Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Breman, Jan.
Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market: Profits from an Unfree Work Regime in Colonial Java.

Amsterdam University Press, 2015.
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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. 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)
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 corvee 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.