Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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The happiness of the innocent

As in the past, the number of trees remained the main yardstick for the state of coffee cultivation and what is striking is the apparent exactness of the numbers recorded throughout the years: down to the nearest tree, suggesting a degree of control of the production process that extended right down to the workfloor. The counts were, however, a grotesque distortion of a reality that lay far beyond the reach and the vision of the reporting officials, who exaggerated the numbers to show how diligent they were in performing their duties. The young trees only bore fruit after three or four years, by which time a new reporter would often have replaced the old one. If the yield fell far short of expectations, he could always claim that the trees were of inferior quality or had been planted in bad soil, or that the berries had not ripened because of adverse weather conditions (too wet or too dry). But millions of trees only existed on paper and had to be written off because the predecessor’s records were inaccurate. Van Gorkom (1880b: 186) wrote disparagingly that coffee production may have been pushed up to unprecedented volumes, but that the officials responsible for it sorely lacked the knowledge required to do their jobs properly, a situation that did not change after the introduction of the cultivation system.

The Resident of the Priangan Regencies reported with satisfaction in his annual reports on the progressive recovery of coffee production. The commission paid to the European staff had encouraged them to ensure that the recovery was consolidated, and was one reason for the excellent result in 1834, when the harvest was more than double that of the previous year. This rising trend continued as a consequence of the enormous expansion in the number of new trees planted in the recent years. The expansion of cultivation to southern districts was facilitated by the opening of a coffee warehouse in Pelabuhan Ratu on Wijnkoopsbaai. The Resident did note that it was more and more difficult to find sufficient people willing to go to the coffee and indigo gardens far away from their habitat. Many peasants fled to evade paying the compulsory tribute. The information that accompanied the Resident’s reports showed only a slight increase in the European staff involved in the administrative work relating to compulsory cultivation in the Priangan. The Resident now had a secretary, a clerk, three Assistant Residents, four coffee controleurs, four warehouse masters and a small number of officials for other crops. Although coffee production was expected to stabilize at the level of 150,000 to 200,000 pikul a year, the Resident warned cautiously in his prognosis for 1835 that the government should be prepared for a slight fall in production. Adjustment after
adjustment followed, by tens of thousands of pikul at a time, and the final estimate of a little less than 100,000 pikul proved still too high. The harvest had fallen again to half of the previous year. But this only encouraged the government to plant even more trees: 11,981,06 in the 1835-36 season. In the light of this persistent effort it is not so much the sporadic increase in production in the course of time that demands our attention but the fact that it was interrupted by a drastic fall, followed by a new peak. For decades, cultivation of this primary export crop would be characterized by strong fluctuations. Nevertheless, the tone of official reports in this period continued to be optimistic, resolutely suggesting that the prospects for the future were good and remained bright.

Official reports during the period of the cultivation system were strongly ideological, radiating a blend of self-righteousness and self-confidence. The self-righteousness was inspired by the conviction that an economic process had been set in motion that produced excellent results, and not only for the Dutch treasury, which benefited from the high profits that remained after operational costs had been deducted, but also for the colonized population whose production and productivity had increased considerably. The self-confidence came from having penetrated deeply into an alien landscape to pursue a policy based on improved knowledge of the land and its inhabitants. The collection of all kinds of information was evidence of this desire to know more. As far as the natural environment was concerned, this intelligence related to geographical distances and accessibility, fluctuations in temperature and weather conditions, the changing of the seasons, the height of mountains, the sources and courses of rivers, and flora and fauna. Specifying all these observations in reports, records and statistics removed the uncomfortable feeling of working in terrain that was as yet uncharted where things happened to which outsiders were unaccustomed. Gradually, however, the foreign rulers gained a greater understanding of the land they had colonized. Registering data on inhabitants and settlements was necessary to enable them to be governed and helped legitimate colonial domination. After all, the new rulers upheld the pretence that their instructions built on the situation that had existed before their arrival and, in that sense, the colonial order had to be understood as in keeping with practices that had been in place much longer. This link between present and past made it necessary to construe a process of historical change based more on continuity than on a break with the past.

A good example of the progressive compulsion to check and record source material was a series of monographs describing the statistics and history of districts. In 1832 J.M. van Beusechem, acting president of the Council of
Justice, had been given the task of making a start on a statistical description of the Dutch East Indies, using data in the government archives. After producing a report on Cirebon in 1835, he came out with a follow-up on the Priangan Regencies a year later. The region was still thinly populated, but the population had doubled to 507,000 between 1796 and 1832. The count was actually too low, as the population had grown by several tens of thousands in the preceding five years. This was not so much the result of natural growth as of the fact that the people were no longer afraid that the government would impose a higher and higher tribute. The prejudice against censuses was now a thing of the past, as it was no longer necessary to claim that there were fewer households than there actually were. Van Beusechem expressed his confidence that the next time, the report would reflect the true figures. He believed that the government deserved to be admired for not eroding the authority of the local chiefs in the Priangan Regencies. He admitted that the lords of the land much enjoyed displaying their pomp and circumstance and undeniably lived far beyond their means, but they did preserve law and order. Where the introduction of the land rent system had led to unrest and rebellion in other residencies – by which he meant the Java War, which had raged from 1825 to 1830 – in the Priangan, under its well-behaved regents, public order had been maintained without a single garrison having to be stationed in the region. As to the devotion of the people, there should be no doubt whatsoever. Even when rabble-rousers from elsewhere had tried to encourage the people to resist the colonial authority – like the rebels who had penetrated the regency of Sumedang from Cirebon in 1830 – their advance failed thanks to the resolute response of the chiefs. With these expressions of praise, Van Beusechem indicated that the Priangan system had been the right choice and that to continue with it would be in the interests of all and sundry.

The regents could count on the obedience of their subjects, compelled them to perform a wide variety of services without payment, and showed a remarkable predilection for public displays of prestige. Their aloof presence demonstrated that they were elevated far above the mass of the population but kept a very close eye on what was going on. Van Beusechem added that the government reserved the right of succession to these positions of regional power. It was the Resident who decided who would take over when the position of regent fell vacant and, after 1809, the same started to apply to district chiefs. The native administration was responsible for simple

31 Serie Statistiek en geschiedenis van de regentschappen op Java, no. 3 Priangan Regencies. J.M. van Beusechem 1836. NA, Ministry for the Colonies, 3046.
police tasks, but more serious offences were subject to the higher colonial courts. The regent was assisted by a *patih*, his second in command and the executive arm of the native government apparatus. The *patih* lived and had his office in the main *negerij*, close to the regent but outside the three walls encircling the latter’s court. The chiefs’ sons often spent some years training as clerks at the office of the residency, so as to learn about the practice of governance. Their training would include writing simple reports, keeping records and conducting correspondence. They used the Malay language, but wrote in Latin characters. In addition, there were Islamic clerics, who were also divided into different ranks. The elite were *imam or haji*, from whom the high priest (*panghulu*) was chosen and who also sat on the regency council and in courts of law. The lower clergy acted as village priests and doubled up as schoolteachers. Their elementary knowledge of reading and writing – gained during several years of study in *pesantren*, institutions that fell outside the control of the government and gave religious instruction – explained why they were also called upon to perform a wide range of non-religious duties, such as administering cow-pox vaccinations and organizing the cultivation schedule of food crops. The residency report for 1846 specified a total of 2,563 members of the clergy, dividing them into higher and lower ranks. The best known priestly school (*pesantren*) were in Limbangan and Sumedang. The first, run by Kiahi Nawawi, had 100 pupils while the second, headed by Kiahi Abdul Jalil, had 300 pupils. The government school set up by Resident Van der Capellen for the sons of local chiefs in Cianjur in the early 1820s had reopened after being closed to save costs, but now had only 20 pupils. The regent paid for the writing materials and the native teacher’s meagre salary and allowed the school to use a room in his *dalem*. The teaching focused on the skills considered useful for relations with local chiefs while ‘avoiding anything that could give the education a religious import’.

To ensure that tradesmen did not purchase food crops at a much too low price – due to the peasants’ eagerness to have a little money in their pockets – the government had issued a ban on free market enterprise. This measure had ensured that the people of the Priangan, innocent as they were in matters of trade and monetary transactions, did not suffer unnecessary losses.

The Government of the Indies was thus always intent on leaving these simple people in their innocence and protecting them against the deceitful actions of profiteers. The happiness of a people is relative and where they can enjoy peace and tranquillity, and generally suffer no
lack, they can be considered to live in a certain degree of happiness. (Van Beusechem 1836: 72-3)

The benevolent situation in which the people of the Priangan found themselves was, according to this official chronicler, partly because they had an ample supply of food, resulting from the expansion of paddy cultivation. In Cianjur and Bandung especially, irrigation projects had turned many swamps into fertile fields. The increase in coffee production may have remained below expectations but, thanks to a better division of labour across the population, a much higher yield would be possible in the near future. As yet, however, there was no sign of a steady linear increase. Based on the production figures for 1833 and 1854, it seems justifiable to conclude that there was indeed a sharp rise in production in the intervening period, from 336,000 to 1,065,100 pikul for Java as a whole. But by comparing two other years, it was equally possible to show that the yield had halved, rather than doubled, from 905,200 pikul in 1839 to 455,200 in 1849. The enormous fluctuations from year to year concealed the fact that, until about the middle 1840s, there had been a sharp increase in production but after that the volume, with extreme peaks and troughs, had remained virtually constant. This levelling out is striking, given that the population were driven to plant more and more trees. That also applied to the Priangan Regencies, whose share had now declined to less than a fifth of total production on Java. The pressure applied by the government was not restricted only to expanding the stock of trees; the work required to plant and maintain them, pick the berries and transport them to the warehouses meant a huge increase in the burden on the peasants. The colonial policy-makers had devised an ingenious solution to this problem in 1839: to impose the obligation to grow coffee not on the cacah – the composite peasant household comprising the landowner and the sharecroppers and farm servants dependent on him – but on the somahan, the co-habitation unit of man, wife and children.

Stagnation

The closer the exercise of colonial power came to the base of peasant society, the more sharply the shortcomings of the regime of forced cultivation, which had been decided upon in the early days of the eighteenth century, were revealed. The relocation of coffee production to the higher lands meant that the peasants continually had to shuttle back and forth between their homes and paddy fields in the valleys and the coffee gardens in the mountains.