Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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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.
The distance was too great to make the journey every day. Although it had been ordered in 1829 that trees should not be planted more than 12 poles distance from the villages, no one had ever paid heed to the instruction. As a consequence, the peasants were forced to travel long distances to the gardens, and had to continue to do so, as the trees lost their fertility only a few years after the first harvest. New plantations had to be laid out from scratch elsewhere, a phenomenon known as ‘wandering gardens’. Fences were built around the gardens not only to keep wild animals out, but also – and no less importantly – to keep the peasants in, so that they could not escape their obligation to work. The only way in and out was closed at night and not opened again until the following morning. Garden mandur lived on the spot for the whole season and their surveillance helped improve the effectiveness with which the planters were confined to the gardens for as long as was necessary. The men in particular would be away from home for months at a time to open up new gardens, a necessary and frequent activity, given the constant need to relocate. For the harvest, the entire family was obliged to move to and stay at the plantations for up to two months, so that, in busy periods, they became true labour camps, which were deserted again after new trees had been planted or the harvest was over. This restless coming and going took place in the opposite direction in the villages. Such wasteful use of labour on a very large scale could have been avoided by allowing the planters to clear fields near the plantations to grow their own food. As already mentioned, however, the peasants were not permitted to do this, nor were they allowed to use vacated gardens to grow food as it was assumed that, after the trees had been thinned out or lopped back to their stumps, the gardens could be used to grow coffee again after a few years. The peasants therefore had no other choice than to continue their up-and-down mobility and, for good or bad, try to satisfy their own needs in the time left to them.

Delivering an increasing volume of harvested and dried beans now took less effort than in the past, thanks to the much improved transport capacity, the possibility of delivering the consignments to district warehouses, and the building of two shipping warehouses on the south coast at Pelabuan Ratu and Banjar for the coffee produced in Cianjur and Sukapura. New roads were laid throughout the area to accommodate the carts carrying the coffee. The following travelogue by Junghuhn paints a clear picture of the enormous caravans that passed back and forth along these tracks.

As I approached the district of Pawenang, I discovered more and more signs of a rather monotonous activity. I saw many hundreds of two-wheeled
pedatis, either in long rows, one behind the other, or clustered together in a circle alongside the road to form a sort of stronghold, in the middle of which the plump draught animals sat chewing the cud like elephant calves. Some of these pedatis were on the way to the Karangsambung warehouse to deliver their coffee, from the whole valley of Garut, etc., while others were on their way home. It was like looking at the following of an army, and I’m certain that half the population that was fit to work and the entire buffalo population was on the move. (Junghuhn 1845: 338-9)

Maintaining the roads was understandably as labour-intensive as building them. The hooves of the draught animals and the heavy, cumbersome carts with their great wooden wheels broke up the road surface. The unrelenting repair work required the continual mobilization of labour to perform corvee services. An official, the kepala jalan, was appointed in each district to make sure that enough people could be press-ganged into performing these ‘public works’. He received his orders from the district chief and kept a record of when, where and to whom his pool of workers had to report. On the through roads, there were permanent maintenance gangs every 500 rods\(^3\) to make small running repairs whenever necessary. These labourers doubled up as guards, ensuring the security of the traffic on the roads and providing transport assistance where necessary.

Daendels was the first Governor-General convinced of the necessity of improving the infrastructure. Once this was on the agenda, his successors applied themselves to constructing a wide variety of public works, including roads, bridges, official residencies, warehouses, checkpoints, stables, lodging houses, storehouses and guardhouses, etc. This resulted in a network of communications and facilities that enabled the transport of goods and persons to be expanded. And, as always, to meet this increased demand, the peasants were compelled to perform unpaid services, either by working as porters, loaders, escorts and messengers, or by providing their horses, buffaloes and carts free of charge. Who had to perform corvee services for the government and who was exempt, and how was this policy put into practice? These questions can be answered by referring to a memorandum drawn up in 1832 by Van Sevenhoven, the first Director of Cultivation.\(^3\) The document contained many of the observations he had made during

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\(^3\) One rod is equal to roughly 3.5 metres.

\(^3\) Memorandum on agriculture and the setting up of a coolie establishment, by J.I. van Sevenhoven, Director of Cultivation to the Residents, 8 September 1832. Ministry for the Colonies 1814-49, 3202.
his numerous inspection tours throughout Java. He had noticed that, at the *jangol* – the places where the labourers had to report for work every day – people were often left hanging around because there was no work for them. Rather than seeing the corvee services as work conducted by a pool of reserve labour, he envisaged an approach similar to what he had encountered in Pekalongan, where a coolie establishment had acted as a depot for regulating employment for several years. The coolies brought daily together at the establishment worked on the orders of the government but could also be hired out to private entrepreneurs for payment. Van Sevenhoven wanted to introduce these arrangements throughout Java to create a pool of reserve labour. The inhabitants of the main *negorij* were exempted from the obligation to provide corvee services. Van Sevenhoven believed that it would be politically unwise not to respect this exemption. Certain categories outside the main *negorij* were also exempt from corvee services, either because they held positions of local authority or because they paid to be relieved of the obligation. That meant that the burden was the heaviest on those who were the most vulnerable economically. What could be done to ensure that it was not the worst off who were the victims of this unequal division of obligations? Firstly, by using labour more efficiently and effectively, as was already the case in Pekalongan. Rather than requisitioning people arbitrarily for corvee services, which was excessively unequal, it would be better if the Residents were to calculate how many coolies they needed for the work that had hitherto been performed as corvee services. This demand could then be met by entering into an agreement with the owners of paddy fields obliged to provide labour services that would exempt them from paying the annual land rent tax in exchange for them fulfilling this obligation. Van Sevenhoven clarified this proposal by noting that the privileged class had a considerable influence on the people and that acting against their interests would be sure to have adverse repercussions. In exchange for a reduction in the land rent on the ownership of the land, *sawah* holders would have to surrender one labourer for a period of six months. Then followed a passage in which Van Sevenhoven showed that he was familiar with the *cacah*, the composite peasant household which was the primary social formation in rural Java.

... if the sawa holder has three men, who are dependent on him, each of them will have to work for two months. I hope that all the Residents will be sufficiently familiar with the Javanese household to know, that the sawa holders, are actually the descendants of the original settlers and heads of the families, which are dependent on them, and which
they protect and to whose livelihood they contribute or are completely responsible for, and who will be obliged to assist them, primarily in the provision of corvee services and in cultivating fields, etc.; these hereditary owners and the families dependent on them have special names which are different in each Residency, but are known to each Regent and each chief, such as Tjatja, Sikap, Orang Bibit, Kredja, Patjol, Krawan, Kroman, etc., etc. (1832: 23-4)

Going into more detail, he explained that the mass of the population fell into two classes: the landowners, who were liable to pay taxes and provide services, and the rest, who tilled the formers’ land. These dependents usually performed the services imposed on their masters. Van Sevenhoven’s plan was essentially to continue this practice, but to make more effective use of the requisitioned labour by allowing them to be hired to third parties, so as to prevent idleness or waste. Although this proposal was received with interest at the highest level, the going practice remained as it was: the concentration of a labour reserve in the main negori to perform all the services required by the government. This floating reserve assembled at the balebandong, the public grounds in front of the regent’s residence, where the patih and the jaksa (the public prosecutor) had their offices. The requisitioned labour gathered in the main negori and in the district headquarters to perform transport services on the government’s orders, with or without their animals and carts. In 1857 in the Priangan Regencies, 500 riding horses and 2,853 gladak or draught horses were kept available just for the regular ferrying of persons and goods (De Haan IV, 1912: 661 and 929). According to another source, it was 500 riding horses and 5,000 servant’s horses, for which 4,500 families had to be set aside and kept exempt from all other services (De Waal 1866: 566). For road construction and repair, the conscripted coolies probably reported directly to the workplace.

The mobilization of peasant labour in the service of the colonial economy did not stop the native chiefs from resolutely defending their right to have their subjects perform a wide range of services for them, too. These obligations, the scale and frequency of which were very difficult to catalogue, were a major source of irritation to European officials. For that reason, the authorities tried to declare the resolution of early 1836 restricting corvee services applicable in part to the Priangan by urging the regents to draw up and submit a description of these services (De Waal 1866: 362). The unexpressed hope was that this would have a restraining effect on the servitude of the peasants to their lords. After all, labour was needed on an increasing scale to grow and supply coffee and to perform the public
works associated with it. To achieve this objective, it was logical that all other claims, including those of the local gentry, should take second place. The question was how the size of the army of labourers could be expanded to increase the colonial tribute, without others being able to lay claim to their labour power.

It was with this aim in mind that the Resident – without incidentally being authorized to do so – initiated a radical intervention in the social order that prevailed in the Priangan Regencies in 1839. The somahan ruling abolished the cacah formation, which was the basis of the agrarian economy on Java. Van den Bosch had drawn attention to the existence of the cacahs in 1830, possibly on the basis of information that Nicolaus and Pieter Engelhard, or perhaps Lawick and De Wilde, had included in reports to their superiors and which had been preserved in the government archives. According to Van den Bosch, the larger landowners, or sikap, employed the landless to tend to their fields. In return for a share of the harvest, the labourers – known in the Priangan Regencies as bujang – performed the tributary services that their masters were obliged to provide as landowners. The multi-layered peasant households consisted of an average of 22 members or four nuclear families. In the introduction to a document outlining the principles of colonial taxation, the Governor-General described the household structure as follows.

The Javanese are – according to traditional native institutions – divided into tjatjas or families, comprising a head, and several households that are dependent on him. The households often consist not only of blood relatives, but also often include labourers, who are subordinate to the head of the tjatja. (Blik op het bestuur 1835: 154)

The 1839 somahan ordinance meant giving up the principle that the tribute was imposed on the basis of landownership. Under the new provisions, all households were equally liable to a variety of levies. Instead of being imposed on the primary production formation of three or four families, the tax now applied to each of them individually. On paper this gave the cultivation services the character of a levée en masse. Landless households had long been mobilized to grow and supply coffee, but did this work on the orders of their masters, the heads of the cacah. The latter could no longer meet their obligations solely by sending their dependents; they now had to go and work in the coffee gardens themselves, along with their wives and children. Although this was not the primary intention the new rules, if strictly applied, would have brought about a radical change in the peasant
order. The direct mobilization of peasant labour meant that those who did not own their paddy fields but leased them as sharecroppers, were no longer completely under the control of the landowners. In this way, the regulation violated the golden rule of colonial policy, not to bring about any change in the unequal relations between the landowning and the landless classes at the base of society. Eroding the power and prestige of the better-off class ran against the principles of a policy aimed at not upsetting the balance of local power.

Crisis

Despite the intensified mobilization of labour, coffee production in the Priangan fell rather than rose. The Resident’s report for 1846 spoke in sombre terms about the planting of new trees. A total of 562 fruit-bearing trees were required for one pikul of beans. Through lack of maintenance, new gardens were soon overgrown with grass (alang). The mobilized labourers simply failed to do what was required of them.

The influence of the chiefs and the clergy is enough to lead and direct the people, who are soft-natured and amiable, and to subject them willingly to any task imposed upon them, even though this may require great sacrifice on their part. It cannot be said, however, that they are content, as the cultivating class, by nature slow and oppressed, who are thereby able to fulfil their basic needs with ease, display an apparent indifference to all special services required of them by the existing institutions and shows little interest in improving their lot through labour, industry or engaging in enterprises of benefit to themselves or in the general interest. (Verslag Residentie Preanger Regentschappen 1848: 87)

The coffee cultivation system had been notorious for many years for the ease with which the Priangan peasants could be mobilized to raise the colonial tribute without the claim on their labour having to meet even the minimum requirements of effectiveness and efficiency. ‘Working aimlessly because they had to work’ was already a well-entrenched malady as early as the VOC era, as Goedhart noted (1948: 58), and later generations of colonial officials continued this policy with undiminished fervour. Complaints about the lack of transparency and accuracy of the native chiefs could not hide the fact that the colonial accounts were of not much better quality. ‘Fanciful’ was how Van Gorkom described the official records drawn up by