Coffee and more

The range of products that fell under the system of forced cultivation and delivery varied according to region. This was partly due to variation in administrative practices and partly to agronomic considerations. On the northern coastal plain of Java, to the east of Cirebon, sugarcane soon took up a substantial proportion of the farmland and the labour capacity of the population. In the upland areas of Central and East Java, the same applied to coffee. I will discuss the similarities and differences between growing coffee in these regions and its continued cultivation in the Priangan later. However, I would first like to examine attempts to prescribe the planting of other crops with promising prospects on the world market. These efforts to promote diversification came rather unexpectedly, since in many districts the order to plant coffee had been accompanied by a pledge that the producers would be exempt from other cultivation obligations.

The designation of the Priangan highlands as the centre of indigo cultivation coincided with the start of the cultivation system. At first, this crop was reintroduced – the VOC had insisted on its being produced here at the end of the seventeenth and in the first half of the eighteenth centuries – on a limited scale. Doubts about its profitability and a lack of effective monitoring to ensure the required quality had led to a decline in interest in its production, but it had never disappeared from the Priangan completely. At the end of the eighteenth century, the VOC management had declared itself to be critical of claims that the highlands were not suitable for growing cotton and indigo (De Haan III, 1912: 817). Reports of Pieter Engelhard’s inspection tours of the Priangan in the early nineteenth century show that, during his tenure as Commissioner, he had issued orders to plant a number of fields with indigo by way of experiment. There is also, however, no lack of reports showing that reintroduction of the crop would be strongly resisted. The peasants did grow indigo, but only to dye textiles they had woven at home for their own use. In his annual report for 1800, the inspector for Cianjur warned that peasants were so afraid of having to grow indigo that they would flee at the first signs of preparations being made (ibid.: 823). Van den Bosch nevertheless decided to give indigo priority even over coffee. According to official reports, indigo was to be planted on land that was not or was no longer suitable for growing coffee. As provisional inspector of the new crop, G.E. Tessiere, was ordered to conduct an investigation and his findings, based on a tour of the regencies of Cianjur, Bandung, Sumedang and Limbangan in April 1830, led to the Priangan being designated as a production area for a substantial share of the
envisaged volume of indigo. Cirebon was also identified as a region where production could be successfully introduced. To encourage the managers in charge of cultivation and processing to make a greater effort, they were assured of a tenth part of the revenue from the sale of the crop. Government officials and native chiefs received this ‘cultivation commission’ on top of their regular salaries or other emoluments (Reinsma 1980). To process the indigo into dye, Tessiere requested and was given permission to build 19 factories spread throughout the Priangan Regencies. The factories were built close to the fields (Van Deventer II, 1866: 148-54).

The peasants may have had a great aversion to growing coffee, but its replacement by the new crop that had to be processed in a factory before delivery imposed an even greater burden on their already meagre means of subsistence. In reaction to reports of massive land flight the authorities ordained that the peasants who stayed behind would have to bear the full weight of the new obligations. The assumption that it took some time for the colonial authorities to become aware of the disastrous consequences of this policy is incorrect. The Resident of Cirebon indicated as early as December 1836 that not everything was going according to plan. The revolt he referred to was not unusual in this traditional centre of unrest, but a hastily set up commission of inquiry concluded that it was not inconceivable that the introduction of indigo had aroused much resistance (Van Deventer II, 1866: 195-6). Van den Bosch had tried to mollify him and, a month later, insisted that growing indigo was very lucrative for the producers, as they were paid well for their labour and were exempted from all corvee services. Among themselves and behind closed doors, the policy-makers could be more candid in exchanging views about the unwillingness of the peasants to do what they were told. A member of the Council of the Indies noted in a memorandum that the resolute assurance of the Resident of Cirebon that the peasants planted indigo of their own free will was incorrect and that it had been touch and go whether the whole residency would be up in arms. He also warned that paying cultivation commission to the officials and chiefs charged with supervising the cultivation and processing of indigo encouraged abuse. Council member Pieter Merkus, at this stage a declared opponent of the Governor-General, took a more principled approach to the problem. He called the assumption that the Javanese peasants were aware that they had entered into a contractual agreement with the government misplaced (ibid.: 221). In a subsequent memorandum, he warned against going any further with the use of force to acquire labour and products from the peasants. He had little confidence in the report by the Resident of Cirebon, since it was his policy that had led to the unrest surrounding
the introduction of indigo to the region. Reading between the lines of its report, it is clear that the commission of inquiry had ordered the Resident to exercise caution and advised him not to advocate a situation in which ‘the chiefs felt bound to physically confine those unwilling to work’ (ibid.: 295). In July 1831, the Resident of the Priangan Regencies suggested, choosing his words carefully, that growing indigo was too demanding on the peasants, but Van den Bosch stood his ground. Criticism now came from lower down in the colonial apparatus, and focused on the conflict of interest between indigo and coffee. By 1834, the initial optimism had been replaced by doubts about the wisdom of continuing the cultivation of the new crop in the Priangan Regencies. Shortly after Van den Bosch had left the colony his successor, Jean Chrétien Baud, went on a tour of inspection which led him to express his satisfaction with the situation in the residency and the willingness of the people to do as they were ordered. The new Governor-General spoke less favourably about the cultivation of indigo. He was concerned that it was being grown at the expense of coffee, which was much more important commercially. A year later, cultivation of this new crop – introduced with such high expectations – was abandoned. A report by Inspector for Cultivation Louis Vitalis on the situation in East Priangan was very influential in reversing the previously so optimistic outlook. The Inspector wrote that the people of Sukapura and parts of Sumedang lived in small, widely dispersed settlements. These peasants were still nomadic and depended for their livelihoods on growing food on dry ground, which produced very little. They had no time to grow indigo and what they earned from it was not enough to live on. In addition, they were forced to travel long distances over difficult terrain. It was not uncommon for them to take two weeks to reach the production site allocated to them, while they were at great risk from attack by rhinoceroses, tigers and other wild animals on the way. In the three factories that Vitalis visited during his first inspection in April 1835, several thousand peasants had died of hunger. He described graphically his encounters with walking skeletons that dragged themselves from place to place, many of whom expired from the rigours of their ordeal. Some were so exhausted that they died as they ate the food that was issued to them as an advance on their first meagre wage.26 A second report by Vitalis on the situation in Sumedang was equally alarming.27 Lack of food had led to an unimaginably high level of mortality.

26 Report on the state of indigo cultivation and factories in the Priangan Regencies residency by L. Vitalis, 14 April 1835. NA, Baud collection, 461.
27 Idem, 29 June 1835. NA, Baud collection, 461.
Vitalis recommended closing all indigo factories in the Priangan Regencies except one, abandoning cultivation of this crop and giving the fields back to the peasants to grow paddy. These recommendations were put into practice almost immediately.

As with the cultivation system in general, abolishing the forced cultivation of indigo proved more difficult than its introduction. That had everything to do with the assumption at the top of the colonial bureaucracy that labour could be requisitioned without restraint and for the lowest possible payment – if it was paid at all – from a pool of workers who were required to be conveniently available at all times. Later criticisms of the problems surrounding the cultivation of indigo were much sharper with the benefit of hindsight, but a climate had developed at the time in which reports voicing any form of criticism were dismissed as biased and unfounded. This dismissive response found its way back to the metropolis and critics, who clearly knew what they were talking about, were obliged to express their complaints anonymously. A publication from 1835, for example, expressed this criticism in no uncertain terms, denouncing the negative impacts of indigo cultivation in the Priangan Regencies (Blik op het bestuur 1835: 54). The complaint was backed up with facts that only insiders were privy to. Indignation among the main policy-makers about these ignominious allegations ran high and led to a ban on civil servants, whether still in active service or not, making official documents public. The leaking of information had to be stopped to ensure that critical discussion on the new regime would be restricted to only a small circle of those directly involved.

What is striking about the introduction of the cultivation system is that the line of command in the colonial enterprise did not acknowledge any countervailing opinion and that its stated objective had to be achieved at any cost, irrespective of whether the burden on the peasantry was too great. Although food production was extended rapidly in large parts of the Javanese countryside, agricultural activity was primarily focused on growing cash crops for export. Besides the fact that the scaling up of production was accompanied by the exercise of force, the government also had an inadequate understanding of the structure of the native economy and the resources on which the peasants relied for their survival. Managers and the actual cultivators had insufficient agronomic knowledge and no effort was made to investigate whether efficient production was possible with the existing techniques and tools. A small number of experimental agricultural stations were set up but were unable to bring about any great change due to the lack of a clear agenda. The policy-makers showed hardly any interest,
if at all, in what the forced delivery of these crops meant to the mass of the peasants. Attempts to introduce improvements in the shortcomings that emerged in practice were more incidental than planned. This haphazard approach explained the tendency to improvise and the ease with which objectives were simply replaced with others if that proved potentially more expedient. An important step towards improving these aspects was the appointment of a Director of Cultivation at the end of 1831 to supervise the production and expansion of the prescribed crops. This meant that, in addition to the specific policy pursued in the separate districts, there was now an inspectorate with the task of inspecting, coordinating and reporting on cultivation activities across the whole island. A small batch of young men were taken on as probationers and provided with agricultural training. An official was given the job of compiling a statistical record for each district containing reports and other documents from the government archives, and including maps and sketches.

The government focused its attention on the cultivation of sugarcane, coffee and indigo. In a memorandum in mid-1830, Van den Bosch indicated that other crops should also be encouraged, including cotton, silk and tea. Tobacco, pepper, cinnamon, cochenille (used for dyeing) and cinchona were later added to the list. Most of these products did not get past the experimental stage, or not until much later, and interest in them seemed to be inspired more by a sudden and short-term fascination than a sensible weighing up of the pros and cons. Of course, the introduction of coffee more than a century earlier had been no less unplanned: its unexpected import from distant regions, random planting first in areas that proved less suitable for it to grow, placing officials in charge with no knowledge at all of the crop, and uncertainty as to how it would sell on the world market. In my view, it is the persistence of this ineptitude that is so striking. What had been introduced informally, almost as a hobby, at the start of the eighteenth century continued to be approached in the same way in an age in which rural Java had been, in the words of a later commentator, turned into one huge labour camp. This may have been an exaggeration, but it did not change the fact that the expertise with which the colonial policy-makers had initiated the cultivation system was anything but impressive. It seemed to lack the essential features of a system: cautious preparation, careful implementation and close monitoring of the impact. Vitalis related how he repeatedly had to suggest that a failed crop should no longer be grown. During an inspection in 1837, he discovered 2,000 coffee planters who had been working in a garden for five years. Some of them had to cover a distance of 28 miles just to get there. In this period, their efforts had produced only
a total of three *pikul* of coffee (Vitalis 1851a: 3). The ‘production method’ basically entailed setting ambitious goals and then taking resolute but impetuous measures to pursue them. If this produced disappointing results, but it was too difficult or impossible to adjust the manner of working for practical reasons that could not be overcome at that time, the experiment was abandoned, the books were closed and the costs incurred were written off. Attention would then shift to another crop, as demand for colonial commodities was growing as never before. This development was closely linked to increasing integration in the world system and the search for new commercial crops which, as the consequence of a limited understanding of market forces, were hitherto unknown or had at least until then remained out of sight. Some of these were plants that grew only in the wild and which were now being considered for cultivation. In 1830, the Dutch consuls in Egypt, Peru and Chile received requests to supply cinchona seeds. Egypt and Chile both replied that it would be difficult to comply with this request and that costs would be high due to the inaccessibility of the areas where the seeds grew. Behind the apparent success of the main products on which the cultivation system focused – primarily sugar and coffee – there is a long history of failures and disappointments. The reports on these experiments are obscure and do not express fully the extent to which the sometimes extremely high costs were usually charged on exclusively to the native producers. And who should care, as the experiments required little investment, while the required labour could be requisitioned at no cost at all?

**More and more coffee**

The Priangan region retained the function it had been designated a century earlier: as an epithet for the forced cultivation and delivery of coffee. How did the region fare under the cultivation system? Not well, at first. Its founder had in the early 1830s decided to give priority to indigo in the firm conviction that it would be much more profitable, as the price of coffee had fallen on the world market. The Resident of the Priangan Regencies, who had opposed what he considered to be the over-hasty introduction of indigo as it imposed too great a burden on the peasants and would not be profitable for the government, was relieved of all involvement in the new crop by the Governor-General and even threatened with dismissal when he continued to object. On the other hand, there are reports that the native chiefs found it easier to motivate the peasants to grow coffee so that they would not be mobilized for the feared cultivation of indigo.