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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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
mandador or kepala trup recruited the members of his gang from different settlements, brought them to the site of the new garden and stayed with them as long as the work of opening up the land lasted (De Haan III, 1912: 615). The peasants allocated to the gang boss planted and tended the trees and were joined by their wives and children for the duration of the harvest, who would help with the picking, peeling and drying of the beans. Above the gang boss was a koemetir kopi, who was usually in charge of three gangs and reported to a native supervisor in charge of coffee production, who was responsible for ensuring that everything went according to plan in his district. He had to keep a ‘coffee book’ (a register of names of all the gardens and gang bosses, together with the number of labourers they had working for them), report to the Coffee Sergeant and accompany the regent and patih when they made their tour of the gardens. In this way, the native management gradually became more structured.

How much time did the peasants spend on raising the tribute? Daendels’ estimation of two months a year for each household was a wild guess with no basis in fact. The relocation of coffee cultivation to the hill plantations had increased the workload substantially. The order to maintain 1,000 trees a year was a shot in the dark, not based on what the peasants could reasonably be expected to produce, but on the growing demand for this colonial commodity on the global market. The price paid to the planter was completely out of proportion with the profits made first by the VOC and then the colonial government. The picking alone took the planter and his family several months each year, not to mention the work of laying out the garden, the processing of the beans and their compulsory delivery to the warehouses. De Haan did not venture to estimate how much time this took, but concluded cautiously that it must have imposed a considerable burden on the planters and their families (De Haan I, 1910: 159). It was not only the amount of time involved, but the extremely low price the planters received and the fact that they were not paid a single cent for all the work done until they delivered the coffee. The involvement of the other members of the household in growing the coffee occurred almost unnoticed. The early notion that the planter would tend to the coffee trees and pick the berries, while the other family members would grow food and do all the other work, had long become obsolete. The whole family was considered subject to the tribute and, by the end of the eighteenth century, what started as a secondary activity alongside meeting the household’s basic needs, had become the peasants’ household main occupation. According to the colonial wisdom of the time, the heavier burden would act as an incentive to the indigenous economy (De Salis 1809: 25).
Transporting the now much greater volume of coffee from the highlands to the coast continued to be a serious problem. On his arrival in 1808, Daendels noted that there were hardly any paved roads inland. Traffic had to use narrow tracks that were almost impassable during the monsoon. The construction, on Daendels’ orders, of the Grote Postweg, the main road across Java, reduced the travelling time for mail and officials with their equipment but, to limit damage to this long-distance route, it was closed for the transport of coffee. The beans were largely carried to the warehouses using buffalo, of which there was a serious shortage. Nicolaus Engelhard had already issued a ban on the export of pack animals from the Priangan regencies as early as 1793. To prevent them from being requisitioned for the notorious coffee caravans, the peasants hid their draught animals, which they needed to tend their paddy fields, or sold them off. Some of them preferred to carry the coffee on their own backs and spare their animals, which were valuable and scarce possessions. They could transport the coffee on foot if they were permitted to deliver it to a small local depot nearby, even though this meant that they received a lower price for their corvee labour. The existing warehouses at Cikao and Karangsambung were considerably expanded to be able to deal with the much greater supply. The long waiting times on arrival and departure added to the privations that had to be endured during the journey. The footpaths taken by the caravans widened to become roads. In the bustle, animals were lost, injured or stolen, or died from exhaustion and lack of food. The journey progressed slowly through the difficult terrain, no more than a few poles a day, so that it might take more than two months to complete the return journey. There was an added risk of being robbed by gangs roving around in the hinterland in search of booty: labour and animals to work in the sugar mills around Batavia. Lawick refuted these accounts, saying that the highland peasants were not being robbed at all but were in fact selling their draught animals to free themselves of the claims made by their chiefs not only on their labour but also on their possessions (De Haan IV, 1912: 556).

The introduction of carts to transport coffee, an innovation that did not start to take off until after the turn of the century, was an enormous improvement. It happened gradually and at first only on a few stretches, because the state of the roads did not permit them to be more widely used. The most common form of carts, pedatis, could of course carry more coffee than the pack animals. But the heavy, cumbersome vehicles, with their large, solid wooden wheels took a long time to cover any distance and caused considerable damage to the roads they used. So much so that the following caravan would have to seek out a new track, resulting in three or
unfree labour as a condition for progress

Pedati. From the beginning of the 19th century, these unwieldy and heavy peasant carts facilitated the transport of coffee from the hinterland to the Company’s warehouses on the coast. The introduction of the pedati brought to an end the use of pack animals, mainly buffalo, for this purpose.

Source: F. de Haan – Priangan, vl. 1, p. 165

four ‘roads’ running alongside each other. Using animals to pull the carts often meant that there were not enough left to plough the sawahs when they were most needed. Peasants’ priorities naturally lay with producing food rather than delivering coffee. They sabotaged the additional task by burying the beans they had picked, throw the sacks in which they were packed away or get someone else to take the burden off their hands at no cost or even for payment. They did so as not to lose the use of their own labour power and that of their buffaloes when they were needed to meet their own basic needs. The colonial authorities were aware that the forced cultivation of coffee could jeopardize food production. In 1804, Pieter Engelhard noted an excessive shortage of rice in all regencies. Expansion of the fields planted with paddy progressed at an extremely slow pace. Resident Van Motman established in 1808 that the quantity of uncultivated land in the Priangan was many times larger than the area that had been
brought under cultivation: ‘generally speaking, it is safe to estimate that two-thirds to three-quarters of these lands are uncultivated wilderness’ (De Haan IV, 1912: 451). In 1809, the Prefect of the Cirebon Priangan Regencies reported to Daendels that the sawahs in his jurisdiction could only provide less than a third part of the food requirements of the population. The great majority of paddy was still grown on non-irrigated tipar and gaga. The forced labour in the coffee gardens meant that the peasants had insufficient time to convert the dry fields into sawahs. This explains why Daendels, in his usual commanding style, ordered expansion of the area of irrigated land and made the local chiefs responsible for keeping a close eye on the rhythm of the agrarian calendar (Van Deventer I, 1865: 31-3). It was their task to ensure that the peasants had sufficient cattle and tools to till the land and that sowing and harvesting were not delayed. That this work schedule had to be achieved within the bounds of a policy that gave absolute priority to the forced cultivation and delivery of increasing quantities of coffee was a consequence that the Marshall and his subordinates were not prepared to accept. Their refusal to do so was based on both a lack of factual knowledge and unwillingness to recognize that these objectives were incompatible.

Expansion of forced labour

Immediately on his arrival Daendels showed himself to be a confirmed supporter of the forced cultivation of coffee. He did not consider for one moment breaking with the old VOC regime as had been practised in the Priangan Regencies. He argued that the low state of development of the native population did not permit the transition to colonial production based on free labour. The Marshall resolutely rejected the argument that the Javanese had an aversion to the system of compulsory cultivation and delivery and wished instead to be recognized as the owners of the land they tilled. According to him, the peasants were accustomed to working for their chiefs since time immemorial and had no concept at all of agrarian property rights. As far as the situation in the Priangan lands was concerned, Daendels should have known better. In 1809 Lawick, at that time the Prefect of the Cirebon Priangan districts, had clarified to him that the land for growing crops did not belong to the regents. In Daendels' view, the state's forceful hand was necessary to ensure that the Javanese would pay their taxes without fail. The Governor-General even had his doubts if the incentive of compulsion could ever be lifted. He believed that these people had no other needs than to fulfil their absolutely basic requirements and were not willing