Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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The solution chosen by the Company may have been the cheapest, but was it the best option for increasing production? The delegation of authority to the district chiefs was little more than a cosmetic change, as the exercise of power at this level was little different from that in the regency headquarters. Chiefs, from high to low, acted as agents implementing the system of compulsory cultivation and delivery. Behind the facade of their cooperation in collecting the colonial tribute, however, they were in charge of a completely different economic activity: growing paddy. Although the paddy was not intended for export, it was of considerable economic importance, also to the chiefs themselves, and they gave this staple food preference over growing coffee at the behest of the VOC. They kept double accounts and gave priority to activities that were more lucrative and over which the Company had no control. In an attempt to ensure proper supervision, the Company issued the regent’s substitute and his district chiefs with deeds of appointment. Nevertheless, coffee production continued to depend nominally on the regents, as a consequence of which their prosperity increased. But it was arguable whether this was enough to ensure their loyalty. Nicolaus Engelhard, Commissioner in the final decade of the eighteenth century, poignantly observed that the regents would have happily exchanged their riches for their lost freedom of action (De Haan I, 1910: 146).

Failing management

The discussion among policy-makers in the latter years of the VOC on how to proceed with the system of colonial exploitation did not at first lead to any change in the production of coffee for the expanding world market. The improved results were partly due to the Cultivation Instruction drawn up by Commissioner Rolff in 1789 on where, when and how coffee should be tended and harvested. He composed the manual based on his own experience, but also obtained information from the coffee sergeants and regents. It was the first attempt to use practical knowledge to give the cultivation of coffee a more professional basis (De Haan II, 1911: 631-43). Demand had risen gradually in the course of time, sometimes increasing more rapidly in response to specific events. In 1791, for example, when a slave uprising on the island of San Domingo put a stop to the export of coffee from this West Indian colony. The price rise that this caused on the European market stimulated the expansion of cultivation on Java. Newly appointed Commissioner Nicolaus Engelhard rapidly increased the level of supply, thereby playing an important role in assuring the budget required to continue the
colonial endeavour. He was succeeded in 1800 by Pieter Engelhard, who undoubtedly had his predecessor to thank for his appointment. Their close family ties (their mothers were sisters) did not prevent a rift developing between them, caused by the disappointing revenues in the final decades of the eighteenth century. The Company’s directors had expressed their displeasure and the blame for this unexpected setback was laid at the door of the Regent of Cianjur, which was the main area of cultivation. He was accused of not supervising the picking, collection and delivery of the coffee properly. This criticism was just as applicable to the Commissioner, but he defended himself by accusing the coffee sergeants of false reporting. Shortly before he stepped down, Nicolaus saw an opportunity to rehabilitate himself by planting new trees on a large scale to compensate at least partly for the fall in production. With a display of admirable diligence, his successor succeeded in increasing production within a few years to the unprecedented level of more than 100,000 pikul. This was only possible by increasing compulsory cultivation to 1,000 coffee trees per household per year and stepping up the supervision by the inspectors.

In 1805, the greater effort required of the Commissioner to fulfil his demanding tasks led to him requesting a deputy to assist him. His request was approved and he agreed to the appointment of Lawick, who was his closest colleague, but the two soon clashed. Four regents who had dealings with the new Kommissaris Kecil complained to Engelhard about his deputy’s inappropriate behaviour. According to the Regent of Sumadang, Lawick had set fire to a number of kampungs in the highlands in 1806, causing a local uprising that had led to an exodus to Cirebon (De Haan I, Personalia, 1910: 106). An alternative interpretation claimed that the Deputy Commissioner had incurred the displeasure of the Resident of Cirebon by alleging that his bad governance had led to the unrest. A committee set up to investigate the affair ruled in favour of Lawick, though its conclusions were disputable. Engelhard was suspended and his deputy was appointed acting Commissioner. Lawick continued to be held in high esteem under the new regime and Daendels would appoint him Prefect of the Cirebon Priangan lands.

Although the former Commissioner had fallen into disfavour, the inconvenience this caused meant only that the kongsi to which he belonged had to lie low for a while. Two years later, however, Engelhard found a powerful patron when Daendels was appointed Governor. Besides being promoted to influential and lucrative positions, he was also a partner in the purchase of private landed estates. From Daendels, who had called him ‘very experienced and mild in his dealings with the natives’, the once disgraced Commissioner had little difficulty in transferring his allegiance to
Thomas Stamford Raffles, who also had nothing but praise for Engelhard’s governance of the regencies. De Haan summarized his career as follows: ‘It is clear that he sought to make improvements and planted coffee with great enthusiasm, but it is equally certain that he had much cause to be grateful to his competent deputy, and that there are serious doubts about his financial integrity’ (De Haan I, Personalia, 1910: 98). This was a judgment that could have applied just as easily to his cousin Nicolaus and to many other high-ranking VOC officials. Following these often long-lasting feuds reveals the lines along which individual interests were promoted. It was a close-knit network in which the various factions were held together or driven apart by family relationships or other ties of affinity. It is interesting to note that the regents, too, were very sophisticated in forming alliances with the colonial authorities, switching to a new coterie of prominent figures in good time whenever they felt it was necessary.

The downfall of the VOC manifested itself in a financial crisis, mainly due to huge internal corruption, that made it impossible to continue to run the Company on the old footing. De Haan described the activities of the trading company at the end of the eighteenth century as one big swindle (I, 1910: 324). The establishment of a state commission in 1790 could not prevent the debt burden from running up even further to the gigantic amount of 134 million guilders when the Company was wound up at the end of 1799. The VOC’s bankruptcy must be seen in the context of the political changes that took place in the Netherlands at the end of the eighteenth century. During a political revolt in 1795, a republican movement which sided with the French revolution deposed the party favouring the princely stadtholder and established what was known as the Batavian Republic. In the wake of this regime change, on which I shall elaborate more in the next chapter, a state commission was set up by the new Dutch republic to replace the governing board of the VOC. This Raad der Aziatische bezittingen en etablissements (Council for Asian Possessions and Establishments), installed in 1800, took over all the assets and liabilities of the VOC. The Council’s mandate was to prepare a blueprint for the future handling of colonial business.

In the preceding years, the VOC’s governing board had tried in vain to avert the debacle by putting its own house in order. In 1793, a Commission-General arrived in Batavia to put a stop to the increasingly heavy losses. The most prominent member of the Commission, Sebastiaan Cornelis Nederburgh, based his investigation completely on the selective information provided by the company’s directors. Driven in the first place by their own interests, they were firm in rejecting far-reaching reforms from the very beginning. In his policy memorandum from 1796, Consideratiën over
de Jacatrasche en Priangan-Regentschappen, Nederburgh acknowledged that the payments to the coffee growers were indeed very meagre, not even enough to cover the costs of transport. But the Commissioner-General rejected a price rise to stimulate production, preferring to calculate how much the Company’s profits could be increased by cutting back on expenses. The only dissenting voice from within the colonial apparatus was that of Dirk van Hogendorp. Shortly after being appointed as the VOC’s trading agent in 1786, Van Hogendorp had been sent to Northern India to manage the Company’s factory in the town of Patna that lay upstream from Calcutta on the Ganges river. He witnessed from close quarters the introduction of the Permanent Settlement, the tax system imposed by the British East India Company to reshape its domination over Bengal along different lines (Guha 1981). The debate then raging on who should be considered the owner of the land inspired him, a few years later after returning to Java, to express increasingly vocal criticism of the VOC’s policy. In a radical departure from existing practice, Van Hogendorp advocated a land tax based on recognition of the ownership rights of the peasant population, paying civil servants and regents a fixed salary, abolishing corvee services and the system of compulsory delivery. He also recommended, as in India, the introduction of free trade between colony and mother country. The vested interests in Batavia were vehemently opposed to these modern ideas and were able to prevent Van Hogendorp from making his plans public. He was also a veritable thorn in the side of his superiors in other respects. In 1798, this high-ranking VOC official was even held in detention in Batavia accused of abuse of power and fraud (Fasseur 1985). He managed to escape and, after a halt in Bombay, reached the metropolis. He released his first publication in 1799, Berigt van den tegenwoordigen toestand der Bataafsche bezittingen in Oost-Indië en den handel op dezelve, in which he outlined his ideas on how to manage the colonial domain to the new government in Holland. And not without success: he was made a member of the state commission set up in 1802 to design a Charter for the East Indies. This document was, however, ultimately drawn up without him, due to his sudden departure abroad on diplomatic service for his new republican masters. His adversary, Nederburgh, had in the meantime returned from his colonial mission and was also appointed to the Charter Commission, so that he did have the opportunity to leave his mark on its report, which was published in 1804 (De Haan IV, 1912: 763-4). Nevertheless, the principles that Van Hogendorp advocated had won sufficient support for the final ordinance to be a compromise that satisfied neither party and had no impact at all on policy or practice.
The arguments employed in the dispute between the main proponent and opponent of radical reforms around the turn of the century continued to resound in colonial circles until the introduction of the cultivation system three decades later. In his riposte to the deliberations of his opponent, Nederburgh pointed out that the enormous costs incurred in building up a finely meshed government apparatus would reduce the profit destined for the state’s coffers. Perhaps even more persuasive was his opinion that Javanese peasants would never increase production of their own free will. He believed that they lacked the sense of enlightened self-interest on which Van Hogendorp’s argument was based. The exercise of force remained unavoidable, as Nederburgh had already stated in his Consideratiën.

As far as the nature of the Inlander is concerned, he is lazy and slothful, and capable of no labour of any kind other than what they saw as absolutely necessary to meet their basic needs. (Nederburgh 1855: 122)

Van Hogendorp on the other hand, took account, if not of the presence, then of the imminent emergence of *homo economicus* in the Javanese landscape. Javanese peasants could, after all, only earn the head tax he proposed imposing along with the land tax in place of the corvee services by acting as market producers, i.e. by selling at least a part of the crops they produced. As Van Hogendorp wrote to his brother:

... let us have the courage, as the English have done successfully in Bengal, to permit the Javanese peasant to own or lease his land. We shall then have people to deal with, rather than slaves or draught animals. Let us have the courage to abolish forced labour and corvee services, and introduce land tax on products and a small poll tax. And then we shall earn millions, yes millions, from this beautiful island, the most fertile land in the whole world. (Van Sillem 1890: 58-9)

The disagreement between Van Hogendorp and Nederburgh became less marked when the former proved willing to compromise on the issue of absolute ownership rights. He saw no reason why land that was not already in use should not be issued to non-native leaseholders. And the view that he was much more concerned with the welfare of the Javanese population than his opponent was somewhat tempered by the fact that both he and Nederburgh, as members of the Charter Commission, were bound by the instruction that exploitation of colonial possessions must ‘provide the greatest value for the trade of the Republic and the greatest benefit for the
country’s coffers’. Experience had shown that laying claim to the labour power of the peasants was a necessary condition for achieving this objective. Consequently, what became known in the first half of the nineteenth century as the cultivation system is correctly interpreted as an expansion and standardization of the regime set in place by the VOC.

After the fall of the VOC

When the VOC was wound up, the possibility of abandoning all interests built up in Asia over a period of two centuries was apparently never considered. There was clearly little doubt about the potential profitability of this distant endeavour. All experts in colonial affairs consulted were in favour of continued exploitation of the Dutch possessions in the East Indies. The Company’s management had proved inefficient and ineffective. From this perspective, state-directed policies would increase colonial production and the consequential benefits for the mother country. After all, the purpose of a colony was to make a profit, and as much as possible. This was the main priority and the interests of the native population should not stand in the way. Only a few were willing to admit that the ideals of the Enlightenment that underpinned both the American War of Independence and the French Revolution should perhaps also be applied to the colonial rule in the tropics. Not of course with full recognition of the universal validity of liberty, equality and fraternity. These principles were essentially applicable only to the white tribes of the Atlantic community, and not to other parts of the world where other races lived and worked. But was it unthinkable for a foreign ruler, while seeking his own benefit, to also concern himself with increasing the happiness and prosperity of his indigenous subjects? Van Hogendorp believed in this civilizing mission and urged that it be recognized.

In terms of our domination of Java this means specifically: ‘to protect these same Inlanders from all violence and hostility from without and within; to provide and assure them of civic liberty, the right to own property, protection from all oppression and the exercise of impartial and fair justice’ (Van Hogendorp 1800: 8). Nevertheless this enlightened politician, too, proved unwilling to demand the unconditional and immediate application of these high ideals.

The advice that the Charter Commission published in 1804 essentially recommended continuation of the existing state of affairs. That was not so surprising since, after Van Hogendorp’s premature departure, Nederburgh had free rein in the Commission. He was the final editor of the report