Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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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
to work any harder than necessary to achieve this (Daendels 1814: 104). The ideas he had inherited from former VOC officials had also taught him that it would be highly inadvisable to encourage the peasants to want more than to satisfy their basic needs and to arouse a desire to aspire for progress that would make it difficult to maintain their current state of dependency. Pieter Engelhard had expressed this standpoint early in the nineteenth century and, in 1829, when he was a member of parliament, Daniël François van Alphen had also argued against enlightening the indigenous population of Java. The introduction of a form of government that would increase their freedom of thought and action was out of the question (De Haan IV, 1912: 738-9).

The notion that the cultivation and delivery of coffee was evenly distributed across the whole population was based on a far-reaching failure to acknowledge or, conversely, a desire to ignore the way in which local chiefs tried to manipulate the allocation of obligations in their own favour. Lawick satisfied the arbitrariness of the chiefs in distributing the workload unevenly in 1808 by agreeing to a regulation stipulating that peasants performing services for the regent or the district chiefs had to maintain only 500 rather than 1,000 trees. In 1810 he reported to Daendels that many of the peasants liable to cultivation services remained unaccounted for (ibid., 1912: 421). Possibly in response to reports of this nature, Daendels ordered in 1811 that, if segments of the population temporarily or permanently evaded work in the coffee gardens, the remainder would have to make up the shortfall. This meant that the number of trees that each household had to maintain could rise to as high as 3,900 (ibid.: 786). In effect, this instruction boiled down to the fact that the colonial high command in charge of coffee production did not care who did the work, as long as it got done. The official policy was, however, to ensure that the workload was evenly distributed and to put a stop to the arbitrary way in which the chiefs treated their subordinates by relieving some of them of the burden, while overloading others to way above the norm. In short, the pretence was maintained that the whole population was or should be involved in the forced cultivation and supply of coffee.

Daendels’ attitude towards the gentry was far from accommodating and the way in which he treated them smacked of condescension. To make the difference in standing between them comprehensible, he gave them military ranks (Van Deventer I, 1865: 21) The Governor-General acknowledged that the chiefs were indispensable, as the inherent respect of the population for the aristocracy made it possible to continue and increase the cultivation of coffee. The peasants’ subordination to their chiefs should not, however,
be preserved and acknowledged at the expense of the dominant role of the government. The regents were therefore deprived of a number of judicial and police tasks that they had hitherto performed. Limiting the space in which the chiefs were accustomed to operating demanded their explicit obedience to the authority of the colonial government. The local chiefs were integrated into the colonial apparatus by giving them the status of civil servants, albeit without salary. As before, their income remained linked to the coffee money they collected: the regents received a *rijksdaalder* for every *pikul* supplied within their area of jurisdiction, a quarter of which they had to pass on to the chiefs under their command. Although this represented a substantial income for the *patih* and *cutak* chiefs, those in the lower ranks of the indigenous administration earned very little. They made up for what they did not receive formally by appropriating part of the peasants’ share. The European staff also shared in what was later to be called ‘cultivation commission’. The Commissioner and his successor, the Prefect, received a quarter of a *rijksdaalder* per *pikul*, as did the Sergeant. Lastly, the warehouse masters also received a sizeable commission, on top of what they charged for storing the coffee beans and for organizing the transport to the coast. In addition to these legal dues, they kept for themselves part of the cash payments set aside for the peasants when they delivered the coffee.

Despite the condescension and disdain that the regents had to endure, they had no reason to complain in material terms. Daendels decided to write off the enormous advances they had received in successive instalments and which tied them in debt to their European superiors in the colonial apparatus. The steady rise in coffee production increased their wealth, which they used to live in great opulence, an ostentatious display in which their large entourage of lower chiefs-cum-clients shared. The position of the Sundanese landed gentry and clergy suddenly became even more comfortable when Daendels quite unexpectedly decided to increase the *cuke* that the peasants were obliged to surrender from a tenth to a fifth part of the rice harvest. In 1804, as Deputy Commissioner of Native Affairs, Lawick had informed his superiors who should benefit from this share, a motley crew of local chiefs. And this was not the last time the peasants’ burden was increased. The early-colonial state, the foundation of which was laid by Daendels, imposed demands on the availability of labour free of charge for infrastructural works, including the construction and maintenance of roads and bridges, offices, warehouses and bungalows for officials, for the transport of goods, mail and the colonial bosses, and – not in the last instance – to enable expatriate officials to show their status in a similar way to the local chiefs – by having a retinue of minions at their disposal.
De Haan established rightly that the term ‘corvee services’ only became popular in Daendels’ time (I, 1910: 264). By mobilizing labour cost-free and on a large scale for shorter or longer periods for a wide range of activities, useful or not, the government made it clear that it was stepping into the shoes of the indigenous rulers. It was a continuation, at least so it was claimed, of a tribute that the people had been accustomed to pay from generation to generation. The obligation to cultivate coffee did not relieve the peasants from their duty to provide corvee services to their own lords, or only partially so. Lawick’s report to Raffles on Bandung in 1812 referred to the tugur, the obligation of peasants to report to their chief for rendering corvee in large numbers in turn (De Haan II, 1911: 690-1).

Daendels originally intended to pay for the work done on building roads but failed to do so because of a lack of funds. The peasantry felt the pressure not only of the corvee labour itself, but also the callous treatment that accompanied it, while the risk of not surviving the brutality of the work regime drove many of them to desert. Even after the Grote Postweg was finished, a broad area along both sides of the road remained uninhabited. The inhabitants had every reason to believe that they would be forced to work whenever the government felt it necessary to repair the roads or for the
transport of goods and officials. Attempts to abscond were frustrated by the introduction of a rule that the whole population of a district was obliged to perform corvee services and could, if necessary, be set to work far from their homesteads. Requisitioning them cost nothing and the distance they had to travel was also of no relevance. After all, according to the stubborn but mistaken belief of the colonial rulers, the peasants had time on their hands.

A new measure was that all colonial buildings – including offices, checkpoints, warehouses and even dwellings – had to be guarded day and night. The early-colonial government took on the characteristics of a night-watch state, a regime of surveillance that gradually extended along roads and into villages (De Haan I, 1910: 262). Of course, the process of opening up the hinterland, which was now progressing more systematically, led to greater mobility and ‘vagrants and beggars’ perhaps made these regions less safe than before. But the new measures were not so much aimed at assuring security as equipping the colonial apparatus with a whole corps of guards, orderlies, messengers and other servants who made the lives of their colonial white masters more comfortable. A substantial part of these services were provided without payment. The Governor-General was permitted to requisition local people by the hundreds to work in his palace in Bogor, the Resident was allowed several dozen personal servants, while lower officials had to rely on a handful of guards and attendants to dignify their status. As mentioned above, Daendels was planning to alleviate the burden of corvee services and meant to use the records now kept by his subordinates to find out why and how to do this. They were full of complaints about the ease with which native chiefs obliged their subjects to displays of servitude. The rancour expressed in these reports mainly focused on the wastefulness of using subjects purely to satisfy a desire for prestige and finery, a contempt rooted in the perpetually severe shortage of labour for the coffee gardens. There was not a word, of course, about the free services enjoyed by the colonial officials themselves. Rather than contributing to economic growth, a large number of idlers and layabouts hung around the abodes of their masters of whatever complexion.

Beyond the reach of the government

Reducing the burden of the corvee services seems to have been commonly interpreted as restricting the entourage with which the landed gentry were accustomed to surrounding themselves. As early as 1804, Pieter Engelhard had tried to persuade the Regent of Bandung to call only on clients living in