached workers only through an intermediary who was also creditor and debt collector, deductions applied first.

The third and most significant function was moneylender. The *voorschot* mechanism in *Verslag* 1921 (§17) ran at two tiers, the *lurah* at land lease and the *mandur* at daily labor. When the *mandur* advanced *voorschot* to a worker, for *landrente* or food in the lean season, he locked him into an obligation of indefinite duration. Bosma (2013, pp. 122–123) and Knight (1992, pp. 81–82) document the *tengugap* mechanism, hidden interest the *mandur* charged, often above the rate the borrower understood, making repayment nearly impossible within one cycle. The combination made the *mandur* a multi-tier extractive actor, taking from the same worker at recruitment, in production, and along the debt cycle.

Regional Variation as Data on System Modulation

Regional variation is not an exception weakening the structural argument but data testing it. If the system was rooted in the logic of sugar industrial production, variation in its expression should be explicable as modulation against local political and agrarian conditions.

The *Vorstenlanden* shows the most dramatic modulation. Wasino et al. (2019) show its land system ran on a different logic: brokers were not village *lurah* facing *sawah* owners but *bekel*, apamanage holders appointed by the king or superior holders. Under *Praja* Mangkunegara IV, and later the Resident of Surakarta's superintendent, land and labor management developed differently from the colonial lease model. In Probolinggo and Besuki, *rietbrand* concentration offers another window. KV 1877 records that in Besuki, where fires were most numerous, entrepreneurs shifted field guarding onto village apparatus without compensation. KV 1900 records hundreds of fires in Surabaya and Probolinggo in one year, and Bijlage Z of KV 1918 shows 2,112 cases across Java in 1913, falling to 1,115 by 1917 (KV 1918, Bijlage Z, p. 29).

The reading of *rietbrand* as worker resistance is accurate but incomplete. KV 1894 Bijlage B records Resident De Wit's observation that in some areas cane fires were welcomed by entrepreneurs for reasons of production calculation. The same fire could be read as *wraakzucht* against *mandur* and village heads, as unexpected gain by the factory, and as uncompensated security burden on the village.

The indigenous voice scarce in *Koloniale Verslagen* surfaces in Volume XII (1914, pp. 50–51) through the newspaper *Sinar Djawa*, titled "*Het bittere van de suiker*" (The bitterness of sugar). In Tjoerahdami, Bondowoso, Besuki, after a fire in a *riettuin*, villagers were forced by the *dessabestuur* to seek *ketrangan* for days without pay, under threat of *straf*, leaving them, as they told the author, "*benauwd dat wij onze kinderen in den steek moeten laten voor lang*" (afraid we must abandon our children for long).

The cane fires of 1913–1920, with union growth in KV 1921 and *Verslag* 1921, show how pressure from below shifted entrepreneur calculation. *Verslag* 1921 records in Bijlage IX (Sardjan al. Kartosoedirdjo) that recent wage rises were attributable to P.F.B. action: "*Het is te danken aan de actie van de P.F.B. dat in de laatste jaren het werkloon bij de suikerindustrie hooger is opgevoerd*" (it is thanks to P.F.B. action that wages in the sugar industry were raised in recent years).

Pasuruan is a historical pivot. With Besuki, its Resident reports triggered the 1894 inquiry and the *Kabinetcirculaire*. It was distinctive: intense sugar industry, Madurese seasonal migrants, more hierarchical villages than Central Java, and local-elite networks woven with factory interests. The

Resident's report, village heads imposing communal contracts, *mandur* running *voorschot* at extortionate rates, indigenous administrators acting *de facto* as factory *gecommitteerden*, was documented at higher density there. That the same pattern marked both residencies is why Van der Wijck read the problem as systemic, not local.

Regulatory Framework and Deliberate Prioritization: Exegesis of the *Kabinetscirculaire* of 5 February 1894

Regulatory Context: From KV 1893 to *Kabinetscirculaire* 1894

The *Kabinetscirculaire* of 5 February 1894 was not born in a vacuum. It answered reports from two East Java Residents, Besuki and Pasuruan, confirming systemic abuse in land lease and recruitment. KV 1893 held the first central admission: village heads in both residencies acted as factory agents, pressuring peasants to lease, imposing communal contracts, and using office for financial interests tied to the factory. None was new, Resident reports had appeared since the mid-1870s (Mail Report 1877 no. 370; Bosma, [2013](#), p. 122). KV 1893 gave the pattern recognition coherent enough to demand response.

Van der Wijck answered with a *kabinetsmissive*, a confidential letter to the Heads of Government in the Residencies, dated Buitenzorg 5 February 1894 and published in *Archief voor de Suikerindustrie in Nederlandsch-Indië*, vol. 2 ([1894](#)). That it appeared in a sugar industry journal rather than the *Staatsblad* or an internal circular is the first signal: its audience was entrepreneurs and managers, not the public or parliament. Most historiography treats it as a marker of when the state “began to act,” without reading the language defining those limits. This subsection reads the three key phrases.

Exegesis of Three Key Phrases

The *Kabinetscirculaire* opens with a problem diagnosis (Van der Wijck, [1894](#), pp. 230–231): in Besuki and Pasuruan, and possibly other Java residencies, village heads, under pressure from above or on their own initiative, were forcing communal labor contracts and exceeding their authority.

Phrase one: “*dessahoofden daarbij als vermomde fabrieksgecommitteerden optreden*” (Van der Wijck, [1894](#), p. 231), village heads acting as “*disguised factory agents*.” What deserves attention is not the corruption charge but the word choice. *Vermomde* (disguised, masked) presupposes that the disguise is a known and managed condition, not an unanticipated anomaly. An official genuinely encountering an unprecedented situation would have chosen words like *misbruikten* (misused) or *handelden buiten hun bevoegdheid* (acted beyond their authority). Van der Wijck chose *vermomde*, which presumes an identity hidden behind the mask of formal office, and a mask familiar enough to have its own name. The phrase is therefore implicit acknowledgment that the colonial state knew the *lurah*'s actual function in the brokerage system, and that this function had operated long enough to be recognized as a pattern.

Phrase two: “*schadelijk voor de industrie en in verband daarmee voor de te beschermen bevolking zelve*” (Van der Wijck, [1894](#), p. 231). This appears among three considerations Van der Wijck asks Residents to keep in mind before acting. The full passage holds that brusque intervention (*brusque ingrijpen*) could bring highly unwanted and far-reaching consequences, harmful to the industry and *in connection therewith* to the population that ought to be protected. The clause “*en in verband daarmee*” (and in connection therewith) makes protection of the population a derivative function of protection of the industry. The implication: intervention threatening the industry automatically threatens the population, since without a healthy industry there is nothing to protect. This is a highly specific ideological construction, inverting the causal relation between capital and welfare so that defense of industrial interests can always be represented as defense of indigenous interests.

Phrase three: “*zonder de groote belangen van de ondernemers onnoodig te schaden*” (Van der Wijck, 1894, p. 232), in the prescriptive part of the document. A head of government performing his duty correctly, Van der Wijck writes, protects the population from extortion and abuse, suppresses abuse with an iron hand, if necessary, but also acts without partiality, without unmotivated harshness, and *without unnecessarily harming the great interests of the entrepreneurs*. The key word is *onnoodig*

(unnecessarily): he does not prohibit action that harms entrepreneurs, only action that harms them *unnecessarily*. The *Kabinetcirculaire* does not order the abolition of the brokerage system; it orders the disciplining of abuse so long as that disciplining does not touch fundamental industrial interests.

Read in sequence, the three phrases form a consistent structure. They diagnose abuse already known and acknowledged; they restrict intervention by tying industrial interest to population welfare; they redefine a “good” Resident as one who acts without shaking the industry’s foundations. What looks like an order to clean up is an order to manage limits not to be transgressed.

Deliberate Prioritization vs. Administrative Incapacity

Van der Wijck’s *Kabinetcirculaire* is not a document of administrative incapacity. It is a document about limits the colonial state deliberately set for itself. The difference is between persistence as unintended failure and persistence as documented policy choice.

Gordon’s (1999) *perintah halus–perintah keras* frames this. He identifies them as two sides of one mechanism (1999, pp. 18, 28): *perintah halus*, courteous orders through seemingly voluntary hierarchy, carries the implicit threat of *perintah keras*, dismissal of the *lurah*, restriction of irrigation, collection of tax arrears. The *Kabinetcirculaire* is a perfect *perintah halus*: it tells Residents to act with *tact*, engage entrepreneurs cooperatively, and avoid *ongemotiveerde heftigheid* (unmotivated harshness). What is unsaid, but built into its logic, is that action “*onnoodig te schaden*” entrepreneur interests will earn sanction.

Gordon (1999, p. 14) records that Resident De Wit, author of the sharp Besuki report that triggered the *Kabinetcirculaire*, took early retirement, while Van der Wijck commissioned a follow-up reaching similar conclusions. That De Wit’s career ended is consistent with deliberate prioritization. Knight (2014, p. 208) confirms Van der Wijck’s stake: this Governor-General came from a family owning a major sugar factory, was close to the chair of the new sugar syndicate, and “helped emasculate measures proposed by his own senior officials which might otherwise have circumscribed the industry’s activities.” The argument does not rest on his motives, but the fact strengthens the reading that his limits were not neutral.

The structural admission contained in the *Kabinetcirculaire*, that *lurah* functioned as *vermomde fabrieksgecommitteerden* by policy choice, not oversight failure, was not new in *Verslag* 1921. The *Mindere Welvaart Onderzoek* articulated the pattern explicitly twenty years after the *Kabinetcirculaire*. The *Eindverhandeling* (Xc Deel III, 1914, Bijlage 5, p. 474) formulates the *desahoofd*’s transformation: “*’t Desahoofd verandert van karakter, wordt de verantwoordelijke persoon, die op alle wijze zal trachten te voldoen aan de zware eischen van ’t bestuur (niet zelden van den grooten ondernemer. Bew.). De bevolking ziet in ’t desahoofd steeds meer de echo van ’t Europeesch bestuur.*” In English: “The *desahoofd* changes character, becomes the responsible person, who in every way will seek to satisfy the heavy demands of the administration (not seldom also those of the great entrepreneur. Bew.). The population increasingly sees in the *desahoofd* the echo of the European administration.” The bracketed *Bew.* (from *Bewerker*, the editor) is an admission from the official editor of a colonial state document that the interest of the “*grooten ondernemer*” was often inseparable from the demands of the *bestuur* itself.

Pattern consistency across nearly three decades, KV 1893, 1894, 1900, Van Deventer (1904), *Mindere Welvaart Onderzoek* (1914), and *Verslag* 1921, adds weight. If persistence reflected incapacity, one would expect periods of improvement. Instead, there is consistency: premiums to the *lurah* held similar ranges from 1894 to 1921, *voorschot* was still “*algemeen bekend*” in 1914 as in 1921, *vrijwillige verhuur* still “*dikwijls schijn*”, more readily explained by stable policy preference than by continuous administrative failure (Table 1).

Table 1. Consistency of *lurah–mandur* brokerage indicators in colonial Java, 1894–1921

Indicator	1894 (Onderzoek)	1901 (Ten Brink, Van Deventer 1904)	1914 (Mindere Welvaart Onderzoek)	1921 (Verslag)
Recruitment premium to desabestuur per bouw	f 1–10 (mostly f 2–5)	f 2.50; sometimes f 5 or f 10	reported still common	f 5 or more
Above-rate lease premium (special cases)	f 100 per bahoe (Van Deventer 1904, p. 54)	-	-	f 500 for ~30 bouw (Verslag 1921, p. 91)
Voorschot to peasants	documented (KV 1894 Bijl. B)	documented	"algemeen bekend" (MWO XII, p. 49)	confirmed (Verslag 1921, §17)
Vrijwillige verhuur as schijn	implicit in Resident reports	-	"dikwijls schijn" (Eindverhandeling)	confirmed

Note: The dash “-” indicates absence of specific numerical documentation in the genre concerned, not absence of the practice. MWO = *Mindere Welvaart Onderzoek*. Sources: Onderzoek 1894 (cited in Van Deventer 1904, pp. 53–54); Ten Brink (1901, cited in Van Deventer 1904, p. 54); MWO XII (1914, p. 49); Eindverhandeling Xc Deel III (1914, Bijl. 5, p. 376); *Verslag van de Suiker-Enquête Commissie* (1921, pp. 89–91, §17). Compiled by the author.

Read through Wolf’s (1956) broker concept, the consistency in Table 1 is structural, not merely empirical. Wolf locates the broker’s power in the position between two systems that cannot reach each other directly, whose value depends on the gap staying open. Each indicator monetizes that one positional advantage: the recruitment premium prices access to labor the factory cannot reach, the lease premium his command over land it cannot assemble, *voorschot* his capacity to bind peasants it cannot bind. What holds constant from 1894 to 1921 is therefore not unrelated practices that happened to resist reform but the positional structure from which all derive. This is why periodization clarifies the argument: across the three phases the regulatory context changed repeatedly, from tacit operation to acknowledged abuse to organized challenge, yet the position was preserved. A system whose surface practices held while everything around them shifted is better explained by a policy that kept the broker’s position intact than by three decades of administrative failure.

CONCLUSION

This article advances two reinforcing claims about the brokerage system in Java’s sugar plantations between 1870 and 1920. The first is empirical: consolidating scattered fragments, it identifies four profit layers of the *lurah*, recruitment premiums, above-market lease premiums, control over marginal peasants through *voorschot*, and capital accumulation as indigenous capitalist, with three functions of the *mandur* as supervisor, broker, and *tengugap* moneylender. Together these form an extractive architecture working at different moments of the production cycle, far more effective for capital and more exploitative of labor than the direct recruitment the *Agrarische Wet* formally regulated.

The second claim is analytical: persistence was not state incapacity but documented policy choice. The strongest evidence is Van der Wijck’s 1894 *Kabinetscirculaire*, whose language frames protecting the population as derivative of protecting the industry (“*in verband daarmede voor de te beschermen bevolking zelve*”) and defines good intervention as one “*zonder de groote belangen van de ondernemers onnoodig te schaden*.” Cross-cluster confirmation, Van Deventer (1904) on premiums, *Mindere Welvaart Onderzoek* (1914) on *vrijwillige verhuur dikw. schijn* and the village head as “*echo van ’t Europeesch bestuur*,” and *Verslag* 1921, shows that consistency over three decades is better explained by stable policy preference than by administrative failure.

These findings sharpen two debates. Against the coercion thesis of Breman (1983, 2015) and Elson (1986), coercion was structural to Java’s sugar system but was systematically mediated through the *lurah* and *mandur*, not exercised through state apparatus directly, which is what made it reform-resistant: so long as *lurah* and *mandur* appeared to act on their own initiative, the state could treat any outcome as village-level abuse separate from policy. Against the economic history of De Zwart and Soekhradj (2023) and Gallardo-Albarrán et al. (2022), the analysis does not contest the wage responsiveness they document but situates it within an institutional architecture colonial policy actively

framed, of which the *lurah–mandur* system was one. The broader implication: separating the two theses is less productive when the mediation layer between them is left out of view.

The argument carries relevance beyond the colonial period, though continuity should not be overstated. The mechanism analyzed here, an intermediary deriving income from standing between an enterprise that needs labor and a population that supplies it, has analogues in contemporary plantation and informal economies, where labor contracting, advance-based recruitment, and debt-tied work still organize agricultural and migrant labor across the region. More transferable is the analytical move: reading documented inaction as possible deliberate prioritization, rather than assuming incapacity, shows how states sustain exploitative arrangements by declining to dismantle them while calling restraint protection. Where regulatory failure is too readily blamed on weak capacity, the language of protection deserves scrutiny as evidence of policy choice.

Two limitations bound these conclusions. First, the sources are almost entirely colonial; the *Minderheidsnota* of Sardjan al. Kartosoedirdjo and the *Sinar Djawa* citation are valuable as exceptions, and their marginal placement shows how thoroughly the colonial viewpoint dominates the record, so the reconstruction rests largely on how the state and industry described the broker, not on those subject to him. Second, the Dutch sources were read with machine translation checked against the secondary literature, as set out in the methodology; this preserves reliability for the argument but stops short of the philological reading a specialist in nineteenth-century administrative Dutch could bring.

These limitations point to further research. The frame closes at the *Personeel Fabrieksbond* around 1920; how brokerage was transformed, displaced, or reconstituted under union pressure in the 1920s and 1930s remains open. Three lines invite work. First, the indigenous experience of brokerage might be recovered through vernacular sources, regional newspapers, movement pamphlets, oral traces, outside the colonial archive privileged here. Second, the four-layer framework and the *mandur*'s triple-function model could be tested against brokerage elsewhere, the Deli tobacco belt, the rubber estates of Malaya, the sugar districts of the Philippines and Cuba, to gauge how far the structure is specific to Java. Third, the textual method applied to the *Kabinetscirculaire*, reading administrative language for the policy choices it encodes, could extend to other moments of apparent regulatory failure, where the vocabulary of protection may repay close reading.

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Availability of data and materials

The primary sources used in this study are publicly accessible digitized colonial documents. The *Koloniaal Verslagen* (1871–1921) and the *Verslag van de Suiker-Enquête Commissie* (1921) are available through *Delpher* (<https://www.delpher.nl>) and KITLV-Leiden University (<https://kitlv-docs.library.leiden.edu/open/Metamorfoze/Kol.%20Verslag/koloniaal%20verslag.html>) and the Internet Archive (<https://archive.org>). The *Mindere Welvaart Onderzoek* volumes are held in the collection of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV). No original dataset was generated in this study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study is based entirely on analysis of publicly available historical archival documents. No human subjects were involved, and no personal data were collected or processed.

Consent for publication

The authors have given approval for the publication of this manuscript.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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