Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

Breman, Jan

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.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66310.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66310

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2321928
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 corvee 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 numpang. 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 numpang 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: numpang 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...
and which receives little attention in the literature. References to these footloose labourers can only be found indirectly. In his 1836 monograph, for example, Van Beusechem referred to the low incidence of marriage in the Priangan Regencies in the preceding years and suggested that it was because a considerable proportion of the population was permanently on the move (1836: 8). The significance of this phenomenon cannot be understood without considering the claims that the landed gentry made on agrarian labour, both in opening up the region and in collecting the colonial tribute. This requires taking a closer look at the gentry itself, a social class that lived from the yield of agrarian production without taking an active part itself in cultivating the land.

Higher and lower-ranking chiefs

‘Regent’ was the name the VOC used for the select group of native chiefs that held power in the Priangan (De Haan I 1910: 338-57 and IV 1912: 325-38). That their numbers remained limited to five was more a matter of coincidence than a well-considered choice based on knowledge of the ranks and statuses of the indigenous aristocracy. The first chiefs to be designated as regents were those who could provide evidence – either real or fake – that they had been appointed by the ruler of Mataram. The VOC’s directors had no understanding at all of the intricacies with which these lords competed with each other for power and status, though they were aware that attaching clients from among the population was a decisive factor. The Company tried to impose some kind of order on this opaque situation by taking decisions on the spur of the moment, with no clear vision of their purpose or reach. The lord of Sumedang could claim the oldest rights but his influence declined as that of vassals of the sultan of Cirebon, especially the lord of Cianjur, increased. However, the VOC soon enforced restrictions on the efforts of this harbour principality to extend its reach of control inland. It could do this only by assigning to itself sovereign rights and demanding unconditional loyalty. From then on, Batavia would decide which of the candidates for succession would be chosen. This would usually be a son, though not always the eldest, and if it were more opportune for some reason or another, it might be an outsider. Van Beusechem described this unpredictability in 1836 as the prerogative of absolute power. A regent could be dismissed if there were any doubts about his loyalty or good conduct. This happened to the regent of Bandung in 1802. The VOC also periodically reviewed the administrative jurisdiction without warning. The regencies