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=2321958
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
distribute young coffee plants to a number of chiefs on the coastal plain between Batavia and Cirebon who were willing to take good care of them (Leupe 1859: 56). It soon became clear, however, that the coffee shrubs would not thrive on the low plains. Transferring them first to the hills of Krawang and then to even higher upland produced a much better result. The regent of Cianjur was the first to send a consignment of beans weighing almost a hundred pounds to the Company, in 1711. The price he received – 50 guilders per pikul (in 1695, 1 pikul was equivalent to 125 pounds) – was reasonable although, compared to the prices on the Dutch market, a little on the low side. Other regents in the Priangan also endeavoured to introduce coffee. Early sources suggest that this was not too difficult as coffee was a crop that required no capital, no expensive tools and a minimum of knowledge (De Haan I 1910: 119). The new crop spread quickly, especially in the remote hilly hinterland to the south of Batavia which, by the middle of the nineteenth century, would expand to become the main cultivation area for this export crop on Java. The VOC would become one of the main suppliers of this new colonial commodity. In 1726, it controlled half to three-quarters of the still modest global trade, half of which was grown in Priangan, first and for all in the regency of Cianjur (Knaap 1986: 34).

In the early stages, coffee growing was exceptionally lucrative for the VOC, while the regents also saw their incomes rise enormously. When he died in 1726, the regent of Cianjur had amassed a fortune of 26,000 rijksdaalders, on which he also earned interest. The chief of Kampongbaru was even richer: he was owed 32,000 rijksdaalders by the Company and owned considerable land and buildings in the environs of Batavia. This generosity soon came to an end, however. The first restriction was to bring coffee under the VOC’s monopoly regime. From 1723, it was an offence to sell coffee to private merchants. As negotiations on price and quantity with the chiefs made way for forced delivery and they no longer had a free choice, the relationship became increasingly based on coercion. This change became very clear when some years later, in 1726, the Company board introduced a radical price cut, expressing fears that the peasant producers were becoming too wealthy and might use their new funds against the Company’s interests, for example to buy weapons (Knaap 1986: 41; Ricklefs 1993: 215). This sudden discovery that the natives were subversive by nature, together with doubts about the loyalty of the regents, strengthened the VOC’s resolve to lower the prices it paid. In the first instance, the price was reduced by half but, on closer inspection, even this sizable cut seemed insufficient. In 1726, acting on the orders of his superiors, the Governor-General decided that five, rather than 21, rijksdaalders per pikul was sufficient reward for
this relatively light work. As an excuse, the Company claimed that it had insufficient cash and now argued that the coffee replaced the tenth part of the yield it was entitled to as the ultimate owner of the land.

The cuts aroused resistance among the peasants. The available archives do not give a full picture of the scale on which this occurred. One indication is the murder of the regent of Cianjur, the largest supplier, a few months after the radical price cut in 1726. He was the only chief in the Priangan ever to be killed by his subjects. It was later claimed that he was killed by a jealous lover of one of his wives, but the account that the murder was committed by a lower chief who was indebted to him is more plausible (Knaap 1986: 33). A cause of greater concern to the VOC than the unrest was that, in some places, the peasants destroyed the young coffee plants. After all, the price cuts had been intended to increase the Company’s profit margin, not to reduce the supply. In 1726, the Resident of Cirebon complained that coffee gardens were being neglected and becoming overgrown. Other reports told of labourers who had come to the Sunda highlands from the coastal plain of Cirebon in previous years to harvest the new crop were leaving again (ibid.: 45-6). These expressions of protest suggest that, in the early years, the proceeds from the sale of the coffee did not disappear exclusively into the regents’ pockets, but that at least part must have filtered down to the peasant producers themselves. In Cianjur and Kampongbaru, the main centres of production at that time, the damage was so enormous that it would take more than 60 years to restore it to its former level. De Haan, the source of these and later data, concludes from the price cut that the free labour of the past had given way to servitude and what had been a trade transaction now became a form of tax tribute (I 1910: 122). This interpretation is supported by the measures the VOC took in response to the flagging interest in growing coffee. Batavia issued an order to ‘urge the lazy folk’ to get back to work and took the obvious step of blaming the native chiefs for the unrest – which could not be ignored – among those subordinated to them. The regents and lower-ranking chiefs were accused of keeping the coffee money themselves, rather than passing it on to the peasants. In this view, the problem was not the excessively low price, but the chiefs’ failure to pay the producers. To curb the extortion and fraud of the gentry – many of whom were suspected of increasing their income substantially by smuggling – it was suggested that European inspectors be appointed.

In 1729, the Resident of Cirebon ordered all households in the Priangan highlands under his jurisdiction to plant ten new coffee trees each year. The regents in Cianjur, Kampongbaru and Djatinegara also reported that they were having to resort to increasingly harsh measures of discipline to
persuade the peasants to grow coffee. They informed the Company that, if prices did not go up, coffee cultivation was doomed to disappear. Their request was rejected, as the measures taken to rectify the situation – essentially the use of greater coercion – proved successful. In fact, they exceeded even the wildest expectations: the harvest was so high in 1735 that the VOC ordered the regents to stop the annual planting of new trees and to extirpate the oldest trees. This instruction was justified by claiming that the peasants themselves did not own the land, but grew coffee on the orders of the Company. As the Company also owned the trees, it was entitled to insist that no more coffee should be produced. The VOC directors in Amsterdam had no objection to their agents ordering the trees to be destroyed, as long as they were replaced by other crops, like paddy and, especially, pepper. The great difference between the official price and those on the black market led to a considerable increase in coffee smuggling, a problem that was only
marginally affected by closer surveillance. When, some years later, supply once again fell behind demand, the order was given to stop destroying the trees and plant new ones again. If the peasants had ever received a share of the coffee proceeds, this would certainly have been much less after the price cut, which would not have increased their willingness to grow more. As long as the VOC had not yet established a fixed position in the market, the volume of coffee it sold continued to vary widely from year to year. The budget available to finance the coffee trade was already limited, making production for the world market risky, and this risk was passed on to the peasants of the Priangan. The lack of understanding among the planters for the continually changing orders from Batavia to deliver more or less coffee must have been exacerbated by the fact that the first payment for all the cultivation work done would not be received until after the first harvest four years later, while they were not paid at all for cutting down the trees. Refusal to increase or decrease the number of trees was punished heavily and inspections were carried out to ensure that the growers complied with these orders.

**Increasing the tribute**

Although the imposition of forced cultivation was a radical change, it initially only involved relatively small quantities. Coffee was most likely first grown only on the regent’s own land, around his *daalem*. The trees would be tended by peasants in turn, in the form of corvee services (De Haan I 1910: 154). When the Company increased the volume that had to be supplied, trees were also planted on the land around the peasants’ own dwellings. They would take the harvested beans to the local chief or directly to the warehouse. Little labour would have been required for cultivation, maintenance and picking. There was a long-cherished belief that, after planting, the growers had very little to do other than wait until the ripe beans fell to the ground, after which he could gather them together with a light, wooden rake. They would then be dried in the house or under a veranda and, after the shell had been removed, they would be ready for delivery (De Haan I 1910: 149; III 1912: 581). The work was allegedly light, required no training and could be performed by all members of the household as a minor but welcome supplement to their main preoccupation: growing food.

Of all the products that the people of the Priangan supplied to the VOC, coffee was ultimately the only one that remained. Initially the beans were mainly traded for consumption in West Asia and the Middle East. From