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.
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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.
After a tour of the Sundanese highlands, Resident Van der Capellen expressed his dismay at the bad condition of the coffee gardens. The colonial authorities had already realized that their efforts to increase production had not resulted in the expected breakthrough. This called for more detailed investigation, a task entrusted to Inspector of Finances Van Haak. In the autumn of 1822 he reported his findings to the Chief Inspector. He began by observing that, after 1800, the coffee trees had not been planted on fertile ground. This had only recently improved. He also noted that, since 1808, the chiefs had failed to perform their supervisory duties satisfactorily. He confirmed that planting gardens on higher ground had produced much better results. Figures provided by the Resident’s office showed a total of 29,290,733 trees, of which 12,093,248 had been planted between 1817 and 1820. Deducting 3,124,941 trees that were no longer fruit-bearing, this meant that the harvest was the product of 14,072,544 trees. Since the number of coffee planters in the official records was 18,645, there should have been 18,645,000 fruit-bearing trees. That left a production shortfall of more than five million, caused by many years of neglect or even destruction during the British era. In short, there was still a large pool of underutilized labour that could be deployed to increase production further. The peasants had to travel between 40 and 70 poles15 to deliver the beans, a journey of 8 to 14 days for porters and pack animals, or 10 to 18 days for buffalo carts. The opening of warehouses in a few district headquarters in 1819 meant that smaller planters, who had no animals, could deliver their beans closer to home. They were paid less per pikul because freight drivers had to be subcontracted to carry the coffee in carts from these collection centres to the coast. The exhausting journey, the bad state of the roads and shortage of cattle feed meant that many of the animals died en route. Because of this risk and the low price the peasants received, as well as the fact that they were underpaid for the weight they did deliver, there was a great temptation to smuggle. The ban on Chinese from moving around in the Priangan Regencies was extended to Moors, Bengalis and Arabs, while Europeans were also forbidden to trade in the region. Sealing off the Priangan, rather than paying the peasants more for the coffee they delivered, remained the preferred solution.

In Van Haak’s opinion, this was indeed the right choice. He then noted that coffee was produced with neither the Resident nor the inspectors being familiar with how it was grown. Consequently they lacked the knowledge to supervise the process. The sense of duty of the European staff left much

15 1 Java pole is approximately 1,500 metres.
to be desired, certainly given the high incomes they enjoyed due to the generous commission in cash they received for the coffee planted and delivered under their supervision. Besides their lack of experience with what they were supposed to do, their exceptionally meagre knowledge of the country and its people was an obstacle to them performing their tasks with any degree of competence. They also had insufficient time to become acquainted with the area under their jurisdiction. Their command of the language was pitiful, despite this being a condition for being appointed to the job. Their failure to give the regents the respect they deserved and to give them the money due to them was also a cause for concern. All in all, this meant that the European officials did not take measures in the interests of the local population, such as promoting agriculture, and because of sheer negligence jeopardized the goal of increasing coffee cultivation. The sale of estates to private landowners had disadvantaged the regents, who could no longer derive income from the land and peasants alienated from their jurisdiction. Lastly, Van Haak expressed his concern about the neglect of paddy cultivation, which made it difficult to meet the food requirements of the population. The main thread of his argument was to warn the European management in charge of coffee production not to push up the level of forced cultivation too high and to take an example from the indigenous chiefs, who also moderated their demands on their subordinates. Conversely, however, expansion of the paddy fields should not occur at the expense of the land planted with coffee trees. The Inspector of Finances made it clear that the government could not permit such a reduction in the production of this major commercial crop. Van Haak added a large number of appendices to his report containing data on the size of the population (almost 200,000, of which only 44 were European), the number of coffee planters, the state of the trees and the yield of the crop from 1817 to 1820, which he had obtained from the Resident's office. The distribution of the data among the different regencies offered insight into the relative importance of each. The epicentre was still in Cianjur, but the figures gave an early warning of the shift to Bandung that would gather pace in the following years, in terms of both population numbers and coffee cultivation. The statistics also included the production of coffee and paddy on the private estate of Sukabumi. The revenues from the harvest of both crops showed the enormous scale of this territorial intrusion into the Priangan Regencies.

The restoration of ties with the markets in the Atlantic world after the end of the Napoleonic wars gave a strong boost to the production of export crops in the colony. The Commission-General had found coffee production,
especially in the new production areas that had emerged since the beginning of the nineteenth century, in a bad state. The stagnating sales in the first years of British interim rule had led to widespread neglect of the trees. Restoring the area under cultivation to its former size took a considerable time. Although there was no change in the existing regime for the Priangan Regencies, it was the intention to encourage coffee production elsewhere on Java on the basis of free labour. The impression was created that the choice for unforced cultivation and sale had the approval of King Willem I (Van der Kemp 1916: 136). And yet, it did not reap the success that had been expected. Daendels had already driven coffee cultivation to unprecedented heights ten years previously, especially on the plain of Cirebon and on Java’s east coast. But, once they were ripe for picking, the many millions of trees that he had ordered to be planted there produced an extremely meagre harvest. This figure was so low compared to the Priangan region, where a coffee tree would produce seven times as many beans, that in his report to Raffles in 1812 Rothenbühler proposed terminating growth of the crop completely in the region of Surabaya (Rothenbühler 1881: 55). In hope of better results, the Commission-General decided in 1817 to switch to free cultivation in areas where coffee was hardly grown, if at all. But the aversion to growing the crop was so strong, based on earlier experiences, that even the higher prices that private (Chinese and Arab) buyers were prepared to pay could not persuade the peasants to plant coffee on a genuinely large scale in the new production areas. The disappointing results led the government to fall back on the tried and trusted method of using coercion. An instruction that came into force in 1823 ordered coffee-planting villages to continue to do so in the future, but henceforth in the form of a levy in kind. The measures signified the cancellation of the free agreements of previous years. The new course had the desired effect but the pretension of free cultivation proved impossible to maintain, as Leonard du Bus de Gisignies reported a few years later (Van der Kemp 1916: 164). Willem van Hogendorp, who was the actual author of the report, was told by an informant in Central Java in 1828 about the way in which the peasants were put to work: ‘They are driven to the gardens with a stick, just as everywhere else’. The difference from the situation in the Priangan Regencies was therefore not as great as intended. The traditionally much tighter control on compliance with the system of compulsory supply in this region probably explains why, as in the past, the cultivation of coffee continued to be linked primarily to these districts. A prognosis in 1818 forecast that three-quarters of the total production would come from the Priangan Regencies (ibid.: 192).