Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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VII  Winding up the Priangan system of governance

‘A system that is arbitrary, repressive and secretive’

The public debate in the metropolis on whether to continue the cultivation system began to gain momentum after the middle of the nineteenth century and focused on the role of the government in the colonial economy. The question also arose of whether forced levies should be replaced by free labour as the basic principle of the cultivation of crops for export. The political choice that would ultimately be made was the outcome of a long-drawn-out dispute between the various schools of thought within and outside Dutch parliament. Advocates on all sides of the argument had to take account of the impact on public opinion in the mother country of the publication in 1860 of Max Havelaar. The book, written by former Dutch colonial official Eduard Douwes Dekker under the pen name Multatuli

34

and subtitled ‘Or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company’, had in the words of the leader of the liberal lobby sent ‘a shudder’ through the country (Van der Meulen 2002: 418). The change in the foundations of colonial policy that gradually took shape was preceded by an extensive survey of the production of the two main commercial crops regulated under the cultivation system, coffee and sugar. In 1863, the government of the East Indies was ordered to recommend improvements in the coffee production of Java. The investigations which would be the basis for the new policy were initially entrusted to C.P.C. Steinmetz. As former Resident of the Priangan Regencies (1851-55) and as the author of yet another manual on the cultivation of coffee (1865), he was eminently qualified for the task. However failing health prevented him from what he set out to do and after his death in 1865 C.J. Bosch, Chief Inspector of the Department of Cultivations, was designated to complete the official enquiry. In 1868 he had completed his report – *Algemeen Verslag der Uitkomsten van het onderzoek betreffende de Koffijkultuur op Java* – which found its way through the bureaucracy to parliament in the Netherlands where it was included in the Proceedings of the States-General 1870-71. Because coffee cultivation was organized along different lines in the Priangan Regencies than in the rest of Java, the situation in this region and the problems that occurred there were described

34 Literally, ‘I have suffered much’.
in a separate memorandum.\textsuperscript{35} What is striking is the exceptionally critical tone of this account on the working and impact of the coffee regime in the Sunda highlands. ‘A system that is arbitrary, repressive and secretive’, was the judgment on the mode of production in the Priangan Regencies, which had previously received so much praise. Each of these three condemnations was explained in detail.

Secrecy had led to all information that might have detracted from the success of the colonial enterprise being omitted from official records, resulting in a make-believe portrayal that presented what was going on in exaggeratedly rosy terms and systematically underrepresented the reverse side of the policy pursued. The need to provide good news that would keep their superiors content caused officials to cover up or even distort facts and figures in their administration that might give the impression that set targets had not been met. If disappointing results of the coffee regime could no longer be suppressed, they were blamed on faulty decisions by a predecessor, e.g. the choice of the wrong terrain for plantations, or on circumstances beyond the control of the government, such as inclement weather. Only when the situation got really out of hand and failure could no longer be concealed, even the highest echelons of the bureaucracy had to come up with a radical reappraisal of what had been reported before. A poignant example of this belated acknowledgment of misrepresentation was the fiasco of indigo cultivation. Early indications that growing and especially processing this crop would seriously disrupt the peasant order in the Priangan were blatantly ignored. The whistle-blowers were reprimanded by their superiors higher up in the colonial machinery and told to shut up. The true scale of the indigo disaster did not penetrate to such lofty heights until Vitalis, as Inspector of Cultivation, drew attention to the widespread starvation, staggering mortality and mass desertion. Publicizing inconvenient information was traditionally considered improper, a blemish on the reputation of the obedient colonial official who knew exactly what his superiors expected of him: confirmation of the administrative order of the day. During the great coffee survey now under way, all district heads were asked if they were aware of any facts regarding the aversion of the peasants to coffee gardens being laid out at great distances from their villages. Shocked, the Assistant Resident for Sumedang stated that both the regent and the \textit{controleur} had told him under oath that they had not given any information of such a nature to Chief Inspector Bosch.

\textsuperscript{35} Aanteekeningen betreffende de koffiecultuur in de residentie Preanger Regentschappen, Bijlagen Handelingen van de Staten-Generaal 1870-71: 2759-2951.
latter added a note to this reply: ‘It puts one in mind of a crime and it was
indeed a crime in the Priangan to tell the truth to a delegated official of
the government’ (Colonial Report 1870-71: 2774). It can be assumed that
the government’s policy-makers did discuss its impact in detail, but that
occurred without them having to account for their actions or to consult
outsiders on the decisions they made. Colonial governance took place in a
closed shop atmosphere and this inward-looking bias was only reinforced by
the hierarchical structure of authority. The recalcitrant Multatuli was one
of the few who broke through this wall of bureaucratic silence. He described
the chain of good news that ran from the lower ranks of the colonial ap-
paratus to headquarters, a fabricated optimism that the Governor-General
upheld in his reports back to the metropolis.

And what should the Governor-General do if someone should write him
letters claiming that the Javanese are badly treated here and there? The
answer is obvious. The Governor-General should not read the letters,
as it is clear that reading such letters will disturb him in the fulfilment
of his duty: protecting the Javanese people. And if the writer of such
improper letters should persist? Then the Governor-General must make
his displeasure known to him and force him to resign his post. This is
how our system works, gentlemen. (Multatuli 1862: 59)

Brushing off undesirable news was not, however, restricted to the reports
of European officials. They, in their turn, complained about being misled
by the native chiefs, who also saw to it that only propitious news reached
the ears of their superiors. The colonial officials had little direct contact
with the peasantry. Inasmuch as this did occur, questions and answers that
were exchanged during these encounters could be edited to comply with
the desired portrayal of the situation. Penetrating to the base of society
was no guarantee of the accuracy of the information obtained, as Kinder
de Camarecq pointed out in the introduction to his detailed investigations
of a Priangan settlement shortly after the middle of the nineteenth century.

The respect of the Javanese, and especially the Sundanese, people for
their regent is such that as soon as the lower chiefs order them in his
name to deny or be silent about something, they will be certain to obey
the order. (1861: 60)

The author emphasized that he had gathered his data during a recurring,
long-lasting and good-natured survey he conducted in the settlement, with
no intervention from the regent. His knowledge of the Sundanese language had enabled him to follow the conversations of the district head – who remained present during his visits – and to ask further questions if he felt the need. This method of collecting data still qualified as ‘supervised’ investigation. It reveals the different layers of obfuscation and secrecy that made it difficult to obtain a clear picture of how the peasant economy actually worked. The official view focused on blaming the local chiefs for shirking their duties, while the colonial authorities remained carefully out of the line of fire.

Repression. The coffee report brought to light in great detail the onerous burden that the forced cultivation of coffee imposed on the people of the Priangan. The gradual relocation of production from in or close by the peasants’ villages in the valleys to higher and distant gardens had made a significant contribution to this steadily increasing burden. ‘The fatal system of planting coffee in regulated gardens had to predominate’ was how one commentator summarized the trend of producing ever more and more beans (Colonial Report 1870-71: 2768). The distance that the peasants were made to travel to the gardens had increased considerably over time; to more than 30 poles, according to the most recently available figures. To make supervision easier, the gardens had been grouped together in gigantic plantations.

The district of Ujungberung [Kulon], for example, has only one garden, which is tended by 44 dessas, some of which are 1-2, others 7, 8 or 9, but most 10, 12 and 14 poles distant. The district of Cilokotot also had one garden for 65 dessas; the districts of Pesser Maleber, Cikondang and Jampang Wetan, with a total of 62 dessas, also plant their coffee in one garden, while the distance to the dessas vary widely from 1 or 2 to 31 poles. (Coffee Report 1870-71: 2775)

In the very hilly terrain in which coffee was grown, covering a pole took twice as long as on a flat road. It was therefore not surprising, continued the report, that – given that it was much more difficult to tend to the trees and pick the berries in coffee gardens more than six poles away from peasant abodes in flat country – most gardens produced a very low yield. An instruction dating from before the introduction of the cultivation system, forbidding the laying out of plantations in the Priangan more than 12 poles from the settlements, was disregarded on a large scale and this continued to be the case in 1865 and 1866. Even this provision dating from an earlier era set the distance three times longer than for the rest of Java, namely
four poles. The only way to maintain the trees and pick the berries during the harvest season was to confine the peasants to the gardens. The work sites became temporary living quarters for both the labourers and their supervisors. The coffee report calculated that a skilled planter could pick the ripe berries from no more than 10 trees a day during the peak period. As the harvest extended over some 15 rounds, the work – after the berries had been picked, they had to be dried and the beans shelled – took up a large part of the labour capacity of the peasant household. According to an estimate by the Resident in 1864, this added up to around five months, ‘during which time the people, with the exception of occasional visits, were away from their homes’ (Coffee Report 1870-71: 2763). The labourers would often try to cut short their stay at the plantation by ripping the fruit from the branches too early, throwing away the green berries and only taking those that were ripe to the drying sheds. The adults and children used the sheds to sleep in at nights. These communal shelters were miserably inadequate and this way of life, which forced the peasants to live as coolies, led to ‘much loose behaviour’.

After the work in the gardens was completed, the women and children returned home, but the men were not done until they had delivered the beans to the warehouses. This was, after all, besides growing the coffee, part of their compulsory delivery duties. Here, too, the distance from the gardens to the coffee warehouses was a serious problem. There were far fewer depots in the Priangan than in the other residencies on Java. The time required to transport the beans could extend to several days, and there would often also be a long wait at the depot, where the warehouse master refused to accept beans that had not been properly dried and sorted by quality. Rather than having to do this work all over again or wait even longer, the planters would often hide the rejected coffee or throw it into a gorge. The transport and delivery of the beans were not only time-consuming but also incurred costs that the planters had to pay themselves. They had to arrange for carts and draught animals, and the high mortality among the latter, caused by the bad state of the roads, meant that they might have to buy new animals en route. To spare the animals, some planters preferred to carry the beans to the warehouses on their own backs. This was clearly only possible for short distances. Sometimes the burden of transport was so strenuous that planters simply gave the beans away or were even prepared to pay hesitant recipients to take them off their hands (Coffee Report 1870-71: 2774). Lastly, the burden of work was made even heavier by the fact that the gardens regularly had to be relocated. The first harvest could take place when the trees started to bear fruit, but the yield began to decline already after a few years; most gardens
were only productive for five to seven years. They would then be abandoned and the work would be transferred to newly opened up land. All the work of laying out the garden, planting the trees and maintaining the crop in the first years before the trees began to bear fruit had to be performed without the planters receiving a single cent for their efforts.

Even when they were finally paid, it was still very little, despite the fact that the rate had been increased by 25 cents a *pikul* each year after 1859, until it had reached 6.5 guilders in 1867. It meant that for much more demanding work, the peasants were at best paid only half that earned by coffee planters in other residencies, while basic necessities were more expensive in the Priangan than elsewhere. Between 1853 and 1864, the lowest wage paid on Java for free, unskilled labour was 20 cents a day and, in some areas, could be as high as 50 cents. But only a few residencies paid the lowest rate for growing coffee. In the same 12-year period, the daily wage in the Priangan remained stagnant at 3.5 cents (Coffee Cultivation on Java 1871: 267). The coffee report sought the cause of this much lower wage in the operation of the Priangan system, which had subordinated the peasants to their lords in serfdom.

Not only do the people of the Priangan pay as much tax as their counterparts elsewhere, they actually pay more. Collecting the taxes is beyond the control of the European authorities, and the lower class is left to the mercy, or lack of it, of the chiefs, and it is known how far that goes; we know from experience in the Priangan, that the tolerance and patience of the people are inexhaustible, and the chiefs take advantage of this to extort and torment their inferiors with no regard for their misery or the heavy burden impressed upon them. (Coffee Report 1870-71: 2773)

Based on the 118 days a year required to grow the coffee stated by the Resident – a figure that was much too low, according to the coffee report – the highest daily wage in the residency was nine cents in 1863 and the lowest less than one cent in 1864. The wages paid in the five regencies fluctuated from way below to far above these amounts. The conclusion that followed came as no surprise: the tortuous work and the exceptionally low payment had given the people an aversion to growing coffee. This observation was followed by statements by colonial officials who now had the opportunity to say what they had always had to suppress or deny. They had never been able to reveal facts that might have displayed the peasants’ hatred of growing coffee. For example, that planters in Sukapura had once destroyed young coffee plants by pouring boiling water on them. It also became known that
a **controleur** in Garut once called out the **prajurit** (a corps of native police) to force the peasants to pick the coffee at bayonet point and that on many occasions the chiefs punished open resistance with immediate and cruel beatings. The **controleur** at Blubur acknowledged that wide-scale aversion did exist but added that it could not be supported by facts because the people were too scared to show their real feelings.

**Arbitrariness.** The more insight the colonial apparatus acquired into the native workfloor, by appointing **controleurs**, the fewer opportunities there were for escaping from the system of forced cultivation. Although the population continued to be undercounted, officials in the region were able to register more and more inhabitants who had escaped their notice in earlier counts, or had been intentionally kept out of their sight by the native chiefs. Colonial policy-makers saw the discovery of the **cacah**, the composite peasant household, as proof that there was a large pool of reserve labour which they could employ as they saw fit. The Resident had issued an order in 1839 that, from then on, the obligation to grow and deliver coffee would apply to each nuclear peasant household. The extent to which this instruction was actually enforced in practice can best be answered by reversing the perspective and examining how the peasants responded to this order for the mass mobilization of labour to grow coffee.

The descriptions referred to in the preceding chapter, of the situations in two peasant settlements in the regencies of Sumedang (by Kinder de Camarecq) and Cianjur (by Van Marle) shortly after the middle of the nineteenth century, offer an impression of the way in which the increased burden was distributed among the local population. A considerable proportion of the inhabitants of these settlements were exempt from providing cultivation services. These were, in the first place, those who were unfit to work – small children, the elderly and the disabled – who lacked the physical strength to meet their own basic needs. Secondly, there was a privileged category consisting of chiefs, the clergy and others (including **hajis**), whose high status exempted them from taking part in compulsory coffee production. But these privileges were no longer permanent or complete. When the picking season arrived, they too had to join the army of labourers in the gardens. The instruction that women should pull up their **sarungs** between their legs showed that they, too were required to work. More or less the same applied to the corvée services that had to be performed for the government for a maximum of 52 days a year by the same classes of people who bore the brunt of the compulsory work in the coffee gardens. What was perceived by the colonial authorities as arbitrariness started with the peasants who worked as **panukang** in the fields of the landed gentry. The lords tried to
ensure that these labourers remained exempt from the cultivation and corvee services imposed by the government as far as possible and to call on their labour for their own private use. The same applied to the rahayat, who were part of the chiefs’ entourage and had to perform a whole range of duties for their masters which would have become virtually impossible if they had to provide compulsory services for the government as well. Their status of rahayat to a prominent lord did not take the form of economic servitude but was primarily an honour indicative of a rank that gave them prominence in the peasant landscape, sufficient reason to claim exemption from compulsory services.

The final way in which the principle of universal servitude to the government was eroded in practice was through the possibility of buying exemption. Peasants who owned sufficient land could free themselves of the despised and low-paid work in the coffee gardens by paying lower chiefs an amount of money. As a result of all these exceptions, the households that were not exempt had to bear an even heavier burden. In essence, it meant that land-poor and landless households were more likely to have to fulfil their obligations to provide cultivation and corvee services than those that were better off. The colonial authorities did not concern themselves with these mutual arrangements, but were aware of them. Van Sevenhoven, the first Director of Cultivation, even devised a plan to wrest dependent members of composite households free from the grip of the cacah so that they could fulfil their labour obligations directly to the government. Clearly, not everyone was subject equally to the colonial tribute, despite what the instructions prescribed. The question then remains to what level the labour burden that the government imposed on peasant households in the Priangan had increased under the cultivation system.

Taxation, resistance and retribution

When forced coffee cultivation was first introduced in the early the eighteenth century it allegedly imposed no great burden on the planters. The trees, few in number at first, were planted close to the peasants’ homes and supposedly required almost no maintenance. All the planters had to do was collect the berries when they fell from the trees. The berries were then dried in a shed and the peasants could process them into beans while continuing their work in the paddy fields. In short, it was a job that – at least in the eyes of VOC officials – required little effort and provided the peasant households with welcome additional income. That this was an