Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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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
inaccurate portrayal of the situation became clear when coffee production was increased through the use of force. Compelling the peasants to work was seen as justified, firstly because it represented a continuation of traditional native practices, according to which the peasants were in servitude to their lords, and secondly because of the reluctance of the peasants to work of their own free will, a consequence of their non-economic mentality. Their inborn tendency to laziness and the absence of anything more than the simplest incentive to meet their basic needs had to be combated by imposing work morals and discipline. Force would lead to an increase in labour productivity, a precondition for a better livelihood in the long term. Gradually, another argument came to the fore which was intended to find a rationale for the claim on the peasants’ labour. In this perception, which became the essence of the cultivation system, the tribute – in the form of a claim on land and labour – was seen as a form of taxation to which the people of Java had already been accustomed in the pre-colonial era. Van den Bosch calculated that the colonial equivalent of this tribute would entail making available one-fifth of agricultural land to grow export crops and an equal claim on the total labour power of the peasant population, set at 66 days a year. Without notification, the basic unit for meeting these obligations had been shifted from the male provider to all the members of the household, with the consequence that not only the head of the household but all other employable men, women and children had to pay tribute in the form of one-fifth of their joint labour power. It was a long time before the nature and size of the composite household, as the basic unit on which the peasant order was based, could be determined with any accuracy. The initial view of the cacah as the basic unit, on which Van den Bosch also based his calculations, allowed the peasants some scope to spread the tribute out over the three to four households that made up the cacah. That was no longer possible after the introduction in the Priangan of the numpang instruction in 1789 and the somahan instruction in 1839, which required each nuclear household to provide cultivation and other corvee services. This of course entailed far more than the 66 days a year that Van den Bosch had specified.

But how much more? Another way of calculating what level of taxation was acceptable dated from the end of the eighteenth century and prescribed the planting, maintenance and harvesting of 1,000 trees per household as the standard for servitude. The sources do not make clear why and when Rolff, the Commissioner for Interior Affairs who first set the target in 1789, arrived at this number. There is no doubt, however, that his decision was inspired by the growing demand for coffee by the VOC, which saw increasing opportunities for selling this commodity in the expanding
world market, rather than by the productive capability of the peasants. Henceforth, the norm of 1,000 trees was imposed by force with no one even bothering to find out how many working days were required to meet that target. When asked for his opinion, Resident Van der Wijck admitted in his report in 1856 that the scale of this burden effectively made it impossible to maintain and that the most that could be expected of the planters was two-thirds or even half of the set amount. But, he added, the peasants had become accustomed to the work regime. In 1835, after the introduction of the cultivation system, Van Sevenhoven had tried to persuade his superiors to adopt a more accommodating attitude towards the coffee planters. The brutal conditions in which the labourers had to work in the mountain gardens, which he estimated at 225 days a year including corvée services, and the exceptionally low payment they received for their efforts took on the tone of a complaint against the Priangan regime in his report. His call to at least increase the payment fell on deaf ears. On the contrary, the first Director of Cultivation was severely reprimanded for his candid protest. Van Gorkom, who had an intimate knowledge of coffee cultivation, observed in an article published in 1866 that a standard household of man, wife and children spent an average of 100 days in the mountain gardens. This calculation did not include, however, the time spent on laying out the gardens, planting young trees, drying the berries and processing them into beans, or transporting and delivering the coffee to the warehouses (Van Gorkom 1866: 400). The coffee report commissioned in 1863 also provided figures for the number of working days required to grow and deliver coffee in the Priangan: according to the Resident’s calculations, tending to 1,000 trees from the laying out of the gardens to picking the berries and producing the beans took up an average of 125 days per household. Native chiefs came up with a slightly higher figure of 137 days. The authors of the report said that these figures were too low and incomplete, partly because they did not take account of the time the planters needed to get to the garden and to carry the beans to the warehouses. This is also shown by the statement elsewhere in the report that the work in the gardens took up no less than five months a year per household.

The burden of labour was not of course restricted to the forced cultivation of coffee. The government also requisitioned labour to provide corvée services for public works, including the building of not only roads and bridges, but also offices, warehouses, stables, sentry posts and accommodation for civil servants, the transport of goods and services, guarding roads and villages and, lastly, a small army of guards, messengers and servants for the official and personal convenience of colonial authorities. These obligations
could extend to 52 days a year for each taxable household. It was permitted to avoid this work by sending a substitute. The summary shows that cultivation and corvee services together monopolized the peasants' labour power for at least six months of the year. Because it was allowed to send substitutes or to buy exemption from these obligations, it is practically impossible to calculate the average burden imposed by all these services. The absence of the better-off, for payment or otherwise, meant that burden was heavier for those who did turn up for work, who mainly came from the land-poor and landless segments of the peasantry. The two categories of colonial servitude were recorded separately in the government's official records, but it was an incomprehensible and irrelevant distinction for the mass of those subjected to the regime of forced labour. Of course, the planters received a meagre payment for the coffee they delivered, while in most cases they were paid nothing at all for the public work they performed. In practice, however, the differences were much smaller than they appeared on paper. The work in the gardens fell under the cultivation system, while building drying sheds and accommodation for lower and higher work bosses, as well as the construction of depots and warehouses, were registered as corvee services in the official records. These compulsory activities, referred to generally as work by order of the government, imposed an excessively heavy burden on the peasant economy.

Over and above the colonial tribute to which the inhabitants of the Priangan districts were subjected, there were the shares of their food crops that they had to surrender to their lords. The most important was the *cuke*, which was set at one-fifth of the paddy yield; half of this went to the chiefs and the other half to the clergy. In addition to the *cuke*, the peasants had to supply a wide variety of other items, including bamboo, firewood, chickens and ducks, present gifts on festive occasions and during religious celebrations, perform stable and household services, and provide manpower for the building and maintenance of homes for the landed gentry. Lastly, there was a range of ad hoc taxes, for example on the sale or slaughter of cattle, a market tax, ferry tolls, inheritance tax and other tributes whenever they were demanded. And, of course, not to be forgotten, the tending of fields appropriated by the gentry and other services provided by the *panukang*, who the local chiefs tried to exempt from the colonial tribute as far as possible. Some of these claims were imposed on all of a chief's subjects, but other applied only to the *rahayat*, clients who were members of the lord's personal entourage. Servitude to the landed gentry could mean full or partial exemption from obligations towards the government, but in the course of time the colonial authorities gradually tightened their grip on the
local population, resulting in an accumulation of claims on the labour power of the peasants. The picture was made even more complex by the fact that the different kinds of servitude were not applied uniformly in practice. The better-off had more chance of being relieved of their obligations or, if that was not successful, they could show their willingness to serve by sending a substitute. This differentiation, however, does not change the fact that the total claim on the labour power of the peasants had risen to an extremely high level under the Priangan system.

Did the order from above to produce increasing volumes of coffee not meet with resistance from the people of the Sundanese highlands to the regime of forced cultivation? The government saw the lack of any overt and sustained resistance as proof that there was sufficient capacity among the peasants to raise the desired tribute. Peace had never been disturbed by mass protest and it had never been necessary to station troops in the region to maintain law and order. While persistent protest movements had threatened to develop into popular uprisings in other parts of Java, such as in the Princely States and neighbouring Cirebon, the people of the Priangan lands
were considered obedient and content with their lot. Their subordination to colonial domination was mediated through the authority of local chiefs. Acknowledging the latter's power and prestige had proved an effective and cheap means of forcing the peasants to deliver the main trade crop in the past century and a half. If they did not respond to the coercion with acts of resistance it was because their traditional subordination to the local chiefs was used to introduce the cultivation of coffee for sale on the world market and to steadily increase its volume. Of course, the landed gentry had to be paid for their loyal mediation but the cultivation commission received by the regents was only a fraction of the prices that the coffee raised at auctions in the metropolis. The awareness that without the collusion of the local lords the resistance of the peasants against the forced cultivation of coffee would have been much greater was a running theme in colonial reports from the end of the eighteenth century. This streamlined image of forced cultivation and delivery did not mean however that there had been no resistance at all. It was a sensitive topic that was treated with considerable reluctance or avoided completely in official reports. The government could only uphold the impression of docile peasants and their co-opted lords if resistance was presented as sporadic, limited in scale and easy to defuse. And then only by not looking behind the official facade of favourable facts and opinions for evidence to invalidate them. Occasionally, however, and almost in passing a reality was exposed that was intended to remain concealed. For example, in the private correspondence between Van den Bosch and Baud, shortly after the introduction of the cultivation system, in which they discussed with obvious concern reports of land flight from the Priangan and Cirebon and mentioned the rebellious spirit that dominates in the latter region.36 Would the resistance to the heavy tribute not lead to a new war in Java after the one that had been successfully fought in Central Java from 1825-30? The mild and generous attitude to the usually obedient Priangan population soon made way for a harder approach if the progress of the coffee cultivation came under threat. Affairs like that described by Multatuli in Lebak also occurred in the Priangan. A complaint, for example, submitted anonymously for fear of being punished simply for reporting it. Such cases, of claims that intimidation had taken on violent form with the lower local chiefs being the main culprits, found their way into colonial reports. They could also, after all, be interpreted as proof that hard-handed action was regrettable but necessary. In his time,

Commissioner Rolff did not shy away from calling prestigious chiefs to order by slapping or kicking them, bawling out regents in public and threatening to dismiss or banish them. It was Nicolaus Engelhard himself who asserted that no native would wish to plant coffee without the use of physical force, being beaten or put in the stocks (De Haan I, 1910: 160). As repressive measures against the higher native chiefs involved in coffee affairs gradually became milder, it was mainly the lower chiefs, such as petingi and garden mandur who were called to order with a flogging or being chained in the stocks. Punishing the bosses of work gangs now aroused colonial sympathies.

Such a poor fellow was then humiliated for many hours, hung up by his big toes, buried bare-headed in the mud, etc. It is no surprise that he would then later take every opportunity to vent his rancour on the gang he supervised. This was how mutual hatred was aroused in the villages. (Janssen 1888: 8)

Corporal punishment was banned in 1866, but it is doubtful whether it was strictly enforced. Illustrative of the general attitude was the approving tone in which, many years later, an incident was recalled during which Kinder de Camarecq had devised an original method of putting a stop to the widespread theft of cattle while he was serving as Assistant Resident in Sumedang in 1854. He summoned all 30 district heads in the regency to his office and told them each to bring the ten most likely culprits from their districts with them. When all 300 suspects were assembled before him, he ordered them first to identify from their midst 30 as possible cattle thieves. The group of 30 were then asked who were the three ‘baddest’ among them, after which these three had to decide amongst themselves who the ‘guilty party’ was. This man was then informed that, every Saturday, he would be given 40 lashes in the presence of the whole group. This public chastisement would continue until the criminal confessed. The first flogging took place immediately and when everyone returned the following week, his wounds were not yet healed and he fell into a swoon after twelve lashes. When he regained consciousness, he begged to be hanged but his judge said that the punishment would continue every week until he confessed (Gonggrijp 1919: 974-5). Almost three-quarters of a century later, the chronicler of this incident expressed his admiration for the innovative and resolute action of this colonial official. According to him, Kinder de Camarecq continued to be seen by the people of Sumedang as a man who brought them order, peace and prosperity.
Repression continued to be endemic to coffee cultivation, but the colonial authorities’ view of the situation extended no further than the native managers, who were held responsible for day-to-day discipline on the workfloor. And was it not, incidentally, the higher and lower chiefs who tended to resort to excessive violence to punish their subordinates? They made use of agents, known as *jagos* or fighting cocks, who came from the peasant class, were familiar with the local situation, provided information that was not available through the regular channels, and spared their bosses all kinds of *susah* (Sollewijn Gelpke 1879: 142-4; Hasselman 1891: 104). In the colonial state system, these fighting cocks acquired a new role, acting as informal mediators for the chiefs, intimidating the peasants – if necessary by the use of violence – to fulfil their tributary obligations. In this sense, the *jagos* had become exponents of the colonial power structure (Schulte Nordholt & Van Till 1999). They also sometimes worked at their own risk, initiative and expense. In his indictment of the evils of the cultivation system, Vitalis mentioned gangs, led by close relatives of the regent, who committed robberies and murders in Cirebon. In his view, the population was nowhere as badly tormented and repressed than in the Priangan Regencies. He related how, during an inspection tour of the region, he had encountered a group of ten old men, who had been tied by their thumbs to a rope thrown over the branch of a tree. They had then been hoisted up until their toes could just touch the ground. Another time, he came across naked men with their arms tied crosswise and lying on the ground, where they remained exposed to the blazing sun. According to the inspector, it was not only members of the gentry who committed such excesses. Dutch officials were also guilty of harassment and torture, including beating victims until they were half (or completely) dead and, in another instance, covering the bare upper body of a young woman with ants (Vitalis 1851a: 118-20).

The continuing and far-reaching surveillance in both the villages and the coffee gardens – the costs of which were not borne by the government – ensured that resistance did not develop into collective action. Although the coffee report noted a few incidents that had not previously come to light, it by no means reflected the extent or the nature of the peasants’ obstinate refusal to work. It is perhaps suggested a little more clearly in a report on the

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37 This Inspector of Cultivation not only had strong words to say about the perpetrator of this abusive treatment, but also mentioned another case that he had witnessed in a report that he sent to G.G. Rochussen. When he received no response, he repeated his complaint verbally at a reception at the palace in Bogor. The Governor-General reprimanded Vitalis on this occasion that his actions were inappropriate and ordered him never to trouble him with such cases again (TNI, 1852: 295).
long waiting times at the warehouses that made the peasants ‘recalcitrant’ and could only with great difficulty be prevented from throwing their loads into a gorge. This is not easy to reconcile with the traditional portrayal of the Sundanese people in the official records as docile and timid, acquiescing in their fate. The peasants employed the weapons of the weak, but it was an arsenal that they used frequently and on a large scale. The *controleur* at Sukabumi gave a number of examples of sabotage and determined obfuscation, which the authorities could do nothing to discourage.

1st tending to gardens carelessly and inadequately, despite repeated orders to do it better, for instance damaging the trees with the *pacul*, despite being ordered to keep a foot away from the trunk with tools;

2nd picking and transporting berries carelessly, so that they can be found, including many unripe ones, on the ground in the gardens and on the roads, proof of insufficient care, while dried coffee berries still hang on the trees. (Coffee Report 1870–71: 2774)

The machine of coffee cultivation, which had steadily moved into a higher gear over a period of a century and a half, had now lost its power and momentum. The planters refused any longer to do what was required of them: to grow and deliver ever larger quantities of coffee. As Van Gorkom observed, more and more trees were producing fewer and fewer beans (1866: 400). Colonial reports had described the Javanese people in general and the inhabitants of the Priangan in particular as almost endearingly docile and eager to please. That cliché was fuelled by the argument that there had seldom been collective and organized open rebellion, while the authorities persistently refused to acknowledge the covert and stubborn resistance that the people – with no other means at their disposal – displayed in response to all attempts to force them to cooperate in a system of production in which they were ruthlessly exploited. With hindsight, it is necessary to revise the impression that there had been no public resistance to the forced cultivation of coffee. Cirebon remained a hotbed of unrest for the entire period in which coffee cultivation imposed a heavy burden on the people and Peter Carey refers to sources showing that the peasants’ hatred of growing coffee was an important reason for the broad popular support Dipanegara enjoyed in the early years of the Java War (Carey 2007: 466). Reports from the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century refer to considerable land flight, the classic form of protest resorted to by peasants labouring under an excessive burden of obligations.
Table 8.4 shows how the colonial apparatus steadily lost its grip on coffee cultivation in the Priangan Regencies. It compares the way in which the system was applied in the East Javanese district of Pasuruan and in the Sundanese highlands between 1853 and 1864, the results and revenues, the scale of the harvests and the annual payments to the planters. The figures hardly require detailed elaboration. Although the number of trees in the Priangan Regencies had increased enormously and most of the coffee was produced in gardens, the revenue remained far behind that of Pasuruan. The heavier burden of cultivation services imposed on the people of the Sunda highlands produced fewer rather than more coffee beans, while the incomes of the Sundanese planters stagnated also at a much lower level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pasuruan</th>
<th>Priangan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of coffee-planting households in the 12-year period</td>
<td>386,291</td>
<td>1,061,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of trees in gardens</td>
<td>41,153,873</td>
<td>596,918,294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of trees in <em>kampungs, pagars and forests</em></td>
<td>276,123,535</td>
<td>174,249,973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee production in <em>pikul</em></td>
<td>2,129,601</td>
<td>1,535,157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of trees to maintain per household:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– in gardens</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– in <em>kampungs, pagars and forests</em></td>
<td>750</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual production in <em>pikul</em> per household</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of trees required for 1 <em>pikul</em> of coffee</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average household income per year</td>
<td>fl. 54.91</td>
<td>fl. 6.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Coffee Report 1870-71: 2776

Cultivating coffee and growing food

Separate attention should be devoted to the question whether the forced cultivation of coffee took place at the expense of growing food. The prevailing view was that it did not affect the way the peasants met their basic needs. After all, coffee was not grown on the land that they used to grow food. While coffee trees were largely planted in mountain gardens, the *sawahs* were mainly located near the streams and rivers down in the valleys. From this perspective, by contrast with the sugarcane grown on the lowlands, producing coffee did not impinge on any of the resources the peasants needed for their basic survival. Both Cees Fasseur (1975) and Robert Elson (1994) used this argument to suggest that, as it was grown