Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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In the late eighteenth century, there was a discussion about whether the moment had come to rescind the decision to place coffee cultivation under indigenous management. Sebastiaan Nederburgh, sent to Batavia by the VOC as Commissioner-General to come up with proposals for how to proceed further, made it known in his report in 1796 – which was probably ghost-written by Nicolaus Engelhard – that governing the Priangan Regencies and taxing the peasants was currently costing the Company nothing. This money-wise conclusion put an end to any further discussion on alternatives. Even the costs (and incomes) of the inspectors, the Commissioner and his staff, were not borne by the Company itself. While the VOC did reward the chiefs for their collusion in coffee production, the price paid for their services was completely out of proportion with the profits that the VOC enjoyed from the subsequent trade. Even after coffee had been upgraded from luxury good to mass commodity, profit margins remained exceptionally high. The commission paid to the regents for their mediation brought them wealth and an opulent lifestyle. But they lost their fortunes just as easily as they made them through the excessive financial manipulations of the highest-ranking Company officials. The regents, placed under the tutelage of the Company were only appointed if they paid off the debts of their predecessors, and had to act as guarantors for each other. But no matter how detrimental this deceit must have been for their willingness to meet the Company’s demands, the treatment meted out to the chiefs was many times preferable to what the peasants could expect. Lack of information makes it impossible to determine whether they saw the cultivation of coffee as unpaid corvee services. In a memorandum from 1804, Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp expressed an opinion that many before and after him were to share: ‘All the coffee beans picked by the Javanese must be supplied at a low price or, as is widely acknowledged, for nothing’ (De Haan III 1912: 704).

Tackling ‘cultivation delinquency’

Because the Company refused to pay a reasonable price for the coffee, the planters were tempted not to surrender some or all of their harvest by throwing away or burying the beans, so avoiding the recurring and tedious journeys to the warehouses. Sometimes they would sell the coffee clandestinely to merchants who were willing to pay more than the Company. This evasion of the VOC’s monopoly first of all affected the chiefs, from whom the peasants kept their illegal transactions secret. These practices were
mentioned as early as 1727, almost immediately after the first radical price cut. Yet the chiefs themselves were even more inventive than the peasants in ensuring that not all the coffee they had collected actually reached the Company’s warehouses directly. Many loads switched owners on the way, often more than once, and the nearer they got to the coast, the higher the price the buyers were prepared to pay. If a regent failed to deliver the quantities that were expected of him, he or his subordinates were soon suspected of doing business with private traders. To combat these practices, the Company decided that no one should be permitted in the Priangan who did not belong there. The measure was a logical extension of the forced cultivation and delivery of coffee, but was presented as expressing the Company’s desire to protect the simple and honest inhabitants from ‘bad external influences’. The ban on ‘strangers’ in the region applied in the first instance to Chinese merchants who, as elsewhere, acted as intermediaries between the Company and the local people. They would buy the coffee up at their own cost and risk, but also operated as agents for European landlords living close to Batavia or – a better kept secret – Company officials. The inhabitants of the Priangan were also not permitted to leave their settlements. Growing or transporting the coffee were the only excuses they had not to be where they belonged: at home. They were not allowed to travel without a written permit issued at the office of the residency or by a chief. Failure to produce this pass on demand was punished by a lashing with a cane or a few days in the stocks. More serious offences like stealing cattle or coffee would mean a year in chains. There was little opportunity for anything other than growing your own food and the compulsory crop, and performing corvee services for your chief. These rigorous restrictions explain why there was little trade in the Priangan other than transactions with the Company and why there were almost no pasars in the region. Whatever non-local goods were available were brought back by the drivers of the pack animals that had taken the coffee to the warehouses at the frontiers, where petty traders offered goods such as textile or ironware that were in demand in the interior.

The peasants complained that the obligation to plant new trees each year left them insufficient time to maintain the standing plantations regularly and properly, but to no avail. A proposal in 1802 to reduce the number of trees per household to 500 was rejected but, again in 1808, Lawick did acknowledge that the number of trees that had to be planted had risen to an unbearable level. It had been established earlier that expansion of coffee cultivation to all regencies had led to a fall rather than a rise in production. ‘The people flee, desert and defect from regions where they are placed
under such excessive pressure,’ he reported to the Deputy Commissioner. He warned that adhering overly strictly to the demand that each household should maintain 1,000 trees a year would lead to large-scale desertion and revolt. This burden had become more onerous since Nicolaus Engelhard had announced in 1795 that the ban on deserting to escape the obligation to grow coffee also affected numpang households. When this instruction was first introduced in 1739, it applied only to landowning peasants, in light of the custom that landless peasants were exempt from the tribute. As we have seen, this was no longer the case from 1789 and extending the ban on desertion or defection to the landless helped include them in the system of forced cultivation. As before, the chiefs did all they could to expand their clientele, but this was no longer driven by the desire to steal a march on their rivals in terms of power and prestige, but to enable them to fulfil the Company’s demand for coffee, coffee and more coffee. Sealing off the highlands as a sort of reservation and forcing the inhabitants to stay put were the main instruments used by the Company to collect the colonial tribute. What started as a free trade transaction in the early eighteenth century ended up as a system of forced cultivation and delivery. The chronicler of this regime described how the peasants were driven by fear of punishment and the chiefs by fear of their superiors, and how the whole system of cultivation prevailed because no one had the power to resist it. The violence used to keep the population under control remained outside the Company’s field of vision, as it had no direct contact with the workfloor. Nevertheless, Nicolaus Engelhard spoke of the need for ‘continual punishment’ to get the peasants to work and keep them working. We know more about the pressure exerted on the chiefs to combat ‘cultivation delinquency’. Even when these offences had been committed by their subordinates, the Commissioner and his overseers did not shy away from caning the managers of the coffee businesses, putting them in the stocks for days or months, or sentencing them to long periods in chains. As the highest chiefs, regents faced dismissal and exile for serious and persistent neglect of duty. Was the exercise of all this violence not excessive, even in the context of the times? Nicolaus Engelhard – who was by no means severe compared to the other Commissioners – expressed the certainty that no native would ever plant coffee without being forced to do so. In this way, what was actually a consequence of a ruthless regime was also identified as its cause and justification. The refusal to pay the peasants for their work gradually became standard practice in the eighteenth century and was also legitimized with hindsight as a continuation of the pre-colonial system of tribute.
Every expression of concern would almost automatically end with the argument that there was simply no other choice. The Sundanese were seen as naturally lazy and slothful; in Engelhard's words to Nederburgh, they were capable of 'no labour of any kind other than what they saw as absolutely necessary to meet their basic needs' (De Haan IV: 732). Left to his own devices, the Priangan peasant was completely unprepared to do anything more than he had to. That could only be achieved by subjecting him to strict control and discipline. From this perspective, coercion was a possibly regrettable but unfortunately necessary part of a long civilizing mission. In the final instance, the chronicler of this period shared this conclusion regarding the forced cultivation of coffee. In an economic sense, the introduction of the system was a great step forwards which the population may have taken reluctantly but which also put a stop to the under-utilization of the forces of production which held the Priangan back in its development. As late as the beginning of the twentieth century, colonial archivist De Haan assessed the impact of the Priangan system with striking light-heartedness: certainly, the coercion was severe, but for the native population compliance with the coffee regime meant merely a loss of leisure time, a change to which native life would duly become accustomed (De Haan I 1910: 148). Whether this is really true will become clear below as we explore the eclipse of the VOC and the transfer of power to the officials of the colonial state around the end of the eighteenth century.