Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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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
the Resident’s staff. Any errors discovered had to be corrected covertly so as to avoid any troublesome questions from higher up.

The number of trees seems to change quickly and radically, and we have no reason to believe the accuracy of the count. Many years ago, a controleur in the Priangan discovered, through detailed investigation, that a garden which officially had 100,000 trees, actually contained no more than 10,000. The Resident felt embarrassed to issue an order for the immediate correction of the official records. Afraid of an unpleasant response from Batavia, he advised rectifying the error gradually. (1880b: 189)

Did the somahan ordinance have the desired effect? Most probably, the army of mobilized labour did increase considerably and the Resident did, at least on paper, succeed in finding the necessary hands to enable the area planted with coffee trees to be expanded. One regent had objected in vain to the new regime, claiming that it took no account of the traditional distinction between the classes. In reply, he was told that a more equitable distribution of the labour burden would improve the economic situation of the poor segment of the population (Van Rees 1867: 510). This suggested that the new measures would bring about a more equal distribution of wealth, while its real aim was of course to increase the burden of labour for everyone. De Waal also observed that the link between landownership and the duty of servitude had been broken and replaced by a system based on the nuclear household (1866: 368). Others, however, did not confirm the assertiveness of this claim. According to an anonymous source, a private landowner in the region who gave the impression of being up-to-date on the latest developments, the ordinance failed because it did not impose the obligation to servitude uniformly across the whole population. Other reports also showed that the heads of the cacahs were still in the first instance responsible for providing the labour required to grow coffee, but that in busy periods the workforce expanded by direct requisitioning all segments of the population. That also applied to the corvee services imposed by the government. The claim that, at the time of the cultivation system, the whole of Java was one large labour camp, is considered an exaggeration by Van Niel and others, but for the Priangan Regencies it would seem, at least in intention, not far from the truth. Van Gorkom’s observation that the peasants made no distinction between unpaid corvee services and badly paid cultivation services is also relevant in this respect (1880b: 185). Both were founded on coercion, which would have been reason enough for the
peasants to evade them wherever they could or, as this became increasingly difficult, to perform them slothfully and with obvious dislike.

The conclusion displays a certain doubt whether the total mobilization of labour achieved the intended aim of increasing the level of production. This question must be answered in the negative. In the first place, distributing the burden more evenly across the population did not mean that it was lighter for the coffee planters individually. The continued expansion of the area under cultivation and the increase in the number of hands required to raise the colonial tribute did not lead to a corresponding rise in yield. Many trees died because they had been topped off or pruned without the required care. They were planted with similar lack of zeal. The available work reports paint a picture of planters who, often working in the pouring rain, would quickly dig a rough hole in the ground and stamp down the young plant with their pacul and their feet. The young plants were called cambutan, literally ‘ripped out’, and with good reason; the planters pulled the saplings roughly out of the nursery gardens and left them lying on the ground with broken roots for several days before planting them. The more it was forced up, the less productive the cultivation of coffee became, a trend expressed in the increasing number of trees required to produce a pikul of beans. The expansion of the labour base led to lower rather than higher yields. The long-standing hatred of the peasants for the yoke under which they laboured was fuelled by the steady fall in the price of coffee on the world market between 1842 and 1849, the brunt of which they had to bear (Goedhart 1948: 43). The decision to reduce the payments to the peasants was at variance with Van den Bosch’s pledge not only to allow the producers to benefit from higher prices but, conversely, also to protect them from the risk of lower revenues. Although there was probably no change at all in the amount paid to the peasants in the Priangan, maintaining the basic price – already fixed for several decades at 3.15 guilders per pikul – signified a continuation of the injustice under which they had long suffered. Van Gorkom summarized this ruthless policy as follows:

As always, the people had to foot the bill; the coffee cultivation system became their nemesis, their long history of suffering. ... In the Priangan Regencies, this was worse than elsewhere. (1880b: 186)

In 1854, the Directorate of Cultivation reported that there were 64,712,369 coffee trees in the Priangan Regencies; in 1855, that had risen to 69,168,370 and, a year later, yet again to 69,911,622. The survey also recorded the stock of garden trees, forest and pagar or kampung trees, together with precise
details of the average yield per tree, the number of planters, etc. Started in 1837, these records would be kept dutifully for the whole of Java for several decades. Everything had been done on far too grand a scale, concluded Goedhart with the wisdom of hindsight. Sometimes the whole population was mobilized to prepare land and lay out gardens, taking no account at all of how this would affect the work they needed to do to secure their livelihoods. Furthermore, trees were planted because it was prentah (ordered), but no one concerned themselves with making sure that the planting was successful (Goedhart 1948:52). This author reported that, in the second half of the 1840s, cultivation in regulated gardens on Java rose from 147 to 183 million trees, while the planting of hedge and forest coffee fell from 173 to 129 million trees. The results of later research showed that, after 1845, the system of garden coffee was expanded with unleashed fury, especially in the Priangan Regencies.

Table 6.4 Priangan coffee production 1847-64

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>total no. pikul</th>
<th>average per year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1847-49</td>
<td>258,490</td>
<td>86,163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850-52</td>
<td>467,501</td>
<td>155,833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853-55</td>
<td>658,451</td>
<td>219,483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856-58</td>
<td>499,480</td>
<td>166,493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859-61</td>
<td>389,706</td>
<td>129,902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1862-64</td>
<td>287,520</td>
<td>95,840</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Colonial Report 1870-71

To make inspections easier, the widely dispersed gardens were merged to form enormous plantations. Sometimes there was no more than one in each district, so that many tens of kampungs, often located far away, had to provide the necessary labour. The mass planting of new trees in these years initially led to a sharp rise in production but it proved impossible to sustain. It proved too much for the workforce, as the figures for the period from 1847 to 1864 show.

Van Gorkom, who spent the whole of his long career in the coffee business, reported in 1866 that, of the 50 million trees recorded in the Priangan residency, four-fifths were fruit-bearing. Nevertheless, their yield was extremely low, and he explained why in his accompanying notes.

If we take a walk through one of the most magnificent and expansive gardens in the coffee residency, the Priangan Regencies, we are amazed
at the variety of trees that form the borderlines and which are laden down with fruit, but which surround a core that is the equivalent of a wilderness, that surrounds itself in darkness and permits itself as little air and light as possible, so that fructification of the trees must remain an illusion. There they lie, the splendid coffee forests, extending for many poles, and because of incomplete and insufficient maintenance, perhaps half are not productive. And yet rich forests have been sacrificed to plant these gardens, immeasurable forces have been employed, and are still employed, and hundreds and thousands of men, women and children – and the plantations as well – waste away there, because the division of labour is as fictitious as the direct, judicious and industrious inspection. (1866: 399)

The persistence of this stationary production, despite the intensified effort to expand the area of land under cultivation and mobilize more and more labour, eventually forced the government to acknowledge that it had no other choice than to introduce radical reforms. The report on the great coffee survey conducted in the 1860s (discussed in Chapter VII) spoke of ‘the fatal system of planting coffee in regulated gardens’ which was seen as the predominant cause of the crisis after 1845 (Colonial Report 1870-71: 2768). In 1856, to give him a greater insight into the nature of the problem and possible solutions, the Director of Cultivation ordered Resident Van der Wijck to conduct an investigation. The main issue he was to address was whether the burden of forced coffee cultivation had been increased to such a degree that it exceeded the capacities of the population in parts of the residency. Although Van der Wijck’s report concluded that this was not the case, it was clear from reading between the lines that a turning point had been reached and that the area used to cultivate coffee would inevitably decline in the long term as much of the land had been depleted through persistent use. Another objection was the remote locations of the gardens. Not only were the plantations often as far as 20 poles from the villages but, with the latter in the valleys and most of the gardens at between 2,000 and 4,000 feet, the peasants also had to deal with considerable differences in altitude. Reassuringly, the Resident added that the peasants were used to this inconvenience and could not do without the income it generated, little as it was. The total number of coffee trees in the Priangan Regencies grew from 45,271,330 in 1835 to 69,911,622 in 1855. It was an ominous sign that this increase was not maintained, but declined again after this extensive effort. In 1866, the stock of trees had fallen to 39,660,814 and then rose again the following year to 48,945,945. These figures have to be taken for what they
are worth – very little – but there can be no doubt about the downward trend. During this period, there was also a shift from forest and *kampung* coffee to garden coffee. The predominance of the first two kinds in the early years of the cultivation system, as described in the discussion on the report by Assistant Resident Nagel, was completely reversed. Of the stock of 48,945,945 trees in 1867, 41,651,489 were planted in gardens, and were therefore generally a considerable distance from the peasants’ villages.

Resident Van der Wijck managed to avoid being the harbinger of only bad news. The number of inhabitants had grown to 806,000. Based on the substantial increase in the number of paddy fields and new *kampungs*, the Resident made it clear that he did not share the often-heard opinion that the population suffered under the burden of the new system. He stated cheerfully that, with the exception of a few districts not blessed with riches by nature, abundance reigned throughout the residency. In fact, in his opinion, the inhabitants of the Priangan were much better off than their counterparts in other parts of Java (Report by Van der Wijck to the Director of Cultivation 1856: 3). The Resident referred to the high revenues from the sale of salt as proof of the prosperity of the inhabitants and praised the progress made in the recent decades. Of course, the great distance that the planters had to travel to the gardens made it difficult for households to maintain 1,000 trees and it was therefore advisable to reduce this to 800 or even 600–700 as an absolute maximum. In the thinly populated and still uncultivated southern part of the Sunda highlands, where nomadic agriculture was still practised, the *gaga* peasants lived far from the coffee gardens and could not be expected to tend more than 500 trees. Finally, given the very low revenues, Van der Wijck considered it advisable to abolish the cultivation of coffee in a small number of districts. However, he warned that this might cause peasants to desert from nearby areas, where forced cultivation was still in place. To illustrate the depletion of the coffee gardens in Cianjur, Van der Wijck pointed out that in 1834 a total of 5,250,000 trees in this regency had produced 46,712 *pikul*, while in 1855, 14,000,000 trees had yielded only 37,000 *pikul*. This meant that three times as many trees were needed to produce one *pikul* in the later year than in 1834. The Resident’s anxiety exclusively focused on the sharp decline in productivity. It was a telling sign of the one-sided nature of his investigation that he completely failed to address the growing imbalance between the work involved in growing coffee and the payment the planters received.

A radical change in the organization of the work that was disadvantageous for the planters was the introduction of the West-Indian method of preparing the berries after picking. This work was subcontracted to
European businesses which, after 1848, had been given permission to set up mechanical hulling mills in a number of locations. This meant that the ripe berries, until then peeled and dried in the gardens, now had to be delivered to the hulling mills for further processing. The pickers continued to use the former drying sheds to sleep in at nights and to shelter from the rain during the day. The sheds, known as ‘chicken runs’ (Goedhart 1948: 68) were not at all suitable for these purposes. Carrying the freshly picked berries every day to the mills, which were mostly at some distance from the plantations, was a heavy and time-consuming job. The mills had insufficient capacity during busy periods, meaning that the carriers sometimes had to wait a long time to deliver the berries. The mill managers also used them for all kinds of coolie services. Other complaints were that the mill-owners did not pay the full amount for the berries they received or refused, rightly or wrongly, to accept unripe berries. To put a stop to the damaging and repressive impact of the mills, the Resident advised in his report returning to the old method of preparing the berries. His advice was taken up in the following years and the licences for the mills, which were processing 40 per cent of Priangan coffee production in 1854, were rescinded. As a concession, the pickers were given permission to take the harvested berries back to their villages for drying. Although this meant carrying the sacks with fresh berries, a heavy load, to their homes, it considerably reduced the amount of time the pickers had to spend at the plantations in accommodation that was inadequate in all respects (Van Heeckeren van Brandsenburg 1865).

Security patrols along the borders of the Priangan Regencies and on the roads could not prevent the smuggling of clandestinely acquired coffee. The Resident had to admit that the continuing low prices paid to the peasants contributed to their collusion in these illicit practices. He specified low payments and a lack of suitable land as the main problems, adding that there was little to be done about the second. In an attempt to solve the first problem, the cost price per pikul in the Priangan was finally raised in 1859, from 3.15 to 5 guilders, and then by 25 cents a year to 6 guilders in 1865. But the increase had little significance, as what the Sundanese peasants received remained way below the price that coffee planters were paid elsewhere on Java (40 guilders per pikul in 1866). Van Gorkom calculated that, in 1864, a total amount of 180,129.02 guilders had been paid to the Priangan producers for 31,328 pikul. Distributing this amount among more than 85,000 households required to take part in the forced cultivation of coffee meant a revenue of 2.11 guilders per household. This was the payment each household received for an average of 100 working days, including the labour of the wife and children. The pittance was completely out of
proportion with the effort involved. The producers of this commodity, which generated such high profits for the colonial rulers, were accorded absolutely no economic value. Van Gorkom concluded his calculations with an indignant exclamation.

And yet the expansion continues, and yet the population is driven further and further every year to increase the statistical tallies! ... The cancer has to be sought in the system. This system is preposterous. (1866: 400)

Non-compliance

The claim on labour rose to unprecedented heights in the mid-nineteenth century. The question is, however, whether the colonial authorities in the Priangan also succeeded in their objective of distributing the obligation to work equally across the whole population. Only those incapable of working – the disabled, the elderly and very young children – continued to be exempt. Chiefs, the clergy and others of high status, such as those held in esteem for their pious behaviour, were also not called upon to supply their labour. Furthermore, not all those registered as obliged to work actually turned up in person. Sending a substitute was permitted and occurred on a wide scale, paid or not. But did this also apply in the Priangan Regencies, where the somahan ruling of 1839 had explicitly put a stop to the composite peasant household, which also contained sharecroppers and farm servants? Resident Van der Wijck suggested that imposing the obligation of servitude on all households meant that the cacah heads would lose their control over the land-poor segment of the population, which would irrevocably led to redistribution of landown-ership (Van Rees 1867: 510-1). In an essay published much later, De Roo de la Faille agreed with the Resident, concluding that there had been a process of levelling off between landowning and landless households. In his view, this process of homogenizing the peasantry of the Priangan had been set in motion as early as 1789, in Rolff’s instruction, and consolidated half a century later in the household regulation. The process had broken the link between the bumi-juragan and his numpang dependants. It became impossible for the former to retain more farmland than he could tend to with his own immediate family and bujang, and he had to release the other household heads dependent on him. (See De Roo de la Faille 1941: 423-4.)