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V Unfree labour as a condition for progress

Shifting coffee cultivation to gardens

The initial practice of permitting peasants to plant coffee near to their homes had the advantage that they could combine the work of tending to the new crop with what had always been their priority: producing food for their own subsistence. Using the balubur – the regents’ own fields – for the compulsory cultivation of coffee, with their subjects coming in turn to the main negorij from near and far, could also be interpreted as a continuation of existing relations of servitude. But the progressive rise in production towards the end of the eighteenth century led to this system being revised. The peasants indicated that there was no more land around their homes to grow more coffee or claimed that these fields were depleted through over-use (De Haan III, 1912: 610). More important than the lack of space in and around the peasant settlements was the fact that it was impossible for the Commissioner and his small staff of coffee sergeants to conduct regular inspections of the numerous and widely scattered plots of land. Both problems made it necessary to organize the cultivation of coffee along different lines, moving it to more remote, as yet uncultivated, land. The objection that the new coffee gardens were further from the settlements was outweighed by the advantage that there was ample space to expand into the forest around them, as they were far from any human habitation and land already in regular use to grow food.

The first hillside coffee gardens were laid out at the end of the eighteenth century and required the mobilization of an enormous army of labour. First of all, the land had to be cleared by chopping down and burning the trees. Levelling the ground was especially time-consuming as terraces had to be constructed on the slopes to stop the soil being washed away. After that the soil had to be tilled repeatedly with a pacul, a kind of hoe, and all the stubble and stones removed. The gardens were divided into sections by broad paths and the outer boundary was marked by a fence and a moat, which served to carry off excess water and to keep wild animals at bay. Tigers and rhinoceroses made the forests and the mountains unsafe until deep into the nineteenth century. The remote and inaccessible locations of the coffee gardens fuelled the fears of the labourers mobilized from far and wide to prepare the land for cultivation that they would be attacked by
predators on the way to and from their work. If there were reports of tigers being seen in the area, they would refuse to go (De Haan I, 1910: 155-6; see also III; 1912: 612-3). It is hardly surprising then that many peasants left their habitats on hearing that they were shortly to be set to work to construct hillside coffee gardens in distant places.

Coffee saplings were initially planted using shoots that had germinated from fallen berries under existing trees. It was not until later that they were first grown in nursery plots and then, after two years, transferred to the garden, where they would start to bear fruit after another two years. To prevent the trees from growing together, they had to be planted six to eight feet apart. This meant that it remained possible to walk between them. After every two rows in both directions, there was a row of dadap trees, which were planted before the coffee shrubs and grew high enough to keep them in the shade. This practice continued until the discovery that the coffee trees did not need shade in the higher zones, because the sun was weaker. From 1807 it was no longer permitted to plant paddy or pisang shrubs between the coffee trees. As this was a break with a long-standing tradition, it was not at first strictly enforced. Later, however, orders were issued to uproot paddy and pisang that had been planted between the young trees. Everything other than coffee was banished from the gardens. According to the colonial officials, this gave a neater impression. They showed no concern for the benefits the planters had enjoyed from growing other crops in the gardens while the coffee shrubs were still developing.

During the first three years the planters had to return once a month to the garden to remove the weeds that grew between the trees and to remove leaves and fallen branches from the paths. Officially, this maintenance work was intended to make it easier to pick the berries, but the inspectors also wanted to keep the gardens neat and tidy. It would later be discovered that loosening the soil regularly with a hoe made the fertile upper layer wash away more quickly, reducing the yield. To prevent the trees from growing too high for the berries on the top branches to be picked by hand, the trunks were topped off, while the lower branches were also removed to leave room on the ground for fallen berries. Topping off the trunks was considered a good way of restoring the growing power of old trees until it was discovered that this very labour-intensive operation did not have the desired effect. It became normal practice to abandon coffee gardens that had been in production longer than six to eight years and replace them with new ones, since there was no shortage of uncultivated land at a more elevated level in the Sunda highlands. Picking the berries was extremely labour-intensive and, because they were not all ripe at the same time, could
take two to three months. This meant that the planter and his family had to relocate to the garden for this whole period, because they lived too far away to cover the distance every day. They had to take enough food with them for the duration of their stay, or arrange for a regular supply to be brought up. When the coffee was still grown close to the villages, the beans were dried over a wooden fire in the yard around the peasant’s homestead but, after it was moved to the gardens, this took place there, too. Instead of carrying the wet berries to the settlements after picking, the planters removed the flesh and husked the beans on the spot. The beans were then spread out in bamboo drying sheds, under which a small fire smouldered day and night. The army of harvesters would also sleep in these covered sheds at night and take shelter there during heavy rainfall. Speaking from his own experience, De Wilde noted details that were not to be found in any of the official reports, because his account also refers to the inspection practices.

In such work-sites there are usually one or more blocks of wood with holes, in which the feet of lower Chiefs and common people are locked, for the slightest misdemeanour, for several hours, a whole day or longer, by way of punishment. These are deeds that the Javanese Chiefs commit in the highlands, with or without the knowledge of the Regents and Sergeants. ... In some districts, when the Resident, or some other high-ranking figure, comes to inspect the coffee gardens unexpectedly, the people are driven into the mountains at night to clean the gardens by torchlight. I know for a fact that, on one of these occasions, an old woman was dragged off by a tiger. (1830: 184)

The advantages of growing coffee in gardens were self-evident. It was much easier to monitor these large-scale cultivated estates than small plots widely dispersed throughout a much more diverse agrarian landscape. Separate sections in the gardens were allocated to labourers from different villages and numbered pickets stated how many trees had been planted and when. With the various sections subdivided by the footpaths, it was possible to organize the work even further by allocating plots to individual households mobilized for cultivation. The gardens were accessible only through an opening in the perimeter fence, which reinforced the sense of confinement. Shifting the cultivation of coffee to gardens was driven not only by the lack of sufficient waste land for large-scale production nearer to the peasant settlements, but also by the desire to keep both the coffee and the planters under close surveillance. Although the ‘hedge’ and kampung coffee continued to be grown for many more years it was considered less effective,
because it was small-scale and difficult to keep track of (De Haan I, 1910: 154). The distance between the peasants’ homesteads, where they grew their food crops, and the coffee gardens where they worked for the colonial tribute was certainly a major nuisance. At first, efforts were made to keep the distance to a minimum. A modified instruction that came into force in 1805 contained the provision that the most suitable land must be chosen ‘as close as possible to the campongs’, but the decisive criterion was that the gardens must not be too far apart. This condition, stipulated for the convenience of the colonial inspectors, was given priority over the distance from the settlements. The order issued by Rolff when he was Commissioner in 1789 that every household had to tend to 1,000 coffee trees each year and to plant new trees until this number was reached, actually heralded the transition to larger-scale cultivation. Gardens with 200,000 trees or more needed a large area of forested land, and that lay beyond the zones where peasant agriculture was concentrated. The latter were located on lower ground in valleys where rivers or streams flowed, while coffee proved to thrive best on higher land in the mountains. This meant that the coffee planters not only had to cover great distances, but also differences in altitude, making the journey even longer and more laborious. While it might take 20 minutes to walk a pole’s distance on flat ground, it could take twice as long climbing up a hillside. Rather than four hours, it would therefore require at least eight to reach a garden situated at a distance of 12 poles from a village.

Mobilizing labour

These large-scale enterprises may have been referred to as ‘gardens’, but they were in fact extensive plantations, prepared for cultivation by a large army of 1,000 or more menfolk recruited from far and wide. It was not uncommon for them to remain unproductive because the soil was not suitable, the trees were planted too close so that they grew together, or because the labourers deserted en masse due to bad treatment, lack of food and inadequate shelter during the cold nights and heavy rains. The term ‘mountain plantations’ is more accurate also because the mode of production differed substantially from the way coffee was grown in and around the villages. The work in the gardens was organized from the very beginning along more industrial lines. Early in the nineteenth century, an overseer was appointed to supervise the planters and ensure that the work progressed as it should in the different stages of production. He was in charge of a work gang, known as a t’rup, of some 30 to 50 labourers. This