Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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increased exponentially and, despite resistance from Javanese rulers, was forced upon the local population.

From free trade to forced delivery

The VOC's interference in the local economy was not limited to its ambitions to acquire a hegemonic position in trade. In the early eighteenth century, it became increasingly involved in the production process itself. The Company had a shipyard in Rembang to build its own ships. Sawmills supplied the wood and ropes were manufactured from coconut fibres in Semarang. Of greater significance was an instruction ordering the peasant population to abandon the traditional method of producing indigo. Around 1700, a number of Dutch indigo-makers arrived to supervise the new process, based on the technique used on the Coromandel coast in India (De Haan III 1912: 412-3). The experiment was a failure, however, and in the mid-eighteenth century Jacob Mossel made a renewed attempt, again without success (Hooijman 1781: 301). The VOC also initiated the cultivation of coffee at the start of the eighteenth century. This commodity, at that time completely unknown to the local population, would in the course of time expand to become a monoculture. Before examining this in greater detail, however, I would like to reiterate how, in the early years of the VOC’s control of the Priangan, the region initially supplied the Company with a much wider variety of products.

Under the treaty that put an end to the remaining self-governance of Cirebon in 1681, the sultan was no longer permitted to trade with Makassarese, Malays, Moors or any other foreign merchants. The inhabitants of the harbour principalities were not allowed to sail further than Bali or Borneo, and then only if they had a pass from the Company. The demolition of the city walls and the construction of the fortress – called De Bescherming (Protection), a name given with no irony intended – illustrated the coercion exercised by what remained, in effect, commerce pur sang. The closure of the transport route to and from the highlands heralded the start of a process of exploitation of the inhabitants of the hinterland, which would gradually grow in scale and intensity. The records of the factory manager in Cirebon show that the entire production of crops like rice and pepper was bought up by Chinese middlemen, who also sold textiles and opium to the local population. The VOC official complained that these brokers engaged in smuggling, so that not all the goods found their way to the VOC’s warehouses. In 1691, the Resident urged in a letter that the inhabitants of
the Priangan be paid directly in cash (Hoadley 1994: 102). This was driven, however, much less by concerns about withholding remuneration to the peasant producers than by a growing awareness that the system of bulk buying by middlemen was causing a serious decline in profit margins. As a consequence, the VOC started to intervene much more directly in the process of agrarian production. For example, it started employing paid labour to fell trees for timber (Peluso 1992). This was because the demand for timber had risen so excessively and, along with it, the pressure of work, that the required labourers failed to turn up or deserted. There was no guarantee, however, that the payment actually reached the labourers themselves, as it was paid out to the chiefs. Hoadley, who retrieved this information from the VOC archives, correctly points out that the supply of commodities by the peasants had not formerly been based on forced labour (Hoadley 1994: 105-6). The Daily Register of 1694 includes an instruction ordering buyers of cotton and indigo to pay the producers promptly. Letters from Cirebon a year later indicate that peasants were only prepared to supply good quality indigo if they received a decent price. And in 1729 and 1739, the Resident proposed giving peasants cash advances, or at least paying them for the number of coffee plants they cultivated. These proposals, which were never put into practice, were intended to increase production by devoting greater attention to agronomical considerations. As the system of bulk buying gradually declined in importance, the Chinese merchants disappeared from the scene. The princes of Cirebon were banned from appointing Chinese officials, as a result of which, although they did not entirely lose their influential position in the indigenous economic and political network, they were certainly sidelined. This dislocation was expedited by placing them under the direct supervision of the Company. The only authority that they retained was as managers or as estate owners in the areas surrounding the capital, with rights to land and the peasants living on it. Growing and milling sugarcane became important business in these environs and the Chinese held the upper hand in this agro-industry which showed distinct capitalist features (Hoadley 1994: 109-1).

From the experience it had gained at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, the VOC learned that, if it wanted to lay claim to peasant labour in a way that was both effective and profitable, it was both necessary and desirable to work through the chiefs. Ignoring them had resulted only in persistent obstruction and sabotage. Direct contact with the population only undermined the chiefs’ authority. The Company felt that it was too risky and costly to fill the resulting social vacuum. In a resolution in 1695, the High Command in Batavia ordered
the chiefs to supply a wide variety of goods (De Haan III 1912: 399). The instruction contained all the elements of the system of quotas that the Company had adopted. In the first place, the receipt for the goods delivered was to be accompanied by a note that, the next time, more of the same goods, and others as well, should be supplied. The quantities reaching the VOC’s warehouses were never enough to satisfy continually rising demand. Secondly, the instruction announced that cash payment was to be made for goods received, without going into further detail about the size of the payment or other conditions. Thirdly, the instruction gave no indication of how the chiefs should proceed to ensure the cooperation of the peasants. The system of quotas assumed that the Priangan peasants would obey their lords, taking it so much for granted that any discussion on the matter was deemed unnecessary.

The quantitative change introduced in the early decades of the eighteenth century – a progressive increase in the quotas – was accompanied by a qualitative change. The earlier products, such as birds’ nests, cardamom and wax, increasingly made way for indigo, cotton and, above all, coffee, which would eventually replace all the other goods almost entirely. This trend reflected the shift in the VOC’s activities from the purchase of high-quality commodities in small quantities, mainly for sale on Asian markets, to the acquisition of much larger volumes of tropical products to be shipped to the Company’s entrepôts elsewhere to meet new and swelling consumer demand in the global market. Although rice did not fall under the quota regime, transit notes drawn up in Batavia show that the VOC shipped as much rice as all the other trading companies together, a share that increased even further after 1730 (Nagtegaal 1988: 175). The overarching importance of this staple food, which was still largely bought up by Chinese merchants based in Cirebon and other coastal towns, was not entirely separate from the system of forced delivery. To pay off the debts it had accumulated when the VOC assisted its military operations in East Java, Mataram had agreed to supply the Company with 800 koyang of rice a year after 1705 (the equivalent of about 2.8 million pounds weight). This war tax accounted for a considerable share of the total volume of the VOC’s trade (Ricklefs 1986: 18).

The cooperation of the chiefs may have required the exertion of considerable pressure, but was mainly achieved by rewarding them financially. In 1698, the VOC made it clear that nothing could be gained without continual pressure. A regional chief who had not fulfilled his obligations to supply goods was in default, but this was not yet followed up by sanctions (De Haan III 1912: 414). The intermediary role imposed on the gentry was very lucrative for them. The money they received was a form of payment for their
mediation: making sure that the peasants worked hard enough, keeping outsiders out of their regions and preventing practices that were contrary to the Company’s interests. Conversely, if they followed their instructions loyally, they could be assured of retaining their positions of eminence and of protection against rival attacks on their power base. Involving chiefs in the Company’s operations naturally reduced their independence and room for manoeuvre. According to Hoadley, however, the benefits were so large that they were not tempted by resorting to ‘illegal’ transactions, for example selling indigo, cotton or coffee to Chinese buyers, as well as rice. Smuggling or violating the rules in some other way may have been more profitable, but the risks were great. If they were caught, they might be dismissed or transferred, meaning a loss of power and income. From this perspective, the regents gave in to the demand of the Company’s agents because of the financial rewards they received. But did the peasants cooperate for the same reason? This is of course a distinct possibility, but loses some of its cogency in the face of evidence that payments intended for the peasants often only partially, if at all, reached them. Does this imply that their cooperation was based on coercion rather than choice? Hoadley rejects this conclusion, arguing that, until the mid-eighteenth century, coercion had not been the driving force behind the acquisition of tropical products under the bulk purchase system. In his view, the main incentive was money, and the VOC’s strategy was tempered by fear that a more rigorous approach might lead to conflict (Hoadley 1994: 128, 132-3). In my opinion, Hoadley overestimates the freedom of the peasants to trade with their chiefs under the old regime. I will return to this issue of voluntary or coerced cooperation later in this chapter.

The start of coffee cultivation

The VOC first became involved in the coffee trade in the seventeenth century, in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The first plants to reach Batavia, just before the end of that century, came from the Malabar coast of India. According to the VOC annals the coffee shrub was imported to Java towards the end of the seventeenth century but there is good reason to believe that this was done through the mediation of Muslim traders or pilgrims (Clarence-Smith and Topik 2003: 5). A few high-ranking Company officials planted the first saplings in their gardens. After receiving a sample of the harvested beans in 1706, the Company directors in Amsterdam sent a letter to Governor-General Van Hoorn recommending that coffee be grown on Java. At the end of 1707, Van Hoorn informed his superiors that he had