Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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The colonial hierarchy tolerated little criticism from within, while the tendency to present a united front towards outsiders also did little to encourage a free and frank exchange of opinion. Yet the transition from trading company to state enterprise did seem to have contributed to a very gradual change in the code of conduct. Compared to the servants of the VOC, who sought to maximize their own profit with little ado or embarrassment, their successors as state officials at least tried to deny or conceal the fact that they were acting in any way other than in the public interest, no matter how it was defined. Once they had been found guilty of misconduct, it was more difficult for the new generation of administrators to restore their earlier reputation for honour and integrity. Raffles lost his job prematurely partly as a result of his abuses in the sale of land, while Daendels, after being accused of financial misconduct, was not permitted to return to Java as Governor-General in 1816. The higher requirements that were progressively imposed on those in positions of authority did not of course mean that these new public morals were introduced without problems but, compared with the previous regime, violations were tolerated less easily and punished more severely. This was a change that helped mark the advent of the colonial state. Behind the dividing lines that separated the old and new administration of the colony around the turn of the nineteenth century, however, lay a continuity that can also be seen in the career profiles of the administrators. Many of the old guard simply transferred their loyalties to the new masters, no matter whether they were Patriots or Orangists (monarchists), or were – in succession – Dutch, French or English. These old retainers not only followed all the swerves and curves of policy, but claimed that they had always been fierce supporters of the new course. Muntinghe was perhaps the ultimate personification of this flexibility, according to the derisive judgment of his contemporary and rival Willem van Hogendorp, who described him as ‘at all times the obedient servant and cowardly follower of whoever holds the reins of power’ (Van der Kemp 1916: 34-5). After having worn out Nederburgh and Daendels, Muntinghe became a great favourite of Raffles, who praised him as his right-hand man. After the departure of the English high command, he patiently awaited the restoration of Dutch authority in the firm belief that it would once again make use of his standing as a man of all colonial seasons.

In search of a new policy

The fall of the Napoleonic empire ended in a major realignment of the multinational state structure on the European continent. At the Vienna
conference in 1815, the combined diplomacy of Britain and Prussia saw to it that the territorial aspirations that had magnified the role of France in the wake of the 1789 Revolution were revoked. As part of the policy of containment, the United Netherlands were cut off from political allegiance to their southern neighbour and reconstituted in a new monarchy. A son of the last princely stadtholder Willem V from the Orange-Nassau dynasty, who had taken refuge in Britain, invested himself in 1815 as King Willem I of the newly formed state in northwest Europe. I shall first discuss the repercussions for colonial governance and in a final paragraph at the end of this chapter, briefly comment on the changes in the political setting in the metropolis.

Back in Holland from his years of exile, Willem I appointed three Commissioners-General and gave them orders to come up with proposals for a new colonial policy. At the instigation of the chairman, Muntinghe was not included among the candidates. He had, after all, joined the ranks of the occupier after the British takeover. In the foreword to his work on Java and its people, published in 1817, Raffles thanked his prominent adviser profusely for the services rendered. This praise raised doubts about the impartiality of this undeniably expert and experienced man. Baron Godert van der Capellen was new to colonial affairs and had been appointed chairman exactly because of his unblemished record. This lack of familiarity with the situation in the colony also applied, though to a lesser extent, to Cornelis Elout, the second and most prominent member of the trio in terms of rank. Elout had been sent to Java earlier, in 1806, on a similar mission but it had been recalled before reaching Batavia. The third Commissioner was a nondescript figure who soon faded into the background. With these choices, the King made it clear that he did not trust the old guard. Others who were not considered were Dirk van Hogendorp and Daendels, whose track records worked against them. The trio of Commissioners departed from

13 The publication of The History of Java (1817) immediately incurred the displeasure of the colonial policy-makers. They accused the author of having political motives and questioned whether British rule had indeed left such a favourable impression on the Javanese as Raffles had suggested. Just to be sure, the author of an official memorandum warned that it was advisable to see to it that the indigenous leaders of Java did not become familiar with the work ‘... to ensure that the flattering way in which the Javanese are presented does not encourage them to develop ideas that may be disadvantageous to the crucial importance of a good relationship with the inland rulers.’ (S. van Deventer I, 1865: 270). Fear that the British Governor had left behind an overly favourable impression did not prevent later colonial authors from expressing their undisguised admiration for Raffles. As M.L. van Deventer wrote at the end of the nineteenth century: ‘At the pinnacle of the history of Java in our century stands a foreigner, with his system, his sensible designs, and the introduction of his radical reforms.’ (1890: 16)
Texel at the end of October 1815, arriving six months later in Batavia. This
gave them plenty of opportunity to discuss their mission on board, armed
with an instruction issued before they left and a government regulation
drawn up on the basis of a draft charter dating from 1803. The question the
Commissioners had to address was whether to adopt the principles of free
cultivation and free labour that the British administration had introduced
or to return to the previous regime of a captive peasantry and forced cultiva-
tion and deliveries of export crops. Van der Capellen showed himself to be
a cautious man and had already informed the King before his departure
of his doubts about the feasibility of implementing the liberal ideas that
formed the core of the government regulation drawn up in 1815 regarding
the Asian possessions in the near future. The ‘liberal ideas’ boiled down to
the instruction to put an end to the regime of coercion and monopoly that
dated back to the VOC era. What was to replace this remained unclear for
the time being. In the period of trial and error that now commenced, there
was no avoiding the need for practical arrangements to be made in a number
of areas. The most important of these was the decision to accept or reject
the principle of tax collection introduced by Raffles, henceforth referred
to as the land rent system. The decision had to be made without the Com-
missioners having the opportunity to give thorough consideration to the
advantages and disadvantages. The Raad van Financiën (Financial Affairs
Council) argued in favour of retaining the land rent system. That was by
no means surprising, as its president was Muntinghe, who had contributed
prominently to Raffles’ design for its promulgation. His reservations about a
village-based system of collection – he referred to the ryotwari settlements
introduced in western India – were practical in nature and required further
investigation to seek a solution. The recommendations that Muntinghe
submitted to the Commissioners-General on 11 July 1817 gave primary
importance to coffee cultivation which, as one of the cheapest forms of
state income, had to be maintained.

Muntinghe gave two answers to the question as to how that was to be
achieved. He observed that the only way for the government to secure its
supplies under conditions of free cultivation and delivery was to pay a good
price. Conversely, if the price of labour was set too low, coercion would be
imperative. Muntinghe recalled that the VOC had engaged in free trade
when it first arrived, and that supply was adequate because the suppliers
received a reasonable price. He opposed the claim that the Javanese lacked
the virtues required for any other system than forced labour and warned
against the costs of enforcing such a coercive system, which should not be
ignored in calculating the advantages and disadvantages. Is it conceivable,
he argued, to enforce people to plant and tend to 72 million coffee trees and
to deliver 35 to 36 million pounds of coffee without fear of unrest, de-
sertion, rebellion or some other form of calamity and thereby, in the long run,
bringing about the downfall of the regime? What would happen, Muntinghe
wondered, if a Dutch farmer were forced to supply his produce at half, or
a quarter or a tenth part of the real value? Certainly, the Javanese became
slow and unwilling as soon as they were forced to work for others and
under supervision. Yet behind this lethargy was the zeal and enlightened
self-interest that drove every simple peasant. Muntinghe described these
qualities in lyrical terms (Van Deventer I, 1865: 319).

This advocate of free labour also referred to the system of village-level
governance that had so conveniently come to light during the period of
British rule. The village headman was supposedly elected by the inhabitants
of the locality in rotation and was given responsibility for representing the
interests of the community. Muntinghe called on the European authorities
to make use of this institution, which had existed since time immemorial,
to interact with the peasantry. With the village council, the government
had an instrument that was ‘like a clog, tractable enough to take on any
form that a benevolent and compassionate government may wish to give it’
(Muntinghe, in Van Deventer I, 1865: 331). In the regulation governing the
collection of the land rent, issued at the start of 1814, the village headman
was already identified as the agent in matters regarding the tribute imposed
on the locality. Raffles had discarded his original intention to impose a
land tax on the cultivating households individually for practical reasons.
Instead, he introduced a system of taxes per village, with the headman of
the desa acting as the intermediary, ‘renting’ the land from the government
and responsible for parcelling it out to the peasants for cultivation. The
Commission-General decided to maintain this regulation. The recognition
of the village council and its designation as the lowest level of administra-
tion dated from this period. It completed the ‘descent’ of the exercise of
power to the colonial workfloor, a system that would remain intact until the
end of Dutch rule. The village headmen, charged with collecting the land
tax, were considered the representatives of the peasant households. Their
periodic election by the villagers from their midst was formal confirmation
of their status. This was considered an ‘ancient custom’ on Java, which had
been brought to an end by despotic rulers and reinstated by Raffles.

In 1818, the Commission-General issued an instruction that made this
interpretation, based on the discovery of a past that had never existed (Van
der Kemp 1916: 362-4; Breman 1979 and 1987a), normal practice for the largest
part of Java that fell under the land rent system. To facilitate supervision
of the newly appointed local tax agents, Raffles’ Revenue Instruction included a provision that each village council should keep a record of the amount of tax levied and how it was distributed among the villagers, but little had come of this provision in practice (Van der Kemp 1916: 43-4). As a consequence, the Land-Rent Inspectorate had no idea at all of how much cultivable land there was in each village or what crops were grown on it, in total or per household. Land registers would not be initiated until much later, unlike in British India, where the classification of landownership, known as survey and settlement records, had been introduced on a large scale from the early nineteenth century. The colonial authorities on Java had little other choice for the time being than to determine a reasonable collective tax in consultation with the village councils. This procedure, known as the admodiation system, generally entailed rather unpredictable negotiations, usually conducted with the intercession of the gentry. After many expressions of praise and much bargaining, the result was often a far too low or excessively high estimate. The latter could lead to peasant protests which, as happened on the coastal plain around Cirebon, could escalate into a full-scale popular revolt. The collective tax imposed through the village council, in cash or agrarian produce or a combination of the two, was therefore a continuation of the system which had been initiated in earlier years under British rule. It was a pro-bureaucratic and anti-feudal style of administration. Nonetheless, the Commission-General did rescind Raffles’ decision not to depend on the landed gentry as an intermediate layer between the government and the peasant order. Van der Capellen proved to be very much aware of the resistance of the nobility to their exclusion and took this into account. Muntinghe made general recommendations for the cultivation of coffee, proposing no measures that would apply solely to the Priangan region. He pointed out that, from Cirebon to the east, 20 million trees had been lost in 1812-13 during the British interlude due to negligence or wilful destruction. He added that the government should lease the remaining coffee plantations on the northeast coast to the Javanese for free cultivation. A general inspectorate would be established to supervise cultivation and to encourage the peasants to grow crops, in particular coffee, for the European market.

The deregulation of coffee cultivation, except in the Priangan

It was clear advice, but the Commissioners-General did not implement it for the time being. A few days after receiving the report from the President