Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

Breman, Jan

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.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66310

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2322045
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
of the Raad van Financiën, they left for a four-month tour of inspection through Java. The purpose of the tour was to make site visits, starting in Cirebon, to see for themselves how the land rent and coffee cultivation ordinances worked in practice. Before returning to Batavia at the end of 1817, the Commissioners-General issued a statement about this main export commodity. This interim measure, announced on 7 November of that year, had a clear liberal intent. Coffee planters could lease land at a reasonable price and were free to work on it as they saw fit. They were also promised that they would be protected against abuse of their rights. The Priangan Regencies were however explicitly excluded. The Commission-General simply stated that coffee growing in this main production area should continue as before. This outcome was intended to be a temporary compromise as Van der Capellen considered it inconsistent to allow a system to exist in part of Java that was based on principles contrary to the rest of the island. In exchange for being exempt from land rent, the people in the Priangan were obligated to grow coffee and deliver it to the government’s warehouses for a small reimbursement. In other words, everything remained the same as it had been before. Van der Capellen offered his apologies for maintaining this exceptional situation in a letter to minister Anton Falck in 1816 (Van der Kemp 1916: 189-90).

There was no village autonomy nor elected village headmen in the Sunda lands. The regents continued to wield the power once bestowed upon them by the VOC. The forced cultivation of coffee thus continued in this part of Java. Not on the basis of persuasive argumentation, admittedly, but for the same practical reasons that Nederburgh, Van Hogendorp, Daendels and Raffles had appealed to in their turn. The continued isolation of the Priangan Regencies from the outside world was part of this policy. An ordinance to cordon off the region was issued once more in 1820, following complaints in the preceding years of coffee being smuggled from the highlands to the coast, where it was brought at a much higher price to the market. That this illicit trade was conducted more by the gentry than by simple peasants is illustrated by an official demand to the Residents of Priangan and Cirebon in 1819 to warn the local chiefs about the unacceptability of such practices.

The Commissioners-General now gave priority to introducing the land rent system. The first article of this decree, announced in mid-March 1818, was that the land rent would be collected at village level. It was hoped that, with the appointment of Lawick as Inspector-General and H.J. van de Graaff as Deputy Inspector-General of Land-Rent Revenues, the future could be faced with confidence. Of course, many instructions followed on the further elaboration of the system that was to be in force for most of the
island. There was however no adequate explanation of why the Priangan lands, and not elsewhere, should remain the epicentre of coffee production. The only reference to the continued apartheid of the region was the explicit instruction that the state of affairs that was soon to be introduced in the rest of the island did not apply to this traditional centre of coffee cultivation. The persistent exceptional position attributed to the Priangan was the result of a compromise. The colonial policy-makers wanted the maximum volume of coffee at the lowest possible price. Not complying with the ideals of enlightenment that had blown over from Europe may have been a little awkward, but if coercion was necessary to increase the cultivation of this most important export crop, then so be it. The enormous profits that the forced supply of coffee generated were now easily defended with the argument that the non-economic behaviour of the Javanese peasant – or more accurately, the Priangan peasant – did not permit his freedom of action. The low rung of civilization on which these people lived justified the postponement of their freedom until a later date. The only way to help them on the road to progress was to restrict their freedom of action. Moreover, this was a regime that they were familiar with from their time under the rule of the Javanese kings. This reasoning provided the fundament for an ideology on which colonial domination would rest until the very end.

Based on the findings gathered during its long tour and on the study of memoranda and other documents left behind by the British authorities, the Commission-General outlined the course to be followed. Newly appointed Residents were given instructions to report back on the situation they encountered in their areas of jurisdiction. The transfer of power from the British to the Dutch went off peacefully, except in Krawang and western Cirebon where a revolt raged again in 1816 (Van Deventer 1891: CLXVI). The cause of the unrest was the nature and scale of the compulsory services and forced supply of commodities. The first demand of the rebels was for the workload to be lightened. An intercepted letter showed that local chiefs had called on their people to join the fight: ‘Have all food prepared and have all people who wish to have a different lord or ruler ready to march to Cirebon.’ Muntinghe, whose estate lay in this area, tried in vain to ward off the use of violence by telling Van Motman, the Resident of the Priangan Regencies, that the ‘rebels’ were nothing more than ‘innocent creatures’. But the crowd, which had swelled to 2,500, refused to disperse. The armed response was carried out not only by colonial troops under the Resident’s command, but also soldiers on foot and horseback led by the regents of Sumedang and Limbangan. Sixty of the insurgents were killed, 100 wounded and 500 taken prisoner (ibid.: 138-42). After the revolt had been quashed, a commission was
set up to investigate its causes. Its report referred to excessive oppression and exploitation by private landlords, who had pursued their regime of coercion with the support of local chiefs. It made an urgent plea for the lot of the common people to be improved. Although the unrest had been restricted to the coastal plain, there were fears that it would spread to the Priangan highlands, where the people endured a much heavier burden. The rebels were led by a notorious and feared gang-leader. This was not the first time that public order had been disturbed in this region. It was perhaps this reputation that had inspired the decision not to reintroduce forced cultivation in this area bordering on the Priangan. When Resident Servatius instructed the regent in the hinterland to encourage his people to grow coffee, he was informed that the Javanese had developed an almost insurmountable aversion to growing this crop and to the coercion that accompanied it.

In his report on the Priangan Regencies and Krawang in 1816, Resident Van Motman was content to give a rough estimate of the quantity of coffee produced, 42,000 pikul at the most, as there had been no regular inspections in the previous years. There were very few coffee inspectors and even fewer with more than a year or two of experience. Nevertheless, Van Motman predicted a rapid recovery in production, claiming that it should be possible to increase it to 100,000 pikul in the short term. The European staff who had to supervise production comprised, in addition to the Resident and four assistants, one inspector for each of the five regencies (Cianjur, Bandung, Sumedang, Limbangan and Sukapura). At that time, the Resident was still living in Wanayasa, on the border between Krawang and Cianjur, where Macquoid, as Superintendent of the Coffee Culture in the British period, had moved into a simple pasagrahan while waiting for a wooden house to be built. Van Motman suggested relocating his office to Cianjur. When this occurred, shortly afterwards, it was a clear sign that coffee cultivation had moved from the foothills to the highlands.

The survey initiated by the Commission-General also included investigating the state of coffee production. This important task was entrusted to the Inspector-General of Land-Rent and his deputy. Lawick and Van de Graaff reported on their findings at the end of 1818.14 Quite logically the prospects for the Priangan Regencies were given most attention. This old production centre would have to continue to supply the greatest share of the export crop. It was therefore necessary to maintain the instruction that

each household should plant and tend to 1,000 fruit-bearing trees a year. The reporters established, however, that the number of households was much larger than the number of coffee planters. This was because the tribute was imposed, according to local custom, on the basis of the composite peasant household.

... the coffee planters understand a *tjattya koppie* as a whole extended family of blood relations; for example, a father, his sons and sons-in-law will all count as belonging to the same *tjattya koffij*, while in effect there are often three or four households, all living independently. (Lawick and Van de Graaff 1818)

In addition, by no means all coffee planters had to tend 1,000 trees, as coffee production had not penetrated everywhere, and especially to the more remote districts. A new road was urgently needed to expand production to the still inaccessible region of Sukapura. The observation that the coffee inspectors had been negligent in ensuring an even distribution of production was accompanied by a recommendation to the Resident to instigate a further investigation into the size of a *cacah kopi* and to determine whether the work involved in producing the coffee was distributed proportionally. The inspectors were criticized for relying too much on information from the regents rather than touring around to inspect the planting and tending of the trees themselves. There were also concerns whether the peasants were receiving correct payment for the compulsory delivery of their harvest. The two warehouses where this took place – Karang Sembung and Cikoa, situated where the highlands gave way to the coastal plain and the rivers became navigable – did not possess reliable weights and scales required to determine the volume of the loads. Bad roads and the long distances that the planters had to travel to deliver the coffee – the return journey, with pack animals or carts could often take a month or even longer – led to a proposal to open small warehouses spread over the districts to make the delivery of the beans less burdensome. Another suggestion was to ensure that there were sufficient pack animals and carts available for the transport.

In their report Lawick and Van de Graaff lastly drew attention to the problem caused by the alienation of land in the Priangan to private owners. Daendels had limited himself to selling land around Bogor, but under Raffles a much larger area had been sold off. The owners of these huge tracts often imposed different, and even heavier, burdens on the peasants than their countrymen endured under the government. The reporters’
main concern, however, was not the injustice suffered by the peasants. Their much more serious objection was that the existence of two parallel systems of taxation was a source of confusion and conflicted with colonial interests. They recommended a ruling on this grave and urgent matter from the metropolitan headquarters, a suggestion that must have come straight from the top of the colonial machinery.

**Patching up leakage and other irregularities**

The authorities tried to restrict the widespread smuggling of coffee by building watch-houses on the main through routes and manning them with guards to check passing traffic for contraband. In addition mounted police *(jayangsekar)* accompanied by constables *(pancalang)* patrolled the whole area. To ensure that they themselves did not engage in corrupt practices, they were relocated to another district every month. And that was not all; the Resident also used ‘disguised inspectors’ who moved amongst the population dressed in Sundanese clothing. Posing as traders, they would go to Krawang, Bogor, Cirebon, Tjampea and even Batavia to track down buyers of smuggled coffee. According to Jean Chrétien Baud, the ban on the sale and use of opium in the Priangan Regencies announced in 1824 was introduced out of fear that inhabitants of the region would sell coffee illegally to pay for their addiction *(Baud 1852: 161)*. Another interpretation suggests that the fact that the Chinese acted as opium sellers was reason enough to ban them from the residency. This implies that the Chinese had persuaded the local chiefs and their people to use the drug. Colonial archivist De Haan emphatically rejected this explanation stating in plain language that, at the end of the eighteenth century, VOC officials used opium to pay for the coffee delivered to them.

> It was not the Chinese who were to blame for these practices, but in the first instance the Commissioner of Indigenous Affairs who, of all the various articles that he supplied to the highlands, had found none more profitable than opium, and who, through his privileged position, could easily quash all competition. *(De Haan I, 1910: 248)*

The permission granted to the Priangan regents to sell the drug was rescinded because of fears that the local chiefs’ desire for income from this source might become too strong, at the expense of their primary task: to supervise the cultivation of coffee.