Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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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.

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than the drawing board. Tampering with the weights continued. If the growers delivered their coffee to small depots closer to their habitat, they were paid much less than they were entitled to for transporting the beans to the main but far-off warehouses. According to a report from 1811, they received around half of what they had a right to (De Haan 1910: 457). Nor was there any change in the standard practice of paying the regents an advance and deduct this when their accounts were settled each year. Daendels saw himself as a reformer who was very concerned about the welfare of the population. One of his early instructions was remarkable, giving very precise guidelines for how to till the paddy fields in Cirebon. The landowners had to keep a store of seed of exactly the right quality in sufficient quantities, comply with a planting schedule to minimize the risk of a failed harvest, leave no fields untilled, inform the lower chiefs of the time of the harvest to ensure that they received the fifth share, etc., etc. Ensuring strict compliance with these orders also entailed expanding the network of irrigation canals to allow paddy to be grown in inundated fields. When regulating the cultivation of compulsory crops, Daendels assumed that growing coffee did not require a great effort from the population. He calculated that it would mean no more than two months’ work a year per household (cacah kopi), a tally that included picking, drying and transporting the beans to the warehouse. In exchange, with an average production of two to three pikul, the peasants were supposed to be paid eight to twelve rijksdaalders. This converted to a daily wage of eight stuivers, according to Daendels the highest rate paid on Java. In other words, rather than complain about coercion and underpayment, the peasants should have had good reason to be content.

Stepping up corvee services

The Governor-General also prided himself on having considerably reduced the extent of corvee services. He may not have gone as far as Van Hogen-dorp, who had argued in favour of completely abolishing these unpaid labour services, but did want to restrict them to maintenance of roads and bridges and the transport of persons and goods on the orders of the government. Laying new roads, digging canals, building government offices and other infrastructural works would from then on have to be paid for in the form of a daily wage or subcontracting. This regulation, too, remained

10 This amount is apparently based on an average annual production of two to three pikul of coffee per household.
non-operational. Daendels wanted to open up Java to modern traffic and he requisitioned the labour required to achieve that ambition. He explained the need for this in his memoir: ‘There were no paved roads, no checkpoints, no bungalows for overnight accommodation; even in the lands around Batavia, there were only a few roads that were suitable for wheeled vehicles’ (Daendels 1814:17). Suitable, that was the keyword in the mass mobilization of unpaid labour. From this perspective, the roads already existed, so the working population could be requisitioned to improve them *en masse* and free of charge. Even the *Grote Postweg*, the main trunk road traversing the region, was largely laid ‘at no cost to the state’. Little came of the intention to hire coolies to build the more difficult sections of the road and the work was done by rounding up villagers in Priangan, who not only received no payment but no food either. The use of forced labour for this project cost many thousands of lives, and a much larger number fled to avoid being conscripted. The regions through which the road passed were deserted for many miles on both sides and the heavy transport duties that accompanied the construction work led to failure of the rice harvest and a fall in coffee production (De Haan I, 1910: 491; IV: 97-904). The new long-distance road was primarily of military and strategic importance, enabling faster communications between different parts of Java. The indigenous people were not allowed to use it to transport their coffee in buffalo carts. This meant that there were sometimes three roads running parallel, the worst of which was for indigenous traffic. The custom of requisitioning unpaid labour continued not only for infrastructural works: in the regency of Bandung alone, 200 porters had to be permanently available to carry letters and accompany officials. Horses and their drivers were also conscripted in large numbers for the same reasons. Daendels himself did not shy from emphasizing his supreme status by making almost unrestricted use of the services of the Priangan people in the palace that had been built for him in Bogor (De Haan I 1910: 493-4). Looking at the cultivation and corvee services required by the government as a whole, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that the pressure on the population much increased rather than decreased under Daendels’ regime.

The self-righteousness displayed by the Governor-General contrasted strongly with the dismal outcome of his policy. Despite his claims to the contrary, he failed to perform the task he was charged with when he was appointed Governor-General, namely ‘to improve and secure the lot of the common Inlander; to abolish all irregular and arbitrary taxes and other abuses’ (art. 29 in the instruction from the King of Holland). When all is said and done, the reforms introduced by the Field Marshall benefited the
colonial state and harmed the people. Although the reach of the government came closer to the peasant order and the requirements for detailed reporting were gradually raised, insight into what actually happened at the foot of the economy remained very limited. A lack of factual data is, however, no excuse for the praise that Daendels bestowed on his own deeds. Contemporary critics made it clear that he should have known better. According to Johannes van den Bosch, who was to become the founding father of the cultivation system, forced coffee cultivation under Daendels took up not two but six months of a household’s annual working time. This much higher estimate also took no account of the peasants’ obligation to provide transport services and accompany travelling officials (De Haan, I: 458). Van den Bosch’s calculations were undoubtedly driven by hostility towards the former Governor-General, who had forced him to leave Java in 1810. But, in the same year, Lawick – a loyal servant to the Governor-General – sent his superior a letter that left no room for misunderstanding about the hatred of the indigenous population, from high to low, for the coffee regime (De Haan IV, 1912: 811). In the absence of reasonable payment for their labour, the people of Priangan had such an aversion to growing this crop that brute force was the only way to ensure its continuation.

Were there no alternative options to derive the greatest possible profit from the possessions in the East Indies? Very soon after the VOC had established its authority over the hinterland, large estates had grown up in the area around Batavia, which grew food for the city as well as a variety of commercial crops, including sugarcane and, later, coffee for export. These private estates were often owned by Company officials, who usually left the daily management to hired hands, caretakers who had left the Company, and contractors, who were usually Europeans, Chinese or locals of mixed race. These managers employed local peasants and migrants from elsewhere who had settled in the area. On some of the estates, these newcomers – who came from close by or further afield – made up the main workforce. Over time, the number of estates increased, mainly on the coastal plain but also encroaching on the foothills of the Priangan highlands. They dominated the area known as the *Bataviasche Ommelanden*, the lands on the urban outskirts. Lacking sufficient public funds, Daendels was forced to sell off land, resulting in a new wave of expansion of these privately owned estates. The Governor-General did not lose sight of his own interests in this process. He had the Council of the Indies allocate him an extensive area of land in Bogor that had been owned by the government. This domain covered an area of no less than 236 square kilometres. After increasing the profitability of his acquisition, by raising the paddy tax and other levies, he sold part of
it back to the government, including the land on which the palace he lived in stood, and another part in the form of private estates. These transactions were very lucrative for him, but irreparably sullied his reputation.

Daendels considered the promotion of private agro-industry an effective means of stimulating economic growth. Land was now sold not only on the northern coastal plain of West Java but also elsewhere on the island, ‘a large part of which can be transformed into plantations for sugar, cotton, indigo and other products in only a few years’ (Daendels 1814: 111). There was no interest in buying such government concessions from among the Javanese gentry. Daendels took this as proof of his belief that land ownership was an unknown and undesirable notion for the colonized people. He made it clear that no land was to be sold in the Priangan Regencies as this would have a harmful effect on the cultivation of coffee, which he was resolute to avoid at all costs. He was, however, prepared to allow Chinese interested in cultivating new land to do so. They would have to grow crops like tobacco, cotton, indigo and peanuts, which in his view the native population were not willing or able to grow. Daendels expected this form of agribusiness to contribute to increased prosperity in the Sunda lands. His experiment to set up Chinese kampungs, encouraging ‘this diligent but not very trustworthy race’ to live in settlements of their own so that they could be more easily kept under control, also ended in failure. The Governor-General’s intended policy seemed to be based on an agronomic division into two zones, with private estates on the coastal plain focusing on newer crops for export and the higher lands reserved mainly for the production of coffee under the direct supervision of the government. There was, however, insufficient time to promote this two-pronged policy out, both modalities of which assumed the sustained servitude of the peasantry.

The common denominator of all the measures introduced was that they should not negatively affect the coffee regime, and the profit that this crop generated for the state’s coffers remained the main priority in all decisions taken. The regents and lesser chiefs, subject to the instructions of the colonial administration even more than in the Company period, continued to be indispensable as mediators in imposing the heavy burden on the population. The entire package of measures relating to coffee cultivation in western Java drawn up by the Governor-General would continue to exist from 1808 as the Priangan Ruling. The colonial exploitation of this region at the start of the nineteenth century differed substantially in a number of ways from the policy practised throughout the rest of the island. As before, the Priangan regime was determined by the government monopoly on coffee production and the forced planting, cultivation and harvesting of
this crop by the local population. The regents received no fixed allowance in money or kind for their managerial role, but a commission which depended on the volume produced. Daendels is rightly seen as the formal founder of the Priangan system (De Haan I, 1910: 496). He owed this reputation not to his introduction of a new system in these highlands in West Java but, as befits a conservative reformer, to the fact that he streamlined a mode of production that had been established much earlier.

**Sealing off the Priangan**

The separate regime imposed to ensure that the metropolis continued to enjoy maximum profit from its colonial assets was emphasized further by sealing off the Priangan Regencies from undesirable contacts with the outside world. The best way to preserve peace and order was to keep the inhabitants shut away in their settlements to the greatest extent possible. After all, they had no reason whatsoever to go elsewhere. Outsiders were permitted to travel through the Priangan lands only with a pass. European visitors were kept out with the argument that they disrupted the lives of the local population by demanding their unpaid services. In addition,