Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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represented on the one hand a return to the system of forced cultivation and delivery imposed primarily on the inhabitants of the Priangan by the VOC from the early eighteenth century onwards, but it also reflected an acceleration in the process of globalization. That process crystallized into a restructuring of the international division of labour between ‘West’ and ‘East’. In the specific case of the East Indies, Van den Bosch set himself the goal of promoting economic growth on Java and making it competitive with the slave-labour-based production of tropical crops in the West Indies as a supplier of agrarian products to the industrializing and urbanizing world in the northern hemisphere. After the VOC was disbanded, a few high-profile colonial reformers had in the early decades of the nineteenth century taken a principled stand against continuing the forced cultivation of coffee in the Priangan and everything associated with it, including extremely low payments to the producers, preserving the authority of the native chiefs, and the government monopoly on buying the products. In the new revisionist view, this mode of production had become outdated. The top of the colonial apparatus could only justify the temporary continuation of the system in the highlands of West Java with the argument that these revenues remained as yet indispensable. Not only to cover a wide range of expenses – the high cost of the Java War (1825-30) in particular –, but also and especially to demonstrate to King Willem I and his advisers in the metropolis the profitability of the overseas possessions. Preserving an aberration of what was intended to become the general modality of collecting taxes seems to have embarrassed the policy-makers. In their final report to the Minister, the Commissioners-General returned to the question of whether it was advisable to continue the regime in the Priangan Regencies on the old footing or whether it would perhaps be more efficient to introduce the land rent system here, too. Their conclusion, however, was a resounding ‘No’ to the latter option. They turned the lack of uniformity in the system now into a recommendation for pluriformity (Report of 16 March, 1818, Van Deventer I, 1865: 393). In later arguments, the apology for the failure to standardize the revenue policy throughout Java would be deftly transformed into a plea to, above all, take account of ‘historically developed relations’, thus justifying diversity on the basis of an imagined tradition.

The Priangan variant as a ‘colonial constant’

The Priangan coffee regime, which had survived into the early decades of the nineteenth century as a backward remnant of early-colonial exploitation,
now served as a model for establishing the cultivation system. Van den Bosch aimed not only to increase cash crop production on Java but also to extract a greater surplus from it. Although he never tired of repeating that peace and order could only be assured if the prevailing situation was disrupted as little as possible and rejected out of hand any whisper of reform, far-reaching changes in the nature of the Javanese peasant economy and society were set in motion under his rule. The ultimate aim of colonial domination remained the same as at the start of the process of state-building. Van den Bosch left no doubt at all that the East Indies were conquered territory. The people had the right to good governance and could expect their own institutions to be respected as far as possible. But, having said that, he added immediately, ‘For the rest, the interests of these lands should be completely subordinate to those of the Mother Country.’ The coercion inherent in the cultivation system implied not only the obligation to provide the required labour, but also to accept the unilaterally imposed compensation for the export crops produced without complaint. As had traditionally been the ‘custom’ with the compulsory supply of goods, there would be no bargaining about the price. The native races of the tropics had a natural tendency to sloth and indolence. There was no alternative to the use of force, and that applied equally to growing coffee, which would not succeed without rigorous discipline being imposed by the government. Free labour was an illusion, and perhaps always would be. As Van den Bosch insisted also in retrospect:

With a people, that can hardly be compared with our own children at the age of 12 or 13, no arrangements or institutions should be expected, through which the fruits of labour as referred to above, would be distributed fairly, and to achieve that through the influence of an extremely limited number of officials spread widely among millions of inlanders, of whom less than a dozen understand their language reasonably, is equally impossible, so that the dessa dwellers too leave command over their harvest entirely to their chiefs. (Van den Bosch 1864: 79)

If the absence of a work ethic could not be seen as a genetic trait, the cause was found to lie in the morals and customs that had dominated the lives of the Javanese since time immemorial. This reference to an ancient tradition was very useful to Van den Bosch, as it enabled him to reduce the payment the peasants received for their forced labour to the lowest conceivable level. A precondition for the success of this policy was to keep the people of the Priangan in an advanced state of quarantine, as contacts with the outside world could be expected to increase their aspirations. This ran counter to
the colonial interest, which required that nothing should be permitted that might arouse a desire among the people for more assets or introduce new customs that would disrupt the simplicity of peasant life.

Money was also saved by cutting back on the costs of imposing discipline, that is to say all expenditures relating to supervising the introduction of and compliance with the cultivation system. Increasing the peasants’ agrarian production was achieved by delegating this responsibility from the government to native intermediaries. Recognizing ‘traditional’ holders of authority had the advantage of being a mode of cheap governance. What it came down to was that the peasants themselves paid the bill for their exploitation and subordination. The frequently heard suggestion that the colonial government restored the former dignity of the native chiefs is misconceived. The state apparatus had indeed become less feudal and more bureaucratic under Daendels. The deposition of the landed gentry from their former positions of authority may have been reversed to a certain degree in the years that followed, but this by no means constituted a process of re-feudalization. Relatively strict rules were imposed to avoid the highhanded and whimsical way in which the native aristocracy had acted in earlier times. As officials integrated in the colonial administration, the regents and lower dignitaries were placed under the stewardship of white superiors, which significantly restricted their freedom of operation. This all applied to a much lesser extent to the Priangan region, where the authority of the native chiefs retained a real significance, also under the newly introduced cultivation system. Since the start of the system of compulsory supply by the VOC in the early eighteenth century, this tried and tested practice continued to exist in the highlands of Sunda until deep into the nineteenth century, even after the colony had been transformed into a state domain. The cultivation system, which came later and lasted for not yet half a century, had a much less impressive track record. The Priangan regents had more autonomy than their counterparts elsewhere, including the right to collect tribute, while expatriate officials enjoyed less authority than elsewhere on Java. The region that the VOC had first laid claim to was not integrated into the land rent system but had to continue to produce crops for export. When more modern forms of government were introduced on Java, first by Daendels and then Raffles, it became common to speak of ‘the Priangan system’, and from 1816 the term was also used in official documents. The term is misleading, not only because it never became a fully fledged system – the administrators simply continued with what others before them had decided – but also because it was not the Priangan that adopted a new course, but the rest of Java. The regime in the region was therefore not an ‘exception’,
as has often been suggested, but had been a constant feature throughout the history of the colony. It became an unequalled success formula for the colonial exploitation of the East Indies, surviving from around 1720 until 1871 – a good century and a half. The Priangan was transformed, but as a gradually evolving economic, political and social order rather than a system as such, into a strangulated mode of production based on coercion and a whole network of arrangements that as good as excluded change, from within or outside.

In colonial circles, there was a tendency to attribute the exercise of force inherent to the cultivation system to shortcomings in the inborn non-economic mentality of the Javanese, perhaps in combination with historical circumstances. An alternative explanation was suggested by ethnologist Herman Nieboer, who made the connection between regimes of open versus closed resources. If land is not a scarce commodity, he argued, people will not freely place their labour power at another’s disposal, preferring to remain independent and open up as yet uncultivated land. In this situation, the only way to lay claim to the labour of another is by exercising extra-economic force. This was how Nieboer explained slavery in tribal societies (Nieboer 1910). Willemina Kloosterboer applied this theory more widely, using it to understand various forms of unfree labour in colonized and other pre-industrial societies (Kloosterboer 1954). As long as waste land was relatively widely available on Java, it would not be possible to find wage labour for the Western-led agro-industry on a voluntary basis. This situation would gradually change in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as land replaced labour as a scarce factor of production. As the population increased, so did the pressure on agrarian resources. In addition, the steady advance of commercialization in the rural economy helped create a landless proletariat from which large agribusinesses could fulfil their requirements for a casual or permanent workforce. I shall return to this turnaround in Chapter VIII. Without wishing to deny that there was a shift in the balance between land and labour along these lines, I would like to point out that a landless underclass had formed within Java’s countryside much earlier. The existence of this underclass had already been identified in early-colonial reports, including in the 1822 colonization report, drawn up for Commissioner-General Van der Capellen by Muntinghe.

The Javanese kings, having insufficient funds always to pay their subjects for the services they required of them, found it equally impossible to demand that this unpaid labour be carried out by the poorest members of their populations, who owned no land at all, and possessed no other
 Means of subsistence than the work of their own hands. Demanding that this numerous class among their subjects should provide them with compulsory unpaid labour would amount to condemning them to hunger and destitution. The kings were therefore forced to restrict the obligation to provide unpaid labour to the owners of the Sawa fields. A share in the yields from the Sawa field was their payment for the compulsory labour, in place of money. (republished in Ottow 1937: 268-9)

A landless class of pre-capitalist origin remained confined in the peasant economy in a relationship of unfree labour, a position from which it was only very gradually liberated in the later colonial era. As we shall see the labour mobilized en masse for cultivation and corvee services was largely performed by land-poor and landless peasants. The switch from labour being in short supply and therefore kept in bondage to a situation in which labour became abundantly available because the free access to land was blocked, marked the transition that took place in the course of the nineteenth century. This also meant that the need for coercion by the government gradually declined, as the conditions required for a free labour market were now in place. But this change was not only brought about by the free play of social forces determined by a combination of demographic growth and economic expansion. It was by no means a coincidence that the abolition of the cultivation system and of the Priangan system coincided with the announcement of the Agrarian Act in 1870. The Act regulated the lease of uncultivated land on Java, which the colonial state declared its property. In the late colonial era, the government exchanged total control over labour with control over land. This was the unbridled violation of the rights of the native population that Muntinghe had feared.

The system of land rent revenue, so much was crystal clear, would never yield what the managers of the colonial enterprise had promised themselves: a steadily growing surplus that could be transferred to the state budget in the metropolis. What was under the land rent scheme called the lease of farmland by the state to the peasants might perhaps be sufficient to cover the costs of governance and administration but there was no substantial surplus to be expected from the imposed taxation. That could only be achieved by increasing the volume of export crops even further. The global economy was developing at a steady pace and it was important that the price of colonial goods sourced from Java was certainly no higher, and preferably lower, than that of the Netherlands’ competitors active in the business of imperialism. That economic principle ensured that production on the basis of unfree labour remained an essential requirement. Only by
paying the peasants the lowest possible price for the use of their land and labour was it possible to make a profit for the mother country. It was this understanding that persuaded Johannes van den Bosch to reject the model of private estate-based production using free labour that had been suggested to him. His mission to the West Indies on behalf of the King to reorganize the way these colonies were managed strengthened his conviction that it was only possible to achieve a minimum production price by saving as much as possible on the costs of native labour. This reasoning lay at the basis of the cultivation system that Van den Bosch devised and put into practice. So who was Van den Bosch, how did his plans take shape and what were his modes of operation?

Spreading benevolence at home and on Java

Johannes van den Bosch started his promising career in 1799 as an officer in the Engineering Corps in the East Indies. During his first ten-year stay in the colony, he bought a large estate close to Batavia, which he ran efficiently and profitably. He was forced to leave Java in 1810 after a disagreement with Governor-General Daendels. On his return to the metropolis, he reflected on the knowledge and experience he had gained in colonial practice in the East Indies. This resulted in a two-part treatise, dedicated to the King, which was published in 1817-18, Nederlandsche bezittingen in Asia, Amerika en Afrika, in derzelver toestand en aangelegenheid voor dit Rijk, wijsgeerig, staathuishoudkundig en geographisch beschouwd, met bijvoeging der noodige tabellen en eenen atlas nieuwe kaarten [Dutch possessions in Asia, America and Africa, considered in their state and relevance for this Kingdom, from a philosophical, political and geographical perspective, with the required tables and an atlas with new maps]. He most likely also made his way to the upper echelons of the freemason movement in The Hague and that connection to the haute bourgeoisie helped him to become a confidant of the royal family. His interest in political economy led Van den Bosch to an in-depth study of metropolitan poverty, which had become even more pressing as a result of the economic crisis that still held the country in its grasp. Despite his steady rise to higher ranks in the military, he left active service to devote himself to solving the misery in which the lower classes were confined. In 1818 he established the Benevolent Society with the support of a select group of influential figures, including Frederik, the King’s second son. The economic distress, deteriorating into pauperism, in which the urban poor in particular lived, was alleviated by relief provided by the