Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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VI The coffee regime under the cultivation system

A new surge in the colonial tribute

The argument that forced labour was unavoidable to keep the cost price at the lowest possible level had to be played down in the public presentation of the government’s policy to generate a surplus in the colony. The minister in charge of colonial affairs stated with regret that the Javanese people did not possess the work ethic required to extract all the potential benefits offered by the fertility of their island. This observation led him to declare in 1830 that the starting point for government on Java was ‘to guide the people to devote their labour to that purpose that was most in accordance with the interests of the mother country’ (Van Deventer II, 1866: 497). The reverse argument, that the price to be paid for prioritizing these interests was clearly to the disadvantage of the colonized population, was however much more difficult to justify. The imminent abolition of slavery – although introduced with much delay by the Dutch government – suggested that the plea to maintain the regime of unfree labour on Java would not necessarily be greeted abroad with unanimous approval. This explains the government’s concise summary of its intentions in the colony, ‘to obtain the best possible product of the best quality and at the lowest price, without putting the population under pressure’ (quoted in Van Gorkom 1880b: 177-8).

To ensure that the suffix to this sentence did not remain in the realm of fiction, the government decided to present its policy of demanding that the people of Java engage in productive work as encouraging them to an effort that would benefit both them and their country. Since these people were not willing to grow crops for export of their own accord, because of their childlike, non-economic mentality, there was nothing else for it than to impose the necessary discipline upon them. As long as they showed no signs of having internalized the need to work, coercion would remain necessary to lead them towards progress.

When explaining the foundations of the cultivation system he envisaged, Van den Bosch referred to forced cultivation and delivery of commercial crops as the main pillars of the regime pursued formerly by the VOC. In

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25 After stepping down as Minister for the Colonies in 1848, Baud accepted the chairmanship of the commission set up in 1853 to prepare for the abolition of slavery.
his view, a return to that policy was in line with the principle of raising tribute, to which the peasantry had already been accustomed in the remote past. The people of the Priangan Regencies were living proof that there was no cause to doubt that orders from above would be carried out loyally. After all, the traditional arrangement had been preserved in this region, with the help of the native chiefs. So why not introduce the same regime on the rest of the island? Not everyone was, however, convinced that this precedent would work as Van den Bosch suggested. In an early protest against the new policy Cornelis Theodorus Elout stepped down as Minister for the Colonies. Jean Chrétien Baud, at the time Director of Colonial Affairs and later on his successor as Governor-General and Minister for the Colonies, critically responded that breaking with the ancien régime outside the Priangan Regencies had brought about changes that would be difficult to reverse. The blueprint revealed by Van den Bosch did not include the return of the landed gentry elsewhere on Java to a leading role in the cultivation and collection of the crops. Certainly, the Sundanese people had proved to possess an exceptional propensity for obedience, but was it realistic to expect the peasants in other regions of the island to do what was required of them, without the native chiefs having to intervene directly and at close quarters? It was arguable whether the greater docility ascribed to the people of the highlands of West Java could be attributed to a difference in mentality or to a form of governance that had intentionally left the structure of native authority in the region intact. Engelhard’s statement, that the Priangan regents kept the peasants under control with a whole range of means that were not only invisible to the European officials but far beyond their reach, comes to mind in this context. The cultivation system was introduced at a time when the colonial apparatus was still far removed from the workfloor. In other words, there was no guarantee that the orders issued would have the desired effect. The solution found for this problem – outside the Priangan – was to designate the village council made up by local headmen as the link between the government and the people and to reward its members, at the expense of the majority of inhabitants, with tax-free land holdings. This village structure, which Raffles ‘discovered’ and identified as the traditional basis of the peasant order, became the focal point for the allocation and distribution of the burden of growing crops for export imposed on the people under the new tribute system. In that sense, colonial exploitation in the Priangan Regencies – where the village system that was prevalent elsewhere did not exist – was organized differently than it would be under the cultivation system. My account will continue to focus on the introduction and impact of the system in the highlands of West Java.