Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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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 *daelem*. 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
the Ottoman empire the beverage started to spread to Western Europe around the middle of the seventeenth century (Clarence-Smith and Topik 2003: 26-7). As the strongly fluctuating sales in the early years showed, the Company initially held a modest position on the global market. It had to try and increase its share, especially on the Atlantic markets, and benefit from coffee's slowly growing popularity. It had not yet become a drink of the masses, but the volume being traded had risen so strongly that it was no longer a luxury commodity whose supply had to be restricted to keep the market price high. The point had already been reached before the mid-eighteenth century when it was no longer sufficient to grow coffee around the peasants' abode. To continue to fulfil the Company's orders, the dry land around the kampungs had to be cultivated. There was plenty of waste land available at first, and the trees were planted on soil that had only been roughly prepared. The undergrowth was removed to make room for the young plants, but larger trees were left where they were. In the first year, paddy was planted between the coffee saplings, so that the work to cultivate the soil also had some immediate economic value. The first harvest of what came to be known as ‘forest coffee’, took place after four years. It was delivered in the same way as the coffee grown in the kampung courtyards, to the local chief or directly to the warehouse. In the early years, this new mode of cultivation was limited to settlements close to Batavia, on relatively low lands extending only as far as Krawang and Bogor. It made sense to expand cultivation in places where the people already had experience of growing the new crop but, given the difficulties of transporting the coffee over great distances, it was more important to keep the supply lines to Batavia as short as possible. The lack of roads, bridges and modes of transport were undoubtedly significant factors in choosing the first areas for production. The areas selected for cultivation were transferred first to the foothills of the Priangan and later even further inland after it was discovered that the coffee grew better at a higher altitude than on the hot coastal plain. The regency of Cianjur, colonized by migrants from Cirebon, would grow to become the VOC's main coffee-producing region in the eighteenth century. The harvested beans were initially carried to the coast along footpaths by porters with pikulan, carrying poles. The paths were later widened to allow transport by buffalo or packhorse.

Although the VOC succeeded in increasing the coffee quota, transport remained a problem. Before the mid-eighteenth century, two transit warehouses were built on the banks of the Citarum and the Cimanuk, at Cikao and Karangsambung. From there, the coffee was transported to the coast by water in boats. Because both rivers were not navigable upstream from
these points, the coffee had to be brought in over land by pack animal, a return journey of at least two months. Especially in the eastern Priangan, the coffee planters took a long time to carry their harvest to the collecting stations. The coffee was weighed before being loaded onto pack animals and transported to the transit warehouses. Because there were an insufficient number of animals, porters were still necessary to help carry the steadily increasing volume. It was heavy work: a single load weighed a quarter of a ‘bergse pikol’ (55.5 pounds). A buffalo could carry a double load plus enough rice for the driver. It was also common for the planters, who were only responsible for delivering the coffee to the small district warehouses, to be charged for the costs of transporting the goods further. These costs were deducted from the price the producers were paid for the coffee. Poorer peasants in particular, without their own pack animals, would be keen to deliver their harvest at the earliest opportunity, resigning themselves to the substantial deduction for the quantity of beans they had delivered. Planters who undertook the long journey themselves would often not return in time to tend to their rice fields. It was more important to ensure that the coffee arrived on the coast before the onset of the monsoon than to allow them to plant and harvest paddy in the proper season and therefore give priority to secure their livelihoods.

A harvest of 100 pounds in 1711 had expanded to some 100,000 pikul a century later. This massive increase was only the start of a much greater increase in volume in the decades that followed. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the concentration of coffee production in the Priangan region, which had started earlier, continued. A revision of the quota regulations in 1763 almost entirely exempted the lowlands adjacent to Batavia from compulsory coffee cultivation. Private estates in this region, closer to the coast, not only survived but even increased in size and number. Since the VOC bought coffee and other commodities on which it held a monopoly from these large-scale agrarian estates at low prices, the owners preferred to sell their goods directly on the urban market in Batavia. The main actors in this market were Chinese moneylenders/bulk buyers (Boomgaard 1986). They were not permitted, even temporarily, to roam around as free

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8 As early as 1805 Lawick, appointed as acting commissioner, reported hearing from a regent ‘that, instead of using pack animals, the people carried the coffee to the warehouse themselves’, that ‘1,200 people from the district of Galonggang were employed to carry the coffee’ and that ‘these people had been given such heavy loads that they succumbed under the weight...’ Elsewhere, he said that the Regent took the buffaloes away from the people, so that the latter hid them from sight and therefore had to carry the coffee themselves, with the result that many succumbed (De Haan III 1912: 636).
traders in the Priangan region. They were known as notorious breakers of established monopolies and were kept safely at arm’s length. Not far enough, however, as the difference between the excessively low price paid by the Company and what these clandestine traders were prepared to pay was too great. The lands around Batavia acted as a buffer zone in which coffee beans bought up underhandedly in the hinterland could be whitewashed. VOC officials were, of course, also party to these illicit practices and the quantities involved must have been considerably larger than suggested by the official records. When coffee cultivation was moved further into the Sunda highlands, it imposed a heavy burden on the sparser population settled there. To ease the burden a little, the VOC gradually exempted these upland peasants from the obligation to supply a wide range of other products. In 1752, Jacob Mossel reported that 2,600 pikul of pepper had been delivered in addition to 12,000 pikul of coffee, but the rising demand for the latter led to a drastic reduction – or complete abolition – of the compulsory delivery of other crops that had formerly fallen under the quota regulations, such as pepper, cotton and indigo. At the start of the eighteenth century, indigo had been high on the list of the Company’s priority products (De Haan I 1910: 220-5). However, coffee soon became a monoculture that left the peasants no time for any other activity, except growing paddy for their own subsistence. Compared with the much more varied crop pattern that had existed earlier, this change signified a declining diversity in the agrarian economy. A clear indication of this contraction was the small number of local market places operating in the Priangan region at the end of the eighteenth century (De Haan I 1910: 400-1).

Imposing a tribute was of course not new. The court of Mataram demanded the delivery of a wide range of products from the Priangan, which varied widely from region to region. When it extended its authority over the region, the VOC made it clear that it intended to take over the sovereign rights of its predecessors. Local chiefs received orders to follow the instructions of the new rulers and subordination continued to form the basis for imposing obligations on the population. The annual ritual of bringing in ‘muddy-footed Javanese’ from the vicinity around Cirebon to do maintenance work on the on the canals and harbour of Batavia was justified by referring to similar corvee arrangements in former times. It is, however, doubtful whether this early-colonial claim on native labour power can be considered a continuation of the duties to which peasants had been subjected under the old regime, as they were now nominally rewarded for the work they had performed. Nevertheless, the costs to the VOC were low: the peasants were badly paid and only those who survived the harsh work
regime – sometimes no more than half of the total workforce – actually received payment (De Haan I 1910: 262). The term ‘corvee services’ is even less applicable to the work gangs, also procured in the surroundings of Cirebon by agents of the sugar mills around Batavia to cut and mill the cane produced. Though these seasonal labourers also received a wage for the work they performed, they had no say at all in the terms of their employment.

Coercion and desertion

A far heavier burden than these new ways of mobilizing labour was of course the obligation imposed on the peasants to cultivate certain crops, especially and increasingly as time passed, coffee. They were not only forced to grow the coffee, but also to deliver the beans to the VOC’s warehouses and to accept whatever price the Company decided to pay for them – or at least whatever was left of it after the chiefs had deducted their share. Because of the trade monopoly imposed by the VOC, the peasants had no space at all to negotiate. By disallowing outsiders, and the Chinese in particular, access to the region, the Company usurped the market entirely (De Haan I 1910: 390). Forest patrols went around to enforce the ban and violators were arrested and, if they were lucky, kept in detention in chains (De Haan I 1910: 105). The region was almost hermetically sealed off. The closure of the Sunda lands was the consequence of a colonial policy initiated in the eighteenth century.

The VOC considered itself not only as the ruler but also as the owner of the land and its people and conducted business accordingly. But the levying of tribute should not be seen as holding on to old customs. The increased scale and intensity of the burden imposed on the peasants was not the only difference between the new and old regimes. They were now coerced to practise sedentary agriculture to enable the extensive cultivation of the crop that increasingly monopolized the VOC’s attention. In De Haan’s words: ‘It was the cultivation of coffee that sealed the fate of nomadic peasants and forced them to live in permanent settlements’ (De Haan I 1910: 16). The mandate entrusted to the native chiefs meant that they made peasants’ access to land to cultivate food dependent on their willingness to fulfil the colonial obligations to grow and supply prescribed crops. Conversely, as Van Imhoff noted in a report of his journey through the Priangan in 1744, the laying out of the coffee gardens also helped to turn the nomadic rice growers into sedentary cultivators. Sundanese peasants were willing